CHAPTER II

WEAVING COBWEBS FOR MEANINGFULNESS

A person throughout his life continues to search for something meaningful. This meaningfulness is nothing but the in-depth understanding of things as described in Vedanta Philosophy. In one's attempt to find this meaningfulness, one tries to find meaning in everything of life. Be it rituals, customs, tradition or the knowledge transferred to one through one's ancestors or predecessors. Throughout life one continues to play with things around and all the behaviour is repeated throughout life is the replica of one's childhood. As a child plays in his childhood, the same story is repeated in later stages of life. Whether it is the youth or the fag end of one's life, one continues to toy with one's feelings, emotions and even thinking without discriminating the good or bad. No one tries to understand that the so-called knowledge is crammed without using one's intellect. They keep on finding and pursuing pleasure in insignificant things which do not enrich life in any way. No discrimination or sorting of knowledge is allowed. The customs and traditions are handed over with a forceful urge as a child plays making of houses with sand or clay and decorates them and also continues to follow the elders by arranging marriage of dolls and following the customs. The same practices are followed in later stages. The only difference is that the plays in the childhood are without any social pressures and obligations but in later life, one has to bear and comply with all the prevalent social customs, traditions, pressures and obligations. If anyone tries to keep away from such practices, one has to bear all the brunt of society. Literature has always remained a source of exhibiting social and cultural scenario. The role of art in culture is unique. Every culture has certain exclusivity of expression which is specific to that culture. Every culture has different beliefs in its approach to life and death. There is a cultivated attitude to changes. Literature as symbolic action is relevant in the expression of the inherent search and this relevance cannot do without its specific form and style. The strength of an art-form lies in its ability to derive its latent energy from the secret and warm womb of its culture and to give it a universalistic concern. One starts from the apparently regional form and seeks to give it a mould, a mode of expression that makes it unique and universal at one and the same time. This is the key to great art. Not only this, great art with its sizeable slice compels the reader to reflect. Many women writers have used this genre of short story writing to paint the inner workings of their female protagonists who are entrapped in the relationships which bares
the power and social control. These writers are concerned about the problems faced by women and reveal the power structure. In this process short stories raise the awareness of the reader by drawing attention to the cause for such conditions. The writers are using it as a small and powerful tool to express their grievances. The pattern of life and interaction is shown in the second work of Githa Harihanan *The Art of Dying* which is a collection of short stories. Rajul Bhargava speaks about Githa Harihanan as:

Thus, like most post feminist writers, Harihan too seems to focus on some underlying truth that is not always described or even referred to in the story. There are always so many empty spaces the reader has a fair change to infer from. She often gives us a realistic account of what seems a trivial matter or event. Although the final version resembles external reality, the method of presentation suggests that there is more to the story than the mere external narrated details. In most stories, on first reading, there seems to be some internal disconnectedness, some disjointedness, the ending as much as the beginning as the first line, but there is always an internal design, some oblique reference which combines into a rich texture of trope – exposing a pattern of feminist meaning within the symbolic structure.

Different stories are woven to find meaning in diverse lives under different social and cultural conditions. Every character of this compilation by Githa Harihanan forces the reader to think upon the vagaries of our society. The crisis faced by different characters in the stories in reality is the crisis hovering over the society. M. K. Naik speaks about Harihanan:

Her second book, *The Art of Dying* (1993), a collection of twenty short stories, reveals the ... pessimistic vision of life in India. The title story centers around a mother and a daughter, the dying mother is obsessed with her son, who died quite suddenly. The much-antologized “Remains of the Feast” shows the relationship between an old woman, dying of cancer, and her teenage great-grand-daughter; the old widow attempts to compensate for her life-long deprivation by tasting “forbidden” foods like egg-laden cakes and coca-cola.

The system reflects how a character under different conditions first tries to adapt or suppress one’s feelings and desires, but in reality he remains simmering throughout life in search of something better or realistic. Only those stories of *The Art of Dying* have been selected for this chapter, which have relevance with the topic selected. Female protagonists described in the different stories present an account of complex female figures. Instead of concentrating only on the traditional image of a woman imbued with feminine sensibility, Harihanan also presents a picture of different women who are quite away from the modesty and delicacy attached to the
traditional woman. The women in *The Art of Dying* see themselves apart from the traditionally assigned duties and present a bold human nature.

In her story “Untitled Poem” Hariharan tells a simple story of a retired salesman and his wife Sarala who have moved into a new house built after the life-savings. The unstated in the story is presented through the figurative structure. The home in which they have now shifted is the palace of contentment for them though it has only a small garden. All her life Sarala had taken satisfaction in the ‘pretend gardens’ on the seventh floor balcony. She could not plant the tree of her desires that could “dig its roots deep into the soil” throughout her life till then. The roots that symbolize belongingness are missing in the couple. Both are engaged in their own tasks and there is nothing to share. They have no children who can strengthen the bond between the two. The narrator is always busy musing over his sheet of paper as he is an aspiring creative writer and his wife is always busy with her garden. The only thing that she can find pleasure with is garden.

Sarala does not understand poetry. But she likes to hear me read it out—or used to, in the days when we still thought marriage meant doing things together. Now, in the evenings, we eat early—boiled vegetables, rice, a glass of cold milk each. She does not have an ulcer but she shares my diet. Our dinners are austere, serious affairs. If we had children, perhaps the small talk of other households, grandchildren, other people’s private sorrows, would have filled our spare, half-empty plates (p.3).

Sarala has an old gardener to help her in the maintenance of the garden. “They make a good team. She is the navigator, he the oarsman” (p.4). The empty spaces that are created due to lack of children are compensated by growing spider plants. Her moments of peace and pleasure are intruppted by a rodent as one calls it “woman’s destiny’. The rodent starts taking pleasure in destroying the paradise of her desires. He uproots the the most fecund and the lushest of her plants, tears them up in pieces. He does not eat the plants but sings “a song of pure destruction” (p.5). Here the writer gives a powerful evidence of what every woman feels at the pure destruction of her desires. Though torn apart and uprooted, a woman continues to live on. She is not weak and can also destroy her enemy when the moment comes. She can become Kali and Durga, the destructive force of evil, when the time demands. She strikes her enemy dead and thus saves her garden.
The desires of women are curbed in a patriarchal order. For a widow, life becomes very thorny due to social fear. Throughout her life, she strives to find a balance between the desires of her inner self for freedom and the outer world which seems insensitive to her problems and feelings. With the fear of society in mind, no one is able to see the things clearly and objectively but in the later period of life, this fear does not exist at all. This aspect is delineated in the short story “The Remains of the Feast” and an exhibition of the bruised psyche is brought to the fore.

In “The Remains of the Feast”, the narrator remembers her great grandmother Rukmani. She dies at the age of ninety. Owing to ambition and weak hearts, her son and daughter-in-law have died before her. In the last stage of her life, her body licked away by a cancerous goiter, hands creased by needles and tied to the IV pole, legs outstretched on a raised bed, could not resist the temptations of the heart. Her sense of humor is somewhat embarrassing at times. She wants to see her great granddaughter becoming a doctor. “Yes, Ratna, you study hard and become a big doctor-madam,’ she would chuckle” (p. 10).

The two generations share a strange companionship. Rukmani has started eating everything which she has been restricted throughout her life especially as a widow. She breaks through the chains and eats the ice-cream, samosa and biscuits made by the non-brahmin hands. The terrifying shapes of her desires can be seen in the way she tastes lemon tarts, garlic, fruit cakes laced with brandy, bhel puri from the fly-infested bazaar, peanuts with chilli powder deep-fried in oil. Ratna loves her grandmother and understands her craving for the prohibited food. She used to bring everything her grandfather wants.

So we began a strange partnership, my great-grandmother and I. I smuggled cakes and ice cream, biscuits and samosas, made by non-Brahmin hands, into a vegetarian invalid’s room. To the deathbed of a Brahmin widow who had never eaten anything but pure, home-cooked food for almost a century (p. 12).

Rukmani becomes widow at a younger age and is forced to live an austere life while craving for different kinds of food and dresses. She wants to live a life full of enjoyment and thus looks for the bliss which is very rarely obtained in life. Somehow she manages to pass her life rearing her children and looking after every household business but in the end the volcano of her emotions, feelings and desires erupts demanding spicy food and drink from her great granddaughter. This attitude brings out the hidden recesses of the psyche, which have been repressed. Such recesses
seek liberation of the soul. Ratna tries to fulfil every demand of Rukmani including pastries with eggs and coca-cola. These midnight feasts continue for about a week. Ratna understands the different tides of repressed desires in the heart of her great grandmother. She brings in all the eatables and drinks as desired by her. In the beginning the great grandmother consumes all the desired articles hesitatingly and later on she openly starts her parties. She confronts the society transgressing all social manners expected from a widow. She even wants to wear a red sari. The social factors that are internalized in the psyche of grandmother compel her to act in a deterministic manner. In Jungian terms it is opening up of the complexes of the shadow. Pradeep Trikha explaining grandmother's strange behavior says: “Perhaps this is her suppressed revolt against the system in which she lived.”

Rukmani’s life shows that the repressed desires lurk again and again without any significant and realistic changes in one’s life. One only struggles throughout life by looking for something refreshing. In the end Rukmani leaves the world with a desire to wear a red sari which shows that had she been allowed in her life, she would have clad in red sari but in the end the poor lady had to die wearing the sari of different shade. Ratna wants to cover her great grandmother’s dead body in red sari but her mother due to the fear of societal taboos gets her burnt in a pale brown sari with prayer beads. The fear of society does not let her fulfil even the last wish of Rukmani.

Due to the continuous wandering in the ruts engraved by the society one is unable to understand and analyze the events. The system does not allow anyone to live freely as one is under various social and cultural pressures of the society. As is evident in this story, the main character Rukmani living in deep austerity is forced to live against her desires and ambitions. Not to speak of big desires or ambitions she is not even able to eat what she longs for till she does it slyly in old age and is about to rest in grave. Hariharan shows that desires can be repressed but cannot be restricted too long. Krishna Daiya describing the style of Githa Hariharan says:

Hariharan blends the comic and the tragic wonderfully. ‘The Remains of the Feast’ has a comic strain in it as an old woman near the end of her life suddenly feels the urge to sample all the food she has been forbidden. But it also has a tinge of sadness in it. The description of her past life and of her emotions moves us. Thus humor and pathos are mingled beautifully here like sunshine and showers.
Githa Hariharan very skillfully describes the dilemma Rukmani has been living over three-fourths of her life. Her giggling turning into the uncontrollable peals of laughter to the border of hysteria symbolizes the bottomless pit of suppression which she passes throughout her life. Some of the details given by Hariharan are touching and heart-rending. The restrictions and taboos imposed by the society on half of the population do not allow them to find any space to breathe in and live properly. It is not only the question of food and dress which she is not allowed being clad even after death but also the question related to the self. It is very strange in a tabooed society that if a woman dies before her husband she is decorated as a married woman on her last journey whereas if her husband dies before her she is compelled to live like a vagabond.

Githa Hariharan throws light on the underlying problems related to the outside world. The society here is the representative of power. There is a need to confront the reality and power. The growth of individual consciousness is in conflict with the traditional pattern of behavior which can be seen in the case of great grand daughter-in-law. She is still in the clutches of the social norms and could not dare to fulfil the last wish of Rukmani. However, Ratna’s reaction exposes the underlying possibility of rebellion. The story-teller, the great grand-daughter, Ratna, tries to understand the great grand-mother through identification prior to exorcism. She identifies:

She has left me behind with nothing but a smell, a legacy that grows fainter every day. For a while I hunt the dirtiest bakeries and tea-stalls I can find. I search for her, my sweet great-grand-mother, in plate after plate of stale confections, in needle-sharp green chillies, deep-fried in rancid oil. I plot her revenge for her, I give myself diarrhoea for a week (p.16).

The society on its own cannot suggest solution to all these happenings and events. There is a dire need of inherent change. Since ages the society has been carrying this burden of the beast without any logical thinking and understanding. The subjugation of the character by social and cultural forces has failed to bring a meaningful change. For a positive and meaningful change, one has to face them boldly and rise against them.

The title story “The Art of Dying” speaks about the established meaning of a woman’s life. From the point of view of a male it is a peaceful existence but from a woman’s it is only the negation of the self. They seem to accept the unconditional surrender but they crave for change the mundanities of womanly etiquette. Like men they too have a messy storehouse of desires,
impulses, drives and instincts that lie deep down which they too have right to find expression for. The tenor of every woman’s existence is described in the experience of the narrator as:

Death—or madness—is far too sudden, dramatic. The tenor of my life—wifing, childbearing—has been determined by the subtle, undulating waves of progress creeping over my body. Bleed, dry up; expand with life, contract with completion. A peaceful, gentle existence; motion, not quite blunt-edged change (p. 64).

The narrator has joined a Counselling Centre as a volunteer. Her mother is bed-ridden and is ailing, dying of unidentified causes. With the ‘stubborn dregs’ of memory, her mother says: “Your father was always jealous. He caught me combing my hair once in the balcony upstairs. That was the last time I was allowed to stand there alone” (p.69). Her father’s authority in the house was the law of the family. The year he died, he sent a photograph of his wife and his to his son and daughter and ordered: “...The photograph is for you to frame and hang in your living-room when we are gone. Find a reliable framing shop; but there is no need to be extravagant—ordinary, plain wood should do” (p.71). Unable to love the stingy, unemotional husband, she gets fixated on her son Ram, the latter precocious as evidenced in his awards, prizes and citations. Ram somehow died without any message or explanations to leave behind.

It is Ram who hangs on the wall now, ornately framed, garlanded like a revered ancestor. A glass cupboard below the photograph houses row after burnished row of undeniable testimonials: silver cups, gold medals, plaques of appreciation, citations, extravagantly signed certificates (p.71).

All the suppressed emotions of the mother desire pain, ‘excruciatingly sharp pain’ (p.68). As a sympathetic spectator and listener to other people’s memories, the narrator wants her mother to see that she too is a healer of sorts. The narrator describes a case in the Counselling Centre. The ‘silent and expressionless’ (p.68) wife could not conceive even after being married for four years. Later on the narrator finds out the cause as the words tumble out from the husband’s thick lips that his mother has been sleeping between them every night for the last four years at his wife’s bidding. Hariharan, through this incident, lets us see the simmering tumult just below the surface. The husband is unable to judge the real cause of his impassive wife and finds his wife responsible for not conceiving the child.

The narrator is a source of strength to the patients. But her mother requires a special strength to face death. “She is, whatever the doctor says, a terminal patient. Her fragile body is
chained to the life-support machine of her memory” (p.79). Even on her death bed, she keeps on remembering Ram, her son. The story reminds the reader *Sons and Lovers* by D.H. Lawrence. Paul in *Sons and Lovers* fails to establish a satisfying relationship with his girl-friends due to the possessive nature of his mother and in the present story Ram during his life time was not sure whether he would marry his girl-friend. The narrator remembers:

As he described Janet to me, his arms cradled my younger daughter, sleeping against his broad chest. It is madness to compete with, or even grudge, the impossible standards set by a brilliance frozen in youth (p.72)

After his death the narrator feels: “Luckily, I think, he did not marry. Many condoling visitors said as much when he died; strangely, this seemed to give my mother a moment of relief” (p.77). Her mother calls out for Ram even in her sleep and in her ultimate sleep where, “He awaits her, his chest as broad, his face as unlined as in his framed photograph, the eternal lover” (p.79). The silence in the story speaks louder than the words. The women who survive on the ‘stray bits of flotsam’ (p.67) seem to live a peaceful existence from the eye of a male.

Hariharan has tried to suggest that if one represses one’s instincts, the chances of deriving pleasures in life are lost. As social and moral codes are disadvantageous to the women, they are the worst sufferers. If they are bold, they rebel, but if they are weak and too sensitive, they can slip into the valley of mental illness. Their mental illness describes the intensely meaningful emotional experience. The secret inner world of such characters explains the pain and suffering that they bear. Githa Hariharans’s skill of psychological exploration can better be seen in the story “The Warden”. The beginning takes the reader to the cinematic technique of flashbacks and flash forwards. This gives voice to silent terrors, secret feelings and the emotions. “The Warden” brings forth the story of two women. One is the caretaker, Basamma and the other is the mistress who is being taken care of. The beginning shows them in old age. The flashback tells that Basamma first meets her charge when both are quite young. The mistress of the house, psychologically challenged, is kept locked up in the outhouse. Basamma has just lost her baby and the owner of the house has brought his baby to her and addresses her as a god send. The owner visits the outhouse only when it is a moonless night and the mistress is calm, tame, docile little thing. But the trouble comes within seconds.
Once she bit him, hard, her teeth had drawn blood on his arm. I had to run back to the outhouse, save him, hold her down, lock ourselves in. Shutting out her wild, frenzied screams, holding down her stick like arms that had now grown powerful talons, I shot him a glance that said, Are you satisfied? (p. 33).

In the course of time her son grows up and gets married. However, the social responsibilities are fulfilled by providing a servant and the occasional visits. Both women seem alike in their bouts of insomnia. Basamma tells her the story of her village, her parents and gets psychological relief of sharing. The mistress becomes restless when she hears the stories of Basamma’s dead husband and her baby. She rather becomes a baby herself:

Whenever I told her about my dead husband, or my baby, she became restless. She would hug herself tightly, or tickle her underarms and the soles of her feet. Like a fool I waited everytime for the giggling to begin before I remembered what a mad bitch she is. A rotten seed, I tell you, what can you expect of the fruit? (p. 37).

Nowhere in the story is the reader told directly about the reasons of the madness of the mistress, but as the reader moves deeper, it appears that she might also have been suffering from the same sting that has bitten Basamma. Her reasons are so excruciating that she could not control her mental balance. At times during fits, she makes mess of everything. “She slashed all the photographs—the rows and rows of great-grandfathers and mothers, their fathers and mothers” (p. 38).

Slashing of the photographs indicates the pain of a woman who is pressurized by social expectations to such an extent that she starts developing a mental disorder. The confined space of Indian woman in the socio-cultural hierarchy is also responsible for this situation which needs to be recognized while studying these characters. Sometimes the alienation and the loss of identity lead to the desire to destroy everything. Her taking refuge in her loneliness worsens the situation and leads her to disintegration. Everyone curses Basamma for that. She remembers the attitude of the family:

They shook me till my bones rattled. They called me a block of wood. A lump of coal. A piece of dog shit. I gave it to her, I can tell you. I can shake more than bones. They too must know that by now—years later, they fawn on me every time I say I am going back to the village (p.38).
Basamma, however, has got the experience to handle them. She threatens them to go back to her village, though knowing in heart her inability to remember even the way to her village. The members of the family of the mistress try to lure her in every possible way.

I can’t remember how to get to my village, and the fools-new, young ones who know even less than the old ones – pile endearments, flattery and saris on me. I keep the saris in a tin trunk. The key is tied round my neck (p. 38)

Hariharan, here, throws light on the selfish attitude of the modern individualistic society which only knows how to grind its own axe without caring for the feelings of others. No body wants to understand the feelings of Basamma. And none dares to take the responsibility of the mentally challenged mistress. On the contray, people compel her to stay there. As Basamma, too, has no place to go to, she continues to stay there.

With the passage of time, the owner of the house dies. A servant comes to inform and ask to follow the rituals that a widow follows. No body notices the fact that the way the mistress is treated in the house, she is a born widow. Suffering at the hands of society, she is asked to follow the rituals of the society. Both are now locked in that outhouse waiting for death. It ironically throws light on the significance of the title of the story. The locking out of both the women narrators in the outhouse symbolizes the position of the women in society who cannot give vent to their feelings in their own house. They do not have even the infinitesimal hope of emancipation. As Fiona Tolan discussing Feminisms says:

Women’s oppression was achieved by a combination of physical violence and cultural pressure. All aspects of society and culture functioned according to a sexual politics that encouraged women to internalize their own inferiority until it became psychologically rooted. 6

Hariharan exposes the bitter truth of an Indian family where ties are more important for a woman than her own affairs. A woman feels completely lost if the strong bond of the family is missing. A male can show his aggression in this atmosphere but a woman often goes deep in depression. When this depression is accompanied by helplessness, the result in majority of the sensitive women’s cases is madness. In this situation where family or the society is the cause, no one expects compassion or care from any relation. The family of the mistress is afraid of taking the responsibility of the mistress. Sugar-coated words come as bait to Basamma so that she might
not leave the mistress. Society even locks the outhouse from outside thus revealing the extreme cruelty. Basamma weeps over the condition of the mistress as well as her own helplessness. She identifies herself with the mistress:

She lies there like a broken tree, not a leaf on her for years, and you are afraid? You make me laugh. I hold her in my arms and weep all over her. The tears flow from my face to hers. She is a broken, mangy old woman, just like me, and we lick the tears off each other's faces (pp. 39-40).

Basamma is weaving cobwebs to make her life meaningful by helping and nursing the mistress of the house. This is not only a question to help the mistress but also to make her both ends meet. She is aware of the crudity of the family of the mistress and finds herself also in the same situation faced by the mistress. Both Basamma and the mistress belong to different classes but their fates bring them together. Their needs vary according to their social status and cultural set-up but the cord that binds them to their families is lost and also the very meaning of their life for them. Instead of losing control over her mental state, caught in the shackles of stress and strain, Basamma, being stronger than the mistress, finds affinity with her and takes care of her. “The Warden” thus reveals the complex and deep study of woman's anguish and alienation within the traditional confines.

The life of the majority of the women is within the confines of the four walls of the house. The responsibilities make a girl a woman. She sacrifices her whole life serving her family. In the busy routine of life, one often misses the real meaning of life. In the traditional Indian society, the married couple lives under the same roof, married for many years, having children and bearing responsibilities. They spend their life like two isolated islands amid the sea of problems and responsibilities. They both play their roles as assigned by the society and transmitted from the culture. In the dusk of one's life, when nothing remains in hand or one of the partners leaves the world, the only thing remains behind is reprieve. This situation is beautifully dealt in the story “The Reprieve”. Nagaraj Rao, an advocate, in his seventies, remembers his dead wife Mangala:

Since he had moved away from the town in which they had lived—since he had been moved by his eldest son who said his frail father was his responsibility—away from the old house in which they had spent all their fifty-odd married years, Nagraj Rao found himself thinking of Mangala more and more of the time. It had become something of an
obsessive settling of accounts, a stock-taking and reordering of memories, a final attempt, or rather a belated attempt, to know the woman who had been his wife. Fifty three years, he thought, and how did she escape me so completely? (p.41).

Throughout life Nagaraj and Mangala remain busy about the household chores or the responsibilities they bear. He prides himself of being a provider, the power of authority being male financially independent, least concerned about who is actually taking care of a thirty member household. His anima is seen in providing the family and achieving career goals. Mangala gets married at the age of fifteen. She is a perfect example of traditional Indian woman. The traditional duties of a woman keep her away from the real joys of life.

For fifty years, she had been a good, or at least unobtrusive wife in the background. She had run the machinery of a thirty-member household, had oiled its creaky joints, though Nagaraj Rao had been responsible for the larger, more obvious task of providing the components of the machinery, the family members who would be part of the fold, the hierarchy (pp. 42-43).

Mangala serves the family for fifty years, accomplishing different roles. The machinery that they have built painstakingly throughout their life is now obsolete. Later on the members of the family leave the house one by one for different reasons of death, marriage and job. To her, the very purpose of her womanhood is destroyed. She gets ill and develops cancer. She dies peacefully fulfilling all the eligibilities of a patriarchal structure. She reveals not only the pathetic condition of Indian woman but also her features of tolerance.

She died as she had lived, nothing ugly or sudden, just a slow, lingering, inconspicuous bundle of well-disguised pain, the flesh slowly but not offensively disintegrating, more and more gaunt and faded, till the end came like a gracious blessing one night, a night like any other when Nagaraj Rao and the servants slept (p. 43)

In Indian society a woman is expected to be submissive, obedient, supplicant and docile. Her family and the society make her learn how to bear the responsibilities of the house. These lessons are so deeply engraved in her mind that she forgets her own identity. She caters to all the needs of the family. She devotes herself in the duties towards the house and finds her happiness in the happiness and satisfaction of others. When due to varied reasons, the members of the family disintegrate; she feels that the very purpose of her life is fulfilled. This is clearly portrayed in the character of Mangala.
When one remains alone and there is nothing left to do, one craves for the support and security of one’s near and dear ones. Mangala dies as she lives without bothering anyone. The loneliness and insecurity created by the absence of Mangala is realized by Nagaraj Rao too late. He desires to have a look of her face:

He saw her look of surprise, and he thought, in quick gasps of greed, let me look at her, let me look at her. Quick, memorize every inch of her face, the shade of her eyes, the shape of the nose and lips, the small mole on her chin (p.46).

What the wife did for him throughout life is not easily recognized by him. He is vacuous to care for her feelings till he visits the house of his son in an alien city, alone, after the death of Mangala. In a nuclear family, he realizes what he has missed in his life. In the end he dies repenting and remembering Mangala. Githa Hariharan throws light on the radical changes in the society that redefines the identity of individual in general and women in particular. Nagaraj Rao, while comparing his married life with the married life of his son, repents:

Had he then missed something finer, more essential, in his pursuit of justice, and in his well-deserved leadership of an untidy, amorphous family? He heard his son and daughter-in-law talking in whispers hours after they had switched off their bedroom light. He stared hard at the wall that separated his room from theirs- what did they talk about? It seemed to him that Mangala and he had talked only about the children or the many problems of the household. Had she wondered about his cases? His life away from, and independent of, the household? Had she been lonely? Or too busy or tired or vacuous to care? (p. 44).

Married at the age of fifteen, burdened with responsibilities, Mangala develops so many diseases before her death. Nagaraj Rao realizes this after shifting to his son’s family. Away from the courts, his relatives, family fields, his clients and cases, in the evening of life, he muses over the life he has spent and longs for his dead wife before breathing his last. All his life he had but thought about himself. He finds it difficult to remember what he and his wife had talked about, how she had slept. She always wore that restrained look she had been taught to be as the mistress of the house. Many empty spaces in the story give the reader to understand the underlying truth. By creating the characters of Mangala and her daughter-in-law, Hariharan has thrown light on the changing conditions of women. L.L.Yogi speaks:
The role of women in Indian society can be visualized as a prolonged conflict between her traditional image as a sacrificing, docile and complacent individual, and the gradual emergence of her image as assertive, confident and articulate individual. Though the writer gives a trivial incident yet the realistic expression makes the reader dive deep in reality. It is in Mangala that Nagraj comes for solace, peace and completion. Even in the end of the story, he dreams of Mangala and craves for ultimate sleep. It is a touching story of a seventy-year-old man Nagraj Rao discovering Mangala in his daughter-in-law before dying of a massive heart-stroke. Belated finding of anima makes him reprieve: “A reprieve, he thought, the greatful tears spilling out of his eyes, and as the pain gripped his chest again, he fell into the dark safety of her outstretched arms” (p.47).

In another story “Gajar Halwa,” Hariharan details the conditions under which the children of the poor people are compelled to work in the houses of the rich people. It is a story related to the subalterns. Though ignorant and innocent in the beginning, they train themselves to work in these circumstances later on. The sense of alienation and insecurity in a big city make Perumayee reminiscent about her life in the village. Owing to circumstances she is compelled to work in a big city. Her father, a lazy drunkard, has left the family. Her mother has worked hard and carries baskets of gravel to make both ends meet while also carrying the youngest child on her hip who is still breastfeeding. Her brother is sent to school whereas Perumayee and her baby sister attend the household chores. It throws light on the gender difference which finds the education of a boy more important than that of a girl. The woman is never allowed to be a child, from the very childhood, she plays the role of a mother, and is always burdened with the responsibilities of the family. She is forced to nurse her brother when she herself is a child. When Amma is not able to find work, she decides to send Perumayee to Delhi with Chellamma who is her neighbor’s cousin with lots of instructions. The insecurity and fear to leave the surroundings and a mother’s trepidation to send her daughter outside are well described by the author. Perumayee is quite afraid to go in an alien city. “I stuck to Chellamma like a leech on the train and didn’t look at anyone’s face” (p. 82).

The class difference is also explored in the story. It is the social structure and the economic structure that create this difference. It is the economic problem that brings Perumayee to a far city, away from the warmth and the security of the family. Perumayee is somewhat
nervous in the beginning, as she does not know much about the cooking and the way of living with the rich people. Chellamma, belonging to the same class of Perumayee, is quite aware of the weaknesses of the memsahibs.

But what do I know of their cooking, Chellamma? What if they find out? What if they beat me?'

Do you want to take the first train back to Salem? I don’t have to help you, you’re only my cousin’s neighbour’s daughter. Do you want to go back and become a beggar? Or worse? These memsahibs in Delhi know nothing, you’ll learn their cooking in a day or two (p.80).

At the same time she also wants to support Perumayee as she is also aware of the problems faced by the poor people. Mohanty discussing the poor women workers says:

It expresses not only their common interests as workers, but acknowledges their social circumstances as women for whom the artificial separation of work and home has little meaning. This “occupation” is a strategy of collective resistance that draws attention to poor women workers’ building community as a form of survival.8

Chellamma instructs Perumayee to keep her mouth shut when she is bargaining with the memsahib regarding her payment. She knows the way with which she can make profits and thus bargains on behalf of Perumayee:

Two hundred, memsahib. The lady in the next building has offered two hundred and fifty, but I said what is fifty rupees, my memsahib depends on me. And who will look after my sweet baba? (p.81)

Chellamma is an expert and experienced worker in this field. Providing mutual help and support helps in building community in a place distant from their home. Memsahib’s dependence on the servant makes her accept the payment demanded by Chellamma for the services of Perumayee, though with some reluctance. They are interdependent. Though there is difference of locale, circumstances and patterns of life yet their interdependence make them accommodate with each other.

The scarcity in the village is compared to the plenty in the city but the social security that she has enjoyed in her village is missing in the city. For the need of this social security she makes friends belonging to the same class. She remembers:
At the milk-booth, the queue reminds me of our fights at the water-tap in the village. But I don’t have to push so much here. I’ve made friends. We stick close to each other, so that we feel brave enough to stare boldly at the goondas who jump the queue and pinch the girls. My friends work in the flats in the same colony, their memsahibs are a lot like mine (p. 83).

In her village, while standing in the queue for water, Perumayee is not sure whether she would get the water. Even if she would, it would be plenty or not. But she is quite secure in her village, residing among her own people and relatives. On the contrary, in this alien city, in the milk queue, she has the constant fear of teasing by knaves. Her experience in the city makes her learn how to finish the work quickly without caring for details. Her friends suggest her not to be a silly fool and emotional in doing the household chores. As far as work and money is concerned, with the experience of six months she would be able to get a job for double the money in a richer colony.

So I learn to swab quickly, skipping corners and under the beds when she is not looking. The water freezes my fingers. How can people wash their clothes when the sun doesn’t even shine properly? In our village near Salem I would scrub and scrub our clothes, hit them again and again on the rocks near the river. Here I squeeze out the baby’s stinky clothes, and pretend not to understand when the memsahib points out the yellow stains drying in crusts on the diapers (p. 83).

Both memsahib and Perumayee belong to different classes and speak different languages. Their needs bring them together. They are not attached emotionally to each other but within their periphery they are trying to do something meaningful for their respective families.

Githa Hariharan has dealt with different conditions of women in these short stories. Another aspect that she drives home is about the life of a widow. The life of a widow is not considered to be better than hell in some areas in the present times. The oppressive system starts operating from the house itself. In the desperate struggle for survival, woman bears all the brutalities and the atrocities of the society. Widow’s pathetic condition describes the position of women in the patriarchal set-up and her inability to break free the shackles of male chauvinism. After desertion from the owner of her life, her world is defined by others, her parents and her society. Women trapped in brutal institutions such as child-marriage, dowry, prohibitions on women’s education and enforced widowhood are condemned by the social reformers and these
aspects are looked upon as a challenge by the feminists. In her story “Revati,” Hariharan presents a picture of a widow who is quite different from her counterparts in past.

She was an unpleasant reminder of a world gone by. A child-widow was a thing of the past, a page from a history textbook that should be safely contained between cardboard covers. Not what she was, as large as life, walking, talking, eating huge mouthfuls of our food (p. 93).

The traditional picture of a child widow brings before the reader the image of an innocent girl whose head is shaved clean and her bangles broken. The self-sacrificing, submissive and saintly picture of a child widow is turned into the picture of an economically dependent but irritating widow. In the story, at the time of her marriage, she is ten and becomes widow within a year. Unlike others, she gets education and is sent to Madras for a degree. She gets a job in small town in a residential school. She is independent and the family feels that it has made up for her marriage. No one in the family ever thinks of the remarriage of Revati. They even have forgotten about her tragedy. Even after getting education, she is not in a position to share her hidden desires to anyone. Her hidden desires are revealed in her attitude towards different things. The narrator remembers, “She gazed at me in my bridal finery, her face filling with a wistfulness, hideously unashamed and undisguised. She could not keep her hand away from my sari of Benarasi silk” (p. 92).

These suppressed desires result in a kind of revolt. This is an indirect revolt that flouts the socially accepted behavior. Whenever she visits the family of the narrator, she puts everyone in trouble in one way or the other because of her lacking civic sense. Her grotesque manners put everyone in trouble. “The other problem was food. She ate enough for two men, unaffected by details such as how much she was leaving in the dishes for the rest of us” (p.94). She eats voraciously and shows lack of all those feminine niceties. Time passes and it is ten years since she has retired from her teaching career.

Nobody said it in so many words, but clearly, something had to be done about Revati. It was ten years since she had retired from her teaching career. She now lived alone, at least for a small part of the year. The rest of the time she visited her brothers and sisters for long stretches, her bulky frame in the wrong place at the wrong time, always in the way (p. 95).
Later on the family sends a poor cousin, an idiot but physically strong, to accompany her. After a year she again comes back, fatter than earlier she was. Her hidden sexuality is hinted during a small incident with the imbecile. The whole matter is hushed up by the family by sending the idiot away with a hundred rupee note and some vague promises. She drifts away from the world of the normal people to madness. Commenting on how Hariharan has created the socially unacceptable picture of a widow in the character of Revati, Ellen Dengel says:

In contrast to the concept of ideal woman, we are confronted with a subversive image of womanhood in “Revati”. The female code of chastity, modesty and silence is turned upside down by the bulky widow who, instead of merging with the needs of the family, centers her attention and the attention of others around her bodily needs. Consequently, her characterization dwells on the very physicality of her existence. The shift from the ethereal female ideal of the epics cannot be greater, as the narrative revolves around a woman’s body, including its vulgarity and ugliness.

Revati is an anachronistic creature in her family emphasizing the complexities of woman’s position in the miniscule component of family culture. There is some sort of understanding in the crazy ways she shows. Just at the age of ten, she becomes widow. She has so many hidden desires which have not been fulfilled. She sighs greedily whenever she sees new saris. She lacks civic sense and all those feminine niceties. She does not care for socially accepted behaviour. Her suppressed desires reinforce her in the role of a rebel. She presents a contrast to the socially approved norms of womanhood. She moves away from the patriarchal structure of the family which results in crisis. The questions of liberty of choice, the right to live or to understand the world in her own way has no place in the social system that weaves the social reality. She exhibits a picture of ambiguous female figure who towards the end of the story suffers from fits as she does not fit into the modern world of the family. The female members of the family try to tempt her wandering mind back. The loneliness, the emptiness and the suppression of her sexual desire throughout her life take the form of a rebel in her and she flouts all the social norms prescribed for a widow. Throwing a hint on the alienation of an ostracized widow, the story compels the reader to ponder over the pathetic condition of a woman.

In another story “The Closed Room,” Hariharan emphasizes the writer’s struggle to hold on and the pressures on the writing community. Being a woman, Hariharan in all her writings, talks of the physical and mental pressures a woman bears. In the present story, she through her
female character tries to sum up all the upheavals and quandaries of the life a woman meets within the Indian society. The story starts with a woman who has a vision of a lady to become past of her writer husband, lying on a floor in the conditions which are woven for the journey of the ultimate departure from this world. This woman also identifies herself with the lady in the room sitting by the side of her husband.

Though the words are his—and in the sense she sees, the experience as well—she looks at the woman first. In spite of the red kumkum on her forehead, vulnerable, given to smudging on a sweaty forehead, the woman is familiar. She thinks: If I had thought of looking into a mirror then, that may well have been my reflection (p. 160).

The mirror becomes a symbol of a sense of identity and self. The husband confesses that whatever he has written throughout his life is almost rubbish. Having the past rich experience he knows how and why most of the writers compose so many volumes. He wants to confess the truth in his autobiography. For this he allows his wife to pen down his thoughts. Born in a highly scholastic milieu, yet she dare not become a writer as the environment in her society has not allowed her to be a writer. Rajul Bhargava discussing the short stories of Githa Harihara says:

In ‘The Closed Room’ once again we meet a woman who like a true wife is a faithful helper who helps man in his act of creation. Women have the potential to help in creation but cannot be given the role of a creator—that is a male prerogative. Women have to learn to be unobtrusive, remain in the background.¹⁰

On the other hand, her husband is a great writer having a rich experience of writing since his childhood. This man has written volumes of women’s equality, but has never allowed her or encouraged her to be a writer. During his attendance to the call given by the death, he is trying to sum up his autobiography. Being unable to write himself, he allows his wife to take the pen and write only those words which flow through the tunnels of his mind. While dictating, the person meets his physical death but till his mental departure from his physical body, he continues to flutter words which his wife somehow tries to write. Though apparently she thinks that no interpolation is done in words of her husband but she does so. Here the magic of Githa Harihara’s writing comes to the fore through this female character and awakens the years’ long hidden desire of this lady in particular and women in general for being a writer. Here this woman character at last finds a meaningful cobweb of her life. She knows that now there will be no hindrance in her journey of writing. The broken words murmured by her husband, who have no
significance, have given her the opportunity to write what she likes. Anu Celly speaks in this regard:

When women writers write a short story dealing with aspects of gender consciousness, they attempt to present facets of female sensibility, wherewith the common characters question and probe the links between cultural conditioning, psycho – sexual determinants and socio – political – economic factors which govern their destinies, as well as to explore and discover alternative ways of survival and empowerment. They have women who emblematize the spirit of tenacity, who sustain and enrich each others’ lives and struggle to know themselves fully, as well as to strive for a meaningful relationship with the world around them.  

The picture of bold woman, who refuses to move in the pre-ordained orbit, can be seen in her story “Virgin Curry.” It is a story of two roommates in a hostel, Pat and Brenda. Both work in an office and share a room. Pat is a fun-loving and carefree modern woman always out in the company of boys till she meets Samit, a married man. After the entry of Samit in her life, she stops taking all the calls of the boys. Her late night visits with Samit irritates Sister Phyllis to such an extent that Pat is thrown out of the hostel. This is what Pat exactly wants. She meets Brenda after a week in the office where she comes to hand over her resignation letter. Brenda finds a complete change in Pat’s dress and views. Brenda remembers:

A week later, she came to office to give them her resignation letter. She looked thin and tired but it suited her. Also, she wore a silk sari, it looked pretty expensive to me, and believe it or not, a string of pearls (p. 109).

All the time Pat keeps on talking about Samit only. Her earlier plan of joining computer classes is replaced by doing a correspondence course to get a degree first as Samit wants her to get a degree first. The career-oriented woman in the beginning of the story is now more interested in playing the traditional household role.

In presenting both the characters, the author portrays the contrast between the two. Pat is a woman who enjoys her relation with Samit, the man of her choice, without bothering about the rules of society. The transition from sexual purity to sexual emancipation is another aspect that has been dealt with in the story. Pat is more concerned with the attainment of her personal goals and freedom than sticking to the norms of the society. Though she is not married to Samit, yet she keeps a real home for him and dresses like a married woman. With this she acts as
embodiment of the paradigm of feminine behavior. Pat’s flouting of the social conventions is counterbalanced with Brenda’s following the social codes.

Githa Hariharan’s dynamics can be assessed easily in the variety she offers to the reader. Her story “The Will” emphasizes the position of a woman, who is a housewife. Her life is culturally rooted in India. A docile, obedient wife who is dependent on the decisions that her husband takes for her and knows nothing about the larger issues of life, starts her life from a new angle after the departure of her husband from this world. How she copes with the situation is another situation that Hariharan has presented before the reader. A.G. Khan evaluates the condition in convincing words:

Jung holds that an individual is not just a product of his immediate ancestors, the parents, but also a product of racial consciousness. This racial consciousness that shapes one’s beliefs and attitudes towards life almost determines his actions. An immediate situation may provoke one but his motives are a sum total of personal, communal, social and racial forces. A Hindu woman is not just a woman – she is a woman, an Indian, and also a Hindu. These three and several other pressures such as political, economical, and domestic ones decide her destiny.\(^{12}\)

A woman cannot think of her life without the small world she has made for herself. Lost in the duties towards her family, she forgets her own individuality. After the death of her husband she feels helpless, insecure and lonely in this world. She leads her life as dictated to her by her husband. Sushila is one such character. She feels nervous and helpless after the death of her husband, but soon realizes that her husband does not like nervous woman and so tries to show confidence. She is not able to think other than what her husband believes.

Sushila looked at her crumpled pallav with a twinge of guilt. He hated nervous, silly women. She drew the pallav closer around her shoulders, and sat upright again, a picture of dignity (p. 147).

Sushila gets an envelope from the lawyer written by her husband with the guidelines for the rest of her life. Hope eventually comes her way and fame nudges her out of the drudgery of being only a widow. Life keeps on going as usual. She performs her duties as an administrator with courage and determination as is written in the letter left for her by her husband. She becomes the instance of a strong woman who can make her own pathway. But one day she loses the letter
and again turns into a grief-stricken widow who has nothing left to live on. Colette Dowling explains:

It has to do with dependency: the need to lean on someone.... Those needs stay with us into adulthood, clamouring for fulfilment right alongside our need to be self-sufficient.... Any woman who looks within knows that she was never trained to feel comfortable with the idea of taking care of herself, standing up for herself, asserting herself.  

The patriarchal framework of womanhood has conditioned Sushila’s mind. She finds it difficult to think on her own. The story is based upon the problems faced by a woman after the death of her husband. She realizes her importance when one day her grandson comes to get her help with his homework. It is like a rebirth for her. From the vulnerable, submissive and aimless woman, she realizes the importance of her individuality. She does not lose heart and then decides to transform her limitation to strength. She awakens to make a meaningful niche in her life. Sushila at last rises above the matrimonial bliss and realizes her potential.

Hariharan in her stories also throws light on the attitude of the present generation towards death. In the contemporary modern life, which first moved from a joint family to a nuclear one, is now moving towards individualism. They react towards death in a realistic way. The children who are living and working far from their parents have no attachment to them. The sense of belongingness within family and thus in society is fading away. They have no time to think of their parents’ love and sacrifices, which they made for their off-springs. The materialistic aspirations lead us to delusion, selfishness and self-centeredness. This selfishness originates in ignorance and leads to the degradation of moral values.

Githa Hariharan shows a keen interest and sensibility in various types of arts and different forms of expression. Her distinctiveness consists in concentrating on every aspect of circumstances that influence the life of a woman. Her stories like “Love poems,” “Repeated Performance” are the transference stories. The magic of the transference can be felt when the absence of the person becomes the presence. “Revati,” “The Remains of the Feast,” bring out the theme dealing with grotesque characters. “The Warden” shows the psychological depth of the character. “Gajar Halwa” is a subaltern story dealing with the sense of alienation of a Tamil maid servant. “Untitled Poem,” “The Will,” “The Reprieve” give us an idea about the strength of the woman and the realization of their identity. “The Closed Room” deals with the position of a
woman as a writer. Hariharan in her short story collection describes the hidden truth that is not always described. It is her unique direction that enables the reader to reflect the position of Indian woman with different angles. Rajul Bhargava Speaks about the writer as:

Githa Hariharan in her short story collection *The Art of Dying* (1993) has projected the post feminist ethos with perfection. The main text seems to run smoothly well within the orthodox order as if upholding the traditional power equation, but very subtly she lets us see and feel the simmering ferment just below the surface. The muted subtext, the ‘unsaid’ seven-eighths of the story speaks louder than the voiced narrative.

Death is the stark reality of life. It happens in every home and every individual is destined to see death at least once in life. It can be in the household, in the neighborhood, in the village or among the relatives. Githa Hariharan deals with the theme of death in these short stories. The different ways in which the death occurs explains the art of dying. Instead of having the serious atmosphere, there is some sort of humor in almost all the stories. Here lies the forte of the writer. Githa Hariharan paints the reality without any exaggeration of human suffering. Social hindrances come in the way of natural happiness, bar the individuals from enjoying fruitful human relationships. These forces prevent them to take action. They continue to suffer throughout their life in the goals of their own making. The triviality and insignificance of man-made barriers and the bludgeoning impact of taboos deprive people to have real happiness. They also thwart the free and full growth of human potential as these barriers do not let them breathe the free air of freedom. The writer’s sensibility is remarkably progressive and her female protagonists gradually move towards growth. The purpose of this quest is to explore the true meaning of life and a harmonious concord between one person and the other.

After giving a variety of female characters in *The Art of Dying*, Githa Hariharan presents a character that is gifted with a golden tongue in the novel *When Dreams Travel*. This novel is woven in a fine tapestry of myth and legend giving emphasis to the women’s desires, dreams and courage. In fact this novel is a feminist rereading of the myth existing in history for such a long period. The story is vibrant and innovative about the quest for love and power. *The Arabian Nights* is a famous canonized text that has been given a new perspective by Githa Hariharan. She intermixes past-present-future and creates a new tale while shaping her dreams. *The Arabian Nights* is a collection of stories integrating fairy tales, romances and legends. The writer presents the hidden text behind the existing stories.
One Thousand and One Nights or The Arabian Nights' Entertainment is first translated in French by Antonie Galland. In the nineteenth century Richard Burton translated these tales from French into English. These Arab tales are the picture of the East as well as the Orientalist stereotypes of irresponsible tyrants and the callous way with which they treat their women. This is the picture of the East that has made its place in the mind of the west. Similarly the Eastern women, unable to get themselves free, are in the need of colonization and thus the reader can see the picture of Third World woman as meek, obedient that never rises above the weakening generality of their ‘object’ status. Mohanty tersely comments:

The relationship between “Woman” (a cultural and ideological composite other constructed through diverse representational discourses- scientific, literary, juridical, linguistic, cinematic, etc.) and “women” (real, material subjects of their collective histories) is one of the central questions the practice of feminist scholarship seeks to address. This connection between women as historical subjects and the representation of woman by hegemonic discourses is not a relation of direct identity or a relation of correspondence or simple implication. It is an arbitrary relation set up by particular cultures. I would like to suggest that the feminist writings I analyze here discursively colonize the material and historical heterogeneities of the lives of women in the third world, thereby producing/representing a composite, singular “Third World woman”-an image that appears arbitrarily constructed but nevertheless carries with it the authorizing signature of Western humanist discourse.¹⁵

Hariharan suggests that there is a possibility that the rich culture of the East is changed by the translations of misogynous scholars who wrote down the oral literature produced by women.

The above-quoted collection of tales is a piece of world literature which proves the existence of mixed, shared cultural heritage. The story is scattered in different layers of history and is connected with a few common threads for centuries. Githa Hariharan, while finding gaps in the story, recasts and deconstructs throwing light on the misogynist ideologies in the famous patriarchal structure. The time is woven into a flux of past, present and future. The geographical boundaries are not given much importance. Through myriad characters, Hariharan dives deep into the dark stream of history for searching the valuable pearls of hidden truth. M.K. Naik has made valuable observations:

This novelist’s third novel is very different from the earlier work, which was primarily in the social realist mode, through story telling was an important trope. When Dream
Travels (1999) is a kind of feminist retelling of The Arabian Nights. It is the story of not only Shahrzad (Scheherezade), but of her sister Dunyazad (to whom the stories were ostensibly addressed) and their husbands. All kinds of fantastic stories are woven into the narrative, but it is a dark, thought provoking book, not an entertainer. 

The structure of the story in the novel is complicated, which establishes the fact that story-telling is the peculiar possession of women. It is the women who are telling or inventing tales. The novel is divided into two parts. Part one “Travellers” describes the tale of Shahryar and Shahzaman and Part two “Virgins, Martyrs and Others” is made of seven pairs of short stories. According to the canonized text, Shahryar, the ruler of Shahbad and Shahzaman, the ruler of Samarkand are two brothers. Shahzaman is once invited to Shahbad. His elder brother wants to see him. Just out of his city palace Shahzaman camps for the night to begin the journey next morning. At night he remembers that he has forgotten to keep the special gift. He slyly goes back to his palace but is shocked to see that his queen is sleeping with someone else. He kills them there and then and goes back to the camp ordering his men to set out immediately for Shahbad without waiting for dawn. Reaching Shahbad, his sorrowful face makes his elder brother worried. He in order to entertain his brother arranges a hunting expedition but Shahzaman refuses to participate. While alone in the palace, he finds his sister-in-law committing adultery. Other black slaves and slave girls are also engaged in the naked lecherous activities. This sight shocks him but also gives him a kind of relief that he is not the only husband betrayed. On returning from the trip Shahzaman narrates everything to him starting from his own experience to what he has recently seen in his brother’s palace. Shahryar refuses to believe the infidelity of his queen. At this Shahzaman asks him to furtively spy on the queen. Finding the charge true, Shahryar proposes to renounce the world till he meets another husband suffering the same destiny. Both travel far and wide and reach a sea-shore to ake rest under a tree. Suddenly they see a giant with a large box on his head. A beautiful lady comes out of the box and offers her lap to the giant to sleep. As the giant goes in deep sleep, the lady tells them her whole story as how she has been forcibly carried away by the giant on her bridal night. Since then she has been befooling the giant by committing adultery in his presence though being imprisoned in a box. At this both the brothers decide to return to their royal life. They believe that no woman is chaste as both find their wives committing adultery. On returning Shahyar first orders the execution of his wife and other slaves who were engaged in the naked lecherous activities. Then he makes a hideous plan to take the revenge. The way to take revenge is that the sultan decides to marry a
virgin every night and gets her killed in the morning so that disloyalty can be stopped. This created a terror in the whole kingdom. So Scheherzad, wazir's daughter, a witty and courageous one, takes the task in her hands. She starts narrating a tale, full of adventures and leaves the story in between so that sultan, in order to listen to the end of the story, postpones her execution. In the process she weaves a continuous thread that makes her survive for one thousand and one nights, after which sultan renounces his cruel vow of taking lives of the damsels. Dunyazad, her younger sister is married to Shahzaman and the order is restored. Thus Shaharzad is able to save the lives of many innocent maidens. The story ends with a happy note that the couples will live happily ever.

*When Dreams Travel* consists of two parts. In Part one, the full development of the main plot of the original text is summarized. The set of fourteen tales, organized in seven pairs, is described in part two. Hariharan deconstructs the common sense notion and deals with the unrevealed details of the story. She questions the so-called peaceful assumptions of the original text. It can be said that Hariharan's deconstruction of the original text starts where the summary of the original text ends in part one of *When Dreams Travel*. In the first chapter of Part One titled 'In the Embrace of Darkness,' the writer retells the age old story of the canonized text. The novel tells a different story is clearly indicated by the last line of the first chapter: "The story ends on-stage. Off-stage it has just begun." In Hariharan's text, each of the seven tales told by Dunyazad develops one aspect of the previous Shaharyar and Shaharzad's story.

The introductory section presents Shaharzad as the only character gifted with golden tongue. She, while playing the role of a gambler, behaves as if she were not frightened at all.

She throws back her neck, holds her goblet high and drinks deeply, eyes shut. What she does not swallow she holds for a moment or two, rolling the liquid in her mouth as if she is tasting it for the last time. Then she wets her lips with her tongue and begins again (p.6).

Shaharzad is a fighter as she knows that she has to be a savior. Her tongue holds the destiny of her own as well as the destiny of many other innocent maidens. Hariharan indirectly raises the question of male supremacy. Since childhood men are given the advantage to rule. They are made to believe that they represent law and justice and once this patriarchal law is established, they become symbols of authority. Here both the brothers, Shaharyar and Shahzaman, are filled with the spirit to rule and to become the distributor of justice.
Two kings mounted on their thoroughbred horses, from that height surveying the world around them, dispensing what is right or wrong. Shahyar and Shahzaman must have become aware quite early in their lives of their entanglement with justice, and that they, with the advantage of height, could dispense it as they chose (p. 9).

This height is not only the symbol of their administrative powers but also the power of male hegemony with which they have the productive authority of 'gender'. In later life the only way to impart justice that occurs to them is to marry a virgin every night and get her killed in the morning. For them women means only material enjoyed and destroyed.

Saharzad, however, is clever, ambitious and quick-tongued and with the help of her silent sister, Dunyazad, she persuades Shahayar to repent and make them acknowledge that all women need not be killed. Here the writer shows the strength of a determined woman:

He (the Sultan) has been brought to his senses by a woman; and with, of all things, her stories; her ready tongue, her cleverness. In this abnormal climate where imagination—through the medium of the word—asserts its power over the bloodshedding sword, everyone forgives everyone (p.21).

As she is 'born of the city', she cares for the city by putting her life in danger. She becomes a manager and carefully manages all affairs. She presents a picture of a witty woman who can make her own way and boldly refuses to submit. The way she concocts stories leads us towards the consciousness of the writer as to how Hariharan blends past and present and thus weave a meaningful story. This multi-layered story has many deep questions that force the reader to think about the western colonization, misogynistic approaches prevalent in the texts and the Third World difference.

The second section of the novel throws light on the fact that thousand and one nights are over. Dunyazad is married to Shahzaman and is widowed now. She gets news in Samarkand that Shaharyar is getting a tomb built in the memory of Shaharzad. What actually has happened to Shaharzad is not known. So Dunyazad travels to Shahbad to get the mystery explored. This tomb reminds one of Taj Mahal, a mausoleum built in the city of Agra by the Mughal emperor Shahjahan in the memory of his wife who died in 1631. This beautiful monument on the banks of Yamuna takes the name Mahal from Mumtaj Mahal. The monument is a piece of exquisite art and cultural refinement. It is built in pure, white marble and its interior decorations include arabesque engravings with precious stones. This mausoleum is a symbol of cultural exchange.
and shared heritage. It is also considered as one of the Seven Wonders of the World. Hariharan gives a similar picture of the monument of Shaharzad by Shaharyar without any name. Shahryar remembers and praises Shahrzad only for her chastity, again a virtue of woman in patriarchal construction, and not for her intelligence. Dunyazad hears about the plan for the tomb. He explains:

The large numbers of people who have been supervising its execution, the brilliant architects, calligraphers, engineers and artisans whom Shahryar has drafted into service as his team. There is one especially gifted calligrapher who has been seized and transported to Shahabad from a distant, captured city. Shahryar has promised him liberty once the tomb is inscribed with the most tender, holy and beautiful words known to man (p. 60).

By getting the tomb built, Shahryar wants to prove to the world his love for his wife. He, who is known as Sultan of justice and later turns into a Sultan of bloody honor, is now keen to prove himself as the Sultan of love. He says:

"I will show the world how much a man can love a woman. I am building a memorial that will do justice to my love for Shahrzad. And it must do more – it must teach generations to come what a chaste woman is" (p. 59).

Hariharan has sketched this widely known text to peep through the cultural heritage and gender difference. Male sexuality connected with oppression is exposed in the novel. The chastity of a woman is another quality in the patriarchal construction of the society. A woman is always treated as an 'object', the other and can never be a 'subject' which is a peculiar possession of a male. Regarding this, Fiona Tolan speaks:

De Beauvoir, however, argued that woman is always situated as the other to man. The man is always the subject-self, the 'I', whilst the woman is always the object, the other. This belief, she continued, permeates human history, and informs the whole of Western philosophical thought. It is, for example, central to the work of the famous psychoanalyst, Sigmund Freud, who based his theory of sexuality on the possession of the phallus/penis. A man is a man because he possesses the phallus; a woman is, simply, not a man. Therefore, a woman is a lack, a negative-she lacks the phallus that confers subjectivity. This lack of the female self can also be detected in art and literature, where women frequently appear as objects of men's desires or fears-metaphorical virgins or whores- but never complex autonomous individuals.¹⁸
For Shahryar, Shahrzad is only the ‘other’. He never remembers Shahrzad for love or her wit but wants to show off his love so that it can be recorded in the history. Shahrzad is never treated as an individual but always as an object to prove virginity. It is the wit of Shahrzad that saves her and the other damsels. Otherwise before Shahrzad could take the position of a survivor; many innocents were slaughtered to prove their innocence.

The blood-dripping sword in the hands of Shahzaman is the symbol of power in the hands of the male. Shahzaman seems to be insecure and suspicious man who is afraid of darkness. It is the darkness of the sexual insecurity, hatred for women and his lack of confidence in his own power. Shahzaman means Shah of Time, ruler of the age. He does not seem to live up to his name. His feeling of sexual insecurity does not let him rule the dark continent of his mind.

Dunyazad travels to the city of Shahbad where she meets Dilshad, personal slave of Shahrzad. It is these two women and their search for Shahrzad that constitutes the main elements of the plot. Dilshad acts as a catalytic agent to strengthen the doubts of Dunyazad regarding the disappearance of Shahrzad. She has a peculiar date-shaped mark at the side of her mouth. On being asked, she narrates the story. The mark was a parting gift from a freakish poet Satyasama, a rare slave. She had fur all over her body. Due to her truthful poems, she was ordered death by the king. But the executioner spared her life out of sympathy and was put into a merchant’s boat. Later on she became a favourite of Shahryar’s court but fell in love with one of the eunuchs. This was a serious offence and thus she was imprisoned in a windowless room. Her passion was the open sky and without it, the poet began to fade away. Dilshad was her nurse and this mark was a parting kiss that she had given her. This mark has now become a symbol of the poet who spoke truth. This story of Satyasama is again discussed from a different angle in part two of the story under the title “Nine Jewels for a Rani”. The character of Satyasama is an invention of Hariharan as she says:

Satyasama was also necessary because I wanted to have a link to India. In a sense I was playing Dunyazad. And If Shahrzad was to become real for me and I was to become her silent sister, I had to create a character who would—and even her name Satya is from Sanskrit and it means truth and sama is from the Arabic and it means the sky—show the fact that actually our heritage is like this. I did want to combine the Hindu and Islamic strands as experienced in day-to-day life in India. Nobody tells you that this strand what you know is Hindu in origin. This is it: it all comes to you mixed up. It was this subtext as well, when I was looking at the different versions and trying to make them heard.19
Dunyazad weaves cobwebs for the love of her sister Shahrzad. In the beginning she has played the role of an audience, the prompter, the chorus, the heckler but now she is back as battle has not yet finished. She has learnt many things from her savior sister and enters the palace of Shahabad in a male disguise. She meets Sahiba, the old nurse-maid who helps her in undressing the male disguise. On being asked about the death of Shahrzad, Sahiba refuses to give any satisfactory answer. This further strengthens the doubt in the mind of Dunyazad. She gets a message from Sultan Shahryar but remains in dilemma about meeting him. After considering the situation, she, at last decides to meet him. The whole night she dreams of travelling through tunnels and palaces as if in search of something. This search symbolizes the search of her self. She spends the whole night festered with memories. Next day she goes to meet her brother-in-law. Once again Dunyazad plays the role of a silent listener as Shahryar speaks about his precious love for his queen and how he would demonstrate this love to the whole world. The next meeting is more intriguing where instead of giving the answers to the queries, both of them silently challenged each other adding knots in their afterlife.

Dilshad shows wooden chest of Shahrzad to Dunyazad which the Sultan himself has presented her. Dunyazad finds an old ivory-framed mirror in that chest. While looking into the mirror, she sees a reflection of her self. She finds herself different from her savior sister Shahrzad. The hammam drifts her into the sweet memories of her childhood spent with her sister and mother Raziya. The memories travel to the sad arena of her mother’s death. Her death has a different image in Dunyazad’s eyes:

She saw her mother’s heart for a moment before it was shrouded from sight and buried forever. And what she saw was not a broken sprig, but a chamber where outrage swelled the air, stretched it to grotesque dimensions till the tightly packed, thin skinned balloon of a place exploded the aftermath of an enraged heart. (p.84)

Once separated, the mother and the daughters never met each other. Dunyazad feels the pain of her mother’s heart and imagines her mother screaming against the injustice done to her daughters. In reality it is the outrage and anger in the mind of Dunyazad which has long been suppressed in her heart and now wants to rebel. Hariharan through the silenced woman in the text exposes the injustice cut off from the pages of the original text.

In order to take revenge, Dunyazad goes to any extent which proves that a woman is like Nature: destroyer and preserver. She needs to have a rightful place in life as it may lead to the
welfare of entire mankind or it can lead to disastrous results. As the quietness of Dunyazad in the
beginning of the novel is like the deceptive silence before the storm, it brings a great disaster
with it. Dunyazad, in order to retaliate, drifts into a plan with Prince Umar, Shahrazad’s son, to
overthrow Shahryar, his own father, in order to have inner peace. To her Prince Umar seems to
reflect the spirit of her father, the wazir and her mother Raziya.

The disappearance of Shahrazad symbolizes the disappearance of women from generation
to generation in the historical facts. The suppression of the feminine culture and the domination
of the male culture are responsible for the absence of women in history. Githa Harisharan deftly
presents this fact before the reader through Dunyazad. Dunyazad longs to see her name in the
incomplete phrase written on the epitaph in the memory of Shahrazad. Though the different roles
of Shahrazad related to male are engraved on the waves of time, the name of Dunyazad is
nowhere. She reads: “Here lies Shahrazad, Beloved Consort of Sultan Shahryar, Daughter of the
Chief Wazir to the Sultan of Shahbad, Mother of Prince Umar and the departed Prince Jaffar” (p.
49).

Prince Umar is fed up with the waste of money and the despotic rule of the father. Hariharan repeatedly makes the reader remind of the famous Eastern cultural references in
telling her tales and thus she highlights the presence and position of Eastern cultural references
and the importance of East in the world culture represented in architecture and literature. The
male supremacy over the female is another shared cultural heritage which is beneath the surface.
Hariharan explores the hatred of women so obvious in the story.

Two royal heads, writes Shahyar, may sleep on the same pillow, but two rulers cannot
live in the same kingdom’. It is not clear at first whether the second head belongs to
Umar or Shahrazad. But Shahryar seems to have almost forgotten about Umar, so muted
are his complaints about his imprisonment. It is the past that is vulnerable to a string of
shril questions. ‘How could I not rule over her? How could I not rule? How could I not
join myself to her if it meant my salvation?’ (p. 104).

Story telling as women’s tradition is a cultural reference established in *When Dreams Travel*. In
the novel male characters are silent and they listen to the tales that are told to them by women.
Women are not allowed to move outside in the world as they dream. Through their dreams only
they travel. They travel into the world created by their imagination where they are allowed a
voice. Shahryar wants to know the source of Shahrazad’s tales. She replies: “I don’t have a sword,
so it seems I cannot rule. I cannot rule, I cannot travel, I don’t care to weep. But I can dream” (p. 20). Describing her dreams she says:

My dreams? They’re nothing- just a rubbissy pile of rough, uncut stones.’ She turns to her sister, Dunyazad. Between them passes a swift, secretive look. ‘Besides,’ adds Shahrzad, darting a teasing look at Shahryar, ‘only those locked up in hovels and dungeons and palaces can see and hear these dreams. Only those whose necks are naked and at risk can understand them (p. 20).

Shahrzad feels that her dreams can only be understood by those who are at risk and are locked up in hovels and dungeons. The women who can take risk and make up for the absence of sword (a clear phallic symbol associated with power), are entitled to understand the dreams. Shahrzad, a witty one, created different worlds of imagination to save her life and the life of the innocent maidens. Shahrzad, from the position of victim in the original text where she is remembered as trying to survive and then provide the source of entertainment for the generations to come, becomes manager and holds the scene in Hariharan’s text. She becomes the symbol of the empowerment of women in When Dreams Travel. In part two of the novel two women, Dunyazad and Dilshad are the active story tellers.

Shahrzad knows that her golden tongue can save the destiny of many other women. Her risk-taking goes beyond the spirit of martyr. Her imagination holds the death at bay. Her wonderful felicity with imagination leads the reader to the magic and labyrinthine of the writer’s imagination. The way she invents and connects stories, helps in lightening up the dark and forgotten continents of a reader’s mind. For instance, Hariharan explores how the male ego of Shahryar and Shahzaman heals after discovering that there is another person also who has been more abused than them. “What comfort to discover a shame larger than one’s own!” (p.15).

Hariharan focuses on the women’s version of the tale which has been prohibited for centuries. Shahrzad is a savior and Hariharan searches for the expression of the desire for unmapped territory to recuperate women’s voices. Shahrzad has exiled herself from the unreliable sea of feminine consciousness.

To go to the wazir’s room, where books, plans, men and their seductive powers awaited her, she had to cross the invisible line that edged her mother’s wing. Behind this shoreline lay a sea of predictable movement, bodies swelling and going flaccid, bodies dripping blood or milk, bodies coming together In sticky embrace, bodies heaving and
pushing to come apart. Shahrzad had to leave behind this monotonous, womanish sea, this watery womb, and put her foot on land (p. 68).

Hariharan relates the dreams as a source of power even to all the women. Shahrzad says: “The powerless must have a dream or two, dreams that break walls, dreams that go through walls as if they are powerless” (p. 25).

The dreams are made more and more powerful so that the stories can be rectified to make justice to Shahrzad’s memory. Dunyazad, her younger sister and Dilshad, her personal slave, inherit her dreams and it is their search for Shahrzad that becomes the crux of the story. The sisterhood of women triumphs over every despotic authority. The impending fate of Shahrzad is the question that is prevailing throughout the novel. Hariharan throws light on the fact through Dunyazad who muses over the disappearance of Shahrzad, questions herself as to how bold woman can ever be content behind the closed doors of harem. The other possibility erupts like the discovery of a beautiful ivory mirror among the things of Shahrzad. Dilshad deliberately shows this mirror to Dunyazad. This mirror has been given to Shahrzad by a young man. The hint of romance provided by Dilshad makes Dunyazad to have a vision of Shahrzad and the young man in the carefree mood. Shahrzad’s eloping with the young man could also be one of the reasons of her disappearance. This also is the escape from the palace, the symbol of patriarchy and the despotic control of her husband.

It is a historical fact that Aurangzeb killed his brother, his father and sat on the throne but his way of ruling became the decadence of once mighty ruling Mughal Dynasty, which ended with his death. Similarly in When Dreams Travel Prince Umar, with the help of Dunyazad imprisons his father in the same mausoleum that he (Shahryar) is getting built for the queen. Prince Umar speaks: “Your time is past, father. Now you should - if it is not too late – turn your thoughts to the all-merciful and plead forgiveness for your sins” (p. 102).

Dunyazad feels that now her task is over and she plans to go back to Samarkand. Here ends the first part of the novel. Shahrzad’s telling stories for meaningfulness becomes the source of inspiration for other women. Dunyazad and Dilshad tell stories to each other to throw light on the multiple meaning of the possibilities of the male chauvinistic world in part two of the novel.
In part two Dunyazad and Dilshad tell tales to each other. These tales are the comments and expressions on the main narrative. Dilshad and Dunyazad are the lively tale tellers in part two. They are free to tell the stories without any danger of being their heads chopped off. These tales throw light on the post colonial and feminist aspects.

In the first story of part two, Shahrzad is shown pregnant and is ready to deliver. The personal sufferings of Shahrzad are described in detail in this story. The description of her biological procreation and her feelings of being a mother as well as to reach the Sultan’s bed at the stipulated time even after bearing the pains of delivery are touching. Dunyazad, in sisterly affection, offers to take her sister’s place in the bed of sultan but Shahrzad does not allow her to do so.

Dunyazad will take her place. Her enigmatic sister knows how to wait, poised like a feline hunter stalking her prey. And her sister’s motive is simpler than her own; she wants to save Shahrzad as much as Shahrzad wants to save the city. But will her sister, taciturn, quick to anger, be able to talk all night? (p. 129).

Shahrzad’s risk-taking capacity to the extent of danger is endless as she does not agree to Dunyazad’s suggestion that as Shahrzad has given birth to a male heir, Shahryar can be killed. Instead she remembers a saying used often by her mother: “If a serpent loves you, wear him as a necklace” (p. 130). This proverb acts like a guiding light to her. Shahrzad thus represents the perfect example of feminine identity acting as a savior of mankind. The different aspects of female psychology are repetitively narrated in the novel. Shahrzad weaves stories to save the lives of others just as Sita of The Thousand Faces of the Night who sacrifices her music for the welfare of her family. Both believe in the welfare of the family and society and, therefore, act as preservers. Dunyazad weaves cobwebs for the love of her sister Shahrzad. Dunyazad gets the information of the death of Shahrzad in Samarkand and travels to Shahabad to find out what happened to her sister.

The tale “Nine Jewels for a Rani” is about a monster. The one-eyed monkey woman, who is deformed and abandoned by her parents, behaves in ways differently from the other girls. She loves to climb trees and stare at moon light. Her name is Satyasama. As she is stricken by lightening, she loses one of her eyes. But she concentrates more on what she sees with remaining one eye and starts singing while sitting on a tree. The Eternals like her singing and even leave
some coins in a plate by the tree. But then Eternal city is divided into Eastwallahs and Westwallahs. The Eastwallahs love sunrise and Westwallahs love sunset. All are happy till the problem arises. They both believe that birdsong can influence the moods of sunrise and sunset. As long as one-eye sings simple, silly songs, she is left alone for “all the world loves a simple fool” (p. 142). They even leave some coins in a tin plate near the tree. Then she falls in love with Rani. The Rani wants love songs that would light up a mind. So one-eye creates beautiful poems about the sky and the light of day and night. Another thing that happens is that there are changes in the climate of Eternal city and the Eternals suffer from sunstrokes to such an extent that they have melted their brains. When they cool down, they take different contorted shapes. These grotesque brains have a method and believe that they no longer can share the sky. They create the departments of Shame, Fear and Loneliness (SFL). One-Eye sings of peace and balance of Day and Night but SFL just see danger in these songs. As she mixes day and night in her songs, she is asked not to sing. She refuses to shut up and as a result she is put in prison for one year. Further she is instructed not to sing in future after getting freedom. On the contrary in the first night of freedom, she sings whole heartedly and is caught and “chopped, limb by limb”. When the Eternals return to dispose of the pieces, the trunk begins to moan. Some of them feel puzzled but others remain there with their prayer beads and weapons to insult her. This moan is so agonizing that Eternals wish that they are either deaf or could go into exile somewhere.

This tale of “Nine Jewels for a Rani” itself reveals the intricacy of the writing of Githa Hariharan. From the feministic point of view, Hariharan connotes that day and night complement each other even in their difference. Though men and women are biologically and psychologically different yet they complement each other while enjoying their own peculiar differences. Still a woman is always treated as subordinate. In the above-said tale till One-Eye sings simple songs, she is appreciated. All the people love a simple performing fool. On the other hand when “she sang of storms; of changes in the sky; of the eternal marriage between east and west, the departments of Shame, Fear and Loneliness became powerful in the city (p. 144).

The patriarchal structure of the society as envisaged in “Nine Jewels for a Rani” never allows woman to grow properly. She is never allowed to express her feelings freely. When One-Eye tries to speak her mind, she is punished. “Only complete silence would earn her the right to be a free citizen of Eternal City” (p. 148).
The male-dominated society irrespective of place, caste and creed, suppress the feelings of woman. When woman starts raising questions and enters the forbidden areas and meditates over different aspects of life, lightening strikes their visionary eye. Monkey face, after the lightning strikes her one eye, gets confidence and start singing. She has been tried to stop and the departments of SFL become powerful in the city. One-Eye sings of peace, the necessity of both sunrise and sunset, the undeniable necessity of day and night but SFL see only danger in her songs. She is forbidden which clearly refers to suppress the otherness. The art in different forms moan for the peaceful co-existence which is as precious as any beautiful piece of jewellery. One-Eye, till her last sigh, weaves cobwebs for peaceful existence.

In Dunyazad’s story ‘A lover, a Tomb’ Shahyar’s sufferings are shown after being deposed by his son. He is now imprisoned in the tomb of his own making. He is slowly sinking unnoticeably into death. However he is not at all guilty over the years of bloodshed in the past. He feels that it was he who made Shahrzad the martyr. He had given her the title ‘Sultana’ and also came to admire her for her chastity. One day when he realized that Sultana was turning wily, he felt that one must lose the game:

The thought came to Shahryar one day that this most chaste of women, Wise Shahrzad, was turning into Wily Shahrzad. One of them had to win. Shahrzad disappeared; he mourned her deeply (p. 159).

Shahyar mourns her deeply by constructing a mausoleum in her memory. He tries to remember her face which ‘is complex, composite picture that looks at him gravely’ (p.160). Dunyazad’s stories are reminiscences of the thousand and one nights.

In another story ‘The Well Constructed Lie’, Dilshad hears about the fifth wanderer of the world which is ‘A testament of the nobility of man and the heights he can reach’. On her visit to that monument she hears the story related to that monument by a donkey and a monkey. According to them Azhar, the connoisseur in sword and Mazhar, an expert in writing inscription, have built this minar, building each storey of the minar symbolizing their life’s achievements. When the minar seems to be touching the sky, they become old by then. They feel happy to see the minar as the memorable story of their triumph. Later on both beastly story tellers start quarreling about who is the hero of the story. Donkey favours Azhar and the monkey supports Mazhar. A pebble on the ground is asked to judge. The pebble describes few details which have
been escaped by them. He adds: “The higher you go, the more the damn things need building” (p. 166). He further explains that when Azhar and Mazhar come to realize that they are still not close to the clouds as they had hoped, they fall into the valley of despair.

Realizing the truth, Azhar looks down and falls to his death and Mazhar, after a few years, loses his mental state speaking all kinds of gibberish. Both Donkey and Monkey are enraged by this postscript and begin to kick around the pebble. Dilshad comes to rescue the pebble and with her wit outrun them. The story ends with their cursing Dilshad. Thus in the story Hariharan brings forth the way the power structure works. The well built lies in the patriarchal structure have been supported by the sycophants. These lies are constructed so powerfully that to match them is beyond human capacity.

There it was, smooth, rounded, glinting, the marble phallus that thrust its way into the sky. It invited her to come forward and be dwarfed by its audacious size and its celebration of flawless, manly beauty (p.164).

Simone de Beauvoir writes:

Since patriarchal times women have in general been forced to occupy a secondary place in the world in relation to men, a position comparable in many respects with that of racial minorities in spite of the fact that women constitute numerically at least half of the human race, and further that this secondary standing is not imposed of necessity by natural feminine characteristics but rather by strong environmental forces of educational and social tradition under the purposeful control of men.20

A woman in this power structure never thinks of herself to equal the power that is constructed so high beyond her vision. In this male chauvinism, the design and the inscription have remained in the hands of man. These monuments are so well constructed in the history that they become the story of man’s triumph. They have been built so skillfully that any effort to explore the truth invites the wrath of the society. Both power and the testaments of the society have remained in the hands of man and this aspect further strengthens the notion of disappearance of women in the history.

“Rupavati’s Breasts” is another tale about the three different versions of the same story told by an old couple and Satyasama. Satyasama is in pursuit of knowledge and she meets an old couple. The old woman tells her the story of Lord Buddha who was born to a young woman
called Rupavati. Rupavati tears her breasts off to feed the hungry woman who is about to eat her own child due to hunger. Rupavati’s heroic deed gets her breasts back. On her request to Indra she is turned into a man called Rupavata. Then in another birth as Chandraprabha he gives up every inch of his flesh to a hungry tigress who is about to devour her own cub. This version of the story is rejected by the old man as he tells:

‘Facts,’ he snarled at the old woman. ‘You have all your facts wrong. How dare you pollute this house with such unrealistic lies? Listen—and correct yourself before it’s too late’ (p.181).

According to him, Buddha never chooses to be a woman as he is not in favour of the entry of women in sangha. To him the life span of sangha would dwindle to half after the entry of women. So Buddha is born as a man Rupavata. He saves a woman and a child from dying of hunger and later on he marries the same woman whom he names Rupavati and adopts the child. The couple lives happily but the son grows out to be an ungrateful person and, with the company of other discontented lot, he hits his own father. Rupavati plucks her breast as she has milked such an ungrateful son. Rupavata stops her from doing so and prays to Indra to keep her one-breasted. His wish is granted and as long as she remains one-breasted, Rupavata is safe from enemies.

Satyasama sifts both the versions with her own sieve and tells another tale. Once a young Brahmin, Chandraprabha takes shelter in the house of a couple Rupavata and Rupavati. As they have been sleeping, Chandraprabha’s wife and her child wail outside the hut due to hunger. Chandraprabha is a Brahmin and tells the ignorant couple that Rule 3112 of the written law says that a woman is the source of life so Rupavati should pluck out her breasts and feed one each. Instead of obeying, Rupavati grapples to Chanderprabha’s ears and plants the ears into the soil and the earth pushes up tender ears of corn and with that they go back to their routine.

After listening to the version of Satyasama’s story, the old couple whisks Satyasama away with broom and stick. Even after getting bruises, she is happy as she walks ahead keeping her back upright. Andrew Roberts argues: “The project of articulating women’s experience includes the rediscovery of the unrecorded, of what has been omitted from the conventional histories and novels.”

21
This patriarchal construction of the stories that include the religious aspects following the ideological constructions based on moral and ethical principles of life, force to adopt power structure. Any deviation from them gets the anger of the society. The old woman’s version in the story is rejected by the old man as based on false facts. He narrates his own version which is accepted by the woman as completely subservient and obedient to her husband. The couple reacts very strongly to the version of Satyasama which is against the patriarchal construction of the society. Chitra Sankaran says in this regard: “Harihanan by merging myth and parody, past and present seems to signal to us that all reality comes to us filtered through language and that language is linked to power.”

Harihanan points out the proof of the religion given by Chanderprabha to gain his own selfish ends. Different laws of the religion demand sincerity and sacrifice from women for the welfare of society. Analyzed between the lines, the corrupted versions are quoted to achieve their own selfish purposes. And all the narrations are written to suit their own needs.

Another story “The Woman under the Deadly Skin” resembles the story of Shahrzad. The tale contains two versions of the story which is similar to the possibilities of the disappearance of Shahrzad. Poison skin, the main character, unawares made to drink poison every day, until her skin becomes poisonous to kill the enemy. In the first version when she comes to know the reality, she, instead of killing the enemy, opts for the pure life of recluse in chastity.

‘Wait,’ she said. ‘You are a man made to be loved, but I – my skin – there is an evil in me, a poison that will destroy you. No man should touch me till the day I die. Though I long for love as much as you do, I must take a vow of chastity for ever’ (p.206).

In the second version the poison skin could poison only the enemies. When she gets fed up with this life, she escapes back to her original place. She finds that a handsome goatherd who has been snake bitten, is about to die. She makes love to him and discovers that her poison subsides and the life of the shepherd is safe. In both the versions Poison Skin tries to weave cobwebs for meaningfulness. She goes back to her roots and opts for chastity to find meaning of ‘self’ whereas in the second version she tries to make the life of others meaningful. When she loves out of compassion, she no more remains a poison woman. Shahrzad, in the novel discussed above also tries to save the life of other maidens.
Hariharan in the story suggests that since ages woman has been used as the object to gain selfish ends. In the story, poison woman is made poisonous to gain the selfish ends of the minister. But her consciousness does not allow her to kill others and she opts for the life of chastity as Shahrzad opts for harem. In the other version, though she tries to fulfill the purpose of the minister by killing the enemies but soon she gets fed up and escapes to live a life of compassion throwing a hint on one of the reasons for the disappearance of Shahrzad. One of the reasons of Shahrzad’s disappearance is her escaping away from the palace to join a lower class young man.

In “The Chameleon on the Wall”, Dilshad, while travelling on the arid landscape, comes across a high-pitched singing voice of a woman. Balancing dangerously she somehow manages to enter the mansion where an ordinary girl is singing. The girl requests Dilshad to stay there and help her to rescue. Her brother, an angry fellow spies on her in spite of the fact that she has been locked-up. She starts telling story to the lizard hanging on to the wall blocking Dilshad out of the view of the screen where her brother’s hiding post is. In her story there is a young woman who is wooed by different men who gives her different gifts including a son born out of her ear, a little slave, a pot that would never empty the food and a special parting gift by a hermit who says her to “Be always what a man desires” (p. 250). When asked about the best gift, Dilshad returns the pot whereas the voice behind the screen claims for the gift of restoration of woman’s beauty and chastity.

Just then they heard a yell from behind the screen: ‘What! How can you be so stupid? It was the hermit who restored the woman’s beauty and her chastity. She became what a man desires, and do you know a man who doesn’t desire a chaste woman?’ (p. 250).

At this half the screen collapses. Then the girl starts telling another story which ends at the question who is more powerful—the chaste man or a pure woman? It is suggested that a chaste woman is more powerful. As the man agrees angrily to the answer, the wall breaks down and the girl escapes. This story makes the reader remember the first scene of part one “In the Embrace of Darkness”. It is the women who invent and tell stories to save life. Dunyazad plays the role of supporter and helper to Shahrzad. Here Dilshad helps to rescue the ordinary girl. Behind the screen is Shahzaman, holding the sword in his hand. The brother in the tale is behind the screen, spying over her sister. The only justice lies in either to lock the women or to murder them for the wrong done by them. Every time the chastity is to be proved. All the questions raised lead to the
patriarchal construction of the society where a woman is considered a subaltern, a thing or commodity. She is not given the right place due to the fear and doubt in the mind of man which Githa Hariharan projects in the characters of Shahzaman and the brother of the ordinary girl. Even Ravana, who wanted to win over Sita, was suggested to disguise himself as Rama to have Sita. But he refused to do so for the reason that he would not be able to maintain the purity of thought which would come with the thought of Rama.

It is not only the despotic ruler Shahryar and Shahzaman who are responsible for creating disorder by killing the virgins but Hariharan suggests that the society is also to have its share. Shahryar faces the serious threats of rebellion or the anger of the society. Shahrzad plays the game which she and her younger sister along with other friends have used to play in their childhood; and has named this game ‘The Martyr’s Walk’. They desire to be heroines realizing that they have to confront their killer, preparing to die.

But it is always a man who waits for them and he has something sharp in his hand, something that draws blood. Otherwise where are the terror and the excitement and the hard-won martyrdom? (p. 53).

Shahrzad faces the consequences. Dunyazad, the younger sister, is made to look back years later that it was always Shahrzad who did everything before her. Nothing is left for her to do. However she is the part of the plan made by Shahrzad to face the Sultan. Dunyazad who is the secondary character in the original tale is brought to the fore by Hariharan in When Dreams Travel Part two. Dunyazad’s tales are about her family and are the comments on the main narrative. Mohua Ghosh compares the original text to the novel written by Hariharan as:

The stories told in the legend and the novels are completely different. In the Arabian Nights the stories told are all related to male adventures and heroism. But they represented women as wicked, traitors and debauchees, cruel and witch-like although they were supposedly told by a woman. Though this aspect is absent in When Dreams Travel in both the tales we see the stories pointing to the fact that women are objects of desire only. They are denied any sort of identity and recognition despite their talents. Even having such talents as to surpass men was considered an offence and women were tortured and cruelly punished for that. In the original text this is taken for granted; in the modern text this has been probed and challenged.

Dilshad’s last tale is about Shahrzad titled “The Morning After” throwing hint at the possibility of Shahrzad alive in the harem. “The Morning After” comes as revelation to the readers. It shows
Shahrzad, in an old and decrepit state in the harem under the care of young servant girls accomplishing her journeys from pot to bed. She finds it hard to sleep after confronting so many sleepless nights. In her dream she recalls her past, her becoming a story teller, a fighter to save herself from the danger of being killed. She revives her past, how she turned martyr from a virgin, how she mesmerized the king with her intelligence to save the kingdom. She is now, however, unwilling to remain trapped in the unpleasant past full of violence inflicted by the cruel despotic king on the innocent virgins. Now she is more worried about the present generation of women. This old queen warns her present generation to remain alert to face the challenges thrown by the patriarchal society. Mohua Ghosh writes in this regard:

The author of *When Dreams Travel* is uncertain about the place of women in today’s world. The pervasive rise of fundamentalism pins woman as its worst victim suggesting that her situation is a continuing reality through time and space. She wonders about further grim eventualities, which may be in store for the ‘second sex.’ Thus Hariharan does not conclude but ends her story connecting feminism with post-feminism evoking the struggle of the earlier women to caution the future ones to remain conscious.

The past-present-future continually shuttle each other finally curving into one another in a circle without any beginning or end. Shahrzad and her tales are survivors. They become myth, travelling across times and cultures to reach the modern woman to a different generation. Describing the role of fiction to reveal the change in the position of woman Hariharan says:

> What fiction can do is actually, is actually show that even when there is change, sometimes the change is only a veneer, that beneath that apparent change a lot of the old modes continue to function. They have adapted themselves, they have disguised themselves in different ways.

Using the orthodox society as the backdrop of her novel, Hariharan portrays the atrocities and violence inflicted upon women since ages. The situation of the female class has not yet improved. It has been a continuing reality though the old modes take the shape of new ones. Every generation has its own dilemma and pitfalls. The difficulties that they will have to face and how to overcome those difficulties is a big issue. This will decide their role in the progress of human race. What this old warrior says to young girls in time of peace sounds a warning and a challenge:

> I fought for myself, and yes, for you as well. And you – what will you do when your turn comes? When the drums roll, and the sword blunted with age, the rusty axe, wake up to be freshly sharpened? (p. 276).
Hariharan pushes the gender issue to the fore and reveals the patriarchal authority. She shapes up the elements of the legend to pursue the reality. She challenges the patriarchal male-centered history by standing for alternative views and sensibilities. She changes the course of the realm, the way ‘real’ history takes place. Her feminine insight is worth noting in this last tale. The patriarchal oppression and violence in the original text has never been questioned earlier. Hariharan openly interrogates and exposes the hidden and silent violence beneath this famous and highly acclaimed story. Deepsheekha Kotwal and Priyanka Gandotra write about the Indian English women writers as:

The contemporary writer has a special advantage as she herself has been exposed to the stresses and strains which the new Indian woman is subjected to and is trying to deconstruct stereotypes of the Devi and Mother India. Myth, legend and history are politically motivated narratives controlled by dominant discourse to perpetuate its ideology. The subjugated are either silenced or made complicit. The creative writer turns to revisioning of myth and history as it may provide metaphor and structures which may help explicate her present dilemmas and her personal story as well as that of other women."

Shahrzad tells stories under compulsion of male chauvinism. She remains in the harem during the day and at night the despotic Sultan’s prison is her fate. She attains no position as a wife or a mother. She is not allowed to enjoy her motherhood. She is forced to continue the work assigned to her. However her disappearance is questioned by Hariharan in the novel:

What will happen to you, Shahrzad, when the urgent need for storytelling, the demand for prolix invention, is withdrawn? Will you be satisfied with bedtime tales to your children? (p.133).

Hariharan criticizes the exchange of women in the system of power. In the original text women are presented as objects. Women used to have no identity. In When Dreams Travel, she exposes the brutality of treating a woman as an object in harems:

All kings are collectors. All of them, whether sultan or raja or chosen leader turned supreme. Their whims and preferences may vary, but most are partial to filling up their treasure vaults—with gems and coins, books copied out by scribes in letters of gold, or stallions, slaves and subjects. But the prize collection is not stowed away in the same vault. It is hidden in the harem, or zenana, or a special palace, or bedchamber. These valuable items are women of all shapes, colours and sizes (p.90).

The evils of the patriarchal society compel the reader to think. History itself needs to be rewritten from the subaltern perspectives. Her writing is more susceptible to change and more open to
variations. She tries to fathom the centre of the existence of the stories from the point of view of a woman writer. By providing twists and turns in narration, she paints different canvases of departure from the original texts. She reveals the several possibilities of meaning for one story. The feminist re-reading of *When Dreams Travel* leads to read between the lines of original text. There is a possibility that canonized versions are created to suit the patriarchal structures and the female versions are not allowed to flourish or corrupted by the misogynous interference. By exposing the truncated or omitted constructions, Githa Hariharan questions the faulty ideological male-dominated construction.
NOTES


3. Githa Hariharan, “Untitled Poem,” The Art of Dying (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1993) 1. (All further references in this chapter are to this book and they have been incorporated in the draft with page numbers).


