Chapter Two

Mummified Fragments:

Characters and Themes in Hariharan’s Novels

“Character in Literature is the always shifting and changing element that makes each story different no matter how similar the plot” (Bailey 26).

Hariharan’s first novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* is by design dominated by female characters. Hariharan’s projection of subservient male characters is a part of her ploy in her attempts to break the stereotype of Indian women. Hariharan attempts to renew the whole community of women through representation of myths. She has attempted to project a new sense of woman’s identity that transforms her status from the victimized to the empowered by conceptualizing the mother-daughter relationship. There is a clear shift from the poetics of suffering towards a poetics of individualistic empowerment as a noticeable trend in *The Thousand Faces of Night*. The interaction of gender identity and national identity is an important aspect of postcolonial women’s writings. Therefore, they are faced with a dual situation – rejecting essential national metaphors of feminine identity and simultaneously constructing a collective national identity for women. Here, Devi, the protagonist, is caught in the transition from tradition to modernity. The women portrayed in this novel reflect a sense of bewilderment and vulnerability. On the one hand, they are portrayed as symbols of growth and fertility and on the other they appear as symbols of withdrawal and regression. Till recently, the authors restricted their narratives to
the boundaries of the actual if they have to maintain the illusion of being true to life. Unlike the women writers who have been staying within the constraints of the realist norm, Hariharan suggests alternative modes of existence and explores alternative forms of linguistic experimentation. Critics have attempted to arrive at a definition of a specific set of feminine aesthetics based on the female biology and experience, e.g. themes like rape, childbirth, breast-feeding, menstruation, sexual assault etc. invariably create an aesthetics of suffering. In contrast to this, Hariharan's novel attempts to move from aesthetics of suffering towards aesthetics of joy.

For surveying feminine destiny from different angles, Hariharan has employed four different narrators – Devi, her mother Sita, her grandmother and Mayamma, the housekeeper. The novel can also be called a Mahabharata from the feminine perspective telling stories of Ganga, Gandhari and Amba, unlike the original, where stories of Karna, Arjuna or Bhima's stories were told. Yuganta written originally in Marathi by Iravati Karve and later translated into English by the author is an appropriate example of the retelling of the great epic from the feminine perspective. The only difference is that the latter is based on sociological research and the former is a result of the author's creative skillfulness. An attempt to tell the stories from the perspective of the female characters is a deliberate act by the author to break the stereotype of male narrators and also to reveal the hidden truth behind the traditional stories.

Devi, the protagonist, is the author's solution to the woman's condition in a patriarchal set-up. The author seeks solutions by subverting the existing social
patterns and values. Devi's quest for a self image and identity within the framework of the male-oriented social structure fails. Devi is fed with stories of mythical figures by her grandmother and Mayamma. Her grandmother consciously circumvents the more prominent figures of the Hindu myths – Sita or Savitri who are celebrated as epitomes of female virtue. Mayamma, the pragmatic storyteller, feeds her real stories based on her own life - a saga of unrelieved suffering. Devi’s grandmother interweaves the tales of mythological heroines like Gandhari, Damayanti, Amba and Ganga – female manifestation of anger, autonomy, revenge and determination with those of ordinary women – Sita, Uma and Gauri who epitomize female suffering. Hariharan’s description of the magical intimacy between Devi and the grandmother is symbolic of many possibilities that are open to all women through the mentor figures. Devi’s grandmother, her first teacher, imparts knowledge through purposeful re-telling of the forgotten mythological characters who contained great fury in them. Fed with these histories of her mythical ancestors, Devi enjoys a close and secure relation with them in her dreams and visions. She often visualizes herself as Devi riding a tiger setting out to destroy the mythical demon.

The mother-daughter relationship has also been redefined in this novel. Pam Morris admits that Luce Irigaray, the French critic is concerned with re-thinking the mother-daughter relationship. Irigaray states that within the symbolic order, this relationship is deformed and motherhood has a limited meaning in a patriarchal discourse. Irigaray does not aim at creating new language but to use existing languages to subvert the functioning of dominant representatives that put forth singular claims to truth. She is concerned with reviewing the prevailing images of
mother and daughter and the construction of other positive models. Devi turns to her grandmother and Mayamma, the housekeeper for inspiration rather than turning to her mother Sita, who fits the ideal description of womanhood in the patriarchal set-up. *The Thousand Faces of Night* challenges essential, generalizing definitions of the mother-daughter bond. In contrast to isolation and loneliness as the only responses to woman’s condition in a patriarchy, Hariharan brings forth solutions that propose rejuvenation and joy in a set of different circumstances that subvert existing social patterns and values. In *The Thousand Faces of Night*, it is the stifling presence of the mother as a social figure in a patriarchal set-up that makes the protagonist question her Self.

*The Thousand Faces of Night* is the story of Devi’s quest for identity when she fails to define her identity within the framework of the male-oriented social structures i.e., as a wife in an arranged marriage or even as a rebellious lover. She finally returns to her mother, “to stay and to fight, to make sense of it all,” (TFN 139) and to start afresh a new life. It is in her relationship to her mother that Devi hopes to find an identity for herself. Devi is in the process of ‘becoming’ on her own terms and her story is interwoven with the narratives of Sita and Mayamma; Sita, personifying perfect motherhood and Mayamma whose motherhood is socially defined. The failed stories of Sita and Mayamma are incorporated into the main story of Devi’s life. Devi is portrayed as a passive listener to the legends of the mythical heroines narrated by her grandmother; the stories of wives of saints and other ideal women recounted to her by her father-in-law; real life experiences of actual women either observed by Devi directly or narrated by her housekeeper Mayamma. When she turns a narrator
herself she rewrites these stories within her own life-story and in the process of doing so she actually releases the forgotten women of the past into the written record of history. By doing so, Devi pays a rich tribute to the three mentors in her life—her grandmother, mother Sita and her housekeeper, Mayamma.

The Grandmother, who lives through Devi’s memory in the novel, was her first teacher. Devi’s initial phase of growing up was profoundly influenced by her. Grandmother’s ability to re-tell stories of the tales of the forgotten women of the past—Damayanti, Gandhari, Amba and Ganga making subtle connections between the profound and awe-inspiring lives of the mythological women and sordid stories of real women around her fascinates Devi. In her grandmother’s stories:

...there was room only for heroes and heroines. Princesses grew up secure in the knowledge of what awaited them: love, a prince who was never short of noble, and a happy ending....She twisted it, and turned it inside out and cooked up her own home-made yardsticks for life (TFN 20).

All the heroines of her grandmother’s stories were strong women who staged their protest against exploitation in their own powerful ways. Gandhari’s fury is hidden behind the thick bandage she tied over her own eyes opting to share the darkness of her blind husband’s world. Amba is a female avenger, who transformed the fate that overtook her into a triumph and avenged herself against her offender, Bhishma. Ganga, who drowned her children and walked out of marriage when the
terms of marriage were broken, represents female determination. Damayanti’s Swayamvara is the ultimate celebration of the autonomy of woman as the princess chooses to marry the man she loves even against Divine interference. The more prominent figures of the Hindu myths – Sita, Savitri, Mandori, Ahalya or Anasuya are often celebrated as epitomes of female virtues and pativratas. The histories of these mythical characters turn her into a dreamer. In her dreams and visions she encounters her mythical heroines and deities and entities of the other world. She often sees herself as Devi riding a tiger setting out to cut off evil and mythical demons. She becomes a woman warrior ordained for the redemption of women.

Devi’s mother, Sita, fits the ideal description of womanhood. The name Sita is symbolic of an ideal wife, mother and daughter-in-law. She is self-effacing and denies herself her ‘womanness’ (symbolized by her violent renunciation of her music) in order to be an ideal wife and ideal daughter-in-law. While walking on one single path to a single goal – wifehood, she does not hesitate to tear the strings off the wooden base of her veena.

When she cut herself off the clandestine link with the past, a foolish young girl’s dreams of genius and fame, she made a neat surgical cut. She seemed to forget, along with the stringless veena condemned to dumbness, her own mother, father, the gurus of her childhood. She wrote them the occasional duty-dictated letter, but she could never find a time convenient enough to revisit the town where they still lived or to indulge in a narcissist voyage to the small claustrophobic home replete with dated, obsolete memories (TFN 104).
By giving up her veena she was giving up Saraswati, to take on another goddess, the most ferocious of all, Kali. Sita meticulously planned the lives of her husband, her daughter and herself with systematic efficiency. "Sita was at liberty to take her husband by the hand and lead him from promotion, till he was within the exclusive circle of fast-rising executives, who brought home three thousand a month" (TFN 104).

When Devi was born, Sita found a new veena to play on. Sita planned her daughter's education and sent her to America. She sent her husband on a prestigious assignment. However, the strain proved too much for him and he died of a cardiac arrest. She erased her memories of him just as efficiently as his body was disposed, quickly and efficiently in a "modern sanitized crematorium", before returning to India and devoting her talents to work on Devi. Wisely, she recalled Devi from America to indulge in a few tantrums before settling her into an arranged marriage – a more prominent destination. When she learns about Devi's elopement she is in a fury. She feels Devi had torn her respectability, her very name, to shreds and the outcome of her anger is depicted by her subsequent actions:

She spends her rage and bitterness on the over-pruned plants, the impertinent cook, the nosy neighbours and the old men depends on her...Then, after a second round of ruthless spring-cleaning, in a house that reeked of Dettol, phenyl, polish, incense and cut roses. she sat down armed for an even more merciless exercise of introspection. Ready for self-examination, she sat before the relic from her past, the
broken veena, freshly dusted and waited for Devi to come back two
her. (TFN 108/109).

Sita is thus reborn in her daughter’s adventures in life and she salvages her lost
life by returning to her music, to her veena. Finally, when her daughter returns to her,
the realization dawns upon her that woman is primarily an individual: the other roles
of wife and daughter are inconsequential. Hariharan reinterprets the archetypes of
mother and child from the perspective of feminist sisterhood. It is the love of the
mother that restores in the protagonist a rekindled desire for life.

The most decisive role in the protagonist’s life is played by Mayamma, the
pragmatic story-teller, who tells tales of real life, stranger than mythical stories.
Mayamma’s life is a saga of unrelieved suffering. A victim of society and her family,
she is ill-treated by her husband, mother-in-law and then by her spoilt son. Finally,
she finds refuge in the house of a rich relative Parvatiamma. Frail and old, she now
tries to replay in her mind the myths that she could not play in her real life.
Mayamma’s narrative reflects the exploitation and failure of motherhood as it has
failed to create sustained life. In what seems to be an ironic attitude of passive
resignation, she appears to be spending her last nights in mechanical service to the
same benevolent Goddesses who have denied any kind of happiness to her all her life.
She learns the strategies of survival as every woman has to learn for herself, and
survival is the highest ideal in the struggle ridden life of woman. Mayamma’s story is
thus filled with incessant sufferings due to a sly husband, harassing mother-in-law and
a wastrel son, who teaches her the strategies of survival. The character of Mayamma is
close to the author. While experiencing the phenomenal boredom due to the confinement in the early months of motherhood Hariharan was surrounded by incredible range of old women, who came up with all kinds of advice. She shares her experiences and the inspiration behind the creation of Mayamma. In her interview to Arnab Chakladar she says:

...And so I started writing the section on Mayamma, the old woman, first, and that just sort emerged intact—because I had got to know so many old women like that so well. Probably for the first and last time as a writer I had that experience some writers talk about, “it wrote itself”. I know it’s possible and I also now know that it doesn’t happen too often. After I had that little fragment I knew that there was something I could work on, but I had to figure out how to make a novel of it!

The depiction of Devi’s character reveals her unwillingness to follow the path led by different women in her life. In fact, her failure to fit into any of the moulds set by them shows her as a rebel. She resolutely believes that the women she knew were bound by extremities. She rejects all the existing myths and role models. She also rejects the socially sanctioned role of a wife and a mother offered by her husband, Mahesh, and chooses to be swept along in the rich current of Gopal’s voice. Neglected by her husband, Devi is driven towards desperation. It was Gopal’s music that tempted and seduced her. The bliss she finds in Gopal’s company is short-lived. He reminds her of her last day in America. “...When she saw the pale, ghost like
figure of Fellini's Casanova. But what she saw now is undeniable flesh and blood before her was no bogeyman in a young girl's dream." (TFN 8).

During her short stint in America, Devi's experimental nature prompted her to smoke hash in Dan's company. This she does 'to complete her American experience.' While returning to India after her brief stint in America she felt, "She was no longer the weak dog-paddling Devi, a raw, half-baked creature, but someone who had spotted a distant horizon and was swimming towards it." (TFN 8). Instead of sinking into a despairing isolation while parting from Dan, Mahesh or Gopal she experiences hope and a sense of rejuvenation as the past is erased and present becomes an experience on which to build her future. Devi's final assertion of her autonomy becomes the celebration of the power of the divine Devi as well as that of the entire community of women. Through her female characters in *The Thousand Faces of Night*, Hariharan has attempted to provide role models for the oppressed of their kind; reinterpreted old myths to assert if not their primacy at least their coordinate position and questioned the validity of those traditions and practices that have circumscribed them in the codes of morality which have subordinated them.

Hariharan repeatedly advocates her feminist ideology and articulates her awareness of women's positions of disadvantage and gender discrimination in her attempt to erase the past and help formulate a future of comparative equality among the sexes. Like other feminist women writers she, too, attempts to show changed role models with a seeming negation of their real presences in order to call more attention to them, believing as they so go along that it is better, to say, 'not enough than to say
too much’. *The Thousand Faces of Night* is resolutely dominated by female characters. Hariharan’s projection of subservient male characters is a part of her ploy of her attempts at breaking the stereotypes of powerful Indian men. Dan, Mahadevan (Sita’s husband), Mahesh, his father (Baba), Gopal etc. are minor male characters. They play a role comparable to women characters in many novels written by male novelists. Dan’s role in *The Thousand Faces of Night* is only that of “a friend, an experiment for young Devi eager for experience.” (TFN 6). For Devi, Dan merely was an answer “to the white claustrophobia of an all-clean, all-American campus.” (TFN 3).

Fond of stories right from her childhood and a lack of a feeling of companionship with her husband draw Devi towards her father-in-law, Baba. An attractive old man “with his aquiline nose, long narrow eyes, wide forehead with deep creases, and full lips surrounded by a soft, white bush, give him the appearance of a dignified patriarch” (TFN 50-51); he too, plays a significant role in moulding Devi through the stories he fed her. His stories were meant for a woman who has already reached the goal that will determine the guise her virtue would wear. His views on women, depicts how the author subverts an entire tradition through the male characters that she has created. His advice to Devi is:

The path a woman must walk to reach heaven is a clear, well-lit one. The woman has no independent sacrifice to perform, no vow, no fasting; by serving her husband, she is honoured in the heavens. On the death of her husband, the chaste wife, established in continence,
reaches heaven, even if childless, like students who have practiced self-control. (TFN 55).

Devi has no qualms parting from her husband Mahesh, ‘the stranger who becomes her husband...’ (22) He admits to wanting a woman at home, ‘who will be a wife and a mother.’ He admires women for their self-assuredness and energy, that is evident when he reminisces about his childhood friend Arun’s mother:

She was...not exactly beautiful, but there was something self-assured and energetic about her, like one of those modern mothers in glossy magazines. She was a doctor, a senior practitioner..., but the things, she would bring in her hamper for Arun. Cakes, chutneys; everything homemade...I think I must have been in love with her... (TFN 108).

Hariharan here clearly indicates that men like Mahesh wish their wives to be servile and caring but also competent enough to manage their profession. It is a blend of tradition and modernity that is expected of women to the advantage of the menfolk. They wish the women to be career-oriented and highly professional but do not want them freed from the household chores. An ideal combination of a multi-tasking woman and a self-sacrificing woman, who can strike a fine balance between her household responsibilities and professional tasks, is well-appreciated by men in a traditional patriarchal set-up. Mahadevan, Devi’s father and Gopal, her lover, also do not find a place of prominence in the novel.
Devi's quest for self-image is one of the prominent themes in the novel. Female-bonding is represented by Sita, Devi and Mayamma. The novel's main focus is subversion of existing social patterns and values as shown by the protagonist. The other themes include realization of womanhood as different from motherhood. By narrating the tales of mythological heroines the theme of 'Revisionist-Myth making' is explored by the author. Mayamma represents the theme of survival as the highest ideal in the struggle-ridden life of woman. Rejection of archetypes such as Sita is another important theme. Erasure of past suffering, hope and sense of rejuvenation, sufferings in patriarchal system are the themes projected through the characterization of Sita, Devi and Mayamma. The novelist unveils the process of enchantment of Devi in her relationship with Gopal, “The peacock danced, its crowned head still and self-absorbed, its plumage on exhibition. The male danced, ostensibly for the peahen, dowdy and offstage, blending into the background, dull brown against brown.” (TFN 129).

There is a sense of filial piety throughout the novel. Owing to Devi's sense of responsibility towards her mother, she comes back from America and it is the same obligation towards her mother that brings her back home towards the end of the novel. Devi's search for self-esteem and individuality takes her through the various experiences in the novel. The mythical dimension informs and enforces the crisis of identity in the context of the divergent forces stultifying the female ego. The agonizing and violent internal conflict of Devi forms the essence of the novel. The novel deals with penance in its myriad forms and results in a multiple response ranging from self-inflicting suffering to protest, revenge and violence. For instance,
Sita, in the face of the rebuttal from her father-in-law hung her head over the veena for a while then pulled the strings out of the wooden base. The mythological stories of penance by Gandhari and Amba had a tremendous impact on Devi’s mind. The novel deals with the battles of woman in her relationship with man and society not only to urban existential angst but to times immemorial. In this novel, Hariharan’s attempt to renew the whole community of women through representation of myths intends to erase the past and help to reformulate a future of comparative equality among the sexes. Hariharan’s versatility as an author with a mission to subvert the entire tradition can be recognized in every work of fiction she has created. For this purpose in her second novel, *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* she experiments with a male protagonist and a host of other male characters.

Vasu, the protagonist, is a retired school teacher from P.G. Boys’ school, Ellipettai. He leads a lonely widower’s life with two of his sons employed and settled away from home. It is his loneliness that makes him relive incidents from the past. He is stalked by stubborn ghosts of his father, his wife Mangala and her friend Jameela. In her interview to Arnab Chakladar, Hariharan says. “It is actually the most autobiographical of my novels”. She further admits in the acknowledgements to the book that the idea Vasu grapples with reflects her own eclectic course of reading of six years prior to writing this novel: Hariharan’s extensive readings on education, alternative methods of teaching, ancient Indian education, Indian healing systems and healing in general. The novel reflects her extensive reading and understanding of *Charaka Samhita* and *Panchtantra*. The similarity between Vasu and the author is that both have the same educational background, and therefore their love for English
literature and Shakespeare in particular, is suggested in the novel. Hariharan has made
generous use of quotations from *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*. Shakespeare as
a poet of humanity inspires Vasu and moreover, his preference for Shakespeare was
owing to the scope of various interpretations that the bard allowed.

Vasu, who leads a peaceful retired life, engages in the process of self-
discovery which speeds up on the arrival of a reticent child, Mani. Mani, a stupid boy,
a slow learner, becomes the biggest challenge for the retired school master, Vasu. As
in all Hariharan’s novels, the individuals are quite firmly linked to their past as well as
to the other characters. In *The Ghosts of Vasu Master*, one cannot imagine something
happening to Vasu without that affecting the little boy immediately. Vasu would tell
the little boy stories about his life. Similarly, whatever happens to the little boy affects
Vasu Master. The links, the gaze, the connections are all very close. The connections
between the characters are like grapes, all stuck together in clusters.

The stories told by Vasu interestingly are linked to Vasu and his life. Among
all the characters created by Hariharan, Vasu closely resembles the author herself. The
autobiographical element present in Vasu can be substantiated on the basis of the
author’s confession in her interview to Arnab Chakladar. Vasu, with a B.A. in
English Literature and his art of story-telling to heal the diseased mind of Mani
resembles the author. Hariharan says, “A lot of the questions which preoccupy the
retired school teacher are precisely those questions which preoccupy me”
Another intriguing aspect of the novel is that any interaction between the two characters Vasu and Mani is impossible, because the latter does not speak. Therefore, it is an immensely challenging task for the author to hold the narrative intact and retain the interest of the reader. Vasu sorts it out by telling his own narrative – eliciting parallel narratives. The role of story-telling in *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* is very clear. The fables are about the two central characters’ lives. Hariharan has based the stories on the *Panchtantra* and the *Jataka tales*. These tales serve as guides in the art of living – how to lead a good life in the worldly sense – a sensible life, a balanced life.

As the novel progresses the bond between Vasu and Mani grows stronger. In the beginning Vasu thought of Mani as, ‘a mask, a log of wood, a hounded animal; an impervious brick wall, a frozen puddle of drain water, a freakish victim, a cunning beast of prey.’ (TGVM 51). Gradually, Vasu learns to think of him and understand him in human terms. Vasu manages to build a bridge between the two in order to encourage and support Mani, an extraordinary student, with whom no well-known and tested strategy seemed to work. What Mani needed was not an ordinary teacher but a truly pragmatic healer who taught him how to live. Through Vasu, Hariharan unravels the mystery behind the defeat of children like Mani, with no desire to learn. Vasu experiments with his teaching skills and exposes the failure of the monotonous strategies of teaching prevalent in the present educational institutions. By incorporating stories using fantasy, fable and a host of brilliantly imagined characters, Vasu slowly succeeds in bringing a noticeable change in Mani’s behaviour and responses. The fables are about the lives of the two central characters’ namely Vasu
Master and Mani. Stories are used in the traditional sense – to heal the listener and also to heal the story-teller. The purpose of story-telling in the traditional sense is to implant moral values and major life skills. Vishnu Sharma's *Panchatantra* stories were meant to train the princes and thus serve the society by inculcating good moral values. The necessity and popularity of such fiction is reinforced with the very recent publication of Gautam Bhatia's *Panchatantra – Parables for 21st Century*, politically inspired by James Finn Garner's 'politically correct' *Bedtime stories*. Bhatia takes the men, women and animals of *Panchatantra* and relocates them in contemporary India with its newly acquired notions of political correctness. The characters engage with the burning issues of the day – unemployment, oppression, environmental pollution, sexual incompatibility etc. All the characters lay exposed by the behavior and absurdities of the present life full of turmoil. Hariharan also believes in the therapeutic value of telling one’s own story. In her interview to Joel Kuortti, Hariharan says:

> There's that lovely folk tale Ramanujan has retold, called 'Tell it to the walls', where there is this old woman who is so unhappy and miserable that she gets fatter and fatter because all these complaints are being stored up in her. Finally she goes to this half-ruined house and starts recounting her woes and sorrows to one wall. That wall crumbles and then the other wall, and having got the tales out of her system, she becomes quite slim and healthy. This is obviously a reference to the therapeutic value of telling your own story, as well as telling somebody else's stories to try and understand that person.” (Kuortti 114).
The stories told by Vasu to Mani basically serve as a guide in the art of living — how to lead a good life in the worldly sense, a sensible and balanced life. Hariharan further stresses on the importance of narrative in relationships and also as a fascinating aspect of story-telling: It is in *The Ghosts of Vasu Master*, where this comes out more strongly because if the child (Mani) does speak, then the challenge is how you get hold of his narrative. He has to begin with his second best which is actually how we all begin, which is to tell everybody else our own narrative first (Kuortti 118).

Vasu, the first person narrator, shares his challenging experiences with the reticent boy, Mani, throughout the novel. His actions, gestures and attitudes towards the reluctant and slow learner speak volumes of his idealism. Vasu emerges as the selfless, passionate and dedicated teacher who with his relentless and persistent efforts brings hope to Mani and others like him. Vasu’s persistent efforts and its fruitful results provide a critical view of the modern education system. Vasu through his successful experiment forces the reader to believe in the benefits of ancient India and Indian healing system (Ayurveda). The narrative is a clear illustration of tradition versus modernity where the former emerges triumphant. By stressing the benefits of story-telling. Vasu provides alternative methods of teaching. Teaching what the students have not asked for is meaningless and it only impedes the learning process. A teacher has to reinvent himself in order to become effective. Vasu exhibits his constant ‘connect’ with his pupil Mani which gets reciprocated positively. Mani appeared to Vasu like a ‘starved child suddenly brought face to face with a full plate’ (TGVM 232). Vasu’s lessons with Mani ‘assumed the forked dimensions of theory
and practice, story and drawing.’ (TGVM 233). What transpired between Vasu and Mani can be acknowledged as true education. “The fantasies and fables fed to Mani regularly were returned to Vasu in the form of ‘pictures without erasures’. They were not mere copies, but were his versions, created with obvious enjoyment”. (TGVM 233).

Vasu’s dilemma of dealing with the retarded Mani is presented through a fable:

Grey mouse (read Vasu), has built a reputation of sorts for his patience. But behind the public image, within the privacy of the mousehole, Grey Mouse often felt a pang in his heart as he watched Blue Bottle (Mani) stumbling through the simplest of leaps; making the mistakes over and over again, day after day. (TGVM 170).

Vasu improvised on the existing stories to make it comprehensible to Mani. Stories seemed to soothe Mani though he showed no sign of understanding them. Stories acted as a healing agent. Vasu’s commitment and faith towards the cause of educating Mani was so strong that he was willing to stretch himself to any extent. Vasu is aware of the undaunting task that lay before him when he says: “I had to somehow build a bridge between us so that I could validate, confirm, encourage, support, enhance.” (TGVM 52).
Vasu was a man full of illusions about his abilities and therefore his sincere attempt to take the class out to the cinema ‘The Taming of the Shrew’ brought about his nemesis. The philosophic voice of Vasu is evident when he jots down in his notebook the following lines:

In the wide range of choices a teacher has – whether of technique or concept – he must accommodate two quarrelsome polarities that for some reason find each other irresistible. We think of love and fear as opposites; and so they are. Love allows for the necessary distance that is natural between the lover and the beloved; the all-important bridge is built of affection and concern. Fear contains desire, but no affection; if deep-rooted enough, it can use force to constrain the freedom of another. But why are these two antagonists, so markedly, obviously different, seen in each other’s company so often? Because fear is a good actor; it can masquerade as love (TGVM 62).

Vasu is philosophic, introspective and constantly poses questions for which he seeks answers. He fills up pages of the notebook with appropriate quotations, other men’s words which illustrate his own wayward thoughts:

Vasu comes to recognize the necessity of reconstruction from the dismantled parts of various ideas, beliefs, models that are his inheritance. His willingness to use whatever lies at hand as materials for the stories that eventually seem to heal Mani suggest an attitude to traditional culture which treats it as an open resource for the future, not
For instance, in the chapter, ‘The Mascot of Melting pot’, Vasu uses the *Panchatantra Tales* only to twist and change the original version in his attempt to heal Mani. The king of the jungle, the lion is replaced by the old Fox, who has a vision that all the animals in the forest must stop killing each other and live together as one big family. The forest acquires a new name – Melting pot. The strange and wonderful creature with the features of all the animals was born who becomes the mascot of the Melting Pot. The animals go back to their old names and habits; they begin to question the identity of the mascot. As he is unable to establish his identity the rest of the animals kill him. The forest, once again becomes a jungle where each one asserts his will to act. Similarly, the diseased mind of Mani is symbolic of the consequences of the flawed education system. Vasu’s vision to usher in the change by taking resort in our age old tradition is the only hope. Mani plays a significant role as Vasu the protagonist ceases to be a teacher in the absence of this disciple. To bring about the equivalence between teaching and healing, Mani is a reticent pupil and Vasu is the teacher who makes up fables of his own to heal is pupil. When introduced at the beginning of the novel, Mani is an unimpressive character:

Mani had smooth skin and a thick, short neck. He was a pale-skinned boy, so pale that the black of his hair was startling. The black-mop sat like an unruly crown on the egg-shaped face below. His clothes were always a little too big for him, as if he had not yet grown into them. (TGVM 8)
As Mani grew up, his silence was as disturbing as a continuous reproach. When he was sent to school he became a violent little boy – as a result of the children who made fun of him. Having changed four schools, his father gave up. When he turned eight, his schooling was discontinued. As a result of his growing aggression he was caned, shouted at, ignored, tied up and gradually he grew into a restless, untrusting boy. When Mani was brought to Vasu he was a twelve year old with the brain of a six or seven year old. For Vasu, his teaching career advanced post-retirement. With the arrival of Mani, Vasu began the second half of his teaching career on a far more ambitious scale than the first. With this experience Vasu came to terms gracefully with ancestral legacies. He succeeded in living up to his inherited tasks of healing and resurrecting Charaka, Shakespeare and Gandhi. Mani and Vasu create a new world for themselves. All that Vasu had to do was learning afresh and teach Mani how to live.

The three ghosts that haunt Vasu throughout the narrative are those of his father, his wife Mangala and her friend Jameela. They appear in his dreams and become a vital part of his day-dreaming as well. Both Mangala and Jameela are childhood friends. The portrayal of women characters in The Ghosts of Vasu Master takes less prominence compared to Hariharan’s first novel The Thousand Faces of Night, where women dominate throughout. Mangala, Jameela, Vasu’s mother, Lakshmi and his grandmother are the female characters portrayed here. They are all dead and make their appearance through Vasu’s memory. In the novel, Vasu Master’s mother Lakshmi and his wife Mangala exhibit the stereotype of traditional Indian
woman. These characters represent the formula of the psyche of millions of Indian women. The representations of both the women are based on social, cultural and religious generalizations. These characters exemplify the traditional Indian woman, who is genuinely committed to her familial duties. The chapter ‘The Faces in Mangala’s Mirror’ throws light on the two distinct traits possessed by Mangala. Vasu knew her more as a ‘cloudy memory’ than as a person. In his memory she remained as obscure as his forgotten mother. He recalled her as pale and insubstantial; a figure perennially on the retreat. Mangala in the company of her friend Jameela was altogether a different person. “The two swam and frolicked as if the whole world – cool water, the afternoon stillness, the shared squeals of pleasure – all belonged to them forever” (TGVM 43). Their raised voices, whispers and laughter remained with them only in each other’s company. They were a perfect pair, team or couple. It was their completion of each other that held Vasu in thrall. But of all the things about Mangala, Vasu’s most vivid memory is of her death. For their sons Vishnu and Venu, Mangala was a ghost-expert, who knew hundreds of ghost stories. Vasu knew his wife Mangala and his affection for her only when he lived with her ghost. Otherwise, when she lived she was inconspicuous like his mother. The only time she shed her customary reticence was when the family made one of their rare trips away from Elipettai.

Lakshmi, Vasu’s mother, died when he was still a little boy. All that he remembers about her is irretrievably mixed with what he has heard. Her birth was not celebrated by her parents as they had run out of patience and names for daughters. For a year she remained nameless as her parents didn’t find a name and were not inclined to spend money on a naming ceremony for one more daughter. It was the affectionate blessing of the old sweeper, who comforted her mistress, ‘Never mind, she can still
be the Lakshmi of her husband’s house” (TGVM 31). Having got a goddess’ name did not change her destiny. Like most women she too was destined to lead a miserable life escaping her husband’s unpredictable explosions of temper and surviving her mother-in-law’s jealous rule of the household and keeping the house clean, pure and unpolluted. A shy and introvert person by nature she had never exchanged more than six words with her neighbours. She fought a losing battle on all fronts and melted away into the shadows of the loud, tyrannical household. She lived just about to give an heir to her husband. Like Vasu’s wife Mangala, his mother Lakshmi too led an inconspicuous life. Vasu’s grandmother spent most of her time cooking food for their family that was obsessed with food and his father tested the results of the pure, vegetarian Brahmin diet. Vasu’s father, the chief physician of their household had a rival in his own mother. Vasu’s grandmother was a thin, shrunken old woman whose flesh hung over her sharp-edged bones. She was a formidable bully but was the first love of his life. For her, the kitchen was the sole apothecary and food a magic weapon. She treated those skeptical of the powers of food with a withering scorn. She firmly believed in the theory that food cures one’s body naturally – from constipation and insomnia to impotence. She was ambitious about transforming Vasu into a soft, sweet, pliable person who could be emptied into the mould she had chosen. Having known the benefits of chillies- she ate chillies raw. She rarely used the word medicine. That was left to her son. Her concoctions were classified into two types: the everyday menu, which was tailor-made to guide us along the right path; and her special chutneys (wisdom chutneys) which went right up from the stomach to the mind and transformed the ones who ate them into better human beings. Vasu’s grandmother reminds one of R.K. Narayan’s *Waiting for the Mahatma*, where Sriram.
the protagonist is reared by his grandmother, an overprotective, affectionate lady obsessed with food. Sriram, like Vasu had lost his mother in his childhood.

Hariharan’s portrayal of the female characters in this novel is in stereo-type roles who wield their power within the four walls of the kitchen. All their ambitions and abilities find expression in the realm of their kitchen. It is the daily menu that displayed the exercise of their skills. All the female characters help us to recognize the confined space of Indian woman in the socio-cultural hierarchy. Moreover, these characters are confined to a framework, which was based on the ideals of class, race and gender. To live life under the dominance of male order and to lead a submissive role is a general feature of woman stereotype. They reflect the patriotic traditional Indian society.

Vasu’s father is an ideal combination of the trio – Charaka, Shakespeare and Gandhiji. He is truly representative of our rich cultural heritage and traditions. Being influenced by the colonial rule and William Shakespeare’s plays Vasu’s father is an embodiment of tradition and modernity. Therefore, Vasu, an English teacher, clings on to Shakespeare for two specific reasons: Shakespeare is the poet of Humanity (as taught by his father) and Shakespeare allowed more room for interpretation.

Vasu’s father, an ayurved believed, ‘A healer is a teacher – as he teaches how to live.’ He was a healer who brews his ayurvedic potions. He possessed six hardbound tomes on ‘Ayurveda’: A Manual of Physical and Mental Hygiene by Acharya Kumaraswamy, A hundred back issues of ‘The Vegetarian’ (monthly
bulletin by the International Vegetarian Congress) bound together in hard cover; a cardboard file that contained an assortment of essays, articles, speeches, newspaper clippings and photographs on Gandhiji; a book without a title – his ayurveda bible that contained prophylactics and cures for every disorder known to man; the Collected Works of William Shakespeare and lastly the Panchangam. The essence of each of these books contributed towards the making of his personality. He was no ordinary healer. “His powers were directed at the food that made the body; the body that made the mind; the mind that made the unique, whole individual, the carrier of the spirit. These spirit-bearing minds then made the pyramid, India with the Brahmins at the tip-healers, custodians and guardians of the masses below (TGVM 21).

Vasu is quite happy to be ‘a Tamil-speaking sub-human’ but the endless quotations from Shakespeare and the school he is sent to has their effect on him. Moreover, the unique blend of all these teachings he inherits helps Vasu become a truly pragmatic healer, who takes up the daunting task of curing Mani. Like Mangala and Jameela, Vasu’s father too stalks Vasu like a stubborn ghost. The anti-European/anti-British feelings emanate in Vasu in the form of his father’s stern words while he was explaining Wordsworth’s Daffodils to the class, “What he (Wordsworth) needs is a well-brewed stomach-cleaner to loosen his bowels. A potent rasayanam. Then he wouldn’t need those poor flowers every time he is constipated” (TGVM 2).

Vasu’s father appears only in Vasu’s dreams. Having been dead 30 years, it is the spirit of his father that remains alive in Vasu’s memory. The promotion of Vegetarianism, Ayurveda, Gandhian teachings and Shakespeare’s quotations taught by his father are permanently etched in Vasu’s memory. The ancient traditions of
healing and vivid pictures of ayurveda practice are brought alive by the spirit of Vasu’s father. The unique combination of Shakespeare’s quotations and the ancient healing practice of Ayurveda in this character are truly representative of the blend of British education and ancient practices prevailing in the present times.

The minor characters in the novel include Veera Naidu, the pot-bellied headmaster of P.G. Boy’s school, Raghavan also a teacher at P.G. and Gopu, Mani’s brother. Gopu, impatient about Vasu’s willingness to drift in the past, represents the youth disinterested in our past and cultural heritage. He carries a larger than life image as nature has bestowed him with bold and impressive strokes unlike his mentally-challenged brother Mani.

The highlight of the novel is its ending. It concludes with Vasu’s philosophy and an unusual examination paper set by Vasu. The new model question paper was not meant to uncover deficiencies and losses of the students but to light up one or more of the manifold paths that confront the examinee. Vasu’s philosophy reflects an enlightened soul:

All healing approaches claim to be universal; all are in reality bound by their relativity. We must use them as springboards from which we can make an imaginative leap into the silent, enigmatic heart of the mysteries that beset our world. And validity: no path that leads to recovery can be ignored. No law guides the traveller’s journey down
any of these paths, no law, that is, except trial, as gold is tried by fire (TGVM 266).

The work reflects the author's philosophy. It reinforces the importance of ancient Indian education and the need for alternative methods of teaching. Hariharan in the voice of Vasu Master makes a subtle attack on the education system:

We have seen that a school or a teacher can fail to educate pupils. The words school and teaching have become elastic: they can be cut and stretched to fit almost anything. They are now available in a free size that fits any institution, any puppet or dummy who cares to wear them. Loving, sharing and caring are victims of a similar tortuous contortion; but that is an aside, though not to be forgotten (TGVM 36).

Vasu represents that clan of the fraternity of teachers who act as teachers, philosophers and guides: almost an extinct community and a rarity today. Hariharan's concern for the present education system, which she believes is redundant, is well reflected through the character of Vasu. The novel deals with the theme of reliving the past. Storytelling, one of the oldest Indian traditions is depicted as the best therapy. Vasu Master, the healer and teacher teaches Mani how to live: it is the theme of the novel. The adaptation of the stories from the *Panchatantra Tales* and glorification of the age-old methods of healing forms the crux of the novel. The concern of the novel includes promotion of vegetarianism, Ayurveda, Gandhian values and humanism by use of Shakespeare's quotations. The novel is all about alternative method of teaching
and healing. Teaching through storytelling and healing through Ayurveda also promotes, safeguards and revives our age-old traditions. The title of the novel *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* is also a reminder of the past; the memories of Mangala, his dead wife and his father keep haunting the protagonist throughout the novel. Teacher as a pragmatic healer is the message of the novel.

*In Times of Siege* has a host of characters, the majority of them representing the academia. The protagonist, Prof. Shiv Murthy is a Professor of History at Kamala Nehru University offering a distance education course. He represents the ‘respectable, decent’ middle class who respects people irrespective of their identity. And yet, his attempt to reconstruct the past by writing a lesson on the reformer poet Basava enrages the fundamentalists. Basava, the mystic poet, social reformer, Finance Minister and political activist all rolled into one is discussed throughout the novel. The lesson by Shiv Murthy traces the life of Basava, the growth of his radical ideas and his struggle against caste divisions and the temple establishment and his Veerashaiva movement which ignites and enrages the Hindu fundamentalists. Basava is being remembered after eight hundred years. The projection of Basava in his lesson is seen as an attempt to reconstruct the past and it leads Shiv to discover that the ideas he has inherited about history, nations and patriots are changing day by day. In this journey of discovery he encounters the so-called ‘liberal fence-sitters’ and the ‘fundamentalists’, who ransack his chamber. The novel spans a duration of one and a half months (August 31 2000 to October 15 2000). It is during this short span that Shiv Murthy evolves as an individual in more than one way. His encounter with all kinds of fundamentalists, war mongers, rabble-rousers and people who are against
war, hatred etc. transforms him. Moreover, as his wife has gone to Seattle to be with their daughter Shiv learns to become independent and a better housekeeper. In his most influential work, *Aspects of the Novel* E.M. Forster defines a round character as one that is well developed and closely involved in and responsive to the action. Shiv Murthy appears to be a complex and fully developed one. As it happens in modern fiction, the reader is encouraged to become involved with the character of Shiv and even identify with him. This empathy is possible only when the reader is aware about the character – his strengths and weakness or his likes and dislikes. Shiv’s initiation into writing a history lesson on Basava is guided by his father’s ghost. Having thus justified his action he behaves as a ‘real person’ in the given situation. As a ‘real person’ he is not perfect. The flaws, such as fear, gullibility and lack of insight identified in Shiv are also developed. Shiv, with his secular ideology, represents those ‘ordinary, educated and decent people’ who are willing to speak up for the fundamental values that hold their world in place. He wants to ensure that everyone in society can go about their business and enjoy basic freedom to think, speak and ask questions. Shiv’s reflection and instincts are more or less balanced, which is justified by his age and position. He is cautious in his relation with Meena because he is being challenged for the first time on both personal and political fronts.

Meena, on the other hand, is a passionate, outspoken young girl. She is the daughter of Shiv’s childhood neighbor, Sumathi. Shiv is obsessed with her because of his fearful fascination for everything her world stands for: risk and danger, choice and commitment. Meena is central to an understanding of the novel. She is a Sociology student who is writing a thesis on women’s stories: the stories are based on the life of
women affected by the anti-Sikh riots after Indira Gandhi’s assassination in 1984. Unlike other college-going girls of her age, Meena seems more worldly-wise. She talks of causes and street theatre, ‘gender’ and ‘courting arrest’ with the ease of a veteran. Even with a fractured foot she does not seem to be aware of her powerlessness. Meena’s personality is demonstrated through the two pictures she put up on the wall. One is a feminist poster; just an image of match-stick women holding hands to make a perfect circle. The other has a grey line drawing of a face of indeterminate gender in the background. At the top of the poster are the words in screaming red: ‘Speak up! Before it’s too late.’ As her intimacy with Shiv grows, she stops calling him ‘professor’. According to Shiv, “Meena is a sweet and disturbing mixture of irony and inexperience.” (ITOS 178).

Meena represents the assertive, independent and outspoken image of contemporary woman. She has no qualms staying alone with a man. On the other hand Shiv thinks it is his responsibility to amuse and entertain Meena in his wife Rekha’s absence. The bonding between Shiv and Meena gets stronger with every passing day:

University folklore converted into stories with punch lines. Childhood games with words: rector as rectum, adult education as adultery education. Shiv is taking a crash course from Meena on how to live with power and not give up laughter. Survival by play; play as a survival mode. Words, more words. What else can connect them? A passing touch, an accidental meeting of his fingertip, her skin, when he
settles the cushion under her foot. He knows every inch of the cast that takes the shape of her leg (ITOS 47).

Apart from conversation, Shiv helps Meena with washing and combing her hair and making her bed. Meena is unlike other women he has confronted earlier in life. He thinks:

She is just twenty-four. At an age when she should be looking at love for the first time, trembling with wonder and confusion at all mysteries of the human heart. The human body, her own body. A man’s body. Instead she sits in a meeting to rescue an ageing historian from a mob (ITOS 111).

Hariharan has accomplished the task of portraying strong and independent women in her novels with a view of changing the general perception of women as weak and docile. The women in India not unlike women elsewhere have begun to move toward self perception, self expression and self determination, slowly indeed and not entirely against tradition, within the family ties. The western concepts of equality, individual rights and personal choice would challenge and dismantle the Indian family structure, which is based on sharing and accommodation. Hariharan’s works dwell on this “difference” of postmodern feminism. Meena influenced by the western feminism is fiercely independent despite her physical handicap. She is neither bashful nor an introvert in her interaction with Shiv. She is confident of protecting her vanity. At the moment of crisis it is Meena who lends her support to Shiv and stands
like a pillar. Shiv’s dependence on Meena is strategically highlighted in the novel to indicate the changing position/status of women in Indian society. Her portrayal as an activist student and her concern for the widow’s plight is emphasized in the novel. It shows her as a dogmatic and thinking individual. She is projected as a Sociology student whose commitment towards the marginalized women of society is emphasized in the novel. She provided tremendous support to Shiv Murthy to keep him sailing through the adversity of life.

Shiv represents the contemporary man who independently handles the house and plays a perfect guardian to Meena, a daughter of an acquaintance. Meena, with a fractured leg takes refuge at his place. Though initially Shiv finds himself in a difficult and awkward position when he has to play the Good Samaritan but he gradually finds himself taking responsibility of nursing Meena and show signs of a better housekeeper. “Shiv’s preparations seem woefully inadequate. He has made the bed in the little room downstairs, remembered to keep a bottle of water and glass on the table” (ITOS 8).

Meena’s arrival totally transforms Shiv. With little help from the maid-servant Kamla, Shiv takes charge of the situation. For the first time he makes breakfast, tea, snacks. He also goes to markets he has not been to for years. A thoughtful Shiv brings along a pair of light aluminium crutches, chocolate-chip ice cream etc. He ensures that Meena’s stay at his place becomes very comfortable. With Meena’s presence in the house Shiv begins to feel like an intruder in his own house. In the absence of his wife, it is Meena who becomes a pillar of strength to Shiv. The tremendous support provided by her keeps him sailing through the adversity of his life; when attacked by
fundamentalists. When questioned by Anuradha Roy about the author’s intention in depicting a relationship between the 52 year old Professor with a young student Hariharan says:

Reflection and instinct are more or less balanced in Shiv – as much as they are in many men of his age and position! His response to Meena is understandable, not just because he is a cautious, rather unglamorous middle-aged man and she is a passionate, outspoken young woman – but because he is being challenged for the first time on both personal and political fronts. In his life before the crisis brought on by the fundamentalists – what Meena calls the fundoos. Shiv sidestepped commitment in every way. Personally, this meant a half-hearted affair with a colleague if his marriage was not quite what it should be. But his obsession with Meena is not just physical – it’s also his fearful fascination for everything her world stands for: risk and danger, choice and commitment.

A man with unconventional looks, Shiv asserts his identity of a self-regulatory, mindful historian and refuses to budge even under pressure from his departmental Head. He vehemently turns down the Head’s demand for an apology and necessary changes in the lesson on Basava. Shiv says, “The lesson does not distort history by any stretch of the imagination. And I will not apologize or explain myself to a group outside the university, as a group of people we do not recognise as historians” (ITOS 70).
Shiv is deeply, emotionally stunted by a childhood experience, the sudden disappearance of his father, when he was just thirteen years old. His father had been a frustrated freedom fighter, who taught Shiv to speak his mind fearlessly. When he dares to do so, he is forced to face the worst consequences. His room is ransacked by the mob; the tables and chairs and bookshelves are broken, the walls defaced. He is attacked from all fronts for his attempt to write about Basava. Shiv begins to feel a sense of insecurity and the fear of an endangered species whose natural habitat has been taken over. His savaged room: even its memory, the imagined memory of its ruin, suggests that all hope of pretending it did not happen is an illusion. The novel captures the plight of a common man like Shiv thrown unwittingly into political trouble and forced into taking a position. *In Times of Siege* is a cautionary tale for placid ‘liberals’. Hariharan is deeply affected by the various politically backed issues like the Emergency, demolition of Babri Masjid and the Gujarat riots when she admits:

…it is possible for many people to be “liberal” because they are not directly, painfully affected by the oppression of the authorities they are critical of. Recent experiences – Gujarat for example – show that the times of siege we are talking about have stripped the cushioning of even this usually comfortably placed class. The liberal in the novel, Shiv, says in some desperation when he sees the “opposition” is not as united as they need to be: “Forget your little arguments, the enemy is almost at our heels! If this can happen to ordinary, cautious man like me, what about the ideologywallas?” But the novel is also saying that when pushed to a point where a choice has to be made, many of those we think as “just ordinary, decent people” will speak up for the
fundamental values that hold their world in place – peace and harmony
so that everyone in society can go about their business, as well as the
basic freedom to think, speak, and ask questions. This is what
happened during the Emergency, after the demolition of Babri Masjid,
and after the Gujarat carnage (Roy).

*In Times of Siege* demonstrates the oppressiveness of reducing ‘multitudinous
mysteries’ to oversimplified opposites. Hariharan has attempted to portray the modern
Indian experiment of a multi-cultural nation, reduced to crude dichotomies. In order to
exemplify the contemporary society a host of minor characters are created by the
author. Amar is an activist and a committed member of several citizens’ groups. He
firmly believes that Shiva’s case should be taken up by a citizen’s forum. He also
distributes leaflets that scream in twenty-four point bold type: Is the past up for grabs?
His proximity to Meena irks Shiv and makes him jealous. Shiv finds Amar ‘confident,
ruthless, so-very-young’. “It’s not a simple jealousy Shiv feels for Amar, not the age-
worn, sexual jealousy Shiv feels for Amar, nor the age-worn, sexual jealousy of one
man for another, or shop-soiled age for youth. What Shiv finds puzzling is that he is
almost as fascinated by Amar as he is by Meena. That he is as intrigued by Amar, and
perhaps, as afraid.” (ITOS 199).

Mrs. Khan, Shiv’s colleague represents the marginalized Muslim community
of India. Even in an academic circle everybody’s space is shrinking all the time. There
is a sense of the immediacy, and the all-pervasiveness of prejudice and hatred. This
situation is not only prevalent in some remote part of the country or out on the streets
but in a university campus. Prof. Arya’s views shared in a meeting demonstrate his intolerance towards the minority:

Our land has always been a temptation to greedy marauders, barbarous invaders and oppressive rulers... Today, apart from Muslims even Christians, Parsis and other foreigners are also recognized as minority communities. But in many of the states the Hindus have been reduced to a minority, and the Muslims, Christians or Sikhs are in a majority (ITOS 19).

Mrs. Khan is subjected to torture in the name of religion by her colleagues. She is looked at with some sort of fascinated horror. The resentment of her colleagues directed towards her, forces her to proceed on leave. Hariharan has described her state of mind with utmost sincerity:

But now she has a week to recover from the new status thrust on her – Muslim Mrs. Khan, a woman who has travelled leagues from her grandmother’s and mother’s lives to work in an office and make a modest contribution to the family income. Now she is being pushed back to square one, to the old diminishing religious identity (ITOS 20).

The novel, set in 2000, points at the regressive attitude amongst the citizens despite fifty odd years of our independent status. Divisive politics and religious animosity still dominate Indian society. The ironic situation is thus created when Mrs.
Khan is looked at by her colleagues with some sort of ‘fascinated horror’ as if she were an alien creature, that too, in a place of learning.

In the character of Dr. Arya one finds the anti-hero. An eminent historian, Dr. Arya is a pamphleteer-turned-scholar. The novel hints at his association with the Hindu fundamentalists. The feeling is further strengthened in the departmental meeting, where he raises strong objections about a key paragraph which points towards the story of foreign invaders on Indian land and how it has resulted in a situation where Hindus have been reduced to a minority. He particularly finds Shiv Murthy’s lesson on ‘Basava’ highly offensive and objectionable. On the lesson he reacts, “Are these foreign-lovers nationals of our land? We will accept only people whose loyalty to our traditions and our heroes down the centuries is undivided and unadulterated” (ITOS 133).

Amita, a lonely and bored wife of a very successful Chartered Accountant, embodies the woman of the upper class who smokes cigarettes and indulges in hurried and ungratifying sexual acts to beat her boredom. Extra-marital liaison is what keeps her occupied. She is the embodiment of the moral degradation of Indian society where, earlier, even discussing sex was considered a taboo.

Amita and Shiv have slept with each other a few times. But perhaps ‘slept with each other’ is inaccurate. They have, on four occasions had extended lunches; lunches which have extended to hurried, unsatisfying sex at her house. All four times she lay in bed afterwards, her face veiled cigarette smoke, watching him dress; each time he let
himself out of the house and got back to the department, feeling like a truant schoolboy (ITOS 21).

The author’s view on the degrading moral and cultural values of Indian society is highlighted. Hariharan has captured the changing values of Indian society in this novel and created characters that represent the moral degradation of our value system.

Both, Rekha and Tara, who are the wife and daughter of the protagonist, are shown as being away in Seattle throughout the novel. Their presence comes through telephonic conversations and e-mails. Rekha, an efficient administrator, is considered an asset in her office. Shiv misses her terribly, when he is attacked by Hindu fundamentalists. The tough, ‘smooth talking’ Rekha whom Shiv had known expresses her concern and anxiety when fundamentalism lands on Shiv’s doorstep. She warns her husband to stay away from the fanatics:

I do see you can’t give in so easily. It’s not as if I don’t see the principle thing. But to be idealistic at such a time, and with such people! Don’t forget, you’re dealing with hoodlums who have pulled down mosques and churches that have stood for so many years. They’ve engineered riots, for god’s sake, what’s a little violence to them? And they’re so powerful now. What can we do – Shiv, don’t you understand? I’m afraid’ (ITOS155).
With tension building up in Delhi, Rekha vehemently voices her protests and imagines the worst scenario that her husband Shiv has to face. Her worst fears needed Shiv to play the unfamiliar role of comforting her, a quality he had never cared to display. Rekha makes frantic calls to Shiv when she learns that her husband’s room was ransacked by hoodlums. A worried wife, Rekha, displays her emotions which surprises even her husband. It is when her husband’s life is in danger that she shows her true self. The tough, smooth-talking Rekha becomes terrified and vulnerable when she learns that her husband is in trouble. Shiv, too shows fear with regard to the safety of his wife and daughter, when an anonymous caller threatens to harm them.

Tara. Shiv’s daughter, employed in Seattle is a comfortable young girl unlike her father, a man with ‘fumbling and yearning’ uncertainties. Even as a child, with all the confidence of a conformist bent on survival, she told her father, “My teacher and my friends say there’s God. The whole world says it; only you say there isn’t a God. I’ll believe the whole world, not you.” (ITOS 112). Employed in the IT sector, Tara’s salary is a clear indication that Rekha’s genes have triumphed over Shiv’s. The controversial lesson by her father on Basava is a constant source of embarrassment for Tara. Like most of the expatriates she too nurses patriotic feelings and has learnt to appreciate Indian traditions. In both her novels, *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* and *In Times of Siege*, Hariharan has developed her male protagonists and the female characters do not have much role of significance. It is the life of Vasu Master and Shiv Murthy that takes a prominent place in both these two works of fiction.
Mr. Anant Tripathi, representative of the Itihas Suraksha Manch symbolizes the revival of Hinduism. In his fiery speech, he instigates the Hindus to shed cowardice. He declares,

We have to shed the cowardice that has grown in us with Muslims, then Europeans storming Indian shores. Though Hindus were among the bravest of the ancient peoples, repeated outside conquests have made them cowards. Even Mahatma Gandhi said so. We want to make the Hindu strong and courageous again. A meek person cannot survive. I am not only talking about muscle power. We must return to our old militant spirit if the Hindu nation is to become great again. We must spread moral and spiritual strength in the younger generation by taking teachings of courage and valour to schools and colleges (ITOS 90/91).

Mr. Tripathi represents the so-called protectors of Hinduism. He speaks for the Hindu fanatics better known as the VHP/RSS. The ideologies of these fanatics are mouthed by the spirited Mr. Tripathi. He wants to exercise his power and suppress all the forces that try to vilify Hinduism. Shiv’s lesson on Basava, according to Mr. Tripathi, is not an expression of freedom but is an attempt by so-called secular people, who are interested in obtaining foreign-funding, to project Hinduism in an incorrect and defamatory manner. He firmly believes that the texts that overemphasize caste-divisions and denigrates Hindu culture should be banned. He feels that any attempt to tarnish the image of the Indian past should be attacked bravely. The face of secular India in the novel, Dr. Menon, is in charge of the Modern
India course. He eliminates two questionable statements on minority communities from the lesson on ‘Modern India’ module to steer clear of controversial statements.

All the myriad characters portrayed by Hariharan bring contemporary India alive to the readers. Each character is representative of the diverse culture, an intrinsic part of India. In her review on the book, *In Times of Siege*, contemporary novelist Anita Nair writes, “There are no resolutions in this book; no pat endings, which is what makes the book even more remarkable. Hariharan manages to instill a certain sense of rightness rather than dissatisfaction that unresolved endings could have.”

About the protagonist Shiv Murthy and other characters Nair writes:

> It is enough we know that Shiv has been forced to see, be free to be curious, to speculate; to debate, dissent, reaffirm the value of the only heirloom he needs from the past, the right to know a thing in all ways possible. Be it Meena or his mind. In Shiv, Hariharan has created a character who for his ordinariness is that much more potent. And among her cameos, it is Menon who with his penchant for staring at the ceiling that leaves an indelible impression... There is gentle humour and irony, sensitivity and enough flesh and blood to make up for those times when the book meanders aimlessly or when the shrillness and a tendency to much ‘speechifying’ breaks the pace of the narrative.

Hariharan’s views on Shiv are expressed in an interview with *The Hindu*:
Shiv, the liberal in the novel says in some desperation when he sees the ‘opposition’ is not as united as they need to be... Forget your little arguments, the enemy is almost at our heels! If this can happen to an ordinary, cautious man like me, what about the ideologywallas?” But the novel is also saying that when pushed to a point where a choice has to be made, many of those we think of as “just ordinary, decent people” will speak up for the fundamental values that hold their world in place – peace and harmony so that everyone in society can go about their business, as well as the basic freedom to think, speak, and ask questions. This is what happened during the Emergency, after the demolition of Babri Masjid and after the Gujarat carnage.

The novel deals with divisive politics, religious animosity and fundamentalism as its major issues. The educational campus is deliberately chosen as the hub of anti-social activities. The novel depicts the sad state of the country completely seized by fanaticism, hatred and mistrust. Shiv and Meena’s relation depict the vacillating nature of man-woman relations. The concerns of the novel also include moral degradation and extra-marital liaisons prevalent in the society. Through this novel Hariharan the writer-cum-activist appeals for peace. In addition to being a political narrative, the novel is about gender – “Shiv’s transformation towards action is actually accompanied by a sort of feminization.” (ITOS). After having looked after bedridden Meena, Shiv becomes a better house-keeper. The novel is a concern with looking at the past, reconstruction of the past and ultimately it is a fusion of the past with the present. The story of Basava is incorporated into the novel with an aim to
with grave problems of society. Therefore, she is considered as a cerebral writer or activist writer.

A comprehensive study of the themes and characters of Hariharan’s novels leads to convincing conclusions about her writings. Highly influenced by her Indian culture she has attempted to adopt different techniques and themes to highlight her feminist views. In order to foreground her feminist ideology, she seems to have made subtle use of the post-modern literary theory while attempting to critically confront patriarchy. She succeeds in transforming and reinventing the real world within the imaginative spaces of fiction. In her literary corpus spanning two decades she has managed to write novels that belong to the middle-class ‘emancipatory narratives’. She also attempts to introduce ‘open-endedness’ in her novels. Through her novel *When Dream Travels* she has successfully managed to deconstruct the past and thereby reconstruct a more meaningful present. Especially in her first novel, *The Thousand Faces of Night* Hariharan has generated accurate representations of women for the present by exposing misrepresentation of women in patriarchal culture. As a part of re-visionist myth-making, Hariharan also attempts to retell old stories in different ways. Whether it is *Mahabharata*, *Panchatantra* or *Arabian Nights*, Hariharan tries to demolish the cultural stereotypes popularized and patronized by the patriarchal set-up. Thus, she also tried to create a new sacred space within the old discourse and recreate in words a new world. The characteristics of post-modern literature are clearly visible in the novels of Hariharan. *The Thousand Faces of Night* celebrates and favours fragmentation of narrative. *The Thousand Faces of Night* combines the traditions of historical narrative (*Mahabharata*) and fiction in a
combines the traditions of historical narrative (*Mahabharata*) and fiction in a truly post modern style of mixed genres. Another characteristic of post modern literature is the questioning of conventional notions of reality. In *The Thousand Faces of Night* and *In Times of Siege*, Hariharan’s narrative calls attention to its representational rather than presentational status. The narrative rejects its role as a presenter of universal truth. In the novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* there are multiple narratives – Devi, Mayamma and Sita. Each of these multiple voices functions and speaks for certain subjective positions and hence can deliver only a particular version of the story. Thus, it ceases to be a unifying grand narrative. Another aspect of her fiction is the absence of a conclusion and leaving the narrative open-ended without offering any solution or resolution. This again is a feature of post modern literature. The absence of archetypal heroes as protagonists in *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* and *In Times of Siege* ensures that her novels definitely can be categorized as post modern literature. In all her works she does deal with relevant social issues and thus proving to be an activist writer. She aims to usher in change through her writings. Hariharan has pushed the gender issues to the centre and decentred patriarchal authority. Her novels are representational in style, and record a revival of the traditional narrative manner and also explore the significant role tradition plays in bringing the Indian English novel to the mainstream of Indian narrative.
Works Cited:


Nityanandam, Indira, and Reena Kothari. *Indo-English Fiction: The Last Decade*.