to her three children and has become the mother-figure for the whole kingdom, through her intelligence and courage

Dunyazad also rises above the role of biological mother to her imbecile son to become the saviour-mother of Samarkhand. She watches and waits, as the reign of terror envelops Samarkhand under Shahzaman. When her efforts to contain the damage being caused by the sickness and suspicion perpetrated by Shahzaman’s rule prove fruitless and insufficient, considering the enormity of it all, she, who had been ready to use her dagger against Shahryar himself, has a hand to play in the disposal of Shahzaman. After Shahzaman’s unexplained disappearance, the city heals under the calm guidance of Dunyazad. Though she is responsible for the restoration of sanity in Samarkhand, she is not greedy for power for herself or for her son. She recognizes the unsuitability of her son to be the ruler of the country and makes her stepson assume power. She thus becomes the mother-figure for her city in putting the welfare of its people above the vesting of power onto her son.

The disenchantment with various institutions, ranging from marriage and motherhood to political institutions like monarchy, religion and Western educational methods is thus put across powerfully in the four novels discussed. A discussion of the women in Githa Hariharan’s novels and the nature of the worlds they inhabit, the circumscription or the emancipation that is a part of their lives becomes necessary now.

Chapter – III
CONSTRUCTIONS OF FEMININITY:
CONFORMING AND TRANSCENDENCE

Carol Dyhouse quotes the following passage from the nineteenth century novel, *The Story of an African Farm* in powerful illustration of her arguments on the social construction of femininity as a process of stunting and belittling:

They begin to shape us to our cursed end…when we are tiny things in shoes and socks. We sit with our little feet drawn up under us in the window, and look out at the boys in their happy play. We want to go. Then a loving hand is laid on us: ‘Little one, you cannot go,’ they say; ‘your little face will burn, and your nice white dress be spoiled.’ We feel it must be for our own good, it is so lovingly said; but we cannot understand; and we still kneel with our little cheek wistfully pressed against the pane. Afterwards, we go and thread blue beads, and make a string for our neck; and we go and stand before the glass. We see the complexion we were not to spoil, and the white frock, and we look into our own great eyes. Then the curse begins to act on us…. We fit our sphere as a Chinese woman’s foot fits her shoe, exactly as though God had made both – and yet he knows nothing of either. (“Women” 14-15)

Stark images of the conditioning of the female mind to uphold the precepts of patriarchy, the deployment of women themselves as agents of patriarchy, and
the constriction of the female worlds through these means come across powerfully in this excerpt from the Victorian novel. In modern times, the beaded necklace may have been replaced by something else, but the circumscription of the female world by an internalization of masculine standards of worth, beauty and gender roles, still remains largely true in the developed world and to an even larger scale in developing countries like India.

There is criticism against feminism as against every other philosophy proposed so far that most of what counts as feminism concerns itself with the predicament of the Western white woman. Hence, it follows that feminism which talks about the plight of women in general, their representation in literature, in media, an awareness or lack of their needs and a host of other things must also speak of and strive to include those problems and attitudes and possible solutions specific to different cultural and social milieu.

In the Vedic and pre-Vedic times (around 2000 BC and before), a woman enjoyed some degree of equality with man, for she could sit next to men and perform Vedic sacrificial rituals. Ancient India produced philologists and grammarians like Gargi and Maitreyi. There is even a myth of creation which posits woman (Saraswathi) as the creator. Even in the normally accepted Hindu myth of creation, where Brahma, a man is the creator of the universe, there are female deities, who represent knowledge, power and wealth. There is also a considerable body of evidence to show that prior to Aryan influence, the Dravidian Indians worshipped goddesses.
In ancient literatures of both North India and South India there are instances of women power destroying kingdoms and mighty rulers. Elango Adigal’s *Silappathigaram* mentions that Madurai, the capital of The Pandya Kings was burnt by the rage of Kannaki, when her husband was wrongly accused of theft and killed by mistake. Veda Vyasa’s *Mahabharata* tells the story of the Kauravas, who fell because they had humiliated Draupadi in their court. Valmiki’s *Ramayana* is also about the defeat of Ravana, who abducted Sita and tried to marry her forcibly. Also, the existence of Ardhanareeshwar, a deity form in which God is half-man and half-woman, points to the comparatively high status, enjoyed by Indian women compared to women of other cultures in ancient times. Scenes of ‘swayamvara,’ whereby potential grooms assembled at a bride’s place and the bride chose her partner from among them, are found in the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*.

Regarding the contribution of the numerous goddesses in ancient Indian culture to the cause of feminism, feminists, the world over differ in their views. Some of them argue that the goddesses help to maintain patriarchy by feeding women with divine images of either decent goddesses, who are submissively married or frighteningly out-of-control, unmarried goddesses, the clear message coming across in this setup, being that as independence makes women bloodthirsty and dangerous, women should imitate the submissive Sita rather than the ferocious Kali. Some other Western feminists like Rita M. Gross regard the Hindu goddesses as sources of intensely liberating symbols. The visual presence of
divine females in a variety of roles and poses has promoted the concept of humanity of women through positive female imagery that provides psychological well-being. In contrast, the long struggle of Western monotheists to exterminate the goddess has been a powerful pointer to the “Western patriarchal notion that femaleness is unworthy of symbolizing the sacred” (107).

Rita M. Gross points out that even the strong goddesses are not feared, negative entities to the Hindu men and women, though some early Western scholars had misinterpreted them to be so. She points out that it has been possible for Indian women like Indira Gandhi to come to premium positions of power, even as early as the middle of the 20th century, only because Indian men and women are used to and comfortable with divine images of female strength and power like Durga and Kali.

Sherry B. Ortner in her essay, “Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?” makes the intelligent observation that the rights given to women are comparatively more in some societies, but there are always limits, and no society, the world over has given equal rights to men and women. So also, the Indian women in ancient India enjoyed reasonable freedom, had access to education, were allowed marriages of their choice to a certain extent, had numerous images of positive female power to derive psychological comfort from, and yet were supposed to require male support, throughout their lives. The Manu Smriti, the well-known compendium of codes for societal living in ancient India, is for example, full of contradictions regarding the state of women. It declares in some places that a
woman must be honoured and kept happy if a home or family is to be blessed by God, another orders her to serve a husband, even if he were lecherous or unfaithful. One particular section, which talks about the dependant status of women, says:

Pitaa Rakshati Kaumaree, Bhartaa Rakshati Yauvanee:

Putroo Rakshati Vardhakyee, Na Stri Swaatantryam Arhati.

(The father protects the woman during childhood, the husband during her youth and the son, during her old age, a woman does not deserve freedom). (qtd. in Alladi Uma 2)

The book of codes further elaborates on the rather tough ideals forced on a woman of those times. Listing out the characteristics of an ideal wife, it says that a good woman should be like a slave, while working/ serving; a minister, when counselling/ advising; Goddess Lakshmi in her looks/ personality; the earth in forbearance/endurance; a mother, while feeding and Rambha, the celestial prostitute in bed.

Sangam literature describes the position of women in ancient Tamil society. Though women had access to education, and though there is evidence of the existence of many female poets during this period, it is also found that very tough standards were imposed on women. Women were supposed to possess the qualities of ‘acham’ (fear), ‘mudam’ (ignorance, sometimes feigned, because a woman is not supposed to exhibit her intelligence, when in the company of men),
‘nanam’ (bashfulness) and ‘payirppu’ (an aversion for even the dress of a man other than one’s husband).

The most important virtue of women was considered to be chastity. *Silappadhikaram*, a Tamil classic belonging to the post-Sangam period, has the focus of its story on the chastity of Kannaki. Kannaki is hailed for her chastity and she gets the power to burn the city of Madurai, to avenge the death of her husband, because her chastity is as fiercely powerful as fire. Kannaki is worshipped by people to this day, because of her chastity.

There was a gradual decline in the status of women after the Sangam period. It deteriorated to such lengths, that women themselves became completely ignorant of the glory their women ancestors had enjoyed in society, as active contributors to it. Women who were largely confined to their homes and who were subjected to several evils like child marriage, torture of widows, including the practice of Sati in certain parts of the country in the time of British colonial rule had to be brought out from their apathy and acceptance by social reformers.

In the post-Independence period, women are faced with several problems that threaten their very existence like female infanticide in some parts of the country, preferential treatment given to boys over girls with regard to educational opportunities and property rights, in families which are still largely steeped in patriarchy, lack of awareness among women regarding voting rights, child marriages, forceful dowry demands, disparity in pay, male chauvinism at the workplace etc. Still Indian women, today are better-off than their counterparts.
were, a century ago. More women study and go to jobs, more women have reproductive rights and there is a representation of women in almost all spheres including the military and politics, even though Indian women are way behind the realization of equal status and representation that feminists speak of.

As for literature, in Indian writing by women, according to Rajul Bhargava, there is “a multi-layering of postmodern feminist differences.” He points out that “the feminist narratives are not preoccupied with the theme of the struggle for equal rights, but rather with the conflicts and tensions of implementing these rights in society which still operates according to traditional patterns.” (“Infidel” 76) He adds further that women in India like women elsewhere have begun to move towards self-perception, self-expression and self-determination, slowly indeed and not entirely against tradition, within the family bindings.

Chanda, Ho and Mathai discuss the vortex of Indian women’s writing as the intersection between women’s individual identity and the identity of the community, two mutually implicated dimensions whose bonds are rather complex (58). Indeed it can be said that Indian women writers are constructing narrative mappings of alternative Indias through their novels and short stories. They are contributing towards creating a set of representations of India which confront the reader with diverse regional, national problems, while suggesting directions for change and improvement in synchronicity with women’s issues.

Thus feminist readings based on gender as a tool serve to describe the position of women inside local patriarchies, the extent of the psychological
damage inflicted on them as second class citizens of a repressive social order, and also the means and varied ways by which women rise up against or subvert the confining clamps of the said local patriarchies. Now, of Githa Hariharan’s four novels being studied, the Hindu Indian framework of rules, traditions, models and myths provides the backdrop against which women’s submission or rebellion, conformity, compromise, empowerment, and enlightenment are all viewed in three of the novels namely *The Thousand Faces of Night*, *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* and *In Times of Siege*. As for *When Dreams Travel*, the novel does not fit in with a specific geopolitical reference. The story could have happened anywhere in the East. However, the framework is predominantly that of Muslim tradition of the times of the *Arabian Nights*. With regard to the Hindu Indian framework, it is fashioned in great detail with the help of myths drawn from the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* and the lives of saints in *The Thousand Faces of Night*, while in *In Times of Siege* and *The Ghosts of Vasu Master*, it is present in a more suggestive, subtle mode.

The concept of chastity and preservation of virginity might not be very important considerations for a woman in Western society. They have however remained important considerations in Indian tradition and despite rapid Westernisation, continue to remain so in the Indian psyche. Centuries of patriarchal prescription have insisted on virtuosity and chastity for women. In *The Thousand Faces of Night*, Baba says, “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” (55). He glorifies the pre-eminence of chastity, saying that “on the death of her husband, the chaste wife, established in continence, reaches heaven, even if childless, like students who have practised self-control” (55). Githa Hariharan’s heroines however do not fit into this mould prescribed for Indian women. In The Thousand Faces of Night, for example, Devi has a sexual relationship with Dan in America and doesn’t seem to have any qualms about it, when her wedding is being arranged by her mother.

Amba points out to the queen of the Kurus, that “a pure princess cannot give her heart to two men, without bringing shame to her unborn sons” (36). But a man has nothing to stop him from giving his heart to two or more women. The saintly composer Thyagaraya has two wives. While the Hindu scriptures all insist that a woman must have only one husband, and she must be chaste and virtuous, it lays down no such conditions for men. Baba himself tells Devi, the story of Muthusamy Dikshitar the saintly composer, who had two wives. Devi’s grandmother, albeit satirically, talks about what a woman’s heart is supposed to do, when she tells her the story of Amba who was carried away by Bhishma “When you marry, Devi, your heart moves up to your shoulder and slips down your arm to the palm of your hand. The hand that holds you tightly as you walk round the fire receives it like a gift. You can’t do anything about it: when you marry, it goes to him and you never get it back” (37).
Githa Hariharan both belongs to and jumps the tradition of Indian women novelists, in the way she has tried to explore the realities of women’s world and has gone further to search for other possibilities that are outside the commonly prescribed spectrum. True to the title, *The Thousand Faces of Night* presents a plethora of women characters, some of the present, some growing out of the mythical past. What is enchanting about Githa Hariharan’s treatment of the myths is that myths, legends, epics, whatever she touches upon are not dead, passing records. The characters are not lifeless drawings belonging to the past. Instead they grow, evolve in her hands as she tries to interpret the yawning silences in between the familiar episodes, in wholly new ways. In her own words the characters become “more rounded”.

The names of all the three main characters are the names of goddesses. Devi, named after the all encompassing goddess figure, ‘Shakti’ strikes the reader as a weakling compared to her mother, Sita. Her life is dominated and manipulated by her mother. Her spirits of rebellion in the form of a brief fling with the Afro-American Dan do not in any way mould, or develop her personality. It could just be said that Devi’s fling with Dan before she comes over to India to play the demure daughter to her mother is as if the author has included the incident to undermine or attack notions of virginity or virtue as have been applied to Indian women.

Once Devi comes back from America, and the ground is getting prepared for Devi’s marriage, the reader is fed with a whole range of stories, each dealing
with a different plight of woman with reference to marriage. Devi’s grandmother had fondly wished a princess’s wedding for her granddaughter. The idea that a woman’s ultimate goal in life is to be wedded to a man is charmingly impressed upon Devi. “You will live like a princess, she would say fondly to me between her kisses, and I listened rapt, my seven-year-old mind thrilling at the splendours that awaited me” (20). The way Damayanti is bathed in fragrant oils and decorated with pearls and emeralds, in preparation for her ‘swayamvara’ highlights the image of a woman, as an object of desire and pleasure for men.

Devi’s own ‘swayamvara’ or process of choice of bridegroom is not glamorous or as much in keeping with her heart’s desire, as Damayanti’s is. What is common between Devi and Damayanti is that for both, as for thousands of other women, marriage is offered as the only option and goal of a woman’s life. But where Damayanti recognizes her heart’s desire and is unswerving in her love and loyalty to Nala, Devi does not know her own mind. She settles for what her mother’s clever, connivance offers her as the best choice, namely, Mahesh.

The next story, the reader hears from Devi’s grandmother in a flashback is that of Gandhari’s. Women have not been and are still not being considered as individuals with minds, desires, passions of their own. Gandhari as a woman is taken for granted too. She walks to her husband’s chamber, all starry eyed and expectant, every inch the shy bride eager to meet her regal husband. To her shock, what she sees in her husband’s eyes is not warm love but a glazed vacuum. Gandhari’s immediate blindfolding of her eyes has been traditionally viewed as a
sacrifice born of devotion to her husband. Githa Hariharan peeps a little into the blindfold and sees blind rage and fury there. Fury at being taken for granted, fury at the weight of tradition and prescribed roles thrust on her. Acceptance then is the watchword as far as woman is concerned.

The same mantra is what is seized upon by Sita, Devi’s mother. When her father-in-law angrily reprimands her for playing the veena, without keeping the flowers in readiness for his pooja, his words ring in her ears, “Are you a wife? A daughter-in-law?” She bends and keeps looking at the veena. The fury that Gandhari bundled up and tied in that fierce knot round her eyes runs through Sita’s fingers. With one discordant twang she pulls the strings of the veena. As Gandhari’s denial of her sight is an act of fury hidden under royal sacrifice and dignity, Sita’s denial of her passion for the veena is an act of pure rage, hidden under wifely duties and circumspect behavior prescribed for a daughter-in-law. Sita’s father-in-law as a patriarchal male can indulge in his desires and fancies, his passion for puja. But Sita or any other female in that household for that matter has to fit herself only into roles prescribed for her. Their desires and passions are always secondary to their prescribed duties.

“A girl is given only once in marriage” says the girl who marries the snake in grandmother’s story. With love as weapon she manages to bring out the human form from under the snake skin and with great vile and cunning manages to find a way to her feminine fulfillment. As Devi’s wise grandmother points out, “A woman gets her heart’s desire by great cunning” (TFN 20). Amba’s story from the
*Mahabharata* is the backdrop to Uma’s unhappy marriage. It adds to the list of various possible dimensions of womanhood and to the different versions of fate/plight that present themselves to Devi in the form of the numerous stories that her grandmother feeds her with, in the course of her path towards womanhood.

Amba’s story is that of a princess and a courageous woman, who managed to transform her hatred, the fate that overtook her into a triumph. The story goes thus: The jasmine garland in her loving fingers has almost touched the neck of Prince Salwa in a ‘swayamvara’, when she is snatched away from the fulfillment of her heart’s desire and lifted on to a horse along with her two sisters, Ambika and Ambalika. It is Bhishma, who is carrying them on his horse, for his brothers. But when he reaches his palace and hands over his booty to his stepmother, Amba tells the mother that her heart has already been given to a prince, and that she cannot marry anyone else.

Amba is allowed to go to her lover but the lover scorns her saying that she belonged to another man. The poor girl goes and waits by Bhishma’s private chamber. She begs him to accept her. Though his manly desire craves to be satisfied, his vow of celibacy stops him and he spurns her, keeping his face averted. Amba’s heart burns in a smouldering flare of rage and hatred. She swears on vengeance and undertakes a hard penance to achieve her aim. All the bitter hatred in her bosom swells into libation for her penance. At last, Lord Shiva appears before her and gently accepts the garland of Nagalinga pushpas from her hand. He then promises her, her revenge. Whoever wore that garland will surely
kill Bhishma. Amba goes with that garland from kingdom to kingdom in search of a prince or warrior to whom she could offer her garland of destruction. But no one dares to fight Bhishma and Amba is heartbroken. She throws her garland on a pillar in Drupada’s court and gives up her life. But the hatred contained in her heart lives on in the garland.

Amba is reborn as Drupada’s daughter. She is raised like a son and when the appropriate time comes, she becomes a man. During the battle of Kurukshetra, the prince rides the horse with Amba’s garland round his neck, and kills Bhishma. Devi’s grandmother tells her the story of Amba, when she talks about the unhappy marriage of her cousin Uma who had been ill-treated by her husband and sexually abused by her father-in-law. Amba is spurned by her lover, the king of Salwa and her abductor Bhishma alike. She however refuses to take her fate, lying down. She swears to take revenge on Bhishma, the invincible warrior. She is not intimidated by his stature or his reputation. She undertakes a rigid penance and though it takes her another birth, she manages to avenge herself in the end.

The grandmother’s story at this point definitely suggests that women need not and should not submit to injustice. The story of the female avenger who could get into manhood through her penance and the intensity of her wanting, the hatred that had made it possible for her to rise beyond the life prescribed, why even the gender planned for her by the gods, both frightens and fascinates Devi.

Nourished by grandmother’s stories as a child, Devi’s active imagination fantasizes for Devi the kind of life she would want. The Devi of her imagination,
has a strong mountainous woman for her mentor and she learns to aim her fine arrows at targets and to endure pain. She works relentlessly and is at last declared fit to face her battle with men. Her mentor presents her with a magic vest to be used as a last resort in her battles. Devi is hailed as the incarnation of Durga as she marks “here, the devouring body for life, there, puts out with one swift arrow, the evil eye” as she strives to “purge the earth of fat-jowled slimy-tailed greed” (TFN 43). She spurns fawning offers from admiring suitors and chooses a woodland youth, strong and supple who has lived a life of seclusion in the mountains, and who calls him, his goddess, on seeing her craggy, wind beaten face.

She lives a life of happy companionship with her husband and dies the death of a brave knight after avenging the mauling of her youngest daughter. It is clear that Devi craves a full life with passion, love, pain, companionship, affection and courage. But Sita scorns the dreamy eyed aspirations of Devi. She directs her daughter’s life from one end of a tether; the tether neither too tight nor loose, but always in control. While Devi has always dreamt of a ‘swayamvara’, where the bride gets to choose her husband, in reality, Mahesh is chosen as a suitable husband for Devi by Sita.

The red, succulent fruit that Devi bites into, in her dreamy imagination hints at a longing for passion and full blooded love. But Mahesh is “a polite stranger” in the weeks since their wedding. He views marriage as “a necessity, a milestone like any other” (49). When Devi wants their marriage to take root and
grow like a sapling growing from strength to strength, Mahesh prefers to think that both parties in the marriage have understood their role. He mentally shrugs a relieved shoulder, “Thank God, we Indians are not obsessed with love” (54). ‘We’ here is not only an instance of the particular or personal being used to define the general but also the male view being used to automatically define or stand for the female view.

Mahesh seems totally insensitive to the possibility of Devi possessing an individuality and personality that needs to express itself in a role away from that of a wife. When Devi says that she wants to learn Sanskrit so as to understand Baba’s quotations better, he says that the English translations are good enough. She suggests that she could get some job for herself and again Mahesh responds with “but, when the baby comes…” (65).

Devi’s view of her place in Mahesh’s world is best described in her own words, “almost as lifeless as the stuffed bird, a grotesque study in still-life” (57). Mahesh’s chauvinistic attitude as he, without bothering to find out, what is really bothering Devi, contrasts her with other women who are less-educated yet are happier than her, does not bring her any closer to him. His insensitive insistence that if she were a woman, she would surely want to be a mother and his attempts at making her undergo the fertility treatment, provide the last straw. “Any news, he asks. His eyes quickly apprise my body, all bones and flat stomach” (86). Mahesh’s construction of a woman is such that when he looks at Devi, “everything dissolves into nothingness except Devi’s unrelenting womb” (93).
Baba, Devi’s father-in-law speaks for Manu, the great Hindu law-giver and the founder of Hindu patriarchy. In his interpretations, women are instruments of men’s initiation into ‘bhakti’ but have no salvation of their own to seek. Devi is led into the intricacies of Hindu traditional thought and philosophy through Baba’s stories. Baba’s stories in fact attempt to canonize woman and put her on a spiritual pedestal thereby depriving her of the right to be human. “It is a case of castration by canonization” (Paul 110). For example, because Jayadeva’s wife is honoured by the gods for her virtuosity, Jayadeva’s identity is changed to “the husband of Padmavathi.” Saraswathy Bai’s greatness ultimately wins over her miserly husband. Narayana Thirtha’s wife’s selfless devotion initiates him into sanyasa. But such an honourable position brings along with it prescriptions of limits. “The housewife should always be joyous, adept at domestic work, neat in her domestic wares, and restrained in expenses. Controlled in mind, word and body, she who does not transgress her lord, attains heaven even as her lord does” (TFN 70-71).

When Baba tells Devi, stories from the lives of saints and from Sanskrit scriptures, he always-withholds the story of ‘kritya’, “almost as a lethal weapon kept from children,” possibly because he fears the possibility of the kritya reaction in Devi. But it is the kritya story that fascinates Devi. In Baba’s unread story, a kritya is “a ferocious woman who haunts and destroys the house in which women are insulted. She burns with anger, she spits fire. She sets the world ablaze like Kali shouting in hunger. Each age has its kritya. In the age of Kali, … each household shelters a kritya” (TFN 69-70). Now the kritya in Devi asserts herself.
Every household that insults a woman, shelters a kritya, and so Devi leaves the household that had insulted her womanhood. It is her way of rebellion against Mahesh’s concept of her as a convenient object with useful organs. In moving from self-pity to a yearning for revenge, Devi is also inspired by the example of her favourite goddess. “I became a woman warrior, a heroine. I was Devi. I rode a tiger and cut off evil, magical demons’ heads” (41).

Devi’s choice of Gopal as her refuge is a vehement statement against the linking of her womanhood and motherhood. Devi attempts to assert her womanhood through her relationship with Gopal, but soon realizes that it is again one more of the roles set aside for women by men. And again, “she fled, as in a nightmare that compels the certitude of choice, from image to image, the array of masks and costumes, memories of her various and discrete lives” (129). Almost always, in a life that holds man and woman together, the woman does not ever get to be her real self. It is an array of costumes and masks that is her lot. As Devi says reprovingly of herself, woman has learned too well to please and that struggle itself becomes the all-consuming, all-important mission of her life. Devi decides however that she is not going to lose her real self in the masks, she had been cajoled into wearing, in her efforts “to please.”

Here, the use of the term, heroine and the generic name, Devi are significant. Though Devi has been appearing as a central character, right from the beginning of the novel, she has only been a passive, malleable human being, subject to the commands and hopes and subtle influences of other people. Now,
for the first time she makes a strong, independent, decision for herself. It marks
the beginning of Devi’s search for her own Self. At this point, she is transformed
from a passive, ordinary, spineless woman to a form of the powerful goddess,
Devi. She becomes worthy of the title, heroine. Having rejected and outgrown the
various sacrificing and self-effacing images of Devi, namely Sati, Parvati,
Haimavati and Gauri, she chooses to be inspired by the fiery rage of Durga and
Kali and walks out, seeking a new life for herself.

Devi sees in Gopal’s artistic freedom, a possible escape from the pressure
of expectations and limits of married life crushing her and her identity. As Devi
prepares to leave Mahesh for Gopal, “she shakes off the ghost of her father and
takes on Gopal in her first attempt to write her own version of womanhood”
(Kothari 45). She knows that she is taking a risk. She argues with herself: “I will
soar high on the crest of Gopal’s ragas, and what if I fall with a thud, alone, the
morning after? I will walk on, seeking a goddess who is not yet made” (TFN 95).
Here, one would do well to recollect Simone de Beauvoir’s definition of women’s
needs. She defines a woman’s needs, not with reference to happiness but with
reference to liberty. Here, even if Devi were to fall, it would atleast be her
conscious decision.

Devi does indeed fall with a thud. She realizes soon that her position as
mistress to Gopal is no different from her position as wife to Mahesh. Neither of
them offers enough space for her. The reflections of herself she sees on the mirror-
studded buttons of Gopal’s kurta seem to awaken her inner self. Devi decides that,
it was time she stopped being a mere reflection of someone else’s desires and ideas. She “liberates herself from the pressures of feminine role-play, to attain a state of free creative individuality” (Nair 173). She rejects all the real and mythical role models, and in the new destiny, she seeks, she hopes to find a new meaning in her relationship with her mother.

It is significant that, towards the end of the novel, Devi not only creates new spaces for herself but through her life, she inadvertently creates a space for her mother, so she would relinquish her conformist and protective attitude. As her name plainly suggests, Sita’s character is delineated against the Sita of Ramayana, who has traditionally been considered to be the model of Indian womanhood. As the novel progresses from beginning to end however, there is a shift in the constitution of Sita “from a self-sacrificing to a self-preserving femininity” (Chanda, Ho and Mathai 60). Devi’s rejection of her marriage to Mahesh, brings home to Sita, the futility of her self-denial which had in effect become changed into a suffocating control of her husband and daughter, without resulting in true happiness for any of the three.

Sita is reborn through her daughter’s adventures in life and she attempts to retrieve her lost self, by returning to her music, her veena. At this point Devi returns to her mother, “to offer her, her love” (TFN 139). Here, Githa Hariharan “reinterprets the archetypes of mother and child from the perspective of feminist sisterhood” (Kothari 44).
The female bond is celebrated in *The Thousand Faces of Night*. The mother-daughter relationship which usually has a limited meaning in a patriarchal setup is redefined in the novel. Feminists, all along have stressed the importance of the restoration of a mother-daughter bond, even after the facts of gestation, birthing and suckling. In the Indian context, daughters are usually brought up with the understanding that their parents’ home is only a temporary home for them and that it is the husband’s home which would be the real home one day. Once married, they are treated as guests in their erstwhile home. In this context, Devi’s return to her mother Sita in search of a new meaning in her life, takes on a special significance.

The bond is not restricted to two women alone. In the evolution of Devi through her dreams, hesitant first steps in life, her attempts at conforming, her rebellion and her psychological rebirth as an individual, Reena Kothari credits Devi’s rebirth to more mothers than one (45). Mayamma, who tells real stories from her life, that had in effect been a saga of unrelieved suffering, plays a major role in Devi’s growing up. She has been a victim of society, her family and a life ruled by gender. While Devi laments the equally dreadful nature of all the choices available to her, Mayamma’s life has been one long saga of suffering and acceptance, with not even a pretence to the power of choice.

Married as a child, ill-treated by her husband first and then by her wastrel son, Mayamma has finally become a mother-figure in Mahesh’s house. She has not been able to change the course of her destiny and so she has learnt to accept...
and accommodate. She believes and pronounces that the suffering of women in society is because they are women. According to her, survival is the highest ideal for a woman, and she states: “I may have learnt how to wait, when to bend my back, when to wipe the rebellious eyes dry” (TFN 126). She is a source of comfort to Devi, and “through her silent endorsement of the radical actions of Parvatiamma and Devi, she recreates a genealogy of women” (Kothari 45).

Parvatiamma holds a strange fascination for Devi. Though Mahesh is reticent about her, and considers her leaving, the ultimate betrayal, Devi keeps talking about her to Mayamma. Parvati’s leaving in search of individual salvation, when her husband’s stories insist that a woman’s salvation is bound up in her husband’s, is a powerful statement. Devi finds that her mother’s choice in life had been very different from her mother-in-law’s. While “Sita had chosen self-denial and asserted her role as wife and mother, Parvati had chosen rebellion and asserted herself by shuffling aside her familial role” (Paul 109).

Vijayasree points out that the name Devi is added as a suffix to the names of all goddesses. Besides the name Devi in its original puranic sense refers to Mahamaya, the Absolute Divine Power. All the forces which appear in various names and forms are in fact different manifestations of Devi. Githa Harihara’s Devi, when placed in this tradition, acquires a symbolic status and her quest becomes representative of that of the whole community of women. Furthermore, “it marks a voyage in the gynocentric past, a time when the Goddess Devi was the centre of creation” (178).
Devi’s grandmother’s narration of stories from the myths and legends is described as a kind of revisionist myth-making. She doesn’t use the more prominent figures of the Hindu myths, as a launch pad for her comments and views on happenings and people in her life. She doesn’t discuss Sita, Savitri or Anusuya who are often celebrated as paragons of female virtues. On the other hand, she retrieves the marginal figures like Damayanti, Gandhari, Amba and Ganga — long relegated to minority status, almost forgotten and often rendered silent and invisible in patriarchal versions of myth. It is however significant that all these women had great fury in them and expressed their protest against exploitation in powerful ways.

Gandhari’s anger at being taken for granted is hidden behind the bandage, she ties over her eyes, to share the darkness of her blind husband. Gandhari’s gesture is not representative of a passive acceptance but of a quiet channelled white hot fury to perfect the assigned role. Amba is the blood-thirsty avenger, who perseveres through successive births, to take revenge on Bhishma for the injustice done to her womanhood. Devi learns through this retelling that victimization can be transformed into ‘agency.’ There is a strong message of resistance. “No heroine died without this powerful and destructive protest that left its mark, a memorial to a fighter behind her” (40). Ganga, who drowns her children and walks out of marriage, when the terms of marriage are broken, represents female determination. “Damayanti’s swayamvara is the ultimate celebration of the autonomy of woman as the princess chooses the man, she loves, even against
divine interference” (Kothari 43). Devi draws sustenance from all these heroines but she does not copy any of them. As she acknowledges herself, she is greedy for a story of ‘her own’ instead.

Devi has been accused of being a weak character who is not able to make decisions. It would seem that the author has made her purposely so to underscore and truly reflect the predicament of women. Simone de Beauvoir while viewing the secondary status of woman from a psychoanalytic point of view makes the observation: “The psychoanalyst describes the female child, the young girl as incited to identification with the mother and the father, torn between viriloid and feminine tendencies; whereas I conceive her as hesitating between the role of object, “other” which is offered her and the assertion of her liberty” (83). Devi as she herself points out is intent on walking the tightrope that Indian society, her mother and Mahesh hold before her. At the same time, something within her is also rebelling against the constricting forces. In the end, the spirit of rebellion triumphs and Devi glories in the freedom of the woman in her.

In The Ghosts of Vasu Master, Vasu Master uses the term, “my feminine ghosts” to refer to Mangala, Jameela and Eliamma, the real ghost from Mangala’s story. But the list of feminine ghosts includes his mother, grandmother and the calendar beauty from his childhood days, actress Rita-Mona. Vasu Master’s memories of his mother are mixed up with what he had heard, because his mother had died, when he was still a little boy.
Vasu Master’s mother had not had a name for almost a year, because her parents were ashamed of spending money on a naming ceremony for their sixth daughter. At last, the old sweeper woman, who swept the backyard and collected the cow-dung, inadvertently gave her the name, Lakshmi as she comforted her mistress saying that the child would have been better-off, if it had been born with ‘a little bit of extra flesh, just a few inches’, but still the child could be the ‘Lakshmi’ of her husband’s house. But to the end of her life, Lakshmi, the sixth daughter of female-weary loins remained apologetic about her very existence, always hovering in the background, never getting over the inferiority complex to ever assert her presence.

Vasu Master recollects that his mother’s ambitions were on a lower scale- escaping her husband’s unpredictable explosions of temper, surviving her mother-in-law’s jealous rule of the household, and above all, keeping the house, and everyone in it, clean, pure and unpolluted. He thinks of her short, insignificant life: “It was not very surprising then that Lakshmi had melted away into the shadows of this loud, tyrannical household. She lived just about long enough to give my father, his heir, and obviously, even that was a shoddy job” (32).

In this context, Jayaprakash A. Shinde cites Adler’s views regarding the two factors that add to the sense of helplessness in a child: (1) Unsuitable treatment and unfortunate environment; (2) Organ inferiority. In the case of Vasu Master’s mother, being the sixth daughter of parents who wanted a son is the unfortunate environment and she is also subjected to unsuitable treatment by her
parents, husband and other relatives, all of which contribute to her inferiority complex. Adler speaks of three possible responses to constraining circumstances, namely successful compensation, defeat or some form of retreat and compromise. Lakshmi had not attempted to compensate for her inferiority complex in any way and had meekly submitted to the pressures of her environment.

Descriptions of Mangala, Vasu Master’s wife show that her response to the dominating pressures of patriarchy had been one of retreat. Vasu Master himself acknowledges that she had been a shadowy presence in his life. He had not seen her for what she was, all through her life of fifteen years with him. She had been an object of convenience performing her assigned role day after day. Vasu Master recollects, “She would hover around my bed with strips of cloth dipped in cold water when I lay groaning with a fever, or she would sit up, night after night, mending the boys’ shorts and my vests, while I marked the homework books for the next day” (GVM 123). He knew her more as a cloudy memory than as a person. He thinks of her as a woman, who had remained as obscure as his forgotten mother. He recalls her as pale and insubstantial, with an aura of silence and mystery around her. When his memory presents her image to him, he sees her as a figure perennially on the retreat, always offering him only a partial view: “And I also saw, in the hazy depths of the landscape, Mangala looking out to the stretches of sea beyond the skyline. I did not see her face, only her back; and the loose end of her sari flying behind her like a sail” (39-40).
Vasu Master had known Mangala as a man, as a husband. Yet he wonders, “Who was she?” (GVM 43). Jayaprakash A. Shinde compares the question in Vasu Master’s mind with Tom Brangwen’s exclamation in D.H. Lawrence’s *The Rainbow*. “What had he known, but the long, marital embrace with his wife!” (123). Shinde observes that man always struggles to make woman, a part of himself, the extension of his will. He doesn’t recognize the otherness in her. Nor does he make an effort to really know her and share his world with her. Vasu Master continues to think of Mangala as the unknown, as long as she is alive and even after her death.

There are scenes of Jameela and Mangala frolicking about as young girls, in the sea by their village. Yet, when Vasu Master takes Mangala and his sons to the sea-side during a holiday, she does not join the other three to bathe in the sea. Vasu Master had not made the effort to reach out to her and understand her. So she too had retreated and had effectively shut him off from her inner world.

Only after Vasu Master’s momentous association with Papaya-headed Mani, which transforms his whole life, rendering null and void all the precious precepts he had learnt all his life and held close to his heart, not only about teaching and learning but about life itself, that Vasu Master re-visions his life with Mangala and rues his insensitivity. His gradual evolution into the ideal teacher for Mani, not only transforms him into a more sensitive, caring, mother-figure, but also relieves him of the blinkers of patriarchy, that he had not known he had been sporting.
It is significant that Mangala had kept her precious possessions like kumkum boxes made of sandalwood, pieces of her dowry silver, old photographs and her wedding invitation all bundled up in a silk sari and that the precious bundle should also contain the square pieces of cloth into which she had embroidered flowers, leaves and birds and also larger ones with landscapes that had the sea as a recurring image. The pieces of cloth bore Mangala’s signature embroidered on to them. They were precious possessions to Mangala not only because they reminded her of Jameela, but also because they had been the sole means of expression of her creativity and inner mind. In a household and within a marriage that did not bother to see her individual self, the pieces of cloth represented something that she could feel proud about as proof and expression of her skill and imagination.

Vasu Master recalls his grandmother as “the first love of my (his) life” (GVM 34). Even though her son was a trained physician (the ayurved), she thought of her kitchen as the real apothecary and food as the magic healer, capable of curing the body naturally of anything from constipation and insomnia to impotence. Some of her concoctions were part of the daily menu, and some to be given at periodical intervals. She not only gave Vasu her wisdom chutneys to nurture his body, but also told him stories to keep his mind from fear. Mangala, an educated woman, believed in ghosts. But Vasu Master’s illiterate grandmother had scoffed at ghosts. “What is a ghost, Nuisance? Nothing, but a part of you, that’s no
longer in control. A little pocket of garbage in your mind, that rots and begins to stink. So- what do you do? Take a big broom and sweep it out, making sure you don’t leave anything behind” (138).

Vasu Master’s grandmother was a wise, strong woman, a rationalist who was discerning enough to know her husband’s shortcomings. She spoke of him with an irreverent amusement as if he had been a stupid and unimaginative child, she had briefly known. She had said to Vasu once: “What is a husband, Vasu? Just a hungry stomach and a few other things, never mind what. But all equally greedy, swallowing like a big, red, swollen mouth, then, chewing and belching” (GVM 174).

Even though her husband had been a clerk in the British government in India, she had had her own individual ideas and beliefs. She had given away her bangles to Gandhi and was therefore ‘in some diluted way,’ part of history. She had played the roles of wife and mother, but she had not been retiring or submissive like Lakshmi, Vasu Master’s mother or his wife Mangala. She had managed to carve out her own separate identity and own special space, which she filled with her rational thinking and individual opinions.

Another striking woman character from The Ghosts of Vasu Master is that of Eliamma. If grandmother exudes a down-to-earth practical confidence and a self-opinionated, assertive nature, Eliamma is the picture of pathos and poignance. Eliamma from Mangala’s story, looks out into the watery horizon with longing. She aspires to do something meaningful in her life. She wants to be in the centre
of the expanse she sees, in a womb held in place by the ocean’s ancient secrets. 
She hands over her visible body to a stranger and goes away in search of 
excitement. But what she gives up, she is not able to claim for her self again. She 
makes herself invisible for the sake of new adventures, and excitement. But it 
becomes a permanent invisibility. After her initial excitement with her new 
milieu, though she longs to get back her original visible body, she is not able to get 
it back. She yearns for someone to see her briefly but to no avail. The author 
seems to suggest here that every woman, particularly every Indian woman is in a 
way another Eliamma.

The average Indian woman represented by Mangala in The Ghosts of Vasu 
Master and Devi or Sita or Mayamma in The Thousand Faces of Night marries a 
virtual stranger in an arranged marriage, exchanging her visibility, her identity as 
an individual self for the hyped pleasures of marital life. Vasu master says of his 
wife Mangala, “She was, what shall I say, unnoticeable, inconspicuous; like my 
mother, memorable only as an absence. I knew my wife and affection for her only 
when I lived with her ghost. This ghost had a frail, vapoury body; made more 
insubstantial by my lapses of memory about what she actually was.” Again he 
says, confirming the representation of every woman in the image of Eliamma, 
“Eliamma, Mangala and Jameela were in my mind at least ineluctably linked, 
always hand in hand” (131). Mangala specifically is represented by Eliamma. 
Eliamma is also a representation of the women rendered invisible in male literary 
texts down the years.
Here it becomes relevant to consider Ruthven’s views on the manifestation of the otherness of woman in literature. He points out that “the binary opposition between ‘self’ and ‘other’ manifests itself in our value system as possession versus lack, and becomes the generative matrix for a series of metaphors which constitute variations on the same theme.” He further states, exploring the varied forms of purposeful exclusion of the feminine ‘other’ from a discourse: “‘Lack’ is troped as feminine ‘absence’ by contrast with masculine ‘presence’, ‘invisibility’ as against ‘visibility’ ‘silence as against ‘voice’, ‘gap’ as against ‘text’” (Ruthven 44).

When the woman is suppressed, invisible, made to be absent, the act of oppression involved, not only affects the female, but by extension also the male who is inexorably linked to her. Eliamma in Mangala’s story talks about her invisible state: “There was, she found, a catch to being invisible. Everything she touched, sickened, froze, died; or became invisible to everybody but her” (GVM 130). If she scooped out fish from the sea to load a poor fisherman’s boat, the fish lay in the boat, unseen till it began to rot. “… green and brown tentacles of seaweed, barnacles, turtles jellyfish – everything fell apart when she touched it” (130).

In When Dreams Travel chastity is the central pivot around which the majority of the action of the play evolves. The chastity of his wife is so important to Shahryar that he goes to the length of taking a virgin bride every night and killing her the next morning. The more the stress given to chastity, more is the deliberate veering away from it. Both Shahryar’s queen and Shah Zaman’s queen
indulge in sexual orgies. Shahrzad has a lover and later on Dunyazad has a lesbian relationship with Dilshad.

The sheer magnitude of Shahrzad’s and Dunyazad’s contribution to the societies they lived in has to be judged against the societal conditions. Brought up in an Eastern society of the middle ages that did not set much store by women’s education, status, rights and powers, Shahrzad and Dunyazad still refuse to be the shy, simpering, weak individuals who are expected to swallow the fate that is doled out to them. Their daring, courage and quiet wisdom helps them to save their kingdoms from the perverted madness of Shahryar and Shah Zaman.

Alison Jaggar in her article titled “Feminist Ethics” asserts that feminist ethics is committed to eliminating the subordinate status of women (qtd. in Sankaran 68) Chitra Sankaran points out that in line with this philosophy, in the course of the novel, Shahrzad becomes transformed from the archetypal victim fighting for her survival into a prototype of the feminist heroine who revels in the danger and tackles it. The first scene of the novel which opens on four figures, makes a caustic comment about the place of violence in male pretensions to superiority. That real superiority is not defined by violence is made clear in the deliberate shifting of focus from the two royal brothers with a sword each, to the girl whose neck is being threatened by the sword. Her control over the situation is made clear.

The reader is told that “It is she (Shahrzad) who holds the scene together. If she stops, if she collapses, if she loses Shahryar’s interest or attention, the roof
could cave in, and with it, all hope of the city’s deliverance, or its sultan’s redemption” (*WDT* 7). Subtle changes in Shahrzad’s character construction shift her from the position of a victim to that of the puppeteer, the master-narrator who carefully plays and controls the scene. She is no longer the nervous girl fighting for her life, who is seen in the frame-story. She is the established saviour of the city, a feminist prototype, worthy of emulation. The image of the feminist heroine comes across clearly in the following lines: “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” (6).

There is a major shift in the status of two other women characters too in the novel. Dunyazad, who is only a secondary, marginalized character in *The Thousand and One Nights* becomes a central character in *When Dreams Travel*. Dilshad is a major character in the latter novel but being an ugly slave girl, she could not have featured in the former text, “steeped in gender and class politics” (Sankaran 69).

In *When Dreams Travel*, the array of women characters is impressive. The story is itself carried forward by three women, Shahrzad, Duniyazad and Dilshad. Shahrzad is central to the story. She is described as the mother of all storytellers. The author describes her as a shape-shifting woman, a woman with many names. In this manner, Shahrzad could well be the story teller of the 1001 Arabian Nights,
Scheherazade, or she could be any or each of the different women who weave fantasies of different kinds in their bid for survival.

The reader is presented with a vision of the game, Dunyazad and her sister had invented and played in the days of blood and terror, before Shahrzad’s courageous plunge into the battle with death. They had named it the “Martyr’s Walk.” In her mental vision, Duniyazad sees herself walking erect in a long silk robe. As she drifts nearer and nearer to the hunter, he and everyone else are able to see that “she would die for her dreams” (WDT 53).

Shahrzad however has a different vision. She sees herself walking naked and erect towards her executioner. Though she has not been naked in public previously, her steps are steady and measured. She looks steadily at the man who is going to be her lover and tormentor. He looks at her too and like “a hoard of glinting red jewels, he sees her daring, her tenacity, her love of power and danger and her greed for life” (54). She is a fighter through and through. She is not willing to give up and die. Her vision of her acceptance of her nakedness shows her readiness to be a martyr. Her nakedness here represents her being in the public eye.

Once Shahrzad agrees to marry Shahryar, her whole life would be the talk of the people. But if she were to accept to try her hand at martyrdom, it would not be as what others have designed it to be. She is going to try and expand the space that is being offered to her, expand it lengthwise, breadth wise, in all directions in order to grant living, breathing space not only for her but for a host of other
women in the city. “He thinks she can vanquish her with a simple dagger. She can feel something hard and unyielding in her stomach; it pushes its way up to her chest, her head till there is a firmly clenched fist behind her eyes” (54).

Here the martyr’s walk is presented as a symbolic representation of the fate that awaits Shahrzad and Dunyazad, who are going to meet the sultan and try and beat him at his own game. But there is a definite suggestion that it is equally a representation of women’s plight in the universal context, the doom and danger awaiting the martyr being the doom and danger that every woman faces in her relationships with men:

The game is called ‘The Martyr’s Walk’ and each player describes herself as she makes her way to the blade holding hand that waits for her. Minor variations are allowed. Sometimes the waiting doom is to be dealt out by a hunter, sometimes an executioner or an evil jinni or a king old enough to be their father. But it is always a man who waits for them and he has something sharp in his hand, something that draws blood. (53)

Shahrzad plans with her sister, Dunyazd, how she is going to ward off the sword in her executioner husband’s hand. Her tongue is to be her match for his sword. The very first night as Shahrzad and Shahryar meet on their bed, Dunyazad crouches, hidden behind a partition. Lovemaking does not distinguish between male and female “In the many limbed creature writhing on the bed, the carpet against the wall, Dunyazad cannot see where the man and the woman are”
It is after the act, that the woman becomes the threatened and the man the threatening. But Shahrzad has other plans to waive the threat. She starts with her story that vaults over land and sea, seeks unknown climes, traverses the world and through it all holds Shahryar in its thrall.

Shahrzad speaks for her life. She must be scared, must be terrified, lest the Sultan should say “Enough with her story, off with her head.” But her will is strong. She is a fighter. Her terror does not show through. Dunyazad crouches behind the curtain and adds a grunt, a question now and then to egg the story on. The scene repeats itself night after night and Shahrzad continues doggedly in her efforts. It takes three years by which time, Shahrzad has given birth to three children, before Shahryar has a change of heart and puts an end to his desire for revenge. A thousand and one nights, one after the other, Shahrzad has said stories - stories that have at last convinced Shahryar that there are all sorts of people in the world and that not all women are unfaithful. Even on the days on which she delivers her children, she continues with her long battle for survival.

When Shahrzad decides to pitch herself into the battle, soon after her father, the Wazir asks her, she is a mere girl. When she comes forward to take her part in the gamble conceived by her father, he thinks of her as a promising pupil, exiling herself from the shifting, unreliable sea of feminism enclosure. But in the instant in which her father interviews her, her face is already made up, ready, prepared to take the challenge. When she crosses over from her mother’s wing to her father’s room, the author describes her crossing over, investing it with more than one
significant meaning. She is leaving behind the role prescribed for a woman. She is going to take up the mantle of a man’s role. When the protection of a city, its people, has been traditionally looked upon as the duty of a man, Shahrzad takes it on. After Shahrzad agrees to marry Shahryar, her father, the Wazir shows a moment of tenderness but before going to the palace, he places an order for a shroud.

When the Wazir looks upon Shahrzad’s ready acceptance of martyrdom itself as manly, she reaches beyond and not only becomes the saviour of herself and the city but also the redeemer of the sultan. Shahrzad thinks to herself, as she ruminates on her lonely struggle for the delivery of the city, soon after the delivery of her child: “The palace senses her plan; sees her straining to stretch time, her time into a number as close as possible to infinity” (131). When women have usually been identified with space, here Shahrzad’s usurping of male ambition to identify herself with time, is explicit. Dunyazad wonders about her sister, “Can danger be addictive? Are there women, who come alive only when danger is at their heels and their blood races with terror?” (132). But it is a sad fact that man feels threatened by manliness in his women. He cannot see wisdom, ambition reserved for men, surfacing in women.

After her role in the redemption of the Sultan, Shahrzad continues to take an interest in the lives of the people in her city. But her empathy for the needs of the people is seen as a rise of ambition and assertion of her usurping nature, by Shahryar. “The thought came to Shahryar one day that their most chaste of
women, ‘Wise Shahrzad’ was turning into ‘Wily Shahrzad.’ One of them had to win. Shahrzad disappeared, he mourned her deeply” (159). That Shahryar has played a role in the disappearance of Shahrzad, which has either been caused because of his displeasure with her usurping of power or her growing relationship with Abdulla or both, is clear here. Shahryar wishes Shahrzad’s forced or voluntary disappearance, to be hidden under the label of death, as a face-saving measure.

In Githa Hariharan’s revisioning of 1001 Arabian Nights, Shahrzad’s act of storytelling itself is seen as “a desperate struggle of the imprisoned genius to channelise its creativity, to achieve a ‘feminine écriture’ ” (Kundu “Writing” 160). But it is characteristic of patriarchal male gaze, that when Shahryar is speaking eloquently to Dunyazad after the supposed death of Shahrzad, he praises Shahrzad only for her chastity, and not for her wisdom or creativity that had saved the city. On the tomb, that contains the supposed remains of Shahrzad, the epitaph reads, “Here lies Shahrzad, Beloved Consort of Sultan Shahryar, Daughter of the Chief Wazir to the Sultan of Shahbad, Mother of Prince Umar and the Departed Prince Jaffar” (WDT 49).

Shahrzad is worthy of remembrance only because of her erstwhile status as wife to her husband and mother to her sons. Nothing else of merit is remembered of her. And of the three children of Shahrzad, except for Prince Umar, the other two are dead. But while the bearing of dead son Jaffar is mentioned, bearing of the
daughter is not considered worthy of mention, as also the relationship of sister Dunyazad’s.

Dunyazad, loving sister and accomplice of Shahrzad plays a pivotal role in Shahrzad’s mission. She is the patient watchwoman on the side, when the heroine of the redemption play, lugs on night after night with her stories. The reader comes to know that the two sisters had not planned on accepting defeat at any stage. A dagger had nestled in her self as she waited and kept watch over her sister. As Dunyazad feels enragd with Shahryar because he talks more about the tomb that he is going to build in Shahrzad’s memory than about Shahrzad herself, the words fly into her mind, “… did we together hold back the dagger that could have been used long ago, when you slept tamed, satiated, unaware – only for the mediocre epitaph?” (69).

When Githa Hariharan begins with her re-visioning of the gaps and silences in the original Arabian Nights, as Shahrzad is transformed from being the victim to a saviour and heroine, the characters on the side are also brought to the centre stage. Dunyazad is an example. Twenty years after the redemption, when there is sudden news of the death of Shahrzad, Dunyazad rushes to Shahhad, disguised as a man. The major action in the re-visioned novel revolves round her. It is in Dunyazad’s thoughts that the reader persistently comes across Shahrzad and her story of daring, courage and sheer will.

The relationship between Shahrzad and Dunyazad is very touchingly portrayed. Shahryar’s grand plans for a memorial for Shahrzad meet with
Dunyazad’s scorn. Her own emotions in the situation are more personal. “Though what the Sultan says is platitudinous, his words bring before her such a distinct image of the young Shahrzad, bold defiant and unruined, that her eyes fill…. She bends to regain control of herself” (59). Dunyazad who had long played the role of “obedient child” with her sister, plays an active role in the change of crown and power from Shahryar to Prince Umar. When her observations of happenings and patient hearing of the butterfly whispers in Shahryar’s palace point to the possibility of Shahryar’s hand in Shahrzad’s sudden illness and death, she makes her decision.

She makes a modest petition to Shahryar, who is making plans for his marriage to two young girls, that before the impending royal marriage, the Sultan and his two real brides should make a pilgrimage to Shahrzad’s tomb. Away from the prying attention of vassals, guards and harem and all the fawning apparatus of courtly existence, they should pay one last tribute to the savior of the city, Shahrzad. Shahryar falls in with the plans, unaware of the secret plans being hatched about him. Prince Umar seizes the chance and captures the throne, imprisoning his father in the same marble monument that he had built for his wife. So it is ultimately Dunyazad’s hand that deals in the final blow to Shahryar. She also continues the role of redeemer of the city, earlier donned by her sister. She delivers the city to safety once more.

Shahrzad and Dunyazad’s mother, Raziya is also a forgotten, sidelined character in the original novel. Githa Hariharan fleshes out the character of
Raziya, attempting to bring her thoughts, her pain and anger into light. Raziya is silent, when her husband, the Wazir makes the decision to make a martyr out of their first-born. She dies on the five hundredth night after Shahrzad and Dunyazad leave for the palace. People whisper that she had died of a broken heart. But Dunyazad, grieving for her mother, in the Sultan’s palace sees her mother’s heart for a moment. What she sees is “not a broken spring, 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” (84).

In the novel, Githa Hariharan revisits Scheherazade as an inspirational myth for feminism on account of her qualities of strength, daring and intelligence. In myths and literature contained within the patriarchal order of things, usually, it is seen that men are assigned the role of facing enemies, and when they emerge victorious, it is invariably the heroine or a bride that he gets as his prize. There are very few models of mythical heroines who, like Shahrzad have successfully gambled with death and won, thereby saving the whole community. Indeed, “the worth of feminine wit is seldom given such a flattering representation as in the creation of the famous story-teller, endlessly narrating for her life and the lives of other women… just as committed feminist writers are doing” (Passos 125).

In *In Times of Siege*, the women characters that the reader comes across do not fit into roles that Indian society usually prescribes for them. Tamil culture talks about chastity being a jewel for a woman. Even the saint poet Tiruvalluvar says that when a chaste woman says that it should rain, well, it rains. Thus, chastity is
something that has been prescriptive for women in India. It is still so in the Indian psyche to a large extent. In this novel however, Githa Hariharan clearly and deliberately makes the point that chastity should be a matter of choice for the woman concerned as it is with the man.

Amita has had occasional sexual interludes with Shiv. Meena is not perturbed over much about Shiv’s passionate advances towards her. The author just stops short of taking their passion to a natural culmination of the sexual act during a moment of closeness. The moment ends in an anti-climax. Something as prosaic as a mosquito catches the attention of Meena and the security guard’s plea for permission into the house dissolves her in laughter. The weight of the moment suddenly crumbles and gives way to lightness and purposely so. The sexual act or the concept of chastity and the losing of it are just like any other everyday happening.

Meena, a twenty-four year old young girl, is introduced in a position in which, she needs the help of others. But, in the course of the novel, the reader gets to see images that reveal her to be a strong personality, comparable to Shahrzad among Githa Hariharan’s heroines and the closest in approximation of the androgynous principle. Meena imprints her mark on the place she is in, both literally and metaphorically. The two posters that she puts up in the room allotted to her in Shiv’s house are characteristic. One contains an image of matchstick women holding hands to make a perfect circle. The other poster has the famous
lines by Reverend Martin, the German pastor, who was a victim of the Nazi concentration camps:

In Germany, they first came for the communists, and I did not speak up because I was not a communist. Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak up because I was not a Jew. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak up because I was not a trade unionist. Then they came for the homosexuals, and I did not speak up because I was not a homosexual. Then they came for the Catholics, and I did not speak up because I was Protestant. Then they came for me… but by that time there was no one left to speak up. (ITS 27)

At the top of the poster, it is written in screaming red, “Speak Up! Before It’s Too Late.”

The two posters speak of Meena’s assertive nature in contrast to the hesitant, half-guilty existence of the traditional woman conditioned by the self-important postures of man and his bigoted rules that have shaped society. She marks her territory, makes her presence felt in the room soon after she enters Shiv’s household. The posters also express both Meena’s awareness of women’s state and the need for forging a sisterhood among women. Again they speak of her active involvement and interest in the so-called men’s sphere, her resolve to do her bit for the society she is in, and also her belief that gender has nothing to do with taking responsibility for its betterment. Though Shiv is almost immediately
infatuated with the fish-eyed Meena, she herself is completely unselfconscious, and shows no pride of conquest. Nor does she show any maidenly inhibitions in her movement round Shiv or his household.

When the storm clouds of protest and violence surround Shiv, Meena shows immense maturity in helping Shiv handle the situation. She rises from being a mere student-girl with her movement curtailed, to a veritable tower of strength. She is the catalyst, who draws out the hero from inside the hesitant professor, content with his own world of academics. She asks of the hesitant Shiv, “You don’t like confrontations, do you?” (30). Her support is not of words alone. She makes quick decisions regarding the modality of organizing support for Shiv and the cause of academic freedom and the right to truth that he stands for. She looks the girl matriarch to Shiv, taking charge, “listening to Amar, proposing leaflets, posters, a broad-front rally” (110). Shiv thinks of Meena’s life and its preoccupations, comparing them with his own, thus: “Her brief history, a history of doing. His longer history, peopled with events in books, bound to a repository of public events, long past” (111).

Meena shows no signs of girlish defencelessness, even when she is hurt and ailing. She tells Shiv that she does not want her parents to be informed of her accident. She shows grit in taking her pain and temporary incapacity in her stride. The cast on her leg is solid, tactile. But, oblivious to the limitations it imposes on her, she strives to ease Shiv out of the invisible cast of fundamentalism and violence that is threatening to immobilize him. “Though she lies in bed, her leg
encased in fibreglass, she does not seem aware of her powerlessness” (31).
Meena’s character shows multiple dimensions. She is just twenty-four. But, she
has rejected girlish romance and other usual preoccupations of the age in order to
look “a starker terror in the face” (111).

Shiv sees Meena in a wondrous child’s world, all bubbly with innocent fun
and enjoyment in the company of Babli, the maid Kamala’s daughter. They draw
yellow-winged butterflies, brilliant blue flowers, extravagant orange leaves and a
creeping network of vines on the white cast on Meena’s leg. Shiv joins in adding
his artistry to the canvas. He draws the bee hovering over a flower. He thinks of
the hour as “his brief hour of reprieve, the comforting storm before the calm, spent
in the secret garden of wise children” (84). She shows courage and bravado, when
she tells Shiv, that he has to confront the panel and Arya, who are bent on making
Shiv submit to pressure. She takes her position, cast and all in the rally and
meeting organized by the supporters of academic freedom. She has lofty ideals,
and she believes in standing up for them, which quality in Shiv’s imagination
makes her similar to his father.

Meena shows immense understanding in her handling of Shiv’s fascination
for her. She has a quiet affection for Shiv, and gives room to his passionate
overtures with a tender, mature understanding of the storm that is assailing him,
within and without. When she is about to leave Shiv’s house after the cast has
come out, she perceives the weight of the moment for Shiv. “She steps back,
places a gentle hand on his cheek in a brief, almost maternal caress” (203). The
use of Shiv’s father’s walking-stick by Meena in the end reinforces the idea of Meena being a parental figure for Shiv, in understanding his little fears, uncertainties, passions and helping him rise above them all to hold on to his ideals, to face hatred with courage and win.

In all of the four novels, we find a growth and evolution in the characters of the protagonists. The clear message that comes across in this transformation is that of the androgynous principle being the ideal state. There is a huge transformation in Devi as she moves from being a puppet in the hands of her mother, incapable of knowing her own mind, to a woman who has become cognizant of her own self and is ready to challenge prescribed roles. When she makes the decision to go with Gopal, there is a marked change in her. From an indecisive dithering, she has moved to confident, risk-taking. She asks herself, “what if I fall with a thud?” (*TFN* 95), yet she goes ahead with her decision. If this is the masculine getting added to the feminine, in a representation of the androgynous, a similar phenomenon of larger magnitude is seen in Shahrzad of *When Dreams Travel*, as she evolves from potential victim to saviour of the city and generations of men and women, a feat that is usually reserved for the male in patriarchal tradition and literature.

A similar transformation in reverse is identified in the protagonists of the other two novels. They transcend gender in individual ways. In *The Ghosts of Vasu Master*, as the crow tells the mouse, Vasu Master indeed grows a metaphorical womb to hold the hurt, wounded psyche of papaya-headed Mani,
secure and undisturbed for several months before bringing him out, carefully, carefully, with his stories and single-minded devotion and affection. Similarly, in *In Times of Siege*, Arnab Chakladar observes in the course of an interview with Githa Hariharan that “Shiv’s transformation towards action is actually accompanied by a sort of feminization, in the sense that he becomes a better house-keeper, etc”.

With a discussion of the various women characters, with differing levels of masculinity and femininity in them under way, it becomes necessary to discuss the predicaments and plot situations in the novels that make the characters what they are and also to explore the features of feminine language and style, if any that give life to the characters and the situations.

**Chapter – IV**

**PLOT AND NARRATION:**

**A MEDLEY OF VOICES AS NARRATIVE STRATEGY**

It has long been argued that the novel is the genre that belongs to the female domain, that the female finds her urge for expression satisfied in its loose structure that sets few limits, if any. Virginia Woolf, in her article, “Women and Fiction” believes that apart from the medium, even form and substance vary from male to female: “It is probable however that both in art and in life, the values of a woman are not the values of a man. Thus, when a woman comes to write, she will find that she is perpetually wishing to alter the established values – to make