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
serious what appears insignificant to a man, and trivial what is to him important (49).

According to Woolf, women’s writing is radically distinct from the writing of men, because it refers to a marginalized female experience. Gender differences influence not only form but also content. She describes the sentence made by men as heavy and ponderous. The woman alters the sentence until it takes the natural shape of her thought without crushing or distorting it. Virginia Woolf praises the style of her fellow modernist, Dorothy Richardson thus: “She has invented, or if she has not invented, developed and applied to her own use, a sentence which we might call the psychological sentence of the feminine gender. It is of a more elastic fibre than the old, capable of stretching to the extreme, of sharpening the frailest particles, of enveloping the vaguest shapes” ("Dorothy Richardson” 191).

The French feminists of the 1970s and 1980s led by Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray and Helene Cixous also argue for modernism’s radical feminist potential by suggesting that women writers use avant garde linguist forms to escape the confines of patriarchal language. Irigaray stresses on multiplicity, fluidity and the erotic intimacy of touching as constituting the female imaginary. While the male model of language has been that of a mirror of masculine presence, Irigaray compares the feminine form of representation to the speculum. The surface of a speculum is curved and hence deforms the reflections of a male discourse. The
curved shape corresponds to the physical specificity of the female body and hence this mode of representation is founded on the intimacy of touch.

“Write your self, Your body must be heard” (338) declares Cixous. She sees a connection between a woman’s body, whose sexual pleasure has been repressed and women’s writing. According to her, when women learn to write their bodies, it would be possible for them not only to realize their sexuality but also to gain access to their native strength. American women novelists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries registered a call for a new sexual freedom, Dale Bauer contends. By creating a lexicon of “sex expression,” in their writings, these authors explore sexuality as part of a discourse about women’s needs rather than confining it to the realm of sentiments, where it had been relegated by earlier writers” (4). This new rhetoric of sexuality has enabled critical conversations about who had sex, when in life they had it, and how it could have significance. Sexuality has now become a potential force for female agency in American women novelists’ novels through a gradual transformation of the traditional ideal of sexual purity.

Luce Irigaray however points to the inability of masculine language to truly express women’s “jouissance” or sexual pleasure. She draws an analogy between women’s language and their sexuality. As women’s jouissance is more multiple than men’s unitary, phallic pleasure, feminine language is more diffusive than its masculine counterpart. She states in her article “This Sex Which Is Not One”, that “the geography of her pleasure is far more diversified, more multiple in its
difference, more complex, more subtle than is commonly imagined” (353). Irigaray connects this idea with women’s language that “sets off in all directions, leaving “him” unable to discern the coherence of any meaning” (353).

Alice Jardine elaborates on the way, modernism has lent itself to a ‘women’s language’ She feels that modernism allows the putting of women into discourse, “permitting women writers to take unprecedented control of the means of writing” (qtd. in Mullin 146). Stenn, for example, has tried to do in her writing what Picasso and his fellow cubists attempted in painting when they tried to represent an object from several different angles simultaneously on the same canvas. The poet, Hilda Doolittle on the other hand, relies on calm, clear, pure and intensely visual images.

The wide range of modernist writing by women shows that many women find modernism’s focus on stylistic innovation to be liberating, offering a new kind of writing in which to articulate a new kind of female experience. What has come to be called French feminism for example has promoted an exciting new approach to thinking about women, their bodies, and their desires. They lay emphasis on language as both the ultimate tool of women’s oppression and a potential means for subverting, if not escaping that oppression. For French feminists, women’s desire is what is most oppressed and repressed by patriarchy and what most needs to find expression – an all but impossible task since, according to them, language itself is patriarchal. “Jouissance” the French word for orgasm or for a pleasure so intense that it is at once of the body and outside it, has
become a fashionable term of literary theory for an intensity which like woman’s pleasure is outside language.

According to Kari Weil, Lacan’s rereadings of Freud emphasize the fact that language precedes us. The child’s ability to establish the separateness from the mother that is necessary for subjectivity coincides with what Lacan will call his/her “entry into language” (158). Human beings are not only the active users of language, but because they can never invent it anew, they are also subjected to its terms and limitations – “language creates us too” (158). For feminists this goes to validate the point that all human beings are also born into patriarchy since language is its primary tool of subjection, writing even the unconscious. Thus women are doubly alienated from the means of self-knowledge. Hence, the drive towards an ‘écriture feminine’ or feminine writing, by the French feminists.

Cixous writes about what the so called “écriture feminine” must do and would do in her essay, “The Laugh of the Medusa”. “Women must write their bodies, write their desires and so unleash their power.” When they do so, she predicts that “a woman’s body with its thousand and one thresholds of ardor, once, by smashing yokes and censors, she lets it articulate the profusion of meanings that run through it in every direction – will make the old single-grooved mother tongue reverberate with more than one language” (342).

As Kari Weil points out, “for Cixous, promotion of feminine difference leads to experiments with prose that break normal syntax, effacing the borders between subject/verb or active/passive” (165). Irigaray and Cixous also mention
punning, word play and the elimination of an unitary subjective “I” as some of the characteristics of disruptive feminine writing. Kristeva’s form of experimental prose is linked to the maternal through the semiotic – those bodily rhythms and pulses which create a signifying bond between mother and infant, both in the womb and in the period after birth. There is a focus on motherhood in Cixous’s reference to feminine writing too. She identifies feminine writing with mother’s milk while Irigaray speaks of women’s speech as an exchange of fluid, “a flux that never congeals or solidifies” (qtd. in Kari Weil 167).

There is also criticism against such views. The idea of a specifically feminine language is untenable within the philosophy of both Derrida and Lacan, even though both through their theories of deconstruction and ‘differance,’ expose the false reasoning and false images by which man has asserted his primacy and power over women. There are also charges of essentialism against the linking of maternity and language. Feminist critics like Domna Stanton have pointed out that the kind of argument put forward by Cixous and Irigaray “appears to locate the essence of femininity and feminine writing in biology, if not in a specific maternal experience which all women do not share” (qtd. in Kari Weil 166).

Margaret Whitford seeks to explain Irigaray’s motive. What Irigaray most wants to change is the dominance of the male imaginary, thereby uncovering the female imaginary and bringing it into language. Irigaray argues that such dominance has been gained through a kind of matricide by which patriarchy has buried its connections to the feminine and to the body or matter. Patriarchal
culture has repressed its own maternal originals and it has made it impossible for women to represent or imagine their own relation to the mother by refusing her difference from the male subject.

She goes on to say that the first step to be taken is for woman to imagine her relation to her mother’s body, in order to reverse the devaluation of her origins and her “imaginary” within culture. Whitford explains that the imaginary is associated with the mother, whose connection to the infant has not yet been broken by paternal law. Where the imaginary is presymbolic, the imagination is post. What is important to Irigaray is that the images with which desire is represented, should be life-sustaining. In short “the feminine of écritoire feminine must not be regarded as representing something which exists in the world, but as (re)productive, giving life to new possibilities for imagining and so living women’s bodies and desire” (Weil 168).

Wittig, another important feminist’s views are however closer to De Beauvoir’s than to Cixous or Irigaray. In her novel, Les Guerrilleres, women reject their bodies as a potential source of identity. “They say they must now stop exalting the vulva. They say that they must break the last bond that binds them to a dead culture” (qtd. in Weil 161). Wittig’s feminist writing practice cannot be defined through women, but through a struggle against women’s patriarchal inscription. She has ultimate faith in the neutrality of language and reason. As Judith Butler writes, “for Wittig, language is an instrument or tool that is in no way misogynist in its structure, but only in its applications” (26). The point for
Wittig is to take conscious control of the tool, whether in theory or literary practice and in doing so, prove that even the so-called “particular” point of view of a woman can be universal, can speak for the absolute subject. She opines that language as a whole gives everyone the same power of becoming an absolute subject through its exercise.

When the Indian women writers are considered, as far as subject matter is concerned they have focussed mainly on the man-woman relationship to try and describe, analyse and define the Indian woman’s identity. The first generation of women writers recreated and retold the destiny of Indian women resigned to their condition in a patriarchal society. Even though many of the recent avant garde writers stress the pleasures rather than the sufferings of the woman’s condition, the pivot of narration continues to be the man-woman relationship. “Their women succeed in carving an identity for themselves, defying societal expectation and emerging intact after a cathartic experience, but this self representation is achieved with reference to the male” (Ravi 79).

Recently however, many writers have started attacking the notion of considering the man-woman relationship as the centre point of narration. There is a new celebration of the female-female bond. Indeed, there is an attempt to create new paradigms for the recreation of women’s identity. Srilata Ravi quotes Luce Irigaray’s views in this context, “… motherhood has a limited meaning in a patriarchal discourse” (79). She argues on the same line that given the restricted meaning of mother, the separation of mother from daughter entails total loss since
no other identity is allowed except maturing. “The restoration of a mother-daughter bond even after the facts of gestation, birthing and suckling is important” (79). It would be a means of showing resistance, a way of sustaining the persistent effort against the sexism that has existed down the centuries.

In the writings of early Western women writers, the discussion of sexuality itself was taboo, let alone female sexuality. But an examination of the works of ancient writers of India reveals that both men and women had not hesitated to discuss sexuality in their writings. Among Indian women writers, although the early forms of writing by the Therigatha nuns addressed the issue of personal freedom, the poetry that followed later was a celebration of womanhood and sexuality. The Sangam poets who dominated the era between ca. 100 BC-AD 250 wrote extensively about what it meant to have a female body. The translation of Venmanipputi Kuruntokai’s ‘What she said to her girlfriend’ reads, “On the banks shaded by a punnai clustered with flowers, when we made love my eyes saw him and my ears heard him; my arms grow beautiful in the coupling and grow lean as they come away” (qtd. in Tharu and Lalita 73).

Tharu and Lalita observe that the content of the poem is bold for its time because it expresses a woman's pleasure in sex. The poems written around this age echo a sense of sexual liberation.(73) According to A. K. Ramanujan, who translated most of the poems of the Sangam Age, many of the poems echo the need for bodily love and passion, the foolishness of war and the ‘spears’ that men left with to wage wars.
Among the poets who wrote in the 12th century AD came the medieval Kannada poet, rebel and mystic, Akkamahadevi, whose life and writing challenged the patriarchal dominance of the world at large. She is supposed to have wandered naked in search of divinity. Akkamahadevi uses the image of her body to defy her critics when she says, “Brother, you've come drawn by the beauty of these billowing breasts, this brimming youth. I am no woman brother, no whore” (qtd. in Tharu and Lalita 79). As a radical mystic, she uses the image of her genitals to convey her understanding of the Bhakti tradition and the Hindu idea of rebirth when she says, “Not one, not two, not three or four, but through eight four hundred thousand vaginas have I come. I have come through unlikely worlds guzzled on pleasure and pain.”(qtd. in Tharu and Lalita 80)

In the eighteenth century, Muddupalini, a courtesan in the kingdom of the Nayaka kings of Tanjavur in the south of India, composed the Radhika Santwanam. It consists of five hundred and eighty four poems about the relationship between Krishna and Radha. In an unusual third section, Krishna complains that Radha insists on making love even though he doesn't want to. According to K. Lalita, no other Telugu poet, man or woman, has written about a woman taking the initiative in a sexual relationship. Her compositions created a stir in the literary world when they were published almost two centuries later. The erotic poems stunned even the most liberal of readers and critics.

When Githa Hariharan is considered against the rich tradition of such native ancestors and the enormous innovations of her creative and critical sisters
from other soils, the researcher finds several features that are identified as characteristics of ‘feminine écriture’ in her language and modes of writing. Shoba Venkatesh Ghosh observes that “interiority, narrative circularity, proliferation of domestic detail and open-endedness were identified as radical feminist practices of the 1970s and 1980s” (72). Irigaray and Cixous list punning, word play and multiplicity as characteristics of disruptive feminine writing.

In her novels, Githa Hariharan has evolved a style of her own – a non-linear narrative, that spreads out in all possible directions, like a web that seeks to enfold several possible meanings all at once in its multiple interweaving. Story, myth and fable twine, join together in intricate pattern, here carrying the story forward, there highlighting a character twist, clarifying or justifying in yet another. It seems to be at once representative of a wholly new, innovative feminine writing and reminiscent of the ancient Indian storytelling tradition with its richness, variety, innovation and ingenuity as witnessed in its mind boggling variety of literatures, techniques and forms. The Mahabharata with its stories branching off into more stories that present themselves together as one big colourful mosaic, all the while also remaining connected to the main story, particularly seems to have informed Githa Hariharan’s technique. Evidence of the legacy of the Panchatantra fables is also seen in Githa Hariharan’s fiction.

Githa Hariharan told The Times of India in 1999, “A writer’s gift is her own special voice. My voice is right for a medley. I enjoy weaving both poetry and short stories into my novels.” Indeed, myth and story, along with a medley of
voices is the characteristic technique that Hariharan uses in all of her novels. They help to stretch the space her characters occupy and add multilayered dimensions to both the characters and the events in their lives. She describes her technique of arriving at the enchanting, intriguing and to use her own vocabulary, shape-shifting montage, that each of her novels is, thus: “My writerly voice likes the complex, the elliptical, the indirect, the sneaky, the tricky—with very simple trail at the heart of things, but putting them together in a complicated mosaic” (“Mark Her Words”).

Speaking about the thematic construction of her novels, Githa Hariharan describes her first three novels as quest novels. She says that the story and the quest travel side by side and the quest is for both the story-teller and the listener. The idea of story as protagonist runs completely through the first three novels and to a large extent in the fourth novel also. She says, “The mode of quest is itself a story and the protagonist and reader are also searching for a story” (Navarro-Tejaro 203). Githa Hariharan elaborates on her use of myth, story and fables saying that she has twisted the myths here and there and used them in The Thousand Faces of Night. In The Ghosts of Vasu Master, she has gone a bit further and invented little fables, a chain of fables with ancestors in the oral and written Indian tradition. She talks about the way she has employed the tale in the narration of her third novel thus: “In When Dreams Travel, I pushed this use of the tale to the question of what you do with the story onstage” (203).
Regarding the narrative techniques used by Githa Hariharan in *The Thousand Faces of Night*, Rama Nair observes that the “Prelude” to the novel itself showcases the claim for a new ‘feminine écriture’ by Githa Hariharan. She calls it “a striking experiment in an innovative study of the interrelation between narrative technique and feminist theory in contemporary women’s fiction” (171). The use of point of view, symbolic names, interior monologue, time-shift, irony and the interrogative structure as narrative methods make a profound impact. The Prelude begins with the reflection by Devi, “I have always liked the story that comes whole and well-rounded.” The ironic observation prepares the reader subtly to enter a world of stories with jagged ends, stories which do not end.

The Prelude begins with a first person narrative by Devi, but later switches to a third person narrative, thus making it clear that Devi is going to be the central character in the novel. There is a frequent time-shift in the novel. As Rama Nair says, “the combination of frequent time-shift with the third person narrative prevents one from adopting just one point of view, which might retard one’s perception of the psychological depth of the central character” (171-72). Devi’s journey as a quester in the novel is hinted at in the Prelude itself, where Devi’s questions to her grandmother and to Mayamma find prime focus.

The first few pages of the novel deal with Devi’s American life. Devi has had a fling at crossing the slim borderline between the two cultures – has smoked a joint, slept with Dan and is now ready to shrug her American life off her shoulders. Her mother holds the strings that pull her towards India. Her mother
doesn’t openly force her. But the unspoken pressure is there. The loneliness, her need for her daughter are powerful strings. Devi both responds to and rebels against strings. Her attraction to Dan is described as her reaction to the “all-white claustrophobia of the American campus” (TFN 3). After coming to India, Devi quietly falls in with her mother’s plans to find a suitable bridegroom for her. When the wedding plans are underway, a series of images of different weddings are presented. Myth and tale are cleverly interwoven into the fabric of the novel.

Devi’s grandmother had fondly described Damayanti’s ‘swayamvara’ to Devi, when she had been a mere child. A vision of the preparations and the mythical wedding itself is presented to the reader, as arrangements for Devi’s marriage are described. The legendary story serves to present multiple layers of meanings and possibilities at this juncture. The romance and the festive images attached to weddings in general are evoked on one hand. But there are also other meanings. In the legend, Damayanti gets to choose her heart’s desire as her husband. Even when the gods themselves come in disguise she is not swayed. She chooses the right man.

For Devi, however the ‘swayamvara’ is not a real ‘swayamvara’, in the sense that it does not give the real power of choice to the bride concerned. It is Sita who cleverly manipulates Devi’s life. She pulls strings here and there and makes Devi meet only those prospective bridegrooms who have gone through Sita’s filtering process. In Damayanti’s story, Damayanti marries the handsome loving
Nala, but the story goes that after the inauspicious ‘Sani’ bites him in the form of a serpent, Nala’s form becomes unrecognizable to Damayanti. He becomes black.

Nala Damayanti’s story subtly presents a foreboding regarding Devi’s marriage. As it turns out, Devi finds out that marriage is like “a sacrificial knife, that draws blood, one drop at a time” (54). She doesn’t find the loving companionship that she had dreamed about, with her husband. In the end, she leaves her husband, much like her mother-in-law, Parvatiamma who also had found it impossible to live within the role prescribed to her by her husband. Devi points out, having found it out only in the course of her evolving adulthood and maturity that her grandmother’s stories “were no ordinary bedtime stories. She chose each for a particular occasion, a story in reply to each of my childish questions. Her answers were not simple. They had to be decoded. A comparison had to be made, an illustration discovered, and a moral drawn out” (27). Indeed, grandmother’s stories light up a hidden detail, comment on a happening, and offer an interpretation on the various events and decisions in Devi’s life and the different facets of her evolving character.

In Devi’s relationship with Gopal, she comes to realize that she occupies the same shrunken space that she had occupied within her marriage to Mahesh. Her secondary status is stressed through the image of her being a mere reflection on the mirror-studded buttons of Gopal’s kurta. Her realization of the self-absorbed, narcissistic world of Gopal’s, in which she remains an outsider, forces her to review her life. She looks into the mirror, with her peacock coloured sari
draped on her. The mirror throws back at her, myriad reflections of herself. Devi makes a decision and covers the mirror with the sari. She is tired of trying to be a reflection of other people’s desires. Now, “everything, the beds, the table, the sleeping body of Gopal, were themselves again, no longer reflections” (TFN 138).

Devi’s gradual disenchantment with her life with Gopal and her decision to leave him are subtly compared to a singer-disciple’s evolution into a musician, ready to strike out on his own. Gopal says, “when his voice lights up the darkness with a colour like the peacock’s neck, I know he is ready” (138). There is a mention of the same blue of a peacock’s neck, when Devi sets out on her own: “Devi left the sari behind, the sari which was the colour of the peacock’s neck, when she boarded the train to Madras alone” (138). She also has learnt her lesson and is striking out on her own. Devi has liberated herself “from the pressures of feminine role-play to attain a state of free creative individuality…. ” (Rama Nair 173). Now, a connection is established between the purport of Devara Dasi Maya’s vachana, which is used as an epigraph to the novel and the essence of Devi’s self. “Now, it is the self, the androgynous principle which is neither male nor female, that is in quest of selfhood” (175).

As the novel unfolds, in the beginning, Devi seems to be rendered with a high degree of passivity. Premila Paul observes that the high degree of passivity has a purpose. “Her seeming non-thinking and non-action despite her privileged background” draw us to “more complex characters on the periphery, influences
and not just the recipient of the influences” (Paul 108). Sita, Mayamma and Parvatiamma are a few of those complex characters on the periphery.

Sita’s attachment towards inanimate objects serves as a symbol to explicate her character and actions. She tends to think of organizing her life or that of her husband or daughter in terms of her experience with these objects. She had been an expert at manipulating the veena to produce heartrending, soulful music. After she discards her veena, her husband Mahadevan and daughter Devi become her new veenas. She reorganizes her life so that she would be able to manipulate their lives and get the credit of being the ideal woman. “She pruned and repotted it sensibly, as she did her plants, and she did it in the belief that it would take in the soil, even if it was the soiled ground of a life devoted to being the ideal woman” (TFN 107).

If Sita’s rejection of her veena is a powerful symbol of Sita’s decision to take up conforming, with a vengeance, her return to the veena is a poignant symbol of her rejection of assigned roles, a blunting of the bitterness that had crept into her mind after her determined self-denial, and her first steps towards an inner healing. The inviting call of the veena that Devi hears on her return to her mother’s household signifies both the birth of a new positive relationship between mother and daughter, and a renewal of life itself. It is a call to deal with the repressed self and the buried bitterness. True to themselves, they could make sense of their lives and help each other grow with no urge to control.
The various meanings that motherhood has for the major characters of the novel is an important concern in *The Thousand Faces of Night*. “By interweaving three narratives, *The Thousand Faces of Night* displays multiple referents for a single signifier, mother” (Ravi 84), Sita measures ideal motherhood against worldly indices and acknowledges failure in the end. Mayamma’s one all-consuming goal, which she feels would justify her existence as woman at all, is biological motherhood. It however does not turn out to be as much of a blessing as she had imagined it would be, and at last Mayamma finds fulfillment in being a mother-figure at Mahesh’s household. For Devi, Mahesh’s insistence on motherhood as a certification for her womanhood is the catalyst that spurs her on in her journey towards an individual identity.

As discussed earlier, Indian women writers were ahead of their times in discussing womanhood and sexuality, as early as two thousand years ago. Though the tradition continued down the years up to the early eighteenth century, British influence brought about a change in mindset. British rule in India and the effects of colonialism with its Victorian snobbery brought with them, an awe of Western ideals and a shameful disowning and criticism of almost all aspects of native culture. The association of the sexual act with sin and shame and also constraints against a discussion of it in literature, particularly by women, has settled down on the Indian psyche. To find a way out of societal constraints therefore, women writers often use imagery from nature as a literary strategy to externalize female sexuality.
Githa Hariharan uses the wild gulmohur instead of the jacaranda, which is conventionally used in Indian setting, to symbolize the intensity of passion in Devi. The author says that the jacaranda, is “made for wafting spinelessly in the arms of brutal winds” (*TFN* 85). In contrast, the gulmohur “usurps the purple numbness with her incessant chatter….. The tongue of desire leaps from the deep, green streaked recesses of the petals, the wetness wildly spreading” (85-86).

In *The Ghosts of Vasu Master*, instead of myth and story, it is the combination of memories and fable that carry the story forward. Jayaprakash A.Shinde quotes Jyoti’s words from Jai Nimbkar’s *A Joint Venture* to describe Vasu Master, the protagonist’s philosophy of life: “Life should be led with conscious intention, not simply allowed to happen” (120). Vasu Master, on the verge of his retirement is affected with a psychosomatic condition. The loose bowel condition is a symptom of the turmoil that is going on inside him, though he himself does not fully recognize it. His visit to the doctor to cure his physical condition triggers his memories of the past. Memories bring with them ‘ghosts’- ‘ghosts’ of persons, fondly remembered, but no longer alive like his father, mother, grandfather, grandmother and his wife Mangala, and those of people, still alive like Veera Naidu, the headmaster of PG school, his colleagues, Venkatesan and Raghavan, Venkatesan’s spiritual guru, Mani’s brother Gopu, Mangala’s friend Jameela and sons, Vishnu and Venu.

Vasu Master’s memories of his father, the stories that he reads in the town library in his new found free time, the fables that he himself invents to
communicate with Mani, provide insights into the characters, suggest explanations for developments in the story, comment on the same, and in short provide a symbolic framework on which the plot of the novel unfolds. Vasu Master’s album of pictures has clean marks of different milestones in his life. But the last two photos seem to mark something final. There seem no further milestones in the yawning empty pages that follow.

It is at this juncture that the reader is first introduced to the crow that comes and sits by his window to caw incessantly. The crow represents death which is on the horizon, now that Vasu Master is in his last year of his school-life. It is again at this point that the reader meets the mouse of the little mouse hole in Vasu Master’s room, which as revealed by the stories that follow, represents Vasu master himself. The mice, crows, spiders and all the other tortuous creatures that invade Vasu master’s mind are representations of the ailment, doubts and the sheer seeming purposelessness of his retired life.

The single uniform size beds made by Procrustes for all the travellers who come his way, beds which made some of the travellers, “defunct creatures with bound arms or amputated feet” (GVM 25) is a solid comment on the moral science classes conducted by Veera Naidu for the spiritual upliftment of his school boys. Like the Procrustean beds, they ill serve the purpose, reaching only a few and leaving the others cold. Starting with this allusion to myth, Githa Hariharan with her stories, pulls apart most traditional concepts associated with the revered institution called education.
The story of the mouse who goes to the wise snake to find out how to become a teacher serves to explicate the author’s idea of the “real teacher.” A teacher must be a judge, an ideologue, a doctor, a priest and finally, most important of all, be a mother, who nurtures and then delivers (29-30). The relationship between Vasu master and Mani is very special. It is marked by the deepest and most tender affection. In the process of trying to reach through to Mani and teach him, Vasu master is reborn as a real teacher, one with all the tenderness of a mother. Mangala, Vasu master’s wife is at best a shadowy presence in the story. Vishnu, Venu, Venkatesan are all peripheral characters.

Memories of Vasu master’s father are the ghosts that fill in the background, giving details of the young Vasu or Srinivas. All his life, Vasu master had taught his students from the same text books, using the same blackboard and the same techniques. He dreads the years after his retirement. Death in the form of the crow in his story seems to be waiting for him across the emptiness of his final years. He refuses to go to his sons, and take the rest that they suggest, he should take. It would again be the “waiting” there, with nothing else. He realizes that Death had always been his neighbour. But he desires that he should forget “death” and fill his hours with what had made his life purposeful. He describes his view of himself early on in the novel. “Even then, I knew what I was first. What mattered was not the branding on my forehead, which merely declared that I was the son of my father. It was the fact that I was surrounded; I was a central figure flanked by fifty bodies and minds in my care” (5).
Vasu Master sees himself as the little grey mouse which had had a long association with the spider with its tricky cobweb representing the traditional insensitive methods of teaching that ensnare and cripple many a young mind. Mani is the beautiful bluebottle, bigger than and different from the rest of the flies in the room. The other flies laugh at him and pity him because he is not like them. The bluebottle becomes puzzled, scared and silent. Now the grey mouse, Vasu Master rescues Mani from the cobweb and gives him shelter in his hole. He refuses to subject Mani to the stickiness of the cobweb. He has his method to make the bluebottle aware of his own unique beauty and talent. He has his stories. From the “unity in diversity” slogan of India, the partition of India, the traditional methods of teaching, Mani’s predicament, his timid scared response to the oppressive coercion of the traditional school, the special needs of different children to Vasu master’s evolution into the real teacher, everything is discussed, commented upon and conveyed to the readers through suitable fables.

Vasu Master’s recurrent diarrhoea is a continuous symbol and a metaphor. It stands for Vasu master’s inability to think of his life without the purpose he had avowed for it. When empty hours stretch in anticipation of death, the body rushes in with its loose bowels and diarrhoea in semblance of some activity to fill up the mind. Vasu master recalls that as young Vasu, he had experienced the only moment which had kept him close to constipation. And this was in his “Rita Mona” days as he describes them.
As an adolescent he had been enamoured of the fulsome picture of the actress, Rita Mona whose image decorated the calendar in his father’s room. It excited him to just watch the image:

As I stared at her, at the flesh more or less visible through the pink sheath, I often felt a hard, dry lump going down my throat, my windpipe, then further and further down till it clogged my intestines… Her hypnotic perceiving look, and the breasts which swelled out of the calendar to smother me, were the only sights in the world which moved me to the point of constipation. (117)

When his senses are fully alive, excited, his diarrhoea disappears. It is seen that the bouts of diarrhoea start troubling him, when Vasu Master is on the verge of retirement. The doctors are perplexed. They look at the records, X-rays and turn a puzzled face to him. Even Vasu Master doesn’t fully understand that his condition is a psychosomatic one. The very thought of inaction, purposelessness, retirement brings in the tremors. The truth of this statement is confirmed in Vasu Master’s words:

I wanted to tell all three of them – Vishnu, Venkatesan and God. I have been waiting, waiting all these years for a very different beginning. When I thought of the might-have-beens, a tremor went through my bowels. Then I remembered a task or two, nothing to do with either lotus eating or looking for a new father in dotage and the spasm passed, leaving a dull ache behind. (141)
Mani poses a challenge to Vasu master. He, who had ploughed through thirty years and at least as many sets of students, is suddenly at a loss, trying to communicate with “papaya headed Mani”. Mani drives him close to tears by his impenetrable silence. He is a challenge, an inspiration, a stimulus for the development and evolution of Vasu master. He provides him with a new beginning, a real purpose and in the process, inadvertently soothes the troubled insides of Vasu master. The lotus-eating life or the second childhood that Vasu master’s own sons prescribe for his retired years, bring in the tremors but the need of Mani opens the floodgates of innovation, imagination and affection in Vasu master and he evolves into a better teacher. This process of growth and possibility is ushered in and immediately the disturbed bowels of Vasu master quieten down.

The regret that fills Vasu master’s mind on not having tried to see or understand Mangala when she was alive, troubles him like a festering sore. The pink swollen wound, which is swarming with maggots is the wound in Vasu master’s mind that is made worse by torturing thoughts of regret. The troubled mind had gradually given way to a dull aching sense of loss, over the years: “I felt a weepy inconsolable sense of loss... It was not in darkness but in that raw feeling of twilight that I felt, with a sudden sharp awareness the absence of Mangala and our sons” (123).

The tale of Ammukutti, Nanikutti and Ummikkutti is the tale of “woman,” clear and loud, as Githa Hariharan sees it. Of the three silkworms the first one that is boiled, cocoon and all, before the wings could come out, the second with half
emerged wings that is imprisoned in a match box and the third with fully emergent wings could represent women in different time periods down the ages. Whatever the case, the third silkworm, Ummikutti is definitely the author herself or women writers like her who weave the tales of their lost sisters into their own tale. “If you saw her creations, the colours and shapes she uses, you would understand why she is no longer called Ummikkutty; why she has grown into Begum Three-in-one. The stories she spins, you see, are not all her own, and not always easy to unravel; because all of them weave in, with the finest of silk threads, the ghosts of her lost sisters” (137). Here the author seems to stress the recovery of the lost texts of women writers and the need to give voice to the silenced women in canonical texts, both of which are major aspects of the feminist agenda.

So it is seen that the action of the novel is admirably carried forward through fable and symbol. The fables at times become riddles that require a little searching before one can draw out the connection or comment related to the action of the story. The clues for interpretation remain spattered, embedded here and there in the fabric of the novel. Commenting on the feminist concerns of the novel, Jayaprakash A. Shinde observes that as Vasu Master, trained in the traditional, patriarchal male set-up, is the narrator, the novelist is restrained from openly advocating the women’s cause. But she does so, ‘elliptically,’ through Vasu Master’s feminine ghosts and their interweaving relationships. “She shows how, dependence on man causes abnegation of woman’s personal self and disruption of normal life,” through Eliamma’s story and the repetition of it in Mangala’s life. It
may therefore be said that “she grabs the male space to fill it with female purpose” (Shinde 131).

Githa Hariharan’s *When Dreams Travel*, exemplifies sexual difference theories, by exploring the liberating potential of imagination to create a new non-misogynous universe of popular references. Joana Passos puts forward the idea that feminist writing can be less concerned with identifying the mechanics of local patriarchies than with the search for alternative ideas and projects for women. She posits three questions as possible pivots around which an enquiry of a work of art could be attempted from the perspective of sexual difference theories, in her comparative study of Indo English and Lusophone women writers: If, women had ever been allowed to have their way in terms of power and social re-organization, what would they do? How will liberated women be? How will the liberated woman be different from the domestic version created by patriarchy? (101).

Joana Passos observes that these questions are very much relevant to *When Dreams Travel* and that the novel answers these questions in a very creative, intelligent way.

In the novel, the author projects exemplary heroines, while deconstructing misogynous stereotypes. Thus Githa Hariharan’s rewriting of Scheherazade’s tale falls under the definition of figuration, which means that Githa Hariharan “is creating new figures that embody alternative concepts and images, translating to a shorthand version, the horizon of liberated feminist identities.” (Passos 102). Also by rewriting the tale from a feminist angle, the author imposes on the reader a
complete re-thinking of the hatred of women, clearly obvious in the famous translations of medieval Arab anthologies. In this way, Githa Hariharan is not only “answering back to a misogynous literary tradition but she is also deconstructing and eroding the sexist impact of the original” (102).

The popular reference used in When Dreams Travel is the story of Scheherazade of The 1001 Arabian Nights. Githa Hariharan revisits Scheherazade as an inspirational myth for feminism on account of her qualities of strength, daring and intelligence. Usually the patriarchy patronized literary tradition is full of men, who face enemies and emerge victorious. Scheherezade’s is one of the precious few, mythical images of women who succeeded in gambling with death and won the game.

When Dreams Travel has a complex structure. Vision and revision are presented in parallel streams. The lines of the Argentinean writer and essayist, Jorge Luis Borges, which are used by the author as Prologue before the second part of the novel, “I thought of a labyrinth of labyrinths, of one sinuous spreading labyrinth that would encompass the past and the future” (WDT 111) seem to exactly describe the design that the author must have had in her mind, while planning, When Dreams Travel. The author herself describes the structure of “WDT” as “being like Chinese boxes – you keep making smaller and smaller boxes and even that does not lead you to the heart of things”(qtd. in Kagal 42).

The novel revolves round the master storyteller Shahrzad whose stories sustain her life, night after night in the Arabian Nights. Therefore it is only natural
that the author views Shahrzad, her boldness and intelligence, her life and the lives of others around her all through a maze of stories, one leading to the other, one presenting a re-vision of the other, stories shifting from one geographical locale to another, depicting both and slipping away from both. The novel is divided into two parts: the first unfolds the story of the four main characters, Shahrzad, her royal husband, Shahryar, Shahryar’s brother Shah Zaman and Shahryar’s sister, Dunyazad. The second is a series of tales told by Dunyazad and the fur-skinned slave girl Dilshad to entertain each other in the course of their seven day sojourn in the desert.

Githa Hariharan’s novel begins where the main story of 1001 Arabian Nights ends. Githa Hariharan appears to have dreamt sequences, people and images into the familiar tale. Githa Hariharan uses the old story of Arabian Nights as theme and intertext. While continuously reminding the reader of the original, the novel also continues to invent details, and the two are woven together inextricably. The narration is therefore not the straightforward, linear narration. Rama Kundu comments that the absence of linear narration contributes to the impression of dreams. “It is the way dreams travel – the circuitous mode of a repetitive yet logical dream” (156).

The “grim faces” of the thousand and one nights are evoked and at the same time the author uses the revisioning “deconstructively to bring out the terror, the terrible oppression and injustice, the inherent chauvinism of the comfortable patriarchal assumptions—often blunt-insensitive-irrational—that she reads between
the lines of the world famous legend” (Kundu “Writing” 151). The stories narrated by Shahrzad are contained within the frame of the larger story. Githa Hariharan makes use of the framework alone in her novel.

Within the framework, Githa Hariharan uses the devices of metafiction, intertext and magic realism in order to foreground her feminist discourse in the post-modern context. In post modern metafiction, a characteristic trait is the blurring of boundaries between fictional texts and their critical readings. As Currie points out, metafiction is “a monistic world of representations in which the boundaries between art and life, language and metalanguage, and fiction and criticism are under philosophical attack.” (qtd. in Kundu 151). Viewed against these descriptions, we find that WDT is indeed an illustration of the concept of metafiction. Multiple representations of the original story which bring to the fore, silenced characters like Shahrzad’s mother Razia, Dunyazad, etc., along with the stories that Dunyazad and Dilshad narrate to each other are each an imaginative expansion of the boundaries of the original tale, an attempt at repositioning of viewpoints and a commentary on all these at the same time.

Githa Hariharan comments on her own use of *1001 Arabian Nights* as the frame story for her re-visionist narrative, through Dunyazad’s recalling of a proverb that her mother had told her: “If the dishes increase in number, it’s likely, they are from the houses of neighbours.” Shahrzad thinks to herself that she must remember the proverb too, “especially, when she slips someone else’s passing idea into her narrative, or when she cribs a phrase or two, sometimes an entire frame”
(WDT 133). But then she comforts herself that she is safe—“no one looks at a nose or an eye out of the context of a face. The synthesis will be hers, and in that sense, the authorship.” This is indeed the author Githa Hariharan talking about her crafting of When Dreams Travel, as much as Shahrzad speaking about the invention of the stories, that she told the misogynous Sultan. In keeping with the constantly shifting points of view, in some places like the above-mentioned, the novelist identifies herself with Shahrzad, the story-teller, and in certain others, she plays “the other.”

Shahrzad argues with herself: “She bent her back and built the skeleton of enduring bones, the framework. Others stretched their canvas in her frame. They colonized her body, her skillfully planned design, to paint in their sticky colours and words, their own moral themes” (WDT 274). In this quote, the word “she” refers to Shahrzad, while “others” refers to both misogynist writers who possibly filled their stories with patriarchy defined morals and ethics into Shahrzad’s frame story and the more recent author, Githa Harihan herself, who has retained the framework but displaced the secondary narratives to the second part of the novel and who has used allegories of modern issues, and stories with feminist and moral themes in the place of stories from the original novel. The author goes on: “Through the window, Shahrzad sees the sun rise as it has so many times before: the same story, different words, a new storyteller” (274).

Dilshad and Dunyazad reenact and revive Shahrzad in their stories. At the same time, the stories help the author to rewrite the legend in the post modern
context of feminism and metafiction. As Dilshad and Duniyazad retell the stories of Shahrzad in their own way, the author legitimizes her revision of the story too: “Shahrzad like her own story is a survivor. The travelling tale undergoes a change of costume, language and setting at each serai on its way…. . She is now a myth that must be sought in many places, fleshed in different bodies before her dreams let go of Duniyazad or her descendants” (25).

*When Dreams Travel* is in other words, fiction about fiction and it knows that it is fiction. The author’s tone of joviality and the use of a style that involves a liberal use of parody and irony are other aspects that are in keeping with the characteristics of metafiction. The jovial tone used to describe instances of cruelty and sadness forces the reader to repeatedly go back to the original tale and re-examine it. An instance in point would be, when she talks about the two Sultan brothers’ sense of justice: “All his subjects love him, such as the love of a subject is. So, two kings mounted on their thoroughbred horses…with the advantage of height, could dispense it (justice) as they chose” (9).

Dark tales recounted with sinister descriptions are also interspersed here and there to shock the reader out of the lull caused by the light narrative tone and force him to a chilling realization of the reality of pain and murder, dark terror and despair. The fat sacrificial goat that the Wazir buries in his own garden and which suddenly becomes Shahrzad, the pool of blood that he tries to swim across, with dismembered parts of female bodies floating around, the hand of Shahrzad, with the ring, that the Wazir had gifted her, still intact on it, coming over to the Wazir
himself, the sub-human cries and moans emanating from the mutilated body of Satyasama are all instances in kind.

Dilshad’s story to Dunyazad has an old woman and her husband retelling the famous legend of Lord Buddha’s previous birth. He had been a woman by name Rupavati, then. When the old woman tells the story of Rupavati to Satyasama, her narration is dismissed as a pack of lies by her husband. He then gives his own version of the story. Subsequently Satyasama makes bold to take similar liberties with the story and gives out her version. She however gets thrown out of the house by the angry couple for her efforts. Through the whole process, the woman’s will is shown to be completely subservient to her husband’s will.

Chitra Sankaran interprets this story as a pointer to the possibility “that previous female versions of any story could have been omitted, truncated and corrupted by misogynous interference to produce the final canonized version suitable to a ruling patriarchal structure that gets enshrined by successive generations of readers as the authentic version” (71). Indeed, Githa Hariharan, by merging myth and parody, past and present in *When Dreams Travel* gives her readers the message that all reality comes to us filtered through language and that language is linked to masculine power.

Again, in Githa Hariharan’s recast version, *When Dreams Travel*, the location is unspecified marking the universality and non-localisation of misogynist patterns. The tale could have taken place anywhere. The original *1001 Arabian Nights* acknowledges that the oral tales, passed down for centuries, incorporated
stories from a variety of cultures including the Persian, Indian and Arabic and the original frame story itself refers to China. “In tide of yore and in time long gone before, there was a King of the Kings of the Banu Sasan in the Islands of India and China, a Lord of armies and guards and servants and dependents …” (Burton 2).

In *When Dreams Travel*, the narrator says: “the city in the clutches of a dream, we are told, could be Samarkand, Basra, Isfahan…Alexandria, Ctesiphon, Baghdad. It is difficult to pin a single name on to it, locate this mirage city on a coded map” (29). Not only the geographical location, but also the time is non-specific, in the manner of myths and fairytales. Though the aim of this timelessness seems to be to bestow a fairy-tale atmosphere onto the novel, it also subtly underscores the way patriarchal ideologies continue to influence and direct lives and society, year after year, through all times and ages.

In the beginning, the setting of the novel is clearly at the centre of a “misogynist cosmos.” However after the frame story, where, Shahrzad, the Arab girl narrator’s situation as the potential victim of a perverse, power-crazed sultan, is established, the narrative becomes woman-centred. Shahrzad’s victimhood is replaced by a glorious saviour status that gradually emerges through in Part Two, where two women, Shahrzad’s sister, Dunyazad and Dilshad, the slave girl in Shahryar’s palace having grown close together in a relationship that has lesbian overtones, tell each other stories, one tale answering the other’s for seven days and nights.
It is said of Dunyazad and Dilshad, “Two women and their goading jinn wander through the infinite wilderness of stories” (115). Here the jinn that goad Dunyazad and Dilshad are Shahrzad and Satyasama respectively. The fact that Shahrzad is still living, hidden somewhere and is not dead as her husband, the Sultan was having everyone believe is hinted at in this description itself. While the dead Satyasama, who is the inspiration for Dilshad is described as “a disembodied, wandering spirit” and “a wayward lie-spinning spirit,” who goes where Dilshad goes, Shahrzad is described thus: “One of the jinn, a fleshy, majestic woman sits from the other three, behind a screen or a door” (113).

When the stories that Shahrzad says in the 1001 Arabian Nights are compared with the ones that Dilshad and Dunyazad tell each other, having got Shahrzad’s book of stories from the Sultan, it is found that while the former are possessed of “an unbroken linearity and a satisfying completeness,” the latter are marked by “broken narration, discontinuity, abrupt turns and twists and shocking conclusions which are not conclusive at all.” (Kundu “Writing”159).

They are suggestive of the innumerable possibilities that hide between the written lines and the host of voices that could be lying unheard under the supposedly spoken words. It is as if the broken contours of narration relive the kind of stilted, fragmentary and incomplete expressions which were the maximum possible forms of expression for the women involved regarding the truth, they wanted to reveal. To glimpse at the whole truth, one has to put the pieces together.
While speaking of Dunyazad, the author mentions that Dunyazad “will never forget the preeminence of this story, (the story of *1001 Arabian Nights*) the nucleus of her existence. Though it has already been lived out, it still waits to be fathomed” (*WDT* 116). An attempt at putting the pieces together, an attempt at reading the silences, an attempt at fathoming the hidden depths of the story is what is done in *WDT* from “the perspectives of the writer and the woman” (Kundu 159). It is said of Dunyazad in the novel, “Dunyazad knows there are storytellers and storyseekers. Her vocation is to search the story-to light up all its remote corners, not let a single detail escape” (*WDT* 115).

Dunyazad who had been a minor character watching the original story unfold on the stage, with her sister and the Sultan as main characters, is now chosen to be the story seeker. It is said again of her, “Dunyazad’s talent is her sheer doggedness. Shahrzad’s story, (and so hers) she will examine minutely, zealously from every point of view that occurs to her—a pregnant Shahrzad, a dying Shahryar, a wazir in anguish, a young Prince Umar, a fiend-possessed Shahzaman, even the outsider Dilshad” (116). The stories that Dunyazad tells Dilshad represent the different points of view, that the author seeks to examine in Dunyazad’s name, points of view, which light up unsuspected details, ask previously un thought of questions and help to bring out the bare cruelty, real pain, crude insensitivity, the helpless anger, the pathos and the heroism, the sheer misogyny hidden between the details of the popular entertainer.
“When Dreams Travel” is written in a self-assertive tone, establishing storytelling as a women’s tradition passed on among them, from generation to generation. Though the male characters listen and repeat the tales they have heard, it is women, who invent them. Further, it is as if the storytellers in WDT are compulsive storytellers. For Shahrzad, storytelling is the only way to survival. Githa Hariharan further sees it as Shahrzad’s only happiness and source of power. She states, “The powerless have a dream or two, dreams that break walls, dreams that go through walls as if they are powerless” (25). So it is the power of her narration, which ultimately overthrows the sword hanging over her head and every other woman in the kingdom, breaking down the walls that had been closing in on generations of women all at once. Female power brings the Sultan up from bestiality to humanity.

Towards the end of the novel, the reader gets a glimpse of Shahrzad, physically reduced to the weakness of old age and the ministrations of two young slave girls in an obscure corner of an unknown palace. Her mental make-up is however still that of a heroine. She feels like telling the young girls, who are barely containing their revulsion, that if it had not been for her, Shahrzad, the girls wouldn’t have been born. She had saved the girls’ grandmothers from being beheaded. She however quells the petulant voice inside her as being unworthy of a heroine. She suddenly remembers a warning that she must give them, and a question that she must ask them: “I fought for myself, and yes, for you as well.”
And you – what will you do, when your turn comes? When the drums roll, and the sword blunted with age, the rusty axe, wake up to be freshly sharpened?” (275).

Shahrzad had fought a battle, but more may and will come. The sword and the axe are symbols of male aggression and violence which do not fit into any time limits. They would surface at all possible times and the girls, representative of all future generations of women, should prove themselves to be worthy of Shahrzad, who had shown them a way, and be prepared to fight it out. Here Shahrzad, “sees her past, their futures, curving one into the other, a circle with no beginning or end” (WDT 276). The mingling of past, present and future here again serves to underscore the pervasive nature of patriarchal aggression that seeps through century after century in a timeless fashion.

Rama Kundu comments that Githa Hariharan sees Shahrzad’s act of storytelling itself as a powerful, ingenuous form of feminine écriture. Though the stories supposedly told by Shahrzad in 1001 Arabian Nights do not possess characteristics of ‘feminine écriture,’ the stories that the silenced women of the original text, Dunyazad and Dilshad are made to tell each other in WDT through seven nights and days rewrite in a modern feminist perspective and in a smaller scale, “the macrocosmic metanarrative of the Thousand and One Nights” (Kundu “Writing” 160).

The possibility of art as a liberating device for women imprisoned in the dungeons of patriarchal norms is an idea that comes through powerfully in Shahrzad’s victory over death. The power of art to break down confining walls is
reiterated in the story of “The Lonely Voice” that Dilshad tells Dunyazad. In the story, Lonely Voice’s brother is suspicious of her and keeps her imprisoned within four walls. The stories that Lonely Voice tells Dilshad, who is crouching on the window sill, cause the walls to break down, one by one. In this story, “Lonely Voice” seems to be a representation of Woman, and her brother, who is suspicious of her and curtails her freedom, is a representation of Man. Man does not trust his fellow human-being, Woman and tries to keep her within walls. In the end, Lonely Voice’s striving in the form of stories saves her from the prison.

In *The Thousand Faces of Night*, the stories told by Devi’s grandmother provide the base out of which Devi ultimately evolves a story of her own, getting the courage to release her Self from the confining pressures of survival within the patriarchal world. In *The Ghosts of Vasu Master*, Vasu Master’s stories help the terrified, numb soul of Mani to understand feeling and love and to break down the walls of suspicion and fear that had been keeping him from the rest of humanity.

Storytelling as a feminine tradition is not the proposition of feminism alone. Marina Warner, in her comprehensive study on storytelling and the female tellers talks about references to legendary sibyls in classical mythology, followed by widespread writings expressing fear and hatred of women’s voices in the texts of the medieval period. These two traditions, the classical and the medieval one, together with some references from Catholic scriptures have created a binary opposition between the “docile” wife and the gossiping one (qtd. in Passos 102).
Warner brilliantly links the usual old age of the story teller to the post fertility period, when grandmothers are allowed a voice because they have less of a wifely role. The symbolical content of the ageing, speaking figure is that a woman’s voice is the opposite of a pregnant belly. This is to underline the fact that in the patriarchal order of things, fertile women are supposed to be silent, erasing the subject hood of a wife in relation to a husband. Her interests, her personality, her voice is subordinate, subservient to those of her husband. On the contrary the old hag, widowed grandmother or the old servant are husbandless women. Hence they are allowed a voice.

In this connection, it must be recalled that the grandmother figure with her rambling stories is an important character in Githa Hariharan’s *The Thousand Faces of Night*; and in *The Ghosts of Vasu Master*. In *The Thousand Faces of Night*, the grandmother’s voice rings true and clear, with a practical, sometimes satirical uptake on the predicament of woman, on religion and society. In *The Ghosts of Vasu Master*, Vasu’s grandmother seems to be the only woman with a voice, what with Mangala speaking very little and Jameela known only through her laughter. Mangala remains a shadowy presence, much represented by the picture/photograph in Vasu’s possession, where Mangala has her face away from the camera. The grandmother however with her wise sayings and wisdom chutneys makes her presence felt even in the proximity of her domineering, six-foot high son.
The plot in *In Times of Siege* is the outcome of the author’s mental compulsion to write about the real world that is round us and that is somehow all of a sudden, a large global space and an area of increased parochialism with loud articulations of different national and sub-national identities at the same time. The plot of the novel revolves round a historian, who is victimized by a group called the Ithikas Suraksha Manch, for a lesson he has written on the reformer-poet Basava. The author expresses the view that fundamentalism in India has turned History itself into a disputed site, with different groups claiming affinity to different versions of it. Most disturbing of all is the attempt of the professed custodians of Indian culture to reduce the multiple nuances, myriad shades and strands of Indian culture to one homogenous whole and the rich multiplicity of myths and legends to one safe, shrunken, authoritative version.

As a writer and citizen, Githa Hariharan has been a part of many movements and has, along with many other artists, writers and film-makers with whom, she has been in close association, rued the regressive direction, the nation seems to be moving in, in various academic and cultural fronts. She decided that she would take for her new novel, an issue that “she was not only interested in, but was living through.” And it so happened that as she was midway through her writing, eminent historians, Sarkar and Panickar had their volume on the freedom struggle recalled. Githa Hariharan notes, “I felt a tremendous compulsion to write about what these manches are doing to us. I wanted to write not just about a specific aspect of the fundamentalisms—or conservatisms—we are seeing around us,
but the insidious ways in which minds are being shrunk” (‘New Voices, New Challenges’ 32).

The novel is set in a university deliberately as a place of learning is supposed to “break down walls and enlarge the student’s world, not shrink it by encouraging the irrational, or reinforcing prejudice, or inculcating hatred of anything or anyone that is different from the self” (32). As intended by the author and as it often happens in the real world, ironically, the move against heterogeneity of views and opinions, against free discussion and debate begins exactly in the university itself in the novel, in the form of opposition to the lesson on the poet, Basava. Shiv, the ordinary, middle-aged, middle-class professor, who had written the lesson, quite surprisingly even to himself, stands up for his beliefs and through that against the pseudo-nationalist, cultural policing of the academic world. The novel says that heroes are not always formed of special moulds. Even those who are thought to be ordinary, decent people will speak up for the fundamental values that hold their world in place, when pushed to a point.

Regarding her use of the Basava story that permeates the background, with chunks and snippets popping up at intervals, to comment on or provide parallels, the author says that she has had a long association with A.K. Ramanujan’s translation of medieval Kannada ‘vachanas.’ As a college student, she was struck by the contemporary voice of the poems, with their ruthless commitment to social equality and the questioning of formal religion. She was particularly taken up by
the work of Basava, poet and reformer, who asked dangerous questions about religion.

He was at once, deeply religious and a critic of the caste based chauvinism that had become a part of the trappings of religion. He wrote for example: “there are so many gods, there’s no place for a foot.” Or he taunted the traditionalists, saying that they used the same thing, water- in their temples as well as their lavatories. The novelist states, “Basava is just the sort of complex man who cannot be interpreted in just one official way as we are being bullied into doing with so many icons” (“Resisting Regimentation”). She observes that if society is forced into seeing the past, and figures from the past in the way the present “history-rewriters” want it to see them, then the richness of those lives, times and ideas would be lost.

The novel marks a significant point in the author’s literary work in the sense that it marks her transit from the largely inner world of her characters, marked with fantasy, myth and fable to the real world with its multitudinous faces and urgent problems, where it is not the private world alone that one sees in its meandering depths, but a private world in conjunction with the large, wide external world. Patriarchy would have called it a step into the men’s world.

Speaking on the choice of plot for the novel, Githa Hariharan answers a question thus: “Even if a writer does not write what is usually perceived as political writing-direct social commentary, or unbending realism or something authentically Indian-the writer should aim at revealing truths, questions and/or
answers, that are fundamentally political.” She underscores the role of art in shaping society, pointing out that “fiction has a thousand ways of giving us a new take on the dynamics of power relations” (Interview: Britannica.com 2000).

In the delineation of this kind of plot, Githa Hariharan acknowledges her debt to Coetzee’s *Age of Iron* and *Disgrace*, observing that “there are chilling, heartbreaking parallels between apartheid and communalism just as there are between Hitler’s fascism and Hindutva” (“Resisting”). Like *Disgrace*, *In Times of Siege* deals with a university professor’s ardour for a female student; but, while in the former, “this obsession has drastic consequences for the middle-aged predator, Hariharan’s infatuated academic feels empowered by his very brief physical contact with Meena” (Schellhorn 31).

Githa Hariharan explains the impulsive passion of Shiv, a middle-aged professor, usually given to much reflection and thought for the young student thus:

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 only 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. (“Resisting”).

This comment definitely goes to prove that Shiv’s obsession with Meena is not just physical— it is a symbol also of his fearful fascination for everything her world stands for: risk and danger, choice and commitment
Regarding the mode of narration, Githa Hariharan has taken a different approach suitable to the nature of the subject, she has chosen. She remarks, in this context that as one grows as a writer, he/she is willing to take bigger risks and that often there is no space or time for magic. As for the place of story as a narrative technique, though *In Times of Siege* does not exactly have its plot progressing through the stories themselves, it does have stories playing a part in the narration. As Anita Singh points out, the book is a combination of fact and fiction that tease each other (97). Happenings of the saint poet Basava’s time are placed side by side with happenings of the present day.

The use of Basava’s story in the novel is deliberate. He was a multi-faceted man, attached deeply to religion, yet satirical of the casteism, the mindless rituals that masquerade as expressions of piety and the inhuman chauvinism, that were associated with it in his times. His vachanas exhibit a sharp questioning and rejection of caste. A fierce champion of a casteless society and social equality, he was a complex man who cannot be interpreted in just one official way. Professor Shiv’s presentation of Basava as a real man with ideals, successes and failures is unacceptable to fundamentalists for whom the idea of failure cannot and should not be associated with the saint-poet.

The violence perpetrated as protest by the fundoos, as Meena calls them is reminiscent of the communal violence that flared up in the idealistic society of Kalyan that Basava had worked to establish. The intolerance and prejudice, the mindless hatred and the resultant anarchy are the same, only the time periods are
different. Basava’s story is the hypotext that comments on and clarifies happenings in the hypertext of Shiva’s story, all the while pointing at the unchanging nature of the seemingly changing times and people.

And there is the ubiquitous voice from the past that is a characteristic mark of Githa Hariharan’s novels. Here it is the voice of Shiv’s lost father. Yet the method of storytelling in In Times of Siege is by and large clearer and more straightforward than in the other three novels. “Here she has abandoned her earlier elliptical or ambiguous techniques of storytelling to a more clear cut treatment of her material.” As Anita Singh points out further, the author uses a “slow ambulatory narrative style that seems to reflect the cerebral numbness experienced by the main protagonist, the mental paralysis produced by events beyond one’s control” (97). Meena’s sociology thesis is on what she calls women’s stories – stories of women affected by the anti-Sikh riots after Indira Gandhi’s assassination in 1984. Each story is a reflection and a reinforcement of the sickness in society that the novel is trying to portray.

The cast on Meena’s leg is a metaphor. “It is symptomatic of the three Rs – restriction, regression, repression, a woman is subjected to all her life.” “… The communal fascist forces also function as cast incapacitating and ruthlessly paralyzing people’s rights” (Singh 98-99). If Meena’s movement is constricted by the cast on her leg, Shiv is wrapped around by metaphorical constrictions that stifle him like a cast.
Shiv had taken for granted all those values, his freedom fighter father had fought for. They had been his inheritance – truth, freedom, secularism, debate and the right to know. Now they are suddenly being made inaccessible to him. He is being completely immobilized by the bigotry and prejudice that he sees around him. The all-accepting middle-class man in him is in conflict with the ideals he has inherited. He loses count of interviews, meetings, telephone calls and hate mails. He feels like “a body in a lawless country, a body that has somehow unlearnt the law of gravity” (ITS 131).

Shiv sees two images, side by side, condemned to be coupled forever in his imagination. One is that of Basava, confronting his menace, standing up to what he passionately believes in. The second image is to the right, “inexorably tailing the first.” The image tailing the first is his vandalized room, in shambles now and no longer, a safe haven of refuge. Basava links the years, 1168 and 2000. Shiv feels that “the distance between imaginary lands of literature and the prosaic city of history has shrunk. All occupy the same beleaguered space, the same territory under definite siege… the manch and its cohorts are telling them that there is only one way to remember the past” (110).

Shiv’s mind is disturbed. At the same time, his father’s words resonate in his mind: “You must mine the truth. If you settle for safety, if you choose to go along with whatever makes your life comfortable, truth will escape you completely” (110). Shiv knows that it would be so easy to render an apology, retract the lesson and forget about it. However, he doesn’t take the easy way.
Meena is the catalyst that helps to bring out the hero in him. The heady fascination he feels for her translates itself into the courage to take on all the ugly prejudice, hatred and violence unleashed against him. Through Shiv, Githa Hariharan portrays most emphatically and graphically how even the cautious, silent, middle class voices in society will be raised during times of siege.

Symbol and metaphor and story form the basic framework on which Githa Hariharan’s creations rest and rise into wondrous works of art. Parody, an acknowledged post-modern technique used to incorporate the textualised past into the text of the present is used liberally in When Dreams Travel and The Thousand Faces of Night. A tone of satire and irony colours the mode of narration in all the four novels. The narrator says in When Dreams Travel, of Abdullah, who is speaking and Shahrzad, who is listening, “The man is telling the woman, a story. Or wait, perhaps it should not be called that, shy as it is of fantasy and symbol and fiction” (97). Here, Githa Hariharan has used her own words to sum up her philosophy of narration.

Martina Ghosh and Schellhorn find a common factor in the focal point of narration in three of the four novels discussed here. In The Thousand Faces of Night, When Dreams Travel and In Times of Siege, the author chooses as her point of focus, the characters inhabiting the margins of a larger canvas. Devi in The Thousand Faces of Night, Dunyazad in When Dreams Travel and Shiv in In Times of Siege are all protagonists, “whose lives get determined for them by forces
greater than themselves, and who have to work towards finding their own self-
definitions in the course of the narrative” (Ghosh-Schellhorn 31).

To sum up the discussion on Githa Hariharan’s unique style of narration, it would be apt to quote the writer herself:

My novels would be impossible without plurality in many ways—of narrative voices, alternative scenarios, reinterpreted tales and so on. Perhaps this is also a comment on the nature of the eternal tale. And it is in the nature of these stories all of us hear retell that they are never finished. There is no authoritative version; They must be twisted and retold for our times and lives” (Pioneer, 1999).

In keeping with this philosophy none of Githa Hariharan’s novels discussed here have neat, complete endings. In each of the novels, the end leaves the reader’s thirst still unquenched, with pointers to different possibilities, new beginnings contained in it. Shiv’s question in In Times of Siege seems to sum it up. He asks: “Is all narrative doomed to be inconclusive?” (105).

Chapter – V
SUMMING UP

A feminist reading of a text presupposes the adoption of the feminist approach. But there is no feminism now, but feminisms. The researcher therefore examined the key precepts of different feminist theories and applied a few of them as tools to attempt a feminist reading of four of Githa Hariharan’s novels.