

Story-within-story in Githa Hariharan's Fiction

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Abstract

The present article humbly seeks to examine as to how deftly the 'story-within-story'- tool finds prominently its way ahead in Githa Hariharan's fiction and lets the author glide through the plethora of her intents and motives. Writers, they say, are the unacknowledged legislators of the world; and the treasure-house of their art, in terms of theme and narrative techniques, hail to impress the reader in more than one way. As we sail through Hariharan's fiction, one finds her writing honing step by step into further refinement acquiring a pleasing voluptuousness that is eventually found suited to unravel the stuff of dreams. Stylistic changes are part and parcel of anyone's writing; but there is something that remains unchanged in Hariharan's fiction throughout: her preoccupation with storytelling that turns her eventually to the mother of storytellers. The device, story-within-stories, is not at all a tool invented by her; it is rather so that the dexterous and powerful strokes by her pen storm through, leaving indelible marks for the posterity enabling thus to transform storytelling – of the story-within-story variety – to the art that it is; reshaping and deconstructing the whole history of traditional tales picked from different parts of the world.

Key Words: Refinement, narrative techniques, expression, internalizing, transform, psychological, protest, circuitous, sacrifice, epitome, autonomy, interwoven, patterns, heroism, mechanism, self-defense, onslaught, intricacies, saga, struggle-ridden, revolt, fantasies, unadulterated, nourishment, polarization, metafictional, patriarchal, archetype, existence.

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Introduction

The aim of any literary work is often, if not always, to represent the burning contemporary issues expressed through powerful strokes in the garb of certain tools employed by the geniuses destined to bring certain changes: denouncing follies, uplifting the downtrodden; and empowering the underprivileged ones - to quote only a few. They are undoubtedly, to quote PB Shelley, "the unacknowledged legislators of the world." In the panorama of Indian English fiction, right from the three giant pioneer novelists- Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan and Raja Rao to the contemporary ones, there had been many prominent writers; and needless to say, each one of them has improved his/her style of writing through invention and practice. The outcome of this treasure house of art can be witnessed in the form of hallmarks they have established – the powerful and appealing works whose multi-dimensions in terms of theme and narrative techniques have impressed the reader. The present article is a humble effort to examine as to how deftly the 'story-within-story'- tool has been employed by Githa Hariharan in her fiction in order to achieve emphatically what she strived for. Right from her first novel, *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1992), Hariharan has travelled a great deal refining her style of expression. "Not only has (her) writing honed into further refinement", points out Anuradha Marwah Roy, "her language which was very economical has acquired a pleasing voluptuousness especially suited to unravel the stuff of dreams." (Roy *Pioneer*, 7/2/1999) But what remained unchanged from the very beginning, is Hariharan's preoccupation with storytelling "turning gradually to the mother of storytellers." (Roy 7/2/1999)

The device, story-within-stories, is not, however a tool invented by Githa Hariharan; it is just that she practised it with dexterous and powerful strokes; its root lying deep in the history of such internalizing of the relationship between authors and readers, art and life: Rama listening to the *Ramayana*, *The Canterbury Tales*, Hamlet seeing the play within the play, epistolary forms, the interpolators of Fielding, and *Tristram Shandy* are the examples - to quote only a few.

By adopting the narrative technique of story-within-story, Hariharan, like an astute artist, leaves the indelible marks for the posterity to the tune that none, among the Indian writers in English, could compete her in the race. Nevertheless, there are other works and writers who have proved their worth and marked their place strongly. Salman Rushdie tried his hand in *Midnight's Children* and did a pretty good job. Amitav Ghosh gave it a shot in *The Shadow Line* and had even better luck. Githa Mehta proved to be quite an old hand in *The River Sutra*. But "it was left to the other Githa", observes Anjali Roy, "to transform storytelling – of the story-within-story variety – to the art that it is." (Roy *The Literary Criterion* 87) To her, stories

only have meaning when “these are retold for our times, from different points of view – by different story tellers.” (Lal *Literate World* 21/03/03) Her addiction to take over the challenge can be traced in her own words: “Like any writer, I am deeply indebted to Coetzee’s works” and also those of “Andre Brink, Calvino, Rushdie, Borges, Pat Barker, Amitav Ghosh - all the traditional tales from different parts of the world.” (Lal 21/03/03)

Applying this device in her first novel, *The Thousand Faces of Night*, Hariharan correlates the stories of Devi, Sita and Mayamma in order to bring alive the underworld of Indian women’s lives - where most dreams are thwarted and the only constant is survival. The opening of the prelude, thus, lays the foundation of this very tool: “I have always liked the story that comes whole and well-rounded, complete with annotation” (vii). In the novel Devi’s grandmother, her first teacher; imparts her a secret knowledge through a purposeful retelling of the tales of the forgotten women of the past - Damyanti, Gandhari, Amba and Ganga, and shrewdly nurtures the heroine’s body as well as her soul, “preparing her” what Pranjape points out, “with her stories and experiences for the awful life that awaits her as a woman.” (Pranjape 19)

The tales of mythological women narrated to Devi, carry due weightage in themselves for all these women incidentally carry a lot of furry in their life protesting against injustices rendered to them by virtue of unjust socio-political ethos, and unreasonable and whimsical patriarchal norms; and therefore nurture Devi’s psychological terrain to face these unreasonable norms and make a choice of her own. Also the stories narrated by the grandmother are not the ordinary ones to amuse the kids. Each tale is appropriately selected and narrated in response to Devi’s query so as to let her draw a parallel or seek a derivation in order to nurture and satisfy her curiosity. The stories are painful and, at times, shocking remedies to Devi’s wounds. Moreover Devi is not a silent listener of the tales; she raises many ‘how’ and ‘why’ to her grandmother, and the shocking and unbelievable responses help bring out the true status of Indian women since ages. “A woman meets her fate alone”, “A woman without husband has no home”, “A woman fights her battle alone”, and “a woman gets her heart’s desire by great cunning” - are a few of the replies to Devi’s hows and whys, imparting her a well-woven tutelage, and thereby nurturing her creative yearnings. “It is through (this) inspired tutelage of her grandmother” observes C. Vijaysree “that Devi’s artistic vision is first unleashed and her creative yearnings are tenderly nurtured imparting a secret knowledge to her through a purposeful retelling of the tales of the forgotten women of the past.” (Vijaysree 178)

In the novel, as the story goes, Gandhari was given in marriage to

Dhritarashtra - the prince of Hastinapur. In her bridal entourage she was much impressed by the refinement of culture and riches of the people of Hastinapur, but soon she realized that she was unjustly married to a blind man, and in her pride and protest she tore a piece of cloth and tied it tightly over her eyes forever. The story is narrated to Devi when, on having looked at a photograph of her mother playing veena, she asked her grandmother if she ever played the one. And in her reply through a circuitous route she (the grandmother) finally came back to Amma's photograph and told how once having played the veena beautifully, her mother gave it up for ever only to become a dutiful daughter-in-law, an ideal house wife. Having listened to this interpretation of Gandhari's choice and its correlation to her mother's sacrifice Devi says: "...the lesson I learnt was different... (it) brought me five steps closer to adulthood." (Hariharan 29)

As the novel proceeds we come across another figure Amba, wrapped in the garb of a wholesome story - a female avenger, who transformed the fate that overtook her, into a triumph and avenged herself against her offender, Bhishma. And yet another woman, the angry Ganga, an epitome of female protest and pride, who drowned her children and walked out of marriage when the terms of marriage were broken, constitutes the very essence of next story in the novel. Not less dashing is the story of Damyanti's Swayamvara - the ultimate celebration of woman's autonomy, as the princess chooses to marry the man she loves, even against the Divine interference.

The tales of these mythological heroines are interwoven by Devi's grandmother with those of ordinary women – Sita, Uma, Gauri or Devi herself – into familiar patterns of heroism and suffering, "the link between their lives, thus, proves very vital one." (Hariharan 30); and, in this way, Devi does not merely learn the stories, but more importantly she learns that stories are meant to be revised and retold. Retelling a tale of the past thus turns into an act of restoration – restoration of a lost tradition. Devi thus develops a mechanism of self-defense against any onslaught. She contemplates: "Amba's story or maybe it was Uma's made a deep impression on me, like an irresistible horror-film, and I day-dreamed more and more about female avengers." (Hariharan 40) Also Baba's (Mahesh's father's) stories led Devi further into the intricacies of Hindu traditional thought and philosophy complementing her grandmother's stories, and empowering her to make choices of her own. And the story of Mayamma's (the household caretaker) life constitutes a saga of unrelieved suffering in itself. She merely accommodates all through her life: "I have learnt how to wait, when to bend my back, when to wipe the rebellious eyes dry." (Hariharan 126) The third phase of stories in the novel, thus, culminates in the essence that

every woman has to learn for herself, and survival is the highest ideal in the struggle-ridden life of a woman. The lesson Devi learns out of this all rejuvenates, however, a spirit of revolt in heroine's mind. She feels cheated like Gandhari, slighted like Amba, and suffers like the snake-woman when her own life becomes a living-hell in her husband's house. She grows wild in her fantasies seeking an escape in her weird imaginings: "I had, of course, to respond to my grandmother's years of over-rich, unadulterated nourishment with a story of my own." (Hariharan 40) She now transforms herself into an active participant, viewing all the heroines as "a source of over-rich, unadulterated nourishment", and strives for her own story in her vision: "I was Devi: I rode a tiger and cut off all evil, magical demons." (41)

The technique story-within-story does not, in any way, lose its charm in the second novel of Hariharan – *The Ghosts of Vasu Master*. Vasu Master, a retired teacher, tries to teach Mani, a slow learner, and in the process tells him one fantastic story after the other as he faces up to the biggest challenge of his life: can he teach (or heal) Mani? This storytelling function is shared by Vasu Master with several others: Mangala, his Grandmother, Gopu, Jameela, and his father; apart from the non-human world like that of spiders and crows. As pointed out by Anjali Roy, it is "her foray into the world of fable from which she returns to retell the lives of her human protagonists" where "the reader can hear the voice of her human characters in the tales of the mouse and the crow, the spider and the fly." (Roy 87)

There are stories about the ghosts, and also those narrated by the ghosts and by many other narrators in the novel meant not for mere entertainment but to address serious and provoking issues as diverse as what Veena Seshadri observes, "holistic healing, the polarization of the country and the concept and techniques of education from the gurukula system of ancient India to recent developments." These stories are targeted, in a well-organized and pre-decided way, to "expose the themes of corruption, nepotism and progressive decline in moral values." (Seshadri 28) As observed aptly by Anjali Roy, "History repeats itself as a twentieth century schoolmaster emulates the methods of a venerable old teacher, Vishnu Sharma, to awaken the intelligence of his simpleton ward by presenting the ways of practical wisdom in the guise of simple stories, the magic mantra, as it were, for healing and teaching." (Roy 28) Burrowing into the deep recesses of his collective unconscious, Vasu Master unlocks the door to a secret wisdom – enshrined in the mother of all the stories, *The Panchatantra*. Like *The Panchatantra* or *The Arabian Nights*, the stories told by Vasu Master to Mani constitute only one level of storytelling. "The Chinese box", remarks Anjali Roy, "conceals several other levels where characters are always listening to or telling stories." (89)

When Dreams Travel, the third novel of Hariharan, explores the story of the archetypal storyteller- Scheherazade, “constituting”, what Rama Kundu opines, “a fantastic book for anyone who is interested in telling stories and the hows and whys of storytelling.” (Kundu 180) Hariharan’s story “reverberates with echoes from the text of the past and at the same time carves out daring lines of departure.” (180) This is a tale told from all sides - those who have power and those who haven’t; and “establishes story-telling as a women’s tradition passed on among them, from generation to generation.” (180) More interestingly, the male characters in the novel can listen and repeat the tales they have heard, but it is women who invent them.

Shahzad, Dunyazad and Dilshad are the three women story-tellers linked to each other by bonds of family, love and the palace life. Because of particular circumstances in their lives, “they understand the power, the pleasure and the responsibility of story-telling” and, each, in her own way, “carries out this activity, as an entertaining gift for others, as wise lessons in life and as a form of empowerment to manipulate opponents.” (Web Sources)

Hariharan, here, divides the narrative into two parts: the first includes her retelling of the Arabian Nights story, and the second contains a series of tales Shahzad herself might have told the king. All these stories are essentially the same; all double-back on each other, with a few differences, to illustrate her point about collective memory and an individual voice - the themes of memory and desire. Memory is a font of storytelling and a manipulator of history. Shahzad is able to tell so many stories, not because her memory is good. But what she does not remember, she invents or re-shapes. Desire is the motivation for telling stories that dominate a tale which, in a deliberate echo, seems to embody a thousand and one different aspects.

Hariharan finds this useful for her metafictional schemata. Seen from the angle of modern fiction theory this double fiction appears to be a story about storytelling, with the purpose to suggest the ulterior triumph of art over life, of imagination over mundane and cruel reality, or the ennobling effects of art even on an insensitive in sensitized mind and, of course, the possibility of art as a liberating device for a woman imprisoned in the “dungeon” of patriarchal norms. Over years, centuries, millenniums Shahzad, the narrator of *The 1001 Nights*, had emerged to be the archetype for a story teller, who could feed the curiosity of the listener, keep him in suspense, and thus hold him in a thrall under the charm for her magic. Her stories were a string of self-contained tales, which were within the frame of another story.

In the second part of the novel Duniyazad encounters Dilshad, a slave-girl, and the two tell stories to each other for seven nights and days. This is their way of re-enacting reviving Shahrzad; at the same time this is the author's device to rewrite the legend in the postmodern contest of feminism and metafiction. The novelist, therefore, remarks:

"But 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. It adapts itself to local conditions, to this century or that a permanent fugitive from its officious parent, legitimate history." (Hariharan *When Dreams Travel* 25)

The rolls of narrators and addressee here go on interchanging. The speaker becomes the listener and vice versa again and again. "And the stories they tell to each other", remarks Rama Kundu, "are absurd, fragments of magic realism, broken incomplete stories or just hints of stories that would leave the listener perpetually dissatisfied and thirsty for the knowledge of 'what then?'" (Kundu 185) The experimental techniques of *When Dreams Travel* are concerned with the representation of representation, what John Barth calls "the effect of the regressus in infinitum produced by the story-within-a story, and the process whereby characters in a novel become authors or readers within the fiction, reminding us of the fictitious aspect of our existence." (189)

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