

## Narrative Expertise of Githa Hariharan's Novels

# 11

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The novels of Githa Hariharan substantiate her narrative expertise as the twin objectives of literature namely delight and instruction go hand in hand by blending harmoniously both the aesthetic considerations and the social concerns. Aiming at excellence, Githa Hariharan perfectly balances herself as a writer of social concern and narrative artist to drive home her ideas in an effective way. The maturity in the choice of theme and the perspective of life afforded by the positive ending is matched by the remarkable maturity of her style. The author rewrites, revises and edits her own writing many a time that her friends mock at her saying that she suffers from a writer's disease called editoritis. This paper attempts to view the novels of Githa Hariharan as a reservoir of narrative techniques such as plot, structure, characterization, setting, narrative situations and language employed by her in designing her novels.

In the analysis of the plot in all the three novels, *The Thousand Faces of Night*, *The Ghosts of Vasu Master*, and *In Times of Siege*, it is observed that they have 'plots of thought' which involve progress in the protagonists thought and feeling and in that they can be particularized as the 'affective plots' since the protagonists change in attitudes and feeling but not in philosophy as it is well exposed in the first two chapters. In all the three novels, it is not the chronological retelling of the story and the organization of the plot is developed out of the important elements of external conflict (person vs. society). In case of Devi, the conflict is with the patriarchal society regarding gender where as in *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* Vasu's conflict is with the methods of teaching and Shiv in *In Times of Siege* feels it when his basic right is disturbed by a fundamentalist group .

Githa Hariharan herself insists on the significance of the structure of a novel since it is the part of the story and any complexity in structure is linked with what is happening in the story. Hence, she patterns a kind

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of layered structure where past and present coexist in a fairly complicated way but knit neatly in all her novels. Moreover, the structure of the novels has been planned in such a way that each chapter highlights the themes as well as dissects and interlinks with other related themes in an effective way. *The Thousand Faces of Night* has a prelude along with three parts consisting of eight chapters, the first and the third having three and the middle part comprising two chapters. The theme of female suffering within the hold of patriarchy is highlighted in the 'prelude' as it records the ordeal and horrible status of a woman who fails to deliver a baby. The expression of her sense of suffocation in the patriarchal society and a warning to be alert is well-expressed when Mayamma guides "so be careful, Devi ...when you next ask a question" ('Prelude' TFN).

Githa Hariharan structures her novel in such a significant way that the novel opens up and ends with 'home coming'. The first one, of course, is Devi's returning home from America to be caged in the name of marriage. The last chapter pictures the 'home coming' of a married daughter to her mother's home for a permanent stay breaking the marital bond which is usually not welcomed in a patriarchal society. This concept is subverted in the novel as it ends with the happy welcome extended by the mother to the daughter's home coming both trying to expand their space by giving new meaning to life. The first chapter exemplifies the utter contrast between the eastern and western cultures and the other two chapters are related to Devi's 'present'. Devi's fondness for her grandmother and her stories and their impact on her in moulding her personality are well expressed. The second part narrated by Devi is about her experience in her in-laws' house, her married life with Mahesh, the life of Mayamma, Uma, Annapurna and stories of mythical goddesses like Durga and Kali. In the third part, first chapter is devoted to exhibit the change within Sita, Devi's mother by contrasting her past and present, the second chapter to unfold Mayamma's life and the last one to portray Devi's resolution towards modernity.

*The Ghosts of Vasu Master* consisting of 48 chapters is sprinkled with ideas and methods to understand the truth in the protagonist's own ways. There are three epigraphs prefaced to the work each commenting on the nature of knowledge and of teaching. The first is from Charaka

which is about the privileging of the intelligent the next from Shakespeare which admits that all cannot be masters and all masters cannot necessarily be emulated. The third is from Gandhi where he admits “I have nothing new to teach the world. Truth and non-violence are as old as the hills” (qtd in ‘epigraph’ GVM). It insists on this kind of humility, this submission to the other, the quality of patience which is required in this present era. Jasbir Jain aptly comments in her article, “Men in the minds of Women: Women Writers and Male Narrators in the Fiction of Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Desai and Githa Hariharan” that “Knowledge exists, it need not be created but, it needs to be tapped for one’s use”(55). The structure of the novel is episodic. Though each story or chapter can be read independently there is continuity in meaning as well as necessary progression in the plot. Both papaya – head Mani and Vasu change, grow and learn to relate to each other as the narrative progresses. Methods vary just as human beings vary. “Vasu moves from one method to another — storytelling, tabulation, food, companionship, love and care, that is, mothering, and succeeds in large measure in winning Mani’s trust” (55).

Another strand which moves through the story is that of Vasu’s body whose ailments cannot be diagnosed. The body and its ailments feature even in the letters from his son and in the memory of the advice offered by his dead wife. In fact, the opening chapter shows us Vasu’s visit to a doctor “I sat on the chair, waiting for the old man to tell me what was wrong with me” (GVM 1). The doctor admits defeat and sends him off another trail — naturopathy, yoga and ayurveda— alternative systems of medicines of healing the body. Subsequently, Vasu is engaged in exploring alternative systems of learning and teaching, ways of healing the mind. The narrative structure is multidimensional comprising the world of the animal fable, Vasu’s wife Mangala’s ghost story, her friend Jameela’s wordless tapestries and her own fable, the memoir Vasu is writing of his career as a teacher and his more personal autobiographical musings, his father’s ayurvedic lectures, and the young Mani’s muteness. First, the large variety of ghosts, male and female, then living memories of the past, and at last a richly inhabited present. There are Venkatesh and his Swami; and Gopu, Mani’s older brother, a young boy who has

already turned a cynic. In the background are Vasu Master's two sons Vishnu and Venu as well as Veera Naidu, the shopkeeper school owner and once in a while the headmaster. A third force is projected through Vasu's dreams (and nightmares), which connect the past with the present.

Two main narratives run side by side in *The Ghosts of Vasu Master*. One is the relearning of old age, the other of the theory of education. The proliferation of narrative pulses in the novel allows 'truth' and 'rightness' to multiply beyond the exclusivity of univocal discourses. *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* itself is a web rather than a narrative line or a point. In his narrating voice he comments upon the experiencing voice that articulated the question about the web: "I found I could not detect an obvious pattern in what I jotted down in my note book. Not, that is, till I allowed these obstinately visible stands, separate but full of tantalizing possibilities, to co-exist and intertwine when and where they pleased" (GVM 27).

Though he ruminated on the obvious patterns of teaching to the school boys, later he started allowing multiple strands to coexist and understood the tantalizing possibilities of these plots and their multiplicity to acquire the power to transform both his method of teaching and papaya head Mani. Thus, Vasu is made to learn in time the answer to his early question, "how do you weave a web that links and transfigures each line of experience, each point into one learning?" (GVM 26) In this way, the novel moves forward and weaves in the obstinately visible strands of those histories and the eras of which they are made, and it twines and winds them until Vasu and his readers gain the knack of transfiguring 'experience' into 'learning'.

*In Times of Siege* consists of 12 chapters dated from 31 August 2000 to 15 October 2000 with the time span of just 45 days. The main message of the novel 'speak up before it's too late' is revealed in a picturesque way through the poster on the wall. *In Times of Siege* is carefully structured with unlikely links between different kinds of time and space. In all the novels, she cleverly paces the book and leaves enough clues to the reader that several stories woven in here are destined to an explosive climax. There is no absolute resolution and she lends the

conclusion of the story for the dreams of the readers in each book. However, in *In Times of Siege*, Githa Hariharan deviates from the elliptical path or the ambiguous notes of her earlier narrative forms and restores to an explicit treatment of her material since reality overtakes fiction with uncanny regularity.

In all the three novels, Githa Hariharan uses dreams saturated with symbolic import. As pointed out by Freud dreams are never concerned with trivialities. It takes wisdom to learn how to interpret and respond to one's dreams, since this is part and parcel of the whole of reality. Dreams reflect feelings, emotions, beliefs, habits and sometimes repressed feelings. Psychologists admit that at some deep unconscious level, any dream fans out into the infinite horizon of emotion and thought that constitute the individual psyche. In addition to feelings, Abraham Maslow, a famous American psychologist believes that "dreams reflect bodily needs, psychopathologies and social maledictions" as he has pointed out in his article on 'Electric Dreams'. Julia Ching comments, "The dream often indicates a suppressed desire or an unresolved conflict, either of which might be related to certain threats to our personal identity" (19). Recent experience of an individual may play a great role in dream-content and dream-formation. Amba's story and Uma's marriage which have made deep impression on Devi have terrified her but she yearned and dreamt of such female avengers and thereby her gender identity.

Flight of ideas, determined by internal and sometimes by external associations is responsible for the shifting seems, the apparently disconnected and illogical content of a dream. The inner impulse or feelings are transformed to an outer object or form or act which represents or symbolize it. In a fundamental sense, the function of an individual dream and a collective, archetypal myth are similar, arising from the conflict between conscious and unconscious, between in a sense, two parts of the mind. All the dreams are delineated in minute descriptions. The protagonists in all the three novels almost had nightmares rather than dreams and have either a dream of flight or drowning often. On the last day of her departure from America, Devi had a dream of drowning in a sea along with her Black American friend Dan which symbolizes the fear of the alien culture within her mind. The vision which Devi had in

her adolescent age, in fact structures her future life. After listening to the stories of her grandmother Devi confirms her conviction “I lived a secret life... heads” (TFN 41). All the novels of Githa Hariharan are almost entirely devoted to “telling” and very rarely “showing” the inner life of the protagonists. In all the three novels, the narrative situations and events are presented scenically in terms of a character-reflector mode. Since the works apparently concentrate entirely on one character whom the reader follows from the beginning to end, the reader only see, hear, witness what the hero himself sees, hears or does.

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