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POSTMODERN ELEMENTS IN GITHA HARIHARAN

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ABSTRACT

In today's world when influences travel very fast, literary trends in no time assume global character. Therefore, while Modernism took almost half a century to reach here, postmodernism is as familiar to us as it is to the western world. A number of the current crop of our authors have been influenced by postmodern tendencies in literary writing. This paper seeks to trace postmodern element in a potent voice of our time Githa Hariharan who has won global critical attention for more than half a dozen powerful novels and has also drawn attention for her impeccable prose style.

Keywords: postmodernism, revisionism, intertextuality, myth, subversion, magic realism, hyper reality, metafiction

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A novelist with post-colonial and postmodern consciousness, Githa Hariharan impressed the literary world with her very first novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1992) for which she bagged Commonwealth Writers Prize in 1993. She took pen to unmask female issues and their troublesome lives and while writing with feminist consciousness she successfully integrated traditional Indian values with postmodern outlook and world view. Honestly conceding the feminist strain in her novels Hariharan herself says she is a writer "who is a feminist along with several other things."¹

Before discussing Hariharan as a postmodernist writer it is requisite to understand the term "Postmodernism." Postmodernism is in fact a wide-ranging phenomenon and a complicated term. It emerged as an area of academic study in mid 1980s in Europe and America. Its scope is very wide and comprehensive. In fact this term is used in various disciplines to express the sense of new cultural epoch. It comprises literature, fine arts, architecture, sociology, music, fashion and many other aspects of life and society. It is hard to trace its exact onset but it is unquestionable that all innovations and experiments after modernism may be included as something postmodern. It shows dissatisfaction with modern representation of political, cultural and social practices. Even India didn't remain untouched with the impact of Postmodernism and Indian writers also started giving postmodern hue to their works.

What are the key elements of Postmodern literature or what characterizes Postmodern Literature? Basically, postmodern literature is characterized by the use of metafiction, unreliable narration, self-reflexivity, inter-textuality, pastiche, parody, magic realism, fabulation, paranoia, absurdity, subversion, revisionism, minimalism, maximalism, simulation, hyper-reality, cyber-culture, pop-culture, techno-culture etc. It is significant to note that one traces reflections of many of these features in the works of Githa Hariharan.

Githa Hariharan, a major voice in Indian English Fiction is basically a postmodernist writer. All her works illustrate postmodern sensibility. She follows the postmodern ways of writing like Arundhati Roy and Salman Rushdie. Being a postmodern author Hariharan uses the postmodern themes and techniques in her novels. Characteristic of postmodern literature can be traced in her novels where she has attempted to re-explore stories from the myths and histories with great inventiveness. She weaves into her narrative, the flux of tales from traditional texts. She experiments with her narrative technique. In all her novels a different technique is used. Though there are common elements like focus on storytelling, use of mythical technique, magic realism, embedded stories, poetic language, revisionism which bind all her novels together. She can be studied as a postmodern author on the ground of the thematic patterns evolved and artistic technique used in her novels.

The central theme of all her novels is the rewriting of given narratives be it myths, history or fables which is essentially a postmodern technique called revisionism. In fact, 'Revisionism' becomes an important tool in the hands of Hariharan. Revisionism means 'the act of looking back'. Many old stories were retold in different ways from gynocentric perspectives; many traditional figures of patriarchal mythology have been re-invented demolishing the cultural stereotypes propagated by the male dominated society. Hariharan has revisited, revisioned ancient myths and legend as an answer to the present theoretical demands for overthrowing the patriarchal systems and old traditions which strangle female entities. Revisionism is very much evident in the novels *The Thousand Faces of Night* and *When Dreams Travel*.

Hariharan, as a post-modernist novelist, has experimented with the narrative technique in her novels. One of the most important techniques used by contemporary writers is Intertextuality. It was in the 1960s, Julia Kristeva wrote about intertextuality. She used the phrase in her dialogue with the texts of 'Bakhtin'. Intertextuality makes the structure of the novel complicated but interesting. It allows the writer to remain absent but at the same time gives him or her opportunity to inspect old values in new context. It was because of these advantages that inter-textuality has become the most meaningful approach to literature today. Hariharan in *The Thousand Faces of Night* has made a very efficacious use of this concept of Inter-textuality. Her intertextual references to earlier Indian Literature have made the novel a patchwork quilt of multiple narratives that refuses any straightforward linear development of the story. Hariharan has utilized this technique to underline the feminist issues by comparing women's condition in ancient India with that of her women characters of the modern period.

Her first novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* moves around the lives of three women Devi, Sita and Mayamma and for telling the stories of these three women Hariharan subverts the traditional Indian values with postmodern outlook and worldview. Hariharan has used the mode of inter-textuality in this novel. She subverts and deconstructs the foundational institutions of meta-narratives such as tradition, religion, womanhood, marriage to explore new perceptions of truth. She has made an adequate use of myths taken from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata and related them to the women characters of the novel. She juxtaposes the condition of the contemporary Indian women with the mythological tales which subjugates women. C. Vijayshree very aptly declares the novel as "... a remarkable rendering of the collective struggle of women for self-liberation through the author's play narrative structures-framing texts within texts, with texts overlapping in curious ways, her carnivalesque accumulation of inter-texts ranging from the tales from the Mahabharata to folk stories and her deft interweaving of these with the lives of real women."²

From the novel it can be presumed that Hariharan suggests that myths are not just the grandmother's stories but they are told with some hidden purpose. There is perhaps the hint how baby girls' mind are made ready to accept the subjugation unconsciously. Devi in childhood was fed with such stories of women who sacrificed their lives for the comfort of the patriarchal society. Every tale is narrated in response to Devi's query in order to nurture and satisfy her curiosity. For Devi still a child she finds the stories sometimes too much flabbergasting. Yet she is not a silent listener, and continues asking questions. She was told the stories of Gandhari who accepts blind husband, Amba, a mythical character from the Mahabharata who was also a victim of this patriarchal society. Grandmother narrated story from Panchatantra- the story of a girl who wedlocks a snake. All the mythical stories show that women have always been seen as a commodity. But the worst thing is that society has always accepted the injustice on women as their destiny. So the myths of this type implant the

quality of self-sacrifice in women and colonize their mind and they instinctively carry on internalizing their subjugation as a process of cultural transmission and form the collective unconsciousness in women.

The discussion of myths in this novel is so much substantial that S.Ramanathan considers this novel “commemoration of Indian mythology.”³ Myths are revisited, rewrote and retold from a female point of view in order to focus the inner lives of women. She tries to draw an analogy between contemporary and mythical figures. She further states that this Mahabharata is narrated from feminine perspective telling not only of Karan, Arjuna or Bhima but also of Gandhari and Amba. When we delve into this novel we will find that although Devi, the protagonist of this novel is fed with the stories of self-sacrificing women but in practical life she doesn't prefer to become scapegoat for this male dominated society. By subverting patriarchal ideologies, she gets rid of her matrimonial bondage and walk towards her mother “to stay and fight, to make sense of it all.”⁴(139) Besides these major postcolonial qualities the novel is filled with several other qualities of postmodernist writing technique. Hariharan's narration is punctuated with poetic and lyrical description. The linguistic innovations of the novel serve beautifully and perfectly to the aesthetic purpose of the novelist. Like other Indian-English writers she also uses words from our national language and regional language frequently in her linguistic patterns. In her novel Hariharan has not only Indianised the incidents but has also nativized the use of language. She abundantly uses Tamil words “agraham”, “astapdi”, “nadaswaram”, “kolam”etc. She is liberal in her use of such words. She has used it to represent Tamil Brahmin customs. No English word could replace the Tamil word used in this novel. Any attempt by the author to replace or shun the original Tamil vocabulary would have failed to communicate the ethnicity of the region. She takes the Indian culture to the western readers of the English-speaking countries through her chosen Indian vocabulary. Her language intertwined with ideas, images and designs is the most important postmodern writing tool she uses. She wants the language to be as clear as mirror. She may not be as innovative as Arundhati Roy yet she frequently rejects the traditional syntactical pattern.

Her next novel *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* (1994) is a fine example of another postmodern technique Pastiche, related to Inter-textuality. In this novel Hariharan is influenced by A.W Ryder's translation of the famous collection of the Panchatantra tales. The stories told by Vasu Master to young Mani are the reworking of the Panchatantra. As Anjali Roy observes, “History repeats itself as a twentieth century school master 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.”⁵ The embedded tales function as a pedagogic device in Mani's education. Vasu Master teaches Mani through storytelling method. Actually through Vasu Master Hariharan advocates ancient time story telling method in our education system to teach students because the purpose of storytelling was to implant moral values and major life skills. The method of storytelling used in this novel is innovative. Here again Hariharan has applied the technique of ‘revisionism’. Through this novel Hariharan wants to restore the ancient way of learning – storytelling method. The tales narrated in this novel are taken from the Mahabharata and folklores. Therefore, multidimensional vibrations of voices are witnessed in the novel. Hariharan has used fantasy, fable and several imaginary characters to introduce the psychological waves of Vasu Master.

Another uniqueness of the novel is the use of magic realism, the most important genre popularized by Latin American authors and Rushdie which has also influenced Hariharan like several other authors. *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* includes dreams taking place during normal life, the return of previously deceased characters, extremely complicated plots, wild shifts and myths, fairytales and fables. There are stories about ghosts and also those narrated by the ghosts to explain some serious issues, to expose the theme of corruption, nepotism and decline in moral values. The style of introducing fantastic or impossible elements into narrative that is otherwise normal is the most important postmodern technique what may be called ‘magic realism’ employed by Hariharan.

Hariharan's masterpiece *When Dreams Travel* (1999) in fact is a brilliant work by her. This work may be called a kind of experiment by her as she is rewriting the popular legendary tale *The Arabian Nights* or *The Thousand and One Nights* in a new mode. In real sense *When Dreams Travel* is a continuation of the Arabian Nights. As we know that The Arabian Nights talks about 1001 nights in which Shahrzad is narrating stories while talking to Shahrzad whereas Hariharan's *When Dreams Travel* starts after the completion of 1001 nights when Shahrzad succeeds to win over Shahrzad. In this powerful novel she has completely changed the outlook of the

original legend. She has experimented with the pattern, narration, theme or motif, perspective, vision and politics of the original text with a view to achieving the re-exploration of the off-scene and marginalized background and characters. She has given a fresh platform and new direction to the theme of the original text. Not satisfied with the content of *The Arabian Nights*, Hariharan has given a new postmodernist hue to this text.

In fact, *When Dreams Travel* is a rewriting of the Arabian legendary tales *One Thousand and One Nights* through gynocritical point of view. Githa Hariharan has decolonized the original text. The rewriting of canonical text is a post-modern technique and Hariharan has very deftly applied this technique in this novel. By re-writing Shahzrad's story from feminist angle, Hariharan imposes on the readers a whole re-thinking of the hatred of women so obvious in the famous translation of the medieval Arab anthologies. In this way, Hariharan is not only "answering back" to misogynous literary tradition but she is also deconstructing and eroding the sexist impact of the original. Hariharan through this novel revise and modifies an old myth with feministic perspective. This novel employs that postmodern technique what is called 'revisionist myth making'.

One thing which is worthy to be noticed is the author's treatment of the subject. There is visible change in the subject matter. Here the author tries to write a metafiction through an elaborated intertext that is made to foreground the feminist issue from a fresh perspective. In fact, it is a great challenge to write a pre-written novel with a new angle. Seen from the angle of modern fiction theory this double fiction appears to be a story about story- telling, with the purpose to suggest the ulterior triumph of art over life, of imagination over mundane and cruel reality, or the ennobling effect of art even on an insensitive mind, and of course, the possibility of art as a liberating device for a women imprisoned in the "dungeon" of patriarchal norms.

Hariharan in this novel has used parody in a contemporary context with a view to mock and comment on the original work. Parody is one of the recognized postmodern ways of literary incorporating of the textualized past into the present. The intertextuality in this novel envisions the indivisibility of the past-present-future and manifests the ambition to rewrite the past in a new context. Her powerful use of irony is repeated reminder- "The thousand and one nights are done"⁶(21) only to invite the reader to look back to those nights and a few more days and night in addition, in the hazy and distorted calendar of an uncertain past. The novel concludes with a vision of Shahrzad- now an old woman- which brings past -present-future together, curving into one another, "a circle with no beginning or end."⁷(276) Written within this frame the novel ends (not concluded) by connecting feminism with professionalism, evoking the struggle of the earlier women and cautioning the women of future, "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?"⁸(276)

The other postmodern characteristic found in this novel is the abundant use of magic realism. Dunyazad and Dilshad tell each other the absurd tales of magic realism which are not always complete leaving the listener perpetually dissatisfied and thirsty for knowledge of 'what happened next?' This novel deals with unrealistic tales with no linear narration. The stories are fragmented like interior monologue. Hariharan however continuously interweaves and intersects (criss-crosses) between some text and her novel, reminding the reader always about the doubly fictional quality of her novel. As a critic remarks, the novel is full of magic and varied narrative style. A good storyteller, Hariharan prods readers into finding their own answers."⁹ Praising Hariharan India Today writes: She can do magic.... beautifully written and obviously deeply felt... Hariharan's greatest gift is the ability to weave poetry and magic into the simplest of sentence, so that reading her is an effortless pleasure."¹⁰

Hariharan's last three novels *In Times of Siege* (2003), *Fugitive Histories* (2009) and *I Have Become the Tide*(2019) are also postmodern in theme, technique and characterization. These novels act as a mirror in which we see the distorted figure of contemporary India where we talk big things regarding freedom and the empowerment of the individual, irrespective of his economic, religious or social standing. These novels juxtapose both historical and political issues. Postmodernism advocates plurality and gives voice to subaltern classes and opposes grand narratives that try to homogenize the whole world. Hariharan in her novel *In Times of Siege* uses the method of historical revisionism to make comparison between the past and present India. By using historical

revisionism Hariharan attempts to define the question, "What does history mean to us? Hariharan draws a comparison between the 12th century historical figure Basava, an Indian philosopher, statesman, Kanada poet in the Shiva focused Bhakti movement and a social reformer during the reign of the Kalachuri dynasty, King Bijjala I in Karnataka and 21st century Prof. Shiv Murthy a history teacher in an open university, New Delhi. Shiv Murthy and Basava are on the same wave length. As Basava was caught in controversy due to his appeal for the abolishment of gender and caste discrimination, in the like manner Prof. Murthy gets in hot water because of a lesson on Basava as he has not made the heroes heroic enough, rather than he has made the villainous too villainous. In his lesson he focuses on the political rather than the religious figure. Some fundamentalists attack him for distorting history. He is caught up in 'siege' like condition. Hariharan believes that "to seek permission to speak, write or sing is a form of death."¹¹ Actually through the story of Shiva, Hariharan wants to say that in a democratic country like India where constitution guarantees freedom of expression, unfortunately some fundamentalists, either of any religion are making fun of this provision. Hariharan wants to say that we are living in times of siege. What is more shocking is that siege is not just external-the mob or the fundamentalist or the terrorist- but within our minds. In order to put a stop to the 'siege of the mind', India's large middle educated class particularly intellectuals and scholars should come forward and speak against the fabrications of dogmatic ideologies. The issue is not all about history but about the politicization of academics. Another postmodern feature of this novel is indecisive ending.

Her fifth novel *Fugitive Histories* is set in the backdrop of Gujarat Godhra carnage in 2002. Hariharan through this novel is asking some questions as her heart aches to see the disparity among the people of India in the name of religion. This prejudicial feeling is creating disharmony in the incongruent lives of all Indians belonging to any religion. Due to Godhra carnage several innocent lives were sacrificed without any fault of theirs. They had to leave their home due to communal violence. They became 'fugitives' in their own lands. So, Hariharan interrogates with disturbing questions. Is it not a shame to be fugitive in one's own motherland? Or will India continue to have 'fugitive histories' to its credit? Hariharan laments the tragedy of Gujarat carnage. She wants to say that if Gujarat, the birth place of Gandhi will confront such a huge carnage, what about the other places in India. Hariharan is sorry to see the mentality of people of India who are making partiality in the name of religion only. Such things do not embellish the country like India which is known for its 'Unity in Diversity.'

Her latest novel *I Have Become the Tide* is based on the prevalent caste system in India. This novel is nothing but a narrative of three distinct perspectives which intertwines past and present. It brings together three parallel stories which travel from the story of a cattle skinner to three Dalit students and thereafter to a professor. The novel begins with a story of Chikka, a son of a cattle skinner around 900 years ago and then moves around three Dalit Students - Satya, Ravi, Asha who face casteism in college campus and then moves to the present time where a university Professor Krishna writes about his discovery that a poet Kannadeva who is described as a "Hindu Saint" is none but that very untouchable boy Chikka. The Professor is targeted by Hindu militants for his research on Kannadeva as this discovery is not acceptable to them.

This novel emerges from three incidents in contemporary India- the institutional murder of Rohith Vemula in Satya's case, the murder of M M Kalburgi in the professor's story and Kannadeva's symbolization of the 12th century Bhakti movement. With these narratives she wants to say that not enough change has come in Indian society. Even today casteism is prevalent in India as it was centuries ago. Besides casteism, she also raises questions on writer's freedom on writing, speaking and putting forth their ideas in the world's largest democracy. Is it not a kind of persecution on writers to ask them to write according to the wishes of fundamentalists?

Through her fictions she wants people to understand the difference, make space for others to thrive and celebrate the diversity. Hariharan's novel may be called allegories of modern issues also because her novels highlight many social and political issues of India of present time. Her fiction aims at revealing truths that are fundamentally human. Therefore, the topical allusions may become less significant with the passage of time, the essential humanity will survive.

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