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CREATING A CONGENIAL NICHE: FEMALE COMPANIONSHIP IN
GITHA HARIHARAN'S SELECTED NOVELS

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ABSTRACT

The present paper critically analyzes a few selected novels of Githa Hariharan an Indian English Writer to unravel the threads of companionship that seams the experiences of women belonging to different classes and age groups together. Women since time immemorial has been the victim of subjugation by the patriarchal society where female are considered subordinate to their male counterpart. Hariharan is well known for her revisionist attitude in writing. Her works deal with a rewriting of the myths to fit into the corpus of the present scenario. The rewriting technique gives the writer an opportunity to unveil the implicit ideologies of the so called dominant structures which interpellates female into subordination. The motive of the writer is to present before us female characters who exert their identity through the rejection of traditionally codified norms and regulations. The resistance offered by the female characters seems to work at its best when they form dyads. The female bonding symbolizes a strengthening of congenial relations that not only binds together the experiences of women, but at the same time gives them an opportunity to dismantle the edifice of dominant power structures which play a major role in the suppression of women. The power exerted as an association changes the paradigms of power structures where the centre and the margin reciprocate their powers, thereby making the powerless powerful by lending them a voice of their own.

Keywords: subservient, interpellates, ideology, dyads, congenial, unravel, patriarchy.

Githa Hariharan is one of the Indian English Writers who has been successful in portraying the female world at its best from talking about the positioning of women in a patriarchal society to a stance taken by women in freeing themselves from the shackles of subordination through a resistance offered to the ideologically framed setups.

The writer is well known for her contributions to the Indian Writing in English with the acclaim she has amassed for her innovative works in the field of literature. She was awarded with the commonwealth Writers Prize for her best first novel in 1993, for her work *Thousand Faces of Night* (1992). Her other noticeable works includes novels like *The Ghost of Vasu Master* (1994), *When Dreams Travel* (1999), *In Times of Siege* (2003), *Fugitive Histories* (2009) and *I Have Become The Tide* (2019). Apart from this she has also written and edited short stories for children.

In the present paper we will focus our study on a few selected novels of Hariharan like *When Dreams Travel (WDT)*, *Thousand Faces of Night (TFN)*, *The Ghost of Vasu Master (TGVM)* and *Fugitive Histories (FH)*. We try to look at these works from an insight of feministic perspective and as an example of self-assertion formed through a web of feminine congeniality.

On analyzing Hariharan's novels we infer that her female protagonists are seen as fighters and survivors who dismantle the edifice of power structures that try to suppress them. Here the female characters overtly display a resistance towards the authoritative dominant structures. It is noticeable that these women characters are at their best to fight against repression of any kind when they are provided with a support specially when it comes from someone belonging to their own gender. The intra gender associations adds on to the empathy quotient that is necessary for evaluating the sufferings of other women.

Hariharan's novels that have been taken up for study in this paper are analyzed with an aim to discover associations formed between the women protagonists. Be it the sisterly love between Shahrzad and Dunyazad; a familial bond between Devi and her grand -mother or between Sita and Devi; the friendly affiliation between Mangala and her friend Jameela or an inexpressible relation of sympathy between Mala and Yasmin. All the women characters in these novels are seen as victims of subjugation where each one clings to a mode of survival in their fight against either a coercive, patriarchal or legal repressive institutional setup in the society.

Shahrzad is a victim of the coercive force exerted by king Shahryar; Devi displays a tussle between traditions and modernity which places an individual on the helm of a dilemma; Mangala, Bala and Sita portrays the verdict of patriarchy where female are always considered subordinate to the male members in a society and last but not the least we have Sara who is struck by the waves of intolerance between the two fractions of society i.e. the hindus and the muslims.

All these characters form a resistance to the prevalent repressive institutions and practices. Whenever there is a disparity in the distribution of power in the society it creates another powerful structure as the resistance to the previous power structures which shows the way towards emancipation. This resistance culminates from the death of co-operation among the individuals in a society. Hariharan's characters uphold their stance of resistance in defying established rules and regulations formed by the so called privileged section in the society.

In *WDT* which is a reworking of the *Thousand and One Nights* circumvents the story of the tyrant and authoritative king Shahryar who kills a bride every night as a symbol of women's unfaithfulness. The present novel focuses on Shahrzad, the cunning and quick witted queen who not only saves her life but also the lives of many young girls who could be the victim of the tyranny of the blood thirsty king. Shahrzad's plea to women to be self-empowered exudes the acknowledgement of her own self- powering that has been the outcome of her discursive talents as she states, "I fought for myself, and yes, for you as well" (*WDT*, 276).

The struggle that Shahrzad led had been successful due to her curative power where she blends together fact and fiction. When enquired about the source of her stories where did the stories come from, she states that, "I don't have a sword, so it seems I can not rule, I can not travel, I don't care to weep. But I can dream" (*WDT*, 29).

But the courage Shahrzad amassed came not only from her creative and imaginative mind, but was the inference of the support she received from her sister Dunyazad. Dunyazad who in the original text had been rendered an insignificant position has been given a place of eminence in the revised version. So far Shahrzad was well known for ever entertaining tales with which she had mesmerized the king and saved her own life. In the revised version she is no more just praised for her chastity alone, but is seen as an innovator of marvelous tales that depict her creativity and intellectuality. It is her sister Dunyazad who help her attain the position of a charmer and power holder as she is seen exuding her thoughts to another character called Dilshad, in the novel " You and I have a script of our own – a story or two waiting to be told, our text of gold to be written, every page remembering us to posterity" (*WDT*, 107).

The stance taken by Dunyazad resonates well with the opinion Sharada Iyer exudes in his work “Creation and Fertility – An Act of Incompatibility”, where he talks of confessional writing as a mode of exhibiting one's experiences and desires especially by women who have so far been unheard (68). Similarly Dunyazad and Dilshad emulate Shahrzad in their confessional story telling. In the novel we come across stories that have been told by Dunyazad and Dilshad respectively in a question and answer narrative where the next story provides an answer to the previous one. The attempt made here by both of them is to free the previous narrations of Shahrzad's stories from its misogynist interpretations. The original text has been an outcome of male interpretations that overtly reflect women as subservient to her male counterpart. The set of stories recited by these two narrators are told in the pretext of delivering Shahrzad free from the image of merely an entertainer to enlarge her contribution as an innovator and fighter.

Likewise the grandmother in *TFN* becomes a guiding spirit for Devi in her struggle against the limitations set by the patriarchal society. Devi who has returned from the U.S. in order to marry as per the wishes of her mother Sita finds herself enmeshed by a vicious circle of stereotypical chauvinistic society. Unable to cope with the world around her Devi takes refuge in the mythological stories recited by her grand-mother to her in her childhood, that spoke of daring women characters who fought for their rights and desires as stated by the grandmother who thought, “A woman gets her heart's desire by great cunning” (TFN, 20).

Devi on the other hand becomes a motivation for her mother Sita in breaking free from the shackles of traditionally bound expectancy which restricts every woman from expressing her true self, as is categorical in the stance taken up by Stuart Hall where he talks about the restrictions on an individual which is, “---always lodged and implicated in the practices and structures of everybody else's life” (229) and which can never let the person free.

As is explicit in the view opined by Gulati in his work *Indian women: Myth and Reality*, that how women are straitjacketed to a limited role in the Indian society where their demands for freedom is regarded as unreasonable and harmful to the women herself (83). This makes women look for security, affection and a vent out for repressed emotions in someone who is likeminded. Like Shahrzad and Devi, Mangala who the role of Vasu's wife in *TGVM* look out for a companion in her best friend Jameela instead of her husband. The patriarchal system had placed both Vasu and his wife poles apart where there was no probability of confrontation between them. On the contrary Mangala sought her freedom of being with oneself exclusively in the company of her friend Jameela where, “The two swam and frolicked as if the whole world – cool water, the afternoon stillness, the shared squeals of pleasure – all belonged to them forever” (TGVM, 43).

Similarly the dyad of Sara and Yasmin too astonish us by the amount of psychological rendering both has on each other in the novel *FH*. Sara who had ventured out collecting information for a documentary on the recent carnage that took place in Ayodhya, encounters Yasmin a victim of the riots. Sara is sympathetic for Yasmin after listening about her ordeals as to how her father had lost his only livelihood as well as his son, who went missing from the day the riots took place. While lending a helping hand to Yasmin in forgetting the trauma of the riots, Sara in this process goes through an experience of discovering her own identity. She had always been in a limbo situation in regard to her identity before she met Yasmin, who taught her the true meaning of her father's words when he used to say, “Don't be ashamed of who you are and don't be ashamed of who you're not” (FH, 180).

Bala and Mala both constitute another coordinating pair from the novel *FH*. Mala is the grand-daughter of Bala. Bala is a hysterical person who has been confined to a room because of her unconventional mannerisms. She reminds us of the character Bertha Mason from the novel *Jane Eyre* who like Bala was heightened to a position of a monster which was the reflection of her repressive personality. Bala's erratic behaviour is the outcome of subordination she has undergone ever since she has been married. Her husband bullied her and tried to control her life without allowing any free space for her to express herself which ultimately left her confined to a small room that became for her the entire world.

Bala draws a connection between herself and her grand-daughter Mala. Along with a similarity in their names, Bala searches for an image of her recessive traits in Mala. Mala's elopement with Asad who is a muslim

boy symbolizes for Bala an enactment of freedom from the restrictions that ties one to suppressed feelings. Mala's disobedience is visualized by Bala as a break-through that negates all possibility of subordination.

Thus the analysis of these few selected characters from Hariharan's works makes us dwell deeper into the constitution of interpersonal relationships and their interdependence on each other for their own acquiescence. The study makes it categorical how powerful associations can be especially when they are sought for deliverance from subjugation.

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