Survival Tactic of Woman in Githa Hariharan’s The Thousand Faces of Night and When Dreams Travel

Anju Bala Sharma¹ and Tanu Gupta²

¹ Ph.D Scholar, Dept. of Humanities and Social Sc.
Maharishi Markandeshwar University, Mullana,
Haryana, India.

² Head, Dept. of Humanities and Social Sc.
Maharishi Markandeshwar University, Mullana,
Haryana, India

Abstract: In the Indian context, several feminists have realized that the subject of woman’s emancipation should not be reduced to the contradictions between man and woman. In order to liberate herself, the woman needs to empower herself to confront different institutional structures and cultural practices that subject herself to patriarchal domination and control. This research paper analyses how the Indian English fiction writer, Githa Hariharan uses the genre of fiction as a medium to transmit the culture to learners exhibiting the Indian myths in a detailed manner, proves myth making a survival strategy and shows how woman survive even in the odd situations of her life and examines the survival tactic of women characters.

Key words: Myths, survival tactics, patriarchal society, female-bonding.

Githa Hariharan articulated Indian myths taken from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata and relates them to the women characters of her first novel, The Thousand Faces of Night. The close study of both the novels The Thousand Faces of Night and When Dreams Travel of Githa Hariharan, reveals that struggle for survival or individual identity is the main theme. The story of marital discord and the woman’s survival outside marriage is turned into a remarkable rendering of the collective struggle of woman for self-liberation through the author’s narrative technique of framing texts within the text and her intertextual weaving of Mahabharata and folk stories with the lives of real women. In the Indian traditional family system, these
myths have a unique importance as they are orally and verbally transmitted from one generation to another generation in order to “establish the sanctions for the rules by which people conduct their lives” (Abrams, 2005, p.170).

Devi’s grandmother’s stories which were drawn from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata focused on the woman’s pride, destiny and self-sacrifice. Her stories seek to establish a link with lived experiences; myths for her were possible resolutions of a perplexing reality. She narrates the story of Gandhari who plays a significant part in the Mahabharata. Gandhari was married to a very rich prince, whose Palace was “twice as big twice as magnificent as her parents Palace” (28). Whereas on meeting her husband for first time, she was taken aback for “The White eyes the pupils glazed and useless” (29). In anger Gandhari vowed to never see world; so she bound her eyes with the help of her veil. Summing up the story Devi’s grandmother says, “She embraced her destiny—a blind husband with a self-sacrifice worthy of her royal blood” (29).

It is the way Devi interpreted the story and realized the blindness of her parents. Gandhari’s story is once again reflected in the life of Sita, Devi’s mother. Devi’s mother Sita has to put aside the music, the need of her soul to perform traditional duties of wife, daughter-in-law and mother. By stifling her own wishes she transforms herself into an ideal daughter-in-law. She broke her veena to satisfy her in-laws. But her sacrifice was never the sacrifice of weak. She considers Devi as the symbol of veena. For years thereafter, she remains unhappy; this is confirmed by her extreme silence and the rigidity with which she conducts herself in her real life. Towards the end of the novel, she acknowledges her selfhood and the needs of her ‘self’. Her return to music and the welcome Devi gets are strong indications of her release of her ‘self’ from the clutches of the past.

In the course of revisionist myth making, Devi has learnt survival. From her grandmother’s stories Devi listened to and learned the strategies of woman survival. She rewrites these stories in her own life. Her strategy for survival is different. Devi learns from Amba’s story “A woman fights her battle alone” and applies this strategy for herself. The grandmother narrated the story of Amba who transformed her fate that overtook her into one of triumph by avenging her offender Bheeshma. This story built a brave attitude in Devi. She fed on the stories of mythical figures and becomes a dreamer. Her artistic and creative yearnings are unleashed and nurtured. “She day-dreamed more and more about female avengers” (40). These lessons permanently imprint themselves in her mind. Nourished
by her grandmother’s stories, Devi imagined herself to be a great warrior of enormous physical strength and agility, trained by a mentor to fight against men and who warns Devi that she must be prepared to endure unimaginable pain. In her fantasy, she becomes a woman warrior, a heroine. She confesses, “I lived a secret life of my own; I became a woman warrior, a heroine, I was Devi. I rode a tiger and cut of the evil magical demons heads” (41) for the emancipation of the world.

It is significant to note that the grandmother chooses to recount the stories of women who are not stereotypical females, submissive, self-sacrificing and subdued. Her women are self-directed heroines, who have shown their courage in countering the hegemonic discourse – Gandhari blindfold herself as a mark of protest, Mansa has the power to retrieve her husband from the snake skin, Amba avenges herself on her offenders, and Damayanti has the courage to choose her husband openly. Re-living the stories in retrospection, she understands the implications for her situation and becomes self-directed. Survival is the highest ideal to every woman in her struggle ridden life. These three women — Sita, Devi, and Mayamma find a way to come to terms with their life. Mayamma has learnt how to wait, when to bend her back and when to wipe her rebellious eyes dry. She blesses Devi when leaves the house, saying “seek the river, miles away, where the dim forest gives way to a clear transparent flood of light” (126). Her choice is to be fixed in her women’s role, but through Devi she can too see a different life. Both Devi and Sita realize “whatever is dependent on others is misery; whatever rests on oneself is happiness” (68).

All such stories of mythological women become Devi’s cultural and psychological survival kit. Therefore, the underlining theme in Githa Hariharan’s novels is human relationship, especially the one that exists between husband and wife and also between mother and daughter. In all these relationships the woman occupies the central stage and significantly the narration shifts through her feminist consciousness. Her novels reflect the lives of suffocated woman in search of refuge from suffering.

Another strength giving aspect through which woman counters patriarchy and tries to create a world of her own is female bonding. An important expansion of nurturing and care giving is the woman-woman dyad, also called female bonding, which helps in female identity formation. It plays a significant role in identity formation as well as in sustaining women in the patriarchal set up. In a society where the male and the female worlds are strictly compartmentalized, women find their space in the ‘inner courtyard’, where the feminine environment is supreme. The concept of
female friendship, especially the mother-daughter relationship, is the central concern of the recent feminists’ psychological studies. These relationships aid the development of the female personality. The girls, being of the same gender as the mother, do not completely separate from their mothers. The mothers also tend to experience their daughters as more like and continuous with themselves. Thus, the formation of identity blends with attachment felt for their mothers. Hence, the mother-daughter and woman-woman bonding becomes a growth-fostering medium with empathy as an important nutrient.

The study of The Thousand Faces of Night shows how woman opposes patriarchal hegemony by developing female bonding. Female friendship between Devi and Mayamma is prominent and strength-giving. Devi is concerned for Mayamma when she is sick, but Mahesh’s unconcerned remark is: “So leave her alone . . . if you fuss over her today, she’ll do it more and more often” (53). In Mayamma’s suffering Devi feels one with her when she ruminates about her life in retrospect whereas Mahesh does not ‘take it all too seriously’ (82). Similarly, Devi’s loneliness and her problem with Mahesh do not escape Mayamma’s notice. Devi empathizes with Mayamma’s life-stories. The two women, so apart in age and social standing, build a strong interactive bond between themselves.

Women tend to be empathetically and sympathetically related towards other women.

In the patriarchal community, woman forms her own community to stand against the patriarchal forces. It is clear that woman exhibits empathic ties, a kind of cooperative devotion with the other woman and helps her through her crisis in life. This kind of helpful relationship and sympathy can be attributed to their fellow-feeling, undergoing similar experiences as members of the same community. In The Thousand Faces of Night, Parvatiamma shelters Mayamma, who is thankful to her for her charity, “I came to her with only a torn sari over my weeping flesh. She gave me this home. She gave us all a home” (63). Similarly Devi’s widowed grandmother ‘collected in her old age more and more wounded refugees in her house, stray objects of charity’ (39). Devi’s cousin, Uma, molested by her father-in-law and ill-treated by her husband, seeks shelter with her. The grandmother empathizes with the domestic problems of Gauri, the maidservant, as if they were her own. Distant relatives, having been “orphanned or deserted by philandering husbands, found in her house a warm refuge. They came and went and my grandmother never let them go empty-handed . . . with advice culled from the epics” (26-27).
Together with her disappointment, Devi realized that all through her life, she was running away from her trials — America, the house of Jarcand Road, Mahesh and Gopal. She had been living as a weak willed woman and she had allowed others to treat her as a puppet and they pulled her string. Devi realizes that she has made very few choices in her life. Devi knew that this time was right to make choices in her life to write off the male scripts. She has to find her authentic self now. She knew if she did not act now, she would be forever condemned “to drift between worlds . . . a floating island detached from the solidity of mainland” (138). She wants to come back to her mother from whom earlier she tried to escape through her flight of the imagination and through her identification with the male world.

Suitcase in hand, Devi opened the gate and looked wonderingly at the garden, wild and over-grown, but lush in spite of its sand-choked roots. Then she quickened her footsteps as she heard the faint sounds of a Veena, hesitate and child like, inviting her into the house. (139)

Although Devi returns to offer her love, Sita is also reborn through her daughter’s adventures in life. She retrieves her lost self by returning to her music and to her Veena. Sita has been the ideal wife, daughter-in-law and mother. When her ideal becomes ineffective and void, she is ready for self-examination. “She sat before the relic from her past, the broken Veena, freshly dusted, and waited for Devi to come back to her” (109). The inviting call of Veena to Devi suggests a restoration of new positive relationship with mother and herself. Both Devi and Sita have liberated themselves from the pressures of feminine role-play to attain a free creative individuality. Sita and Devi share one thing in common. Both are strong willed. But as a critic asserts, in one case, ‘this becomes a strength to live by, in the other, it becomes a venom to poison the life force’ (Khan 139). Devi empathizes with her mother for her strong resistance to patriarchy when she broke her Veena to satisfy her in-laws. But her sacrifice was never the sacrifice of the weak. It had the force of a rebellion. However, in the bargain, what she lost was her own comfort, privacy and needs.

Hence, The Thousand Faces of Night is not only about the confrontation of tradition and modernity, the conflict between the ‘old’ stories and ‘new’ ones that need to be articulated; it is also about the search for identity that Devi embarks upon with a corresponding change in her mother’s attitude that hints at an affirmative relationship being established between mother and daughter, where story telling emerges to be a significant trope.
In the novel *When Dreams Travel*, Hariharan’s Shahrzad is a magnificent fighter, who knows, she holds the destiny of many other women in her tongue. Her daring has a measure of pleasure, of love for risk taking that goes beyond the self-sacrificial spirit of the martyr. Shahrzad cares for the city, for the common people’s lives, the ones she is trying to save from the tyrannical sultan. In this retelling of *The Thousand and One Nights* by the Indian novelist Githa Hariharan, the main protagonist is Scheherazade — here renamed Shahrzad who each night extend her execution through the power of her stories. Her fantastical tales are told as part of a power game with her husband, the Sultan Shahryar, a battle in which she is joined by her sister Dunyazad, Hariharan’s novel subverts the escapism of her sources by reminding us of the political context whilst also presenting us with a range of stories that are dark, poetic and witty. Twisting the fine fabric of myth and legend, knotting into it her own concerns about women’s dreams, desires, their gift of golden speech, their courage, is the story of two sisters, Shahrzad and Dunyazad. Past and present, reality and fantasy, are blurred with richly evocative prose and a large dose of “magic realism”. The silent and absent women in the original story of *The Thousand and One Nights* come to the surface here. Shahrzad’s sister Dunyazad, their mother, the mother of Shahryar, the slave girls and maids in the palace and Shahrzad herself who were silenced after one thousand and one nights, speak in Githa Hariharan’s *When Dreams Travel* and tell their story.

“The original stories, supposedly told by her do not carry feminine features” (Mittapalli, 2001, p.187). These stories often smack of obscene or rude male sexism, which is understandable as “they were actually told written by male orators in an orthodox cultural context which necessarily confined the woman indoor” (Mittapalli, 2001, p.187). Hariharan projects Shahrzad’s act in an altogether different light. She sees her creativity, as her only happiness and power. The powerless, she observes, “have a dream or two, dreams that break walls, dreams that go through walls as if they were powerless” (25). The author aptly brings out woman’s power that she finds lying concealed between the lines of the source text, that “He (the Sultan) has been brought to senses by a woman . . . with her stories” (21). At the same time Hariharan also successfully notes that Shahrzad’s creative power of storytelling goes unacknowledged. For example, when Shahrzad (supposedly) dies, Shahryar praises her only for her chastity, that is to say, patriarchal value imposed exclusively on woman and not for her creative talent. The voiceless woman’s voice is going to carve a place, and enjoy
the glorious place in the history of creative writing permanently as Dilshad says to Dunyazad: “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” (107).

Then, over seven days and seven nights, Dunyazad and Dilshad play a grown up version of a dangerous but exiting game, *The Martyr’s Walk*. If you were talking or writing about your life, what would you say? Dunyazad, Dilshad and Satyasama take turn playing the woman who saves herself and others through her fiction. Dunyazad’s tales develop the novel’s frame characters, but only as confined to life in the palace and its surroundings, whereas Dilshad’s stories venture out into the city and its crowded markets, the countryside, and the forest. Both sets of tales, though, gradually take the reader to a more recognizably Indian culture context. Dunyazad and Dilshad travel, re-inventing their lives and bodies and in this process, mirroring and distorting the reality created by Shahrzad, so that the past and future are reconstructed by strong determination of wishes, dreams and memories of these dreams.

In the first section of the novel, we realize that Shahrzad is no longer an archetypal victim fighting for her survival but a bold woman stimulated by the danger implicit in the situation. She shifts from the position of a victim to that of puppeteer, the master-narrator who carefully plays and controls this scene. Against the passive listeners, king Shahryar and Shahzaman, she is one who is “gifted with movement . . . talking for her life” (Hariharan, 1999, p.5).

Hariharan’s narrative “off stage”, starts by questioning the meaning of “travelling” and “dreaming”, two words in the title *When Dreams Travel*. Shahryar wants to know where Shahrzad got the inspiration for all her amazing tales. This is her answer:

I don’t have a sword, so it seems I cannot rule, I cannot travel, I don’t care to weep. But I can dream. (...) My dreams? . . . Only those whose necks are naked and at risk can understand them. (20)

Shahrzad refrains from giving the sultan a straight forward answer because as she says bluntly, only those at risk should be entitled to understand the dreams that make up for the absence of a sword (a clear symbol, associated with power as violence). Then ‘to dream’ in this novel, is a form of wisdom passed on between women. Although not allowed to travel physically, women always took to travel through imagination and in fact, a manual for survival. Shahrzad’s story itself shows that dreams and imagination can make women survive.
Hariharan is quite clear about Shahrzad’s love for risk. In the first tale told by Dunyazad, the reader is brought inside the harem, to meet Shahrzad, swollen by pregnancy, trying to prepare her performance of that evening. Meanwhile her body starts the process of giving birth to the baby inside her. Shahrzad is scared and impatient. Dunyazad, in solidarity, concern for the city women but Shahrzad will not allow that. Dunyazad then propose to kill the sultan. Since she has given birth to the male heir, they have what they need to keep order in the palace and the city. They can dispose of Shahryar. Shahrzad will not accept this alternative either. Shahrzad’s love for danger makes of her a perfect figuration for liberated patterns of feminine identity because she represents, together with her self-assertive wit and saviour behaviour. It is like locking a good jinni in a household bottle. Githa Hariharan shows the kind, helping and sympathetic nature of woman and how she uses her extraordinary power for the survival of others.

Through her female characters in both the novels she tries to show how woman survives in male dominated society. Woman faces all the problems in her life and even survives with her inner strength and female bonding.

References:


