

Aesthetics Survival and Morality in Githa Hariharan's Novel *When Dreams Travel*

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Abstract

In her book *When Dreams Travel*, Githa Hariharan, the 1993 Commonwealth Writers Prize winner for Fiction, examines important narratively-related topics. The narrator skillfully combines Scheherazade, also known as Shahrzad of the *Arabian Nights*, into a lively and creative tale about a game that is always played: the pursuit of power and love. Two ambitious brides, sisters Shahrzad and Dunyazad, who aspire to be heroines or martyrs, live between the Sultan, who desires a virgin every night, and his brother, who has tasted the bitter taste of betrayed love. The story, which unfolds with all the grandeur of a contemporary myth, examines a number of topics, including the crises inherent in the act of narratives itself and the fallibility of narrative. It discusses ethical issues and the role that aesthetics plays in ethics. All of the aforementioned topics will be covered in my paper as I attempt to investigate the boundaries of meaning in extreme acts of narrative, like Shahrzad's instance, and how these affect ethical and aesthetic concerns in tales.

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Githa Hariharan's first novel, *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1992), won her the Commonwealth Writers Prize in 1993. Since then, she has published a collection of stories, *The Art of Dying* (1993); three novels, *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* (1994), *When Dreams Travel* (1999), and *In Times of Siege* (2003); and a collection of stories for children, *The Winning Team* (2004). Her strongest stance on 'gender politics' and the 'abuse of power,' two topics that are always pertinent to people, appears to be found in *When Dreams Travel*. 'Literary texts, traditionally viewed as repositories of moral and aesthetic insight or challenge, tend now to be seen as predominantly ideological constructions, or sites of power struggles between social forces of various kinds,' note Coady and Miller in 'Literature, Power, and the Recovery of Philosophical Ethics' (Coady and Miller 201). Through its first French translation by Antoine Galland, Hariharan's reworking of the well-known *One Thousand and One Nights* or *The Arabian Nights Entertainment*, as it became known and celebrated in the West, *When Dreams Travel* dismantles and, in the process, reexamines some deeply ingrained misogynist ideologies in beloved patriarchal texts.

This doesn't seem like a novel that deals with social concerns at first glance. It is a fantasy story that revels in genius and magic, palaces and dungeons, and appears to be more attuned to the bizarre, the gothic, and the realm of fairy tales than it is to reality. Hariharan's adaptation is similar to the original *Arabian Nights* or *Thousand and One Nights* in this regard since, as Arab historian Mottahedeh notes in the original collection, "*ajā'ib*" (loosely: marvels, wonders, and astonishing things) and 'the emotion of astonishment... those objects or events that inspire this astonishment' (29) is essential to both Hariharan's book and the *Thousand and One Nights*. Importantly, even though Samarkand is mentioned in this recast text; the place is left blank, indicating that sexist patterns are not localized. Anywhere in the East could have been the setting for the story. Given that the canonical version admits that the oral traditions, which have been passed down for centuries, included tales from at least three distinct Eastern cultures - Persia, India, and Arabia - and that the original frame story itself alludes to China, this is understandable in one way.

In tide of yore and in time long gone before, there was a King of the Kings of the Banu Sāsān in the Islands of India and China, a Lord of armies and guards and servants and dependents.... (Richard Burton, *The Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night*) South Asia, the Middle East, and the Far East are all mentioned in this frame story. The city in the book 'in the clutches of a dream,' we are told, could be 'Samarkand, Basra, Isfahan... Alexandria, Ctesiphon, Baghdad. It is difficult to pin a single name on to it, locate this mirage city on a coded map' (Hariharan 29), the narrator makes a categorical assertion. The nature of myths and fairy tales is also non-specific with regard to chronology. Although it supposedly gives the book a phony fairy tale feels, its timeless quality also quietly upholds the persistent power structures of prevailing patriarchal ideology. According to this deceptively innocent presentation, the story's aesthetics appear to center on satire and symbolism rather than Rather than using realistic depictions, the story's aesthetics appear to center on parody and symbolism. Despite ethical issues, none of these variables appear to indicate a new bent on realist depictions. However, beneath its appealing timeless appeal and deceiving simplicity, the book tackles topics that have always held great importance in the so-called, 'real world,' for, central to Hariharan's project, seems to be what Adrienne Rich describes as the act of 'Re-vision - the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction...' (35).

The first question that needs to be addressed is why a recasting of *The Thousand and One Nights* is necessary. This question leads us to one of the novel's main ethical concerns, which is to center those who have been marginalized in various ways by both enduring patriarchal power structures and former colonial ones. Let's start by dissecting the politics behind the text selection itself. One example of a text that traveled from East to West and was included in the canon of world literature is *The Thousand and One Nights*. It also subtly introduced and imprinted its aesthetic and ideological patterns on a number of European and Western literary genres, ranging from fantasy to fairytales. In contrast to the importation of only raw materials from Asia and Africa, this reality itself defies colonial mythology that claimed that knowledge flow was constantly directed eastward. The selection of the book thus turns into a polemical and moral act in and of itself - an act of retrieval and re-possession. However, the act of reclamation is not simple. Conversely, When *Dreams Travel*'s narrative structure and artistic inclination seem to highlight the difficulties associated with this act of re-possession.

There are two sections to *When Dreams Travel*. The first part, 'Travellers,' is a reworking of *The Thousand and One Nights*' original frame story, the premise of which is introduced in the first section, 'In the Embrace of Darkness.' The goal of the first of the next two sections, which retells the story of Shahryar and Shahrazad, appears to be to highlight and discuss the ideological patterns in both the original and the recast frame-narrative that were introduced in the opening section. The second part, 'Virgins, Martyrs and Others,' begins with a brief introduction with the subheading 'A Dream, A Mirror.' Seven pairs of short stories are then told, one by Dilshad, Dunyazad's boyfriend, and the other by Dunyazad, Shahrazad's sister. As a result, unlike the original, Hariharan moves the ancillary storylines to part two of the text rather than including them within the main narrative. One of the primary structural distinctions between Hariharan's work and the original anthology is this.

The reorganization indicates that the story's main theme has changed considerably. It is now a story with the moral resolve to focus on women's issues and to expose the sexist and classist tendencies that taint the original story, rather than an Arabian entertainment. As a result, there is no longer any indication of the secondary narratives, which in the original were the stories Shahrazad told the Sultan. Rather, part two introduces us to brand-new stories with feminist and moral themes that contrast greatly from those in the original Arab anthology that was translated.

The relationship between sexuality and power lies at the heart of the ethical discussion that the book sets up. The work repeatedly emphasizes the connection between male sexuality and violence. Four characters - two men and two women are introduced throughout the narrative. Each of the two males, brothers Shahryar and Shahzaman, is depicted brandishing a sword: the former a 'mere ornament... a grand showy thing of gem-encrusted gold' while the latter holds another 'plaything in his hand, an ancient, blood-dripping sword' (Hariharan 5). This scene, which is described in the text as 'self-absorbed,' is presented as a primal scene - an archetype of sorts rendered 'shamelessly immortal' (Hariharan 5) It is implied not only in art but also in everyday life. It is implied that violence and masculinity have become inextricably linked in our society. The violence that is lurking in the background is highlighted in the first section. We're informed that, "It is she [Shahrazad] who holds the scene together. If she stops, if she collapses, if she loses Shahryar's interest or attention, the roof could cave in, and with it, all hope of the city's deliverance, or its sultan's redemption." (Hariharan 7) In keeping with the professed feminist ethical principle, which, as Alison Jaggar claims, is dedicated to eradicating women's subordination, we see in this first section that Shahrazad is no longer the stereotypical victim struggling for her life but rather a fearless woman inspired by the situation's implied danger. She transitions from the role of a victim to that of the puppeteer, the master-narrator who meticulously plays and manipulates this drama, thanks to little but impactful alterations in her character development. She is the one who is speaking out against King Shahrazar and Shahzaman, the passive listeners. '*gifted with Movement... talking for her life*' (Hariharan 5; emphasis added). Instead of being scared by the violence all around her, this Shahrazad enjoys the risk and turns into the quintessential feminist heroine. "We are informed: She throws back her neck, holds her goblet high and drinks deeply, eyes shut. What she does not swallow she holds for a moment or two, rolling the liquid in her mouth as if she is tasting it for the last time. Then she wets her lips with her tongue and begins again." (Hariharan 6)

The narrative is also committed to raising 'questions about power' (Tong 160). The royal couples are seated comfortably in a shaded bower of the royal gardens on the day after the thousand and one nights, which marks the start of the second frame narrative part, 'On the Way to Paradise.' We understand that Shahryar has spent a thousand and one nights entertaining the king with her stories and now needs to get used to her routine. After being sufficiently amused by the stories, the inquisitive monarch now asks about his beloved wife, who has managed to avoid the sword thanks to her cunning, 'Shahrazad... where did all those stories come from?' (Hariharan 9). Shahrazad's answer is succinct, extremely unromantic, and not intended to please: 'From my dreams; only those whose necks are naked and at risk can understand them' (Hariharan 9). As is true of most patriarchal writings that are intended to hide the fault lines between the weak and the strong, her response highlights the power structure in the original hypotext. Hariharan's recast text highlights the fact that fault lines are frequently obvious across the gender barrier, in contrast to the original *Arabian Nights*, which focused on Shahrazad's wit and the entertainment value of the stories she told. As a result, *When Dreams Travel* opens with us in the midst of a misogynistic universe. However, there is a change in the text that reverses this pattern. The narrative shifts

to a woman-centered focus following the frame story, which quickly explains the Arab girl narrator's position as the possible victim of a power-crazed, woman-hating Sultan. Part two replaces Shahrazad's victimhood with a version in which two women, Dilshad, a slave girl in Shahryar's palace, and Dunyazad, Shahrazad's sister, are lesbian lovers who spend seven days and seven nights telling each other stories, one story responding to the other. Here, Dunyazad, who was merely a supporting, marginalized character in *The Thousand and One Nights*, takes center stage. An ugly slave girl named Dilshad is a completely new character who would not have appeared in this patriarchal work that is rife with gender and class politics. The queen, Shahrzad, is also no longer a scared young woman battling for her life. She is now recognized as the city's savior; she is the martyr who put her life in danger to rescue the lives of other women and is given the respect she deserves. Dunyazad and Dilshad imitate Shahryar's storytelling in the second portion, demonstrating her status as a feminist role model deserving of imitation.

At least one of the seven story pairs that the two women recount in part two merits a quick analysis. Notably, Hariharan writes entirely new narratives in part two that have nothing to do with the original book, in contrast to the first portion, which is a retelling of the original frame plot of the *Thousand and One Nights* with notable modifications. I want to introduce some of the terms Gerard Genette uses in *Palimpsests* before delving into the ethics and aesthetics of these two short stories. Genette refers to all kinds of relationships and echoes between texts with the term 'transtextuality,' and the actual presence of a text in another, such as through a quote or allusion, with the term 'intersexuality.' Genette also uses the term 'hypertextuality' to describe the relationship between a particular text (the 'hypertext') and a prior text (the 'hypotext'), the latter grafted on to the former, as Hariharan's text is obviously to *The Thousand and One Nights*. It is noteworthy that the two stories that take place in the second section, which I will now analyze, have all of these textualities. Dilshad's narrative is named 'Rupavati's Breasts,' while Dunyazad's version is titled 'Three Scenes and a Father.'

In the former account, Dunyazad's father is the protagonist. He undergoes three 'adventures' in this episode, all three serve as allegories that expose the decadent and abusive state of patriarchy under the cruel reign of King Shahryar with his unshakeable thirst for virgins and the moral dilemma this causes to 'the high principled wazir,' as the father of two daughters himself, and one for whom we are told 'virginity holds the city's real treasury in its tight grip' (Hariharan 168). In the first episode, the Wazir finds himself in the middle of an arid, endless desert and in the extremity of exhaustion spies 'a gleaming, opal-hued pool' (169) in the distance. As he proceeds towards it, he is stopped by a heavy hand that holds him back and a clear voice, which he recognizes as either his father's or his teacher's, rings out with authority: 'No, you haven't finished.... Did you think that was all? A whiff of morality, a pinch of justice, and the task is done? Is salvation to be bought so cheaply?' (170) the voice, which could be constructed as the conscientious aspect of patriarchy, instructs him, 'The journey, dear wazir, begins here. Be patient; you will have your fill of the pool' (170) But when the Wazir reaches the pool it turns out to be a hellish oasis filled with the dismembered limbs and body parts of the virgins executed night after night by the king. The last dismembered limb that slides up to him he recognises to be 'the capable hand of his first-born' (171).

In the second episode, the Sultan's messenger confronts the Wazir as they rush home. 'Is there a virgin in this house?' he asks with a hopeless shudder, anticipating the eunuch's next remarks. The Wazir buries his oldest daughter in a hole he digs in his garden after the Eunuch has hurried off when the call for prayer interrupts them. After prayer, the Eunuch comes back and asks the house 'Do you house a virgin?' (171). The talking house responds in the negative. Following the Eunuch's departure, the Wazir excavates the earth and finds a fat goat in lieu of his daughter, implying that all women in a chauvinistic, male-centered society will suffer the same fate. This concludes the second episode.

The Wazir returns to the desert in the third episode, carrying the goat on his arm as he rushes to feed his ravenous God. 'The Lord, a gigantic man with wild unwashed hair and red eyes,' strangely reminiscent of Lord Shiva, one of the Hindu trinity of Gods, notifies him peremptorily, 'Remember, only something you love will fill my stomach with your devotion' (175). Once more, the lines are echoes of a well-known Tamil myth known as Saiva Siddhanthi. In the story, Lord Shiva challenges his devoted follower's faith by taking the appearance of a deranged Shaivait heretic and requesting that he slaughter the world's most beloved creature in order to feed him. The devotee kills and cooks his own son despite having sworn that he would never send a Shaivait unfed from his house. After that, the heretic invites his son to join them for dinner. When the grieving devotee pretends to reach out to his young, deceased son, the boy suddenly materializes in front of them! Lord Shiva presents himself to the formerly desolate, now amazed man and praises his dedication in a tale very evocative of the Old Testament parable of Abraham and Isaac. The status of canonical texts, whether literary or religious, that are regarded as stores of moral and ethical wisdom under patriarchy is replaced in this myth by Wazir and Shahrzad, revealing them as ideological constructs that uphold and impose authoritarian, chauvinistic power structures. The story of a Hindu devotee and his son first reveals how common patriarchal conceptions of God as an authoritative figure are; second, it questions the This claim is interestingly addressed in Dilshad's story, which recounts the well-known story of Lord Buddha's prior incarnation in which he was born as a woman named Rupavati in a variety of erratic ways. In Dilshad's tale, an elderly woman and her spouse recount Rupavati's tale to Satyasama, a nomadic female storyteller. It goes without saying that the woman's angry husband rejects her account as 'lies' and presents his own version instead. When Satyasama tries to alter the elderly man's story in a similar way, the irate pair throws her out of their home,

demonstrating how thoroughly her husband's will supersede her own. In order to create the final canonized version that is appropriate for the prevailing patriarchal structure and is subsequently accepted as the authentic version by succeeding generations of readers, it is possible that earlier female versions of any story were left out, shortened, and distorted by misogynistic interference. In the end, Hariharan appears to be telling us that language is connected to power and that all reality is filtered through it by fusing myth and parody, past and current.

If gender can be defined as a classification within a social system that normalizes the unequal distribution of power between men and women, then feminist ethics can be defined as the practice of attempting to understand, criticize, and correct this, as Hilde Lindemann notes in her text, *An Invitation to Feminist Ethics*. Then, it is viewed as a moral deed that makes us consider how gender functions within our moral convictions and behaviors. Githa Hariharan highlights the significance of projects that 'reworld' patriarchal ideologies by rewriting them from a feminist perspective. By doing so, she aims to accomplish all of these goals to varied degrees in her book, which leads to the identification of the underlying patriarchal agenda by exposing its faulty ideological foundation.

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