



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2636 (Print):2321-3108 (online)

IDENTITY CRISIS AND RE-VISIONING OF MYTH IN THE NOVELS OF GITHA HARIHARAN: A CRITICAL OVERVIEW

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DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.12.1.142](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.12.1.142)



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Article info

Article Received:30/01/2024

Article Accepted: 24/02/2024

Published online:01/03/2024

Abstract

The age of Githa Hariharan is undisputedly the most complex phase of the cultural history of India. There were quick transitions, and subtle and unpredictable changes that redefined the identity of individual in general and of a woman in particular. As Githa Hariharan herself asserts, "all my novels and stories look at power politics in some way or the other. Fiction has a thousand ways of giving us a new take on the dynamics of power relations". The main objective of this paper is to foreground Hariharan's individual contribution to Indian English fiction by discussing her handling and sensitising the theme of identity crisis in relation to the dynamics of power manifesting itself in various forms such as patriarchy, misogyny, historical revisionism, censorship and religious fundamentalism. Her first three novels - *The Thousand Faces of Night*, *The Ghosts of Vasu Master*, and *When Dreams Travel* which may be treated as a trilogy, feature ancient mythical characters. Her latest book, *Fugitive Histories* exposes the legacy of prejudice that, sometimes insidiously, sometimes perceptibly, continues to affect disparate lives in present-day India. In fact, among the new generation of Indian novelists a name to reckon with would be Githa Hariharan, the Commonwealth Writers' Prize winner.

The paper intends to embark on the two most dominant aspects of Githa Hariharan's fictional art: treatment of identity crisis, and re-interpretation of Indian myths and legends.

Key-words: feminism, fictional art, identity crisis, legends, myths, narrative, novels, post-colonial, re-visioning, re-defining, quest

Githa Hariharan was born in Coimbatore, India, and she grew up in Bombay and Manila. She was educated in these two cities and later in the United States. She worked as a staff writer in WNET-Channel 13 in New York, and from 1979 to 1984, She worked as an editor in the Mumbai,

Chennai and New Delhi offices of Orient Longman. Since 1985, she has undertaken professional editing on a freelance basis. She is also a social activist known for her refreshing care and concern for women.

Githa Hariharan's Works

The works of Githa Hariharan include novels, short stories articles and columns and also the essays of different topics that garner her deep interests. She published her first novel, *The Thousand Faces of Night* in 1992 and was awarded Commonwealth Writer's Prize in 1993. This novel was followed by *The Ghost of Vasu Master* (1994). Her third novel, *When Dreams Travel* appeared in 1999 and it was quickly followed by *In Times of Siege* (2003). Her latest publication is *Fugitive Histories* which appeared in 2009. In addition to novels, Githa Hariharan has also authored a collection of short stories namely *The Art of Dying* (1993), and a book of short stories for children, titled *The Winning Team* which came out in 2004. *A Southern Harvest* (1993) is a brilliant collection of short stories from South India translated by her into English and *Sorry Best Friend!* (2004) is a collection of short stories with a variety of presentations for children co-edited by her.

Awards and Nominations

The Thousand Faces of Night won the 1993 Commonwealth Writers' Prize for best first book. The book was also nominated for the IMPAC award in 1996. The story *The Warden* from *The Art of Dying* was nominated for the Pushcart Prize in 1995. The Ghosts of Vasu Master was nominated for the Commonwealth Writers Prize in 1995. *When Dreams Travel* was nominated for the Booker Prize in 1999. *In Times of Siege* was short listed for the Eurasian section of the Commonwealth Writers' Prize 2004, and it was also nominated for the Kiriya Prize in 2004.

Introduction

According to *The Atlantic Companion to Literature*, "Githa Hariharan's works belong to the renaissance of Indo-English literature which began in the early 1980s when Salman Rushdie's novel *Midnight's Children* appeared." [1] The age of Githa Hariharan is undisputedly the most complex phase of the cultural history of India. There were quick transitions and unpredictable changes that redefined the identity of individual in general and of a woman in particular. The advent of the television

and the consequent expansion of the news channels plus entertainment channels are the most outstanding phenomena that sped up the transitions. No transitional phase in the cultural history of India has been as forcefully accelerated as this. The spread of education is also a triggering factor of pivotal significance which took place during the last two decades. The education was not confined to make people literate but it had new functions to perform. The spread of technical education and management studies shaped the reshaped mind of common Indians with handsome participation of women in redefining and reshaping the cultural history of India. The spread of communication with easy access to information through cellular phones and internet are some other prominent features contributing to the new cultural identity of India. The simultaneous advent of so many decisive factors stirred the social configuration of country with a number of new possibilities and probabilities rising up to meet the new challenges. It is, however, interesting to know that the changes that took place confronted the traditional values system that ruled over the Indian society with despotic authority. The concept of generation gap acquired new impetus and became more decisive in comparison to previous years. The birth of a new order and new system became obligatory. The advent of the multi-national companies is another very prominent feature responsible for the new shape of the society. Education too had a new form and a new enlightening function by acquiring international implications Employment was also redefined. The limitations of times and spaces were reduced to inexistence and movements of the young aspirants became more free. The induction of new technology in the fields of computers paved way for the escape of Indian minds and women too became integral parts of this new wave. Thus it becomes clear that the society was changed fast as per trends and needs, and the women were no exception to it. The birth of a new woman in the old society practicing quaint orders and methods was the common phenomenon witnessed in all corners of the vast social set up.

Review and Discussion of Literature

Githa Hariharan has, over the years, come to inhabit a very distinct space in Indian Writing in English: that of a sensitive and creative writer responding to political events, which she makes no attempt to allegorise. Rather they are present in all their starkness, irony and tragedy. Beginning with *The Thousand Faces of Night* and working her way through *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* and *When Dreams Travel*, Hariharan finally seems to have ventured into the exact tone and language that she is quite at home in. The somewhat oblique irony and humour of the tale told in *In Times of Siege* transforms itself into the spartan, elegant and nuanced prose of her latest work *Fugitive Histories*. At times lyrical, at times luminous and sharply perceptive, *Fugitive Histories* is perhaps Hariharan's most mature work to date. Her novels have always invited rave reviews and vigorous debate in national and international magazines, and her popularity can easily be gauged from the fact that she has been translated into a number of languages including French, Italian, Spanish, German, Dutch, Greek, Urdu and Vietnamese. Her essays and fiction have also found place in anthologies such as Salman Rushdie's *Mirrorwork: 50 years of Indian Writing 1947-1997*. She has been the subject of a number of research projects, and numerous articles/papers focusing on different pertinent aspects.

Statement of the Research Problem

The crisis of identity has always enjoyed a defining significance in the thematic framework of the Indian English novels. The novels of R. K. Narayan, Mulkraj Anand, and Raja Rao redesigned the techno-thematic fabric of Indian English fiction and laid the foundation of the new Indian English fiction. The post-colonial age represented by these three novelists was chiefly a quest for identity along different dimension of socio-political and economic order of India. The novels of Mulkraj Anand explored the thick congested fabric of Indian life and structured his fiction with unquestionable authority. The crisis of identity plays vital role in the cast of the narrative of Anand. His novels like *The Untouchables* and *The Coolie* elucidate the hidden dimensions of human psyche along socio-economic and cultural

dimensions. As delineator of Indian social life, Anand's sympathies are with the masses. In fact he is the leader of down-trodden. [2] On the other hand, the novels of Anita Desai mark a parallel stream in the history of Indian English fiction. It is however undeniable that her novels have been knit around the complex idea of identity crisis with a female character at the centre of piercing focus. Anita Desai added impetus to the feminist wave that came into critical notice since the advent of Nayantara Sehgal in the horizon of Indian English writings. She investigated a world subsisting within the world and located the fragmentation of the protagonists' identity.

Githa Hariharan is one of the most prolific woman writers of India. She made her presence felt as a sensitive fiction writer in Indian English with her Commonwealth Writers' Prize winning debut novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* in the early nineties, has now established herself as a strong individual voice and proved herself to be one of the most outstanding women writers of the present times. She has been consistently writing ever since the arrival of her first novel in 1992 to be followed by *The Ghost of Vasu Master* (1994), *When Dreams Travel* (1999), *In Times of Siege* (2003), and *Fugitive Histories* (2009). Besides these novels, she has also to her credit a collection of highly acclaimed short stories *The Art of Dying* (1993) and a book of short stories for children *The Winning Team* (2004). She has also edited a volume of stories in English translation from four major South Indian languages, *A Southern Harvest* (1993), and co-edited a collection of stories for children, *Sorry, Best Friend!* (1997).

Like most other Indian English writers, Githa Hariharan has also been preoccupied in her fictional writing with the theme of identity crisis, especially in its feminine context. The crisis of identity has always enjoyed a defining significance in the thematic framework of the Indian English novel. The Big Three - R.K. Narayan, Mulkraj Anand and Raja Rao - tried to explore it in terms of the socio-cultural, political and economic realities of the post-colonial India. They re-designed the techno-thematic fabric of Indian English fiction and laid the foundation of the new Indian English fiction. The

post-colonial age represented by these three novelists was chiefly a quest for identity along different dimension of socio-political and economic order of India.

It is to be mentioned here that with the potential entry of such powerful women novelists as Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Desai, Sashi Deshpande, Manju Kapur, Anita Nair and others, a definite feminist touch was given to the theme (of identity crisis) in its exploration of a world within the world to locate the fragmentation of the protagonist's identity. There is yet another dimension to the treatment of the theme of identity crisis, especially in the novels of Amitav Ghosh who view it in terms of a collision between the individual and the history.

Writing in the nineties, Githa Hariharan definitely benefited from being an integral part of the larger tradition of Indian Writing in English on the one hand, and an important cord in the tradition of Indian feminist writing on the other. What distinguishes her from other contemporary writers in Indian English is the use of myths and legends as part of her narrative strategy. It is, in fact, through subtle allusions to myths and legends that the narrative acquires the desired intensity to mirror the agony of identity crisis.

The paper intends to focus on the two most dominant aspects of Githa Hariharan's fictional art: treatment of identity crisis, and re-interpretation of Indian myths and legends.

Revisioning of Myths and Contributions of Githa Hariharan

Indian English fiction has been a powerful tool to universalize our ethnic culture through an interpretation of myths found in abundance in our scriptural texts. The women writers, while portraying different facets of women and dealing with their problems in love, sex and marriage, have taken recourse to Indian mythology relating it to the predicament of their women characters.

Mythology is, in fact, a system of hereditary stories of ancient origin which were once believed to be true by a particular cultural group, and which served to explain why the world is as it is and things happen as they do, to provide a rationale for social

customs and observances. As *Hans Blumenberg*, a famous German intellectual historian, observes, the function of myth is to help human beings cope with the inexorability of reality and the course of events - a need that is not outmoded by scientific advances and rationality. In the Indian traditional family system these myths have a unique importance as they are verbally and orally transmitted from one generation to another in order to establish the sanctions for the rules by which people conduct their lives. Indian mythology is replete with stories about gods, goddesses and even legendary heroes, and Githa Hariharan, being brought up in a traditional Hindu family, might have been well acquainted with them to suitably use them in her novels.

The 1980's were indeed an era of the so-called myth-busting. Indian feminists began to step out of shadows and rewrote mythology which was usually written by men. This was necessary because the male discourse often eluded women, making them almost invisible. Women had to write themselves into discourses, and men-made myths of Indian womanhood had to be taken out of their hands for they had been used as another instrument to support their patriarchal ideals. A central aspect here was the revisionist re-making of mythology from a female standpoints. The "revisionist retelling of the past" is not just an act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical orientation. It is a lot more than that. It is an act of survival for Indian women. Re-visioning myths is a method of emancipation by which tradition gets reinvented and man-made laws are subverted.

The most common issues of today like deteriorating man-woman relationship, cultural and religious beliefs and superstitions have been given space in Githa's fiction. The blending of myth, culture, religion and history together makes her writing vigorous [3] Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night* is not just a womanist novel but a definite feminist writing in which myths are revisioned, rewritten and retold from a female perspective. The focus of the novel is on the inner lives of three women—Sita, Devi and Mayamma—who belong to three different generations. They are separated by the gulf of time and caste, but are

linked by the shared reductiveness of their gender. They seem to find themselves within an invisible, metaphorical wall which each tries to tear apart in her own way to create a space for herself. Hariharan deftly examines the prescription of the gender relations by means of the stories of Amba, Gandhari, Damayanthi and others taken from the vast repository of Indian mythology. According to Meenakshi Bharat, this book “questions the confining code of patriarchy and brings to light the survival strategies of three generations of women” and Hariharan “makes concerted use of myth and folktale to enlarge the space of the lives of “real” people, especially women.” [4] Her second novel, *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* argues the theme of the teacher-taught relationship, and through it the process of self-discovery. The story is woven with the thread of memories of a retired school teacher, Vasu, who intends to begin the second phase of his teaching career “on a quieter but far more ambitious scale than the first”. He starts teaching Mani, a slow learner for whom he has to devise new techniques, using fantasy and fable such as the Panchtantra stories. The conflict of his real and his imaginary marks a difference with significantly their mutual participation in a larger whole. Vasu is certainly gripped with his own ‘hole’ until working with Mani enables him to change his ability to perceive. The third novel, *When Dreams Travel* is a re-writing of *The Arabian Nights’ Entertainments* or *The Thousand and One Nights* as these texts became known in the west through the French translation. By re-writing Shahrzad’s story from a feminist perception, Hariharan imposes on the reader a whole re-thinking of the hatred of women so obvious in the famous translations of the medieval Arab anthologies. In this way, Hariharan is not only “answering back” to a misogynous literary tradition but she is also deconstructing and eroding the sexist impact of the original. “In attempting to do all of these things to varying degrees through her novel, Githa Hariharan points to the importance of projects that “reworld” patriarchal ideologies by revising them from a feminist perspective, thereby prompting the discovery of the underlying patriarchal agenda by revealing their flawed

ideological make-up.”, Hilde Lindemann points out. [5]

In the later two novels she moves closer to the political situation of the country. *In Times of Siege* is a parable for our times, one that tells how menacing religion can be in the wrong hands. What begins as a domestic contretemps evolves, by virtue of circumstances, into a lesson on the dangers of revisionism, the implicit deception of censorship. Hariharan’s latest novel, *Fugitive Histories* takes her into the vortex of contemporary political situation. Using the Ahmedabad carnage of 2002, the novel stands as a beautiful specimen of how deftly it can weave political events into private lives. This work faithfully exposes the legacy of prejudice that, sometimes insidiously, sometimes perceptibly, continues to affect disparate lives in the country. As Khushwant Singh puts across, “Hariharan writes with anguish, pain and anger about what is happening to our country.” [6]

The Quest for Identity in Githa’s Novels: A Critical Analysis

Githa Hariharan enjoys a crucial place in the history of Indian English fiction. On one hand she is an integral part of the larger part of the tradition, on the other hand, she is an important cord in the tradition of Indian women writers. It is clear from a close survey of these two traditions that the crisis of identity and the pivotal aspect of the techno-thematic network of the Indian English fiction. The women characters of Hariharan are conscious of individuality and struggle for liberated feminist identity, along patterns of resistance, survival, imaginative choices and solidarity, leading to unexpected life stories. [7] She seemed to believe that according to D.H Lawrence woman is neither a diversion nor a prey; “ she is not an object confronting a subject, but a pole necessary for the existence of pole of the opposite sight” (Beauvoir 245). [8]

Gita Hariharan’s five novels that hit the literary horizon are written during this tumultuous era of Indian socio-cultural history. Devi the protagonist of the first novel, *The Thousand Faces of Night*, returns to Madras after obtaining a degree from the USA and she returns only to fall prey to the

chafing pressures imposed upon her by the old existing order. The crisis of identity becomes evident in the contrast between Devi and her mother Sita. It is interesting observation that Sita nurtures the dream of a happy conventional marriage for her daughter but it turns out to be a disaster for Devi. Her lover offers a temporary escape from the hollow married life but the order rules over like a tyrant. The use of myths and legends is the most marvellous part of the technique of narration. It is through these subtle allusions, myths and legends that the narrative acquires the desired intensity to mirror the agony of the crisis of identity. *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* is another masterly structured tale of a school master who has retired from a school in a small town. The relation between Vasu and Mani accords intensity to the impact of crisis of identity of the school master who resides too much in the past and has virtually no present. Teaching Mani who cannot speak is a great challenge before Vasu and that seems the only weapon to surmount the barrier of identity crisis and relocating the lost identity. In reality, in the novel, "human emotions are excellently expressed through the life of Vasu Master." [9] *When Dreams Travel* is another masterstroke of fantasy well in cadence of *The Tales of Arabian Night*.

The quest for identity gets momentum with the journey of mind along times and spaces in Githa Hariharan's *The Ghosts of Vasu Master*. Human emotions are dealt through the life of Vasu Master. He is an English teacher in P.G. Boys' School. The story starts with Vasu Master's retirement from the school. He gets a notebook as a farewell present from his students. He starts writing his observations about teaching. He becomes a private tutor. He does not have many students but one, the most complicated and intractable case, Mani. This is a sort of an autobiography of Vasu master, and how his life changes when he is offered to teach a slow learner. Mani is ridiculed by the whole town. And it is a sort of challenge to teach Mani. In the process of teaching Mani, Vasu sails through his own monotonous memories-right from childhood. The novel definitely reminds us of the Panchatantra stories-the usage of plants and animals to explain a point to children. This story also has a shade of Taare

Zameen Par within it. Here, Vasu Master uses the same philosophy while teaching Mani when he realizes that Mani is impatient and irritated with pens, pencils and notebooks. And doing this, he teaches us the true meaning and the different perspectives of the words intellect and love. Vasu Master has no great immediate success with Mani, but finally finds at least one thing-'the stories' that seems to keep him entertained and interested.

In Times of Siege is another important novel of Githa Hariharan. The novel is structured around the ethnic identity of the individual in relation to the larger aspect of his identity. The novel unfolds many layers of human psyche as an individual along ethnic and nationalist dimensions. *Fugitive Histories*, the last publication credited to Githa Hariharan, is a novel steeped in pathos. The narrative owes its basis to the gallant efforts of a Hindu girl Mala who marries Asad a Muslim boy of her choice. As the narrative advances, Mala tries hard to relieve the happiness of the past which is metaphorical to the reordering the fragmented identity.

Conclusion

It is clear from the above discussion that the crisis of identity plays pivotal role in the thematic design of the novels of Githa Hariharan. Thus a critical scrutiny of the identity crisis in her novels is to explore the depth of the narrative and discover the latent meaning and experience of her narratives. In the light of prevailing disparities and rapid transitional changes, it is more evident that the study of the crisis of identity in the novels of Githa Hariharan is to the study of the most tumultuous transition in the study of India. The new definitions and dimension of human mind and human relations seek apt representation in the backdrop of what had been happening for generations. The strain between any two characters is the strain between any two individuals, making an institution and being a part of it. The crisis to which Hariharan's characters are subjected is the crisis hovering over the society. A detailed study of the novels of Githa Hariharan acquaint us with the base realities of emerging social set up of India without any emotional or ideological veneer. The age comes out and presents itself in all forms of realities hitherto mirrored or concealed.

The stories of Githa Hariharan echo through time, inspiring countless others to dream and to dare like a tree that shelters many birds, her tales give shelter to many dreams. She taught us that every story is a seed, and from it can grow forests of new beginnings. [10]

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Dr. Ansari has published forty-three articles/papers so far in reputed journals both on language as well as literature aspects. He has also published to his credit five ISBN research/guide books titled John Keats and His Poetic Development, Simplified Introduction to English Literature, Improve Your Functional English, Improve Your English Grammar and Spoken skills, and Enhance Your Spoken Skills in English His upcoming book, "Practical Approaches to Communication Skills in English" is in procedure of publication.

Dr. Ansari has successfully completed one University Grants Commission approved and funded Minor Research Project, entitled "Tendencies of Escapism in the Poetry of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Keats and Byron: A Comparative Study" in 2018.

Dr. Ansari is a recipient of more than twenty Honours/Awards/Recognitions so far. In addition, he remained Elected Senator and Elected Academic Council Member, Member to Transfer Committee in L.N. Mithila University, Darbhanga, Bihar