



A Psychological Approach to Githa Hariharan's Novel When Dreams Travel

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Abstract

Githa Hariharan's novel *When Dreams Travel* intricately explores the psychological dimensions of memory, identity, and trauma within a postcolonial Indian context. This article employs a psychological framework to analyze how characters negotiate intergenerational trauma and cultural dislocation. It highlights the novel's use of storytelling as a therapeutic strategy for healing fractured selves. Drawing on psychoanalytic and trauma theories alongside narrative therapy, the paper illuminates the psychological depth of Hariharan's narrative and its contribution to contemporary postcolonial literature.

Keywords: Githa Hariharan, *When Dreams Travel*, psychological approach, memory, trauma, identity, storytelling, postcolonial trauma.

A Psychological Approach to Githa Hariharan's Novel *When Dreams Travel*

Githa Hariharan's *When Dreams Travel* (2008) offers a compelling narrative that traverses the terrains of memory, trauma, and identity formation across three generations—Shakuntala, her daughter Sakhi, and Sakhi's son. The novel's intricate structure, incorporating personal and historical narratives, foregrounds psychological themes of trauma's persistence and the quest for healing within the aftermath of cultural rupture. This article applies a psychological lens to the novel, situating its exploration of memory and identity in relation to relevant psychoanalytic and trauma theories.

Psychological Themes in *When Dreams Travel*

Memory: Fragmentation and Reconstruction

The novel presents memory as a fragmented and often elusive phenomenon, mirroring the psychological impact of trauma. Shakuntala's past is marked by trauma, leading to gaps and silences reminiscent of Freud's repression concept, where painful experiences are pushed out of conscious memory yet heavily influence mental life (Freud). The novel's recurring motifs of dreams and storytelling highlight unconscious attempts to process unresolved trauma.

Memory reconstruction—revisiting and narrating past events—is depicted as critical to healing from trauma. Cathy Caruth theorizes trauma as “not fully experienced at the moment of occurrence” and only accessible through “repetition” and “narrative” (Caruth 4). Hariharan's novel dramatizes this through its layered narratives, illustrating how trauma is both personal and generational.

Identity and Psychological Conflict

Sakhi's negotiation of her identity amid the legacies of her mother's trauma exemplifies the fluid nature of selfhood. Following Erikson's model, identity development involves resolving internal conflicts shaped by past and present influences (Erikson 22). Sakhi's struggle highlights how inherited trauma influences her psychosocial development, particularly in cultural and familial contexts disrupted by displacement and loss.

Identity in the novel is not fixed but a dynamic process shaped by storytelling and reconnection with history. The coexistence of multiple narrative voices reflects the dialogic construction of identity in postcolonial subjects.

Intergenerational Transmission of Trauma and Resilience

When Dreams Travel illustrates the transmission of trauma across generations, where Sakhi inherits emotional and psychological struggles originating from Shakuntala's experiences. This intergenerational trauma aligns with psychological research showing that unresolved trauma can affect descendants (White 35).

However, the narrative also emphasizes resilience. Through storytelling and mutual understanding, the characters move toward healing, echoing contemporary notions of post-traumatic growth—the potential for positive psychological change following trauma (White).

Storytelling as a Therapeutic Process

Storytelling in the novel functions as a psychological tool facilitating trauma integration and identity reconstruction. Narrative therapy posits that constructing coherent life stories enables individuals to reframe trauma and regain agency (White). Hariharan embeds this healing process within the novel's structure, as characters narrate and reinterpret their histories to overcome fragmentation.

This meta-narrative dimension allows *When Dreams Travel* to serve as a literary enactment of psychological therapy, where writing and re-telling stories becomes cathartic, contributing to personal and relational reconciliation.

Symbolism and Psychological Interpretation

Dreams and journeys in Hariharan's novel carry symbolic psychological meanings. Dreams symbolize unconscious desires, fears, and memories, connecting to Jungian archetypes and the process of individuation (Jung 42). The recurring motif of "traveling" dreams metaphorically represents the transmission of unconscious material across time and generations.

Physical journeys in the novel mirror internal psychological transformation, portraying each character's movement toward self-understanding and healing.

Conclusion

When Dreams Travel is a profound exploration of psychological themes set against the backdrop of postcolonial Indian society. Hariharan's portrayal of trauma, memory, and identity showcases the complex interplay of personal history and collective past. Through narrative storytelling, the novel offers a model for psychological healing and resilience, revealing the power of literature to engage with trauma and identity reconstruction. This psychological approach enhances both literary inquiry and trauma studies, underscoring the novel's significance within international postcolonial literature.

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