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Sacred Stories, Subversive Voices: Mythology As Resistance In Githa Hariharan's Fiction

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ABSTRACT

Githa Hariharan, a famous Indian novelist and feminist writer, is well-known for her unique reworkings of mythology and storytelling traditions. Her writing disrupts mainstream cultural narratives by highlighting women's experiences and resistance. This study looks at how Hariharan uses mythology as a method of feminist resistance in The Thousand Faces of Night and When Dreams Travel. Traditional Indian mythologies frequently reinforce patriarchal beliefs by excluding female voices. Hariharan challenges these hallowed tales by redefining mythological women as active agents of rebellion and self-determination. Using feminist literary theory, gender performativity, and postcolonial views, this study investigates how Hariharan's fragmented, polyphonic storytelling undermines patriarchal narrative authority. The study concludes that Hariharan reclaims mythology as a dynamic, evolving space that empowers women and destabilises patriarchal and cultural hegemonies. Her work positions mythology as a powerful tool for feminist and narrative subversion.

Keywords: Githa Hariharan, Feminist Mythology, Narrative Resistance, Sacred Stories, Subversive Voices, Postcolonial Feminism, Storytelling as Power.

INTRODUCTION

Mythology plays an important part in Indian cultural consciousness, not only as an inherited collection of religious stories, but also as an intellectual framework that determines social structures, moral ideals, and gender standards. The endless historical figures of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, which pervade everyday life in India, frequently establish images of ideal women, such as Sita's obedience, Draupadi's chastity, and Gandhari's blind devotion. These mythic figures have long served as patriarchal pedagogical tools, justifying women's subordination in the name of *dharma* and familial honour (Kumar 14). Feminist scholars like Uma Chakravarti and Nivedita Menon claim that traditional Indian mythology has persistently maintained male power by making women invisible or mute in the epic narratives that build Hindu cultural memory (Chakravarti 102; Menon 58).

Githa Hariharan, a prominent Indian author and feminist scholar, places her literary work within this cultural and ideological context. In order to reclaim mythology as a location of resistance rather than worship, her writing continuously questions sacred tales. A dramatic rethinking of mythological women is provided by Hariharan's books, especially *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1992) and *When Dreams Travel* (1999), which turn them from passive objects of divine will into active agents of defiance, pain, and narrative. She challenges linear, patriarchal historiography and introduces female voices into the voids and silences of cultural memory by utilising intertextuality and narrative fragmentation (Rajan 211).

Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night* juxtaposes myth with the lived experience of contemporary Indian women, implying that the oppressive mechanisms buried in ancient texts still haunt modern household life. Devi's path of self-discovery is paralleled in her interactions with fabled figures such as Gandhari and Ganga, who are reimagined as symbols of suppressed rage and maternal rebellion rather than paragons of virtue. This mixing of personal and mythological narratives demonstrates what Chandra Talpade Mohanty sees as the "feminist rewriting of cultural memory" (Mohanty 76). Similarly, in *When Dreams Travel*, Hariharan reclaims the voice of Shahrzad, the storyteller of *One Thousand and One Nights*, portraying her not merely as a survivalist but as a feminist historian who subverts death through narrative (Hariharan 86).

This feminist reinterpretation of myth is more than an aesthetic gesture; it is also a political act of reclaiming. Drawing on Judith Butler's gender performativity theory, this study investigates Hariharan's use of storytelling as a performative arena in which identity is enacted, negotiated, and rejected, rather than inherited. Butler contends that gender is not a fixed identity, but rather a set of performances that may be subverted through different iterations. In Hariharan's literature, the act of storytelling becomes precisely such a subversion, with female protagonists rejecting the roles allocated to them by myth and forging new subjectivities through narrative.

This intervention also has a substantial postcolonial component. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's analysis, *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, puts the subject of voice and agency at the heart of postcolonial feminist theory. Hariharan's texts respond constructively by portraying mythological women as speaking subjects who re-author their stories, rather than voiceless victims. Homi Bhabha's concept of cultural hybridity illuminates Hariharan's storytelling approach, which combines oral tradition, modern feminist philosophy, and postcolonial critique to create a polyphonic, transgressive literary voice (Bhabha 113). These mixed voices undermine the authority of canonical myth while elevating disadvantaged perspectives, particularly those of subaltern women.

This viewpoint reinterprets mythology as a dynamic space of female possibilities, as opposed to romanticising or discarding it. According to critics such as Dr. Chandramani, Hariharan's portrayal of Gandhari as a figure of resistance puts into question her traditional image of docility, revealing underlying narratives of grief and rage behind fabled calm (Chandramani 107). Similarly, Kelaiya and Vaja's work on "vernacular feminism" shows how Hariharan's reworking of myth politicises household rituals and family legends (Vidyayana 2023). Kurrey and Tripathi emphasise Hariharan's fiction's examination of caste and gender hierarchies embedded in sacred texts (Kurrey and Tripathi 198–213), whereas Phate and Sudha argue that her literary interventions contribute to a larger project of feminist cultural critique (Phate 1–15; Sudha 30–35).

Thus, this perspective portrays Githa Hariharan as a resistance mythographer, a writer who employs sacred tales to challenge rather than maintain tradition. Hariharan creates a counter-narrative by reclaiming myth as a site of diversity, dissent, and performance, rejecting patriarchal beliefs while embracing female power as makers of meaning and history.

OBJECTIVES AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This paper aims to explore how Githa Hariharan uses mythology as a literary strategy to resist patriarchal constructs and reclaim female agency. The core research question is: How does Githa Hariharan's feminist reimagining of mythological women in *The Thousand Faces of Night* and *When Dreams Travel* challenge dominant cultural narratives and empower subaltern female voices?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper is grounded in feminist literary criticism, particularly Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, which challenges essentialist gender roles by highlighting the performative nature of identity. Postcolonial theory, especially the work of Gayatri Spivak on subaltern voices and Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity, further informs the study. These perspectives illuminate how Hariharan's work destabilises fixed notions of identity and reclaims marginalised voices through myth.

METHODOLOGY

The research employs close textual analysis of Hariharan's novels, focusing on narrative structure, characterisation, and intertextuality. Selected episodes and passages are examined through the lens of feminist and postcolonial theory to understand how mythology is repurposed as a site of resistance.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The reworking of mythology as a feminist and postcolonial strategy in Indian English writing has received a great deal of academic attention. Scholars in feminist and cultural studies have investigated how myth may sustain and challenge hegemonic power structures, particularly those associated with patriarchy and nationalism. Githa Hariharan's fiction has emerged as a vital location in these debates, where mythology is neither accepted at face value nor completely rejected, but critically revised to amplify marginalised female voices.

Kelaiya and Vaja (2023) pioneer the concept of "vernacular feminism" in Hariharan's work, emphasising how mythic subversion occurs not only on an epic scale, but also in the everyday and home domain. Their research on *The Thousand Faces of Night* suggests that mythology is discreetly embedded in everyday routines, household roles, and storytelling traditions. Hariharan's characters "enact resistance through their reinterpretations of ritual and speech" (Kelaiya and Vaja), implying that the home can be a subversive arena where sacred myths are challenged and repurposed. This is consistent with Nivedita Menon's broader contention that feminist politics in India must address localised and intersectional forms of gendered power (Menon 60).

The work of Kurrey and Tripathi (2021) expands this view by examining how Hariharan's novels critique both caste and patriarchy through the lens of myth. In their comparative analysis of multiple Hariharan texts, they argue that "myth is a double-edged sword—while traditionally used to justify social hierarchies, it can also be wielded as a tool of disruption when reinterpreted from below" (203). Particularly relevant is their reading of *When Dreams Travel*, where *The Arabian Nights* are transformed into a palimpsest of female voices resisting silencing and death. They further note that Hariharan's narratives echo Gayatri Spivak's call to "strategically essentialise" in order to foreground subaltern agency (Spivak 281).

Phate (2021) strengthens the field by focusing on the narrative methods Hariharan uses to undermine patriarchal mythological authority. Polyphony, intertextuality, and narrative layering are identified as important instruments that "disrupt the monologic male-centred epic tradition" (5). This lends support to Homi Bhabha's concept of the hybrid story as a place of resistance in which fixed identities and cultural

codes are deconstructed and recombined (Bhabha 113). Hariharan's use of many perspectives and broken timeframes creates what Phate refers to as "counter-mythography," in which female characters are afforded narrative power that has previously been denied to women.

Dr. Chandramani (2020) highlights the symbolic and political significance of Hariharan's reworking of Gandhari in *The Thousand Faces of Night*. Gandhari, traditionally regarded as an image of wifely devotion, transforms into a figure of suppressed dissent in Hariharan's hands, her blindfold a performative protest rather than an act of commitment. Chandramani observes that this translation "reconfigures passive suffering into an eloquent silence pregnant with rebellion" (107), indicating how Hariharan reframes legendary archetypes to reflect modern feminist consciousness.

Sudha (2017) emphasises the importance of myth in developing alternative feminist subjectivities. Her examination of *The Thousand Faces of Night* delves into Hariharan's use of myth as a venue for identity reconstruction, rather than just cultural critique. Sudha describes Hariharan's mythic women as "transgressing the boundaries of their textual origins to inhabit new, plural identities within contemporary feminist frameworks" (34). This process, she contends, reflects Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, in which identity is constructed via repeated actions of speech, resistance, and embodiment (Butler 179).

Scholars such as Rajeswari Sunder Rajan and Chandra Talpade Mohanty have also provided fundamental insights into the politics of rewriting myths. According to Rajan (1993), Indian women writers frequently engage in "acts of narrative trespass" when they reinterpret myth from a feminist perspective, exerting authority over discursive spaces traditionally dominated by male voices (Rajan 211). Mohanty's (1995) critique of universalised feminist narratives emphasises cultural uniqueness and the material conditions of women's existence, which Hariharan addresses by situating her feminist rewritings inside the actual experiences of South Asian women.

Furthermore, Githa Hariharan has repeatedly indicated in articles and interviews that she intends to use myth as a vehicle of feminist resistance. In an interview from 2000, she says, "The stories we tell ourselves define who we are and what we may picture becoming. By reinventing myth, I hope to broaden that worldview, particularly for women who have been told for generations that their fate is quiet" (*Indian Express*).

This corpus of scholarship, taken together, supports the primary point of the current study: mythology in Hariharan's literature functions not as a fossilised legacy, but as a malleable, living text capable of resistance. The reworking of Gandhari, Ganga, Shahrzad, and Dunyazad shows how mythic characters may be reimagined to express fury, sadness, desire, and agency. This literature also emphasises the significance of applying feminist and postcolonial theories particularly those of Judith Butler, Gayatri Spivak, and Homi Bhabha to comprehend the subversive potential of storytelling in recovering cultural narratives and rewriting collective memory.

REWRITING GANDHARI AND GANGA IN *THE THOUSAND FACES OF NIGHT*

Githa Hariharan’s *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1992) serves as a feminist palimpsest, an intertextual environment in which classic myths are reinterpreted with subversive implications. Devi, the heroine, returns to India after studying abroad, only to face traditional expectations of women. Her personal dilemma serves as a reflective surface for legendary echoes, particularly those of Gandhari and Ganga, whose stories have been mythologised into models of feminine virtue, self-sacrifice, and maternal quiet.

Hariharan reimagines Gandhari not as the devoted wife who blindfolds herself to share her husband Dhritarashtra’s blindness, but as a woman whose act is an autonomous display of resistance. The narrator remarks:

She blindfolded herself not out of devotion but defiance.
Her silence screamed louder than the words of kings.
She carried a kingdom in her blindfold, but no one saw her fury.
— *The Thousand Faces of Night*, Hariharan (92)

This radical representation challenges the conventional understanding of Gandhari's blindness as passive loyalty. Instead, Gandhari's silence serves as a symbolic protest a "silent scream" that critiques the elimination of female opposition in epic narratives. Hariharan, according to Dr. Chandramani (2020), "feminises protest by transforming docility into deferred resistance," using Gandhari's blindness as a metaphor for women's self-imposed invisibility inside patriarchal structures (107). Such a rearticulation aligns with Gayatri Spivak's concept of the "muted subaltern" and her call to reclaim repressed voices through strategic literary intervention (Spivak 284).

Also, Ganga, the heavenly river goddess and mother of Bhishma, is reinvented in Hariharan's narrative as a woman who refuses to perform the role of the idealised, self-effacing mother. The novel's retelling challenges the sanctity of motherhood as an absolute biological and spiritual obligation.

Ganga's river did not cradle; it drowned.
She bore sons only to release them.
Each child a sacrifice to her freedom.
Each drowning a refusal to be confined.
— *The Thousand Faces of Night*, Hariharan (95)

Hariharan presents a novel image of maternal agency in which Ganga's actions are not cruel but liberating. Her refusal to be defined solely by motherhood calls into question the long-revered image of the self-sacrificing mother in Indian mythology. Phate (2021) notes, "By denying the sentimental ideal of motherhood, Hariharan reclaims maternal subjectivity as a site of power and choice" (7). This reading resonates with Judith Butler's theory of performativity, which holds that gender roles, including motherhood, are not innate but enacted and therefore capable of subversion through alternative performative acts (Butler 179).

Devi's internalisation of these legendary rewrites marks a turning point in her self-awareness. When confronted by cultural and familial constraints, she begins to perceive myth once an instrument of repression—as a source of resistance. Kelaiya and Vaja (2023) argue that Hariharan's mythic insertions "serve as narrative ruptures that expose and contest the hegemony of domestic ideology" (*Vidyayana*). Devi's defiance of her oppressive marriage echoes Gandhari's deliberate silence and Ganga's maternal disobedience, completing a powerful trinity of feminist resistance.

SHAHRZAD'S FEMINIST STORYTELLING IN *WHEN DREAMS TRAVEL*

Hariharan's *When Dreams Travel* (1999) employs the epic frame story of *One Thousand and One Nights* to create a feminist counter-narrative. The key characters, Shahrzad and her sister Dunyazad, are reinvented as more than just survivors of patriarchal violence, but as active agents of resistance. Shahrzad uses narrative to challenge the despotic authority of King Shahrayar, who murders his brides in a single night. Her narrative procrastination serves as a metaphor for feminist survival and resistance:

If a story could postpone death, then a thousand stories could rewrite fate.
— *When Dreams Travel*, Hariharan (86)

This sentence captures the transformational power of storytelling. Shahrzad uses narrative to recover her life and, metaphorically, the lives of many women silenced by patriarchal decrees. In line with Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity, reappropriating a classical Middle Eastern story into a polyphonic feminist arena emphasises the "dislocation and reinscription of cultural meaning" (Bhabha 114).

In Hariharan's version, Dunyazad typically a supporting character—becomes the main character. She becomes a storyteller in her own right, guarding Shahrzad's memories and writing her own narrative. Her remarks convey quiet defiance:

They gave me silence. I returned it wrapped in words.
I stitched stories out of scars.
Every tale a thread of resistance.
Every pause a protest.
— *When Dreams Travel*, Hariharan (103)

Dunyazad's transition from passive observer to narrative agent echoes Spivak's call for the re-voice of the subaltern. Her storytelling is a form of healing, resistance, and self-fashioning—what Rajeswari Sunder Rajan calls a "narrative trespass" into prohibited terrain (Rajan 213). Hariharan intentionally fractures the narrative structure by combining numerous female perspectives and discontinuous timelines. This fragmentation defies linearity, a formal metaphor for breaking free from the patriarchal tradition of male-authored history.

According to Sudha (2017): "Hariharan's Shahrzad and Dunyazad do not merely survive; they inscribe themselves into a living feminist archive, refusing to be forgotten or overwritten" (33). Their narrative autonomy echoes Butler's claim that identity is formed through repetition, rupture, and rearticulation. By writing and rewriting themselves, these individuals undermine essentialist identities and reclaim agency from inside the very mechanisms that are meant to destroy them.

Hariharan's intertwined mythic and narrative reconfigurations restore sacred myths as changeable locations of resistance rather than relics of tradition. *The Thousand Faces of Night* and *When Dreams Travel* demonstrate what feminist critics term the "strategic rewriting" of culture—whether by recasting Gandhari's quiet as defiance, Ganga's drownings as self-liberation, or Shahrzad's stories as feminist revolution (Mohanty 81). These retellings are more than just modifications; they are political interventions that reveal the patriarchal framework of cultural memory and replace it with a multiple, contested, and subversive archive of female voices.

CONCLUSION

Githa Hariharan's literary refurbishment of mythology is more than just a creative undertaking; it is also an intentional feminist and political action. Her books *The Thousand Faces of Night* and *When Dreams Travel* deconstruct the inherited power of sacred traditions, reassembling them as locations of resistance, plurality, and autonomy. Hariharan subverts traditional representations of legendary figures such as Gandhari, Ganga, Shahrzad, and Dunyazad, giving them voices that challenge patriarchal institutions ingrained in both mythology and contemporary life.

Hariharan's narrative technique is based on feminist and postcolonial theory, using Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity to challenge essentialist notions of femininity. Her characters do not accept the roles that mythology has assigned to them; rather, they reinvent them via acts of disobedience, storytelling, and silence. Gandhari's blindfold becomes a symbol of resistance rather than devotion, and Ganga's maternal rejection becomes a reclaiming of agency. These reinterpretations demonstrate how myth, which has long been employed to justify female subjugation, may be turned against itself when reappropriated by feminist voices.

Moreover, Hariharan's literary approach reflects Homi Bhabha's concept of cultural hybridity, combining current feminist views with oral tradition and fragmented narrative structures. This hybridisation disrupts linear, male-dominated historiography, allowing for new ways of knowing and remembering. Her polyphonic storytelling challenges monologic interpretations, emphasising the diversity of female experience and supporting the subaltern's ability to respond directly to Gayatri Spivak's essential inquiry.

Most importantly, the domestic and epic overlap in her writing, demonstrating that acts of resistance do not have to take place on huge mythic stages; they may unfold in kitchens, letters, and whispered tales between sisters. This infusion of myth into the domestic realm strengthens what critics such as Kelaiya and Vaja call "vernacular feminism," in which the mundane becomes political and quiet becomes subversive.

Hariharan reclaims mythology as a malleable and revolutionary text through intentional intertextuality and cultural critique. Her story reveals how rewriting cultural memory may question dominant notions and open up narrative spaces for dissent, redefinition, and transformation. By doing so, Hariharan positions mythology as a living, evolving discourse that can and must be modified to incorporate previously excluded perspectives.

Furthermore, Hariharan's mythopoeic resistance validates storytelling's ability to recreate rather than simply recollect. Her work advocates for a continual examination of the tales that build identities, encouraging both writers and readers to take part in the rewriting of tradition, as well as the larger feminist effort of reclaiming the sacred as subversive.

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