

## GITHAHARIHARAN'S *WHEN DREAMS TRAVEL*: A UNIQUE SAGA OF WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

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Githa Hariharan is the one of the most prolific women writers of India. She is a recipient of the Commonwealth Writers' Prize for Best First Book for her debut novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1992). She is a feminist whose fiction focuses on women's issues, their pains, struggles, anguishes and predicaments. Hariharan is critical of the constraints of domesticity and patriarchy on the individual development of woman. She believes that woman is not an "object" or a "commodity" to be exploited, but a capable human being full of immense possibilities which remain hidden to man only because he never tries to realize it.

Hariharan's *When Dreams Travel* (1999) pivots around a young vibrant and brave woman Shahrzad. The novel is a retelling of the classic *The Thousand and One Nights*, a cornucopia of stories where the author has skilfully blended myth, legend and the power of fertile imagination.

*When Dreams Travel* is a metanarrative that examines the story of Shahrzad and Shahryar from a feminist perspective. Sultan Shahryar is a cruel Sultan who marries a virgin each night and then beheads her in the morning. This brutal practice continues until Shahrzad, the Wazir's daughter offers to be the Sultan's bride with the determination that she will set right the gender power equation.

Shahrzad is a magnificent fighter who exemplifies how a woman braves the challenges of patriarchal society and survives with her strength, sagacity, grit and creative talent. Shahrzad manages to keep death at bay by telling interesting stories to Sultan for a thousand and one nights- a range of stories, dark, poetic, and witty by turns, spanning medieval to contemporary times. These tales include accounts of a limbless, headless monkey-woman who refuses to die, a pool full of dismembered female body parts, an endless manor built by two brothers, a woman who feeds the hungry with her breast and many more. With her power of narration, her gift of golden speech and her untrammelled imagination, Shahrzad extends not only her execution but also saves many other women from being beheaded at the hands of the cruel Sultan, and finally makes the Sultan realize that all women need not be killed. Though the story is not new, yet it is told with such inventiveness, such surefooted style and panache that it lights up the forgotten corners of the reader's mind. With its sharp and lively blend of past and present, its skilful reworking of the historical tradition, and its controlled use of evocative language, Githa Hariharan's multi-voiced narrative assumes the significance of modern myth. Joana Filipa da Silva states:

"Modern myths, like Shahrzad's, are part of popular culture, of our collective cultural heritage, and can work as a powerful mechanism to understand the real or interpret experience.... Shahrzad is an example of a positive reformulation of feminine/feminist identities, reversing the traditional

victim status of women to a position of empowerment, even in the most adverse circumstances . . . the women characters created by Hariharan are serious candidates to think new forms of liberated feminist identity, a long pattern of resistance, survival, imaginative choices and solidarity, leading to unexpected life stories.” (qtd in Bhardwaj)

Shahrazad’s father eulogises his daughter’s wit, intellect and bravery in the following words: “ ‘In the streets of the city, my daughter, you are a living legend. Your wit will live on, longer than any of your children or grandchildren. I see your name, Shahrazad, like a vine that creeps forward inch by inch, growing from one millennium to another’ ” (273).

When thousand and one nights are over and Shahrazad is sent to her queen’s chamber, she actively participates in the task of ruling over the country. Her sudden demise raises her to the level of a martyr who succeeded in achieving her mission – making Shahryar mend his prejudice against women. Hariharan has beautifully depicted how women counter the oppressive patriarchal hegemony and emerge as heroes and saviours.

**References:**

Hariharan, Githa. *When Dreams Travel*. New Delhi: Penguin, 1999. Print.

Bhardwaj, Neelam “Routes to Alternative Womanhood in Githa Hariharan’s *When Dreams Travel*”. [www.galaxyinrj.com](http://www.galaxyinrj.com) . accessed on 18.03.16.