Githa Hariharan

II.5 Hariharan: Decolonizing the Mind

“We, in India, think quickly, we talk quickly, and when we move we move quickly. There must be something in the sun of India that makes us rush and tumble and run on. And our paths are paths interminable. The Mahabharata has 214,77 verses and the Ramayana 48,000. The Puranas are endless and innumerable. We have neither punctuation nor the treacherous ‘ats’ and ‘ons’ to bother us - we tell one interminable tale. Episode follows episode, and when our thoughts stop our breadth stops.”

Raja Rao

Githa Hariharan won the Commonwealth Writers Prize for Best First Book in 1993, with her novel The Thousand Faces of Night (1992). She has also published a collection of short stories entitled The Art of Dying (1993) and two novels, The Ghosts of Vasu Master (1994) and, more recently, When Dreams Travel (1999). Hariharan also works as a free lance editor and she has published an anthology of Indian short stories translated from four major South Indian languages. She called it A Southern Harvest (1993).

Hariharan lives in New Delhi but she has lived in the United States and in Manila, as well. A curious biographical detail is her recent complain against the discrimination of mothers, at New Delhi’s Supreme Court. Her case contributed to make explicit the fact that although the Indian constitution says the natural guardian of a Hindu minor is “the father, and after him, the mother”, it does not mean that only in the case of a deceased father, does the mother become the guardian of a minor. Thanks to Hariharan and her husband the legal rights of mothers were promoted by the outcome of this case.

Together with Anita Desai, Shashi Despande and Meena Alexander, Githa Hariharan has been ailed as one of the women writers producing a body of Indian literature that is committed to feminist and social issues. As I hope to have proved above, the names of Arundhati Roy and Nayantara Sahgal (among possible others) can surely be added to this short list. While attempting to describe what is special about this segment of literary production, critics like Chanda, Ho and Mathai discuss the vortex of Indian women’s writing as the intersection between women’s individual identity and the identity of the community, two mutually implicated dimensions whose bonds are rather complex. If, as these critics claim, Indian women writers are constructing “narrative mappings of alternative ‘Indias’” through their novels and short stories, then, they are contributing to create a set of representations of India which confront the reader with diverse regional/national problems, while suggesting directions for change and improvement, in synchronicity with women’s issues.

The above view of feminist Indian literature, attuned to the social dimension of texts, seems to invite feminist readings based on “gender”, as a tool to describe the position of

women inside local patriarchies and the extent of the psychological damage inflicted on them as second class citizens of a repressive social order. Naturally, women’s writing is not isolated from other forms of social critique given the overlapping nature of social forces. What is special about writing that is committed to women’s issues is that the analysis of social and political problems is directed first and foremost at the position of women, revealing how these social problems are specifically felt by a group of individuals of that society.

The activity of writing, together with story-telling, are pedagogic discourses that can contribute to promote dominant patriarchal ideologies. When these two activities serve this function, they become the targets of Hariharan’s critical perspective. This amounts to say that Hariharan shifted her reflection from the representation of a concrete society to the analysis of popular discourses promoting certain notions of how to behave as a woman, what activities to perform or which dreams to nurture. For example, why is it that traditional popular tales usually make women desire the prince, if the prince can be more cruel and violent than the powerless shepherd? Acquired notions of class differences and the wish for social mobility tend to make certain men more desirable to provide for women, granting these characters subtle forms of ownership and abuse, more easily allowed and accepted in a suitor that has status and power. This reasoning is an instance of Hariharan’s intelligent deconstruction of certain common-sense notions embedded in story-telling and in some patterns of narrative craft which require critical re-thinking. As a means to confront the patriarchal ideology of these texts, Hariharan re-tells the famous One Thousand and One Nights in such a way that the re-created text argues, for example, that self-preservation has to be more important that social mobility, defending the preference for shepherds or merchants.

Apart from the productive effectivity of “gender” as a tool of critical analysis to understand the exchange of women in a system of power and social mobility, Hariharan’s creation of alternative women characters, and the design of a plot around their unconventional choices, embodies a form of writing closer to sexual difference theories and their search for women’s solutions and priorities. What I mean is that feminist writing can be less concerned with identifying the mechanics of local patriarchies than with the search for alternative ideas and projects for women. If, would one wonder from the point of view of sexual difference theories, women had ever been allowed to have their way in terms of power and social re-organisation what would they do? Another way to go around the perspectives advocated by sexual difference theories could be phrased as “how will liberated women be?” How can she be different from the domestic version created by patriarchy? I think this set of theoretical questions is relevant to present the last text I am going to address in this part of the research because When Dreams Travel really answered some of these questions in a very creative and intelligent way.

Contrary to the two previous novels, the critical analysis of which was important to get a glimpse of India’s realities (its most pressing problems, its self-defining mechanisms, its working through of colonial memories, its current challenges and tensions), Hariharan’s novel is more de-territorialised. It is a fantastic text, full of magic and ghosts, which could have happened anywhere in the East…long ago. This does not mean that the politics or the ideological discussions of this novel are less serious or less effective. It just happens that it constructs its meaning in a different way, more dependent on parody and symbol, as language and thought games, than on the straight-forward representation of a concrete geo-social referent. When Dreams Travel is a different kind of text, say, more in the “myth

making business”, projecting exemplary heroines while de-constructing both misogynous and colonial stereotypes. Thus, Hariharan’s re-writing of Scherazade’s tale, from a postcolonial and feminist perspective falls under the definition of “figuration”, offered in section I.1.1, which amounts to say that Hariharan is creating new figures that embody alternative concepts and images, translating to a short-hand version, the horizon of liberated feminist identities.

Because of the above description of the aims and the structure of When Dreams Travel, I agree that Githa Hariharan and this novel should be part of current genealogies of women’s writing in India. By deconstructing stereotypical characters and plots in story-telling, Hariharan is undoing the implicit morality and prejudice of traditional texts. Secondly, while re-writing a new, “corrected” version of an established, canonised tale, she already is imagining beyond the frame of dominant ideologies, de-colonising the reader’s mind in the process.

The re-writing of canonical texts is a postmodern technique, quite current, for example in the writing of Angela Carter, another very powerful re-writer of traditional tales. I will not take this discussion further, though I make the connection. In this research, the texts are being discussed from feminist and postcolonial point of views, which already proved quite productive and adequate to track down different forms of situated socio-political critique voiced by a genealogy of committed women.

Githa Hariharan’s When Dreams Travel (1999) is a re-writing of The Arabian Nights’ Entertainments or The Thousand and One Nights, as these texts became known in the West via a French translation. By re-writing Shahrzad’s story from a feminist angle, 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. The detailed analysis of When Dreams Travel will be undertaken below. For the moment, I want to settle general aspects of the text, so as to guide my readers through a labyrinthine narrative structure.

When Dreams Travel is written in a self-assertive tone, establishing story-telling as a women’s tradition passed on among them, from generation to generation. In the novel, male characters can listen and repeat the tales they have heard, but it is women who invent them. To claim story-telling as a feminine tradition is not a unique or isolated position within feminism. One of the most comprehensive studies on story-telling and the female tellers who are said to have told them has been done by Marina Warner. She follows references to legendary sibyls in classic mythology, followed by widespread writings expressing fear and hatred of “women’s voices” in the medieval period. These two traditions, the classical and the medieval one, together with some references from Catholic scriptures, have created a binary (popular) opposition between the docile wife and the “gossiping one”. Warner brilliantly links the usual old age of the story-teller to the post-fertility period, when “grandmothers” are allowed a voice because they have “less” of a wifely role. The symbolical content of this ageing, speaking figure is that a woman’s voice is the opposite of a pregnant belly. This amounts to say that fertile women have to be silent, erasing the subject-hood of a wife in relation to a husband. On the contrary, the old hag, widowed grandmother or the old servant, are husband-less women: hence they are allowed a voice.

Another relevant detail to add to this genealogy of the bond between story telling and women’s writing is the historical fact that, in India, newspaper publications were the first “milieu” to accept women’s texts for publication. In the nineteenth century, the press was

already very active in many small Indian towns and the inclusion of a section focusing on women’s subjects (among which the serial or the short story would be included) proved to be an extremely popular measure. Thus, story-telling, in the shape of short story writing, has indeed been friendly territory for women.

And what is there in this rewriting of The Arabian Nights’ Entertainments (an alternative name of The Thousand and One Nights) for the postcolonial dimension of this research? Why would Githa Hariharan find important to decolonise such a text? What is at stake in such an enterprise?

According to Jack Zipes, who has published extensively on story-telling, the original Arabic title of this famous anthology of tales (the object of diverse selections and editions) is The Thousand and One Nights, referring to an anthology of popular tales compiled in the Middle Ages. The oldest known manuscript is probably from the XVth century, but there are references to the title of this anthology in older documents. This written version of oral tales includes elements from three recognisable different cultures: Indian, Persian and Arab. The first European translator of the Arab anthology was Antoine Galland who published the French edition under the title of Les Mille et Une Nuits, in twelve volumes, from 1704 to 1717. The French translator not only used the original Arab collection, but he also added some more tales that he collected from a Christian Arab called Youhwna Diab or Hanna Diab. In the XIXth century, Richard Burton translated these tales from French into English, although Edward William Lane had already published a selection of several pieces in 1839-41. Apparently, Burton’s edition (1885-1888) is not completely faithful to the French original, and Zipes cannot help mentioning the “astonishing anthropological footnotes.” I suspect the timing of this translation, at the height of British colonialism, may well explain the “astonishing” notes. The impact of the Arab tales in the West was tremendous. To begin with, the tales introduced a totally new concept of the sprawling, endless possibilities of literary form, not to mention the creative use of motif and fantasy. The most direct inheritor of the influence of The Thousand and One Nights was a narrative sub-genre mostly devoted to children: the fairy tale. The tremendous success of the Arab tales made of them part of the everyday cultural references of Western culture, and several of the stereotypes that projected a notion of “India” or “the East” in Western mentalities, where certainly promoted with the help of this text.

Some of the Orientalist stereotypes one finds in The Thousand and One Nights (and which where endlessly repeated in other narratives) concern a universe of fabulous wealth, exotic life styles and the decadent sensuality of Eastern peoples, ruled by irresponsible tyrants who followed whim and caprice, instead of reason, in the management of their marvellous cities. And the ruthless way these oriental kings disposed of their women? Was that not further evidence that the East was ruled by undeserving princes to be replaced by the fair, chivalric and righteous Western representatives of other, more sober and sensible forms of power? Take Shahryar, the sultan in The Thousand and One Nights, as one such

250 Robert L. Mack, in his introduction to Arabian Nights’ Entertainments, defends that, apart from Hanna Diab, there were other sources from where Galland copied the tales he added to the original Arab Collection. Galland was the secretary of the marquis de Nointel, the ambassador of Louis XIV in Constantinople. There, he had the time and the opportunity to translate diverse manuscripts and unidentified fragments which he later added to his translation of The Thousand and One Nights. (Oxford World’s Classics, OUP, 1995, 1998: xvi).
archetype. He had all the available virgins of the city beheaded, plus his wife and her slaves. Certainly not the kindest neither the most balanced of rulers! This, and similar deductions of this kind, is the motive that made the Arabian Nights such a delightful text for colonial Europe. It fed the logic of its racist worldview and it confirmed all of the corresponding expectations of sin, lust, irresponsibility and (what prizes to conquer!) fabulous wealth. This is the East the West dreamed of and hoped to encounter.

What if, as Hariharan playfully suggests in her novel, the rich and sophisticated cultural heritage of the East was altered beyond recognition by the pen of the misogynous scholar who wrote down the oral literature produced by women, the traditional story-tellers? What if Euro-centric readers misread the tales? Even so, the reversal of colonial discourses praising the exclusive cultural superiority of Western culture is put into question by the phenomenon of The Arabian Nights’ Entertainments. Even this ‘corrupted version’ of Eastern culture dazzled Europe. Who seduced whom? Which culture claimed the power of the sultan, and which culture was telling the tales? Which metropolis was voraciously hungry for the pearls of the colonised culture?

II.5.1 “Eastwallas and Westwallas”

In colonial, Victorian England, The Thousand and One Nights were widely known and they became a current source of Orientalist images. These images inspired many Western writers, from the precursors of the gothic novel, like Walpole and Clara Reeves, to Sir Walter Scott, Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, Charlotte Brontë, Joseph Conrad, H. G. Wells and James Joyce. The aesthetic influence and the systematic intertextual references to the Arab collection are well established in literary criticism. Stereotypes of the orient always focused on wealth, sensual delight, exotic appearances and habits, magic and mysticism. To colonial eyes, references to luxurious products invoked business opportunities and the impending rewards for the colonial enterprise, thus encouraging it. As for the other aspects of the (then) current stereotypes of “the East”, they were so easily memorised and repeated because they were as instrumental to colonial mentality as the promise of wild profit. Let us consider the above mentioned elements in Orientalist stereotypes: magic, a tainted mysticism (suspect of mere superstition), “licentious behaviour” and “odd” or “illogical” ways of living. All of these stand in striking opposition to reason and Enlightenment, the universal gift the West wanted to bestow on the rest of mankind (whether they need it or not). The irrational is, then, the common element that links all these images of the East. Even the “fabulous wealth” of the Arab tales might look, to imperial eyes, uncontrolled, excessive and un/reasonable, being the simple product of privileged accumulation and not of clever organisation.

According to the introduction of Robert L. Mack to the Oxford edition of the Arabian Nights’ Entertainments, eighteenth century critics were quick to note the irrationality of the tales, deeming them the product of a woman’s imagination, without the sober wit or pragmatic intelligence fit for men (the quoted male critics are indeed sober in their judgement: they all repeat the same ideas using the same words. Not very witty…). However, the importance of irrational representations of the East for colonial England was that these could be used to influence public opinion in favour of colonial practices. With

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252 My working definition of “archetype” is “primordial image or pattern that recurs throughout literature and thought, consistently enough to be considered a universal concept or situation” (Britannica, vol. 1, page 529).
255 See on section I.2.2, Homi Bhabha’s theory of the stereotype as a conceptual tool in the construction of dominant colonial ideologies.
such irrational stereotypes, it was easy to promote the idea that Eastern people were unable to rule themselves and, consequently, in need of colonisation (and the architects of colonisation needed public support). The next stage in this instrumental use of Orientalist stereotypes was to convince the colonised middle-class that they were unfit to rule themselves and then, the stable colonies would be freed from the danger of nationalist stirrings (obviously there is a logic of class alliance that lies underneath the whole project of colonialism. No one was concerned about convincing hard working peasants or slaves of anything). This was the political scheme that took advantage of certain stereotypical images of the East, being “unreasonable” cultural products translated into evidence of a lack of proper civilisation.

The impression of irrationality is something that the text of The Thousand and One Nights, itself, instigated, both in terms of form and content.

The labyrinthine structure of Hariharan’s When Dreams Travel is a mirror image of the structure of The Thousand and One Nights, again, a replica of other ancient traditions of interminable story telling, as is the case of Indian literature and its foundational sacred Vedas, where episode follows episode. This point is made by the critic Meenakshi Mukherjee256, who, on her turn, falls back on the words of the Indian writer Raja Rao, quoted in the epigraph to this section.

The effect of the labyrinthine structure of The Thousand and One Nights is, just as in the spectacular twists and turns of the gothic novel257, to create in the listener/reader a predisposition to accept the interference of the marvellous and the supernatural because of an excess of alternative, narrative levels, and an excess of the possibilities of the plot. In both cases, the reader is confronted with narrative developments that go beyond the expectations created by a self-contained, linear, realist narrative. Being the latter the model of Western literary tradition, what appalled critics in the Arab tales (for its deviance from rules of taste and technique) was precisely the novelty that captivated a wider public, making of the translated volumes a huge success.

It is meaningful that Hariharan chose to rewrite such a widely known text when debates on identity, cultural heritage and postcolonialism are becoming mainstream. After all, this is a text that travelled from East to West, as part of the wider flow of products arriving in the colonial centre. This fact contradicts colonial mythologies, which claimed that, in terms of culture, the flow was one way, from West to East, while merchandises and raw materials travelled the other way around. It was never so. Cultural influences were always exchanged between colonial centre and colonies for centuries of their joint history. That is the case of The Thousand and One Nights, a text that stood to the test of time and displacement with an amazing vitality. When rewriting such a canonical text, Hariharan is not rewriting a piece of Eastern literature alone. It is rather a piece of world literature, which proves the existence of this mixed, shared cultural heritage. And, this cultural and artistic exchange still goes on, embodied in the contemporary journey of Hariharan’s novel, following on the footsteps of the translated Arab anthology, which travelled to the West before it, to fascinate more and more readers.


257 The gothic novel is a sub-genre of horror tales. The name “gothic” is taken from the architecture of the setting where these tales usually take place. The type of setting is one of the structural characteristics defining this sub-genre and the specific importance of these space/architectural co-ordinates is related to the constellation of themes and meaning of the sub-genre. The gothic is centred on the supernatural, curses, evil, and the irrational, which are underlined and enhanced by the shadowy atmosphere of gothic castles, with their winding stairs, secret passages, dungeons, isolation and decay. Madness and lust are related aspects of these spaces outside of the everyday, “reasonable” world.
Hariharan includes in her novel other narrative elements that hint at the long cultural exchange and shared heritage between East and West. For example, both civilisations admire exquisite art and cultural refinement and the Taj Mahal is considered one of the wonders of the world. Like the Arab tales, it was created by Eastern “know how”, and earned world recognition. Just as Hariharan rewrote The Thousand and One Nights, she also shifts her representation of the Taj Mahal, a monument to love, to unexpected grounds since, in her novel, the fact that it is a tomb (though a graceful monument) is the real symbol of the love between men and women. The Taj Mahal is a mausoleum built in the city of Agra by the Mughal emperor Shah Jahan to the memory of his beloved wife who died in childbirth in 1631. Shah Jahan and Mumtaz Mahal (which means “chosen one of the palace”) had been married since 1612. The beautiful monument on the bank of the Yamuna took the name Mahal from his princess. The mausoleum is built in pure, white marble and its interior decorations include arabesque engravings with precious stones. This exact description of the monument is reproduced in the novel, confirming the fictional invocation of a real referent that is never named.

Shah Jahan conquered his place in history for his monuments and his able leadership, but his reign ended in a humiliating way. According to Mughal tradition, there was no law of primogeniture, so, each time the emperor died, the fratricidal wars between his sons would settle who would succeed in becoming the next emperor. Shah Jahan had four sons. Aurangzeb did not wait for his father’s death. He killed two of his brothers, incarcerated his father and seized the throne for a long and ruthless reign. His austerity and his religious zeal made him decrease support for court musicians and painters and all the monumental building plans were stopped. His endless wars and his endless enemies led to the decadence of the once powerful Mughal dynasty, which did not survive long after Aurangzeb’s death. Again, this historical information is important because it is included in the main plot of Hariharan’s novel. In chapter 11, a violent dynastic succession takes place as Prince Umar (just like Aurangzeb) imprisons his father and takes hold of the palace and the city. In this fictional case, the chosen prison is the mausoleum Sultan Shahryar was building for their queen. Austere prince Umar is tired of his father’s waste of money with obsessive planning and construction of monumental buildings.

By connecting the Taj Mahal to The Thousand and One Nights and some key pieces in Indian history, all of which are included in the plot of When Dreams Travel, I want to track down the subtle way Hariharan is using, repeatedly, famous Eastern cultural references, like epic history, literature, and most achieved master pieces, to tell her tales. In this way, she is building a self-assertive argument that reclaims the contribution of “the East” to world culture, in literature, architecture and legendary history. I think this is her way of transcending old dichotomies and obsolete conceptual divisions of the world.

Presently, I will deal with one of the passages where Hariharan makes her postcolonial position explicit. However, it should be understood that the plot of When Dreams Travel clearly emphasises the feminist aims of this rewriting, in relation to other ideological discussions. Still, I think the points I made above are very blunt, although on a meta-narrative level, for it is not only the plot of the novel, but also the indirect reflection on a shared cultural heritage, with contributions from different cultures, which is her argument to make Euro-centric/colonial self-images stand on a relative position by comparison with other worth contributors to world heritage. Unfortunately, together with a set of inimitable masterpieces, sexism is the other shared cultural heritage that neither the East nor the West have managed to transcend. Both share this flaw.

“Nine Jewels for a Rani”, one of the short stories included in the novel, and an interesting piece to approach from a postcolonial point of view. When Dreams Travel is a novel divided in two parts. Part one is the main narrative. It comments on the original The Thousand and One Nights, whose plot is described in a short first section entitled “In the Embrace of Darkness” (pages 3 to 16). Then, in the next two sections, much longer than this first one, Hariharan tells her version of Shahryar and Scheherazade’s myth, “talking back” to different aspects of the original narrative presented in the first introductory section. Part two has a small introduction, and after that, seven couples of short stories are narrated. This means that Hariharan displaced the secondary narratives to another section of the text (part two) instead of integrating them, one each night, in the main narrative. That is the main structural difference between the original anthology and Hariharan’s rewriting. I think she opted for this different form of organisation because the mythical story she wants to rewrite concerns the couple Shahryar and Scheherazade. She does not rewrite the secondary narratives (each of the nights), that is, the tales that Scheherazade told the sultan. Instead, in part two, she writes new tales, which are very different from anything you find in the translated Arab collection. Hariharan’s tales are allegories of modern issues.

Another major difference framing these new tales is that they no longer are narrated in the same context as the original nocturnal tales. In the Arab collection, Scheherazade tells her tales to save her life (and other women’s lives) by entertaining her husband, the sultan. In Hariharan’s version (part two), two women, who are lovers, tell each other stories, one tale answering the others’, for seven days and seven nights. The victim’s position of the princess is replaced by companion love in the re-written anthology, for Dilshad and Dunyazad are the active story-tellers in this version. The tale I am going to analyse here is the second tale of the first night. I provide a short linear summary of the story and then I comment on the postcolonial arguments of the invoked text. There are other scattered references to postcolonial issues in all of the tales, but this was the “richest” short narrative to discuss under this frame. For the main narrative (Shahrzad and Shahryar’s tale), the postcolonial argument was made explicit above when discussing the shared cultural heritage between East and West, asserting the contribution of the East as the source of standards of the most achieved architectonic beauty, impressive literature and ancient history.

The tale “Nine Jewels for a Rani” is about a monster, the one-eyed monkey woman, who was either abandoned by embarrassed parents, or, is the sick, deformed product of an unkempt childhood in the city streets. This monster ends up being “chopped, limb by limb” by the inhabitants of Eternal City, but the severed trunk, covered with an abnormal fur and dried blood, refused to die. For days on end, it just moaned. Some of the inhabitants felt puzzled and even sorry for the thing, but others just returned with weapons and prayer beads to insult and abuse it. This violent group was of “different colours, sizes and shapes” but, in their violence and lack of compassion, “(…) it was hard to tell them apart. They could have been members of the same happy family.”

259 The structure of Hariharan’s novel: Part I, N1 (Sharyar and Sahrzad’s tale); PartII, seven pairs of short stories: N2, N3, N4…
260 Structure of the original text: N1, N2, N1, N3, N1, N4, N1…
261 Allegory: trope in which a second meaning is to be read beneath the surface story; metaphor extended into a narrative structure; short narrative that establishes a parallel between different levels of meaning; Joseph T. Shipley, Dictionary of World Literary Terms, in London, George Allen & Unwin Ltd. 1955, see also Chris Baldick, The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms, Oxford University Press, 1990.
This one-eye monkey woman was a monster and a dissident who behaved in ways that other girls would never have been allowed by their families. For instance, she loved to climb tall trees, and stare at moonlight. The name of this deviant girl was Satyasama and her story was told to the traveller Dilshad, when she arrived to Eternal City.

Satyasama, the street orphan, lost one of her eyes because she was stricken by lightening. She adapted to the loss of one eye by concentrating more on what she saw with the remaining one, and she started to sing from the top of her favourite tree. The Eternals liked her simple singing and even left some coins in a tin plate by the tree. At this stage, Eternals and monster tolerated each other well.

Eternal City was divided in two, because of nothing else but the “innocent, baby-blue sky”\(^{264}\). The sky divided the city into Eastwallas and Westwallas. The Easties loved sunrise, and worshiped the fact that light rose in the East. To celebrate this fact, they chanted “one thousand and one names in its praise”. The Westies “found this early morning devotion a bizarre and alien thing. Surely anyone with a iota of sense or piety or love for motherland would see it was the West he should turn to?” and so, they loved sunset. Life went on in Eternal City because there was enough sky for everybody, and enough sunrises and sunsets.

The problem is that both Easties and Westies believed that birdsongs could influence the moods of sunrise and sunset. As long as One-Eye sang simple, silly songs, she was left alone for “all the world loves a simple fool”. But then, two things happened: One-Eye fell in love with her Rani (the title of the wife of a sultan) and heat waves struck Eternal City.

“Rani” is the fond name One-Eye gives her lover, but, because of its connotations of power, the poor monster was tortured by Eternals who wanted to know “Who is she? What are her aliases? Is she anti-city? Anti-Sky?\(^{265}\). Because of this encounter with her Rani, which brought to One-Eye refined emotions, she started to have visions with her only eye, and she condensed what she saw in her songs, which became more elaborate and incomprehensible. The Rani wanted love songs that would “light up a mind”, so, One-Eye abided and created beautiful poems about the sky, and the light of day, and night, the things she liked the most.

The second thing that happened is that there were changes in the climate of Eternal City and heat wave after heat wave made the Eternals suffer from sunstrokes. These melted their brains and, when they cooled down, they would solidify in contorted shapes. These grotesque brains had a method: they believed they no longer could share the sky and they created new departments of Shame, Fear and Loneliness (SFL) to deal with their discomfort.

One-Eye sang of peace and of the undeniable necessity of having both sunrise and sunset, since the natural circle of day and night could not be broken. The grim departments of SFL, who could not understand poetry nor love songs, just saw danger in these songs (“Is she pro-Westwalla? Anti-Eastwalla?”). The singing monster was summoned for interrogation and she was forbidden to sing because she mixed night and day (East and West) in her songs. These oppositions were fundamental, and not to be questioned. One-eye refused to shut up and, consequently, was imprisoned for one year. After this period, she is promised freedom if she remains silent. Instead, in the first night of freedom, she gave her greatest performance ever and, at dawn, she was caught and “chopped, limb by limb”. When the Eternals return to dispose of the pieces, the trunk began to moan and “Eternals wish(ed) they were deaf, or that they could go into exile somewhere to hide their fear and self-loathing”\(^{266}\).

\(^{264}\) Ibid, Hariharan, 1999: 140.

\(^{265}\) Ibid, Hariharan, 1999: 143.

\(^{266}\) Ibid, Hariharan, 1999: 149.
This summary of one of the fourteen tales is in itself evidence of the complexity of Githa Hariharan’s writing. The sheer amount of condensed issues brought to bear in this narrative piece makes its discussion difficult to organise. Since it was the frame of postcolonial criticism that made me choose for this particular story, I will analyse it from this angle of approach.

As I said before (part I, section 2), postcolonial criticism developed from previous critical reactions from Western academies to the literature being produced in former colonies. The emergence of the modern (and postmodern) segments of these non-western literatures was deeply shaped by the independence struggle, the corresponding anti-colonial discourse and the necessary self-assertion of local cultures. A few decades after independence, the development of a strong stream of socio-political criticism by younger writers (mostly post-independence generation), who started to reflect on their current postcolonial societies (both in terms of their internal problems and international relations), replaced the previous nationalist thematic. The second of these two moments in the development of postcolonial literature has been more independent from the implied opposition between ex-colonisers and ex-colonised, breaking with the frame of mind behind Orientalism (or Africanism), racism, and nativism (the inverted, self-assertive reaction to whiteness and colonial discourses). These binary frames of mind are not a very positive or productive way to think postcolonial criticism because one keeps falling into comparative dichotomies that trigger hierarchies of status and prestige. Hariharan reacts to these binary schemes by questioning the real hold of these dichotomies since cultures, literature, goods and people always travelled across this barrier, transgressing any rigid separation. Still, Hariharan does not mean East and West are the same thing. She builds a strong self-assertive argument in her text. The point is that fundamentalist or purist barriers, as political constructions to protect power claims that feel threatened by neighbouring cultures, have to be rethought and freed from their lethal connotations. This ample horizon of thought is necessary to understand that Hariharan is not creating a “silly entertainment” when she writes such an allegory of the dichotomies of colonialism (Westwallas and Eastwallas, sunset and sunrise, day and night) in a parodic light. She is creating an argument to dismiss their relevance. As Hariharan points out, day and night always co-existed and, in their difference, are necessary and complementary. It is the deviation from natural, pacific co-existence between peoples that can only be explained by “a deformation of sane minds”. Hariharan names the forms of this deformation in her allegory. One is “racism”, as the racism against the monster. That is why the murderers of the singing monster are all colours and shapes, meaning all races can be violent or wrong. It is the willingness to be violent which is the problem, not the colour of your skin. Another form of deviance form the pacific acceptance of cultural differences is the drive of dictatorial forms of power to censor and spy on people in order to control them. Actually, the short story discussed above is quite able to list an impressive list of repressive measures: censorship, persecution, imprisonment without trial, torture and murder. What is more, this very complete enumeration of such blighted patterns of action is represented as standard practice, typical of repressive regimes. Hariharan’s economy of means to sketch such histories, and worse, represent them as a pattern (which implies wide repetition and wide recognition) is impressive, not only for its ideological impact but by the amazing control of language and narrative technique they imply.

The fact that she departs from a suggestion of a real, concrete problem, like the climate changes brought about by the hole in the ozone layer, to the fantastic belief that songs can change the weather is not innocent either. Fundamentalism looms big in the background of this tale. There are undertones of religious belief in the chants of the Easties
to praise sunrise. Besides, the false link between “singing” and “weather changes” invokes some forms of primitive magic or ritual. Finally, it is no coincidence that the ones who come to insult the moaning corpse carry “prayer beads”.

But the Westies do not score a better picture to justify their love for sunset, either. Devilishly, Hariharan uses exactly the main three arguments of colonialism, namely, “piety” (missionary zeal, the spreading of the word of God), sense (the Enlightenment, the constellation of Western traditional philosophies related to the privilege of reason and logos, in detriment of emotions and instinct) and love for motherland (nationalism and Anglophilia, in the latter case making the West the only reasonable “motherland” for those who had opted for “piety” and “sense”) to justify their preference for the sunset.

The ideological provocation inscribed on the lack of a true argument to justify these pseudo-oppositions does not deny the fact that there is day and night, or East and West, but, simply, that to think that the two cannot co-exist is an artificial idea promoted by ideological sectors who are afraid of losing their ground (the departments of Shame, Fear and Loneliness, or, if you want, inter/intra-national competition for power and exclusion of rivals). Just as fundamentalism and colonialism are insane enterprises for wanting to suppress “otherness”, whose existence and necessity are unsurpassable, Hariharan explores in this short story the pathetic of all the violence inflicted on the poor monster who just wants to sing her visions as love songs.

On the other hand, the monster woman is indeed supernatural, as its “undeath” proves. The text suggests that the monster was picked, like a pawn of God, to sing truth, so that she could “light up” (meaning “bring knowledge”, “provide awareness”) the minds of the Eternals. It is curious to note that Hariharan always follows the “rules” of story-telling as they are implied in the traditional fantastic tales of The Thousand and One Nights. In these ancient Eastern tales, there is a supernatural sphere, which is inhabited by jinn’s, magicians, witches, spirits (not necessarily of a dead person), ghosts and fairies. This supernatural world interferes with the everyday, human world, and it picks its favourites and chosen ones. These chosen humans, very often bear a bodily mark or a sign of this preference. The circumstances of birth may also contain some of these marks, often enumerated by wise man or prophets, and current among the people as forms of folklore or superstition. The fact that One-Eye loses one sight by lightening suggests divine intervention, especially because it is this physical damage that opens the “visionary eye”. It is current in the East, and also among the gypsies, the belief that women have a third eye, an “eye of the mind”, which allows them to see beyond appearances and have access to knowledge hidden from men. It is because of this old belief that women still wear a red dot in the middle of their foreheads, in-between the eyes. But, there are other elements that create in the reader the notion that One-Eye is unique. She is, physically, a monster, a deviant, and an abnormality. That the minus in one dimension would be compensated by a surplus in another is a general narrative formula that one already finds in folk tales and in ancient classical myths. For example, Achilles and Samson had a weak spot (respectively the heel and the hair) to make up for their extraordinary gifts. This widely established narrative formula allows me to claim One-Eye Satyasama as a seer, unaware of her powers.

The piece of wisdom One-Eye sings to the Eternals (and the readers) is a riddle which underlines the way night and day complement each other, just as precious stones fit a structure of gold to make a necklace (the jewels for the Rani). This complementary nature of day and night, or East and West, is not the product of homogeneity nor fusion, but it allows for peaceful co-existence and even moments of productive contact:

“So the Eastwallas and the Westwallas muddled along somehow. Occasionally they even managed a few memorable celebrations together: there were some Easties and Westies who actually
got together at midday or midnight. They made laws and music and paintings and buildings and babies and business.”

(Hariharan, 1999: 141)

To some “deviant minds”, both Easties and Westies full of prejudice and fear, it is necessary to deny the possibility of the pacific (and necessary) co-existence of different peoples, sharing the same earth, water and sky as we always did. On the contrary, to the fool/artist, the one illuminated by supernatural intervention, it is perfectly possible to praise and sing of the joined contributions of different peoples whose peaceful existence is as precious as the finest piece of jewellery.

II.6 Shahrzad and her Followers: Dunyazad and Dilshad

The names I used for the title of this section (Shahrzad, Dunyazad and Dilshad) are the names of the three main characters in Githa Hariharan’s When Dreams Travel. They are women story-tellers, linked to each other by bonds of family, love and the palace life. Because of particular circumstances in their lives, they understand the power, the pleasure and the responsibility of story-telling and, each in her own way, carry out this activity, as an entertaining gift for others, as wise lessons in life and as a form of empowerment to manipulate opponents.

Before I can proceed with my analysis of Hariharan’s text, I think it is important to establish some elements of the plot of the original main narrative of The Thousand and One Nights, as I found it in a critical edition267, after a three volume collection from 1812, which reproduces the standard version, current in England, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In the original version, two brothers, the sultans of different cities, discover that their wives are adulterous. It is important to note that the lovers of the sultan’s wives are always lower in social rank, actually, slaves or “one of the meanest officers of the household”268. As revenge for adultery, wives, lovers and attending slaves are killed in a blood thirsty rage to make up for this wrong. Eventually, one of the brothers, sultan Schahriar, convinced that no woman is chaste, decides to marry a virgin every night and have her killed in the morning, so as to prevent any “disloyalty”. In the city where this carnage takes place, the sultan’s visier had two daughters: Scheherazade, and the youngest, Dinarzade. Scheherazade was witty, courageous, had read in abundance, had a prodigious memory and had applied herself to philosophy, physic, history and the liberal arts. Besides, she was a “perfect beauty” and no one doubted her “solid virtue”. She asked her father to propose her to the sultan because she had a “design to stop the course of that barbarity (...) upon the families of this city”269. As part of Scheherazade’s plan, her younger sister Dinarzade is to play a role:

“As soon as I come to the sultan, I will pray him to allow you to lie in the bride-chamber, that I may enjoy your company this one night more. If I obtain that favour, as I hope to do, remember to awake me to-morrow, an hour before day, and to address me in these or some such words: my sister, if you be not asleep, I pray you, that till day break (...) you would tell me one of the fine stories of which you have read so many.”

(Oxford World’s Classics, 1996: 16)

According to the canonised text, every night, at dawn, Scheherazade starts narrating a tale, full of adventures, suspense and magic. The sultan is so fascinated by the tale that he postpones Scheherazade’s execution till he has heard the end of her story. Of course, narrating for her life, Scheherazade makes one tale lead to the next, weaving a continuous thread that makes her survive for one thousand and one nights, after which the sultan renounces his barbarous vow and deems Scheherazade the saviour of many other damsels that would be sacrificed to his “unjust resentment” 270.

The above summary of the main narrative of the original Arab collection establishes several of the points that Hariharan deconstructs and comments upon through her re-writing.

While the original text is divided into numbered nights (each a secondary narrative, N1 – n2 – N1 – n3 – N1 – n4….) inserted in the main narrative (Schahriar and Scheherazade’s story), in Hariharan’s version, the reader gets the full development of the main narrative (part one) before the separate set of fourteen tales organised in seven pairs (part two).

The links between the different narrative lines also work differently. In the ancient collection, the story of Scheherazade and the sultan works as a frame to give coherence and continuity to the whole bunch of different stories inserted on the main narrative. In Hariharan’s text, each of the seven tales told by Dunyazad comments on, or develops, one aspect of the previous Shahryar/Shahrzad’s narrative. Dilshad’s seven answers are closer to the scattered spirit of the tales of the original collection, being more independent from the main narrative.

Hariharan’s novel starts very much in the same way as I started this section, with a summary of the original tale of sultan Shahryar and his wife, the able Shahrzad. This sixteen pages long section is called “In the embrace of Darkness”, a title that underlines a nocturnal setting as the right time for story telling, by opposition to “real life” that happens during the day (the opposition between day and night, with different connotations, is one of the motifs of the novel). This introductory section invokes the supposed light character of the original anthology of translated tales. It is presented as a static play, more of a tableau vivant. This static scene features two women and two men. Sultan Shahryar is in bed with his wife Shahrzad and he is listening to the tale she is telling. Next to the bed, on the floor, sits Dunyazad, Shahrzad’s younger sister, waiting for the right moment to say her short (but vital) lines, which allow the story-teller go on with her tales; a bit further, sits Zaman, the sultan’s younger brother. In this static scene, Shahrzad is the only character gifted with movement. Shahryar has the right between life and death. Dunyazad is the helper, the right hand of the heroine. Zaman is the opponent, the one who is instigating Shahryar’s prejudice against women.

Hariharan has reduced the narrative to a sort of primary scheme, an archetype of an endlessly repeated scene, going on forever. Hence the static representation of “this self-absorbed scene (which) lives on, shamelessly immortal” 271. In this primal scene, the two masculine characters are marked by silence, which is a feature that opposes them to the story-teller (and which they share with Dunyazad). Their silence however is marked by the position of power of the sultan, and the dripping sword held by the second man. Both men can be potential murderers. The inherent association between masculinity and violence is coherent with the pattern developed in the long canonised version of The Thousand and One Nights. As Hariharan points out in her own re-writing, the main male characters are always part of a dynasty, which passes power on, from father to son. And power is so much the

basis of definition of male identity that, at its expense, male characters are often emptied of any real affective life. During the plot of most pieces, brothers are busy carrying on their legacy (“to rule, to mount, steer, lord over”) as kings, fulfilling the role expected of them. Shahzaman means “shah of time, ruler of the age”, Shahryar means “friend of the city, master of the city”\textsuperscript{272}. Nevertheless, under closer scrutiny, this pair of rulers, seizers of power, dispensers of justice, does not seem to live up to their roles. Hariharan’s Zaman (Shahrazad’s opponent, with the dripping sword) is portrayed as a deeply insecure and suspicious man, terribly afraid of the night/dark. This fear of the night is explained in a tale, in part two (“The Adventures of a Sultan”), as fear of desire, sexual insecurity, which in terms of the construction of male identities means lack of “energy”, “strength” or “manly qualities’. Zaman’s fear of not living up to his role, as a ruler, is condensed in his lack of confidence on his virility. Hence, his hatred and suspicion of women, this “dark continent” he cannot master.

The connection between sexuality and power is continuously reiterated in the The Thousand and One Nights. As Hariharan’s narrator points out, in all the versions of the tales the lover of the adulterous queen is always someone lower in social rank than the husband. Note that any other nobleman will not do. The necessary difference in class is a displaced translation of a gender notion that equates “desire” with “power”. If a woman asserts her feminine desire, she has to have a “weak(er) man”. Coherently, in the version I summarised above, the queen is found with “one of the meanest officers of the household”\textsuperscript{273}. Women’s desire is then connoted with a threat that can un-man rulers and erode their claim to power. Again, that is why in the canonised story, the brothers leave the palace for an obscure life once they are confronted with the spectacle of their wives/queens adultery. If betrayed by their women, who, through their devices have proved able and clever enough to fool them, these two princes no longer consider themselves fit to rule. They simply lose face. One can only conclude that the basis of identity to rule, from a masculine, dynastic point of view is neither wisdom nor the ability to promote justice: it is sheer competition with women. That the nature of women’s betrayal is sexual is only logical if one considers they were not allowed access to any aspect of public life. Even so…from their private realm, women’s behaviour could un-man the most powerful of kings.

If insecurity eliminates Zaman as a heroic character, barbarian violence and despotism finish with Shahryar. How can a king who demands the sacrifice of a virgin every night be respected or admired by his people? In her version of this old tale, Hariharan hints at the serious threats of rebellion Shahryar had to face by placing the sultan’s chamber in the dungeons of the palace, the only place where he felt safe from the anger of fathers and brothers intent on avenging their daughters and sisters\textsuperscript{274}. The only probable heroine left in charge of this initial tableau vivant is Shahrazad, the holder of the scene, the one “gifted with movement”\textsuperscript{275} ...“talking for her life”. In spite of her situation, this Shahrazad is rather the gambler than the victim, and she is not frightened at all:

“(…) 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. (…) Shahrazad’s eyes turn shrewd;”

(1999: 6, 7)

\textsuperscript{272} Ibid, Hariharan 1999: 9.
\textsuperscript{273} Ibid, 1996 (1812): 2.
\textsuperscript{274} Ibid, 1999: 67.
\textsuperscript{275} Ibid, 1999: 7.
Hariharan’s Shahrzad is a magnificent fighter, who knows she holds the destiny of many other women in her tongue. Her daring has a measure of pleasure, of love for risk-taking that goes beyond the self-sacrificial spirit of the martyr. She has been well re-named, this Shahrzad, “born of the city”, “clever, ambitious and quick-tongued”\(^\text{276}\). “Born of the city” is a name that stands in opposition to “master of the city” (Shahryar), and to “chosen one of the palace” (Mumtaz Mahal, the princess buried in the Taj Mahal). Both the ruler and “the chosen one” are creatures of the palace, closing ranks with institutional power. Shahrzad, by contrast, cares for the city, for the common people’s lives, the ones she is trying to save from the despotic sultan.

The opposition between city and palace is, like day and night, another of the main motifs of Hariharan’s narrative, but while the night complements the day, the palace does not “complement” the city. The palace rules and abuses the city. One of the most meaningful passages to describe this difference of positions between palace and city represents them as two geographically separated entities, being the city the view ‘below’ the high roof of the palace. The vertical angle from above, to look at the city, reproduces the social hierarchies dividing them. This passage happens in the tale “The Palace Thief”, which is a symbolical title, for this tale is about Prince Umar, Shahrzad’s and Shahryar’s heir, the one who will imprison his father (in the tomb he was making for his mother) and take power in his hands, thus stealing authority away from the palace minded, spoilt, irresponsible sultan. In the tale, little prince Umar asks Nadeem, the executioner (one of his few friends), “What is the city like? I mean, your city, the one in which people lead ordinary, humble lives?”\(^\text{277}\). As an answer, Nadeem takes his friend to the palace roof and, with a restraining hand on the prince’s shoulder, which Umar “gently shook off”, the executioner let the child look down:

“The city lay below them, a different world. It was enormous, varied. The city had grown and spilt over, well beyond its walls. The symmetrical perfection of its palatial centre had worn out even in the circles that enclosed it and protected it from its people. Umar was a little repelled by the city’s disorderly look, and the apathy with which it bore its history of plunder. He could feel, even at this distance, the regular beat of its enduring heart and the quiet strength of its mundane life. Its life had gone on for years, before he was conceived, and it would carry on after him. The secret was that though people lined up for parades, though they kissed the ground before the royals and lit up their streets to celebrate regal whims, the citizens’ daily lives had a focus and logic and meaning independent of palatial marvels or fears. Umar, reared on the splendours of the palace, on its over-rich diet, came face to face with the scarred city and its banal, daily struggle for bread, and he was moved to tears.”

\(1999: 225\)

This poetic description of the city, as different from and opposed to the palace, becomes a recurrent motif that reappears in different tales. Hariharan also personifies the spirit of the palace, an ever changing, malevolent figure. This spirit, or logic of the palace, haunts everyone inside it, making his graceless presence felt through nightmares and visions. Although the gender of this spirit is ambiguous, he is eventually personified as a palace-man, the slave buyer who picks Dilshad for the palace’s harem. He is “old, hoary with a gravely skin of weather-beaten stone. His greying marble dome bulges with an all-seeing eye. He wears innumerable layers of clothing, bits and pieces of many costumes, fugitive scraps of different histories”\(^\text{278}\). This spirit of the palace, like Zaman, is no ally of Shahrzad. However,

\(^{276}\) Ibid, 1999: 16.
\(^{277}\) Ibid, 1999: 223.
\(^{278}\) Ibid, 1999: 233.
it is not them who she has to fear. It is Shahryar, the ruler of the city, who can give the command that will murder her.

It may seem to the reader that I am giving too much room in this analysis to quotes of Hariharan’s text, but her greatest achievement in terms of feminist intervention is to reconstruct a powerful myth. The projection of a myth has to be utterly seductive, powerful, strong, the kind of image that has the power to hold on to your imagination. Hence, I cannot refrain from providing a glimpse of this “enchanting” writing style, or I will not make justice to the power of this novel.

Though Hariharan summarises the canonised version of the tales in her initial section, she mercilessly explores pathetic details in the original text, while re-telling it. For instance, Hariharan considers the complex internal life of the main male characters, concluding that their broken hearts heal the moment they discover there is a husband who has been more abused than them. Then, pride is the only feeling that structures their emotional lives. Secondly, Shahryar’s scheme to kill all the new wives before they can have the opportunity to be adulterous could simply have been replaced by celibacy, if he feels so bad against women. This alternative does not occur to the bright sultan. This ironical deconstruction of the original, canonised version, is important to erode its credibility and assert the re-writing, Hariharan performs. In fact, to quote the original version is also necessary to mark with accuracy the distance of When Dreams Travel from the established, known text.

Apart from ironical deconstruction, the first innovation, or deviation, from the canonised (1812) version of these tales is that Hariharan starts her “story-telling” after the thousand and one nights are over, when Shahrzad reconciles sultan Shahryar to womankind and order is established again. According to the narrative patterns of story-telling, the conflict is settled, and the tale is finished. But this is the cue to let Hariharan’s imagination in. She closes her summary of the canonised version with the following words: “The story ends on stage. Off-stage it has just begun.”279. This is when Hariharan’s feminist re-writing of the legendary tales starts, exactly at the moment the narrative of the original text stopped. But there is more to this transition. So far we have been “on stage” looking at an old, static story. Off stage, in “real/fictional life”, a new story is about to start, and this time it is women’s version of the tale that is going to be told…

Mind that in this fantastic novel there is no realist referent in terms of space (like for The God of Small Things, Kerala, Southern India) and time (in Rich Like Us, Indira Gandhi’s Emergency Regime). Contrary to the other two previous writers, Hariharan writes a fantastic text, which does not invoke a specific location, though the text is by no means incoherent (it fabricates its own world). The suspension of a time/space realist referent does not cancel the ability of literature to carry on effective forms of social criticism. The difference in relation to the other two more realist texts is that Hariharan’s set of arguments are constructed as a sort of allegory instead of composing a point of view on a certain postcolonial location.

Hariharan’s narrative “off stage”, starts by questioning the meaning of “travelling” and “dreaming”, two words in the title When Dreams Travel. Shahryar wants to know where Shahrzad got inspiration for all her amazing tales. This is her answer:

“I don’t have a sword, so it seems I cannot rule. I cannot rule, I cannot travel, I don’t care to weep. But I can dream. (…) My dreams? They’re nothing – just a rubbishy pile of rough, uncut

Shahrzad refrains from giving the sultan a straight-forward answer, because as she says bluntly, only those at risk should be entitled to understand the dreams that make up for the absence of a sword (a clear enough phallic symbol, associated to power as violence). Then, “to dream”, in this novel, is a form of wisdom passed on between women. Although not allowed to travel physically, women always took to travel through imagination and what has been told and repeated as idle entertainment is, in fact, a manual for survival280, secretly kept away from men. Shahrzad’s story itself shows that dreams and imagination can make women survive.

And dreams travel, in narratives, told and (re)written. Just as Shahrzad’s named was “reconstructed by men across the seas”, overlapping sexism and colonialism on a double frame of misreading, and became corrupted from Shahrzad, the city born whose “fate was tied up with her city’s well-being” to Scheherazade, “pretty tinsel in a child’s treasure chest”, the meaning of her stories was equally corrupted to “innocuous bedtime stories dressed in fabulous clothes”281. But Shahrzad and her tale are survivors, they became myth, travelling across cultures and time, to reach nowadays’ women (still, “the powerless [who] must have a dream or two, dreams that break walls, dreams that go through walls as if they are powerless”). In this way, Hariharan reclaims, explicitly, a tradition of women’s wisdom in story-telling282, linking the corruption of the original text (possibly feminist) to its Western colonisation, as “women, dreams and stories are transported from India to Persia to Arabia to France to England”283. This is, as I state above, the precise history of the text The Thousand and One Nights until it reached the Western public through translation (there is an obvious anti-colonial argument here, as colonisation is equated with corruption). Hariharan’s mythical argument is that it is time the real nature of these tales is “corrected” to make justice to Shahrzad’s memory, celebrating the fact it has survived long enough, through a chain of women story-tellers, to beat the “official” version in the end.

The first two disciples who inherit Shahrzad’s dreams are her younger sister Dunyazad and her personal slave Dilshad. It is these two women, and their search for Shahrzad, that become the main elements in the structure of the plot of When Dreams Travel.

The first difference that marks the first day after the thousand and one nights from the precious ones is that the time to tell stories is over. No woman is at risk any longer, Shahryar will rule the city, and Shahrzad can disappear into the harem. In this way, order is established and the conflict that triggers the plot is settled. But…Hariharan changes the horizon of expectations for the possible ending of the tale by asking, simply, what happened to Shahrzad after her moment of glory? Could she, such an extreme lover of risk and power games, be ever content with the domestic life of motherhood and wifehood, lost to the world and the city, behind the close doors of the harem? This question is crucial to understand the

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280 In her first novel, The Thousand Faces of Night, (1992), Githa Hariharan represents story-telling as a feminine tradition, passed on among women, in this case from grandmother to grand-daughter and from old servant to young mistress. The connection between story-telling, self-awareness and survival strategies is already central in this first text. (The Thousand Faces of Night, Penguin Books India, New Delhi, 1992.)


feminist struggle at stake in re-writing literary (and other) traditions. How could anyone like Shahrzad be content with domesticity, how would someone with the spirit of the most daring warrior cut herself/himself down to the corset of women’s protected, quiet existence? Hariharan is quite clear about Shahrzad’s love for risk. In the first tale/night told by Dunyazad, the reader is brought inside the harem, to meet Shahrzad, swollen by pregnancy, trying to prepare her performance of that evening. Meanwhile, her body starts the process of giving birth to the baby inside her. Shahrzad is scared and impatient. What if her body fails her? Dunyazad, in solidarity, concern for the city women (and also curiosity for the sultan) offers to take her sister’s place in the bed of the sultan, but Shahrzad will not allow that. Dunyazad then proposes to kill the sultan. Since Shahrzad has given birth to a male heir, they have what they need to keep order in the palace and the city. They can dispose of Shahryar. Shahrzad will not accept this alternative either. It is then, in this desperate situation, that Dunyazad realises the extent of her sister’s addiction to danger, her pleasure in manipulating Shahryar each and every night, and, sadly, her doom if she succeeds in her intent of redeeming him. What will happen then, when the excitement to play with death is over? What can live up to that experience? Shahrzad’s love for danger makes of her a perfect figuration for liberated patterns of feminine identity because she represents, together with her self-assertive wit and saviour behaviour, a model of personality on which domesticity looks like the cruelty it is for less quiet and family minded spirits. It is like locking a good jinn in a household bottle.

Another shift of perspective in When Dreams Travel, in relation to the original (1812) version of the tales, is the change in main character, for Hariharan chose to build her plot around the forgotten sister of Shahrzad, younger Dunyazad. This time, the plot starts when Dunyazad is informed of Shahrzad’s death. This sad event is the beginning of new journeys, and new nights, with Dunyazad’s departure from her home city to find out what happened to her sister, emulating the previous journey in the canonised version, when the younger sultan receives an invitation to visit his brother. Only this time, it is two sisters and not two brothers, who are searching for each other.

Dunyazad, “born of the world”, travels secretly to Shahabad, in search for the answer to a suspicion she dares not formulate, though the reader can guess it. She fears the murderous sultan may have something to do with this sudden death. The quest for Dunyazad is to establish how and why Shahrzad died, avenging her, if that is the case.

By considering primarily women’s views and lives in this re-written version of the tales it is as if Hariharan’s were guessing and re-inventing everything that could have possibly been omitted from a previous women’s collection, truncated and corrupted by misogynous interference. Within the frame of the plot, this feminine version actually exists, written first hand by the sultan’s visier who was called to take note of Shahrzad’s stories (the first masculine hand intervening in a woman’s oral text).

When Dreams Travel offers two possibilities for Shahrzad’s post-glory destiny, and, until the end, we are not told which one is to be taken as the true answer for Shahrzad’s disappearance. The second alternative follows Shahrazad growing old, and decaying in the empty life of the harem. This possibility takes the reader to the very last tale of the novel, and I will let it rest for the time being.

The other (the first) possibility is introduced by the discovery of a beautiful ivory mirror among Shahrzad’s things. It is Dilshad, “Happy Heart”, the slave appointed to take care of Dunyazad, who deliberately shows her this object, hinting at the existence of a story connected to it. Dilshad has a boyish body and a cunning look of ageless witch, which stir desire in Dunyazad…
Who gave the mirror to Shahrzad? Dilshad, who has been Shahrzad’s slave, starts with a tentative “there was a young man, a traveller and a foreigner who could tell tales of his travels as merchant”, which tells the whole tale, before it is told. Frustrated after the first sentence that escaped her lips, Dilshad reflects she is still not up to the challenge of becoming one of Shahrzad’s followers. This scene is important to underline that Shahrzad is not only the subject matter of tales, but that her tale itself is the source of inspiration for other women, in this case, encouraging the young slave to become a story-teller herself. This is an instance of the ways in which liberating myths (or figurations) can provide role models.

The hint of romance that escaped Dilshad’s lips inspires Dunyazad to have a vision of Shahrzad’s with her young man, happily smiling, looking younger in a carefree mood. Again, Hariharan is writing the unwritten, evoking, through this unexpected twist in the plot, the canonised narrative where the adulterous wife, with a lover from lower social rank, un-mans her despotic high-class husband. This narrative hypothesis explains Shahrzad’s sudden disappearance as a case of desertion, publicly translated as the announcement of the queen’s death. That is why Dunyazad never finds anyone who has seen the body or knows where the body is.

A few days later, Dunyazad has a dream (remarkably similar to the vision) and a second time she sees her sister laughing, free from the palace, with her young companion, who may be “a commoner in the company of royals, but he is no plaything”\textsuperscript{284}. The reference to the lower social class of the lover is very important. It falls in the tradition of the original stories of adultery, but this is a different story for it is women’s version: Shahrzad does get away with it, by leaving the palace before she can be caught and “punished”. The point here is not adultery but rather that Shahrzad dared to leave the palace (a symbol of masculine, patriarchal power) escaping the control the husband was supposed to have over her.

Since Hariharan’s novel stakes a claim to women’s dreams and story telling as lessons of survival, I think one should not dismiss Dunyazad’s dream and vision as false. The existence of “a young man” would indeed explain the sudden news of Shahrzad’s “death”/ “disappearance”. Besides, there is another indirect piece of internal evidence in the structure of the novel: a tale that repeats this same story, only with different “fictional characters”, exactly as it happens with the weaving of story tales inspired by life (remember the above reference to allegory). As I said previously, several of the tales in the second part of Hariharan’s novel comment and expand on the rewriting of the main narrative. The tale “The Woman Under the Deadly Skin” (fourth night, part two) reproduces the narrative situation of Shahrzad, escaping from the palace to join a lower class lover.

Poison Skin is recruited by a palace-man to be used as a spy. She drinks poison everyday, until her skin had such a concentrated dose that it kills her lovers. The tale contains two versions of the destiny of Poison Skin (just as it happened with Shahrzad), once she realised what was expected of her. The scholarly, written version of the tale, says Poison Skin opted to live the life of a recluse (the harem?), in chastity, to avoid killing the prince she was ordered to seduce. But there is a popular oral version, narrated by a young shepherd, which says that Poison Skin was only poisoning as long as she was making love to warriors in the enemy camp. One day, she decided to run away from the palace that employed her services and she met a handsome goatherd who had been bitten by a snake and was about to die. Out of compassion, she made love to him, feeling she could not do more damage. He did not die. Poison Skin hence discovered she was not poisoning to the many passionate and rustic lovers she had. It was sexuality with high-ranking partners that was deadly.

\textsuperscript{284} Ibid, 1999: 97.
Similarly, Shahrzad’s escape from the palace is a liberating alternative to the secluded life she has in the harem, where she is neither allowed the simple pleasures of a normal life of her own, nor has she any share in public power to compensate for her exclusion from the life of the city.

Dunyazad does not know how to decide between the possibility of a hasty, invented death to hide the escape of a runaway wife, or the credibility of the official story claiming that a decaying, depressed Shahrzad really took ill and died quickly. But another issue delays Dunyazad, prolonging her days (and dreams) in the palace. She cannot make up her mind between her attraction for Dilshad and Shahryar. Prince Umar provokes a decision by inviting his aunt to join a coup d’état to depose Shahryar. Unlike Shahrzad, Prince Umar is no liberator of the city. He only wants to replace his father’s folly for another kind of order, responding to “the call of God”: He is “fundamentally austere”, another Aurangzeb in the making. Dunyazad drifts into complicity with her nephew to overthrow Shahryar and this political choice implies a sexual option for Dilshad as her new lover and companion instead of Shahryar. The moment Dunyazad settles her political and affective alliances, she seems to be in peace with the death/disappearance of her sister Shahrzad as if she had achieved what dreams and visions had been urging her to do. This “inner peace” means the real source of anxiety was not to discover what may have happened to Shahrzad but to make sure that Shahryar, who closed is wife in the harem out of jealousy for her political wit and her growing popularity with people, does not win in the end.

The ambiguity of the narrative concerning Shahrzad’s disappearance makes sense, as myths are not supposed “to die”. There are, nevertheless, extensive references to Shahrzad’s tomb. As it fits a truly legendary character, Shahryar wants to build the most beautiful tomb to his wife, to be visited by everybody (and as Dunyazad and Dilshad suspect, to try to clean his name in history with this late display of affection). On her first night in the palace, Dunyazad dreams she is visiting her sister’s tomb. On this magnificent grave, covered with a “sheet of living gems from one end of the room to the other, a sheet that lilts with a subtle, rhythmic movement, like a carpet of flowing water” she finds, among these exquisite tokens of grief, the tablet with Shahrzad’s epitaph. It reads:

“Here lies Shahrzad, Beloved consort of sultan Shahryar, Daughter of the chief Wazir to the sultan of Shahabad, mother of Prince Umar and the departed prince Jaffar.”

(1999: 49)

Dunyazad wakes up screaming in desperation as her hands search for the missing inscription in terms of love and complicity: “sister of”. This absence, like the omitted parts of the tales Hariharan imagines to re-cover, tells a history of effacement and invisibility for women, from generation to generation. The only exception is the victim’s role: there is a whole gallery of female martyrs in popular culture. Ironically, Hariharan translates this visibility of the role model as victim to a children’s game called “the Martyr’s Walk”, which is Shahrzad and Dunyazad’s favourite game as little girls. They play this game out of the desire to be heroines, like boys, but for women or girls, the only available stories that promise any terror and excitement as central characters imply martyrdom at the hands of a man with something sharp on his hands. Thinking in this way, they pretend they have to confront their killer, preparing to die. The difference between Dunyazad and Shahzad, when

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286 According to the patterns of story-telling, the heroine is saved by the intervention of the hero, with whom she is in love. In this case, action and centre stage belong to the male hero. See Vladimir Propp, Morphologie du Conte, Gallimard, Paris, 1970.
they play the martyr’s game, is the latter’s “greed for life”, which makes her see her walk in a different light than the usual victims. For Shahrzad, no matter how, on what grounds, the aim of the game is not public recognition for martyrdom. It is rather to find a way around her executioner.

The dream with Shahrzad’s tomb, and the scattered references to the Martyr’s walk, combine with the construction of a magnificent tomb (a clear invocation of the Taj Mahal) to bring reflection on the possibility of Shahrzad’s death. If that is the case, it is curious that the body is never found or seen by anyone and there are no clear clues concerning the motive and circumstances of the death of the queen. It is also remarkable that widowed Shahryar never mentions memories of Shahrzad or of their moments together but only talks of his own grief and the magnificent tomb he is building as a monument to their “rare love”. This monument provokes different reactions: Dunyazad only sees the gift of a tomb, meaning, dead/lethal love; the sultan just wants to live up to his father, who had the city of Shahabad built on the spot he chose; Dilshad thinks of the taxes people are paying and the practice of enforced labour. Where Dunyazad sees negativity and Dilshad displays class awareness, Shahryar, oblivious of his people’s suffering and Shahrzad’s actual absence muses “what colour is a dream?” once more severed from any expression of emotional life, maturity or wisdom.

In the intimacy of their first night together, Dunyazad dares to ask Dilshad if the strange, fur coated mark on the side of her mouth is a birthmark. Dilshad answers it was a gift from Satyasama, a one-eyed woman poet. The story of the one-eyed woman poet, analysed in the previous section, is thus included in the main narrative sequence. This is an example of the internal repetition of structures and elements between the main narrative and the tales, which creates a meta-level of coherence between the different narratives included in this text. That is why it is a novel and not an anthology of short stories, because there is a way you can actually insert most of the tales in the past of the main narrative, or as a sort of expansion on a minor detail mentioned in the main narrative.

The concluding sections of Hariharan’s re-telling of the initial tableau vivant leave the reader with a lesbian couple, an alternative that was erased from the set of possibilities of the initial archetype. Another point is that both Dunyazad and Dilshad break free from the palace and its patriarchal order, becoming nomad story-tellers as a way of life. As a reword for Dunyazad and Dilshad’s part in the imprisonment of Shahryar (they are the ones who take him on a visit to his wife’s tomb), Prince Umar gives Dilshad the written version of Shahrzad’s tales (as recorded by the sultan’s chronicler) and her freedom. With this material in hand, the two disciples of Shahrzad sit down to train their voices and skills to the new role. Dunyazad’s tales are about her family, reproducing themes and settings that have captivated most women writers who took up the political dimensions of private lives as means to sparkle feminist awareness. She tells a tale about her sister (which I will analyse below), her brother-in-law (Shahryar), her father (the wazir), her husband (Zaman), her nephew (prince Umar), her lover (Dilshad) and herself (Dunyazad). With this list of main characters, it is easier to make more concrete my earlier point, namely, that Dunyazad tales are extensions or comments on the main narrative, rewritten in part one. Dilshad, now a one-eyed story-teller (she accidentally lost her sight in the fight during Shahryar’s imprisonment)

288 It would be interesting to analyse this text from the point of view of postmodernism for there are several features of the novel that would fit such a frame of analysis. The most obvious postmodern feature is the fact that it is a re-writing of a previous, widely established text, but from a confrontational point of view which erodes the ideological impact of the original. Besides, the repetition of narrative structures, constructing a multilayered, self-replicating narrative (made of the different tales) follows a postmodern aesthetic.
with Satyasama’s mark on her mouth, starts by telling the tale of (Satyasama) the one eye monkey woman, until she learns to tell the tales of her own travels. Dilshad’s adventures teach her about the inherent rivalry and violence in feelings of brotherhood and the hegemonic discourses sanctioned by established myths, which always overlap sexism with aristocratic/high caste privilege. Her last tale is about Shahrzad, like the first one told by Dunyazad. It is proper, and sensitive, that her inheritors should start and finish this collection of tales with homage to Shahrzad, their precursor and inspiration.

On the last tale, told by Dilshad, Shahrzad is old and decrepit, making her journeys between pot and bed with the aid of disgusted slaves (that is the second possible ending for this character). After so many sleepless nights, Shahrzad no longer can sleep. That is her curse. Alone, widowed, abandoned by all her friends, waiting for death in the harem, she recalls her dreams of becoming a famous story-teller and how she achieved this. Nevertheless, there are less pleasing memories: through time, Shahrzad has been realising that stories that are being told as her invention, are not hers. Her stories have been colonised and someone else’s moralist themes are there. Shahrzad, always the fighter, considers counter-action. She can go teaching her tales to younger girls, but, she realises with a grimace, she cannot fight for them. They will have to struggle for themselves when their turn comes. The thousand and one nights are not over after all. The old axe is only waiting to be “freshly sharpened”.

Hariharan’s novel projects again an old myth, but with a feminist adaptation. Both the canonised version and this re-writing prove that Shahrzad’s myth lives on, as one of the narratives praising women’s intelligence and solidarity. Myths are symbolical narratives containing role models and inculcating a set of values on its audience. They are one example of what Homi Bhabha called the pedagogic strategies to narrate collective identity (see section I.1.2 on this). In this way, they are key references that interfere with unconscious life, a sort of primordial archetypes with a strong emotional appeal. Myths also become stereotypes, after which one replicates poses, style or behaviour. In this sense, myths are very close to Braidotti’s definition of figurations (see section I.1.1), especially if they invoke a politically charged location or, as it is the case, a specific (feminist) struggle. 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. This is not to say that myths are, always, openly pedagogic. They are complex narratives, ambiguous and multi-layered, allowing diverse interpretations. Still, they transmit an objective model of behaviour and promote certain values or attitudes. 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. Secondly, the bond, between the sisters Shahrzad and Dunyazad, and the sisterhood of story-tellers across time and space, constitutes examples of “healed narcissism” promoting women’s self-esteem. Last, but not the least, the women characters created by Hariharan are serious candidates to think new forms of liberated feminist identity, along patterns of resistance, survival, imaginative choices and solidarity, leading to unexpected life stories.