

Myth, History and Identity

A Study of The Major Works of Githa Hariharan

Githa Hariharan, a reputed novelist concerns with feminist revisionist thinking and writing. She uses the deconstructive approach of rereading, rewriting and reinterpreting the past. Revisioning the past has been a recurrent literary trend in contemporary feminist writing in India. As a recent consciousness of writing, it looks back to the past to bridge the gap between the past and present experiences of women. Hariharan's fiction aims at deconstruction and reconstruction of myth, tale, history and legend. Her revisionary writing focuses on tracing the female suppressed experiences, unexplored meaning and discovery of female self. Another noteworthy point is that it tries to create an ideological and historical link with the past and thereby it addresses the contemporary social and personal predicaments. Hariharan is highly an innovative writer who writes with subtle language, humour and tenderness (Michael Ondaatje).

Hariharan's revisionist fiction has rethought of myths, tales and histories in subaltern perspective or from the marginal point of view. Myth is not simply what it is defined as unreal or false or irrational but a "superior reasoning" (Roland Barthes) or ideological construction (Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak). On the other hand, Jung defines myth as 'collective consciousness'. Again, Herder considers myth as an allegory and he aligns it with the evolution of human consciousness. Myth has a spectrum of meanings as it stands for symbolic values, ethics, aesthetics, metaphor, speculation or sign etc. Indeed, myth is literature

created by the primitive consciousness or unconsciousness to explain inexpressibility and hold worldviews. Most often they are referred and invoked in daily discussions and communication to make certain points of view or worldviews. In course of time, this primitive tradition is replaced by history and modern literature. Hence, revisionary writing reviews on values, ethics, aesthetics, metaphor, speculation or sign and ideologies from present perspectives.

Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night* marks some transtextual elements of Indian classical literatures, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. The mythical figures like Amba, Ganga, Gandhari, and Sita have been revisited and reinterpreted from a feminist perspective. Their marginalized background is recounted and their repressed self is reinforced. Some modern characters are created whose social and personal predicaments are similar to those classical figures. Devi, Sita, Parbatiamma, Mayamma, Gauri, Anamika are some marginalized figures in the novel. *When Dreams Travel* is a reconstruction and recontextualisation of popular Arabian tale *Arabian Night* or *One Thousand and One Nights*. Her *Fugitive History* and *The Ghost of Vasu Master* are a revisit of personal history and rediscovery of a lost self. Moreover, *In Times of Siege* is a political allegory telling the stories of conflict between fundamentalism and secularism, the force of multiple narratives and force of the singular narrative, dominant bourgeois-autocracy and intellectuals. Her recent published novel *I Have Become the Tide* (2019) is about the struggle and frustrating fate of those who are fighting for equality, dignity and identity.

The study examines how the author articulates the condition of women's subalternity and marginality throughout generations and it shows their diachronic link through the revisionist writing and interpretation.

Findings:

- Githa Hariharan's revisionary writing has been an exploration of subalternity and marginalized background. Her revisiting of myth and history reconstructs and recontextualises suppressed conditions and thereby presents unheard voices and consciousnesses. In her fictions, it is observed that she has visited some mythical figures whose names are often invoked in everyday life.
- Her revisionary writing has two aims: one is to reflect the contemporary social and personal predicament and create a historical link with the past. It aims to show the common experiences of marginalized women throughout the generation and create it as the basis for political identity. With this strong objective myth, tales and history are reconstructed and recontextualised.
- Hariharan has made an effort to trace the state of subalternity, marginality and situation of voicelessness in the past. Subalternity is a common aspect of Githa Hariharan's revisionist fiction. Almost in all her novels, this aspect can be seen. Basically, a strong connection between the present female subalterns and the past is made. Their situations are juxtaposed, compared and contrasted.
- Another aim is to question the traditional mode of interpretation, debate over it and subvert some traditional values and aestheticism propagated by myths and tales. In

this subversive practice, ethical and political interrogation is made. Her deconstructive vision resembles with Helene Cixous' declaration, "Thus, there are no grounds for establishing a discourse, but rather an arid millennial ground to break, what I say has at least two sides and two aims: to break, to destroy; and to foresee the unforeseeable, to project" (Cixous, *The Laugh of the Medusa*, 1963).

- The past is brought back to discussion for argument, revisioning and creating new points of view. It also focuses on reinterpretation. This process helps to raise the subaltern voice. She has also revisited the recent past to highlight an aspect of intellectual subalternity and new subaltern in India.
- Hariharan's fictional works focus on caste-based oppression and gender marginalization which are deeply rooted in Indian culture which is still, covertly and overtly, prevailing in the society. It is obvious that massive reformation, education and research have not fully successful in their effort to eradicate these social evils. Another notable point is that caste, class and gender discrimination work in the same line.
- Hariharan shows that the oppressive mechanism and complicit ideologies are formed by the people of privilege to create certain social orders and thereby keep powerless people at the underdeveloped stage for their own benefit.
- Her fiction also illustrates a noteworthy point that intellectual voice in India is always suppressed by the state authority or some other powerful fundamentalist agencies. Intellectual voice is either distorted or fragmented or diffused by certain strategies. Intellectuals and cultural practitioners are treated as leftists. Their arguments, points of views and ideas are not listened by the authority of the state. Academicians are always kept under the strict surveillance of the state apparatus. Thus, the bureaucratization of

higher educational institutions has snatched the freedom of working and doing research. Under such circumstance, intellectuals lose their collective strength and fail to raise their voice. This kind of autocracy becomes a threat to democracy. Academicians and scholars have no freedom to do research and often their findings and research results are ignored or not tolerated. Writers and cultural practitioners often encounter with life-threatening from the various fundamentalist forces or organizations supported by some political leaders or state or religious institutions. Hariharan raises this issue of the intellectual subaltern in her political novels *In Time of Siege (ITS)* and *I have Become the Tide (IBT)*. In *ITS* Shiv Murthy, a history Professor at Kasturba Gandhi Central University and specialist in medieval Indian history become a victim of such hot protest and vandalism in Delhi.

- Hariharan's fictional art stands for the plurality and multiplicity of voices. She not only denies but also subverts the idea of singularity of the national narrative. It is never possible in such a pluralistic society. Hariharan is very critical about India's acute desire for a singular narrative. She argues that since long India as a subcontinent grows as a fragmented nation with multiple narratives and diversity. Diversity is one of the basic features of this subcontinent. It is a hallmark of this nation as India holds a diversity of culture, race and ethnicity.
- Thus, contemporary Indian women writers like Githa Hariharan, Shashi Deshpande, Manju Kapur, Kavita Kane, Anita Nair and Mahasweta Devi not only concern with women's experiences in feminist politics of revisionist writing, but also with the general aspect of marginality in society. No doubt, they want to reach to the core centre of female marginalization and domination, but while doing this they are mapping the

picture of the whole life in a particular context. What insightful lesson is received from their powerful writings is that in India there are active forces to order the daily life of common people following the biased tradition of caste, class, gender and ethnicity.
