

NARRATING DREAMS AND DAUGHTERS: GITHA HARIHARAN'S *THE THOUSAND FACES OF NIGHT* AND MANJU KAPUR'S *DIFFICULT DAUGHTERS*

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Paul Cogley in *Narrative* defines “narrative” as a particular form of representation implementing signs which includes “the showing or the telling” of events and the mode selected for that to take place (6). He elaborates the complexity of the narrative by pointing out that “as soon as we start to look more closely at this phenomenon, it is evident that the apparently natural impulse of storytelling or story listening (or reading) is far from simple. Even the most 'simple' of stories is embedded in network of relations that are sometimes astounding in their complexity” (2). In a similar vein Mark Schorer defines technique as “any selection, elimination or distortion, any form of rhythm imposed upon the world of action by means of which our apprehension of the world of action is enriched or renewed” (72).

As the genre of novel developed in India in English, the problem of how to say was not as prominent as the problem of what to say. But gradually the Indian English novelists too gave attention to the manner of storytelling. A novel by an Indian writer in English requires direct involvement of the experiences and values which are valid in the Indian context. The writing of a genuine Indian English novel presupposes historical and geographical awareness of the Indian situation (Mukherjee 29). Apart from this, an Indian novelist often confronts a number of aesthetic problems while presenting the nuances of Indian life through a foreign language like English. An Indian novelist, writing in an Indian language, can easily take certain basic assumptions for granted since both the writer and the reader share a similar background and common experiences. However, readership/authorship of Indian novel in English cuts across diverse ethnic, religious and cultural backgrounds which make the writer uncertain of the basic assumptions and it affects the writer's use of devices of storytelling too. While in the early years of the twentieth century, the technique was the primary concern for most of the writers, this concern with narrative technique has been slow to evolve in Indian English fiction. As early as 1938 Raja Rao in the foreword to *Kanthapura* asserts that the epic method is the most suitable for the Indian temperament: “And our paths are paths interminable . . . Episode follows episode, and when our thoughts stop, our breath stops, and we move on to another thought. This was, and still is, the ordinary style of our story-telling” (vi).

The nineteenth century not only witnessed the growth of the male writers in English but also of women writers who were equally competent. However, the works of the women writers differ from that of their male counterparts. Not only there is difference in the kinds of experiences of men and women have, but also in their manner of contextualizing, analyzing and communicating. Traditionally, in India, discourses, sermons, political rhetoric which were of grave seriousness have been dominated by men, while storytelling, lullabies, folk songs etc. have been the domain of women. In fact, narration of the same reality, descriptions, images and comparisons, perspectives and perceptions everything differ when the gender of the narrator changes. In this context Jasbir Jain opines:

It is not a difference of form one cannot say that men write about external facts and women about internal life; one cannot also say that men write about thickly inhabited worlds and women about solitary figures but women do write about the responses of women, of the shadows which they alone can see and the anguish they alone can feel. It is a difference of perspective. (“Gender and Narrative Strategy” 54)

Jasbir Jain goes on to elaborate that male narratives locate public events such as partition, escape,

massacre at the center of the story and when they move to personal consciousness; it is the loss of lineage, of land, of power and of identity. In all male narratives, women are either absent or objectified as victims. In stark contrast, narratives by women writers carve their selfhood and reveal their inner selves through memory, dreams, hallucinations, surrealism and images and so on. Their narratives mainly emerge not from their themes or the subjective relationships but from their aesthetics which move beyond realism and realistic description (“Daughters” 1657).

The fictional form gave women the opportunity to widen their area of concerns and to allow their imaginations to interact as well as go beyond reality. As writers, they valorize and empower what hegemony has labeled as passive, powerless and mute. Thus, women's fictional narratives articulate both the existence of the dominant power structures and the female desire to disavow and defy these structures. However, as Malashri Lal has pointed out, Indian women's writing basically tends to be “non-aggressive” (28) and it can also be argued that the depiction of resistance to socio-cultural context in their writings have done little to dislodge the dominant discourse.

Women writers, by actively shifting attention from social perspectives to personal ones, provided a new direction for fictional development. Women writers project a “self” which is no longer an object of sympathy and sexual gratification for men but a subject with individual choices. Women defy norms and move outside social codes but some of them reconcile to their fate like Virmati, while some move forward like Ida, or there are still others who opt out of marriage and child-bearing like Shakuntala in *Difficult Daughters*, Devi in *The Thousand Faces of Night*. There are others, who accept conventional roles and become restless on being confined within the domestic threshold.

Women writers try to make women readers aware of their plight by speaking about their personal experiences. Humour, irony, fantasy and myths are used with the specialised purpose of exposing the tyranny of the patriarchal ideology. Varied themes like sexuality, mother-daughter relationships and other purely female experiences find expression through their writings. While dealing with such comparatively novel themes, these writers make use of certain narrative strategies. The implication is that not only women writers use strategy, even men do. As Jasbir Jain observes all rebels do this as do all original minds (“Gender and Narrative Strategy” 49). But the statements they make are connected with their thought processes and their world views, or with their ability to outgrow those cultural models and reach out to other consciousness. Jasbir Jain comments:

When the experience which is being narrated moves against the current, is unconventional or unusual, is radical in its standpoint, or displays a strength which may be best muted for the time being, strategy is resorted to. There is no hesitation in laying a false trail or employing subterfuge. Moreover, it is never the same, for then it would become a theory. It may be imagery, or landscape, or scriptural references or character, or subplot, or structure which is being used for this purpose and waiting to be decoded. (“Gender and Narrative Strategy” 48)

In *The Thousand Faces of Night*, Githa Hariharan creates a narrative that shifts and undermines the conventional ideology of womanhood. The novel mainly consists of first-person narratives by Devi and Mayamma and the sporadic presence of a third person narration is also evident. In fact Hariharan makes use of the art of story-telling that takes the narrative forward. The crux of the novel is the re-writing of given narratives be it myths, history or fables which is essentially a postmodern technique called “revisionism”. In Adrienne Rich's words, “Re-vision: the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction, is for us more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival” (18). Rich sums up the significance of revisionary writing to deconstruct the stereotype images and reconstruct the cultural tradition of women. Until we understand the assumptions in which we are brought up, we cannot know ourselves. This drive for self-knowledge for women is more than a search for identity. We need to know how we have been led to imagine ourselves and instead of passing on that

tradition we need to break its hold over us. Thus revisionism became an important tool in the hands of women writers and hence many old stories were retold in different ways from gynocentric perspective. Many traditional figures of patriarchal mythology have been re-invented demolishing the cultural stereotypes propagated by the male dominated society.

This revisionism is very much evident in Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night*. She has used this technique very effectively to deconstruct the misogyny and colonial stereotypes which project that women have no independent life to live except to serve her husband. By deconstructing stereotypical characters and plots in storytelling, Hariharan has undone the moralities and prejudices of traditional texts. Devi, the young protagonist grows up on tales and mythical stories culled from *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* and the fables of India. As a child, she listened and tried to compare those tales with the real tales of people around her. However, the adult Devi deconstructs them as her perceptions changes with maturity. As Devi recalls that her grandmother had an answer for every question, but “her answers were not simple: they had to be decoded” (TFN 27). Thus with age, Devi's perception changes and so does the decodification of those tales. Hence, instead of following her husband blindly like Gandhari, she runs away from the suffocating union in marriage. Even the fable of a beautiful girl married to a snake is deconstructed by Devi. The social prejudice “A girl is given only once in marriage” (TFN 33) fails to stop Devi from eloping with Gopal. She deliberately discards those role models like Gandhari revolting through self-penance. Instead she gorges on those mythical women avengers like Amba or the Goddess who rode the tiger and cut off evil, magical demons' heads. After her marriage Baba's moral versions of a “virtuous wife”, a “*sumangali*” only defined her limits as a wife and daughter-in-law. Devi deconstructs those stories culled from Muthuswamy Dikshitar, Jayadeva, Purandara Dasa, Narayana Tirtha, Syama Sastri, Thyagaraja and the devotion of their respective wives to them. In a similar fashion, Hariharan through Devi re-visions them and finally discards them. Devi flips through the pages of Baba's orphaned books and reads about a *kritya* which has been omitted (by Baba, perhaps deliberately). The story is about a ferocious woman who haunts and destroys the house in which women are insulted. Thus Devi deconstructs and reconstructs the stories fit for her “survival violence” (TFN 58).

Hariharan's use of dream fantasy is another device to give a psychological insight into Devi's mind. Her urge to live a life of her own often surfaces in her dream visions. Right from her childhood, she is a dreamer and Sita felt exasperated by her daydreaming. But as Devi grows, she realises and confesses: “I lived a secret life of my own: I became a woman warrior, a heroine. I was Devi. I rode a tiger, and cut off evil, magical demons' heads” (TFN 41). Devi's suppressed desires find expression through her dreams. Even after marriage she dreams of flying. This time dream fantasy takes an allegorical shape. Devi recounts “I flew swiftly . . . I flew into a castle and when my feet touched the ramparts, I could fly no more” (TFN 57). Through these dream visions Hariharan puts the reader into Devi's inner recesses of mind. Before marriage, Devi had more freedom and hence she flew swiftly. The castle resembles the Jacaranda Road house, Devi's marital home. But once she alights in this castle, she could fly no more. She loses both freedom and independence. In her dream she tries to survive through violence “scratch, bite, stab, twist” (TFN 58) which she fails to do in real life. Hariharan makes an adept use of this dream vision technique to delineate Devi's real intentions and finally she succeeds in realizing her dream by eloping.

Once Devi flees from the Jacaranda Road house, Mayamma becomes the sole resident of the entire house with infrequent visits of Mahesh. Thus in the later part of the novel, Hariharan delineates the life story of Mayamma who is enacting her past in retrospect. The long chapter infuses Mayamma's present and past. In alternate paragraphs Hariharan reveals Mayamma's past through her conscious reminiscence. The story line is partly narrated by the omniscient narrator who gives details of how Mayamma is living all alone in that big house, and in between the author explores whatever goes on in Mayamma's mind as she does her daily chores.

In the entire novel, the narration shifts but not in a linear manner. As the tale unfolds, the stories of

various characters are interwoven with the lives of the three women Mayamma, Sita and Devi, belonging to three different generations. By doing this the narrator discards what she has said at the beginning of the 'Prelude' "I have always liked the story that comes whole and well-rounded, complete with annotation" (*TFNix*).

Manju Kapur has established herself as a chronicler of Indian middle-class manners and ethos. She is often compared with Jane Austen since she too explores the domestic sphere with minute details, a domain dominated by women. In an interview with Ira Pande, Kapur opines "I am exploring the spaces that women occupy in domestic relationships. It is a world I know and understand" (*Hindu*). In both *Difficult Daughters* and *A Married Woman*, Kapur makes use of realism as a strategy to present the lives of women in a middle-class family.

Difficult Daughters simultaneously portrays the independence acquired by the nation and the independence desired by Virmati, the protagonist of the novel. The major part of the novel is narrated by the omniscient narrator who seems to know everything but does not take part in the story. According to Genette, such a narrator is called "heterodiegetic" (255), someone who is not a character of the novel, yet knows everything. The novel begins with Ida's narration but she narrates sporadically and becomes the connecting link weaving the information "pieced together" with "material from memories that were muddled, partial and contradictory" (*DD* 258). Ida looks for ways to connect with her dead mother and in the process constructs her mother's life. The role Ida plays in narrating her mother's past is very small and in Genette's view such a narrator who is part of the novel is termed as "homodiegetic" (256). Ida begins with a cryptic statement: "The one thing I had wanted was not to be like my mother" (*DD* 1). Such strong assertion of disowning one's mother at once puts the novel in motion. Even the novel ends in a similar way where Ida remarks: "This book weaves a connection between my mother and me, each word a brick in a mansion I made with my head and my heart. Now live in it, Mama, and leave me be. Do not haunt me anymore" (*DD* 258-259).

In this way, the novel appears to form a complete circle and this circularity gives direction, continuity and speed that carry the story forward. At different points in the novel, Ida takes over the narration of the tale. However, her presence is felt briefly and this breaks the monotony of the storytelling. The novel begins with the funeral of Virmati and Ida's reminiscence of how "contrary to her wishes, she was being burnt with her organs intact" (*DD* 1). We also get a glimpse of the strained relationship of Virmati-Ida. After Virmati's death, Ida travels to Amritsar to discover her mother's past life which had turned her into "a silent, brisk and bad-tempered" (*DD* 2) mother. In the ninth chapter, Ida once again surfaces when she visits AS College with her uncle Kailashnath. She gives a vivid description of the college. In between, the omniscient narrator narrates Virmati's life, and the beginning of her illicit love and her revolt against her family. Thereafter, Ida continues with her narration in the seventeenth chapter where she first goes to meet Swarna Lata Sondhi, Virmati's roommate during her BT in Lahore. Later she gets visa to visit Lahore which has become a part of Pakistan after Partition. There she takes photographs of the Government College Lahore and records all the details of her mother's life. When she learns of Virmati's unwanted pregnancy and her abortion with the help of Swarna Lata, Ida connects with her mother's agony. Ida recalls how Prabhakar had forced her to terminate her pregnancy which led to their divorce as she was unable to forgive her husband. Her conversation with Parvati masi aka Paro briefly comes in the twenty-third chapter. Paro's calling her sister as a "simple" girl invokes disgust in Ida as she says "I hate the word 'simple'. Nobody has any business to live in the world and know nothing about its ways" (*DD* 207). In the twenty-fifth chapter, Ida tries to pick up the loose threads of her mother's marital life and finally at the end bids farewell to her mother's memory.

The epistolary style in the novel adds a new dimension. This technique was first introduced by Samuel Richardson in his novel *Pamela or Virtue Rewarded* (1740). This epistolary mode has come a long way and has been extensively used by novelists. However, instead of writing the whole novel in epistolary

form, Manju Kapur deftly makes use of it to take the story forward. The author introduces the epistolary style when the reader is made to witness Virmati's reaction after comparing the letters from her suitors Inderjit, her fiancé chosen by her family, and Harish, her next door neighbour. All the events and happenings that took place for six months from September, 1939 to February, 1940, are depicted through the letters exchanged between Virmati and Harish. This epistolary technique presents an intimate view of the characters' thoughts and feelings without the interference of the author. The presentation of events from several points of view lends the story dimension and verisimilitude.

Many critics agree that the epistolary technique is mostly concerned with the subjectivity of mind which has become a commonplace usage. Bakhtin is of the view that the letter leads the novel to “the depths of everyday life, its smallest details, to intimate relations between people and into the internal life of the individual person” and is characterised by “psychology and pathos” (396). Bakhtin's observation is very much applicable to *Difficult Daughters*. The reader gets to know details of Virmati's life and how she is locked up in the godown, while Indu is married off to Inderjit to save the family prestige. Virmati is not even allowed to attend the marriage ceremony. She is only let out of the godown on Mahatmaji's birthday to spin in the morning. On the other end, we get a glimpse of the Professor's life. He has moved out to another place with his family to avoid any chance meeting with Virmati's family. The reader gets information of Ganga's second pregnancy which reiterates the fact that Harish is very much involved in his conjugal life while he professes undying love for Virmati. Paro, Virmati's youngest sister, and Kanhiya, the Professor's student, acting as messenger for them, becomes evident from the letters. The chapter concludes with Virmati's letter, informing about her strong stand of going away to Lahore, leaving the Professor and his thoughts behind.

For Ian Watt, too, the letter is particularly useful in providing the immediate imitation of individual experience. Watt argues that “the epistolary method impels the writer towards producing something that may pass for the spontaneous transcription of the subjective reactions of the protagonists to the events as they occur” (192). Ruth Perry argues that the epistolary technique consists of the “outpourings of lavish consciousness heightened by suffering and by isolation” (114) and claims:

Unfolding a story in letters automatically emphasizes the psychological angle of vision as no other narrative form does. Because the letter-writer's imagination is involved in the translation of experience into language a fiction told through letters becomes a story about events in consciousness, whatever else it may be about. (119)

In *Difficult Daughters* Virmati starts writing letter to Harish to communicate her loneliness and get respite from her alienated life. After her unforgivable act, she is forced to live a life of solitary confinement in the godown. Virmati is left alone to suffer the pangs of her deviations. Her family members avoid any sort of communication with her. She burns with anger and humiliation at her family's indifference. But her humiliation reaches its peak when she hears about Ganga's pregnancy and her insistence to meet Virmati. In solitude Virmati learns to control herself. She comes to term with reality and decides to go to Lahore for higher studies. At other times, in that solitary godown her thoughts flow incoherently in her head and Virmati becomes more observant of her surroundings. She relates the godown with that of her grandfather's in Sultanpur, and perceives even the minute details of how “the light in the angan grows dimmer and more mellow” (*DD* 81) in the evening. Away from household activities she feels strange and her existence becomes similar to that of “one pea alone in a whole long pod” (*DD* 92), no use to anybody.

Finally, Manju Kapur takes resort to the dramatic style of adding an “Epilogue” at the end to sum up the entire story. But before that she dedicates a chapter for all the characters who had something to tell about the events that took place throughout the novel. The ending saw the emergence of multiple voices narrating incidents and situations of the country after Independence. Excerpts of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru's speech on India's Independence are incorporated to lend authenticity. The Epilogue informed the readers about how Ganga left Amritsar with her children and mother-in-law for their village house in the

United Province and was never able to return to Harish. Virmati and Harish left Amritsar and started living in Delhi where Harish was offered principalship in one of the new colleges of Delhi University. Ida was born but as she grew up she never showed any intellectual brightness. Harish's other two children Giridhar and Chhotti came up to Delhi to complete their studies. Giridhar started his business and married one of his customers despite protest from both the families, while Chhotti joined the IAS to support her mother and grandmother and never married. Ida ends the story by snapping the already strained relationship with her mother by saying "Do not haunt me anymore" (DD 259).

An analysis of the narrative techniques used by these writers verifies the fact that women's writing in India has not only evolved in thematic concerns but women writers have extensively used innovative narrative techniques. In terms of portraying their protagonists, the authors have stopped voicing the emotions and desires on their behalf; instead they let their women characters speak for themselves. They delineate them as strong-willed characters who have the determination and courage to face life's hardships; in spite of all oddities, they do not succumb to any self-negating acts. This evolution of women protagonists could become plausible because the authors deliberately juxtapose the characters to show how these new women differ from the traditional ones. The authors portray their protagonists in a realistic frame and thus lend authenticity to the novels. They also revision myths from the feminist perspective and let the women construct their own meanings out of them as in *The Thousand Faces of Night*. Moreover, they do not stick to any one particular kind of narrative technique. They use multiple techniques to tell the story. Manju Kapur does not solely rely on the epistolary mode in entirety but uses them at moments when the readers should have an intimate glimpse of the inner life of protagonists. Githa Hariharan, too, makes use of multiple perspectives by letting each of the three women tell their stories. These women writers make use of what Forster expounds as "Expansion. That is the idea the novelist must cling to. Not completion. Not rounding off but opening out" (137). Hence, instead of employing a particular technique to narrate their stories, women writers have made use of multiple techniques to tell a single story. These novelists not only differ from their predecessors but also improvise on the art of storytelling. The intermingling of multiple perspectives has helped to create new sensibilities and their slick craftsmanship has created new dimensions and possibilities for the novels written by Indian women novelists.

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