

Research Article

Narrative of One's Own: Discerning Female Standpoint and Magical Realism in Githa Hariharan's *When Dreams Travel*

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ABSTRACT

The post-colonial perspective on magical realism has been the centre of critical attention which in turn undermines the significance of the women magical realist writers. This paper is an attempt to navigate the eccentricities of magical realism that foreground the exclusion of female voices and feminist perspectives. The study attends to the magical realist narratives by women characters in the novel, *When Dreams Travel*, by an Indian novelist, Githa Hariharan. Through textual analysis of the novel, it will be illustrated that magical realism's dichotomy manifests creative recuperation of women's lost identity. Drawing on feminist standpoint theory, the paper will demonstrate that varying epistemic status (such as gender, class, caste, sexuality, social location, etc.) leads to diverse perspectives on stories. The analysis will further explore how marginalised female experiences, sufferings and realities find a way of expression through storytelling. Not only does the articulation of surreal imaginations, visions and dreams by women characters intermingle natural and supernatural but also represents the narrative from their vantage point, thereby, revisiting and eventually reconstructing their reality.

Keywords: Magical realism, Magical feminism, Storytelling, Intersectional marginality, Standpoint theory

INTRODUCTION

Magical realism can be defined as a mode of narration that establishes the harmonic co-existence of supernatural and natural in an ordinary and mundane realistic setting.

Christopher Warnes (2009) in his work, *Magical Realism and the Postcolonial Novels*, defines it as ‘a mode in which real and fantastic, natural and supernatural, are coherently represented in a state of equivalence’ (p. 03). As a narrative form, magical realism deciphers reality and makes us more aware of the diverse perceptions of it, consequently, subverting the established version of history or truth. This study argues that the subversive characteristic of magical realism ruptures the conventional boundaries of not only colonialism but patriarchy as well. Maria Takolander and Jo Langdon (2017), in their work, *Shifting the “Vantage Point” to Women: Reconceptualizing Magical Realism and Trauma* asserts, ‘magical realism works to destabilise what is discursively understood as real in ways that are commensurate with a feminist as much as with a postcolonial agenda’ (p. 42). By expanding the horizons of reality to the realms of fantasy, not only does magical realism provide us a diverse and polyphonic understanding of realism but also provides space to the oppressed voices. Therefore, the marginalised female voices find space in magical realism’s dichotomy. The term, in the South Asian context, can be also be fathomed as a creative prism to reflect the criticism of the stringent patriarchal norms deeply rooted in the South Asian societies and cultures.

The magical realist works by Indian women writers such as Mahashewta Devi, Arundhati Roy, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Githa Hariharan, etc. amalgamate magic, fantasy, myth and other supernatural elements to build the narratives of everyday reality that articulate the collective trauma caused due to female oppression and trivialising objectification of women as a community in South Asia. This study attends to the magical realist narratives of women characters in the novel, *When Dreams Travel*, by an Indian novelist, Githa Hariharan. The novel is a retelling of the famous, *One Thousand and One Nights* or *The Arabian Nights Entertainment*. Hariharan’s narrative is inclusive of fantastic elements, dreams, magic, myth, djinn, palaces and dungeons and it simultaneously deals with tangible issues like patriarchy and colonialism. Through the novel, the author does not only demystify the misogynistic discourse but also deconstructs the idea of an archetypal woman in the classical text, *The Arabian Nights*. In this paper, first, it will be deliberated that as a retelling, this novel put forward the otherwise neglected female point of view. Drawing on the feminist standpoint theory, it will be further substantiated that differing epistemic positioning (such as gender, class, caste, location, sexuality, etc.) of the storytellers in the power structure leads to diverse perspectives on stories. Secondly, through textual analysis of the stories in the novel, it will be demonstrated that marginalised female experiences, sufferings and realities find a way of expression through storytelling. The study will elucidate how Hariharan has used the frame narrative technique of magical realism to not only trace gender inequalities but also to point out the intersectional marginalities within the feminist

discourse of the novel. Lastly, the study will elucidate that the counter narration of women's experiences in the novel confronts and eventually materialises the gaps (the lack of female voice) in the original Arabic collection of stories.

WHEN DREAMS TRAVEL: A COUNTER-NARRATION OF FEMINIST STANDPOINT

The narratives of cultural stories are often imbued with phallogocentric biases. Largely because the cultural discourse is set by dominant power structures of a society while the narrative produced by the oppressed is hegemonised and often dismissed or labelled as fallacious (Harding, 1987, p. 188). However, the narrative from the viewpoint of the oppressed is rather a plural and heterogeneous version of reality. Sandra Harding, the feminist standpoint scholar, in *Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology: What is 'Strong Objectivity?'*, points out:

Knowledge claims are always socially situated, and the failure by dominant groups critically and systematically to interrogate their advantaged social situation and the effect of such advantages on their beliefs leaves their social situation a scientifically and epistemologically disadvantaged one for generating knowledge. (Harding, 2005, p. 442)

Similarly, the cultural narrative of *The Arabian Nights* is 'epistemologically disadvantaged one' since its overtly misogynistic narrative has muted the voices of women characters and subjugated their experiences. *When Dreams Travel*, as a retelling, consciously exhibits the lost female point of view, which is advantageous for generating knowledge of the realities of female oppression. In the very first chapter, we are briefly taken back to the original story of Shahryar, the Sultan, killing his adulterous wives, which consequently gets him on to the violent stint of marrying a virgin girl every night and killing them the next morning. Shahrzad, daughter of Sultan Wazir, becomes the city's saviour by marrying Shahryar. To save her life, she goes on narrating stories to him for one thousand and one nights. Ultimately, Shahryar being entertained enough pardons her from the execution. Hariharan picks up the story of Shahrzad, the storyteller, where ends in *The Arabian Nights*. Shahrzad's sister, Dunyazad, otherwise a silenced spectator, becomes the active protagonist in the novel's first section. She is introduced in Shahabad as 'Dunya-zad, born of the world, Queen Mother of Samarkhand, widow of Sultan Shahzaman' (Hariharan, 1999, p. 37). She has been adorned with a larger-than-life persona in this novel. The grandeur catered to Dunyazad in this retelling is quite contrary to the dehumanised space provided to her character in the original text. The shift of authority from a latent character to a dynamic female protagonist can also be seen as the shift in the standpoint from the oppressor to the oppressed. Dunyazad's mystical hallucinations keep taking her to Shahrzad's grave till she finally

visits it in reality. She keeps envisioning the conditions her sister must have gone through while the grand act of storytelling. Each time she hallucinates or dreams about it, the readers are provided with an alternative perspective on Shahrzad's story. The silenced female standpoint is recovered through dreamy or magical refractions in the counter narration of the retelling. These magical inferences offer the interpretation of the original plot through the lens of women's experiences. The articulation of their surreal imaginations and dreams as stories, intermingle supernatural and natural and represents the narrative from their perspective, thereby revisiting and eventually reconstructing their worldview. Thus, when Sultan questions Shahrzad's dreams, which are claimed to be the source of her storytelling act, she says, 'only those locked up in hovels and dungeons and palaces can see and hear these dreams. Only those whose necks are naked and at risk can understand them' (Hariharan, 1999, p. 20). Shahrzad, here, refers to the marginalised voices which can only be heard and understood by those who have experienced oppression. Shahrzad's standpoint moves from her individualistic battle to the struggles of women as a subaltern community.

Varied accounts of reality are in incessant dialogue with each other and this hybridity of magical realism provides space for counter-narration against the trivialising objectification of women characters in *The Arabian Nights*. The following day at the ending of the original tale-telling session, Shahryar inquires about the source of Shahrzad's stories to which she replies, 'I don't have a sword, so it seems I cannot rule, I cannot travel, I don't care to weep. But I can dream' (p. 20). In the novel, dreams, imagination and hallucinations play a vital point of intersection between natural and supernatural. Dreams can be taken as one's subconscious desires and repressed narratives of reality. Hariharan revisits the female characters of the original Arabic collection of stories and utilises dreams as a narrative tool to unravel their repressed psyche. The title of the novel also emphasises the idea of the metaphorical journey of the women characters asserting back their lost identity. Hariharan also redeems Shahrzad's character from her redundant image of Sultan's saviour. Her genius as a storyteller is neither reduced to a mere entertainer nor just a way to Sultan's redemption and his path to salvation, instead, her act of storytelling is recognised as a means to signify the journey of articulation of her oppressed experiences and in doing so she asserts her identity against her trivialising objectification. Though Shahrzad is shown to be dead in the first half of the novel yet in one of Dunyazad's stories, *The Morning After*, she mystically survives. The ever-death-defying character is seen as an older woman asserting, 'I, Shahrzad, saved your grandmothers from being beheaded. I saved them and so your mothers and you. You would not be here if I had not done it' (Hariharan, 1999, p. 275). Like Shahrzad's character, Dunyazad has also been liberated

in this retelling. In one of her stories, *The Dreams of Good Women*, she exhibits her concern about being in the shade of her valorous sister. She says, 'I do love my sister but I do not want to be her shadow' (Hariharan, 1999, p. 256). By the end of the first part, Dunyazad avenges her sister's death with the help of the slave girl, Dilshad. By becoming an ally to Umar (Shahzad and Shahryar's son), she tumbles Shahryar's tyrannical rule and brings upon his imprisonment.

In *Feminism and Methodology*, Harding claims that 'at any moment in history there are many "subjugated knowledges" that conflict with, and are never reflected in, the dominant stories a culture tells' (Harding, 1987, p. 188). In the novel, the 'subjugated knowledge' can be identified as the overlooked female worldview acquired by the lived experiences of the women characters, who are silenced in the original text. Hariharan derives the magical elements from the stories of *The Arabian Nights* and, in the course, attempts to bring forth the 'subjugated knowledge' by confronting the gaps (i.e. the missing voices and buried trauma in the original text) and counter-narrating women's lived experiences; thereby recovering their lost identities. For instance, in the original plot of *The Arabian Nights*, Shahrzad ends up with a male heir at the end of the excruciating period of one thousand and one nights. However, the readers are not given any details of her pregnancy which can be considered as a 'subjugated knowledge' that was overlooked by the dominant phallogocentric worldview. The retelling of this episode in one of Dunyazad's uncanny stories, *Rowing a Floating Island*, depicts Shahrzad to be pregnant with Sultan's child while the process of storytelling has still not ended. Both the sisters are off-stage, and they have bizarrely hidden Shahrzad's pregnancy from Shahryar till nine months. Dunyazad reveals Shahryar's ignorant stance towards his wife's condition, which can be perceived as a gap in the original plot that never revealed the critical circumstances of a pregnant woman and thus dehumanised Shahrzad's character. The feminist standpoint scholar, Patricia Hill Collins pointed out that while generating knowledge about women's social reality, their 'concrete experience' offers the definite 'criterion for credibility of the knowledge claims' (Collins, 1990, p. 201). The worldview generated by narrating lived experiences of Shahrzad and her pregnancy is essentially the feminist standpoint. Michelle Caswell, in *Dusting for Fingerprints: Introducing Feminist Standpoint Appraisal*, asserts:

Feminist standpoint epistemology seeks to recuperate these non-dominant forms of knowledge by not only stressing their intellectual legitimacy, but affirming that holding such marginalized epistemologies is, in fact, intellectually advantageous. That is, members of marginalized communities see things differently than those who occupy dominant positions, and those differences in perspective strengthen and enrich the creation of knowledge... (Caswell, 2019, p. 09)

The above-mentioned ‘non-dominant forms of knowledge’ is the subaltern worldview of Shahrzad and Dunyazad which is recuperated in this novel’s retelling. The subjugated worldview is a perspective from below, which is considered advantageous in not only accommodating the experiences of the oppressed but also of the oppressors. The feminist standpoint theorist termed this advantage as ‘double consciousness’. As Dorothy Smith puts it, women exercise a ‘working, active consciousness’ of both the worldviews, the oppressor and the oppressed (Smith, 1990, p. 19). Having this epistemic privilege, Dunyazad’s standpoint grounds the magical storytelling to the realism of the plot by narrating how Shahrzad, while saving her own life and lives of innocent virgins of the city, must have managed the labour of childbirth during the ‘working hours’ (Hariharan, 1999, p. 128). Hariharan’s counternarrative accounts of Shahrzad’s pregnancy simultaneously reflect Shahryar’s benefitting position, giving away the whole social order. Therefore, the peripheral position of women characters becomes the social locale of epistemic privilege. Alison Jaggar expounds that women’s ‘distinctive social position’ makes possible a ‘view of the world that is more reliable and less distorted than that of the ruling class’ (Jaggar, 2004, pp. 56, 57). Thus, these anecdotal events from Shahrzad and Dunyazad’s mystical life backstage are not only less distorted but also counter-narrative of the prevailing onstage hegemonic narrative of *The Arabian Nights*.

Another instance is when Shahrzad successfully gives birth to the child and prepares herself for the storytelling performance ‘as the night’s perennial bride’ (Hariharan, 1999, p. 132). This story is reflexive of Shahrzad’s case of marital rape by the Sultan which never bears a mention in the original plot. Dunyazad, being the lone witness of this heinous act, suggests her sister kill the Sultan in his bed and save the city from his terror. She says:

We have to get rid of him while he is still prepared to listen to your stories... I can’t bear to see you go on like this night after night. Tonight is the perfect night to silence him... There is a kind of poetic justice in the timing, don’t you see? (Hariharan, 1999, p. 130)

Though Dunyazad remained a silent accomplice of Shahrzad in the original tale-telling session, Hariharan provides her the space to feature her perspective and assert her individuality. By suggesting that her sister must kill Shahryar, Dunyazad proclaims her defiance to the archetype of a forgiving woman. Contrarily, Shahrzad being the embodiment of a sacrificing mother, denies following her sister’s violent scheme. Dunyazad’s standpoint here is a ‘critical perspective on reality and a position of political consciousness—that seriously questioned the legitimacy of the dominant worldview

that women's natural and biological destiny was limited to the role of wife and mother' (Brooks, 2007, p. 62).

Alison Jagger asserts that the masculine perspective has been so prejudiced that the male interpretation of social reality inevitably neglects the suffering of subordinate classes (Jagger, 2004, p. 56). The dominant masculine language conspicuously overlooks their own homogenising instinct, which is less accommodating to women's lived experience and tends to muzzle it. Therefore, the failure to identify the advantageous female standpoint causes what Dorothy Smith labels 'bifurcation of consciousness' of women (Smith, 1977). With the bifurcated consciousness, women, are conditioned to interpret their world through the male perspective and are interpellated into their own oppression. As Joyce McCarl Nielsen asserts, 'Without the conscious effort to reinterpret reality from one's own lived experience—that is, without political consciousness—the disadvantaged are likely to accept their society's dominant world view' (Nielsen, 1990, p. 11). Similarly, the predominant male perspective in *The Arabian Nights* conveniently convinces the female characters into their subjugation. For instance, Raziya (Shahryar and Dunyazad's mother), whose name, in the novel, translates to a 'woman who is agreeable' (Hariharan, 1999, p. 83). Her character accepted the dominant masculine worldview and having bifurcated consciousness, she could never manage to register her voice in the original plot and died in silence. The narrator in the novel reveals:

If she had reservations about her children being offered up for sacrifice, no one heard about it. Except the Wazir perhaps, and he was adept at reducing voices, especially those raised in protest, to a complicitous silence. (Hariharan, 1999, p. 83)

Raziya, being the mother, was never asked by the Wazir before he decides to sacrifice their daughters to Sultan's treacherous desire. The dominant masculine discourse refuses to provide dimensions to women characters, and consequently, they are left dehumanised and silenced. However, counter-narration of this retelling reveals the torment she must have gone through while being silenced by her husband.

INTERSECTIONAL FEMINIST STANDPOINT

Oppression functions in complex ways, and 'woman' as an identity cannot be understood as a universal category. Women, occupying different epistemic statuses, are differently situated in the masculine power structure. Therefore, intersectionality within the feminist discourse would acknowledge the various and intersecting forms of oppression suffered by women owing to differences like class, caste, sexuality,

social location, etc. In her work, *The Concept of Intersectionality in Feminist Theory*, Anna Carastathis explains:

Rather than reducing the phenomena of oppression to one foundational explanatory category...and ontologically privileging that category, intersectionality theorists argue that oppression is produced through the interaction of multiple, decentred, and co-constitutive axes. (Carastathis, 2014, p. 308)

In the novel, different forms of subjugation and privileges are in constant interaction with each other and exist in an overlapping form. Hariharan, by having a character like Dilshad (the outsider who marks her absence in the original text), instead of gliding over the differences, aims to append a standpoint that provides a perspective on the lives of slave women who are doubly marginalised in what Dorothy Smith calls 'ruling relations' (Smith, 2007).

In the second part of the novel, rebellious women characters refute the original grand act of storytelling that stretches till one thousand and one nights and re-enact it in seven days and nights. Dilshad and Dunyazad narrate seven pairs of short stories to each other, one in response to the other, ultimately liberating themselves from the clutches of the hegemonic discourse of *The Arabian Nights*. Hariharan portrays fragmented mystical stories and orally transmitted tales intermingling real and fantastic to construct a counternarrative discourse. While storytelling and travelling, they both reinvent their lives and bodies by distorting and reflecting reality simultaneously. Dilshad says, 'You and I have a script of our own- a story or two waiting to be told, our text of gold to be written, every page remembering us to posterity' (Hariharan, 1999, p. 107). They both go on creating, as the title of this paper suggests, 'narrative of their own' (Woolf, 1945). Therefore, these stories by Dunyazad and Dilshad reflect gender roles, biases and dynamics of power structures in a hierarchal construct of patriarchy. Both these women characters had different set of stories to tell in order to record their resistance. Dilshad's stories, in a way, marks the disassociation from the original plot of *The Arabian Nights* only to serve a different purpose for the novelist. Magical realist stories by Dunyazad, a widowed royal queen, concretise the gaps by providing a voice to the silenced women characters in *The Arabian Nights* while Dilshad, the slave girl, narrates mystical stories from the perspective of a slave girl with no royal privileges. Therefore, Hariharan's narrative can be understood as a conscious attempt of including an intersectional standpoint through Dilshad's character.

Dilshad, while re-enacting the act of storytelling along with Dunyazad, poses her intersectional standpoint through her mystical stories. The social positioning of Dilshad fetches her the epistemic privilege over the royal queens, such as Dunyazad and

Shahzad. Her standpoint not only provides an inquiry into the lives of subjugated lower working-class women but also reveals the advantageous position of royal women, who are complicit in the oppression of lower-class people. Uma Narayan describes this epistemic privilege as 'double vision' (Narayan, 2004) which gives us a less distorted, more accurate and panoramic view of the hierarchically structured patriarchal society. Therefore, through differently contextualised mystical stories, both the characters, Dunyazad and Dilshad, register their defiance differently. The plot is reflective of the fact that sometimes the oppressed people are also complicit in the oppression of the people occupying lower marginal identities. For instance, Sabiha, the nursemaid of Shahzad's children, can also be seen as an underprivileged woman, standing at the lowest rung of the hierarchy of the patriarchal structure. Such characters occupy a doubly marginalised identity. However, being entitled by the absence of class struggle, the royal women at the harem hold a relative privilege over Dilshad and Sabiha. The relationship depicted between royal queens and their slaves shows how the upper-class women are complicit in subjugating working-class women at the royal harem. Donna Haraway, in her critical works, calls attention to the valuable insights gathered from the differences in women's standpoints along with the 'elaborate specificity' that each one exhibits (Haraway, 1991, p. 190). Through these intersecting voices, Hariharan tries to derail the power dynamics associated with the interplay of class, caste and gender in society. Hence the narrative of this retelling demonstrates that there cannot be a unanimous marginalised standpoint; rather, the narrative must be inclusive of the various intersecting standpoints.

These female characters in the novel are divided by class privileges and have different experiences, but they are united against the common patriarchal oppression. The novel sustains the bond by accommodating all the voices of those who experience coinciding and concurrent forms of oppression. As bell hooks in her essay, *Sisterhood: Political Solidarity Between Women*, says:

We do not need to share common oppression to fight equally to end oppression. We do not need anti-male sentiments to bond us together, so great is the wealth of experience, culture, and ideas we have to share with one another. We can be sisters united by shared interests and beliefs, united in our appreciation for diversity, united in our struggle to end sexist oppression, united in political solidarity. (hooks, 1986, p. 138)

In the second part of the novel, Dunyazad and Dilshad are seen in an unspoken consensus where they aid each other and show solidarity towards other oppressed women. It turns out to be an inclusive act of resistance since the series of different mystical stories depict the solidarity of both these characters, along with the

acknowledgement of differences in their social positioning and lived experience. In her essay, *The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House*, Audre Lorde conveys, 'we have been taught either to ignore our differences or to view them as causes for separation and suspicion rather than as forces for change' (Lorde, 2007, p. 112). Therefore, the author's representation of intersectional standpoint is a concept of accommodating and articulating all levels of oppression rather than just unifying them under one singular category of oppression.

The intersectionality within the feminist discourse of the novel is also brought to the surface through the appliance of frame narrative technique. The technique of embedded narratives, that is to say, a story within a story was very much a part of the original text, *The Arabian Nights*. However, in this retelling, the author uses this technique to bring out poly-perspectivity. One of Dilshad's stories, *Rupavati's Breast*, is about the tradition of storytelling and how the retelling of the same myth reincarnates different versions of it. The story has an old couple, each telling a different version of a mythical legend of Lord Buddha. Old woman's version of it has Lord Buddha born as a woman called Rupavati who give both her breast to a hungry beggar woman. However, they come flying back to her due to her heroic courage. Old Man's version of it could not have a woman as Lord Buddha's incarnation so he discards it and tells a different story where Buddha is born as a man called Rupavata who marries a hungry mother of a child, he renames her Rupavati. The child later plans to kill his father, Rupavata, but is stopped by his mother who takes out one of her breasts and says, 'take the breast who milked an ungrateful child' (Hariharan, 1999, p. 183). So she survives on one breast.

Satyasama, their visitor, could not hold back and narrated her subversive version of the story wherein instead of Rupavati feeding a hungry woman and her child with her breast, she pulls out the hungry woman's husband's ear and plants it in the soil only to reap ears of corn, row after row. However, this version seems so dangerous to the old patriarch that he throws Satyasama out of his house and 'She walked ahead rapidly, her back upright, a pair of proud sentinels pushing their way out of her' (Hariharan, 1999, 188).

These nested mythical stories elicit a mosaic view and therefore, offer more than one narrative perspective. The technique of producing different perceptions of reality with the help of a cluster of different points of view is integral to magical realism as a prominent feature. Magical Realism's plenitude facilitates bringing out the intersectional standpoints. By giving us three different perspectives, Dilshad's story re-enacts the creative metamorphosis of the mythical tale of Lord Buddha. Hariharan intermingles

myth and reality to portray the journey of the transformation of a myth in oral literature. The difference in perspectives is basically due to the ideological interventions of different storytellers. The author, in this story, put across the point that due to the dominant patriarchal power structure, the female version or the version of the oppressed is often brushed off under the canonised version of a story.

CONCLUSION

This paper attempted to navigate the attributes of magical realism that brought out the feminist standpoint to the surface. Looking at magical realism through women's vantage point derailed the clichéd postcolonial perspective on it. Critics like Amaryll Chanady interpret the association of magical realism with Latin America as 'territorialization' of the form (Chanady 1995). However, this study undertook the deconstruction of the dual territorialisation of the term. The territorialisation of this narrative technique by the patriarchal upper-class male writers is challenged by the women magical realist writers. Hariharan in her novel presents the counter narration of female experiences by revisiting the patriarchal narrative of the famous, *The Arabian Nights*. Magical realism, as a narrative technique in the novel, deciphers the reality to provide a more inclusive and polyphonic understanding of Realism and in doing so it provides space to the oppressed female voices and further manifests a creative re-establishment of women's identity.

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