



SATIRE AS A MODE OF EXPRESSION IN GITHA HARIHARAN'S FICTION

DR. PAWAN KUMAR

- MA, Ph.D. English, MBA(HR) PGCTE
Dept. of Education, Chandigarh
INDIA

ABSTRACT

Every creative artist adopts an effective mode to give expression to the felt style. These modes of expression vary from person to person depending upon his/her perspective, the subject content and above all the writer's degree of maturity and expertise. The themes of woman's existence, identity and survival found prominent place in the writings of the novelists such as Nayantara Sehgal, Shashi Deshpande and Anita Desai. Sehgal deals with man-woman relationship and the unequal status of women in Indian Society; the long suppressed silence of women find due voice in works of Shashi Deshpande whereas Anita Desai depicts the psychological state of lonely women.

INTRODUCTION:

Githa Hariharan, no longer satisfied with woman's passive role as woman and wife, expresses her angry protest. "She erodes the age old wisdom", observes rightly Urmila Varma, "contained in sayings, proverbs, stories, myths and beliefs"; her anger finding its due vent "through the mode of satire, irony and sarcasm." (Varma 100) Her version encompasses the whole history of woman's role and beliefs the emergence of a new woman who is true to her own self. Satire is a powerful tool in Hariharan's arsenal employed effectively to subvert and erode the archetype myths and the ideology propagated by the mechanisms like patriarchy; thereby empowering the victims to stand erect and establish their own identity. "(She) critically examines, dissects and questions the age-old norms", observes rightly Urmila Varma, and "the tools she adopts are quite sharp and probe very deep." (100)

In her first novel *The Thousand Faces of Night*, Hariharan exposes the sick social structure and its ill conception. Gauri, the maidservant had been working to build a little pile of dowry-gold, chain-by-chain, bangle by bangle but her would be in-laws "asked for fifty sovereigns of gold" and after ten years of work, "(she) have only fifteen" (Hariharan, *The Thousand Faces of Night* 31) The piercing stroked take a leap further: "There is still the nose-

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stud to be bought, the toe-rings, the stone earrings set in gold, and the thali.” (31) The daughter of this very household Devi though envisions the happy moments with Mahesh, her husband, but not without satiric interrogatives: “And what if Mahesh builds his grey, impenetrable walls, his heart mine only on holidays?”(58) The satire often tends to sarcasm when it comes to comment on Mahesh’s attitude towards the sacred institute - the marriage; and Devi contemplates:

“I can’t help admiring his restraint, his detachment which views marriage as a necessity, a milestone like any other. It is a gamble, he says. You measure the odds as best you can, and adopt yourself to the consequences.” (49)

The sarcastic strokes do not stop here and Devi finds Mahesh (who builds defiance at home) nothing more than a pawn: “the company directors, perhaps, prefer their pawns clean-shaven so that they can read and move them more efficiently.” (60) Even Gopal for whom Devi leaves her husband is not without vague pride, and “walks a straight and narrow path as purposeful as Mahesh’s.” (78)

Through this tool, Hariharan probes effectively into what Rama Mehta opines: “women are treated as chattels” (Mehta *Inside the Haveli*). When Bheeshma abducted three princesses from their swayamvara and the eldest princess Amba confided her secret of having given her heart to King Salwa, Bheeshma and his step mother were speechless with surprise; “but they quickly recovered their royal poise” writes Hariharan, and continues: “So what if one third of the booty lost? The other two were young; they would bear the royal house strong warrior-sons.”(37) That the man’s ego could render irreparable harm to woman is brought out vividly by Hariharan: “He was a brave man, so he couldn’t be a loser.” (38) The man’s undue pride finds a sarcastic outlet through grandmother’s remarks: “All husbands are noble, Devi. Even the blind and deaf ones?”(29) The satirical strokes against the slot earmarked by society for a woman and the expectations enforced upon her are vividly portrayed through the hairy, bare-chested priest frowning at the girl-bride: “Flourish, like fierce look and without harming your husband; be good to animals, amiable to everything else... large-hearted Indra shower on this young bride brave sons and good fortune...”(79) That man marries woman basically to beget sons and satisfy his lust is brought out efficiently through words rolling out of Mayamma’s husband’s mouth who echoes in the priest’s voice: “Having taken seven steps with me, be my friend; be my inseparable companion...let our common path be lit by our lustrous love...so that we may bear a son.”(79-80) When Mayamma’s husband worn into middle age disappeared, taking with him all the money in the house, her mother-in-law “summoned astrologers from all the neighboring- towns”, who are competent enough to examine Mayamma’s horoscope that is “without a blemish” (81). They unhesitatingly declare: “Her lucky horoscope would lead him back.” (81)

In her second novel, *The Ghosts of Vasu Master*, Hariharan's little deft satiric strokes, dashing foreground the calm and passive acceptance of socio-cultural ethos by Lakshmi who did not have a name for almost a year because her parents "did not want to spend money on naming ceremony for one more daughter." (Hariharan, *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* 31) Also they "could not bear the thought of people laughing at them on witnessing their failure (to beget a son) year after year." (31) The satire tends to sarcasm when the sweeper tries to comfort her mistress: "she could have been born with something else down there. Life would have been easier with a little extra bit of flesh, a just few inches."(31) The abnegation of female child in Indian society can be observed aptly in Swami's discourse: "Poor Venkatesh has a whole string of daughters...what he had to provide them with."(140) Society's perception about girls and the way they are considered burden to parents is continued through Swami words: "in addition to the dowries that would come up sooner or later...there were books, slippers, fees, milk and skirts to be bought."(140) Through the use of this very weapon Hariharan rejects the concept of overall control a husband is entitled to exercise traditionally. Vasu's grandmother speaks of her husband only with an irreverent amusement as if he had been rather stupid and unimaginative child she had briefly known:

"What is husband, Vasu? Just a hungry stomach and a few other things, never mind what. But all equally greedy, swallowing like a big red swollen mouth, then chewing and belching." (174)

"Preoccupation with the physical charm of woman", remarks Jayaprakash A. Shinde, "amounts to the denial of woman's intelligence"; and Githa Hariharan "is averse to such wrong representation of woman in pictures and advertisement media." (Shinde 127) Man's sensual and voyeuristic obsession with woman is vividly brought out and satirized through Vasu Master's attraction for the young actress in photograph, he has seen in his childhood. He has now forgotten what the starlet was called – Rita or Mona. But the name is not important. What mattered was that Rita or Mona was dressed like an apsara. Hariharan highlights the wicked attitude of man and his weaknesses through what Vasu Master remembers of Rita – Mona:

"Rita-Mona wore an emerald-green sequined cloth round her billowy breasts, and an equally dazzling purple garment round her hips. Both strips were tied so tightly that her torso was a series of little wavy bulges...Her hypnotic, piercing look, and breasts which swelled out of the calendar to smother me, were the only sights in the world which moved me to the point of constipation." (17)

When Raman, the son of a film producer, failed in the examination, his father came to see Veera Naidu, the headmaster of the school. It was amazing that the same man who "fed his gems of moral science – honesty is a pearl, simplicity an uncut diamond – had no trouble

understanding Raman's father" (152); and by the time the two men emerged from Veera Naidu's office, both were beaming with good will: "They had spent a useful half hour together over cups of coffee; another envelope had been passed across the table; and Raman (and his failed examination) had been entirely forgotten." (152)

And what a rightful claim that those who wanted a seat at PG, or wanted to pass, "their parents will have to pay up their contributions – do their bit of Naidu's dream building." (183) 'Work is worship', are letters stamped on SUPW certificate issued by Veera Naidu; by the time the boys, however, were pronounced socially productive, "they had cleaned the stinking, everyday toilets fifty-two times a year, tended the twin buffaloes Naidu kept in the backyard of the school"(74)

Hariharan's tales are the allegories of modern issues that carrying a vital meaning: "The spider in the large cobweb is the supreme ruler of his kingdom. Everything on the cobweb is food for the spider's appetite. His wants and hungers are the only laws of the land." (190) Satire, at times, is let implicitly through the mouth of animals against human pride and follies. When, under the able-guidance of old fox, the animals decided to live together without killing each other and eating-up their neighbours, and the scarcity of food arose; the wise old fox explained them: "this was a small price to pay for making history; and for setting an example to other forests, to say nothing of the two footed predatory animals (man) so fond of zoos." (79)

Also tips are due to all those who want to govern and remain in power through Hariharan's sarcastic arsenal:

"Do you shoot an unruly mob if you want to remain in power? At the most you may tear-gas them; or order a lathi-charge. That's enough – they'll be back at their business in no time at all, chastened and obedient." (178)

In her third novel, *When Dreams Travel*, Hariharan's pen strikes even more alarming notes of satire when she brings out the ideology of socio political ethos: "All kings are collectors. All of them, whether Sultan or Raja or chosen leader turned supreme" The women in sultan's harem are barely more than objects whereupon they are termed as items: "These valuable items are women of all shapes, colours and sizes." (Hariharan, *When Dreams Travel* 90) It is by means of irony and satire, Hariharan incorporates and invents the women – so long invisible or inaudible or both – in the source text (1812). This process itself involves the challenge and rejection of the andocentric imagination and an underscoring of the 'other' presence. For example, she points out in her characteristic satiric-ironic vein: "As for the mother (or mothers) (of the sultans) the story teller is completely silent on the point." The little satiric strokes even probe deeper: "Surely Shahryar and Shahzaman must have required the services of a mother before they mounted their steeds." (8)

At times, satire is punctured with sarcastic interrogatives to bring out the unreasonability of whims and caprice the sultan Shahryar has acquired. The king, who is supposed to ensure well-being of his subjects, has nurtured a completely irrational notion of marrying a girl each day and beheading her the morning next lest she should grow unfaithful. “How much does this dream weigh?” whispers the slave girl to a friendly eunuch and questions “Can it break a man’s back?”

From the very beginning, Hariharan’s sole motto, in re-writing of the old text, has been to bring out the injustice and male chauvinism of Sultan Shahryar that was implied in the source text but was not questioned. The activities of forced labour and human transportation are indicated amply in a satiric vein as Dunyazad, Shaharзад’s younger sister having arrived to investigate Shaharyar’s suspected role in her death, hears about the tomb he plans to build for Sharzad and the large number of peoples he has drafted into service as his team:

“There is one especially gifted calligrapher who has been seized and transported to Shahabad from a distant, captured city. Shahryar has promised him liberty once the tomb is inscribed with the most tender, holy and beautiful words known to man.” (60)

The satire occasionally contains ample venom and Hariharan probes deeply with her surgical expertise on the subject. The wazir, having taken his daughter to the mighty Sultan to propose her, knows that Shahryar is waiting for them. Of late, however, “there have been so many marriages” writes Hariharan, “that there is no point in making a pompous ceremony of it all.”(257) She further adds with her piercing armour: “Next door is the real point, a fat serpent (the sultan) coiled in its bed, waiting with its hood raised ready to strike.” (257)

And how the task of two masculine figures in the novel – the one arrogant king and the other loyal minister has been made easy by Shahrzad – a prey in the guise of a goat, is brought out with the clinical efficiency by Hariharan. The lord, a gigantic man “with wild unwashed hair and red eyes”, watches the wazir as “he tenderly bathe the goat” (175). And how could the loyal servant, the wazir, not prove his stake to the worthy master:

“We feed you with joy, master, says the wazir as he embraces the goat’s neck and the hand with the knife flies down, plunges deep. The goat bleats joy fully as her head falls to the ground.” (175)

But wait! There is another detail. The master doesn’t want to eat alone. “Eat with me”, he commands; and “honoured, weary, the wazir sits down by the lord, the goat before him. He waits for the lord to taste the first mouthful.” (175)



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