

# Curative Power of Storytelling: A Critical Analysis of Githa Hariharan's Works

## Abstract

More than any other form of communication, story telling is the most effective and impressive way to communicate one's ideas. Storytelling came into existence ever since the humans started communicating. Its history can be traced back to the pre-literary tales in the third century. It is this creativity of passing down stories from one generation to another, that has attracted Githa Hariharan's attention. This impact can be seen in the way storytelling has become an integral part of her novels. Her novels *When Dreams Travels* and *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* emphasizes how this technique of storytelling can at times be used as the best tool for healing and survival in life. The present paper will throw some light on the therapeutic tactics used by the protagonists, to either survive in life, in society or on an individual front. The characters of Shahrzad and Vasu Master very effectively emphasizes on this perspective of survival and healing through storytelling.

**Keywords:** Storytelling, Survival, Communication, Oral Tradition, Power, Stories, Healing

## Introduction

The word stories remind us of the bed time stories recited to us by our mother's and grandmother's. The charm and spell exuded by these stories haunts inevitably everyone's childhood. These stories setup the the building base of our personality. It is through the medium of these stories we conceive the idea of good and bad. In this regard J.H.Miller has very aptly said:

Nothing seems more natural and universal to human being than telling story. Surely there is no human culture, however "primitive", without its stories and habits of storytelling, its myths of the origin of the world, its legends of the tribe or group of stories about folk heroes... . From our earliest childhood we hear stories and learn to repeat them. As adults, we hear, read, see, and tell stories all day long- for example, in the newspaper, on the television, in encounters with coworkers or family members. In a continuous silent internal activity, we tell to ourselves all day long.... At night we sleep and our unconscious minds tell us stories in our dreams. (1995:66)

The oral tradition of storytelling is not a new concept but can be traced back to the early third century, that initiated with the pre-literary tales. The oral tradition of storytelling where the stories were handed down from one generation to another was in practice not only in India but also abroad. This important part of human activity not only forms the basis of our communication system but at the same time presents us with simple explanations for our dilemmas that we face in our day to day business. Storytelling is a unique phenomenon in itself as it holds up its uniqueness, by having varied versions of the same story. Undoubtedly the core of the story cannot be tampered with, but it can be told and retold, heard and reheard in a repeated format, with different storytellers.

This unique characteristic of storytelling makes one point very categorical that it is a two way process, where not just the speaker but also the listener plays an active role. Though in the process of storytelling the listener surrenders himself to the magical world of the speakers narrative, yet this is not complete until and unless the message is delivered to the mind of the listener. The process does not halt here but carries its effect on the listener who has his own right for interpretations, thus making it an explorative experience, wherein the listener could explore new dimensions that might have so far been unseen.

The present paper would throw some light on the phenomenon of storytelling in the works of Githa Hariharan. The present paper would be

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dealing with the novels *When Dreams Travel* and *The Ghosts of Vasu Master*, two such works by Hariharan that aptly reveals her obsession with storytelling used as a narrative strategy by her to reveal the complex nature of reality. Both of these works explore the healing ability of storytelling, where the storyteller consciously or unconsciously has full control on the mind of the listener and influence him to a large extent.

*When Dreams Travel* which is Hariharan's recasting of the famous *One Thousand and One Nights* or *The Arabian Nights Entertainment*, as it came to be known in the west. *The Arabian Nights* is the age old story of Scheherazade or Shahrzad, the famous female story teller who not only saved her own life but the lives of all the virgins who would be made to sacrifice their lives in the name of the tyranny of the king Shahryar, an Arabian king who every night would marry a new virgin and kill her. *When Dreams Travel* is an attempt of retelling stories from a new perspective with new listeners so as to foster new interpretations that would help in filling up the gaps in the previous versions of the story. *When dreams travel* begins where *The Thousand and One Nights* ends. The novel is divided into two parts, the first half is narrated by an unnamed third person narrator which is the retelling of the original story and the second half is a collection of stories that Shahrzad might have told.

Right at the beginning of *When Dreams Travel*, we are placed in a world where women are treated as puppets. But then something occurs in the text that inverts this pyramid of power. After the original story the narrative becomes woman-centered, and Shahrzad is no more a puppet but a puppeteer who controls the scene and carefully plays with her narrative. She is no longer a timid girl fighting for her life. She is now elevated to the position of a savior of the city, the martyr who put her life on stake to save the other women. Shahrzad's victimhood is replaced by a version in the second part where the two women, Dunyazad, Shahrzad's sister and Dilshad a slave girl in Shahryar's palace, who are lesbian lovers, tell each other stories in order to emulate Shahrzad in their storytelling. The series of stories is an answer to other's story, which goes on for seven days and seven nights. It is noteworthy that unlike the first section which is a retelling with significant differences of the original frame story of *The Thousand and One Nights*, in part two Hariharan writes completely new accounts, which are totally unrelated to the original text, thereby giving the adulation proper to the woman who risked her life for others.

When the novel opens we see the king at the pinnacle of his power, but with the process of storytelling put into practice he becomes submissive to the narrative power of Shahrzad. It is the magical spell of storytelling that entirely inverts the pyramid of power bringing Shahrzad to the top. Here Hariharan has emphasized on the overall process of storytelling which is not merely narrating a series of events, but at the same time comprises an amalgam of imagination and invention. The stories of Shahrzad seem captivating because they incorporated all these

elements in a well defined proportion. What made them interesting was the creative reinventing of the stories she might have heard before, these were not mere copies but her innovation. It is under the shadow of death that Shahrzad tells her stories. In her case the survival depends on her ability to catch hold the interest of the king. She has to each time create a sense of curiosity in the king, that makes him eager for the next night to hear the untold half. The power of her narration can be measured from the fact how the relationship between the king and herself changes with the passage of time. She is not only successful in holding the interest of the king, but also renders an authenticity to her tales which makes it even more interesting. In her case it is the psychological or the mental power of storytelling which overcame the physical power of the king.

In one of the chapters we are shown the Sultan and his brother asking Shahrzad about the origin and the source of her stories, even though she was less travelled than the two, 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" (TFN, 20). In the story Shahrzad is a survivor who knows that her life and the lives of all the other virgins lie in her tongue. Thus survival through words becomes one of the motifs of the protagonist here and this take on survival comes through the self realization of one's own capabilities which one discovers only when one communicates and relates to others and this kind of involvement is necessary for survival.

In her another novel *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* storytelling has not only been used as a better way of teaching but also a way to healing someone mentally. The novel traces the power of storytelling. In this novel the place of Shahrzad has been taken over by Vasu Master, who is a newly retired school teacher. As in *When Dreams Travel* Shahrzad used the device of storytelling as a tool to survive, here Vasu uses the same device to help someone else survive in the battle of life. After his retirement, Vasu does not quit teaching and continues to teach children at his place. But a new phase of his life begins when a twelve years old boy named Mani who has "swallowed, chewed up, spat out, outgrown his parents four siblings, eight doctors the last with foreign degrees and equipment, four schools and innumerable principals, teachers, fellow pupils, canes, taunts and jeers" (TGOVM, 11), becomes his pupil.

Mani like any other child of his age was born as a normal child. Problems started thereafter when with the advancing age he initially grew uncontrollable and finally silent, when the efforts of tying him, shouting at him by others did not help him. He changed four schools but could not be tamed by any of them. Finally discouraged by all the possible efforts to cure him, his father brings him to Vasu Master, who is well known for his patience. When Mani is brought for the first time to Vasu, he gives his consent to teach him as he is not aware of Mani's basic problems. It is only when he starts teaching Mani, he realizes that Mani was not a normal child, but rather required altogether a very different way of teaching and guidance.

It was not simply making him learn and write, but the challenge here that lay for Vasu was to initially make him sit and listen, which was near impossible for Mani. In his first few days of teaching, Vasu realized that it was becoming impossible for him to make Mani sit and listen silently even for a few minutes. It is then that Vasu realizes all his teaching techniques floundering as none can cater to Mani's requirements. Eventually Vasu discovers that it is through the process of storytelling, that Mani can be treated. Vasu himself had been greatly influenced by the stories that his grandmother had recited to him during his childhood days which eventually helped him finding ways out of his problems in future. Likewise he also realizes how a few stories also helped in curing most of the patients who often visited his father for ayurvedic treatment. It is in his past that he finds the key to his future. As this is the last and the only resort left he decides to heal Mani like his grandmother and father through stories.

The effect of storytelling on Mani is very explicit. He for the first time seemed to listen to Vasu with an awestruck look as if eager to hear more from that quarter. This is the first win for Vasu, for whom making use of pencil and book by Mani was not the priority, but to gain his attention was the first and foremost goal of his teaching capabilities.

The series of stories that Vasu recites to Mani are fragments of stories from the *Panchatantra* and the *Buddhist Tales or Jatakas*, with a little revisionist and innovative twist so as to lent his stories an authenticity, which would capture Mani's attention. In the earlier times, these stories from the *Panchatantra* and the *Jatakas* were used to implant moral values and major life skills. These were basically meant to train the princes and thus serve the society by propagating moral values. But here the stories are used in the traditional sense i.e. to heal the listener. This is obviously a reference to the therapeutic value of telling stories to cure.

Through inculcating stories in his teaching Vasu crossed the first hurdle of his teaching barrier. Further in order to create a link between his stories and reality, he attributed the characters like the grey mouse to himself and represented Mani as the blue bottle fly. Through this comparison Mani could evaluate how Vasu like the grey mouse always had pity and love for the fly and the fly represented himself who at every step required guidance to face this harsh world. Vasu substituted animals and birds for humans in his stories as he could presume how Mani was more fascinated with beasts and birds. Once the process of listening initiated, the listener himself took the next leap into the world of imagination. This was the second achievement for Vasu as this proved that Mani was no longer a passive listener, but started articulating the symptoms of an active listener as he started using his innovative power to reason what is good and bad. In one of the episodes, Vasu draws two pictures, one of a mango and the other of a cane and asks Mani to choose one. Mani chooses the scrap with mango drawn on it and puts it in his pocket and tears the other; this is interpreted by Vasu as a new step towards their friendship.

Though the world of stories fabricated by Vasu takes Mani into an imaginary world yet he tries his best to link this imaginary world to the real world. Through his stories like the 'Melting Pot', he establishes this point of view that the world cannot be an imaginary entity rather we have to survive in this world and find a surviving space for ourselves where withdrawing from reality or escapism is not the solution. Likewise the story 'Lions and Tigers' which is a story told by Vasu's grandmother to him is another example that teaches us to differentiate the imaginary and the realistic world in order to survive.

#### **Aim of the Study**

To explore the unseen facets of Githa Hariharan's works which makes storytelling her preoccupation and an indispensable part of her writing

#### **Conclusion**

Both these works of Hariharan very aptly depicts the art of storytelling and its impacts that may be psychological, social and educational. It is quite evident from these works that the healing effect of storytelling not only cures the listener but many a times the narrator also. In *When Dreams Travel* it is not just Shahrzad who uses this power of speech to save her life and enlighten herself as an embodiment of innovation and creativity, but it also the king who seems to be transformed by the end of her series of stories. Thus both, Shahrzad as well as the king goes through transformation.

Similarly in *The Ghosts of Vasu Master*, Vasu is not only successful in transforming the life of Mani, but himself too discovers a new face of his personality. In the true sense the real challenge for Vasu Master was not the forty long years of teaching experience in the boys school, because during those forty years Vasu regarded himself as a failure as he was not in a capacity to read the minds of his students. It is this void that makes him take up the challenge of training Mani. Throughout Mani's learning process Vasu realizes that he is like the grey mouse of his own story who though represents to the world his patient nature, but deep within is scared to venture out in the world of perils. It is through his teachings and lessons to Mani whom he represented as the blue bottle fly he realizes that he himself too have to come out of that hole or cocoon in order to live life.

Thus with these words of Michael Foucault 'Knowledge is power' it is justified that knowledge controls man with the mental force rather than physical force. It was not the physical power of Shahrzad, but the knowledge and innovative power of mind of Shahrzad which controls power. Likewise Vasu Master's knowledge of words controls the impulsive Mani not through physical force but through the force of his tongue.

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