

REVIEW

Manipulating Desire

Hariharan explores the war of the sexes with powerful wit

ANJANA SHARMA

When Dreams Travel
By Githa Hariharan
Picador India
Rs: 195;Pages:276

THERE are some books, a clutch of writers, a handful of vivid imaginations that fill one with an eager anticipation to enter worlds waiting to be born: Hariharan is one such novelist. When Dreams Travel, Hariharan's audacious, delightful book travels farther, faster in the manner of her dream travelling women protagonists than her earlier works.

Crossing boundaries, merging traditions, blending myth, legend, and the power of a fertile imagination, Hariharan crafts a tale both fantastical and poignantly close to the skin. The point of entry, as Hariharan herself declares, is the book of books, a cornucopia of stories, the classic Tales from a Thousand and One Nights. What Hariharan does with this legacy is another matter. Seen through her eyes the classic is reborn as a tale of the times, a story of all times, a narrative of all stories ever imagined and articulated. Twisting the fine and frayed fabric of myth and legend, knotting into it her own concerns about women's dreams, desires, their courage, their gift of golden speech, is the story of two valiant sisters, Shahrzad and Dunyazad. Linked to them are two brothers, two Sultans, two cuckolds, Shahryar and Shahzaman. It is a fabulous and fearsome foursome who have come together to fulfil a mission: to rid the brothers of the stain, the scar, the stigma of being cuckolded by their previous queens.

It is an age-old problem, how to heal the fragile masculinity punctured by the rapier point of female sexuality. Shahryar's determination to right the gender power equation is terrifyingly simple. To ensure his status as a non-cuckolded husband, he marries, again and again: a virgin wife for one night, a headless woman the next dawn. The logic is indisputable; a dead woman is a chaste wife. But this cannot continue as the supply of fresh, nubile virgins dwindle. Besides, it hurts the palaces image to have a ruler who feeds on flesh, daily. The wise Wazir rights this by providing his own virginal daughters, the redoubtable duo, Shahrzad and Dunyazad. The turgid current of virginal blood is stemmed by Shahrzad's silver tongue, dammed by the walls of her untrammelled imagination. For one thousand and one nights Shahrzad's stories hold death at bay, for Shahrzad like her own story, is a survivor. Her nightly audience comprising the thwarted brothers and her accomplice sister, is an audience that follows Shahrzad as she embarks like an effortless traveller... unburdened by anything less portable than imagination.

Ultimately it's this that holds the book together: the magic and mystery of the writerly imagination, her wonderful felicity with image, her wounding wit, her incredible ability to connect this story with any story ever imagined, ever heard, ever forgotten. It's a story of how the sisterhood of women triumphs over the overweening authority and specious control of the fictive brotherhood of emasculated men. A story that's not new, yet told with such inventiveness, such surefooted style and panache that it lights up forgotten corners of a reader's mind. Hariharan, in her own words, is the womanly fabricator, the builder who strips others' creations of what takes (her) fancy. Here she's built a verbal monument that'll stand the test of all monuments: time.

[Click here to see the article in its standard web format](#)

■