

Hidden Scriptures and Intertextual Allusions in Githa

Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night* and *When Dreams Travel*

Dr. N. Prasheeba

Faculty, Department of English

St. Teresa Arts and Science College for Women

Mangalakuntu, Karungal, Tamil Nadu, India

prasheeba1982@gmail.com

Abstract

Julia Kristeva's concept of "a mosaic of quotations" is at the core of "intertextuality" and intertextuality has become a powerful literary strategy in Githa Hariharan's novels *The Thousand Faces of Night* and *When Dreams Travel*. Allusion is an indirect reference to some event, person or thing, or an artistic work, whose relevance is not explained by the author, but it relies on the readers' familiarity with what is thus mentioned. Hariharan has skilfully woven the novels with allusions and anecdotes from great Indian epics like *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, and the famous *The Thousand and One Nights* or *Arabian Nights*. However, a close reading reveals several hidden allusions to Christian themes. They are not merely decorative references but interpretive frameworks that deepen the psychological and moral dimensions of her works. Her female protagonists parallel both mythological and Biblical women, thereby bridging cultures and belief systems and enriching feminist discourse. This paper "Hidden Scriptures and Intertextual Allusions in Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night* and *When Dreams Travel*" examines the hidden scriptural references and intertextual allusions in the two chosen novels. In these novels, sacred texts and secular

experiences intersect, and an intertextual reading brings to light the narrative craftsmanship of this contemporary Indian English writer.

Keywords: Christian, Biblical, Allusions, Intertextuality, Myth, Reality

One cannot definitely say where and when a text begins and ends because “one of the peculiarities of the literary works is that they are never single” (Bennett and Royle 5). In the 1960s Julia Kristeva introduced the concept of intertextuality to the academic world. The concept intertextuality describes how different texts communicate with one another. In the article “Word, Dialogue and Novel” Kristeva refers to Bakhtin and states, “any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another” (37). This concept of mosaic is the core of the concept of intertextuality. A text can never be a completely independent creation but is always a reproduction of earlier texts. No text stands all alone but is instead responding to earlier texts. It also promotes and seeks further responses, as all utterances depend “upon what has previously been said and on how they will be received by others” (Allen 19).

Allusion is one of the major components of intertextuality. It is an indirect reference to some event, person or thing, or an artistic work, whose relevance is not explained by the author, but it relies on the readers’ familiarity with what is thus mentioned (Baldick 9). Hariharan is an exponent in making use of this technique. Being a skillful writer, she alludes to various ancient myths, legends and scriptures. She also makes reference to historical periods and cultural elements in her novels. A close reading of her novels, *The Thousand Faces of Night* and *When Dreams Travel*, brings in a number of Christian and Biblical allusions.

In *The Thousand Faces of Night* Hariharan praises the holiness and goodness of women with the illustration of Purandara Dasa’s wife, Sarasvati Bai. Once, a Brahmin comes to Dasa for alms. But he does not help him. So the poor man approaches Dasa’s wife with the

same request. She immediately gives him one of her nose-rings, without a second thought. As the man goes to Dasa's store to sell the jewel, Dasa charges his wife. In fear, she takes some poisonous potion to end her life. But suddenly the potion changes into her jewel. Her husband is astonished at the miracle, and he vows to change his way of life.

Similar events are found in the lives of Christian saints too. St. Casilda, who is greatly venerated in Spain and Latin America, was the daughter of a Muslim king of Toledo. She was raised up as a Muslim. She always felt compassion for Christians. She showed special kindness to Christian prisoners by frequently sneaking bread into the prison, hidden in her clothes, to feed them. Once, she was stopped by her father, and "he asked her what she was carrying, and she replied 'Roses'; he asked to see them, and roses miraculously appeared" (Lanzi 141).

The same incident occurs in the life of St. Elizabeth of Portugal. Elizabeth was the daughter of King Peter III and Contance of Aragon, Spain. She was brought up in a spirit of strict piety, and self-denial. Her generous and indefatigable charity towards the unfortunate and the sick had been remarkable all through her life. Her suspicious husband was surprised to see "the bread loaf which she was taking to the poor transformed into roses" (Mausolf and Mausolf 245).

Baba advises Devi, quoting Manu, that a Brahmin should give importance to spirituality, over material things. He cautions her to be aware of the desire for wealth. He declaims, "Tell me, O mind, where real joy comes from? From the wealth of men or a vision of God? Cream and milk or Rama's nectar-sweet name?" (Hariharan, *Thousand Faces* 69). The same idea is found in the Bible, where Jesus preaches to His disciples, "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal" (Matt. 6:19-20). Again Jesus

admonishes, “Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God” (Lk.18:25).

Hariharan talks of “eagle-shaped chariot that flew swifter than the wind into the thick, billowing clouds” (Hariharan, *Thousand Faces* 41). Devi is taken into the clouds, in her fantasy. This imagery alludes to an incident in the Bible. Prophet Elijah, in 2 Kings, is carried away into heaven by a chariot of fire. “As they continued walking and talking, a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them, and Elijah ascended in a whirlwind into heaven” (2 Kgs. 2:11).

Grandma talks about gods and goddesses to Devi. She tells her, “One or the other watches your every step. An assistant goddess keeps records of every mortal on lotus leaves with a pen of reeds” (Hariharan, *Thousand Faces* 40). This concept alludes to the Christian belief in the role of Guardian Angels, in an individual’s life. Their task is to enlighten, protect, guide and pray for the persons entrusted to their care. The Psalmist declares, “To his angels he has given charge over you, to keep you in all your ways. Upon their hands they shall bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone” (Ps. 91:11-12). There is also a reference to the book of record, maintained before God, concerning every individual. “The Lord took note and listened, and a book of remembrance was written before him of those who revered the Lord and thought on his name” (Mal. 3:16).

“Fathers, brothers, husbands and brothers-in-law should honour brides, if they desire welfare. Where women are honoured, there the gods delight; where they are not honoured, there all acts become fruitless” (Hariharan, *Thousand Faces* 65). This piece of Baba’s advice to his daughter-in-law, in the words of Manu, makes one allude to Tobit’s advice to his son, Tobias, in the Old Testament. Tobit calls his son and says, “Honour your mother and do not abandon her all the days of her life. Do whatever pleases her, and do not grieve her in anything. Remember her, my son, because she faced many dangers for you while you were in

her womb” (Tob. 4:3-4). Once again Sirach says, “do not forget the birth pangs of your mother” (Sir. 7:27).

Baba sums up his illustrative stories with an ambitious conclusion, “By public confession, repentance, penance, repetition of holy mantras, and by gifts, the sinner is released from sin” (Hariharan, *Thousand Faces* 67). This sounds to be an echo of the Biblical passage, “Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed (Jas. 5:16), and “whoever conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will obtain mercy” (Ps. 28:13).

Hariharan’s third novel, *When Dreams Travel* is a recasting of the famous *The Thousand and One Nights* or *Arabian Nights*. In this novel, Hariharan deconstructs and re-examines the misogynist ideologies found in the original patriarchal text. The recasting of *The Thousand and One Nights* brings out one of the central ethical concerns of the novel, namely, to centre those marginalized in different ways by the patriarchal power structures. In this regard, Hariharan’s version is not so different from the original *Arabian Nights*, because those objects and events, that are central to the original text, are equally so to Hariharan’s novel.

In one of Dunyazad’s tales, her father, the king’s wazir undergoes three “adventures” in an episode. The second one, among the three episodes, shows the wazir hurrying home to be confronted by the sultan’s messenger. He pre-empted the eunuch’s words by calling out with a helpless shudder, “Is there a virgin in this house?” (Hariharan, *When Dreams* 173). When they are interrupted by the call for prayer, the eunuch rushes off to pray. The wazir slips into the house. The young woman, who has peeped through the window, joins him to dig a pit in the courtyard. When the pit is deep enough, she steps into it. He covers her up with mud, leaving tiny pores on the surface so that she can breathe. The eunuch returns after

prayer and asks the house “Do you house a female virgin?” (173). The talking house responds in the negative. After the eunuch’s departure,

The wazir looks at the freshly dug courtyard, deliberating. He feels a measure of shame, relief, disbelief; there is also a dull pain in his chest like an omen of heartbreak. He sinks to his knees and scoops up handfuls of mud till he has uncovered the source of the voice, a plump white goat that looks at him with limpid eyes. Their tears mingle; he scoops her up in his arms, the beloved goat, with joy and regret. (Hariharan, *When Dreams* 173-174)

The plump goat hints at the fate decreed to all women in a chauvinistic male centered society. This episode runs on to the next one.

The wazir is in a hurry. “It is time for him to make his offering to his hungry god” (Hariharan, *When Dreams* 174). He carries the goat to the desert. He feels the goat’s heart beating against his chest. She does not make any attempt to escape. “She is in fact snuggling up to him lovingly; their bodies are pressed together in a cocoon of trust” (174). The wazir reaches the heart of the desert, and finds “the large, manly figure... the lord, a gigantic man with wild unwashed hair and red eyes” (175), strangely reminiscent of lord Shiva, one of the Hindu trinity gods. The wazir apologizes for his delay and feels for the hungry god, who demands him, “remember, only something you love will fill my stomach with your devotion” (175). Then the wazir pulls out a long, glinting knife, and is ready to sacrifice his first born. The goat bleats joyfully as her head falls down. A pathetic scene follows thereafter. The god does not want to eat alone. He commands the wazir also to eat with him. The weary wazir sits down before the cooked goat. The relentless god demands that his daughter also must dine with them. The wazir trembles with despair. Still, he goes to the remains of the cooking fire where the goat’s head lies uncooked, and calls out beseechingly, “come, sweet Shahrzad. There is just one more thing we must do together” (176). To his astonishment she appears,

and the father and daughter run to the tormenting guest. But the god and the meal have disappeared.

The episode echoes of a well-known Savia Siddhanthic myth, a favourite of the Tamil race. In the myth, lord Shiva tests the faith of his ardent devotee by appearing before him in the form of a mad Shaivait heretic and demanding that he kills the most favourite thing in the world to feed him. The devotee, who has vowed that he would never send away a Shaivait unfed from his home, kills and cooks his only son. The heretic then sits down for a meal and asks that his son join them. The heart-broken devotee pretends to call out to his young dead son and to his surprise the son appears before them. Lord Shiva reveals himself to the formerly desolate, now astonished man and praises his devotion.

The episode also alludes to an Old Testament anecdote in the Bible, where God decides to test Abraham's faith. God demands a sacrifice of Isaac, Abraham's only son. God says, "take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love... and offer him as a burnt offering" (Gen. 22:2). This echoes Hariharan's words, "Remember, only something you love will fill my stomach with your devotion" (Hariharan, *When Dreams* 175).

Again in the first part of the episode the wazir finds a plumb goat in the place where he buried his daughter. In the Bible, as Abraham "reached his hand and took the knife to kill his son" (Gen. 22:10), he was stopped by the Lord, and is given a goat in the place of Isaac, to be sacrificed. The same episode also makes a reference to the New Testament, where Jesus Christ is referred to as the "Lamb of God" (Jn. 1:29), meaning that He would die for the salvation of the world. Hariharan uses words like, "salvation", "redemption", and "savior" to refer to Shahrzad, who would save herself and the womenfolk of the city from the tyrannous king. She can also be compared to the goat, mentioned in Leviticus. The sins of the whole community are cast on the goat and are driven to the desert, so as to redeem the people from their sins:

Then Aaron shall lay both his hands on the head of the live goat, and confess over it all the iniquities of the people of Israel, and all their transgression, all their sins, putting them on the head of the goat, and sending it away into the wilderness by means of someone designated for the task. The goat shall bear on itself all their iniquities to a barren region; and the goat shall be set free in the wilderness. (Lev.16:21-22)

Hariharan has chosen the apt symbol - goat - to picturize Shahrzad as a saviour.

The toothless minister, in Dilshad's story, was born with a full set of teeth. The people thought that he would grow up to be a king. So the anxious mother being "afraid of what the real king would do if he heard about his boyish rival" (Hariharan, *When Dreams* 208), pulled out all her son's teeth. This makes a strange allusion to King Herod, who was frightened at the birth of the new king Jesus. So the parents of Jesus were asked by the angel of God, "to flee to Egypt, and remain there ... for Herod is about to search for the child to destroy him" (Matt. 2:13).

Hariharan portrays the minar as "a marble ladder to heaven" (Hariharan, *When Dreams* 162). This makes one allude to an Old Testament passage in the Bible. Jacob, the son of Isaac left Beersheba and went towards Haran. He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night. He took one of the stones of the place, put it under his head, and slept there. "And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angles of God were ascending and descending on it" (Gen. 28:10-12).

Again, the minar in the novel, that "grew ... as far as the eye could see till it disappeared into the clouds" (Hariharan, *When Dreams* 163), alludes to the tower of Babel in the Bible. It stands as the symbol of man's pride. The two brothers in Dilshad's tale plan to perpetuate their glory and pride through the tower, which is "within touching distance of a low, dark cloud" (165), and they think only the tower can make people "remember their

numerous victories over life and all livings” (165). The tower would serve as a tool to tell the next generation, the story of Azhar, and Mazhar. They say to each other, “As long as this minar stands, our story will live” (165). This makes a straight reference to the Bible, where the people said among themselves “come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves” (Gen.11:14).

Hariharan revisits and reconstructs the age-old myths, legends and scriptures. Intertextuality is the technique that she uses to drive home her message. Most of her works seem to be a collage of diverse sources like great epics and legends, historical persons and monuments, literary and musical references, Tamil and Sanskrit words, and cultural practices. A careful reading of *The Thousand Faces of Night* and *When Dreams Travel* reveals the depth and complexity of Githa Hariharan’s fiction. This richness, along with the multidimensional perspectives her novels offer, arises from her skillful use of intertextuality as a powerful literary strategy.

Conflict of Interest: The corresponding author, on behalf of all the authors, declares that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this article.

Copyright: © 2026 Dr. N. Prasheeba authors retain the copyright of their original work while granting the journal the right of first publication.

License: This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0) License. This license permits others to copy, distribute, remix, adapt, and build upon the work, including for commercial purposes, provided appropriate credit is given to the original authors. The authors are also free to archive and share the published work in institutional repositories, personal websites, academic social networking platforms, and other non-commercial or commercial platforms in accordance with the terms of the CC BY 4.0 License.

Works Cited

Allen, Graham. *Intertextuality*. Routledge, 2000.

Baldick, Chris. *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*. Oxford UP, 2008.

Bennett, Andrew, and Nicholas Royle. *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory*. 3rded., Pearson, 2008.

Hariharan, Githa. *The Thousand Faces of Night*. Penguin Books, 1992.

---. *When Dreams Travel*. Penguin Books, 1999.

Kristeva, Julia. "Word, Dialogue and Novel." *The Kristeva Reader*, edited by Toril Moi, Blackwell, 1986, pp. xxx–xxx.

Lanzi, Fernando, and Gioia Lanzi. *Saints and Their Symbols: Recognizing Saints in Art and in Popular Images*. Liturgical Press, 2004.

Mausolf, A. J. M., and J. K. Mausolf. *Saint Companions for Each Day*. Saint Paul Society, 1986.

The Holy Bible. Edited by Thomas Nelson, Catholic Bible Press, 2002.