In Search of Absent Presence(s): The Narrative as Disnarrated Space in Githa Hariharan's *When Dreams Travel*

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> Wandering through the gradual galleries
> I often feel with vague and holy dread
> I am that other dead one, who attempted
> The same uncertain steps on similar days.
> Which of the two is setting down this poem—
> A single sightless self, a plural I?
>
> (Borges, Poem of the Gifts)

"A classic is a book that has never finished saying what it has to say," wrote Italo Calvino in his 1991 essay "Why Read a Classic?" *(The Uses of Literature* 125). *The Arabian Nights: Tales from a Thousand and One Nights*[1], a concoction of scintillating tales, is one such book. Of uncertain authorship, date, and geographical location, the book serves as one of the earliest and classic examples of the art of traditional storytelling. Following the technique of a frame narrative, the tales have proven to be shape shifting and transcultural. The history of their creation and evolution is a complex albeit pyrotechnic labyrinth of compilations, modifications, translations, variants and scholarly revisions, which forms an indispensable chapter in folkloristics[2]. The main, umbrella frame story that inaugurates the book's fascinating storytelling enterprise narrates the, now well-known, story of Scheherazade who resorts to storytelling in an attempt to ward off her impending decapitation at the hands of King

Shahryar. Betrayed by one woman, the king devises a blood-curdling revenge strategy: find a fresh virgin each day, marry her for the night, and behead her the next morning. This set into motion an almost endless mechanism, whereby, the virgins, one after another, lost their virginity and their heads until Scheherazade, the wazir's elder daughter, the glib and mesmerising storyteller, marries the king and succeeds in taming the executioner's axe. Captivating the king within the intricately woven web of her myriad stories, she narrates a fascinating tale every night for a thousand and one nights. These one thousand and one nights of storytelling culminates into a moment of redemption for the king and one of emancipation for Scheherazade and the other remaining virgins. King Shahryar abandons his macabre plan and is reconciled to womankind; Scheherazade successfully saves the lives of other women along with her own and earns for herself a well-deserved place as a saviour and a raconteuse in the annals of folk memory[3].A perfunctory reading posits the narrative as a relatively uncomplicated and quite charming tale of betrayal, salvation and the happily ever after, enriched with several sub stories which add to the central frame story's entertainment value. A closer reading, per contra, tears through the story's contrived simplicity and specious closure. Over the years, the vast trajectory of compilations, translations, and scholarly research that *The Arabian Nights* has traversed, establishes the polysemic nature of the book, which has an inexhaustible capacity to illuminate the, hitherto, hidden, forsaken, or undiscovered, dark corners of the labyrinth that it is. These hidden, invisible absent presence(s) are what Githa Hariharan explores in her book, *When Dreams Travel*, a brilliantly evocative and powerfully written variant of *The Arabians Nights*. Its narrative proper begins at the point where its predecessor's suppositiously ends: on the other side of the thousand and one nights of ceaseless storytelling and delves into the beyond of the preceding

narrative's presumed 'happily ever after'.

> Mirrors are filled with people.
> The invisible see.
> The forgotten recall us.
> When we see ourselves, we see them.
> When we turn away, do they? (Galeano 1)

A narrative work is woven around a pivotal storyline and it is particularly so in the case of a frame narrative. In a frame narrative, the central story enables to string together multifarious sub narratives. The central frame story of *The Arabian Nights* is a case in point. Like its master storyteller Scheherazade, however, it is an elusive creature, a mirror that reflects and refracts in turn. Hariharan uses this play of reflection and refraction to, imaginatively, knit her narrative with those voices, implicitly present but furtively hiding or hidden behind the singular voice of Scheherazade. Dunyazad, Scheherazade's younger sister, and Dilshad, a young slave girl, (a new introduction to the age-old narrative), are the peripheral voices, eithersilent or entirely unknown, that Hariharan reclaims or creates and gives a voice to. Instead of Scheherazade, the whole story revolves around Dunyazad's journey to find out about her elder sister's mysterious disappearance or even apparent death, which she suspects to be a murder. She meets Dilshad who becomes her companion on this expedition and the past, the present, and the future turn fluxional, coalescing with and diverging from one another, as they exchange dreams and memories through mutual storytelling:"For seven nights and days there are dreams in mirrors, mirrors in their dreams. There is a festering memory in Dunyazad's story of the night. Dilshad or Satyasama take this pulpy, oozing memory and transform it in the hard and relentless light of day" (118).Their stories not only give rise to a polyphonic text but one that serves as an interesting and sui generis example of a self-reflexive,

imaginative narrative space based on 'what might have been'.When speaking of space in narratology, a distinction needs to be made between literal and metaphorical uses of the concept[4]. Forms of textual/narrative spatiality include spatial frames, setting, story space, narrative world and narrative universe[5].In Hariharan's narrative these spatial forms function through the 'disnarrated', a significant concept in narrative theory introduced by Gerald Prince in 1988.*Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory states*:

> As delineated by Prince, the disnarrated comprises those elements in a narrative which explicitly consider and refer to what does not take place(but could have). It can pertain to a character's unrealized imaginings (incorrect beliefs, crushed hopes, false calculations, erroneous suppositions), to a path not followed by the events recounted, or to a narrative strategy not exploited. (118)

If narrative is appertained to the telling, the disnarrated is concerned with the tellability. In other words, the disnarrated underscores whether a narrative is worth narrating or telling. "This narrative is worth telling because it *could have been* otherwise, because it normally is otherwise, because it was not otherwise"("Disnarrated"). By focusing on what does not happen but could or should have happened; or perhaps, should not have happened, the disnarrated creates an alternative narrative space which provides new perspectives to look at a text and renders it open to greater imaginative visibility. In *When Dreams Travel*, the disnarrated functions at multiple levels. To begin with, Dunyazad and Dilshad's stories, as the projections of unactualised possibilities and unexplored dreams and desires, stem from disnarrated space(s). "[They] travel, reinventing their lives and bodies and, in the process, mirroring and distorting the reality created by Shahrzad, so that the

past and future are reconstructed by the sheer determination of wishes, dreams and the memories of those dreams" (Biscaia 127).

In' Nine Jewels for a Rani' (134-149), Dilshad's first story, she narrates the story of Satyasama of Eternal City, considered a freak by the city's inhabitants. Possessing a furry face and a simian appearance, she is an outcast. Cruelly re-named Monkey-Face, she resides on a peepal tree. One night, a lightning strikes the tree. As a consequence, she turns blind in the right eye but she acquires a power of reasoning and a set of values quite unlike those of her city. She is now completely alienated from the others, both physically and intellectually. She continues to reside on the lightning struck tree and takes to singing, becoming a perfect candidate for a public freak-show. Eventually, the sultan buys her and she becomes a part of his harem. She falls in love with a eunuch who becomes her poetic muse. She is able to survive only by performing in some spectacle but once the sultan's interest in her begins to wane, she withers away, gradually growing silent with the execution of the eunuch she loved. The peepal tree she resided on is hacked followed by the chopping off Satyasama's limbs one by one. All that remained of her was a mutilated mess. Even then,"She will refuse death though she is bereft of her friend the rani. She will resist succumbing to the relief of silence, its escape from pain and hatred, as long as that moan continues" (149). Satyasama's tale becomes a symbol of survival, an unfulfilled desire of resistance, of emancipation, for Dilshad, the slave-girl. Hariharan subtly posits Dilshad as the representative voice of King Shahryar's harem, a site of his power politics. Through Dilshad, she projects the disnarrated possibility of a subaltern resistance to tyranny and exploitation. In a masterstroke, Hariharan brings this possibility to a full circle by designing a hypothetical situation within the text where Shahryar is deposed and imprisoned by his son, Umar, and suggests the elusive slave-girl, Dilshad's role

‘in wresting power from one sultan,[and] vesting it in another’(114), finally winning for herself freedom to start life afresh. Satyasama’s tale also becomes a potential disnarrated device through which Dilshad endeavours to help Dunyazad (and, by implication, Hariharan attempts to help the readers) resolve the various possibilities involved in Shahrzad’s mysterious disappearance, absence, or death. Like Satyasama, Shahrzad too, thrived on having an audience for her storytelling. With the thousand and one nights of storytelling over, what fate could have awaited her? Surely, the prodigal storyteller who had so successfully ‘cheated the regal sword’ (23) in the past, would have desisted from succumbing to it in the present. Did she then, like Satyasama, refused to go silent? What could have happened to her? Perhaps, ‘she too has learnt the lessons of the tales she told’ (25) and has become a ‘permanent fugitive’ (25); ‘…now a myth that must be sought in many places, fleshed in different bodies, before her dreams let go of Dunyazad or her descendants’(25).

A pivotal narrator of Hariharan’s narrative, Dunyazad, too, weaves a narrative out of the disnarrated space. She “stalks the old Shahrzad story with wary devotion, drawing obsessive rings round it like a predatory lover. She sees all memories and visions through this one prism” (116).Keeping Shahrzad’s story as her point of reference, she examines ‘minutely, zealously, from every point of view that occurs to her’ (116), seeking stories in the absent presence(s): a pregnant Shahrzad in her story “Rowing a Floating Island” (121-133); a dying Shahryar in “A Lover, a Tomb”(150-161); her father, the wazir in anguish in “Three Scenes and a Father” (168-176), her psychotic and possessed husband Shahzaman, Shahryar’s younger brother in “The Adventures of a Sultan” (189-200), a young Prince Umar in “The Palace Thief”(215-225); and even a story about Dilshad in “The Slavegirl’s Palace” (233-245). Since her stories do not discount the

original story, we can safely claim that they do not fall in the category of denarration[6]. The stories neither occupy the non-narrated / unnarrated[7] space nor qualify as the unnarratable[8]. Woven around that which does not occur but could or should have occurred, the stories are instances of the disnarrated. They recount roads not taken, choices not made, and goals not reached ("Disnarrated"). Among the stories, "Three Scenes and a Father" serves as an excellent example of the rhetorical function of the disnarrated space. The story is a hypothetical imagining on Dunyazad's part about the moral anguish the wazir, a father of two daughters, one of whom he were to sacrifice at the blood-thirsty altar of the sultan, must have undergone. Composed of three phantasmagorical sub-episodes of allegorical import, the story highlights the choices made and those abandoned. In the first episode, the wazir finds himself in a vast desert, "alone in the face of an impending storm" (169). He walks on and eventually stumbles upon an "opal-hued pool" (169), dips his face in the water and, as he pulls out his face, he gasps to discover a "whole population of dismembered bodily parts, pickled in a vicious fluid," (171). "All of female Shahabad seems to be represented in this hellish oasis" (171) and among those body parts, he comes across "the capable hand of his first-born" (172). He kisses it tenderly, slips it back into the pool and, without turning back, walks away from it. For now, the wazir has won over the father. A choice made, a decision taken. In the second episode, the wazir quickly buries his eldest daughter in a pit he digs in his courtyard. The sultan's messenger arrives and asks the talking house if it houses a female virgin. The house responds in the negative and the wazir heaves a sigh of relief. It seems, at this stage, the father wins the battle back from the wazir. This paternal triumph, nonetheless, is short-lived. As soon as the messenger departs, the wazir removes the mud covering the pit, only to discover "a plump white goat that looks at him with limpid eyes" (174), instead of his

daughter. The third episode unfolds with the wazir running across the desert for it is "time for him to make his offering to his hungry god" (174). His god ordains, "Remember, only something you love will fill my stomach with your devotion" (175). The wazir lights a fire and begins to cook the goat he had discovered in the courtyard of his house. "The goat, the wazir's daughter, is now cooked meet" (175). The disnarrated reveals the worth of telling a narrative not only because it could have been otherwise but sometimes also because it was not otherwise. By imaginatively constructing her father's moral dilemma and internal conflict, Dunyazad underscores the choice he could have made and the one he made because it could not have been otherwise in a rigid patriarchal, authoritarian world where women were condemned to the fate of sacrificial scapegoats, a world, whose inegalitarian values, find a strong echo even today. The story also functions as an instance of Hariharan's use of the disnarrated as a narrative strategy to effectively expose the power equations within a patriarchal world and the consequences it entails.

> The thousand and one nights are done, or so they tell her. Dunyazad carries those story-laden memories like festering wounds, not in some safe, reticent organ, but in a permanently deformed tongue weighed down by memory, memory laced with fantasy (22).

At the finishing end of Dunyazad's inventive spectrum of stories is her story "The Dreams of Good Women" (253-267). The story marks the apotheosis of the narrative borne out of the disnarrated space. The story points out to the "unexploited lines of development" ("Disnarrated") which Shahrzad's "porous umbrella of a story, a wandering story" (8), could have taken. It is an imprint of Dunyazad's unrealized desire to swap places with her more famous sister, to be the one chosen for the role of the martyr, the saviour, the awe-inspiring raconteuse. The story opens with Dunyazad alone in a

room, unable to resist looking in the ivory-framed mirror. Suddenly the face of a girl appears on the surface of the mirror: "There she is in the mirror, the other half of herself she lost in the wazir's room many years ago." (254). The younger Dunyazad complains to the wazir, her father that she is the "eternal younger sister" (256): "[Shahrzad] goes every place first. She does everything before me, then tells me all about it. And when it's finally my turn, what will be left? All I can do is live out what she has already described and possessed completely" (256). She confesses she loves her sister but does not want to be her shadow. Slowly, the image in the mirror fades away and a new image is illuminated where there is no wazir or Shahrzad. The only inhabitants of this image are a younger Dunyazad and Shahryar, transported back in time "in which a thousand and one nights tailed a single day" (258). In the, now stale, past,Shahryar was Dunyazad's "first sight of a man in the thrall of desire" (56) as she sat crouching on the floor, a witness to the thousand and one nights of storytelling and story seeking . Now, in the present, they silently appraise each other and Dunyazad goes to his chamber. There they see a sleepless Dilshad waiting for them. Suddenly, the pawns on the chessboard of fantasy and untapped possibilities shift positions: "Dilshad is playing Dunyazad to Dunyazad's Shahrzad" (259). Through the story, Dunyazad relives a past and an unactualised desire and suggests how the 'could have been' would have altered the future.

> It is always this mysterious, unknown corner of a story that sets the writer going. It was Dunyazad's position as the unheard younger sister, the yearning, questioning follower, which allowed me to step into the story as a writer
>
> (Hariharan, "The Unknown Corner- A writer's bank of myths" 8).

Githa Hariharan's *When Dreams Travel* is nothing short of a perfectly ensorcelling act performed by an accomplished conjurer of stories.

Its narrative as well as its narrative strategy is, inherently, a case of the disnarrated. With a knack to draw out the absent presence(s) from the mysterious, hidden corners and bestow upon them the power of dreams and possibilities, Hariharan brews up a potent narrative based on the 'what if'. Besides the individual tales narrated by the book's two chief narrators—Dunyazad and Dilshad—Hariharan's overarching narrative that frames these tales is in itself a search as well as a manifestation of the absent presence(s), the 'what could have been'. Her narrative is entirely an exercise to seek and reclaim the disnarrated space. Through self-reflexivity, the narrative first, locates the disnarrated space and then builds itself upon it. What is, perhaps, most interesting is the spin Hariharan gives to the notion of the disnarrated. To think of 'what could have been' is a retrospective act, laced with nostalgia. In *When Dreams Travel*, Hariharan does not confine the disnarrated space to a mere delving into the past. Instead, she uses it as an instrument of clairvoyance. The disnarrated space in Hariharan's hands traces a trajectory from what could have happened in the past to what could happen in the future. One can best understand this through Dilshad's introduction in the text. While Dunyazad and her stories express what did not occur but could have in the blurry, distant past, Dilshad and her stories indicate what could happen in the future. Her stories create a thought-provoking tapestry of tales where the medieval and the contemporary perspectives are sewn together. Through Dilshad's stories, Hariharan pours the absent presence(s) of the past into the powerful dreams of the present and almost magically transforming the disnarrated space into an anticipatory device that can be used to break the shackles of a singular time, space, history and context and reach a future where "The powerless [would continue] to have a dream or two, dreams that break walls, dreams that go through walls as if *they* are powerless" (25). Hariharan implicates her own desire to create stories out of

fugitive voices and histories through Dunyazad and her stories. Dilshad, as an emblem of the future descendants of Shahrzad and her storytelling legacy, illumines the road ahead for others to explore and unravel not only what could happen with Shahrzad's story but also, with the art of storytelling itself. *When Dreams Travel* is a one of its kind instance of a narrative that emerges from and revolves around the disnarrated space which is porous and fluxional, effortlessly blending the past, present and the future, 'curving one into the other, a circle with no beginning or end' (276).

End Notes

1. C.f. Lyons, Malcolm C., and Ursula Lyons Trans. The Arabian Nights: Tales of 1001 Nights. Vols. 1-3. UK: Penguin. Print.
2. Folkoristics is the formal academic study of folklore. The term derives from the nineteenth-century German term for folklore, *folkloristik*.
3. Folk memory refers to a body of recollections or legends that persists among people.
4. C.F.Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory. First ed. 2005 and The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy. Second ed. 1999.
5. C.F. The Cambridge Companion to Narrative. 2007.
6. Denarration is the narrator's denial or negation of an event or state of affairs that had earlier been affirmed. C.f. "Disnarrated."
7. Non-narrated or the unnarrated refers to the ellipsis underlined by a narrator within a narrative or inferable from significant lacunae in the chronology. C.f. "Disnarrated."
8. The unnarratable refers to those aspects of a narrative that are deemed unfit for narration because they violate formal, generic, social or authorial conventions and laws or simply because they are not sufficiently interesting, thereby falling short of narratability or tellability. C.f. "Disnarrated."

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