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## The Study of Societal Predictions and Criticism with Reference to the Heroines in ‘When Dreams Travel’ and ‘Eating Wasps’

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### Abstract:

The novel *When Dreams Travel* by Githa Hariharan and *Eating Wasps* by Anita Nair explore the intricacies of social conventions and cultural expectations, especially as they apply to women. Using its narrative structure to question patriarchal myths and investigate questions of identity, power, and agency in a world where male voices predominate, Hariharan’s *When Dreams Travel* retelling of the *Arabian Nights*: The novel criticizes how historically male-centric narratives stifle women’s tales and their fight for autonomy. In contrast, Nair’s *Eating Wasps* explore the lives of women in a tiny Indian hamlet throughout several generations, revealing the silent struggles they face in the face of social rejection, suppression, and unmet desires. Nair draws attention to the oppressive societal expectations that are placed on women through the protagonist’s path of self-discovery and resiliency. Both books provide a keen social critique, challenging the inflexible rules that define gender roles as well as the restrictions placed on women’s freedom of speech. The stories highlight the need of recovering silenced voices and pose questions to ingrained cultural norms that still limit and mould the lives of women.

**Keywords: Cultural norms, societal criticism, Gender norms, Identity of Patriarchy, The independence of women.**

## **Introduction**

Githa Hariharan and Anita Nair critically investigate the ways in which women's identities and choices are shaped by societal norms that impose limitations on them. Hariharan retells the *Arabian Nights* in *When Dreams Travels* in order to show how patriarchal narrative has historically silenced and marginalized women. She challenges the power structures that shape women's lives by examining how cultural expectations restrict women's autonomy through nuanced tales. In an environment where male authority rules, Hariharan's characters, fight against these narratives in an effort to regain their voices. In a similar vein, Nair depicts in *Eating Wasps* the silent struggles women endure while living under the constraints of social criticism and oppression. The book shows how societal expectations push women to repress their aspirations and fit into positions that minimize their uniqueness through the experiences of women from several generations. The characters in Nair's stories struggle with pain, remorse and humiliation, but they also show resiliency by rejecting these limiting roles. Both authors promote self-discovery, empowerment, and the reclaiming of women's stories and identities, emphasizing the fortitude needed for women to defy traditional norms and confront double standards in society.

## **Review of Literature**

*In Subverting Patriarchy: A Postmodern Reading of When Dreams Travel* ( 2008 ), Shubha Tiwari presents a critical perspective on gender and power while delving into Hariharan's use of a postmodern narrative style to subvert conventional patriarchal systems.

*In Narrative voice and Female Subjectivity in Githa Hariharan's when Dreams Travel* (2010).G. Murali focuses on how Hariharan emphasizes women's narratives and retells classic tales from a feminist standpoint in order to give voice to female subjectivity.

In her article *Deconstructing Patriarchal Narratives in Githa Hariharan's When Dreams Travel* (2015), Priyanka Arora examines how Hariharan's book challenges conventional patriarchal ideas by focusing on the female characters' resiliency and resistance.

In her 2019 article *Exploring Gendered Trauma in Anita Nair's Eating Wasps* Chitra Sankaran explores how Nair depicts gendered trauma throughout generations while looking at the internal struggles generated by cultural expectations in the characters.

Meera KrishnaMurthy, in *Breaking Silence : The Eating Wasps, Search for Freedom (2020)*, focuses on how Nair depicts women's battles for strength and independence by weaving together personal and collective histories in her narrative.

In *Cultural Expectations and Identity Formation in Eating Wasps (2022)*, Nandini Nayar explores how cultural standards influence women's identities and decisions, highlighting the inner struggles that Nair's female characters deal with.

### **Objectives**

The research work, *The Study of Societal Predictions and Criticism with Reference to the Heroines in 'When Dreams Travels' and 'Eating wasps'* is done with the following objectives:

To evaluate how cultural norms are portrayed and how they affect women's identities and decisions in *When Dreams Travel* by Githa Hariharan and *Eating Wasp* by Anita Nair.

To investigate the ways in which both writers question conventional gender roles and critique patriarchal norms through the use of narrative devices including symbolism, multiple perspectives, and non-linear storytelling.

To contrast the ways in which Hariharan and Nair handle questions of autonomy, power, and gender in their different socio cultural settings.

To examine the ways in which the main characters in both books defy societal norms and take back their identities, providing alternate examples of female empowerment in the process.

### **Methodology**

Using a qualitative research methodology, this study examines social critique and cultural expectations in Githa Hariharan's *When Dreams Travel* and Anita Nair's *Eating Wasps*. It also integrates literary analysis and feminist criticism. This method provides a thorough analysis of

the topics of criticism and societal expectations, providing insights into the ways in which both novels add to the current feminist discourse in Indian literature.

## **Discussion**

*When Dreams Travels* by Githa Hariharan and *Eating Wasps* by Anita Nair are two incisive critiques of the cultural norms that force women into constricting role in society. In both books, the effects of patriarchal conventions on women's identities are examined, along with how these constraints influence their freedom of choice, ambition, and autonomy. Classic stories like *The Arabian Nights* are re imagined in Hariharan's *When Dreams Travel* in order to highlight the gendered oppression and power relations present in cultural narratives. Hariharan challenges the gender standards by means of symbolism and metaphor. She does this by presenting many view points and bringing to light the voices of women who are suppressed for questioning these expectations.

In a similar vein, Nair's *Eating Wasps* uses numerous perspectives and a non-linear narrative structure to examine how women from various backgrounds deal with trauma, shame, and social constraints. The book explores the deeply embedded patriarchal norms that control women's conduct and frequently push them to make decisions that limit their autonomy. The authors emphasize the challenge of achieving self-determination in a world where male power structures rule, while emphasizing the fortitude and tenacity of their characters. By using these narrative strategies, Hariharan and Nair challenges traditional storytelling and present stories that focus on women taking back their identities and overcoming social norms.

### **Societal standards and Women Struggle for Identity**

Women's identities are significantly shaped by cultural expectations, which frequently place them in predetermined roles that restrict their agency. *When Dreams Travel* by Githa Hariharan and *Eating Wasps* by Anita Nair both show how patriarchal systems impose cultural norms that control women's decisions, actions, and self-perceptions.

Hariharan re imagines *The Arabian Nights* in *When Dreams Travel* in order to highlight the ways in which patriarchal power dynamics confine women in positions that are prescribed by men. As Shahrzad, the main character, navigates a society where cultural expectations tie her identity to

her job as a story teller and a saviour of women, she becomes a symbol of tenacity. These expectations carry weight because of the constrictive nature of societal conventions that limit women to roles of upholding male honour. Shahrzad is not just a storyteller; she also serves as a medium for the upholding and challenging of patriarchal power. Dr. Sarabjit Kaur notes: “Hariharan critiques the patriarchal power structure of the Hindu society through these contemporary women. She also shows the reader the position of Indian women in the traditions and culture of this male-dominated society.”(79) Shahrzad has successfully used storytelling to ensure her survival and free other women, but she is still constrained by the societal expectation to uphold honour and carry out obligations placed on her by a culture that is dominated by men.

Anita Nair explores the lives of women from many generations in *Eating Wasps*, showing how cultural expectations still influence and regulate their identities. The main character, Sreelakshmi, is driven to suicide by her obsession with society’s judgment of her. Her affair, which goes against societal expectations of propriety and purity, causes stigma and embarrassment and serves as an example of how patriarchal standards scrutinize and punish women for their choices. Dr. Navya V.K. draws attention to this as a widespread problem: “Anita Nair’s *Eating wasps* (2018) explores everyday lives of ten women, who are fighting their own battles with different facets of patriarchy. This feminist fiction presents the issues of contemporary women in all its complexities.” (1266) The disgrace attached to Sreelakshmi’s private life is evidence of how cultural expectations severely restrict women’s liberty and have a negative emotional and psychological impact on those who don’t conform to expected roles.

Through their narrative studies, the two novels show how cultural expectations push women into rigid frames. These stories highlight the enduring power of societal norms that shape women’s identities, often at the expense of their autonomy and general well-being. Two such are the heroic struggle of Shahrzad and the tragic death of Sreelakshmi.

### **Story telling Techniques: Subversion and Criticism**

Hariharan re imagines *The Arabian Nights*’ structure in *when Dreams Travel*, departing from the conventional linear, male-centric storytelling that permeates these stories. The fractured identities of the female protagonists are reflected in the novel’s fragmented and overlapping narrative structure. Hariharan subverts the traditional narrative of a single authority by allowing

for the emergence of numerous voices and opinions. This method is a critique of the ways in which patriarchal narrative frequently marginalizes or silences women. The fractured storyline reflects the splintered identities that constrictive cultural standards force on women. Ritu Arora notes the non-linear storytelling of Hariharan: “destabilizes traditional narratives, allowing female characters to reclaim agency and voice.” (31) The story’s disarray serves as a metaphor for how patriarchy breaks women’s identities, but these broken places provide the female protagonists opportunity to reclaim their agency and determine who they are.

In a similar vein, Nair uses a variety of viewpoints in *Eating wasps* to depict the shared experience of women’s challenges over time. The book weaves together the stories of several women, showing how patriarchal forces and cultural norms cut across social and temporal boundaries. Characters such as Sreelakshmi, Urvashi, and Nalini alternate in the story, allowing Nair to highlight the universality of gendered oppression and the variety of ways in which women respond to it. The wasp, a recurrent theme in the book, is used symbolically to represent both suffering and survival, summarizing the women’s tenacity. According to Vinitha: “ the wasp symbolizes the internalized pain of women who find ways to resist and survive despite their suffering.” (96) This motif challenges the social institutions that cause these pains for female characters while also highlighting their tenacity.

In Nair’s work, the wasp stands in for women’s hidden problems brought on by social limitations. Nair gives voice to the intricacies of women by challenging patriarchal myths through the weaving together of stories and the use of a communal method. In a similar vein, Hariharan empowers women to take back control of their tales by exposing and challenging the patriarchal confines of women. Through a combination of fragmented storytelling, different perspective, and potent symbols that critique traditional standards, both authors praise the tenacity and autonomy of women.

### **Sexuality, Authority, and Independence**

The works *When Dreams Travel* by Githa Hariharan and *Eating wasps* by Anita Nair explore gender, power, and autonomy in great detail, emphasizing the ways in which patriarchal norms restrict women’s freedom in both overt and covert ways. Both writers examine how women deal

with these limitations, frequently utilizing subversive tactics to exert dominance while remaining inside the boundaries of their own socio cultural environments.

Hariharan reinvents Shahrzad of *The Arabian Nights* in *When Dreams Travel*, showing her storytelling as an act of resistance as well as a way of survival, Shahrzad's stories, which she told every night to stall her execution, tipped the scales against the Sultan's authority, Shahrzad uses storytelling, a field that has historically been associated with men, as a means of expressing her independence. She resists the patriarchal system that aims to suppress her by taking control of the story and symbolically undermining the Sultan's authority. This narrative act is a subdued protest against the systems that imprison her as much as a survival act. Hariharan portrays them: "Shahrzad's tales become more than just stories; they are acts of defiance, questioning and destabilizing the patriarchal control embodied by the Sultan." (67) Hariharan uses this narrative method to both highlight how women can retake power by agency, turning them into objects of male control.

On the other hand, Nair examines power relations in casual interactions in *Eating Wasps*, revealing the frequently covert ways that patriarchal standards control the lives of women. The book tells the interrelated lives of several women from different origins who struggle with societal norms that limit their freedom. For example, the accomplished journalist Urvashi seems to represent contemporary, progressive values. Beneath this façade, though, is the need to live up to society's expectations of femininity, particularly in her relationships. Her battle to strike a balance between social expectations and professional achievement highlights how deeply embedded patriarchal traditions continue to influence the decisions made by even seemingly powerful women. This is further demonstrated by Najma's story, in which cultural norms and familial responsibilities constantly threaten her autonomy. Nair uses these characters to show how women's roles in families and societies are determined not only by overt oppression but also by subtle, daily constraints that rob them of their autonomy, Anita Nair states, "The choices women make are often dictated by invisible strings--- cultural, familial, and societal expectations--- that pull them back from stepping out of predefined roles." (112)

Furthermore, Nair's utilization of many viewpoints emphasizes how these power dynamics are universal. The entwined tales of Sreelakshmi, Urvashi, and Najma demonstrate how cultural norms restrict women's autonomy in many social contexts, regardless of class or educational



attainment. Nair's use of this storytelling approach enables her to examine the complex relationship between gender and power, demonstrating how patriarchal authority endures in even seemingly progressive environments.

Through their complex depictions of gender and power, Githa Hariharan and Anita Nair both highlight how ubiquitous patriarchal control is and how it restricts women's autonomy. Whether it's *When Dreams Travel*'s deft subversion or *Eating Wasps*' portrayal of common hardships, these stories show how resilient and resistant women can be while navigating constrictive cultural norms. In the end, both authors celebrate the resourcefulness of women who discover methods to exercise their agency within these limitations while criticizing the manner in which patriarchal dominance functions.

### **Rebellion and Claiming Identity**

*When Dreams Travel* by Githa Hariharan and *Eating Wasps* by Anita Nair explore the concept of resistance and identity reclamation by featuring heroes who rebel against societal norms and work to restore their independence. These stories demonstrate how, even in civilizations where patriarchal structures predominate, women can recover their agency and voices.

Shahrazad's journey in *When Dreams Travel* from a helpless storyteller to a self-aware narrator is a potent allegory on the fight for female emancipation. In a world where patriarchal narratives rule, Githa Hariharan gives the fabled storyteller from *One Thousand and One Nights* agency and resistance. At first, Shahrazad uses his narratives to help himself survive against a despotic ruler who takes a new wife every night and murders her, According to Hariharan: "her stories are laced with fear, yet they are her only weapon in a world where women are mere objects of desire or scorn" (18) , who describes Shahrazad as a storyteller trying to extend her life. Shahrazad's position in this phase seems to be reactive--- a way to defend against death in a society where men rule.

But as the story progresses, Shahrazad transforms from a simple storyteller into a narrator who is becoming increasingly conscious of her own voice. Her identity has undergone a profound transformation with this shift: instead of being defined by the stories she tells, she now actively constructs her own narrative. Hariharan reveals: " Shahrazad realized that her voice had more power than just keeping her alive; it could shape destinies, bend narratives, and break free from a

rebellious and empowering deed. Shahrzad takes back control of her own future by challenging conventional myths that are meant to silence female voices.

Hariharan challenges the ways in which narratives, traditionally molded by male viewpoints, have been utilized to restrict women to particular positions by using Shahrzad's metamorphosis as an example. Hariharan emphasizes the use of narrative as tool for empowerment and survival by providing a different model in which women take back control by crafting their own stories. The transition of Shahrzad from passive survival to active resistance is a metaphor for the reclaiming of voice and identity against an oppressive system.

Despite the terribly brief life of Sreelakshmi, Anita Nair portrays her in *Eating Wasps* as a powerful symbol of identity reclamation and resistance. Despite passing very early in the story, Sreelakshmi's character continues to be a strong and inspirational figure for the other women in the book. Her spirit represents the fight for self-determination and voice recovery in the face of persecution from society. The way in which Nair portrayed Sreelakshmi emphasizes that the process of recovering one's identity is not just an individual undertaking but rather a generational effort.

The Characters who face their own struggles, like Urvashi and Najma, find inspiration in Sreelakshmi's enduring presence. Her legacy is portrayed as a source of resiliency, emphasizing how women's challenges are cyclical. Anita Nair says: "Sreelakshmi's life may have been cut short, but her spirit lives on as a reminder of the strength it takes to reclaim one's voice in a world determined to silence it." (182) This passage demonstrates how Sreelakshmi's legacy lives on, serving as a beacon of hope and inspiration for generations to come.

Sreelakshmi's character's symbolic significance highlights the notion that regaining one's identity and voice is a common journey. Her perseverance in speaking up in a society that frequently attempts to silence women's voices is an inspiration. According to Nair's description, empowerment and group resistance are entwined with the quest for identity. Though Sreelakshmi, Nair challenges the social restrictions placed on women and highlights the resilience of individuals who, in spite of these restrictions, go on claiming their identities and defying social standards.

Through the accounts of other women who defy social norms and overcome restrictions placed on them by culture, Nair expands on this idea of resistance. Alternative examples of empowerment can be found in characters like Najma, who struggles against the limitations of *her orthodox upbringing, and Urvashi, who defies conventional gender norms. These women negotiate intricate social constraints, but in the end, they decide to put their autonomy and sense of reclaiming identity is fraught with obstacles, but it is also where true empowerment lies-- forging one's path despite the weight of cultural expectations.*" (217) However, this road is not without difficulties.

### **Conclusion**

The novels of Githa Hariharan and Anita Nair provide a critical analysis of the cultural norms that constrain women, Shahrzad is recast by Hariharan's *When Dreams Travel* as a figure of resistance, demonstrating how narratives can be used to empower people and reclaim their identities while also serving as a vital survival strategy. Sreelakshmi's unwavering spirit is also portrayed in Nair's *Eating Wasps* as a symbol of resistance, impacting other characters and emphasizing the cyclical nature of women's problems. Through the adventures of their characters, both authors use inventive storytelling strategies to subvert conventional gender stereotypes and promote autonomy and self-definition. Their artwork highlights the value of regaining individuality in the face of constrictive cultural conventions, showcasing the tenacity of women and the transformational potential of self-assurance. Hariharan and Nair promote the pursuit of individual and group autonomy while criticizing society's limits through their emphasis on empowerment and resistance.

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