

Questions Are the Point

By VAIDEHI IYER

Questions play a large role in Githa Hariharan's world. As a teacher and author of seven novels, Hariharan feels impelled to continually ask: "Shall we look at ourselves like this? How does it look? What is the view like?"

Hariharan, who has taught in the United States and India, sees the fact that students are more willing to ask questions as a sign of their need for change. As she told SPAN in Chennai just before the recent launch of her new novel, *Fugitive Histories*, "Very often, it's the whole point of a novel or a story of mine—to simply know what question to ask, how to ask it, and in what context. In universities around the world, that's possible because students are curious and demanding. They are not taking anything for granted."

Born in Coimbatore, in Tamil Nadu, Hariharan grew up in Bombay and Manila, Philippines. After earning an M.A. in communication at Fairfield University, Connecticut, in 1977, she worked as a staff writer at a TV station, WNET-Channel 13, in New York City. She returned to Bombay in 1978.

"From the B.A. I did in Bombay, I received a sort of 'book learning,' and some of my teachers there had quite an impact on my work. One of them was, in fact, what I call the midwife of my first novel," Hariharan laughs. That teacher served as a sounding board through the gestation of the novel, *The Thousand Faces of Night*, and helped her edit the draft.

In that book, Hariharan drew from the freedoms and struggles of her life as a student in the United States, and how it leaves a person with a new perspective of life. Devi, one of the protagonists, returns to India and tries to reconcile to tradition after experiencing more independence in the United States.

"When I think of my student life in America, I not only think about my university...but also about my practical



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experience of being there," Hariharan says. "I lived and worked in Manhattan and I learnt...to live alone as a woman, which was very important to me and has served me well. I learnt the great pleasures of solitude. I learnt to enjoy museums, bookshops, art, and the amazing creativity you see on the streets of America."

After holding the World Literature Residency at George Washington University in Washington, D.C. in 2004, Hariharan served in 2006 as a distinguished Montgomery Fellow at Dartmouth College, New Hampshire. There she taught a course she had designed, called *The Edges of Nation Making: Perspectives on Modern Indian Literature*.

"At Dartmouth, I could set two very difficult exams and tell the students, look, you could perhaps learn something from the exam itself," she says. "I see the exam as one more chance. If you missed something in class, if there was something you didn't understand, we could discuss it again. A real open book test was pretty difficult for me to set, leave alone for them to answer. It wasn't like writing a term paper. They had to choose the questions they wished to answer, and that was not an easy task. I thought they were extraordinarily lucky, that such an experi-

Githa Hariharan (center) with students at Dartmouth College, New Hampshire.

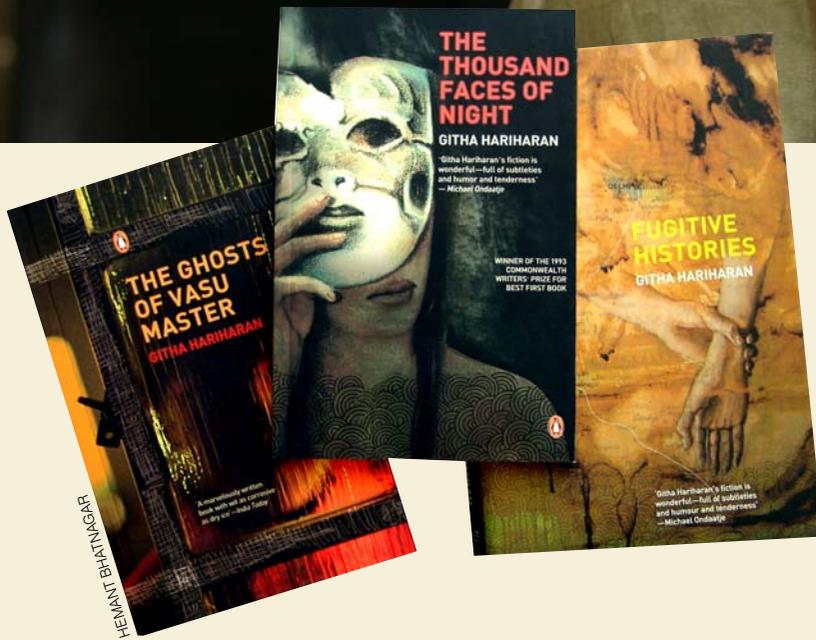
ment was possible and that they could be a part of it. The kinds of connections they could come up with were amazing."

Hariharan, who has lived in New Delhi for more than 20 years, spent the past year, ending in February 2009, as writer in residence at Jamia Millia Islamia university. She feels that writing itself is an educative process and tells her students that it would be difficult to write if they were only Xeroxing from situations and characters.

"I think, in my first novel, I was trying to find out how to enlarge what seemed like very small, uneventful lives. Quite accidentally I stumbled upon myth, fable and the tale as a literary strategy, and I went on to add nuances and dimensions to these characters, plus populate the world of my novel with a lot of voices," she says. "And from that, I learnt that my interests, abilities and agendas as a writer include looking at the dangers, possibilities and mysteries of multiplicities."

Though she enjoys teaching tremendously, Hariharan says her experience is very intense as she does it only occasionally. "Teaching for me is a time to examine all the ideas that I usually examine in

Whether writing a novel or teaching literature at a university, Githa Hariharan finds that asking questions leads to insight.



indirect and sneaky, artistic ways but, in teaching, I am actually looking at them with all the lights on....," she says.

Hariharan notes, however, that there is a kind of careerist thrust in the current generation of students. "They might be asking you about writing but what they really want to know is how you found your agent

or how you got yourself published," she says. "There is a kind of impatience that distracts from the purpose of learning the craft of writing. This is not so much a critique as it is something I say with a certain sense of sadness."

Wishing that Indian writers could teach more, Hariharan explains that people like

her, who are not teachers in a conventional way, face limitations "because we don't have Ph.D.s and did not set out to work as teachers for a number of years." She notes that this is a problem in India, but not in certain countries like the United States, where writers can teach not just creative writing but even be attached to an English department and teach a course in literature.

"I think it's a great pity that we don't have more openness for that kind of thing here. I think it's a great shame for students. It's a loss for them and fellow faculty," she says. "And, of course, it's a huge loss for writers because I think it's wonderful to be occasionally attached to an institution and it's absolutely wonderful to be among students. They always give you much more than they receive."



Vaidehi Iyer is a journalist and editor based in Chennai.