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Githa Hariharan's *The Ghost of Vasu Master*: A Tale of Silent Suffering

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Abstract:

The modern Indian literature witnesses the contemporary Indian situation and suggests solutions for the development of Indian society. Though the country has attained tremendous progress, the role of Indian women remains the same. Over half of the world's population is female, yet they unjustly receive an unfair balance in life from conception. The first generation women novelists wrote mainly to voice their concerns for and sympathize with the sufferings of Indian women, rather than to censure the society. They have dealt with the domestic issues, man-woman relationship, and the struggle of women for their existence in the society. The post-Independence India witnessed a spirit of fiction writing by women writers of greater quality and depth. Gender discrimination is the universal phenomenon in the society. It is not something that is just an issue in non-industrialized countries, but it is an issue that no country or culture has been able to escape. The aim of writing this article is to highlight the theme of helplessness on the part of a woman. Whether she is a mother, daughter, sister or wife, the society always desires that she should be docile, timid and submissive.

This paper makes a humble attempt to discuss such issues about women marginality and reflection of socially imposed values on women with well acclaimed modern day novelist Githa Hariharan's novel *The Ghost of Vasu Master*. The novelist focuses on the theme of gender-differentiation and domination of the male categories, along with the silence and surrender to which a woman is subjected in our society. Many instances of discrimination and inequality facing woman and girls, is due to cultural and religious stereotypes that continue to remain unchallenged and blatantly ignored. Hariharan explores the lives of female characters, namely Mangala, Lakshmi, Vasu Master's grandmother and Jameela who are trapped in stereotyped gender roles assigned to them by a patriarchal society which demands total subservience from

women. Through the study of women characters, Githa provides us with a peek into the Indian tradition system and the position of women in Indian context. Many Indian women writers through their novels are trying to highlight the change towards which our society is moving but still millions of miles need to be covered for this change to be visible.

Keywords: marginality, patriarchal, stereotype, inequality.

Githa Harihara is a contemporary Indian Writer in Indian fiction in English and a social activist who portrays the social issues in her literary works. Hariharan is the winner of the Common wealth Writers' Prize for best first book, her novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1993). It is a critically acclaimed work which deals with the issues of gender and identity in a multi layered and subtle way. Her other novels include *The Ghost of Vasu Master* (1994), *When Dream Travels* (1999), *In Times of Siege* (2003), and *the Fugitive Histories* (2009). Hariharan is known for her bold and frank style of writing because her writing deals with issues concerning modern society. Through her fictional works, she offers alternatives to make the reader think about the circumstances in the contemporary Indian society. Her novel *The Ghost of Vasu Master* gains great critical attention. It explores the themes of teaching, maladies and the process of healing, teacher-student relationship, and the deceptive nature of reality. Very deftly Hariharan has entangled various themes into one novel. However, in this novel the primary focus is on problems encountered by Vasu Master as a teacher. But On probing deeper into the novel one cannot ignore the female sensitive issues concerning their longings, and their marginal existence in male-dominated and tradition-bound society.

Neelam Sanwal Bhardwaj observes through her article *Enlarging The Limits of The Canvas: Feminist Perspective in Githa Hariharan's The Ghost of Vasu Master*:

“Although the *Ghost of Vasu Master* is not a woman-centric novel, yet Hariharan has subtly addressed many relevant feminist issues through it. The Process of marginalization of the girl-child, the husband's neglect of their wives, Crimes committed upon women's bodies and psyches, feminine interiority, post Widowhood loneliness, friendship among women all these feminist issues find a highly refined, though brief expression in the novel.”

Before proceeding with the theoretic base of this paper essay, a few words about the plot, style, and form of the novel should be mentioned. More and more details are added, more and more perspectives are offered as the narrators begins to relieve incidents from the past and discovers in his own halting but in an imaginative way. Githa Hariharan weaves plot, thread by thread, into a colorful multifaceted story. The story of Hariharan's second novel, *The Ghost of Vasu Master* (GVM from now onwards) is centered on protagonist Vasu Master, (B.A English Language and Literature) teacher who has taught for forty years in P.G Boys' School, in the town of Elipettai, Chennai. He has recently retired from his job. But this ending of the profession is not a normal ending for Vasu Master. At this point, he finds a new chapter in his life. This chapter asks him some of the most important questions related to significance of life and teaching. Though, he is retired from his duties as a school teacher, Vasu has been waiting for "a very new beginning" (GVM: 141) in life. He engages himself in giving private tuitions to students at home. He does not have many students, however and eventually he is only left with one that is the most complicated intractable case, Mani, a twelve year old boy, but "with, it seemed the brain of a six or a seven –year-old" (GVM : 11). However, in suffering Mani is "an old, old man" (GVM: 11). Mani is a mentally abnormal child, who would not speak at any situation at all. Doctors have failed to understand the cause of his abnormal behavior. "He could not sit in a place for more than a few minutes at a time. He wandered around the small room, a strange captive animal" (GVM: 13). Vasu Master works hard and makes effort to restore Mani's confidence and emotional well-being. He acquires a strange new routine. He says, "...solitary walks to the town library and back; cooking for myself and reflecting obsessively on food and stomach and the link between the two; and setting things in order-unraveling knots of ideas" (GVM: 27). He tried all his old PG tricks to halt Mani in his tricks and seize his attention. Vasu Master eventually finds at least one thing that seems to keep Mani entertained and interested, and this thing was fables, particularly of animals. Therefore, Vasu Master humbly adopts the mode of story- telling, because he believes that this method is one of the best methods to instruct Mani. He tells his retiring child one marvelous story after another in his effort to teach and to heal Mani. These stories are fables of humble creatures such as gray house, blue bottle fly, the cobra, three silk worms and so on. The method of story-telling used in *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* is innovative. The narrative technique of the novel is ancient as well as modern. Her experiments of using fantasy fable and wonderfully imagined characters lend the novel a unique texture .The

effect of fables on Mani is astonishingly positive. He learns to behave civilly, even learns to draw and paint. Vasu Master efforts to teach Mani take the broadest meaning of the teaching. In the end, Vasu and Mani set out on a new journey together. Through this novel Hariharan also condemns a reassessment of the hollowness of contemporary system of education and the limitations imposed by confining prescribed texts.

Structurally, the novel is fragmented into forty eight stories as the chapters in the novel are organized as separate stories, events, incidents, anecdotes and digressive asides, related to Vasu Master's life. Moreover it is assumed that distinctive can be called as zigzag narration.

The women discussed in the novel, are ordinary housewives such as Mangala, Jameela, Lakshmi, Shakuntala and Vasu's grandmother. All of them make their appearance in the novel through Vasu Master's memories and reminiscences only, because actually all of them are dead now. Hariharan observes an Indian woman's position through Vasu Master's memories about his mother and wife.

Mangala is Vasu Master's wife. She died many years earlier. Vasu Master remembers Mangala as a shadowy figure. Although they have lived together for fifteen years. She gave him two sons, Vishnu and Venu, yet he does not know her completely. He confesses that she is to him "a cloudy memory than a person... pale and insubstantial; a figure perennially on the retreat" (GVM: 41). In his memory, she remained as obscure as his forgotten mother. He recalls her and meets her ghost by seashore, dressed in silence, offering him only a partial view. There is an aura of silence and something mysterious about her. Mangala has a childhood friend in village named Jameela. Mangala in company of her friend Jameela was altogether a different person. "The two swam and frolicked as if the whole world—the cool water, the afternoon stillness, the shared squeals of pleasure—all belonged to them forever" (GVM: 43). Their raised voices, whispers, and laughter remained with them only in each other's company. They were the perfect pair, team or couple. This incidence suggests that after marriage there is nothing, in her life, enjoyable and exciting; life filled with the routine household duties. After marriage, she acts as a prudent housewife and manages her house well. She plays her role of wife and mother with "a delicate, feminine modesty" (GVM: 122). She serves her husband dinner and irons his clothes. She takes care of her husband during his illness. She mops the steps of her house twice

a day. She works hard and rarely comes to the school like other wives. But she also looks after the studies of her children. These traditional duties of a woman kept her away from the real joy of the life. Once, Vasu with his wife, and two sons made one of rare trips to the seaside a little outside Madras. During the visit, Mangala also enjoys a momentary freedom. Vasu Master with his children waded into the sea, but Mangala did not go into the water with them. She walked along the seashore, looking for shells and all kinds of odd things to add to the children's collection. Instead of enjoying the occasion, she thought of her children. Although she knows the art of swimming but desists from it. Vishnu asks her to swim with them. She replies that she used to swim in the village pond till she was ten. Often mothers unselfishly sacrifice their joys and sorrows for the sake of their children. On another occasion, Vasu Master has taken Mangala and their sons to see a film about 'Henry VIII'. In the film every time Henry embraced a woman, she covered the eyes of Vishnu and Venu with handkerchief and her sari respectively. Even on the occasions of enjoyment and entertainment, she concerned much about her motherly duties. Vasu Master could not protect children as she did, from bad influence. She was beautiful wife and caring mother. In our Indian tradition mother plays a very significant and crucial role in all the walks of life of children. She manages the family, responsibly brings up children and the development of children and family. But it was only after she had died that Vasu, Vishnu and Venu found that they could not fill her place. Vasu Master discovers Mangala's little treasure five years after her death. He finds small mirror, two sandalwood boxes of kumkum, old photographs, their wedding invitation card, pieces of her dowry silver, bunches of flowers made of satin, and pieces of cloth embroidered with flowers, birds and animals with Mangala's signature all wrapped in a pale green silk saree. All these things are so valuable for Mangala and obviously they are related to her family. Here seems husband to be everything for her. This shows the pan-Indian mindset of the traditional housewife who places her husband on a high pedestal and accepts family system as the only alternative means of living life. These treasures that has remained locked for years, did not interest Vasu Master. The pieces of embroidery do not stir in him admiration for Mangala's creativity but they bring back to his mind the image of voluptuous Jameela who had taught Mangala sewing and stitching. Mangala is the first educated woman in her family but remains confined to the household activities. She diverts her creative urge to embroidery work but the pieces of embroidery showing her creativity are not encouraged or admired by Vasu Master.

The Hindu society demands every wife to merge herself with the identity of her husband in her life. Though these women are devoted and caring, they are devalued. She had been taught since her childhood that she has to obey her husband and family. Her parents offered her no chance to think about her own identity. Vasu Master is an English teacher and well educated, yet he is highly deep rooted in life-long traditions and norms. He is found and brought up in a rigid social system and has never been touched by the progressive minds. He cannot accept his wife 'other than himself'. They both live under the same roof, married for many years, a couple with two children, and then also they remain as an isolated island. He rarely had any conversation with her. He never identified her real self. Mangala's approach to life is traditional, she accepts the male superiority. Vasu Master, his father, and his grandfather are self-contained persons. They wish their wives should follow them silently. Patriarchy structure has been a major feature of the traditional society. Vasu Master's grandmother was somewhat rebellious woman, but Mangala and Vasu Master's mother were too weak to rebel against their husbands. Vasu Master says about his mother, "She would have been timid, worrying, little thing, nagging, pestering like a high-pitched mosquito. She did not learn how to bite though" (GVM: 32). Same is the case with Mangala also. Hariharan portrayed the sacrificing nature of traditional women through the character of Mangla. But in the same novel she had given yet another face of women by portraying Vasu Master's grandmother. Even though she was an illiterate lady she was able to judge matters objectively and she didn't obey her husband blindly. She was dare enough to mock at his mistakes. Vasu's grandmother had some traits of a new woman. She was not meek, docile, and submissive as Lakshmi, Vasu's mother and Mangala were. She did not accept her husband blindly and not suffer silently in her confinement. When she knew her husband's limitations, she stopped respecting him. While her husband served the British rulers, she boldly helped in her own way the nationalist cause. Due to her recipes she even rivalled her son in ayurveda. While playing role of a wife and a mother, she got her separate identity through independent thinking and acting.

The life of the protagonist Vasu Master's mother depicts the social constraints placed upon women. Today also, we can find that in Indian society the birth of a girl child is not welcomed with so much joy. When the Vasu's mother was born, there was no joy or excitement at their home. The parents are worried about the society and "they could not bear the thought of people

laughing at them on witnessing their failure” (GVM: 31) in giving birth to a son. The reaction of her parents was dull, common, and ideological. Her parents did not celebrate her birth. For almost a year, she did not have a name, as her parents did not want to spend money on a naming ceremony for one more daughter. In *Socialization*, Leigh Minturn analyses the fact that: “the differential status of boys and girls is apparent from birth. The midwife is paid twice as much as for delivering boy as for delivering girl. The birth of a girl occasions no public ceremony” (Minturn 273-274). Stereotypically, in India a daughter-in-law is always blessed for having son. This shows that a birth of a girl child is considered to be an unfortunate event in a family. It was an old sweeper, who comforted her mistresses, “never mind she can still be the Lakshmi of her husband’s house” (GVM: 31). Thus, Vasu mother is named as ‘Lakshmi’. Lakshmi is brought up as an unwanted child in her family she could never overcome her inferiority complex to the end of her life.

Vasu Master recalls, “Her ambitions were on a lower scale – escaping her husband’s unpredictable explosions of temper, surviving her mother-in-law’s jealous rule of the household, and above all, keeping the house, and everyone in it, clean pure and unpolluted” (GVM: 32). She, “had never exchanged more than six words to her neighbours” (GVM: 32). They always hear her but whispering “lower your voice, shut the door. Bath and change your clothes before going out” (GVM: 32). A woman’s personality is re-moulded in many ways after marriage. They are taught to be obedient wives and daughter-in-law and also to respect their elders; manners are taught to them, like how to walk, talk, sit, and work at home and many others. Women and men are fundamentally the same and that it is just the social constraints that put limits on what women “can” and “cannot” do. They are neither considered as individuals with a personality of their own, nor do they have any personal life.

Lakshmi fought losing battles on all fronts. Her husband and sometimes her mother-in-law enrage her. Hariharan ironically conveys through Vasu Master that she “had melted away into the shadows of this loud, tyrannical household. She lived just about long enough to give my father his heir, obviously even that was a shoddy job” (GVM: 32). She accepted everything as a submissive. In Indian tradition a woman plays a very significant role on all spheres of conducting and guiding a family. She suffers like anything in the process of building and unifying the family and placing the reputation of the family in a high position and at many times she loses her own

identity. In portraying the life of Lakshmi, Hariharan condemns the socio-cultural constraints of Indian society, which impede the growth of women and reduces them as mere disabled creatures.

Shakuntala, Vasu Master's cousin yet another submissive woman. Vasu's cousin Shakuntala comes and stays in his house for four weeks. She suffers from some mysterious illness. The pain is unbearable for her. Vasu's grandmother and aunt whisper that she is overburdened with work in her in-laws' home. This shows how the married women suffer at the house of their in-laws. Vasu nurses his cousin, Shakuntala for a month knowing she would die after returning to her in-laws. These types of women are seen choked by the domestic traditional and social confinements. In reversion of all the duties, responsibilities and devotion she extends to society, family, she is given to exploitation, oppression, suffocation and ultimately, silence. Shakuntala's character reveals the nude reality of society that is woman is not been able to raise her voice against the injustice will be implied on her.

Hariharan successfully portray the role and position of women in our society. She delineated the concepts of woman in a traditional society and the responsibilities and services expected from woman. The household and women characters in the novel actually are the microcosmic view of Indian society. The women characters in the novel depict simplicity, innocence, sincerity, generosity and the spirit of devotion to their male companions. Both Mangala and Vasu Master's mother, Lakshmi are unable to assert their right to separateness of being and this lead to their mute sufferings. The inferior positions of women in the traditional Indian society have been reinforced by a number of traditional practices such as polygamy, early marriage, and illiteracy and by years of subjugation. The novelist has raised significant points pertaining to the gender issues and inferior position of women in society and family. Hariharan draws the attention towards the importance of literacy, which is the dire need of our time. Women should be educated so that they understand how culture imprisons them since the majority of them have accepted the status quo to the extent that they worship male domination. Tradition only continues to fetter women and making them to certain stereotypes. The family is a major social institution and if this re-socialization starts in the family it will permeate into the other social institutions. In order for these changes to materialize, it needs passion, determination, and commitment of everybody in society, man, or woman.

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