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Enlarging the Limits of the Canvas: Feminist Perspective in Githa Hariharan's *The Ghosts of Vasu Master*

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Abstract:

Although the novel *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* deals mainly with postmodern and postcolonial themes, yet Githa Hariharan, in her usual style, has used fables and embedded narratives to address feminist and gender issues as well. The novel attempts to view women as seen and understood by men. The protagonist of the novel is a retired school-teacher, Vasu. The women discussed in the novel are ordinary housewives such as Mangala, Jameela, Lakshmi, Shakuntala and Vasu's grandmother. All of these women exist in Vasu's memories and reminiscences only. These women appear to be caught in domestic roles, yet there are certain submerged aspects to their personalities. The cryptic tapestry bundled in Mangala's trunk, the ghostly tale of Eliamma, the feminist fable of three silkworms—all add a mystical dimension to the lives of these homebound females. The novel attempts to explore feminine interiority and its sophisticated expression through domestic arts.

Keywords: Fable, Allegory, Marginalisation, Empowerment, Patriarchy

Githa Hariharan's second novel *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* takes a fresh approach to address a number of postcolonial and postmodern issues. It deals with such themes as alternative methods of teaching, maladies and the process of healing, teacher-pupil relationship, and India's journey as an independent nation. On probing deeper into the novel, however, it may be said that the novel also explores issues concerning women, their longings and their marginal existence in a patriarchal set-up.

Although *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* is not a woman-centric novel, yet Hariharan has subtly addressed many relevant feminist issues through it. The process of marginalisation of the girl-child, the husbands' 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. In an interview given to Arnab Chakladar, Hariharan speaks about the feminist perspective in the novel: "*The Ghosts of Vasu Master* was my most ambitious attempt at looking at gender elliptically. And I think that is actually the most autobiographical of my novels" (www.anothersubcontinent.com).

Before beginning the discussion regarding the feminist themes in the novel, it will be appropriate to have a brief overview of its main narrative frame. *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* depicts the tale of a retired school-teacher, Vasu who lives by himself in the small place called Elipettai. Vasu is learning to cope with life after retirement. The memories of his past haunt him

via thoughts, reminiscences and dreams. Vasu's life has been a tale of linear existence. In playing his role as teacher, he had completely forgotten being a husband and father. Vasu has still to make out what he was as a husband, a father and a son. His wife Mangala has died many years ago. His two sons Vishnu and Venu have grown up and live in Madras and Bombay respectively. Vasu is unable to deal with the ghosts of his past: His Ayurvedic father, grandmother, wife Mangala—all dead, Mangala's friend Jameela, his old school P.G. and his students. Vasu has also been suffering from a number of psychosomatic diseases and often visits the doctor.

Vasu, who has been waiting for “a very different beginning” (141) in life, gets such an opportunity when Mani, a twelve year boy, is brought to him. Mani's life is not simple either. He is a mentally retarded boy, who would not speak at all. Doctors have failed to diagnose his disease. Due to his disability, Mani has not been able to learn anything in school. His experience with schools, classmates and school-teachers has made him an untrusting and guarded boy. Though he is a twelve year old boy, his brain is that of a six or seven year old. But in suffering Mani is “an old, old man” (11). Mani's long experience of silent suffering finds affinity in Vasu's lonely existence. The biggest challenge for Vasu as a tutor is to restore Mani's confidence and emotional well being. Before Mani can learn anything, Vasu has to pull down the metaphorical wall of silence Mani has built around himself for his defence.

Vasu begins from the very elementary level—telling stories. These stories are fables of humble creatures such as grey mouse, blue-bottle fly, the cobra, three silkworms and so on. The fables are a thinly disguised allegory of Vasu's own life with Mani in it. The effect of the fables on Mani is astonishingly positive. He learns to behave civilly, even learns to draw and paint. But most importantly, his faith on humanity is restored. Vasu's final success comes when Mani makes his first verbal communication with him and utters his own name, “Mani”. Vasu, too, benefits from this relationship immensely. Mani is the mirror in which Vasu can see his own past. Through his own initial disappointments with Mani, Vasu is able to comprehend his father's disappointment with him. Eventually, Vasu becomes a teacher in the true sense of the word. Vasu's father had told him that a teacher has to be, above all, a mother. Vasu has succeeded in creating a womb of fables and has, like a mother, delivered an evolved and educated Mani. In the end, Vasu and Mani set out on a new journey together.

The female characters in *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* have not been as well defined as in Hariharan's other novels, yet she has sketched them with a few deft strokes leaving to the readers' imagination the rest. A lot can be imagined and construed by putting together what has been said and what left unsaid. Vasu's world is predominantly a man's world. Of the women Vasu mentions are his wife Mangala, her friend Jameela and the spectral Eliamma. Vasu also thinks about his mother and grandmother often. Vasu's wife, Mangala, is a reticent and self effacing woman. Vasu has no images of her except as mending the boys' clothes. When Mangala is alive Vasu does not realise that it is her silent presence that keeps orderliness in his life, whether it is his impeccably starched veshti, or the tidy house. It is only after her death that Mangala became conspicuous:

She said very little about either her belief or her fears . . . And as the years went by, she seemed to grow more and more self-effacing. She went about her daily tasks as wife and mother with a delicate, feminine modesty. It was only after she

had died that we found we could not fill her place, even the three of us put together. (138)

After his retirement, Vasu opens Mangala's trunk and examines the contents to find her stitchwork bundled up in a bedsheet. The range of Mangala's tapestry shows her evolution from a carefree girl to a disciplined housewife. Beginning with stitching garish flowers, Mangala has graduated to stitching landscapes and seascapes. The tapestry brings back to Vasu's mind memories of Mangala's friendship with Jameela. Both the women would often sit together talking and stitching. Jameela is quite different from Mangala. Unlike Mangala who is airy, illusive and insubstantial; Jameela is endowed with "ripe perfection" (43). Her voice is husky. Vasu remembers how a shy and quiet Mangala would become open and garrulous in Jameela's presence.

It was there completion of each other that held me, the coexistence of earthy and ethereal, cocoon and butterfly. A perfect pair, team or couple. Who was the Mangala Jameela knew? Jameela could not have known her as I did; as a man, as a husband does. But this woman Jameela could draw out with expert ease; or I should say, the woman with two faces, bodies, whose double-scaled laughter had tantalized me in the other room: who was she? (43)

Mangala and Jameela are bound together in a strong bond of sisterhood. Between these two friends is the ghostly Eliamma. The memories of the three friends, Mangala, Jameela and Eliamma are entangled in Vasu's subconscious en bloc, with the sea forming the background. It is mainly through Mangala and Jameela that the novel looks at gender issues. Mangala, whom Vasu calls a "ghost expert" (124), tells her sons Vishnu and Venu a very strange ghost story, "Eliamma Goes Fishing".

"Eliamma Goes Fishing" is a sensitive narrative of the young woman's dreams and longings, and the price she has to pay to live her dreams. Eliamma is an ambitious young woman who dreams of going to the sea. Her dream cannot be fulfilled simply because of her gender. One night, she meets a ghost at the sea-shore who says he can help her in her quest. In order to fulfil her wish of going to the sea, Eliamma makes a pact with the ghost. She gives her body to the ghost and becomes invisible. The ghost promises that he would return Eliamma's body when she returns after a month. Eliamma takes the ghost's help without even wondering why he would want to help her:

Can you make me invisible? Asked Eliamma. . . .

Yes, he replied, for as long as you like. I will take care of your visible body till then—and wait for you.

Eliamma was as impatient as he was. She couldn't be bothered with details till she had tried out. . . . and Eliamma felt herself being lifted out of her body till she was as light and insubstantial as air; and as invisible. (128-29)

An overjoyed Eliamma sets on a journey to fulfil her dream. In her invisible state she spends many months happily. Finally she becomes tired of her invisible existence. She returns to the seashore hoping to find the kindly ghost ready to give her body back. In vain does Eliamma wait for the ghost who would never return. It is now, that Eliamma realises that the ghost has

tricked her. The tale, as cryptic as any myth, can, however, be deconstructed to understand that it is not really a ghost but a man who tricks Eliamma into pawning her body to him.

The novel also contains Mangala's and Jameela's search for their true selves. An aging Vasu comes to understand their journeys by studying the bundleful of their stitchwork. The tapestry designed by Mangala and Jameela are expressions of their real selves, their dreams and longings. Their web of sisterhood has been cryptically written into their needlework. The sea is a perennial symbol of freedom for both. The sky is always coloured in pale and ambiguous colours. The tapestry reveals the inaccessible interiority of Mangala that Vasu had failed to fathom when she was alive. Mangala's mode of expression finds a remarkable similarity with that of aunt Jennifer in Adrienne Rich's famous poem "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers":

When Aunt is dead, her terrified hands will lie
Still ringed with ordeals she was mastered by.
The tigers in the panel that she made
Will go on prancing, proud and unafraid. (9-12)

Unlike Eliamma and Mangala who are unable to survive the patriarchal onslaught, Jameela is a survivor. After Mangala's death, her unfinished landscapes are completed by Jameela. It is quite a mystery to Vasu why Mangala wanted Jameela to complete those designs. Does the tapestry contain a message for Vasu? Had Mangala and Jameela wanted to share their fears and longings with Vasu? After her husband's death, Jameela decides to visit Vasu for the last time before returning to her native place. Vasu fails to comprehend the meaning of the flicker in Jameela's eyes and her silent reproach. As she leaves, it appears to Vasu that Jameela has taken away with her the tangible woman that Mangala was, and that only the ghost of Mangala has been left behind with him. It is on looking at the designs made by the two friends that Vasu can trace in those artistic expressions a world of suggestive possibilities. What Vasu failed to comprehend earlier, becomes lucid when he carefully studies Jameela's loom. Vasu transcribes Jameela's tapestry to find in it a fable "Begum Three-In-One".

The embedded narrative "Begum Three-In-One" is the story of three silkworms, Ammukutty, Nanikutty and Ummikutty who live on a tree free of all cares. Three travelling brothers spot them and attempt to catch them for their silk. The eldest brother, the chief, catches Ammukutty and throws her in boiling water. And when she is dead, picks up the rich silk and goes to the town happily. The second brother dithers, but succeeds in catching Nanikutty whose wings are still moist and are stuck to her sides. Being too kind to kill her, the second brother gives her a new home in a paper bag. Nanikutty has to learn to live in the paper bag. She can never learn to fly because her wings have not developed fully, She lays eggs like a good female, and dies soon after the birth of her young ones. Ummikutty, luckily, is out of her cocoon at the right time. Her wings have developed fully. On seeing that the third brother is coming for her, she flies away. Ummi's wings become flashy. With the silk that she can produce, she continues to spin the stories about her two sisters Ammu and Nani. Ummi is now called Begum Three-In One:

Ummikutty . . . is still in hiding somewhere in the forest, weaving on her old spinning loom. Year in and year out she designs a tapestry full of meaning; but

whatever she weaves is also ever-dissolving. . . . The stories she spins, you see, are not all her own; and not always easy to unravel; because all of them weave in, with the finest of silk threads, the ghosts of her lost sisters. (137)

“Begum Three-In-One” is a feminist fable of the three friends Eliamma, Mangala and Jameela. Through euphemism and allegory, Vasu comments on the poor lot of the female sex. Like Ammukutty, she could be exploited even before coming of age; like Nanikutty, she could be uprooted from her home by a man who marries her. A few, like Ummikutty, escape because of their luck, yet their psyches are scarred forever. The three brothers represent the oppressive patriarchal forces. Only Jameela, the survivor, is left to relate the crimes done on her friends’ bodies and psyches.

Nanikutty’s tale finds a striking parallel in Vasu’s mother Lakshmi. Lakshmi is the most marginalised female character in the novel. Her parents do not even recognise her existence. She is not even given a name. It is many years later that the little girl is given the name Lakshmi by the sweeper-woman. Lakshmi’s life is short and fearful. After dutifully giving birth to Vasu, she dies as though the purpose of her life has been served. Shakuntala, Vasu’s cousin, meets the same fate. Married only a year before, she is made to do laborious work at her husband’s house which makes her very sick. When critically ill, she is brought to Vasu’s father, the Ayurved. The Ayurved gives Shakuntala a special diet and counsels her regarding her malady. The treatment is completed in four weeks. Shakuntala dies six months later. Vasu’s father, however, says that he understood that Shakuntala did not have enough time and will-power to counter her disease, and that all he could do for her was to ease her journey to death. The Ayurved’s treatment had taught her to “feel for” the malady “as you should for a wayward sister” (16).

Women empowerment is an abiding interest in all of Hariharan’s novels. Hariharan’s enquiry into the gradual process of a woman’s awakening to the need of self empowerment can be seen in the novel *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* as well. The novel does not have an overt feminist agenda, yet an insight into the psyche of a woman can be had through the brief glimpses Vasu gives of the women in his life. The most powerful woman character in the novel is Vasu’s grandmother. She is shown as a strong and self-willed old woman ruling the kitchen till the end of her life. Of course, Vasu does not know what she was as a young woman. It is clear that time and old age has empowered the grandmother. She can hold her own during conflicts with her strong-headed son, the Ayurved. She doesn’t believe in ghosts or fairytales. She believes that food is the best medicine for disease. Vasu, closest to her, knows a lot about the woman inside her. She would say to Vasu, “What is a husband, Vasu? Just a hungry stomach and a few other things, never mind what. But all equally greedy, swallowing like a big red swollen mouth, then chewing and belching” (174). Vasu discovers the youthful rebel in his grandmother when he learns that she has been part of history, though only marginally. After her widowhood, the grandmother finds her prophet in Mahatma Gandhi and donates her gold bangles for the cause of the freedom of India.

The two empowered women in the novel are Jameela and Vasu’s grandmother. It is ironic that widowhood and old age liberates the women in *The Ghosts of Vasu Master*. Does it imply that Mangala, Lakshmi and Shakuntala missed the chance to empower themselves? Does it mean that Jameela and the grandmother—like Ummikutty—are lucky to survive their husbands? Do Jameela and the grandmother have to pay a heavy price for their empowerment? Through the female characters such as Mangala, Jameela, Shakuntala and others, Hariharan presents the plain

yet graceful aspect of femininity which patriarchy abuses, feeds upon and, in the process, destroys.

On the other end of the spectrum is the glamorous version of femininity signified in the novel by the beautiful young actress Rita-Mona whose picture hangs in the laboratory of Vasu's father. Vasu compares her to an apsara, "the kind who descends to earth now and then for the sole purpose of distracting young (and old) hermits" (17). The voluptuous foreign actress who plays Kate in the movie *The Taming of the Shrew* has the same impact on Vasu's young students. These actresses' overt sexuality sets them apart from the homebound version of femininity such as Mangala, Lakshmi or Shakuntala. Vasu, like an objective observer, can discern that the voluptuous actress playing Kate was not exactly what Shakespeare, had envisioned while he wrote the character of Kate in his play *the Taming of the Shrew*. Vasu's observations also show that men view women merely as sexual objects. It is ironic that Vasu who does not remember her wife's features even after a marriage of fifteen years, can recall the calendar-girl Rita-Mona's beauty in minute detail. By embedding the glamorous side of femininity against the background of its plainer counterpart, the novel encompasses almost all the roles played by femininity at the service of patriarchy.

The Ghosts of Vasu Master presents the feminist issues from the male perspective. Vasu represents this male perspective, and his deliberation on issues such as the silent communication in Mangala and Jameela's tapestry, Jameela's post-widowhood loneliness, his grandmother's defiant act of donating her gold for the sake of the freedom movement or Eliamma's disappearance; bears testimony to the mellowed male sensibilities towards the feminist concerns. Vasu's act of valuing many forgettable details of the women's lives: what Jameela had wanted to tell him on her last visit to him, or why Mangala would never visit a doctor, or why his grandmother would reveal the secret of her last recipe to him alone; opens new possibilities of an androgynous approach—a hopeful picture where men and women come halfway in an effort to understand each other. The novel reiterates Hariharan's belief: "There are men who are feminists" (*The Hindu* 19 Mar 2007). Vasu is the binding thread of these feminist narratives. The core of the novel's feminist argument lies in Vasu's awakening to the fact that the concerted efforts of both men and women can lead to the creation of a world where both men and women can empower themselves and be their true selves.

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