



Exploring Identity: A Study of Gita Hariharan's 'The Ghosts of Vasu Master'

¹N. SATISHKUMAR, ²Dr. Mukta Gupta, ³DR. PARVATHI INDURI, ⁴Dr. GANDI
⁵SOBHAN, ⁶KARROTU VENKATESWARARAO, KOLLURU GOPALA KRUSHNA

¹M.A. English Litt., M. Phil. B.Ed. (Ph.D.), ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH
SATYA INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY AND MANAGEMENT (SITAM)
VIZIANAGARAM, A.P., INDIA

²Asst. Professor in English, Faculty of Humanities, Language and Social Sciences
Shri Venkateswara University, Gajraula, U.P

³M.A.Eng., M.A.Edu., M.B.A., L.L.B., PGCTE., Ph.D., Associate Professor of English
Dadi Institute of Engineering & Technology(A), (DIET), Anakapalle, Visakhapatnam,
Andhra Pradesh 531002, India.

⁴Associate Professor of English, AVANTHI'S RESEARCH & TECHNOLOGICAL
ACADEMY, BHOGAPURAM, VIZIANAGARAM, A P – INDIA

⁵M.A. ENGLISH, M. PHIL, B.ED., ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH
SATYA INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY AND MANAGEMENT, (SITAM),
VIZIANAGARAM, A.P., INDIA.

⁶M.A(English), B.Ed., AP SET
Assistant professor of English,

Satya Institute of Technology and Management (SITAM), JNTU, GV, Vizianagaram. India

Abstract –

This is an autobiographical novel of Githa Hariharan. Human emotions are excellently expressed through the life of Vasu Master. After the retirement he starts jotting down observations, memories, and thoughts about teaching. He starts to teach Mani. This is a sort of self –discovery. He takes this up as a sort of challenge, and in the process of teaching Mani about the values of life, actually relives his own memories-right from childhood. The novel definitely reminded us of the Panchatantra stories-the usage of plants and animals to explain a point to children. Here, Vasu Master uses the same philosophy while teaching Mani. Vasu Master doesn't live only in the present but his past also haunts him. He tries to understand his present. The novel is concerned with well-being on all levels: soul, mind, and body.

Key words: Identity crises, Protagonist, Patriarchal, Autobiographical, Postcolonialism, Postmodernism, Rhetoric.

Introduction:

Githa Hariharan was born in 1954 in Coimbatore in the state Tamil Nadu in the south of India and she grew up in Bombay and Manila. Githa Hariharan's "*The Ghosts of Vasu Master*" explores the theme of teacher- pupil relationship and (through it) the process of self- discovery. Using fantasy and fable such as the *Panchtantra*, the novelist examines the nature of teaching through its protagonist's engagement with his pupil.

The Self-Discovery of a Teacher:

The quest for identity is identified with the journey of mind along times and spaces



in Githa Hariharan's 'The Ghosts of Vasu Master'. Human emotions are dealt through the life of Vasu Master. He is an English teacher in P.G.Boys' School. The story starts with Vasu Master's retirement from the school. He gets a notebook as a farewell present from his students. He starts writing his observations about teaching. He becomes a private tutor. He doesn't have many students but one, the most complicated and intractable case, Mani. This is a sort of an autobiography of Vasu master, and how his life changes when he is offered to teach a slow learner. Mani is ridiculed by the whole town. And it is a sort of challenge to teach Mani. In the process of teaching Mani, Vasu sails through his own monotonous memories-right from childhood.

The novel definitely reminded us of the Panchatantra stories-the usage of plants and animals to explain a point to children. This story also has a shade of Taare Zameen Par within it. Here, Vasu Master uses the same philosophy while teaching Mani when he realizes that Mani is impatient and irritated with pens, pencils and notebooks. And doing this, he teaches us the true meaning and the different perspectives of the words intellect and love. Vasu Master has no great immediate success with Mani, but finally finds at least one thing-'the stories' that seems to keep him entertained and interested. Vasu Master himself wasn't brought up on appropriate stories. He discovers that the stories in his childhood which he was told weren't at all like the ones other children heard. Now, he

can see their power and finds them useful for himself. At this level Vasu master's training to Mani reaches a psychological level where he tries helping Mani to get free from whatever demons and burdens the latter carries within. Now, however, he can see their power -- and finds them useful for himself too. Vasu Master doesn't live only in the present, the past also haunts him. Scenes from his childhood and his past are recounted, all in trying to understand the present. These stories are told in short chapters, alternating between events in the present, stories, and recollections, along with a bit of philosophizing on Vasu Master's part. The novel is interspersed with many stories Vasu Master recounts. Gita Hariharan has acknowledged the influence of the famous Panchatantra Tales to this novel. Just like Vishnu Sharma teaches the King's sons through short stories, Vasu master enlighten Mani through his stories.

The Ghosts of Vasu Master is concerned with well-being on all levels: that of the soul, the mind, and the body. Vasu Master's physical ailments get some attention, while Swami offers him to follow the path to enlightenment (and well-being). Then there is Vasu Master's father, a doctor of the very wise and understanding sort, who shows a variety of ways of healing (or at least moving towards healing).

The Confusing Images and Discovering the Self:

According to Joseph Conrad what we find in modern experimental novel is: "*His vision of her vision and her vision of his vision of her vision.*" This novel is in one sense about "seeing the past through the present". The Ghosts of Vasu Master talks all about those undigested parts of life (karma), that have caused him a constant diarrhea in his working life. Except from the experiencing and narrating selves, the story has changing in and out of various discursive frames lined up in the novel. There is his son Vishnu's materialist frame, the very spiritualism of Venkatesan's Swami and the ambitious activism of Gopu. But there is also the **world** of the animal fable (especially Vasu's ongoing serial of the Grey Mouse), his wife Mangala's ghost story, her friend Jameela's wordless tapestries and her own fable, the memoir Vasu is writing of his career as a teacher and his more personal autobiographical musings, his father's ayurvedic lectures and the young Mani's deep muteness, all these things create complexity in Vasu's mind.

Githa Hariharan finds herself at the nexus of the structures of narrative, education, gendering, postcolonialism, and postmodernism. As these multiple stories bring many



internal conflicts. The weaving of different experiences within the various characters and their personalities puzzles. In fact, Vasu is pretty puzzled by the jumble of memories, stories, and images that seem to come to him of their own accord. He often says "*For some reason, I thought of*" whatever story comes next; he seems not to know. He begins the same linear form and the same question-answer rhetoric. It is an inter-mingling of images in which the angles of refraction and reflection are for us to chart. There are temporal mirrors of experiencing selves, narrating self, and reader. In this wilderness of mirrors Vasu feels himself a lost, confused, and sidetracked.

The conflict of his real and his imaginary marks a difference with significantly their mutual participation in a larger whole. Vasu is certainly gripped with his own "hole" until working with Mani enables him to change his ability to perceive. This wilderness of images does not give up hope of reaching wisdom. Mani is a boy who plays the reader's role. He becomes plain Vasu, as in the dream where he finds himself in the fields with his classes. That dream story is about giving up the master's discourse and turning to the rhetoric of fables, stories, and open-mind exams. Early in the novel, he can see his own mangled body in the mirror of Mani's eyes which is the mirror of his own youth, silenced for hours at a time in his authoritarian father's office. A bit later, he finds his dead wife's mirror where he sees himself an ugly stranger, a scarred face and hounded animal.

Mani is like a hounded animal (hounded by teachers, other boys, his family, and people in the street). Finally, everyone is hounded by death, by the "hole" over which Vasu worries. As he gathers notes to reflect his "Forty Years in a Classroom," Vasu sees a number of ways to name this hole. His vision sharpens the wounds of time, but it also offers him a virtual depth. Like the rest of those whom he knows, Vasu hardly feels like a Master. Mani teaches him to shed like an old snake skin.

He looks at each person in his life through his/her reflections in yet another, the way Swami and his father show him the dictatorial ego they have in common. The way his own boy self silenced in his father's study shows him where Mani is when the boy sits in front of Vasu, silent and resentful of the standard books and exercises. Vasu tries it with him at first. Vasu was not given his father's ayurvedic bible. The novel is full of Fathers, who reject Vasu through arrogance and criticism like his boss Veera Naidu, his son Vishnu, fellow teachers like Raghavan or his friend Venkatesan, the Swami, and his students as Raman or Gopu (Mani's brother). But he brings these rejections on himself because he fails to deal himself fully against this patriarchal order that has hold upon all of these figures.

The father was Vasu's fierce Sanskrit teacher. Vasu was a helpless object, helpless because he was expected to remain passive. Thirty years later, in a dream he finds himself again in the room he and Mangala shared during the mourning rituals after his father's death. Both "actor and spectator," he examined a swelling wound on his body; when he cut it, there was pus, but also "*the wound was choked with maggots— hundreds of tiny, restless creatures, feeding and growing, filling up the gaping hole*" (122).

The hole marks what Vasu never received, the pus his poor defense, the maggots the gnawing carrion feeding for a lifetime off that hole. Vasu's lifetime diarrhea and his poor sleeping send him to doctor after doctor, none of whom can diagnose this wound, this hole. His diagnosis should be within his incomplete self. We could say that Vasu becomes a teacher, a master, in the effort to become the father he had and the one he didn't have. To become the master he could not be around his learned father-teacher. But more importantly, the dream is a way for him to gain access to the ayurvedic's wisdom. "*I had to conduct my next medical examination in my own half-baked and haphazard fashion.*" (109) We can call the novel his medical inspection through the mirrors he uses; we can call it a psycho-analytical weaving through memories and fables. This is a way of retrieving the wisdom



and effectiveness from the position of hopelessness

Conclusion:

Githa Hariharan's 'The Ghosts of Vasu Master' is a narrative of mixed origin part fiction part fable the narrative is a psycho-social story of a teacher who has to unlearn all that he knows about education and invent new and wonderful ways of comprehending and defining the world around him. The Ghosts of Vasu Master becomes a treatise both on healing and education. After working for forty years as a teacher, he retires but without sense of fulfillment. And he wakes up to find himself dead. As Franz Kafka says - "A man did not know that he existed until one day he awoke to find himself dead."

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