

Mummified Fragments: Characters and Themes in Hariharan's *Novel*

The Ghosts of Vasu Master

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Abstract

Hariharan's versatility as an author with a mission to subvert the entire tradition can be recognized in every work of fiction she has created. For this purpose in her second novel, *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* she experiments with a male protagonist and a host of other male characters. Vasu is the protagonist of the novel. He is a retired school teacher from P.G. Boys' school, Ellipettai. He leads a lonely widower's life with two of his sons employed and settled away from home. This article scrutinizes the life of an idower is all aspects.

Key Words: experiments, versatility, widower, oppression, unemployment

Hariharan's versatility as an author with a mission to subvert the entire tradition can be recognized in every work of fiction she has created. For this purpose in her second novel, *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* she experiments with a male protagonist and a host of other male characters. Vasu, the protagonist, is a retired school teacher from P.G. Boys' school, Ellipettai. He leads a lonely widower's life with two of his sons employed and settled away from home. It is

his loneliness that makes him relive incidents from the past. He is stalked by stubborn ghosts of his father, his wife Mangala and her friend Jameela. The novel reflects her extensive reading and understanding of Charaka Samhita and Panchlantra. The similarity between Vasu and the author is that both have the same educational background, and therefore their love for English literature and Shakespeare in particular, is suggested in the novel. Hariharan has made generous use of quotations from the Complete Works of Shakespeare. Vasu, who leads a peaceful retired life, engages in the process of self- discovery which speeds up on the arrival of a reticent child, Mani. Mani, a stupid boy, a slow learner, becomes the biggest challenge for the retired school master, Vasu.

As in all Hariharan's novels, the individuals are quite firmly linked to their past as well as to the other characters. The Ghosts of Vasu Master, one cannot imagine something happening to Vasu without that affecting the little boy immediately. Vasu would tell the little boy stories about his life. Similarly, whatever happens to the little boy affects Vasu Master. The connections between the characters are all stuck together in clusters. The stories told by Vasu interestingly are linked to Vasu and his life. Among all the characters created by Hariharan, Vasu closely resemble the author herself. Vasu, with a B.A. in English Literature and his art of story-telling to heal the diseased mind of Mani resembles the author. The role of story- telling in The Ghosts of Vasu Master is very clear. The fables are about the two central characters lives. Hariharan has based the stories on the Panchtantra and the Jataka tales. These

tales serve as guides in the art of living, that how to lead a good life in the worldly sense, a sensible and a balanced life.

In the beginning Vasu thought of Mani as, ‘a mask, a log of wood, a hounded animal; an impervious brick wall, a frozen puddle of drain water, a freakish victim and a cunning beast. Later Vasu learns to think of him and understand him in human terms. Vasu manages to build a bridge between the two in order to encourage and support Mani, an extraordinary student, with whom no well-known and tested strategy seemed to work. What Mani needed was not an ordinary teacher but a truly pragmatic healer who taught him how to live. Through Vasu, Hariharan unravels the mystery behind the defeat of children like Mani, with no desire to learn. Vasu experiments with his teaching skills and exposes the failure of the monotonous strategies of teaching prevalent in the present educational institutions.

The purpose of story-telling in the traditional sense is to implant moral values and major life skills. Vishnu Sharma’s Panchatantra stories meant to train the princes and thus serve the society by inculcating good moral values. The necessity and popularity of such fiction is re-enforced with the very recent publication of Gautam Bhatia’s Panchalantra - Parables for 21st Century which was politically inspired by James Finn Gamer’s politically correct Bedtime stories. Bhatia takes the men, women and animals of Panchatantra and relocates them in contemporary India with its newly acquired notions of political correctness. The characters engage with the burning issues of the day, like unemployment, oppression, environmental pollution, sexual

incompatibility etc. All the characters lay exposed by the behaviour and absurdities of the present life full of turmoil. Hariharan also believes in the therapeutic value of telling one's own story. In her interview to Joel Kuortti, Hariharan says: "she goes to this half-ruined house and starts recounting her woes and sorrows to one wall. That wall crumbles and then the other wall, and having got the tales out of her system, she becomes quite slim and healthy. This is obviously a reference to the therapeutic value of telling your own story, as well as telling somebody else's stories to try and understand that person."(Kuortti 114).

Vasu, the first person narrator, shares his challenging experiences with the quiet boy, Mani shows his actions, gestures and attitudes towards the reluctant and slow learner speaks volumes of his idealism. Vasu emerges as the selfless, passionate and dedicated teacher who with his relentless and persistent efforts brings hope to Mani and others like him. Vasu's persistent efforts and its fruitful results provide a critical view of the modern education system. Vasu through his successful experiment forces the reader to believe in the benefits of ancient India and Indian healing system (Ayurveda). The narrative is a clear illustration of tradition versus modernity where the former emerges triumphant. Vasu provides alternative methods of teaching, through the students have not asked for is meaningless and it only impedes the learning process. A teacher has to reinvent himself in order to become effective. Vasu exhibits his constant 'connect' with his pupil Mani which gets reciprocated positively.

Mani appeared to Vasu like a ‘starved child suddenly brought face to face with a full plate’. Vasu’s lessons with Mani “assumed the forked dimensions of theory and practice, story and drawing”. (TGVM 233). The true inspiration between Vasu and Mani can be acknowledged as true education. “The fantasies and fables fed to Mani regularly were returned to Vasu in the form of ‘pictures without erasures’. They were not mere copies, but were his versions, created with obvious enjoyment”. (TGVM 233).

Vasu was not prepared on the existing stories to make it comprehensible to Mani. Stories seemed to soothe Mani though he showed no sign of understanding them. Stories acted as a healing agent. Vasu’s commitment and faith towards the cause of educating Mani was so strong that he was willing to stretch himself to any extent. Vasu was a man of foiled illusions about his abilities and therefore his sincere attempt to take the class out to the cinema ‘The Taming of the Shrew’ brought about his fate.

Vasu was philosophic, introspective and constantly poses questions for which he seeks answers. He fills up pages of the notebook with appropriate quotations, other men’s words which illustrate his own wayward thoughts. Vasu comes to recognize the necessity of reconstruction from the dismantled parts of various ideas, beliefs, models that are his inheritance. His willingness to use whatever lies at hand as materials for the stories that eventually seem to heal Mani suggestion that is an attitude to traditional culture which treats it as an open resource for the future, not a closed, epic authority, but something that can be rewritten for present needs

For instance, in the chapter, ‘The Mascot of Melting pot’, Vasu uses the Panchatantra Tales only to twist and change the original version in his attempt to heal The king of the jungle, the lion is replaced by the old Fox, who has a vision that all the animals in the forest must stop killing each other and live together as one big family. The diseased mind of Mani is symbolic of the consequences of the flawed education system. Vasu’s vision to usher in the change by taking resort in our age old tradition is the only hope. Mani plays a significant role as Vasu the protagonist ceases to be a teacher in the absence of this disciple. To bring about the equivalence between teaching and healing, Mani is a reticent pupil and Vasu is the teacher who makes up fables of his own to heal is pupil.

The three ghosts that haunt Vasu throughout the narrative are those of his father, his wife Mangala and her friend Jameela. They appear in his dreams and become a vital part of his day-dreaming as well. The portrayal of women characters in *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* takes less prominence compared to Hariharan’s first novel *The Thousand Faces of Night*, where women dominate throughout. Mangala. Jameela. Vasu’s mother. Lakshmi and his grandmother are the female characters portrayed here. They are all dead and make their appearance through Vasu’s memory.

In this novel Vasu Master’s mother Lakshmi and his wife Mangala exhibit the stereotype of traditional Indian teach Mani how’ to live. These characters represent the formula of the psyche of millions of Indian women. These characters exemplify the traditional Indian woman, who is genuinely

committed to her familial duties. The chapter 'The Faces in Mangala's Mirror' throws light on the two distinct traits possessed by Mangala. Like Vasu's wife Mangala, his mother Lakshmi too led an inconspicuous life. Vasu's grandmother spent most of her time cooking food for their family that was obsessed with food and his father tested the results of the pure, vegetarian Brahmin diet. Vasu's father, the chief physician of their household had a rival in his own mother. She was a formidable bully but was the first love of his life. For her, the kitchen was the sole apothecary and food a magic weapon. She treated those sceptical of the powers of food with a withering scorn. She firmly believed in the theory that food cures one's body naturally - from constipation and insomnia to impotence. She was ambitious about transforming Vasu into a soft, sweet, pliable person who could be emptied into the mould she had chosen.

Hariharan's portrayal of the female characters in this novel is in stereotype roles who wield their power within the four walls of the kitchen. All their ambitions and abilities find expression in the realm of their kitchen. It is the daily menu that displayed the exercise of their skills. All the female characters help us to recognize the confined space of Indian woman in the socio-cultural hierarchy. Moreover, these characters are confined to a framework, which was based on the ideals of class, race and gender. To live life under the dominance of male order and to lead a submissive role is a general feature of woman stereotype. They reflect the patriotic traditional Indian society.

Vasu's father is an ideal combination of the trio - Charaka, Shakespeare and Gandhiji. He is truly representative of our rich cultural heritage and traditions. Vasu's father, an ayurveda believer He was a healer who brews his ayurvedic potions. He possessed six hardbound tomes on 'Ayurveda': A Manual of Physical and Mental Hygiene by Acharya Kumaraswamy, A hundred back issues of 'The Vegetarian' (monthly bulletin by the International Vegetarian Congress) bound together in hard cover; a cardboard file that contained an assortment of essays, articles, speeches, newspaper clippings and photographs on Gandhiji; a book without a title - his ayurveda bible that contained prophylactics and cures for every disorder known to man; the Collected Works of William Shakespeare and lastly the Panchangam.

The essence of each of these books contributed towards the making of his personality. Vasu's father appears only in Vasu's dreams. Having been dead 30 years ago, it is the spirit of his father that remains alive in Vasu's memory. The promotion of Vegetarianism, Ayurveda, Gandhian teachings and Shakespeare's quotations taught by his father are permanently etched in Vasu's memory. The ancient traditions of healing and vivid pictures of ayurvedic practice are brought alive by the spirit of Vasu's father. The minor characters in the novel include Veera Naidu, the pot-bellied headmaster of P.G. Boy's school, Raghavan also a teacher at P.G. and Gopu, Mani's brother. Gopu carries a larger image as nature has bestowed him with bold and impressive strokes unlike his mentally-challenged brother Mani.

The highlight of the novel is its ending. It concludes with Vasu's philosophy and an unusual examination paper set by Vasu. Hariharan's concern for the present education system, which she believes is redundant, is well reflected through the character of Vasu. The novel deals with the theme of reliving the past. Storytelling, one of the oldest Indian traditions is depicted as the best therapy. Vasu Master, the healer and teacher teaches Mani how to live: it is the theme of the novel. The adaptation of the stories from the Panchatantra Tales and glorification of the age-old methods of healing forms the heart of the novel. The novel is all about alternative method of teaching and healing. Teaching through storytelling and healing through Ayurveda also promotes safeguards and revives our age-old traditions. The title of the novel *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* is also a reminder of the past; the memories of Mangala, his dead wife and his father keep haunting the protagonist throughout the novel. Teacher as a pragmatic healer is the message of the novel.

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