

Hauntology of a Retired Man: Storytelling as Self-Cure in Githa Hariharan's *The Ghosts of Vasu Master*

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Abstract

This paper proposes a new reading of Githa Hariharan's Commonwealth Prize-winning debut novel *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* (1994) through Jacques Derrida's concept of Hauntology. It argues that *Vasu Master* is not haunted by spirits, but by what Derrida calls the 'specters of unfinished pasts'. The novel is studied as a late-bildungsroman where an old South Indian schoolteacher, declared a social failure, uses indigenous storytelling, Ayurveda, and memory to exorcise his own conditioning. Hariharan replaces the Western model of success with an Indian model of self-realization. The paper explores how failure becomes a site of freedom and how storytelling becomes therapy.

Keywords: Hauntology, Late-bildungsroman, Storytelling as Cure, Indian Middle-Class, Githa Hariharan, Alternative Pedagogy

1. Introduction

Indian English fiction is crowded with young, angry protagonists who rebel against the system - from Rushdie's Saleem to Roy's Estha. Githa Hariharan does something radical in her first novel. She gives us a 62-year-old man who has already obeyed his whole life. *Vasu Master* is a retired government school teacher in a small coastal town in Karnataka. He has followed every rule. He taught from the prescribed textbook for 30 years, he married because his father told him to, he raised two sons. At retirement, the balance sheet is brutal: his wife Mangala has left him after 35 years of silent marriage, his elder son is a low-paid clerk in Madras, his younger son has failed his exams and disappeared. He lives alone in his ancestral house with a leaking roof, a meagre pension, and a cupboard full of unused textbooks.

In the logic of Indian middle-class morality, Vasu is a certified failure. Hariharan's genius is that she begins the novel exactly at this point where most Indian novels end. What Indian society and philosophy call vanaprastha the evening of life, Hariharan makes the morning of a new consciousness. This is what this paper calls a late-bildungsroman the coming of age of an old man.

Hauntology and the Indian Middle Class

This paper uses Jacques Derrida's concept of Hauntology from *Specters of Marx* (1993). Derrida argues that a ghost is not a dead person returning. A ghost is an idea, a structure, a promise from the past that refuses to die and continues to control our present. The present is always haunted by unfinished pasts.

Vasu Master is a perfect case study of hauntology. His house is not haunted by spirits, it is haunted by ideologies patriarchy, colonial education, and middle-class notions of success. He cannot move forward because he is still obeying ghosts. To be free, he must not exorcise them violently, but must learn to have a dialogue with them. This is precisely what he does. The novel can be read as a structure of four interlocking hauntings. Hariharan does not define ghosts as horror. She gives a very Indian, human definition through Mangala's storytelling. Vasu is obsessed with newly inflicted memories of recent past and the remembrances of the older past. Memories come back again and again and bring with them 'ghosts'- 'ghosts' of persons fondly remembered, now dead like his father, mother, grandfather, grandmother and his wife Mangala and still alive like the headmaster Veera Naidu, the teachers- Venkatesan and Raghavan, Mani's brother Gopu, Mangala's friend Jameela and his sons- Vishnu and Venu. As Mangala explained, "Ghosts were not always like that: souls with no bodies with no matter, or life as we know it." (GVM, 67) Ghosts were once real people with real bodies. For Vasu, his father Appu Master, his student Mani, and his wife Mangala are such ghosts. They were real, but now they live as ideas controlling him.

The Ghost of Patriarchy

Vasu's father, Appu Master, was also a schoolmaster, but a more successful one strict, respected, feared. Vasu spent his entire childhood and adult life trying to become Appu. He internalized Appu's pedagogy, discipline is more important than curiosity, obedience is more important than imagination. Even after Appu's death, his voice lives in Vasu's head. When Vasu tries to make Ayurvedic powder, he hears his father saying, "A master should not become a quack." This ghost represents what Ashis Nandy calls the 'intimate enemy' - colonial and Brahminical patriarchy that lives inside us. Vasu's first step towards freedom is to realize that his father was also a frightened man performing a role. Vasu remembers "Appu Master believed that a stick and a Sanskrit sloka could set any boy right." (GVM, 34) This shows the colonial-Brahmanical pedagogy that haunts Vasu.

Vasu Master's mother had died when he was still little boy. He remembered her as he says, "irretrievably mixed" with what he had heard (GVM, 31). His mother did not have a name for almost a year because her parents did not want to spend money on a naming ceremony for one more daughter. They also feared that people would laugh at them for not producing a son. The old sweeper woman, who swept their backyard and collected the cow-dung, comforted her mistress saying that "life would have been easier for the child if it had been born with a little extra bit of flesh, just a few inches". But, she added, the child could still be "the Lakshmi of her husband's house" (GVM, 31) and this is how the child got the name Lakshmi. But to the end of her life, she could never get over her inferiority complex. This incident represents the pathetic condition of Indian woman and reveals her feature of tolerance. Due to all these, she becomes timid and worried by nature. 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).

The Ghost of the Education System

Mani is the most important ghost. He was Vasu's most brilliant student - curious, questioning, alive. Vasu, as a textbook teacher, could not handle Mani. He punished him for asking questions outside the syllabus. Years later, Mani becomes a Naxalite, a radical activist, and dies in a police encounter. Mani returns as a ghost not to take revenge, but to ask a question that haunts the entire Indian education system: "What is the use of your grammar, Master, if you cannot teach me how to live? You taught me to parse a sentence, but did you teach me to parse injustice?" Here, Hariharan indicts the entire Macaulayan model of Indian education that we still follow. It produces clerks who can write good English but cannot think critically. Vasu's guilt about Mani is his realization that he was a bad teacher not because his students failed, but because he never taught them to fail, to question, to imagine. This critique predates her second novel *In Times of Siege* (2003), which openly attacks communalized textbooks, by almost a decade.

The Ghosts of the Silenced Women: A Feminist Inversion

For thirty years, Vasu's house was full of women - his mother and his wife Mangala - who never really spoke. Or rather, Vasu never listened. He was the 'Master' at school and at home. After retirement, when the house becomes empty, their absences become presences. He begins to hear Mangala's bangles, his mother's humming. Hariharan, as a committed feminist writer, performs a brilliant narrative inversion. The Master who had the power to silence must now become a listener. He remembers small cruelties - how he dismissed Mangala's interest in music, how he never asked his mother what she wanted. Mangala's ghost is the most powerful because she refuses to return. Her absence teaches Vasu that women are not ghosts to be summoned at will. They have their own lives. This feminist hauntology makes the novel much more than a story about an old man.

Metafiction as Therapy

The fourth and most beautiful haunting is that of stories themselves. To pass time in his boring classes, Vasu used to tell his students stories from the Panchatantra, Jataka tales, and local folklore - stories of talking jackals, wise crows, and foolish kings. Now, in his loneliness, these characters start talking back to him. A crow from a story he told in 1972 comes and questions his interpretation. This is pure metafiction. Hariharan suggests that stories are not dead things we use. They are living entities that live inside us and shape us. This is where the novel finds its healing power. Vasu was a teacher who used stories to kill time. Now, he becomes a human being who uses stories to heal time.

After retirement, Vasu tries to become an Ayurvedic doctor. He reads old palm-leaf manuscripts and makes chooranams (herbal powders). No patients come. In worldly terms, it is another failure. But philosophically, it is a breakthrough. Ayurveda teaches him a different philosophy of the body - not the Western idea of body-as-machine to be fixed, but body-as-memory, as a balance of elements. He learns that his own acidity, his sleeplessness, are not medical problems but emotional ones - undigested memories. Similarly, katha or storytelling becomes his real medicine. In the Indian tradition, from Kathasaritsagara to grandmother tales, storytelling has always been medicine. A story is told to a child

who cannot sleep, to a grieving person. Vasu stops telling stories with a neat moral at the end “Moral: Honesty is the best policy” and starts telling open ended stories that help him understand his own life. The narrative form of the novel itself mirrors this. It stops being linear like a British novel with chapters, and becomes circular like an oral Indian tale, with stories within stories.

Conclusion

The beauty of *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* is that it refuses to give us a conventional happy ending. In a Bollywood film, Vasu would have become a successful Ayurvedic doctor, his wife would have returned, his sons would have touched his feet. Hariharan does nothing of that sort. At the end of the novel, Vasu is still in the same leaking house. He is still poor. His wife has not returned. But he is transformed. He has learned to make tea for his ghosts. He no longer fears them. He talks to them, argues with them, laughs with them. He has achieved what the Bhagavad Gita calls sthitaprajna a state of equanimity.

As Vasu Master trained in traditional Indian male psyche, is the narrator, the novelist is restrained from openly advocating woman's cause. Githa Hariharan uses Vasu Master's version of his 'feminine ghosts' and their relationships. Githa Hariharan draws the attention towards the importance of literacy which is need of the hour. Even though a free and compulsory primary education program is available for girls, many are unable to take advantage of it due to household responsibilities and family constraints. Vasu's grandmother, mother, and Jameela have not been given the chance to educate themselves. At the core of social institutions lies the family, the fundamental unit characterized by a hierarchical and unequal power dynamic. The author illustrates how the unequal distribution of power between the sexes influences every aspect of women's lives and prevents most from fully experiencing themselves as women. Githa Hariharan makes the reader aware of women's subordinate and inferior status in family and society. The need of the hour is to confer on woman the rightful, equal, independent status that would act as an impetus to her development as an individual and a social being.

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