

Therapeutic influence of Fables, Parables and Bizarre Story-world in Gita

Hariharan's *The Ghost of Vasu Master*

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"Vasu Master spins a succession of fables which, in their range and diversity, epitomize the human condition. But there is also a deep vein of fantasy and mystery running through them, which breaks out in all its enchantment in the strange and glittering climax." *The Telegraph*

Gita Hariharan's place in the field of contemporary Indian short fiction fashioned by female writers is no less important than that of Nicolai Gogol's place and contribution in the arena of short stories or Maria Edgeworth's in regional novels. Her short stories display an ardently sincere influence of *The Panchatantra*, the most important book of Indian fables. As far as Indian short stories are concerned C V Venugopal writes: "The number of stories written by Indian English writers over the century runs into thousands stories on practically every topic under sun, stories running from a bare two pages to over twenty" (Naik 225). About the contribution of Indian women story designers he writes: "Experimentation with technique, with language, has been pronounced too... A number of women writers, too, have added to the bulk and quality of Indian English short story" (Naik 225). Githa Hariharan's stories have been published in various anthologies and magazines in India and other countries. She received the Commonwealth Writer's Prize and the Best First Book award for her first novel, *The Thousand Faces of Night*. Her other works include *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* (1994), *When Dreams Travel* (1999), *In Times of Siege* (2003), and *Fugitive Histories* (2009). A collection of highly acclaimed short stories, *The Art of Dying*, was published in 1993, and a book of stories for children, *The Winning Team*, in 2004. Githa Hariharan has also edited a volume of stories in English translation from four major South Indian languages, *A Southern Harvest* (1993); and co-edited a collection of stories for children, *Sorry, Best Friend!* (1997).'

The Ghosts of Vasu Master contains all the essential elements of children's literature. *Dialogue's* issue on children's literature defines the children's literature in following words; "It is a universal truth that children are the most precious possessions of the world ... The inquisitive and imaginative mind of children loves to enjoy fairy tales, fables, fancy stories and they love to watch cartoons, comics and horror movies. If the adult world is the world of seriousness, reason and logic, children's world is enlivened by the wonderful, the improbable and the super-natural" (Editorial). Vasu master's childhood stories told by his grandmother were different as compared to other kids. His stories were 'crude and astringent, like the stinging ginger- chilli combination.' Mani's character is introduced as a silent catalyst in the long chain reaction of short stories. Mani was a twelve years old child with 'the brain of a six or seven - year - old' child. Mani '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.' In every respect, Mani was different with other children. '...Mani was a puzzle; the kind you suspect has been given to you without all the pieces you need'. This reticent child needed 'someone who could

demolish the wall of silence around him, brick by brick.' Mani required 'a truly pragmatic healer.' Vasu master used stories as medicines to cure Mani. 'Stories seemed to soothe Mani. It mattered very little what they were about, since he showed no sign of understanding them.' However, when Vasu first filled up the silence between them 'with nonsense about animals and forests, his mask of defiant imperviousness slipped, and he sat, chin cupped in both hands, elbows on the table, watching' his face. As per Divyarajan Bahuguna '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.... 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.'

Chapters like 'The Mascot of Melting Pot', 'The Crow and the Great Cobra', 'Why are Gray Mouse and Black Crow Neighbours', 'Blue Bottle Finds a Friend', 'The Dreams of a Mouse', 'Inspector Buck-Tooth's Visit', 'When the Python Wakes', 'The Fatal Kundalini', 'The Spider's Pleasure', 'Firefly's Legacy', 'Can a Wingless Wasp Fly Again', 'The Sting in the Scorpion's Tail', 'An Unfinished Tale', 'Two Scenes in a Mousetrap', 'The Serpent and the Schoolmaster', 'and 'Terminal Examination, — can be called the documentation of Hariharan's technique of storytelling. '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.'

'Children are interested in nature, birds, objects and animals. But their interests are fleeting and instantaneous' writes Shoari Nejad in *Psychological Principles of Education* (chapter 3, 5). Mani's response was rarely seen, 'he sat still and open-mouthed, however long the story was; or whatever it was about. At the end, he had of course no questions; even a smile was rare. But sometimes, the forgotten spittle in his mouth would drool, or fall to the floor in one great gob; and then he snapped his mouth shut, as if he had suddenly shuddered awake.' Such students need a lot of attention on the part of the teacher. Such stories play the role of psychological tool to cure them. Vasu in his letter to Vishnu and Venu writes; 'He does not speak, but I have great hopes of curing him' (87). After various therapeutic sessions of stories, Mani makes peace on his own terms with the hated pencil and paper of his school days. He starts making pictures :

...His strokes grew increasingly swift, bold, clear; his details minute; his pictures without erasures. And I in turn began to recognize some of the creatures he drew: a timid mouse and a smug' buck-toothed one; an aggressive wasp oblivious of its loss of wings; a dazzling firefly; and in the distant background, the sharp outline of a crow's beak.

Mani was returning the models Vasu had given him. 'But they were not mere copies. His own versions, created with obvious enjoyment ... His imagination was no stranger to playfulness.' This definitely was a good sign of success for Vasu. The fruits of Vasu's hard work were ready to flourish now. He comes to know that 'Papaya-Head Mani—fool, clown, as dispensable as a buzzing fly—had this unexpected, strangely moving power....he was not just an idiot with an odd knack, but possessed of an intelligence which had narrowed, learnt to work around and despite his disabilities.'

The very first story in *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* clearly embodies the experimental vein of Gita Hariharan. Even character portrayal of all the animals is quite different, stupefying and sometimes astonishing too. Her characters seem to be inspired by the animal fables of *The Panchatantra*. As per Saurabh Kumar Singh; 'Animal fables from this source are predominant and remain as always society's traditional vehicle of social and moral instruction. ... Thus it is not at all surprising to find a clever quail, a smart jackal, an intelligent crow, or a stupid tiger;... these fables are retold in many languages not only within India but throughout the universe.' In 'The Mascot of Melting Pot' the old fox spends 'most of his life alone in a bush, thinking and studying.' He teaches all the animals of his forest 'to live together as one big family.' 'The forest soon had a new name- melting pot.' Gita Hariharan's dexterous use of imagination is evident in the lines cited below:

Then a strange and wonderful creature was born. No one was very sure who the father was, but a doe gave birth to an animal that struck them with awe. The animal had ears like a rabbit's, hooves like camels, a snout like a wild boar's, and the limpid, almond-shaped eyes of a deer.

But the strangest of all was its skin. It was striped like a zebra's, and each stripe, like a distinct flag, reminded them of what they used to be. One stripe was a strip of tiger skin; the next was a strip of elephant hide; and so on. The effect was a patchwork of flags, except that this body of flags breathed, fed and slept. (79)

This strange creature was 'the mascot of melting pot'. All the animals of the forest forgot their real animal instincts. After years long control over their natural instincts these animals suddenly realized their true nature. 'For instance, when the tiger was grazing peacefully by the nilgai, he felt a sudden, dreadful longing to strike, claw and tear. He remembered the taste of blood. And at that moment, the nilgai...recalled the smell of danger ;...'(80) Very soon the concept of 'Melting Pot melted away, as if it had never been.' The mascot was killed and torn to pieces. 'The forest became a jungle again. The animals lived as best they could, alone or in pairs and herds, happy in spite of knowing their names, fears and hungers. It was a hard tiring life, but they no longer felt blind and deaf; as Young Fox put it, each one could assert his will to act.'(81) This story brought 'an expression on his (Mani's) face, perhaps for the first time' since they had met. This expression was the reward for Vasu master.

In next story, the characters are donkeys and an 'unusual visitor: a messenger from death'. The story ends proving the witlessness of donkeys. The writer calls these stories 'flights into the absurd'. However, all these absurd stories leave magical impression on the mind of Mani. Vasu is made to speak thus.

As I have said before, Mani was the sole audience of my flights into the absurd. ...I let one or two, or sometimes all three tuition boys, sit through my story sessions with Mani. Mani was restless and unable to sit till the others settled down; and till I began.

Once the first sentence rolled off my tongue, it was as if I had a snake – charmer's bean-pipe in my hands. All his agitation was stilled; his restlessness vanished. He sat down, his mouth slipped open, and he took off slowly, smoothly, on some inward voyage I could make possible, flag off, but never share."

In chapter number fifteen, entitled 'Why are Grey Mouse and Black Crow Neighbours?', she presented Gray Mouse as 'thinking sort of mouse', having his own problems: 'a wife and a nestful to be fed; and in his quieter moments, a few questions which had nothing to do with crows to be examined.' Unlike his neighbour Black Crow was 'swift, decisive, single-minded. He was partial to things that glittered; or that were stiff and cold, full of stale, swelling pulp.' Vasu successfully makes animals and insects the companion of Mani. At one place Vasu says:

It amazes me now that I never stopped to think of what Mani got out of my obscure, dimly-lit fabrications, with their obsessive return to the same unglamorous creatures: a kind of poor man's feast of fantasy.

'Blue Bottle Finds A Friend' tells the tale of blue bottle fly, 'an abnormal fly in the house' of flies. Normal flies used to tease blue bottle fly, by flying round and round him and chanting and buzzing these lines:

Blue, blue, clumsy old shoe.

What can we do?

The spider wants you.

Finally, blue bottle finds a guardian in the form of a lonely Grey Mouse.

He saw him fly in sweeping, dizzy circles in the sunbeams, his silky body turning all the colours of a rainbow (106).

Charles G.D Roberts in his book *The Kindred of the Wild: A Book of Animal Life* writes: "It is with the psychology of animal life that the representative animal stories of today are first of all concerned... The animal story at its highest point of development is a psychological romance constructed on a framework of natural science" (24). In her short stories, Gita Hariharan makes her animals feel and think just like human beings. They behave like intellectuals, they dream, preach, teach and look 'for the most essential, tricky questions'.

But even a housebound mouse can dream, and Grey Mouse took to dreaming cramming his mind with tidbits of what he has seen, heard, thought and felt all day, to be turned into something strange and fantastic every night (118).

Here Vasu master is trying to build up Mani into something he was not. 'Mani was not just a victim or a martyr; in the strange tales... he grew into something more, something closer to his silent reality.' For him he was not unlike a warrior-in-training; an almost-hero.

The story of three caterpillars ; Ammukutty , Nanikutty and Ummikutty respectively , is not less interesting and vivid . Hariharan's skill of describing the miniature details of animal characters in tremendously interesting way is evident in these lines:

They found, for instance, two little knobs on their heads which they could use like antennae, to learn about the world around and beyond their tree-home. And they discovered the spinnerets on their heads too; from these they could put out long, slim threads of silk.

Buck-Toothed mouse in 'Inspector Buck-Tooth's Visit' gives expression's just like human beings. 'Buck-Tooth struck his head with his paw in disgust and despair.' (pg. 145) After confronting the situation he was stranger to, 'he sank into corner , miserable and unsure of himself .' (pg. 145) A story about Vana Devi and a tribe called Nagaleelas talks about the deforestation and its side effects on innocent people. Even the names of the characters are symbolic e.g. ; Never- Fear, Never – Waver ,Never-Say- Die , Never-Bow and Never – Bend. The horrible outcome of cutting of trees has been expressed in these lines :

Years later, only five of them were left together: - Fear, Never – Waver, Never-Say- Die ,and the twins Never-Bow and Never – Bend. The five friends remembered their forest only when it came to them in the gift of a dream. And what they saw in their dreams they barely recognised. They saw their beloved pining for her lover and her youth: their forest grown gaunt and sterile, her green heaven irreparably damaged. And what about the Nagaleelas who stayed behind? Never-Fear saw in his dreams bundles of skin and bone; hollow men and ragged women.

In 'The Fatal Kundalini', Bandicoot is defined as 'a shiny' smooth creature'. He is extremely brave. 'Bandicoot then stood on his hind paws' tall and pillar – like for them all to see. The enticement of meat and mould, the fear of claw's and cat's eyes: nothing made his heart beat faster than its usual, regular rhythm . And his tufts of hair did not bristle, or his pig-like body tremble even once."

Chapters entitled 'Mangala's Journey', 'Eliamma Goes Fishing', 'Begum Three –in – One' and 'Two Paths of Bliss, deal with ghost and ghost stories. In 'Two Paths to Bliss', Vasu seems to convey us a message that was given to him by his grandmother:

What is a ghost , Nuisance ? Nothing but a part of you that's no longer in control. A little pocket of garbage in your mind that rots and begins to stink . So – what do you do? Take a big broom and sweep it out, making sure you don't leave anything behind.

'The Spider's Pleasure' reflects the fear and concern of Grey Mouse for blue-bottle about the presence of crow and spider outside the mouse hole. He taught bluebottle the leaps and somersaults. In 'Firefly's Legacy', the Grey Mouse answers to the questions of one of the wasps, in form of stories of fireflies.

A heart shaped forest occurs in 'The Sting in the Scorpion's Tail'. An old Glow – Worm, fascinate all the animals of the forest and receives a new name ; 'Diamond or 'Old Man Mirror'.

Old Man Mirror shone in the dark like a skilfully cut diamond; he was made up of a hundred intricate facets . Each of these mirror – bits threw back a different kind

of reflection, so that it was often difficult to understand Diamond to see him whole; to sum him up in a few words.

The diamond speaks in his whispery but surprisingly effective voice; "Every one of us is entitled to a light of his own." Ultimately 'like magic, or a prophecy come true at last' he makes all the creatures of the forest glow. Gita Hariharan's characters feel like human beings and act in response like them too:

Diamond paused for a minute in the midst of his long hours of travel. His eyes filled with tears of joy, and sorrow as well'.

Grey wiped an eye surreptitiously with his paw.

The jealous scorpions stung anyone who didn't appreciate the taste of their poison. An extra - large dose of scorpion - poison stung even Diamond himself.

They watched, horrified, as a thousand glittering shards of mirror fell off the banyan tree and flew in different directions to all the corners of the forest.

In 'The Serpent and the Schoolmaster' Vasu and Mani themselves appear in the form of the characters in a story. Hariharan creates the story within a story in the Ghost of Vasu Master:

Once upon a time there was a Vasu and a Mani. Vasu said: Come, Mani, let's create a new world. A better one. Mani agreed and began drawing up plans, as Vasu navigated their course and peopled the new places they passed with a cast of characters.... Oh well, said Vasu, I think you have learnt something, haven't you? Mani nodded and smiled. In the depth of his smile, Vasu saw what his own gain had been. When he was alone, he could feel the end of all things. When he lived through Mani, or when he waited for his approaching face; or even when he suffered as Mani turned it away, no longer interested, Vasu felt alive then - intensely alive.

At last Vasu Master for the terminal examination writes ten riddle-like questions in the form of ten incomplete stories. At times, Vasu found virtue in his 'labyrinthine existence' and could declare himself as a seeker, 'as a story teller'. Githa Hariharan makes him speak at one place:

A story can be peopled with names and recognizable terrors, so the child is less afraid to look his own fears in the face. If Mani can acknowledge his fears through mine, through my private mythology, will it help him name them - aloud - at last?

In chapter no. 41, entitled 'The Frayed Black Curtain' Vasu receives the reward of his efforts to treat Mani in form of sketches. However, Mani continued to be crippled by his silence; but the improvement was visible in his actions. Vasu in the concluding lines of this chapter says;

Mani's story was the only one I had not heard from the storyteller's lips. I knew I would hear it someday; but knowing I must wait, I yearned to hear it. I saw before me a story beyond speech. Like Mani, it was a slow, painful movement from one still photo to another; not an animated series of moving picture.

Jaina C. Sanga's views expressed in *South Asian Novelists in English: An A - to - Z Guide* are precious enough to be quoted here; '... Once again, the range and variety of

the fables encompass the human predicament. The underlying skein of fantasy and mystery attempts to take the novel to heights that rival the realm of magical realism, the novel building up to a well-orchestrated scintillating climax.'

Hariharan's skill to vividly delineate the pain of these creatures depicts her extraordinary art of peeping into the psyche of such animals: The pain of Grey Mouse at the point when he gets trapped in the mousetrap is depicted thus:

- the door snapped shut, neatly cutting his tail in two. The pain in his tail and the pleasure in his mouth blent strangely, and he squealed louder than he had all his life, with more anger and rapture than he had ever dared to feel.

The influence of Ivan Illich and R.D.Laing, Susan Sontag and Oliver Sacks and the *Panchatantra* is clearly evident in this book. In the 'Acknowledgements' she herself acknowledges her debts to 'the translations of 'niti' and its explanations in Arthur W. Ryder's Introduction to his translation of *Panchatantra*. Ram Lingam's views indicate the importance and validity of Panchatantra stories in following lines; 'The main theme of the *Panchatantra* is 'Neeti' which is hard to translate in English. 'Neeti' roughly means practical worldly conduct or even a "wise conduct of life". That makes the *Panchatantra* connected with one of the branches of ancient Indian science known as the *Neeti-Shastra* which teaches us, how to relate to and understand people, reliable friendships, problem solving through tact and wisdom and how to live in peace and harmony in the face of the many pitfalls in life.' Gita Hariharan's such animal stories are capable of producing feelings of pity, and love for the animals. As per Nandita Mahapatra; "Animals being presented as personalities capable of feeling mental and physical pain, thinking and reasoning, served to promote humanitarianism." Interestingly enough, 'Using fantasy, fable and a host of wonderfully imagined characters - and the gentle, humane and philosophic voice of Vasu master - the author creates a richly textured and complex work that eloquently explores the human condition and the underlying principles of all human actions.' Gita Hariharan's bizarre characters and penchant for storytelling continues to amaze and entertain us.

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