

Narrativising the Past: Exploring Native Knowledge Systems in *The Ghosts of Vasu Master*

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Abstract

This paper takes up the issues of decolonization and discusses the relevance of reviving the ancient thought systems. The Ghosts of Vasu Master by Githa Hariharan is the story of a retired school teacher Vasu, his reflections on past life and his relationship with his students in a local village school. The novel, through the characters of women now deceased, also reflects upon the practice of Ayurveda in the traditional Indian households and the long and mystical association of women with it. Here, Hariharan points to the fact that how in ancient Indian education system stories were used to teach children. Beast fables have always been a prominent source of entertainment for children and to drive home moral ideas to them. Works like Panchatantra, Jataka tales, etc have played crucial role in propagating human ideals and values. The novel critiques the prevalent system of our school education and calls upon to integrate the ancient and modern forms of our education system.

Keywords: *Native, Knowledge systems, decolonization, Ayurveda*

This paper takes up the issues of decolonization and discusses the relevance of reviving the ancient thought systems. *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* by Githa Hariharan is the story of a retired school teacher Vasu, his reflections on past life and his relationship with his students in a local village school. The novel, through the characters of women now

deceased, also reflects upon the practice of Ayurveda in the traditional Indian households and the long and mystical association of women with it. Vasu master is a teacher for whom retirement means the beginning of another responsibility for his veneration of the teaching profession is so high that he regards teaching and learning as activities which last lifelong: “All of us are pupils and teachers. While there is life in each of us, we learn and we teach” (*GVM* 28). After retirement, Vasu master has been given a scrapbook which is the storehouse of his memories related to school. During his spare time, he is writing an essay “Four Decades in a Classroom” to educate budding teachers. Two practitioners of Ayurveda, his father and grandmother are examples of an ideal teacher in his life. Memory plays a vital role in shaping the teaching philosophy of Vasu master and also helps him in narrating his life’s experiences:

But just when I am done with remembering, when I round it all off, put an end to it, I see that flash again, the burst of life when everything blurs for a second. And then it all begins again, the tragic-comic antics of an apparently random sample of humanity, a street full of passing faces, it continues, picks up a thread and ties others into intimate knots, the pictures moving one at the tail of what went before, like the partly hidden view of a wheel. Like a serpent, gliding past silently, sinuously, taking care never to leave me too far behind. (*GVM* 274)

His philosophy of teaching is: “. . . and more important (I thought much later) can a teacher live in perpetual fear of the outside world? Can he pretend forever that blind ignorance is innocence?” (60).

After retirement, Vasu master decides to undertake the responsibility of teaching Mani. Mani is a psychologically dull child and his family members have tried hard to get him admitted to some school, but he has been rejected by almost all the schools. In such a condition, he is brought before Vasu master for receiving tuitions. He is a sort of dull and inactive boy who “did not open his mouth for months together” (12). Initially, he grew like a normal child and the delay in babbling was considered normal for the children of his age and so ignored. He grows into a precocious child when his head swells and it cannot be exactly pointed out whether he is really mad or somewhat retarded mentally. Vasu master himself remarks, “when he first came to me, it was not clear whether he was retarded, mad or neither” (10). But as he grew, his parents realized that there is something abnormal with this child as he does not speak like others: “His silence was as disturbing as a continuous reproach” (116). He is beaten or tied up or is confined for a day or two. He continues to withdraw himself more and more into his inner world. For Vasu master, he is “as a mask a log of wood, a hounded animal; an impervious brick wall, a frozen puddle of drain water, a freakish victim, a cunning beast of prey” (51). Thus, he emerges as a serious challenge to all of the Vasu master’s teaching experience and tricks which he had used during forty years of his tenure at PG school.

Stories play a vital role in establishing communication between them, and as the familiarity between them silently increases, Mani starts listening to Vasu master's sentences. Here, Hariharan points to the fact that how in the ancient Indian education system stories were used to teach children. Beast fables have always been a prominent source of entertainment for children and to drive home moral ideas to them. Works like Panchatantra, Jataka tales, etc. have played a crucial role in propagating human ideals and values. Once when after a prolonged call to respond to the queries, Mani did not respond, Vasu master decided to flog him. But Mani displayed more alacrity and cut the books lying on the table into pieces in defiance of Vasu master's impending violence. This incident compels Vasu master to think about the nature of punishment for the boys and the aim it should fulfill. Though he himself was not a stern master like a few of his colleagues, yet he always aimed at correcting the boys. Vasu master was compassionate like his grandmother regarding the punishment of children: "night after night, my own lack of sleep as incurable as Mani's loss of speech, I asked myself: could Mani subvert the natural order of things? Grow complete in a way afflicted cannot?" (*G/M* 46). With the passage of time, Vasu master became sure of one thing that Mani can recognize and swiftly act upon some of the human emotional stimuli. Now he felt as if "(he) had to build a bridge between us so that I could validate, confirm, encourage, support, enhance" (52).

The characters of Vasu master's stories are grey mouse, blue bottle, bucktooth, spider, firefly, fox, etc. These animals allegorically represent the real-life human characters, their beliefs and opinions, for example, Grey mouse is Vasu master himself, blue bottle is Mani, fire fly is Mani's elder brother Gopu, etc. Gopu, Mani's elder brother, has been referred to as the "navigator" (99), as he raises some burning issues of contemporary human society and thus compels Vasu master and the readers too to stretch the limits of their thinking. Vasu master's favorite pastime is to go back again and again to the world of memories. It's a journey that does not take one forward, rather it's a visit into the hinterlands of the mind.

In the particular instance of Mani, it seems as if the disability has been imposed on him by the family and society. But with the healing touch of Vasu master's fables, Mani starts exhibiting interest in his talks, and it grows keener day by day. In their interpersonal relations, Vasu master's stories hold special significance. The story of Grey mouse explains the importance of true friendship for human beings. Grey mouse desires friendship with blue bottle. Blue bottle is a fly and spider wants to kill her by trapping her in her cobweb. Since blue bottle is always happy bubbling with enthusiasm, other flies are jealous of her. Grey mouse achieves a truce between spider and blue bottle and thus helps him come out of danger. Thus Grey mouse is Vasu master himself who helps Mani in overcoming his difficulties. Grey mouse imagines that he will be like another courageous mouse that does not tremble in presence of a cat. This mouse even braves a snake that slithers in his burrow by chance.

Likewise, the story of Black crow and Grey mouse, who were neighbors to each other, tells us that we should learn to accept each other with differences while being part of a society at large. Earlier, Grey mouse and Black crow were unaware of their existence in the vicinity of each other. But they discovered each other when they had spent considerable time in their own pursuits.

The novel is a pungent criticism of our prevalent system of school education and calls upon to integrate the ancient and modern forms of our education system. The story of Mascot presents the idea of living in peaceful, harmonious relations with each other and holds special significance in the context of the diverse and multicultural society of India. The very idea of 'melting pot' as a place where differences melt in each other has been discussed by several multiculturalists.

Vasu master thinks what should be his role as a teacher with respect to Mani as teaching him was quite different from the conventional classroom teaching. He wanted to provide Mani a learning experience that will be different from what children usually have in schools. A teacher has to decide what kind of education will be liberating. He said in his parting function that every individual is teacher and learner at the same time, and this process continues till one is alive. Sarita Prabhakar writes that "two strands—the healing of the mind and the healing of the body are interwoven and are seen as interdependent. A teacher has to be a psychologist, a pedagogue, and also a mother. Structured through memories, dreams, and fantasies, the narrative dismantles various inherited ideas, beliefs and models" (153). Thus emphasis is on healing, and stories play the role of anodyne in healing psychological wounds. Stories develop the habit of focus and concentration in Mani by arousing his curiosity. He comes to develop what Vasu affectionately calls "story look" on his face.

The education system of Vedic times laid stress on the development of a wholesome personality and enriching life by adhering to moral values. Moral standards were high and people respected each other's progress. The ideal of progress had to be achieved only by following the righteous path. Religion played a vital role in shaping the theoretical approach to imparting education to children. Now decline of religion in society has led people to associate themselves more with consumerism which has resulted in rising of cutthroat competition among students. It required certain religious rites to be performed like upanayan, samavartan, etc. to gain studentship. The structure of society was such that not everybody desired to get studentship. This however was a boon and bane both for the society.

The teacher and disciple lived in close communion with each other, and the teacher was supposed to be the guardian of the student. Thus the healing power of the school education system lay in integrating the qualities of head with the heart. Thus the ancient system of education in India was prosperous, diverse, and flourishing. Wisdom consisted of leading a simple, pure, and honest life where religion played an important role. Also, education tried to develop people into good and responsible citizens. Our modern education

system lacks many qualities and one among them is the professionalism of teachers. It must be noted that the father of Vasu master was thoroughly versed in the principles of ayurvedic treatment and esteemed his profession high. The blatant commercialization of education has produced only businessmen and not teachers. Degrading moral values between the teacher and the taught spirit of cut-throat competition has not given anything worth cherishing to the students. Various committees have been constituted by the government and other bodies to improve the system of school education in our country but the situation remains far from improvement. However, as we see with the change of time technology has impacted a lot our system of education. In reality, it may not be possible to transform our entire system of education along the ancient prescriptions but certainly, the novel strongly urges to decolonize the prevalent system. Appropriation of technology to this end can be an effective measure to curb the menace of colonization.

Our present education system introduced by Macaulay with an aim to expand and establish the rule of the empire is still continuing along the values of colonial heritage. Certain other features like the caste system which is based on the hierarchical organization of society do not allow the effect of education to trickle down to those placed at lower steps in the hierarchy. For many centuries, it was the highly selective availability of education which helped the upper castes maintain their dominance in society. The same is true about gender politics in our context where men denied the right to education to women and thus confined them to their own households. Whatever awakening we see in our society today is the result of our contacts with the more developed civilizations of Europe.

Presence of the Past: Feminine Ghosts

The novel is a sort of bildungsroman about Vasu master and how his life changes after retirement from the school. He reminisces about his relations with grandmother, mother, father, wife, and now with his sons Vishnu and Venu. “Feminine ghosts” (131) refer to Mangala, Jameela, and Eliamma who played important roles in the life of Vasu at one point of time or the other. His isolation with his already settled sons is visible when he remarks: “I did feel a strange detachment from the family love that had been allotted to me as sustenance, though the promised taste of nectar did not follow. My children were strangers to me though I could claim little credit for that” (57).

Vasu master comes across a tin trunk in which his wife’s meager belongings like a soft pale green silk sari, a small mirror, two sandalwood boxes of kumkum, some old photographs, etc are preserved. Vasu master fantasizes about the existence of her wife Mangala by the seaside. He even used to write down his dreams related to her. Mangala holds a minor place in the life of Vasu master and she never had the chance of forming part of any significant happening in his life.

Vasu master is essentially a traditional individual caught up in a modernist world, where he is trying to find some support to hold. Crumbling human values around him grieve him so much that he likes always to reminisce about

the past. This becomes more pronounced a tendency in him after his retirement when he has no work to do at home. He is a widower whose children are settled in their respective places. The angst or existentialist anxiety that plagues him stems from his problem of being in this world:

Man is a being in this world, that is, he has a concrete existence in this world. The world is a concrete reality, but it is passive and non-conscious. Only man is conscious and by attaching significance to the various objects of the world he establishes his position in it. . . . man alone acts in the existential sense of the world because man makes his own choices. He has the freedom to choose which course of action he will take and the actions he commits shape his character, in turn influencing further actions. (Mitra 26)

Ayurveda: The Science of Life

During his childhood days, Vasu master was a sickly boy with a lean body frame and was often administered with his father's ayurvedic concoctions. In describing the paraphernalia of his father's ayurvedic treatment, Vasu master informs us that his father used to maintain a stack of six bulky books on his study table related to Ayurveda which also included A Manual of Physical and Mental Hygiene written by Acharya Kumaraswamy to teach people "how to get rid of their filth" (18). Another collection included the back issues of a journal The Vegetarian published by the International Vegetarian Congress. Then there was an anonymous book which was the "bible" of Ayurveda and had "prophylactics and cures for every disorder ever known to man" (19) and a panchagam which was used frequently for answering astrological queries and to administer to the patient some ayurvedic medicines during certain auspicious planetary combinations. Ayurveda literally means knowledge of life and is a form of medicine which is popular in India since Vedic times. The two texts which mostly form the basis of this system of medication are *Charaka Samhita* and *Sushruta Samhita*. There are various theories regarding the origin of these books and the historicity of their writers namely Charak and Sushruta is shrouded in mystery.

In India knowledge has always been given a primary status in society in both material and spiritual forms. Knowledge has always enjoyed a primary, privileged status in India. In this regard noted revivalist Kapil Kapoor observes:

It is to be noted that culture is understood here as a set of systems or grammars, tantra (on which various institutions of a society are founded). Thus there are systems/grammars such as Indian culture has, for example, of dance, language, music, polity, ethics, arts, crafts, painting, sculpture, literature, etc. These systems are expressed in compositions, texts, and the whole network of these systems, texts, constitutes the knowledge or culture of that community. The sheer amount of

knowledge-literature, texts of knowledge, available in Sanskrit is amazing. The tradition has several knowledge typologies for this large body of literature to classify and arrange the compositions in a hierarchy of validity according to their status as discourses of valid knowledge. (13)

Thus, as we see, the novel highlights the contemporary relevance of India's ancient knowledge systems to get rid of many social and cultural problems society is suffering from. It calls upon to decolonize the Indian culture from the harmful impact of western civilisation.

Ayurveda exhorts us to return to nature. Critics and environmentalists, like Vandana Shiva, argue that Eastern cultures as they tend to be collectivistic in nature as against the Western ones, which are more individualistic, do not regard nature as simply a source to satisfy man's greed. For instance, in Hindu mythology nature has been portrayed as a bountiful mother, a giver of endless things to men. Thus the relationship between human beings and nature is one of symbiosis where both take care of each other's requirements. In western corporate cultures with more emphasis on profit and development, nature remains a highly exploited entity.

Much of theology is inward-looking and yesteryear-referenced. There are endless conversations/disagreements about texts, dogmas, beliefs, and conventions. I have often criticized theology for its blatant failure to attend to, or even take interest in, the concrete ordering of the world-that of power, control, access to resources, and overwhelming suffering. It is disturbing that mainstream theology continues to neglect the pervasive devaluing of women, the marginalized, and the natural world. This autistic theology continues to be the hegemonic form. (Eaton 26)


A similar opinion is voiced when S M Nair quotes Sitakant Mahapatra:

They still look upon life as a gift to be celebrated; and this ancient Earth as one to be praised, worshipped and also celebrated. They are the one to whom the earth is not something to be used, not a possession or an object for exploitation but a living entity, an object of reverence, and the relationship is one of sacred trust and loving intimacy. For, they believe as much in celebrating one's life in this world as in remembering, adoring and celebrating the world in one's life. The sacred soil of ancestors into which one is born is thus a part of one's fundamental psychic experience of life and is a part of its spiritual dimension. The earth, the land, the village enter into and are secure in racial memory and it is only an ethical imperative to worship the Earth goddess, the Mother Earth. (quoted in Nair n. pag)

Women in Indian culture are supposed to be the natural guardians of nature. Ecofeminists have argued that nature mostly suffers at the hands of men because of their aggressive, violent, and greedy nature. Thus natural calamities like deforestation, floods, and landslides are seen as man-made and women are supposed to be the main victims of these disasters. The traditional association of feminine nature with ethics of care leads one to position women as closer to nature than their male counterparts. Recipes of grandmother even today form an integral part of our household treatment of body ailments and this ancient wisdom has now been commercialized on a wider scale leading to the availability of packaged medicine in markets. On one hand, it has helped in popularizing and demystifying the ancient therapies of medication but on the other, it has also made such products out of reach of the poor. On the whole, women can play a crucial role in protecting the environment.

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