

Research Paper

Exploration of Indian Traditional Female Stereotype in Githa Hariharan's The Ghosts of Vasu Master

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ABSTRACT

Githa Hariharan is a postcolonial Indian woman writer. She was born in 1954 in Coimbatore, India, and she grew up in Bombay and Manila. Her fictional world includes novels, short stories, essays, newspaper articles and columns. Her first novel, The Thousand Faces of Night (1992) won the Commonwealth Writers' Prize in 1993. In it, she explores the story of a woman, who does not live happily even after her marriage.

Her other novels include *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* (1994), *When Dreams Travel* (1999), *In Times of Siege* (2003), and the new *Fugitive Histories* (2009). In her fictional world she explores the power politics in some way or other. Her novel *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* gains great critical attention. Many critics attempt to explore the novel with different perspectives including feminism, psychology and self discovery. The present paper is essentially about stereotypes as found in the literature and culture of India. The focus of the paper is on the exploration of the stereotype of traditional Indian woman in *The Ghosts of Vasu Master*. In it, Vasu Master's mother Lakshmi and his wife Mangala exhibit the stereotype of traditional Indian woman. These characters represent the formula of the psyche of millions of Indian women.

Stereotype can be defined as something repeated without variation. It is something confirming to a fixed or general pattern. These patterns mark the standardised mental picture held in common by society. Stereotype of traditional Indian Women presented in this novel are based on social, cultural and religious generalizations. These characters exemplify the traditional Indian woman, who cares for her family duties, honest with her duties as a mother and follows all other norms of the society. The concept of traditional Indian stereotype is complex and multi layered. In fact, the concept of woman determines many socio-cultural factors as it is rightly pointed out in the preface of Sushila Singh for her book, *Feminism: Theory, Criticism, Analysis*: The concept of woman is of central importance in the formation of feminist theory. But as a concept it is radically problematic because it is crowded with the overdeterminations of male supremacy – invoking in every formulation the limit, contrasting other, or mediated self – reflection of a culture built on the control of women.

The story of the novel is about a retired school teacher and his memories about his past life. Though, he is retired from his duties as a school teacher, he intends to begin the second half of his teaching career which he describes 'on a quieter but far more ambitious scale than the first'. He starts teaching Mani, a slow learner for whom he has to devise new techniques. He gets a Note book as a gift from his students on the occasion of his retirement. He plans to write an essay entitled 'Four Decades in a Classroom' as a

guide to younger teachers. But he cannot write about his teaching experiences because his memories about past life disturb him in his writings. It seems that Githa Hariharan is also interested in the depiction of complex layers of his psyche. She used fantasy, fable, and several imaginary characters. The novel has been divided into forty eight chapters. These are tales, anecdotes and incidents, related to Vasu Master's life, which explore the stereotype of many women characters.

Mangala is Vasu Master's wife. It is a tragedy on the part of Mangala that though she gave Vasu Master two sons, Vishnu and Venu, he reminds her more as a cloudy memory than as a person. The focus of his memory always lays somewhere else and she always remains in the background. His memory:
I always saw her in my mind against a seashore in the background, the monotonous slosh and thud of waves against rock and sand drowning out all possibility of words. (41)

Even in his dreams she 'dressed in silence' and offering him just a partial view. Her character maintains the traditional 'aura of silence' as a major feature of the image of an Indian woman. Another important fact about man-woman relationship as husband and wife is depicted in the novel as it found in the traditional scene of Indian society. Mangala always remembers her childhood, these memories made her happy and excited. She shares it with her childhood friend Jameela. This incidence connotes that after marriage there is nothing, in her life, enjoyable and exciting; life filled with the routine duties of mother and wife. She cannot share with Vasu Master, because there is a sense of respect. In the Indian tradition the relationship between wife and husband is not like friends but they maintain as God and worshiper.

After spending many years with Mangala Vasu Master wondered 'Who was she?' (43)

Traditional mental pattern does not allow a man to accept his wife as 'other than himself'. The relationship depicted in the novel follows the traditional mode of thinking. It is reflected through the memories of Vasu Master, though, he is teacher and well educated, he cannot accept his wife 'other than himself'. They both live under the same shelter, married for many years, have children then also they remain as an isolated islands. They cannot share their

memories with each other as Vasu master cannot speak with her about his teaching experiences and as Mangala cannot share her childhood memories with him.

It is also very contradictory that Vasu Master discovers Mangala's tin trunk treasure after the five years of her death. This situation is also a stereotype scenario from the Indian society. In Indian society man must earn bread for family and wife must cook food and take care of all the members of the family. They both play their role as it is assigned by the society and transmitted from the culture.

Mangala is perfect example of traditional Indian woman. As a wife and mother, she had a delicate feminine sensibility and modesty. It is generally observed in the Indian tradition that, woman's primary roles have been that of wife and mother.

Mangala went about her daily tasks as wife and mother with 'a delicate, feminine modesty'. She served her husband his dinner, put out his clothes as he got ready for school. She hovered around his bed with strips of cloth dipped in cold water, when he lays groaning with a fever, she sat night after night mending the boys' shorts and his vests, while he marked the homework books for the next day. These traditional duties of a woman kept her away from the real joy of the life. Once, when they go to the sea shore a little outside Madras, Vasu master goes with children in the water, but Mangala does not go in to the water with them. She walks along the seashore, looking for shells and all kinds of odd things to add to the boys' collection. Instead of enjoying the occasion, she thinks of her children. On another occasion Vasu Master has taken Mangala and their sons to see a film about 'Henry VIII'. In the film every time Henry embraces and kisses a woman. As true Hindu cultured woman, she tries to divert her sons from the obscene scenes and the bad influence of western culture on her children. She covers the eyes of Vishnu and Venu with handkerchief and her sari respectively. Even on the occasions of enjoyment and entertainment, she concerns much about her motherly duties. Vasu Master admits that he cannot protect children as she does, from bad influence. She is beautiful wife and caring mother.

Traditional Indian women always give full devotions to their husbands and sacrifice for their husbands' welfare. They believe god in their husbands and worship them. Mangala is also devotional wife, who always works for her family and husband. Five years after Mangala's death, in her tin trunk, Vasu Master discovers her little treasures wrapped in a silk sari. In it, he finds two sandalwood boxes of kumkum, their wedding invitation card, and pieces of her dowry silver. All these things found in Mangala's trunk have value in Indian traditional context. At this time, Vasu Master realizes Mangala's spiritual attachment with him. Besides, above things, he discovers old photographs, two large bundles contained bunches of flowers made out of smooth fabric, and dozen square patches of cloth embroidered with flowers, leaves, tame birds and animals with Mangala's signature, cross-stitched, and also much larger pieces of cloth with the tapestry of landscapes in which the sea was a recurring image. This is her life's property, which is the fact of majority Indian women. Mangala represents thousands of other Indian housewives, who are the sources of production but are not the owner of product.

Though, she was educated, she believes ghosts. She tells many stories about ghosts to her children. This shows her superstitious nature which can be seen as one of the major features of Indian stereotype. Like the other wives, she rarely goes to function. In general, Indian women wears silk sari

when there is any special function. Vasu Master also remembers Mangala when she has wore her torn old silk sari, when she attended an annual function at PG, in which, one of the sons had received a prize.

Vasu Master, his father and his grandfather are 'self contained' persons. They wish their wives should follow them. Vasu Master's grandmother was somewhat rebellious woman, but Mangala and Vasu Master's mother are too weak to rebel against their husbands. Vasu Master says about his mother:

She would have been timid, worrying, little thing, nagging, pestering like a high-pitched mosquito. She did not learn how to bite though. (32)

Vasu Master's mother had died when he was still a little boy. He remembered her as he says, 'irretrievably mixed' with what he had heard. 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'; 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. (32)

She had never exchanged few words with the neighbours, but she was obsessed with them. Neighbours always heard her whispering. Each member of the house tells her to lower her voice, and shut the door. As true house wife, she always instructs to others to bath and change the clothes before going out.

Lakshmi, Vasu Master's mother, fought a losing battle on all fronts. Her husband and some time her mother-in-law enrage her. She had melted away literally into the shadows of loud, tyrannical household. She lived just about long enough to give her husband his heir; obviously it was a shoddy job. She accepted everything as a submissive.

To study these characters, it is necessary to recognize the confined space of Indian Woman in the socio-cultural hierarchy. A close look at the story, we find that these characters confined to a framework, which was based on the ideals of class, race and gender. These characters try to identify themselves as valuable, social individual. They are the part and parcel of patriotic traditional Indian society. To live life under the dominance of male order is general feature of woman stereotype. The picture which emerges out of the original inhabitant's culture is an unpretty affaire and it is maintained in the present novel. They always think in the terms of what is socially valuable. I find this formulation of stereotype is helpful, in that, it enables us to examine and identify Mangala and Lakshmi as stereotype of Traditional Indian Woman.

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