



A Study of Githa Hariharan's *The Remains of the Feast* from the Feminist Perspective

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Abstract

This research paper focuses upon the 'feminist discourse' in Githa Hariharan's short story *The Remains of the Feast* which was published in 1993 and yet, continues to arouse the reader's interest even today. This short story remains as an important one, for in academia, we generally deal with notions of western liberal feminism. In this paper we consider how Hariharan, an Indian author has chosen as her focal character, Rukmini, who is a 90 year old Indian widowed woman in a South Indian Brahminical family. The tale is told by her great-granddaughter Ratna, who is studying to become a doctor. This is a brilliant and unconventional tale of how the dying Rukmini, triumphantly tries to assert her identity, though she is hedged in by the oppressive norms of patriarchy in traditional Indian society: functioning as it does along the lines of gender, caste and creed. Her sister in arms is her much younger grand-daughter, Ratna. This research paper dwells upon how Feminism is often a construct of Patriarchy. It also offers a critique of social, economic, cultural norms which restricts the freedom of women.

Keywords: Feminism, Feminist Discourses, Indian Elderly Female, Marginalized, Identities.

Githa Hariharan's, *The Remains of the Feast*, published in 1993, still arouses the reader's interest even now. This brilliant story was part of an anthology, *The Art of Dying and Other Stories*. This story is a strange tale, and shatters the stereotypical portrait of aged women in literature. The tale revolves around Rukmini, a 90 year old great-grandmother, and her great-granddaughter Ratna, who is studying to become a doctor. It is surprising that one of the first things that is described about the room of the now dead great-grandmother is a smell of pressed and faded roses. One does not associate 'rose' with old age and that too with the death of an old lady.

Ratna talks about how the two women shared their lives not quite as roommates, and yet they stayed in one corner of the old ancestral home. It is interesting for in an instant it closes the yawning age difference between them and it almost seems they are mates.

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Rukmini is tied- confined to the ancestral home-and she cannot move out of it. Feminist studies often highlight the fact that women are often marginalised in their homes. In fact both Rukmini, and even Ratna are both staying in one corner of the old ancestral home, and yet, perhaps for both of them, there is a feeling of not being quite at home?- a temporariness- as if both are marginalised-both the voices of Ratna and and Rukmini seem to be marginalised by the dominant discourse of society-of Patriarchy.

Ratna's father is a nervous, jerky man given to antacids and sweaty ands and lacking in vitality of spirit, nonetheless, he is he seems to be the one empowered by Patriarchy to make the crucial decisions as to whether any operation should or should not be performed for Rukmini. Apart from the avowed consideration of the risks posed by her age, one gets the feeling that Rukmini has long been a victim of apathy, the bulge on her neck has existed for a long time, and yet nothing has been done.

There is the excuse offered to the doctor that Rukmini had been a widow and her son(the father of this effete grandson) had merely been a fourteen year old , when the lump had first appeared. So, no medical action had been taken. Ratna, is not yet a fully qualified doctor, and is not empowered to take decisions. Her mother plays the role of the ever obedient granddaughter, and yet, she seems to be a perpetrator of patriarchy.

Here reference may be made to Bell Hook's essay 'On Patriarchy', and how surprisingly enough, or not so suprising at all women too are in many cases the perpetrators and upholders of Patriarch (Hooks, 2010, p.2).

When Rukmini tries desperately to break free from the taboos of society and demands for unconventional food like crispy onion bondas, or cakes, or even Coca-Cola, Ratna's mother turns very grim. When Ratna follows the dying wishes of her great grandmother and lovingly drapes her red saree-her first silk onto the dead body, her mother turns aghast and throws it aside, as if the elderly woman is a pollutant.

The text takes one unawares. The way the reader learns of the chubby face of the 90year old lady, her raucous laughter. It is all the more uprising given the fact that the old woman's son and daughter-in law are both very cautious, and very urbane are both dead. One would expect sombre tragedy. But, almost in an act of defiance Rukmini has outlived them. It seems strange and strange that despite of it all she is defiantly triumphant.

In Hariharan's story where right from the beginning there is an attempt at subversion of the rigid structure of society and the narrative too breaks free from stereotypes. The old woman's peals of laughter, and even the more unconventional and outrageous description of how she could fart like a whistling train, and break out in raucous laughter in an act of defiance, goes against conventional notions of an old widowed woman in a Brahminical family in Southern India. The story would seem to suggest that this slightly hysterical woman who has been marginalised in her family as a widow, and has lived within the restrictive social cultural restrictions of society, seems to thrive in her way with derisive laughter.

Once the illness sets in, and the cancer eats into her body, Rukmini seems to want to scream out and live as she has never lived before. She talks in a complicated tone, acts flirtatiously and cajoles Ratna to bring in all the forbidden food that she craves for. These food have been made by unsanctified Non-Brahminical hands, and is non-vegetarian and she

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even chuckles in glee at the thought that some of it may contain alcohol also!

The manner in which Githa Hariharan has used certain food items as cultural markers is indeed remarkable. Food can be seen as a signifier for it represents not only culture and tradition, but also contains binaries of purity/taboo, as well as has implications of power and identity. Jon D. Holzman in his essay 'Food and Memory' points out that

a wide body of literature emphasizes memory structured through what is constructed as women's special relationship to food, providing access to histories and memories not found in other types of accounts.. Women writers often use cooking, food and eating as signifiers. (Holzman, 2019, p.370).

The old woman craves for the 'brown', 'drink' 'the kind that bubbles and makes popping sound when you open the bottle. The one with the fizzy noise as you pour it out' and one learns it is the Coca-Cola! (12) Through a sense of 'defamiliarisation' the drink seems to be even more exotic. Just as the impact of the tale comes through the unexpected acts and words used, there is the strange and powerful image of the old lady holding onto her tumbler and tasting the forbidden Coca-Cola. The tumbler would have normally contained tea, or better still the traditional coffee in a South Indian household, but here there is the inroad of the American-iced Coca-Cola which is itself iconic of the modernised world. The food and beverage here stands for the different cultural constructs.

In this context, one can state that the desire for the hitherto out of bounds food is an act of revolt,-of the elderly lady's long pent up desire to assert herself and make up for lost time and lost opportunities. Even when she vomits she asserts some control over her own body as the frothy 'brown like the alcoholic coke' is ejected outwards. Also her questions to Ratna:

Those small cakes you got from the Christian shop that day, Do they have eggs in them? Do they? She persisted. Will you and her eyes narrowed with cunning "Will you get one or me?"... With her gums she bites in "Lots and lots of eggs", I would say...
Oooh," she would moan. Her little pink tongue darted out and licked the frosting. Her toothless mouth worked its way steadily, munching, making happy sucking noises. (12-13)

In the act of eating and consumption there is celebration of power. The woman, who has been forced to live her life in denial of her body, celebrates her power in the act of eating and even when she is vomiting. For almost a century she has been made to deny her body and now when she is dying she wants to live for one last time. Debashri Basu in her essay 'Gastro-Cultural Conflicts' says,

Food figures predominantly in fiction about old people. The theme of food may not be pivotal, yet numerous narratives acknowledge old people's desire for rich and fine food. Such narratives often signify the expressions of displaced desire as opposed to old age which is stereotypically considered to be a desire free domain. (Basu, 2019, p.6)

Rukmini, in her dying moments in the hospital, even when she is pinned down with the needles and drips, wants to break free from the cold mechanical world of the hospital, and move yonder to the domain beyond where there are no such restrictive practices.

To the horror of Ratna's mother the old widow desires to wear a bright red sari with the widest of borders. This desire though articulated sounds so abnormal, that it is passed off as an act of delirium. Even when Ratna lovingly covers the dead body of her great grandmother with her own red silk sari, it is set aside by her mother. Ratna's mother takes on the role of a carrier and upholder of Patriarchy. She thrusts aside the vibrant red and covers the dead body with the pale widow's weeds. On the neck she sets the rosary beads, something which Rukmini has never worn when alive, and yet her dead body is made to wear it in keeping up with what society wants to impose.

Ratna continues with the acts of revolt. Gender, caste, cultural norms are all fought against through these acts of subversions. At the end of the story after the death of the old woman there are references to the 'empty shelves' of her room and her great-granddaughter in an act of defiance, as if in vindication of Rukmini, her flesh and blood, and her friend she fills up those empty spaces with bright books of hers. She is a would-be full-fledged doctor, and armed with her knowledge she has her say in the politics of space.

Significance of this story:

This short story remains as an important one, for in academia, we generally deal with notions of western liberal feminism. In this paper we have instead an Indian writer, writing about the trials, tribulation of two women characters in the Indian context. Yet, the story gains in significance because it is a telling commentary on the condition of women, and too such an elderly one. It is remarkable that Hariharan should have chosen such a character like the great grandmother as a focal point in the story. However, the story gains in significance because Githa Hariharan's tale is not only about one particular character, or her family. Both in real life and literature women are often marginalised---the marginalisation is all the more for the widows, and that took a very elderly one. So this story within the compact space of a few pages offers enough scope for a study on Feminist Criticism and Gyro-criticism.

The Remains of the Feast remains a story where not once in the story the reader allowed to forget the sense of corporeality of the 90year old protagonist, the body becomes the marker. The chubby face of Rukmini, her raucous laughter, the obscene lump on her throat, her craving for taboo food, her vomiting, even her dead body at the end lays stress on the physicality- on the reality of the throbbing desires of the human body, though society tries its best to hem it in.

Rukmini's character all the more important because she becomes a representative of the elderly, marginalised women characters whom society would not seem to grant them the control over their own bodies. Rukmini's rebellion is an act of resistance to the politics of robbing people of their body and identity.

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