

The Ghosts of Vasu Master: A Truthful Portrayal of Hindu Way of Life by Githa Hariharan

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ABSTRACT

One of the new women writers of the post-modern era, Githa Hariharan attempts to highlight in her novel *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* certain oriental concepts which were established for ages in India. Those concepts mentioned in the novel have widely been discussed in India and followed or practised by Hindus since time immemorial. Ample, worldwide research is still going on some concepts like yoga, Ayurveda, the Gurukula Education system, the student-teacher relationship, and the Hindu way of living and Philosophy. Hariharan's liking for story-telling is reinforced by creating the protagonist Vasu Master as a new avatar of Vishnu Sharma who can create, and narrate *Panchatantra*-like stories throughout the novel. Her contribution is very important as she infuses intellectual vigour into the works of Indian women writing in English.

KEYWORDS

Hindu philosophy; Geetha Hariharan; post-modern era.

Certain Indian concepts like religion, tradition, and culture, have truthfully been presented and dealt with appropriately by Githa Hariharan in the novel *The Ghosts of Vasu Master*. The paper throws light on some outstanding concepts focused in the novel like 'Panchangam', the scientific tool commonly used in every household; 'Ayurveda', the oriental medicinal system, and 'yoga', the very popular concept of all times; the ancient Hindu philosophy of life propounded in the *Bhagavad Gita* - the karma theory; the most common practices of Indian life like worshipping nature, plants; the age-old, Vedic and scientific education system, 'Gurukulam' and inculcating morals indirectly through the stories of *Panchatantra*.

Panchangam

Vasu master recalls the days spent with his father during his childhood and describes the books in his father's library. A Manual of Physical and Mental Hygiene- *The Vegetarian*, a cardboard with all the collection from newspapers, Mahatma Gandhi's autobiography, his father's Ayurvedic, *Bible*, *Collected works of Shakespeare*, and the Panchangam.

Githa Hariharan presents the importance of Panchangam in the Hindu way of living. It is commonly found in any Hindu household. Every year an updated version will occupy the bookshelves of every house. The book is an integral part because people refer to the Panchangam for everything. They can locate their birthdays, death anniversaries, the most

auspicious days and times, etc. “Living without Panchangam within easy reach was like living in a town without oxygen.” (Hariharan 19). She also mentions the use of Panchangam for an Ayurvedic physician like Vasu Master’s father. These physicians could tell the ideal dates for consummation so that they can beget male children if they desired.

Our Hindu Panchangam is very accurate in the calculation of time even up to the minute fraction of time. The authors of Panchangam have a great depth of knowledge both in astronomy and astrology, and their calculation of time for the occurrence of lunar eclipse or solar eclipse never goes wrong like the observations of the so-called scientists of the day. They study all the movements of planets, and stars, and based on their positions they predict things very precisely. So, from scholar to layman, everyone depends upon Panchangam for many reasons even today. We can’t deny its accuracy and sanctity as it is a very scientific tool.

Ayurveda

Ayurveda, a great boon to mankind is a prominent contribution made by the ancient sages of India. An elaborate discussion and criticism of Ayurveda can be noticed in the novel. Ayurveda is derived from the Sanskrit words ‘Ayush’ and ‘Veda’, which means the science of life. The age-old and exquisite oriental medicinal practice was once taught in the ancient universities of India-Takshalsila and Nalanda where scholars from distant countries used to study. It is the oldest health care system that originated in India and spread to other countries like Egypt, Greece, Rome, and Japan

It is believed that it was first taught by the creator Brahma to Prajapathi Daksha who in turn taught it to the divine Aswins. Later, the Aswins taught Indra the chief of Devas. Ayurveda in India—the science of life, has been mentioned in one of the oldest (about 6,000 years)

philosophical texts of the world, *The Rig Veda*.

The verses of *Rig Veda*, the earliest source of Ayurveda, refer to ‘panchamahabhut’ (five basic elements of the entire creation), and the three ‘doshas’ or primary forces of prana or vata (air), agni or pitta (fire) and soma or kapha (water and earth) as comprising the basic principles of Ayurveda. *The Rig Veda* also mentions organ transplants and herbal remedies called soma with properties of elixir. The two distinct schools: Atreya—The School of Physicians, and Dhanvantari—the School of Surgeons were developed around 1500 BC. These two schools of thought led to the writing of two major books on Ayurveda—*Charaka Samhita* and *Susruta Samhita*.

Hariharan opines that Ayurveda survived even during British Rule. Gandhiji said: “The little that remains of the glory of Ayurveda should not completely be lost.” (Hariharan 22). This science of life deals with the chief components of the human body –vata, pitta, and kapha; and any imbalance of these three elements causes a variety of diseases in the human body. Githa Hariharan discusses this Ayurveda, very often through the lectures, and speeches of Vasu Master’s father, across the novel. She says about Charaka, the father of Ayurveda, the Indian science of healing. She also quotes Sushruta, the renowned Ayurvedic surgeon, and discusses the concepts of Charaka and Sushruta on life and health. The measure of life is wholesome and unwholesome and the two-fold medical system promotes vigour in healthy and destroys diseases in the ailing. Thus Ayurveda defines a healthy person as “...a person whose body wastes are regularly excreted his mind and soul are all tranquil i.e. disease-free condition of body, mind, and spirit.”(Hariharan 223)

Yoga

Githa Hariharan incorporates the concept of Indian yoga and the awakening

of Kundalini in one of the chapters of the novel through the speech of one swami. Yoga is the supreme concept with which one can purify and strengthen the physical, mental, and spiritual systems of individuals. Swami says that concentration is the path to self-realization. This concept of kundalini one comes across in Raja yoga: Actually, according to Raja yoga:

the spiritual power in a man usually lies in a dormant state. This power normally remains asleep near the lower extremity of a person's backbone... The human backbone or spinal column is like so many 8's piled one on the top of the other; forming two vertical channels side by side. The vital energy or nerve current of a person works in his body by passing through these channels. The left channel is called Ida and the right channel is pingala. ...There is a third channel inside the backbone which is between the Ida and pingala. Its name is sushumna. Normally this channel remains closed. It opens up when the Kundalini power is awakened...He starts having genuine spiritual experiences. The awakened kundalini power, as it starts moving towards the brain, seems to pass through different doors, each one of which introduces the spiritual aspirant to a newer set of genuine spiritual experiences. Each one of these doors is called a chakra... When kundalini power reaches the sahasrara chakra through the sushumna channel the spiritual aspirant becomes illuminated. (Bhaskarananda 29-31)

Githa Hariharan, through the speech of swami, employs this knowledge of Raja yoga and that of the great cobra. She speaks of the Adishesu, Vasuki, the lord Vishnu's bed, the snake as a garland of Lord Shiva; a snake as a weapon in the Ganesha's

hand, and the same snake as the peasant's guardian of the fields.

Once, Vasu Master's teacher, his father asked him to repeat one slokam. "Mana yeva manushyanam karanam bandha mokshayoh; Tasmad tat abhyaset mantra yat ichchet mokshamavyam." Vasu used to have much trouble remembering those Sanskrit slokas. But he remembered the meaning of this slokam by rote learning. "The mind is the cause of both bondage and salvation. So if you desire freedom, train the mind and discipline with Mantra." (Hariharan 211)

This is only possible through the practice of yoga. Vasu master feels that neither the teacher nor the couplet reveals the mantra to discipline the mind. Only the individual, on his own, should try to find out the right key. The feeling conveyed by Githa Hariharan in this context is that the learner or student should be given enough scope for individual thinking, which enables him on the right path to attaining knowledge.

Karma theory and Detachment

Hinduism believes in the doctrine of cause and effect, which in Sanskrit is called Karmavaada. It is thoroughly discussed in the *Bhagavad Gita*, the holy Hindu scripture. The word karma means action as well as the effect of action. According to this theory, all good actions produce good effects, and bad actions have negative effects. The fruits of good deeds bring pleasure and enjoyment to the doer, while the fruits of bad deeds cause suffering and pain.

Vasu master attends the discourse of a Swami along with his friend Venkatesan. There the Swami speaks on karma; the pain or pleasure, peace, and happiness we experience due to the karmas we perform on this earth. Master attends his speech several times and found it monotonous because it has been delivered with minor variations. Hariharan mocks such routine speeches of Swami and their actions. Here, in this context, swami

speaks of detachment, a prime concept of Karma theory. *The Bhagavad Gita* rightly puts it in the chapter: 2-47 verse:

“Karmanyevadhikaraste ma
phaleshu kadachana/ ma
karmaphalaheturbhurma te
sango’stavakarmani.”

(Your right is to perform your duty only, but never lay claim to its fruit. Let not the fruit of action be not your object, nor let your attachment be to inaction (Ramasukhadas)).

It means the doer of the action has every right only over the action (karma) but not over the effect (result). So whatever action that a person performs on this earth, he should not have any attachment to the work. One should perform the work just like a water drop on the lotus leaf.

Swami urges the followers to detach themselves from their mundane activities and relations. But Githa Hariharan has created the character Vasu master as an embodiment of this special feature ‘detachment’. He has been experiencing the same in his life since his wife’s death 20 years ago. His two sons Vishnu and Venu also stay away from him. Moreover, he is not interested in going to their places despite their frequent invitations after his retirement at PG but prefers to enjoy the company of his students as a tutor.

Concept of Plantation

The concept of Plantation, which is very crucial nowadays, is set for discussion in this novel with enough references from sacred books of Hindu mythology. Githa Hariharan presents one axiom from the well-learned philosophy of Vasu Master’s father originated long ago by Indian sages. “Ten wells are equivalent to one pond, ten ponds to one lake, ten lakes to one son, and ten sons to one tree.” (Hariharan 76)

The prominence given and attributed to trees in the Hindu lifestyle can be estimated with this saying. It also expresses the eco-friendly nature of Indians right from the Vedic days. Githa Hariharan further states:

And if you have any ancestors languishing in hell, at least fourteen of them will be redeemed if you plant five mango trees in your garden. Or better still, by the roadside. (Hariharan 76)

This is an instance that tells us how the elders of society have created such beliefs to cultivate good practices even in the common man by using some sort of sentiment.

Vasu Master once thinks of his father and his tamarisk tree in SUPW i.e. socially useful and productive work at Veera Naidu’s PG backyard and recollects his father’s preaching related to trees. The observations of the scientist J. C. Bose (India) are well supported by the character of Master’s father. Trees have hunger and thirst. They cry and weep. They also sleep during the night. This idea has its backing in Hindu philosophy. According to this philosophy, the living beings are of two kinds—Sthavara (un-moving) and Jangama (moving). The seed for all these living beings is the Lord himself. To quote Ramasukhadas, *Bhagavad Gita* (10/39), the lord Krishna says:

Yachchapi sarva bhutanam beejam
tadaha marjuna - Na tadasti vina
yatsyat mayabhutam characharam.
(I am the seed of all the beings.
There is no creature, animate or
inanimate that can exist without
me.)

We consider trees as living beings, so we plant them and worship them as gods and goddesses. Besides that, they have great medicinal value in Ayurveda.

Worship of Nature

Worshipping nature as a goddess or mother is an ancient concept of India, which we come across in one part of the novel. The author, while trying to present a group clash between the so-called townsmen and the tribal Nagaleelas with the title ‘When the python wakes,’ talks of a tribal sect called Nagaleelas who live in the forest and treat it as their mother. But,

in one year, there were no rains. So, they offered an extravagant feast for Vana Devi. Hariharan depicts the traditional offering, the dance they performed in presence of Vana Devi as:

The Nagaleelas prepared a sumptuous feast for Vana Devi. The women and children sang her praise as they piled up the best of their stock: dried strips of wild boar meat, fragrant roots, and nameless thirst-quenching berries. In the evening, just after sunset, they held hands in a circle within a circle within a circle, swaying, pleading for the goddess 'protection and forgiveness. An old one cried from the depths of his heart: mother if we have angered you, here we are, ready to negotiate a truce. (Hariharan 165)

The belief in Vana Devi, the forest as a mother, is a concept that prevailed in this land since time immemorial. The sources which help the survival of mankind are given the status of mother on this land. These eternal life-giving and preserving sources like rivers, cows, and trees are being worshipped as Ganga maatha, Gomaatha, Tulasi maatha, Bhumaatha, etc in this culture.

Gurukula System

The Indian Education system is a special point of discussion in this novel *The Ghosts of Vasu Master*. The author discloses her views in an interview with Dhanyasree. M:

The *Ghosts of Vasu Master* was born out of my very personal interest in learning and teaching – I say personal because at that time my children were little fellows in elementary school. But I didn't want to look at learning as a separate enterprise; I wanted to connect it to all the other ways in which we learn about each other and ourselves. So I have the old man and a little boy,

and though the old man may or may not succeed in teaching (and healing) the silent little boy, the old man certainly learns a lot about himself in the process.

The above words of Githa Hariharan reflect her interest in learning and teaching. It looks as though she has done an intricate study of the Indian education system of the past and the present. She is very successful in vindicating certain systems of the past and criticizing the present-day school business. In the novel, when Vasu Masters' sons ask him to join them, he writes two letters in reply, in which he bluntly says that he has several children to tutor and has no idea to shake off the mantle he has worn for so many years. He also mentions the importance i.e. the wealth of the ancient system of Gurukula. The word Gurukula refers to, Home of an Acharya, schooling is residential where children from different cross-sections of society live, study, eat and play together. Acharyas and students live here as members of one family. These schools were there from Rig Vedic times in our country which form the base for the present-day residential schools at various levels. The author writes:

The Rig-Veda describes some of these small schools run by a teacher at home with his pupils as residents. In the initial stage, the lungs and the mouth seemed to be the only organs in action; the pupils are described as frogs croaking lustily after rain. In the second stage, the comfort of a chorus gave way to individual performance. Each pupil struggled in solitary meditation to grasp the truth of the texts he was earlier taught. His struggle could end only with understanding. Nothing new or organic grows with cramming; its results are as futile as dry wood on ashes-which can never blaze. (Hariharan 208)

On another occasion, Vasu Master writes in his scrapbook:

...The teachers or godmen have to renounce their individual names and shed their personal histories. They get the powerful appellation such as swami or teacher. (Hariharan 161)

Further, the discussion runs on the relation between a guru (teacher) and sishya (disciple). In Gurukula, (the study grove) the very first step to learning is apprenticeship. A disciple stays with the guru for some 12 years. In this duration, the disciple's young and eager mind should struggle to master the unwritten Vedas on the other hand. This is a process of learning and living under the protective shade of a teacher. Hariharan writes of our legacy:

Centuries ago, the teacher was likened to an umbrella; and the pupil as well. The preceptor sheltered the pupil, a creature in the making. The pupil looked after his teacher, shading him with his tenderness and affection. There were no secrets between teacher and pupil." (Hariharan 207)

But today people are trading in learning- i.e. buying and selling. These people are sinners, not teachers. If the teacher's heart and soul belong to his pupil, he can teach him the truth without hiding anything, and then the students can also ask questions fearlessly. So there is enough scope for a student to think individually. The comparison between the age-old Gurukula system and present-day schooling is done by Vasu Master at several places in the novel. The school of Rig Vedic times is compared to Veeranaidu's PG Boys school where our protagonist worked for many years and retired.

Githa Hariharan's faith in the old system as well as her strong intentions to redeem the present-day schooling from all kinds of malpractices can be understood in this context. Her study of the old Gurukula system has indeed matched the detailing of

Taittiriyaopanishad quoted by Swami Bhaskarananda:

In ancient days to be educated, irrespective of their caste and creed a pupil lives in his teacher's home. He had to remain there till his education was finished. During that period one had to practice celibacy and imbibe noble ideas or virtues and get an education in which emphasis was put on developing the character. The guru was the only role model and spiritual guide for their lifetime. The teacher would teach not only the Vedas but also grammar, poetry, mathematics, morals, science, etc. This student-teacher relationship is not based on money. The teacher lived a very simple life devoid of luxury. Students were not a financial burden on the teacher as the students go to the neighbour's homes and beg for their food. The cows provided them with plenty of nutritious milk. The student, on the completion of his education, becomes a snataka, the graduate. After graduation, the students offer their teacher some gifts as a token of their gratitude. There was a farewell meeting; where the guru gave the final address to the students. (29-31)

Vasu Master does not come across such gurus or sishyas nowadays. He has only teachers who resort to giving corporal punishment. He has been associated with such teachers who use the cane very frequently at the PG Boys school of Veera Naidu. These people according to Vasu Master are the real makers of classroom rowdies. He feels that these teachers are spoiling the upcoming generations. So, unlike other teachers, Vasu master arranged some model trips where the 'pupils spoke to each other with no benches, readers or black boards between

them; when the teacher was the direct source of light.' (Hariharan 109) One can observe that his ideas and practices are somewhat similar to the ancient model of Gurukulas and very practical.

Panchatantra

For centuries, the Panchatantra tales have entertained and educated children and adults with morals. Some believe that they are as old as *The Rig-Veda*. There is also another story about these fables. According to it, these are stories Shiva told his consort Parvathi. There is another popular story that tells the historicity of Panchatantra. Long ago, in the Kingdom of Mahilaropya, there lived a king who had three unintelligent sons. The king was worried about the heir to the throne as his sons were incapable of governing. Then a skilled pundit, Vishnu Sharma convinced the king that he would teach the princes about kingly conduct through a series of stories, which would be more effective than the scriptures. Thus he compiled the collection in five volumes termed Panchatantra meant to serve as the guide for the princes to learn about kingly behaviour.

Panchatantra is a collection of stories written by a teacher to help instruct the different aspects of daily life illustrated by the five principles: Mitra Bhedha (The Loss of Friends), Mitra Laabha (Gaining Friends), Suhrudbheda (Causing

Dissension between Friends), Vighraha (Separation) and Sandhi (Union).

Githa Hariharan has created Vishnu Sharma's reincarnation in the chief protagonist character- Vasu master. The influence of Panchatantra on her is so great that she has grabbed every opportunity to retell the tales from it. She tells many Panchatantra-like stories to transform Mani, an unusual 12-year-old stupid student into a normal one. In her acknowledgements she proudly mentions: "I first came across the translation of 'niti' and its explanation in Aurthur W.Ryder's introduction to his translation of the Panchatantra..." (Hariharan 275)

Many stories she employed in the conversation between Vasu master and Mani are Panchatantra-like, where one finds that the characters are almost animals or insects that we come across in our daily life. Sometimes we feel that they shadow the characters in the novel. For instance, the often-repeated characters in Vasu Master's stories 'The Grey Mouse and Blue Bottle' are none other than Vasu Master himself and Mani respectively. The other things are easy to guess for any reader of the novel. They Cob Web as PG Boys School; Spider as Veera Naidu; Fire Fly as the father of Vasu Master and the Wingless Wasp as Gopu, the brother of Mani.

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