

## ***The Ghost of Vasu Master: Exploring the Self through Teacher-Taught Relationship***

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**Abstract:** *Teaching is not a passive activity, but the active one; it makes a character, and provides an identity. It is not only a profession for wages, but also as a means of self development. The Paper beautifully represents the psychological trauma of the protagonist and his journey from disintegrated self to a confident, hopeful and creative person. It tries to explore a new perspective into the novel, and observes the self-discovery of a teacher through teacher-taught relationship. Although many critics have observed the novel with the point of view of self-discovery, but no one of them explored the self discovery emphasizing or through teacher-taught relationship. It shows that Vasu Master develops an intimate relationship with Mani, based on faith and support. Mani's positive response during teaching, becomes a source of hope and inspiration in Vasu's otherwise empty life. The stories which Vasu tells to Mani, to encourage, teaching him the moral lesson of life; becomes a source of inspiration for 'Vasu' himself. At the end, when Mani starts drawing pictures representing the beginning of his education; Vasu seems refreshed and full of creative energy.*

*As described by many critics, the major theme of the novel is self discovery. The paper represents not only the self discovery, also explains the means of self discovery and its process; which we can see in the paper and the novel is ultimately the teacher-taught relationship. The paper shows this whole process in a truthfully.*

**Key Words:** *Identity, Self Discovery, Teaching, Education, Relationship*

Among the new generation of Indian novelists, Githa Hariharan, born in Coimbatore (1954), is a name to reckon with particularly in the context of postcolonial Indian writings. A writer as well as a social activist, Githa Hariharan's novels successfully represent the traditional values of Indian society integrated with modern thinking and consciousness. Her first novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1992) won the Commonwealth Writer's Prize in 1993. This was followed by *The Ghost of Vasu Master* (1994), *When Dreams Travel* (1999), *In Time of Siege* (2003) and *Fugitive Histories* (2009). She has also authored a collection of short stories – *The Art of Dying* (1993), *The Winning Team* (2004), *A Southern Harvest* (1993), and *Sorry Best Friend!* (2004). Her fictional world also includes newspaper articles and columns. Her experimentation with style, structure and theme differentiates her from other writers. The quest for identity and self is an important theme in Githa Hariharan's novels. This theme becomes more important in the present scenario. In her own words: "I see myself as a complex of fluctuating identities. I would not be able separate my life as a writer, citizen, feminist. Identity is something we re-invent on a daily basis." (Hariharan, Interview with Bageshree S.). In her novels she

represents social, psychological, educational and cultural problems in an effort to make the reader sensitive as well as sensible to these aspects.

*The Ghost of Vasu Master* (1994) is a well structured novel about a retired school master who after retirement from his routine teaching work, faces the biggest challenge of his life related to disintegrated self and 'teaching' and 'healing' of his reticent student named Mani. The relation between Vasu Master and Mani represents a new scenario about self discovery and teaching profession which is reflected in one of the three epigraphs at the beginning of the novel by Charaka, which means that: "The entire world is teacher to the intelligent and foe to the unintelligent." (Hariharan:1994:ix) The present novel, written at a time of social and cultural change in India as a result of onset of globalization and new technology, represents grappling with serious problem of identity crisis and is also deeply related to crucial issues like education, alienation, dismantling of joint families and old value systems. Education system, during this phase, was beginning to acquire a new form and function as it was beginning to get more and more privatised and career oriented.

The process of discovery of the self is identified with the journey of mind along with times and spaces in Githa Hariharan's *The Ghost of Vasu Master*. Human emotions are treated through the life of Vasu Master. The novel begins with the retirement of the protagonist Vasu Master, a recently retired teacher from P.G. Boys school, situated in a small town- Elipetti in India. He was a teacher of English Literature and Language for nearly forty years. The beginning of the novel can be considered as an experimental in the sense that normally the novels begin with the birth or beginning of the profession of the protagonist, but this novel starts with ending of the profession (Teaching) of Vasu Master. Yet, what is significant here is that the ending of this profession begins a new chapter in Vasu master's life by throwing up some of the most difficult questions related to the significance of life and teaching. Vasu Master retires but without a sense of fulfillment. He is constantly haunted with the question as to who and what he really is and what is the purpose of his life and existence. Even his teaching method reflects his psychological turmoils. Vasu Master teaches the same class for forty plus years and yet is unable to read the psyche of his students. He suffers from the feelings of nostalgia and is in search of self identity. He wakes up to find himself dead as he depicts his condition through the lines of Franz Kafka, who says, "A man didn't know that he existed, until one day he awoke to find himself dead" (24). However his retirement turns out to be a new beginning for him that paves the way to know and understand himself. Away from the familiar circumscribed world of school, Principal and classroom, Vasu Master begins to recollect incidents from the past and discovers, in his own unique way, the nature of teaching, teacher and student. The task related to teaching Mani that he takes up after his retirement becomes a process of exploration of his own self:

Perhaps no school, no teacher can assume responsibility for the learning that should stretch across the entire lifetime of the pupil. But then how do you weave a web that links and transfigures each line of experience, every point, into one learning? (26)

This is the real challenge that he faces at this time, as he starts giving tuitions to the four children after his retirement. One of them is a special child Mani, special in the sense that he is a complicate and problematic child. The boy is twelve years old when he comes to Vasu Master but “with it seems the brain of a six or seven-year-old” (10). Mani always remains silent and is apparently rude in his behavior. Mani is born as a normal child, walks and talks at the right time, then without any crisis, he becomes quieter, his silence is disturbing. His parents try many schools for him and many private tutors as well, but without any success. Finally Mani's father comes to Vasu Master for help. Vasu Master initially does not think very highly of Mani: “To date I had thought of Mani 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).

Living alone in a remote village of Elipetti, with his wife dead and two sons Vishnu and Venu living in Madras and in Bombay and with no healthy relationship with his colleagues, Vasu is frequently haunted with feelings of loneliness. He always feels nostalgic, remembering his childhood, his grandmother, his father and his wife. His split personality- both mentally and physically, adds to his miseries. He often says: “I am not sure what different pieces have to do with one another, I am digressing.” (17). A teacher with both internal and external conflicts can rarely cure the other people from their ignorance and illiteracy. As a man too, he seems to be a failure as he fails to maintain the relations and balance in his own life. Vasu starts teaching Mani to fulfill the emptiness, loneliness after retirement and to restore his title of ‘Vasu Master’ in the real sense. Vasu seeks Mani as his only companion, who can provide him past in words and the theoretical possibilities of future. Vasu feels that it’s the time for which he has been waiting all these years, for a new beginning. It is at this difficult and late stage of life when he tries to discover his ‘self’ through meaningful teaching and providing some kind of 'healing' for Mani as well as for his own self. Describing this challenge, he says:

But Mani was a puzzle; the kind you suspect has been given to you without all the pieces you need. And here was a puzzle I had to put together if I was to understand Mani, even in part; if I was to know what I was to him and he to me; and if I were to find myself before it was too late. (99)

Vasu’s views on education, teaching methods and ancient education system are vividly presented in the novel. He believes: “all of us are pupils and teachers, while there is life in each of us, we learn and we teach.” (28). Vasu Master’s efforts to teach Mani gradually go on to acquire the broadest meaning of ‘teaching.’ He is as much a psychologist as a pedagogue since he realizes that one has to “first become a judge, an ideologue, a priest and a doctor to be a teacher in real sense” (29).

The situation of Vasu Master and Mani is shown almost equal and parallel in the novel as both suffer- one from identity crisis and other from his problematic mind. Here starts the psychological journey of Vasu Master along with the teaching of Mani. Vasu now decides to

learn to understand him in human terms. He tries to build a bridge between them, to validate, conform, encourage, support, enhance. Yet, he is also worried as to what would happen 'if the bridge collapses'? At first Vasu Master is not much successful with Mani. "It had been two months, twenty-four lessons since we first met, and the voyage I had lovingly planned had not yet begun (45). But Vasu has faith in 'Rigveda' and believes that if the teacher's heart and soul belongs to his pupil, he can teach him the truth exactly as he knows it. Vasu decides to take Mani with him, on his weekly visits to library. Gradually, with the passage of time, he develops an intimate relationship with Mani and wins his trust. Vasu entertains fantasies about Mani's first words, and secretly hopes that they will be - Vasu Master! But still Vasu yearns for that cry of recognition. After teaching for some time, one day Vasu finds that the boy is interested in stories and this provides him with that necessary missing clue that he henceforth so imaginatively employs to gain access to Mani's heart and healing.

When I first filled up the silence between us with nonsense about animals and forest, his mask of defiant imperviousness slipped, he sat, chin cupped in both hands, elbows on the table watching my face.... This look was my first reward; It told me that Mani was with me; and so part of my story. (77)

So Vasu Master begins to weave a web of fables and parables and tales of undigested 'karma' with more real life images to inspire, to teach and to cure Mani of his unexplainable reticence and defiance. Through these fascinating and fantastic stories he travels into his own childhood and also into his innermost recesses of fear and weaknesses. He recounts scenes from his past, trying to understand the present. For these stories he was inspired by his grandmother, who had narrated him many stories in his childhood. Now he can realize the power and usefulness of these stories. So Vasu Master's process of self discovery is initiated and speeded up through the teaching of Mani, especially understanding and catering to him at a psychological level, where he tries to help Mani from whatever burdens the latter carries within. In the opinion of one of the critics namely Bahuguna:

This story also has a shade of *Taare Zameen Par* within it. Here Vasu Master uses the same philosophy while teaching Mani, when he realizes that Mani is impatient and irritated with pens, pencils and notebooks. And doing this he teaches us the true meaning and different perspectives of the words 'intellect' and 'love'. (1)

The stories told, are in short chapters and many of them are influenced by *Panchtantra* tales. Every story has dual meaning and relates to Vasu and Mani. The most important among these is the story of a Grey Mouse and a fly Blue Bottle, the story that moves parallel with the novel. As a matter of fact, Grey Mouse is the image of Vasu Master, almost confined to the mouse hole, always fearful to the dangers of the world outside. As Mahesh Kale points out: "the Grey Mouse is not a mouse, but a person in grey profession i.e. teaching." (200:2) The disabled fly Blue Bottle is the image of Mani. At the end of the story, Grey Mouse comes out of the mouse hole,

showing confidence upon himself and Blue Bottle, that he may still survive well; being disabled. It represents Vasu's journey to his ancestral village Nageswaram, along with Mani. Free from his confined mentality, Vasu Master enters in a new world of reality through his journey to Nageswaram. The sleeping python (the suppressed inactive personality of his mind) seems to be awake now.

As Mani now seems to understand a variety of entangled subjects presented as stories; symbols and narratives, one day at Nageswaram, Vasu asks him to draw pictures on the stories told by him to Mani. The process of education of Mani begins as he starts drawing the marks and pictures of those stories. Mani has allowed himself in an active role, which engages him in his own creation of myth and symbols on paper. In this manner Mani moves three steps closer to citizenship. The language itself has come into existence through these marks and pictures. Vasu Master seems to be full of hope and creative energy at this realisation and says, "come, Mani, let's create a new world. A better one." (262). Finally at his ancestral village Nageswaram, where he spent his childhood, he seems to discover his self which is free from all fears and inhibition: "When I woke up, I felt refreshed, even exhilarated. The day ahead was no longer full of empty time, or the fearful waiting of a lifelong fugitive" (265).

Vasu Master and his pupil, grow and learn and finally, having travelled successfully through their myriad confusions, frustrations and resentments, come to terms with the world around them and their own places in it. Githa Hariharan relates the whole process in a most imaginative and richly textured way, intimately exploring the complexities of the prevalent human conditions, specially related to lack of communication, understanding and compassion in human relationships. Vasu Master cures and educates Mani, though not completely, and Mani's education in real sense seems to have begun only now.

So *The Ghost of Vasu Master* becomes a treatise both on the process of teaching and learning the real meaning of life, self and at the same time, realizing one's relatedness to each other. It also goes on to establish that there are no fixed routes and that it is never too late to begin. One can, like Vasu master, begin whenever the awareness dawns: "All I had to do was begin all over again; learn afresh...teach Mani (and myself) how to live." (263) Geetha Hariharan, through the process of self-discovery of Vasu through Mani, has made a bold attempt to highlight the various knots and limitations, especially related to education system, that so often 'bind' our minds and throttle the growth and expansion of our consciousness.

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