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**Non-Violent Resistance Against Socio-Cultural Norms - A Study**  
**on the Short Story 'The Remains of the Feast' by Githa**  
**Hariharan**

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**ABSTRACT**

India is a composite nation of ancient history, and myriad amalgamations of religions, cultures, communities and languages. The people are bifurcated into minority and majority communities based on their religion, caste, creed. This country with a deeply rooted culture is further divided by social order, borne by its caste system with equally deeper roots. Furthermore, the primary authority of men over women and other genders is normalised, veiled in the social order, religious, socio-cultural norms, superstitions, and interpolated into society in the patriarchal domain. 'The Remains of the Feast', a short story written by Githa Hariharan that recounts the life of a deceased grandmother by her granddaughter. As she narrates the story, Ratna brings to light, the life of Rukmini - a ninety-year-old, Hindu, Brahmin widow

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who lived almost her entire life, fettered to the chains of religious, socio-cultural norms, patriarchy, tied to her lineage. She also divulges how Rukmini broke free from those chains in her dying days. Githa Hariharan holds a firm place in the world of contemporary Indian writers. She is well known for her novels, short stories, essays, newspaper articles, columns with revolutionary ideas. The scope of this study is to examine the social-cultural order in Brahmin food culture, widowhood and freedom for feminine sensuality and the different forms that non-violence assumes to resist these socio-cultural conventions.

### **KEYWORDS**

Githa Hariharan, 'The Remains Of The Feast', Non-violence, social order, socio-cultural norms, food culture, patriarchy, widowhood, feminine sensuality.

### **INTRODUCTION:**

'Non-violence'- a word intrinsically entwined with our Indian history reminds us not only of Gandhi who proclaimed it; but also, of a series of world leaders like Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, Leymah Gbowee, etc., who followed in his steps. Non-violence is a noble virtue that stands for "the use of peaceful means, not force, to bring about political or social change"

As we know, traditionally, non-violence has taken various forms in history: marches, vigils, leafletting, samizdat, magnitizdat, satyagraha, protest art, protest music and poetry, community education and consciousness-raising, lobbying, civil disobedience, boycotts or sanctions, tax resistance, legal/diplomatic, etc.

But, does the word, 'non-violence' facilitate only the aforementioned modes of passive resistance? Or could it render itself to means of resistance beyond the existing ways and our imagination?

We shall derive the answer to the foregoing questions, by taking a look at a quote by Gandhi and then relating it to Rukmini.

"Non-violence is the greatest and most active force in the world. One cannot be passively non-violent... One person who can express ahimsa in life exercises a force superior to all the forces of brutality." (I-63)

In other words, it means that non-violence is not a passive force rather an active force superior to all other brutal forces. Going by this, we could call Rukmini, a 'woman of action' as she refuted the social-cultural norms toward the end of her life while she was bed-ridden with throat cancer. She wielded non-violence as a weapon to cut down the invisible ties that tied her down to the flippant ropes of religion, minority, caste, etc.

"So, we began a strange partnership, my great grandmother and I. I smuggled cakes and ice creams, biscuits and samosas, made by the non-Brahmin widow who had never eaten anything but pure, home-cooked food for almost a century." (pg.284)

Throughout the short story, Non-violence takes shape in unusual forms of her once forbidden desires like eating, grooming, expressing feminine sensuality as she is overcome by a sudden streak of rebellion. To a cynical eye, her attitude would appear to be one last act of defiance before death, but a refined eye free from bias could uncover the truth of self-reclamation.

#### **NON-VIOLENT RESISTANCE AGAINST FOOD CULTURE**

"If anybody said that I should die if I did not take beef-tea or mutton, even on medical advice, I would prefer death. That is the basis of my vegetarianism."

— Mahatma Gandhi to the London Vegetarian Society on November 20, 1931.

The above words were uttered by Gandhi. However, the usage of personal pronouns clarifies that vegetarianism is his personal preference; a choice of goodwill that he made at his discretion. It was not forced upon him.

On the other hand, there is an extensive degree of normalised suppression in several aspects of Indian culture. Food culture is just one of them, particularly in a Brahmin household, as caste hierarchy is mostly influenced by the purity of occupation and diet. In a caste society, to achieve purity of body and spirit, it is necessary to be a vegetarian and religious simultaneously.

“A month later, we had got used to her new unexpected inappropriate demands. She had tasted,

by now, lemon tarts, garlic, three types of aerated drinks, fruit cake laced with brandy, bhel-puri from the fly-infested bazaar nearby.” (pg. 285)

"Bring me peanuts with chilli powder from the corner shop. Onion and green chilli bondas deep-fried in oil." (pg.286)

Rukmini's demand for oily, greasy street food is not a typical craving for unhealthy junk food. Onion and garlic are considered Tamasic foods producing sedative effects on the mind and the body, that has been linked to invoking carnal energies in the body. Thus, these vegetables despite their nutritional value are excluded from the Brahmin food culture. Therefore, Rukmini's demand for fast food and edibles from roadside shops insinuates recuperating her rightful sexual appetite.

"Those small cakes you got from the Christian shop that day. Do they have eggs in them?" (pg.284)

“Do they?” she persisted. ‘Will you,’ and her eyes narrowed with cunning, ‘will you get one for me?’” (pg. 284)

“No, no I don't want water, I don't want juice.’

‘I'll tell you what I want,’ she whined. ‘Get me a glass of that brown drink Ratna bought in the bottle.’ (pg. 285)

Initially, the late-night secret rendezvous between the grandmother and granddaughter could be mistaken for a mere gratification of suppressed cravings of a ninety-year-old woman. Nevertheless, when the binge eating of strictly prohibited food items like sweets, oily pastry, soft drinks, confined only to the bedroom extends into the expanse of the living room unafraid of the audience; It becomes clear that Rukmini's overeating is not coincidental but an act with ulterior intentions. This theory strengthens further, as her request for forbidden pastry, soft drinks, street food turns into licit demand.

“Lots and lots of eggs,” I would say, wanting her to hurry up and put it in her mouth. “And the bakery is owned by a Christian. I think he hires Muslim cooks too.” (pg. 284)

This purposeful eating of Rukmini with oddly specific pre-requisites concerning the religious orientation of the shopkeeper is an embodiment of non-violence which she utilizes to escape from another religious-cultural incarceration designed to maintain Brahmin social order.

“It burns, it burns”, she would yell then, but she pursed her lips tightly together when my mother spooned a thin gruel into her mouth. “No, no,” she screamed deliriously. “Get me something from the bazaar. Raw onions. Fried bread. Chickens and goats.” (pg. 285)

Rukmini's demands become increasingly intense, compulsive to the point of delusion, as her throat cancer grew monstrously, and she approached death. This expresses her suppressed rage as well as her desperation to avenge her deprived self. As a result, Rukmini represents millions of other women who have had their taste buds shackled by caste, society, and ritual.

### **NON-VIOLENT RESISTANCE AGAINST WIDOWHOOD**

Widowhood is yet another taboo in the Indian culture that imposes even more restrictions upon Indian women, especially upon Brahmin women. After the death of their spouses, women are expected to give up earthly pleasures and devote their lives to worship. These ladies are frequently shunned by society and seen as cursed. Hindu widows are thought to bring bad luck to others if they participate in any auspicious festivals. Widows are expected to dress only in white, and to stay away from colourful attires; especially the colour red, which would allow women to exude their feminine sensuality. Moreover, they are kept away from red in particular as it is an auspicious colour in Indian culture. In Hindu mythology, red is associated with the revered goddess Durga. The colour symbolizes purity and fertility. Thus, it is the preferred colour for a bride's garments.

"And she was already a widow then, my father was the head of the household. How could he, a 14-year-old boy, take the responsibility?" (pg. 283)

In the patriarchal society, widowhood fell upon Rukmini at an early age; social norms sidelined her; leaving the heavy responsibilities of a family head to rest on the shoulders of her indecisive fourteen-year-old son. He could not be faulted for overlooking the severity of his mother's grave illness at a tender age, nor could he be blamed for not addressing her naivety in heeding

relatives' advice and avoiding a life-saving surgery.

However, on her death bed, Rukmini reclaims the feminine pleasures of life taken away from her by widowhood.

### **FREEDOM OF FEMININE SENSUALITY**

"'Bring me a red sari,' she screamed. 'A red one with a big wide border of gold.' And her voice cracked..." (pg. 286)

"'Bring me your eyebrow tweezers,' I heard her say. 'Bring me that hair-removing cream. I have a moustache and I don't want to be an ugly old woman.'" (pg. 286)

Rukmini has experienced the bitterness of widowhood for seventy-six years at the age of ninety, in her bedridden malignant state. She made one final attempt to oppose the benighted life that cultural conventions had forced on her during her long, placid existence, just before her last moments. As her non-violent resistance takes the mould of red sari, eye-brow tweezers, hair-removal cream it brandishes the socio-cultural notions. She reclaims the freedom to feel and express her feminine sensuality.

### **CONCLUSION**

This paper examines the role of non-violence in resisting the socio-cultural norms ingrained in food culture, widowhood, freedom for feminine sensuality. By delving into the finer points of social order in Brahmin food cultures, cultural ramifications of widowhood and their impact on Rukmini's life.

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