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Teacher's Dilemma In Githa Hariharan's Novels *The Ghosts of Vasu Master and In Times of Siege*

G. Kayal Vizhi, M.A., M.Phil.



Githa Hariharan

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The Teachers in the Novel

The role of the teacher is often formal and ongoing. Teaching is a social process and to define it is very difficult, because teaching is influenced by the political and social backgrounds of the country. In Githa Hariharan's novels *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* and *In Times of Siege*, the central characters Vasu Master and Shiv Murthy play the roles of teachers. *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* begins with the retirement of Vasu Master. Haunted with the question "Who am I?" he is not sure about himself, knowing not what he is and what he has to do. As his professional career comes to an end, he begins to realize that he was a teacher. However, his retirement starts a new beginning for him, to know himself. It becomes a search for his own identity.



Tales Told by the Teacher

The novel is filled with the tales told by Vasu and their eloquence and meaning lead the way to understanding the teacher. Every tale has a parabolic significance, and it is not directly stated. This is the peculiarity of the novel. Vasu Master's memories haunt him like ghosts. His abnormality was that he was seeing the ghosts of his father, wife, grandmother and many others. Since he leads his life in isolation, these ghosts disturb him. Being a person of split personality, mentally and physically, he was a problem to himself. He often says, "I am not sure what different pieces have to do with one another, I am digressing" (*GVM 17*). As a man he seems to be a failure as he fails to maintain relationship, and as a teacher after retirement he faces frustration.

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Process of Self-Discovery

The process of Vasu Master's self-discovery is speeded up by the arrival of Mani. At first, Vasu thought that there could be no change in Mani. This pessimistic approach shows that the teachers are not honest in their profession and are not ready to face the modern challenges and this is perhaps because of their individual problems. In a counselling session, it is Vasu who suggests that Mani should be admitted somewhere in a good school. This is indicative of Vasu's own limitations and ignorance. But Vasu Master after his tutoring of Mani realizes that there are changes possible and Mani is better than he had ever expected. A teacher like Vasu teaches the same class for forty plus years and is unable to read the psyche of his students. It shows that he lacks the knowledge of educational psychology. He himself accepts, "I had spent a lifetime with boys like these and I still had to imagine what went on in their heads" (*GVM 2*).

A Caricature of a Teacher

Vasu is a caricature of a teacher in the Indian education system. It is strangely antithetical that he was a teacher but unfortunately he wasn't a student. He started learning when the process of actual teaching ended. Vasu was a teacher of traditional ideology. He was also the result of social circumstances. Everywhere in the novel, the reader has a glimpse of a social system as a controlling force. Vasu can be seen as a man versus a teacher who is not sure of his role as a teacher, his role as a father and a member of society.

A Wanderer in the Unreal World

Vasu, an unrestrained wanderer in the unreal world, is the protagonist of the novel. Vasu is not a real teacher of flesh and blood; he was made by the system and he played the role. As a teacher, Vasu is a failure but still he is an advocate of 'standard' and 'class'. The education system and such teachers have broken the very back-bone of the purpose of education. Vasu's interaction with 'standard six B' clearly puts the fact before readers. He never cared about the

reactions and the results were well deserved. Here, the education system is criticized. The grey mouse is not a mouse but a person in that grey profession i.e. the teacher. Vasu is supposed to be a teacher, but he is not a teacher at all. It is true that there is nothing to call as suspense to surprise the readers, to get them shocked, in the course of the novel even the readers are forced into some introspection and be a part of the inevitable journey to self-discovery.

Contemporary Historiography and Hotly Debated Issues

In Times of Siege revolves around the story of Shiv Murthy, a history professor, who specializes in ancient Indian history and is accused of falsifying history by a group of Hindu nationalists. By telling the story of a history professor, Hariharan deals with the subject of contemporary historiography and discusses its key issues. Her main argument is centred on the nationalist re-writings of history and its propagandistic usage. Showing that national identity is per se mythical and imagined, Hariharan simultaneously engages with the exclusions affected by nationalist ideology.



Ambiguous and Complex Picture of Basava, the Founder of Veerashaivism

In Shiv's account, the saint-like figure of Basava is rendered more ambiguous and thus more complex. Certainly, Shiv's historical essay is full of 'lapses', i.e., parts that lend themselves to misinterpretation. In Shiv's view, history is seen as a discipline that asks questions rather than

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provide answers. As historiography is the result of the interpretation of sources, among them literary ones, Shiv makes the attempt to reconstruct Basava's life. The novel claims that historiography is a highly problematic field, but it also questions how public opinion is manipulated and hegemonic cultural images are disseminated. The role of public institutions and the media is shown and critically commented on by Hariharan.

Professor's for Mythical Heroism

The historical text, which is produced by Shiv's reinterpretations of the Basava story, thus becomes a source and resource for political agency in the present. There are two instances in which inter-textual references become tangible: first, Shiv's obsession with Basava surpasses a purely academic interest and thus hints at Shiv's hidden desire to aspire to such mythical heroism. Secondly, Shiv's father was a fighter for Indian independence and thus another heroic model, which makes Shiv feel second-rate. Shiv's reflections on Basava illustrate the discrepancy between mythical heroism and contemporary middle-class mediocrity.

A Typical Anti-Hero

Shiv is a typical anti-hero, his public fall from grace triggers a redefinition of Shiv's stance and political position in the contested field of contemporary communal politics. As he makes a silent promise to his young friend Meena, "[a] promise to stand firm, to resist giving up" (*TS 180*), it becomes clear that Shiv will desist from falling back into political apathy. It is of course no coincidence that Hariharan emphasises two main points concerning gender and class in her novel. First, the fact that even an average middle-class person can stand up to the threat posed by the Hindu Right; and second, the role of women in political debate. In contrast to Shiv's anti-heroic stance, Rekha (Shiv's wife) and Meena take up a position of powerful resistance, if not dominance:

Like Rekha, Meena names things with ferocious certainty. Communalist fundamentalist, these women warriors seem to know exactly which cities they want to raze to the ground, which they want to raise in their place. (*TS 60*)

Influence of Women

Thus Shiv's transformation should be considered in relation to his utter mediocrity as well as to the role of women in his life. Meena undoubtedly introduces politics via her involvement as a student activist to Shiv's heretofore uneventful middle-class way of life. Moreover, she is shown to assist in Shiv's growing into the mould of a politically active intellectual. Hariharan creates a configuration through the choice of her two main characters, Shiv Murthy and Meena, which she sets in relation to the controversy caused by his history lesson.

Two Major Points: Post-retirement Self-definition and Politics-inspired Rewriting of History

The Ghosts of Vasu Master fits into the mould of the quest novel in which the protagonist Vasu is seeking self-definition during the post-retirement period. A peculiar lyrical charm is evident in this effort to come to a humane understanding of life and to recognize the confusing impulses to human action philosophically. The novel also presents a reassessment of the hollowness of the contemporary system of education and the limitations imposed by confining it to the prescribed texts.

In *In Times of Siege* Hariharan captures vividly the Hindutva-inspired party attempts at rewriting of history which runs counter to their ideologies. She asserts that any attempt to homogenize history must be opposed as one should not yield to institutional pressure and political groups. This study offers further scope for analyzing the intentions, challenges and limitations of teachers in their defined roles.

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