CHAPTER III
ASSERTIVE EFFORTS FOR CO-EXISTENCE

In the words of Chandra Talpade Mohanty:

If the struggle for a just society is seen in terms of move from powerlessness to power for women as a group, and this is the implication in feminist discourse that structures sexual difference in terms of the division between the sexes, then the new society would be structurally identical to the existing organization of power relations, constituting itself as a simple inversion of what exists.  

The situation quoted above happens when men and women are seen as different categories and the struggle is limited only between the two groups: powerless versus possessing power. No assertive efforts to seek a just society can be made in these conditions if the motives are filled with selfish purposes. If one seeks a just society then all the efforts of human beings should be concentrated to achieve the aim instead of doing injustice to anyone. Driving home the other serious problems of human beings that are impediments on the way of achieving a just society, Githa Hariharan suggests in her writings how the assertive efforts for co-existence on the part of human beings can bring fruitful results. Whether it is the way we impart education to our students or the field of politics, only assertive efforts can help us to serve the society in a progressive way. She, in her second novel *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* and fourth novel *In Times of Siege*, does not concentrate much on the theme of female oppression. She chooses male protagonists to describe the shades of life in both these novels and concentrates on the universal efforts of co-existence. To convey her outlook on the prevailing problems in India, she not only elaborates the events but also suggests the cause of the problems.

*The Ghosts of Vasu Master* narrates the story of a retired teacher from P.G. Boys’ School, Elipettai. At farewell he gets a diary as a present from the students in which he makes notes of his thoughts about teaching. How one feels during the slack after getting the retirement from the busy routine of his life’s work is described well by the writer. It becomes very difficult for him to spend the time after the retirement. Now he has enough time to notice the insistent cawing of the crow, the spider making the cobwebs, the mouse and its hole. Vasu feels that as a retired teacher, he must learn some new tricks of survival. He must engage himself in some fertile activity to avoid falling into the hell of tediousness. There is a well-established proverb that standing pools gather moss. A man always needs something new in life, some curiosity to
move on. Githa Hariharan, with the sinuous moves of memory of Vasu master, weaves a remarkable story. The story concentrates on the rediscovery of the lost art of living by Vasu Master. The other characters except the physical presence of Mani are introduced to the reader through the memory of Vasu Master. The novel is located in a small town in the south of India. It presents a medley of fables, Ayurveda, ghosts and knowledge of different aspects to reveal reality.

M.K. Naik speaks about *The Ghosts of Vasu Master*:

Hariharan’s fascination with tales assumes more importance in her successive .... Her second novel, *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* (1994), is entirely different from her woman-centered first novel or her short stories *The Art of Dying* (1993). The protagonist is a retired school teacher (‘master’). Vasu has no company but his memories; of his dead wife, his two sons who live in another town, his father who was an Ayurveda, his dead grandmother who gave food and cooking supreme importance, and Veera Naidu, the principal of the school. The only physical presence in his life is Mani, a mentally handicapped young boy, whom no one can control or teach. Vasu Master’s reminiscences are interspersed with his “classes” with Mani, whom he tries to teach through drawings and stories. Vasu’s concern with sickness and health is as important as his fascination with the power of stories.2

After retirement, Vasu gets a challenge to teach a student who is somewhat mentally challenged. It is the most complicated case for him. This second half of his teaching career is on a far more ambitious scale than the first one. The boy, Mani, is of twelve years of age but has the brain of a six or a seven year old.

Vasu Master, patient, mild and soft spoken as described by Veera Naidu, tries his best to teach Mani from books, and the old teaching methods with which he used to teach the boys of 6th class. After trying hard to teach him, he finds a thing that seems to keep him clutched to stories. The old teaching methods are to be discarded to find new ways to heal the mind and explore alternative systems of teaching. In the beginning of the novel, three epigraphs are prefaced throwing light on the nature of knowledge. The first is from Charaka describing that intelligent can learn from the entire world. The second one is from Shakespeare which speaks that all cannot be masters and all masters cannot be truly followed. The third one is from Gandhi which speaks ‘I have nothing new to teach the world. Truth and non-violence are as old as the hills.’ All the three statements verify the existence of knowledge. The only thing needed is to mend it to solve one’s purpose. Though earlier in school Vasu Master was not interested much in stories and their power, but now he realizes their importance. To play the role of a story teller Vasu
Master feels that he must unite in himself the roles of patriarch and mother. He starts telling fables. His fables resemble the fables of *Panch Tantra*. In one of Vasu’s early fables, mouse asks a wise snake as to how to become a teacher. The snake replies that one has to first become a judge, an ideologue, a priest and a doctor and the most difficult part is that one must grow a womb that nurtures and delivers. After knowing the answer the mouse goes home and asks her mother if she can teach him to be a mother. The novel thus is concerned with the well being on all levels which includes soul, mind and body.

Human emotions are articulately expressed through the life of Vasu master. In the process of teaching Mani about the value of life, he actually relives his own memories, his childhood, his adolescence, his marriage and the birth of his sons. In his childhood memories, he recalls the endless quotations from Shakespeare recited by his father, his grandmother’s wisdom chutneys which can transform a man into better human being, his stomach and its vicissitudes, the rasayanam. His adolescence makes him remind of the period, in which he had a huge crush on a foreign model on a pinup calendar. He remembers:

> I have forgotten what the starlet was called. Rita or Mona, something like that, something a little foreign. The name is unimportant. What mattered was that Rita-Mona was dressed as an apsara- the kind who descends to earth now and then for the sole purpose of distracting young (and old) hermits.³

The wrong representation of women in print and electronic media can cause serious harm to the younger generation. Vasu quite vividly remembers that calendar:

> Rita-Mona wore an emerald-green sequinned cloth round her billowy breasts, and an equally dazzling purple garment round her hips. Both strips were tied so tightly that her torso was a series of little wavy bulges. Her neck, shoulders and stomach were different colour from her face and arms. Their exotic pink veiled the bare skin beneath. She had lush eyebrows that were a startling jet-black. They curved like wings... Her hypnotic, piercing look, and the breasts which swelled out of the calendar to smother me, were the only sights in the world which moved me to the point of constipation (p.17).

Gittha Hariharan brings into light the fact that such representation of woman as merely an object of lust is distortion of the real image of woman. It ignores the real virtues of a woman and also creates a bad influence on the innocent minds. To sift the good from the bad is the duty of the society as well as of the individual so that steps can be taken to cure the society from such diseases. Jayaprakash A. Shinde writes:

> As Vasu Master, trained in the traditional Indian male psyche, is the narrator, the novelist is restrained from openly advocating woman’s cause. But she does so implicitly,
through Vasu Master's version of his 'feminine ghosts' and their relationships. She makes the reader realize woman's subordinate, inferior position in family and society and the need of the hour to confer on her the rightful, equal, independent status that would act as an impetus to her development as an individual and a social being. Chaman Nahal defines 'feminism' as 'a mode of existence in which the woman is free of the dependence syndrome'. Githa Hariharan shows how dependence on man causes abnegation of woman's personal self and disruption of normal life. It may be said that she grabs the 'male space' to fill it with female purpose.

In the year of Rita-Mona, there was panchangam and endless quotations of Shakespeare which allowed Vasu more room for interpretation. The past is used in the story to understand the present. Vasu's father, who was an ayurved, is no more. He remembers his father saying that a healer is a teacher who teaches how to live.

A person is three things at a time. To reach him, educate him, all three—his body, his self and his social involvement—must be touched. This is why an ayurvedic diagnostic examination investigates the seeker's (or the patient's) digestive power; the emotional and social spheres which encase him; the peculiarities of the land in which he grew up, and where he contracted his disease; and the distinguishing disease patterns of that land (p.178).

Vasu remembers his cousin Shakuntala who is a frail, 20 years old and has been married a year back. The wall of silence has surrounded Shakuntala. His father has talked to her alone several hours, cooks her food himself and does everything to cure her. He gives her medicines but finds himself unable to improve the social conditions in which Shakuntla has been living. His grandmother knows that the girl is put to work by her in-laws, which is the cause of the disease but now she does not have the time to confront the cause. Pale and bloodless she dies about six months after her return to her husband's family. The pathetic condition of a woman is made implicit by Githa Hariharan. She has no courage to revolt against the conditions in which she is put in. The vicissitudes of married life is the cause of her oppression and this oppression takes her life. Vasu's father does assertive efforts to heal her but to no effect.

Hariharan chooses the male protagonist to describe the feelings of caring, nurturing, dreams and emotional sensitivity which lie undiscovered in the males hidden from the society. The qualities often associated with a woman are not much explored as far as a male is concerned and Hariharan deals with an expert brush. Jasbir Jain writes:

Hariharan's *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* once again chooses a male protagonist because a woman would not have filled the requirement. The freedom and independence which Vasu can exercise, the dreams of making the speech in the function in his honour, the
manner in which he refuses to read his sons’ letters—none of these would have been possible in the small town setting which allows cultural contexts to emerge clearly. A different setting with a woman narrator would have been a different book. The choice of the male voice or consciousness is thus, first of all, motivated by what the writer has set out to do which, in this novel, is to emphasize the quality of nurturing. Social and cultural contexts, and defined gender roles have dictated the choice.

There are rare moments of women’s discourse in the novel. Vasu Master uses the term ‘my feminine ghosts’ (p. 131) for Mangala, Jameela and the real ghosts from the stories of Mangala. Her mother and grandmother can also be included in his list of ‘feminine’ ghosts. Each story has its own way of offering Vasu a chance to understand life in a more explicit way. He acts as a teacher, a psychologist and a mother who tries his best to help Mani to get himself free from all the problems he carries within. This thoughtful novel is divided into short chapters.

In the life of Vasu Master, his grandmother, his mother, his wife Mangala and her friend Jameela play important roles. His grandmother is an old thin shriveled woman ‘whose flesh hung over her sharp edged bones’ (p. 34). She is a difficult opponent of his father and the first love of Vasu. She has full control over the kitchen with a basketful of chillies and is of the belief that “food shaped, controlled and modified the mind” (p. 34). Chilly, as the special ingredient in her kitchen, is grown by her in the backyard of the kitchen. He recalls that his father and grandmother treat food as the foundation of our temperament. Vasu recalling the wisdom chutneys of her grandmother also recalls her skill of daily menu.

The daily menu was an exercise of her skills. If I translate it into the necessities of the literature I have taught, I would say our lunches and dinners were her journals, her exercises in creative writing measured against some classical touchstones. The wisdom chutneys were, on the other hand, great imaginative leaps: having practiced the routine, more prosaic aspects of her profession, the occasional wisdom chutneys was the result: the end, the masterpiece, soaring into the realm of pure fantasy (p. 35).

The grandmother is quite confident of the ingredients and measures whereas the chutnies that Vasu makes is flavoured. Though she is not educated, yet she has the practical knowledge of the life and its complexities. Vasu, as an expert in the practicalities of life, finds himself unable to touch the heights of his grandmother’s experience. Hariharan thus digs at the social structure which does not allow negotiating reality. And she beautifully conveys how individual’s attempts continue to weigh against odds.

Man is not generally susceptible to change and if change occurs it is not taken positively and easily. It is taken as an encroachment upon the rights of dominating person and community.
It is not necessary that in a family only the male has to be dominating. Had it been so the term henpecked would not have been coined and a person under the dominance of his wife would not be jeered at. Generally people get involved in trifles and thus are not able to maintain the harmony of the first unit, family and the society.

The grandmother in Vasu’s memory is ‘tiger’s heart wrapped in a woman’s hide’ (p. 227). She always fills the secretive air about her concoctions ‘with pointless old-woman bullying’ (p. 110) as wisdom has a secretive nature to her. She believes in giving punishment though the grade of punishment is different. Once when Vasu makes a mess of her chutney, She lifts him ‘by the ear, a good inch or two off the floor’ (p.48) and marches ‘to my father’s room, her hand never letting go of my ear’ (p.48). But soon she is filled with remorse and calls Vasu ‘my Nuisance-Krishna’ (p.49). She also tells him a story of a little boy who lives in a forest with a wise strong old woman. The old woman works hard all day. The boy bears a whim that the forest is full of dangers. The old woman tries to make him understand that there are no wild animals in the forest but the boy does not believe her. The reason being;

Sure enough, overfed with stories, his head and stomach and everything else clogged with tiger-stories and lion-stories, the boy began to see shiny yellow eyes staring at him every night. At first they only looked in at him from the window of their hut. But as his stories got wilder, more difficult to digest, the animals also became bolder (p.51).

One night, a tiger enters into the hut. The boy runs out of the hut calling for the old woman who has been sleeping soundly. He jumps into the river. As he does not know how to swim, he drowns. In reality there was no tiger but only the whims in the mind of the boy. Vasu’s grandmother is as wise woman as the old woman in the story. The recipes are the symbol of wisdom for her. Even on her death bed she leaves with Vasu a recipe made of mint leaves and bitter gourds as a symbol of mixture of joys and sorrows in life. The wisdom given by her grandmother proves productive for Vasu in later life. When he cooks first meal for Mani he puts aside the chillies and adds large spoonfuls of sugar. Mani has been deprived of kind words and thus needs more sugar than the bitterness of chillies.

It was Vasu’s grandmother who teaches him to face his fear of ghosts. In an Indian family, grandmother is often caring and protective towards her grandchildren. His grandmother, though illiterate, does not believe in ghosts. She encourages him to confront his fear. In later life, facing alone the dreariness of life, Vasu hears her saying:
What is a ghost, Nuisance? Nothing but a part of you that's no longer in control. A little pocket of garbage in your mind that rots and begins to stink. So-what do you do? Take a big broom and sweep it out, making sure you don't leave anything behind (p. 138).

The grandmother has been a part of history. She has contributed her precious possessions and so finds mention. On Gandhi's appeals, she parted with her four worn bangles to save the country from the Britishers.

This was my first inkling that my grandmother too had in some diluted way been part of history. She was on its outermost circle, a mere peripheral ripple, but her nose and ears had always been sharp and close to the ground. Even in the chaste and claustrophobic enclosure of her widowed life in Nagaswaram, she had felt the need for a new prophet; a leader. And she had responded to this need and looked about in her circumscribed existence for such a person. Though I am no longer sure she actually referred to Gandhi, though I am no longer sure of dates, whether she was alive or dead before Gandhi's time I would like to think she had heard of Gandhi from my father; even been moved by his appeals to part with her four worn bangles (pp. 176-177).

The grandmother's nationalism is mingled with truth, tolerance and spiritual tradition. She, like many Indian women, has sacrificed the treasure of her house for the welfare of the nation. Many women like Vasu's grandmother sacrificed the most precious possessions to achieve the freedom and contributed the way they could do for the noble cause.

Vasu remembers his father and grandmother together as two rivals on a lush green battlefield. Both have their own space in the garden outside to grow the crop of their own wish. His father used to grow the medicinal plants and herbal bushes and his grandmother used to grow plebeian vegetables. Though both do positive efforts in their own way but they have the common aim to take care of the health of Vasu. He recalls:

Both watched over every meal I ate; though my grandmother naturally had the advantage here, the kitchen being her undisputed dominion. (Every healer must know how to cook, my father liked to say. But if his quotations in Shakespeare's English kept his mother out of the front room, she had her own homegrown weapons to keep him out of the kitchen) (p. 219).

Vasu feels of his grandmother as caring, bullying and dominating at the same time. For an Indian woman, her husband is the first and the last guru in her life but his grandmother finds it difficult to do so as he remembers:

Like so many of us, my grandmother discovered a prophet of sorts after she had discarded others by trial and error. Inevitably, her first guru was her husband. As a good wife, a respectable woman, he should have also been the last. But she obviously discovered his shortcomings quickly; and even years after his death, she would speak of
him with an irreverent amusement, as if he had been a rather stupid and unimaginative child she had briefly known (p. 174).

It is not possible to decide who is superior and infallible on the basis of gender. In the past, men, owing to more exposure in relations, were considered to be more intelligent than women. So they were considered to be the first and last ‘guru’ of their wives. But they too had their shortcomings. As grandmother is intelligent enough to find the shortcomings of her husband, she considers him to be no more than a child. She says to Vasu once:

What is a husband, Vasu? Just a hungry stomach and a few other things, never mind what. But all equally greedy, swallowing like a big red swollen mouth, then chewing and belching (p. 174)

Grandmother does not accept her husband blindly. She is fearless and different from the other female characters portrayed in the novel. Though her husband serves the British rulers yet she sacrifices her ornaments for the nationalist cause. Her formula for life, to have some jaggery after eating a hasty meal of chillies, to make a recipe by blending mint and bitter gourd, reveals her true attitude towards life. To her life is a blending of sweet and bitter experiences. A balance is needed to keep the life going on. With her independent thinking, she makes a position in the mind of the reader.

Vasu’s mother dies when he is still a little boy in the novel. The memory of his mother is ‘irretrievably mixed’ (p. 31). His mother is the sixth daughter of the family, the unwanted one as the family needs a son. The family does not show any interest in spending money on the naming ceremony for one more girl. Therefore, she remains unnamed for a year until the sweeper, who collects the cow-dung, does it. She also tries to comfort the sullen and silent mistress by saying:

She could have been born with something else down there, she admitted. That would have been best, of course. Life would have been easier with a little extra bit of flesh, just a few inches. But never mind, she can still be the Lakshmi of her husband’s house (p. 31).

Vasu’s mother throws light on the bitter reality that her life could become easier if she were a boy. This reveals the psyche of millions of stereotyped traditional Indian woman. In India, an important mechanism of male dominance is the spread of gender ideology through sanctions of religious texts and their gender-selective interpretation by the leaders. Their attitude towards the difference has its roots in social, religious and cultural generalizations. Peter Barry while discussing feminist criticism says:
Thus, the argument runs, the notion of penis envy need not be taken as simply concerning the male physical organ itself (what might have been Freud's intentions), but as concerning that organ as an emblem of social power and the advantages which go with it.6

Vasu's mother gets the name 'Lakshmi', a name fit for a goddess. The social structure of an Indian society makes the girl realize her confined space in the society. 'The baby had cried hesitantly, as if she knew an apology was expected of her' (p. 32). She is timid and has a worrying and troubled childhood. Vasu Master says about his mother, “She would have been a timid, worrying little thing, nagging, pestering like a high-pitched mosquito. She did not learn how to bite though” (p.32). In the traditional Indian society, the position of woman is always perceived in relation to man. From birth onwards and at every stage of life, she is dependent on him. They are expected to be married off and settle down in life. In these circumstances it is not possible to have high ambitions.

Her ambitions were on a lower scale-escaping her husband’s unpredictable explosions of temper, surviving her mother-in-law’s jealous rule of the household, and above all, keeping the house, and everyone in it, clean, pure and unpolluted (p. 32).

After marriage a woman is expected to attend all the daily chores and also to lower her voice so that others may not hear it. Imposing another condition to remain silent or to lower her voice, she is conditioned to feel inferior. Throught her life she never dares to raise her voice.

She had never exchanged more than six words with our neighbours on either side, but she was obsessed with them. They can hear, they can hear, she was always whispering. Lower your voice, shut the door. Bathe and change your clothes before going out (p. 32).

Working for the welfare of the family and to keep the honour of the family, her own identity has been lost somewhere. After giving birth to the heir of the family, Lakshmi silently leaves the world. Throughout her life, she remains devoid of the power that can be attained through knowledge.

In a society where women are termed as Sarswati, the goddess of knowledge and Lakshami, the goddess of wealth are in reality devoid of both economic rights and the right of education. One of the main reasons why she remained through her life incapable to speak of her problems is the lack of education, wealth and the inferiority complex that is sown in her since her birth. In the novel, Hariharan writes: “It was not surprising then that Lakshmi had melted away into the shades of this loud tyrannical household. She lived just long enough to give my father
his heir, and obviously even that was a shoddy job” (p.32). She is the character who has accepted the established norms of the society and does not revolt the existing system which denies the freedom that can nourish the self. Jayaprakash A. Shinde writes in this regard:

According to Adler, the sense of helplessness in child is exaggerated in two ways: (1) Unsuitable treatment and unfortunate environment and (2) Organ inferiority. In the case of Vasu Master’s mother it is the unfortunate environment—‘the sixth daughter’ and also the unsuitable treatment by the parents, the husband and his kin that leads to the aggravated sense of inferiority. Adler spoke of three responses: (1) Successful compensation, (2) Defeat or some form of retreat and (3) Compromise. Lakshmi failed to compensate for her feeling of inferiority and meekly succumb to the pressures of the environment. Githa Hariharan is critical of the immediate constraints on woman’s individual development— the constraints of domestic life and dominating patriarchy.7

Patriarchal ideology has created social norms and these norms are supported by patriarchal social structure, what seeks to aggravate the marginalization of women. This marginalization starts from the very first unit of the society. Rajeswari Sunder Rajan discussing Feminism says:

For it is within the family that girl-children experience their first feelings of rejection or discrimination on account of their sex, where they may be required to perform hard domestic labour, denied the freedom to come and go, married off, frequently without their consent and on payment of dowry, and then subjected to the vicissitudes of married life, which would include harassment by in-laws, marital discord, unwanted pregnancies, domestic drudgery, and the continuing cycle of the burden of girl-children of their own.8

Woman as in the case of Vasu’s mother is a suffering and sacrificing lot and that face of society where dual moral standards, to which women are subjected, can be deciphered. She is a picture of inherent woes of womanhood. She is socially and culturally conditioned to accept her lot as it is.

Vasu’s wife, Mangala, died years ago but she only gets a strong presence in the novel. The mild, patient, unnoticed Mangala is memorable for Vasu only as an absence. He recalls his dead wife as calm, pale and insubstantial. His most clear memory is of her death. Vasu is not able to remember Mangala ever going to the doctor. She always takes care of the family, but remains unnoticeable and inconspicuous like her mother.

I don’t remember Mangala ever going to a doctor. She would hover around my bed with strips of cloth dipped in cold water when I lay groaning with a fever; or she would sit up, night after night, mending the boys’ shorts and my vests, while I marked the homework books for the next day (p. 123).
Both Vasu's mother and his wife died early. For him, Mangala is a woman who remained as obscure as his forgotten mother. Even after being the mother of two sons, she is remembered by Vasu as a memory and not as a human being. She has served throughout her life with complete devotion. While looking at his photograph of class I Vasu notices his dress impeccably starched. This aspect throws light on Mangala being a caring wife. He opens Mangala's tin trunk and finds little treasures intact. The embroidered small canvasses bear Mangala's signatures. The depth of her mind gets reflected in the 'ambitious complexity of a tapestry' (p. 39). Vasu remembers:

The sea was a recurring image in these landscapes; and though the skyline was pale and ambiguous, the foreground, thickly embroidered with hundreds of shells, was intricate and clear; almost tactile in its three-dimensional quality. (p. 39)

Vasu remembers Mangala as "pale and insubstantial; a figure perennially on the retreat" (p.41) by the seashore: "I always saw her in my mind against a vast seashore in the background, the monotonous slosh and thud of waves against rock and sand drowning out all possibility of words" (p.41). There is always an aura of mystery and silence around her.

Mangala remained protective towards her children, Vishnu and Venu. Vasu remembers her rarely visiting the school of the children, doing daily work and keeping her emotions integral in the 'aura of silence [and mystery] that hung about her' (p. 42). When Vasu takes Mangala and sons to see a film, she covers the head of Venu and Vishnu. She acts as the self-appointed censor. She wants to protect her children from the ill-effects of cinema as they were too young 'to separate the beautiful from the gross' (p. 60). In an Indian society, a mother always helps the child to be acquainted with the cultural values.

A mother thinks that her children are unable to sift well from all the gross around them and tries to protect them from alleged immoral values, whereas a teacher is unable to provide such protection. A teacher can only help the students know the various facts of life and may also help them in choosing right or wrong but cannot provide the security and protection given by mother as exemplified by Mangala. Vasu Master tries to give the best to his students and takes them to movie. After coming back, during teaching hours with students, he finds them to be vulgar as they have drawn nonsense pictures on the blackboard. A mother having comparatively less number of children in her hold as compared to a class can help the children in taking all the good from the most awful. Therefore, she protects them from getting involved in delinquent acts and thus provides them the best in the world.
This incident clearly signals that a mother is the best teacher in the world who can lead them to the right path. The educational eminence of Vasu Master and the obligatory fear of the school among the students are not able to provide that fortification which Mangala provides to her children. The literary interpretation of Vasu Master cannot protect the child from the practical interpretation of life.

Mangala and Jameela are childhood friends in a village across the border, not far from the sea. They form a perfect team. Jameela is the person whom Mangala laughs with and looks in the eye, and shares threads and cloth to make a beautiful landscape. Vasu remembers the companionship of Mangala and Jameela as:

I saw two happy, brown bodies in the village tank, stealing an extra splash on the way home from school. The two swam and frolicked as if the whole world—the cool water, the afternoon stillness, the shared squeals of pleasure—all belonged to them forever; as if they did not plan to grow up into full-fledged women, into Mangala and Jameela (p. 43).

After marriage both get busy in their life. The only moments when they are full of ecstasy is the sewing time. Jameela begins teaching Mangala sewing. They both enjoy each other’s company outside male inspection as Vasu is never at home when Jameela comes. They find their voices in sewing and stories. Their animated voices, raised voices, whisper and deep and throaty laughter proves ‘the coexistence of earthy and ethereal, cocoon and butterfly’ (p. 43). Vasu remembers that in the company of her friend Jameela, Mangala is quite different from the wife Mangala that he knows. The excitement that Mangala shows in the company of Jameela grows fainter in Vasu Master’s presence. He introspects:

Who was the Mangala Jameela knew? Jameela could not have known her as I did; as a man, as a husband does. But this woman Jameela could draw out with expert ease; or I should say, the woman with two faces, bodies, whose double- scaled laughter had tantalized me in the other room: who was she? (p. 43).

Vasu Master tries to understand this Mangala who is quite different from her wife Mangala. Most of the times, man does not try to understand where the real happiness of his wife lies. He only tries to make her a part of his without realizing her individuality. This otherness only creates distance in their relationship. Vasu remembers Mangala as:

She was unnoticeable, inconspicuous; like my mother, memorable only as an absence. I knew my wife and my affection for her only when I lived with her ghost. This ghost had a frail, vapoury body; made more insubstantial by my lapses of memory about what she actually was (p. 123).
With their ‘delicate feminine modesty’ (p. 122), both Lakshmi and Mangala spend their life in mute suffering. After Mangala’s death, Jameela comes to take the unfinished pieces of embroidery to make them complete as this is the only reason to visit the house where she and Mangala spent so many afternoons together.

Vasu remembers a trip with his family to the seaside a little outside Madras where the ‘freedom from routine’ (p. 123) made Mangala quite different, shedding her usual reticence and ‘more receptive, open to the possibility of change’ (p. 123). The mystery of the mind that is reflected in the embroidered clothes resembles the ‘cool, mysterious secret of the waves’ (p. 123). Even away from the responsibilities of home, she is still concerned about the joy and happiness of her family. While everyone else is enjoying playing in the water, she looks for the shells and other ‘odd things to add to the children’s collection’ (p. 124). She is a mother who is always eager to take care of the happiness of her children. Vasu remembers how Mangala used to feed her children, rolling rice and jaggery that are slipped into their open mouths. She fulfills her duties as a wife and a mother with feminine modesty.

In a family, a woman plays many roles without getting acknowledged. No one recognizes her importance as she attends all the chores with submission. Moreover, one doesn’t give much importance to the things that are easily available. The difficulty to attain a thing brings the importance and value of that thing. Under the love and care of a mother, children generally don’t take care of the responsibilities. Vasu Master tries to teach Venu Cycling. He never gets more than the art of balancing. The night Mangala dies, Vasu finds Venu sitting by the cycle. He wonders how Venu has managed to mount the cycle. The sad memories of his mother surpass the teaching of the father proving mother as the best teacher. Mangala’s children suddenly grow up after her death. Her death leaves a void which Vasu feels can never be filled. He realizes that even the three of them put together cannot fill that space.

Mangala believes in ghosts. “Unlike my illiterate grandmother, Mangala, the first educated woman in her family, believed in ghosts” (p. 138). Even after getting education, she is still superstitious or the writer has given us another instance of a woman dreaming like Shahrzad of When Dreams Travel. With her ghost stories she can also travel the mysterious depths of her mind which are otherwise hidden from the world outside. She appears to have knowledge outside her home and it is realized in the way she intellectually concocts stories. She tells different ghost
stories to children. They consider her a ghost expert. Her stories were imbued with the unexpected and unusual gift of suspense.

Part of the gift was the air about her when she spoke of ghosts, an air which told us that she knew what she was talking about; that she was on familiar, even intimate terms with her ethereal heroes and heroines (p. 124-25).

Mangala tells the story of Eliamma which seems to be the expression of her hidden desires. Eliamma is a beautiful lady who lives in the old fishing village by the sea. She wants to know something hidden in the depth of waters mid-sea. After attending her share of fisherwomen’s work, she wanders by the seashore. She has the longing to go far beyond the sight to know the secrets. She thinks of requesting the fishermen to take her with them, but also knows in her mind that they will only laugh at her. One night Eliamma meets a stranger. She, then, makes a bargain with him by trading body with him for a month so that she can be invisible and thus cannot be seen by the men who bar her to go out the sea on boats otherwise. In her eagerness to know the secrets of the sea, she forgets to go back to the land. When she realizes and comes back, the only thing she finds that the stranger never comes back to exchange the body so she is stuck on a ghostly state of invisibility. She feels a strong sense of frustration because of her separation from the society and the loss of her past heritage. She waits endlessly for the day when she will find someone who sees her briefly. This dream is quite away from the painful experience of her present state of affairs. Mangala concludes the story as:

To be completely invisible was to be lonely in a way the living, did not know… Eliamma waits. She waits and waits; a patient ghost, for the day she will find someone who sees her briefly. Someone who will willingly accept her freakish gift (p. 130).

Psychologically Mangala has the desire to explore the world but she is fixed through restrictive relations to everything around her. She has become invisible to her culture to those dependent on her being faithful to her gender scripting. As a woman she has the immense power with which she can achieve a lot but this power remains hidden because her aspirations are often thwarted by the male-dominated world. It is not possible to save the branch after cutting all the roots of the tree. As in a story told by Vasu’s father, he says:

Think of a plant that grows in water, he told them. The leaves above, intent on survival, are interlocked for safety. But they are jostled about by wind and current. While deep below, the roots planted firmly in the earth are still and supportive (p. 195).
The woman is the root of the family who strengthens the family by her strong, supportive role. Eliamma can partially be blamed for her own plight as she has wrongly joined the race to go ahead. Though it is right that she wants to explore the world but the means that she opts to get her desires fulfilled were entirely wrong. Therefore, she becomes a victim of deception. In process she left the roots or in other words, her body for the sake of enjoyment. S.N. Prasad speaks:

At the same time there is a very important authorial suggestion which must be underlined: it is that liberation of the woman may be a positive gain, but it must know a limit. If the limit is crossed, whether it is the woman’s or the man’s freedom in question, there would be disaster.\

In ancient times, the society had set values to follow but in present times there is an absence of these cultural values. Erich Fromm’s ideas on the concept of roots can be stated as:

Rootedness is the need to establish roots and to feel at home again in the world. Productively rootedness enables us to grow beyond the security of our mother and establish ties with the outside world. With the non productive strategy, we become fixated and afraid to move beyond the security and safety of our mother or a mother substitute.

The Indian culture which is the lighthouse for the world, stands ignored. No one should leave the roots of his culture that teach him peace, harmony, tolerance and universal acceptance. Going away from roots, one cannot flourish as it will take one nowhere. This is not to support the picture of Third World women (meek, obedient and subordinate) as is represented by western feminists but to remain intact to the positive value of our own culture.

Hariharan in the character of Jameela presents Hindu-Muslim relations in the background. She is Mangala’s friend and is ‘full, earthy, with a slight limp that offset her ripe perfection’ (p. 43). Both share happy moments while embroidering beautiful landscapes on clothes. Vasu remembers the bond between Mangala and Jameela and ‘their completion of each other’ (p. 43). It is the ‘comfortable familiarity’ (p. 68) with which she used to come in Mangala’s home.

Jameela and Mangala have shared their afternoon together, sewing and embroidering different landscapes of their imagination. She is always in burqa whenever Vasu has seen her. It is with expert ease that both women understand each other. After the death of Mangala, Jameela visits her home to take the incomplete embroidered clothes to make the complete landscapes which have been left in between due to Mangala’s death.
When Jameela becomes widow and no longer manages to stay in Elipettai, she decides to return to the village. She comes to meet Vasu and goes inside ignoring ‘usual half-way meeting point’ (p. 68) straight to the place where she and Mangala used to sit taking off her burqa ‘with comfortable familiarity’ (p. 68). For Mangala’s sake she comes to say good bye to Vasu. ‘The pair of searching, pitying eyes’ (p. 70) in burqa left an empty space in Vasu’s mind. He promises to store carefully everything that Mangala and Jameela have stitched. With her departure ‘the part of Mangala Jameela carried in her, like her property’ (p. 70), is slipped out of his life. She remains in the memory of Vasu as “an image, and a ghostly one at that” (p.70).

Jameela’s story is quite different from the ghost story of Mangala. Jameela is full of life, ‘Warm and alive under her ineffectual burqa’ (p. 131). Though Elimma lost in the world of ghosts, in imaginary thoughts, Jameela remains a survivor. While looking at the embroidery, Vasu says:

I was looking at the last canvas Jameela had embroidered on Mangla’s behalf: a hazy seascape in which all was ambiguous movement, suggestive of mysterious possibility. I knew immediately that nothing tangible would survive here: no recognizable creature of flesh and blood (p. 131).

Jameela’s wordless tapestries speak a lot. She has gone ahead in her stories from Mangala. Her story of three caterpillars is the story of gender. The three caterpillars in their sisterly togetherness have grown in companionable silence. Playing and walking on trails of silk to their heart’s extent and raising their silk threads into fantastic shapes, they share their varied dreams to each other and thus make a tapestry that belong to all the three equally. The three sister caterpillars tell each other stories, rich mixtures of dreams and begin to live in sisterly togetherness:

They learnt designs and new stitches from each other. By the time they were ready to sleep in the three grey bags they planned to sew for themselves, they had a common fund of patterns; a rich mingling of dreams, a tapestry that belonged to all three equally (p. 133).

Though in childhood, Mangala and Jameela have enjoyed their life yet both get the same congenial environment and circumstances to grow and flourish. In any society where half of the population is living under constant threat, many of the women cannot enjoy their life in full bloom. In their childhood or adolescence, these friends may be sharing their learning, feeling, emotions and other vicissitudes of life together but it is not necessary that they are able to
continue their companionship throughout their life. One may have different kind of fate or the other may have to face different kind of society where female is treated as a thing or commodity or as Hariharan in ‘When the Python Wakes’ writes:

He told them: We come from a place that does not even merit a dot on the Indian map. But who draws and colours these maps? We know now: maps are made in offices in the faraway capital, by ignorant men who think we are lazy, stupid buffaloes to be shooed into corner they please. We know now who the enemy is. We have our own map; we have spied in the enemy’s camp. We have been invisible worms in its smallest holes (p. 167).

Many psychologists are of the view that masculine and feminine tendencies work in the one and the same individual. The creation of the world is the result of male and female unison. Therefore not only in the outer world, the innermost core of a being has the seeds of bisexuality. Harcharan Singh Sobti in this regard speaks:

If we look at man and woman, from a distance, due to difference in their biological organism, man appears to be a man and woman a woman. But if we get closer and listen with the subtle ear of mind we shall find that in every male organism female is breathing and likewise, in female organism a male. This only shows that individual is, simultaneously, both a masculine and feminine being. Man has suppressed the feminine within and the masculine in woman has surrendered himself. The politics originates within. The fundamental thing about man and woman is not equality. (The equality before law is a different matter.) The notion of equality breeds confrontation. The deeper thing is being complementary to each other. To displace complementary character and introduce notion of equality is to play politics that suits only a few.\textsuperscript{11}

Githa Hariharan, after exploring the traditional aspect of women who make a powerful presence even in their absence in the novel The Ghosts of Vasu Master where the reader comes to know about the female protagonist in the novel only through the memories of Vasu master, describes another aspect of women in the role of the political activist, Meena in her fourth novel In Times of Siege. This reveals the depth of the scope of the personality of her female protagonists. Hariharan’s variety of themes can be thus seen ranging from personal conflicts to political tangles.

The efforts for co-existence are made by every creation of the universe. Nature around us exemplifies this. The struggle for existence in the world of nature allows the stronger to dominate the weaker one. They have to do this in order to exist. The world of human beings is different. Here the stronger section dominates the weaker one to show its supremacy and power.
Their efforts serve their selfish ends. This leads to the feeling of insecurity and lack of faith among the weaker. If this feeling continues to simmer, it causes disastrous results.

Githa Hariharan in the novel *In Times of Siege* compels the reader to think about the present situation prevailing in the society. As a great visionary of the age, she throws light on the degradation, restlessness, anarchy that has set in the present society. If there is imbalance in society, it cannot flourish. She says:

I don’t see my writing as an introduction to India and I am not self-conscious about being “Indian” in my writing. For some reason all of us like to imagine that a writer is a writer because she has a great deal to say (message!) or is a good egg (social concern!). Both these should be there, but really, in the ultimate analysis, a writer is a writer because she has a narrative skill—a balancing act she can perform. But writers’ voices are heard on the public stage. So they have a special responsibility to discharge, especially in a country like India. I am a writer, but I also live in modern India and am very much an engaged citizen of our multicultural society. So it is inevitable that I am interested in examining certain relevant themes. The tussles between tradition and modernity, or better still, the making of modernity; equal rights for women, in the arenas of legislation as well as social practice; and in recent times, the strengthening of secular ideas and movements to combat growing fundamentalism. Even if a writer does not write what is usually perceived as political writing-direct social commentary, or unbending realism or something “authentically” Indian—the writer should aim at revealing truths, questions and/or answers, that are fundamentally political. Fiction has a thousand ways of giving us a new take on the dynamics of power relations.12

It may not be out of place here to mention that Hariharan has vigorously attempted to bring forth the problems related to different aspects of Indian society. The complex modern society has given birth to the contemporary novels which are multifaceted in their choice of themes and treatment. The writers today are presenting the complex problems and dilemma of the modern society. A civilization is known by the way it treats its women. In the present times women are quite conscious of the constructive role they are playing in the society. T.M.J. Indra Mohan writes in this context:

Feminism should attempt in seeing itself as a component of Enlightened modernism in which meaningful relationship needs to be built up between male and female in terms of socio-cultural amity. It need not become a socio-political force which in turn will thwart an objective evaluation of feminist ideals and writings. We should rather consider feminism as a movement for social change.13

Positive efforts are being made to build a society based on mutual care, love, co-operation, and compassion. The need is to create a way of life that includes serving others without being
subservient. A society can only flourish if the assertive efforts of both male and female based on the virtues of good will and compassion is made.

Hariharan in *In Times of Siege* does not concentrate on the recurrent themes of female oppression and exploitation. Instead, she presents the female characters generating more positive power than the male characters. She presents the liberalizing aspect of change in the attitude of women. Not only this, she also shows the traditional attitude of women in her novel.

The central issues of the novel are the role of history, academic independence and free speech. The writer narrates the story of a professor in History at Kasturba Gandhi Central University, Delhi. In quiet and peaceful life of the mild-mannered professor comes a chaos when his friend’s daughter Meena gets her leg broken and requests him to stay in his house for recuperation. The intrusion of Meena makes everything topsy-turvy in the calm and peaceful life of sober, meek and undominating Shiv. He “feels like an intruder in his own house.” It is very difficult for him to share his house with Meena in the absence of his wife Rekha. As his wife Rekha is away in Seattle, he tries to manage the situation by taking leave from the office and works from home on his classes.

How the individuals born and brought up in a different culture react differently, is also explained by Hariharan. Meena, the daughter of Sumathi, a friend of the Murthys, is a university student. She is writing a thesis on the stories of women affected in the riots. She belongs to a generation engaged in the world she lives in. Her world view is different. She is a bright, zealous, independent and voluptuous young woman who plays an active role in political debates. She stands for democratic and secular principles. Her positive outlook on life and her innate resourcefulness brings success. She belongs to a world of women in which she seems to be modeling her own life according to her own desires, without getting bogged down by any social agents or forces. Knowing the plan of Shiv to call her parents, she forbids Shiv to inform her parents about her broken leg. The atmosphere in which she has been brought up has made her independent.

And Shiv—for the first time in his life he makes breakfast for two; tea for two; snacks for two. He goes to markets he has not been for years, unlikely shopping lists to hand. A white plastic stool for Meena to sit on while bathing. A shower head and a tube he attaches to the bathroom tap so that Meena does not have to bend for a bucket bath. Girlish skirts because Meena cannot wear her salwars and jeans. Ice cream, chocolates, fruit, even flowers (p. 28).
It is natural that whenever anybody lives with a person who is not so close to him, he tries to adjust and come out with fruitful solutions for each other’s help to prove his worth and live assertively. Shiv tries to do the same. As far as Meena is concerned, she feels completely at home. Shiv can feel:

Meena is transparently pleased to see him; Shiv finds something touching about this. Whatever she thinks or feels is there on Meena’s face, not just faithfully mirrored, but multiplied in intensity—as if her face has captured the potent essence of every passing emotion (p.24).

Meena has no hesitations to ask Shiv to take her home, help her to wash her hair. This attitude of helping others and also to take the help of others in crisis is the result of her hostel life that has taught Meena to manage things in the world outside the security of home. Even Shiv makes breakfast for her, does shopping for her. He is rich in empathy.

The spoon that has been moving regularly between the bowl of ice-cream and her mouth pauses. She looks up into his face through a long unruly curl that hangs over one eye. Even Meena’s face, he sees, is capable of keeping a secret or two. But her look, though it is a look Shiv cannot read easily, convinces him. He can play guardian to Meena, his yet-to-be-discovered ward, at least for a few weeks (p.25).

Shiv inexpertly tosses the vegetables and cooks the rice for her. His anima activated in genuine caring of Meena. Both start enjoying each other’s company. He knows that Meena is in pain but she bears it with great courage:

Shiv and a nurse help Meena on to the X-ray table. Shiv can see that Meena is in pain but she does not say a thing. The firm set of her mouth and her clammy hands overwhelm him with a protective feeling, a feeling that is entirely superfluous, considering it has nowhere to go (p. 44).

With a purpose in her mind Githa Hariharan exposes the foibles of society with all its hypocrisy and selfishness. She plays the role of a great thinker of the age. She narrates the character of Shiv caught in the nexus of fanatic fundamentalists. This comes out when a lecture written by Shимвruthy on Basava gets challenged by a group of fundamentalists. These fundamentalists by twisting and turning the facts pour the communal hue on the whole episode to achieve their selfish ends. An organisation called ‘Itihas Suraksha Manch’ opposes the portrayal of a medieval poet Basava by Shiv claiming it to be distorted, fake and biased. Shiv finds himself trapped in the circumstances both on the personal and professional level. Both the events collide and take
Shiv to another plane which is quite different from the earlier one. The present plane is full of risks and demands an active participation of Shiv in all the activities.

In the course of events Hariharan brings forth many hints about the growing restlessness and intolerance in society. She also prepares the reader to view the scenario of clashing ideologies, social and moral degradation. The reader views Shiv in a dilemma to respond to the problem that has caught him abruptly. Later on the decision of Shiv, to fight for his beliefs and not to give in to the pressure from the bigots, gives an optimistic note. His struggle to hold on to his principles of scientific objectives and the problems that would come in the way of such a struggle, are elaborated with full conviction by Hariharan.

Hariharan has painted the character of Meena better equipped than Shiv revealing the changing picture of women in the present society. She is politically conscious and behaves no more like a woman who is confined to the four walls of the house only. She is no more ignorant of the prevailing conditions of the society. She is aware of the poison of this communalism that is raising its head in the contemporary society.

Hariharan introduces a battalion of characters having different opinions regarding the problem. Dr. Sharma, the head of the department, who wants his last year before retirement as head unsullied by controversy, informs Shiv about the developments. He asks Shiv to apologize as Itihas Sureksha Manch has accused Shiv of distorting history and historical figures. Hariharan by creating characters like Dr. Sharma and Dean actually takes the dig at people who have no principles and give up under pressure. Meena, a girl of principles, comments upon the head of the department “These liberal fence-sitters! One whiff of danger and they fall off the fence, over to the wrong side” (p. 79). He is a yes man to Arya who is colored as bigot in the novel. A number of clues in the novel show that Arya is associated with these fundamentalists. The writer gives an emphasis on Arya’s look while Shiv and Meena play a game of animal toys:

As Shiv puts away the animals in their box, he studies the tiger in his hand. Even though its ace is crudely painted, it is expressive. The sheep-faces are somewhat bland, but the wooden tiger looks hungry, single-minded. A little like Arya’s new look (p.29).

Dr. Sharma’s meeting for a healthy discussion too is spoiled by Arya. Though Shiv finds difficult to reach the base, Meena, with her deep understanding of facts, does it without much labour. She understands the man behind the controversy. She gets straight to the heart of the matter accusing Arya behind all this. While Shiv is still trying to comprehend the situation
Meena pierces into the problem guessing, "It's Arya, isn't it?"(p. 55). Meena sneers Itihas Sureksha Manch by saying that the word 'protection' nowadays implies 'attack'. So she encourages Shiv to chalk out a plan to answer the attack. Shiv’s meeting with the Head and the Dean results in hardening his resolve to face the bigots. He is a staunch believer of Basava and holds him like his father in reverence. However these fundamentalists for their selfish motives have the power to harm others mentally, emotionally and physically only to satisfy their bigotry.

At home Meena hands over two envelopes to Shiv. One is an article on the first page of the 'Current' in which the Itihas Suraksha Manch, an independent social and cultural organization issued a statement to put an end to tamper with History and also quoted several historians to support their claim as well as accusing Shiv with vested interests. Another envelope is anonymous poison mail threatening Shiv to hurt him and his family.

In the novel it is shown personal enmity gets its shelter in the collective interests. It is always based on its focus on the personal well-being. It does not have any concern with the well-being of the planet and the whole of the humanity. Professor Arya, a fanatic in the novel, does all kinds of efforts to harm Shiv. He cannot leave any opportunity to degrade Shiv. A number of incidents in the story show the mal intentions of Arya towards Shiv. His association with fundamentalists is quite evident. Arya’s face ‘once hangdog and apologetic’ (p. 17) becomes ‘aggressive’ (p. 17). His connections with ‘Khaki gear’ (p. 17) has given him this new look. When Shiv tries to tell Meena about two faces of Arya, the department-Arya and the father-Arya, she is sure about the intentions of Arya and with full clarity she says:

‘You’re trying your best to humanize him, aren’t you?’ says Meena. ‘Why should we rack our brains figuring out his life? Finding out what made him such a twisted piece? He’s like all his ancestors—tyrants capable of personal acts of kindness. Nazis who responded to music and poetry.’

Meena listens intently when he tells her about Arya and the meeting. ‘I’m not surprised,’ she says. ‘They’re crawling out of the woodwork now that it’s their season.’ She looks at Shiv in that way she has, directly into his eyes, her chin cocked in a sideways, challenging stance. ‘You don’t like confrontations, do you?’(p.30).

Meena encourages Shiv to face Arya by saying, “Even better, you have to confront this Arya. Ignoring him is not going to make him go away”(p. 119). Menon discloses that the meeting between Shiv and other faculty members was engineered by Arya to degrade Shiv. Arya’s face ‘looks bloated as if he has been feasting on Shiv’s misery’ (p. 125). He does not spare a chance to hit Shiv physically showing the extent of his hatredness for Shiv. “... Arya has pounced on him
and has him by the collar. Shiv can feel Arya’s pungent breath on his face. Menon too has jumped up and he is holding Arya round his waist, pulling him back” (p. 127). As the, “mission has been accomplished” (p. 127), he goes out of the door. His face promises Shiv to meet once more. It is his individual interest that finds shelter in the collective interests of the fundamentalists. Individuals like Arya cause damage to the well being of the society for their own vested interests. Hariharan in an interview with Joel Kuortti says:

Our government and its cultural wings, both official and unofficial, suddenly decide, for example, that some film-maker is not going to present an authentic picture of Indian culture. But Indian culture is not some animal who lives independent of us, outside our bodies; it’s not something discrete out there, so that you can say it begins here or ends here; or that somebody owns it, that it’s somebody’s private property.15

Assertive collective efforts are very important to reveal the truth. Hariharan also brings forth the role of media in the present day-to-day life. Meena is quite aware of the significance of media at this critical situation. The expansion of news channels, online news information is the most outstanding phenomenon that is speeding up the transitions. How the hegemonic cultural images are spread to influence the public opinion, is critically analyzed by the writer. Shiv faces the articles published in different newspapers against his lesson on Basava. Even Rekha has got the entire information regarding the episode through media. His interview with a T.V. channel is another challenging situation for Shiv. The pale face of Kamala, Shiv’s maid, is ‘colored with animation’ (p. 94) when she informs him about T.V. people who come to take the interview of her ‘desirable Sahib’ (p. 95). She belongs to the class of people who have nothing to do with the seriousness of the situation and are easily fascinated by the glamour of the things. The role of media in guiding public opinion can be seen as:

The news editors have reduced his seven minutes to an admirable ten-second sound byte; Shiv is impressed that even he can sound like a quotable politician. All the same it is so strange to see and hear himself that he misses the rest of the coverage in jumble of swiftly passing images (p. 146).

Meena has the intelligence which enables her to come out of the grip of the insurmountable troubles that dog Shiv’s life and in consequence hers also. She displays admirable courage, imagination and far-sightedness in sizing up the situations. The education and the opportunities that come with the education have helped her a lot. She does not depend on others for survival. Rather she solves her problems with the help of her friends and is assertive, practical and resilient. She as a career oriented woman knows how to manage the situation.
Meena, with her friends, takes the stand to support Shiv who sees himself in the quagmire of problems. Shiv feels 'that he is there, a symbol or statue around which living, talking people gather to make plans' (p. 137). Others around him are deciding the course of action regarding placards, leaflets to be printed, to take the permission of the police for the rally and other similar things to handle the fundamentalists. The media takes an interest in sensationalizing the dispute, hate mails play their own role to complicate the matter and violent protests from both the sides make the matter complex. People who are from academic side and who are from outside academia choose the sides to contribute in making their own nexus. The interweaving of the life story, vachanas of Basava, cultural terrorism, the political atmosphere made by Meena and her friends, Shiv’s childhood memories of his father and Shiv’s past are presented deftly by Hariharan.

The conflict in the novel is presented before the reader in such a way through logically developed episodes that the reader realizes how an ordinary man can be caught in the web of unavoidable circumstances. The power to get out of it lies within Shiv but it is Meena who makes him realize his strength in him. Toni Wolff, a Swiss Jungian analyst, in her paper on the four aspects of feminine psyche describes them as Mother, Hetaira or Companion, Amazon and the Medial. She says:

Similar to the four basic psychological functions, all the four structural forms are inherent to every woman. If possible she will realize the one which is the most consistent with her nature. By and by, a second form will assert itself from within... If the gradual integration of the next structural form does not take place, the original one will be exaggerated and turn negative.16

According to her similar is the process for of the third and fourth one and the integration of all the four structural forms of feminine psyche of the woman is an approach to self. That woman is complete that has the integration of all the four in her. She is regarded in the process of individuation. Meena is bold like an Amazon. Even in her helplessness, she radiates power:

The woman in the narrow bed in his study, a young woman. Almost a girl, except that she seems more worldly-wise sometimes than he. She talks of causes and street theatre, ‘gender’ and ‘courting arrest’ with the ease of veteran. She too, he has discovered, is a frequenter of meetings; though her meetings are played out in a world where a different language is spoken, where it is possible to feel passions foreign to him. Though she lies in bed, her leg encased in fiberglass, she does not seem aware of her powerlessness (p.31).
As a Mother, she experiences Shiv’s problems. At a very high spiritual level she acts as puella aeterna, the father’s daughter.

He bends over her and straightens the covers. Then he gently pushes into place a strand of hair falling across her cheek. She smiles, a mysterious, sleepy smile. His fingertips take away with them a touch of her warm, moist cheek (p.35).

Meena arouses in Shiv a value that can stimulate in him the total realization of personality. As a companion, her fish-eyed beauty is explained sensuously. Not only this, Meena is becoming a signature on to Devi.

Meena. Fish-eyed. Fish-eyed, dark-browed, tangle-haired. Wide-hipped, generous-lipped. The list he can chant seems endless. Shiv invokes Meena, Meena’s attributes, with a thousand names—like a devotee who mumbles himself into a stupor. A devotee whose words keep him upstairs in safety, while the flesh and blood reality lies downstairs in her room (p.49-50).

Meena is mother, daughter and companion to him. Alchemical relationship can be visualized in Shiv and Meena. It is the relationship between a man and a woman in which the qualities are interchanged. Changes take place in Shiv. She hands over some papers to Shiv saying: “‘See? There are all kinds of people on our side.’ Shiv notes the our in place of your. He tries to smile in appreciation as he takes the paper from her” (p170). Meena, who is also a young political activist, summons the strength in him. Belonging to the young generation of women in India, she stands for democratic and secular principles. She is neither morally weak nor intolerant in spirit.

She presents the picture of a woman who survives in a hostile world and brings solace to others and supports her male counterparts. She has a decisive mind of her own and has the power to make others agree to her point of view. She denotes the equal social and intellectual position of the men and women. She engages in erudite conversations with Shiv and freely befriends other men. Acting as a catalyst she enables Shiv to take up the challenge. Though as an activist she indulges in various other activities of her own yet she encourages Shiv to take the risk instead of kneeling down before the fundamentalists. She is vibrant, confident and naturally assertive. She represents a picture of change, a modern girl who is quite conscious of her rights. Discussing the character of Meena in an interview, Hariharan says:

...Meena is representative of a particular kind of young person—not the yuppie sort, but the kind particularly engaged in the world she lives in—and wanting to change the all the inequities it breeds, tolerates and promotes.
Meena actively participates on a political stage and defends political principles with conviction. She seems to know her mind and is extremely clear of what she wants of life. She goes out in the world to get it. With Meena's assistance, Shiv realizes the significance of his position and is ready to face the challenge.

There is no intention in the novel to segregate women's world from that of men. Rather Meena helps Shiv grow into a politically active intellectual. She takes charge of the chaotic situation like a manager and manages things well. She is the product of her active participation with the social environment. With her support Shiv gets strength to make a silent promise to her that he will stand firm and resist giving up.

The attitude of Meena and Rekha towards Shiv's problem is quite different. Both react in a different way to get out of the problem. Rekha does not want Shiv to go further whereas Meena can't imagine him apologizing or taking back a word of the lesson written by him. She plans how these 'fundoos' can be beaten at their game. Her head is full of plans to confront the fundamentalists. In this way she represents a new woman ready to face the challenges.

Hariharan also brings before the reader the generation gap between the middle aged professor who feels that his fifty two years is an unlikely age for the birth of a hero, 'a castaway in an island where all the natives are young' (p.2) and Meena who is young and energetic and so feels otherwise. She calls fundamentalists 'fundoos,' a word that Meena's generation is familiar with and she willingly joins hands with Shiv in his battle with fundoos (p. 57). The novel throws light on the different walks of life. The difference between the youth and middle age, the attitude of the fundamentalists and the dilemma of an ordinary man, the sense of dignity and humiliation are well managed by Hariharan.

In Indian culture a daughter always looks up to her mother whenever she finds herself in a difficult situation. When Meena gets her leg broken she does not want her parents to be informed as it would worry them. Hariharan also throws light on the hostel life that makes the individual independent but also has its effect on the emotional relations which leads to emotional deprivation. Individualism which is prevalent in the west is not much acceptable in the Indian context. Indian culture teaches to co-operate and compromise. The emotional ties and values which are a part of Indian culture are under attack in the modern Indian society. She smokes, drinks and has no fears about her relationship with a person almost of the age of her father. These are the aspects that a traditional Indian woman cannot even dream of.
Githa Hariharan introduces complex female figures that act as wife, mother or daughter. For Meena, marriage is not as important as her career. She is self-sufficient. She proves that a woman is man’s pride in prosperity and his support in affliction. She seems more worldly wise than Shiv. She represents new woman who is ready to confront the struggle and moves in the world with dignity. She is a girl of twenty four the age in which normally a girl with traditional upbringing looks for her partner. On the other hand she is arranging meetings to rescue an aging historian from the clutches of fundamentalists. Gayle Greene and Coppelia Khan say:

The new woman is prepared to confront, to struggle and survive with dignity. Trying to challenge and deconstruct the myth of male sovereignty, the woman today is striving hard to redefine the gender roles prescribed for her by society thus transcending what society has deemed to be the ‘nature’ of woman. A knowledge that the ‘inequality of the sexes is neither the biological given nor a divine mandate but a cultural construct’ seems to have made this woman an autonomous being who is capable of finding her own ways.¹⁸

Meena makes an assertive effort to form a meaningful relationship with Shiv towards the end of the novel. Acknowledging the limitations of her relationship, she accepts it imperative in her life. Rekha, Shiv’s wife, is away in Seattle. Her presence can be felt in the novel when she speaks on the phone from Seattle on a few occasions. Rekha is a domestic woman who is engrossed in keeping things in order. She is much concerned about her home and garden. She has the efficiency that makes her rule the home. When Meena’s mother requests Murthys to be her daughter’s guardian, she not only gives her approval but also helps Meena in purchasing goods and also brings her home for lunch.

Rekha is good at naming things. When Shiv and Rekha first moved to their house, the backyard was a jungle. Rekha, enervated by the challenge, transformed it into a garden. Rekha is a perfect housekeeper. Before going away to Seattle she leaves detailed instructions with Kamala, the maid, to take care of Shiv. Even in Seattle, she is worried about her garden and Shiv. Her assertive efforts can be seen ‘to grow a lush landscape, complete with orchids on tree trunks, on Delhi’s inhospitable rocky soil’ (p. 57).

Hariharan draws a contrast between Rekha, a domestic woman and Meena, a political activist.

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 (p. 58).
In an Indian society, a woman generally shows faith in her husband. She always thinks him to be predictable ignoring the fact of the vast sea of unpredictability in which he lives. Shiv’s relationship with Amita is a corner that is unsupervised by Rekha. His act of infidelity to his wife has made him feel guilty. For a permanent solace, he has always looked up to Rekha. In the situation that Shiv faces, he longs for Rekha’s company. He does not tell Rekha about the whole situation. He is sure of Rekha’s sound instinct for the safe position. He comforts himself with what Rekha might have said in that situation:

Take stock of the situation first. Don’t commit yourself one way or the other. If you can’t make a decision, go to bed and will yourself to sleep. And in the morning, be ruthless with yourself (p. 59).

Rekha is like a permanent solace to him. So Shiv informs Rekha about the matter. She is not aware of the ‘Arya’s tainted atmosphere’ (p. 81) in the university. So she has not taken the matter seriously. When she reads the news online that ‘it was a bigger mess’ (p. 102) than she thought. She thinks of it so unlike of Shiv to create such a big mess ‘and all for a correspondence course and some poet no one remembers’ (p. 103). As a wife, she is much worried about Shiv and no longer seems to remember her garden or household. Meena is brave-hearted but as she is young and inexperienced she is not aware of the challenges one has to meet in these serious situations. Hariharan shows either one boldly rises against the destructive cultural terrorism or they will strike immense loss even to the lives of the individuals who do not have the courage to rebel. Rekha is quite aware of the seriousness of the situation and the risk involved in it. Therefore she forbids Shiv to get himself involved in it. She is exasperated at his involvement in the controversy and wants him to forget the past represented by Basava and Shiv’s father and face the realities of present. Probably she does not realize what Shiv’s father and Basava meant for him. She is only concerned about Shiv’s welfare. She also plans to prepone her visit. As a wife, Rekha’s fears are justified in Indian context. Her voice trembles when she says:

I do see you can’t give in so easily,’ she said. ‘It’s not as if I don’t see the principle of the thing. But to be idealistic at such a time, and with such people!’ Her voice shook again, then fell almost to a shamed whisper. ‘Don’t forget, you’re dealing with hoodlums who have pulled down mosques and churches that have stood for so many years. They’ve engineered riots, for god’s sake, what’s a little violence to them? And they are so powerful now. What can we do-Shiv, don’t you understand? I’m afraid (pp. 154-55).

Shiv knows that Rekha’s fears are well placed as he has got threatening calls. Still he does not want her to be scared. It is the support of Rekha with which he is to ‘negotiate the unknown
world ahead' (p. 156). Rekha for Shiv is always an expert, calm and poised wife, and an image which is quite different from the frightened, vulnerable Rekha. She plans soon be back to her ‘predictable husband’ who has, for a moment, shed predictability. She is doing assertive efforts to save her husband from the tribulations on one hand and taking care of her daughter in Seattle and thus performing the duty of her being a mother on the other.

Tara is Shiv’s daughter, younger than Meena. She is indifferent to the contemporary realities of India and doing job in Seattle. The small world in which she lives, she seems to know it very well. She gets the job that promises a ‘yuppie future’ (p. 112). Even in her childhood, she has the, “confidence of a conformist bent on survival” (p. 12). Very early in life, she overcomes doubt as she says, “My teacher and my friends say there’s a god. The whole world says it; only you say there isn’t a god. I’ll believe the whole world, not you” (p. 112). Without knowing the reality she feels embarrassed that her father has written something against temples and priests. She e-mails Shiv:

I’ve been getting messages from friends in Delhi and some Indians here. It’s sort of weird and embarrassing to explain why you have written something against our temples and priests and all that. It’s only after coming to the US that many of us have learnt to appreciate Indian traditions. This sounds like a lecture, doesn’t it, and that must amuse you, considering I always ran away from your lectures! (p. 112).

Both his wife and daughter are unhappy over what has happened. It is a shock to Shiv from somebody his own, “how is he to negotiate the world ahead” (p. 156). Both Rekha and Tara are not aware of the realities. They react only on the general information they get from friends, print and electronic media. She is perturbed by what she thinks to be his father’s disrespect for Indian traditions. By introducing the character of Tara, Hariharan has revealed the domino effect of traditional upbringing. She is much influenced by her mother as Shiv says that ‘Rekha’s genes have triumphed over his’ (p. 111). Girls like Tara do not accept change so easily. To be away from the established facts is a thing that seems far away for Tara.

Amita is one of the colleagues of Shiv. Her ‘half-hearted’ (p. 21) affair is with Shiv handled tactfully by Hariharan. The values of traditional society are under scrutiny in their relationship. Amita’s husband is a successful chartered accountant but is unaware of the melancholy that his wife is facing. She is stung by loneliness. Her greatest fear is boredom. O.P. Ranchan while exploring sorrows of loneliness writes:
Loneliness is a pervasive malady. But this feeling becomes all the more obstinate if we smother it and run away from it. The feeling of loneliness in its painful and fearsome aspects does not disappear so long as we keep escaping from it through some form of activity, may it be drink, sex, politics, social work, or some fanciful religion. It is a mistake believing that we do not feel lonely if we keep ourselves busy with activity. The fact is that it continues to return, despite all our escapes. All escapes are ineffective and the feeling of loneliness becomes all the more agonizing with every repeated escape. 

Her extra marital affair with Shiv throws light on the mechanical treatment of the emotional relations in the fast progressing society. Hariharan writes:

Amita and Shiv have slept with each other a few times. But perhaps ‘slept with each other’ is inaccurate. They have, on four occasions, had extended lunches; lunches which have extended to hurried, unsatisfying sex at her house. All four times she lay in bed afterwards, her face veiled by cigarette smoke, watching him dress; each time he let himself out of the house and got back to the department, feeling like a truant schoolboy (p. 21).

The traditional veil transforms into the veil of cigarette smoke in the case of modern women like Amita. She makes the reader remember Eliot’s *The Wasteland*. Nancy K. Gish writes:

Eliot closes the scene of ‘The Fire Sermon’ with a reference to Goldsmith’s *The Vicar of Wakefield* in which a young woman who was seduced sings a song of grief and regret:

> When lovely woman stoops to folly,  
> And finds too late that men betray,  
> What charm can soothe her melancholy?  
> What art can wash her guilt away?  
> The only art her guilt to cover,  
> To hide her shame from every eye,  
> To give repentance to her lover,  
> And wring his bosom—is to die.

The contrasting allusions set up an opposition between sex as a moral act for good or evil and sex as empty gesture, the burning of passion divorced from value. The latter is linked to the most terrible and destructive symbols of the human condition: the ruined, infertile land and the realm of the dead. 

Sex as an empty gesture and divorced from value will lead to nowhere. It represents only the destructive symbol of the society. Amita represents the women who want to enjoy sex with the person of her choice without taking care of the conventions of society. In order to get away from the loneliness and boredom which is her greatest fear, she invites Shiv to her place. Shiv expresses his inability as he has to look after Meena. Amita gets hurt but in this modern world, she also knows how to stick gamely ‘to the unspoken rules of their relationship’ (p.21). She has achieved economic independence but not the peace at heart. The material happiness cannot
achieve the inner peace to her. To exorcise her disgust, she indulges in ‘hurried, unsatisfying sex’ (p.21). The degradation and the reversal of values is an undesirable phenomenon. K.M. Pandey speaks: “The western individualism may prove impractical in the Indian context because the collective unconscious still operates on the principles of faith and dogma.”

Growing materialism and lack of emotional response in relations is the root cause of this problem. The relationship of Amita and her husband represents an aspect of modern Indian society that is running after the material gains oblivion of the real happiness of life. Hariharan shows that in such a society the values are left behind as no one cares for the other.

As far as the crisis of Shiv is concerned, both his colleagues, Amita and Menon, try to help him out. Shiv finds a mixture of sympathy, curiosity and excitement in his colleagues who come to discuss the matter with him. Shiv’s reflection reveals that he feels lack of faith in all aspects of life. He still does not want to believe the problem to be real. From the behavior of Amita and Menon it appears to him that the battle is imminent. Amita is good at heart and helps Shiv in the meeting to get to the matter quickly and also keen to figure out how Menon and she can help Shiv in sorting out the problem.

While Rekha and Tara are away, Meena comes to live with Shiv under compulsion. He is lonesome and looking for someone who can colour his life. Her arrival directly transforms Shiv. Both of them try to understand each other, their personalities, emotions and feelings. When this particular incident happens, Shiv and Meena come nearer to each other irrespective of the fact that Meena is just a tourist to his home. He can eliminate all the characters from his mind while doing yoga but not Meena.

He thinks of Rekha’s yoga instructor telling her to empty her mind of all thoughts but one. Hold the one lone fragment firmly in view till it grows bigger and stronger, filling the frame. The head, the dean, Amar and his band, even Arya’s promise of more trouble to come, tumble out of Shiv’s head. Meena, weighed down by her cast, is less willing to move. He shakes his head to clear and fix its sights on his father (p.129).

Meena tries to intrude in the happenings related to Shiv. She even tries to give solutions to his problems and successfully takes Shiv out of the dilemma he faces. Rekha and Tara are unable to render any help to him being sitting thousands of miles away from him. Whatever they know it is from friends or media. As information is distorted and not based on facts, both of them are unable to understand him and even start cursing him for getting involved in such type of controversy.
Hariharan portrays Shiv as the centre with a large female component in him whereas Meena has more of male component in her. The relationship between Meena and Shiv becomes a complicated one. Both realize that their relationship would be undefined and unconsummated one. They are in a 'no-man’s land of possibilities' (p. 167). They could have developed mutually satisfying relationship with each other; they seem to be on the verge of it but then they hold back realizing the importance of present. One can see androgyny in their relationship where their qualities are interchanged. In just forty six days both Meena and Shiv experience a deep understanding and an intense and satisfactory companionship with each other.

The concept of convergence of masculine and feminine consciousness can be inferred when Shiv looks at a tree finding the root is the mouth of the tree. The water poured at the bottom sprouts green at the top. The Indian philosophy also exhibits here the concept of convergence of the feminine and masculine consciousness resulting in the salvation and the realization of the self. The ‘kundalini’ at the ‘muladhara’ represents the feminine consciousness and ‘sahasrara’ at the top represents the masculine consciousness. And it is the union of the two that ends in the equivalence of the personality of an individual. The void present in Shiv compels him to find solace in Rekha and Meena who help him realize the inner strength lying in him. Both make emotional acknowledgements of each other as true individuals. The way they react is quite natural in their circumstances. For providing help to Shiv, they are ready to stake their own comfort and peace.

At the end of the novel, Shiv is free of all self doubts and has a resolve to face the outer world. Parting is painful for both of them. They have an aching void left within them. For a moment, she with a suppressed groan feels that she does need a crutch. The writer says:

Her voice is low and husky, as if she has just woken up. All the certainty that is second nature to her, all the challenge that she exhales with every breath, has deserted her for the moment (p. 203).

Hariharan reveals the selfish attitudes in which every individual fights for the type of world which he demands. The acceptance of the individual differences and an assertive collective effort to shun away the narrow-mindedness can solve many problems created by the selfish attitudes of man. Mohanty while speaking on the problems of women says:

...differences are never just “differences.” In knowing differences and particularities, we can better see the connections and commonalities because no border or boundary is ever complete or rigidly determining. The challenge is to see how differences allow us to
explain the connections and border crossings better and more accurately, how specifying difference allows us to theorize universal concerns more fully. It is this intellectual move that allows for my concern for women of different communities and identities to build coalitions and solidarities across borders.\textsuperscript{22}

Harihanar’s voice rings in the voice of Meena. She suggests the well-known phenomenon of unity in diversity. The co-responsibility and oneness anchor the idea of a peaceful society. Nature as such has no facility of recording various events or happenings. Only the time which witnesses the incident can lift the veil. On the other hand any incident is explained or justified by various people or groups, institutions or society depending upon their perception, understanding, prejudices, biases and interests. A truth is distorted as per the marriage of conveniences of different vested interests of individuals or groups. As Shiv says:

The important thing to remember... is that history, like the human mind, is a complex body with many strands. Ours is a rich, plural history. Of course all these threads must be repeatedly re-examined (p.97).

Any happening of the past cannot be put in true essence as it has different minds and further the interests are involved and a different aspect is treated as truth opposite of the real truth. Gary Day, discussing F.R.Leavis’s: Criticism and Culture, says:

The purpose of evaluating literature is to keep alive the tradition of the human world, not by admiring its achievements, but by bringing its values, purpose, and significance to bear on the present.\textsuperscript{21}

The journey from Mangala to Meena brings home the changing conditions of Indian women. Women are not outside from what is happening in the society. Sometimes to get education has been accepted as the basis for freedom for women and on the other it is considered that to become economically independent would provide them freedom. But every independent woman is not happy. Economic independence has enabled her to pay the price for happiness but has not enabled her to feel and enjoy it. In the garb of modernism, they have been caught in a web of new roles. This freedom, without realizing the responsibility, is not at all a sign of progress. To put up with the responsibility with full confidence and faith is another issue which has not been dealt seriously since ages. Patriarchal domination is still prevalent though in different shapes and moods. The change can be seen from the aspect of economic independence but not from the social aspect. Though the status of the family has been raised yet the light of faith within the family is dwindling. The magnetism of marriage has been reducing to a compromise. To make
the society run smoothly, some rules are necessary to follow but if one is chained to such an extent that longing for freedom becomes a cry then this craving for freedom takes the form of revolt. However what is needed is awareness that there is only a thin veil between adjustment and surrender. The smoothness with which the author touches the zenith of the problems in the society in both her novels makes the reader realize that assertive efforts for coexistence can benefit the mankind. The very act of knowing this can take us to the path of knowing the power of self.
NOTES


3. Githa Hariharan, *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1994) 16-17. (All further references in this chapter are to this book and they have been incorporated in the draft with page numbers.)


11. Harcharan Singh Sobti, “Ajit Cour: A Study in Loneliness,” Indian Women Novelists, Set III,


    184.

    (All further references in this chapter are to this book and they have been incorporated in the
    draft with page numbers).


16. Toni Wolff, “Structural Forms of the Feminine Psyche,” Translated by Paul Watzlawik,
    (Zurich: C.G. Jung Institute, July 1956) 14.


18. Gayle Greene and Coppelia Khan, Making A Difference: Feminist Literary Criticism


