CHAPTER III
FEMINIST ELEMENTS IN
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FEMINIST ELEMENTS IN

THE GHOSTS OF VASU MASTER

3.1. Introduction:

The success of any literary work depends on how the author selects theme and crafts it in his or her work. Githa Hariharan has been successful in this process because she has all the abilities required for a creative writer. Her imagination, creative force and perfect understanding of grand realities can be vividly observed in this novel. She has evolved a typical Indian English teacher, Vasu Master who is brought up in the traditional Indian social system. She has woven the entire study around the character of Vasu Master. The success of Githa Hariharan must be recorded both in selection and development of plot.

Githa Hariharan has selected a relevant and appropriate main character Vasu Master. Vasu’s wife, Mangala is a representative of the traditional social system. The third and most significant aspect lies in her feminist approach, which is echoed by her throughout the novel. The thematic continuity and message treatment are the two unique aspects of this novel. This chapter analyses The Ghosts of Vasu Master (TGVM) where Githa Hariharan depicts Vasu’s feminine ghosts who are Mangala, Jameela and Eliamma, the real ghosts from Mangala’s story. H.B. Patil has rightly observed:

“Many critics attempt to explore the novel with different perspectives including feminism, psychology and self discovery. The present novel
is essentially about stereotypes as found in the literature and culture of India. The focus of the novel is on the exploration of the stereotype of traditional Indian woman in *The Ghosts of Vasu Master*. In it Vasu Master’s mother Lakshmi and his wife Mangala exhibit the stereotype of traditional woman. These characters represent the formula of the psyche of millions of Indian women.” (Web 01-12-2011)

In order to examine feminist elements in this novel a careful analysis has been made in this chapter in a systematic manner. The novel has many pros and cons told in short chapters, alternating between events in the present, stories, and recollections, along with a bit of philosophizing on Vasu Master and his life style.

This novel is a credible success of Githa Hariharan. The feminist elements tackled by the author are not much in high tone but she has depicted sufferings of wife, Mangala in an interesting manner. The novel reaches its height in a meaningful manner. Her creative force is very much novel, realistic and equally convincing. It has been pointed out:

“*The Ghosts of Vasu Master* (1994) is a beautiful exploration of the human conditions and of human action. Vasu the newly retired teacher is left with a single student Mani, who though twelve has a mind of a six or seven year old. Vasu Master succeeds in drawing him out only by narrating various stories which help Mani to free himself from the burdens he carries with him. With a deft use of fantasy, fable and humane characters, Hariharan reveals new depths of the human condition and presents an entertaining and thought provoking novel.” (Sinha 112)
In the present chapter some observations have been made in order to throw light on feminist elements reflected in this novel. It deals with the life of a school master, Vasu who retires from his job in a local school. But he does not join his family in Madras and continues to teaching as a tutor. He takes to teaching Mani, a twelve-year old mentally challenged child and considers it as the biggest challenge of his life. In this process, Vasu starts reliving incidents from the past. He is beset by the ghostly twins’ dreams and memories.

Dreams take a perverse kind of pleasure in distorting facts and memories and refer to the exercise of memorization of facts. Memories haunt Vasu Master and bring with them ‘ghosts’ of persons fondly remembered. Vasu Master, through the stories he narrates, unlearns his own past experiences. The novel is, thus, concerned with revision, growth and understanding. It shows–

“The narrative, placed largely indoors, makes maximum use of memory and fables. It is the world of knowledge, the bringing together of different kinds of knowledge – traditional, experiential, herbal, fabulous, remembered past – and through them make an attempt at negotiating reality.”(Bharat 54)

The concept of woman is of pivotal significance in the formation of feminist theory. But as a concept, it is radically problematic because it is crowded with the over-determinations of male supremacy, invoking in every formulation the limit, contrasting others, or mediated self-reflection of a culture built on the control of women. Feminism in this novel is examined in the chapter.

Githa Hariharan’s novels focus on feminist elements and *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* is not an exception to this. However, the feminine ghosts include his mother,
grandmother and the actress, Rita-Mona his boyhood fancy. Vasu Master’s mother
dies when he is still a boy. She does not have a name for almost a year after her birth.
Parents do not want to spend money on the naming ceremony for one more daughter.
They also fear that people would laugh at them for not producing a son. The old
sweeper woman comforts her mistress saying that the girl would be the Laxmi of her
husband’s house. In this way, she gets the name Laxmi. But, to the end of her life, she
remains the sixth daughter of female weary she could never get over her inferiority
complex. Githa Hariharan is critical of the constraints of domestic life dominating
patriarchy. Sunitha Sinha Says:

“The feminist theories based on ‘gender’, structured the shape of the
feminist debate in the 1980s. These theories identify and deconstruct
stereotypes, create resistance to the ideologies promoted by them and
encourage women to seek alternative ways of life.”(Sinha 109)

Githa Hariharan has tried to reveal this new life of new woman in her
literature and reflected new feminism which was dominating Indian scene from
1990s. Her works grow out of her feminism and other political beliefs. To study these
characters in the novel The Ghosts of Vasu Master, it is necessary to recognize the
confined space of Indian women in the socio-cultural hierarchy.

The understanding of the centralised frame is vitally significant in this regard.
These characters try to identify themselves as valuable, social individual. They are the
part and parcel of patriotic traditional Indian society. To live life under the dominance
of male order is generally a feature of women stereotype. The social understanding of
the problem by the author is very much significant. Githa Hariharan’s characters are
built on the image of Indian woman as one of aurae/auras of silence.
Thus all these reflections are the intermittent struggle that the author has portrayed through her work. Realizing feminist elements is a major aim of the writer. She has noted that her choices were dictated by feminist choices which she has perceived in her major works.

*The Ghosts of Vasu Master* is a unique work created by Githa Hariharan focusing on feminist elements. Her standing, zeal and enthusiasm to fight and confront the established system have been rightly reflected on almost every page of this novel. Her crusade against the system is revealed in an objective manner here.

**3.2. Feminist Approach of Githa Hariharan:**

Feminism has been evolved in western liberal democratic tradition of United Kingdom, France and America. The whole process began in Europe after French Revolution of 1689 which proclaimed ideas like liberty, equality, fraternity and social justice, which led towards the feeling of unity and equality. The progressive ideas had changed the entire conception and vision of life. The male and female equality became a growing need to provide a new dimension of life. In due course of time, the progressive ideas travelled from Europe to India. These ideas have not only affected Indian social thinking, but also changed the social perspective of life. Githa Hariharan has closely witnessed all ups and downs in Indian society and has also witnessed the struggle experienced by Indian woman in manifold nature. She has to understand the social systems around her and has to mark her pathway for bringing total change in her life. Githa Hariharan has used different symbols and images to depict her struggle. *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* is a unique example of this portrayal. The English teacher Vasu Master is functions in a traditional soul frame and the characters around him represent his conflicting interests which echo his social experiences.
Women are defined not by the struggling development of their brain or their will or their spirit but rather by their child bearing properties and their status as compared to men who make, and do and rule the world. It is little wonder that when women come to the task of rendering their experience they come with a profound sense of their marginality and distance from having a meaningful impact, or self defined role in the world.

“Life is a challenge”, it has to be met. The clichéd saying is far truer in case of the woman. For a woman, life is always a challenge and since ages she has been subjected to the many challenges thrown by society, customs, traditions and men. The feminist approach is a key aspect to look at novels written by Githa Hariharan. She has very well treated her works under this approach. She treats her subject-matter in a sophisticated manner and she has accomplished in her task. She has courage and confidence while treating this complex issue. Githa Hariharan has depicted her feminism through different codes. They are not only social but are cultural. Cultural code refers to all the systems of knowledge and values evolved by the texts. The study of cultural codes in the novel can make one understand feminism in a righteous manner. She is impressed by the women’s skin and sari.

Githa Hariharan has developed feminism through different symbols. She has noted that, the principle of life of women should consist of ‘live and let live’. Enjoy life by sharing and caring for one another.

In *The Ghosts of Vasu Master*, Githa Hariharan also shows feminism through the characters of Mangala, Jameela, Eliamma. Here the meaning of Eliamma is the earth mother that shows that she uses the name in a symbolic manner. It has been considered that the novel is built on teacher-student relationship. The technique is
very well used by the author. Vasu Master has recently retired from P.G. Boy’s school, Elipettai; he was the teacher of English Language. The novel can be considered as experimental beginning.

Githa Hariharan has eloquently expressed human conditions by describing post-colonial bringing up in Indian society. The feminism of Githa Hariharan is full of sensitive explorations of human relationship planned in a realistic manner. In her first novel, *The Thousand Faces of Night*, she has voiced feminism, strongly. The second novel also centralizes feminism but in a different angle. *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* is unique in nature. U.R. Ananthmurthy says that the novelist develops the visitor of life on the principle of action and reaction.

It is a complex novel but not the difficult one. In other words, it looks complex but if one devotes ones attention to it, one can understand various aspects of it. We are unable to find numerical links as there are no numbers given to chapters. The whole theme is based on feminism. Githa Hariharan has ably depicted these consequences.

3.3. Sociological Perspective:

The sociological perspective can help to understand what forces played on the social matrix of fiction. It is true that the author is born and brought up in social environment and directly or indirectly the social conditions around him or her affect the setting of their literary works. Githa Hariharan is a product of Indian social system and the close observations made by her can be described as a sociological phenomenon.

All the characters in this novel are thus socially representing certain class of society. They are realistic, objective and closely related to social factors. Different
figures, such as Mangala, Jameela, Eliamma represent their rural background in the coastal India. Mangala and Jameela are born in the same village and share sufferings commonly. Eliamma belongs to fisherman community and she is struggling hard for earning her livelihood. It has been noticed that Eliamma swims to reach the centre of expanse of the ocean and wants to explore for its wealth by reaching in the depth of its womb.

This passage shows how Githa Hariharan has had a clear understanding of social surrounding problems around her. Eliamma’s struggle of life has been depicted by Githa Hariharan in an accurate way. The entire fabric of characters evolved and depicted shows how her female characters are representing social struggle and sufferings throughout their life. The progressive feminist elements have been depicted through her characters. Successful literature can always be described as a dialectics between tradition and modernity. Githa Hariharan has registered her protest against the traditional system, through characters like Eliamma who remains a free bird.

The author minutely observes the social behaviour of human beings prevailing around her minutely. These persons and their social relationships are also depicted by the author. The socio-cultural interrelationship of characters is woven by the author to describe various social issues in a structural social system, which has gender bias, caste differences and economic disparities as well. Literature has been truly described as mirror of society and it reflects social interactions prevailing at time when the author is evolved in the process of dialectics between society and culture. Understanding sociological realism is a popular trend in the literary world. A critics has perceived–
“Most literary historians and critics have taken some account of the relation of individual authors to the circumstances of the social and cultural era in which they live and write, as well as of the relation of a literary work to the segment of society that its fiction represents or to which the work is addressed.” (Abrams 288)

Gitaha Hariharan has ably examined social problems and reflected upon them with a rigorous feminist pursuit. In the context of feminist literature, sociological perspective aptly suits because Githa Hariharan’s novels present a social world of many complex relationships. In her novels, many men and women live together, journeying across life in their different age groups, classes and gendered roles. These crowded novels are placed in a cultural scene where many important changes of attitudes, norms and goals give these people a curious feeling of grouping in a new world. The young and the old are equally caught in a world of transition, faced with constant search for new moorings and guidelines. The women are particularly caught in the process of redefining and rediscovering their own roles, position and relationship within their given social world. In the extended families, that Githa Hariharan presents, two or three generations create unforeseen gaps and disruptions within the family fold. Women’s understanding becomes questionable as the old patterns of behaviour no longer seem to be acceptable. These struggles become intense quests for self-definition, because it would not be possible for one to relate to others with any degree of conviction unless one is guided by clarity about one’s own image and roles are reflected in literature; they are the author’s class, status, gender and political and other interests that is called sociology of literature.
In this work, the author’s social conditioning to look at *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* reveals a teacher’s approach to life. The relationship between Vasu Master and Mangala, his wife, is a depiction of social reality. From the perspective of sociology the Abram says: “Sociological critics treat a work of literature as inescapably conditioned in the choice and development of its subject matter, the ways of thinking it incorporates, its evaluations of the modes of the life it renders, and even in its formal qualities.” (288-9)

In this novel, the stories bear feminist pulses. Mangala, Jameela and Eliamma, the real ghosts from Mangala’s story are referred to as ‘my feminine ghosts’ by Vasu Master. But the ‘feminine’ ghosts also include his mother, grandmother and the actress, Rita-Mona, his boyhood fancy. Githa Hariharan constructs female characters such as Mangala, Jameela, Lakshmi, and Vasu’s grandmother in order to depict her views about the status of women in the male hierarchy.

This shows how Githa Hariharan has portrayed social interaction in the mind of Vasu Master. Literary authors draw their characters from social groups prevailing in a social structure, and they portray realities around them. It is observed: “Social structure, most sociologists agree, is the enduring patterns in society that place people into relative positions based on important characteristics like age, income, gender, race, or ethnicity.” (Ron 119)

The characters in *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* also represent these social interactions. Githa Hariharan has covered various levels of man-woman relationship between Vasu Master and Mangala. These works frame have potential roots of feminism and humanism. It is true that, “Social interaction is a complex, subtle
process whereby people initiate and respond to one another based on commonly understood symbols”(119)

Githa Hariharan has used such symbols as vehicle of ethno-cultural process. Her understanding of social milieu clearly shows study of human behavior. Human actors are sandwiched between the structural influences of the macro social world and the dynamic, creative process of social interaction in the micro social world. Githa Hariharan’s micro-social observations are clearly visible in the behavioral patterns of Vasu Master. The retired teacher, Vasu Master, cures and educates Mani, though not completely. The process of education of Mani begins as he starts drawing the marks and the pictures of stories that he has heard from Vasu Master.

This is based on understanding of ethno cultural process by Githa Hariharan. The minute sociological observations of a writer reflect social behavior of an individual. It is true that, “Recognizing how we are affected by the world and how we affect the world will certainly enhance our understanding of human behavior and our ability to act on the world ourselves.”(120)

The study of Githa Hariharan’s The Ghosts of Vasu Master reveals her objective social understanding with a keen view of micro-processes which can be stated as undercurrents in the social processes. The change in the novel should be associated with the changes in view of life and concept of time. The changes are related to content, technique and language. The writers writing such novels can be called revolutionary novelists.

Githa Hariharan’s treatment to the novel, The Ghosts of Vasu Master, has put forth manifold aspects of social life which can be studied through a sociological angle. Vasu Master has recently retired from his job in a small town school. Away
from the familiar circumscribed world of school, Principal and classroom, Vasu Master begins to relive incidents from the past, and discover, in his own halting but imaginative way, the nature of teaching, teacher and pupils.

All these processes occur on a wider social setting which Githa Hariharan has described minutely. How she has treated myth and cultural realities in Indian society can be described below.

3.4. Myth and Reality:

In any literary work there is a myth which the author evolves with facts around it. *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* speaks the life story. This myth is of a teacher’s ghost narrated by the author. The literary crafting undertaken by the author stands for the expression of facts woven round the narration. The author has unfolded different facets of social life in the mouth of Vasu Master. The study of this novel needs to understand different myths handled by the writer. The contemporary criticism requires understanding the facts about the myth developed by the writer. The plot, characters and events are clearly related to each other in a myth. The binding of these three requires a careful analysis of facts. The Vasu Master’s narration of life slowly unfolds facts one after another like a screen play and the ghost narrates the past life. Then one after another, events come to light and they throw substantial light on the linkage between the main character and sub characters. This social relationship is proved by the author keeping feminism on the top agenda.

Vasu Master feels compelled to realize the necessity of reconstruction and the reconstruction of feminine identity involves the narration of stories through the process of juxtaposition of fables and dreams. Jameela’s story is a clear fable of gender. Her three caterpillars tell each other stories, accumulating a common fund of
patterns; a rich mingling of dreams, a tapestry that belongs to all the three equally. Three brothers find the cocoons, and the allegory of gender acts itself out in their three fates. One ends as the yard of silk, a life as the object of desire, as the robes of phallic power. The second shrouds herself and lives and lays eggs in a paper box which is the life of procreation. The third escapes deep into the forest, hiding in a “shapeless camouflaging sack,” weaving and designing a tapestry full of meaning; but whatever she weaves is also ever-dissolving and always multiple because all of them weave in, with the finest of silk threads, the ghosts of her lost sisters.

Githa Hariharan points out that mother are the best teacher, through an apt illustration. Vasu Master had been teaching his son Venu cycling but was never able to make him learn the art of balancing. The father had failed but the mother’s sad memory succeeded which enabled Venu to learn cycling. To emphasize mother’s significance and difficulties associated with womanhood, Githa Hariharan has inserted the story of a mouse. In one of Vasu’s early fables, Mouse asks a wise snake how to become a teacher and the snake replies: one has to become first a judge, an ideology, priest and then a doctor. After mastering these patriarchal roles, the snake tells him that ‘one must grow a womb that nurtures and then delivers’. So the mouse must go home to his old mother and ask her, to teach her to be mother. The fable suggests that Vasu must unite in himself the roles of a patriarch and a mother.

Literature draws a thin line between myth and reality which improves the understanding about cultural life depicted by the writer in fiction. Githa Hariharan’s *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* is an original reflection in this vein. The description in the novel is cheerful, revealing and meaningful to understand myth and reality of Indian social life.
Tradition, the world over, has assigned a lower and subordinate position to women in its social set-up. However important the actions and duties of a woman be, she is always neglected the background and is obliged to subordinate her interests and desires to the collective will of her community and in particular to the male members. These constricting and narrow social norms drain her to obliterate herself, her individuality and separate identity.

Change is the law of life and the status of women all over the world has been undergoing a rapid change in recent times. Traditionally, the Indian women accepted the framework of the family with a blind faith and rarely, if ever, showed a spirit of rebellion. But times have changed and the women of India too are taking strides, though slow, at the moment towards attainment of selfhood, independence and personal dignity.

Vasu Master is a myth created by Githa Hariharan and she has represented her characters in the form of ghosts. In the novel, Githa Hariharan shows how women are subordinated right from their birth. In Indian society, women are assigned secondary position. Religion, social sanctions and cultural traditions further aid the subjugation of women. Women are never able to be other than the images trusted upon them by men. Vasu’s family structure seems to be patriarchal as the males rule the house. Vasu’s mother is discriminated on the basis of her gender since her birth. She belongs to that category of woman that is confined to the constraints of domesticity. She is victimized and discriminated. Her naming ceremony is delayed for a year as her parents do not want to spend money on one more daughter. They are apprehensive that people would laugh at them for not bearing the son. The old sweeper woman who sweeps their backyard and collects the cow dung comforts her mistress and claims
that life would have been easier for her if she were to be born as a male child. This suggests that the gender discrimination is prevalent in Indian society. The sweeper points out that she could still be the Lakshmi of her husband’s house and thus is named as ‘Lakshmi’ paradoxically, despite the avoidance of financial burden in organizing her naming ceremony. Her very name is symbolic and refers to the goddess. In a traditional Indian society, a woman is associated with life, fragility, purity, beauty and the goddess. These are again the characteristics assigned to women by men as they seek to define their limits and capabilities. It seems that Githa Hariharan is supportive of Simone de Beauvoir’s view that ‘a woman is not born, but made’. In a family, a female baby is an unwanted child; she is totally ignored. The birth of a female child is considered to be an unfortunate event in the family. It proves to be the starting point of humiliation and subordination for women which continues till the end of her life. Men believe that women should be confined to home, protected and controlled. The male dominated society renders woman with certain inherent qualities such as weakness, feeble-mindedness, patience and so on. She is also not supposed to complain about her sufferings. It shows that, “According to the common misconception and misuse of the term, myths are merely primitive fictions, illusions, or opinions based upon false reasoning.” (Wilfred, 183)

Githa Hariharan’s Vasu Master is truly a myth reflected in an effective manner which represents life story of a teacher and his narrations. The plot in a dramatic or narrative work is constituted by its events and actions, as these are rendered and ordered toward achieving particular artistic and emotional effects. Githa Hariharan, in The Ghosts of Vasu Master, has given emotional effects using fantasy in a fabulous fashion. The Vasu Master’s is a unique and wonderful character evolved by the author with complete craftsmanship. The texture and diction evolved in this character is self-
expressive and eloquent and Githa Hariharan has put her philosophy in the voice of Vasu Master in the form of ghost. A fiction writer touches social realities by understanding the bitter truth of life around. Iyenger observes, “Captivity, slavery, subordination were ugly, degrading, demoralizing things, and this applies to individuals as well as to whole people and nations.”(Iyenger 693)

Githa Hariharan has drawn her characters from traditional Indian society which is full of imbalances and full of social disparities. Vasu Master and environment around his dwelling exemplify this. The character of Vasu Master is a bundle of all these complexes which can be unfolded here.

Understanding myth and reality in a fiction is a challenging task in modern criticism. The author exposes social facts in her own style but it depends on the reader to understand these myths in a real sense. It acknowledged that a reader needs to be alert to the bewildering variety of applications of the term ‘myth’ in contemporary criticism.

In *The Ghosts of Vasu Master*, the reader has to understand many complex myths such as teaching career of Vasu Master, his coaching to Mani who is a slow learner and relations with his mother Laxmi, neighbour Eliamma, wife Mangala and their social relationship. Githa Hariharan has portrayed Vasu Master as a symbol of modern renaissance of India. Githa Hariharan has evolved her feminist symbols from her legacy drawn from Toru Dutt to the modern writer like Shobha De. Githa Hariharan, it seems, has carefully studied Indian English literature from Rabindranath Tagore to R.K. Narayan and evolved her feminism on her own footings. She has described the life of Vasu Master in a proper direction. The themes, background and
social typology of characters evolved by Githa Harihara make a clear distinction between myth and reality. The example can be cited below as Githa Harihara writes,

“Eliamma, Mangala and Jameela were, in my mind at least, ineluctably linked, and always had in hand. But though one had gone ahead of the other, both Eliamma and Mangala were receding ghosts. Their stories and Jameela’s for all their common motifs were different.”(The Ghosts of Vasu Master 131)

Thus, Githa Harihara has unfolded these motifs effectively. She stands as one of those new leading Indian novelists who have a passion of understanding myth and reality of the Indian social radius. Under this background, it would be interesting to study the patriarchy and marriage relationship pursued by Githa Harihara in this novel.

3.5. Patriarchy and Social Relationship:

Patriarchy is a unique character of traditional Indian society, appearing continuously from the ancient to modern period. The male domination in a society not only makes women’s life miserable but also disturbs their peace and harmony. In the novel, The Ghosts of Vasu Master the main figure, Vasu Master, is a product of patriarchy prevailing in the traditional Indian society:

“She knew what her ailment was, he told my grandmother. She learnt to feel for it as you should for a wayward sister. She did not have the time or will-power to confront the cause. But I prepared her, he said. I saw the way she had to go, and I eased the journey. That is all I can do.”(TGVM 16)
It is not fatalism or resignation but an active, strategic response to the conditions which are beyond his control. The subordinate position of all women characters in the novel bears the recognized mark of the feminist movement.

Vasu Master’s father is a patriarch. He is firm and uncompromising. He possesses the book called ‘Panchangam’, a kind of religious book. The book would guide human beings in all possible matters. It would instruct when particular ceremonies should be solemnized or the auspicious days so. It would also specify the auspicious dates in the year for fruitful copulation. Vasu himself describes the significance of this scripture.

This emphasizes the gender biased rationale of society. Vasu further observes that, a panchangam is as basic to life as oxygen. This means that religion and astronomy aid the subordination of women by in juncting male-centric doctrines.

Though he is an English teacher, yet Vasu is highly influenced by the age-old traditions and customs in the society. He is found and brought up in a rigid social system and has never been touched by the progressive winds. Vasu’s family structure seems to be patriarchal as the males rule the house. The behavior of Vasu Master has been depicted effective by. His relationship with his wife, Mangala and other female characters shows his secondary attitude to look at women. The male domination in an age-old social structure is reshaped by the author through the character of Vasu Master and the story is webbed around him: patriarchy, man-domain in married life, traditions.

The socio-cultural realities also make their way properly. *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* is a narration which mirrors the patriarchal system and the rebellion of women in this system. The feeling of feminist aspirations is also slowly pointed in this novel
in an indirect manner. There are no propagandist approaches of the author to this work. Since time immemorial woman has been the victim of the rule, domination and oppression and is treated like a beast of burden and an object of pleasure. Man has always looked down upon her as the weaker sex, his property, and as servile to him. Women's oppression is traced not to individual male malevolence but to the social and the familial structures based on patriarchy. In a patriarchal society, a female child is brought up under the strict control of her parents with the views that she is to be given to a new master, her husband, who will determine and shape her for the rest of her life. She is groomed to be an object of sale right from her childhood. She hardly gets any encouragement to develop her independent, individual self. The decision in terms of her career or even marriage is taken by her father, brother or mother. The patriarchal practices which reduce women’s status to inferior social beings are further perpetuated by myths and traditions which unfortunately have been embedded in the fabric of every society.

Indian society is traditional and is governed by norms and conditions prevailing in the traditional system in a rigid way. It known that the feminists believe that the different high positions occupied are for their innate qualities and not for the cultural hegemony therefore patriarchy prevails in Indian social life.

This hegemony of patriarchy intensely prevails in the traditional Indian society’s life. Patriarchy is the character of a social system. It shows: ‘Where men dominate, oppress and exploit women’.

Githa Hariharan has delineated epitected this type of situation in most of her works. The Ghosts of Vasu Master is not an exception to this. The reflection of feminism was but natural in literature. The treatment that Vasu’s mother, Lakshmi
receives at the hands of her parents in a marginalized fashion. Githa Hariharan focuses on gender bias of the society through the depiction of Vasu’s mother. She strengthens the claim of feminist movement that women are social constructs. Vasu’s mother, Laxmi is the birth daughter. She could never overcome her inferiority complex.

Githa Hariharan’s work also reflects such elements interestingly. The Western civilization is pervasively patriarchal; that is, it is male-centered and controlled and is organized and conducted in such a way as to subordinate women to men in all cultural domains. Even in the eastern societies this male domination continues as a legacy of rigid social system. Patriarchy was observed by early critics. It was noted that patriarchal society had come in the way of women occupying position of prestige.

*The Ghosts of Vasu Master* truly exemplifies this stance. In traditional societies, people differentiate between male and female in every aspect of life. It is clear that, ‘when women champion their cause, men blame it on patriarchy’.

There are many basic problems in value crisis. The greatest problem for women is that preservation and expression of their identity. Githa Hariharan has also incorporated this identity crisis in her novels. In *The Ghosts of Vasu Master*, she has tried to reveal this process effectively. In Indian society the patriarchy prevailed right from epic age and is rooted in cultural system. Sujata and Gokulwani have noted that, “Patriarchy has always hindered women from exercising their power and release themselves off the control over them. The culture of most of the countries is patriarchal and a woman is in constant fight for right.” (Sujata 48) Women’s progress is hindered by patriarchal attitude of men. And women are strongly to get their due.
Githa Hariharan’s portrayal of feminism is different and includes various aspects in relation to feeling of patriarchy. She has led her characters against the patriarchal system.

3.6. Characters in the Novel:

The significance and success of an author depends on how effectively the social theme is explained and how efficiently the characters have been drawn and developed by him/her. The thorough understanding of novel mostly depends on the clear cut interpretation of characters evolved by the author. In the novel *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* the characters represent the Indian social system. Vasu Master is a typical English teacher serving in a socio-cultural system. His mission of life is teaching of English. However, he develops his feelings and actions in the rigid system.

The man-woman relationship treated and revealed in the novel, is also traditional and is based on patriarchy. The woman is looked to as a secondary person and she is exploited in the system. These feelings have been described by Githa Hariharan on a balanced ground. Her style of narration is gentle, touchy and equally realistic.

Vasu Master never fully gathers the women in his life but perceives the things around him with a new understanding. Vasu’s cousin Shakuntala comes and stays in his house for four weeks. She suffers from some mysterious illness. The pain is unbearable for her. Vasu’s grandmother and aunt whisper that she is overburdened with work in her in-law’s home. This points out the fact how married women suffer at the house of their in-laws. Vasu nurses his cousin, Shakuntala for a month knowing she would die after returning to her in-laws.
The Ghosts of Vasu Master is narrated by a newly retired teacher. Having spent most of his life teaching at the private PG Boys’ school in the Indian town of Elipettai, Vasu Master moves a bit uneasily into retirement. Vasu Master, through the stories he narrates, unlearns his own past experiences. The novel is, thus, concerned with revision, growth and understanding. Jasbir Jain has justly commented upon the choice of the male narrator and protagonist of the novel:

“Githa Hariharan’s The Ghosts of Vasu Master… 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 son’s 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.” (Bharat 47)

Githa Hariharan is one of such epoch making writers who have successfully taken feminist stance in fiction. Githa Hariharan’s Vasu Master is her own creation. It shows –

“His farewell present from his students was a notebook and among the things he does is to begin to make notes – jotting down observations, memories, and thoughts about teaching. He also continues to teacher a
bit, becoming a tutor. He does not have many students, however, and eventually he is only left with one – the most complicated and intractable case, Mani. The boy is twelve when he comes to Vasu Master, but ‘with it seemed the brain of a six or a seven year old’. He does not speak, either and he has been through numerous schools and doctors, without anyone being able to draw him out or keep him under control.” (Web 10-04-2011)

Vasu Master’s life and his shy nature are unfolded by the writer in an effective style. The commitment of Githa Hariharan can be described as per her dedication to feminism. Most of her novels focus on this aspect. Vasu Master has no great immediate success with Mani but eventually finds at least one thing that seems to keep him entertained and interested in stories. Vasu Master himself is not brought up on proper stories discovering in his childhood that the ones he was told were not at all like the ones other children heard and ‘even worse than their bare, inadequate story content was their favorite theme: the dangers of storytelling.’ Now, however, he can see their power and finds them useful for himself too.

The narration has been made interesting by the writer by providing new insight as she has a creative genius. There is a link between the past, present and future. Vasu Master does not live only in the present: the past also haunts him, and part of what he is trying to do is to ‘make peace with memory’. His wife, Mangala died many years earlier, and she only gradually becomes a strong presence in the book. Since his childhood and his past are recounted, all in trying to understand the present. Vasu Master the a protagonist of the novel and it seem that he is having a deep respect for Mangala, Laxmi, Jameela and Rita Mohna.
Mangala is an example of typical Indian women thought over by the writer. Vasu Master remembers Mangala, his wife, as a shadowy figure. Although they have lived together for fifteen years and have had two sons, he knows her more as a cloudy memory than a person. He thinks of her as a woman who has remained as obscure as his forgotten mother. He recalls her and meets her ghost by the seashore, dressed in silence, offering him only a partial view. Always, the aura of silence and mystery hang about her. Mangala and Jameela are childhood friends in village. She speaks with pleasure and excitement of the childhood landscape of fields on their way home from school. Vasu has known her as a man, as a husband. Both Mangala and Vasu Master’s mother, Lakshmi are unable to assert their right to separateness of being and this leads to their mute suffering.

Mangala is open to the possibility of change and is ready to mould herself to suit the needs of her family. She represents those women who always sacrifice their wishes and dreams for their family and prepare themselves for any eventuality. Mangala carries out her responsibilities as wife and mother with a delicate, feminine modesty. For her, home is the first and last priority. She serves her husband dinner and irons his clothes. She takes care of him during his illness. She scrubs the steps of her house clear twice a day. She works hard and rarely comes to the school like the other wives. But she also looks after the studies of her children. During the visit to the sea-shore, Mangala enjoys momentary freedom:

“It was as if an entire week of breathing damp, salty air, the freedom from routine and the freedom of muddy clothes, the joy of finding shells intact, and above all, the cool, mysterious secret of the waves,
drew Mangala out of herself; allowed her to briefly shed her customary reticence” (TGVM 123-4)

Mangala does not venture into the water but collects shells and other things for her children. She knows the art of swimming but desists from it. Vishnu asks her to swim with them. She replies that she used to swim in the village pond till she was ten. This incident points out that a woman has to leave all the hobbies after her marriage. She cannot continue her earlier life. On another occasion, when Vasu Master takes Mangala and children to see a film about Henry VIII, Mangala blindfolds Vishnu with her handkerchief and covers Venu’s head with her sari during the love-making scenes on the screen. It would not have been possible for Vasu Master to protect them from evil influences. As Vasu says, she is her own censor. She is a loving and caring mother. It is only after her death that Vasu, Vishnu and Venu realize her importance.

Vasu Master discovers Mangala’s little treasures five years after her death. He finds a small mirror, two sandalwood boxes of Kumkum, old photographs, their wedding invitation card, pieces of her dowry silver, bunches of flowers made of satin and pieces of cloth embroidered with flowers, birds and animals with Mangala’s signature all wrapped in a soft silk sari. All these things are invaluable for Mangala and obviously they are related to her family life. Her husband seems to be everything for her. Marriage institution in India curtails the capacity and scope of a woman and compels her to accept family system as the only alternative means of living life. Mangala is the first educated woman in her family but remains confined to domesticity. However, she diverts her creative urge to embroidery work. But the pieces of embroidery showing her creativity are not admired by Vasu Master. The
invaluable things of Mangala do not hold any interest for him. However, they evoke in him the image of Jameela who has taught Mangala sewing and stitching. Simon De Beauvoir says, “The situation of woman is that she-is a free and autonomous being like all creatures-nevertheless finds herself living in a world where men compel her to assume the status of the other.” (Beauvoir 138)

The novel mainly focuses on two characters, Vasu Master, and his wife Mangala. H.B. Patil states:

“It is a tragedy on the part of Mangala that though she gave Vasu Master two sons, Vishnu and Venu, he reminds her more as a cloudy memory than as a person. The focus of his memory always lays somewhere else and she always remains in the background.”(Web 01-12-2011)

Mangala and Vasu, Veshnu, Venu live together for fifteen years and have two sons; yet he does not know her completely. She remains obscure. But, she is a reincarnation of Vasu’s mother. Vasu recalls her as ‘pale’ and ‘insubstantial’:

“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. (TGVM 41)

There is an aura of silence and something mysterious about Mangala. The narrator points out that he has observed Mangala and Vasu alone in a room, she is serving him his dinner or she is putting out his clothes as he gets ready for school; or she is sitting by him, needle in hand. She is a devoted wife and loving and caring mother. She nurses Vasu whenever he is ill; but he never acknowledges her sacrifice:
“She was, what shall I say, 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.”(123)

Githa Hariharan implies that a man always desires to make woman part of himself. The fact that she is other than himself bothers him. Man is just unwilling to accept the ‘otherness’ of woman. Likewise, Mangala has no say whatsoever in the affairs of her family–

“In these intimate photographs of Mangala, I was not present except as a hidden spectator. The other person, the one she laughed with and looked in the eye, with which she shared threads and cloth to make a beautiful landscape, was a woman, Jameela.”(42)

There are pragmatic social elements described by Githa Hariharan through her female characters. Many a time she introduces some interesting tribes and social sections which are very important in this novel. Eliamma belongs to the cross-section of fisherman’s community and Githa Hariharan has shown her as a self-sufficient woman.

Eliamma’s story is narrated by Mangala, who is considered to be a ghost expert. Mangala has first seen Eliamma at the sea-shore. She lives in a fishing village and is brought up to be a fisherwoman. She is beautiful and could have married one of her admirers. But she prefers to live alone in her hut and wander by the sea-shore night after night. She seems to be an orphan looking for her home. She looks at the sea and desires to be in the centre of the sea. Once Eliamma sleeps behind an old boat
in the sea. When she wakes up, she sees a stranger who asks her if she wants to travel across the ocean. He suggests that he can make her invisible so that fishermen would not prevent her. Eliamma agrees and becomes invisible to go out on her sea-voyage. She is so fascinated by this experience that she does not desire to go back. Eliamma’s abandonment of her home and her desire to leave alone can be seen as women’s desperate desire to get rid of this world that is full of sufferings for women. Later on, Eliamma goes back to the shore in search of the stranger but could not find him anywhere.

The very name, ‘Eliamma’ compounds the words earth-mother and as the name suggests she is an epitome of feminineness. She tries to see something at a great distance; something as yet unknown, hidden perhaps in the depths of the waters mid-sea which is unresolvable contradiction of her gender. She makes a bargain with a stranger by trading bodies with him for a month. She can then be invisible so that finally she can go out to sea on boats otherwise barred to her by the men. The stranger never returns to trade back the original bodies, and so she gets stuck to a ghostly state of invisibility in which everything she touches sickens; freezes; dies; or becomes invisible to everybody but her. In other words, she can be fixed in a recognizable place with established though restrictive relations to everything around her, or, be invisible to culture and toxic to those dependent upon her, being faithful to her gender scripting.

Githa Hariharan believes that women possess immense possibility which remains mysterious to man. Man never tries to realize the aspirations of women. It can be said that Eliamma’s story shows woman’s desires which are either ignored or suppressed by man:
“Eliamma did her share of fisherwomen’s work: she made herself useful mending nets, cleaning fish, drying them. She went to Church with the other young women. But she did not seem to have either family or friends. The story was that she had many admirers and could have married any of the young fishermen, but she continued to live alone in her hut, and to wander by the seashore all hours of the night like an orphan looking for her home.” (126)

Thus Githa Hariharan has portrayed her female characters from different social segments.

Jameela is a childhood friend of Mangala and they stay in a village near the seashore. Vasu Master has seen this village during his visit to Mangala’s house. Githa Hariharan describes the separation between Jameela and Vasu Master—

“Once Jameela had left; I tied up the pile of cloth in a large sheet and put it away in Mangala’s trunk. As I locked the trunk two things struck me: I had folded all the bits of cloth so that only the reverse side of knots, thread stubble and barely discernible design were visible. At the same time, I realized that I had not left a single reason for Jameela to visit me again. I had placed miles, expanding safely by the minute, between her and me.” (44)

Githa Hariharan shows Jameela as a victim of sexual exploitation at the hands of males. Her case is a glaring instance of how woman is primarily considered as a sexual object. Her free nature and laughter are often mistaken as an invitation on, for her sexual desires. After her husband’s death, Jameela decides to go back to the village as it is impossible for her to manage on her own. Jameela and Mangala have
been childhood friends. Jameela shares everything with Mangala. She also teaches Mangala the skill of sewing. As Vasu Master says: “It was their completion of each other that held me, the coexistence of earthy and ethereal, cocoon and butterfly. A perfect pair, team or couple.” (43)

He is held by their mutual completion. Their closeness and stubborn friendship may have emanated from their desire to seek the bond outside the marital relationship.

Vasu is perplexed when he meets Jameela for the last time and sees Jameela’s eyes filled with pity:

“I looked at her one last time, at the face now hidden by a black mask. There were, on both sides of her invisible nose, round slits covered with white nets. Something from behind these nets (something caged, contained) held me for an instant; then it let go. It was perhaps a pair of searching, pitying eyes. (70)

Vasu Master recalls Jameela as he is obsessed with her physicality. She evokes sexual desire in him. She is used to visit Vasu Master’s house and asks for the unfinished pieces of embroidery even after Mangala’s death. They continue to meet for some time. But when Jameela finishes all of Mangala’s works, they do not have any reason to meet. However, Vasu Master could not forget Jameela and preserves everything she and Mangala have stitched. Jameela goes out of his life but her memory remained etched in him as ‘an image - and a ghostly one at that’. Vasu feels that Jameela is ‘caged’ and ‘contained’ which is the destiny of the women more particularly of the widows as they are not expected to love once again. They should suppress their desire for love or relationship whereas men can indulge in love or extra marital affair. Just as in the case of Vasu, who is attracted to many women after the
death of his wife Mangala, it shows that society has two different set of rules for men and women.

Githa Hariharan has interestingly described the relationship between these two characters as:

“The two swam and frolicked as if the whole world – the cool water, the afternoon stillness, the shared squeals of pleasures, all belonged to them forever, as if they did not plan to grow up into full fledged women, in to Mangala and Jameela.”(43)

Vasu Master’s father is an Aurvedic doctor and his mother Lakshmi passes away when he is a little boy. Vasu Master says about his mother that she would have been timid, worrying, little thing nagging, pestering like a high pitched mosquito. She did not learn how to bite though.

Lakshmi, Vasu Master’s mother, has fought a losing battle on all fronts. Her husband, and sometimes her mother-in-law enrage her. She has melted away literally into the shadows of loud, tyrannical household.

In his boyhood, Vasu Master is enamoured of the physical beauty of an actress called Rita or Mona. The photograph of Rita or Mona covers three-fourths of a calendar in his father’s room. He could recall Rita-Mona dressed as an apsara:

“Rita-Mona wore an emerald-green sequinned cloth round her billowy breasts, and an equally dazzling purple garment round her hips... Her neck, shoulders and stomach were a different colour from her face and arms... She had lush eyebrows that were a startling jet-black. They curved like wings. Her thick lips were a vivid blood-
red...My own tribute to her charms was that not once, not even on my worst days...the calendar to smother me, were the only sights in the world which moved me to the point of constipation.”(17)

The calendar displaying Rita-Mona’s beauty remains permanently linked with the memories of Vasu Master’s boyhood. Vasu Master’s attraction for Rita-Mona highlights the fact that women are treated as objects of lust. The image of a woman that emerges out of the man’s sensual apprehension is always the distorted image of the woman. The obsession with women’s physical beauty results in the negligence of their intelligence. Githa Hariharan strongly objects to such a representation of woman in photographs and advertisements. It can be perceived as an insult to the woman’s honour and dignity.

The image of Rita-Mona transfixes Vasu Master beyond limit. It is the mix of desire and fear, the pleasurable gaze and anxiety of being pierced by her usurpation of the look, the child being terrorized by patriarchy and titillated by its forms of pleasure. Rita-Mona lingers in Vasu’s memory more than his mother or his wife both of whom die early but never really live much in his awareness.

The characters have a strong feminist bearing. Mangala and Jameela find their voices in the marginalized media of sewing and stories, sites where the ghosts of lost sisters may live, visible to those who are as receptive as Eliamma has been to her stranger. For Githa Hariharan it would seem that the subaltern position of a postcolonial woman finds its voice through the means comparable to her characters’ strategies. Subaltern consciousness is a great characteristic of Githa Hariharan’s progressive feminism. She is in favor of exploited working woman who is the sufferer of the system. Githa Hariharan is also Eliamma, the woman writing who must trade
her body with the ghostly male, moving invisibly through male narratologies, her touch deadly to their gendered forms, conventions, conceptions, values and structures.

3.7. Tradition and Protest:

Githa Hariharan is successful in depicting ethno-cultural processes which she has closely observed. Her feminism raises above all these processes. It has been accounted for that a tribe called the Nagaleelas has always lived here. They were a simple, happy people: the men brave and lusty, the women hardworking.

This brings out feminist elements deeply rooted in Indian life, to support her social environment. Further, it has been denoted that they called the forest their mother, which is not surprising because she gave them everything they needed, she kept them alive. They called her Vana Devi and knew they were safe, even blessed, because they always felt her presence in the forest.

About the process of dialogue between tradition and modernity, the fable of timelessness comes to the fore in which Tradition and Modernity are Old and New, united in a fluency, which speaks the present in a non modern way. And Vasu is seen balancing himself in relation to a series of figures with too oppressive a form of rationality, whether Modern on Traditional. Vasu’s mother and his wife’s character show that they are in the bindings of cultural system through the marriage.

Thus, a close examination of tradition and protest against it, make an important feature of Githa Hariharan’s novel *The Ghosts of Vasu Master*. Literature is a social entity evolved by the writer by making a clear distinction between age-old traditions and revolt against them. The sociological study of Githa Hariharan’s novel
shows that she has made a painstaking analysis of social reality through her novel. The three major features of *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* can be noted below:

- The novel focuses on the character of Vasu Master and the entire theme is unfolded around him. The characters around him describe the struggle between tradition and modernity.

- The main point is a description of subaltern consciousness and depiction of the marginalized women. Githa Hariharan has tried to disclose the exploitation of Indian women in a realistic way.

- Githa Hariharan is committed to communist philosophy and complex social issues. She is communicating with self-sufficient and stable Indian women who are fighting against various difficulties which hinder the path of their progress.

3.8. Analysis of Language and Discourse in *The Ghosts of Vasu Master*:

Discourse is the narrative rearranged and reconstructed for its own purposes and aesthetic effects, as in the artful, intricate rearrangements of time and events. Any novel is a painting of the social canvas that provides colorful spectra on the span of time, space and social conditions prevailing around it.

In order to understand the communication modes in literature, discourse analysis as a method has been widely accepted in recent times. This method helps one to examine the content and its quality and quantity. The messages designed by the author can be explained by using these techniques. These messages can be studied on the basis of dialogues and debates in the novel. There are many benefits of discourse analysis as a methodological device. Its manifestation can help to exercise the
meaning, effectiveness, and eclectic communication treated forcefully through these messages. Here in this research work this method has been developed and used in a befitting mode. A large number of critics have used this technique for study of conversation among the various characters in the form of dialogues in a novel. Hence this method is adopted in this research. Through such an approach, the text becomes a message that can be understood only via references to the code.

The reader gets the message only by knowing the code that lies behind it. A structuralist reading is essentially the quest for the code.

Under this backdrop, it would be interesting to analyze the hidden messages in the novel, *The Ghosts of Vasu Master*. By unfolding these codes one can understand discourses effectively. As feminism is the main thrust of this research work a number of instances are cited through which Githa Hariharan has treated her messages effectively. Githa Hariharan has noted that Vasu Master’s Father did some thirty odd years and began to stalk me like a stubborn ghost.

Thus, the concept of ghost first appears in this novel. Like Shakespeare, the author has developed the code Ghost which is the focal point of this work. The author has treated the tradition in a unique way as she describes that he had blessed her as she fell flat, a passive, inert sponge at his feet.

Vasu Master is making self-actualization through this narration, by watching his father work, by looking at the calendar on the wall. He says that his beloved’s hypnotic piercing look and her swelling breasts coming out of the calendar to smother him were the things, which gave him constipation.
The author’s close observance is part of social reality. He is obsessed by Jameela’s throaty laughter, which shows that she is earthy, with slight limp that offset her ripe perfection.

Thus social customs, and traditions through her Githa Hariharan’s characters. The meaning of the word, ‘Eliamma’ is ‘world’s earth mother’. Githa Hariharan has tried to unfold some hidden facts through the depth of the water of mid-sea.

Mangala is the first educated woman in the family believing in ghost, besides her grandmother. These are symbolic representations through which Githa Hariharan has given a meaningful evocation of feminism in her novel.

3.9 Summary:

The different aspects explained in this chapter clearly show that this novel is one of the achievements of Githa Hariharan. Her style, method of presentation and the handling of messages clearly show that she is writer of great caliber.

Her narrative style is a grand success and her achievements clearly illustrate the faceful elements of feminism tried by her. The socio cultural success of this novel is thus covered in this analysis. The discourse analysis conducted in this chapter draws different aspects evolved by Githa Hariharan.

Thus The Ghosts of Vasu Master is an outstanding novel treated with a feminist angle. There are forty eight chapters in the novel but there is no logic of line in the chapters. Even sometimes there is no logical link between the events in some chapters. The single chapter looks independent one. It is like a monologue. Virginia Woolf says, “A chapter is an interior monologue.”
This unfinished tale is a fusion of three forms such as story, unreality and falsehood. In the story, there are three forms mingled together: allegory, parable and fable. In unreality, there are two forms, fiction and myth. In the third form there is falsehood and is a creative treatment of two things: lies and invention.

Thus in this chapter, the full focus is on understanding of *The Ghosts of Vasu Master*. First, her feminist approach is examined with a sociological perspective. The myth and reality which Githa Hariharan has treated are explained. Further, the concept of patriarchy and social relationship is examined. Major characters in novel are unfolded. The protest was evaluated against the background of a traditional society. Lastly, important messages are examined by following the tools and techniques of discourse analysis. The next chapter of the thesis deals with ‘*When Dreams Travel*’.

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