



Self-revival through Food in Geetha Hariharan's “Remains of the Feast”

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Abstract— Women become prey to the double-edged sword of patriarchy and the cultural norms imposed on them, owing to their gender. In process, women are rendered voiceless and often the ‘self’ of women remains muted. Further, if a woman is a widow, she is as good as a dead person, and her existence hardly matters in a patriarchal milieu. Making the matters worse for women are various restrictions imposed on widows, especially if they belong to upper castes. The widows are expected to follow various rituals, particularly those related to food. Often widows are required to adhere to stringent food norms and abstain from eating various foods. Facing such challenges in life, while asserting her ‘self’ to create a new identity for herself towards the end of her life is the protagonist Rukmini, who is a widow in the short story “Remains of the Feast” by Geetha Hariharan. Rukmini, a Brahmin widow demands food that she is forbidden to eat all through her life as a widow, when she is on her deathbed. With the help of her great granddaughter Ratna, she subverts the norms of patriarchy by eating the tabooed food. The present paper argues that food becomes a metaphor for craving –craving for eating tabooed food and also craving for wielding power through food and thereby challenging the norms of patriarchy imposed on women. Further, the women characters in the short story assert themselves through food and create a new identity for themselves, while discovering their new self.

Keywords— Food, Identity, Patriarchy, Self, Subversion.

Githa Hariharan (born 1954) is an Indian writer based in New Delhi. Her first novel, *The Thousand Faces of Night*, won the Commonwealth Writers' Prize for the best first novel in 1993. Her other works include the short story collection *The Art of Dying* (1993); the novels *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* (1994), *When Dreams Travel* (1999), *In Times of Siege* (2003), *Fugitive Histories* (2009) and *I Have Become the Tide* (2019) and a collection of essays entitled *Almost Home: Cities and Other Places* (2014) [1]. The short story, “The Remains of the Feast,” is about a Brahmin widow named Rukmini, who craves for variety of tabooed food when she is on her death bed. Her great granddaughter Ratna becomes her accomplice to smuggle food for Rukmini. On her death bed, Rukmini eats many foods that are a taboo, especially for a Brahmin widow and

finally demands a bright red sari to adorn herself before she dies. However, after her death Rukmini is burnt with a pale brown sari as per the rituals of Brahminic culture.

Anderson et al. [2] in their essay, “Feminist Perspectives on the Self,” maintain that “To be the Other is to be a non-subject, a non-agent—in short, a mere thing. Women’s selfhood has been systematically subordinated or even outright denied by law, customary practice, and cultural stereotypes.” Food practices/eating habits prescribed/proscribed by some cultures also serve to render the status of the other to women in a patriarchal society. Thus, it can be said that food practices tend to curb the expression of self for women, especially widows. As a Brahmin widow, Rukmini, who has adhered to the food norms prescribed by her community, all through her life,

makes demands for various tabooed food while on her death bed, that shocks her family. Ratna, the first-person narrator, who is the great granddaughter of Rukmini says,

...(W)e began a strange partnership, my great-grandmother and I. I smuggled cakes and ice cream, biscuits and samosas, made by non-Brahmin hands, into a vegetarian invalid's room. To the deathbed of a Brahmin widow who had never eaten anything but pure, home-cooked food for almost a century [3, p. 284].

It may be noted how Rukmini, as a widow is restrained from eating any food other than home-cooked food for almost a century. Rukmini is made to suppress her desire for food, as she has to follow the food norms prescribed for a Brahmin widow. It may be said that Rukmini is repressed from expressing her choice/self, even in matters as basic necessities as food. Rukmini, as a widow is totally deprived of expression of self and has to adhere to the strict norms prescribed for a widow, unmindful of her choice. A dying Rukmini who is almost mute, is rendered selfless and voiceless, demands all that she is prohibited from eating, probably knowing that an invalid's demands will be catered to. Through her demands for tabooed foods, she vents out her suppressed cravings while also challenging the dictums of caste/patriarchy. Her demand for food made by non-Brahmin hands indicate that Rukmini wants to subvert her caste barriers and enjoy the liberty of tasting food cooked by non-Brahmins. Ratna, her great granddaughter reasons with the demands of Rukmini and willingly becomes her accomplice to jointly challenge the dictum that her community/caste has imposed on her beloved great grandmother.

Mentioning of Rukmini's strange demands, Ratna states that they had gotten used to the unexpected, inappropriate demands of her great grandmother. Ratna mentions that Rukmini had by now tasted "lemon tarts, garlic, three types of aerated drinks, fruit cake laced with brandy, bhel-puri from the fly-infested bazaar nearby." (285). Rukmini's delirious demands continued when she screams saying "Get me something from the bazaar. Raw onions. Fried bread, Chickens and goats." (285). Ratna sadly admits that they then knew that Rukmini was lost for them. Rukmini's craving for tabooed food is indicative of carnal pleasures that she is deprived of because of her widowhood. Food is often linked to sensual pleasures. Reflecting on the food culture of women during the Victorian era, Brumberg [4] in her essay, *The Appetite for Voice* opines that

Adolescent girls were expressly cautioned against coffee, tea, and chocolate; salted meats and spices; warm bread and pastry; confectionery;

nuts and raisins; and, of course alcohol. These sorts of food stimulated the sensual rather than the moral nature of the girl. No food (other than alcohol) caused Victorian women and girls greater moral anxiety than meat. The flesh of animals was considered a heat-producing food that stimulated production of blood and fat as well as passion (166).

Rukmini pines for foods that arouse sensual pleasure. This could be due to years of bland food that she is fed as a widow. On her deathbed her cravings are indicative of her lack of sensual pleasures as well as her urge to overcome the stringent rules imposed on her as a widow. She challenges Brahmin patriarchy that has tied her through food by eating tabooed food. Through her demand for strange food, Rukmini overturns the patriarchal power that the society has imposed on her for almost a decade. It may be said that food metaphorically becomes a tool to empower Rukmini to free herself from the clutches of patriarchy, though be it for a short interval.

McQuown [5] in her article on "Literature, Food, and Gender" states that "Refusing to eat, serve, or cook in gender-designated ways is a sign that a character refuses to abide by the social system in which they are enmeshed". Refusing to eat the food prescribed for a Brahmin widow, Rukmini demands to eat forbidden food and is successful in fulfilling her desire with the help of her great granddaughter Ratna. Thus, going against the gender normative rules prescribed by her culture, Rukmini undermines the caste restrictions imposed on her. Further, she invites the wrath of her society when she is not cremated with a bright red sari as per her last wish before she dies. Ratna deeply mourns the death of her great grandmother. She plans to avenge her dear great grandmother's death through food. Ratna says, "For a while I haunt the dirtiest bakeries and tea-stalls I can find. I search for her, my sweet great-grandmother in plate after plate of stale confections, in needle-sharp green chillies, deep-fried in rancid oil. I plot her revenge for her, I give myself diarrhoea for a week" (287). Ratna follows Rukmini in breaking the gender norms imposed on women while she recalls the memories of her loving great grandmother through the kinds of food she consumed in her last days. Ratna wants to relive her great grandmother's delirious food choices in order to remember her, not minding her (Ratna's) own physical health. Thus, Ratna also may be said to challenge the patriarchal norms through food, in the same manner as her great grandmother.

CONCLUSION

Food in this story conjectures as a metaphor to subvert patriarchy and to challenge the gender designated ways of eating food. Both the women characters- Rukmini and Ratna discover a new self through food, as food becomes a means for self-assertion for the two women. The two women transcend the societal norms through the ladder of food while creating a new identity for themselves, that is different from their previously subdued selves. It may be said that food becomes a vehicle for the women in this short story to revive their new self.

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