



Asserting Agency in Negotiating Trauma: A Critical Analysis of Githa Hariharan's "The Remains of the Feast"

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Abstract – The emergence of trauma as an alarming global issue has demanded attention and concern worldwide. The term 'trauma' comes from the Greek *τραύμα* meaning 'wound'. The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English defines trauma as "an unpleasant and upsetting experience that affects you for a long time". Trauma as a theory in literature escalated in the 1990s, accelerated by the pioneering works of scholars such as Cathy Caruth, Geoffrey H. Hartman, and Shoshana Felman. In contemporary Indian English fiction, the genre of short stories has consistently represented an essential component of the literary landscape. The potency innate in short stories equates to that of novels in their efficacy to provide radical insights into social, cultural, historical, and psychological arenas. "The Art of Dying" (1993), authored by the esteemed contemporary postmodern postcolonial writer Githa Hariharan is a cluster of short stories that reflect on women's lives within the modern Indian setting. "The Remains of the Feast", a short story from this collection, unfolds the traumatic events in the life of Rukmini and her response to them as recounted by Ratna, her great-granddaughter. The purpose of the study is to inquire into the reactions of Rukmini and Ratna to the events that unwind especially during Rukmini's final phase of life. This paper employs a feminist lens to examine the responses of these two central characters and brings to light the assertion of agency in the process of negotiating with physical and psychological trauma, shedding light on their respective positions within the patriarchal framework.



Keywords— Agency, Patriarchal, Postmodern, Trauma

I. INTRODUCTION

The etymology of the term "trauma" can be located in the Greek word "titrōskein" which means "wound." Initially, the denotation was limited to referring to physical wounds. However, in due course of time, it transcended the limits of the corporal realm, and today 'trauma' also denotes a psychic wound inflicted upon the individual. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, DSM 5 of the American Psychiatric Association has included trauma under a new category called stress-related disorders. In the beginning, the idea of trauma was delimited within the scope of psychology. Later the notion gradually pervaded the expansive field of literature, resulting in a specific area of academic discipline known as 'Trauma Studies'. This

multidisciplinary field attempts to explore the resonance of trauma within the literary domain and comprehend its complex interplay within the bounds of individual cultural and sociological milieu. Trauma theory gained significance in literature during the 1990s prompted by the groundbreaking works of distinguished scholars such as Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, and Geoffrey H. Hartman. The basic underpinnings of contemporary cognition regarding traumatic experience and memory are established in the seminal works of Sigmund Freud. Psychoanalytic theories on the origin and effects of trauma trace their inception to the nineteenth-century inquiries into shock and hysteria, conducted by eminent scholars including Jean-

Martin Charcot, Josef Breuer, Morton Prince, Hermann Oppenheim, Pierre Janet, and Abram Kardiner.

Freud's seminal work, "Studies on Hysteria" (1895), co-authored with Josef Breuer, and his later conceptual assimilation outlined in "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" (1920), bear a profound influence over the theory and application of trauma within current literary discourse. These foundational tenets constitute a cynosure for literary trauma critics, shaping their analytical frame and interpretive purview. As an academic field, trauma studies fathom the unintelligible implications of trauma within societal and literary contexts. It employs an intense empirical approach that includes rhetorical, cultural, and psychological dimensions. The chief nexus to the pedagogical discourse is an inquiry into the formal innovations implicit in textual expressions ranging from traditional print media to contemporary digital platforms.

"*The Remains of the Feast*" is a somberly impressive tale of Rukmini, a senile widow. The narrator is Ratna, Rukmini's great-granddaughter. The duo shared a warm bond despite the huge generation gap. Rukmini, already a widow also lost her only son and daughter-in-law and outlived them by ten years. To add to her woes, she suffered from a chronic goiter which culminated in cancer. Rukmini's unusual and unconventional demands during her final days expose the essence of agency and subversion. The story reaches the climax with Rukmini's death and its aftermath. Rukmini's life, fraught with traumatic events, prompts reflections on the assertion of agency in the process of negotiating physical and psychological trauma and the ways to combat and cope with grief and haunting memories.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Susie Tharu, in her essay titled "The Impossible Subject: Caste and the Gendered Body" (1996) reads '*The Remains of the Feast*' in comparison with another short story '*Mother*' by Baburao Bagul. In her discussion on "The Remains of the Feast", Susie Tharu through a feminist reading of the story, directed our attention to the feminist body in the figure of Rukmini, the old Brahmin widow. She quotes "The narrative does not present widowhood and the paraphernalia of ritual and taboo that attends it, as gender oppression. The enemy here is not patriarchy, but a social world that fails to sustain the spirit. The victim is fleshly nature itself, not women." (1312)

Roopashree, in her article "Self-revival through Food in Geetha Hariharan's "Remains of the Feast" argued that food becomes a metaphor for craving forbidden desires and wielding power, challenging the patriarchal norms imposed on women. She concluded that the two women established

a new identity for themselves through their use of food, thereby transcending social norms.

Amirtha Devarajan's article "Disease, Death, and Desire in Githa Hariharan's "The Remains of the Feast" analyzed Rukmini's stance through an intersectional approach and also illustrated how disease/death can incite the repressed self of the individual and society while challenging the deep-seated oppressive social customs.

Shri. Laxman G. Jathar, in his article Githa Hariharan's "*The Remains of the Feast: Deconstruction of Subaltern Voice*", concluded that while a woman may strive to control her desires and passions, there comes a time when she can no longer suppress them. The author inferred that Githa Hariharan argued for the necessity of elevating the subaltern voices of women and opposed the establishment of separate traditions for them.

The article "A Study of Githa Hariharan's "*The Remains of the Feast* from the Feminist Perspective" by Nira Konar dwelled upon how Feminism is often a construct of Patriarchy and offers a critique of social, economic, and cultural norms that restrict the freedom of women. He asserted that Rukmini's character was particularly significant as she represented elderly, marginalized women whom society denied control over their bodies. Her rebellion served as a means of resistance against the politics that strip individuals of their bodily autonomy and identity.

III. TRIPLE TRAGEDY IN RUKMINI'S LIFE

Rukmini met with the tragedy of losing her husband at an early phase of her marital life. Her son was barely in his teens when she was widowed. Fate denied her marital bliss and she was left to survive the test of time for years to come. In the patriarchal setup of Indian society, a conspicuous disparity prevails in the recipience of a man and a woman when death occurs to one of the spouses. A widower earns sympathy and support from the community whereas a widow invites despair and despondence. Society often perceives her as inauspicious and deems her unfit to partake in celebratory occasions and religious rituals. The plight of a widow is further worsened as she meets the challenges while coping with her loss. She becomes vulnerable to blame which may go to the extreme of making her accountable for her husband's demise.

Rukmini is a Tamil Brahmin, a community known for its strict orthodoxy. In the cultural environment of this class, the proceedings that follow widowhood indicate the deep-rooted biases subjected to women. The widow is tonsured and hitherto clothed in a plain cotton saree. Her movements are restricted and she is confined to a secluded space usually in the backyard or on a roofed terrace. Rukmini was no

exception. However, she did not encounter dire situations. She shared a room “one corner of the old ancestral house”. Nonetheless, she lived a life as befits a widow that was pre-structured by patriarchy.

The next tragedy struck Rukmini when her son and daughter-in-law succumbed to old age. She had to bear the trauma all along her life and now it has been almost a decade since she outlived them. She lost them at a time when she, who was at a ripe age needed their care and attention the most. In the Indian historical convention, a woman is considered to be ‘dependent’ on a man throughout her life. As a daughter, she depends on her father; upon marriage, on her husband, and during her later years, she is dependent on her sons. This patriarchal dogma safeguards the power of men and subordinates the agency and autonomy of women. Rukmini, now a childless widow is dependent on her grandson and granddaughter-in-law.

The third tragedy showed itself as a health hazard. Rukmini endured a chronic presence of a goiter which later manifested into cancer. The narrator recalls her childhood memories thus, “The goitred lump, the familiar swelling I had seen on her neck all my life, that I stroked and teasingly pinched as a child, was now a cancer that spread like a fire down the old body, licking clean everything in its way.” (p.9)

Thus, Rukmini's life was tragically marked by the capricious hand of fate. Not only did she endure the psychological anguish resulting from the loss of her husband and son, but she also underwent the physical torment of a chronic illness, for which she adamantly refused any form of medication. Henceforth, she bore the burden of enduring the anguish and sorrow stemming from a triple tragedy, deprived of the felicities of marital happiness, the gratification of motherhood, and a life of sound health.

IV. NEGOTIATING TRAUMA

Despite the grave circumstances posed by destiny, Rukmini exhibited tolerance and grit in the face of all odds. This in no way implies that she remained unaffected by the tragedies; indeed, they were still vivid in her memory. Cathy Caruth, in her ground-breaking work *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narratives, and History* (1996), defines trauma as “In its most general definition, trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, and uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomenon” (11).

This becomes evident when the narrator states “She would sit in her corner, her round plump face reddening, giggling like a little girl. But some uninitiated friend would be unable to resist and would go up to my great-grandmother and ask her why she was laughing. This, I knew, would send her into uncontrollable peals. The tears would flow down her cheeks, and finally, catching her breath, still weak with laughter, she would confess.” (pp.9-10)

It is often postulated that two opposed emotional or psychological states yield similar outcomes. Laughter may manifest both in moments of profound joy and in instances of intense distress. Likewise, tears may accompany both laughter and sorrow. In the context provided, Rukmini's uncontrollable laughter, swiftly followed by tears, serves as an indication of the underlying trauma she grapples with, perhaps employing laughter as a coping mechanism to navigate her distress.

Sigmund Freud, in ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’ discusses the most powerful single obstacle to recovery. He mentions “What is involved here is a ‘moral factor’, so to speak: a guilt-feeling that finds its gratification in illness and refuses to forgo the punishment that suffering represents”. (p.170)

Rukmini endured the presence of a goitrous lump on her neck for an extended duration. Despite recommendations for surgical intervention during her son's lifetime, she declined the procedure. Her reluctance stemmed not from fear of death but from the want of dying. Enduring the agony serves as an expression of a death instinct within her psyche. At the same time, she did not want to die an unnatural death. Her conviction rests upon the precepts delineated within Hindu scriptures, which posit that abrupt deaths are associated with profound soul anguish. Relatives contributed to her apprehensions by recounting tales of untimely demise, instilling in her a profound dread.

Over the years, the malignant swelling developed into cancer. However, she declined to get treated. Morally, she experiences a sense of guilt for outliving both her husband and her son. Eventually, she views her loss as a little hilarious. As stated by Ratna, she wonders that “She, an ignorant village-bred woman, who signed the papers my father brought her with a thumb-print, should survive; while they city-bred, ambitious, should collapse of weak hearts and arthritic knees at the first sign of old age”. (p.9)

Simone de Beauvoir, in chapter ten titled ‘Women’s Situation and Character’ of her seminal book “The Second Sex,” writes: “Women are made to suffer,” they say. “That’s life; nothing can be done about it.” This resignation engenders the patience often admired in women. They withstand physical suffering much better than men;

they are capable of stoic courage when circumstances demand it: without the aggressive daring of the male, many women are distinguished by the calm tenacity of their passive resistance; they deal with crisis, misery, and misfortune more energetically than their husbands respectful of duration that no haste can conquer, they do not measure time; when they apply their calm stubbornness to any undertaking, they are sometimes brilliantly successful." "In a generous woman, resignation looks like indulgence: she accepts everything; she condemns no one because she thinks that neither people nor things can be different from what they are." (p.790)

Rukmini acquiesced with resignation and moved on with life. Unlike the maladjusted relations that most mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law share, she had a harmonious relationship with her grandson and granddaughter-in-law. Ratna, her great-granddaughter, refers to Rukmini as 'my sweet great-grandmother'. Rukmini was uncomplaining: "She would chuckle, when I kept the lights on all night and paced up and down the room, reading to myself." Rukmini was 'cheerful and never sick'. Her display of what Beauvoir terms 'calm, stubbornness' is seen when she refuses medication to cure herself.

In her work "Trauma Studies," Michelle Balaev conceptualizes a "Pluralistic Trauma Theory," which posits that a traumatic event fundamentally alters an individual's perception and identity, paving the way for new understandings of the world. She regards memory as a dynamic process capable of constructing and reconstructing the traumatic past during moments of recollection. She mentions thus "The emphasis on the possibility for both indirect and direct knowledge of the traumatic past suggests that trauma has particular effects in certain instances of its occurrence. This approach often relies more heavily on the external stressor to show that trauma occurs in specific bodies, time periods, cultures, and places, each informing the meaning." (366).

Rukmini approaches life with a philosophical perspective. At a certain point, she begins to respond to the trauma of losing her loved ones with a sense of humor, which is characterized by a unique and quirky nature. Known for her distinctive sense of humor, she often giggles to herself, expressing a sense of placidity that can be interpreted as a new understanding of life that transcends conventional worldviews.

V. THE FINAL ENACTMENT

Rukmini was now at the terminal stage of life. Bedridden for almost two months, she finally consents to see a doctor. The young doctor who examined her reported a bleak prospect for recovery and advised care in the comfort of

home. At this juncture, Rukmini's conduct takes an unforeseen turn. Born in a conservative Tamil Brahmin family where eating anything from outside is strictly prohibited, she suddenly craves non-traditional, commercially prepared food items typically classified as "junk food."

Uma Chakravarti in "Gendering Caste through a feminist lens" quotes Leela Dube regarding the role of women of upper castes in maintaining caste boundaries and its purity through the preparation of food, as follows, "The bodily purity of upper castes is believed to be linked to what is ingested- so what is eaten, how it is prepared, and how it is served ..." Rukmini, who has adhered to the customary behaviors expected of a woman belonging to the upper caste Brahmin community throughout her life, now exhibits a stark departure from established traditions concerning dietary practices as reflected in the conversation between them:

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

"Do they?" she persisted. 'Will you,' and her eyes narrowed with cunning, 'will you get one for me?'

And does it really have egg in it?"

'Lots and lots of eggs,' I would say, wanting her to hurry up and put it in her mouth. 'And the bakery is owned

by a Christian. I think he hires Muslim cooks too.' (pp. 12-13)

The portrayal of Rukmini's peculiar conduct, characterized by her persistent desire for cakes and Cola, may initially appear as a mere inclination towards experiencing such culinary delights, possibly influenced by observing Ratna's consumption of these items. However, a deeper analysis reveals that Rukmini's cravings transcend mere gustatory curiosity. She shows an insatiable appetite, indifferent to the whereabouts of the source or the vendors of these eateries. Rukmini derives pleasure from flavors hitherto unexplored, oblivion to familial perceptions and societal norms. With each passing day, her demands diversify unabatedly, indicating a profound departure from conventional expectations as Ratna says, "She had tasted, by now, lemon tarts, garlic, three types of aerated drinks, fruit cake laced with brandy, bhel-puri from the fly-infested bazaar nearby." (p.14)

In the seminal work "Studies on Hysteria" authored by Josef Breuer and Sigmund Freud, a key reference is made to the notion of terminal delirium as represented within the framework established by Jean-Martin Charcot. Charcot, a pioneering figure in the domain of neurology and psychiatry, proposed a schematic depiction of the 'major' hysterical attack, comprised of four distinct phases. Among

these phases, terminal delirium assumes significance as a critical juncture within the broader phenomenology of hysterical manifestations. This phase, characterized by a culmination of heightened emotional turmoil and cognitive disarray, represents a focal point in the clinical understanding and conceptualization of hysterical phenomena. Within the context of Breuer and Freud’s inquiry into hysteria, the acknowledgment and analysis of the terminal delirium phase contribute substantially to the elucidation of the complex interplay between psychological distress and somatic expression in afflicted individuals. Ratna describes “It burns, it burns,’ she would yell then, but she pursed her lips tightly together when my mother spooned a thin gruel into her mouth. ‘No, no,’ she screamed deliriously. ‘Get me something from the bazaar. Raw onions. Fried bread. Chickens and goats. Then we knew she was lost to us. She was dying.” (p.14)

This kind of random demand for tabooed things superficially seems to be a repressed desire that has surfaced now. Years of living a tongue-tied and forbidden physical life have taken a toll on her physically and mentally. But it is not as simple as that. Rukmini is in a state of terminal delirium. Here, the repressed desire is not the desire for food but a desire to die. This outlandish wish list was not limited to food alone. Rukmini demands, “Bring me a red sari,’ she screamed. ‘A red one with a big wide border of gold. And, ‘her voice cracked, ‘bring me peanuts with chilli powder from the corner shop. Onion and green chilli bondas deep-fried in oil.” (p.15)

Rukmini meets her end after a brief state of insanity. As set up by the patriarchy, a woman’s life is made purposeless in the absence of a male counterpart. Rukmini has been enduring a pointless life devoid of close relations with her husband and her son. Yet she succeeds in moving along with life without taking any drastic steps. Moreover, she awaits a ‘natural’ death thus resisting the process of getting operated for her illness. This prolonged wait for her end becomes her death drive and she indulges in consuming unhealthy food in a state of delirium.

VI. VI RATNA AFTER RUKMINI’S DEATH

The death of her great-grandmother deeply affects Ratna and she is visibly depressed. She suffers from situational depression (also called reactive depression) a term coined by the German psychiatrist Kurt Schneider in 1920. It is a short-term, stress-related depressive disorder that is endogenous. Ratna is loaded with many unanswered questions. Though a prospective medical student, she is still an amateur. She is in the process of studying the external anatomy and has not yet explored the internal emotional storehouse of the brain. She is left clueless about the pain

that coagulated into cancer of which her great-grandmother told her nothing. Ratna is obsessed with the memories of her late comrade and is filled with vengeance.

Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, the American-Swiss psychiatrist, formulated a seminal model delineating five distinct stages of grief viz. Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, and Acceptance. These phases serve as a framework for understanding the psychological processes individuals undergo when confronted with the profound loss or demise of a dear one. Ratna’s experiences can be readily correlated with these stages, reflecting the universality and applicability of Kübler-Ross’s model in elucidating the complex dynamics of grief and mourning.

In the first phase, Ratna persists in denial, steadfast in her quest to locate her beloved great-grandmother. She reveals, “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.”

In an act symbolizing her journey through the phase of anger, Ratna orchestrates her retribution through self-inflicted suffering as a manifestation of her inner turmoil and punitive measures against herself. She admits, “I plot her revenge for her, I give myself diarrhea for a week.”

During this phase, Ratna navigates the bargaining stage, wherein she strives to reconcile with the distressing event and its implications. She says, “Then I open all the windows and her cupboard and air the rooms. I tear her dirty, grey saris to shreds.”

Subsequently, Ratna attains a state of acceptance, wherein she endeavors to manage and adapt to the profound loss she has experienced. She asserts, “I line the shelves of her empty cupboard with my thick, newly-bought, glossy-jacketed texts, one next to the other.”

VII. CONCLUSION

Throughout her life, Rukmini exhibited a steadfast assertion of her agency despite her illiteracy, notably wielding financial authority by affixing her thumbprint to pertinent documents. She actively participated in decisions concerning her medical treatment, thereby retaining autonomy over her well-being. Furthermore, she commanded reverence from her granddaughter-in-law, who attended to her needs with deference and esteem.

In the present story, both Rukmini and Ratna display subversive behavior. The term “subversion” denotes a systematic process wherein the values and principles upheld by an established system are contradicted or overturned, often intended to undermine the prevailing social order and its normative structures. As the narrative reaches its

crescendo during her final days, Rukmini boldly defies societal norms by openly expressing her unconventional desires, including a penchant for consuming impure food and employing cosmetic implements to enhance her appearance. In doing so, she subverts the rigid constraints imposed upon Brahmin widows, unequivocally asserting her agency without reservation. Contrastingly, Ratna has already transgressed Brahminic dietary regulations, introducing Rukmini to the delights of cakes and aerated beverages. Furthermore, Ratna demonstrates a remarkable endeavor in overcoming the trauma precipitated by the loss of her great-grandmother.

Thus, the two women demonstrate undaunted behaviors that diverge from societal expectations, challenging and potentially reshaping prevailing norms. Their actions disrupt traditional hierarchies and foster a more egalitarian societal paradigm.

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