

Disease, Death, and Desire in Githa Hariharan's "The Remains of the Feast"

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Abstract

This paper attempts to read the intersections between disease, death, age, gender, and caste in Gita Hariharan's short story "The Remains of the Feast." The story revolves around a 90-year-old Brahmin widow, Rukmini, diagnosed with cancer. Interestingly, cancer comes as the reminder of a (un)lived life, and thus, the focus is not on Rukmini's bodily degeneration, but on her desires. Rukmini's craving for oily food (with onion and garlic) from unhygienic marketplaces transgresses the social codes laid for an upper-caste Brahmin woman Rukmini's desire to wear a red saree (for her cremation) despite being a widow is overruled by her daughter-in-law. Her yearning for food and material pleasures stands in stark contrast to her deteriorating condition. Hariharan's story subtly challenges the fixed notions of caste and questions the binary between public/ private, married/ widowed, young/old vis-à-vis disease. This paper attempts to analyse Rukmini's positionality vis-a-vis an intersectional approach. Secondly, it shall illuminate how disease/ death can, on the one hand, refract the repressed self of the individual and society while challenging the oppressive societal codes.

Keywords: Desire, Death, Disease, Life, Transgression, Caste, Gender

Introduction

Gita Hariharan is a celebrated contemporary Indian English woman writer who is known for her novels *The Ghost of Vasu Master* (1994), *In Times of Siege* (2003), *When Dreams Travel* (1999), among others. Apart from that she has published several short stories, scholarly essays, and newspaper articles. She bagged the Commonwealth Writers' Prize for the best first book for her novel *The Thousand Faces of the Night* (1992). The short story in question, "The Remains of the Feast," is

widely anthologised and critically acclaimed.

This short story was originally published in the anthology titled *The Art of Dying* (1992). Hariharan in *The Art of Dying* seeks to destabilise the binary between life and death and instead probes the grey area of "life-in-death" and "death-in-life." The usage of life-in-death here is different from that of the Romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge, whose character life-in-death appears in his famous poem "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner"; Coleridge portrays him as an antagonist, more dangerous than death itself. While life-in-death refers to spiritual life that continues even after one's mortal being passes away, death-in-life refers to an un-lived, repressed life. Such an approach challenges the concept of life and death as definitive forces (the starting and ending point, respectively); instead, it views them as interactive forces that resist fixed meanings. This is why the anthology's title uses the word 'dying' – death as a process– instead of the term death, which denotes the end.

This reiterates the idea that death is not an event that happens in a moment. Instead, it can co-exist with life, especially for patients with terminal illnesses like cancer, death spans over a considerable amount of time. Such an understanding enables the readers to question representations that deem life a boon and death a punishment. Hariharan strives to demystify and naturalise the idea of death, which is either viewed as ominous fate or as a mysterious phenomenon worthy of romanticisation across literary traditions. *The Art of Dying* foregrounds the dialectical relationship between the living and dying.

"The Remains of the Feast" revolves around Rukmini, a ninety-year-old Brahmin widow diagnosed with cancer. At this moment of personal and familial crisis, two significant transformations take place: firstly, the familiar comfort of 'home' is displaced by the alienating experience of nursing home (and thus, the dynamics of the space changes); secondly, cancer, here does not merely signal death rather it kindles the realisation of an (un)lived life (death-in life). This is ironic because she

followed all the injunctions laid by her caste as it promised a secured afterlife. However, the illness does not bring about death; and instead, illness brings about desires. In her seminal text *Illness as Metaphor*, Susan Sontag argues that "illness reveals desires of which the patient probably was unaware. Diseases—and patients—become subjects for decipherment. And these hidden passions are now considered a source of illness" (Sontag 45).

Thus, the focus is not on bodily degeneration but on desires, not on disease but on the literary imagination. Rukmini is not told that her condition is beyond help. Still, her pronouncing her first transgressive wish to her granddaughter, Ratna, shows that she has already entered the final stage of her life, which is not marked by fear but by the desire for things forbidden hitherto: eggs, aerated drinks, fries, garlic, raw onion, chicken, goats, hair-removing creams, tweezers, etc.

Death, Disease, And Desire In "The Remains of the Feast"

It is interesting to note that cancer is not subjected to medical gaze in this short story except for a few instances where the bodily suffering is detailed:

"My great-grandmother looked at her for a minute, her lips working furiously, noiselessly. For the first time in my life, I saw a fine veil of perspiration on her face. The muscles on her face twitched in mad, frenzied jerks. Then she pulled one arm free of the tubes, in a sudden, crazy spurt of strength, and the LV. pole crashed to the floor. '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 comer shop. Onion and green chilli bondas deep-fried in oil" (Hariharan 286).

Rukmini dies immediately after expressing her death wish. The urgency in her tone, punctured by her worsening condition, demands attention as it is an instance of rebelling against one's own body. This split between body and mind is not the conventional one, where the soul would transcend bodily limitations. Instead, this split indicates the ways in which women's bodies have been controlled,

manipulated as docile bodies by the hegemonic discourse: firstly, as an (old) woman; secondly, as a Brahmin woman; thirdly, as a Brahmin widow. This is topped by the fact that the burden of maintaining the tradition is thrust upon women.

Rukmini fights this cancerous oppression of patriarchy through her gluttonous acts. The body, thus, isn't in conflict with the mind; instead, it becomes a site where contesting values, ideologies, desires are inscribed; it, at once, is an agent of patriarchy and resistive to it; in other words, the body fights itself, blurring the line between the body as a diseased site and body as an ideological site. While Brahminical patriarchy restricts her to home-cooked food for all her life, she subverts these interdictions by ordering "lemon tarts, garlic, three types of aerated drinks, fruit cake laced with brandy, *bhelpuri* from the "fly-infested bazaar nearby" (Hariharan 285). In this light, it is noteworthy that she transgresses the codes laid for her caste, gender, her age and her medical condition. The cracking voice in the passage quoted above is an instance of a contestation where desire attempts to overpower disease.

Hariharan tactically foregrounds 'disease' as the site where the real and repressed, body and mind, desire and death, self and society are negotiated. To exemplify one such instance, it was the unexamined lump on her neck which grew cancerous in old age. The outgrowth could be read as a metaphor for repression; the lump becomes the tangible site with repressed desires. In this light, the lump growing cancerous can be read as "the return of the repressed." Cancer becomes the enabling trope that pushes her to hurriedly 'live' to outdo the death-in-life that she has experienced and finally achieve life-in-death. The fast spreading of cancer intensifies the pace and force of desire. In this way, the physical/mental/ psychological and internal/external fuse into each other:

Our secret was safe for about a week. Then she became bold. She was bored with the cakes, she said. They gave her heartburn. She became a little more adventurous every day. Her cravings were varied and unpredictable. Laughable and always urgent (Hariharan 284).

Having said that, one should be wary of doing away with the bodily effects of a disease like cancer. Instead, the idea is that both mental repression (and desires) and bodily harm are troubling. However, in Gita Hariharan's "The Remains of the Feast", the narrative focuses more on the former than the latter.

Caste, Sexuality and Disease: An Intersectional Approach

The feminist sensibilities propounded in Hariharan's "The Remains of the Feast" cannot be fully understood if one chooses a specific strand or category of feminist theory to read it. Instead, a wholesome reading can be facilitated through an intersectional analysis of the text. The idea of intersectionality was advanced by Kimberle Crenshaw, who argues that the "multidimensional" experience of being a woman is erased with a "single-axis framework". She argues against a calculative approach to oppression. Instead, she advances an "intersectional experience" which "is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated" (Crenshaw 2). Although the focus is on Black women here, this argument can be extended to other contexts as well, that is, to understand different structures of oppression and resistance.

An intersectional approach towards Rukmini's character is helpful, as it opens up the nexus of relations which frames her positionality. First of all, she is an upper-caste woman who has lived a puritanical life. In her essay "Conceptualising Brahmanical Patriarchy in Early India: Gender, Caste, Class and State," Uma Chakravarti identifies effective "sexual control over women not only to maintain patrilineal succession but also to maintain patrilineal succession caste purity" (Charkravarti 3). Rukmini exemplifies this dual oppression: the very fact that her life is structured around the interdictions of Brahmin society testifies this. The baggage of caste purity compelled her to adhere to the notions of purity, pollution, and hygiene:

So, we 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 (Hariharan 284).

The deliberate attention on junk food, on the one hand, and on "non- Brahmin hands," on the other highlight that this terrain of desire that Rukmini enters is marked by transgression. The fact that she specifically orders the cake with egg in it from the 'Christian' bakery invites the reader to read against the grain, to understand this as an act of subverting Brahmanical patriarchy. The emphasis on 'Christian' invokes the fact that she comes from a Brahmin household which has taught her to look down upon other religions. More than the food itself, these "non-brahmin hands", Christian hands become markers of impurity. Her desire, thus, is not simply related to food- cravings, but her craving to question norms which she passively accepted hitherto.

Secondly, the text drops subtle hints about the ways in which her sexuality is controlled, not just throughout her life but also after her life. First of all, the text indicates that Rukmini was prematurely initiated into womanhood:

"She would sit in her corner, her round, plump face reddening, giggling like a little girl. I knew better than ask her why, I was a teenager by then. 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. She could fart exactly like a train whistling its way out of the station, and this achievement gave her as much joy as a child might get when she saw or heard a train" (Hariharan 282).

The childlike quality of her joy and giggles indicates subtly that her childhood might have been suppressed or cut short with the imposition of womanhood vis-à-vis marriage, motherhood, and widowhood. This, again, shows how society has constantly appropriated her identity and sexuality. Her dying wish of wearing a red saree for her cremation conveys that her sexuality has been regulated by the social codes laid for a brahmin widow; the red saree is a signifier of marriage, sexuality, and fertility. Though all her urgent gluttonous desires are fulfilled, Ratna's (Rukmini's granddaughter) mother vehemently opposes the idea of cremating her like a bride. This shows that while she is allowed to transgress within the private realm (by eating food prohibited by a Brahmin woman), her desire to create a 'public' spectacle is denied. Hariharan's story subtly not only challenges the fixed notions of caste but also questions the binary between public/ private, married/ widowed, young/old vis-à-vis disease.

Disease, in itself, is posited as a natural, inevitable impurity. Cancer, according to Susan Sontag, is also a disease that is usually associated with impurity and puss-filled and oozing bodies. This association might also be one of the reasons for Rukmini to no longer care about the Brahminical notions of purity and impurity. This frames the specific position inhabited by Rukmini further. The impurity caused by disease enables Rukmini not only to challenge the idea of impurity/purity, but also the idea of "eternal feminine" where women are viewed as "unique and changeless" (Beauvoir). After adhering to the principles of "eternal feminine" for ninety years, Rukmini exhibits agency in attacking the casteist patriarchal system and its ageist associations. It is important to note that this agency is not explicitly sketched out, rather it needs to be "read" against the grain. Susan Lanser in her seminal essay "Towards a Feminist Narratology" argues that "the narratives which have provided the foundation for narratology have either been men's text or texts treated as men's text" (Lanser 343). This highlights the dearth of methods, models and materials in assessing a woman's text. A normative reading of "The Remains of the Feast" might lead to the conclusion that Ratna's mother drew that "She was a sick old woman. She didn't know what she was saying" (Hariharan 286). Such a reading

overlooks a crucial point about reading women's text and agency.

In view of the above points, it is clear that an intersectional approach allows us to better understand Rukmini's life-in-death and death-in-life since it is not viewed from a singular (reductive) perspective of her being a diseased old woman. Instead, it is considered to be an old, widowed, diseased, upper-caste woman who lived by the rules of her caste and gender, which controlled and repressed her childhood, sexuality, and identity. This multidimensional framework allows us to read her desires, transgressions, subservience, resistance, agency, oppression, disease in a wholesome manner.

The text, thus, uses the cancerous and ageing body as a trope to understand how Brahmanical Patriarchy works. It shows how a woman who is old and diseased no longer remains suitable for her movement from *strisavabhava* to *stridharma*. While *Strisavabhava* is considered intrinsic to women's behaviour, the women we encounter in this story have already followed her *stridharma* and thus can be "allowed" to have these personal gratifications. After being a producer for all her life, she is finally a consumer who is being consumed by cancer. But like Sontag points out that cancer is a disease of excess since cancer cells multiply incessantly, Rukmini's response to it is also in excess, both ultimately leading to death, literal as well as metaphorical. Rukmini wants to live on and her last wish to be cremated in a red saree is her final desperate attempt to achieve life-in-death. However, that wish is not granted by the larger structure of Brahmanical Patriarchy. Her transgressions remain anonymous; her feast is nothing but the remains of the feast.

Conclusion

Going back to the title of the anthology *The Art of Dying*, Hariharan postulates dying as a complex art constituting the contradictions between reality and imagination, body and mind, interdictions and resistance, oppression and agency, self and society, life and death. In doing so, she poses a question: If dying is an art, then who is the artist? Is this artist in the ivory tower or the one who is a product of society? In Rukmini's case, we see her attempts to own, control, and shape her death by uprooting

established norms, that is, her attempt to be an artist of her life and death. However, her attempts are undercut by the societal norms that her family chooses to follow. Forever, she remained a passive product of society; however, the fear of an un-lived life galvanised her to take complete charge, to become an artist (in the ivory tower), cut off from societal restraints. Hariharan places Rukmini between these two polarities, foregrounding the complexity of dying, which must not be viewed as a medical phenomenon but also as a complex individual/ social phenomenon.

The very fact that Hariharan understands dying as an art shows the multifaceted relationship between 'illness', death and 'literary imagination'. Literature delivers illness, death, disease from the maze of medical vocabulary, and instead uses illness as a means to refract structures of society. Thus, the relationship between 'illness and 'literary imagination' is not a fantastical one, but one which is anchored in society.

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