

## *Chapter III*

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### **Magical Realism in *The Ghosts of Vasu Master***

Githa Hariharan being a representative of postmodern women novelist, she uses the technique of magical realism in *The Ghosts of Vasu Master*. Magical realism creates a semblance of reality. This novel takes the readers into the world of memories, fantasy and dreams. Madhu Jain highlights and pays rich tribute to the significant merit of the novel thus:

A marvellously written book with wit as corrosive as dry ice and a sharpness which can pin down vague niceties like a needle through a butterfly, and the ability to anthropomorphize animate and inanimate life . . . Hariharan takes in her large fabulist sweep most of the problems of India: from post-colonial hang-ups or blues, clerk mentalities and, allegorically India's perennially troublesome unity-in- diversity and lots more . . . .

Magical realism emerged in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Magical realism yokes reality with fantastic and fabulous unimaginable elements. Magical realism flourished and was in vogue in Latin American literature. The term 'magical realism' was first used by the German art critic Franz Roh in 1925. He used the word 'magic' to refer to things beyond reality like metaphysical. He saw magical realism as a "reengagement with the real and not as a crusade outside the real world" (Roh 15).

The magical world designed by the novelist comes close to the truth and appropriateness of the real world. Magical realism includes elements from the traditional genres like the

fairy tale, gothic novels, myth and mystical stories. *The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms* defines Magical Realism as,

a quasi-surrealistic art form...mixture of realistic and fantastic elements.

Realistic details and esoteric knowledge are intertwined with dreamlike sequences, abrupt chronological shifts and complex, tangled plots.

Magical realists also frequently incorporate fairy tales and myths into their works. (Murfin & Ray 242)

The technique of magical realism is employed by Githa Hariharan by creating an imaginary South Indian village in Tamil Nadu, Elipettai where Vasu Master works as a school teacher. It is like the imaginary world created in different novels, such as ‘Malgudi’ by R.K. Narayan, ‘Wessex’ by Hardy, ‘Hogwarts School of Witchcraft’ by J.K. Rowling. Her creation of the imaginary town is narrated in her own words:

I used my mother’s home town and my father’s village in Kerala as the models for the two fictional places I created. So, it was in some sense autobiographical- but then it is the thing about autobiography in fiction, the idea is not for anybody else to read it such ... I don’t think fiction is meant to be a photograph [laughs]. (Kuortti 10)

Githa Hariharan has employed magical realism in *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* in a very different dimension. The entire action of the novel takes place in Elipettai which is a true effort to imitate reality. “It is the world of knowledge, the bringing together of different kinds of knowledge- traditional, experiential, herbal, fabulous, remembered pasts- and through them make an attempt at negotiating reality” (Jasbir Jain 54).

Githa Hariharan shows characteristic brilliance in sculpting and shaping her narrative. Magical realism becomes a fine mode of narration as it makes the reader believe, reality as fantasy and fantasy as reality. It is a psychological analysis of a teacher who rewinds his past life as a school teacher and invents a new world around him after his retirement. In the interview with Joel Kourtti, Githa Hariharan talks about the novel as: “After all, the entire book lets one side of an old man’s mind” (20).

The novel is replete with all the essential features which constitute children’s literature. While the adult world is the world of reason and logic, children’s world is enlivened by the wonderful, the improbable and the super-natural. Vasu Master’s childhood stories told by his grandmother were different as compared to other kids. His grandmother narrated stories that were “crude and astringent, like the stinging ginger- chilli combination” (Hariharan, “Vasu” 49). Mani is a twelve years old child with the brain of a six or seven – year – old child. “He could not sit in a place for more than a few minutes at a time. He wandered around the small room, a strange captive animal” (Hariharan, “Vasu” 13). In every respect, Mani is portrayed as different from other children. This reticent child needed someone who could be with him and break the pervading silence around him. Mani needed “a truly pragmatic healer” (Hariharan, “Vasu” 15).

Mani was a puzzle. The kind you suspect has been given to you without all the pieces you need. And here was a puzzle I had to put together if I was to understand Mani, even in parts; if I was to know what I was to him and he to me; and if I were to find myself before it was too late.(Hariharan, “Vasu” 99)

Mani's character is introduced with dexterity as a catalyst in the long chain reaction of stories narrated. Vasu Master used stories as a remedy to heal Mani. Stories seemed to soothe Mani. Initially, there is no sign of understanding. Vasu Master felt his attempt was an absolute failure. However, little later, there was a sudden change in the little boy when Vasu first bridged the silence between them, "with nonsense about animals and forests, his mask of defiant imperviousness slipped, and he sat, chin cupped in both hands, elbows on the table, watching my face" (Hariharan, "Vasu" 77).

But there is also the world of the animal fable (especially Vasu's ongoing serial of the Grey Mouse), his wife Mangala's ghost story, her friend Jameela's wordless tapestries and her own fable, the memoir Vasu is writing of his career as a teacher and his more personal autobiographical musings, his father's ayurvedic lectures and the young Mani's deep muteness, all these things create complexity in Vasu's mind.

Githa Hariharan finds herself at the nexus of the structures of narrative, education, gendering, postcolonialism, and postmodernism. As these multiple stories bring many internal conflicts. The weaving of different experiences within the various characters and their personalities puzzles.

In fact, Vasu is pretty puzzled by the jumble of memories, stories, and images that seem to come to him of their own accord. (Bahuguna 2)

The entire plot is narrated through the memory of the protagonist Vasu Master and the narration is steeped in an imaginary world. *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* can be termed as the novel of self-discovery. Self-discovery is a well-known psychological process where the character analyse their strength, weakness as well assess their

accomplishments and undertake a survey of their personal life. *Encarta World English Dictionary* defines ‘self-discovery’ as; “Self discovery is the process of learning about one’s true personality and motives. The novel is acclaimed for its, “... sophisticated, accomplished ... also brave, for it must take considerable courage to attempt something so complex, so full of memory and stillness ...” (Butalia)

*The Ghosts of Vasu Master* is inevitably a novel of self-discovery. Vasu Master contemplates about his survival in this world, his thoughts and apprehension about his ambitions of educating Mani. In his desperate isolation, he travels down the memory lane which is crowded with various memories and anecdotes. In fact, it is an acknowledged fact that every individual’s personality is built up by the past experiences, the individual knows how well to blend the past with the present to synthesize a new future. Vasu Master’s inward journey is further more facilitated by the arrival of Mani as he has to create new stories infused with fantasies and dreams. The novel works on the three epigraphs which stand as a base of the novel. They set the stage for the story of Vasu Master and Mani.

“The entire world is teacher to the intelligent and foe to the unintelligent”.

- Charaka

“We cannot all be Masters, Nor all Masters cannot be truly followed”.-

Shakespeare

“I have nothing new to teach the world. Truth and non- violence are as old as the hills”.-Gandhi (Hariharan, “Vasu” ix)

The novel takes off on three parallel tracks where the postmodern technique of magical realism works. First one is Vasu Master's encounter with the ghost of his dead relatives through his memories. The second one is the stories narrated by the other characters where Vasu Master becomes a listener too. The third one is the fables narrated by Vasu Master to educate his pupil Mani.

We observe the narration is a function shared by Vasu Master with several other characters who narrate their own stories, Grandmother, Mangala, Venkatesan, Swami, Gopu all have a story to tell. Then there are tales like Jameela's "Begum Three-in-one" displaying another level of embodiment where the story acquires a non-verbal medium. Chapters, likewise, are organised as independent tales, containing parabolic anecdotes forming digressive asides. (Roy 112)

Chapters are meticulously arranged as independent tales, containing symbolic and allegorical reminiscence forming digressive asides. There is a unity in digressions and they are relevant but they do not deliberately fuse with the narrative. Vasu Master not only indulges in straight forward self-analysis but also constantly alludes to myths, fables and allegories. It may be because, "The author's message, that learning to live and knowledge are not two separate things, comes across clearly and yes, her technique does have its appeal ..." (Veena 27)

Vasu Master was an English teacher and he had rich knowledge of Shakespeare. Anjali Roy comments on Vasu Master's legacy of Shakespeare thus: "Vasu Master's choice of Shakespeare over the five others comes comprising his father's eclectic liberal humanism over the indigenous legacy of Charaka, Sushruta and Vedas. It also signifies

the victory of formal institutionalized schooling over the gurukula” (qtd.in Kirpal 106). Vasu Master recalled his retirement farewell function where Vasu received a farewell present. While he was delivering his speech, he heard a voice from back benches: “A voice piped up, Vasu Master, we have something for you. To remember us.” (Hariharan, “Vasu” 28-29). Vasu Master was given a gift and he opened it and a small brown frog jumped out of it. Vasu Master was ashamed of his student’s silly behaviour. But he discovered that there is something else in the box and Vasu Master found a blank notebook and a green plastic pen.

Vasu Master realized at the time of retirement that his life as a teacher in Veera Naidu’s P.G. School was unrewarding. He was full of regret on his retirement function. Veera Naidu, the owner and headmaster of the school, called Vasu Master as a patient, mild, soft-spoken person. After retirement, spider, mice, cawing crows, old photographs, past memories became Vasu Master’s friends. On the day of his retirement Vasu Master spoke to his students. The parting word of Vasu Master to his students is that, “All of us are pupils and teachers. While there is life in each of us, we learn and we teach” (Hariharan, “Vasu” 28). The speech reflects the relationship between the teacher and the student.

Vasu Master suffers identity crisis after his retirement. Vasu Master gets a note book as a farewell gift from his students in which he starts writing his observations about teaching, but he couldn’t write about his teaching experiences because memories of his past life disturb him. “So The Ghost of Vasu Master becomes a treatise both on the process of teaching and learning the real meaning of life, self and at the same time, realizing one's relatedness to each other. It also goes on to establish that there are no fixed routes and that it is never too late to begin” (Bhardwaj 193).



Vasu Master makes use of past events and situations ingrained in his memory to create new stories. The reminiscence of Vasu Master's, grandmother's cooking, his father's preparation of medicines, his married life with Mangala, his teaching in school all opens up before his eyes and makes him to realize his self. In an interview with Arnab Chakladar, Githa Hariharan admits; "This is something I am interested in doing in my fiction, my non-fiction, and in my life - making sense of the past, becoming part of the larger debates on our multiple pasts". And in acknowledgements to the above Githa Hariharan says, "Some of the ideas Vasu grapples will reflect my own rather eclectic course of reading over the last six years for the novel. The list included readings on education, alternative methods of teaching, ancient Indian education, Indian healing systems and healing in general".

After his retirement as school teacher, Vasu Master should have lived his life as merry as a bird but he has been deprived of the post retirement bliss and is destined to suffer as he does not enjoy good health. The ailments make him to visit different doctors for proper diagnosis. The doctors suggest him to follow homeopathy or ayurveda and this suggestion reminds him of his dead father who was a doctor of ayurveda.

Vasu Master is very lucky to have been born in a family of good heritage. His grandmother was refined and thoughtful and lovable woman and his father was a doctor. Vasu Master recalls his father's Ayurvedic treatment when he is suffering from insomnia. Vasu Master unearths the childhood of a "Tamil speaking subhuman" (Hariharan, "Vasu" 20) which is buried in the traditional Indian past-of vedas and ayurveda.

Vasu Master is more inclined to engage himself in the habit of evoking past memories. Meanwhile, his father's medicinal preparation flashes in his memory and these memories

disturb his teaching. This awakening of memory makes him very feeble, hence he feels that a teacher should be physically and mentally strong person as he has to acquire, share and transfer knowledge with the students. He understands that a teacher should interpret the psychology of students and must teach with renewed spirit of enthusiasm. Vasu Master acknowledges his failure in teaching, which is reflected in the following lines: “Perhaps they were thinking no wonder; Vasu Master is retiring next month. He really has become a blathering old idiot” (Hariharan, “Vasu” 2).

Githa Hariharan with an expert touch depicts the complex layers of Vasu Master’s psyche. While teaching Mani, Vasu Master relived his own childhood. He undertakes an inner voyage to his childhood and spins up stories to enlighten Mani. Elements of fantasy such as ghosts, supernatural elements are created by Vasu Master through his imaginative power. Many shadowy figures walk out of his mind and come to life. Githa Hariharan shifts the narrative point of view very deftly. The narration shifts from the narrator, to the other characters who narrate their own stories. Vasu Master recalls the stories narrated by his dead wife; her friend’s stories and the parables narrated by his friend Venkatesan.

Vasu Master records in his journal his memories of his past. Vasu Master’s past memories fail to desert him and always haunt him like ghosts. Episodes from his past childhood are evoked to make Mani understand life. Vasu Master’s effort to teach Mani finally makes him a story teller. Vasu Master plays the role of a psychologist as he adopts the pedagogy of storytelling to help Mani. In the process Vasu Master frees himself from his own psychological trauma. The teaching learning process evolves into a journey of redemption for both the teacher and the pupil.

As Vasu Master goes down deeper into contemplation, the truth he has so far refused to accept comes to light. Going through Vasu Master's voyage of self-discovery, the narrator brings in the concept and technique of education from the Gurukula system of ancient India to be adapted in the recent times. Vasu Master incorporates various themes such as corruption and the progressive decline in moral values in his stories. Githa Hariharan presents oriental narratives of storytelling, "Since the post-colonial and post-modern agendas often overlap, post-colonial restructurings of indigenous pasts or returns to "vernacular" roots are invariably subsumed within post-modernist resurrections of history or blending of the global and the local" (Roy 105).

Vasu Master was an adorable father, responsible husband and a good teacher. Vasu Master lives alone as his wife is dead and his sons are grownup and have become independent. One day, when he was left alone in the home with an old family photograph, he delved into the reminiscence of his past life with his wife Mangala. In the photograph, he was wearing a narrow bordered Vesti and a coat which he had got as his wedding; there are his sons and wife Mangala in it. He gently touched the photograph and once again and became nostalgic. He gets a vision of his married life in front of his eyes and this evokes a total purgation of his sentiments. His love for his sons is clear from the following speech: "I placed my thumb on each face, saying the boys name aloud so that I remembered better. Every morning I went through a roll call of more than twenty years" (Hariharan, "Vasu" 5).

Vasu Master gains strength with the arrival of Mani, a smooth, pale skinned, thick and short necked twelve-year-old boy who behaved like six or seven-year-old. Left without any purpose after retirement, Vasu Master decides to accept the challenge of teaching

Mani with his new perspicacity. He gave him books, rubber, ruler, pencils and tried to tutor him but Mani stood passive and did not respond. When provoked by the student's passive behavior he would order the student to stand, but now he says warmly, "sit my boy", yet Mani did not show any interest in studies and both remained strangers. Mani perceived classroom as a punishment room and felt that students in the classroom are like prisoners. Vasu, being matured with age and experience understood that all his efforts will be unsuccessful. He says: "By the end of second week, I was beginning to wonder: Did he really need a teacher? Or did he need someone who could demolish the walls of silence around him" ? (Hariharan, "Vasu" 14)

Vasu Master wrote the story of a mouse that went to a snake and asked him to teach him to become a teacher. The snake suggested the mouse to be first a judge, then a priest and later a doctor. Snake suggested him to grow a womb to become a mother. Mouse asked his mother to teach him to be a mother but he can't because he should have motherly qualities. After penning the story Vasu Master discovered that the role of the teacher is that of the mother and that is not an easy job.

Once again, Vasu Master delves deep into his memory, recalls his mother Lakshmi's death at an early age and his wife Mangala's demise when their sons were very young. He also remembered how Mangala helped Vishnu to ride cycle. He recalled his father's clinic room and his patients. He recalled his grandmother's wisdom and he heard sound from somewhere telling, "Purify the blood, boomed a voice somewhere behind the eyes. Here, drink up this rasayanam" (Hariharan, "Vasu" 257). Now his grandmother and father are no more but their memories and advice are with him by which he introspects his life.

Vasu Master's new student Mani poses a big challenge and makes him search for a new method of teaching. So, he remembers all those who influenced him in his life. Vasu Master had imbibed the heterogeneous culture of India as he had learnt Sanskrit and Shakespeare. "These 'cultures of totality' become available to the protagonist Vasu Master when he owns up to the ghosts of his 'Tamil speaking sub human' past after a life time's wrestle with colonial education" (Roy 105). Vasu Master does not want to adopt the usual method of teaching Mani with black-board and classroom. He decided to employ the technique of narrating fables. Through the characters of animals moral lessons are taught. Vasu Master narrates Mani the fables to make him understand life and morality.

Vasu Master's teaching began with the narration of the story of the Mascot. His main purport was to entice Mani about the importance of teacher in life. Instead of lion, an old, wise fox called itself the King of the forest. He united all the animals, briefed them the value of unity. Instead of killing each-other and attacking violently, they began to live in harmony as a big family. All the animals and reptiles like frogs and snakes became friends, deer and tiger became brother and sisters. After a lapse of a year, a strong and wonderful animal named Mascot was born. He had ears like rabbits and hooves like camel, stripes like zebra on its body. One fine day the old fox died and as the dutiful King of the forest informed all animals about the Mascot. As Mascot grew up, animals started to realize their past traits and characteristics and the taste of blood. All animals suspected Mascot, and they began to avoid him. Mascot was warned by other animals: "Mascot, this is last warning I am giving it to you for old times' sake. Find out who are you and then decide how and where you will live" (Hariharan, "Vasu" 80-81) ? Mascot was absolutely puzzled, and he started living alone. He tried to recollect about his parentage but all in

vain. Mascot had no teacher to enlighten him, to teach him life skills, hence all the animals bounced on him and attacked. Once again harmony was disturbed and chaos returned. He concluded that if one is not taught by a good and extraordinary teacher, the student obviously becomes as Mascot that is a victim.

Vasu Master through the story reflected the thought to Mani about the significance of the teacher in enlightening the young minds. Without the intervention of Vasu Master, Mani's situation would have been more tragic and chaotic like the Mascot. He has to inscribe deeply into Mani that teacher is a torch bearer, guide and a true friend.

Harmonious environment can be built on the bedrock of love, affection, honesty and sacrifice. So, Vasu Master tells Mani the story, 'Why Are Grey Mouse and Black Crow Neighbors?' The Grey Mouse and Black Crow were neighbours but never been friends. The Mouse was living in the hole with his wife and children. The Crow, a scavenger, was always alone, uncompromising and steadfast, but Mouse prepared to stay at the door of its mouse-hole. Ravenous Crow thought there was good meal waiting for him at the next door. This made the Crow jump down the mouse hole. However, the Mouse kept his family safe. Both the Mouse and the Crow recognized that their indifference cannot make them to coexists and help them to become friends. Through the fable Vasu Master taught Mani that an enemy though a neighbour will always remain an enemy and can never become friends and coexists together. Vasu Master educates Mani that friendship can never be nurtured if one wants to betray his friend. Vasu Master teaches Mani the value of friendship. "So, at long last the neighbors' discovered each other. Both realized mouse in his own sad way, and crow in his dim way, what they were to each other" (Hariharan, "Vasu" 97).

Vasu Master expects Mani to shed his inhibitions and come to terms with him. By taking Mani into his confidence, Vasu Master tries to initiate and develop friendship with him as in the ancient Gurukula system of education. He expects that Mani should be a part of his life. To stress the importance of friendship, Vasu Master narrates him a story, 'Blue Bottle Finds a Friend'. Grey Mouse goes in search of friend as he couldn't develop friendship with the Crow. Blue Bottle was obviously bigger and a new type of fly. So other flies that were comparatively smaller hated him and decided to keep him out of their community and perceived him as their enemy. All the flies made fun of him and brought him close to the spiders' web so that he would be killed by the spider. Other flies were very happy and highly delighted and they thought that Blue Bottle would die. Meanwhile with the timely intervention of the Grey Mouse, Blue Bottle's life was saved and they both became friends. Vasu Master made Mani understand that an ideal true friend is one who gives his hand in difficult times like the Grey Mouse. Vasu Master felt, "Only this much was clear, for whatever reason, Mani had not learnt or had refused to learn-to act the way a boy of his age was expected to act" (Hariharan, "Vasu" 107).

Mani isolates himself and stays inside the room and does not mingle with other boys. Vasu Master feels very sorry for the little boy. He feels that Mani should not end up like Blue Bottle who never inclined to explore life. In fact, Blue Bottle is an ordinary fly yet through him Vasu teaches Mani the inscrutable ways of life. The fable becomes an absolute life transforming instrument to Vasu Master, to bring out the philosophy of life.

Next in order, Vasu Master narrates Mani the story, 'Inspector Buck Tooth'. Once Inspector Buck Tooth, an elder litter of Grey Mouse made a surprise visit to his father who was in a futile experiment with Blue Bottle instead of taking care of himself and his

family. Grey Mouse, very innocently shares the story of Blue Bottle to all the flies as well as to his elder litter. This allegorical tale finds parallel because Vasu Master's son Vishnu is also unhappy with his father's similar involvement with Mani. Vasu is very practical man and takes up the responsibility of teaching Mani to earn money. Vasu Master considers being a guru to Mani as a golden opportunity to prove his potential as a real teacher and strives to bring about positive changes in Mani's personality and tries to lead him towards the path of becoming a capable and confident human being.

Once, Grey Mouse dreamt of turning into a fly like his friend, Blue Bottle. Blue Bottle could not mix up with others but sat alone, couldn't learn quick leap which is essential for survival. He couldn't learn simple leaps or simplest lessons to become a fly. The Grey Mouse said, "You are not aware perhaps, that flies learn two types of jumps as they are growing up onejump is the quick leap the leap of survival" (Hariharan, "Vasu" 145). The other older flies tried to teach Blue Bottle, pamper him but he could not learn the simplest lessons. So Grey Mouse, as a trustworthy friend, takes him inside the mouse hole.

Vasu Master spends his old age with the constant fear of his ailments and he thinks that his fear will be unconsciously expressed in his stories. His concern is that the little boy growing up listening to such stories will also develop a sense of fear. Vasu Master has discovered from his introspection that weak and fearful person can't achieve anything. He desires Mani to become bold and strong like the Spider and not timid and meek like the Grey Mouse who always hides himself in the mouse hole. To transform Mani into a courageous person, he narrates him a story 'The Spider's Pleasure'. The Spider was an unparalleled ruler in his cobweb and he was very powerful. But the Grey Mouse announced that he was ready for an open challenge with the Spider but stayed



inside the mouse hole. Vasu Master describes Grey Mouse as: “Not only he had to teach Blue Bottle about the Spider, its nature and function, the pretty usefulness and bigger dangers of the cobweb, but he had to coax Blue Bottle into learning leaps” (Hariharan, “Vasu” 52).

Vasu Master narrates fables to bring about an intellectual awakening in Mani. In all the earlier fables, Vasu Master was preoccupied to teach Mani the truth of life. He taught Mani to ask questions, to criticize and to find fault. Vasu Master told Mani: “This business of asking questions can be quite infectious you tell someone again and again. Don’t take my word as unchallenged truth. Criticize, find fault and ask questions” (Hariharan, “Vasu” 200). He taught Mani, that one should have individuality to form their own views and opinions. So, he narrated Mani the story ‘Firefly’s Legacy’. As the firefly is destined to glow with its own light he can move about anywhere in the dark. “And while he travelled, he saw everything; he flew past in the colours of this light. So, nothing was impossible to understand and classify. Entire forest, and indeed all of nature, was thus his dominion by birth right” (Hariharan, “Vasu” 201). Everything was visible to him. Other travellers couldn’t track their path because they did not have magical lantern like the firefly. Through this story Vasu Master teaches Mani that one should take initiative to improve their life. He teaches individuality and the art of being unique through symbol of the firefly.

The main objective of Vasu Master’s teaching is to make Mani very bold. Vasu Master remains a stranger to Mani. Through narrating various fables with strong message, Vasu has tried his level best to make Mani to face the society. But Mani never expressed any response.

He sat still and open- mouthed however long the story was; or whatever it was about. At the end, he had of course no questions; even a smile was

rare. But sometimes, the forgotten spittle in his mouth would drool, or fall to the floor in one great gob; and then he snapped his mouth shut, as if he had suddenly shuddered awake. (Hariharan, “Vasu” 91)

Githa Hariharan is inspired by the stories of the *Panchatantra*, where the animals speak volumes and teach moral lessons to humanity. The animal characters are quite different, stunning and sometimes surprising too. Vasu Master is very dedicated in his mission to teach Mani; hence he procreates the world of fables and personifies them and embodies them with virtues. It is very evident that Vasu possesses a kind heart and tries to heal Mani. In the ‘Acknowledgements’ Githa Hariharan acknowledges her debt to *The Translations of ‘Niti’* and its explanations in Arthur W. Ryder’s *Introduction to his Translation of Panchatantra*. “The main theme of the Panchatantra is ‘Neeti’ which is hard to translate in English. ‘Neeti’ roughly means practical worldly conduct or even a ‘wise conduct of life’” (Lingam).

Animal fables from this source are predominant and remain as always society’s traditional vehicle of social and moral instruction ... Thus, it is not at all unusual to find a clever quail, an intelligent crow, a smart jackal, or a stupid tiger ... These fables are retold in many languages and are universal to the country’s multilingual literature. (Sheoran, 127)

Interestingly enough, “Using fantasy, fable and a host of wonderfully imagined characters – and the gentle, humane and philosophic voice of Vasu Master – the author creates a richly textured and complex work that eloquently explores the human condition and the underlying principles of all human actions”(Book review). Thus, the use of fables is an important device used by Githa Hariharan, a device with metaphorical under tones,

clearly brings out the embedded magical realism in the novel. The above fables embody the genius of Hariharan's technique of storytelling. The novel is interspersed with many stories that Vasu Master recounts which are intercepted with the present events.

Vasu Master's search for identity and fulfilment was geared up and quickened by Mani's arrival and the former's teaching to him. This teaching was further progressed with the dreams of Vasu Master. Just like getting lost in the past memories, it became a habit to day-dream and stay calm and then to record his feelings and thoughts in his book. Vasu Master believed that dreams are images that are embedded in our mind which can be converted into stories. Dreams can be entertaining, fun, disturbing, frightening and sometimes bizarre. He says that a physician can diagnose the health of a patient by investigating the dreams.

Vasu Master recalled his friend Swami's advice, "Train your memory, said Venkatesan's Swami. Train it to help you concentrate, and discover all your lapses in memory so that you may correct these errors. Concentration is the path to self-realization" (Hariharan, "Vasu" 92). Swami believed that, one can achieve the lofty ideas only by meditation and concentration. Swami instructed Vasu to concentrate and focus his mind on the image of the Cobra which is considered as a symbol that connects the mother earth, serves as a bed for Vishnu, garland of Siva, one of the weapons for Ganesha and guardian of the agricultural fields. This revoked his understanding on the power of meditation, memories, dreams and concentration.

One day Vasu Master waited for long hours for Mani's arrival, suddenly he noticed a crow cawing which rested on a branch hanging outside his window. He heard the cawing of the crow and was totally engulfed with fear. He thought that black crow symbolized

death and its cawing means invitation of death. Immediately he was scared and dreamt that his death was nearing. Vasu Master fell asleep and the crow appeared in his dream. He was left alone on the empty pavement where he came across a rat that was lying dead on the road. The crow poked his beak into fleshiest part of rat, made a hole into the flesh. This dream disturbed and he woke up, he began to interpret the dream. This made him to realize that one should never try to know the mystery of life after death. Vasu Master thought and compares his death to that of the poor rat.

Vasu Master visualised the egg-shaped face of Mani in his dream as he was much fond of Mani. He understood that teaching Mani is not a failure and he could sense Mani's unquenchable thirst for wisdom as he intently listens to the stories. His dreams are now preoccupied by Mani only: "Night after night, my own lack of sleep as incurable as Mani's loss of speech I asked myself: could Mani subvert the natural order of things? Grow complete in a way the unafflicted cannot"? (Hariharan, "Vasu" 120)

Dreams became a suitable vehicle for Vasu Master, to revive his memories. Sometimes he was scared and would wake up as he himself says: "But that night was different; I woke up the next morning with a fear that made me examine my body once again, very carefully" (Hariharan, "Vasu" 121). He dreamt that he was sleeping all alone in the dark room. He and Mangala lived for some months after his father's death in that room. He felt something creeping and irritating and doubted it to be mosquitoes. He also sensed the wound in his body which is infested with tiny maggots. In that dream, he visualized Mangala's death again. He suddenly shivered and woke up from his sleep to find that he is left behind in the room with no one and it was but a silly dream. He was horrified when

he saw in dream that Mangala was dying again and after waking up felt the absence of his wife and children. He expresses his feeling for Mangala thus:

I don't remember Mangala ever going to a doctor. She would hover around my bed with strips of cloth dipped in cold water when I lay groaning with a fever, or she would sit up, night after night, mending the boys' shorts and my vests, while I marked the homework books for the next day. (Hariharan, "Vasu" 123)

Vasu Master recalled the short family trip to Marina beach. The family was engaged in collecting shells in the seashore. Vasu Master along with his sons Vishnu and Venu plunged into water by holding each-other's hands very tightly. Mangala avoided going into water with them but she walked along beach searching for shells. She sat and watched the vast expanse of water and sand. All these memories were brimming in Vasu Master's head, for the first time he sensed his loneliness and felt like a desperate caged bird.

Once, Vasu Master had a dream about Mani. In his dream, Mani is alone in a small balcony crouching on the floor like a very badly inflicted animal. Vasu Master was shocked and he ran to the balcony, tried to bring him into his arms, rescued and eased his pain, but he could not do anything, something prevented him from doing that. Once again, he rushed into the balcony, picked him, raised his head and thought for a minute as his own son Vishnu. This dream reveals his love for Mani.

Githa Hariharan has hand-picked her characters from traditional Indian society which is deep rooted with social discrepancies and inequalities. Mangala is one of the feminine ghosts who visit the memory of Vasu Master. She died at an early age, much before his

retirement and Vasu every time recollects her as typical ideal wife. She is a stereotype of a traditional Hindu woman; she imposes a strict limit to herself and does not get into the sphere of her husband's job and she is only preoccupied with the domestic responsibilities. She never showed any interest to visit the school where her husband works. She is full of regret and consoles Vasu Master after the death of his father and helps him as a dutiful wife.

Although Mangala is remembered as a devoted wife, she is recollected as a shadowy figure. She hovers as a dim, unclear and unimportant image in Vasu Master's memory. His understanding about her is within the circumference of a husband. He never bothered to know her desires or aspirations. Vasu never recognized his wife as an individual born to live with her own identity. She is always made to negotiate her duties without finding space for her own likes and dislikes.

The Indian orthodox society moulded women in such a way that they could not express their feelings. A woman is always made to suppress her emotions, sentiments and be very modest. A husband always expects his wife to be his shadow and does not give her any individual space to recognize her identity. Infact, Mangala doesn't feel liberated in the presence of her husband. She wears a mask to hide her true self. She tends to be her own self in the company of her intimate friend Jameela.

Jameela is a very close reliable friend of Mangala with whom she shares all her secrets, heartbreaks and achievements. Childhood friendship is always a long-lasting permanent relationship. Their friendship is very strong and powerful whenever she confronts personal setbacks she confides with Jameela. "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. Who was the Mangala Jameela knew? Jameela could not have known her as I did as a man, as a husband does”. (Hariharan, “Vasu”121)

Mangala and Jameela belong to a seashore village. Mangala’s childhood memories are splendid and often she recollects them with joy and everlasting happiness. Jameela stays connected with Mangala and frequently visits after her marriage. She teaches sewing and beautiful embroidery in the afternoons. Vasu heard their conversations, sudden lofty laughter and he thought how he has totally failed to notice this sort of hidden femininity in his wife.

Mangala is passive in expressing her unique individuality. She finds utmost joy in accomplishing her duties as a mother and wife. She takes good care of them whenever they fall sick. She has almost reached saturation and she finds no excitement, doing the routine duties. As a traditional mother, she desires to safeguard her children from evil influence and she never likes any entertainments. When she dies there is a vast emptiness in the family which cannot be refilled.

The absence of the mother in the family creates a vacuum and gives it a deserted look. The mother is the reflection of unconditional love, it is a sacred and divine role of women. Children need motherly affection at all crucial stage of life. Mangala as a typical traditional mother is more absorbed in bringing up her children. Her nature is mild and humble. Her presence is not felt when she was alive. After her death, her absence becomes inevitable. Vasu says, “She went about her daily tasks as wife and mother with a delicate feminine modesty. It was only after she had died that we found we could not fill her place, even the three of us put together” (Hariharan, “Vasu” 138).

Vasu opens Mangala's tin trunk, which in turn exposes her secret interests and desires. Vasu opens her trunk after lapse of five years. The trivial things though, they may have magnified her interest. Their wedding invitation, which was kept safe reveals her respect for their marriage and the creative fabric flowers exhibit her creativity. The embroidered work, cross-stitched on square patches exhibited her talent. Jameela takes away the incomplete pieces of art as a memory of her friend.

Mangala is bestowed with the talent of narrating ghost stories to her children. She narrates them some thrilling stories. Eliamma's story not only enthralled and attracts the children's imagination but also hides the lofty ideals of women which are considered too low and rejected by the patriarchal society. Eliamma is a fictional character appearing in the ghost story narrated by Mangala. She is a beautiful young fisherwoman who craves for freedom from the stringent patriarchal rules that befell on women. Her ambitions do not stand on par with the traditional women. She wants to drink life to the lees and move about like a free bird with a headstrong mind fathoming the depths of the blue sea. A strange man suddenly appears before her. He promises to make her invisible and fulfil her desires and when she is back, the strange man disappears and he is seen nowhere. This story narrated by Mangala opens up multitude of human traits. The innocent women like Eliamma, become an easy prey to men who exploit their weakness. Out of innocence women submit themselves to temptation without knowing the consequences. Mangala compares herself with Eliamma who craves to free herself from all shackles. Githa Hariharan presents the voice of the marginalized women who are imprisoned by traditional values. Women have to overcome various hurdles when they try to establish their identity and position in society.



“Vasu’s world is peopled by ghosts and absences; it is a world of forgetting and remembering” (Butalia 30). His journey to the past brings before him the ghosts of the people whom he remembers and recollects by heart. Vasu’s grandmother is another ghost who keeps haunting Vasu Master. She has no formal education, yet she knows out of her experience how to handle situations with discretion. She has in-depth understanding of minor issues of life. She is very gentle and strictly points out the mistakes of her grandson. She also imposes some light punishments to make them aware of their shortcomings and thereby correct them. She more often uses the word ‘Nuisance’ depending on the situation. As a matter of fact, she doesn’t know English, but used it more profusely like a native speaker. She is highly gifted and knows the way of using the same word both in a pacifying as well as in stern manner. Whenever she punishes them she is overwhelmed with remorse. Grandmother often narrates stories which are very absorbing and entertaining.

Grandmother stands a striking contrast to Mangala, who believes in ghosts, but grandmother is not superstitious. All her stories have psychological impact. Grandmother was well aware that fear is the basic instinct which affects both mind and body. Fear can cause varied illusions and it is created by one’s self. Once she narrated a story to get rid of fear. The tiger in the story narrated by her doesn’t really exist. The boy in the story imagines that a tiger chases him and jumps into the river. When Vasu asks her about the tiger, she says, “There was no tiger, Nuisance, it was only in the head” (Hariharan, “Vasu” 51). This uneducated woman’s answer has deep psychological insight hidden in it.

Vasu Master’s grandmother is a woman full of revolutionary views. In spite of staying within the family sphere, she strongly expresses her individuality. She hates to be meek, passive and docile. His grandmother donated her jewellery to Gandhi’s cause

but his grandfather was a clerk who accepted the bureaucracy of British rule. She deviates from the traditional idea that cooking is meant only for girls by teaching her grandson to cook. Vasu Master's mother Lakshmi and his wife Mangala are stereotypes of the traditional Indian women who care for their family negating themselves.

Githa Hariharan has portrayed a varied distinct spectrum of women characters entangled in the web of traditional constraints. Vasu Master is haunted by the memories of Jameela. Obviously, her friendship is a great blessing to Mangala as she never fails to extend emotional support to Mangala. Jameela provides consolation beyond words during the most trying moments. She teaches her the art of embroidery which provides an outlet to Mangala. Without Jameela Mangala's life would have been a void.

The characteristic feature of magical realism is to deal with supernatural elements and unbelievable incidents. Chapters entitled 'Mangala's Journey', 'Elamma Goes Fishing', 'Begum Three –in – One' and 'Two Paths of Bliss, contain horror stories. In 'Two Paths to Bliss', Vasu seems to convey us a message that was given to him by his grandmother: "What is a ghost, Nuisance? Nothing but a part of you that's no longer in control. A little pocket of garbage in your mind that rots and begins to stink. So – what do you do? Take a big broom and sweep it out, making sure you don't leave anything behind" (Hariharan, "Vasu"138).

Vasu Master and his pupil Mani, get along with each other. Mani comes to terms with the world around and understands his place in the vast world. Each chapter echoes events in the present, through the stories and the anecdotes which is conveyed in a philosophical note. Temporal distortion is employed by the novelist as the events are not recorded chronologically. Githa Hariharan incorporates quotes from other texts as

intertextual element which makes the novel more fascinating and marvellous. These quotes have multi-layered meaning and fits the context of the novel.

Though Vasu Master is the nucleus and the entire development of the story moves ahead with him, the character of Vasu Master is revealed through his thoughts. The subconscious mind of the characters is revealed, thus most of the characters are presented as split personality. Joseph Conrad says that modern experimental novel comprises of, “His vision of her vision and her vision of his vision of her vision.” (qtd .in Neill 197)

However, Vasu Master’s retirement turns a new epoch for him. He undertakes a search for his own identity. He leads his life in isolation which leads him into solitude. The isolation is like a punishment to him, as he spends his life without anyone whereas solitude makes him to think and to create new creative pedagogy in teaching. The process of self-discovery takes greater pace as Mani enters the life of Vasu Master. He is an abnormal boy and is unable to neither speak nor write anything. Mani’s development was suddenly disturbed by something. The doctors, teachers and the schools had failed to cure him. At last he is brought to Vasu Master who himself is struggling to find solution to his personal and physical problems.

A truly real presence (not ghost) in Vasu’s life is Mani, a young and silent boy to whom he gives tuitions, Desperate to get a reaction, Vasu tells Mani stories, and begins to supplement them with drawings, and gradually, Mani and his teacher (one might say a failed pupil- for Mani’s parents hand him over to Vasu’s as just that- a failed teacher, failed only because he is assailed by a sense of his own inadequacy) establish some sort of communication.(Butalia 30)

Mani, the new student is very obstinate not to learn or speak arrives in Vasu Master's life. So, Vasu Master decides to make the child speak, so he narrates the child one story after the other thinking that the child will respond and help him to achieve the biggest challenge of his life. The challenge of Vasu is to make Mani a normal human being. When he teaches Mani, it is a sort of self-discovery. The retired teacher Vasu Master heals and enlightens Mani, but partially. The long interesting channel of education of Mani begins as he draws pictures of the stories that he heard from Vasu Master. When Vasu gives Mani some pictures, Mani silently watches the pictures, selects two, tears up one of these and keeps the other in his pocket with a smile. Vasu reflects, "Mani moved three steps closer to citizenship when he laid claim to one image and rejected the other. It was as if he had said, I want to make this mine; this other is not mine though I know what it is." (Butalia 30)

Vasu Master with great patience teaches Mani. Language comes into the life of Mani through the pictures he drew. So, this is the beginning of Mani's study and learning of language. Vasu Master's guilt of not teaching extraordinarily is compensated by educating a differently abled pupil. Though Vasu Master initially had no great success with Mani, but he observes that stories keep him engaged.

The regular schedule of teaching pedagogy doesn't turnout fruitful to Mani. He begins his first two months of retirement with the scrapbook and the three tuition children. The entry of these three children is like "a pale imitation of class room but pupils nevertheless" ( Hariharan, "Vasu" 24). "The things he jots down in his scrapbook, but in a fragmented, directionless fashion; they seemed mirror-image of the memories that I had been beset with lately." (Hariharan, "Vasu" 26)

Vasu's and Mani's story is retold in the story of the Blue Bottle fly and Grey Mouse. Rejected by his compatriots for being too large, not quick enough, perhaps not clever enough, blue bottle finds a home with a Grey Mouse, himself perceived as being slow and stupid. Grey Mouse gives Blue Bottle a home and they don't emerge from it for a long time and Vasu tells us that in that "dark, cramped Mouse hole ... Grey Mouse grew to love Blue Bottle as somebody even more precious either pupil or son. And Blue Bottle in his own dumb, buzzing away, grew accustomed to the tenderness and the dusky, wandering dreams of Grey Mouse" (Bhuthalia 30).

Magical realism is the most engaging postmodern technique, not because it is an oxymoron that yokes the two opposite ideas, but it sounds as the magical word enchanting and entertaining. The readers are naturally drawn into the engaging world of magical realism. The reality that the readers come across is based on understanding of mysterious actions that do not put us in a state of confusion; rather we comprehend these events as components that go hand in hand with reality. "... Once again, the range and variety of the fables encompass the human predicament. The underlying fantasy and mystery attempt to take the novel to heights that rival the realm of magical realism, the novel building up to a well-orchestrated scintillating climax."(Sanga)

The real success of the Vasu Master lies when he finds Mani responding slowly to his teaching. Here lies the success of employing magical realism and storytelling to create the fictional world of fables. These types of students demand great attention from the teacher. Stories play key role and ignite interest in Mani. Storytelling becomes a psychological tool to cure Mani. Vasu in his letter to his sons writes; "He does not speak, but I have great hopes of curing him" (Hariharan, "Vasu" 87). After various therapeutic sessions of

stories, Mani makes peace on his own terms with the hated pencil and paper of his school days. He starts drawing pictures:

His strokes grew increasingly swift, bold, clear; his details minute; his pictures without erasures. And I in turn began to recognize some of the creatures he drew: a timid mouse and a smug' buck-toothed one; an aggressive wasp oblivious of its loss of wings; a dazzling firefly; and in the distant background, the sharp outline of a crow's beak. Mani was giving back the models Vasu had given him. 'But they were not mere copies. His own versions, created with obvious enjoyment ... His imagination were no stranger to playfulness. (Hariharan, "Vasu" 233)

This turns out to be the good sign of success note for Vasu. Thus the efforts and hard work of Vasu bears fruits now. He proves that, "Papaya- Head Mani— as he is always called and stamped as fool, clown, as dispensable as a buzzing fly—had this unexpected, strangely moving power.... he was not just an idiot with an odd knack, but possessed of an intelligence which had narrowed, learnt to work around and despite his disabilities" (Hariharan, "Vasu" 234).

The novelist has adopted the technique of magical realism to make the child understand the ground reality through the fantabulous fables. "We can call the novel his medical inspection through the mirrors he uses; we can call it a psycho-analytical weaving through memories and fables. This is a way of retrieving the wisdom and effectiveness from the position of hopelessness" (Bahuguna 3).