

Expect the Unexpected: A Critical Analysis of Gita Hariharan's "The Remains of the Feast"

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Gita Hariharan is one of the prominent writers in Indian English Literature in the Postcolonial era. She once again proved her mettle in her short story collection "The Art of Dying". The stories in this collection have unique style and wit tinted with humour and pathos. Her short story "The Remains of the Feast" is about an old woman who suddenly craved for food when she was about to die.

Rukmani was the ninety year old great- grand mother of Ratna, the narrator. She belonged to an orthodox Brahmin family who was forbidden from many things especially the food items she craved for a long time. She was an ignorant village- bread woman who outlived her only son and daughter- in- law by ten years. She had a sense of humour which was always quaint but at sometimes embarrassing. "She would sit in her corner, her round, plump face reddening, giggling like a little girl"(9). She loved her great- granddaughter Ratna who was going to study medicine. She wished her to be a doctor as she tried hard and yet in a sarcastic way. She commented that she met a doctor before thirty years that too for her son who was admitted in the hospital. Rukmani was always cheerful and never felt sick. The family was surprised when she was lying in bed for a few weeks before her nineteenth birthday. "She had been lying in bed for close to two months, ignoring concern, advice, scolding, and then she suddenly gave up. She agreed to see a doctor"(11).

The doctor advised to take all the tests as she had a lump on her neck. Ratna's father tried to explain the doctor why they left her with the lump without doing operation. Rukmani's son tried to get her consent but she felt that an operation meant an unnatural death. All her relatives terrified her with horror stories related to the surgery and so she said no. The doctor finally advised them that she was suffering from cancer and it was best to let her die at home as she crossed the stage of cure.

Ratna's mother decided not to tell Rukmani anything about her health condition. She was afraid of visitors who would always be the nuisance which would affect Ratna's studies. Ratna encountered her great- grand mother with a heavy heart and she did not know how to reveal the truth about her condition. Unexpectedly without bothering about her health condition Rukmani enquired about the small cakes that Ratna bought from the Christian shop. She was worried whether the cake had eggs or not. Since Rukmani belonged to a Brahmin family, She was forbidden of eggs meats, garlic and other aerated drinks which she craved for.

People are bound to abide the rules laid down by the society. Each community has unique code of conduct , way of living and tradition to follow. Women have to follow the rules in particular as they belong to a patriarchal society. A woman like Rukmani who belong to an orthodox family has been forbidden from many of their desires even though they sound silly sometimes.

Craving for food is a kind of psychological impact as we don't always eat just to satisfy physical hunger. Many of us also turn to food for comfort, stress relief, or to reward ourselves. While doing so, we tend to eat junk food, sweets, and other comforting but unhealthy foods which may be called 'emotional eating'.

Emotional eating is using food to make oneself feel better. It is to fill emotional needs, rather than one's stomach. As she was about to die, Rukmani wanted to fulfil her desire of eating junk food especially the forbidden one. Ratna got relieved that Rukmani did not care about her physical condition but about the cake. From that day onwards she bought her cakes, ice- cream, biscuits and Samoosas. She was bored with the cakes when they gave her heartburn. Then she became a little more adventures everyday. Her cravings were varied and unpredictable. Laughable and always urgent.”(13)

She wanted to drink Coca- Cola when she felt thirsty. Ratna's mother refused to give it as it would make her sick and Rukmani started moaning. That made the dutiful grand daughter- in- law to give it to her without a word. She drank it to her content. She had tasted then lemon tarts, garlic, three types of aerated drinks, fruit cake laced with brandy and bhel- Puri, Ratna's mother kept on telling that would be a trouble soon and it was so. Rukmani could not swallow the food and drink. But she closed her lips tightly when she was given gruel. The family felt that she was dying. She was in the nursing home for ten whole days:

She lay there quietly, the pendulous neck almost as big as her face. But she would not let the nurses near her bed she would squirm and wriggle like a big fish that refused to be caught . (14)

The doctor lost hope and said said, “Not much to be done now...The cancer has left nothing intact”(14).

Before she died she called Ratna and her mother to her side. When Ratna's mother asked her blessings she screamed for a red sari with a big wide border of gold, peanuts with chilli powder and

onion and chilli bondas: “Then the voice gurgled., her face and neck swayed, rocked like a boat lost in a stormy sea... her head slumped forward. Her rounded chin buried in the cancerous neck”. (15)

After the death of Rukmani. Ratna had learnt in the last two months that she had to ‘expect the unexpected’ from her great- grandmother. She said “ I waited, in case she changed her mind and sat up, remembering one more taboo to be tasted”. Then she brought her bright red saree which she bought for Diwali last year and which was also her first silk saree. She covered her naked body with the saree and it glittered her childish laughter. Her mother admonished her and flung it aside as she thought that it was polluted. “ She wiped the body again to free it from foolish trivial desires”(16).

Rukmani was finally covered with a bale –brown sari and the prayer beads on her neck. As a widow she had to wear the pale- coloured saris and prayer beads. She was forbidden of bright- coloured saris and other jewels. Ratna felt:

I am still a novice at anatomy. I hover just over the body. I am just beneath the skin. I have yet to look at the insides, the entrails of memories she told me nothing about, the pain congealing into a cancer. (16)

The great- grandmother had left her nothing but a smell that would faint everyday. To plot a revenge for her great- grandmother, Ratna ate all the stuff that she wanted to eat and got diarrhea for a week. She tore her dirty, grey saris to shreds and filled the cupboard with her newly bought books. They looked like rows of armed soldiers and “They fill up the small cupboard quickly” (16).

Ratna firmly believed that the unfilled, forbidden and suppressed desires of her great- grandmother accumulated wounds in her mind and transformed into a cancer after a long period of time. She decided to fight against the memory of her great- grandmother because she did not want to be the woman who had been forbidden of her desires.

References:

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