

Female Power through Male Agency: Reading Githa Hariharan's *Untitled Poem* and *The Reprieve*

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Abstract: Githa Hariharan, in her two short stories 'Untitled Poem' and 'The Reprieve', gives the male characters a chance to voice their feelings and in turn puts them into the dock where they reveal the layers of sensitivity that lies undiscovered in them. They are accountable to themselves for all their actions and such actions give the female characters a stronger position. This paper seeks to explore the voices of the male figures and analyze the female characters in relation to them.

Keywords: Male; Patriarchy; Dock; Insensitivity; Women; Position

Githa Hariharan's *Art of Dying and Other Stories* is a collection of twenty stories of contemporary Indian life that demonstrates remarkable originality. In the collection, she introduces complex female characters who emerge as strong characters ready to redefine their position and give themselves a voice. These women characters go beyond their typical stereotypical identification to come out with something substantial for themselves. In the story, *Untitled Poem*, the narrator is a male person. It is the story of a retired salesman, who is also an aspiring creative writer and his wife Sarala. The story has a typical Indian setting where the husband is the bread-earner while the woman a home-maker. The story proceeds through frequent recapitulations of the past before it actually moves into the present. The couple share different interests. While the husband aspires to become a poet, the wife is pre-occupied with her garden. As she moves into the new house, she feels elated to find a stretch of land all to herself. She says, "No more pretend-gardens in the balcony on the seventh floor. Everything I grow now will dig its roots deep into the soil" (1). While the wife spends her time reading books on seasons and seeds for planting and pruning, her husband is busy writing poems. But despite their varying pre-occupations, they find time to share each other's interests. He would narrate his poems to Sarala and she would listen to him attentively even though she has no special interest. As he says, she heard him in the past when 'marriage meant doing things together' (3). Years after, it is still the same. She still hears him read out his poems. She even shares her husband's diet, even though she has no ulcer. "Now in the evenings, we eat early boiled vegetables, rice and a glass of cold milk each. She does not have an ulcer but she shares my diet" (3). The husband respects his wife's passion for plants. When her plants are destroyed by a rat, he gets disturbed and looks for ways to kill the rat. He buys a wooden trap but is unable to catch the culprit. He is not able to trap it with roots, leaves and orange offerings either. Even poison fails to help. He even sits by the window to catch the enemy red-handed but this again ends up in failure. But he does not lose hope. In fact, it becomes his mission. "Some

days later, I realize I have a mission at last. I will see him, confront him and conquer him. He is no elusive, disappearing image” (6). But he ends up as a failure. It is ultimately the wife who kills the rat, something he could not do even after numerous efforts. The story explicitly talks of the relationship that both the husband and the wife share. The couple seems to understand each other well and they get on well together. But there is an implicit reference to the incapability of the man. The theme of the story is not about marital life, but rather about male consciousness, the thought process of a man who realizes that he is incapable. At the outset of the story, the incapability of the narrator as a creative writer is revealed. Even though the narrator seems to have been a successful man as the provider of a family, he is a failure with respect to achieving his own ambitions:

I look at the sheets of paper in front of me, blank except for: 'Bent over the bush grass,' one. 'Does she see the shadow pass? On another. The sheet right on the top is a pale, menacing yellow. It has blue lines running across it, straight and rigid. I write in one long, narrow compartment, If I could”(1).

The incomplete line and the blank pages refer to the narrator's failure.

The forty years of his life have been spent fruitfully. He has been a good provider, has been doing his work honestly and even trying his hand at writing poems. He managed to write two books and a short biography but now after retirement, he says, “My own words no longer move me. I stumble on to something I wrote ten, fifteen years ago and surprise myself” (3). Whatever little he writes is no more than an 'old man's nonsense rhyme' (3). His incapability weighs heavily on him. He has strange nightmares, which remind him of his incapacity as a writer. “The other night I dreamt I was in a windowless, bare hall lit by harsh, merciless floodlights.” He feels as if the ceiling is “like a melting wave. I pushed my head through it, then my shoulders. I flew into the cool night sky, floating aimlessly” (3-4). The narrator's desire to become a renowned poet is not fulfilled. This is just one aspect of his failure. Although the narrator seems to be an image of a 'new-man', supportive and understanding, sharing the interest of his wife, he has failed to prove himself a man, because of his inability to bear children. Throughout the text the narrator conjures up images that speak of his sterility. He knows that his wife's interest in the plants is due to his inability to provide her with a child. Since Sarala has nothing to share with him, she chooses to share the diet. “She does not have ulcer but she shares my diet. Our dinners are austere, serious affairs. If we had children, perhaps the small talk of other households, grandchildren, other people's private sorrows, would have filled our spare, half-empty plates” (3). The poet does not make Sarala feel complete and this is why Sarala resorts to gardening. There is nothing that could strengthen the bond between them. This garden is the only enduring thing in her life because it thrives despite changes in weather; unlike fragile human relationships. Being devoid of natural companionship she transfers her urge for confidence to her old gardener. As the narrator himself says, “They make a good team. She is

the navigator and she is the oarsman. Or I could say, she is the poet, he is the word” (4). This again throws light on the incapability of the narrator to become the confidante of his wife, his inability to evoke in her a sense of belongingness. Towards the end of the story, the author again portrays the narrator as the failure. It is his wife who kills the rodent that was on destroying mission. The man who is supposed to wield power over his wife is rendered powerless in front of a rodent while the woman to whom he refers as 'thick skinned yam'(7) powerfully and effectively asserts her power. Even the rodent mocks at him. “I can hear him mocking an old man's dreams. Fame, wisdom, love, the nectar-laden words of a patriarch” (7). The power, the agony, the hegemony all comes to a grinding halt and that too at the hands of a woman.

The Reprieve is the story of seventy-two-year old Nagaraj Rao, a widower. Nagaraj Rao has a successful personal and professional life. Professionally, he has succeeded as a senior advocate owing to his keen perception and sense of discrimination. “His life had been cluttered with other people's problems. Every morning the front porch swelled with anxious clients. He was a man who could listen, and he had also spent a life time refining his sense of justice” (41). He is a successful man in his personal life. He has been a good provider to the family. He would hand over the earnings to his wife. He had fathered children. As the patriarch of the family, all his life, he wields full authority, though he is least concerned about how the family machinery keeps working. His wife Mangala received no attention from him. She is married to him at the age of fifteen. Nagaraj never heard her talk of her missing her parents. “She grew into an adult in front of Nagaraj- pleasant, patient, hardworking, selfless, discreet- essentially faceless, an elusive middle- of the road woman, who did not attract attention for either her shortcomings or her virtues” (42). Throughout their marital life, Mangala receives very less or no attention from Nagaraj. Nevertheless she plays her part reasonably well. She is a good unobtrusive wife in the background who runs the machinery of a thirty member household and oils its creaky joints. The children grow up, marriages take place and the close knit family breaks up. Nagaraj and Mangala are left alone. It is during one of these years, as if she is left with no purpose, Mangala falls ill and “She was discovered to be an undiagnosed diabetic; she developed high blood pressure; and finally as if to put seal on her fate, doctor suspected cancer” (43). She dies a painless death during her sleep. Nagaraj feels, ofcourse, “a grief appropriate to widower” (43). After this tragic event, his mind is preoccupied with retirement issues, getting ready to say “goodbye to a life he had lived with relish and involvement almost all his adult years” (43). He is taken to Bombay by his son. Nagaraj feels reluctant and the unexpected the new city has a tremendous effect on his mind. “Nagaraj had necessarily entailed frequent introspection, the posing of subtle and often uncomfortably teasing questions, he had not till now been confronted with questions of such a deeply personal, almost obscenely intimate nature” (41). Nagaraj finds himself obsessed with the thoughts of Mangala all the time. He tries to understand, analyze and answer the fifty three years of togetherness, “It had become something of an

obsessive settling of accounts, a stock taking and reordering of memories, a final attempt, or rather a belated attempt. Fifty-three years, he thought, and how did she escape me so completely" (41). He feels the absence of Mangala. He accuses himself and feels liable to cross-examination, answerable and accountable to himself as to 'what had he felt about her as a husband. Had they become one as he had promised in the vows made while walking round the marital fire?" (42). He wonders what did they talk about, how Mangala thought about him and his cases, whether she ever felt lonely or too busy or tired. He thinks of Mangala's dream. He is perpetually haunted by these questions. He is troubled to such an extent that he even goes to the extent of peeping into his son's room and he was 'filled with a longing more insistent that he had ever known" (45). The feeling is so strong that he even imagines his daughter-in-law in the kitchen as his dead wife. He wants to recall "every inch of her face, the shade of her eyes, the shape of the nose and lips, the small mole on her chin" (46). He feels a strong pain in his chest and shouts her name in a frenzy of excitement, rapture, and gratitude and feels "the dark safety of her outstretched arm" (47). Nagaraj's entire life comes to a grinding halt after the death of his wife. His authoritarian attitude undergoes radical change. His wife, even though dead, turns into a living presence in his life. Ironically her presence becomes more conspicuous because of her absence in his life. The male life of power and agency are interrogated in the character of Nagaraj and in Mangala we find a woman who emerges stronger. Hariharan points out is that 'in handling the many problems of the household, Mangala very quickly forgets her own joys and blurs her dreams. It is only in the seclusion that sleep affords does her girl's smile sometimes stretch across her pinched wrinkled face. Despite all this, Mangala knows, she understands and quickly comes to Nagaraj, her face full of tender concern, her hands outstretched, promising dark safety. It is the woman to whom men come for solace, peace, and completion." (Bhargav, 83). In the two stories, we find that the male characters attain fulfillment only in relation to their wives. It is the woman who offers them a sense of being. In these two short stories, Hariharan portrays male characters with unfulfilled dreams and devoid of the typical aggressive male postures. As Jasbir Jain says, 'they are the kind of men who are not categorically the "other", and possess, or at least attempt to cultivate the qualities of nurturing' (58). By giving the male characters a voice Hariharan shows that women are able to successfully resist marginalisation. The male is the agency through which female power finds its legitimate meaning and significance in the context of a family.

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