



LAST CRAVINGS, SILENT REVOLTS: EXPLORING DESIRE IN GITHA HARIHARAN'S THE REMAINS OF THE FEAST

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Abstract

Githa Hariharan is one of the prominent writers in Indian English Literature. Her short story "The Remains of the Feast" was published in 1992 in the collection *The Art of Dying*. It presents a subtle inquiry of desire and rebellion through the medium of food. This paper examines how the dying grandmother, Rukmini, uses appetite—both literal and symbolic—as a form of silent resistance against the cultural and Hindu traditional codes that have governed her life. Drawing on feminist literary theory, postcolonial frameworks, and food studies, this analysis argues that the acts of eating forbidden foods constitute a final, defiant assertion of selfhood. The granddaughter-narrator's role as a secret accomplice further complicates the story's ethics of transgression, suggesting an intergenerational negotiation of tradition and desire. Through close reading of Hariharan's text, this paper demonstrates that food in the story functions not only as nourishment but as a place where identity, power, and rebellion meet.

Keywords: Indian Women's Writing, Postcolonial Feminism. Transgression

Introduction

Food has long served as a potent metaphor in literary works, encapsulating cultural norms, social hierarchies, and gendered expectations. Githa Hariharan's short story "The Remains of the Feast," first published in 1992 as part of her celebrated collection *The Art of Dying*. The short story combines light humour with irony. Through a seemingly simple narrative, Hariharan depicts the final days of Rukmini, a 90 years old South Indian Brahmin widow, through the eyes of Ratna, her granddaughter. Rukmini is on deathbed suffering from cancer

The story that emerges is less about death and more about appetite—for meat, pleasure, and a sense of selfhood that has long been rejected by patriarchal traditions and religious beliefs. The story is significant for the way it turns the kitchen, the sickroom, and the traditional meal into a place of debate. Rukmini's cravings are more than just the whims of a dying lady; they are the outbursts of a lifetime of repressed longings that are at last coming to the surface when the social repercussions of transgression are no longer in place. The granddaughter serves as both a supporter and an observer, and through her perspective, the reader is encouraged to examine the codes of purity, tradition, and feminine propriety that have governed Rukmini's life.

This paper argues that in "The Remains of the Feast," food functions as a triple symbol i.e. symbol of desire, symbol of agency, and symbol of rebellion. . Hariharan employs appetite as a form of resistance against the constraints of gender, caste, and religion. The paper proceeds through three interlocking analyses: first, food as the language of forbidden desire; second, eating as an act of agency and self-reclamation; and third, the granddaughter's complicity as a form of intergenerational solidarity in transgression.

Contextualising the Text: Hariharan, the Body, and Brahminical Womanhood

Githa Hariharan stands out as a significant figure in modern Indian English literature within the postcolonial context. Her first novel, *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1992) earned the Commonwealth Writers' Prize, while "The Remains of the Feast" exemplifies her early writing style that delves into the inner experiences of women whose outward lives seem ordinary, often restricted by societal expectations related to caste and marriage. Rukmini, a ninety-year-old woman, is depicted as being moulded by the strict customs of orthodox Brahminism. Throughout her life, she has adhered to a vegetarian diet, a practice that aligns with the purity and spiritual dedication associated with upper-caste Hindu women. She



has been a vegetarian all her life, strictly following the dietary restrictions that mark upper-caste Hindu women as pure and spiritually devoted. Her widowhood has further tightened these constraints: the Hindu widow is traditionally expected to renounce adornment, pleasure, and a wide range of foods considered exciting, or impure.

"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" (284). Rukmini's late-life cravings for non-vegetarian food, carbonated drinks are not simply as dietary preferences but as acts of symbolic violence against the societal norms. To indulge in the forbidden signifies a transformation of her identity as a woman.

Brumberg in "The Appetite as Voice" opines that Adolescent girls were expressly cautioned against coffee, tea, and chocolate; salted meats and spices; warm bread and pastry; confectionery; nuts and raisins; and, of course alcohol. These sorts of food stimulated the sensual rather than the moral nature of the girl. No food (other than alcohol) caused Victorian women and girls greater moral anxiety than meat. The flesh of animals was considered a heat-producing food that stimulated production of blood and fat as well as passion (166).

From the very beginning of the story, Hariharan links Rukmini's physical deterioration with her newfound desires. What Rukmini craves, much to the surprise of her household, is food she has never experienced in her ninety years. She seeks not comfort or nostalgic dishes from her youth but rather the most strictly prohibited items: meat and eggs, which are the ultimate taboos for a Brahmin Hindu woman. The narrator, Rukmini's granddaughter, plays a crucial role in obtaining non-vegetarian food, biscuits, ice cream, samosas, and egg cakes. "bring me peanuts with chilli powder from the corner shop. Onion and green chilli bondas deep-fried in oil" (286).

Although the two women do not share a room, they occupy adjacent rooms in the old house and engage in their acts of defiance together, united by love and understanding. "So we began a strange partnership, my great-grandmother" (284). It frames the food not as mere nutrition but as wish-fulfilment, as the material enactment of suppressed fantasy. Ratna by not asking any questions, implicitly acknowledges that some forms of desire exceed the need for justification. This dynamic resonates with what feminist philosopher Sandra Bartky describes as the disciplinary dimension of femininity: the ways in which "women's bodies, appetites, and desires are subjected to constant surveillance, regulation, and correction" (Bartky 65).

For a widow who has spent almost century managing her appetites, her appearance, her ritual status, the absence of apology is a profound form of self-reclamation. Rukmini at last in her final days, started to live for herself without any guilt of eating forbidden food.

"A Coca-Cola said my mother, shocked" (285). Ratna's mother refuses to bring Coca-Cola when Rukmini wants to drink but Ratna gives it her. She tastes lemon tarts, garlic, three types of aerated drinks, and bhel-Puri from nearest unclean bazar.

Rukmini's eating is a rebellion—not an open declarative rebellion, but a silent, domestic one. This is rebellion without rhetoric, without manifesto, without the language of rights or feminism.

Intergenerational Solidarity and the Female Body

A key feature of the narrative is its portrayal of a bond between women across generations, rooted in their physical existence and desires. The grandmother and granddaughter come from distinct backgrounds—one influenced by colonial Hindu traditions, while the other is informed by the more adaptable opportunities of postcolonial modernity. This connection is primarily expressed through nonverbal communication. The two women do not engage in extensive discussions about longing, customs, or the significance of defiance. Vandana Shiva observes that the female body in Hindu society has historically been subjected to systems of control that operate through the idioms of purity and pollution (47). Rukmini's body has been such a site throughout her life.



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Rukmini seeks a red sari, representing a bold act of defiance. Hindu widows are generally prohibited from wearing colourful and vibrant clothing, being limited to white attire to avoid attracting men. "Bring me a red sari," she screamed. 'A red one with a big wide border of gold. And,' her voice cracked. (286)

Conclusion

Githa Hariharan's a story about the old widow is the hunger for pleasure, for selfhood, for a life lived on one's own terms. Through the character of the dying Rukmini, Hariharan examines how desire, suppressed over a lifetime by the demands of caste, gender, and religion can find expression in the most intimate and irreversible of acts—the act of eating. In the story, food does not serve as a backdrop; rather, it bears the weight of forbidden yearning, the energy of a silent rebellion, and the warmth of intergenerational female solidarity.

Rukmini does not protest or speak out but eats. And in eating, she performs a final, definitive act of self-determination that all the rituals of the good death cannot undo. In a culture that has long required women to manage, suppress, and apologize for their desires, the act of eating without apology is, finally, a revolutionary act.

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