



STORYTELLING- AN EFFECTIVE TOOL OF TEACHING: A CRITICAL STUDY OF GITHA HARIHARAN'S *THE GHOSTS OF VASU MASTER*

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Abstract

The philosophy of education, in a traditional way, compels the learner to adapt and adjust himself as per the available resources; and confined to a fixed and well-defined curriculum. Learning and memory are two closely knitted concepts; learning is the acquisition of knowledge or skill while memory is the exhibition of what you have acquired. Enhancing one's learning and memory capabilities have surging impact on one's success. The focus of researchers has been, in every sphere of life, that facts and figures learnt during academic years, elapses with the passage of time. The audio-visual aids contribute, though not sufficiently, in this regard: memory retention. Various researches have, over a period of time, proved that teaching, swaddled with stories, exert more influence, and multiple-times more easily memorable than the bare facts. Due care should be taken to make this, teaching-learning process, interesting. Storytelling is one of the narrative techniques, which not only makes the listeners' involved and attentive but also appeals to their imagination and creativity. The storytelling, as one of the best techniques, equips teacher to cross the horizon and simultaneously to illuminate the horizon.

Keyword: Student, teaching, learning, memory, story and imagination.

If you want your children to be smart, tell them stories. If you want them to be brilliant, tell them more stories. - **Albert Einstein**

Storytelling, a trait used to pass values and acquired knowledge to the next generation, is certainly pervasive across history and culture from the olden times, and it is a time-tested technique which was, and is deliberately used by pedagogues: academics or non-academics for learners of different age groups to achieve desired results. Storytelling is an innate part of society; embedded in every facet of human life: from bedtime stories and morning cartoons to catching up with a neighbour or a colleague, all the way to politics and the legal system. Different cultures, from all corners of the world, pass to generations, their own fables and

tales along with their beliefs, traditions, and history. The motivators often employ this method to encourage the employees of the company, to frame their behaviour, to apprise them of the positive incidents, and impacts of the negative decisions in their career advancements. Research confirms that well-designed stories are the most effective vehicle for exerting influence.

The *case study method*, frequently used in business schools, nowadays considered as practical approach, is a popular and potent means of introducing stories into the classroom. Cases typically list problems by giving background details about the crisis, and end with an individual or organization holed up in a conundrum. They are designed, often, to exemplify a certain point or

demonstrate particular meticulous procedures. Students are encouraged to generate possible solutions and weigh the consequences of those solutions. This method stimulates active learning, and in essence, like mock drill, puts students in the role of concluding the story.

Storytelling, in an incredible way, helps with learning because stories are easy to remember. Organizational psychologist Peg Neuhauser found that learning which stems from a well-told story is remembered more accurately, and for far longer, than learning derived from facts and figures. Similarly, cognitive psychologist Jerome Burner's research suggests that we are 22 times more likely to remember a fact when it has been wrapped in a story. Kendall Haven, author of *Story Proof and Story Smart*, considers storytelling a serious business for business. He has written:

Your goal in every communication is to influence your target audience (change their current attitudes, belief, knowledge, and behavior). Information alone rarely changes any of these. Research confirms that well-designed stories are the most effective vehicle for exerting influence. (Haven)

Apart from any other type of narrative, storytelling is one of the marvelous techniques which entice the listener's attention. Storytelling is embedded within courses, often; though in a piecemeal fashion. This inclusion is, always, purposeful and in a consistent manner. According to Woodhouse (2011), the purpose for "storytelling is to 'humanize' the process of learning by appealing to the students' imagination". (p. 212).

In *The Ghosts of Vasu Master*, published in 1994, Githa Hariharan very dexterously, in a very candid manner, weaved the theme of teacher-taught relationship. Simultaneously, she gives a new horizon to the art of teaching that is a skill. The story of the novel revolves around the psyche of Mani (the student), and the efforts of Vasu Master, from the beginning to the end. Vasu Master, who had taught English Language and Literature for nearly forty years at P.G. Boys School, Ellipettai, is struggling to solve his personal and physical worries. Often his memory about his past haunts him. After

superannuation, Vasu Master started coaching class; and Mani is his pupil of that coaching class. Mani is a mute 'pale-skinned boy' who is unable to speak and write anything. Actually something wrong, undisclosed and unrevealed, had gone with Mani disturbing his regular growth. The doctors, the teachers and the schools had failed to cure him.

Vasu Master starts teaching Mani, a slow learner, who along with three more students, is enrolled in the coaching classes. Mani, called as 'Papaya head Mani', a retarded boy, neither opens his mouth nor interactive at any situation, is twelve years old. Even his parents got weary of him and wanted to do away with him. The school principals, where his parents got Mani admitted, were unable to 'know what is wrong with him and..... give him special attention', and shunted him out of the school on the pretention that 'Mani disturbs the class'. Initially reluctant, Vasu Master took this opportunity, of teaching Mani, to prove his ability as a teacher and said:

Of course, I will teach him, I heard myself say, bringing the interview to an abrupt end. I accepted my new charge immediately because I knew Mani was not like the other three tuition boys. They seemed bored and lazy, and I often thought that they richly deserved the two doses they got of the same lessons, one in school and then again in my room. (Hariharan 10)

As a mentor, it is an arduous task to teach and educate a student, who is ineffectual to speak and write; and whose head had grown bigger than his body, in fact an abnormal boy. Though a demanding assignment, Vasu Master accepts the challenge to tutor Mani. Acknowledging Mani's disinterest in formal teaching, Vasu Master tries to foster new bond, the bond of friendship, with him to have access to Mani's heart by narrating him animal fables and stories; realizing that the child, Mani, is closer to animal world of grown up people. The retired teacher, Vasu Master, cures and educates Mani; though not completely. The fables, narrated by Vasu Master, persuade Mani to express himself; though the language manifests itself in drawing the marks and the pictures. So it is the beginning of

Mani's learning. Vasu Master compensates his forty years job by educating an abnormal pupil, Mani.

Vasu Master, a seasoned teacher, realized that textbooks, written instructions, school, blackboards, doctors, classrooms are futile for Mani. He followed the olden technique of telling him animal fables and stories of Grey Mouse and Black Crow, Grey Mouse and Blue Bottle, fables of spiders, firefly, wingless wasp and so on. For Vasu Master, in the matter of choices "a teacher has- weather of technique or concept- he must accommodate two quarrelsome polarities that for some reason find each other irresistible" (62).

Pondering over Mani's resilience towards books, Vasu Master told Mani a story, one afternoon, of a wise old woman and a little fearful boy, living in a forest. Unlike the old woman who was wise, strong, bold, the boy was "a most stubborn, a most stupid boy" (50). The boy presumed "wild animals behind every bush" (50), though the woman tries her best to dispel his fears based on seer stories of lions and tigers. Once, during night, the boy got awakened by the tiger's growl at their hut, made for the dirt track which led to river, jumped into it and drowned. "There was no tiger, Nuisance. It was only in his head"(51). Both Vasu Master and Mani are petrified. Vasu is scared of his narcolepsy and insomnia, fastidious stomach, cancer and Mani of learning. Vasu Master envisages, for himself as well as for Mani, to live a life of astuteness like that of wise old woman, after getting rid of incessant fears.

So we picked up the strips of rubbish the books were reduced to, Mani and I, and we threw them in a pile. The corner of the room looked like the remnants of a celebration. I took off my glasses and looked at Mani. He was a moon-like blur. With my fuzzy-edged vision, his face seemed smoother than ever- a silken egg. ((Hariharan 51)

Vasu Master, having experience of four decades in a Classroom, opinions that teachers "are afflicted and blessed with the task of rearing children"(36). Nowadays, "schools and teaching have become elastic; they can be cut and stretched to fit anything. They are now available in a free size that fits any institution, any puppet or dummy who

cares to wear them. Loving, sharing and caring are victims of a similar tortuous contortion"(36). As a guru, Vasu Master intends to build a bridge between them (himself and Mani) so that "he could validate, confirm, encourage, support, enhance"(52), Mani's leaning skills. To Vasu Master, it is through this love bond between the teacher and taught, student learns inwards methods of teacher, delves deep into the secrets of his mind and the spirits of his life and works. He says: "The pupil belonged to the teacher not to an institution of stone and mud. Learning is a lifelong task not a brief sojourn in an exotic, artificial place" (41).

Vasu Master, being aware of Mani's psyche and abnormality, circumvents teaching Mani with chalk, duster, board and classroom; but effected by narrating fables. Vasu Master recounted the story of the Mascot to his pupil, Mani with the objective to apprise him of the importance of Teacher in one's life. If a man doesn't get good teacher, he becomes as Mascot. The fable runs like this: instead of lion, once an Old fox was unanimously elected king of forest, by the animals, to try a change. He summoned together all animals, told them about his vision to "stop killing each other and eating up our neighbours" (78) and urged them to "live together as one big family" (78). The animals were convinced, somehow by the wise fox, to overlook the shortage of food, to make history of Unity, Fraternity and Brotherhood. Years passed by, and the law of the jungle was almost forgotten, turning jungle into a 'Melting Pot'. To a surprise, "a doe gave birth to a strange and wonderful creature with ears like a rabbit's, hooves like a camel's, a snout like a wild boar's, and the limpid, almond-shaped eyes of a deer"(79) and a quite varied skin. The wise one, the Old Fox, considers the strange and wonderful creature as "mascot of Melting Pot", and "the animals brought up Mascot together" (79). He "continued to be a favourite- the Blessed one", for many years, and welcomed to spend "a week the used-to-be frogs in the pond, then a week high up on the trees with the used-to-be-monkeys" (80) into a grown up animal. Soon after the demise of the Old Wise Fox, the animals began to remember their earlier ways, their habits and "their old languages; soon they remembered other things about

themselves as well" (80). The spell of enchantment gave away.

You can imagine what happened next. Soon the idea of Melting Pot melted away as if it has never been. After their long rest, their spell of blindness, the animals went back to their old names and habits with a vengeance. (Hariharan 80)

The animals feel uncomfortable on his sight, consider him a nuisance, 'called him a spy; he knew all their languages'. A young fox, a grandson of wise one, warned Mascot about his 'ridiculous name' and challenges to prove his lineage.

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. And while you are about it, change that ridiculous name, will you ? (Hariharan 81)

The Mascot belongs to none, his fate oscillates, being puzzled, was left alone "as he had no teacher, no one to help him separate similarities and differences. He had not learnt how to fight or how to be cunning: or how to hide and lie till the danger passed" (81). Unable to decide or side with anyone, the whole herd of animals consider him an outsider, fell on him and tore into pieces turning "the whole forest into a jungle again. The animals lived as best they could... each one could assert his will to act" (81). Vasu Master taught Mani that teacher is important otherwise Mani's situation will be like that of Mascot. A teacher, only, like a light giver, guide and truth-teller can shape his pupil's future. The story brought 'an expression on his (Mani's) face, perhaps for the first time' since they had met. This expression was the reward for Vasu Master.

Through this bridge of fables, Vasu Master attempts to inculcate in Mani the skills, qualities or philosophy of life needed for survival in the world. Another story runs as: Grey Mouse and Black Crow had never been friends, through next-door neighbours, because love, affection, an honesty, sacrifice for each-other are prerequisites for friendship. The Mouse was living inside the hole with his wife and children. The Crow, as scavenger,

always alone, 'swift, decisive, single minded' whose 'glinting eye was now turned on' the mouse who prepared to stay at the door of mouse-hole. Greedy crow thought that there was good meal for him his next door. Registering crow's presence, aware of his power, the Grey Mouse "stayed near his door, so that the one or two times crow swooped down, mouse escaped just in time" (97). Both had recognized each others' habits and ways, and could not become friends. Allegorically, Vasu Master, through the fable/story, teaches Mani of friendship as:

So at long last the neighbours discovered each other. Both realized -Mouse in his own sad way, and Crow in his dim way -what they were to each other. For Crow, Mouse would always be there teasing him: a meal within reach he could not have yet. And for Mouse, a Crow was always there, taunting him: the ultimate predator, the supreme creature of action, lying in wait for him. ((Hariharan 98)

Vasu Master teaches Mani that the friendship is not possible if other wants to prey his friend. He, having found the key to hold Mani's attention, spoke about the animals and insects intentionally, and had become bold enough to try other bridges to establish barrier free communication with him, though Mani's needs were still obscure to him.

But 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 part; 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 99)

To strike a chord of friendship with Mani, Vasu Master retreats to the gurukula system of education. They started, though occasionally, exchanging thoughts and feelings to embark upon an missionary ardour of friendship and learning.

Also, as we slowly won each other's trust, I could rest my hand briefly on his back, lift his chin gently so that we could look at each other; or sit huddled together, side by side. This feeling of closeness, of two bodies

touching, both of us needed: being as we were on the brink of a dangerous adventure. ((Hariharan 103)

'Blue Bottle Finds A Friend' tells the tale of Blue Bottle fly, "an abnormal fly in the house' of flies due to his huge size. He could buzz louder than any of them; he was even more at home in filth and muck" (104). To make themselves feel better, normal flies began to pity him. Considering him to be out of their community; they used to tease Blue Bottle fly, by flying round and round him, their agile little bodies and wings fluttering with ghee, and chanting and buzzing these lines:

Blue, blue, clumsy old shoe,

What can we do?

The spider wants you. (Hariharan 105)

One day Blue Bottle falls in the trap, in spiders' web where spider can prey him. The prospect of his imminent death was certainly a delight for other flies. Meanwhile, Grey Mouse interfered and Blue Bottle's life is saved. Finally, Blue Bottle finds a guardian in the form of a lonely Grey Mouse. He saw Blue Bottle fly in sweeping, dizzy circles in the sunbeams, his silky body turning all the colours of a rainbow (106). Vasu Master taught Mani that the true friend is he who participates in others' joys and sorrows like Grey Mouse.

The story of three caterpillars: Ammukutty, Nanikutty and Ummikutty respectively, is impressive and lucid. Through the character of animals, Vasu Master intends to instill thoughts, morality and life skills required for survival. Vasu Master, in a very interesting and vivid way, weaves the details of miniature animals, to involve Mani in his process of learning.

They found, for instance, two little knobs on their heads which they could use like antennae, to learn about the world around and beyond their tree-home. And they discovered the spinnerets on their heads too; from these they could put out long, slim threads of silk. (Hariharan 132)

The caterpillars, in sisterly togetherness, learnt designs and new stitches from each other.

They had a common fund of patterns; a rich mingling of dreams, a tapestry that belonged to all three equally. Exhausted after their 'rapturous, serpentine movement', they slumbered 'into the safety of their cocoons', ignoring the external threats to their life. Three travelling brothers, 'identical triplets', found the cocoons where the caterpillars' dream to evolve into 'full-fledged lady moths'. The eldest ends as yards and yards of fresh silk, the second, 'spinning those old dreams in her head', would never unfolds her wings; living and laying eggs in a paper box, thanks to 'Middle's procrastination'. The third one escapes into the forest, leaving 'only a husk' for the third triplet. Ummikutty, with her 'hypersensitive antennae, feathery tendrils', still able 'to produce line after line of fine silk; or weave them into fantastic shapes', is always aware of the dangers around her. Any voice below the tree, reminds her of the triplets, secures herself in a cocoon: with a difference, "the shapeless camouflaging sack which she had neatly stitched together with large green leaves" (136).

Vasu Master, espousing individualism, narrates Mani the story of Inspector Buck Tooth. Once, an elder litter of Grey Mouse, Inspector Buck-Tooth, went to his father who was experimenting with Blue Bottle, a flabby fly, instead of attending his own family. Grey Mouse recounts a dream sequence, of him turning into a fly quite 'different from other copycat normal flies'; so could not 'remain huddled with the others', being 'big and fat'; turned into a fly earlier than others. He used to sit alone, couldn't learn leaps as quick leap which is useful for survival of life. His translucent blue and other distinctive features earned him the mask of an outcaste, though, "he is as eager and active as they are; but he knows the pleasure of both wild, uninhibited cartwheels and complete stillness" (145). The Grey Mouse said:

You are not aware, perhaps, that flies learn two types of jumps (or flights, if you want to be precise), as they are growing up one jump is the quick leap, the leap of survival. This is what makes a fly recognize another as one of its kind. (Hariharan 145)

The other lesson, an advanced one many grown-up flies do not have time for in their day-to-day lives. The somersault, best executed in sunbeam, does very little of tangible value for a fly. It does not help it feed; or turn its food liquid; or escape the cobweb; or even, the simplest of needs, to signal its name to a fellow-fly. (Hariharan 146)

The older flies 'tried to train him, coax him and bully him'; but his rigidness, even aggressive could not make room 'to learn the simplest of lessons'. However, 'Blue Bottle, surprisingly enough could turn the widest, most spectacular of somersaults' that all flies can't do it because 'it is a lonely, solitary exercise that promotes individuality; deny the comfort of being part of a mindless crowd'. (146)

Vasu Master taught Mani that individuality is unique; that one should have his own beliefs, concepts, point of views and perspectives. 'Don't take my word as unchallenged truth'. He narrates that: A firefly is able to move 'through the darkest stretch of forest' with his 'magical lantern' till midnight; a lantern that he got in legacy, always on his back; while his fellow travelers 'could see the shadows' in comparison to the crystal clear and lucid views perceived by the Firefly. Vasu Master, via story, mentored Mani that a person should comprehend things on the basis of own views.

And while he travelled, he saw everything he flew past in the colours of this light. So nothing was unfathomable; impossible to understand and classify. The entire forest, and indeed all of nature, was thus his dominion by birthright. ((Hariharan 201)

Stories after stories come in the mind of Vasu and he explains them in such a way that is very simple, and Mani who was regarded as 'block of wood' can easily understand them. Vasu Master's efforts yield results; establishes that he, as a teacher, is successful. Mani 'was no longer violent, either at home or with strangers'. The child was becoming quieter; showed 'expression to articulate, and rarely even try to smile. Through narrating various fables, tales or stories, Vasu Master's endeavours to bring

about positive changes in Mani's personality: whole heartedly, and to lead him on the path of becoming a capable and confident human being.

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