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**THE GHOST OF VASU MASTER: AN EPITOME OF STUDENT CENTRIC EDUCATION**

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**Abstract**

Everyone can point to a teacher who made a difference in his or her life. The core of education is the relationship between the teacher and the student. According to educators, a positive relationship with a student is close and supportive, but not overly dependent. A teacher who cares about his or her students, believes that every child can learn, but differently and at different pace, sets high expectations, is warm and trusting, and strives to keep the relationship conflict-free. He or she also uses humour and admits mistakes, sets clear boundaries, and is open, honest, and approachable. Consequently, improving of student-teacher relationship and lessening the negative student-teacher relationship has important, positive and long-lasting implications for students' academic, mental and social development. Githa Hariharan, winner of Commonwealth Writer's Prize in 1993, in her novel, *The Ghost of Vasu Master*, delves deep into contemporary issues of student-centric education, and specially of exceptional children.

Keyword: Student, teacher, relationship, learn, and motivation.

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"A good education can change anyone. A good teacher can change everything."- UNESCO

Although it has been traditional in education to feel that the children should adapt themselves to the school until recent years; the onus lies on learners to adapt themselves to the school. The concept that education is something fixed and well defined, lacking in flexibility, mars the very purpose of teaching and learning. A new universal system of quality education, based on equality and accessibility, rid of all the past imbalances, demands the inclusion of Special Education Needs (SEN) for certain number of students/learners who relatively require more than usual amount of educational services. The prevailing philosophy in education was somewhat as follows:

Unfortunately, being different implies in our culture not merely a difference in individual characteristics, but also a difference in social status. In the competitive atmosphere of our times, the yardstick of superiority or inferiority is applied to any outstanding difference. Furthermore, any deviation from normalcy, particularly if it is based on any deficiency, evokes unfavorable reactions. For this reason, any classification of children based on a comparison with others, is damaging. Whatever handicap the child may experience through his minus or plus deviation from others is accentuated by being placed in a special category. (Dreikurs 41)

The Kothari Commission (1964-66), the first education commission of independent India, observed: "the education of the handicapped children should be an inseparable part of the education system". Classifying children as "exceptional" or "atypical" on the basis of their disabilities was objected by Rudolf Dreikurs:

Actually, each child has the right to be understood as he is and not to be compared with any other. Fundamentally, each is a human being and has to be respected in his own individuality, appreciated for what he is, and exposed to such treatment as he individually needs. Even the so-called normal children are by no means alike; they too require the same individual understanding and treatment. Classifying people and putting them into categories implies by necessity the setting up of a hierarchy, the use of a frame of reference which establishes superiority and inferiority, and in the end deprives each individual of his secure place in the group. (Dreikurs 41)

Irrespective of disability, though a hindrance, it is the teacher-taught interpersonal relationship which motivates the pupil to overcome certain hurdles viz behavioral, emotional and professional, and achieve self- fulfillment.

Clearly, a positive teacher-student relationship strongly contributes to student learning. Educators, parents and students understand that problematic relationships can be detrimental to student outcomes and development. Productive learning environments are characterized by supportive and warm interactions... (Wubbles 1)

Githa Hariharan's novel, *The Ghost of Vasu Master* (1994), deals aptly with teacher-student relationship, in a very accomplished and refreshing tone. Human emotions are excellently expressed through the life of Vasu Master and Mani. After the retirement, he starts jotting down observations, memories and thoughts about teaching. He starts to teach Mani. This is a sort of self discovery. The novel is student-centric, as it revolves round the psyche of

Mani (the student), from the beginning to the end. The novel reminds us of Panchtantra stories- the usage of plants and animals to explain a point to children. Vasu Master uses the same philosophy while teaching Mani. Vasu Master doesn't live only in the present but his past also haunts him.

Vasu Master begins to relive incidents from the past in an imaginative way, the nature of a teacher, teaching and pupils. This process of self discovery is speeded up by the arrival of Mani and this is a sort of self-discovery. Githa Hariharan explores the concept that the unconscious mind can be studied through self discovery. Vasu Master has recently retired from P.G. Boys School, Ellipettai. He was the teacher of English language and literature for nearly forty years.

The process of self discovery is quickened by Mani's entry in the life of Vasu Master. Mani is his pupil of coaching class. He is an abnormal boy and is unable to speak and write anything. Actually something wrong had gone with Mani. His normal development is disturbed by something. The doctors, the 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. Githa Hariharan is interested in the depiction of complex layers of the psyche of her characters. She uses fantasy, fable and several imaginary characters. Vasu Master shares his story with several other characters who narrate their own stories. Sometimes there is no logical link between the events in a chapter.

Vasu Master, struggles to write about his teaching experiences on the notebook, the students gifted him on his retirement, because his memory about his past deranges him. Though, he is retired from his duties as a school teacher, he intends to begin the second half of his teaching career. Vasu master starts his coaching classes, Mani, a slow learner along with three more students joined the class. Mani is twelve when he comes to Vasu master but "with it seemed, the brain of a six or seven year old." (11) The boy was called as papaya head Mani and he never opens his mouth at any situation. Vasu Master took this as an opportunity to prove his experience as a teacher and he 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 teacher, it is very difficult to teach and educate an abnormal student who is unable to speak and write, and whose head had grown bigger than his body. Vasu Master accepts the challenge to teach and educate Mani. Vasu Master tries to go closer to Mani's heart by telling him animal fables and stories. As a child Mani is closer to animal world of grown up people. The retired teacher Vasu Master cures and educates Mani, though not completely. The process of education of Mani begins as he starts drawing the marks and the pictures of stories that he heard from Vasu Master. The language itself has come into existence through the marks and pictures. So it is the beginning of Mani's study of language. Vasu Master compensates his forty years job by educating an abnormal pupil Mani.

Teaching is not a passive activity, but the active one; it makes a character, and provides an identity. It is not a profession for wages, but also as a means of self development. Vasu Master develops an intimate relationship with Mani, based on faith and support. Mani's positive response during teaching becomes a source of hope and inspiration in Vasu's empty life. The stories, Vasu tells to Mani to encourage him, and teach the moral lesson of life; becomes a source of inspiration for Vasu himself. At the end, when Mani starts drawing pictures representing the beginning of his education; Vasu seems refreshed and full of creative energy. The situation of Vasu Master and Mani is shown almost equal and parallel in the novel as both suffer: one from identity crisis and the other from his problematic mind. Vasu decides to understand him in human terms. He tries to build a bridge between them to conform, encourage, support and enhance.

Our real starting point-was when Mani and I were finally left alone in a closed room. Thinking back on those days, I can now say this starting point coincided with the emergence of our own relationship. Also, as we slowly won each others 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. (Hariharan 123),

At first, Vasu Master is not much successful with Mani: "it had been two months, twenty four lessons since we first met, and the voyage I had lovingly planned had not yet begun."(45) But Vasu had faith in 'Rigveda', and believes that if the teacher's heart and soul belongs to his pupil, he can teach him the truth exactly as he knows it. Vasu decides to take Mani with him, on his weekly visits to library. With the passage of time, he develops an intimate relationship with Mani and wins his trust. After teaching for some time, one day Vasu finds that the boy is interested in stories. Through these fascinating and interesting stories, he travels into his innermost recesses of fear and weaknesses. He recounts scenes from his past, trying to understand the present. For these stories, he was inspired by his grandmother, who had narrated him many stories in his childhood. Vasu Master's process of self discovery is initiated and accelerated through the teaching of Mani; especially understanding and catering to him at psychological level. He tries to help Mani from whatever burdens the latter carries within it. Here vasu Master uses the same philosophy while teaching Mani, when he realizes that Mani is impatient and irritated with pens, pencils and notebooks.

The novel presents, in the background, the role of teacher and student. In this novel, the theme is not of the lonely life of a retired teacher, but a rediscovery of a lost art of living. Githa Hariharan puts the simple art of stories into creative and artistic use in her narrative design. When Mani is brought to him, Vasu does not realize the nature of the challenge. But, as he begins to understand the child's stubborn resistance, he is compelled to find

new ways. Vasu is obsessed with newly inflicted memories of recent past and the reminiscences of the older past. Vasu Master is often disturbed by the memories of his father who has passed away some thirty years ago, ghost of his dead wife Mangla, and her friend Jameela and his grandmother. His mind was filled with memories of grief.

Psychoanalysis is a tool to explain the human behavior in a broad way. It is not merely about the problematic behavior of the human psyche; it is about the passive recipient of love and it helps to identify the sufferings of the subconscious mind. This novel, *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* is used as tool by Geeta Hariharan to expose the inner conflict of the retired school teacher and his student Mani. Vasu starts teaching Mani to fulfill the emptiness, and loneliness after retirement and to restore his title of 'Vasu Master' in the real sense. Vasu seeks Mani as his only companion, who can provide him past in words and the theoretical possibilities of future. Vasu perceives this an opportunity for which he has been waiting all these years, for a new beginning. It is at this difficult and late stage of life when he tries to discover his 'self' through meaningful teaching and providing some kind of healing for Mani. He says:

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)

Vasu's views on education, teaching methods and ancient education system are vividly presented in the novel. He believes: "all of us are pupils and teachers. While there is life in each of us, we learn and we teach." (28) Vasu Master and his student grow and learn and finally having travelled successfully through their myriad confusions, frustrations and resentments come to terms with the world around them and their own places in it. 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 other. Geeta Hariharan, through the process of self discovery of Vasu through Mani, has made a bold attempt to highlight the various knots and limitations, especially related to education system. The polarity of his real and his imaginary sense marks a difference, with significantly, their mutual participation. Vasu Master begins to recollect incidents from the past and discovers, in his own unique way, the nature of teaching, teacher and student. The task related to teaching Mani that he took up after his retirement forges a strong bond with the taught, and a mechanism of exploration of his own self.

Perhaps no school, no teacher can assume responsibility for the learning that should stretch across the entire life time of the pupil. But then now do you weave a web that links and transfigures each line of experience, every point, into one learning. (Hariharan 26)

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 it is never too late to begin.

"all I had to do was begin all over again; learn afresh.....teach Mani (and myself) how to live." (Hariharan 263)

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