

Feminist Writings
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Remains of the Feast - Part 3

So, hello and welcome to this NPTEL course entitled Feminist Writing. So, we are looking at Geetha Hari Haran's short story Remains of the Feast. This will be the concluding lecture for this particular text. So, we have seen, how in the final, lecture before this, we saw how the protagonist in the story, Rukmini had been hospitalized and obviously her cancer has been accentuated to a certain extent, perhaps, by a consumption of outside food.

Food from the bazaar, from the local bazaar, food which are made by, you know, in very unhygienic conditions. And we saw how the act of consuming that kind of food becomes in a way a resistance towards the cancer, that was consuming her body. So there is a bit of an auto consumptive activity that happened through this act of consumption where she kept consuming Coca Cola, samosas, bhelpuri, and all of the kinds of food from the bazaar.

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"It burns, it burns", she would yell then, but she pursed her lips tightly together when my mother spooned a thin gruel into her mouth. "No, no," she screamed deliriously. "Get me something from the bazaar. Raw onions. Fried bread. Chickens and goats."

Then we knew she was lost to us. She was dying.

She was in the nursing home for ten whole days. My mother and I took turns sitting by her, sleeping on the floor by the hospital cot.

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. The sheets smelled, and the young doctor shook his head. "Not much to be done now," he said. "The cancer has left nothing intact."

The day she died, she kept searching the room with her eyes. Her arms were held down by the tubes and needles, cross-cross, in, out. The glucose dripped into her veins but her nose still ran, the clear, thin liquid trickling down like dribble on to her chin. Her hands clenched and unclenched with the effort and she whispered, like a miracle, "Ratna."

My mother and I rushed to her bedside. Tears streaming down her face, my mother bent her head before her and pleaded, "Give me your blessings, Pati. Bless me before you go."



So we are told, we have not given a description of what happened, when she died and the specialty around her death. The day she died, she kept searching the room with her eyes. Her arms were held down by the tubes and needles cross-cross in and out. So, you know, she is surrounded by needles and tubes. So, entire body becomes, you know, enveloped in a way by all this medical machines.

And again, one can connect this to Sylvia Plath's Tulips where similar thing happens, the female body is sort of contained and consumed by the medical machines which scan and gaze up, gaze at her, the glucose are dripped into her veins, but her nose still ran, the clear thin liquid trickling down like dribble onto her chin. Her hands clenched and unclenched with efforts and she whispered like a miracle, "Ratna."

My mother and I rushed to the bedside tears streaming down her face. My mother bent her head before her and pleaded, give me a blessing, Pati. Bless me before you go. So the mother, you know, Ratna's mother goes through this very old woman and request her for her blessings before she goes. So that is, there is a bit of a sacred ritual that, the religious ritual that they had sanctioned within the Brahmin household.

But then we are told that, we would very quickly see in what she does, what Rukmini does over here, which is completely different from anything sacred, completely different from anything which is religious, completely different from anything which is moral. And her final act of subversion becomes a real act of subversion. It becomes a bodily act of subversion, which is a continuation and extension of this subversion that was happening through consuming different kinds of food. So that, that was something which we see over here.

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My great-grandmother looked at her for a minute, her lips working furiously, noiselessly. For the first time in my life I saw a fine veil of perspiration on her face. The muscles on her face twitched in mad, frenzied jerks. Then she pulled one arm free of the tubes, in a sudden, crazy spurt of strength, and the IV pole crashed to the floor.

"Bring me a red sari," she screamed. "A red one with a big wide border of gold. And," her voice cracked, "bring me peanuts with chilli powder from the corner shop. Onion and green chilli bondas deep fried in oil."

Then the voice gurgled and gurgled, her face and neck swayed, rocked like a boat lost in a stormy sea. She retched, and as the vomit flew out of her mouth, her nose, thick like the milkshakes she had drunk, brown like the alcoholic coke, her head slumped forward, her rounded chin buried in the cancerous neck.

When we brought the body home - I am not yet a doctor and already I can call her that - I helped my mother to wipe her clean with a wet, soft cloth. We wiped away the smells, the smell of the hospital bed, the smell of an old woman's juices drying. Her skin was dry and papery. The stubble on her head - she had refused to shave her head once she got sick - had grown, like the soft, white bristles of a hairbrush.



My great grandmother looked at her for a minute, her lips working fearlessly, noiselessly. For the first time in my life I saw a fine veil of perspiration on her face. So again, very, very visceral. The perspiration, the bits of sweat appearing on a face. The muscles on her face

twitched and mad, frenzied jerks. Then she pulled one arm free of the tubes, in a sudden, crazy spurt of strength, and the IV pole crashed to the floor.

Right? So the whole, this becomes obviously very iconic act of subversion where she crushes the medical machines around her, one last show of strength, one last show of bodily subversion, where she summons her strength, whatever remains in her body, in her dying body. And she pulls and jerks the IV pole to the point that it crashes on the floor.

“Bring me a red Saree,” she screamed. “A red one with a big white border of gold. And.” her voice cracked, “bring the peanuts with chili powder from the corner shop. Onion, and green chili bondas deep fried in oil.” So, the red saree over here obviously becomes a very subversive sartorial signifier over here because she is a Brahmin widow.

And for the last part of her life should have worn white saree because of widowhood and her last desire to wear a red saree, of course, red over here becomes, you know, the symbol of femininity in a sense that it becomes the color menstruation. So she wants to go back to be the menstruating woman again. And that of course becomes a very deep and sort of strong articulation of feminine agency over here.

The desire to become the menstruating woman, the desire to become sexualized woman. So, the red obviously becomes the image, the color of sexualized, the sexualization, menstruation, and that becomes, that in a way it connects to a degree of female agency, which is obviously she wants to hold onto.

She wants to articulate with all the intensity, with all the strength. “Bring me a red saree,” she screamed. “A red one with a big wide border of gold.” So again, the colors are very, very important, the colors are very sexualized over here. And of course she wants food, which is very-very sexualized in quality as well.

“Bring me peanuts with chili powder from the corner shop, onion and green Chili bondas deep fried in oil.” So all this desire for food, desire for color becomes part of the erotic quality of subversion that we have seen since the very beginning of the story where she begins to consume, cakes with egg, when she begins to consume with different kinds of aeriated drinks, when she begins to consume brandy, in different forms.

So you know, that this, this becomes, this last desire, this last articulation desire becomes the last bit of a narrative of subversion that she is enacting over here. Then the voice gurgled and gurgled, her face and neck swayed, rocked like a boat lost in a stormy sea.

She retched, and as the vomit flew out of her mouth, her nose, like thick like milkshakes she had drunk, brown like the alcoholic coke, her slumped forward, her rounded chin buried in the cancerous neck. So, the final act, even when she died, the final act of dying becomes one with movement, becomes one of bodily movement in a bodily function. So, that becomes, in a way, a very symbolic subversion in the answer.

She doesn't die quietly. She doesn't die peacefully. She doesn't die with grace. She doesn't die well by blessing the daughter-in-law, the great daughter-in-law, the granddaughter in law, but she dies desiring for a sexualized dress. She dies desiring for erotic food. She does desiring for an act of subversion.

So, you know that last desire becomes very, very important and that becomes an important issue in terms of articulation of female agency, particularly in this kind of a masculinist medical space where she is sort of surrounded and imprisoned by needles and tubes or roundup.

But the last act of toppling that over, the last act of crashing the IV pole to the ground becomes in a way, a symbolic act of subversion, which is something which is quite scenic, in quality, and spectacular in quality. So if you look at the final act of subversion, which is very spectacular, you can contrast that with the clandestine quality of subversion, which happened in midnight in her little room where the great granddaughter would smuggle in food for her and she would eat those secretly in a small room, in a house.

But over here, the final act of subversion happens in almost in public space, the medical space under the public guys, and it becomes spectacular, it becomes iconic and quality has a larger than life quality to it. When we brought the body home - I am not yet a doctor and already I can call her that - I helped my mother to wipe her wiper clean with a wet soft cloth. She wiped away the smells, the smell of the hospital bed, the smell of an old woman's juices drying, her skin was dry and papery.

The stubble on her head, she had refused to shave your head once she got sick - had grown like soft white bristles of a hairbrush. So again refusal to shave her head becomes an act of subversion, becomes an act of resistance through its cancer, to a large extent.

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voice cracked, "bring me peanuts with chilli powder from the corner shop. Onion and green chilli bondas deep fried in oil."

Then the voice gurgled and gurgled, her face and neck swayed, rocked like a boat lost in a stormy sea. She retched, and as the vomit flew out of her mouth, her nose, thick like the milkshakes she had drunk, brown like the alcoholic coke, her head slumped forward, her rounded chin buried in the cancerous neck.

When we brought the body home - I am not yet a doctor and already I can call her that - I helped my mother to wipe her clean with a wet, soft cloth. We wiped away the smells, the smell of the hospital bed, the smell of an old woman's juices drying. Her skin was dry and papery. The stubble on her head - she had refused to shave her head once she got sick - had grown, like the soft, white bristles of a hairbrush.

She had had only one child though she had lived so long. But the skin on her stomach was like crumpled, frayed velvet, the creases running to and fro in fine, silvery rivulets.

"Bring her sari", my mother whispered, as if my great-grandmother could still hear her.

I looked at the stiff cold body that I was seeing naked for the first time. She was asleep at last, quiet at last. I had learnt, in the last month or two, to expect the unexpected from her. I waited, in case she changed her mind and sat up, remembering one more taboo food to be tasted.

"Bring me your eyebrow tweezers," I heard her say.



She had had only one child, though she lived so long, but the skin on the stomach was like crumpled, frayed velvet, the creases running to and fro in fine silvery rivulets. "Bring her saree," my mother whispered, as if my great grandmother could still hear him. I looked at the stiff cold body that I was seeing naked for the first time. She was asleep at last, quite at last.

I had learnt, in the last month or two, to expect the unexpected from her. I waited, in case she changed the mind and sat up, remembering one more taboo food to be tasted. So. it begins to take an uncanny quality now. The great granddaughter Ratna almost hopes, almost expects that to get up in the, you know, the dead great grandmother to get up and ask her one last forbidden food, one last taboo food.

You know because she has expected, she had begun to expect the unexpected from her over the last couple of months. So, she wants to remember, I mean, she, she can almost visualize she getting up from the (())(8:31) position and demanding one more forbidden food, one more taboo food.

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When we brought the body home - I am not yet a doctor and already I can call her that - I helped my mother to wipe her clean with a wet, soft cloth. We wiped away the smells, the smell of the hospital bed, the smell of an old woman's juices drying. Her skin was dry and papery. The stubble on her head - she had refused to shave her head once she got sick - had grown, like the soft, white bristles of a hairbrush.

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"Bring me your eyebrow tweezers," I heard her say.

"Bring me that hair-removing cream. I have a moustache and I don't want to be an ugly old woman."

But she lay still, the wads of cotton in her nostrils and ears shutting us out. Shutting out her belated ardour.



"Bring me your eyebrow tweezers," I heard her say. "Bring me that hair removing cream. I have a mustache and I don't want to be an ugly old woman." So, you know, she can still hear the voices in her head. Her great grandmother telling to bring the eyebrow tweezers, bring the hair removing cream. She didn't want to be an ugly woman. She wants to be a beautiful, and she wants to be a desired woman.

So all these voices are running in her head, the great granddaughter's head, and this becomes the beautiful story about viscosity, as you can see, it is a moving story, a moving account about viscosity and female agency, particularly as it negotiates with the discursive apparatus of the medical space, the home space, the household space, etc.

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suobit on ner nead - sne nau refused to snave ner nead once sne got sick - nau grown, like me
soft, white bristles of a hairbrush.

She had had only one child though she had lived so long. But the skin on her stomach was
like crumpled, frayed velvet, the creases running to and fro in fine, silvery rivulets.

"Bring her sari", my mother whispered, as if my great-grandmother could still hear her.

I looked at the stiff cold body that I was seeing naked for the first time. She was asleep at
last, quiet at last. I had learnt, in the last month or two, to expect the unexpected from her. I
waited, in case she changed her mind and sat up, remembering one more taboo food to be tasted.

"Bring me your eyebrow tweezers," I heard her say.

"Bring me that hair-removing cream. I have a moustache and I don't want to be an ugly old
woman."

But she lay still, the wads of cotton in her nostrils and ears shutting us out. Shutting out her
belated ardour.

I ran to my cupboard and brought her the brightest, reddest sari I could find: last year's
Diwali sari, my first silk. I unfolded it, ignoring my mother's eyes which were turning aghast. I
covered her naked body lovingly. The red silk glittered like her childish laughter.

"Have you gone mad?" my mother whispered furiously.



But she lay still, the wads of cotton in her nostrils and ears shutting us out. Shutting out a
belated her ardour. I ran to my cupboard and brought her the brightest, reddest saree I could
find: last year's Diwali saree, my first silk. So, you know, this becomes a very, very symbolic
and quality.

I unfolded it, ignoring my mother's eyes which were turning aghast. I covered her naked
body lovingly. The red silk glittered like a childish laughter. So redness, obviously the red
saree, is as I mentioned, it can symbolically be seen as a, as a sartorial signifier of
womanhood, a sexualized womanhood, someone about to become a woman.

So we are told that the great granddaughter had received her first silk saree. She is about to
become a woman, the first Diwali gift, and that saree which is given to the dead body, on the
dead body of the great grandmother, and of course that that becomes, that makes a connect
between these two figures, between these two liminal figures of complete. So as I mentioned
in the beginning, perhaps in the last lecture. There is a liminality which informs the identities
of these two people. So we have this great grandmother, who is a very old woman, but wants
to be back to being desired woman, once you are back being the desired girl. And there is this
transition happening in the body and the mind.

And of course we have more metabolic, more biological, more natural transition happening
with the great granddaughter, Ratna. And also two names that sort of, you know, phonically

similar to each other, Ratna, Rukmani. Ratna of course, is a woman, is a girl who is sort of growing up to be a woman, who is on a cusp of womanhood.

And she has received her first read saree, and that first red saree which is a symbol of womanhood, at the menstruating woman, the sexualized woman that is now given to the dead body of, you know, the, the great grandmother. And that becomes very, the final act of subversion, the final act of subversion to a sartorial signifier, a sort of very spectacular sartorial signifier, the redness, the glittering color of the particular saree. And of course the mother's eyes have become aghast, were turning aghast.

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sudde on ner nead - sne nau refused to shave ner nead once sne got sick - nau grown, like the soft, white bristles of a hairbrush.

She had had only one child though she had lived so long. But the skin on her stomach was like crumpled, frayed velvet, the creases running to and fro in fine, silvery rivulets.

"Bring her sari", my mother whispered, as if my great-grandmother could still hear her.

I looked at the stiff cold body that I was seeing naked for the first time. She was asleep at last, quiet at last. I had learnt, in the last month or two, to expect the unexpected from her. I waited, in case she changed her mind and sat up, remembering one more taboo food to be tasted.

"Bring me your eyebrow tweezers," I heard her say.

"Bring me that hair-removing cream. I have a moustache and I don't want to be an ugly old woman."

But she lay still, the wads of cotton in her nostrils and ears shutting us out. Shutting out her belated ardour.

I ran to my cupboard and brought her the brightest, reddest sari I could find: last year's Divali sari, my first silk. I unfolded it, ignoring my mother's eyes which were turning aghast. I covered her naked body lovingly. The red silk glittered like her childish laughter.

"Have you gone mad?" my mother whispered furiously.



And she says, "Have you gone mad? my mother whispered furiously. "She was a sick old woman; she didn't know what she was saying." She rolled up the saree and flung it aside; as if it had been polluted. She wiped the body again to free it from foolish, trivial desires.

So again, the final act of pollution becomes, the final act of subversion. So this equation between pollution and subversion is something which runs throughout the story in a brilliant way actually. It is one of the finest short stories that one can read about the, you know, the whole act of contamination, being an act of subversion.

So desire to be contaminated, desire to be sexually contaminated, desire to be gastronomically contaminated, and all these desires become little micro desires, little micro acts of subversion from within a household space. So these don't become a massive public acts of subversion, but these become little act of subversion, which then, which mean a lot

experientially, which mean a lot existentially, especially in the setting, the cultural setting of this particular household. So she whipped the body again to free from foolish, trivial desires.

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They burnt her in a pale brown sari, her widow's weeds. The prayer beads I had never seen her touch encircled the bulging, obscene neck.

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.

She has left me behind with nothing but a smell, a legacy that grows fainter every day. I hunt the dirtiest bakeries and tea stalls I can find every evening. I search for her, my sweet great-grandmother, in plate after plate of stale confections, in needle sharp green chillies deep-fried in rancid oil. I plot her revenge for her, I give myself diarrhoea for a week.

Then I open all the windows and her cupboard and air the rooms. I tear her dirty grey saris to shreds. I line the shelves of her empty cupboard with my thick, newly bought, glossy jacketed texts, one next to the other. They stand straight and solid, row after row of armed soldiers. They fill up the small cupboard in minutes.

Contributor:

GITHA HARIHARAN : Born in India, continued her studies in the US and worked with pu



The burned her in a pale brown saree, her widow's weeds. The prayer beads I have never seen her touch encircling the bulging, obscene neck. So, the prayer beads, holy Hindu prayer beads come back and she is dressed up as a holy Hindu Brahmin. But before that, the final act of subversion had happened, she had been dorned, she had been given the glittering red saree.

The first silk saree of her great granddaughter had been given to her. So in that sense she had become sexualized again. The final act of the final act, the final desire to be desired. That has come back to her and whatever happens after that, the pale brown saree, the widow's weeds, you know, the prayer beads, which we are told by the way, she never used

Her great granddaughter has never seen her use those. Those are given to her in a very ceremonious, ritualistic fashion, which don't mean anything at all at this point in time. So, we have see an act of experiential, existential subversion, which far exceeds any kind of ritual over here. And the rain lies, the power of this particular story, (())(13:21) impact of this particular story in terms of discursive quality. It attains through experiential processes.

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 insights, the entrails of memories she told me nothing about, the pain congealing into a cancer. So again, we are told that she has, she i's trained to be a doctor, but

she is not really a full doctor yet. As a result of which she still has the experiential existential gaze, not a fully reified medical gaze.

She doesn't, she's hasn't been hardened by the medical gaze yet. She hasn't been hardened by the reified medical gaze yet. So she still has the, the purity, the human quality, the organic quality of the human gaze with which she sees the grandmother, great grandmother. She is left behind, left me behind with nothing but a smell, a legacy that grows fainter every day or hunt the dirtiest bakeries and tea stalls I can find every evening.

I search for her, my sweet great grandmother in plate after plate of stale confections, in needle sharp green chillies, deep-fried in rancid oil. I plot her revenge for her, I give myself diarrhea for a week. So again, I know this becomes a very visceral act of retaliation.

So this is her, plotting a revenge for her, this is the great granddaughter avenging the great grandmother by having diarrhea, by having contaminated food. So, the whole act of willfully having contaminated food, the whole act of willfully having stale food, whole act of willfully having impure food becomes and act of retaliation is something you do to your body, which is, which then becomes a statement against the moral parameters which, which constrict you as a woman.

So the fact that you are giving yourself diarrhea in a way becomes an agentic activities. So, diarrhea over here is a very symbolic, agentic activity, for this particular, in this particular context. So, we find again what you do to your body, willfully, agentially becomes a very important activity over here, especially in relation to the different discursive prison, imprisonment that you are subjected to as a subject, as a female subject in this particular setting.

Then I opened all the windows and her cupboard and air the rooms. I teared her dirty grey sarees to shreds. I line the shelves of her empty cupboard with my thick, newly bought glossy jacketed texts, one next to the other. They stand straight and solid, row after row of armed soldiers. They fill up the small cupboard in minutes, right?

So we find that, the final scene of this particular book, this particular story is how the great granddaughter emptying out her cupboards, of the great grandmother and filling those cupboards with tickly newly bought glossy jacketed medical books, presumably medical texts to stand straight and solid row after row of armed soldiers.

So this becomes almost a scene of agency, an architecture of agency as it were. So, she is now about to become a doctor. She is about to acquire medical knowledge through these texts, and that becomes a scene, that becomes an apparatus, that becomes an architecture of an agentic, of an appropriated agency over here. They fill up the small cupboard in minutes.

So, you know, the whole room is reconfigured, the whole space is reconfigured. So we can find over here as a reconfiguration of space. And again, that is very-very discursive and quality. The fact that she has bought all these medical books is very thick, heavily jacketed, newly bought glossy jacketed medical books.

And it made to stand in cupboard row after row like a soldiers. And again arms soldier become important over here because armed soldiers obviously possessing armed soldiers becomes symbolic act of acquiring agency. So, she gives herself a diarrhea, a revenge, that is a revenge against what she saw happen to a great grandmother.

And that is the way she avenged her great grandmother's lack of agency by going into the dirtiest, most contaminated, the most impure stalls in the bazaar and subjecting herself to all kinds of fried food, to the point that she gives herself diarrhea. Diarrhea becomes an agentic act over here something she does to her body.

And subsequent to that she comes back home, empties the cupboards, and fills the cupboards with newly bought medical textbooks that become an extension of agency, a more permanent marker of agency. And we are told we, we obviously assume that she is about to become a doctor. She is about to become an agentic woman with knowledge, with economics ability, with economic agency, someone who a make our own decisions.

So that, that certainty in the end, that act of certainty in the end, which begins to brew from the fact, from the point where she decides to go and give her red silk saree, her first woman saree to the great grandmother that begins to become the act of, the narrative of certainty with which the story ends.

And, you know, the last scene, the scene of certainty, we have books after books like a row of armed soldiers and they stand together. You know, as some kind of a regiment, a gallery of little of markers of agency which she will acquire as a female. Which she will acquire as a medical student with which she will grow as a woman.

And in that sense that will be a continuation of her avenging her great grandmother, which began, by her going to the bazaar and consuming contaminated food. So with that, we conclude this particular story *Remains to the Feast* which also happens to be the final text for this particular course. We have a series of lectures from now on, you know, conceptual, summing up of all the texts we have done so far.

And also we look at the blend of the theoretical study and the textual study we have done in the course so far. But that will be more of a concluding session, a concluding sessions in the next few lectures. But this happens to be the final texts that we cover in this particular goals, *Feminist Writings*. So, I will see you in the next lecture where we have a conceptual discussion what we have covered so far. Thank you for your attention.