

Tasting Freedom: Craving, Caste, and Resistance in Gita Hariharan's *The Remains of the Feast*

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Article Detail:	Abstract
<p>Received: 06 Oct 2025; Received in revised form: 04 Nov 2025; Accepted: 08 Nov 2025; Available online: 12 Nov 2025</p> <p>©2025 The Author(s). Published by International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL). This is an open access article under the CC BY license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).</p> <p>Keywords— Caste system, patriarchy, gender roles, food, small desires, intergenerational bond, cultural resistance.</p>	<p>Women in patriarchal societies are frequently entangled between the family needs and traditions, with a handful of chances to pursue their own desires. <i>The Remains of the Feast</i> by Gita Hariharan is a short story that illustrates this conflict beautifully through the character of Rukmini, a 90-year-old Brahmin widow on her deathbed. After following caste rules and family responsibilities, Rukmini ultimately starts to exhibit long-suppressed cravings for foods like ice cream, samosas, garlic, onion, and other taboo treats, as well as cake baked by a Muslim in a Christian store. She subtly breaks the caste, gender, and purity norms by letting into these cravings with the help of her great granddaughter Ratna. These seemingly simple acts become a powerful assertion of resistance and agency. Drawing on the concept of social liberty stated by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, this paper argues that food in Hariharan's story represents more than just cravings. It also serves as a metaphor for identity reclamation, self-assertion, and autonomy. Her final acts show how even small pleasures can disrupt long-held systems of control structures and how deeply rooted cultural hierarchies can be challenged by individual, small desires. Hariharan's story thus confirms the fundamental human need for liberty, dignity, and choice even in her twilight of life.</p>

I. INTRODUCTION

Shouldn't women have separate tastes, preferences or desires? Should they go along only with their family's practices and beliefs? Women in this society more often give up their individual wants due to cultural constraints. In the modern world it is not always a shortage of money that restricts women from getting their desires fulfilled. Instead, the unspoken norms dictate how women should behave as mothers, daughters, wives, and widows. At each stage of life, a woman's desires are limited, shaped, or controlled. Those who quietly follow these principles are often characterized as selfless and sacred, which encourages obedience over freedom.

Gita Hariharan is a renowned Indian writer who is renowned for incorporating feminist viewpoints in her writings. She explores themes like social issues, gender, identity, and tradition, especially within the Indian context. She was born into a Tamil-speaking Brahmin Tamil family in Coimbatore. Her first novel, *The Thousand Faces of Night* 1992, received the Common Wealthwriter's Prize. Some of her other remarkable works include *The Art of Dying and Other Stories* a short story collection (1993), *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* (1994), *When Dreams Travel* (1999), and *Fugitive Histories* (2009). This paper digs through one of her short stories, *The Remains of the Feast*, which skillfully exposes how women's

desires are regulated by caste and gender norms, especially through the metaphor of food.

The Remains of the Feast, which comes under the collection *The Art of Dying and Other Stories* published in 1993. This story focuses on a 90-year-old Brahmin widow, Rukmini, who is on her deathbed, suffering from cancer. She has had different food cravings from the beginning but never tasted them because of her caste and gender. This story was narrated by her great granddaughter Ratna, who is a medical student, and she helps her grandmother's unfulfilled desires.

This research follows a qualitative research method. This analysis is theme-oriented and looks at how the narrative illustrates the intersection of caste, gender, and desire, especially through the symbolism of food. All references and citations followed MLA 9th edition.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Many scholars have analysed Gita Hariharan's writings through the lens of caste, gender, and resistance. According to Usha Bande's comparative study of women's fiction, *The Remains of the Feast* is a silenced yet significant protest against social constraints. She observes that Rukmini's desires *expose the deep-seated hunger for agency long denied by social and religious codes* (Bande 142). Likewise, R. Sreelekha, in her essay *Anthropological Explorations in Gender: Intersecting Fields of Caste and Women*, objects that Hariharan skillfully *blends caste and gender to show how both works together to suppress a woman's body and voice* (Sreelekha 154). Scholar Sarala Krishnamurthy also emphasizes the importance of food in Hariharan's writing, stating that *food becomes a metaphor for resistance and a silent narrative of suffering* (Krishnamurthy 133). These interpretations offer the foundation for absorbing how Rukmini's last indulgences defy not only gender roles but caste-based purity standards. This paper extends their arguments by highlighting how Rukmini's small, private pleasures, especially eating food that is prohibited, represent a significant reclaiming of identity and selfhood, even in her final days.

Hunger, agency, and silent rebellion

Rukmini's desire for food is not merely about taste; it reflects a lifetime of being instructed on what

she was allowed to eat. As a Brahmin widow her body was subject to strict rules of discipline and purity, which meant giving up her desires, even for something as basic as food. Her hunger becomes symbolic of everything she was denied as a woman: liberty, choice, and pleasure. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar once stated, *So long as you do not achieve social liberty, whatever freedom is provided by the law is of no avail to you* (Ambedkar 26).

The above quote means that even if law claims to give people equal rights, those rights are fruitless if individuals remain oppressed or limited by society. Real freedom must be experienced in daily life through agency, dignity, and choice, and it goes beyond legal authorization. Rukmini's life in *The Remains of the Feast* acts as an effective illustration of this concept. Though she lives in a free society, she has never experienced social freedom. Due to caste, gender, and religious norms, her body and desires are tightly controlled. She only feels truly free when she expresses her desire for food as she nears death. Her eating becomes more than just a way to sate her taste buds; it becomes a silent yet powerful act of recapturing the freedom that was perpetually denied to her.

Among the most striking moments in the story is when Rukmini, getting closer to the end of her life, requests her great-granddaughter Ratna to bring her cakes, ice cream, biscuits, and samosas.

So we began a strange partnership, my great-grandmother and I. 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. (Hariharan 284)

The above lines illustrate how both elements become secret partners. These items, which are forbidden by caste and purity norms, become a silent but powerful act of rebellion. Topped with eggs and prepared by outsiders, those foods are considered taboo in her orthodox Brahmin family. Even it might seem that her family is worried about Rukmini's health. But the denial of those foods may be the result of something more serious. As Ambedkar rightly

pointed out, caste constitutes the chief cause of such purity fear.

The touch of an untouchable is enough to cause pollution. His approach is enough to defile. And even his shadow corrupts. A Brahmin who has touched an untouchable must undergo purification. (Ambedkar 263).

This demonstrates that the aversion to consuming such food is because of obsessive caste considerations regarding purity rather than health or tradition. In Rukmini's case, this fear had restricted her for nearly a century. However, she cautiously defines the rules in order to consume foods that were once prohibited. When she tastes those foods, her delight knows no bounds, and her face radiates happiness. After getting these items, her joy is infinite. *Her toothless mouth worked its way steadily, munching, making happy sucking noises* (P. 284).

This is obviously the simple act of eating, but it turns out to be a potent act of pleasure and liberty reclamation. Finally, she begins to feel the fresh air of freedom, like a bird released from a cage. These foods are the mute protest against a lifetime of control, and they represent more than simple cravings. As Leela Dube insightfully explains, *The control of food is also the control of Women. In traditional households, a women's access to food reflects her place in the hierarchy.* (Krishnamurthy 89). In the end, true happiness comes from those little pleasures rather than money or large possessions.

Rukmini's modest chase of joy quietly disturbs her family's emotional atmosphere. Her family doesn't directly scold her, but their silence reveals discomfort and disapproval. Her desire seems transgressive, especially because she is an elderly widow and a woman, a label that used to be connected to self-denial and self-control. The daughter-in-law's unease is an indicator of her internalized being in line with social norms. Even as a member of a younger generation, she is still confined by tightly controlled standards.

She had lived all her life through other people's wants, other people's demands, their whims and fancies. No one had asked her, ever, what she wanted. And she

had learned not to ask herself.
(Hariharan 17)

The above quote mirrors Rukmini's life and also reflects the daughter-in-law's silent submission. It illustrates the ways in which women have been taught for generations to forget about their own desires. Rukmini's indulgence becomes a quiet act of rebellion. While others continue to remain silent, she chooses to assert her right today. This contrast reveals how deeply the fear of judgement is rooted in women. Rukmini breaks this inherited obedience by choosing happiness, while others remain confined by it.

III. CONCLUSION

The Remains of the Feast by Gita Hariharan is not just a story of an elderly woman's final desires. It offers a profound commentary on how caste, gender, and tradition control the fundamental human emotions like pleasure and desire. Through Rukmini, Hariharan exemplifies how a woman's body becomes a site of control, encompassing everything from the food they are permitted to consume to the silence they must uphold.

Rukmini's quiet indulgence of "impure" food becomes an intense sign of resistance, revealing the feeling of uneasiness society confronts when a woman selects liberty over lifelong submission even in her last moments. Ambedkar's views on social liberty are an ideal fit for this story. Legal rights are meaningless if society continues to bind individuals to oppressive traditions. Rukmini's life and her diminutive revolt act as a reminder that the struggle for true liberty must take place within the family, community, and culture.

This narrative offers a space for further research on subject areas like food politics, widowhood, gendered bodies, and intergenerational silence in caste-based and patriarchal societies. Significantly, *The Remains of the Feast* reminds us of a perturbing but hopeful reality: even minor actions, such as eating a piece of cake, can challenge centuries of inherited oppressions.

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