

Communal Disharmony In Post- Riot India With Reference To Githa Hariharan's Fugitive Histories

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Abstract

As a creative writer, responding to social- political events Hariharan's writings occupy a very distinct space in Indian English Literature. Her narratives are very realistic with no attempts to allegorize. She presents them in all starkness, irony, and tragedy, right from her very first novel The Thousand Faces of Night. In Fugitive Histories Hariharan brings out the issues of communal disharmony in the name of religion from the women's point of view through the experience of three women's lives. She works around a narrative strategy of constructing hint which deepens the readers' involvement with the story. Consequently thoughts, dreams, desire, and secrets play a major role in her story telling.

Keywords: communal disharmony, narrative, story-telling, prejudice, emotions.

Introduction

Communal Disharmony in Post -Riot India with Reference to Githa Hariharan's Fugitive Histories Fugitive Histories is a story of communal disharmony in post- riot India set in the backdrop of the Gujarat carnage and violence. Fugitive Histories, moves across Mumbai, Ahamedabad, and Delhi. It is a unique novel that sensitively observes the insidious ways in which walls spring up to not just divide people, but to keep some people in and some out. An author according to Hariharan analyzes and reflects why certain events occur, how people think and react. She explains that it is

not an easy job to speculate how "both prejudice against someone different from you as well as desiring someone who is again different from you involved probing some complex and rather secretive emotions we are often barely conscious of" (Manasi).

In *Fugitive Histories* familiar ideas are brought out in a personal private way by deftly weaving political lives into private lives. Hariharan portrays the web of human connections that binds as much as it divides, which is at times lyrical, at times luminous and sharply perspective. She uses the multiplicity and mutability of stories through many voices so that the intersecting and colliding narratives by people from different sections of society capture the subtle but significant experiences in contemporary Indian society. With the background material of reports, interviews, witness accounts, and documentary films Hariharan deepens the impact of the sensitive issues by working around a narrative strategy through the personal stories of the three women characters in the novel.

Through the characters of Mala, Sara, and Yasmin, Hariharan touches upon the impact of a social upheaval on women's lives. Though the Gujarat riot remains the pivot of *Fugitive Histories*, it is also about "all those women from every age group who have to learn to live beyond the slaughter of their sons, husbands, brothers, fathers" (Zaheer). As Hariharan comments in an interview, *Fugitive Histories* takes on contemporary India through the texture of three women's lives. During the launch of the *Fugitive Histories*, she comments, "It's the relationship between Mala and Asad that is the focus of the novel" (Manasi). According to P.D. Nimsarkar, Githa Hariharan in *Fugitive Histories*, "has shown great courage and commitment in selecting such issues which narrate the religious practice and communal confrontation between communities leading to constitutional crisis to state-nation relationship and national integration"(Nimsarkar 72).

Typical of Hariharan's novels, *Fugitive Histories* also explores the answer to many questions. At first the stories in the novel stress to get somewhere which is replaced by the most sober and uncomfortable emphasis on question where we are? Through the answer to that question the author poses the third question 'who are we?' It is how she deals the question which makes *Fugitive Histories* a heartrending experience. Hariharan focuses on the

stories of modern women who break traditions and seek for larger spaces both within the family and outside. The novel comprises the thought processes of the three main protagonists, belonging to the same family and are mother and daughter and the third one is someone the daughter comes across.

The story of Malathi, a Hindu Brahmin and Asad, a Muslim and their idealistic views and attempts to be liberal humanists in a secular country serve as an appropriate background material to portray the sensitive issue of communal disharmony. Mala is the mother who hails from the south Indian Brahmin family. She marries a Muslim from Mumbai who is an artist and refuses to have any religious identity and craves for true freedom. Sara, her daughter faces the dilemma of mixed parentage. She has to come to terms with her identity as Hindu or Muslim. The story of Mala and Sara is like a biography of a family striving for a place of recognition and freedom in society at large.

With the death of her husband Asad, Mala has to come to terms with her widowhood and how to do away with being defined as Asad's wife for which she must know who he was, and what happened to him. Through Mala's recollections of the past, it is possible to know of Mala's background, her love and marriage to Asad, their attempts to lead a liberal life, and finally the death of Asad when the vision of India as a egalitarian space and values he lived are shattered in the Godhra riots. Her private public memories bring out more effectively the impact of the shrinking of the public carnage.

From childhood Mala wishes to set herself free. Neither Mala nor Asad change their religion nor do they enforce their children to be labeled by any particular religion. She respects her children's individuality, understands their needs, and allows them even to choose the identity they want. Samar's decision is accepted by her. As Samar comments "You know how Amma is, against it. Not like Asad"(99).

Mala and her daughter Sara enjoy an understanding relationship. Unlike traditional domineering mother, Mala is very free with her daughter. She encourages Sara to pursue her carrier but with caution. Both of them have concern with each other. Neither is depended on the other and they maintain a comfortable companionship. Especially after the death of Asad they grow

closer. Sara never fails to ring her mother. Mala always understands and never probes unnecessarily, "Mala wants to ask but is virtuously holding back"(107). Sara is very perceptive of her mother's feelings. This modern young woman is full of enterprise. She stumbles into a life of a social worker at her friend's request to write a script for a documentary on the Muslim families affected by the Gujarat riots. It is then that she seizes an opportunity to go to Ahamadabad to become a documentary film maker, and a spokes person for the riot victims. She is the product of her parents, idealistic zeal, especially that of Asad.

The Ahamadabad episode reveals Sara as a woman, not quite ready to stride alone hardly. Yasmin is a Muslim girl who survived the riots but lost her brother and has to vacate the family home after riots. Her thoughts and memories have been captured well by the author. She is eager to continue her studies and to make her dreams come alive instead of brooding over the past.

In the episode of Yasmin, Hariharan broaches that the horrid, graphic memories of the communal clashes are not only a wake of death and destruction, but also a stern reminder of the propensity of fate to go wrong and keeps going wrong. It is there that Sara feels fear as she researches for the movie. Sara is very keen on writing the script for the documentary film on the Gujarat aftermath. Rohini called as Nina, her boss wants the documentary film to tell the stories of the people in their own voices as to what happened to them in 2002, what the state government did or didn't do to rehabilitate them and how these people rebuilt their lives. Sara is taken up by Nina's attitude of writing script. Though she feels it is the right attitude to do the kind of work they are doing she is reluctant to visit Ahamadabad, along with Nina to interview the victims, before writing the script. It is later at night when she looks at her father's painting and recollects the past that she realizes that it is her fear of violence that devastates and creates a hostile world which upsets her. But the thought of Samar, her brother, gives her courage that "there's way to remember without giving into grief. Mourning doesn't have to become an excuse"(48).

Sara makes up her mind to accompany Nina when she sees some photos from Nina's research visit to Gujarat. She could not resist the desire to look at them again and again. "The faces have such, stark black -and -white look, as if they're waiting for Sara for

her to discover their silent thoughts and sufferings and give words to them"(45).

She is especially fascinated by the photo of a heart shaped face girl called Yasmin. She proclaims:

The girl, Yasmin, is about sixteen, seventeen: her face looks straight into the camera. The face is thin and pointed; it has a scattering of moles as if a box of little dots has been emptied on her skin. There's something familiar about the face, some disturbing tug of memory, though Sara does not know Yasmin.(45)

Sara feels that a girl of that age "shouldn't need to look as if she already knows the world because it has stripped before her virginal eyes and shown her the awfulness of its bare skin"(89). When Nina and Sara reach Ahamadabad, Sara finds it difficult to understand "What it is about the place that made it such a willing hostage of a whole big hating mob"(109). Nina informs this area to be called as a border and same can even be called as 'Mini Pakistan'. The entire neighbourhood is dirty, with too many hovels but it is considered as a safe heaven for Muslims. The first family they visit is that of Yasmin's who lives with her parents in two shabby rooms.

The personal meeting with Yasmin helps Sara to understand and see Yasmin's true plight. The impact of the riot has left deep scars in Yasmin. The traumatic experiences deprive Yasmin of sleep.

Often it's almost morning before she can fall asleep. And once sleep finally comes to her, it has trouble leaving. Sleep sits on her head all day like a thick fat cloud sometimes it fools her into believing that the day is only a distraction, a dream. It's the wide away night hours that make up her real life. A secret but real life. (115)

In spite of her bleak existence Yasmin determines to cover her exam portions of five subjects. She is very much confident to pass her exams as she lost two years due to the riots. She is desperate to pass, go to college and get a job. She is worried about her mother who works too hard and her father who often gets sick. Most of all she wants to 'get out of here' a reminder of segregation and victimization. Though only seventeen, she is very courageous, and realizes and accepts the facts that she has to be the daughter and son to her parents as there is no hope of finding her missing

brother, "She has to do it all alone somehow"(116). She intends to succeed so that she can prove to the people, that they are wrong in curtailing her dreams.

It is amazing how positive and progressive is Yasmin's thought regarding religion. She belongs to a community which is very patriarchal and restrictive towards women. Her proactive nature is ready to face the challenge of not only gender but also social injustice. Her strength of mind and ability to endure even the most difficult hardships is very remarkable. Her faith in Allah replaces negative emotions like anger, aggression, frustration, and despair. She considers herself lucky that they have two rooms in a safe area even if they are dark and small. She is grateful for the tap in the bathroom though often there is no water or electricity.

Sara decides to help Yasmin to continue her studies by sponsoring. Yasmin willingly shares her past life before the riots with Sara but the topic of her missing brother Akbar affects both of them very much. Sharing the details of her parents' attempts to find her missing brother brings out the heart-rending sufferings of victims and the inhuman apathy and indifference of the police. Missing is not so bad, it's better than dead. People are no longer mothers or sons or daughters they have become just numbers, statistics, part of action and reaction. For all her courage, Yasmin cannot bring herself to believe that her brother is dead. Any young man's face reminds her of him.

Yasmin and her parents don't talk about him yet what happened is what has happened, what has changed forever is always in their mind. Yasmin believes that something will never become memories, as memories are short lived. A terrible terror that Yasmin cannot overcome is her recollection of attempted rape even though now they have crossed into a new border in the city into a safe house. Sharing this horrible experience with Sara provides a little relief to Yasmin but she cannot overcome her feelings of alienation when she does not see Sara later in the day, "She's alone again; she's alone all the time now though she is rarely by herself"(147).

Not only Yasmin's story but the stories of the women and children in her building and the next are an eye opener to Sara. Sara meets these women in Yasmin's house. All the horrors unleashed out during the riots are brought out by the distraught

women. Countless men come with swords, pipes, hockey sticks, soda-lemon bottles, saffron flags, all kinds of sharp weapons, petrol bombs, and gas cylinders. They break the dargah down the street and put an idol there, all the while shouting, kill them, cut them, burnt them alive, "Then they blasted their lives apart our lives"(158). Mariam explains what this means to Nina and Sara:

It means our men were killed, it means our mothers and sisters and daughters were raped. it means we saw it happening. Our people were grilled like meat. I saw it with my own eyes. The bodies piled up. Everything was over in a flash, Mariam hesitates: maybe she has remembered that everything did not get over in a flash, everything is not yet over.(158-159)

The narration of each woman's experience echoes with a short hand chant, "cut and burnt cut and burnt"(63). It is a chant that echoes Sara's ears because it is trapped there. But as often as she hears it, Sara feels that the chant leaves something out.

There is an empty space before and after, between the cutting and burning. May be no one wants to fill up that awful space. May be that minute of space is too long, longer than any other minute, because that's when a living person felt the breaking blow. Or the piercing stab. Or the burning lick of a tongue of fire.(163)

Sara thus comes face to face with the reality that breaks her father. Some critics find the novel very somber, for there is ray of hope. When the narration of the stories ends in anger turning to hatred, Sara hears a loud voice saying "people don't want revenge, they want to live again"(165). In the silence that follows, the need to live again gives fresh hope to the women. For instance all of them remember not only the dead and the lost but also the living. They remember they are alive.

To be alive means to have a little piece of hope beating inside them like a heart. The heart may be injured, the piece of hope may be raggedy. But without it they can never live this darkroom, go outside live. The lost ones, even the most beloved among them, cannot do this for them. Not even Allah, who is of late being Summoned to work overtime of every street corner and mosque, can live for them. They have to do it themselves people need to live again. (165-166).

Conclusion

By her clarity of observation and deep compassion Hariharan explores the innumerable lives trapped into a kind of limbo. Some caught in a mesh of memory, anguish and hate, and others seeking release in private dreams and valiant hopes. In keeping with her claim that her works grow out of her fundamental concerns like the position of women as marginalized groups, *Fugitive Histories* brings out the issues of communal disharmony in the name of religion from the women's point of view through the experiences of three women's lives. Directly or indirectly women are the target of injustice in the world dictated by men. The novel stresses the universal fact that women are victims of family, society, and religion. It also presents the innate strength and resilience of women. Through the characters of Mala and Sara who dare to be different and Yasmin, who in spite of being differentiated, Hariharan presents the new woman who is empowered affirmative progressive and proactive. It is indeed a novel written by a matured woman who has understands a woman both as a woman and as a person pressurized by all kinds of visible and invisible contexts.

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