Githa Hariharan's Fugitive Histories: A Silent Quest for Identity

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ABSTRACT

Woman is the main contemporary issue faced by all the societies both in West and in India, launching herself in the quest for identity. The portrayal of woman in Indian English fiction as the silent sufferer is no longer presented as a passive character because of the tradition and traditional values of family and society has undergone a tremendous change. They assert themselves as an individual rebelling against the traditional role, breaking the silence of suffering trying to move out of the caged existence and asserting the individual self. Therefore, the contemporary writers expose a graphic picture of Indian woman in their works and tried their best to free the female mentality from silent sufferings.

Githa Hariharan's *Fugitive Histories* is quite as powerful as its predecessor and thematically even more controversial. It is a journey of three Indian women Mala, Sara and Yasmin trapped in the anguish and hatred of their past and trying to release themselves with fearless hopes and dreams. Hariharan portrays the web of human connections that binds as much as it divides. The search for one's destiny is the key theme of the novel. *Fugitive Histories* is as subtly constructed as a Chinese box, concealing narratives within narratives and yet remaining blindingly clear in its exposition of public and private realities. It is about people picking up threads from the point where man-made upheavals have left them. It is a journey back in time. It is the story of Mala, Sara and Jasmine who suffers to trace their own identity and they silently search for their future.

Key Words: loneliness, silent quest for identity, religious conflict, societal conflict, self-confidence.

Woman is the main contemporary issue faced by all the societies both in West and in India, launching herself in the quest for identity. The portrayal of woman in Indian English fiction as the silent sufferer and up holder of the tradition and traditional values of family and society has undergone a tremendous change and is no longer presented as a passive character. They assert themselves as an individual rebelling against the traditional role, breaking the silence of suffering trying to move out of the caged existence and asserting the individual self. Therefore, the contemporary writers expose a graphic picture of Indian woman in their works and tried their best to free the female mentality from silent sufferings.

Feminism emerged as an organized movement for women's rights and interests in the male dominated society. It is not only a reaction to the patriarchal culture which suppresses women in society, but also a reaction to literature which is the product of this culture. It is an attempt to revalue the literature of the past from the gender perspective. Woman is the main contemporary issue faced by all the societies both in West and in India, launching herself in the quest for identity. The portrayal of woman in Indian English fiction as the silent sufferer and up holder of the tradition and traditional values of family and society has undergone a tremendous change and is no longer presented as a passive character. They assert themselves as an individual rebelling against the traditional role, breaking the silence of suffering trying to move out of the caged existence and asserting the individual self.

Women writers have used fiction to explore and share their experiences. The conflicts which they face in everyday lives are woven into the fictional world of their creation. Men in their writings portray women as they want them to be for. It is not possible for the men to express life otherwise than as they know it which again is according to their own experience. Avadhesh Kumar is not wrong when he says that "only she, not he, knows what she experiences, so only she can speak of it" (Jain and Singh 119). Therefore, the contemporary writers expose a graphic picture of Indian woman in their works and tried their best to free the female mentality from silent sufferings.

The feminist consciousness is a consciousness of victimization by the dominating males of the society which leads to women's subordinate status and their consequent

oppression. Sushila Singh in her article " Recent Trend in Feminist Thought: A Tour de Horizon" in *Feminism and Recent Fiction in English* opines that:

> As a philosophy of life, it seeks to discover and change the more subtle and deep - seated causes of women's oppression. It is a concept of 'raising of the consciousness' of an entire culture. (22)

Githa Hariharan fabricates a body of Indian literature that is committed to feminist and social issues. Her novels venture to tear apart the veil of sophistication and social equality by presenting the real status of women. She has created the image of the suffering but stoic woman eventually breaking the traditional boundaries has had a significant impact. Her works simultaneously reveal the tapestry of patriarchy and at the same time attempt to celebrate feminine selfhood and freedom. Though she does not like to be branded as a woman writer because she believes in categorizing a writer, yet she calls herself a feminist as she said in an interview as:

> Am I a writer particularly concerned with "women's issues"? And am I a feminist? The answer to both questions is yes. I want to make it quite clear that in my life my choices have been dictated by what I perceive as the feminist choice. …And anyway, however you define yourself, all our work is informed in some way or the other by feminism, along with the ideas of Freud and Marx. And this goes for both men and women, of course. So …I am a writer (as opposed to a woman writer) who is a feminist, along with several other things! (Hariharan, Interview with Arnab Chakladar)

The contemporary woman does not want to be conventional to the traditional image any more. She wants her due, her rightful place alongside her male counterpart. It has been stated by Shantha Krishnaswamy, “The Indian woman picks up enough courage to raise her head and ask a few awkward and pertinent questions.” (8) Githa Hariharan portrays the custom-ridden Indian society, in the southern part of India.

Her recent novel *The Fugitive Histories* (2009) exposes the legacy of prejudice that, sometimes insidiously, sometimes perceptibly, continues to affect disparate lives in present-day India. Githa Hariharan portrays the web of human connections that binds as much as it divides. She also picturises the wide view of the social life, political events

and the boring aspects of character's inner sensibility make her an existentialist novelist. She writes about the grassroots of the urban segments of Indian life and reality. She is concerned with the personal tragedy of the individuals, and shapes their inner crisis.

Fugitive Histories is as powerful as its predecessor and thematically even more controversial. It is a journey of three Indian women Mala, Sara and Yasmin trapped in the anguish and hatred of their past and trying to release themselves with fearless hopes and dreams. Githa Hariharan portrays the web of human connections that binds as much as it divides. The search for one's destiny is the key theme of the novel. *Fugitive Histories* is as subtly constructed as a Chinese box, concealing narratives within narratives and yet remaining blindingly clear in its exposition of public and private realities. It is about people picking up threads from the point where man-made upheavals have left them. It is a journey back in time.

Mala, a Hindu Brahmin woman, who married Asad, a Muslim artist, despite the misgivings of her immediate and extended family she searches for her future. After the death of Asad, Mala proves to herself and to her daughter and son that she would manage to live of her own. She says, "Go back to your work, I can manage. Get on with your lives." (FH 3) Samar and Sara thought of teaching Mala the art of survival or reconciliation of life after the death of their father, but she manages to live of her own. Mala opened the trunk of Asad and traced out his sketchbooks; almost the trunk is like a biography of Asad. For her astonishment she calls the trunk 'the times' or 'the works' or 'the love story' (FH 5)

Mala feels that the paintings are, "waiting for her like an impatient lover, a patient bandit, wherever she is in the flat." (FH 10) She is back to her usual librarian's desk, she cooks for her alone, she washes dishes, soaps herself in shower, switches on the TV for the evening news, checks her email though she is not in a mood to send reply. She can feel the air of anticipation in the empty rooms and often she feels that someone is waiting for her nothing but the colourful paintings of her artist Asad. She believes that they are speaking with her through its concepts as it reflects the thoughts of Asad.

Mala could go back to renew her own journey which covered an immeasurable number of miles. It is a wonderful distraction for her to escape from the worries of Asad's absence. The recollected chain story of Mala has to unravel because she is a part

of it and the painful ending can take her back to the beginning, a beginning without Asad. Mala suffers a lot of staying alone; her sleep has been disturbed by her avenging thoughts of Asad. She could not sleep without hearing his distinct and cheerful burst of snoring, she says, "a noise she trained many years back into becoming her own private music" (FH 56) She goes to Samar's room to get rid of Asad's memory, there she has gone through the paintings of Asad and she saw a picture of Lord Ganesh and she dwells into the past memory. Though he is a Muslim once Asad bought the statue of Lord Ganesh and he presented it to his mother-in-law, at last it decorated his office table.

In the absence of Asad, Mala cleverly liberated her car from the crowded parking. It shows her ability and self-confidence. To break the silence of isolation she visited Qutb Minar the ambitious stony folly reaching for the sky; it built courage in her to survive despite Asad's death. She rewind the past imaginary film of her marriage with a Muslim, her parents advised her that everything will fall under confusion. Her father says, "It'll always be a problem, the difference between us and them. It won't go away just because you're married." (FH 69) Mala's mother reminded her that the problem starts from the basic thing food and they quarrel with her as, "You're killing us! You'll marry this man, this foreigner, and you'll be lost to us, you'll kill us!" (FH 69)

According to the parents of Mala if she marries Asad it is an offence to the family and it will affect the traditional culture of their religion. But Asad convinced her as, "Anyway we have nothing to do with either lot. It's not as if we think of ourselves as Hindu or Muslim." (FH 70) Mala's mother scolds her bitterly that everyone gossip about them and look at them, "like we're animals in the zoo" (FH 73) Mala's quest to compete her loneliness caused a strong stress in her mind. At last she has thrown away the paintbrush and palette knife into the near by pond. This act will help her to reduce the disturbing memories of Asad and to recreate herself to live a life of her own.

Bala the traditional figure of this novel survives under the male domination of her husband. She got married at the age of twelve. She is a mysterious woman and she feels that she is married to the house even more that she is married to Mala's grandfather. She has to obey the rules framed by her husband and she is not allowed to step out of her in-laws house to visit the neighbours, not even to visit her parents. The author has portrayed this as, "prison condition" (FH 15)

Githa Hariharan aptly presents the male chauvinism through 'she was his', 'she belonged to the house' (FH 15) Woman is treated like an object. Bala is seen as an object in the house and she 'belonged' to him at the same time she should 'be longed' forever for her identity of happiness. Bala has been portrayed as the traditional house-wife, as she did her household works sincerely and devotedly. The only place where she could go without fear is the roof of the house through the ladder in the backyard. She use to go there to dry her hair and she would be entirely herself there. Most of the time Bala is locked in the storeroom, because Mala's grandfather thought that the storeroom is the best place for her to learn how to be a respectable woman. Bala patiently bears the ill treatment of her husband and she suffers as a slave. It has been exposed by Githa Hariharan as, "She had to love the storeroom best" (FH 22)

Once Mala and Asad visits Bala who is bedridden because of old age ill health. Bala told Mala that she had spent her life time under male orders, but Mala has won and she has escaped from the village by marrying Asad. She extol her for her revolutionary thought and she says, "You married him, I couldn't escape this place but I've lived longer that that old bastard boss. We've won." (FH 76) This shows Bala's longing for freedom.

Samar and Sara, the heirs of Asad and Mala are a team of two against the world. Sara is at Mumbai works with her friend Nina to make documentary films on the current issues of India. At present she is to prepare a script for a new documentary film about Sabarmati Express which was attacked in Godhra Station in Gujarat where two of its carriages were set on fire. The train with the Hindu activists on their way back from Ayodhya. The Muslims of Gujarat were the target of brutal violence. Muslim ghettoes were disposed of Gujarat and live in safe areas of Ahamedabad as refugees. Sara does not want to be a dependent of her mother Mala for financial support and she says, "But how could Sara take the risk, how could she ask Mala to support her, even for a while?" (FH 38) Though her thought seems to be matured she suffers to search her own identity whether she is a Muslim or a Hindu. She is under a religious conflict.

Sara's journey from Mumbai to Ahmadabad is to visit the immigrants from Gujarat. Nina and Sara meet the orphaned people as a sort of social visit. Among them Yasmin plays the main role in the thoughts of Sara. Yasmin studies in twelfth standard

with lots of expectations in her mind that they have to return to their previous life and place. Yasmin longs to continue her higher studies back in their city. Sara says:

> Yasmin, seventeen years old. Yasmin's father had a shop downstairs in the house where they used to live. Yasmin's mother used to be a housewife, now an NGO helps her and other women in the area sell the skirts they stitch and embroider. Yasmin's brother was in college when the trouble started, he did not come back home. He's still missing. Her father was forced to sell their house for whatever he could get and move to a safe area. He's trying to set up a small business, but is often sick. Yasmin is in the last year of school. She wants to go to college, but she failed her boards last year (FH 114)

Yasmin suffers under lack of sleep; her aim is to complete her studies and to be helpful to her parents financially. Yasmin's heart races and she longs to live in a home of their own. Sara feels that Yasmin also in a same state as she suffers to identify her own. For Sara she is in religious conflict and for Yasmin she is in societal conflict. Sara worries in what way she is going to help Yasmin and her quest to identify herself "who she is and what she is. It's not just a question of who and what she's supposed to be, but who and what she wants to be, chooses to be." (FH 231) Finally, she says, "Yes, I'm beginning to realize how lucky I am. How glad I am that I'm a hybrid.'(FH 184) The novelist herself reveals that the book would be termed liberal, secular, and broadminded and defines Muslims to make them more palatable.

Githa Hariharan's greatest credit, is that she looks unflinchingly into the ugliness of sectarian destructiveness and strife with an almost photographically realistic lens, but always remains within earshot of her protagonists' small, personal voices; Yasmin's traumas are observed rather than directly experienced, as she is one of the survivors, and though there are harrowing scenes in the book, Githa Hariharan scrupulously avoids both polemic and voyeurism. In this connection, Virginia Woolf aptly says, "For women are always, always, always talking about what one feels…" (Woolf 140)

Githa Hariharan endeavours to highlight the feminine characters individual position in this society. Their experiences with men in their lives and their reactions to those circumstances are well focused by the author. She also displays their individual

quest for identity. This has been exemplified as, "Women, who refuse to accept the prevalent codes, question the injustice, assert to seek fulfillment, are grouped under the title of non-conformists." (Bai 43)

The women characters strive hard to overcome psychological impediments such as inferiority complex, inhibition, reluctance, diffidence, self-doubt and timidity and social barriers such as traditional beliefs and biased religious opinions, in order to achieve freedom and individuality and also to affirm independence in concrete ways.

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