

## PRESENT OF THE PAST AND THE PAST OF THE

### PRESENT: A STUDY OF GITHA HARIAHRAN'S

#### *FUGITIVE HISTORIES*

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#### **ABSTRACT**

*Fundamentalism is spreading across the world like a wild fire. Intolerance, politically motivated communal hatred, hate killings are disturbing the peace of the world. Githa Hariharan in her novel **Fugitive Histories** mirrors the plight of Muslim women victims of the Godhra riots and its aftermath. The realistic account paralleled with the fiction is Gujarat pogrom of 2002. The tropes of the past, the disturbing present and the ambiguous future of the marginalized is questioned in the fiction. The novel is structurally symbolic, involving the empathizing reader to critically unfold the sedimented meanings. The harmonization of Hindu-Muslim is juxtaposed with its conflicts in the novel. The communal forces are the winners and humanity is shamed.*

**Keywords:** *communal, fundamentalism, hatred, intolerance, marginalized*

#### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Born in 1954 in Coimbatore, India, Githa Hariharan grew up in Bombay and Manila. After completing her education in these two cities and in the United States she became a renowned author and activist advocating for the rights of women. Her published work includes novels, short stories, essays, newspaper articles and columns. She won the Commonwealth Writers' Prize in 1993 for her first novel, *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1992). *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* (1994), *When Dreams Travel* (1999), *In Times of Siege* (2003), and *Fugitive Histories* (2009) are her other novels. She has also authored a collection of short stories under the title *The Art of Dying* published in 1993 and a book of stories for children, *The Winning Team*, in 2004. The only non fiction authored by Hariharan is *Almost Home* (2014)

Githa Hariharan's novel *Fugitive Histories* (2009) is based on the sensitive Godhra communal riots and its aftermath. Godhra, a city of the Indian State of Gujarat, infamously became the part of all Indian newspapers on February 28, 2002.

“On February 27, 2002, a fire ripped through a train at Godhra station in Gujarat in western India, burning 59 Hindu pilgrims alive. Blaming Muslims for the blaze, furious Hindu mobs rampaged through Muslim neighbourhoods in several cities seeking reprisals during three days of bloodshed. The cause of the train fire remains a chief area of dispute between the two religious communities... On February 28, a day after the train

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fire, rioters packed in trucks breached the boundary wall of the complex and set houses ablaze. They dragged people out and burned them alive.”(Dawn, June 17, 2016)

Hariharan describes how people driven by religious fervor didn't mind killing others of the same kind . Muslims were charred, brutally mutilated.

“Godhra is a ‘Muslim locality’. In the days and week that followed, the Muslims of Gujarat became the target of brutal violence. The statement of survivors, eyewitnesses and relief workers suggests that state officials and the police connived with the attackers” (Fugitive Histories, 42)

The women became the easy victim of the outrage, the incidents of rapes of Muslim females increased in number. “...a kite Akbar used to fly once upon a time...this cheerful kite had some advice written on it the same advice that was on the charred wall outside the shop. It said “*Muslims Quit India-or we will fuck your mothers*” (FH, 138)

The novel is divided into three parts, titled as ‘Missing Persons’, Crossing Borders’ and ‘Funeral Rites’ respectively. The narrative is interwoven in existing as well as retrospective mode involving three strong female characters Sara, Mala and Yasmin. Mala presents a challenging life after the death of her husband Asad. She lives in the hallucinations of Asad’s presence and connects with him through memories and his meaningful sketches. She frequently takes a dip into the memory lane, remembering her pre pubertal days, when her grandmother Bala made her realize her incompleteness and hollowness of being without brother and on top of that being a female.

“It’s been years since she relived that afternoon when Bala told her about her dead twin . A dead twin who could make her like Bala , half –not whole- for rest of her life.” (FH 24)

Sara is a progressively driven female character, trying to search for a space, womanhood a niche full of thought and expression. She becomes a coherent link between the three parts of the story and also a narrator of fictionalized real life incident which shattered Gujarat in 2002. She lives in Mumbai with her roommate Nina. She leaves her job in exchange of her roommate’s offer of penning the experiences of Muslim women forced to leave their home after the Godhra pogrom. Yasmin is the third strong female character, who is the mouthpiece of the atrocities and the hate crime to which the veiled ladies of her sect became victim at the hands of right winged Hindu fanatics. These fierce fanatics are similar to ‘fundooos’ referred by Hariharan in *The Times of Siege* (2003). In both the novels religion is used for the hate crime but how this religion is politically backed needs to be probed. There is a shift from nationalism to regionalism creating the ground for the labels like “Indian Muslim or Muslim Indian” (FH 102) .Such religious labeling leads to communal disharmony.

The first part of *Fugitive Histories* is titled as ‘Missing Persons’ .Mala by way of the Asad’s sketches which she refer to as ‘artistic diaries’ retrospect her memorable past spent with Asad and introspects her existence without Asad. She creates a web of stories, which she narrates to her children Samar and Sara .These stories are told by her since “no one told Mala stories as she was growing up. Maybe this is why she hasn’t been able to outgrow them like her own children have.”(12).In one of her stories about the drowning of a baby ant she narrates:

“...the ant’s baby falls into water and is in danger of drowning. The ant asks the frog nearby for help, but the frog says, ‘what do I care if you baby is drowning?’ The ant swears revenge and goes to the snake, but the snake too doesn’t care about her baby. The ant goes on like this, finding one creature after another, all bound by

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their common lack of caring, till she decides to bite a little boy who has refused to help her. The bite does the trick. He picks up the stick, which hits the dog, which runs after the cat, which chases the rat, which gnaws a hole in the snake charmer's basket, so the snake inside escapes and is about to eat up the frog, but the frog jumps into the water and rescues the baby ant. (FH, 13)

With this story Mala gives a strong message that all living beings are a part of living chain, we must not remain indifferent to the sufferings of others. "What happens to one also happens, in some way to the other". (13). This message remains connected in a larger perspective with the issue of Godhra riots and its aftermath discussed in the second part of the novel. Mala also asserts that "the ending can take her back to the beginning" (13). The ending always is not the culmination, since it is the reservoir of memories of all kinds, "ending is a raw wound, still painful to touch". The hyphenated identities like Hindu-Muslim, Tamil-Brahmin, and Christian-Hindu are referred in the first part of the novel giving a strong message of harmonious existence in the postmodern times. Mala Vadyanathan, a Tamil Brahmin girl and Asad Zaidi and their children Sara and Samar represent the hyphenated existence of Hindu-Muslim. While Sara's friend Rajat Shaw is an example of hyphenated existence of Christian and Hindu, since his father is a Christian and mother a Hindu. On being asked about her identity by Yasmin later, Sara laments with a deep sigh "I have Muslim relative and Hindu relatives. I'm neither. Sometimes I think I'm Indian. But most of the time I'm just Sara" (167). Strangely but ironically this tolerant existence of two extreme faiths is later questioned in the form of intolerance resulting into communal riots. Sangeeta Barooah, from *The Hindu*, in her interaction with Githa Hariharan comments:

It is one of life's ironies. You have zero roles in choosing your name and yet all your life, you have to mind it. Worse, based on your name, the world draws a rough draft on you. North Indian, South Indian, easterner, north-easterner, Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Sikh...in an increasingly polarised society like ours, like it or not, your name today can be a weapon or a catch.

Seasoned author Githa Hariharan's latest roll-out, *Fugitive Histories* quite skillfully draws on what your name can entail, how it can lead to a volley of prejudices---scornful, long established. But Githa delves deeper here. She peels the mindsets by comparing the times, the generations, the idiosyncrasies—"theirs" and "ours." (Barooah Sangeeta, Beyond Prejudice. The Hindu. March 28, 2009)

The title 'Missing Persons' refers to Mala's missing twin brother, and the loss of her husband Asad. Metaphorically it also refers to Yasmin whose brother Akbar also went missing after the Godhra riots. "Missing is so bad, it's better than dead" (136)

The second part of the novel is titled as 'Crossing Borders'. This part of the fiction involves Sara's visit to riot affected Ahmedabad. She in the capacity of a journal gets into the dwelling place of riot affected dislocated Muslim families. She pens down the pitiful experiences of many Muslim ladies. She interacts with the teenage riot victim Yasmin. At the very outset Yasmin appears to be a normal shy girl in her teens, but there lies an ocean of miseries sedimented deep into her mind. She has a past of missing brother Akbar, present of heartbroken parents and a future full of uncertainties.

"...there's something else coming after...there's also the uncertainty of it, the waiting involved without knowing what. What comes after may be better, but it may also be worse" (142).

Yasmin no more believe in good fortunes or miracles coming on her way, she rationally deduces that her brother will never come back. At least for the sake of her parent's happiness she still asks God for miracles

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“She silently mouths her daily prayers. Allah, your grace can do anything. You know better than anyone that anything can happen...But Allah the Merciful must have decided that He is tired of solving only big problems”(118). Yasmin has lost two years of her studies, because of riots. Having burnt her books and desires, she doesn't go to school anymore. Her mother along with other affected ladies of her kind is engaged in stitching clothes. Her father having lost his business is now struggling hard to make both the ends meet. Sara and Yasmin find themselves comfortable in each others company. Sara wants Yasmin to unfold her dark grief. Sara learns through her interaction with the Muslim ladies that their children have left the school. A woman called Zainab narrates the prejudices and disparity the Muslim children have to face , she tells Sara about her son Nasir's incident,

“My son left the school...we wanted him to study in the English medium school so he could be an engineer...but the principal was doing partition works. He'd ask Nasir in front of everybody else, “Aren't you from Pakistan? ...He kept calling my Nasir a terrorist till the child couldn't bear it anymore” (156).

The borders are drawn between 'us' and 'they', 'our' and 'their'. In her interaction with Nina another lady Reshma expresses the need of a school for their children, so that they can engage in studies away from religious dogmatism, conflict, intolerance, “they could've built another school instead of a big mosque.”(156).

The narration of experiences expressed by the Muslim ladies to Sara and Nina are so tearful, that the cassette players they have brought are not enough for the saga of unpacked emotions called stories, “ all the women and girls and the little boys in the room, have also become recording machines”(158). They narrate their accounts one by one, “ We heard the crowd was gathering in our area...they had swords, pipes, hockey sticks, soda lemon bottles, saffron flags ...petrol bombs and gas cylinders...shouting “Kill them, cut them, burn them alive!”...our men were killed...mothers and sisters raped. The bodies piled up...they had trishuls with them. They wore saffron cloth around their heads. There's no mystery about who they were.”(159). Sara feels shattered on listening to their woeful tales, and could smell the sweaty odour of fear in the room. Sara takes Yasmin to her old sweet home, where Yasmin breaks down and tells Sara about the incident which visits her as a nightmare every night in her dreams. She unfolds with tears how she escaped being molested by middle aged man, her mother came in between. “Ammi covers Yasmin's body with hers and begs. Ammi's begging words make a breathless mess of prayer” (144).In return the man attacked Yasmin with sharp weapon on her thigh. Yasmin recalls the incident full of fear “whispering words that make no sense” (146). But Sara could interpret the meaning out of Yasmin's “nonsense words” (146). Since she could empathize with her now, could feel the pain of being a female more than a Muslim .Before leaving, Sara makes a visit to the Sabarmati Ashram, sits by the side of the Sabarmati river , to recall “ Ishwar Allah tere naam sabko sanmati de Bhagwan”(175).

The third part of the novel is titled as “Funeral Rights”. Sara comes back to her home. She lives in traumatic memories of the stories she heard. She hears a strange voice Shouting “Muslims in India have only two places: Pakistan and Kabristan”(192). She also see in her dream her childhood friend Laila burnt alive and Yasmin getting molested. She visits Asad's grave as if to fulfill her regard with floral offerings, a kind of tribute, funeral rites. Just on reaching the place she finds the worthlessness and futility of such rituals in the contemporary concrete world where she is living. She gives the flowers and fifty rupees to a lady caretaker in the graveyard. Mala is also seen continuing with her chain of memorabilia without Asad. She constructs a world through Asad's sketches. She remembers a particular sketch captioned as “Broken home” sketched in

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February 2002. The sketch revealed the pal of gloom which spread in the war of hate called riots. The novel asks questions of identity of being labeled as “Moderate Muslims, modern Muslims, reasonable Muslims” (201). Hariharan gives a pictorial representation to painful communal war with the description of Asad’s paintings. In this painting five bloodthirsty men with their beastly bent approach the sixth who lamely lies on the floor while the seventh, unarmed, helpless stands meekly watching.

### II. CONCLUSION

*Fugitive Histories* is a challenging novel questioning the freedom of India amidst communal rivalries. Nationalism and Patriotism are replaced by regionalism and individualism. Whether it is the case of Jaat agitation in Haryana or communal riots in Gujarat, the rioters indulge in the shameful act of molestation of women. The novels like *Fugitive Histories* are the mouthpiece of atrocities in the name of religion. The Hindu and Muslim have age old preconceived notions and beliefs of hatred for each other which does not seem to end. We do not need invaders to destroy us now, since we are destroying our own self. The religious goons have become the self styled God, preaching the religious doctrines in their own way. The novel exposes the suffocation created by such fanatics, preferring to burn schools in the name of constructing temples and mosques. The humanity has become the victim of inhumanity. Virtues have become obsolete, meaningless and a laughing stock.

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