

RECREATING HISTORY THROUGH RESISTANCE: ANALYZING GITHA HARIHARAN'S *FUGITIVE HISTORIES*

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Abstract:

The concept of resistance emerges from the fact that people, especially women are mistreated by society, which is primarily male dominated. In order to get their voices heard, they need to voice their opposition and at the same time defy domination. Moreover, women, on the whole, are disadvantaged because of sexual oppression. The establishment of their identity, thus, requires them to demonstrate resistant actions which are often reflected through violations made through various actions and interactions. Fugitive Histories exposes the legacy of prejudice that continues to affect disparate lives in present India. Hariharan portrays the web of human connections that binds as much as divides. Superficially it narrates the tale of love between a Hindu and a Muslim and deeply it looks at the prejudices that exist in contemporary Indian families. The novel also explores the paradoxical effects of the chilling violence of 2002 on women. The novel, centring on the lives of the Muslim women in a relocated colony in Ahmedabad captures how the upheaval caused by violence and migration pushes women from the threshold of domesticity into the outside world, thus recreating history through resistance.

Key words: resistance, history, dominance, religion, oppression.

Githa Hariharan's *Fugitive Histories* is a wonderful amalgamation of varied human emotions, eventually trying to answer the prejudices that affect our daily lives. It is about people picking up threads from the point where man-made upheavals have left them. It is a journey back in time. Noor Zaheer says:

The book is about three cities, Delhi, Mumbai and Ahmedabad. Remarkably, a woman embodies each city. Helping in creating this canvas are a member of vehicles Hariharan uses to navigate through time. Air, water, wind and even the shade of the tree where Sara, Asad and Maya's daughter, along with Yasmin, a survivor of the riots, sit and talk are all employed to transcend time and space, recreate settings and provide links to the present. (Online Version).

Fugitive Histories is a grim tale of a time when some people allowed themselves to be swept away by the meticulous planning that went behind the destruction of entire communities. It set against a backdrop of administrative apathy. It gets grimmer as the survivors' talk of their lack of preparedness and of what they would have done had they been warned even a couple of hours before they were attacked.

The novel is divided into three parts. "Missing Persons", "Crossing Borders" and "Funeral Rites". "Missing Persons" deals with the life of Mala, Asad and Bala. "Crossing Borders" deals with the life of Sara and her efforts to understand the complexities of religious strife along with Yasmin. "Funeral Rites" shows the setting of their lives once again. As Githa Hariharan herself puts it:

In *Fugitive Histories*, I may have begun with a girl Yasmin in Ahmedabad. However, though I was sure about not writing on what happened in Gujrat in 2002, it was also important to link the Ahmedabad strand with other narratives from elsewhere in the country, and if possible, from an earlier generation as well. So I thought of Mala and her life. The book really came into being when Yasmin's and Mala's narratives were connected.

It is the story of Mala, a Hindu Brahmin woman, who married Asad, an artist, despite the

misgivings of her immediate and extended family. Her parents had even pronounced the ultimate words “you are killing us”, to get her to give up the idea of such an unsuitable marriage. But Mala isn't deterred. She marries Asad despite all resistances.

Mala has almost become famous- at least in the neighbourhood in Madras where her parents live, and her extended family scattered across three continents- for having eloped with a Muslim. Some of the cousins pretend they don't know Mala; others are grateful to her for showing how inconsequential their shortcomings are. (72)

Mala's marriage with Asad signifies “symbolic resistance”. Barbara Babcock, editor of an important monograph on 'symbolic inversion', has broadly defined this as 'any act of expressive behaviour which inverts, contradicts, abrogates, or in some fashion present an alternative to commonly held cultural codes, values, and norms be they linguistic, literary or artistic, religious, or social and political’. Mala's determination to marry Asad reflects her resistance. For her, the choice of marrying a Muslim man is “making conscious, ordered, rational choices aimed at wresting a better life for her lost...” (Ghosh 16).

Mala's home in Delhi is empty, save for a life time of sketches left behind by her late husband Asad and the memories they conjure. She relives the heady days of love and optimism when Asad and she robustly defied social conventions to build together a life and struggles to understand how events far removed could so easily snatch away the certainties they had always taken for granted, when the riots took away Asad.

Selfing through Asad's sketches on restless afternoons and sleepless nights, Mala summons ghosts from her childhood:

This couple who must be Mala and Asad, this beginning of what was to be a different sort of life. To get to it, to the point where the frame contains two separate bodies that are animated because they make up one joyous couple, Mala has to go back to another drawing. The sketch she has in mind is a whimsical portrait of her as a girl, drawn at an early stage in their relationship when the years they didn't know each other had to be recounted, drawn and conquered.... The drawing was a seemingly casual one; she recalls watching it in the making, all in the space of few minutes. (8)

Bande remarks: “Women have been identifying the sources of resistance to draw on, and childhood experiences as girls emerge as one of the potent sources shaping women's adult psyche and pointing towards family dynamics as well as the socio-political fabric that underscore the gendered norms” (128). By making Mala relive her childhood days, the writer brings in the resistance. She brings alive Mala's grandmother Bala. Bala is the power-broker of patriarchal system, and in abetting male supremacy. “Bala was subject to a mysterious women's ailment called hysteria. She was strange, she ignored everyone most of the time except, perhaps, Mala, and unlike the women Mala knew Bala also ignored the running of the household as if it had nothing to do with her” (15).

When Bala was still a wife, one of her favourite misdemeanors was cutting her hair. Just as an alcoholic knew where to hide that one bottle her keeper had spared, so Bala hoarded anything sharp-edged. Bala hid these sharp things that she could use the next time she found something unbearable- the cruelty rooted deep in her husband's gravelly voice, or the fact that everything inside her had to be made as neat as he wanted and tied into a hard little ball. She would cut off some of her hair, make a nest of it to be set in the background on a low-hanging branch or in the heart of a hedge. She used this hair to make a hair-nest for she thought 'May be baby bird will be born here and it will learn to fly’ (25). Her thought of bird reflects her wish to be free and independent. Cutting of her hair is an act of resistance. It acts as her weapon.

Even on the death- bed she shows the courage of retaliation and resistance. She reminds us of Rukmini in her short story 'The Remains of the Feast' who goes against all conventions meant for widows. She does not lead an austere life that is prescribed for widows:

... They had shaved her when her husband died, but now that she belonged to no one, Bala

had grown her hair into long, stringy rat-tails. She refused sponge baths most days, and her sari was a shameful rag just like her *choli* on the days she agreed to wear it. But she insisted on her hair being combed twice a day, oiled with stinky hair oil and plaited. She then arranged rat tails on her body in loving display, one for each so she had parallel hairy tracks running from neck to waist (25).

At the time of her death Bala is powerful in a way she never was in living. No one is able to stop her from screaming as many swear words as she can invent. All they do can is to punish her by starving her, but since she is not hungry that doesn't work. In fact, it is only Bala who favours Mala's marriage with Asad (a Muslim):

Bala has an attack of shyness....flirtatiously through the gaps between gnarled fingers. But when it's time for them to go, Bala forgets to be shy. She uncovers her face so she can really look at Mala. 'You and I beat them', she gloats. 'you married him. I couldn't escape this place but I lived longer than that old bastard boss. We've won'.... 'leave your Muslim with me so I can say something to him' (76).

Even as a child, Mala knew that she had to be different: "What she wanted was to be set free from herself. What she really wanted was to be someone else" (15). While Mala retreats further into memories of her conservative Tamil Brahmin family, her larger than-life liberated Muslim-in-laws, and above all her idealistic painter husband, Sara, her daughter struggles with notions of commitment, until she is exposed to the stories of the women who were victims of rape, loss and violence in Gujarat. Sara, the daughter of Mala and Asad, travels to Ahmedabad in the wake of the carnage of 2002 to make a film about the survivors and meets Yasmin, a young woman struggling to put the violence behind her, yet haunted by her past.

Sara embarks on a search for purpose that brings her from Mumbai to Ahmedabad, the venue of recent carnage "It's the first time Sara is visiting a city only so she can see and hear people broken by other people" (105). She tries to explore the paradoxical effects of the chilling violence of 2002 on women. The novel, centering on the lives of the Muslim women in a relocated colony in Ahmedabad captures how the upheaval caused by violence and migration pushes women from the threshold of domesticity into the outside world. Sara tries to understand these people and goes on to meet some of the dislocated families in their relocated colony and that is where she meets Yasmin. The novel largely settles on Sara, shifting between various narrative subjects. Sara is a half-Hindu, half-Muslim young woman from Bombay aspiring documentary filmmaker and NGO worker. She travels to Ahmedabad on a script-writing assignment, a couple of years after the massacres to learn the stories of Muslims affected by the carnage. There, she befriends a seventeen years old girl who is struggling to live up to the multiple pressures she faces after having lost her elder brother-missing, presumed dead. "In fact it's that one girl who stays with her, nudges her as if she can show Sara a way to begin her script" (113).

Complicating Sara's attempts to write the script is her own identity. In contemporary India, "half-Hindu-half-Muslim is not a comfortable hybridity. Sara's Muslim father vehemently rejects religion and cannot come to terms with his son's embrace of Islam as an adult. Sara is haunted by memories of childhood friend murdered in that earlier instance of communal rage, the Bombay riots of 1992-93, because her Muslim name became known. Sara has never been a Hindu or a Muslim, but finds that with the public expressions of communal hatred and political posturing, remaining neutral, or secular, is not really an option.

Hariharan seems to be conveying the dilemma through Sara. She writes:

There's something awful about having to speak for someone else. It's like speaking on behalf of missing persons... One person has to speak up for another.. But, still, it seems a dangerous thing to do, this going inside someone, looking closely at their dreams and defeats, their suffering, being them so you can speak for them in their voice. Because all along there's a nagging little voice asking, 'Can your voice ever be theirs? And who are you

to speak for them (191).

Hariharan describes Yasmin as a “half-child, half-woman”.

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 [Gujarat Riots] 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 safe area. He is 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 (114)

Yasmin is, in fact, a young, brave and highly intelligent young woman who also happens to be a devout Muslim. She realizes the importance of education as she is aware that it is only she who will be of help to her parents in the absence of her brother. “She has to pass because Akbar *bhai* is gone. Earlier she used to think it was only till he came back from whatever he was hiding that she had to be Abba and Ammi's daughter and son. Now she knows he will not come back. She has to be their daughter and son forever” (116). Before 2002, Yasmin's father had a decent business. Her mother was a housewife with no worries or complaints. Post 2002, they are emotionally and financially drained. Yasmin's mother is forced to incessantly work on the sewing machine so that her school fees can be paid and her father's medicines can be bought. So Yasmin is determined to prove that she can do something substantial and she is conscious of her responsibilities that she is now both their son and daughter. This realization signals the strength of her character.

She has to do it alone somehow. Then everyone who tells ammi and abba she shouldn't go to school will never be able to open their mouths again. They'll know they are wrong, they won't say it's not safe for girls, *anything can happen*. They won't say it's no use. It's better she goes to sewing class like Sultana, it's better she does some work now. It's better she helps you now. (116-117)

In fact many people in the re-settled colony are unable to understand why Yasmin's parents are so keen on their daughter's education. Many object to her going to school and some are shocked to know that she even intends to go to college. Her friend Sultana's education is discontinued even though she is younger than Yasmin. This decision is driven by both fear and necessity. Her mother can't afford to send her to school and she is instead sent to learn sewing to contribute to the household expenses. Moreover, given the existing paranoia, safety emerges as major concern. Many of the families feel that it is “dangerous for girls to travel, anything can happen” (227). Therefore young girls are also pressured to marry early and there is a greater insistence on following the *hijab*. On being advised that Yasmin take the veil, if she goes to college, her mother retorts: “the angry ones on both sides want to put our daughters in burqas so that they can prove their point. Did their burqas keep our women safe five years ago?” (227). The tragedy of 2002 had left Yasmin's mother disillusioned but had steeled her against the traditions which prove futile at the time of saving them for any lurking danger. So she voices her resistance by going against the tradition that guarantees no safety to women.

Sara is Yasmin's hope- her resistance to fear of being unsafe: “But when she comes out of the school building during the lunch recess, Yasmin has an excuse to take a break from being careful. There's a surprise waiting for her. It's Sara didi” (123). Yasmin relates her experiences, her feelings to Sara. This becomes her way of resisting past experience from blotting her present.

Yasmin turns wearily to Sara Didi. Has didi understood what she has been saying? Can she really see what it was like, what it is like? There were the dead to be seen, there are still the wounded to be seen. And the missing they must be seen, because there's more than one way in which a person can go missing. (143)

Hariharan presents the picture of the traumatic state in which the Muslim were at the time of

Gujarat Carnage. "We were already scared because we kept hearing terrible things on the loud-speaker, the woman called Razia is saying. She wipes the sweat on her face with her *dupatta*. Go to Pakistan! Go back to Pakistan!" (157).

Nasreen relates her experience:

We heard a crowd was gathering in our area. Then we heard them. Then we saw them. First there were a hundred people, and then there were more. There were so many more... They had swords, pipes, hockey sticks, soda-lemon bottles, saffron flags, all kinds of sharp weapons. They had petrol bombs and gas cylinders. They broke the *dargah* down the street and put an idol there. They came to our houses, they were shouting "Kill them, cut them, and burn them alive!" Then they blasted apart our lives (158).

Miriam says: "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... The bodies piled up. Everything was our in a flash" (158-59). In an attempt to reconstruct their lives, the women inhabiting the colony sew skirts which are then sold out with the help of NGO's. Even young children who should ideally be in school attend sewing classes or learn making kites to supplement family income. Hariharan, thus, explores how women's lives are drastically transformed by such experiences, foregrounding the manner in which, in their familial and community circles, they are forced to take on the roles that they had never envisaged.

One of the ways in which women are directly affected in the aftermath of violence is the manner in which issues pertaining to women's empowerment such as education, equality and gender justice take a back seat in the name of defending a community and its women, community and religious leaders often take a regressive stand vis-à-vis women that equates to an infringement of their basic rights. The narrative explores the ramifications of communalism. It records how violence recasts women as keepers of faith and heightens their awareness of vulnerability. It shows the recession of the little progress women have achieved in little time. Hariharan's narrative, therefore captures the predicament of women caught between their own dreams and the community dictates.

The stories of these women Nasreen, Feroza, Reshma, Najma, Zainab and many others are strikingly similar. Though haunted by searing memories of humiliation, loss and pain, the accounts of these women, nonetheless, are not overtly concerned with their communal identity rather it is the sense of gross injustice of being unfairly targeted in their own nation that angers them. As a woman complains, "We are orphans. We have no one, no police, no government, no country" (164). Though some of them do speak of being better prepared for the next time there is a general and an earnest wish to escape the viciousness of violence. A woman regrets the fact that community leaders instead of setting up a school, spend money on building mosques. Another woman points out, "people don't want to revenge, they want to live again... people need to live again" (165-66). For these women the very act of telling and retelling their stories is, primarily a kind of catharsis. Thus, in the novel, their workplace emerges as a symbol of essentially female space which provides them with an opportunity to uninhibitedly express their feelings, which, in a male domain, may not be heard. The articulation of their grief, repeatedly, also incorporates a feeble hope that once heard their stories may get them justice and may provide the long awaited closure to the tragedy. The tales of horror narrated by all women characters speak of the pain that a community underwent on account of a religious strife. By positioning the experiences of terrorism in their culturally specific narratives, Hariharan seeks to challenge patriarchal ideologies, enabling their female protagonists to articulate their resistance within the social structure.

Sara realizes that, "There can never be enough of them, machine that will pack up their stories, unpack them for others" (158). When she calls Mala, all she can do is describe the hopeless road, the burnt ruin, the mount garbage, the assault of smells. The buildings' ugly, closed faces. And much worse than the buildings, the hovels called parks and colonies and societies. When Sara is leaving the city she doesn't want to think about Yasmin or her family or her neighbours. She leaves the city behind. She wonders if she

had not gone there looking for its wounds, its hideous scars, she may have only seen a place going about its daily business. "How it managed, how were all those people who didn't loot or kill or light a fire fooled with words like pride and honour? How they were blackmailed into complicity?" (177). The experiences in the city fills her with rage. She feels:

There was barely a role for justice, leave alone anything as tender hearted as remorse or healing. How could it happen, how is it being allowed to happen? The rage she feels gives way to grief, or something like it. Whatever it is, it confuses her, it confuses everything; it makes her feel she doesn't know who she is any more. (178)

Sara remembers when she came home with questions about what she was, or what she was supposed to do with forms that asked her to fill in the blank next to religion, Asad, her father told her "don't be ashamed of who you are. Don't be ashamed of who you're not" (180). But the experience now makes her realize that all she can be is a woman, she has no name or religion or race or caste or native land. "She's nothing but a young woman with a body" (180).

The third part of the novel "Funeral Rites" looks at the lead characters trying to cope with and coming to terms with realities. The author explores what the place has to offer to Sara and Yasmin. A bit of idealism in the privileged middle class and some pragmatic solutions like education for the affected is what the author offers. The stories that Sara gathers during her stay in Ahmedabad are teaching her what she is.

As usual there are too many voices pulling this way and that. Sara thinks she understands what is being said but she doesn't know what she's supposed to do. She can only feel, and what's the use of feeling, what good did it ever do? She still has no idea how to turn-what she saw and heard- and what she feels- into a script, or any. Other piece of writing. And she has no idea how to let all these stories, other people's stories that are becoming hers, teach her who she is and what she is. (234)

Sara becomes the voice of the tortured. She keeps on thinking: "Then how is she going to help other people, write reports and train the youth to be socially involved, how is she even going to make it true, this new belief of hers that Yasmin can be a friend" (229).

Yasmin does well in her exams and looks forward to bright future. She prays: *Allah, let me go. Let me get a seat in a college, any college anywhere*" (226).

The characters in the novel Bala, Mala, Sara and Yasmin all have their own ways of protest and resistance. They all retaliate and emerge winners in their own rights. While Bala demonstrates domestic resistance, Mala resorts to memories to resist, Sara becomes the voice of the tortured and Yasmin harbors on education to build her future. While the young-Sara and Yasmin-move into the beleaguered future with their very different armours of ideals, it is left to Mala to let go of the past, encapsulated in her husband's paintbrush, in an epiphanic scene by a laburnum and a pond that is possibly the most beautiful Hariharan has ever written: "... it's dark, she's among the shadows of a commonplace park in an ugly DDA Colony. But the stars shine on Mala as if they still have enough to say" (241).

The novel looks at these familiar ideas in a more personal and private way. It presents a mosaic of lives that collide in unhappy ways but also in ways that produce love, passion and tenderness. *Fugitive Histories*, travel through history and create a platform for the characters to resist history and recreate it through various techniques of resistance. Hariharan portrays many shades of difference, not only between communities but also characters and the different shades of resistance. She assumes the role of a historian and imaginatively resurrects some of the most shameful moments in the nation's past and foregrounds the plight of the severely marginalized and oppressed sections of the society by fictionalizing the lives and concerns of minority women in a deeply communalized contemporary India.

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