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Nationalism and Identity Crisis: Psychological and Physical Displacement due to Godhra Communal Riots in *Fugitive Histories*

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ABSTRACT

Githa Hariharan's *Fugitive Histories* is set in the background of the 2002 Gujarat riots. The novel is a powerful take of psychological trauma and physical displacement of people caused due to the communal riots on the lives of the people. The narrative is mainly the depiction of Muslim women who are the victim of religious conflicts. They face the dilemma of identity and try to find a place and voice in their own country. The novel offers extensive reports, interviews, and accounts of eyewitnesses.

Key words: fugitive, secularism, victim, psychological, displacement

Fugitive Histories comprises of three sections Missing Persons, Crossing Borders and Funeral Rites. The novelist tries to present several problems that aroused after the Godhra riots. The story moves around three cities- Delhi, Mumbai and Ahmedabad. Mala, Sara and Yasmin are the three major characters in the novel. They are trying to free themselves from the pain and hatred of the past. The novel is the journey of Mala, Sara and Yasmin who search for their identity. It also gives personal observation of Githa Hariharan's visit to Ahmedabad after the Gujarat riots of 2002.

According to Wikipedia "Nationalism is an idea and movement that holds that the nation should be congruent with the state. As a movement, nationalism tends to promote the interests of a particular nation (as in a group of people), especially with the aim of gaining and maintaining the nation's sovereignty (self-governance) over its homeland." Nationalism is an ideology developed in the mind and heart of the

people that a nation is an essential unit for social life. Indian nationalism developed as a movement to strengthen the struggle against colonialism and achieve freedom from British rule to attain the status of an independent nation. Indian nationalism is an example of territorial nationalism. It includes all the people of India irrespective of their diverse languages, linguistic, race, ethnic, culture and religious backgrounds. So, a Muslim is as much an Indian as is Hindu. Indian nationality has a strong influence on the politics of India. Though India has declared itself as a secular nation it has witnessed many grave incidences of communal disharmony before and after the partition of India.

According to P. D. Nimsarkar, Githa Hariharan in *Fugitive Histories*, "has shown great courage and commitment in selecting such issues which narrate about the religious practices and communal confrontation between majority and minority communities leading to constitutional

crisis to state-nation relationship and national integration." (Nimsarkar, 72)

Sara, the daughter of Azad and Mala, is another major character in the novel. She is a self-reliant woman who works in an NGO named Sangam in Delhi. The NGO visits troubled and unhappy places to help them. She shares PG room with Nina and together they make a documentary film on the current problems of India. Sara is in a live-in-relationship with Rajat Shaw. He is half-Christian and half-Hindu. Sara's father is Muslim and her mother is Hindu. She faces an identity crisis. Her identities are always questioned by caste, creed, religion and nationality.

Leaving her job, Sara accepts the offer of Nina to write a script for a documentary film. She goes to Ahmedabad to witness the difficulties and problems of Muslims so that she can write a script for the documentary on the victims of Gujarat riots. Sara is traumatized by memories of childhood when one of her friends is killed only because her name revealed that she is a Muslim. When she visits Ahmedabad, she feels the pain and realizes how people suffer for being Hindus and Muslims. She wants to search what it indicates to be half-Hindu and half-Muslim. She realizes that in India a name can change the fate of a person. She also remembers her father's words that there is nothing in the name. Sara meets displaced Muslim people in their relocated camps to make sure that her father's dream is alive and a person can live to be a human. She interviews many women's and tries to reduce their mental stress and anxiety.

There is a mix feeling in Sara, when she visits the displaced Muslim people in their camp. She doubts whether India is a safe place for Muslims to live. During their first visit to the riot hit area, Nina tells Sara that "They call this a border, as they cross a highway, reach an area that is a bizarre mix of bungalows, short and tall buildings, many hovels, too many hovels; and some call this area 'mini-Pakistan'" (FH, 110). Sara courageously talks to Yasmin and her mother and also meet other Muslim families. She understands the agony, pain and trauma these people are going through. Sara realizes the difficulty and discomfort of living a

normal life in such grave circumstances. The riots have made an irreversible harm on psyche of the victims. She talks with many ladies and tries to release their apprehension and trauma. Listening to the miseries of the victims, Sara imagines:

Sara's eyes are intent on Nasreen. Looking at her, listening to what she's saying. Sara can almost see a pair of invisible arms pulling Nasreen into a pit. And suddenly, even as Sara imagines this pit, they are past all preludes. All of them, not just Nasreen, are being pulled into the pit or pushed into it. Now they are in the deep smoky pit of the story. It's not a pit with imaginary terrorists or imaginary Pakistan. There is nothing invisible or imaginary in this pit. It's a pit in which everyone is running, the pit is only a pit, there's nowhere to run. It's a pit where long hard things falls on soft flesh, long sharp things pierce soft flesh. It's a pit that calls fire to it like a magnet. It's a pit that blazes so bright, so hot; you may think the hungry orange fire will never be done with filling up its stomach. (FH 157)

After meeting Yasmin and many Muslim families, Sara enters the stage of identity achievement by accepting the role of a woman. Now, she is not embarrassed by her identity and confidently says she has both Hindu and Muslim relatives. Sara was close to her father's ideals of secularism and stood firmly without any certain religion or caste. Sara has many identities to select from. Like her brother she wants to become peaceful with one identity. But at the end, she is settled with her hybrid identity. Sara proudly says, "Yes I' am beginning to realize how lucky, I am. How glad I am that I'm a hybrid", (FH, 184). Anuradha Goyal says "Though the author has expressed it in the narrow canvas of Hindu Muslim dilemma coming from mixed parentage. But this is a dilemma that all the growing up people face, who have multiple identities, most commonly faced by children of immigrants."

Yasmin a teenager of seventeen years, is a displaced victim of the Gujarat riots. In the beginning, Yasmin appears to be a typical shy girl. But her heart and mind are full of grief, and sorrow. There is fear of the past, the agony of missing

brother and uncertainties of the future. "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" (FH 118). Yasmin does not believe that she will ever attain prosperity in life. She has lost hope that her brother will come back. But in her daily prayers, she requests God for miracles to happen for the sake of her parents' happiness.

Yasmin's aim is to go to college for higher education and support her family financially. She desires to live in her own house. She is in the quest for identity and wishes to be what she was before the riots. The repercussions of the riots, their psychological and physical displacement have changed Yasmin's life. She is sleep deprived which may further increase the risk of physical and mental health problems. "Every night Yasmin waits for sleep to find her. She lies as still as possible, eyes shut tight. It should be easy then, the easiest thing in the world for sleep to come to her, settle on her like a warm old blanket. But, like Yasmin, sleep too is afraid of the dark" (FH 115).

Yasmin makes effort to overcome several burdens of life. She does everything by herself. She assists her mother and does household work. She also has the pressure of clearing the board exam and going to college for further study. Similarly, she has the burden of the promise she has made to Ammi and Abba to protect herself. Many Muslim parents do not send their children to school as it is situated in the Hindu locality. However, Yasmin is self-motivated to go to school for a better tomorrow. She overcomes her fear and attends the school located in the Hindu area.

The psychological suffering and agony Yasmin is undergoing are reflected in her conversation with Sara. It has made her quiet and secluded. She talks about her past, old home, her missing brother and happy family instances of life. After the riots, she feels stranded. Her family suffers the consequences of being Muslim. "They had to quit their neighbourhood, their India. They found a safe house in a Muslim neighbourhood but in return the safe house made them give up their

home, their old life. It made them give up on Akbar" (FH 138).

Githa Hariharan, through the portrayal of Yasmin, presents the dilemma of several displaced Muslims who were forced to leave their native place. They are living like convicts in their own country. The fundamentalists loudly announced on the loudspeakers "Go to Pakistan! Go back to Pakistan! (FH 157). "They are Pakistanis, terrorists" (FH 157). This shows that the hatred towards the Muslims is deeply rooted in the Hindu consciousness. In India, one cannot live without religious identities. And these religious identities during riots result in destruction and discrimination. It has been pointed out "that even after the riots are over, a woman's life and safety cannot be taken for granted. It is as though Yasmin's already fragile and makeshift existence was under constant threat of being destroyed." (Sundaram 133) Manimozhi and Umamaheswari have rightly said that:

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 (Manimozhi and Umamaheswari 272)

Mala is a Hindu Brahmin woman, who wants to marry Azad, an artist. There is tension and feeling hatred in the novel when Mala tells her parents about her desire to marry Azad as he is a Muslim. They become hysterical and furious, "How can you want to marry him...Think of the difference between us and them" (FH, 69). Her parents even utter the ultimate words "You are killing us! You'll marry this man, this foreigner, and you'll be lost to us, you'll kill us!" (FH 69). A Muslim is considered an outsider by many religious groups and people. They have to prove their loyalty, love and affection towards their own country. Mala breaks the social norms to marry Azad. They live a successful life in spite of all the difficulties and challenges. Mala

shields herself from the hold of religious identity and manages to shape her identity as a secular woman. She learns to live life after the death of her husband. She builds her profession as a librarian.

Samar is the son of Mala and Azad and the elder brother of Sara. Many difficulties arise during his naming ceremony. Both his grandmothers came up with different names. Azad's mother wants the child to be named Ahmed and Mala's mother suggests Rama or Krishna. She also recommends the name Ramakrishna "a double dose to help compensate for his half-and-half parentage" (FH 31). But Mala and Azad wish to grow their son as a simple human and decide to call him Samar. Samar is different from Sara; he keeps a beard and has an inclination towards Islamic fundamentalism. He, unlike his sister and parents, embraces religious identity. He does not believe in his father's idea of secularism and wants to have a religious identity. He understands that the social order does not approve of half-Hindu, half-Muslim identity. So, after the death of Asad, he decides to settle in Dubai, leaving his own country behind. Initially, he faces an identity crisis but then chooses to be a Muslim and attains his identity.

In the novel, Asad is devastated after the riots. "The trauma alters him – the lively person gets transformed into an irritable and angry man and a stranger to his family. His agony finds expression in his frenzied paintings – all evocative of the religious butchery" (Parween, 214). The killing of innocent people has traumatized him. He becomes disillusioned, the artist in him is dead and consequently, his sketchbook remains blank. Asad is neither a victim of riots nor he has witnessed it. There is a physical distance between the victims and Asad but he still identifies with them. Azad's ideology of secularism is shattered after the Gujarat riots. He suffers from acute depression and dies.

In the rehabilitation camp the survivors of the carnage give group interview for Sara's film. "In the middle of them all is a small recording machine with a blinking red light, quietly swallowing every sound heard in the room. The machine doesn't know what to do with the silent tears though" (FH 152). It is here that Githa Hariharan delicately

brings up the horrid, unpleasant, disgusting explicit memories of the communal violence that resulted in death and destruction. The horrors have also wounded their bodies and soul. The people have lost their strength to fight back the powers of negativism. It is here that Sara is afraid to do research for the movie.

Cut and burnt, cut and burnt. It's a shorthand chant, a chant that echoes in Sara's ears because it's trapped there. But as often as she hears it, Sara knows the chant is leaving something out. There is an empty space before and after, between the cutting and the burning. Maybe no one wants to fill up that awful space. Maybe 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 (FH 163).

During the interaction with the Muslim ladies Sara learns that their children no longer go school. A woman named Zainab talks about the partiality and inequality done with the Muslim children in school. "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." (FH 156) Another woman Reshma emphasizes the necessity of a school for their children. The children could "engage in studies away from religious dogmatism, conflict, intolerance, —they could've built another school instead of a big mosque." (FH 156).

Sara and Nina are full of tears when they listen to the experiences of the Muslim ladies. The cassette players they brought to record the saga of the survivors are not sufficient enough. Everyone gathered in the room have become recording machines.

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. (FH 159).

Yasmin also talks about the nightmare that she sees every night. She reveals with tears in her eyes how one middle aged man tried to molest her. She is saved from being molested by her mother. "Ammi covers Yasmin's body with hers and begs. Ammi's begging words make a breathless mess of prayer." (FH 144). But still the man attacks Yasmin with a sharp weapon on her thigh.

According to Veerendra Patil "The novel *Fugitive Histories* unravels the struggle of women for their identities which are contested by religion, caste, nationality and violence." (Patil 257) The novel is a documentary on the victims of riots. It is a mouthpiece of atrocities in the name of religion. Not only the women characters but also the male have to struggle hard to overcome psychological problems. The characters suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder. They re-live the traumatic event through nightmares and flashbacks. The unwanted memories make them very upset, sometimes their heart palpitates or they become breathless when they are reminded of the riots. The physical displacement, uncertainties, self-doubt and fear bring negative thoughts and feeling to their mind. This in turn gives rise to mental health problems such as sleepless nights, depression and anxiety. The Muslim families after the riots have to live in the rehabilitation camps. They are displaced in their own country due to biased religious opinions. The characters in the novel strive hard to achieve their identity. The communal disharmony and anti-religious activities subsequently result in the physical and psychological suffering of the people.

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