

## In Pursuit of Self: A Feminist Reading of Githa Hariharan's Fugitive Histories

Dr. Leena V. Phate

Asst. Prof. & Head, Dept. of English,  
Jawaharlal Nehru Arts, Commerce & Science College Wadi,  
Nagpur, Maharashtra, India

HHH

### Abstract

*Githa Hariharan's novels convey an understanding of universal feminist consciousness. She embodies a critical understanding of the communal, social, cultural and gendered difficulties that her female characters had to go through in their pursuit of self. Together with oppression Githa Hariharan thoughtfully depicts the determined quest of the female characters to style a valuable reality for themselves. In the light of these arguments, the present paper is an attempt to examine and probe the way Hariharan's women characters challenge the conventional roles and identity imposed on them by the male-controlled social order as they attempt to recreate a modern self-identity for them. For this purpose, her novel Fugitive Histories is thoroughly studied in this paper.*

**Keywords:** Feminist consciousness, oppression, conventional, patriarchy, quest self-identity

As a woman's freedom movement feminist ideology is committed to undermine the established structure of the patriarchal standard and liberate women from the restraints of chauvinist images and oppression and silencing by the male-controlled society. Simultaneously Feminism also aims at the all-around liberation of women. Emphasizing the "all-around liberation" Gerda Lerner in her book *The Creation of Patriarchy* states that, "It (feminism) is not always a movement, for it can be a level of consciousness, a stance, an attitude, as well as the basis for organized effort" (Lerner, 237). Sushila Singh in her piece of writing "Recent Trend in Feminist Thought: A Tour de Horizon" perceives 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'" (Singh, 22). This awareness of being dominated and disregarded by the patriarchal social order and of challenging the false identity which reduces women to a state of invisibility is the feminist consciousness.

The feminist consciousness directed to the rise of feminist literary works which not only question woman's subordination and subjugation in society but also to narrow-minded, orthodox representation of women in mainstream literature. The modern woman does not want

to be conventional anymore. She wants her fair place together with her male counterpart. According to Shantha Krishnaswamy, "The Indian woman picks up enough courage to raise her head and ask a few awkward and pertinent questions." (Krishnaswamy, 8)

Githa Hariharan is a present-day feminist writer. She has captured the interest of many critics and readers. Many research articles, reviews and full-length studies have been published on her novels. Hariharan has created a place for her internationally with her first novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1992) and won the prestigious Commonwealth Writers' Prize for the best first novel in 1993. Her work grows out of her feminism and other social and political convictions. She is obsessed with the problems of women in particular. Her protagonists do not follow the passive role allocated to them by tradition in society. They think, feel and act finding out their ways of life.

*Fugitive Histories* (2009) is the novel by Githa Hariharan based on the sensitive Godhra communal riots and their outcome. Godhra is a city in the state of Gujarat, India which disgracefully became part of all Indian newspapers on February 28, 2002. *Fugitive Histories* is a journey of three Indian women of different generation in three different cities. It reveals the life of Mala in Mumbai, Sara in Delhi and Yasmin in Ahmedabad. Mala, Sara and Yasmin are caught in the anguish and hatred of their past and suffer an identity crisis in the troubled times of violence and religious hatred. They are trying to release themselves courageously with hopes and dreams. Mala, a Hindu Brahmin married Asad, a Muslim, have two children Sara and Samar. Mala have faith in the philosophy of humanism and not in other discriminations that exist in society. After the death of her husband wants to know what she is without Asad. Sara is in dilemma whether to continue the job in Mumbai or to go to Gujarat and write a script for Nita's documentary about the victims of the 2002 Gujarat riots. Sara does not know what it means to be half Hindu and half Muslim, as her mother is a Hindu and her father, a Muslim. Yasmin, the riot-affected girl wants her life back as it was before the riots.

Set in the background of post-2002, the novel is divided

into three sections, titled Missing Persons, Crossing Borders and Funeral Rites. The first part introduces all the major characters and their lives. The second part talk about Sara's meeting with Yasmin and the suffering of other victims of the riots. And in the third part of the novel, Sara, Mala and Yasmin make an effort to understand, accept and deal with life and they ultimately find their lost self. Heinz Lichtenstein points out that identity is a human necessity. He says, "loss of identity is a specifically human danger, and maintenance of identity a specifically human necessity." (Lichtenstein, 78) According to American-German psychologist, Erik Erikson identity means a "mutual relation in that it connotes both a persistent sameness within oneself (selfsameness) and a persistent sharing of some kind of essential character with others" (Erikson, 109). He has established the theory of psychosocial development of an individual in his Identity and the Life Cycle. He is also recognized for coining the term 'identity crisis.'

### **Mala**

Malathi, Mala for short is Sara's mother. Mala, a South Indian Brahmin is married to Asad, a secular Muslim. She is entirely reliant on him. When the novel begins, Mala is in her empty home after her husband Asad's death. She wants to identify what she is without Asad. She feels estranged, and lonely after Asad's demise. Mala's home in Delhi is empty. She is left with sketches of her husband and their memories together. Githa Hariharan has used the sketches made by Azad to reveal the character and psyche of Mala and to show glimpses of her life.

Mala becomes emotional at the point of recollecting her childhood memories. When she was of the tender age of twelve years, she wanted to live an independent life and fulfil all her desires and wishes. But Mala since she is a girl is not allowed to climb a tree and ride a bicycle like her cousins in the village. She is deprived of complete freedom. Mala does not want to be dominated by male supervision as other ladies of the house. She remembers her childhood days in the village and finds that it was not less than a prison for her. Mala was not happy with her Brahmin identity; she sees different treatment given to a boy and a girl in her house. The childhood incidence created a sense of inferiority complex in Mala for being a girl. Child. "Being her seemed to mean being inept, her fear of failure even before she had failed. Failure tasted like a chalky peanut or an overripe orange that spurted rotten -sour juice into her mouth" (FH, 14).

Mala's childhood ambition was to be one of those fearless and joyous children. She stared at them secretly, enthusiastically from distance. "What she wanted was to

find a place to be in or a thing to do that would set her free from her family, her home and school in the city, her annual summer home in the village" (FH, 14). The novelist through Mala's childhood depicts how a woman's desires are suppressed from her childhood itself. A boy and a girl child are treated differently in a patriarchal society.

Mala feels alienated when she realizes that things will never change even after her growing up into an adult. She starts facing an identity crisis as she does not want to see herself framed into a particular patriarchal set-up like Bala. She feels that she could never have an individual identity in the orthodox atmosphere of the family. She could only live and die as Mala- a pure Tamil Brahmin as the post-lunch conversation of the family only made her realize that she belongs to a specific Brahmin class that is entirely diverse from other religions.

Mala dreams of her own life with freedom of her choice. "She wanted was to be set free from herself what she wanted was to be someone else" (FH, 15). This thought makes her depressed because she is aware of the fact that "she can never be someone else" (FH, 17). She has a vague belief that after death she'll be reborn and fulfil her desire to climb trees and ride a bicycle.

Mala has a strong relationship with her grandmother. Their names Bala and Mala are glued together with the rhyme" (FH, 18). They share an unspoken secret. Only Bala, her grandmother is not against her marriage with Azad.

Susie Tharu and K Lalita in *In Women Writing in India Vol. 1*, explicate that both men and women writers in their literary texts play an important role in the growth of the communal mode of thinking. The tension, hatred is perceived in the novel when Mala, chooses Asad as her life partner, who does not fit into the framework of a son-in-law. When she talks of the marriage to her parents, they lament it saying, "You are killing us! You'll marry this man, this foreigner, and you'll be lost to us, you'll kill us!" (FH, 69). She marries him disobeying all the marriage traditions and customs. She boldly and vigorously violates social conventions to marry Azad and finally elopes with him to Mumbai.

Soon after their marriage, Mala starts facing difficulties as she belongs to a Hindu family. The culture of a Muslim family is entirely different from a Tamil speaking Brahmin family. The secular identity is transformed into a religious one. When Mala gives birth to a baby boy many difficulties are involved in naming him. Azad's mother suggested that the boy would be called Ahmed and Mala's mother decided to name him Rama or Krishna and even preferred

Ramakrishna "a double dose to help compensate for his half-and-half parentage" (FH, 31). But Mala and Asad want to choose a common name for him. So, they name him 'Samar'. Mala's mother wants to perform the naming ritual and to invite all her relatives but that is also rejected by Asad. When a woman steps into a new house, she is deprived of her liking, individuality and even to name her son/ daughter. Mala's mother states, "First you come up with a strange name. We've never heard before then you don't want a naming ceremony. What do you think this boy is going to live in a world all by himself" (FH, 32)?

Mala sometimes feels rejected by her husband when he enters a depressed but artistically productive state after the 2002 Gujarat massacres. Azad turns out to be very secretive particularly regarding what he is doing in the studio. After the death of Azad Mala goes through his sketches and comes to see the grounds because he gave way to the internal chaos that had shaken all that he believed and loved. All of a sudden, she realizes the causes why his inner colours had washed out and his sketchbook is unfilled.

Now after Asad's death, suddenly Mala feels the pain of rejection by society or at times she even feels that heartbroken Asad (due to riots) had also rejected her. She feels so because she does not have any religious identity, which is generally demanded when a person wants to adjust in society according to cultural categorization. Every night she tries to sleep but in vain. Asad does not let her sleep. She feels broken without Asad. Daily after coming back from work, she hesitates to enter her bedroom. She only finds comfort outside her bedroom, where Asad's memories cannot haunt her.

At the end of the novel, Mala takes the palette, knife and one of the paintbrush Azad used in his last years and drops them in the pond. She has the desire to throw obstinate paintings also. But she cannot carry out a funeral rite of the paintings like the knife and the paintbrush. Mala threw palette and brush as they were no longer of any use. By dumping them forever, she pays a last tribute to Asad and decides to manage her life without Asad by keeping his ideas alive. Mala walks back in dark and the stars shine on Mala as if they have something to say. The novel ends with hope.

Mala learns to live life after the death of her husband. The novelist has portrayed the character of Mala from her childhood to her adulthood. She has successfully shown development in her character. Mala, an introverted and submissive girl advance to become a bold, confident, sensible and supportive wife and mother.

## **Sara**

Sara Zaidi, another major character is born to a Hindu mother and a Muslim father. She is the daughter of Mala and Asad. She faces an identity crisis in the novel. "I have Muslim relatives and Hindu relatives. I'm neither" (FH, 167). This question arises since people are cast into rigid religious moulds. Sara struggles to free herself from these concepts. Now and then she is confused, "sometimes I think I'm Indian" (FH, 167). Sara attributes her identity to nationality to get over her dilemma. Further, her pursuit finds comfort with the self when she says to herself, "But most of the time I'm just Sara" (FH, 167). This confirms that individuality triumphs over nationality. Sara forms her distinctiveness.

Sara is a social worker and an aspiring documentary filmmaker working with an NGO named 'Sangam' in Bombay. She is a sensible and contented youth and a humble employee. Nina her roommate redirects her to go to Ahmedabad to witness the problem of the Muslim's there. She grabs the opportunity to go to Ahmedabad on a script-writing on the Muslim families affected by the Gujarat riots.

Sara loves and is in a relationship with a man called Rajat Shaw. His father is a Christian and his mother a Hindu. Rajat also lives in Mumbai and Sara after the day's hectic schedule visits him. Sara is a self-made, loving and carefree girl. But after marriage husband's name becomes the suffix to the wife's name. When the thought of changing her name comes to her mind, Sara's views hesitate, "...drop the Zaidi (Asad's family name), she could be Vaidyanathan like her mother, or Shaw like her boyfriend. Sara Zaidi could become Sara Vaidyanathan, take a break from one half of herself and try out the other. Or she could leave herself behind entirely, turn into Sara Shaw." (FH, 39-40) She defeats this problem by calling herself "I'm Just Sara" (FH, 167). Sara's thoughts are mature but still, she suffers from an identity crisis. She is under a religious conflict and thinks about whether she is a Muslim or a Hindu. Sara is in a dilemma as she does not belong to one religion.

Sara is a dutiful daughter of Asad and is inspired by his ideals of life. She is very near to her father and his death makes her sorrowful. She realizes the fact that Hindu-Muslim riots were mainly responsible for Asad's unfortunate death.

Sara realizes that visiting Ahmedabad is important as she needs to rediscover herself. She is nurtured as an Indian by her parents. After the Gujarat riots, it becomes unbearable for Sara to believe that people can suffer as



they are Hindus and Muslims. She does not want to meet and interview the 'Muslim Indians'. She remembers Asad, saying that there is nothing in a name. But now Sara considers that a name can change one's destiny. She agrees to go to Ahmadabad along with Nina to visit the immigrants from Gujarat. She wants to find out if Asad's vision is still alive and a person can live by only being a human.

In Ahmadabad Nita and Sara goes to meet the dislocated Muslim victims. Among them, Yasmin, a victim of the Gujarat riots has a deep impact on Sara. She plays a crucial part in the thoughts of Sara. Sara is psychologically involved with this girl who has lost her brother and home. After witnessing Yasmin's efforts to live up to the various difficulties, Sara realizes that she cannot bear the heaviness of representation. It complicates Sara's attempt to write the script and her own identity.

Sara after spending a week in Ahmadabad return to Delhi by train. On the train, an old couple shares a delicious breakfast with Sara. During the conversation, the man asks Sara about her cast and origin. Here Sara again finds it difficult to give a definite answer. She replies that she is half-Hindu and half-Muslim. Suddenly the couple who was actively involved chatting and sharing food with Sara, step back. Sara at this point recalls her father's words, "Don't be ashamed of who you are and don't be ashamed of who you're not" (180). She decides to be her parents' daughter, a secular. She chooses to be an Indian and a human being first. Sara made her position quite clear; she will neither think about what she is not nor concentrate on what she is.

Sara disables anxiety, fear and tension. She selects her role as a woman and regains her identity. She encourages Yasmin to take higher education and also gives strength to Mala. She understands that by only being a woman she can firmly stand without a particular name, caste and religion. When Sara reaches Delhi, she tells her mother about her experience and awareness of her new self. Sara very proudly tells her mother that "Yes, I'm beginning to realize how lucky I am. How glad I am that I'm a hybrid" (FH, 184).

Sara is a round and complex character, which develops and finds her identity. She gets a solution to her dilemma and the courage to face difficulties in her life. She renews her faith in her parents' ideas and her own. "It's always been like this. Riots happens, and then people forget. Life carries on. People carry on" (FH, 233).

### **Yasmin**

Yasmin is one of the victims of the 2002 riots in Gujarat.

She is an innocent girl of seventeen years with a heart-shaped face. She lives with her father and mother. Yasmin has lost her brother, who was a science student during the riots. She has to move to a new and safer place with her family and hopes to survive. Her father lost the house and a big shop in the riots. He is now trying to establish a new business to earn a livelihood. Her mother is a housewife and helps other woman and sells the skirts she has stitched and embroidered.

Yasmin is a big fan of Shabana Azami and believes that she would come and save her. She wants to meet Shabana in Mumbai. "She's seen all her pictures, she thinks Shabana Azmi will come and save her from here" (FH, 111). She is preparing for the board exam. Yasmin is in the last year of school and after completing her school desires to go to college. She is determined to get an education to make her future bright and to compensate for the loss of her brother Akbar. The novelist has portrayed Yasmin as a very courageous and optimistic girl. She loves her parents and wants to do something for them. She wants to pass the exam this year because her mother is working hard and her father falls sick. She aspires to go to college and get a job to support the family. Her brother is missing and she would like to play the role of a daughter and son. She wants to shut the mouth of people who tell her Ammi and Abba not to send her to school.

Despite multiple burdens, Yasmin is trying hard to overcome all the challenges. She is doing everything all alone. She helps Ammi with the household work. She also has the pressure of passing the exam as she does not want to lose the opportunity of going to college. Notwithstanding the injustice done to her and many others like her, Yasmin believes god to help. She takes care of herself and has made many promises to Ammi, Abba and Akbar though he is not with them. "The promises she has made to herself are the worst of all, they are huge as airy balloons, but they're made of such fine glass that they can break without being touched. Keeping a promise sometimes means breaking the promise you made to yourself. This is a strange and troubling thought" (FH, 119).

Yasmin is a fighter and has learned to take care of her parents and herself. She has learnt to be careful, "it means avoiding an empty road but also a crowd. It means not going where it's dark or where there may be policemen" (FH, 122-123). The words and expressions that nowadays exist in Yasmin's ears and head, harassing her all the time are: "careful, alert, guarding against, taking care, anything can happen" (FH, 123). She believes that being careful in life is more difficult than the board exam.

Githa Hariharan, through the character of Yasmin, portrays the dilemma of many Muslim individuals who were required to leave their homes forcefully. There is a lot of pressure and uncertainty to disown one's native place. On the loudspeakers, people proclaim "Go to Pakistan! Go back to Pakistan!" (157). It shows that Muslims have become convicts in their own city. Yasmin is going through an identity crisis. She wants to be recognized as an individual and not as a Muslim. Yasmin understands that she has to take care of her safety as she is a Muslim. She finds that there are nearly few good people left in the world. People with tilaks on their forehead and Trishul in their hand haunt her. Yasmin can no more trust people, as she has seen them with hockey sticks, rod, swords, and pipes with her open eyes and also in her dreams. But ultimately, Yasmin gradually accepts the adversity and comes to terms with life. She learns to handle and overcome all the difficulties in her life.

All the three Ammi, Abba and Yasmin herself sit together hand in hand in silence. Yasmin closes her eyes so she can save this moment forever. She has suffered mental and physical pain but still strives to fulfil her dreams instead of lamenting over the past. The support Yasmin gets from Sara, her mother and father and also from her dead brother help her to get her lost confidence and her true self back.

Thus, Githa Hariharan attempts to highlight the female characters individual place in this society. The experiences of female characters with men in their lives and their reactions to those surroundings are well treated by Githa Hariharan. She also exhibits their quest for identity. This has been represented as, "Women, who refuse to accept the prevalent codes, question the injustice, assert to seek fulfilment, are grouped under the title of non-conformists." (Bai 43) The female characters struggle hard to defeat psychological obstacles for example personality disorder, self-consciousness, hesitancy, timidity, insecurity and fearfulness. They also overcome social barriers such as orthodox beliefs and prejudiced religious views. And try to achieve freedom and individuality. The novel also emphasises traumatized religious identities in general. Through the accurate portrayal of all the characters, Githa Hariharan asserts that all humans are linked with one another. The novel shows that everyone's life is connected in this world. The action leads to a chain of reaction that affects the lives of people either directly or indirectly

The novel *Fugitive Histories* resolves the fight of women for their identities which are challenged by religion, caste, nationality and violence. The novel deals with the problems of identity on the individual plane as well as on

the universal plane. Confrontation of these ideologies is evident in the comeback of the characters of Githa Hariharan in *Fugitive Histories*. Mala challenges the religious norms of marriage and marries Asad. Sara lives with Rajat Shaw which shows a live-in relationship against the traditional arrange marriage. They both love and live and do not think of marriage. Mala shapes her identity as a teacher where else Sara as a scriptwriter for documentary films. Yasmin overcomes all the obstacles and regains the lost confidence and her true self.

#### Works Cited

- 1 Bai, K. Meera. *Women's Voices*. New Delhi: Prestige Books, 1996. Print
- 2 Bharat, M. "Feminism and the Family in the Fiction of Shashi Deshpande, Githa Hariharan and Manjula Padmanabhan". *Desert in Bloom*, Pencraft International, 2004.
- 3 Erikson, Erik. *Identity and the Life Cycle*. New York: International Universities Press, 1959. p.109.
- 4 Hariharan Githa, *Fugitive Histories*. New Delhi: Penguin Books India (p) Ltd., 2009.
- 5 Krishnaswamy, Shantha. *The Women in Indian Fiction in English*, New Delhi: Ashish Publishing House, 1984. Print
- 6 Kumaraveni, N and Joseph, S (2018) "Identity Crisis in the Novels of Githa Hariharan" *Review of Research*, UGC Approved Journal No. 48514, ISSN: 2249-894X
- 7 Lerner, Gerda. *The Creation of Patriarchy*. New York: OUP, 1986. 237. Print.
- 8 Lichtenstein, Heinz. *The Dilemma of Human Identity*. New York, 1977. p. 78
- 9 Navarro, Tejero, Antonia (2003) *The Fiction of Arundhati Roy and Githa Hariharan: Another World is Possible*, Penguin.
- 10 Prabhakar, Sarita (2011) *Fiction and Society: Narrativization of Realities in the Novels of Shashi Deshpande and Githa Hariharan*, Rawat Publications.
- 11 Singh, Sushila. (ed). "Recent Trends in Feminist Thought - A tour de Horizon". *Feminism and Recent Fiction*. New Delhi: Prestige Books, 1991. Print.
- 12 Tharu, Susie and K Lalita. eds. *Women Writing in India*. Vol.2. OUP: New Delhi, 1995. p. 74.
- 13 Singh, Jyoti. *Indian Women Novelists: A Feminist Psychoanalytical Study*. Jaipur: Rawat Publication, 2004.
- 14 Trika, Pradeep. ed. "A New Voice in the Indian Fiction: Githa Hariharan." *Indian Women Novelists*. R. K. Dhawan. Set III Vol.6 -New Delhi, Creative Books, 1995.
- 15 Khan, A.G. and Khan, M.Q. "Thousand Faces of Night: An Epic "Cap Bulized?". *Changing Faces of Women in Indian Writing in English*. New Delhi: Creative Books, 1995.