



Githa Hariharan's *Fugitive Histories*: A Study in New Historicist Perspective

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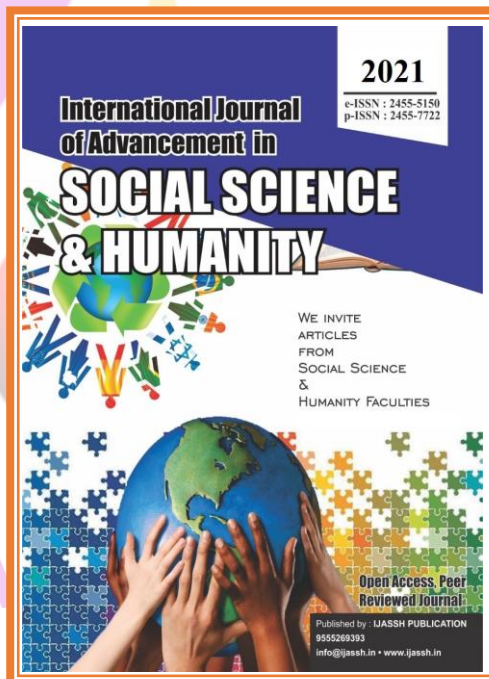
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ABSTRACT

New Historicism is a mode of critical analysis that focuses on the text as a site of power relations. It believes that texts mask social conditions just as social conditions are informed and shaped by textual representations. It tries to explore the complicity of cultural forms with ideologies that support and reinforce the interests of the dominant classes and thus participate in circulating the specific representations of the state for the society to view/read and accept. Githa Hariharan's *Fugitive Histories* lend itself to a new historicist reading in terms of its thematic and narrative technicality. Writing in this postmodern/postcolonial era, Hariharan centres her text on the issue of communal disharmony embedded in post-independence nation state that India is with its claims of secularism as its democratic principle. It mirrors the plights and predicaments of Muslim women victims of Godhara riots and its aftermath. Hariharan in this novel attempts at reconstructing history which has been written by those who are in power, and thereby challenging the narrative and its ideology as the single truth. This short paper is a modest attempt to see that the textual discourse does not exist in a vacuum, but it is influenced by the discourses of historical/social/cultural/political milieus. Githa Hariharan by looking at the Gujarat riots has endeavoured to rebuild/reconstruct the entire event through various other viewpoints mainly those of victims, and thereby reinstating the New Historicist theory that history is not homogenous, it is rather fleeting, shifting and constructed by those who are in power.

Key Words: *Ideologies, Dominant Classes, Representations, Discourses, Milieu, Homogenous.*

Githa Hariharan's fiction *Fugitive Histories* lends itself to a new historicist reading in terms of its thematic and narrative technicality. Writing in this postmodern/postcolonial era, Hariharan centres her text on the issue of communal disharmony embedded in post-independence nation state that India is with its claims of secularism as its democratic principle. *Fugitive Histories* deals with the aftermath of the communal violence of 2002 in Godhara which results in the dislocation of a whole community and, therefore, marginalised within its own country. Sara the protagonist records the testimonials of the women who are the worst sufferers of the historical event so as to recreate the actual situation in the perspective of the victims. Hariharan in the process attempts at reconstructing history which has been written by those who are in power, challenging its ideology that is defined as finitely as the single truth. She seems to say that there are several other perspectives to history and, therefore, history is fugitive and shifting and not homogenous. Githa Hariharan's novel, *Fugitive Histories* (2009), subtly opens up the presence of all the differences given within a postcolonial nation-state as India is. Staring us starkly in the face is the reality that the colonial world bequeathed to us a legacy - that of the partition, the one historical/political event the ghosts of which haunt us in our personal,

social and cultural conduct of everyday life. That India is a secular country, in that it recognises and acknowledges the different identities of its subjects might be true, but the underlying issue, however, is the internal power structure in a multi-cultural set up which is most often ignored.

New Historicism is an approach to literary criticism and literary theory based on the premise that a literary work should be considered product of the time, place and historical circumstances of its composition rather than as an isolated work of art or text. New Historicism developed in the 1980s, primarily through the work of the critic Stephen Greenblatt, gaining widespread influence in the 1990s and beyond. New Historicists aim simultaneously to understand the work through its historical and cultural context as well as to investigate the intellectual and cultural history through literature. In other words, New Historicism aims at interpreting a literary text as an expression of or reaction to the power-structures of the society. *Fugitive Histories* can be read by applying the tenets of New Historicism in which discourse is informed by the Foucauldian concept of power and Louis Montrose's 'historicity of the text' and 'textual history'. The text deals with the particular historical event of 2002, the Godhara incident in which a whole compartment of Hindu activists returning from Ayodhya were burnt down. What the

writer does is to look at this past incident not only to recreate it but also to rebuild/reconstruct the entire event through various other viewpoints mainly those of victims and thereby reinstating the New Historicist theory that history is not homogenous, it is rather fleeting, shifting and constructed by those who are in power. The textual discourse, therefore, does not exist in a vacuum, but is influenced by the discourses of historical/social/cultural/political milieus that are drawn into its context. Received history is tampered with and rewritten from a women centred perspective as in any kind of war or unrest; it is the women and children who are the worst sufferers. Thus, it is but inevitable that Hariharan weaves her tale through her women characters.

The text is divided into three parts with significant titles 'Missing Persons', 'Crossing Boundaries' and 'Funeral Rites'. At the surface level the author speaks of the death of Asad, an artist, missed by his wife, Mala, who ruminates over their hybrid marriage (Asad, a Muslim and Mala, a Hindu). She tries to reconstruct their past life and Asad the person himself through some of his drawings which she has unearthed only after his death. Mala is yet to come to terms with the missing husband from her life, though this is only the result of natural death. Theirs is a marriage that signifies the post-independence secular state

that the nation is. On the other hand, we have the missing persons from the aftermath of the Godhara incident, and innocent people like Akbar who simply disappear from their homes probably got arrested by the police on the pretext of terrorism or killed in orchestrated encounters. As Yasmin, Akbar's sister reflects about her missing brother: "Missing is not so bad, it is better than dead... It's the first time Abba saw that being dead meant being cut. It meant missing a body part, an arm, a leg, even a head".¹ The incident as such is brought to us by Sara's friend Nina who makes a documentary script which reconstructs the past as how on the fatal day the Sabarmati express was attacked in Godhra station. The Hindu activists inside the train were burnt alive. This happened in a Muslim locality and, therefore, the Muslims of Gujarat became the target of brutal violence. As a result,

"To this day the dispossessed of Gujarat live in 'safe areas'— Muslim Ghettos—without civic amenities. In Ahmedabad, for instance, people who used to be part of the city's life-breakers, auto drivers, shopkeepers, engineers, schoolteachers—are now refugees in their own city".²

Nina's documentary in reconstructing history takes into account the stories of some of these people in their own voices,

what the state has done or didn't do to change their situation, and how these people are now trying to rebuild their lives. This leads us into the second part of the text where Sara, Maya and Asad's daughter accompanies Nina in her field trip to Gujarat, where they record the multiple voices of women victims who witnessed the violence in the aftermath of Godhara. These are the women who have either been raped by perpetrators of violence, or have lost their brothers, sons, husbands or find them missing. Their homes have been burnt and they have been uprooted from their living places to Ghettos for safety. Hariharan also refers inadvertently to another past incident that of the 1992-93 Mumbai riots when her friend Laila and her husband were burnt to death. Laila, Sara's childhood friend is described by her in this ironic manner.

“It was as if her parents had unknowingly typecast her by naming her Laila, starting her on the road to romance. Laila took the name to heart, built fantasies around herself; it was impossible for her to be anything but a romantic heroine. In the end, of course, her name made her someone else; someone in whom the men who lit the fires saw nothing romantic or heroic; all she had, in their eyes, was a religion”.³

The name that meant one thing to Laila, her parents meant something else for others. To those others 'Laila' symbolised

the religion they hated, representing the postcolonial other, the marginalized within the nation-state. The process of making of the nation-state involves the shaping of the 'self' on the one hand as well as defining of the other. In such a given situation the hostilities and prejudices are not only hardened but they get deeply embedded. In 'Crossing Borders', at the personal level again, we have Mala and Asad who form the resistance from within the powerful structures of neatly divided religious borders, and yet who have been successful. They are the subversion that power contains within itself. On the other hand we have Sara and Nina literally crossing borders within the nation/state/district, moving from the Hindu area to the Muslim where lines/borders are drawn to demarcate/discriminate/distinguish and separate the two peoples/cultures based on religion. This is the very fact that serves to subvert the idea of a secular state. According to Stephen Greenblatt, New Historicism draws heavily on ethnography and also storytelling wherein people's experiences are recorded. In this case Sara's own interpretations and involvement with the issue is described with great sensitivity. Yasmin is a young girl, with whom Sara identifies, understands that stories are of different kinds as are the storytellers. But on this occasion the story she narrates to Sara is real, a story in which she has to live for the

rest of her life. A host of women gather in Yasmin's small one room home — even after five years of the actual incident these women keep it live in their memories, the trauma, the pain and the suffering. Reshma, Zulekha, Razia, Nasreen, Najma, Mariam, Farida, Zahida, Salma, Abeda, Sabiya, Mumtaz are some of the representatives of the suffering community who face the brunt of the powerful state. Githa Hariharan uses this technique of thick descriptions, which forms a significant element in the recreating of history, with deftly weaving political events into private lives.

India today describes that the daily lives of individuals and those of history appear to blur and seep through time and memory till they become all of a piece. It is a measure of Hariharan's tenacity as a writer that even while writing on a very hackneyed and trite subject of communal hatred and horror which has been taken up so many times in the media by social activists and documentary film-makers, she is able to colour it with her own brand of fierce integrity that we are able to look at it again. This integrity of literary representation makes it so evident that history is fugitive, that it is shifting and that there are other perspectives to it. History cannot be a 'single truth' as constructed or manipulated by those in power. In reconstructing the past lives through the medium of memory and documentary, Githa Hariharan brings alive

the hoary situation of the terror torn Gujarat. Sara could imagine the worst when she listens to the women pouring out their experience with such frenzied emotions.

“Now they are in the deep smoky pit of story. It's not a pit with imaginary terrorists or imaginary Pakistans... It's a pit with closed windows locked doors, then broken windows and doors. It's a pit where it only rains stones. It's a pit where everyone is running – women, children, and men, everyone..... It's a pit full of corpses, the maimed dead. It's a pit full of the maimed living”.⁴

In narrating her own story each woman gains a kind of identity that creates a sense of 'self' in her. Here Sara and Nina almost play the role of ethnographers who would later interpret/retell/reproduce these narratives or incidents. Noor rightly points out in her article that “women... the only survivors of the carnage ... recreate the horrors that people have gone through, horrors that have bruised their bodies and souls”.⁵ Yasmin soon realizes that these women like her are only bodies whose souls are missing because they have experienced rape, murder and death. Ironically, Hariharan conjures up the ghost of Gandhi who has to fight the mob that has gang raped, murdered, burnt people and houses, but seems to remain staunch in his battle for freedom. The third part is titled 'Funeral

Rites' where Sara's own identity is created and affirmed.

"Sara could acknowledge her great grandfather's choice, his faith in home, and say she is Muslim Indian. Or Indian Muslim, since great-grandfather Mulla chose Nehru's republic while merely inheriting the republic of God. Sara could acknowledge a choice made closer to her time and say she's her parents' daughter, she's secular. But given her last name, this may now only mean she's a Muslim who knows how to live with other people; she won't take to jihad if she is angry or unhappy".⁶

The funeral rites of Asad is performed by Mala as she comes to terms with his death, whereas Yasmin who tries to bury her past, decides to move forward out of the confined territory to greener pastures to pursue education, to taste freedom. She foresees an optimistic end to her troubles from her political and historical past which she symbolically decides to bury. It is ironical, however, that the whole event has happened in Gujarat, Ahmedabad, and the place where Gandhi's ashram is founded. People like Asad are in the mainstream while Akbar is still a minority and unaccepted. Asad's own son Samar (Sara's brother) chooses Islamic fundamentalism for he strongly believes that there's no room for him as a Muslim, "whatever I am, whatever

I believe and however I live, I am M. Samar who is just another Muslim, a potential terrorist".⁷ While women like Sara and Yasmin are positive and work towards rebuilding their lives, men like Samar lose faith in the idea of nationhood and democracy. Therefore, the nation/state is being rejected and questioned for all that it stands, though it professes to be a secular state, which speaks for its failure as a system in the postcolonial canvas.

The text, thus, speaks at different levels of representation of the personal lives of Mala, Asad, Yasmin and Sara, on the one hand, and the political, historical, social and the cultural on the other. Hariharan represents a highly polarized world in spite of its proclaimed multicultural, multilingual and multi-religious space. She concedes that the Gujarat violence of 2002 was the culmination of this polarization. In her re-reading/reconstructing of the past Githa Hariharan has certainly conceived of a literary text that is "situated within the institutions, social practises, and discourses that constitute the overall culture of a particular time and place, and with which the literary text interacts as both a product and a producer of cultural energies and codes".⁸ Reading *Fugitive Histories* in the light of the New Historicist perspective not only serves to grapple with the reality of the subcontinent but at the same time it also brings to the fore the literary astuteness of

the writer to handle such a subject matter represented.
that has been deeply thought out and subtly

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