

Perils of Sectarianism: A Note on Githa Hariharan's *Fugitive Histories*

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Goodwill toward all beings is the true religion;
Cherish in your heart boundless goodwill to all that
lives.

—Lord Buddha

Abstract

Sectarian Nationalistic discourse is often perceived as dialectic with a purpose to resolve by integrating the differing, multiple paradigms of thought, rather than as a dialogic which encounters already present notions of nationalism in an individual or a community. Githa Hariharan, a prominent Indian English writer and an activist, in her works, has tried to present the tussles between the various notions of nationalisms and the dominating sectarianisms, the established constructions and the emergent reconstructions, the voiced and the unvoiced. She presents the marginal voices of resistance in dialogue with the centralising majoritarian voices of sectarianism. Her works are influential, politically active and indicative of dynamic ideological shifts. Her novel, 'Fugitive Histories' set in the background of 2002 Gujarat riots, is a powerful take on the sectarian destructiveness and the trauma of lives lived as fugitives. Her narrative is compelling and compassionate, about people who are bewilderingly adrift, trying to find a presence, a voice and a reason, when the very foundations of their lives are betrayed. She revisits the site of carnage and recreates the scenes using Memory, Documentary and History, through her three women characters Mala, Sara and Yasmin. She foregrounds the neglected voices, the unheeded questions, and the forgotten ideals of life, love, togetherness and the culture of co-existence.

Key words: Sectarianism, Resistance, Memory, History, Nation, Human Nationalism

Novelistic discourse is not arbitrary or a historical but is always influenced by its socio-historical circumstances. The post-Independence Indian English novel has consistently tended to foreground the tussle between the various centralising and decentralizing notions of Nation, History, Identity and Existence. Where some writers have tended to present an Idea of India which is inclusive, heterogeneous yet unified in its outlook, in spite of multiple versions or contestations of sectarian nationalisms, others have tended to project sectarian-nationalism undermining the effervescent 'plurality', 'difference' and 'multiplicity' embedded in the Indian ethos. Githa Hariharan's novel, 'Fugitive Histories' (2009) set in the background of 1992-93 Gujarat riots, is a powerful take on the sectarian destructiveness and the trauma of lives lived as

fugitives. Her narrative is compelling and compassionate, about people who are bewilderingly adrift, trying to find a presence, a voice and a reason, when the very foundations of their lives are betrayed. She revisits the site of carnage and recreates the scenes through her three women characters Mala, Sara and Yasmin. Fugitive histories is a 'many-voiced' and 'other-voiced' novel that deals with the post-trauma life of people embroiled in strife, bereavement, agony of lost and missing people.

The novel is divided into three sections dealing with the plight of women of three different generations. The first protagonist, Mala is a middle-aged woman who recently lost her husband and is trying to reconcile herself to a life of his absence but haunted by his memories, ideals and his sketches. Her (Hindu) idealistic marriage with Asad (Muslim) and their long time together, irrespective of the great dangers and ridicule, was a glimpse of what could happen in a multicultural nation like India. Her grown up kids, Sara and Sameer are at crossroads in their own lives, the ambivalence of their 'hybrid' identity threatening their 'peaceful' existence. They are confused of their 'hybridity' which their father had always highly valued. Asad, the artist couldn't bear with the destruction of sectarianism eating away the nation, succumbs to delusion and disease and dies a disillusioned person about the future of his nation and family.

Sara, the daughter is the second protagonist. A journalist by profession and given the job of doing a story on Gujarat riots, is embroiled in a turmoil of her affectations wanting her to take sides. She remembers her father (Asad), her childhood, her dreams of an ideal diverse society and the reality checks provided by the death of her father and the riots. She resists the majoritarian voice asking her to comply and join the community of sectarianism. Her consciousness undergoes a change as she encounters a myriad post-riot lives living constantly in between existence and denial. She is finally able to accept her heterogeneity and hybridity, when she meets Yasmin, the girl battered by the riots.

Yasmin, the youngest of the protagonists, is the daughter of a displaced Muslim family post riots. Her father and mother are caught in a living-death, as they mourn the absence (disappearance) of their young engineering graduate-son. Her father, bereft of his shop and son is only half the man of his previous self, her mother constantly working on the sewing machine, trying to earn enough food to feed three mouths repainted the destruction done by sectarianism. They are now aliens and strangers in their own town, their home. Yasmin resists the voices of disillusionment and realigns her life-choices towards education.

When one transcendental perspective / consciousness of a particular entity (in this case, Nationalism) holds a dominant position, it tries to integrate the entire field. As political theorist Andrew Robinson opines, it integrates all the signifying practices, ideologies, values and desires that are deemed significant. Anything irrelevant to this perspective is deemed superfluous or irrelevant in general (Robinson2). Hariharan constantly pits the idea of 'Nation' against 'Sectarianism' (or Nationalism as it is called) and presents to the reader an ongoing dialogue

between the discourses through her characters. The centripetal forces of dominant nationalisms and the centrifugal forces which resist the hegemony do exist simultaneously, interacting with each other. She, through use of memory, documentary and History gives agency to the women protagonists and their voices of resistances and projects the ongoing dialogic between the authoritarian and the subjugated discourses of Nationalism. Thus in the novel, rather than resolution or closure of particular voice/perspective, we find multiple possibilities of reconciliation and co-existence, as Bakhtin contends for a dialogic novel in his essay, 'Discourse in the novel' (Bakhtin 261- 263).

In considering the Indian nation as a whole, Hariharan presents the life in Indian metros prominently, as it is the hot-bed of the nationalistic discourse. She presents that life in Mumbai, Delhi or Ahmedabad is very similar with their high-end places, busy and noisy lifestyles, multitudes, mall shoppers, trains and traffic. Even the language spoken smells of a global culture-texts, mails etc. Everyone seems to be in a hurry, especially the transit stations loaded with arrivals and departures. What is visible is a panoramic view of objective modernity-, probably a by-product of globalization - a self-centred, self-sufficient, self-adoring individualistic life style, with no concern for 'others stories or existence'. This view of life is in a dialogue with a subjective antiquity, an emergency exclusivist stratifying of society on the basis of gender, religion and community. Sara, the protagonist is aghast when she finds the city of Ahmedabad divided by a imaginary 'Border' after the 2002 Naroda- Patiya riots. People live as if nothing has happened, yet conscious of whose place is where. This project of Localization of culture is fore-grounded with a view to unify or centralize the discourse of Nationalism in politics, economics, Media to minimize the effect of globalization. The author raises the questions: Can they both co-exist together? Isn't it already pertinent? Can't both voices involve in a dialogue? Isn't it possible to have a 'glocal' point of view to facilitate cooperation?

In considering the Indian society, the author represents the effervescent multi- culturalism that is part of everyday Indian life. Sara recalls her childhood friends and school friends, where in every class there was a co-existing diversity. They had learnt to be equal and common. Even in her home, she had parents who were from different religious backgrounds. The notion of India as a multi-cultural entity with space for diversities was part of an Indian ethos. Yet, there is another discourse that is challenging this discourse with its own meta-narratives. She is appalled when people are instigated on the binaries of cultures; the majorities' beinglocal, and the minorities' beingforeign or acquired. She is also concerned of the assigning of 'gender roles' to wives and girls, their social-conditioning and patterns of exclusion. Mala ruminates her past, she remembers the images of her grandmother Bala, who was confined to the store room of her house all her life, always lived in 'Prison conditions', never free to trespass the dictum of her husband, and was banded as 'crazy' and insane. Her spirit was trampled, her mind was tortured and her heart was filled with hatred for her husband. She remembers Asad's grandfather 'The Mulla' who 'sometimes became god's' shadow' and made all the rules for living a righteous life confined to the four walls

of narrow religion. She remembers the utter disregard her parents had of her marriage. All through her life, she had encountered the structured gaze of power, whose objective was authority and whose subjects were historical.

The author poses a dilemma, if we are all the same humans, the same people of one Nation, should 'Love' the universal virtue be constructed by the temporal virtue of religiosity and sectarianism? Through Mala, the author questions, "Is a love story possible if the lovers don't believe that only they matter? And does what follows of real life have to tear this belief to shreds?"(FH5). Sara, when visiting Ahmedabad for the first time, is astonished to see this city could become a people killing mob overnight. The city now is 'bordered', with places designated for different people. She doesn't find much difference to what she is used to in Mumbai. She is unable to reconcile to the fact how this became a centre for bloodshed, "she just can't see what it is about the place that made it such a willing hostage of a whole big hating mob. A mob as big as the city, a mob that became a city. A mob that became the government." (FH 110).

Yasmin, the sixteen year old victim of the communal riots, is yet to understand what had happened to her. Hariharan through her lens, presents the extensive damage that is done to the lives of children in sectarian violence. She has seen, known and experienced more for her age, which has propelled her into adulthood, bypassing the joys of a childhood. Yasmin was abused, her elder brother has been missing, her father has roamed and searched and now is just a shadow of himself, and her mother just keeps stitching and sewing as she cannot bear the silence. Similarly, Sara is also engrossed with a search of her identity, the latent hybridity of being the child of complex differences. If Mala represents the ideal of what our great predecessors thought of an Indian nation to be, diverse yet united in love, Sara represents the dilemma of a present generation, whether to continue that legacy of unified differences or to part ways in divided distinctiveness. After her father's death, Sara seems to be lost on guidance, and she awakes to the fact that she has to take sides. Her life is now even more complex as she has a Christian boyfriend and the work she deals is about victims of the Gujarat communal riots.

The authoritarian discourse of homogeneity is represented through Samar and the counter discourse of Hybridity is represented through Sara. Both are siblings, born to parents who were themselves hybrid- Asad and Mala. Samar is frustrated of his hybridity- he wants to live in a more 'organized' way, take up a job like everyone else. He wants to leave this hybridity and become a proper Muslim; as he was tired of being different. After an altercation with Asad, the last-time they are together, Samar says, 'I finally know what I am, but do you know, who you are? Asad had told Sara- "Don't be afraid of who you are. Don't be ashamed of who you are not." (FH 181).

Yasmin's family had to quit their neighborhoods, their home. It made them give up Akbar, shift him secretly in their heads from the missing to the declared dead list. Yasmin has begun to go to school. But, nothing gets into her head. She is always somewhere else- 'in between'. The emotion of bereavement and trauma sends the whole family to live a life in between existence

and denial. They are uncertain of their present and also uncertain of their future. They have now reconciled themselves to live 'pretend-lives' in 'pretend-homes'. The post trauma experiences of 'other' many women re-establish the fact that the documentary that Sara is filming will always be incomplete and insufficient. Simple things like 'home' and 'freedom' are now something very complex and difficult. For instance, the narrator introspects, "How is Yasmin to describe home? How is she to take Sara-didi there, make her see why it's home?" (FH125) or thinks on what means of freedom or prosperity," To be free. Isn't that too big, too impossible, like wishing to be rich? or wishing to be someone else." (FH 149).

Sara and her friend, Nina soon find out, that their documentary cannot contain what their lives have known. Their world is crowded out by too many ghosts; the dead, the wounded and the missing take up more room than the living ever can. The author through their search introspects on the interrelation between self-identity and Nation-identity. The novel is also a stringent comment on the 'absence' of voices of women and children in a nationalistic discourse, even though they are the worst affected of communal violence. The novel also discusses the lack of record in history to the everyday trauma of a displaced individual. Hariharan, questions the validity of centralising/authoritarian nationalistic discourses of Localization, homogeneity, and uniculturalism against the decentralising/resistant discourses of multiplicity, heterogeneity and hybridity.

Githa Hariharan through her representations in the novel projects the idea that the Nation of India is too big and too ancient that it cannot be divided or destroyed on sectarian basis. History is replete with the facts of communal co-existence and celebrated brotherhood in spite of many cultural clashes and controversies. In an instance where mala and Asad visit Qutub minar and find so many different faces of tourists from all over the country, Asad remarks:

"If there's a spacious place on earth, it is this, it is this, it is this. Even the monument itself silently assures that ' it is possible, or it was possible once and so should be again, to build in stages; to add one part on top of another, even if it is done with different materials, by different builders, and in different times. it is possible to survive despite a slight tilt, still fulfil its original promise of casting the shadow of God over both east and west.' (FH 60, 62).

When Sara visits Sabarmati ashram, she sees all the memorabilia of the great man. The man who lived and died for this very cause of unity in spite of differences, is now but a ghost. Hariharan points out that the ideals of the great Mahatma are now not known or understood by the mobs. He seems to be a missing person or a ghost. Sara decides to help out Yasmin with her studies. Her vision of life and nation is renewed after her meeting with Mahatma or his ghost.

Mala and Asad, two people who stood for an ideal-an idea of non-sectarian India, are only one of the many voices that reiterate the idea of unified India with differences. Yet, those voiced are being drowned in a sea of voices calling for divisions. After Asad's death, Mala thinks, "even

a life time is not enough for those same precious values to be inculcated all over again, the comfortable certainties to be made fuzzy, the rational choice to be set out, the messy politics to be unravelled, the basic civic-mindedness to be hammered in. "(FH236)

Hariharan presents women who through their journey in strife come out victorious, celebrating the values of co-existence, co-operation, and kindness. Her heroines, Mala, Sara and Yasmin, are entangled in trauma and strife, yet undefeated, engrossed in disturbing memories yet undivided, dealt with deadly blows yet surviving. Mala completes Asad's painting and resumes her life with a hope to pass on their legacy of India without sectarianism to the next generation, even though Asad is not by her side now. Sara, unlike her brother Samar, after a struggle with her hybridity, comes out of her shell and celebrates her identity, she takes care of Yasmin's education, and thus lives on with a new hope. Yasmin, battered and bruised by violence, in spite of restrictions, recovers herself and promises to finish education and achieve the goal her 'Missing' brother had wished to attain.

Literature is a mirror of our social life. It shows the enigma that we are and attempts to resolve the tension that is prevalent. Indian ethos is one of a plurality, diversity and multiplicity. Hariharan attempts to refocus this trait of Indian life which has been drowned in the binaries of religion and culture. For her, bereavement is real, lives do matter, ideas have consequences and sectarianism in the name of unifying a particular culture, does affect the idea of Indian life.

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