

Portrayal of the Trauma of Women in Githa Hariharan's *Fugitive Histories*

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Abstract

In *Fugitive Histories*, Githa Hariharan has taken a women-centric plot; she portrays the reality of womanhood in India and women's identity crisis. She has also depicted the plight of women in contemporary society by comparing it with the traditional situation. Hariharan raises her voice against the inequality in the society towards women and explores the "domestic trauma" that takes place in the everyday life of a common woman. She has described minutely the social upheaval and cultural turmoil by exposing women's suppression and their individual struggle which causes personal trauma. Hariharan has portrayed the post-Godhara riots that had occurred in 2002, while describing three leading female characters, namely Mala, Sara and Yasmin, and through them she speaks for women's rights. Her characters are competent enough to break the chain of social conventions and stereotypes. She denounces the patriarchal power structure of Indian society which humiliates women mentally and abuses them physically.

Key Words: Identity-crisis, Trauma, Patriarchy, Culture, Self-liberation, Womanhood

Trauma studies explore the relation between psychic wounds and its representation in fictional and non-fictional works. Trauma has progressively become a key notion that interrogates the link between social history, subjective experience and cultural representation. Trauma studies came into prominence with Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma Narrative and History*, which emphasized to explore the relationship between psychic wounds and its representation in arts. In clinical psychology, the term 'trauma' is described as a psychological injury which is produced by the experience of an external event that damages the individual's sense of self and produces negative effects. Caruth's concept of trauma as "unclaimed experience" means that something has happened to a person drastically but also

has not happened because the person cannot really think of it as he/she experienced it. It is an experience which no one can claim as once own. Trauma is an experience or event so painful that the survivors' mind is unable to grasp it cognitively. The trauma theory has taken place in the fields of social studies, history and historiography, psychoanalysis and literary fiction. Trauma theory represents a critical approach as it is a broad concept which is applicable to individuals and to the groups across cultures and nations. Traumatic experience differs from person to person as each person's response to trauma differs in terms of socio-cultural conditions.

In her work *Trauma: A Genealogy*, Ruth Leys explores the impact of trauma, particularly personality disorder, on the survivors. Geoffrey Hartman has presented

his views on the representation of trauma in literature as dealt in his book *On Traumatic Knowledge and Literary Studies*. These theorists have applied their theoretical precepts for exploring several dimensions of trauma in history, memory, and narrative in the fictional works.

In *Fugitive Histories* (2009) Githa Hariharan represents contemporary Indian women and articulates their feelings and suppressed emotions. Hariharan, being a woman, enters deeply into the inner psyche of depressed women and represent the virtues of the feminine sensibility, their psychological insight and brings into light their issues which are the outcome of women's psyche as they experience trauma. The term 'trauma' in Freud's text, is understood as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind (Caruth 3), a wound of the mind—is not, as the wound of the body, a simple and healable event. She has expressed their viewpoints, attitudes, agonies and their reactions towards the male-oriented society. Hariharan, a cultural commentator, has always been concerned about women's rights, and she herself has challenged the 'Hindu Minority and Guardianship Act' as discriminatory against women. She wrote on the case, "does the law sanction a woman's right to be a parent...Hindu father is the 'natural guarding'...He is the guardian of his child's 'person and property' to the exclusion of mother. The mother's right enters the legal picture only if the father dies" (www.githaharihara.com). She questions India's legal system for equality as she says, "though I am an adult citizen of India, a working taxpaying citizen, a wife and a mother- all things acceptable and respectable- still I am not considered the

'natural guardian' of my child" (www.githaharihara.com). Similarly, Hariharan's women characters revolt against the orthodox and patriarchal system of Indian society. She critiques the patriarchal power structure of Indian society as her core subject to deal with women's crisis for a stable identity, for rights and for freedom.

Hariharan explores the concept of "domestic trauma" that takes place in the everyday life of a common woman and the disorders affecting women in civilian life, particularly in her private life. The texts of psychoanalysis and of literary theory both speak about and speak through the profound story of traumatic situations (Caruth 4). Hariharan narrates the communal disturbance of Hindu-Muslim dilemma by depicting the historical event of Godhara riot which humiliated women mentally and abused them physically. As a consequence of the increasing occurrence of such perplexing war experiences and other catastrophic responses during the last twenty years, physicians and psychiatrists have begun to reshape their thinking about physical and mental experience, including most recently the responses to a wide variety of other experiences, such as rape, child abuse and industrial accidents, and so on, that are now often understood in terms of the effects of post-traumatic stress disorder (Caruth 11).

Ruth Leys, in her work *Trauma: A Genealogy*, explores the emergence of multiple personality disorder in the context of psychoanalysis and trauma theory. Trauma studies seek to reveal the process by which things happen and recognize trauma as being capable of altering or destroying the brain's function. Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) reflects

the direct imposition on the mind of the unavoidable reality of horrific events, the taking over of the mind, psychically and neurobiologically, by an event that it cannot control. In recent years, psychiatry, psychoanalysis, and neurobiology have increasingly insisted on the direct effects of external violence in psychic disorders. PTSD seems to provide the most direct link between the psyche and external violence and to be the most destructive psychic disorder (Caruth 57). Hariharan has put meticulous efforts to highlight the day to day struggle of the women in Modern India and has exposed the gender and communal differences. Self-Identity and self-liberation are the recurrent themes of Hariharan's novels which truly represents contemporary Indian women who suffer from their own traumatic humiliation and the alienation from the mainstream.

Hariharan has described the social upheaval and cultural turmoil by exposing women's suppression, their individual struggle, and their inner psyche which cause personal trauma. Trauma has confronted us not only with a simple pathology but also with a fundamental enigma concerning the psyche's relation to reality (Caruth 91). In its general definition, trauma ('psychological wound') is described as the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena.

Hariharan has set her novel *Fugitive Histories* in 2002 after the upheaval of Godhara riot. Structurally the novel is divided into three parts and thirteen chapters. The novel revolves around

women's dilemma, their search for identity, freedom and self-respect in modern India. It portrays the female characters' plight and how they survive and respond to their traumatic situation. It begins with Mala, a widow who shows a woman's strength after the death of her husband as she decides to live on her own condition. She says to her children Sara and Samar, "go back to your work I can manage. Get on with your lives" (Hariharan 3), because she does not want anyone to look after her as if she is a child whom people have to teach the art of survival. It shows Mala's strength and mental power.

It successfully demonstrates Hariharan's portrayal of strong and competent female characters. The novelist looks at the condition of being single, widowed or divorced as liberation. To overcome the hollowness of her life Mala keeps herself engaged in her work and motivates herself by saying, "I'll do this, then that. I'll do it really well" (Hariharan 10). Hariharan exposes how being a female, women have to face a lot of discriminations, as Mala has the list of her unfulfilled desire, since her childhood she has faced a lot of discrimination between boys and girls or the differences which society and culture imposed upon a girl. The novelist describes the situation of alienation through her characters like Bala and Mala, as Mala suffers a great deal of inequality because she is simply 'She' (a female). Hariharan made her female character strong enough to speak against the injustice and breaks the chain of orthodox beliefs of society. Hariharan describes woman condition at a broader level. She has not only portrayed Hindu women's condition but also Muslim women's lives

and their culture and gives cross-cultural background for her portrayal.

Hariharan aptly chooses the title *Fugitive Histories* which has layers of meaning. The literal meaning of the word 'Fugitive' is a person who is running away or hiding from a dangerous situation or someone who has done something illegal but at the deeper level, it symbolizes the helplessness of the survivors who are forced to live the life of a fugitive person. The other word Hariharan uses is 'Histories', instead of history because she has numbers of narratives and stories to deal with, and her subject is to study the past events related to women of different castes and religions. Hariharan has woven different lives together.

In this novel *Fugitive Histories*, Hariharan chooses Mala, Sara, Bala and Yasmin as her spokespersons and through them; she preaches women's right and demands for self-identity and for self-liberation from patriarchy. Hariharan has described minutely the social upheaval and cultural turmoil by exposing women's suppression, their individual struggles and their inner psyche which cause personal trauma. She describes how each person's response to trauma differs in terms of socio-cultural conditions and embodies different personal and political experiences. As being a Hindu girl, Mala dares to marry a Muslim boy named Asad which raises communal tension between Hindu and Muslim communities, but Mala disbands all the social fetters and chooses to live her life on her own conditions and besides these cultural differences or societal pressures she marries Asad.

Hariharan has portrayed three or four generations of women from the past to the

present to show how women are continuously being suppressed by their surroundings and she has pictured their plights and desires by comparing and contrasting traditional to modern. Mala is very close to her grandmother, Bala who is also subjected to the mental trauma which she suffered throughout her life. She is trapped within the four walls of her husband's house because her husband never allowed her to step out, not even to visit her parents or to be a part of the mainstream, as if she is married to the house even more than she was married to the husband, living like a prisoner.

Then Hariharan portrays another significant female character, a girl of contemporary era named Sara, describing her starvation for a stable identity, as being a half-Hindu and half-Muslim girl in modern India causes her to face trauma because one must have a particular identity as society demands belongingness to a particular religion. Being a female she suffers from the identity crisis, she says that she "Wanted to change her last name, drop the Zaidi, 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"(Hariharan 39). She just wants to be Sara, a woman whose identity is not be confined to particular caste or religion. Gradually she discovers herself, her real worth and says, "Yes, I'm beginning to realize how lucky I am, how glad I am that I am hybrid" (Hariharan 184). Sara confesses proudly, "I've Muslim relatives and Hindu relative. I am neither. Sometimes I think I am Indian but most of the time I am just Sara", (Hariharan 167). As Hariharan insists that Sara is Indian-Muslim or

Muslim-Indian she is just her parents' daughter, she is secular. Through these female characters Hariharan has not only portrayed how women are suppressed by society but also has produced a narrative that challenges the ideology of womanhood.

Hariharan uses the real scenario of 'Godhara Riot' in 2002, as a historical event to depict women's condition during and after any violence or war. Though a woman's role in the war is different she too does not come untouched from the chaos, she depicted Godhara Riot factually as well as metaphorically through the eyes of her female characters. Hariharan has depicted the very reality of the survivors' lives how they were tortured physically as well as mentally. Through the novel Hariharan described what these survivors had witnessed as they said that the rioters blasted their lives apart, their sisters, mothers and daughters were raped their males were burnt alive. Hariharan gives a real picture of the horror as one character pictured the experience of riot as "First there were a hundred people then there were more. There were so many more. There were so many they seemed countless. They had swords, pipes, hockey sticks, soda-lemon bottles, saffron flags, all kinds of sharp weapons. They had petrol bombs and gas cylinders. They came to our house shouting, 'kill the Mian, kill them, cut them, burnt them alive' (Hariharan 158).

Hariharan has pictured the 'domestic trauma' by providing a contrast to the experience of the 'trauma of war', 'bloodshed' and 'physical violence'. Yasmin was a victim of that communal disturbance in which she lost her only brother Akbar. The novelist describes

Yasmin's traumatic experience and shows how she survives and responds to her surroundings. Yasmin is highly haunted by the bloody sights printed in her head that is nagging her all the time. The words like "careful, alert, guarding against, or anything can happen" (Hariharan 123) haunts her more and more, these distressing experience scars her heart-mind, just as the body becomes physically scar. This scar in the heart-mind then prevents the individual from forgetting about the event.

Hariharan has minutely described a girl's inner trauma how she suffers and fights against the male dominance and she gives innumerable illustrations of callousness towards women. Through the novel Hariharan presents the pains and problems which not only a woman but also a girl has to face. As Hariharan portrays Yasmin's inner conflict while walking alone on road, Yasmin looks straight; her dupatta wraps her head, her neck and her chest. She prays "Allah, I am not greedy; you know I never ask you for big things, only small things" (Hariharan 148) because for a girl, like Yasmin being safe is the most important thing of all.

The novelist presents the inner psyche of the victims of Godhara riot and how they were tortured mentally and physically. Hariharan's characters like Feroza Khala, Sultana, Zainab, Reshma, Najma, Razia, Zaika and Zulekha had lost their families in the riot. They described the terrific realities of that time how Muslim males were killed and burnt and females were raped and molested by the rioters. The victims can still hear those phrase like, "Muslim quit India or we will fuck your mothers", "kill them, cut them, burn them alive", "kill all the Mian", these phrases

were articulated by the rioters which echo in the ears of the Muslim survivors. Zulekha says, "Girls were screaming, they were begging us to remove the stumps of wood that has been pushed into them. I will never forget their screams" (Hariharan 160).

G. Hartman in his work *On Traumatic Knowledge and Literary Studies*, argues that trauma is an experience that is not articulated or represented as it happened in reality but Hariharan tried her best to expose the helplessness of traditionally suppressed women who have survived during those days of terror, because she knows that through the help of narratives one can represent the inner self to the world and can reform the society. In the novel, she presents women characters that speak for their rights and take stand for women's freedom. As in the novel, Yasmin's Ammi dares to break the social custom which put a girl into the veil and she supports her daughter by saying, "she is not going to be like us" (Hariharan 227), means no pressure will be put on her like wearing burqa and she can go to the college. Her Ammi grants her the liberty

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which a female deserves. Throughout the novel Hariharan has given perfect illustrations of women's dilemma and their traumatic situations. She has not only depicted how the socio-cultural customs and the patriarchal society had marginalised women for a long time but Hariharan has also given innumerable instance of how women are coming forward to the mainstream and liberating themselves from those conservative system. Hariharan's women characters possess those necessary abilities which a woman requires to live her life properly in this contemporary society.

Trauma has become a key term for literary studies in the twenty-first century because mostly literary works deal with the terror and its aftermath that barricades survivors in trauma and painful memory. Hariharan has not only portrayed how women are suppressed by the patriarchal attitude of the society but also has produced the narrative that challenges the ideology of womanhood. She has raised her voice against social and cultural injustice and women's oppression through multiple stories and narrations.