HUMAN BONDING AND CHAUVINISM IN GITHA HARIHARAN’S FUGITIVE STORIES

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ABSTRACT
Fugitive Histories is the novel by Githa Harihara mainly depicts Gujarat, Godhara riots. In this novel, Hariharan portrays the web of human relationships that joins people as much as it separates. The first part tells the reader about all the major characters and their lives. The second part reveals Sara's meeting with Yasmin and other victims of the riots. In the third part of the novel the three main characters Sara, Mala and Yasmin try to come to terms with life and eventually regain their lost identity. All the main six characters of the book namely Mala, her daughter Sara, Yasmin (one of the victims of 2002 riots in Gujarat), Bala (Mala's grandmother), Asad (Mala's husband) and Samar (Mala's son) face dilemma of identity in various ways. When the novel opens, Asad is dead. Mala wants to know what she is without Asad. Sara, after her father's (Asad) death, is not sure about staying at her job or going off to Ahmedabad to make a documentary film over the victims of Gujarat riots. She wants to know what it really means to be a half-Hindu and half-Muslim in modern India (Mala is Hindu and Asad Muslim). Yasmin, the riot ravaged teenager lost her brother Akbar and her home in 2002, only wants to be what she was before misfortune struck. Then there is Bala (Mala’s grandmother), who is an old hysterical lady. She has lived her life in submission to the patriarchal set up. She never went out of her house and therefore became an introvert.

Missing Persons
The novel opens up, with the Mala’s empty home after her husband Asad's death. Mala is born in a South Indian Hindu Brahmin family of Madras where Asad is from secular Muslim. At the
tender age of twelve years, she, for first time realizes that she wanted to live life on her own terms. Someone who can live life according to her desires and wishes. Since childhood she wanted to be different, to be someone else who could fulfill all her desires. She wanted to climb a tree or ride a bicycle like her cousins in the village but being a girl she was not allowed to do all this. She wanted to be someone who is not dominated by male supervision like the other ladies of the house. She remembers her childhood days spent in the village during her summer holidays. She could see totally different treatment given to a boy in her house as compared to a girl. This clearly shows that since beginning she was not happy with her Brahmin identity. Her children (Sara and Samar) are away from her and busy with their jobs. She keeps on remembering people and one finds her recalling her grandmother Bala quite often, who plays a major role in her identity formation and changes her outlook towards life. Bala makes her realize how life gives only sadness and tears if one does not take right decisions at right time. Bala is caught and trapped in her own home. She is the grandmother of Mala. She is suffering from hysteria. She got married at the age of twelve. Although her husband was only five years elder to her, but he had fill command over the house as well as over Bala.

The day Bala entered the house- she belonged only to the house, even more she belonged to her husband. She never stepped out of the house, not even to visit her parents' place. She does not hold any identity of her own. She could not even go to the terrace. Early in her young age once Bala went to the terrace to get her hair dry, she felt very happy to see unknown streets, so many houses full of different people, a new life to live. But when she saw her husband down the street coming to the house, she immediately came down and locked herself in the store room. She knew that her husband considers store room to be the best place for a respectable woman. Bala can think about identity when she does not have any right to move on freely even in her own house. Bala hardly interacts with the members of the house. She understands the value and worth of freedom. She loves Mala the most in the same way as she loves store room the most in the house.

After the death of her artist husband, Mala looks into the sketches drawn by him and recalls the past. After the death of Asad, she feels completely shattered and lonely. To pass her time, day after day, she cleans the cupboards, his trunk and classifies his clothes by type, textile, age and condition. She goes through his files and papers and manages them. Mala tries very hard to show normalcy in her daily routine after Asad's death but she does not seem to be normal. She works as an Assistant Librarian in a school and joins back after taking a break due to Asad's death. Every day when she comes back from the school, she feels as if Asad is waiting for her or at least his
sketchbooks. She looks into each and every image drawn in the sketchbook and conjures up all the sweet and sour memories.

Crossing Borders

Though Bala could do very little for herself but she wants Mala to break the norms of patriarchal set-up and live freely. Mala feels attracted towards Asad in the very first meeting when she comes to know that Asad feels happier to speak on equality rather than reading Namaz. Asad and Mala start dating each-other and decide to get married. She intentionally visits her grandfather's village to give comfort to Bala by announcing her marriage with a Muslim. The old insane lady listens gravely as if it all makes complete sense to her. She advices Mala to run away and to rebel. She wants her to do what she could not do during her life time. She is the only member of the family who does not react to Mala's marriage with Asad. When her grandfather comes to know about the love affair of Mala and Asad, he immediately sends her back to Madras and tells everything to her peirents. Mala finds herself caught in a trap. Her parents blackmail her emotionally. They even try to make her understand the consequences of an inter-cast marriage. They talk about their religious differences. His father asks, "Think of the difference! ...it will always be a problem, the difference between us and them. It will not go away just because you are married".

Mala feels puzzled and perplexed when her family treated, Asad as a foreigner and a Muslim who does not fit in their framework of a son-in-law. She tries hard to make her parents understand their complex relationship. Finally when she is disappointed by their reaction, she elopes with Asad to Mumbai. She gets married to Asad. After marriage when Mala comes to know about Bala's critical condition, she along with Asad goes to see her. Mala finds the house completely changed. She realizes that now Bala is able to do whatever she likes. Before leaving the village, when Mala finally enters her room to say good bye to her, she suddenly becomes normal and active. She feels very happy to see Asad with Mala. She tells Mala that they both are winners in the end. Mala defeats the family by marrying Asad and Bala by living more than her husband. "You and I beat them, she gloats. 'You married him. I couldn't escape this place but I've lived longer than that old bastard boss. We've won". On hearing this Mala could not stop her emotions. She was pretty sure that her grandfather will never accept any decision taken by her independently. This again shows the helplessness of a woman in a male-dominated society. It is a sort of comfort which makes Bala realizes that like her Mala is no more a prisoner of her husband’s house. Unlike her grandmother she is free to move and live her life as she wants.

Soon her parents call her back for a ceremony, just to show the relatives that Asad is a modern Muslim- not a religious Muslim. The reaction of the family was not in favour of Asad. They
are not able to accept him as their son-in-law, but as they love their daughter, they somehow try to digest this bitter truth that now Asad belongs to the family. Soon after marriage, Mala starts facing problems being Hindu. The customs of a Muslim household were totally different from a staunch Tamil speaking Brahmin family. She tries to search her identity. Though Asad supports her fully but when he is not around or out of the city, she feels the pressure of being a Muslim daughter-in-law. Mala gives birth to Samar. Her mother wants her to name him Ramakrishna. May be she wanted to compensate for his half-Hindu and half-Muslim parentage, but Asad and Mala names him Samar. She even tries to convince them that society does not approve you only by being a human, one need to belong to somewhere. She snaps at Mala, "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?" Now after Asad'd death, suddenly Mala feels a pain of rejection by the society or at times she even feels that heartbroken Asad (due to riots) had also rejected her.

Asad was totally different from his father whom he used to call the 'junior commie' and his great grandfather 'the senior commie'. They both had firm faith in religion unlike Asad. Asad never wanted to get recognized as a Muslim but an Indian. He used to call his mother 'Lady' and her father as 'Mulla', and also told Sara and Samar to call him not 'Abba' or 'Appa' but Asad. He was afraid that 'the lady' will try to get hold of her and then her relatives will try to convert Mala and his children to pure Muslims. Throughout his life, Asad believed in his ideals, he loved them, stood for them and thought them to be indestructible. But after the Gujarat riots, Mala understands that Asad felt heartbroken, his inner colour faded and his sketchbook had gone blank gradually. Mala recalls how once during a rally in Madras, Asad buys a standing Ganesh, "... holding a little umbrella as if he was going to set out on a journey the minute he 179 found an amusing travelling companion" . He tries to give this Ganesh to his motherin-law, who prefers a sitting Ganesh on her doorstep to this ready to move Ganesh. This shows that she could not digest an image of Ganesh in a Muslim's hands. Later Asad gives place to this Ganesh in his studio in Mumbai, in a godless house. Mala finds this "image of Ganesh" in one of the pages of Asad's sketchbook. But this image looks like of a man turning into elephant-trunked Ganesh having large ears to flap the air to swat bad luck.

Asad believed that God is one. After their marriage, Asad visits Mala's house in the village to meet the dying Balam. Being a Muslim, Asad is given a different treatment in the house. No body eats with him apart from Mala. The cook serves him food on a white enamel plate, reserved for any woman during her periods. It just looks like a plate used to serve pet dogs. Asad gets this "special treatment" just because of his marginalized identity. Asad only believes in having a personal identity.
Funeral Rites

In the time of communal riots he could not handle the situation and loses his identity. After the communal riots, happy and peaceful life of Asad in New Delhi suddenly changes. After few years, there is a political disturbance caused by communal riots in Delhi. Asad’s voice sounds like he’s bringing back order. His words sound like he’s bringing them back to themselves. But actually he’s agitated, more agitated than all of them. In Kierkgaard terms, he attains knowledge which he thinks, is required for personal growth but when he experiences that knowledge, he realizes the loss of his identity. He alienates from the society and always remains in his studio. Slowly he becomes an introvert. He starts hiding emotions in his heart. His alienation starts when he does not find himself fit in that society, where people are figured out on the basis of name and religion. Asad encourages his children also to chalk out their respective identities. Mala recalls how Once he tells Sara how he feels when humans are categorized as Muslim or Hindu or Christian or someone else. He wants Sara to fight for her place in this new religious war. He tells her about the various battles people fought for one or the other thing like Freedom Struggle, the Emergency; and all the Old Movements for Rights. This clearly shows his inner turmoil, his state of pain after the communal riots. Being born as a Muslim, Asad is wounded deeply because of the violence against fellow Muslims and most of the time he stays indoors.

Now most of the time he feels sick. He spends his last days in a hospital trying to find out the real disease. But ironically this disease is more concerned with his mental state and not only physical. His heart starts hurting him. He suffers from heart disease. After coming home from hospital Mala sees him almost inside the studio but actually he does not work at all. He keeps his sketchbooks blank as if he is unable to paint or he is ashamed of painting. All the time Mala sees fear on his face which stops him using colours. The last few months Asad has been working with exaggerated energy, as if his paintings can do what rallies and protests and talks can't. Through the sketches of Asad, Mala realizes the sufferings of the victims. One of the Asad’s sketch discloses a naked man kneeling down, with hands on the floor. Mala identifies that he is Asad, asking for help from anyone. She feels shattered. She contemplates how a man like Asad can have this type of look! Mala looks baffled when she compares this helpless image of Asad with the old image of Asad-Happy, cheerful, ready to take challenges, argumentative, a firm advocate of his principles and always alive. She concludes that once he no longer could differentiate between his story of life, their story (Mala, Asad and their family) and other people’s stories, he gave up.

Now the focus of the novel shifts from Delhi to Mumbai, where reader meets Sara, another major figure suffering from identity crisis in the novel. She is the daughter of Mala and Asad. She works with an NGO named 'Sangam' in Delhi. She shares a PG room with Nina, who has already left
Sangam. Sara is in a relationship with a man called Raj at Shaw, who is half-Christian and half-Hindu. Raj also lives in Mumbai and at times after the day’s hectic schedule Sara visits him. Sara was a fun-loving and carefree girl. When Sara was a small girl, she used to feel happy at home. At school, she always felt that she is somewhat different from other girls. She is not like them. In her primary school, she admired a girl named Tripti - who was a confident and smart girl. Once when Tripti enquired about her cast, Sara could not give a definite answer. They remained friends but a thin clear glass window slid into place between them. Years after Sara realizes that being a dutiful daughter of Asad and inspired by his ideals, she becomes a social worker. She was very close to her father and his death comes as a great blow to her. She knew well that Hindu-Muslim riots were chiefly responsible for Asad’s untimely death.

Sara enters the stage of "identity foreclosure". She has not chosen in past. She was happy with her father’s ideals, but once she realizes the reason of her father’s death, she willingly commits to some relevant goals and roles. Her goal of living peacefully in society without having a particular religion and her role of a true and real woman. She feels that working with Sangam is not enough to renew her faith in her parents’ ideals and her own. In search of her identity, she gets ready to write a script for a documentary film over Gujarat Camage-2002. Nina being the director of the film asks her to leave Sangam office and visit Ahmedabad for a week. She wants Sara to see and know the actual position of Muslims there, so that she can write a real script based on real people. Initially she hesitates to visit Ahmedabad as she does not seem to be ready to face the victims. She feels uncomfortable to meet people who suffered a lot only being Muslims. Firstly, Sara is haunted by memories of a childhood friend murdered in that earlier instance of communal rage, the Bombay Riots of 1992-93, because her Muslim name was disclosed. Secondly, these riots came as a great blow to her parents’ ideals. But after some time she realizes that this is what she wanted to do.

Now the scene shifts from Mumbai to Ahmedabad when Sara understands that visiting Ahmedabad is essential if she wants to rediscover herself. Being brought up as an Indian it becomes impossible for Sara to digest that people can suffer as they are Hindus and Muslims. She does not want to meet ‘Muslim Indians’. She recalls Asad, who once told her that there is nothing in a name, but now Sara thinks that a name can change your destiny. She makes up her mind and gets agree to visit Ahmedabad along with Nina. She agrees as she wants to make sure that Asad’s dream is still alive and one can survive by only being a human. Sara reaches Ahmedabad. First day, when they hire an auto to meet some of the dislocated Muslim people in their new relocated colonies, Sara feels that India is not a safe place for Muslims. The first visit to the riot hit area arise mixed feelings in Sara. "They call this a border, Nina tells Sara 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'. Sara gathers courage to enter the building to meet some of the families. She feels as if she is out of breath. She does not know what to ask; she does not know how to face them. She does not want to study them like specimens. She asks Nina to enter first. This clearly shows the mental state of Sara. Her fear shows her troubled state of mind.

The house they enter first is of Yasmin’s. Sara had already seen the photo of Yasmin in Mumbai when Nina asked her to visit Ahmedabad. Sara notices each and every careful move made by Yasmin and her mother. Sara feels as if they are not real. They have a mask of pretense. Sara knows how difficult it is to be normal under such grave situations. Sara talks to Yasmin for some time and meets some other Muslim families. Sara interviews a lot of ladies and helps them releasing their stress and tensions. Sara entering the stage of "identity achievement" by choosing and committing to her role of a "woman" only. She overcomes anxiety, tension and fear. She gives strength to Yasmin as well as to Mala. Now Sara knows well that she can only be a woman, standing firmly without any particular name, religion, race or caste.

Samar, since beginning, he was somehow against his father’s secular vision of a modem Muslim. Unlike his father Asad, very soon in life he realizes that society does not accept such half-Hindu, half-Muslim people. He starts taking pride in where he belongs to. He makes up his mind to settle in Dubai after the death of Asad. Samar attains "identity achievement" stage and he declares to his parents his newly searched identity. He feels happy to be a Muslim rather than half-Hindu, half-Muslim in a country where people gets recognized not by their beliefs but by their caste and religion. He struggled initially but in the end overcomes all the dilemmas of identity and irrespective of his parents’ dream, chose to be a Muslim. Even at the time of Asad’s death, he had a clash with her sister Sara. Sara wanted to cremate him but Samar wanted a grave for him. In the end Samar wins the argument and took him to a burial place. This clearly shows that although initially Samar faced identity crisis but soon he also decides to be on one side. He no more believes in the ideals of his parents.

Conclusion

The novel not only deals with the problems of identity on individual plane, but also on the universal plane. It also focuses on shattered religious identities in general. In the end, through the realistic portrayal of all the characters, the author makes it very clear that all humans are connected with one another. It shows that everyone’s life is connected in this world and every action leads to a chain or reaction that influences the lives of others either directly or indirectly. "What happens to one also that happens in some way, to the other. That's how all those fragments that pass for different lives forge a cunning chain. The
interlocking links may not always be visible, but still they're made of iron. And the ending in a chain story can't really be the end.

REFERENCES