



Voices in Silence: Female Resistance and Recovery in the Face of Domestic and Political Constraint in Githa Hariharan's *Fugitive Histories*

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In *Fugitive Histories*, Githa Hariharan delves into the layered experiences of the people in the Muslim community post-riot. The article focuses on the multifaceted trauma experienced by women in both domestic and socio-political contexts. It also highlights how female characters navigate oppression, ranging from patriarchal control in domestic spaces to the brutal impact of communal violence. It delves into the psychological consequences of violence and the ways in which female characters respond to it. Through the lens of trauma theory, the article investigates how these women, despite enduring emotional and physical scars, exhibit resilience through acts of resistance - both overt and subtle, and how they recover from these painful smothering experiences. By bringing forth the different forms of resistance women display in response to the trauma they experience, the article emphasises the importance of understanding the reasons behind their resistance, rather than dismissing it as mere drama.

Keywords: Female resistance, Rebellion, Recovery, Identity, Trauma

Introduction

India, a country having huge landmass and a wide range of climate with the Himalayas and the Indian Ocean creating a natural barrier is generally accounted to be self-contained. Despite the country embodying various customs, languages, religions, traditions and valuable cultural heritage, it is tied together by a patriarchal structure that naturalises oppressing women culturally, politically, psychologically, domestically and economically (Singh et al., 2022; Sandeep, 2025).

The country is a home to an array of religions, practices, traditions, lifestyles and beliefs. Though, it is a secular country that does not impose or force any beliefs or practices, conflict arises when the people adhere to these beliefs and values rigidly and stubbornly. It is this rigorous observance and practice of the ideas that leave the women of the country vulnerable and susceptible to all kinds of ill-treatment. The focus of Indian women writers shifted from traditional portraying of self-sacrificing women to picturing the treatment and plight of women who are conflicted and in search of identity. It was their writing that served as voices to the silent struggles that women in the country endured through ages.

Githa Hariharan is a highly acclaimed and celebrated contemporary Indian writer in English. She is one of those writers who incorporated into her writings the real situations happening in the country, society and at homes which created a connection between the readers and her works. She began her literary career with a novel titled *The Thousand Faces of Night* in 1992 which fetched her the Commonwealth Writers Prize for Best First Book in the year 1993 placing her in the map among other notable literary figures, further propelling her to write more inspiring and riveting fiction. While her debut was a blend of myth and reality, her future works *In Times of Siege* (2003), *Fugitive Histories* (2009) and *I Have Become the Tide* (2019) addressed serious issues such as extremism, caste discrimination, and communal violence. Her *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* (1994) and *When Dreams Travel* (1999) instils hope to the readers wherein characters in the novel transform and enlighten people through their anecdotes.

The novel *Fugitive Histories* follows the life of Sara, who embarks on a journey along with her friend Nina to Ahmedabad, Gujarat, to uncover the tragic events and the aftermath of the communal riot. It is divided into three parts - Missing Persons, Crossing Borders and Funeral Rites with each part focusing on a story from a different perspective. Although the novel primarily highlights the violent and inhuman actions that the people of the Muslim community had to witness and experience, it also features other poignant and stoic female characters whose stories deserve further study. This article focuses on these characters' life, offering a detailed examination of the hardships of these women along with the women of the minority community who endure gruelling experiences and brutal violence due to religious riots. Their experiences of being imprisoned in their own households for years or dismissed as mere 'girls' within their families, to grappling with parents of different beliefs and struggling to understand their place in the world are put under the microscope.

Literature Review

Many research studies have been undertaken for understanding the psychological and social consequences of communal violence in the novel *Fugitive Histories*. Khanna and Bhangu in their article put forth a strong message on how fundamentalism wins wherein fanatics "prefer building temples and mosques" (2017, p. 28), rather than addressing the immediate basic needs of the victims. Parween (2016) takes a trauma-focused approach, examining the psychological and physical consequences experienced by the minority community in the wake of the riot. The study reveals how both physical injuries and mental trauma are intertwined, with the latter sometimes manifesting in physical illnesses. Phate (2021) extends this analysis by exploring how physical and emotional displacement complicates the characters' efforts to reconstruct their identities amid societal fragmentation.

Furthermore, Rani delves deeper into the fragmentation of identity, highlighting how "man's life is fragmented through pluralism" (2023, p. 259). This fragmentation is central to the lives of characters

like Mala and Sara, who struggle to reconcile their fractured selves in the face of their personal and collective histories.

What distinguishes this article from the others on *Fugitive Histories* is that it takes into consideration the oppression of women, both within domestic spaces and as victims of larger socio-political forces. The article not only identifies the sufferings of women but it also explores and brings to light the ways in which they cope and resist their oppressors. While previous studies have analysed the novel psychologically, there is also a need to address the issues of domestic suppression and childhood scars that are as much as scarring and impactful as the other political forces of oppression.

Theoretical Framework:

The paper employs trauma theory particularly put forth by Judith Herman in her work *Trauma and Recovery* as it is an exact fit for the analysis. Herman argues that trauma is not only caused by a single distressing incident but also from a series of prolonged and repeated violence. She illustrates certain methods for recovery and healing from the trauma. Rather than focussing on the traumatic events, the paper tries to highlight the ways in which the characters emerged from their traumatic past and healed by the application of Herman's trauma theory.

Female Resistance

The female characters in *Fugitive Histories* across various generations are caught up in some kind of chaotic environment. From Mala's grandmother, Bala, up until Yasmin, a teenage girl in Gujarat, they all have undergone deep emotional distress and disparity due to the continuous domestic and socio-political challenges that had been thrown at them. Whenever there is an issue and whatever might be the cause, the women are the ones who are deeply affected. The notion of women being the weaker and vulnerable ones to be susceptible to disparity and oppression for reasons varying from male chauvinism at home to identity loss due to religion-oriented issues and other socio-political reasons, needs to be challenged and unravelled. Each woman in the novel confronts and dismantles these challenges in her own way shaped by her personal experiences and circumstances.

Bala - The Rebel

Bala, the grandmother of Mala is a passive victim to the patriarchal structure that exists in families. She was married to Mala's grandfather at a tender age of twelve, just a week after she started menstruating. Not much is known about the prime years of their marriage since she is introduced to the readers as Mala's grandmother who had hysteria. But pondering on the given facts, it is as clear as crystal that her life was that of a prisoner who was "married to the house even more than she was married to Mala's grandfather" (Hariharan, 2009, p.15). Bala was prohibited from leaving the house and was not permitted to visit her parents too. It was as if "she belonged to the house" (Hariharan, 2009, p.15). Frustration consumed her after living her entire life of perfectly filling out the moulds laid in front of her by her husband and the society that it eventually manifested in psychosomatic illness, her hysteria.

Judith Herman in her seminal work, *Trauma and Recovery* enumerates how resistance is one of the key elements of overcoming trauma as without it they are "unable to reassert control over their life" (1997, p.150). Acting out could be considered as one of the defences to the trauma experienced through ages and it could be expressed in actions that are "mostly impulsive and reckless which might harm oneself or others" (Ponsi, 2017). Bala, having lived a life of adhering to her husband's rigid rules, vent out her pent-up unresolved problems in various ways that were impulsive and revengeful. Bala used to hide anything that was sharp edged ranging from rusty blades thrown out after a shave to knives, the cook probably forgot in the storeroom. She hid some of those sharp objects for "the next time she found something unbearable" (Hariharan, 2009, p.25) and when that happens, she simply cut off some of her hair and made a nest of it. This cutting of hair has happened so many times that it became a foolish thing that the crazy Bala does. But after the death of her husband compelling to the tradition, she shaved her head. Then, as "she belonged to no one, Bala had grown her hair into long, stringy rat-tails" (Hariharan, 2009, p.25). The same Bala who chopped off her hair from time to time to showcase her rebellion wanted her hair to be combed twice a day, oiled and plaited after her husband's death.

Another act of resistance exhibited by Bala was that she “ignored the running of the household as if it had nothing to do with her” (Hariharan, 2009, p.15). Both of these actions could be a psychological indicator of Bala acting out. It is in these instances that Bala rebelled and this could be an expression of the deep-rooted desire of severing ties to part of herself that were too burdensome to hold on to. It was her rejection of the familial and societal expectations that was imposed on her. Finally, when she was in her death bed, Bala was “able to say and do exactly what she wants” (Hariharan, 2009, p.75) something Mala has never seen before. When Mala was about to leave the village Bala calls her and gloats about how both of them beat the others in the family. In her words, “You married him. I couldn’t escape this place but I’ve lived longer than that old bastard boss. We’ve won” (Hariharan, 2009, p.76). Bala was submissive for a long period of time but after a point she decided to resist and showed it in her actions such as cutting her hair and forsaking the household duties and ultimately outliving her husband. ‘Acting out’ was Bala’s way of resistance to the lifelong oppression that smothered her and it was her way of reclaiming her agency and identity.

Mala - The Dissenter

Mala, short for Malathi, mother of Sara and Samar lives in an apartment in Delhi alone. Battling the loss of her husband, Asad, she recollects memories of her past. Mala from her childhood has had problems with being herself. She was forbidden from playing and doing things as a child, simply because she was a girl. She craved to climb trees monkeying up her way the tree as if it was a ladder and wanted to ride a bicycle so fast that all the rest of the world become a blur. But she could not as “she was, simply, she... What she wanted was to be set free from herself” (Hariharan, 2009, pp. 14 - 15). As children Mala and her cousins had no identity in their village, they were just a cluster of squirmy appendages. Being lost most of her childhood and her psyche being affected, her choice of marrying Asad even after so much of hinderance could be taken as a woman making conscious “choices aimed at wrestling a better life for her lost...” (Ghosh, 2008, p.16) Mala always wanting to be free from the clutches of her family chose Asad even though she heard her parents yell

“You’re killing us!” (Hariharan, 2009, p. 69). They eloped to Lonavala and got married there. Mala’s way of going out of the conventional way in a strictly orthodox family is her method of surviving and coping to the life she had lost and had been neglected. After her marriage, Asad and Mala forget the differences between them and spent their lives happily. This was when she found her true identity.

Female Recovery

Sara - The Hybrid

Sara, the daughter of Mala and Asad, lives in a PG at Mumbai whilst she works at the Sangam Office along with her roommate, Nina. Both of them plan to work on a documentary about the Sabarmathi Express fire attack. It is for this purpose she and Nina visit Ahmedabad to collect the stories of the people in their own voice. Sara being a daughter of a Muslim man and a Hindu Brahmin woman often finds herself questioning her identity. She is not sure where she belongs. Currently dating Rajat Shaw, whose father is a Christian, she is completely lost. She ponders on which surname to take up, it could be Zaidi (her father’s) or Vaidyanathan (her mother’s) or Shaw like her boyfriend, which reinforces the idea of dislocation and not being able to find oneself. Suvan Gupta and Tanu Gupta in their article point out that “the pressure to conform to cultural expectations, coupled with the unresolved traumas of her family’s past, creates a sense of dislocation and identity crisis” (2025, p. 56). Sara not able to define herself coupled with her mother, Mala’s childhood unresolved problems of being neglected makes it difficult for her to come to terms with the social surroundings.

Sara also had a traumatic past wherein one of her friends, Laila that she knew and grew up with was set ablaze in a riot. This incident made her anxious and sleepless when she came across Rasheed, Laila’s ex-husband, at the theatre. The sight of Rasheed triggered her memory where she heard the news that Laila was burnt alive. She is haunted by this memory that she was burnt alive and the realisation of how being a Muslim could be one of the prime reasons for the incident disgusts her. Added to that painful memory, Sara is so unsure of who she is, that simple questions haunt her. When a couple

questioned about her native, she found herself wondering how Mala or Rajat might answer to such a question and goes on to say that she lives in Mumbai, was born in Chennai and that her parents are from different parts of the country as they were Hindu and Muslim. In her childhood, her classmate whom Sara adored a lot once asked “what are you then?” (Hariharan, 2009, p. 179). Sara was unable to answer that and though they remained friends there was an unspoken barrier and a thin veil of withdrawal and distance from both ends.

The reason as to why Sara was so unsure might be because of the incident of her friend being burnt alive which scarred her for life and that might be the reason for her to get nervous whenever she is questioned about her identity. Judith Herman posits that identity is often destabilised by trauma and that to reclaim control “one has to make sense of one’s own experience, and to create a cohesive sense of self” (1997, p. 143). The trip to Ahmedabad and her encounter with Yasmin, marked a pivotal turning point. It was during this trip that she began to embrace her hybrid identity, no longer fearful or uncertain about who she was. She expressed to Mala “How glad I am that I’m a hybrid” (Hariharan, 2009, p. 184). Sara was no longer fettered at the thought of being a hybrid and this was the moment of liberation from the constraints of societal labels and self-doubt.

Yasmin - The Hopeful Fighter

Yasmin, a girl of seventeen and a victim whose life turned drastically since the communal riot in Gujarat serves a major role in the novel. She was one of those young girls who witnessed disastrous things happen right in front of her eyes to her people and to herself. Her father owned a shop and above the shop was their house where Yasmin’s family resided. They lived merrily until the day when rioters stormed into their neighbourhood and started cutting, killing and setting people on fire. They looted the shop first, then came upstairs and tracked down the hiding spots of Yasmin and carved a warning in the flesh of Yasmin’s thighs. This was a brutal message that conveyed they would be sold off or sent off soon if they do not leave. Even before this incident, Yasmin had to endure the painful sight of her parents visiting the police station subjecting themselves to abuse, harsh

words and snide remarks silently day after day, clinging to the faint hope of finding their missing elder brother.

After moving to a safer space which was a stuffed dark building, Yasmin had insomnia where “every night Yasmin waits for sleep to find her” (Hariharan, 2009, p. 115). At the same time, she also has somniphobia, the extreme fear of sleep where “she dreads the nights... as there’s a man in her sleep. He’s there to get her” (Hariharan, 2009, p. 145). The memory of this abuse haunts her and affects her sleep cycle. The trauma of the incident shook her psyche and it caused problems in sleep.

Affected by all these during the riot and after it, Yasmin also picked resistance as a tool for coping with the trauma and reintegrating her life. Despite the numerous hardships, she did not forgo her education and remained committed to it. The other families in the building terminated the education of their children as they had a hard time making ends meet while at the same time, they were not totally sure if their kids would be safe. But Yasmin’s parents did not want to stop her education. Yasmin had this grit and determination to pass her examinations and join college and somehow land on a job which escalates their chance of getting out of the dark building. Having sold their previous house and shop at whatever meagre price they were offered and with their son gone missing, presumably dead, their family was in severe financial crisis and deep emotional distress. Yet, when Yasmin realised, she had to be “their daughter and son forever” (Hariharan, 2009, p. 116), she seized the slim opportunity that education offered, to rebuild not just her own life but also that of her family. In this way, she could silence the mouths that insisted she forfeit school as it is of no use and instead attend sewing class which would lend a helping hand to her mother.

Yasmin’s hankering for education, coupled with her acceptance of the possible death of her brother and the dire state of her family, aligns with what Dominick LaCapra refers to as ‘working through’ in the context of trauma. LaCapra defines working through as a process where the traumatised person develops “critical distance on a problem and is able to distinguish between past, present and

future” (1998, p. 2). Yasmin, a first-hand witness to the pogrom, chooses to confront the bitter truth of her family’s situation while focusing on the larger goal of lifting them out of their despair. In doing so, she not only accepts her trauma but also takes concrete steps toward reshaping her future, breaking free from the past and carving a path of resistance against the overwhelming forces of her circumstances.

Muslim Women - The Healing Witnesses

After the violent riot, the entire Muslim community shifted to rehabilitation buildings that were nearby which were dark and tiny. Some also lived in tents and jhuggis - houses made out of metal and mud. Women and children in the building where Yasmin lived, gathered around together to work. They would sew, stitch and hem skirts with the aid of a common sewing machine and sell it with the help of an NGO. Whenever they gathered to work, they would start to talk about the things happening at present but it would often spiral into discussing “what happened to them, to their families, their neighbours, again and again” (Hariharan, 2009, p. 154). Trauma theorists emphasise the importance of articulating one’s wounds and scars, viewing this as the first and most essential step toward recovery. So, women gathering together so that they could make use of the sewing machine led to them acknowledging their past wounds which in turn helps them differentiate the past and have a slight ray of hope for the future. Herman elucidates that to recover from the past experiences it is important to reconnect and “rebuild a network of relationships that are safe and supportive, and begin to participate in society again. This process of re-engagement restores a sense of agency and normalcy” (1997, p. 195). In the novel, the women in the community taking on the responsibility of sewing skirts and selling them to earn money shows that they are willing to reclaim what they lost. By creating a safe space to articulate their trauma rather than repressing it, they come to terms with their past sufferings and reclaim agency through their jobs wherein they seek for a better future beyond violence. Despite the irreversible, brutal trauma the women have been inflicted, they exhibited resilience and strength, coping with their circumstances

through social solidarity and purposeful action with the quiet bravery of seasoned soldiers.

Conclusion

In *Fugitive Histories*, the female characters' journeys of trauma, resistance and recovery reflect the enduring strength and resilience of women across generations, cultures, and socio-political contexts. From Bala, who quietly rebels against patriarchal norms in her personal life, to Yasmin, whose defiance in the face of overwhelming communal violence stands as a testament to survival, the article explores the complexities of female identity in times of crisis. Each woman in the story is caught in a turbulent environment, yet they face their struggles in unique, personal ways with some through overt rebellion, others through quiet, persistent resilience.

Bala, though initially a passive victim of patriarchal oppression who was unsure of her identity, her wants and desires, finally finds a way to resist. She was a total rebel who swore at anyone without any hesitation and no one was there to control her. Her resistance was acting out of the way to all the norms that instructed women to behave in a conventional and disciplined way. This rebellion, albeit subtle, speaks to the desire for agency and reclaiming her identity that was otherwise denied to her in a patriarchal structure. Mala, on the other hand, takes a more conscious approach to her defiance, choosing a life outside her family's restrictive norms by marrying Asad. This act of defiance is symbolic of her quest for selfhood, as she constantly grapples with the limitations imposed on her as a woman. As a girl she did not have much of an identity to herself, it was after her bold choice she came to understand about herself. Mala's life shows that, while the consequences of defying social expectations can be heavy, there is also a significant sense of personal empowerment in making those choices.

Sara's narrative embodies the struggle with identity caught between conflicting religious and cultural legacies. Sara initially experiences dislocation, unsure of who she truly is. The traumatic loss of her friend Laila and the difficulty in answering simple questions about her own heritage intensify her internal conflict. However, through

her encounter with Yasmin and the process of embracing her hybrid identity, Sara breaks free from the shackles of societal and familial expectations. She finally embraces her identity, liberated from the self-doubt and confusion that had previously plagued her.

Yasmin despite enduring unimaginable violence - the loss of her brother and the destruction of her family's livelihood, exhibits a determination to not only survive but also rebuild her life. Her decision to continue her education despite immense obstacles is a form of resistance, showing that education and self-reliance can be powerful tools for reclaiming agency and reshaping one's future. The Muslim women in the community surrounding Yasmin, though fragmented by the violent loss they experienced, find solidarity in each other. Through their work, they reclaim agency by using their shared experiences to rebuild a sense of normalcy, even amidst chaos. By coming together and re-engaging with society through their collective work and conversation, they begin the long process of recovery, demonstrating that collective healing and solidarity can be powerful tools for overcoming trauma.

Through these various female characters, the article puts forth the wide range of trauma that the women endured spanning from domestic ethos to other socio-political reasons. The reasons for the wide range of oppression the women experienced were mainly because of the rigid adherence to the norms and customs of one's culture and religion which paved the way for valuing and prioritizing these practices over the wellbeing of humans. As these practices were upheld with greater reverence, humanity as a whole was affected with women bearing the brunt and ending up the most traumatised. Because of this trauma, the females were not able to find their true identity as they were oppressed and not allowed to be themselves. Rebellious acts of Bala and Mala could be perceived as irrational or meaningless but to them it is through these means that they found peace, purpose and themselves against all the burdens placed on them. It was their way of coping and rising to the years of societal expectations placed on them and being able to find their identity. Sara, Yasmin and the other Muslim women heal from their painful past and have a hope for the future. They come to terms with their true selves and with hope,

they remain determined to never lose their strong identity regardless of any factor. By analysing these women characters psychologically and through trauma theory, it has become evident that women despite being torn apart by various forms of violence, find ways to rise and reclaim their futures. By reclaiming agency, the women take a step forward to identity their true selves. In doing so, they not only survive but also craft their own identity and new narratives of empowerment and hope for generations to come.

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