

**Memory Study Perspective in Literature: A Reading of Githa Hariharan's  
*Fugitive Histories***

**Dr. Sonal Sharma**  
Associate Professor  
SRM University  
Sikkim.

**Abstract**

Memory is an interesting aspect of contemporary fiction and it is often deployed as both constrictive domain and agential faculty. It is also a self-destructive and self-enabling preoccupation in fiction. Characters are often trapped in obsessive memories while it is also political as what is stored in memory and recalled is often the choice of the subject. Apart from its engagement with the past, it enables the characters and narrators to re-examine themselves and others. Memory Studies is an academic domain that explores the use of memory as a tool for remembering the past. It also considers the effect of past in the present.

This paper is an attempt to read Githa Hariharan's *Fugitive Histories* in the light of *Memory Studies* to show how the novelist evokes various forms of memories such as individual memory, collective memory and multidirectional memory to enrich characterization and to highlight the politics of remembrance. How Hariharan's women in the novel – Mala, Sara and Yasmin – get entrapped in and manipulate memory is also within the purview of the paper.

**Keywords:** Memory, Memory Studies, remembrance

**Main paper:**

Githa Hariharan is a distinguished novelist and story teller. She is a feminist and activist. In her novels she has strongly condemned social ills like prejudice, communalism and violence. Her novels express her deep concern for women and children, especially when they are victims of stereotyped social customs and norms.

This research paper endeavours to study the Memory Studies to show how Githa Hariharan evokes various forms of memories such as individual memory, collective memory and multidirectional memory with reference to one of her eminent works "*Fugitive Histories*". It will make a short analysis of Fear. Love. Caste. Violence. Identity to frame a background of my study. The study mainly focuses on How Hariharan's women in the novel – Mala, Sara and Yasmin – get entrapped in and manipulate memory.

Githa Hariharan, being a feminist, has tried to discover problems of Indian women at the top and tried to liberate them from various bondages like patriarchy, and other rigid social customs. Githa Hariharan's novel '*Fugitive Histories*' (2009) is based on the sensitive Godhra communal riots and its outcome. Godhra, a city of the Indian State of Gujarat, that became the part of all Indian newspapers on February 28, 2002 because of communal riots in the city. "Godhra is a Muslim locality'. In the days and week that followed, the Muslims of Gujarat became the target of brutal violence. The statement of survivors, eyewitnesses and relief workers suggests that state officials and the police connived with the attackers (*Fugitive Histories*, 42). The women became the easy victim of the outrage, the incidents of rapes of Muslim females increased in number.

*Fugitive Histories* is nothing but the thoughts of three main protagonists. The narrative is interwoven involving three strong female characters Sara, Mala and Yasmin. Sara and Mala are from the same family and are mother and daughter. And the third one is someone the daughter meets up while trying to find her niche professionally. Mala is the mother, who comes from a south Indian Brahmin family, marries a Muslim from Mumbai who is an artist but refuses to

have any religious identity in order to desires for her true freedom throughout his life. Sara her daughter is confused because she has many identities to choose from, hence as she is trying to settle with one identity like her brother.

The novel is divided into three parts, titled as ‘Missing Persons’, ‘Crossing Borders’ and ‘Funeral Rites’ respectively. Mala leads a puzzling life after the death of her husband Asad. She lives in the illusions of Asad’s presence and connects with him through memories and his meaningful sketches. She frequently swims into the memory lane and remembers her pre pubertal days, when her grandmother Bala made her realize her incompleteness and emptiness of being without brother and above all of that being a female.

Sara is a strong female character who is trying to search for a space, womanhood a niche full of thought and expression. She also presents as a link between the three parts of the story and also a narrator of fictionalized real life incident which traumatized Gujarat in 2002. She lives in Mumbai with her roommate Nina. She leaves her job in exchange of her roommate’s offer of imprisoning the experiences of Muslim women forced to leave their home after the Godhra massacre. Yasmin is the third strong female character, who is the witness of the massacres and the hate crime to which the veiled ladies of her sect became victim at the hands of Hindu extremists.

The first part of Fugitive Histories is titled as ‘Missing Persons’ refers to Mala’s missing twin brother, and the loss of her husband Asad. Metaphorically it also refers to Yasmin whose brother Akbar also went missing after the Godhra riots. ‘Missing is so bad, it’s better than dead’. (136). Mala by way of the Asad’s sketches which she refer to as artistic diaries recollects her memorable past spent with Asad and introspects her existence without Asad. She creates a web of stories, which she narrates to her children Samar and Sara. These stories are told by her since “no one told Mala stories as she was growing up. Maybe this is why she hasn’t been able to outgrow them like her own children have”. (12).

The second part of the novel is titled as ‘Crossing Borders’. This part of the fiction involves Sara’s visit to riot affected Ahmedabad. She discusses the pathetic experiences of many Muslim ladies during riots and interacts with the teenage riot victim Yasmin. At the very beginning Yasmin appears to be a normal shy girl in her teens, but there lies a deep-sea of miseries remains inside into her mind. She has a past of her missing brother Akbar, present of heartbroken parents and a future full of uncertainties. “...there’s something else coming after...there’s also the uncertainty of it, the waiting involved without knowing what. What comes after may be better, but it may also be worse(142)” . Yasmin no more believes in good fortunes or miracles coming on her way, infact she has lost hope that her brother will ever come back. But for the sake of her parent’s sake she still prays God for miracles.

Yasmin has lost two years of her studies, as her books and aspirations were burnt during riots, she doesn’t go to school anymore. Her mother along with other ladies is engaged in stitching clothes which is a means of livelihood for them. Her father having lost his business is now starting from the scratch. Sara and Yasmin find themselves relatable that’s why felt comfortable in each other’s company. Sara wants Yasmin to disclose her miseries . Sara finds through her interaction with the Muslim ladies that their children are no more attending the school. A woman called Zainab pours out her agony that how Muslim children have to face the disparity and bias, she tells Sara about her son Nasir’s incident, “My son left the school...we wanted him to study in the English medium school so he could be an engineer...but the principal was doing partition works. He’d ask Nasir in front of everybody else, —Aren’t you from Pakistan? ...He kept calling my Nasir a terrorist till the child couldn’t bear it anymore (156)”. The borders are drawn between ‘us’ and ‘they’, ‘our’ and ‘their’. In her interaction with Nina another lady Reshma expresses the need of a school for their children, so that they can engage in studies away from religious dogmatism, struggle and prejudice, “they could’ve built another school instead of a big mosque. (156)”.

The description of experiences voiced by the Muslim ladies to Sara and Nina are so pitiable, that the cassette players they have brought are not enough for the tale of unpacked emotions called

stories, “all the women and girls and the little boys in the room, have also become recording machines(158)”. They narrate their accounts one by one, “ We heard the crowd was gathering in our area...they had swords, pipes, hockey sticks, sodas lemon bottles, saffron flags ...petrol bombs and gas cylinders...shouting “Kill them, cut them, burn them alive!...our men were killed...mothers and sisters raped. The bodies piled up...they had trishuls with them. They wore saffron cloth around their heads. There’s no mystery about who they were.(159). Sara feels completely broken on listening to their sad tales, and could understand what they might have gone through. Sara takes Yasmin to her old sweet home, where Yasmin breaks down and tells Sara about the incident which visits her as a nightmare every night in her dreams. She reveals with tears how she escaped being molested by middle aged man, her mother came in between. “Ammi covers Yasmin’s body with hers and begs. Ammi’s begging words make a breathless mess of prayer(144).In return the man attacked Yasmin with sharp weapon on her thigh. Before leaving, Sara makes a visit to the Sabarmati Ashram, sits by the side of the Sabarmati river , to recall “Ishwar Allah tere naam sabko sanmati de Bhagwan(175). The third part of the novel is titled as “Funeral Rights”. Sara returns back to her home. She lives in distressing memories of the stories she heard. She comes across a strange voice stating that “Muslims in India have only two places: Pakistan and Kabristan(192)”. She also sees in her dream her childhood friend Laila burnt alive and Yasmin getting molested. She visits Asad’s grave as if to fulfill her regard with floral offerings, a kind of tribute and to perform some funeral rites. Just on reaching the place she finds the irrelevance and uselessness of such rituals in the contemporary world where she is living. She gives the flowers and fifty rupees to a lady caretaker in the graveyard. Mala is also seen continuing with her chain of memorabilia without Asad. She creates a world through Asad’s sketches. She remembers a particular sketch captioned as —Broken home sketched in February 2002.

### **Conclusion**

In *Fugitive Histories*, Geetha Hariharan has expressed the narrow canvas of Hindu Muslim dilemma coming from mixed parentage. But this is a dilemma that all the growing up people face, who have multiple identities, most commonly faced by children of immigrants to make the

dreams come alive instead of threatening over the past. Mala in *Fugitive History* (FH) is a character, lone after her husband's death, who cannot live her own life. She is in patriarchal system as she simply lives with her association with past experiences, memories, different past photographs painted by her husband. Thus she lives amidst her past, she revisits past family history, past memory and experiences. Memories and flashback recall the tragic event of Indian History, and develop the plot of the novel. The memories of Sara and Mala make conscious of women condition in Indian context; Yasmin and her mother's memories explore religious tensions and devastated life of riot-affected people. *A River Sutra*, *The Thousand Faces of Night*, *The Ghost of Vasu Master* and *When Dreams Travel* also deal with the memories recalled by the characters. Yasmin's memories make Sara aware about religious disturbances and acute division and hatred among Hindu and Muslim. Yasmin is too frightened with the violent riot to take even a little disturbance at ease. Hariharan shows in the novel that memories remain forever in the mind of the person. The past is recreated by memories. Mala's past memories are inseparable and runs side by side her present. The past life of Mala and Asad with their children is revealed through Mala's hovering into past and attempt to relive it. The life of Mala is more detached and she is alone in the house. It gives her ample space to spend a large amount of time in remembering the past memories. Mala 'could find a way to bring the dead back to life.' (11) It is the past memories of Mala's life through which we meet several aspects of Indian life.

**Works Cited:**

1. Hariharan, Githa. *Fugitive Histories*. New Delhi: Penguin Books Ltd., 2009.print
2. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1265474/how-indias-2002-gujarat-riots-unfolded>—BarooahSangeeta, —Beyond Prejudice.The Hindu. March28, 2009