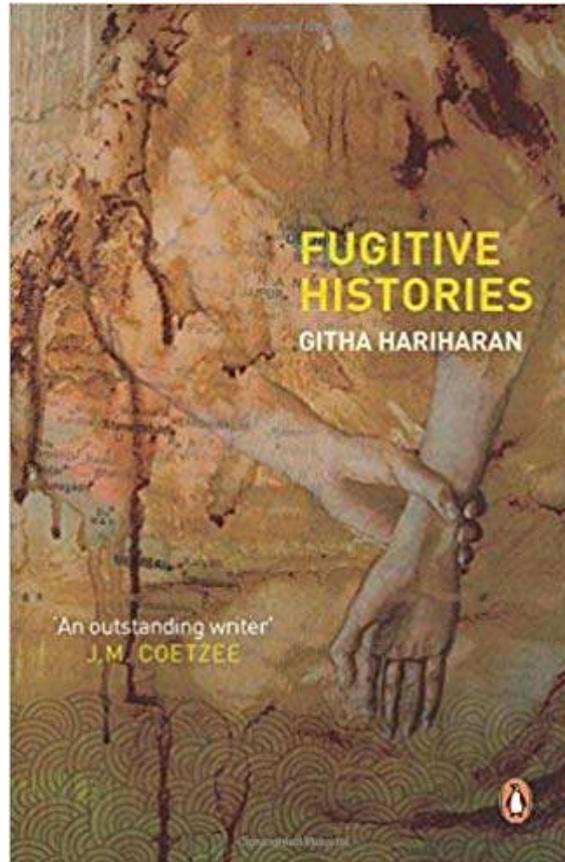


Question of Women's Identities in Githa Hariharan's
Fugitive Histories

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Identity and Identity Politics

Identity politics and question of women's identity are some of the debated issues in the contemporary women's writing in India. Women's identity is politicized by many agencies and ideologies which make use of woman's body. They try to forge a fixed identity for women. Primarily, the word 'identity' describes "who a person is, or the qualities of a person or group which make them different from others" according to Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary (Third Edition). From this entry, it can be deciphered that the word 'identity' describes who a person is and what the qualities of that person are, irrespective of gender. But what happens with the identity of woman is that she is 'identified', rather than she 'identifying' herself. This is how she becomes the 'object', not the 'subject'. According to Heinz Lichtenstein identity is a human necessity. He says, "loss of identity is a specifically human danger, and maintenance of identity a specifically human necessity."¹

Erik Erikson, American-German psychologist, proposed identity to mean a “mutual relation in that it connotes both a persistent sameness within oneself (selfsameness) and a persistent sharing of some kind of essential character with others”². The word itself is contradictory in its meanings which gives ‘sameness’ and ‘difference’. He developed the theory of psychosocial development of an individual through eight stages from infancy to adulthood in his *Identity and the Life Cycle*. He is also famous for coining the term ‘identity crisis’.

Identity as a Concept

Identity as a concept is not a fixed one across time and space, which is desired by any person. The identity one aspires for or tries to shape, grapples with historicity. Another aspect of it is its fluidity. Zygmunt Bauman, a Polish-born sociologist explores the fluidity of identity in the modern world in his book *Identity*³. The description on the back cover of the book reads;

As we grapple with the insecurity and uncertainty of liquid modernity, Bauman argues that our socio-political, cultural, professional, religious and sexual identities are undergoing a process of continual transformation... In a world of rapid global change where national borders are increasingly eroded, our identities are in a state of continuous flux⁴.

‘Identity’, as Erikson conceives it, is both formed and manifested through social relationships⁵. He stresses on the idea of relationships between male and female in a society which plays a crucial role in forming one’s identity. The cultural and social elements play a vital role in gendering the sexes. Philomela Essed and others assert that “Life is gendered. Gender at birth is at once the rebirth, the generation of gender. It marks the course of our lives”⁶. In that way it is the politics of the possible⁷.

Politicizing Identities in India

In the context of India, colonialism, class, caste and gender are the basis for politicizing identities, especially for women and the less privileged category of people. Along with these criteria, nationalism also plays a major role in the formation of one’s identity as it has gained the force again in the contemporary period, wherein the identity of nation is equated with the identity of a religion or class. Under these circumstances one’s identity undergoes a crisis. Since these ideologies intersperse, it becomes a politics - identity politics. In all these cases the affected category is women, as a result of gender politics.

Geetha Hariharan’s Works

Githa Hariharan is a contemporary Indian English Novelist who is committed to women’s issues and power politics in her works and even in her real life. Her first novel, *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1992) won the Commonwealth Writers’ Prize for best first book in 1993. In *Fugitive Histories* she sets women characters in the backdrop of post-Godhra riots in Gujrat in 2002. The novel, in exploring the responses of a few riot-affected people, constructs the lives of women in the 21st Century. The question of women’s identities is raised through the narrative which portrays women’s efforts in shaping their own identities.

***Fugitive Histories* – Post-Godhra Riots**

Characters in Githa Hariharan's *Fugitive Histories* undergo identity crisis in the troubled times of violence and religious hatred. Mala, Sara and Yasmin face this trial. Githa Hariharan sets this crisis in the background of post-Godhra riots in Gujrat in 2002, and the persistence of tension between Hindus and Muslims. The Hindu ideologues believe India is a Hindu nation and hence force the same ideologies on other religions. It also involves the creating of 'self' and 'other'. The seed of this is visible in the literature of the 20th century, more clearly during Swadeshi movement. In *Women Writing in India Vol. 1* Susie Tharu and K Lalita observe that the literary texts, of both men and women writers', played an important role in the growth of the communal mode of thinking.⁸ The tension and hatred is seen in *Fugitive Histories* when Mala, a Tamil Brahmin wants to marry Asad, a Muslim. She marries him defying the marriage norms of culture. When she talks of the marriage to her parents, they lament it saying, "You are killing us! You'll marry this man, this foreigner, and you'll be lost to us, you'll kill us!" (*Fugitive Histories*, 69). They marry and live successfully braving all odds. Mala shapes her identity as a secular woman and builds her career as a teacher. Asad loves his job of painting. Both transform themselves from the clutches of religious identities.

Sara's Identity Crisis

Born to a Hindu mother and a Muslim father, Sara faces the identity crisis. "I have Muslim relatives and Hindu relatives. I'm neither". (*FH*, 167) This question arises since people are cast into the rigid molds of religion. She tries to free herself from these notions. At times she is confused, "Sometimes I think I'm Indian". Thus, she likes to attach her identity to the nationality to end her dilemma. Then a question arises whether personal identity is submerged into that of the national identity. Her search finds solace with the 'self' when she says, "But most of the time I'm just Sara". (*FH*, 167) Individuality wins over the nationality when she shapes her individual identity.

Rajat Shah's Identity

Sara loves and lives with Rajat Shah whose father is a Christian and mother a Hindu. Her identities are contested by religion and nationality. This sometimes makes her worry about her identity since people are cast into rigid religious molds like Muslim-Indian or Indian-Muslim (*FH*, 180) or even Christian Indian etc. After marriage, it is a practice that the husband's name or husband's family name is suffixed to the wife's name which leads to losing the name of her family literally as well as in actual sense. Thus, women's name is politicized in the name of tradition and marriage. This ideology is criticized by Kamala Das in her poem "Spoiling the Name". She says the names are given by others, not chosen by a woman herself. When it comes to changing her name, Sara's thoughts waver, "...drop the Zaidi (Asad's family name), 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. Or she could leave herself behind entirely, turn into Sara Shaw." (*FH*, 39-40) She overcomes this dilemma by calling herself "I'm Just Sara." (*FH*, 167)

Singular and Multiple Identities

Postmodern theory deconstructs the idea of singular identity or fixed identity and proposes multiple identities. It also blurs the boundaries between the 'high'/'low' and grand/local; rather it celebrates the 'low' and 'local'. Being the product of postmodernity, Sara is happy with her multiple identities, rather she is happy with her hybrid identity. She says, "How glad I am that I am a hybrid." (*FH*, 184)

Struggle of Women for Their Identities

The novel *Fugitive Histories* unravels the struggle of women for their identities which are contested by religion, caste, nationality and violence. Resistance to these ideologies is visible in the response of the characters of Githa Hariharan in *Fugitive Histories*. Mala defies the religious norms of marriage and marries Asad, Sara lives with Rajat Shaw which exhibits “live-in” relationship against the traditional marriage. They love and live and do not think of marriage. Mala shapes her identity as a teacher and Sara as a script writer for films.

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