Fugitive Histories: *Need for Communal Harmony*

The novel Fugitive Histories is a historical novel which deals with a particular Indian historical event. Our country is amalgamation of several religions and communities. The people of different religions live together and maintain a certain kind of harmony and peace. But sometimes due to some forces the unity among people of different religions is breached. Harmony is replaced by severe disturbance and clash. Indian history recorded several such examples where the culture of India is turned upside down i.e. people behaves in the opposite manner they were supposed. M. H. Abrams defines historical novel thus:

'Some realistic novels make use of events and personages from the historical past to add interest and picturesqueness to the narrative...The historical novel not only takes its setting and some characters and events from history, but makes the historical events and issues crucial for the central characters and the course of the narrative. Some of the greatest historical novels also use the protagonists and actions to reveal what the author regards as the deep forces that impel the historical process.' (199)

The novel Fugitive Histories deals largely with the riot in Gujarat in 2002. Its causes, adverse consequences and aftermaths are elaborated in detail. The pathetic but a true picture of that particular time and place is recreated. The novel is written from the perspective of the victims i.e. Muslims who were made target by mob in the name of Hindutva.

The novelist shows how people tried to overpower and suppress Muslims ruthlessly. The event is marked as the historical tragedy. Hariharan presented a real, life-like but ugly picture of the riot and its victims through the recalling of the
threatening history. Women were raped; children were burnt alive and; men were made terror-stricken and cut into several pieces. Several mosques were ruined. The Hindus employed several means to frighten them. They were tried to exile. Though the whole community of Hindus were not cruel to them, they could not help them. Some of the Hindus were sympathetic towards them. They wanted to save them from the tragedy. But the devastation took place at such a large scale that they could do nothing.

The Muslims were rehabilitated after the long trail of suffering. But the genocide they had witnessed always haunted them. They were unable to live the peaceful life they deserved. The novelist suggests the possible solution of such religious tensions. She emphasizes on the peaceful co-existence between these two religious communities. At last of the novel she shows the mosque and the temple close to each other. If there is distance between both the communities, harmony may also be maintained. The narrator says, ‘Mosque and Hanuman harmonize; call Sara like a muezzin calling the faithful to prayer.’ (108-9)

In the riot the Hindus shouted slogans: ‘Muslims Quit India—or we’ll fuck your mothers.’ (138) Many times the violence took place when they were little relaxed and assumed the situation under control. They used to appear instantly before the Muslims. They grew from hundreds to thousands in a minute. It was not a mere coincidence. Everything was premeditated. Some of them had ‘cell phones and water bottles. They were prepared for a long day.’ (159) People were plundered, jewellery and money were taken away, and women were raped, cut and then burnt out of communal hatred. ‘The little boy next door. They poured petrol in his mouth. They put a lit matchstick into his mouth as if it was a lollipop. He was burst.’ (159) They were resolute and firm to fulfil their evil intentions by pogrom and genocide. They were heartless who had no sympathy for women, children and old-age persons. They differentiated people only on the basis of the caste.

‘They cut him across the forehead, they cut her stomach.
They cut his legs, they cut her breasts. They cut his legs,
they cut her arms off. They cut and slashed, cut and slashed. Then they burnt.’ (163)

The Muslims were treated worse than corpses. Sufia Bano, bursts saying ‘We were still living but we had to sleep where the dead sleep.’ (161) The dead bodies that were poured into graveyard were rarely in one piece. All the dead bodies were defected: some had missed legs, others feet or other such parts. This terrifying and threatening past makes Sara disturbed and bewildered. All she wants is ‘to find a way to wash her mind clean of it.’ (161) In the historical event, mosques were also ruined beyond recognition. The faith of a particular community (Muslims) was tried to shake and shatter. They placed the Hindu idol at the place of Mosque. They seemed to hate Muslims immensely; they hated everything which belonged to the Muslims.

They had weapons in their hands to harm them seriously to death. They had every kind of weapon from traditional to modern. They had ‘swords, pipes, hockey sticks, soda-lemon bottles, saffron flags, all kinds of sharp weapons. They had petrol bombs and gas cylinders.’ (158) People were ‘grilled like meat.’ It was done in order to create the sense of terror and insecurity. The conviction of the Muslims was not imaginary. They were supported by evidence and witness. On asking about the recognition of the community and people, Farida cleared that their attires made them sure to be Hindus. ‘…they had trishuls with them, they wore saffron cloth round their heads. There’s no mystery about who they were.’ (159) They recognized the properties owned by the Muslims—houses, shops and restaurants, were burnt. ‘They knew which shops were Muslim, which godowns were Muslims…They knew which homes were Muslims.’ (159)

The active and impartial role of police and government is debatable in History. Though as per the records administration did the needful and actions were taken against accused but, the victims oppose it. They reveal their partial treatment and biased attitude for the Hindus and Muslims. They favoured only culprit Hindus who intended to destroy the whole Muslim community while the innocent Muslims were left to suffer. Even after they asked for help to protect them from being cut and burnt,
the police either denied or mocked at them. A victim reminds the satiric remark of a policeman at that time: ‘Snakes that are not poisonous should keep the enemy away by hissing once in a while.’ (160) The violence of the Hindus was a mere hissing to them, but many were killed and terrified by the long series of brutality and havoc.

The police were restricted to take any action against it. Feroza explains to Sara and Nina what police said, ‘They said we have no orders to help you, you better learn to protect yourselves if you want to live in Hindustan.’ (160) Other policemen ‘burst tear-gas shells’ and shot Muslim if they tried to save themselves. Saman Ashfaq also notes the emphasis on injustice on the basis of religious/communal consciousness: 'Though haunted by searing memories of humiliation, loss and pain, the accounts of these women, nonetheless, are not overtly concerned with their communal identity. Rather, it is the sense of gross injustice, of being unfairly targeted in their own nation that angers them.' (37) Even the little Hindu boys could frighten them. They could flaunt at what they could do with them. Farida says, ‘If you had heard the boys on our street screaming they would rape and murder us, you would understand why.’ (164)

It was the irony that the culprit Hindus tried to convert the Muslims into their own religion after killing them. There was no use of changing the religion of a person after killing him/her. Mumtaz saw his neighbour’s corpse on the road and she saw them ‘sprinkling kerosene on the corpse, shouting “Jai Shri Ram!”’ (162) They told that they were converting the corpse. They could neither save them nor could bury them properly after death which was an essential ritual in their religion. The sufferings and pains of these victims are forgotten. The apparent accuseds are somehow set free from the charge of raising violence. The victims waited for justice for a long time but they did not get. Yasmin felt as if the victims were mere voices, not people in flesh and blood: ‘They are just voices, nothing else, because if they were really bodies, really people, wouldn’t some have heard them by now, given them some justice in five long years?’ (162)

It was the mystery that even the reason of the violence and riot was not very clear to any Muslim. They were punished without stating their mistake.
‘Understanding how a spear slashes, or how fire burns, is not too difficult; they’ve all seen it. But how to understand why they did it? (164) Political benefits and vote bank did not allow controlling the situation by implementing suitable strategy. Police was bound not to take action by government which defends ‘every Hindu will vote for them because they got rid of Muslims?’ (164) It was irony that the community, who made their life hellish, helped them later to make their life secure and peaceful. Many social workers are Hindus who work for the welfare of the Muslim victims through agencies like NGO. The victims say, ‘The same people who killed us and looted us and took away our homes. The same people who are now supposed to protect us.’ (164)

In the series of evil effects of riot Yasmin and her Muslim community are rehabilitated separately. They are far away from the city and their own previous homes. The new area they live in is a ‘safe-for-Muslims Zone’ (110), and the nearby highway is called the border of their ‘mini Pakistan’ (110) Yasmin is conscious about the oddness of the place she lives in. She says, ‘But I don’t want her (Shabana Azmi) to come here. I don’t want her to see this place.’ (112) Away from joy and mirth, their life remains static on the heap of fear, agony and approaching danger. Yasmin’s mother is quiet and careful in making every movement; Yasmin is silent most of the times and reacts softly and mildly without any excitement.

The darkness and gloominess captures their life. It leaves no space for happiness and joy. The houses they live in are dark and filthy. They occupy all the negativity in their life. The ‘filthy lanes’, ‘smell of drain’, ‘musty stairs’, shabby and small rooms, dark and old shade on walls ‘blue-green color that darkens the room to a deeper shade’, ‘battered old wooden cupboard’, ‘a broken glass front that has been taped with newspaper’, all indicate how empty and dull their life has been forever. They remain terror-stricken. The haunting past memories lingers on. The victims somehow try to earn livelihood. Sultana, the friend of Yasmin doesn’t go to school. Instead of education she is given training of tailoring to earn some money. Saman Ashfaq takes a distinct view regarding it when he says that the novel 'explores the paradoxical effects of the chilling violence of 2002 on women. The novel, 'centring on
the lives of the Muslim women in a relocated colony in Ahmedabad evocatively captures how the upheaval caused by violence and migration pushes women from the threshold of domesticity into the outside world.' (36) The life of them makes Sara and Nina peep into the tragic life of the victims due to the heinous historical event. They realized how superficial they had known about it through Newspaper and TV. It makes Sara restless.

The dark house of Yasmin is, in actual, a safe place to hide from the remaining people of the country. On the one side, the dark shows the gloomy side of their life. On the other make us feel that they live as refugees. ‘The dark room and the dark house and the dark building. It should make them feel as safe as a hidden cave would, this dark, but it only makes them sad.’ (118) Shifting to a safer place meant a lot of differences in their life. Many hopes vanished with it. Their homes, memories, plans, future, and hope were also crushed. Yasmin’s family also gave up hope to get Akbar back. They shifted him ‘secretly in their heads from the missing list to the declared dead list.’ (138) It made them utmost lifeless. In their new houses they were hopeless and ‘were so tired they wanted to sleep and never get up…’ (138)

People feel themselves homeless even after they are rehabilitated. They do not feel attached with their new houses. ‘They have lived here safely for almost five years, but it’s still a pretend home.’ (150) Yasmin also feels her new house only a temporary shelter on the way to the permanent one. Though the house is not very bad or little in space, yet it is suffocating. ‘They are crowded out by too many ghosts; the dead, the wounded out by too many ghosts; the dead, the wounded and the maimed take up more room than the living ever can.’ (150) The riot affected people live there with in the atmosphere of gloom and sadness. Even amid noise there remains no life in the life of people. They pass life without any joy or delight. ‘Despite the people, the open shops, the stalls, the noise, all the breathing, throbbing signs of life, the road is somehow cheerless, as if it has assessed the whole business of living and knows it’s pointless.’ (110)
Despite the tragic experience, they desire to lead life again happily: ‘People don’t want revenge, they want to live again.’ (165) Yasmin's parents crave for their son Akbar. The hope of her Ammi is dipped in religious devotion and faith. She hopes to meet her son in the heaven after she is dead. Yasmin is also grave due to the loss of her brother in her life. She preserves him somehow in her memories and life through his notebook. Yasmin's father becomes quite hopeless. He thinks as if nothing is left in his hands. He seems fatalist whose fate has cheated by depriving him even the simple life with the company of the whole family:

‘Sometimes he gazes at his open palms, a questioning look on his face, as if expecting the lines there to tell him something. Or expecting his hands to explain how they have been left empty, how his life slipped through his fingers so easily.’ (151)

It was the strange state of Yasmin that she was afraid of crowd, not solitude. The crowd reminds her of the ruthless mob and violence at the time of the riot she has experienced. She feels: ‘Any girl knows that a busy road is a safe road. But Yasmin knows now that she should also be afraid of a crowd.’ (149) The novelist, thus, rejects any biased treatment on the basis of the religion. She takes the side of the numerous sufferers. People should be judges as human beings, not on the basis of the religion or community they belong to.

With the partition of India in 1947, it is rumour that India mainly stands for Hindus and Pakistan for Muslims on the basis of majority of the people who live in these two countries. But it is true that Muslims also live in India and Hindus in Pakistan. A Muslim resident of India is called Indian Muslim/Muslim Indian. We may categorize people like it due to multiplicity of religions. But the truth is that India consists of many religions and Muslim religion is one of them. India can not be claimed of Hindus alone. The people of this religion are part and parcel of the country and share the more or less same cultural heritage which India is known for. But due to some crucial forces and unpleasant circumstances or events the religious tensions
occur. Sometimes it extends to the level of riot. It creates scenes of havoc and ruthlessness among people of both the communities. The novel explores a long-drawn event of religious tension between them.

The religious tensions led the victims of riot to immeasurable suffering. The Muslims were blamed as terrorists and outsiders. The wickedness of some fanatic Hindus is revealed with a very pathetic note when the victims share their horrible past experiences of violence and arson with Sara. People of all ages and genders suffered with the same intensity. The women remember how the Hindu Indians called them ruthlessly terrorists and Pakistanis. Their remarks were shocking to them. They were born in India or have been living for a long time. But they were pressurized to ‘Go to Pakistan!’ It is the impartial behaviour of a particular community of Hindus. The violence and arson took place out of the communal hatred. Some Indians tortured the Muslims as if they were terrorists. They had no proof in their support but they were resolute about what they had said. It is irony that their violent actions were no less than terrorism. The terror-stricken Muslims complain: ‘The loud-speakers kept calling us Pakistanis, terrorists. And what happened to us, that’s not terrorism?’ (157)

Zainab Bano is one of the women who is present at Yasmin’s house to share her experience. She tells how her son was expelled from the English medium school by the principal. He had double-standard for Hindu and Muslim students. Even a little student was disturbed by sarcastic questions whether he belonged to Pakistan. He usually criticized him as unfit even when he did his work on time. He kept calling him ‘a terrorist till the child couldn’t bear it any more.’ (156) She represented the agony of innumerable such women who were eyewitness of the sufferings of their family. A. Marie Josephine Aruna observes the pathetic condition of women: ‘Yasmin soon realizes that these women like her are only bodies whose souls are missing because they have experienced only rape, murder and death.’ (30) The false notion raises the feeling of domination over Muslims. It results into disharmony and chaos. They are afraid of maintaining any relation from the people other than their community. The riot made the Muslims feel alienated in their own country where they were born and lived. They remember the time of freedom struggle where they also contributed
equally. If they all could stand against outside forces without considering any communal differences, they should not be called outsiders within the country.

Muslim individuals are made conscious of their distinctive identity. The Hindu community alienate them. Samar is the son of Hindu-Muslim parents, and is taught always that they are not bound to religious identities. But he feels that people are more interested in and aware of his second name that denotes his religious identity: ‘Asad may have told us we’re not Muslim or Hindu, but the rest of the world only has to hear our last name.’ (99) He asserts that though he is happy to be called Muslim, detests any discrimination on its basis. Asad, his father, is afraid of his ambition of going to America for two years. He is aware of anti-Vietnam war movement in which many Muslims became jihadi in the name of revolt or revenge. Though the novel deals with the conflict between Hindu and Muslim, it also shows that somewhere and sometimes harmony could be maintained. The perfect conciliation and harmony is seen on the way of Sara to Yasmin’s house. The mosque and the temple which are symbolic of two different religions co-exist harmoniously.

The marriages in the country are organized very richly. All the friends and relatives are invited to bless the bride and groom. Rich food, decoration and music are the prominent features in marriages. Marriage is solemnized as per the custom and tradition followed from generation to generation. The marriage rituals are performed in India with utmost sincerity and pomp and show. Mala attends a Muslim marriage with her family. According to the tradition followed in the Muslim religion the arrangement for guests was separate for men and women. Even little Samar had to move towards the male section and Sara had to stay with her mother. They found ‘that the men and women separated at the entrance.’ (78) The face of the bride is covered and is shown only on the special demand of the relatives. Moreover, she is tightly circled by elderly women looking after her. Child-marriage is an age-old tradition followed by the people. It may be noticed at some places even today. Though it is banned legally, yet people have different reasons for its support. In the marriage the bride was a little girl. The sitting bride is a ‘shapeless red bundle weighed down by a head bent so low it may never be able to lift on its own again.’ (78) Sara’s eager wish
to see the bride made Sara and Mala know that the bride was of too tender age to get married. ‘She’s just a girl, a pretty girl dressed up like a woman. And the childish face is wet with tears.’ (78)

The sufferage of women is incessant part of Indian History. The women characters Mala and Bala (mother and grandmother of Sara respectively) who are interwoven within the framework of the riot exhibit different modes of restrictions and subordination. The pitiable condition of women can be traced in the life of Mala and Bala. It is apparent in the novels like Raj, The Thousand Faces of Night, The Ghost of Vasu Master and When Dreams Travel as well. The brief glimpse into the life of Bala and Mala takes us into the inner minds of women. It reveals how women remain subordinate to men throughout their life. The novelist generalizes the particular issues of Mala and Bala. A kind of boredom occurs in Mala when she feels that she also has to live like a typical Indian woman who will be enclosed in the four walls. Mala feels the lack of the spirit of life in the women of her house and anticipates her life like it.

The life of Mala also shows the life of many Indian women living in the same environment she is shown. The boredom and sameness of life sadden Mala. She wishes to be someone else. But she knows that she desires the impossible thing to happen. She seems to swing between the reality and her longing. Her mind constantly moves towards her own dreamy conditions in which she wishes to live. She ‘knows she can never be someone else. All her life she has to be Mala, all the days till the day she dies.’ (17) She wants to be like a male in her dream-vision so that she could be free from the restricted life of a girl and woman. ‘May be she’ll be reborn as someone who can climb taller trees and ride faster bicycles than anyone she knows.’ (17)

Male domination is prevalent in the life of women of the novel through the relation of father, brother, husband and grandfather. The sense of equality between male and female is degraded. Mala is disgraced by her grandfather’s comment on crying without any matter. Her grandfather is the representative of a rigid man who controls the whole family with an iron hand. She is called ‘too stupid too know she’s hungry.’ (18) She is called similar to the ‘official crazy Bala’ (18) who does strange
things frequently. Mala has been called 'stupid' in her childhood by Samar, her brother. She feels the comment of Asad ‘The world is full of ignorant idiots’ is said only for her.

Bala’s strange behavior seems the outcome of her suppressed life. She is punished by her husband on desiccating her hair on terrace. Her husband knows the evil eyes of other men on his wife. But it is Bala who is restricted in the house for it. The men are not accused rather they are free to move in the society. She is pulled downstairs through his coarse arms to behave in the restricted manner. Her husband is of the opinion that ‘storeroom was the best place for her to learn how to be a respectable woman.’ (22) Her early marriage with her husband brought no gems of happiness rather she was disapproved by her husband. 'She belonged to the house’ (15). She became his subordinate only, not his wife.

Bala’s behavior looks strange at once but we realize that it is due to her suppressed life. Later on, during the period of her married life she used to cut her hair and make a nest of it. One may easily consider it as her cynicism but, soon we realize that she is so deeply frustrated by the restrictions laid down by her husband that she started reacting adversely. It gave her psychological relief. Her action of cutting her own hair reveals this tendency. Whenever she found her husband harsh and cruel, and found the things unbearable, she let her suppressed emotions find their exit through her insane activities. Bala made at least her hair free from the imprisonment. This was the only thing she could do. She had her own reason of cutting hair ‘My hair falls down to my thighs…But what’s the use if it has to hide in a tight bun?…May be a baby bird will be born here and it will learn to fly.’ (25)

Sara’s life is tinged with the domination of her brother Samar. Samar boasts and flaunts and Sara pampers even his wrong anticipation. At one time Samar misunderstands Sara’s feelings and she nods obediently. It is Samar who wins always in arguments with Sara. It does not matter whether he is wrong. This brings Sara’s suppression of ideas or avoidance of extending arguments. ‘She knows he will always win their arguments, even when he is wrong and she will then hate him for it.’ (98)
Samar, only eleven months older than Sara, liked to play elder brother seriously. His manner of behaviour revealed his nature of dominance. Sara, in her childhood, had to freeze on seeing Samar. Sara used to become free only when he signaled to move. ‘Samar liked to see Sara waiting for him. She had to be still and very patient…’(90)

But Sara becomes assertive when is grown up. She becomes like Meena of In Times of Siege. She becomes self-sufficient and handles her economical matters on her own. She is reluctant to take help even of her mother. Sara strives to be someone else. She wants to change her identity and desires to acquire a new and fresh status. She thinks of changing her surname. She assumes that she could ‘drop the Zaidi, she could be Vaidhyanathan like her mother, or Shaw like her boyfriend. Sara Zaidi could become Sara Vaidhyanathan, take a break from one half of herself and try out the other. Or she could leave herself behind entirely, turn into Sara Shaw.’ (40)

The real picture of the Indian society is portrayed in the novel. The scene of the station of Mumbai appears to us as the realistic portrayal of the station. There is acute rush at station on the arrival of train. There is battle for boarding the train. The coolies can be identified with their accessories and unique behavior they have at stations. The life of Sara and Nina represents the life of modern women especially of the mega city like Mumbai. They live as PG (paying guest). The inevitable role of technology in their life, addiction to smoking, fast food, importance of Sunday is prevalent in their life. After doing a lot of work on computer Nina asserts, ‘she deserves a lazy Sunday.’ (39) Sara’s physical relation with her lover Rajat without marriage is acceptable for youth today. The trust on the system of marriage in India is degrading.

Fatuation for materialism lessens the warmth of the relations of Nina and her father. Her father is more concerned to the economic matters of her daughter than extending a helping-hand to her. She does not feel a sense of security which could have been provided by him. It resulted into the communication gap regarding professional work. She ‘was reduced to talking her father into a contribution. This was harder than she had expected: 'he decided to act like the businessman he is, saying he couldn’t understand how conceptualizing a film could cost money. Guilt has now
made Nina spend more energy than she needs to on getting the budget just right for the next stage of researching her film.’ (42) Besides illustrating religious tensions, the novelist depicts life-like pictures of Indian market, station and cinema hall. The places are portrayed with reality whether it is pleasant or unpleasant. The scene of the cinema theatre where Sara goes with Rajat to watch a movie is depicted with minute-details. Hariharan, many times, displayed the reality of Indian markets and public places without hiding any stark reality.

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. Githa Hariharan used imagery in the novel to impart her ideas in acute and impressive way. The imagery of ‘gulabjamun’ for Monia’s vital sexual organ is vivid and fresh. ‘Sara and Laila sit on their smooth and warm rock, holding hands, watching Monia staring at them, all the while pumping the life out of the gulabjamun till it’s almost dead, it’s now just a squeezed-out little stick of sponge.’ (97)
Thus, the novel explores the pathetic retelling of the History of India that is Gujarati riot of 2002. The stark reality and ruthlessness of a particular community is revealed out barely. The novel is objective representation of particular time and place, of people and their suffering. Along with this chief issue, she dexterously combined political and feminine issues making it more appealing and rich. A. Marie Joshphine Aruna seems to suggest the abstract of the novel: 'The text thus speaks at different levels of representation of the personal lives of Mala, Asad, Yasmin and Sara, on the one hand, and the political, historical, social and the cultural on the other.' (31)
Works Cited


