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The Postmodern condition of Fragmentation in Githa Hariharan's "Fugitive Histories"

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Abstract

Post -1980 is the period of postmodernism in Indian English Literature with the postmodern novelists featuring Indian tradition and history in a new light using new narrative strategies. Githa Hariharan as a postmodern writer has used the technique of rewriting myths and histories to liberate women. Lisa Tuttle defines feminist theory as asking "new questions of old texts". Old texts are revisited to challenge the gender stereotypes embedded in myths that have fashioned this patriarchal society. Githa Hariharan, in her novel "Fugitive Histories" recalls the Gujarat riots that have left an indelible mark in the lives of the affected people who look out to some form of rehabilitation to keep going in this uncertain world. The female characters she depicts, are strong enough to combat the present situation though they face all kinds of suppression and the sense of resignation with which they bring peace into their life really takes Githa Hariharan to another level. She has tried her best to celebrate life amidst chaos that exists in modern society for she understands that there is no use lamenting over the loss of the past or the collapse of selfhood as Tim Woods rightly points out in his book "Beginning Postmodernism". This paper analyses the postmodern condition of fragmentation in the novel "Fugitive Histories" and shows how women try to reconstruct their lives in the midst of the disparity that prevails in society based on religion and gender.

Keywords: Postmodernism, Rewriting Myths, Gender Stereotypes, Patriarchal Society, Fragmentation, Disparity

Introduction

Githa Hariharan, the winner of Commonwealth Writers' Prize for her first book "The Thousand Faces of Night" (1992), is an activist committed to feminist and social issues. As a postmodern feminist writer, she fights for the liberation of women from all kinds of subjugation through her writings adopting different narrative techniques to drive home the point. She pours her anger against the society that venerates motherhood but looks with contempt at a woman who plays the role of a mother. Indian society bound by tradition poses greater challenges to women that everyday life becomes a struggle to many. By subverting the traditional values and patterns, women have started to demand for their freedom and a host of critical and creative writers have emerged to show their opposition against male domination and marginalisation of women. This postmodern era sees human experience as unstable and fragmented that the writers have come to realise that there is no use lamenting over the loss of the past or selfhood. Thus Githa Hariharan celebrates

life in the midst of chaos for life has to go on. Though women face issues in life, and the pain and trauma they undergo has no bounds, Githa has created women characters who are stoic for they cannot rely on any other source of support and they themselves are the ones who could bring happiness into their lives.

Postmodern Condition of Fragmentation in “Fugitive Histories”

E. M. Forster in his “Aspects of the Novel”, points out “...why novels, even when they are about wicked people, can solace us: they suggest a more comprehensible and thus more manageable human race, they give us the illusion of perspicacity and of power.” But, this is not the case with the postmodern novels. There are no such traditional plots telling us why something happens. It is no longer comprehensible since it is not mimetic as Aristotle had pointed out but constructive. Time and space are compressed to show how the present is related to the past and the past dissolves in the present. As Linda Hutcheon has pointed out, the postmodernist fiction questions the traditional series of interconnected events. No chronological order of events are presented and the narrative itself is a series of disconnected events making the meaning a problematic one. In the contemporary world, man has learnt to live with all differences and has accepted pluralism. It is this that makes him come into conflict with his individual self and collapses his identity. Postmodern fiction deals with such fragmented characters who have experienced a loss of selfhood through a narration that tries to connect these fragmented lives to give a meaning to the text. In fact, postmodernism celebrates fragmentation since the postmodern writers believe that nothing can be done in this chaotic world and that seeking or bringing order is out of question. Julia Kristeva says that to enter into the social order, one needs to assimilate the authority of that order through a revolt to make his or her own meaning. Unless, there is inclusion, there can only be traumas and no true experience. It is through psychic revolt that one creates meaning and gives an expression to the self.

In this novel “Fugitive Histories”, Githa Hariharan shows how the characters suffer from the fragmented self and seek order in this chaotic world through their psychic revolt. This fragmentation is also expressed through a narration of disconnected events that flow in and out of the life of Bala, Mala, Sara and Yasmin. This condition of postmodern fragmentation exists thematically and technically and the characters are all caught up in traumas that arise due to pluralism that exists in the society. Hariharan talks about the Gujarat riots of 2002 when two compartments in Sabarmati express were set on fire. Women are depicted as the most affected, for they remain the suppressed lot with no voice in this patriarchal society. Her women characters Mala, Bala, Sara and Yasmin stand as a testimony to the hardships faced by women in society because of the disparity shown based on gender and caste. Mala loses religious identity because she marries a Muslim, Asad. She is a Hindu-Brahmin and her family is not ready to accept Asad, a painter. Similarly, she becomes a fish out of water in Asad’s house. The couple faces problems from the time they are married because theirs is an inter-religious marriage. When Mala expresses her desire to marry Asad, her father bursts out:

‘How can you want to marry him?’ asks her father, genuinely puzzled. ‘Think of the difference!’ he says. ‘It’ll always be a problem, the difference between us and them. It won’t go away just because you’re married.’ (FH,69)

Their children too face similar problems and they wonder whether they can survive with this thing upon them for ever. Samar, Mala’s son, has no friends in school because they mock at the fact that he consumes meat. Just because he is different, he is not accepted anywhere. Mala often encounters a quarrel between the father and son over this issue. Samar rants that whatever his beliefs are, he is seen as a potential terrorist. At one point, he decides to leave India and find job in US. Once, when Mala was visited by Jamal and his wife Bubbly, the friends of Asad, during the

aftermath of Gujarat riots, Bubbly confesses, “I get angry when people think I’m Muslim. I get angry when they assume I’m too modern to be Muslim” (201). There is news of mutilated bodies everywhere and hate-speak everywhere. Life in its fragmented condition turns traumatic to Mala. Her fears that something may happen to spoil her relationship with Azad, comes true when she notices how disturbed Asad is. Mala contemplates:

“Have they finally become Hindu and Muslim and Christian, all of them, even if they are not believers at all?” (FH,202).

Asad and Mala marry forgetting the differences between them. But the happenings around remind them that they are different. Every night becomes a trauma for Mala when she sees Asad sitting up in bed restless and frustrated and going to the studio, drawing and discarding and Mala understands sleep alone can put him to rest. Mala is greatly disappointed with Asad. His dream has gone, the dream that made him say:

“You didn’t have to worry about whether you were Indian Muslim or Muslim Indian, or part Hindu, or atheist by default, it was enough just to be you” (FH,102).

Mala after Azad’s death, while going through his sketchbook understands the cause for the sleepless nights spent by Asad through pictures that depict a helpless man in the middle of a communal riot. Azad had suffered internally and had tried to express himself through his paintings by revolting against the system that is not ready to change. The secretive life of Asad that perplexed Mala, finally unfolds to reveal the fear in Asad, the man who can paint but cannot act. This is the postmodern condition of fragmentation that brings out the helplessness of a modern man in the society. So Mala, as a way of giving rest to Asad throws his paintbrush and his unfinished paintings into water towards the end of the novel and treats this as an act of prayer to complete the cycle of funeral rites.

Sara is Mala’s daughter staying in Mumbai with her PG mate Nina who is currently working on a documentary about the people affected during Gujarat riots. Nina makes an offer to Sara to write the script for the documentary. Therefore, Sara goes with Nina to Ahmedabad to collect information from the people affected during the riots. There she meets Yasmin, a Muslim girl of sixteen or seventeen years of age who narrates a dreadful story of what happened during the riot, how her family lost their house and the shop, and above all how her brother Akbar, a college going student went missing. She is just one among many who has seen disastrous events take place right before her eyes. Also there was an attempt to molest her and the suffering she has undergone at a very young age is unfathomable. May be, it is this that has made Sara to show special interest in Yasmin.

Sara also interacts with other women who try to rehabilitate their life by associating with an NGO. This is what Sara hears from them about the injustice meted to them:

‘They cut him across the forehead, they cut her stomach. They cut his legs, they cut her breasts... then they burnt.’(FH,163)

‘We’re scared every time there’s a festival, anything can happen. We can never trust each other again. Even the women. Even the children. If you had heard the boys on our street screaming they would rape and murder us...’(FH,164)

Sara also learns that they don’t want revenge. They just want to live. She also learns from Yasmin how the police remained indifferent to the missing case of Akbar filed by her parents. They had asked her parents to look for his body among corpses piled up in hospitals or morgues. At times, bits of clothes were given to them for identification. These gory stories make Sara remember her own brother. In fact, her condition is not different from Yasmin’s. Sara, who failed to understand his feelings till then, understood why he had always wanted to run away from his home. Being a Muslim, he was always seen as a potential terrorist. Yasmin and others like her have lost their

homes and have now shifted to a safe place which Sara calls as ‘In-between’ suggesting there is something else beyond this which may be better or worse. Sara too places herself in a similar situation and wonders whether there is going to be any future at all for her. Once, she takes Yasmin to a restaurant and there she sees a young man in yellow T-shirt who reminds her of Akbar. But, he just walks by without noticing them and Yasmin reminds Sara that the dead and missing live in all kinds of places. The past always haunts them but then it also gives them a hope that everything will become fine one day. Sara, later on visits Sabarmati Ashram where in the form of a dream, she encounters the ghost of Gandhiji which tells her that “In the dictionary of Satyagraha, there is no enemy”. Sara gets the answer to her troubled mind and she considers the story of Yasmin as her own story and decides to help her out. She is not fettered at the thought that she is a hybrid. On the other hand, she understands that her decision to take care of Yasmin will surely make her father Asad happy.

Bala, the grandmother of Mala is another interesting character to be analysed. Like Mala and Sara, she is not caught in any religious oriented issues but is a victim of the patriarchal setup. She is a hysteria patient who shows her revolt by cutting her long hair and making a nest of it in the backyard. Often confined in storeroom, Bala has a secret life to cherish. When, Mala married Asad against her parent’s wish, Bala approved Mala in this way:

‘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’.(FH,76)

Thus, how Bala escapes suffering through revolt in a patriarchal setup is best revealed here.

Conclusion

Githa Hariharan shows how man’s life is fragmented through pluralism. On the whole, Githa Hariharan has effectively used many postmodern techniques to make her narration interesting. She constantly switches between the past and the present with the narration moving from Mala, opening the trunk of Asad after his death, to a period of Asad’s death and cause of his death. The Technique of Paranoia is used especially when Hariharan deals with the communal riots: the characters dream and express anxiety and fear. Again, only a female perspective of the Gujarat riot is explored and no full account has been given. Thus a partial account of history has been discussed and Githa Hariharan focusses mainly on the broken lives of the fugitives, particularly, the Muslims and through telling stories, beautifully links the fragmented lives, in each case, ending with a positive note, giving a ray of hope to a future that seems promising.

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