

Identity Crisis in Geetha Hariharan's *Fugitive Histories*

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Abstract

Identity is particularly subject to crisis in modernity because of the complex relationship between the plurality of selves and the wider society. A man who is conscious of his identity, continually searches for stability, security and belongingness, while one who fails to realize his identity in his social milieu, becomes withdrawn from society and the victim of an identity crisis. This state consists of a sense of isolation, alienation and a feeling that his existence in this life is meaningless. This is, in fact, a very crucial state for a person to decide his roots and identity. As a contemporary writer, Geetha Hariharan deals with the problem of identity crisis or quest for self in her novels. By introducing the characters of Bala, Mala, Sara and Yasmin, Hariharan takes the readers on a ride of different generations and make them notice the changing conditions that have been taking place in the society. This paper shows how these characters achieve their identity in the society.

KEYWORDS: identity, meaninglessness, isolation, alienation, multi-culturalism

Identity Crisis or search of identity has received an impetus in the post colonial literature. Indian English Fiction deals at length with the problems, rising due to multi-culturalism and intercultural interactions. Man is known as a social animal that needs some home, love of parents and friends and relatives. But when he is unhoused, he loses the sense of belongingness and thus suffers from a sense of insecurity or identity crisis.

Identity Crisis or search of identity is no longer confined to the individual; it can characterize a group, an institution, a class, a profession or even a nation. "An individual's sense of identity is neither completely conscious nor unconscious, although, at times, it appears to be exclusively the one or the other. At some places identity is referred to as a conscious sense of individual uniqueness, at others, to an unconscious, striving for continuity of experience and at yet other places as a sense of solidarity with a group's ideals". (Qtd. in Kakar 16).

As a contemporary writer, Geetha Hariharan deals with the problem of identity crisis or quest for self in her novels. Now-a-days, every human being suffers a lot to assert his individuality in this competitive world. The contemporary literature particularly the fiction which deals manifestly with emotional problems clearly reflects the patient condition of the modern man. Search for an identity is innate in every human being. So, search for an identity is an archetypal and universal motif in literatures of all ages. Thirst for identity and striving for fulfillment is a natural inclination inherent in every member of the human race and therefore of universal significance and perennial interest

Geetha Hariharan's *Fugitive Histories* deals with religious identities in India and questions whether one can be a religious. The author has etched some memorable characters like Azad, an artist who died heart-broken as he watched his fellow citizens

kill each other in the name of religion. Mala, his wife is one of the important characters in the novel who believed in the ideology of humanism and in blurring the religious on other divisions that exist in the society. Sara, their daughter, in search of herself, found her calling in helping others, especially Yasmin, who is a displaced victim of the Gujarat riots. Hariharan brings to life the sufferings of women during conflict as their bodies became battlegrounds.

Mala wants to make her identity by creating a place for herself. Observing the condition of her grandmother and the despotic rule of her grandfather, the seeds of revolt slyly simmer in her child-mind she does some misdemeanors which show a hidden rebellion against the traditional and cultural boundaries of the society.

The quest for emotional interaction with the animus can be seen in Mala's relation with Asad. Through this interaction, she seeks to relate to her urge to blossom with the accommodation of male part of her psyche. Asad is Muslim and she decides to marry him against the social conventions and her family members.

Mala's life takes a new turn when she accidentally goes through the last sketchbook of Asad, she realizes that Asad was trying to regain his identity. She understands why Asad wanted to find peace in death. Being heartbroken and utterly disappointed he was waiting for his death. Once Mala understands Asad's disturbed mental state and his longing for death, she lets Asad enjoy his perpetual sleep. She understands that after death, Asad, roaming freely, will definitely find all that he could not find while he was alive

Mala's realization that every individual is an isolated being on this earth but must continue to believe in the possibility of social relations as well as in her belief rings the role of optimum. The process of individualization is achieved with the feeling of oneness and realizing the SELF. Mala, after undergoing confrontation with the world outside, tries to find out the real meaning of SELF.

Another character, Sara, the daughter of Mala and Asad is a social worker, she is encountered with a baffling question as to which religion, culture or place she belongs. Multiple identities and hyphenated existence make her puzzle about her real self and place.

Being a dutiful daughter of Asad and inspired by his ideals, she becomes a social worker. She was very close to her father and his death comes as a great blow to her. She knew well that Hindu-Muslim riots were chiefly responsible for Asad's untimely death. Sara was happy with her father's ideals, but once she realizes the reason of her father's death, she willingly commits to some relevant goals and roles. Her goal of living peacefully in society without having a particular religion is the role of a true and real woman.

Sara has lots of challenges to face. She has to bridge the gap between her SELF and the vast world. She has to identify the personal 'I' with the generalized 'other' and the influence of their 'other' which is society; on "I" that is her SELF. Sara visited Ahmedabad with her friend to speak to the survivors of the riots in connection with a documentary film. She came across many women who have seen and experienced the horrors of the riots as their bodies were plundered by the frenzied mobs.

The house they enter first is of Yasmin's. Sara had already seen the photo of Yasmin in Mumbai when Nina asked her to visit Ahmedabad. Sara notices each and every careful move made by Yasmin and her mother. Sara feels as if they are not real. They have a mask of pretense. Sara knows how difficult it is to be normal under such grave situations. Sara talks to Yasmin for some time and meets some other Muslim

families. She listens to them patiently knowing well that she cannot do anything else for their comfort. She feels afraid of asking any wrong question. Next day, Sara meets Yasmin again in the school during Yasmin's lunch break. As Yasmin talks with her, she sees that her tension gets released. She feels happy as Yasmin interacts with her and gives vent to her feelings. Yasmin talks to Sara about everything. She discusses her emotions and her mental state with Sara. Sara sees Yasmin working hard to pass her twelfth examination. She wants to get admission in a college, so that she can get a job later and share her parents' burden.

Yasmin, a victim of Gujarat riots, symbolizes thousands of women who are trying to learn to live after losing the male relatives of their family. Though all aspects of culture and society by to make her feel inferior, she is trying to find her niche professionally.

Sara feels she can be both- Hindu and Muslim, who celebrates all the festivals with equal passion. She sees a good range of choices before her. She recalls her father's words, "Don't be ashamed of who you are and don't be ashamed of who you're not" (FH 180). Sara enters the stage of "identity achievement" by choosing and committing to her role of a "woman" only. She overcomes anxiety, tension and fear. She gives strength to Yasmin as well as to Mala Now Sara knows well that she can only be a woman, standing firmly without any particular name, religion, race or caste. She feels like a young woman with a 'body' only.

The novel not only deals with the problems of identity on individual plane, but also on the universal plane. It also focuses on shattered religious identities in general. When Sara visits Ahmadabad and listens to the stories of various victims, one can clearly see how religion affects one's identity and social status. How did the marginalized people feel in times of crisis. Political parties misuse religion for their political gains and people suffer. Hariharan has boldly written and recorded the problems faced by Muslims during the Gujarat riots. These riots are considered a systematic political terror unleashed against the Muslims. All the victims suffered identity crisis. When Sara and Neena record their voices, one listens to the heartbreaking stories of these victims. They all are "muslims" which represent their unique collective identity. They form a relevant group and share common values, emotions and goals. This collective identity affects their personal as well as social identity.

Hariharan is in a leading role among other women writers who penetrate social issues. By introducing the characters of Bala, Mala, Sara and Yasmin, Hariharan takes the readers on a ride of different generations and make them notice the changing conditions that have been taking place in the society. Lives of Bala and Sara are quite different outwardly but their internal journeys are alike. They face different impediments, hindrances and experiences in their journey towards individualization. All the cobwebs in the novel show that though the circumstances, processes and journeys are different, yet the ultimate experience is individuating with one's self.

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