
Between the Margins and the Centres: The Liminal Self in Githa Hariharan's Fugitive Histories

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"...all of us, individually and culturally, live in the mappings of our imagined landscape, with its charged centres and dim peripheries..."

(Diana L Eck, *India: A Sacred Geography* 40)

The most fundamental question about human existence is, possibly, *who am I?* The question has remained an elusive site of inquiry across time and space, resisting any lucid understanding or fixed definitions. Repeated attempts at decoding this puzzle has almost invariably led to the concepts of Self and Identity, "terms that seem inevitably to spin in elliptical orbits around any attempt to conceptualise human beings" (Eakin 9). Often conflated, the concepts of self and identity have been pivotal concerns since the beginning of human civilisation and in the past two decades of the 20th century, these have come to occupy the centre of intellectual debate in the humanities, the social sciences, as well as the natural sciences. While there is a lack of consensus among researchers on whether the terms 'self' and 'identity' mean the same and can be used interchangeably, as concepts these are mutually inclusive and function as interface between contemporary theoretical approaches such as poststructuralism, cultural studies, feminism and queer theory, among others as well as between the philosophical trinity of ontology, epistemology and axiology. This persistent preoccupation with the self and identity has led to the emergence of a new

multidisciplinary and eclectic scholarship concerned with the nature of the self, personal identity, and its relationship to and understanding of the world. Such a scholarship acquires profound significance in the present times with its increasing tendencies to eschew or even reject the inherently fluxional nature of self and identity in favour of blinkered notions and stringent codification/categorisation of ourselves and others. As a consequence, humanity finds itself beleaguered by strongly entrenched notions of centres and margins and a vociferous resistance to the co-existence of fragmented, multiple and conflicting 'selves' or 'identities'. There is, then, an acute necessity to reassess the concept of self and, by implication, identity, for what it is: a process', a constant, ever-changing and ongoing reflexive engagement with the 'I' and its perception of others. In fact, most theories of the self, both western and eastern, use the prisms of religion, psychology, philosophy, science, anthropology, literature and history (to name a few), in myriad ways, in order to underscore how and why the self is not a fixed, stable category but a shifting, ambiguous interplay of experiences, undulating emotions and contexts governed or disrupted by the time-space continuum. It is this essential liminality of the self which forms the crux of Githa Hariharans poignantly subtle novel, *Fugitive Histories* and this paper will attempt to examine how Hariharan posits the self and identity as liminal in order to draw attention towards the fallacy of absolutist notions/points-of-view of our contemporary times and thereby, makes a plea for basic human values in lieu of prejudices and insular thought-processes.

Set in post-2002 India, the challenging narrative of *Fugitive Histories* interlaces three sections titled Missing Persons, Crossing Borders and Funeral Rites; oscillates between three cities- Delhi, Mumbai, Ahmedabad- and three generations mapping the

microcosmic throes of the Indian society etched upon the macrocosmic landscape of humanity and; negotiates with multiple, intersecting voices through spatial and temporal shifts to unravel the insidious forms of prejudices arising out of a misplaced sense of the self which perceives oneself as a fixed centre with the power and agency to decide and define what/who would constitute the margins. This complex web of spatio-temporal voices include: Mala, left with only her late husband, Asad's sketches and memories to make sense of “what happened to that reckless old dream, the dream in which two different people can collide to partake of each other” (197); Sara, their daughter, struggling to understand the complexity of her identity and aspirations; Samar, their son, longing for the certainty of a single identity; Yasmin, a young girl Sara meets at Ahmedabad, trying to re-build her life after the Gujarat carnage; Bala, Mala's grandmother, the “beloved lunatic” (24) subversively transcending the boundaries imposed on her and Asad, the artist and liberal humanist unable to come to terms with the loss of the ideology that had once sustained his perception of the self, a loss which made him wonder “if [he] was only playing a game all this time-painting, playing at being a committed citizen of a larger, braver world” (237). The novel begins with the recently widowed Mala, alone at her home in Delhi; going through her late husband's sketches until she stumbles upon a particular image which fine tunes her memory, and she is borne across in time to a life without Asad. The narrative shifts to Mala's childhood in her ancestral home where, standing at the threshold of self-concept, “she knew it wasn't enough just to be her. She needed to find someone else, someone who could enlarge the small space she occupied as Malathi, Mala for short” (14). This subliminal desire to be someone else reflects Mala's first awareness of the need to transcend a predetermined concretised identity. The only other person who seems to understand her struggles to make

sense of a self occupying a realm of in-between-ness is her grandmother, Bala, who “was subject to a mysterious women's ailment called hysteria”(15). Married to a patriarchal bully, she lived most of her life following the rules he made for her which included never stepping out of his house or making everything about her “as neat as he wanted and tied into a hard little ball” (25). Later, Bala's mysterious ailment becomes a subversive means for her to create a space of alternative ordering and possibility where the limits of the periphery are extended and the centre reclaimed. She would collect anything sharp-edged and cut off some of her hair, which he insisted must be hidden away in a tight bun, and her final act of defiance was the day she chopped all her hair off with “*His pair*, [of scissors] so desirable because they were his, but also because they glinted at her, boasted about how new, how sharp they were” (26). At this point, the narrative eases into the space where Mala and Bala's individual yet collective quest to comprehend the nature of their selves finds a new embodiment in Asad: Bala tells Mala- “you and I beat them; you married him. I couldn't escape this place but I've lived longer than that old bastard boss. We've won” (76). Poststructuralist perspective considers identity as multiple, shifting, and in conflict; identity as crucially related to social, cultural, and political contexts; and identity being constructed, maintained, and negotiated primarily through discourse (Varghese 21-44). On the other hand, in Buddhism self is regarded as an aggregate of five constituents- Form (body), Feelings, Perception, Consciousness and Fabrication-and interdependence of these makes the self a process of becoming rather than a stable, fixed form (Thanissaro, 2). Mala and Asad's interfaith marriage in the face of family prejudices and societal opposition is, thus, more than an act of defiance, a re-creation of the self and identity beyond “those usual [socially given] signposts: born in, born on, born to, married on, had a son by, had a daughter called” (5). It is a

reaffirmation of the self as a shape-shifting, fleeting space mapped by complex fluctuating identities. It is an acceptance of humanity as a “chain story” constituted of “all those fragments that pass for different lives [forging] a cunning chain” linked to and “changed by other people's stories” (13). It is an attempt to comprehend the 'I' in relation and through the 'Other' .

As the diverse narrative strands unfold further in a retrospective mode, we encounter Asad's children, Sara and Samar whose struggles with the hybrid nature of their social identity as someone born out of interfaith marriage in a society where one is ultimately diminished to a community identity, began when they were school-going children. Being repeatedly asked “So what are you then?” (179), made to feel different from their classmates, they grew up with an abstruse yet quietly visible “thin clear glass window slid into place between them” (179) and the world which relegates them to its peripheries as fugitive others. Picking up the pieces of carefully cultivated human values, in the wake of the carnage and their fathers subsequent death, Sara and Samar undergo pronounced identity crisis and conflicts with the self. Identity has two contradictory features: it can both, unite and assimilate individuals, as well as divide and differentiate people, marking them as different (Kouhpaenejad and Gholaminejad, 201). Both, the assimilating and divisive roles of identity emerge from social identity markers that create a discourse of control and domination. The individual is not the vis-a-vis of power; it is one of its prime effects (Foucault, 214). The carnage proved a culmination of the lurking prejudices and fears. The steady polarisation and community specific profiling of an individuals identity disillusioned Samar. Tired of being different or trying to be like everyone else, Samar later discovered that there was another way he could turn difference into sameness. “He resurrected his comatose Muslim self, embraced it” I finally know what I am,

[he] said gloatingly to Asad, which is more than I can say for you (205). Samar is unable to reconcile with the hostility towards the in-between-ness of his self. He seeks refuge in the notional security of a presumed monocultural, unitary sense of selfhood. Samar's response symbolises the de-centering of the self as an embodied agent repeatedly "structured in and through discourse without being reduced to it" (Dunn, 695-96). Sara, on the other hand, besieged with self-doubts and scepticism about the relevance and pragmatism of her parents ideals in a world of rigid, parochial perceptions and violent prejudices, embarks on a journey to understand who she really is through a process which involves both continuity and difference, instability and constancy of the self. Working on the script for her friend Ninas documentary on the Gujarat pogrom of the year 2002, she travels from Mumbai to Ahmedabad carrying along with her uncertainties, the memory of Laila, her childhood friend who was burnt to death during the Mumbai riots of 1992. She begins to document direct individual accounts of those affected by the carnage, unsure whether she will be "able to pull out the answers that lie curled deep in this city's core, or herself" (107). Among her interviewees, she meets Yasmin, a seventeen year old survivor of the riots across a lately created border, called by some mini Pakistan. With her life completely shattered in the aftermath of the mayhem, Yasmin still dreams of college and the return of her brother, Akbar missing since the carnage. In the midst of the horrid, graphic accounts Yasmin's undaunted spirit stands out as a beacon of hope yet, Sara struggles to lend coherence to the consequences of prejudices. She wonders if Asad's dream which made him say it was enough just to be you was a mere delusion: "Cut and burnt, cut and burnt. It's a shorthand chant, a chant that echoes in Sara's ears because it's trapped there" (163) and she has no idea "how to let all these stories, other people's stories that are becoming hers, teach her

who she is, what she is” (234). Gradually, towards the dénouement of her narrative thread, she becomes conscious of something being left out- the transitional space of being and becoming. She recalls Asad's words to her: “Dont be ashamed of who you are. Dont be ashamed of who you are not”. It is the moment when Sara crosses a personal border, becomes aware and accepts the hybrid, liminal nature of the self, split up into the knowing and the known, into object and subject, with each of its fragments facing each other inseparably and irreconcilably (Schopenhauer, 6).

Fugitive Histories is a novel where multiple selves collide, shape and are shaped by each other continually. The multiplicity of its apparently disparate narratives that merge, ramify and disrupt linear trajectories is a symbolic representation of liminality. Akin to the narrative strands, the novel's characters and by implication, the concepts of self and identity remain text(s) in the making. Each of them moves through an endless sequence of thresholds to the self much like Mala's chain story with no closures. They reveal that even at the level of self-meanings, self-image, and self-concept, where the historical, cultural, and political particulars of identity are exposed, the self remains dynamic and open-ended (Callero, 125-28). It is best represented through Asad. Possibly, the most profound and palpable character in the novel, Asad symbolises the intersection of the personal and the social, the romantic and the radical, of art and reality, of the past, the present and the future, the multiple voices and myriad stories which constitute the novel as well as the text, subtexts and context. His lifelong resistance to be put into a small box, to be labeled and delimited, thwarted by a world given to distorted notions and debilitating prejudices, deeply affects him and he pours out his hurt, anguish yet persistent hope for an inclusive, egalitarian world space into his sketches. The sketches depict different selves, all interconnected with the same burning desire to know the Self, to find

an answer to the unfathomable questions, who am I? Who are we? How do we know ourselves and others? His conscious choice to defy prejudiced points of view, whether camouflaged as traditionalist, religious or purportedly progressive lies at the essential core of the novel around which revolves the lives and stories of the other characters. They attempt to define themselves through or against who he is: a liminal self. Consequently, each character represents the fragmented, fluid dimensions of an ever-evolving ambiguous self occupying the spaces in-between. According to Verse seven of Isha Upanishad:

“He who sees all beings in the Self and the Self in all beings, he never turns away from It (the Self). /For he who perceives all beings as the Self, how can/there be delusion or grief, /when he sees this oneness (everywhere)?” (Muller, 314)

The Self thus interpreted is inextricably linked to multifarious identities and both are contingent upon each other in their search for coherence and meaning. Daniel C. Dennett, in his essay titled 'The Self as a Centre of Narrative Gravity', draws a rather intriguing analogy between the well-known concept in Newtonian Physics- the centre of gravity- and the self. He describes both as an abstraction and states “each person has a self (in addition to a centre of gravity). In fact we have to posit selves for ourselves as well. The theoretical problem of self-interpretation is at least as difficult and important as the problem of other-interpretation” (<http://cogprints.org/266/1/selfctr.htm>). He quotes David Hume to further substantiate his theory: “For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call *myself*, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never can catch *myself* at any time without a perception, and never can observe anything but the perception.... If anyone, upon serious and unprejudiced reflection, thinks he has a different notion of *himself*, I

must confess I can reason no longer with him. All I can allow him is, that he may be in the right as well as I, and that we are essentially different in this particular.” (*Treatise on Human Nature* I, IV, sec. 6.) Hariharan, through *Fugitive Histories*, thus, explores this multiple, layered, multi-dimensional fluidity of self and identity and, in the process, appropriates these as conceptual tools to foreground the essential liminality of our lived realities wherein fear, prejudices and the divisive binaries of perceived centres and constructed margins can only be overcome through “desiring the difference” (74).

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