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THE PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF COMMUNAL VIOLENCE: MEMORY AND TRAUMA RESPONSES IN GITHA HARIHARAN'S FUGITIVE HISTORIES

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Abstract
The Indian nation, despite being celebrated for its cultural diversity and secular democracy, harbours deep-rooted communal intolerance and hatred. Communal riots have been a persisting issue in the nation's history and the rising number of incidents in the present decades invokes discussions on the psychological aftereffects of such incidents on victims and its representation in ethical narratives. Aside from causing physical destruction to homes and livelihoods, communal violence produces long-lasting psychological scars on the community, affecting identity and straining relationships among individuals. Recounting the aftermath of the Gujarat riots, Githa Hariharan's *Fugitive Histories* paints a bleak picture of the grim reality of the psyche of post-traumatic survivors. This paper examines the literary representation of the altered psychological states of survivors in the aftermath of communal violence in Githa Hariharan's *Fugitive Histories.* By examining the various trauma responses to post-riot survival such as psychological numbing, hypervigilance, intrusive memories, anxiety responses and coping mechanisms, the study explores how psychological trauma reshapes normative cognitive functioning of the human mind. Drawing on theoretical insights from behavioural psychology and traumatic memory studies, this study examines the process behind learning to live once again after loss. The study further showcases the resilience of the minority population and the reformatory procedures as they move towards recovery. In presenting a psychological overview of the Gujarat riots, the novel in itself acts as a form of tertiary witnessing, evoking narrative empathy.

Keywords: communal violence, post-riot survival, Gujarat riots, trauma responses, recovery, narrative empathy

INTRODUCTION

Current socio-political realities demonstrate that the secular and religiously tolerant nature of the Indian Constitution has failed to shield the country from communal hostility, as periodic outbreaks of sectarian riots continue to fracture the already multifarious social fabric of the nation. In his article "Communal Violence in India," Gopal Krishna considers communal violence an "ugly expression" and a force that has had "devastating consequences for the nation in the past, and has gravely retarded the process of integration in the post-independence period" (61). While it is inaccurate to claim that India before independence did not have communal issues, the post-independence aftermath brought new challenges as the Partition of India amplified the intolerances buried underneath. Communal violence has generally involved antagonistic confrontations between Hindus, who form the majority of the country, and other minority religious communities. The Hindu-Muslim co-existence is still an important topic of analysis today than ever before as the problems seem to have deepened rather than being resolved. Gujarat is considered a communally sensitive state and is one of the states with the highest communal riot incidents. The Gujarat riots of 2002 marked the culmination of the brewing religious hatred. During the Godhra Carnage, 58 Hindu pilgrims were burnt alive in Sabarmati Express on their return from Ayodhya by a Muslim mob ("2002: Godhra Riots"). The subsequent mayhem, during which Muslim homes were invaded, robbed, burnt and their women were raped and children mercilessly massacred, was considered one of the worst human rights violations in Indian history. The riots were considered an "equal and opposite reaction" to the train-burning incident at Godhra ("2002 Gujarat Riots"). The Gujarat riots, ultimately, led to the death of around 790

Muslims, 254 Hindus and several missing as the enduring scars persist in its aftermath. The commissions and trials set up to investigate these riots did little to provide answers but instead played the blame-game, leaving those responsible charge-free and those affected justice-denied.

The recurring incidents of communal riots in India expose the deep-seated prejudices, historical grievances, political mobilisations and administrative incompetencies. Consequently, the lived realities of communities who navigate fear, mistrust and insecurity in the aftermath of these conflicts are sidelined and forgotten by the system that refuses to acknowledge or provide solution to these persisting issues. Perhaps literature, through its ability to make aware the absurdity of superficial man-made differences, its portrayal of the degenerative mindset of the perpetrators and its ethical engagement with psychological trauma experienced by the victims, may offer better tools for imagining a nation with secular coexistence. Through its capacity to evoke narrative empathy, literature can create pathways for reconciliation and peace. "Why do communal riots occur? What purposes, if any, do they serve? What conditions aggravate communal conflict?" are difficult questions to be addressed to the social sciences (Krishna 62). Literature, on the other hand, explores the personal and emotional dimensions. Placing the human at the centre, it focuses on the affect of such incidents on the psyche. In "Studying Communal Riots in India: Some Methodological Issues," Vinod K. Jairath proposes the question, "Can we begin to listen to subaltern voices, mainly the victims of communal violence, by examining popular cultural narratives?" (445) emphasising the role of narrative in breaking silences. Set against the background of the 2002 Gujarat riots, Githa Hariharan's *Fugitive Histories* uses a documentary style narration employing a narrator with both Hindu and Muslim roots to navigate the fractured landscape and the equally fragmented lives of survivors. The novel presents the emotional and cognitive aftereffects of violence, where individuals remain trapped in a state of constant alertness, unable to function normally and lead normal lives, anticipating danger in everyday space.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Gujarat riots of 2002 has been extensively documented in non-fictional, journalistic and testimonial books. *The Lucky Ones* (2024) is a memoir by Zara Chowdhary that recounts her experiences as a sixteen-year-old during the 2002 Gujarat riots in Ahmedabad. *The Anatomy of Hate* (2018) by journalist Revati Laul traces the stories of three perpetrators who participated in the hate crimes of 2002, resulting in a chilling account of the casual amorality, lack of remorse and shame. Several investigative non-fictional works such as *Gujarat Files: Anatomy of a Cover Up* (2016) by Rana Ayyub, *Gujarat: The Making of a Tragedy* (2002) and *Gujarat Riots: The True Story* (2014) by M.D. Deshpande have examined the political and institutional dimensions of the riots. While such sociological investigations examine the cause and nature of the Gujarat riots, fictional explorations of the incidents remain relatively scarce.

Githa Hariharan's *Fugitive Histories* is an influential novel exploring the psychological aftermath of communal violence. Existing research primarily focus on the novel's depiction of female subjectivities, religious extremism, and identity crisis. Leena V. Phate in "In Pursuit of Self: A Feminist Reading of Githa Hariharan's *Fugitive Histories*" examines the communal, social, cultural and gendered difficulties that that female characters face in the novel. In "Fury of Faith: PTSD in Githa Hariharan's *Fugitive Histories,*" Shagufta Parween explores the long-term traumatic impact of fundamentalism as presented in the novel. In her article titled "Meandering Memories, Mending to Live: Memory, Trauma and Narration in Githa Hariharan's *Fugitive Histories,*" Kiran Deep examines the entanglements between personal memories and collective trauma using Pierre Janet's concept of narrative memories. Samrat Khanna and Jap Preet Kaur Bhangu in their article titled "Present of the Past and the Past of the Present: A Study of Githa Hariharan's *Fugitive Histories*," examine how religious fundamentalism overrides notions of freedom and nationalism leading to a disturbing present and the ambiguous future. The psychological aspect of communal violence and its capacity to permanently alter the cognitive workings of the human psyche, remain relatively underexplored in the novel within the applied psychology framework. To address this research gap, this study investigates the psychological residues of communal conflict and its life-disrupting aftereffects as they appear in Githa Hariharan's *Fugitive Histories*. The novel in itself functions as a documentary, recording the psychological afterlives of riots, portraying the traumatic memories which intrude, shaping personal identity, social interactions and communal relationships. The study further foregrounds the role of literature in voicing out the invisible psychological scars, underscoring the importance of narrative empathy and ethical witnessing to advocate the enduring human cost of religious violence.

Research Methodology and Theoretical Framework

The study adopts a qualitative textual analysis to examine the psychological and behavioural changes in the post-riot context in *Fugitive Histories.* It draws on interdisciplinary theoretical frameworks from behavioural psychology and traumatic memory studies to analyse the representation of trauma, memory, and recovery. Drawing on diverse theoretical concepts from applied psychology—Paul Slovic's concept of psychophysical numbing, Pauline Boss's theory of ambiguous loss, Maria Tumarkin's notion of the traumascape, Gustave Le Bon's crowd theory, Judith Herman's stages of trauma, and the theories of testimony and witnessing as articulated by Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, the study examines the psychological implications of communal violence. Additionally, the study advances how the novel mediates trauma, in itself becoming a site of tertiary/ethical witnessing, negotiating affective engagement with the readers, leading to the enablement of what Suzanne Keen theorised as narrative empathy. Through this integrative framework, the article explores how *Fugitive Histories* not only documents the psychological aftermath of communal violence but also creates spaces for voicing subaltern experiences, facilitating empathy and the processes of recovery and reparation.

Documenting Loss and Psychological Numbing

In *Fugitive Histories,* Githa Hariharan revisits the 2002 Gujarat riots through Nina's upcoming documentary for which she takes Sara along on her journey and implicitly the readers to encounter the victims' testimonies, thereby facilitating a re-enactment of the traumatic memories of violence. The script to Nina's documentary starts with the Godhra Carnage that incited the subsequent riots:

On 27 February 2002 the Sabarmati Express was attacked in Godhra Station in Gujarat and two of its carriages set on fire. The train was carrying 'Hindu activists' on their way back from Ayodhya. Godhra is a 'Muslim locality'. In the days and weeks that followed, the Muslims of Gujarat became the target of brutal violence. The statements of survivors, eyewitnesses and relief workers suggest that state officials and the police connived with the attackers. (42)

According to Nina, the objective of her documentary is to "tell the stories of some of these people in their own voices. What happened to them in 2002, what the state government did (or didn't do) to rehabilitate them, and how these people are now trying to rebuild their lives" (42). In contrast to conventional media, Sara and Nina do not carry any equipment, cameras or tapes . . . [n]ot even a notebook and pen" when they meet the dislocated families in their relocated colony as Nina says to Sara, "We'll make it a sort of social visit" (108). This emphasises a more personal and empathetic mode of listening as opposed to the mechanical and often dehumanising nature of media coverage that turns trauma into spectacle. Unlike historical or journalistic accounts which often prioritise events, data and statistics, Nina's documentary and by extension Hariharan's novel, aims to restore dignity to sufferers.

In the novel, Sara experiences personal trauma through the loss of her friend Laila as the novel mentions, "Laila and her husband were burnt to death when Mumbai erupted" (52). Laila and her husband are implied to have died during riots which erupted in Mumbai in 1992-93 after the Demolition of the Babri Masjid. Years after the incident, the novel describes Sara as being haunted with "the shock that it can happen to someone you once knew, perhaps even loved" (52). Carrying the burden of personal loss, Sara further experiences a secondary loss by witnessing Yasmin, "a riot-affected girl" and her story in the Gujarat riots. By placing Sara as a common witness to the two incidents, Hariharan shows that communal violence is not limited to the 2002 Gujarat riots, but is part of a longer history of recurring communal hatred in India. In "Towards a Theory of Cultural Trauma," Jeffrey C. Alexander emphasises the collective aspect of traumatic experiences: "Cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness" (1). *Fugitive Histories* portrays how the recurrent riots caused by religious fundamentalism have resulted in latent damages that affect the psychological being of an entire targeted community. Such literary efforts reveal that trauma extends beyond individual victims to involve entire communities, nurturing a feeling of collective distress. Cathy Caruth famously defined traumatic experience as "unclaimed" due to their belatedness. It is not fully processed at the moment but later appears as fragmented memories and involuntary recollections, disrupting the normative functioning of the individual. The 2002 Gujarat riots have caused latent damages that scarred India's Muslim population. While the incident has been barely acknowledged in fiction, the role of literature can be viewed as a meaning-making process involved in overcoming the forced silencing and belatedness after the horrific incident.

In *Fugitive Histories*, Yasmin's lifestyle and family dynamics are permanently altered after the riots. Abba's shop is burnt and the family is forced to sell their home and move to a safer neighbourhood. Additionally, the family is grieving the loss of their son, Akbar Ali, a college student who went missing during the riots. The responses of the authorities to his absence reveal the emotional insensitivity to their conditions of existence. When they seek the help of policemen to find their missing son, their anxieties are met with rude remarks: "Has he eloped with a Hindu girl? Or left home to join the terrorists?" (134). Ammi's bewildered reply that he is "just a student. He doesn't know anything about politics" (134) is met not with empathy but with derision. The policemen look at each other and burst into laughter saying, "This is probably what Osama bin Laden's mother says of him" (134). The policemen's response does not emerge out of individual apathy but reflects a larger societal problem —the deeply entrenched communal hatred and institutionalised stereotyping against Muslims in India. By immediately associating a missing Muslim youth with terrorism or deviance, the novel shows how Islamophobic assumptions promulgated by popular media narratives and political discourse infiltrate everyday policing practices where Muslim identity itself becomes suspect.

In the police station, Ammi and Abba become just another complainant who are rendered insignificant in statistics as the policemen lets them know that "she's just another mother, Akbar just another son" (135). The dehumanization that "Akbar is just another missing person. Just another missing Muslim boy" trivialises their loss (135). The novel reveals the insignificance of individual loss in mass violence and institutional apathy through the officer's detachment:

All day he has to hear people crying, 'My mother, my son, my daughter . . .'[. . .] He wants to tell all these people making their way to police stations all over the city that they are no longer mothers or sons or daughters. They are just numbers, statistics, part of action and reaction [. . .] he fills up half a sheet of paper with an indecipherable scrawl and gets them to sign it. He files it and throws the file on top of a pile. (135)

Robert Jay Lifton calls this "psychic numbing" caused due to the prolonged exposure to the gruesome violence which leads to emotional numbness (620). Examining the diminished capacity to experience affect as the scale of mass violence magnifies, Paul Slovic, in his article, "Psychic Numbing and Mass Atrocity" states that "it is not because people are insensitive to the suffering of their fellow human being" or because of "some fundamental deficiency in our humanity" but instead it is a deficiency in the very hardware of the human brain (126). Subsequently, he introduces the concept of "psychophysical numbing" (129). According to his study, human beings are deeply moved by one man's suffering but are unable to exponentially multiply one man's suffering to thousands. Therefore, the value of human life is inversely proportional to the number of lives lost. The concept of psychological numbing is important because it demonstrates that the feelings necessary for motivating life-saving action diminishes as losses increase resulting in a weaker humanitarian response from the government and authorities. The policemen in *Fugitive Histories* reflect this "incapacity to appreciate loss of life" due to the large number of lives lost in the Gujarat riots (129). To counter the indifference and lack of emotional pressure, Slovic emphasises the need for affective imagery in reporting and documenting. Rather than focusing on mass numbers and statistics, she calls for shift in focus toward emotion-laden storytelling as a step to overcoming psychic numbing (137). Such a view, foregrounds the power of testimony, affective imagery and trauma narratives in overcoming the failure of imagination. Githa Hariharan's *Fugitive Histories* names the victim, personalises his story and visualises the suffering of the family members. The fictional reimagination of the loss in Gujarat riots makes abstract struggles personal and real, enabling readers to respond more to identified individual stories as opposed to unidentified statistical victims.

Fugitive Histories presents without embellishment the piling of corpses in the morgue through Abba's eyes who is confronted with the possibility of finding his son among the dead:

It's the first time Abba saw that being dead meant being cut. It meant missing a body part—an arm, a leg, even a head. It's the first time Abba saw that being dead could also mean a new body part had grown overnight to stick out of the old body: an iron rod or a hammer or a wooden stump or a screwdriver. There was one body with its belly torn open; a spear stuck out of it like a sharp-edged hand calling for help. Another body was just burnt coal. If you touched it, it would fall apart, crumble into a small heap of gritty black powder. Abba didn't know how the others managed to recognize fathers, mothers, sisters and brothers, people, in these monstrous discoloured lumps of flesh, bloated, burnt or cut to pieces. (137)

The morgue, like the police station, becomes a site of depersonalisation, reducing human lives to physical remains awaiting identification. Abba is met with "a horrible mix of guilt and relief"— relief because the dead body is not Akbar's and guilt because it is someone else's son (137). Abba's repeated visits to hospitals and morgues signify a desperate attempt to resist Akbar's erasure—to reclaim him as more than "just another missing person" (135). In the book *Ambiguous Loss: Finding Resiliency Despite Unclear Loss*, Pauline Boss details the ambiguous loss theory which mainly focuses on families, how they navigate absence and resiliency after unclear loss. "The premise of the ambiguous loss theory is that uncertainty or a lack of information about the whereabouts or status of a loved one as absent or present, as dead or alive, is traumatizing for most individuals, couples, and families" (105). In the novel, the sub-inspector tells Abba and Ammi that "missing is not so bad . . . It's better than dead" (135). The lack of clear knowledge as to Akbar's existence stalls emotional closure. As Boss puts it, "The ambiguity freezes the grief process and prevents cognition, thus blocking coping and decision-making processes. Closure is impossible" (105). Given the human need for finality, the paradox of not knowing the presence or absence and "waiting to learn the fate of a child gone missing" can immobilise and traumatise families (106). As Boss puts it, the ambiguity ruptures the meaning of loss and freezes both coping and grieving, "without meaning, there is no hope" (106). *Fugitive Histories* displays the chipping away of hope in Abba after each attempt to find Akbar: "Every night he came back home looking a little more lost. He was losing bits of himself, the bits that made him human like everyone else. At this rate he would lose himself entirely; he would grow lighter and quieter till he was only a nameless shadow. Then that too ended" (137). Each encounter with piled-up corpses and wounded people produces a psychic numbing which leads to the loss of his self. Abba appears trapped in a liminal state where grief is suspended between hope and dread. His situation illustrates how trauma operates not only through loss but through prolonged uncertainty and deferred closure.

Traumascapes and Yasmin's Altered Spatial Perception

The spatial is at the core of understanding sites of peace and conflict and socio-political changes essentially reshape spaces and as a consequence reconfigure the way individuals and groups can move within them. Henri Lefebvre in his work *The Production of Space*, argues that "(Social) space is a (social) product" referring to how it is produced by social relations, politics, and power (26). In this sense, it is not merely a physical reality or an empty abstraction but "also a means of control, and hence of domination, of power" (26). Communal violence transforms city space, turning familiar spaces into traumatic, haunting ones. Trauma is often conceived as a purely psychological process but several thinkers have pointed out how it is invested and inscribed in spaces that previously experienced violence, unexpected mass death and human suffering. Defining traumascapes as "a distinctive category of place, transformed physically and psychically by suffering" (11), Maria Tumarkin, in her book *Traumascapes* states, "Because trauma is contained not in an event as such but in the way this event is experienced, traumascapes become much more than physical settings of tragedies: they emerge as spaces, where events are experienced and re-experienced across time" (11). Rather than asking "how death could transform a place," Tumarkin poses an alternate question, "How does life go on in a place transformed by death?" (176-77) to investigate the relationship between trauma and lived geography which is inevitably a study of haunting. Religious riots reorganise the city space and violence produces new spatial boundaries, segregating communities. Spaces marked by trauma exert significant psychological influence over our lives as individuals and communities. Githa Hariharan's *Fugitive Histories* exemplifies the violence as invested in spaces. The novel portrays the transformation of familiar spaces and the emerging boundaries in the city after the Hindu-Muslim riots. In the novel, Nina informs Sara, "They call this a border" as they cross a highway "And some call this area mini Pakistan" (110). The demarcation of spaces is intended to wall in some people and to wall out others, to determine who belongs and who doesn't. The minority population are delegated an area in the outskirts of the city, confined and contained. In this little space Sara notes the "too many hovels" cramped in the ghetto, making for a slum-like dwelling, a temporary safe space. As Sara travels through the city, she initially admires the beauty of Ahmedabad, but the city imagery quickly moves from surface spectacle to hidden decay, indicating that beneath the façade of normalcy lies a deeply scarred and violated social space. She notes,

The city has shown Sara its showpieces; its everyday outfits; its torn and yellowing underwear. It's even shown her a flash of dirty bare skin. But it remains a stranger; it remains unfathomable . . . She just can't see what it is about the place that made it such a willing hostage of a whole big hating mob. A mob as big as the city, a mob that became the city. A mob that became the government. (109)

The equation of the mob to the city collapses the distinction between people and place as the violence tends to saturate the entire urban space, including the government, indicating the breakdown of democratic order in the face of collective hatred.

The novel critiques the disjuncture between geographical maps and lived reality. Through their fixed lines and neatly demarcated spaces, maps erase the histories of violence and displacement that shape lived experiences. The flattened representation of the city on the page deceptively hides the violence, hatred and prejudices beneath. Yasmin realises the inadequacy of the maps learnt in her school atlas as she creates an alternate map that would incorporate all the details pertaining to the riot—the places of danger, the places she can be in and the neighbourhoods that are safe. The novel foregrounds the internalisation of the fractured city space through Yasmin's memorialisation of the map:

Yasmin has to learn every map as it shows up on the skin of the city like a birthmark that has, for some mysterious reason, taken its time to be born. She has to study it as if it is part of the board exam portion, except this exam comes every day. She has to divide the map into places she can be in, places she can't be in; she has to identify the borders in between, borders that wall in some places, wall out some people. Then she has to print this changed geography syllabus on her brain with indelible ink. (147)

Yasmin's imagined map is a more accurate representation of reality. Her mental map moves beyond an iconographic representation to include an added context of power positions, differences, communal tensions, violence, trauma and emotions. Yasmin, therefore, engages in the act of countermapping. The knowledge of place that Yasmin acquires after the conflict is a reminder of the precarity of her position in the power pyramid. In the face of sectarian violence, Yasmin's altered mental map is a map survival. The novel also records the changes in Yasmin's spatial perception before and after the communal riots: "Four years back, Yasmin didn't even know this part of the city. Maybe she had seen it on a map. Maybe it was hiding in the school atlas, a warning sign small as a dot, so small she'd overlooked it. She knows better than to overlook anything now" (147). This shift underscores how trauma reconfigures her engagement with space, turning the city into a site of heightened vigilance, where previously unfamiliar or insignificant locations acquire new meanings shaped by fear and survival.

In conflict zones, spaces once associated with safety, such as homes, neighbourhoods, and schools, become sites of violence and exclusion. In "The spatiality of violence in post-war cities," Elfversson et al. assert how post-violence, cities "often function poorly as cities and constitute dangerous sites for people to live in" (81). The novel showcases how communal violence leads to displacement as it depicts the loss of homes and familiar neighbourhoods. The trauma witnessed during the riots radically transform the nostalgia of homes and neighbourhoods as they become imbued with memories of the violence, making remembrance a painful experience. *Fugitive Histories* depicts how the burning and looting of Muslim homes is a common occurrence during communal riots mainly to send the message to say that they don't belong here. Yasmin's family is forced to displace to a safer neighbourhood as their shop is first looted and then burnt, "It was a short message, loud and clear: Do you value your life? Do you value your family? Then it's time to leave the neighbourhood because anything can happen" (137-38). The Muslim ghetto is a cramped space with many families occupying different rooms in a house. Trading comfort for safety, she says,

We're lucky we have two rooms even if they're dark and small. We're lucky we have two rooms in a safe area. We're lucky we have a tap in the bathroom, we have to use the water tank outside only once a day. We're lucky we have electricity. You're lucky you go to school. You're lucky your father got some money at least for the old house. You're lucky you didn't have to see your brother's dead body or see him killed. You're lucky you can remember him as he was. You're lucky, we're lucky. They have to say it often, in as many ways as possible. They have to say it as often as possible because in their hearts they don't believe it. Now Yasmin has to believe it. She's lucky. (122)

Yasmin's repeated assertions of being "lucky" is an act of negotiation shaped by trauma that they atleast have little space in an unwelcoming city. It is less an expression of gratitude than an attempt to stablise the harsh reality with forced consolation.

Traumascapes are characterised by the powerful bond between survivors and the sites of their trauma. They are not merely physical settings of tragedies but are also "an essential part of people's experiences of mourning, remembering and making sense of traumatic histories imprinted onto them" (11). As Tumarkin states, "They are places that compel memories, crystallise identities and meanings" (11). In this regard, memorialisation is an important aspect of traumascapes. For Yasmin, home remains unreachable in reality and the only way she can access home is through stories recounted in memory and revisited in imagination. Home for Yasmin becomes a complicated idea as she voices, "I feel so homesick. I know I can't go back. But I can't help wishing I could go home so I can see if it's still there" (125). Her coping mechanism is to visit her home through telling and remembering as the novel states, "How is Yasmin to describe home? . . . Telling Sara about it may be the only way to go back" (125-26). Since home is no longer physically accessible, Yasmin "shut her eyes so she can go home more easily. More secretly . . . preferably by air, because on the land she would have to cross a border that's manned day and night" (127). In her imagination, Yasmin flies high above her street like "a bird or a plane" overcoming the illusionary divisions that politicise space. She whispers the names of people whose houses made up the lane saying, "Botawala, Shah, Patel, Desai, another Shah, Gupta, Sharma" (128) which appears to be a mix of different religions, a reference to the plural syncretic nature of the neighbourhood before the communal violence. Yasmin speculates, "Could it be that there is place for them here? . . . But maybe they could have stayed on? Or come back? But they don't need to come back and live in fear, because they never left in the first place" (127). Even after displacing to the Muslim ghetto for almost five years, Yasmin still considers it "a pretend home. It will remain that no matter how long they live here, no matter how hard they try to make its mean rooms theirs" (150). The novel refers to Yasmin's present house as the "in-between house" as it is "in transit, on the way to somewhere else" charged with uncertainty, waiting without knowing whether what comes after may be better or worse (142).

Traumascapes prove that long after the event is over, the past still remains an unfinished business. Going back to lost spaces is full of visual and sensory triggers that is capable of eliciting a whole palette of emotions. A brief encounter with a traumascape, even if it is only through memory "would give rise to a distinctive order of sensations— awe, unease, involuntary recall, déjà vu, epiphany, fear, delight, recognition" (Tumarkin 188). Githa Hariharan's *Fugitive Histories* show how space is not just physical but also socially constructed and emotionally experienced. By re-mapping and re-contextualising space, Hariharan's novel maps not just the complexities of geographical displacement, but also the emotional and psychological impact of exclusionary violence.

Trauma and Recovery: Testimony, Secondary Witnessing and Narrative Empathy

In his work *The Crowd: A Study of Popular Mind*, Gustave Le Bon theorises the psychological emergence of a crowd, wherein "a collective mind is formed" as individuals lose their conscious personality and take one and the same direction, becoming violent and destructive (13). *Fugitive Histories* presents mob mentality, backed up by institutional propaganda, as the major causative factor for the mob violence that occurred during the Gujarat riots. In the novel, Nasreen, a riot-affected woman, presents the brutal emergence of the crowd:

First there were a hundred people, then there were more. There were so many more. There were so many they seemed countless. They had swords, pipes, hockey sticks, soda-lemon bottles, saffron flags, all kinds of sharp weapons. They had petrol bombs and gas cylinders. They broke the dargah down the street and put an idol there. They came to our houses, they were shouting "Kill them, cut them, burn them alive!" Then they blasted apart our lives. (158)

The mob's coordinated use of weapons and its slogan-driven aggression reflect what Le Bon terms the contagion effect, wherein emotions and impulses spread rapidly, producing a homogenised and heightened state of violence. In the collective mind, the intellectual aptitudes of the individuals are compromised. As Le Bon states, the crowd is marked by "impulsiveness, irritability, incapacity to reason, the absence of judgment and of the critical spirit, the exaggeration of the sentiments" (20) making it convenient for religious fanaticism to mobilise, homogenise and amplify intolerance among a heterogeneous crowd. Regarding the hypnotised state, singularity of mission and contagious nature of the crowd, Le Bon states, "in a crowd, he is a barbarian — that is, a creature acting by instinct. He possesses the spontaneity, the violence, the ferocity, and also the enthusiasm and heroism of primitive beings" (19). Despite the crowd emerging as a collective, the women in the novel state how they were able to recognise many of the faces in the crowd. This suggests how ordinary, otherwise peaceful, law-abiding individuals are subsumed into collective brutality under specific socio-political conditions. After burning children and raping women, they go back to their normal lives—family and workplaces. After the mob violence, Yasmin is very conscious of the violent nature of crowds as she states, "Any girl knows that a busy road is a safe road. But Yasmin knows now that she should also be afraid of a crowd. How's she to find a road that's not empty but has no crowd?" (149). The shift in Yasmin's perception of crowds and spaces reflects her social understanding of the mechanics of a mob violence.

In *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence*, Judith Herman defines psychological trauma as “an affliction of the powerless” (17). She categorises traumatic events as that which “generally involve threats to life or bodily integrity, or a close personal encounter with violence and death” (17). According to Herman, traumatic symptoms begin when the response to danger “tends to persist in an altered and exaggerated state long after the actual danger is over” consequently overwhelming “the ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection, and meaning” (17). The common factor of psychological trauma is a feeling of intense fear, helplessness, loss of control, and threat of annihilation. Trauma intrinsically alters the cognitive and neural functioning of the brain which in turn causes changes in arousal, attention, perception, and emotion. These changes in ordinary human responses, as Herman states “are normal, adaptive reactions” which mobilise the threatened person for strenuous action (17). Herman categorises the many symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder as falling into three main categories—hyperarousal, intrusion, and constriction. Hyperalertness or hypervigilance is the state of being on the lookout for something to happen or awaiting harm, even when the event is long past. Hypervigilance is one of the primary symptoms of people who are afflicted with PTSD. In *Fugitive Histories*, Yasmin’s walk to school becomes a strenuous, anxious-ridden task as it means “being careful,” “running, hiding, keeping her racing heart quiet” as her fear takes the form of imagined pursuit: “there’s someone after her and he may hear it. Someone, or many someones” (123). This state of being in a state of constant anxiousness is emotionally and physically exhausting as the mind and the body refuses to believe that the danger is over. Yasmin voices the psychological implications of surviving post-riot violence:

> It means being shy, watchful, on her guard against men. And fire. Fires that men may light because they know how well fire burns people, homes and lives to ashes. Most of all, being careful means choosing to live. There isn’t a moment in the day or night she can forget that, because then she may forget how to remain safe. Safe and alive. (123)

Hypervigilance is not necessarily a negative thing for victims as it is a coping mechanism of the nervous system trying to protect the individual. In this sense, it is an act of survival as Yasmin states, “being careful means choosing to live” (123). Hypervigilance in itself is a condition brought on by unpredictability wherein their brain concludes—Danger can happen at any moment, be prepared. In the novel, Yasmin is guided by the words of her community, to always be “*careful, alert, guarding against, taking care, anything can happen*” (123). Due to the recurring nature of communal riots, individuals belonging to minority communities are compelled to always be alert in an environment that doesn’t want them. In the novel, a Muslim man voices the dangers of complacency: “We've been idiots, we got too comfortable thinking it wouldn’t happen again” (201). The inability to let one’s guard down reflects not paranoia but a learned survival strategy, shaped by repeated exposure to communal conflict and a mistrust of the society.

Intrusion refers to the invasion of traumatic memories or recollections that disrupt the everyday functioning of individuals. Reliving a traumatic experience, whether in the form of intrusive memories, nightmares or even through material reminders, carries with it the emotional intensity of the original event. When trauma repeatedly interrupts, victims find it difficult to resume the normal course of life. *Fugitive Histories* portrays not just the intrusion of homes, livelihoods and bodies but also the psychological intrusion. The detailed testimonies of the women reveal how the violent event becomes etched in their minds. The communal riots fill the Muslim community with terror and rage, emotions that qualitatively differ from ordinary fear and anger. The survivors struggle to move on and find peace because memory itself becomes invasive—unbidden, repetitive, and overwhelming. Constriction refers to the feelings of detachment, dissociation or helplessness that a person experiences as a latent damage of trauma. It refers to a state of psychic numbing and emotional shutdown that occurs when a person cannot escape overwhelming danger. In *Fugitive Histories*, there is a transcendence of this stage. Instead of surrendering to trauma, the characters continue to move on, living their lives, working and making meaning out of their situation. Their trajectory is marked by gradual movement towards recovery, facilitated through the process of telling. Herman positions remembering and telling the truth about terrible events as one of the stages in the process of recovery and a prerequisite for the healing of individual victims. Testimony, therefore, becomes a crucial step in the process of healing, enabling survivors to resist stagnation.

In the book *Testimony*, Shoshana Felman poses the question, “Is the testimony, therefore, a simple medium of historical transmission, or is it, in obscure ways, the unsuspected medium of healing?” (9). Elaborating on the psychological relation between speech and survival, she positions the telling of the trauma as cathartic and therefore an act of psychological survival. Felman, however, does not present testimony as a guaranteed healing process, instead points out how the “course of its own utterance, quiet explicitly rejects the very goal of healing and precludes any therapeutic project” (9). The act of telling might itself cause further re-traumatisation if speaking leads to re-living and not relief. As Maria Tumarkin states, “remembering a traumatic event can be more traumatic than actually surviving it. Because, in this kind of remembering, an act of memory calls for a partial reliving of an unassimilated past” (9). In *Fugitive Histories*, the women gather together before Sara and Nina to bear witness to the events they had seen happen during the Gujarat riots:

> They started cutting so people couldn’t run away. I saw a woman’s foot being cut.’ Salma shivers. ‘She fell. She was raped, she was cut some more. Then she was burnt.’ The pregnant girl from upstairs, Zakia, suddenly speaks up in a wheezy voice that lets her speak only a few words at a time. ‘I saw it with my own eyes. 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 just burst.' (159)

This testimony is further intensified through another woman who narrates the loss of her family: "'They cut him across the forehead, they cut her stomach. They cut his legs, they cut her breasts. They cut his foot off, they cut her arms off. They cut and slashed, cut and slashed. Then they burnt.' 'They burnt my whole family. They are all in a mass grave now, my whole family'" (163). Testimony leads to the acknowledgement of the traumatic event. In narrating the brutality of violence in detail, the teller gives form to the unspeakable, so that it can be integrated into one's life story. Sharing also allows the re-establishment of a supportive community that was lost during the isolating experience of wounding. The various voices of the women come together to form a collective testimony of the community as the novel notes how Yasmin could "no longer see which voice in the room belongs to which body, or whether the voices have bodies at all. They are just voices, nothing else" (162). Through the telling of their stories, the women in the community confront the horrors not by "acting out" but by "working though" as Dominick LaCapra would call it (148). This articulatory practice is a complex approach that requires revisiting the past in order to work through them, which "may help the survivor to "(re-)gain a sense of control over the past, (re-)engage with life in the present" (Gil 632).

Testimony requires the presence of two people, the teller who witnessed and the listener who is introduced to the event through the teller. In "Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening," Dori Laub develops the theory of witnessing in humanistic trauma studies. According to Laub, "the listener to the narrative of extreme human pain, of massive psychic trauma" becomes "a participant and a co-owner of the traumatic event: through his very listening, he comes to partially experience trauma in himself" (57). The task of the listener is to be unobtrusively present, throughout the testimony and partake in the struggle of the victim. In this regard, he/she comes to inhabit the victims' feelings, defeats, silences, and helplessness and seeks to "know them from within, so that they can assume the form of testimony" (58). In the novel, Yasmin is swallowed by the stories of other people as the novel questions, "Other people's stories. How did they get into Yasmin? How did *she* become other people?" (162). Gradually, Yasmin begins to inhabit "other people's stories that are becoming hers" and these stories "teach her who she is, what she is" (234). Sarah also finds it difficult to sit through and listen to the testimonies told in graphic detail. When Zulekha details how the mothers, daughters and sisters were brutally raped, she challenges Sara, Nina and their recording machine to be warned before being scarred saying, "'You won't be able to bear it. Once you've heard it, it'll never let you forget'" (160). Zulekha's warning comes true when Sara "wishes she didn't have to hear this. She wishes she could get up and leave the room" (160). What Sara hears in the room lingers with her and alters her perception of human beings and their capacity to violence. Sara experiences what is called "vicarious trauma" which is the "secondary traumatisation [that] may arise from witnessing others' suffering, such as by listening to, reading or watching traumatic life narratives" (Gil 633). A vicariously wounded person also feels the same "bewilderment, injury, confusion, dread and conflicts that the trauma victim feels" (Laub 58) and this empathetic witness becomes a moral one who readily partakes in the responsibility to record, store, and transmit the testimony (Gil 633). Sara is a primary witness to the incidents of Laila's death and, later, a secondary witness to Yasmin. She is made aware of both "the actual event towards which the narrative is travelling, that small space of time in which Laila is burnt or Yasmin molested and left brotherless" (192). She begins to imagine, "What was it like? . . . the haters, the hated, the anguished or indifferent bystanders" as she realises how difficult it is "to see other people's pain or hatred or anger, live it as they have to live it again and again in memory!" (184). While Sara acts as a secondary witness, she simultaneously becomes a mediator for tertiary witnessing, assimilating the novel's readers into the act of witnessing.

Felman and Laub pose the question, "What is the relation between literature and testimony, between the writer and the witness? What is the relation between the act of witnessing and testifying and the acts of writing and reading, particularly in our era?" (xiii). Testimonial literary texts undertake the ethical endeavour to listen to the unheard voices of trauma victims, to help restore their dignity and to advocate for their agency. Githa Hariharan's *Fugitive Histories*, therefore, evokes what Suzanne Keen terms "narrative empathy." Through "the interior representation of characters' consciousness and emotional states," the novel promotes "character identification, contributing to empathetic experiences, opening readers' minds" (213). According to Keen, empathetic reading experiences "can contribute to changing a reader's disposition, motivations, and attitudes" by invoking in readers a "sense of shared humanity" (214). The tertiary witnessing done by the novel's reader creates empathy for fictional characters which in turn can increase the hope of creating an empathetic community that would reduce communal wounding in the future.

Conclusion

Communal violence exposure increases risk for fear-based disorders, such as social anxiety, hypervigilance, avoidance, panic disorders and intrusive memories, whereby fear responses continue to persist and haunt the victims even after the situation is deemed safe. Through the experiences of characters like Sara, Yasmin and the other riot-affected women, Githa Hariharan's *Fugitive Histories* foregrounds the psychological repercussions of communal violence, illustrating how trauma infiltrates both individual psyche and collective memory. Through the fragmented narratives and testimonies, the novel moves beyond mere documentation to foreground the affective depth of experiences often sidelined. The persistence of uncertainty after traumatic loss resists closure, revealing how trauma resists resolution, resulting in an ongoing struggle to articulate loss. In testifying to the

Gujarat riots, Hariharan's novel speaks for the other and to others, facilitating the act of listening and witnessing as readers. *Fugitive Histories* underscores the importance of storytelling as both a mode of witnessing and a means of resistance against erasure. The novel invites a psychological understanding of post-violence realities to see the invisible, long-term consequences of communal conflict. It further affirms the necessity of narrative in confronting the legacies of violence.

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