

Extracts from selected interviews

Hindu, 2009

<http://www.thehindu.com/mp/2009/08/04/stories/2009080450050100.htm>

Telling others' stories

It is important to debate the insidious ways in which walls are springing up to not just divide people, but to keep some people in and some out, author Githa Hariharan tells Bageshree S.

***Fugitive Histories* continues the preoccupation of your earlier novel, *In Times of Siege*. This too is talking of liberal spaces being under siege.**

Yes, but *Fugitive Histories* looks at these familiar ideas in a more personal, private way. It presents a mosaic of lives that collide in unhappy ways, but also in ways that produce love, passion and tenderness. After all, shrinking of public spaces also shrinks private spaces. The novel says that we can no longer be satisfied with overused rhetoric. A lot of people with liberal ideas would not hesitate to formally condemn prejudice against a community. But what happens to that same middle class person in day-to-day life when he or she is continuously exposed to the profiling of a community? There is a need to not just define prejudice, but also fears in our individual lives. Prejudice is not something that comes up only when we are in public meetings.

Asad is the most touching and palpable character in the novel though we only hear of him through others. His grief over the loss of an ideology that once sustained him and his vision of India as an egalitarian space is moving.

Asad spends a lifetime refusing to be put in a small box, and then, all over again, he has a diminishing religious identity.

There is a romantic streak in him because the romantic and radical intersect, especially in youth. Asad wonders if what he is seeing is the failure of an ideology or our own failure as people interpreting it.

All political commitments have to be questioned, strengthened, renewed and made meaningful for different times. It is right now important to debate the way in which walls are springing up to not just divide people, but to keep some people in and some out.

What kind of homework did you do on post-Godhra Gujarat?

I visited Ahmedabad in 2004 spent a lot of time there. In a way what Sara feels and says is closely related to what I heard and saw. That grounding was important.

Sara says that it is difficult to tell other people's stories. Do you feel that way too as a writer?

This is a question every writer, film-maker or journalist faces. But how can you tell stories without telling other people's stories? Your own story too consists of other people's stories. But it is always important to be aware that you are speaking on somebody else's behalf. It's dangerous to become a spokesperson. That is how a mullah can speak on behalf of all Muslims and a Swami on behalf of all Hindus. Before you know it everybody gets lumped into homogenous identities.

You fought a famous case on a woman's guardianship rights over her children. How do the activist and the writer in you intersect?

I see myself as a complex of fluctuating identities. I would not be able to separate my life as a writer, citizen, feminist, mother or writer. Identity is something we re-invent on a daily basis. As wives, mothers, working women, people taking the bus, driving the car and being overtaken by everyone else!

What is the big challenge before a woman activist today?

It is important to look at who is setting the terms of reference. An organisation like Rama Sene or something else springs up and takes up an issue and we are suddenly reduced to wasting time and energy discussing whether drinking in pubs is against Indian culture.

If women can afford it and want to, of course, they should. But these are little, private freedoms and they suddenly become all important. The pity is that the real weighty issues that we must look at before they shatter the ground under our feet are camouflaged.

The Indian Express, 2009

A novel discord, Mohan Ramamoorthy

Reading yet again a book of “textured, colliding narratives” after a long conversation with its author is somewhat like revisiting a retrospective of abstract paintings after poring over the painter’s meditative memoirs. Snatches of conversation with Githa Hariharan keep popping up in the mind, as I read her latest novel *Fugitive Histories* the second time.

In Part One — ominously titled “Missing Persons” — the phrase “stories that may collide” (with *collide* in italics in the original text) takes me back to my interview notes — Githa is talking about colliding narratives... The book, written in the wake of the Gujarat 2002 riots, has multiple narratives — one colliding with the other. “What happened in Gujarat is important to us,” she says, obliquely drawing parallels with the historical reality of Partition and its repercussion, with which the country still continues to struggle.

The first 100 pages are populated with different characters: Tamil Brahmin Mala Vaidyanathan and her Muslim husband Asad Zaidi — children of the Nehru era; their post-Emergency children Samar and Sara. Incidentally, Sara’s friend/lover is Rajat Shaw, whose father is Christian, but his mother with the “leaping red of her bindi and the kumkum along the parting of her hair ... was something else first”.

Sara’s roomie is Nina and the landlady Rosy. Sara ponders that if she marries Rajat, she could “carry as much baggage as possible”, calling herself Sara Vaidyanathan Zaidi Shaw. And then, there’s Yasmin from Ahmedabad. The list is by no means exhaustive. Some critics may dismiss the motley cast as cardboard characters and their realities a bit contrived to suit the demands of a narrative that deals with “differences and sameness”. Though the book overtly talks of differences, underneath is sameness, says Githa. All captured through constant shifts from present to past, seamlessly connecting the two; the effortless straddling of different geographies. Githa’s craft and the multiple drafts that went into creating the novel are evident here. Nostalgia, dreams and nightmares and quiet introspection make the narrative delightfully nuanced.

Missing is a strong metaphor she uses deftly. From Mala’s missing twin to Yasmin’s brother who went missing during the riots and now presumed/confirmed dead, they add a real/surreal dimension to the narrative. Regarding the sensual elements in the book (Mala “grinds her teeth when she is mid-orgasm”), Githa says, “Desire and sexuality are two ways of celebrating difference”.

The second part — aptly titled *Crossing Boundaries* — brings the metropolitan Sara to post-riot Ahmedabad and face to face with its teenage victim Yasmin. She’s a “half-child, half-woman”, the author says during the interview. Yasmin and her world seem to be both new and unknown terrain. Not only to Sara, but maybe to the author as well.

When asked about the numerous reports she had read of and some of which she lists at the end of the book, Githa comes to the point: “How do we speak for others? It is both a philosophical and

a craft question". As a creative writer she says she can see the macro playing out in the microcosm of a character's life. It's the big picture helping unravel a character's inner world.

At the end of the book, Githa acknowledges that she "felt it was best to speak for those affected by the Gujarat catastrophe in 2002 in words as close as possible to their own". Her account is based on what she heard during a visit to Ahmedabad in 2004 and read in publications and fact-finding reports of several rights organisations. Being a mother, Githa believes, helps in relating to Yasmin's inner world. "When I went to Ahmedabad, I had same questions as Sara," she says.

In fact, in the novel Githa seems to be conveying the dilemma through Sara. She writes: "There's something awful about having to speak for someone else.... It's like speaking on behalf of missing persons...one person has to speak up for another.... But still, it seems a dangerous thing to do, this going inside someone, looking closely at their dreams and defeats, their suffering, being them so you can speak for them in their voices. Because all along there's a nagging little voice asking, 'Can your voice ever be theirs? And who are you to speak for them?'"

The third part — "Funeral Rites" — looks at the lead characters trying to cope with and coming to terms with their realities. The author explores "What the place has to offer to Sara and Yasmin", for instance. A bit of idealism in the privileged middle class and some pragmatic solutions like education for the

affected is what the author offers. She poses uncomfortable questions throughout the book and when it comes to finding answers she takes recourse to vivid poetic imagery.

Invariably, the conversation veers to her previous book *In Times of Siege*. "In a certain sense, both the books are autobiographical — that is to the extent of being written out of grief". "There's continuity," she avers. While *In Times of Siege* debates ideas, *Fugitive Histories* is more about texture.

Regarding the strong political undertones, she says — "the overt stuff is due to the development of you as an author. It reflects a measure of confidence in understanding and control over craft as well. While writing *In Times of Siege*, I knew I was on the correct path as reality was nibbling at my heels," she says referring to a different kind of censorship some progressive historians faced around that time.

Is there a danger of her getting type-casted as a writer? "In that sense, I am not a specialist writer, you know". She does not want her works to be "slotted as a particular kind of writing". "I want to experiment with different forms and themes." After the current book promotion tour, Githa plans to return to writing.

<http://www.anothersubcontinent.com/>, 2005

"Am I a writer particularly concerned with "women's issues"? And am I a feminist? The answer to both questions is yes. I want to make it quite clear that in my life my choices have been dictated by what I perceive as the feminist choice. I want to say this because many women are very anxious for some reason to say "I'm a humanist, not a feminist", that sort of thing... We can't be wary of the word feminist because there are people in the world who misunderstand the word or have done disservice to the word—you can't use most words then! And anyway, however you define yourself, all our work is informed in some way or the other by feminism, along with the ideas of Freud and Marx. And this goes for both men and women, of course. So the answer to your question would be that I am a writer (as opposed to a woman writer) who is a feminist, along with several other things!

I don't think I could write a single page that would not be informed by my beliefs, or for that matter, my confusions. My work grows out of my feminism and other political beliefs. Which doesn't mean

a novel I write is some kind of handmaiden to ideology.”

“...all my adult life, I have been involved in some way or the other—often in modest ways—in the activities of women’s groups, secular cultural groups, anti-nuclear groups. The guardianship case in the Supreme Court was just the most visible. I also write as often as I can about some of these issues. Otherwise, it’s behind-the-scenes small involvements, just the same as what a lot of people contribute year after year.”

“Perhaps one of the strong points of my work, or perhaps one of the curses of my vision, is that I can never quite see one part of the story or imagine one voice without hearing something in the background. I think multiplicity and the mutability of stories will always hold me in thrall... I love the idea of the same story being told by ten different people.”

Read the entire interview on <http://www.anothersubcontinent.com/hariharan.html>

Hindu, 2003

Anuradha Roy : Your book captures the common man thrown unwittingly into political troubles and forced into taking a position: is the novel a cautionary tale for placid "liberals"?

Githa Hariharan : YES, to the extent that it is possible for many people to be "liberal" because they are not directly, painfully affected by the oppression of the authorities they are critical of. Recent experiences — Gujarat for example — show that the times of siege we are talking about have stripped the cushioning of even this usually comfortably placed class. The liberal in the novel, Shiv, says in some desperation when he sees the "opposition" is not as united as they need to be: "Forget your little arguments, the enemy is almost at our heels! If this can happen to an ordinary, cautious man like me, what about you ideologywallas?" But the novel is also saying that when pushed to a point where a choice has to be made, many of those we think of as "just ordinary, decent people" will speak up for the fundamental values that hold their world in place — peace and harmony so that everyone in society can go about their business, as well as the basic freedom to think, speak, and ask questions. This is what happened during the Emergency, after the demolition of Babri Masjid, and after the Gujarat carnage.

AR : When making fiction out of contemporary upheaval, did you have any literary models, like Coetzee's *Disgrace*, for example, in mind?

GH : There was almost too much from real life threatening to push its way into the novel as I wrote it. The challenge was to contain the times we are living through into an individual, human story. But you are asking about literary models. I am not consciously aware of models as I write; but certainly I am, like all writers, deeply indebted to the writing I admire. In this sense Coetzee's writing has always been a model for me — and this is true as much of **Age of Iron** as of **Disgrace**. There are chilling, heartbreaking parallels between apartheid and communalism, just as there are between Hitler's fascism and Hindutva.

AR : Could you say something about your use of the Basava story?

GH : I came across A.K. Ramanujan's translation of medieval Kannada *vachanas* when I was a college student. I am still amazed by the contemporary voice of these poems — they are ruthless in their commitment to social equality and in their questioning of formal religion. Basava was a poet and politician who asked dangerous questions, about caste for instance. He was also a reformer — what we would today call an activist. A deeply religious man, he mocked pious, caste-obsessed chauvinists. He wrote, for example: "there are so many gods there's no place for a foot." Or he taunted them that they used the same thing — water — in their temples as well as their lavatories. Basava is just the sort of complex man who cannot be interpreted in just one, "official" way as we are being bullied into doing with so many icons. If we are

regimented into seeing the past, and figures from the past, in the way our present history-rewriters want us to see them, we are going to lose the richness of those lives, times and ideas. The next step, of course, is that we will have to judge the present too with this impoverished worldview: say these are "saints" or those are "foreigners".

AR : For a man much given to reflection, Shiv, the 50-something professor, goes unquestioningly by his instincts in his passion for the young student. What was your intention in depicting this relationship?

GH : Reflection and instinct are more or less balanced in Shiv — as much as they are in many men of his age and position! His response to Meena is understandable, not just because he is a cautious, rather unglamorous middle-aged man and she is a passionate, outspoken young woman — but because he is being challenged for the first time on both personal and political fronts. In his life before the crisis brought on by the fundamentalists — what Meena calls the *fundoos* — Shiv sidestepped commitment in every way. Personally, this meant a halfhearted little affair with a colleague if his marriage was not quite what it should be. But his obsession with Meena is not just physical — it's also his fearful fascination for everything her world stands for: risk and danger, choice and commitment.

AR : The novel demonstrates the oppressiveness of reducing "multitudinous mysteries" to oversimplified opposites. Have you, living on a university campus, found things oppressive at times from this point of view?

GH : You don't need to live on a campus to see either the past, or the modern Indian experiment of a multi-cultural nation, reduced to crude dichotomies. Our world is pervaded by the "us and them" mindset as never before.

The Deccan Herald, 2003

What led to the book [*In Times of Siege*]?

As a writer, and more importantly as a citizen who has high stakes in the society I live in, I have been very much part of various movements. Over the last several years, along with a lot of other writers, artists and film-makers, I have felt very strongly that we are travelling in a direction that is deeply regressive, and both as a citizen and a writer I have felt that I must take this head on, and that was the general background that was going on in my head. More specifically, in 1999, after my last novel 'When Dreams Travel' came out, as I was mulling over all these things, I broke my knee and was laid up in bed for weeks together. It was a good time to actually think about how I would construct this new novel, how I would take up an issue that I was not only interested in but also living through. And so I began writing. I was midway through my novel, when to my shock I found that eminent historians Sarkar and Panicker had their volume on the freedom struggle recalled. In fact, I had to stop writing for a few weeks because it was almost as if the media coverage and the kind of historians' fear was both similar yet different from my fictional situation.

Why focus on rewriting of history? History, with all its ugliness and achievements, is something that we should have access to explore, debate. This is what I wanted to focus on, because I think history is not just something that we study in school. It is a tool of analysis for us to know our past. Why do we keep referring to the Emergency? Because we know it could come up. Savarkar's portrait is hanging there. And suddenly his documented reaction to Colonial rule is turned on its head. This is something that we all need to react to. I think there is resistance at all levels, it is simply that more and more areas of resistance are being made invisible.

Why did you choose Vasava's vachanas and Hampi as the backdrop?

When I wanted to show that a history professor gets into trouble for a lesson he wrote years back, immediately my choices were Vasava and Hampi. I first came across the vachanas of Vasava and others when I was 17 years old. In case of Vasava, there is sharp questioning, rejection of caste, which is something we cannot simply forget today. This is a tortured soul, who is trying to understand how he is part of this kind of a society where there is such blatant injustice. Then the fact that the whole movement was absorbed – everything he stood for was completely forgotten. Even his alleged heirs today have no link with all the ideas he stood for. Vasava's ideas continue to challenge our society today. Hampi is a place I have been to, and was made somewhat uncomfortable by its scale. There are no straightforward assumptions there.

You had won a landmark verdict from Supreme Court on the mother's rights on children. What kind of issues agitate you?

That we are talking about Togadia and the kind, when we really should be talking about our fundamental problems is what really makes you sad. That you should be exercising your vote in a negative way, to keep certain groups out, rather than for issues like economic, women and child labour. While at different points in life there have been different issues that I have been involved in, all along I have been involved with women's issues. But I would say now for the rest of my lifetime, along with women's issues, the whole issue of 'fundooisation' (fundamentalisation) of our society, our culture, our minds - that is something I think I should expend energy on.

How much do you agree with the definition 'women's writers'? Do you think there should be a segregation like that?

Of course not, but in the academic context – if you are a literary critic, a sociologist and trying to understand certain bodies of thought, I think it is a perfectly legitimate exercise to look at women's writing, women's voices, or Dalit voices, Afro-American voices. It's important because that is how you study the history of literature. But when these categories become simple, easy labels, it's self-defeating. There is no easy answer to this.

Britannica.com, 2000

"I don't see my writing as an introduction to India and I am not self-conscious about being "Indian" in my writing. For some reason all of us like to imagine that a writer is a writer because she has a great deal to say (message!) or is a good egg (social concern!). Both these should be there, but really, in the ultimate analysis, a writer is a writer because she has a narrative skill—a balancing act she can perform. But writers' voices are heard on the public stage. So they have a special responsibility to discharge, especially in a country like India. I am a writer, but I also live in modern India and am very much an engaged citizen of our multicultural society. So it is inevitable that I am interested in examining certain relevant themes. The tussles between tradition and modernity, or better still, the making of modernity; equal rights for women, in the arenas of legislation as well as social practice; and in recent times, the strengthening of secular ideas and movements to combat growing fundamentalism. Even if a writer does not write what is usually perceived as political writing—direct social commentary, or unbending realism or something "authentically" Indian—the writer should aim at revealing truths, questions and/or answers, that are fundamentally political. Fiction has a thousand ways of giving us a new take on the dynamics of power relations."

The Times of India, 1999 "A writer's gift is her own special voice. My voice seems right for a medley. I enjoy weaving both poetry and short stories into my novels."

"All my books begin with a small space—say the space of a child, or an old man, or a woman—and then stretch it. All my writing works at making a small space spacious."

Pioneer, 1999 "My novels would be impossible without plurality in many ways—of narrative voices, alternative scenarios, reinterpreted tales and so on. Perhaps this is also a comment on the nature

of the eternal tale. My novels have been, so far, preoccupied with the powers of the simple—but not simplistic—tale. And it is in the nature of these stories all of us hear and retell that they are never finished. There is no authoritative version; they must be twisted and retold for our times and lives.”

“I think a writer should aim at revealing truths that are fundamentally political. Fiction has a thousand ways of giving us a new take on the dynamics of power relations.”