

Original Article

A Second Study of Kishwar Desai's *Witness the Night* and Githa Hariharan's *Fugitive Histories*

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Abstract :

The nineties ushered in an era of change that redefined the ethos of the country. It is significant in this atmosphere of change to mention how lives of women have changed. In the contemporary world, women participate in nearly every domain of activity and there is a general feeling of empowerment among almost every woman. The situation at hand however is very complex and dichotomous in nature because on one hand women have been empowered through education and financial independence but they are forced to continuously struggle with the deep-seated traditional beliefs and practices which are against their empowerment to reach their full potential as individuals in their own right. The goal of the paper represents the analysis of one of such issues-violence against women.

Keywords: Violence against women, Female infanticide, Honour killings, Sexual assault, Feminist literature, Kishwar Desai, *Witness the Night*, Githa Hariharan, *Fugitive Histories*, Gender inequality,

Introduction :

Violence against women', is a phrase that has become so commonplace in the modern discourse that it fails to make an impact on anyone who hears or reads it. This goes on to show how the society has dismally failed its women even though they have become greater participants in the building of the new India. Bharti Ray and Aparna Basu place violence against women as one of the foremost issues that are of concern for women in contemporary India (xiii-xiv). This paper will be exploring this very aspect which is an ugly truth, an open secret that dents the buoyancy of India's spectacular growth in the twenty-first century. The status of women can be the indicator of the real progress of a nation.

The paper will be analysing acts of violence against women under the following points of focus, namely,

- Right to be born-female infanticide and foeticide.
- A matter of (dis)honour-honour killings / violence in the name of honour.
- A woman's body as a battlefield-rape and sexual assault during conflicts.

Kishwar Desai's *Witness the Night* (2010) and Githa Hariharan's *Fugitive Histories* (2009) are the two novels that the paper will study to explore these issues. The two writers are important literary voices of contemporary times who lend their perspective to important feminist issues that are plaguing the nation and hampering the growth of women. Desai's *Witness the Night* deals with female infanticide and foeticide and violence against women *Fugitive Histories* deals with the complexities of religious identities in India and the repercussions of the Gujarat riots on the lives on women as their bodies became battlefields where men fought their wars.

The paper will set out to establish that there exists a culture of violence against women in our country and unravel the many layers of regressive ideas and practices behind the veneer of a progressive nation in the twenty-first century.

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Kishwar Desai (b.1957) had an illustrious career in media as a journalist, scriptwriter, TV anchor, producer and the head of a TV channel. She began her writing career with the book *Darlingji: The True Love Story of Nargis and Sunil Dutt* published in 2007. *Witness the Night* (2010) is her first work of fiction which was in the long list of the Man Asian Literary Prize. Recently the book won her the prestigious Costa Book Award for First Novel for 2010. With an arresting writing style, Desai has created a commendable thriller in her debut novel. Her deep social conscience is revealed in the novel as she highlights the plight of girl children in a highly prejudiced upper class Punjab: society. She currently lives in London, Delhi and Goa.

Githa Hariharan (b.1954) is one of the most important novelists and writers in contemporary India. Her fiction reflects sensitive and contentious issues that have taken centre stage in the society which makes her an important social commentator of our times. Subtlety is her forte with which she achieves moments of literary brilliance. Born in Coimbatore, she grew up in Bombay and Manila. She worked as a writer in television and later as an editor and freelance writer. Her first novel, *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1992) won the Commonwealth Writers' Prize in 1993. Her other novels include *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* (1994), *When Dreams Travel* (1999), *In Times of Siege* (2003), and *Fugitive Histories* (2009). She is a visiting professor in many Western universities and is currently a scholar-in-residence in Jamia Milia Islamia University in Delhi. The two novels *Witness the Night* and *Fugitive Histories* are significant contributions to literature and society in the way they have effectively depicted the various facets of Indian womanhood and the myriad challenges involved in liberating women from the patriarchal shackles. The important feminist issue that comes to the forefront while reading these novels is violence against women which is truly reflective of the times that we live in.

In the twenty-first century, one of the worst forms of human rights abuse is the unending perpetration of violence against women. On the International Women's Day in 2008, the UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon said that: "Violence against women and girls continues unabated in every continent, country and culture. It has taken a devastating toll on women's lives, on their families and on society as a whole. Most societies prohibit such violence-yet the reality is that too often, it is covered up or tacitly condoned" (qtd. in "Facts & Figures"). Throughout the world women are being subject to various forms of violence meted out to them by known and unknown males. Fran Hosken argues that violence against women is perpetrated "with an astonishing consensus among the men in the world" (qtd. in Mohanty 178). As much as women have reasons to celebrate their emancipation there are equally compelling reasons for women to be concerned because of their vulnerability to violence. Women have and are still suffering domestic violence, sexual harassment, rape and sexual violence, harmful traditional practices like genital mutilation, honour killings, female foeticide and infanticide and dowry deaths. Women suffer violence at the hands of the very same people who are supposed to love them like fathers, husbands, lovers, boyfriends and relatives. Everyday numerous women are battered, molested, raped, and murdered around the world. Most of these incidents go unreported. Sustained campaigns by feminists against sexual violence since 1970s have prompted the United Nations to recognise "violence against women and girl children as a violation of human rights" (Radford 170).

In a country like India that is largely rooted in patriarchal traditions and mores, women have always been living in shackles in the form of regressive attitudes and ideas that curb their freedom. Indian women are just as vulnerable to violence as women elsewhere. Media reports are replete with news of violence against women in some form or the other. There is a pervasive culture of violence against women in the country cutting across regional boundaries. Ruth Vanita believes that "For every one reported police rape taken up by women's groups in India, there are hundreds of unreported routine marital rapes: for every case of severe wife-beating there are hundreds of more routinized, less severe violence ..." (530). Female infanticide/ foeticide, dowry deaths, rape and sexual assaults, honour killings, domestic violence, sexual harassment are some of the forms of violence that women face in India today. Feminists and women's groups have been fighting a hard battle in India to introduce and amend legislations with regards to violence against women. The Prevention of Domestic Violence Act of 2005 is an example. This law has many challenges when it comes to its implementation but still it is a step forward for women to take legal recourse for an atrocity that went unquestioned. Domestic violence which incapacitates women and crushes their physical and emotional well-being, was considered a personal matter till recently, until feminists brought it to the public space. This paper will focus on three forms of violence namely female foeticide / infanticide, honour killings and rape / sexual assault during conflicts.

Female foeticide and infanticide-killing of infant girls or female fetuses because they are girls is a practice that is quite prevalent in India in varying degrees in urban and rural areas. This is a practice that reveals the deep-rooted prejudices and age-old beliefs, gender inequality and misogyny that exist in the society. May you be the mother of a hundred sons' is a common blessing given to women in India (Bumiller 10). The idea that giving birth to a son is a privilege and a girl is a curse is deeply ingrained in the Indian psyche. Sudhir Kakkar states that: "The preference for a son when a child is born is as old as Indian society itself. Vedic verses pray that sons will be followed by more male offspring, never by females" (8). The Atharva Veda states that: "The birth of a girl, grant elsewhere, here grant a son" (qtd. in Kakkar 8).

One of the reasons for son-preference can be attributed to the Hindu belief that a son has to light the funeral pyre for the parents to go to heaven. Dowry is another important reason that forces mothers and fathers to kill their own infant daughters. A woman “who pines for a son becomes disheartened at seeing the birth of a girl. She begs for the pardon from the family members as if she has committed a crime” (Malladi 10). Julie Rajan is of the opinion that: “Even women are culturally ingrained to value their own gender with low regard, as the value of the male gender is tied closely to a woman’s social and political power”. Over the years the girl child has come to mean a ‘burden’ for the family because of the money involved in her upbringing and arranging her marriage. But even in many urban centres this despicable practice is carrying on in spite of the parents being educated and where there is a greater chance for the daughters to become independent. Bumiller who extensively researched this practice in the eighties in Bombay and rural Tamilnadu says that: “Most of the educated, well off- women of Bombay were of course trying to avoid the astronomical cost of dowries in India, but among the rich, who could afford the cost of any number of weddings, a stronger motive seemed to be to avoid the social embarrassment of having daughters but no sons” (114).

The sex ratios in the in the country suggests that female foeticide and infanticide is happening at an alarming rate that has led to a great paucity of women which is harmful for the growth of any society. According to the Census 2001, the all India sex ratio is 933 females per 1000 males. Haryana is the state with the lowest sex ratio with 861 females (A Handbook). “2001 census informed us that we had 60 lakh missing girls”, says Thekaekara about the numerous infant girls and fetuses that were not given a chance to be born in India. Comparatively, Census 2011 suggests that the all India sex ratio is 940 females per 1000 males while Haryana’s sex ratio has seen a marginal increase with 877. However the worrying scenario emerges from the child sex ratio (from ages 0-6) that suggests the prevalence of female foeticide and infanticide. The all India ratio is 914, while Haryana has recorded 830 (“Provisional Population Totals”). Manjula Padmanabhan in her novel *Escape* (2008) has envisaged a futuristic society bereft of women which may become possible if the killing of girl children continues.

Technological advances have only made female foeticide easy and convenient for those parents who crave for a son and can do away with an unwanted daughter in her foetal stage itself. In the seventies and eighties, procedures like amniocentesis and chorionic villus sampling (CVS), which were performed to detect defects in the child, were used extensively to find the sex of the child and consequently led to abortion if it was a female (Bumiller 115). It was usually the third daughter who was forced to die as parents made peace with raising one or even two girls (Karlekar 314). The ultrasound scan, which is a non-invasive and easy method to detect the sex of the child, is the modern day’s answer to the continuing menace of female foeticide. Private clinics mushroomed in urban areas like Bombay which used to lure people with ads that stated: “Better 500 rupees now than 500,000 rupees later”, indicating the huge dowries to be paid for a daughter’s marriage (Bumiller 115). There was a huge uproar among feminists in Bombay in the eighties against this inhuman practice. The parliament passed the Pre-natal Diagnostic Practices (Regular and Prevention of Misuse) Act in 1994 which followed a similar law enacted by the state of Maharashtra in 1988 (Menon 279). Laws did not deter many families from opting for sex selective abortions nor doctors and medical practitioners from performing these procedures.

Female infanticide is another way of getting rid of a girl child. Tandon and Sharma describe it as “a deliberate and intentional act of killing a female child within one year of its birth either directly by using poisonous organic and inorganic chemicals or indirectly by deliberate neglect to feed the infant by either one of the parents or other family members of neighbours or by the midwife” (3). The female infants would be fed poison or the husk of rice in order to kill them for being born as girls. This practice was prevalent among some communities in rural Tamil Nadu, Punjab, Rajasthan, Gujarat and UP (Tandon and Sharma 3). Mariaye, a woman from a poor family in rural Tamil Nadu who killed her infant daughter told Bumiller: “Actually, I have done the right thing. Why should a child suffer like me?” (102).

It is within this premise that of wanting a male child and abhorring the birth of a girl-that Kishwar Desai’s novel *Witness the Night* lies. The novel is a severe indictment of a society that treats its women in such a contemptible manner. At the heart of the hard-hitting narrative, is the tragic tale of fourteen year old Durga who was a victim of gross injustice meted out to her because she was a girl. Set in Jallundur, the novel traces the travails of social worker, Simran, as she traverses through a dangerous and corrupt world of policemen and politicians in the pursuit of justice for Durga who is a suspect in the murder of her entire family.

Durga was the daughter of wealthy Punjabi Sikh parents who were well respected in Jallundur, Punjab, as philanthropists. The family clearly preferred sons to daughters as was the case in many families in the region. Durga and her older sister Sharada knew that they were unwanted right from the beginning. Their parents adopted the father’s nephews to raise as their sons because they did not have their own. Desai’s idea of using the word “Boys” with a capital letter in all of Durga’s narratives was deliberate to indicate the importance given to them in the Atwal family. Durga and her sister’s world was clearly defined by their gender with little or no freedom or space clearly defir own. Any misdemeanours from the side of them to call they’re completely tolerated but the same was not the case for Durga and Sharada. They only had each other for solace in a hostile atmosphere filled with people who did not want them in the first place. Durga always used to pine for love: “Someone would love me, someone would hold me close” (Desai 16). It

was this loveless existence that drove an unsuspecting Durga into the arms of a sexual predator who used her to his own ends and later led her to be embroiled in the murder of her whole family.

Desai reveals in the course of the novel that both Durga and Sharada were supposed to have died just after birth. In her narrative, Durga called herself “the child who should have never been born anyway” (18). Their family wanted to kill them because they were girls. They were fed opium and buried but somehow they did not die and were allowed to live because the family thought they were witches. Durga gives a detailed account of the attempts by her family to kill Sharada after she was born:

At first they gave her opium and put her in a pot of milk and twirled it around. Miraculously, the milk turned to butter and the crying child still lived. The opium did not put her to sleep.... Finally my grandmother picked up courage and instructed the wretched girl be buried in a clay pot in the earth at night. Unfortunately for her the dogs dug her out... (82)

She later imagined her own attempted killing:

I imagined myself a tiny child as yet not even able to suckle-being fed opium. I probably went to sleep, and they may have thought I was dead. It was only when they began to bury me in the ground that my sudden shriek made Amla run because she thought I was a ghost. I can still feel the earth being shovelled onto me. Sometimes in my nightmares the mud descends on my face, handfuls of dirt are shoved into my mouth and in my eyes. Breathless, I gulp for air and fight the bed sheets. (156-157) The life that the sisters lived was fraught with hatred, prejudice and complete lack of love. Sharada once found skeletal remains of an infant in the fields behind their bungalow which made the sisters realise that there were many others before them who had to die because they were born girls. In a heart-wrenching part in the novel, Durga looked at a tiny bone and asked her sister: “Did she have a name?...I’d like to pretend she had a name, and a chance to grow up.... These little babies...no one even remembers them.... They could have been our sisters” (138-139; 3rd ellipsis in orig.). The girls cried for their dead sisters. Durga even kept the bones of an infant hand in her pencil box as a reminder of a sister that she was not allowed to have.

The so-called philanthropic parents of Durga even ran many clinics and hospitals in the city where sex determination and sex selective abortions were carried out in large numbers. They wanted to “help” other couples from having unwanted daughters. They also wanted to abort the female foetus of their daughter-in-law, Binny, who escaped to her family in UK and gave birth to her daughter. When Durga heard this news that a girl was born in her family in a loving, safe and secure environment, she said: “I don’t know if you understand how important this is for me, for us” (122). Punjab, the state in which this novel is set, has a dismal record in terms of sex ratio and incidence of sex selective abortions. Among the Sikh population, the sex ratio is 893 women per 1,000 males (A Handbook). According to the 2011 Census, Punjab has a sex ratio of 893 while the child sex ratio is 846. The urbanised capital city of Chandigarh, has an appalling sex ratio of 818 and a child sex ratio of 867 (“Provisional Population Totals”).

In *Witness the Night*, Kishwar Desai also touches upon the issue of honour killings, another harmful traditional practice that is detrimental to a woman’s freedom. It is largely reported to be taking place in countries like Pakistan, Turkey, Jordan, Syria, Egypt, Lebanon, Iran, Yemen, Morocco and India (“Facts & Figures” 4) which are primarily traditional societies. Honour killings-an act that has no honour in it is the killing of women who would defy the rigid and conservative strictures about sexual conduct and relationship with the opposite sex based on misplaced ideas about a woman’s chastity and purity. The heinous crime of honour killing is committed because, “In many societies, rape victims, women suspected of engaging in premarital sex, and women accused of adultery have been murdered by their relatives because the violation of a woman’s chastity is viewed as an affront to the family’s honour” (“Facts & Figures” 4). There have been numerous instances of fathers, brothers and uncles killing young girls for these transgressions because they believe that in the chastity of the girls rests the honour of the family. A girl must, at any cost, preserve her chastity and virginity and the family takes pride in giving her away in marriage to a ‘suitable’ male with her virginity intact. No such thing is of course expected of men. A man does not necessarily carry the honour of the family on himself nor do his transgressions in anyway prove to dishonour his family.

Most families tolerate men’s sexual misdemeanours as a male prerogative. As Simone de Beauvoir says: “Patriarchal civilization dedicated women to chastity; it recognized more or less openly the right of the male to sexual freedom” (395). According to R. S. Shrivastava, “Norms of sexual behaviour are much more stringent in case of women. They are considered to be the ‘symbols’ of honour of their family or community. Sexual ‘purity’ in case of women is to be maintained at all cost, while the males enjoy relative flexibility in sexual attitudes and conduct” (173). Most honour killings are endorsed by the families and communities and are carried out with their collusion. It is important to note that a small percentage of men are also victims of honour killings for having relationships with girls from different communities or religions-killed by the girls’ families. United Nations Population Fund estimates that the annual worldwide number of honour killing may be as high as 5,000 women (“Facts & Figures” 4).

In India the practice of honour killings is prevalent in parts of UP, Haryana and Punjab. In the past year alone many cases of honour killings came to light in the media. In urban and modern Delhi, a nineteen-year-old girl Asha and her twenty-year-old boyfriend were murdered by her family last year by the girl’s family. The reason was that the boy was from a lower social class (Rahlan). In May 2010, in Allahabad, UP, an eighteen year-old girl was murdered by her

own brother because she became pregnant while she was unmarried (Joseph). In Punjab, a prominent politician Bibi Jagir Kaur is facing trial for allegedly killing her daughter Harpreet Kaur for marrying a man from a lower social stratum (Swami). Honour killings are prevalent in the west among the Asian and Middle Eastern immigrant population (Chesler).

In *Witness the Night* Durga's sister Sharada, a sixteen year old teenager, fell in love with her tutor, Harpreet, hired to teach both the girls. Harpreet's good looks, charm and compassion towards the girls won the heart of Sharada. She became pregnant and very naively began to dream of eloping with him till one day she was caught by her family members. Sharada had violated all the norms laid down for her by her conservative family by not only falling in love with a man from a lower caste but also becoming sexually involved with him. In the novel, Simran concludes that Sharada "has crossed the lakshman rekha. In a tradition-bound small town like Jullundur, sex outside marriage was taboo. Only the tribal family elders could decide who a woman could marry and sleep with" (103-104). Sharada's act was a clearly an affront to the honour of the Atwal family and their reputation.

Sharada was forcibly taken away from home by her family, kept in isolation and beaten and tortured till her child was born. Her son was taken away from her and was being raised by her 'son-starved' parents as their own. Later she was shifted to a mental asylum and was treated for diseases that she never had. After a period of unnecessary treatment involving drugs, medication and electric shocks, Sharada lost her mind. She lost her ability to speak and think and the only way she communicated with the world was through some unintelligible sounds. She became a mere shell of her former beautiful and intelligent self. Durga painfully narrates Sharada's pitiful state in the novel: "Her lying on that bed, handcuffed to the side, not even allowed any clothes or food, a long chain keeping her from wandering too far away...she would be like that for days, her faeces mixed with menstrual blood lining the floor till someone came and cleaned it up. Why did they do this to her? Her own family, her own flesh and blood?" (166). When Simran found Sharada, she described her thus:

Her clothes, just a long kaftan, had ridden up her legs, revealing scabs and scars from old wounds. Her hand, chained to the bed, fluttered weakly, twisting like a white butterfly. She was pale, paler than anyone I had ever seen; even her hair was white. She was only twenty years old, and the mother of a young son, but she looked like she was a frail woman of sixty. Her skin hung in emaciated strings from her bones. What a price to pay for one summer of love. (118) Sharada was not killed in the name of honour but in decimating her and maiming her for life, they had come very close to killing her. In the end as Durga was recuperating from her own trauma, she was trying to help Sharada make sense of the world that she was lost to. The Atwal family's attitude in the novel reflects the attitude of the modern Indian society that still holds on to archaic ideas that places women in a secondary position and makes them victims of cruel and gruesome acts in the name of upholding traditions and family honour.

Rape is a violent crime against a woman that violates her physically, mentally and emotionally. Rape is being used as a weapon by men to assert power over women for centuries. Susan Brownmiller states that: "Man's discovery that genitalia could serve as a weapon in prehistoric times, along with the use of fire and the first crude stone axe. From prehistoric times to the present, I believe, rape has played a critical function. It is nothing more or less than a conscious process of intimidation by which all men keep women in a state of fear". Among traditional societies in some parts of rural India and Pakistan, women are raped as a punishment for the wrongdoing of the men in their families. Rape is used as a form of control in rural areas (Rosa 42). In India people often judge the rape victims saying that she 'asked for it' because of the way she dressed or behaved. Even in the twenty-first century there is no sign of decline in the number of rape cases that are reported. According to *A Handbook of Statistical Indicators on Indian Women 2007*, the number of reported rapes in 2001 was 16075 which went up to 15847 in 2003 and in 2006 it became 19348. There may be so many cases that go unreported because of the stigma attached to it. A rape victim is victimised many times over during the course of getting justice, in facing the stigma of the society and dealing with her own mental trauma.

Rape has become a vicious form of attack during conflicts. Amrita Basu says that: "Thanks to feminist scholarship, we have come to recognize the political significance of the violence that is enacted in the domestic sphere and its corollary, the rape of women as an instrument of warfare" (265). In an ethnic conflict, the fighting is always between two groups of warring men and one of the ways to attack each other is to violate the bodies of their women. Men consider women as part of their wealth and property and identify greatly with their possessions and an attack like rape on women is considered a great affront to men's honour. R.S. Shrivastava believes: "Since the symbol of honour and prestige of a family or community resides in women, they are the first to be targeted in any situation of conflict between two groups. During war times the women of the vanquished side are considered to be the legitimate possession of the victors" (173). Wars between men are fought on the bodies of women thereby making women's bodies battlefields to settle scores. Looking back at history, the partition of India was witness to numerous rapes and gang rapes of women on both sides of the border. Fearing rape many women committed suicide before attackers could reach them or the men in their families killed them to protect their honour. They believed that it was better for women to die than to be raped by other men.

During times of war and conflicts women are doubly vulnerable because they may be killed or raped or both. Even in the past two decades, when the world has seen some of the bloodiest ethnic conflicts in the Balkan region and

in many countries in Africa, it was women who suffered unspeakable sexual violence. “Women’s bodies have become part of the battleground for those who use terror as a tactic of war—they are raped, abducted, humiliated and made to undergo forced pregnancy, sexual abuse and slavery.... Violence against women during or after armed conflicts is reported in every international or non-international war zone” (“Facts & Figures” 7). According to “Facts & Figures”, “70 per cent of the victims in recent conflicts have been non-combatants-women and children. In Rwanda half million women were raped during the 1994 genocide, in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia sixty thousand were raped and sixty four thousand women were rape victims of the civil war in Sierra Leone” (7). There are rape wards in some hospitals in Africa where rape victims get treated for brutalities that were inflicted on their bodies. Little girls to women of any age are vulnerable to rape during conflicts when there is an absolute break down of human values.

Communal riots have a long history in India right from the Partition to the post-Babri Masjid demolition riots in the early nineties, which proves that in some parts of India the Hindu- Muslim coexistence has been an uneasy one. In the beginning of the twenty-first century, one of the worst communal riots happened in the Gujarat in which around two thousand Muslims were killed. The riots began as retaliation to the burning of a train in the town of Godhra in which 59 people belonging to the Hindu community, who were travelling from the temple town of Ayodhya, were killed. The ensuing large-scale riots that happened between February 28, 2002 and March 02, 2002 were aimed at Muslims, their lives and properties (Khetan). Women paid a heavy price during the riots as they were sexually brutalised by rampaging mobs These stories went largely unreported or underreported in the media. Sayeda Hameed et al. who went to Gujarat in March 2002 on a fact finding mission reported that:

Sexual violence against women can be proved. This crime is significantly underreported and the quantification of such crimes in both the rural and urban settings needs further research. Out of the women who have endured to be alive and tolerate their stay in relief camps, many of them have undergone the most barbaric indulgences of sexual violence- rape, gang rape, mass rape, stripping, insertion of objects inside their bodies, molestation. Most of the rape victims are burnt alive (4).

Many women were raped and murdered and those who survived found it difficult to file FIRs to report the crimes. One thing that came to light after the riots was the collusion of the state and its indifference. Even after nine years, many rape victims of the Gujarat riots are yet to get justice. These women face multiple problems of displacement, loss of livelihood and families. Above that they also have to cope with the trauma of rape.

The following is an account of a rape survivor, Sultani:

On the afternoon of February 28th, to escape the violent mob, about 40 of us got on to a tempo, wanting to escape Kalol. My husband Feroze was driving the tempo... A mob was lying in wait... The tempo overturned. As we got out they started attacking us. People started running in all directions. Some of us ran towards the river. I fell behind as I was carrying my son, Faizan. The men caught me from behind and threw me on the ground. Faizan fell from my arms and started crying. My clothes were stripped off by the men and I was left stark naked. One by one, men raped me. All the while I could hear my son crying. I lost count after three. They then cut my foot with a sharp weapon and left me there.

(Hameed et al. 6)

Fugitive Histories by Githa Hariharan concerns itself with religious identifications in India and whether it is possible to be a-religious. Some characters written by the author are quite memorable such as Azad, an artist who was heart-broken as he observed how his fellow citizens were killing each other over religious principles. One of the key characters in the novel is his wife Mala who had faith in the ideology of humanism and in the erasing of the religious or other disparities present in the society. Their daughter, Sara, in her quest of what she wanted to, discovered herself in serving others, more specifically Yasmin who is the displaced riot victim of Gujarat. Hariharan realizes the agony of women in times of war as their bodies turned out to be battlegrounds.

During her visit to Ahmedabad with her friend, the theme of the documentary was to inform the riot survivors about the riot. She encountered numerous women who have witnessed and experienced the atrocities of the riots when their bodies were robbed by the uncontrollable crowds. One of the women, Zuleikha narrated to Sara: “Those girls were screaming, they were begging us to remove the stumps of wood that had been pushed into them. Each one was crying, ‘Me first, remove mine first’. I’ll never forget their screams” (Hariharan 160). Many victims of the riots lived on measly sums earned through sewing and embroidering and among the women there was a wonderful sisterhood which helped in alleviating their collective pain and suffering. Yasmin was a seventeen-year-old who lived quite happily with her parents and brother till the riots happened after which their peaceful life was shattered. Her brother never returned from college and the family was unable to trace him even after three years and he was presumed dead. She was almost raped by a few men but was fortunately let off because they were more interested in acquiring their house. When the attackers came to their house,

Ammi and Yasmin hid on the roof among boxes and sacks stored behind the water tank... Yasmin is flat on the floor, its smoky dark though it’s not yet night. There must be something sharp in his hand. She can feel it on he inner thigh like a nail tearing the cloth of the salwar, piercing the flesh underneath, then sliding down...Ammi covers Yasmin’s body with hers. Ammi’s begging words make a breathless mess of a prayer. (Hariharan 145). Her father’s

shop was burnt and they received many threats like “Muslims Quit India-or we will fuck your mothers” (Hariharan 138), after which they left the only home she had ever known. This message also shows that the way one group of men want to attack another is through the bodies of their women. The family moved to a cramped flat in another area of the city which was considered ‘safe’. Yasmin was fortunate enough to escape rape but the trauma of that incident and the stories of rapes she heard around her coloured every waking moment of her life. Fear was a constant as Yasmin walked to and from school trying hard to pass her final exams that she failed once. She was constantly bombarded with words like “careful, alert, guarding against, taking care, anything can happen” (Hariharan 123) by her parents; words that said that she was not safe. Her journey- walking distance from school was an ordeal as she tried not to catch any attention and reach home safely. On her way home she thinks that “...being safe is the most important thing of all. Only being safe can help her to be free” (Hariharan 148). Yasmin’s fear is an unsettling and disturbing aspect that comes out of the novel Hariharan effectively brings out Yasmin’s fear in the following Times:

They can’t see the feeling trapped inside her, fighting its way out. This is not a simple feeling. It does not have a name, something small and easy to say, like fear or anger or sadness. It is a little of this, a little of that. Sometimes the feeling changes so fast from one to the other that she needs to check the dupatta around her head and shoulders again, tighten it once more (149). It demonstrates that despite the fact that the riots pass, a woman can not trust her life and safety anymore. It is like the already weak and patchy life of Yasmin would always be at the verge of being shattered. It is a positive ending of the novel since the parents half-heartedly feel they must take Yasmin to Bombay to be with Sarah so that she may join the college. The successful part of the novel begins with the mother of Yasmin indicating that her daughter will not put on the burqa as the women of her era wore. “She is not going to be like us.... The angry ones on both sides want to put our daughters in burqas so they can prove their point. Did their burqas keep our women safe five years ago?” (227). She envisages a free and independent life for her daughter. 1

Conclusion

The subject of violence perpetrated against women discussed and analysed in this paper through a general understanding of the issues and the literary works affirm the fact that there is a culture of violence against women that exists in the country as well as the world at large. From the time of her birth, or even in the womb, a girl is subject to a continuous and sustained assault on her physical, mental and emotional being sustained against women remains unabated even in the twenty first century. The need of the hour is to debate, discuss and most importantly, act in order to stop this gross violation of one half of the population. As Shashi Deshpande says: “...often there are no limits to human cruelty. And cruelty had to be opposed. To be silent is to abet it” (85). By raising these issues in their novels, the two writers Kishwar Desai and Githa Hariharan have raised their voices against violence perpetrated by men on women. Through their writing they have raised some critical questions pertaining to Indian women’s lives in the twenty-first century. These writers’ contribution to literature and society as a whole is very significant for this very reason.

The protagonists discussed in this paper, Durga and Yasmin, both in their teens, are representatives of the present generation. Durga, an unwanted daughter of conservative parents, and Yasmin, a girl scarred by the violence of Gujarat riots, both dared to hope to have a better life for themselves- a life in which they will not be constantly battling issues that are detrimental to their freedom to choose a life of their own. If they have to stake claim to the new world, partake in the progress of India and assert their identities as confident individuals, then it must be in an atmosphere of change. It is extremely important for an attitudinal change to set in that would implore men to look at women as thinking, feeling individuals and not as fragile beings who can be attacked and violated for fulfilling their own needs. The society should not allow another girl to think as Durga did: “I often wondered what life would have been like if I had been loved and wanted and cared for. If I had a mother who did not hate me because I was a girl!” (Desai 190).

The culture of violence against women is extremely pernicious for their growth and consequently for the progress of the country itself. If and only if the country can free its women from the clutches of violence can the women citizens call themselves truly free and the nation call itself progressive in the real sense of the word.

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