

GITHA HARIHARAN'S *IN TIMES OF SIEGE*: HISTORY, POLITICS AND CENSORSHIP

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Abstract:

Githa Hariharan's In Times of Siege deals with history and campus politics, and how it affects the academic activities and careers of the students. The paper is an attempt to show how academic writing is under censorship in contemporary India. At the same time, Hariharan shows how fundamentalists for their interests destroy academic freedom. She provides the twelfth-century social reformer Basava as a major plot for the novel. There is a debate on secularism, fundamentalism, and political issues on the university campus. In India, it is essential to create a democratic space for everyone free which is from casteism, regionalism, and religion.

Keywords: *Siege, guardianship, fundamentalism, nationalism, carnage, intolerance, academic*

Introduction:

In Times of Siege, the fourth novel of Githa Hariharan revolves around history. Hariharan has a personal background and experience in writing this novel. Githa Hariharan and her husband Mohan Rao filed a petition against the Hindu Minority and Guardianship Act 1956 when the Reserve Bank refused to give saving bonds for her minor son. She believed the law is discriminatory against women who said that the father is always the child's natural guardian unless he is dead or insane. Githa Hariharan could not accept the law. She found the whole idea unreasonable that women cannot be the natural guardian of their children when nature had secured maternity. She thought that it is an illustration of how some Indian laws are anti-women. Finally, in 1999 she won and made the Indian Supreme Court reinterpret the Hindu Minority and Guardianship Act. Now legally, the mother can also play the role of the natural guardian of her minor child. Conversing with Suhasini Haidar in Delhi, Githa Hariharan described her win as a half achievement in her fight for her rights. She believes "The law... is as amoeba riddled with parasites" (<https://m.rediff.com/news/1999/mar/13gita.htm>).

Many laws are outdated and need to amend. The incident prepares the way to set the scene for Hariharan to write this novel.

Hariharan, through her novel *In Times of Siege* (2002) has depicted India jammed with the idea of extremists, malice, and distrust. The word 'siege' in the title of the novel is used metaphorically by the novelist. It denotes the whole world at war and the incidents of conflict and disturbance in modern India. The episode of the 9/11 terrorist attack, demolition of Babri Masjid, Gujarat carnage, the exodus of Kashmiri Hindus, all represents religious intolerance and communal unrest in India. The novel acts as a mouthpiece to this distrustful life in India. Githa Hariharan in one of her articles "New Voices: New Challenges", describes:

The writer has to articulate not only the bewilderment and pain of those who live through times of siege; she has to also look at the personal costs, the little fears, and confusions, all the petty but real background against which an ordinary person is forced into becoming some sort of "hero" simply by standing up and saying, "I'm against the Emergency" or "The Babri Masjid is part of every Indian's heritage" or "what happened in Gujarat should never happen again (2004: 11)

In India, there is a lack of academic freedom to write historical and mythological chronicles. They are subjected to trial and censored by religious, political and social organizations. Books on History, mythology, art and culture often give rise to controversies. In this regard, Suketu Mehta's in his article named "India's Speech Impediments" states the disturbing uncertainties, "Writers and artists of all kinds are being harassed, sued and arrested for what they say or write or create. The government either stands by or does nothing to protect freedom of speech, or it actively abets its suppression." India is struggling with what Salman Rushdie rightly calls a "cultural emergency."

Outline of the Novel:

Githa Hariharan covers two months' time in the life of Shiv Murthy, a middle-aged History

professor at Kasturba Gandhi Central University, New Delhi. He is in charge of the BA History correspondence programme. As it is a distant learning university, he has to coordinate different courses and prepare the study material for the history course. Shiv's life rotates around the university. He has to attend academic meetings, prepare lesson modules, and conduct research work related to history.

Shiv Murthy's wife Rekha flies to Seattle with her daughter Tara who got a computer job in the USA. When Shiv lives all by himself in his home, he receives a phone call from the Hostel of Kamala Nehru University that his ward Meena got her leg fractured. Meena is the daughter of his childhood friend Sumati. Shiv brings Meena to his house as he is her local guardian. She is an independent girl and requests Shiv not to inform her parents about her injury. She does not even hesitate to live with an unknown man, in the absence of his wife. Shiv makes all arrangements for Meena's stay in his house and helps her in everyday activities.

Meanwhile, Shiv Murthy is involved in a controversy over his lesson on Basava, the 12th-century poet and social reformer. He receives a phone call from a reporter inquiring about the controversial History module. The reporter accuses Shiv of being on leave because of the protest against the lesson. The Itihas Suraksha Manch blames Shiv for distorting history and demand an apology from him. Dr Sharma, his associate informs that the head of the department and the dean are receiving abusive letters about the lesson on Basava.

Meena supports and guides Shiv that he should not succumb to the pressure of the fundamentalists. Shiv follows Meena's suggestion and refuses to apologize and withdraw his lesson. He comes up with an action plan against them after a discussion with Meena's friends and his colleague's. Shiv also acquires emotional backing from his freedom fighter father's teachings. Later, Shiv's lesson is sent to a Review Committee and the fundamentalist awaits his resignation. At this juncture, Meena extends full support to Shiv and makes all arrangements for a Press conference, arranges a TV show, plan for public meeting and rally, prepares a leaflet attacking RSS with the help of her friends. Shiv's father's philosophy becomes a walking stick for him during times of siege. Meena and Shiv go to the doctor to remove the cast and she finally leaves for the hostel. She manages to ignite enthusiasm in this fifty-two years cautious professor Murthy. In addition to this, Basava's ideals, his father's ghost helps him

arise as a hero out of a common man. Githa Hariharan portrays how even the voice of a simple, silent, thoughtful academician rises in times of siege.

History in *in Times of Siege*:

More than inspiration Hariharan felt an urge to write in *Times of Siege*. In the novel, she discusses the rising episodes of Hindu fundamentalism. The idea that we are living in a period that allowed very little room for debate and dissection motivated her to write the novel. In the interview with Tejero Hariharan expresses "I feel proprietorial about it, and if I can see there is something wrong with it, I am going to shout as loud as I can. Whatever is right in the immediate world around me, I am going to defend as passionately and as clearly as I can" (Tejero, 2004). Her purpose is to give an idea about links among all fundamentalisms. As the novel is set in India, she takes Hindu Fundamentalism because it is through this prism, she views the world. She emphasizes that fundamentalism affects commerce, cultural life and intellectual life and also reduces the collective world view.

According to Arpita Sardar "History should be unbiased in its study as far as religious and cultural compulsions are concerned; it should be guided by a free-thinking. What is disappointing is that severe obstacles are always set in the path of free-thinking by very many forces and elements like religious fundamentalism and cultural nationalism." (Sardar, 2021) Hariharan asserts that the humble voices express their anger like during the emergency of Babri Masjid and the carnage in Gujarat. Bringing the novel closer to reality, Hariharan refers to events like recalling the Panicker Sarkar's volume on the Freedom Struggle and the Sangh Parivar's campaigns against Deepa Mehta's aborted film 'water' and M. F. Hussain's painting on Goddess Saraswati in the novel.

When Hariharan wanted to show that a history professor gets into trouble for a lesson he wrote years back, immediately her choice was Basava, a 12th-century saint-poet. Shiv is inspired and influenced by two persons in his life first his dead father and second Basava. Shiv's module on Basava "hurts the sentiments of a Hindu watchdog group" (ITS, 53). The Itihas Suraksha Mancha accuses Shiv of distorting history. The fundamentalists blame Shiv for damaging Hinduism and depicting Basava as a common man. Besides, Shiv is also accused of overstating caste inequality prevalent in ancient India and presenting the Brahmins and the priests negatively. Shiv does not get any support from the department,

rather he gets a call from the Head of the Department, who repeated the charge:

It seems implied that Basavana city, Kalyana, was not the model Hindu Kingdom. It seems you have exaggerated the problem of caste and written in a very biased way about the Brahmins and temple priests. And also, you have not made it clear enough that Basavana was much more than an ordinary human being. Some people consider him divine; you know. (ITS, 53-54)

Past incidences show that historical and mythological writings have to face controversy. There was a protest against Salman Rushdie's book *The Satanic Verses*. He was accused of blasphemy and Iran issued a fatwa to kill him. Taslima Nasreen has completed more than twenty-five years in exile for writing on the oppression of women and criticism of religion. M. F. Hussain was targeted by Hindu groups and had to live a life of a refugee till the end of his life. Academic writing also has to bear controversy. Shiv Murthy lesson on Basava is attacked for not glorifying Hinduism and its ancient cultural practices. History plays a significant role in the novel.

Politics and censorship in *In Times of Siege*:

According to Sashi Bhushan "In India, scholars' Freedom to Write and Express on ambiguous aspects of Indian history and legends has been controlled by the Section of IPC 295 which in actuality is the result of the colonial hangover. It criminalizes the insulting, and outraging of the religious sentiments of any community/class with hateful actions, speeches and writings." (Bhushan, 2017) A well-known book, written by Wendy Doniger *The Hindus: An Alternative History* (2010) is attacked and faced charges under section 295A. Hariharan, in her novel *In Times of Siege*, reviews historical events through the political and cultural point of view. Shiv Murthy wrote a lesson on Basava for the correspondence course of his university which is attacked by Itihas Suraksha Manch. He has to deal with political pressure from his department and the religious groups.

The department demands an apology from him to stop the growing controversy. But Shiv denies apologizing. The Head of the Department has also prepared a list of objectionable sentences illustrating the severe side of political correctness. Even the Itihas Suraksha Manch puts three demands before Shiv. First, they want an apology for hurting the sentiments of Hindus, second withdrawal of the lesson and third to rewrite the lesson and submit it to the Manch. Shiv believes one should write a true History. According to

Monika Gupta, "Shiv is not violent in his approach. Shiv like Gandhiji is all for ahimsa and he has tried to protest against the unfair allegations of the protestors in a peaceful manner' (Gupta, 102). The lesson is sent to the review committee. Here Meena and her friends extend support to Shiv and arrange a press conference. This event influences the students of the university and they are forced to involve in campus politics. And consequently, the ongoing politics in the education institute destroys the revered academic field.

Conclusion:

Deepak Kumar Singh asserts that "The novel addresses the topical problem of our time, the politics of caste-division and intolerance and aggressiveness of fundamentalist Hindu organization" (Kumar Singh, 107). Khushwant Singh comments on the novel, "Hariharan writes with anguish, pain and anger about what is happening to our country. I put *In Times of Siege* on top of my list of books that must be read."

Githa Hariharan's *In Times of Siege* criticizes the enduring practice of discrimination based on caste, class, religion, and region. The fundamentalists are politically driven and they do not even spare the valued educational institutes. When we look at the history and present-day India, it can be noticed that nothing has changed. Racism, casteism, and regionalism are still predominant today. Intolerance is growing in India. Writers and activists like Githa Hariharan support the freedom of speech and expression. Through the protagonist, she has depicted a simple, silent and middle-class voice that will be raised in times of siege. There is indeed a need to quarantine the education system from the pressures of race, religion and class.

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