



POLITICAL ETHOS IN GITHA HARIHARAN'S *IN TIMES OF SEIGE*

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Abstract:

In Times of Siege is about the times we live in. It is a political novel which examines the jingoism that results in 'shrinking spaces' and the role of the conscientious individual against the rising tide of communalism, intolerance and bigotry. The novel unfolds the story of ordinary lives besieged, of men and women struggling to make sense of hatred, ignorance, love and loyalty. It attacks the regimentation of thought and brutal repression of culture and emphasizes harmony, tolerance, good temper and sympathy. India is a multi-religious, multi-linguistic, multi-ethnic nation, and its heterogeneity is the heart of its secular foundation.

Keywords: Githa Hariharan, *In Times of Siege*, Political Novel, Communalism, Fundamentalism, Cultural Nationalism, Intellectual Freedom, Heterogeneity, etc.

Introduction:

In Times of Siege is Githa Hariharan's latest novel. Her debut novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* won her the Commonwealth Writer's Prize in 1993. Since then she has published two novels, *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* and *When Dreams Travel* and a collection of short stories, *The Art of Dying*. She has also edited *A Southern Harvest*, a volume of stories translated from four South Indian Languages. She has co-edited a collection of stories for children, *Sorry, Best Friend*.

Githa Hariharan, in her earlier novels, seems to be engaged in women's issues. She has written with immense concern and understanding for her female characters. The novels like *The Thousand Faces of Night* and *When Dreams Travel* are about a woman's search for 'her' story. Even the *Ghosts of Vasu Master* are 'feminine' ghosts such as Mangala, Jameela and Eliamma. The hidden and the suppressed world of Indian woman come to light further in the stories collected in *The Art of Dying*. But in her fourth novel, *In Times of Siege*, Githa Hariharan seems to have changed her stance. She is appalled at the religious and ethnic violence the world over and India in particular. Primarily as a novelist, she has responded to the serious political issues such as the demolition of Babri Masjid and the Gujarat carnage. She, thus, expresses her concern, ".....this is our world, our times, and the contemporary faces of violence, hatred and exclusion..... there are wars against terrorism, there is jihad, there is hindutva..... And there are terms and phenomena we cannot ignore, as students and chroniclers, in some form or the other, of our times: Globalization, nationalism, terrorism, jingoism, obscurantism, arid communalism" (Hariharan, 5).

Githa Hariharan believes that in the world we live in, 'our spaces, as writers, artists, citizens – are shrinking all the time'. (Hariharan, 5) This is because of 'the increasing parochialism of each community, the increasing importance of jingoism to the renewed articulations of national and sale-national identities.' (Hariharan, 5) The rich cultural heritage of our country is being wiped out by the drab assertion of 'cultural nationalism'. There are so many militant creeds and the country



is rent by religious and racial persecution. The human race seems to have collapsed. The situation is very grim. It is as Ghalib would have put it:

Koi ummeed bar naheenaatee

Koi suratnazarnaheenaatee

(No hope seems to be fulfilled/ No solution appears on the horizon)

It is against this backdrop that Githa Hariharan in *In Times of Siege* attempts to examine the jingoism that results in 'shrinking spaces' which is 'what contemporary Indian writers experience most directly'. (Ibidem) *In Times of Siege* is about a History lecturer who is victimized by a group called the Itihas Surasksha Manch for a lesson he has written on the reformer- poet Basava. Githa Hariharan makes her intention clear in writing this novel when she says:

I wanted to write not just about a specific aspect of the fundamentalisms or conservatisms – we are seeing around us, but the insidious ways in which minds are being shrunk. This is why I set the novel in a university. The process of learning is supposed to break down walls and enlarge the student's world, not shrink it by encouraging the irrational, or reinforcing prejudice, or inculcating hatred of anything or anyone that is different from the self. Most of all, it is supposed to encourage debate and disagreement, How do you learn to think of yourself if you swallow all the answers someone (and someone ill- equipped) has cooked up for you? (Hariharan, 6)

In Times of Siege, thus, is about the times we live in. It is a political novel which seemed to be ideal in the present scenario. Professor Alok Bhalla has underlined its 'central importance to our troubled times, especially the role of the conscientious individual against the rising tide of communalism, intolerance and bigotry' (The Hindu, 2003). Githa Hariharan has set the novel in a university. The protagonist is Shiv Murthy, a middle-aged Professor of History of the imaginary open University of Delhi, named Kasturba Gandhi Central University. The novel is a 'fast-paced political narrative'. Here Githa Hariharan has abandoned her earlier elliptical technique of storytelling. She narrates the events in the manner of an academic thriller. *In Times of Siege* may be described as a campus novel with a predominantly political theme. In *In Times of Siege*, History Professor Shiv Murthy is the man at the centre. He lives a peaceful life with his wife Rekha and his daughter Tara who has taken up a job in Seattle. Shiv Murthy prepares lesson modules for B.A. history students in the distance education mode. He is engaged in departmental meetings and occasionally relieves himself flirting with his colleague Amita Sen. The Head of the History department is Dr. Sharma. He is against all controversies and believes in the 'consensual' approach to things. Shiv's another colleague is Menon. Amita and Menon are allies of Shiv. Then there is Dr Arya who is described as 'ugly', bigoted Tyrant' (Hariharan, 30). He is referred to as the descendant of Nazis. Into this world of Shiva, comes Meena. Meena is the daughter of Sumathi, a childhood neighbour of Shiv. She is a sociology student at the University where Shiv teaches. She is writing a thesis on women's stories, women affected during the anti-Sikh riots in 1984 after the assassination of Indira Gandhi. Meena has a broken leg injury and calls on Shiv for help. She is taken to the Murthy household. Rekha is away in Seattle visiting their daughter Tara. Shiv nurses Meena with the help of Kamla and Babli his domestic help. Meena is a woman of the younger generation. Her worldview is shaped by radical texts like *The Politics of Hate*, *Onward United Action*, *Women's Voices*, and *The Communalist Agenda*. She is also a fan of Asterix and the Normans and Tintin. She likes to champion political causes through posters Campaigns, 'sit



ins' and demonstrations. She puts up a huge poster in her room by Reverend Martin Niemoller, the German pastor who was a victim of the nazi concentration camp, in screaming red: "SPEAK UP! BEFORE IT'S LATE". This poster speaks volumes for the message and agenda of Githa Hariharan's work.

There is Shiv's father, whose presence hovers throughout the novel. He was a freedom fighter. For him, the freedom movement did not end in 1947. He could not bear the anarchy loosened upon the world and the travails of free India. He left the house after the congress workers meet in Indore, never to return again. His words always inspire Shiv to take positive action: 'All that matters is that you are free thinking. That you have moral courage' (ITs, 40).

Shiv Murthy lands into trouble with his course module about Basavanna, the founder of Veershavism and treasurer of vijaynagar kingdom. Basavanna had questioned the caste hierarchy and stood for social emancipation. The lesson comes under attack by Itihas Suraksha Manch. Shiv is accused of distorting history and heroic historical figures. He is also charged with anti-Hindu bias and a dark portrayal of the Brahmins and priests which has hurt the sentiments. It is analogous to the banning of American scholar James Laine's book on Shivaji – the attack of Maratha Seva Sangh and Sambhaji Brigade in 2004)

Shiv thinks over the fundamentalists. He tries to make sense of the raging political turmoil: Fears that our (Indian) history will force people see that our past, like our present has always been critics of social divisions that masquerade as religion and tradition. So they whitewash historical figures (and) they seize history.

The novel, thus, 'unfolds the story of ordinary lives besieged, of men and women struggling to make sense of hatred, ignorance, love and loyalty'. While doing so it attacks the government policy of saffronization of education. The Itihas Suraksha Parishad is a caricature of Sangh Parivar trying to make teaching of history conform to its ideology of Hindutva.

The fascist ideology is again brought to light when the novel refers to the brutal events like "Campaign against Christians, murder of Australian missionary Graham Staines and his two children, attack on artist M.F. Hussain for painting Hindu goddesses in the nude. Teachers in Goa having their faces blackened for setting 'politically incorrect' exams.... The disruption of the shooting of a film on the plight of windows in Bewares, the list is endless"(Hariharan, 100).

The current political events become a part of the nations' history and the German poet Hans Magnus sees the history of nation state as a "millennium of patchwork". This view is seconded by Edward Said in his remark that "we live in a world of interdependent mongrelized societies. They are Hybrids, they are impure" (1995v:46). These incidents might be understood in the light of Said's plance regarding the return to 'native religion and primitive nationhood" (1995:338) Fundamentalism, has spread throughout the world and we come across Iranian fatwa against Salman Rushdie and Indian nativism based on singular Indian culture or 'one nation – one people – one culture theory'. This threatens the intellectual freedom and basic human values. In this context Said's remarks seem pertinent. He says: 'to accept nativism is to accept the consequences of imperialism, the racial, religious and political divisions imposed by imperialism itself (1994: 276). He calls nativism as "the metaphysics of essences". It distils the essence of a race, a people, or a religion such as negritude, Irishness, Islam, Catholicism or Hinduism. This creates enmity and malice among human beings. Such fanatics attack the liberals like Shiv who realize that their liberalism may even cost their lives. All totalizing notions of identity, whether, imperial, colonial and national should be rigorously scrutinized in the name of the irreducible play 'difference' (Derrida, 1978:280). For, we know, after Deconstruction, that centre cannot hold. Any



concept that fixes identities is harmful to the society. Similarly, the 'radical eclecticism' advanced by Charles Jencks (1977) rejects the idea of totality. All tendencies towards cultural uniformity is resisted. As Lyotard puts it: 'Let us wage war on totality. Let us activate the differences' (1988:82) which eventually leads to the establishment of 'republican principles of freedom' (1988:89).

Incidents based on fundamentalism and parochialism should not be given vent. Instead a sense of harmony, tolerance, good temper and sympathy should prevail. It is this message that Githa Hariharan desires to convey through her mouthpiece Meena when she writes, "the link between fascism and ugly faces of Hinduism unveiling themselves around us is the regimentation of thought and brutal repression of culture" (Hariharan, 101).

Meena represents the young vigilant generation. Her political awareness is evident in her opposition to purchase batteries made by murderers, Union Carbide. In fact, it is Meena who gives Shiv the strength he seeks. She wants to beat the fundos at their game. She, unflinchingly, goes about distributing leaflets, posters and arranges a rally to rescue Shiv. She is not afraid of the violence and displays placards such as 'Stop Talibanization of India' 'History Destroyed' and 'Who's afraid of Manch' (Hariharan, 145). On the other hand, Shiv feels that 'he is in a play, a miscast' (Hariharan, 143), 'a body is a lawless country, a body that has somewhat unlearned the laws of gravity' (Hariharan, 131). He is confounded and asks himself: 'What makes a fanatic? A fundamentalist? What makes communities that have lived together for years suddenly discover a hatred for each others?' (Hariharan, 129) Shiv wonders what would Basava have done in such a situation? He had made Basava's life his own. The questions that Basava faced 800 years ago seemed relevant in the present times. At this critical juncture, Shiv is reminded of his father's words: "You must mine the truth. If you settle for safety, if you choose to go along with whatever makes your life comfortable, truth will escape you completely" (Hariharan, 82). Shiv longs to go back to his teacher's life.

Towards the end of the novel, the course module prepared by Shiv is sent for review, by an expert committee. Shiv is asked to extend his cooperation to put an end to the controversy. The Manch has three demands: First, apology for hurting their sentiments, from Shiv, the department and the University. Secondly, the lesson should be retracted, and, thirdly, the rewritten lesson should be submitted to the Manch. Dr. Sharma tries to make Shiv relent. However, Shiv refuses to send an apology. He, like David in Cotzee's novel *Disgrace*, resolves to stand firmly for his cherished values and rise to heroic stature. At the end, Meena returns to her hostel and Shiv to his domestic and academic routine.

Conclusion:

Githa Hariharan feels that it is high time to re-evaluate our cultural heritage for our own times. India is a multi-religious, multi-linguistic, multi-ethnic nation. In all earnestness one must try to preserve the country's heterogeneity, which is the heart of our secular foundation. To her, "in times of siege, the writer is more, not less important. 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" (Hariharan).



She believes that in doing so the writers will be creating more space for themselves and participatory in the culture by making it more meaningful.

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