

Githa Hariharan's *In Times of Siege*: Can We Practise Human Rights Even Today?

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Abstract

Githa Hariharan's *In Times of Siege*, incontrovertibly demonstrates egalitarian ideology interrogating an individual's right to democracy. There are few questions which take place on the mind of the reader. Can we practise human rights or is it under constant threat? The paper addresses the issues of the ideals of liberals and also of people who try to express their resentment despite being politically inactive. The paper analyses how the lives of common men get affected if they assert their individual opinion in the light of saffronization and communal disharmony. These kinds of the crisis have been observed in times of demolition of Babri Masjid, the war in Iraq and of course during Gujrat Carnage. *In Times of Siege*, sets an example where ordinary people are pushed to a point in which they are forced to speak up for the basic human rights that hold their world in place.

Keywords: secularism, extremism, academic freedom, free-thinking, independence, historiography.

Githa Hariharan is among those writers who firmly believe that they should exert their responsibilities in social and political issues through the help of their writings. She has often stated her opinions in examining themes of various contexts. In this novel, she talks about the importance of strengthening liberal views to fight against religious bigotry. Along with the main narrative of the protagonist Shiv, Hariharan articulates several real-life references where fundamental rights to think, speak and ask questions are under siege. In an interview with Gowri Ramanarayan, Hariharan comments, 'History is a tool to understand ourselves and our times. We may know that under a mosque there is a temple, but the problem begins when they come up with an 'authorised' official version of the past in its entirety, a whitewashed view of a single continuous, homogeneous hindu past, seeking a range of censorship rights' (The Hindu, April 24, 2003).

The novel deals with Shiv, a middle-aged History Professor at an open University in Delhi, who likes to keep his life rather simple and without any kind of commotion. His quiet life stirs when two incidents happen simultaneously. One of his friend's daughter, Meena comes to stay with him with a broken knee. But Meena is not at all diminished with her leg encased in a cast. Interestingly, this cast has been used as a metaphor by Hariharan. It symbolises the eternal suppression of women as a whole. The dominant ideology of fascism works as 'cast' which forces people to limit their reaction in a demanding situation. Meena is a sheer embodiment of indomitable spirit and tremendous mental strength. She feels she is capable enough to manage on her own with her broken leg. She is reluctant to call her parents and decides to stay with Shiv, her local guardian. *In Times of Siege* can be termed as satiric campus novel along with the pioneer works of the genre i.e., *Lucky Jim* by Kingsley Amis, *Changing Places* by David Lodge and *Disgrace* by J.M. Coetzee.

In India, academic freedom in narrating historical and mythological elements has been facing censorship by different political and religious groups for long. Free thinking and free

speech are at peril considering constant threat from self-proclaimed protectors of the culture. Historians of different timeframes have often faced a backlash from different religious and political groups and it has led to unpleasant controversies. Sometimes, media aids in fuelling these controversies without knowing the real truth. Things often take an ugly turn when these kinds of vigilantism do not get proper restriction from the law. In this novel, the protagonist, Shiv works at an open University and his primary duty is to prepare a lesson module for the students. There is little scope for him to interact with the students face to face. Now, this kind of quiet and contented life faces a turmoil when self-proclaimed protectors of history namely Itihaas Suraksha Mancha accuses him of distorting history and historical facts. He is in charge of BA correspondence course and he has written a full module on Basava, the social reformer and saint-poet of 12th century, Karnataka. Basava instigated a society which would be free from any kind of discrimination. According to him, the rigid caste system needs to be abolished to form a uniform society. This particular act of Shiv ignites the wrath of the fundamentalists and they attack not only Shiv but his university as well. For them, Shiv has not ‘sung enough of a paean to the glory of Hindu Kingdoms;’ and also because he has made ‘too much of caste divisions among Hindus’ (Hariharan *Siege* 55). The organisation claims that Shiv has deliberately tried to exaggerate the issue of casteism. He is blamed for showing the temples and Brahmins in a prejudiced way and in this way he has tried to malign the age-old beliefs and values of Hinduism. By gathering social revolutionaries together, Basava ‘attempted a creative, courageous experiment: a community that sought to exclude no one—not women, not the lowest, most ‘polluting castes’. Poets, potters, reformers, washermen, philosophers, prostitutes, learned Brahmins, housewives, tanners, ferrymen—all were part of the brief burst of Kalyana’s glory. All were equal in that they were veerashaivas; warriors of Shiva’ (Hariharan *Siege* 60). Shiv’s course module demonstrates how Basava became vociferous against the polarisation of different social strata. The marriage of a Brahmin bride and a cobbler

groom created much agitation and it led to the burning of the city. After this, Basava's followers got divided and he left the city. Thus, the portrayal of Basava along with the city of Kalyana lands Shiv in trouble with the charge of distorting historical facts. In this connection, Eckstein opines,

In general, the issues Hariharan addresses in *In Times of Siege*—the role of historiography, academic independence and free speech—are firmly rooted in a logical context, yet they of course tackle problems that are valid for all kinds of nationalisms across the globe. (155)

When Meena comes to know about this misuse of power by the self-appointed preservers of history, she does not hesitate to express her opinion,

The group is called the Itihas Suraksha Manch. The protection of history! Whoever heard of history having to be protected? It is true that whether people are talking about culture or history or women's rights, protection has become a much-abused word. A cover-up for all kinds of bullying tactics. (Hariharan *Siege* 55)

This is evident that Meena takes the front seat when it comes to defending the allegations that had been thrust on Shiv. It is Meena who initiates the battle against the injustice. In her words, 'You will have to chalk out a plan. Obviously you can't apologize or take back a word of the lesson' (Hariharan *Siege* 55).

Now, the issue of intrusion of a political organisation into the academic sphere interrogates about the freedom of authors who often find themselves in trouble while depicting history or historical figures. There are many instances where a religious group accuses a certain film that has hurt their sentiments by projecting something controversial. In this situation, Shiv is summoned by his department to discuss the predicament. The Head of the department and vice-chancellor want Shiv to apologise to the organisation and retract the lesson immediately.

Infused with new enthusiasm and firm in his decision, Shiv lets them know, “The lesson does not distort history by any stretch of the imagination. And I will not apologize or explain myself to a group outside the university, a group of people we do not recognize as historians” (Hariharan *Siege* 70).

The novel demonstrates how academic freedom in books and films are controlled by the political framing of divisive forces of various political and religious groups. In this case, it is quite surprising that people from academia like Shiv’s colleague, Dr Arya and, historian A.A. Atre oppose Shiv’s depiction of Basava and predominantly on the portrayal of the city, Kalyana. The crux of the novel is the saffronisation of education. The attack on left-wing historiography is condemnable as it opposes the right to free speech and secularism. In these challenging times, Meena supports Shiv in establishing his secular ideas and urges him to take a strong stand regarding his values which he cherishes. Shiv finds himself cornered in his department. He feels,

Shiv sees his lesson sent to the corner in disgrace. Booklet lies upon booklet in the printing-unit storeroom, waiting to be pulped. There is a warning sign that quarantines it from the other booklets, a sign like the ones on those ominously shaped vehicles carrying dangerous chemicals. Caution! Highly Inflammable Medieval History. Only known antidotes: 500 mg of blissful ignorance or 250 mg of unadulterated lies. (Hariharan *Siege* 86)

Meena gets Shiv prepared to fight against the ire of Hindu zealots. To win over the battle, Meena takes the help of her activist friends Amar and Jyoti. They arrange the broad front rally, publish posters, propose leaflets and organize public meetings to underpin Shiv’s idea of liberalism. According to her, “The link between fascism and the ugly faces of Hindutva unveiling themselves around us is the regimentation of thought and the brutal repression of culture” (Hariharan *Siege* 101).

In the course of the novel, it is also revealed that the story of Shiv is based on a play by H.S Shivaprakash which is also about the life history on Basava. It was in Kannada and it was taught in various universities across the country. After some years, the playwright was accused again for not portraying Basava as an extremely heroic figure by some fundamentalist groups and they demanded to withdraw the lesson from the university curriculum. They did every possible thing to make things worse like burning of copies and the playwright's effigy. Being afraid of the situation, the authority removed the play from university syllabus in 1995. It is important to understand the situation in which liberal-minded people still dwell. The pressure of being under threat is still the same in 2000. The shrinkage of space for free-thinking poses serious trouble to not only authors but for filmmaker and painters as well. In the words of Hariharan,

Now in 2000, the distance between the imaginary lands of literature and the prosaic city of history has shrunk. All occupy the same beleaguered space, the same territory under indefinite siege. The horizon, the sky, all wide-open spaces are reduced to the size of a pinpoint; the Manch and its cohorts are telling them all that there is only one way to remember the past. (*Siege* 110)

With the help of Meena and her committed comrades, Shiv tries his best to find his much-needed space and power. Their undying enthusiasm incites the required passion in Shiv where he feels the need to show his worth as a historian to the world. Meena inspires him to not avoid any kind of confrontation time and again. She opines, 'Even better, you have to confront this Arya. Ignoring him is not going to make him go away'(119). Thus, the innate strength of Meena is potent enough to provide counter-discourse to the bigoted fanaticism of the Hindu zealots. With the available resources, she can make use of some citizens' groups to protest against the injustice of the rightwing fundamentalists. One of her placards says, 'STOP TALIBANIZATION OF INDIA to HISTORY DESTROYED! to WHO'S AFRAID OF THE

MANCH?’(145). Amidst all the interviews, Television shows and telephonic conversations to the media, Shiv decides to confront his colleagues in his department. Things take an ugly turn where his colleague Dr Arya physically attacks him in the course of a heated argument.

Shiv is yet to figure out a few questions which arise on his mind, 'What makes a fanatic? A fundamentalist? What makes communities that have lived together for years suddenly discover a latent hatred for each other?' (Hariharan *Siege* 129). Meanwhile, Shiv's room in the department gets completely vandalised by hired agitators who are not the university students. In Hariharan's words, 'His room, his books, stripped naked. A sullied place, no longer anyone's refuge. His room has been pushed into no-man's land. The table and chairs and bookselves are broken, the walls defaced. There are torn books everywhere, cupboard and files open-mouthed and in shambles' (Hariharan *Siege* 130). In this baffling situation, Shiv tries to imagine what Basava would have done if he had been pitted against these fanatics. Unfortunately, he does not find any answers. He 'sees two images side by side, condemned to be coupled forever. There, to the left, is Basava confronting his Manch, standing up to what he passionately believes in; confidently leading his men and women through the intricacies of ideology and politics. To the right is the second image, inexorably tailing the first' (Hariharan *Siege* 136). As a result of this vandalism in his room, Shiv realises that his predicament in this current state of affairs can be easily relatable to Basava's struggle to establish an egalitarian dream. It seems there is technically no difference between 1168 and 2000. In this way, the shrinkage of space and time is indicative of the fact that any form of art is still under siege. Human rights to free expression are violated by many political and religious groups to gain some motives. Anita Nair writes about Shiv,

It is enough we know that Shiv has been forced to see, be free to be curious, to speculate; to debate, dissent, reaffirm the value of the only heirloom he needs from the past, the right to know a thing in all ways possible. Be it Meena or his

mind. In Shiv, Hariharan has created a character who for his ordinariness is that much more potent. And among her cameos, it is Menon who with his penchant for staring at the ceiling that leaves an indelible impression. There is gentle humour and irony, sensitivity and enough flesh and blood to make up for those times when the book meanders aimlessly or when the shrillness and a tendency to much 'speechify-ing' breaks the pace of the narrative. (India Today, February 24, 2003)

Before this controversy, Shiv was busy writing a new lesson on the rise and fall of Vijayanagar empire. To have a piece of first-hand knowledge, Shiv visited Hampi in the year 1996. While visiting the place in an auto, the auto driver, Suban expresses his grief over the ruins of the glorious medieval Hindu Kingdom. He says, 'It must have been beautiful. They shouldn't have broken it down' (Hariharan *Siege* 159). Here, 'they' means the Muslims who are his ancestors. It seems Suban offers an apology to Shiv for the wrongdoings of his forefathers. It has become a norm to assume that the Muslims are the invaders and they are Hindu's enemies. In this situation, Shiv becomes quite apprehensive about the lesson he is going to write. He realises, 'He was naked, unprotected. He had forgotten who exactly he was; all the collective progress of the last fifty years had been torn off his body in an instant' (Hariharan *Siege* 159). After visiting the place, Shiv gets the notion that the Hindu Vijayanagar Kingdom was 'planned to flaunt its glory, intimidate the subjects into subjection. And all the grandeur, like its kindred great cities, invariably built on the blood and sweat of hovels swallowed up by time' (Hariharan *Siege* 158). Through his fieldwork, he comes to know more details which are quite different from the stereotypical idea of the glorious kingdom. He discovers,

Behind the facade- the spectacle of the wonder-city, the palaces and poetry, the dancing girls dripping with jewels, the treasuries and temple coffers

overflowing with precious metals and stones –age-old recurring motif of other, darker associations. Tribute, arrears, massacres with fire and sword, revenge, slaughter. Imperial glory, intimate with the landscape of the battlefield. Then fall, decay and ruin. (Hariharan *Siege* 158)

Shiv cannot write to vindicate realistic assessments because of the vigilance of some watchdog groups which might vociferously raise their condemnation. This is extremely unfortunate for a historian not to practise free-thinking in terms of writing historical facts. His dilemma is evident in the following lines,

Despite Shiv's contempt for the head, his stomach contracts. Is it possible to write history—or anything else at all—if you have to worry about your masters' objections, their venal sentiments? Shiv puts down his pen and waits. (Hariharan *Siege* 157)

There is little scope for multiple identities to co-exist in India. In this context, Amartya Sen states, 'The world frequently taken to be a collection of religions [or of "civilizations or culture"] ignoring the other identities that people have and value, involving class, gender, profession, language, science, morals and politics' (Sen xvi). In the novel, Hariharan has given many real-life events where willingness to embrace new ideas face backlash by pseudo-secularists. Shashi Deshpande says,

Increasing intolerance is being translated into a concern for what is called 'our culture', which leads a particular group into becoming sensitive about a particular issue, giving it a chance to show its muscle, clout and its political power. (230)

Hariharan believes that it is important to accept the need for diversity and it is equally necessary to practise it at home, to internalize it and make it a part of the law to establish a diverse cultural nation to coexist peacefully. This idea is reflected in Hariharan's celebrated

essay, 'New Voices, New Challenges'. In this essay, the author underscores the fact that learning should break down the boundaries and enhances the vision of the learners. On the contrary, what is happening in educational institutions is that people are discouraged to exercise free-thinking and unfortunately, this thinking is reinforced by prejudice. In addition to this, this often leads to intolerance which forces people, especially the extremists to the path of violence. She further says, 'How do you learn to think for yourself if you swallow all the answers someone (and someone ill-equipped) has cooked up for you?' (Hariharan *New Voices* 32). By challenging the notion of homogeneity, Hariharan foregrounds the need to practise heterogeneity. Moreover, she also opines that the basic fabric of societal foundation will collapse if there is a constant threat from communal forces in the name of cultural and religious nationalism. Prabodh Joshi says,

In these difficult times when political correctness is the only discourse happening in the society and major's hegemony is celebrated in one way or the other, Hariharan's novel comes as a huge warning, not only to society but also to creative artists, intellectuals, academics and cultural activists that we need to be critically aware of our times and should shed-off the reticence of being complacent fence-sitters. (25)

There are some real-life references where free expressions have been hindered in terms of art, film making and many more. Intellectuals such as writers, playwrights and filmmakers often go under the scanner to examine their adherence to preconceived notions. Meena's friend Amar shares some examples where extremists assert violence in the name of preservation of culture. We have references such as the murder of Australian missionary Graham Staines and his two children, the condemnation 'on artist M.F. Hussain for painting Hindu goddesses in the nude' (100) and many more. Filmmaker Deepa Mehta faced the wrath of fundamentalist groups for the portrayal of a lesbian relationship and the plight of Hindu widows in her films

respectively, Fire and Water. So the very fact that any kind of dissent from the majoritarian opinions might cause controversy, posits obstacle in the path of free-thinking and free expressions. In this connection, it is apt to remember Meena's lines, "The link between fascism and the ugly faces of Hindutva unveiling themselves around us is the regimentation of thought and the brutal repression of culture." (Hariharan *Siege* 101)

There is another aspect of Shiv's persona which needs to be analysed in detail. Shiv is preoccupied with his father's memory and it paves way for him to be haunted. Being haunted, he creates his lesson on Basava. Shiv's portrayal of Basava is a clear reflection of his father's ideologies. Hariharan also states her opinion that the past has always been polythetic. People dealt with a diversity of opinions and multiple identities in the past. Historiography influences historians like Shiv who wants to remember everything related to history. Whereas Shiv relies on variable sources to fathom Basava's hagiography, he is entirely dependent on his memory for his father's delineation on his mind. Shiv reminisces the past to take inspiration for dealing with the present. His father's ideologies of the freedom movement, independence and liberalism aid in comprehending Basava's radical frame of mind. At any cost, Shiv cannot conform to the hegemonic vision of the right-wing Hindi zealots, because if he does so, he will lose himself. By intermingling past and present, Hariharan posits the fact that secularism is still under ideological siege. There is a striking parallelism between the city Kalyana, and Delhi as both are demonstrated as the city of ruins. In both of the cities, the right to express free thinking is thwarted severely. Moreover, Vijayanagar can be identified with Shiv's room at the university for being vandalised by fundamentalists and extremists.

Towards the end of the novel, it is seen that the controversy diminishes with the advent of new news over time. Shiv's life becomes normal when the letter from VC arrives. At the end of the novel, Shiv hands over his father's stick to Meena because he feels that he no longer needs it anymore. He thinks that the responsibility of carrying out of secular notion lies in the

shoulders of young generations. Meena is potent enough to safeguard secularism along with her young comrades. Through the novel, Hariharan conveys the message that it is important to accept the concept of plurality in this country of diverse culture and it is equally necessary to emphasize in the concept of the use of reasoning in terms of practising tolerance. In this context, it is apt to quote Anita Singh's statement,

This work is a progressive criticism of communal fascist forces. It is a prophetic work, which envisages and predicts our present day's violation of human rights under various pretensions, which has virtually taken the whole world under siege and turned it into the heart of darkness. (206)

The marginalisation of space for the idea of arbitrariness is not acceptable if we want new identities to co-exist peacefully. The novel can be termed as a wake-up call for people to understand that the human race must be protected for the sake of multiple identities to co-exist. The sole purpose of the novel is to propound the fact that the idea of homogenized nation is illusory and must be prevented.

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