

Githa Hariharan's *In Time of Siege*: a Story of Conflicting Pursuits of an Intellectual Woman in the Era of Globalization

1. **Kumari Anupma**

Research Scholar, P. G. Dept. of English, V. K. S. U., Ara

2. **Prof. R. K. Sinha**

P. G. Dept. of English, S. P. Jain College, Sasaram

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Abstract

Indian English fictional writings are fortunate enough to have writers like Githa Hariharan who is more interested in the presentation of some of the social and moral issues of our society which are still persistent in different forms and disturb the intellectuals from time to time. Among her contemporaries, she is more enthusiastic in the portrayal of the contemporary events and incidents with microscopic observations. Almost all the novels of Githa Hariharan – *The Thousand Faces of Night*, *When Dreams Travel*, *In Time of Siege*, *The Ghost of Vasu Master*, *Fugitive Histories*, *I Have Become the Tide*, etc. are wonderful in creating a unique kind of initiative in terms of social documentation in Indian English writing. Githa Hariharan seems to be wonderful in composing novels related to social and moral issues.

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INTRODUCTION

Githa Hariharan's novel *In Time of Siege* deals with an individual's dilemma to cope with the circumstances occurred in this life because the nature of such circumstances is too bitter and full of contradictions for many reasons altogether. The life of Shiv which figures in the centre of the novel is full of struggle and conflict and that is why the novel symbolizes the role of inevitable constant struggle in the life of an individual. According to the critics, there is an anger, an anguish and also curiosity in the novel which is quite necessary for a good writing associated with contemporary issues and trends and also influence the cotemporary minds with pain and anguish. Khushwant Singh praises the book in these words:

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.

It is the commonplace criticism that Githa Hariharan is more interested in the dissatisfaction of the characters in her novels. And it seems true also. For instance, in her novel – *Fugitive Histories*, she has narrated the dissatisfaction and anger of the victims of communal riots and communal violence. *I Have Become the Tide* shows her anger and dissatisfaction towards the caste prejudices in our country and how it is devastative and dangerous in putting hurdles in the progress of the people belonging to scheduled castes. Similarly, *In Times of Siege* is quite remarkable and outstanding in the presentation of Shiv's anger and dissatisfaction and his search of some other alternative in his life. A critic writes in *India Today* in these words:

As Hariharan cleverly paces the book, she leaves enough clues so that one knows that the several stories woven in here are destined to an explosive climax. There are no resolutions in the book, no part endings. Which is what making the book remarkable. Hariharan manages to insist a certain



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sense of rightness rather than dissatisfaction that unresolved endings can cause. In the peculiar times we live in, when even the past has only a precarious hold in time, a book like Hariharan's *In Time of Siege* comes as a warning. Disturbing and moving, it tells of how menacing religion can be in the wrong hands.

This novel is not only about Shiv's journey in the vast domain of conflict and suffering, but at the same time, the thematic perceptions in this novel present the cases of many more who are somehow destined to lead life in this world of chaos and anarchy and find themselves hard to survive. Shiv's life is the symbol of such inevitable circumstances in which he finds almost impossible to retain his strong sense of individuality. A critic writes in *The Indian Express* in these words:

A chilling novel for the times... Hariharan writes with an unflinching eye for painful details, often cloaked in a dry, almost black humour, and all of it drenched in a simmering violence which lurks just beyond our doorstep... Hariharan's triumph in this novel is that she manages to draw attention to images trapped and distorted within the shards of the broken mirror of liberalism, without being judgemental a novel disturbing in its evaluation of contemporary issues and our mundane reactions to them.

In this novel, as in her other novels, we find the beautiful and artistic combination of past and present into one whole for different purposes. She often correlates the contemporary events with the past and shows an outstanding comparison between the past and the present. For her, the problem is not the outcome of present scenario, rather it is in the continuous form with some change. Her each and every novel deals with the same, and this sense of her composition provides her an opportunity to dive deep into human emotions and passions. A critic writes in *Baltimore Sun* in these words:

The confusion of past and present are at the heart of Githa Hariharan's *In Time of Siege* which describes with blunt honesty the now – common battle between medieval religious fundamentalism and modern liberalism. A modern fable beautifully told in a spare style that is modern as its subjects.

The novel seems to be episodic in nature but Githa Hariharan's absolute sense of documentation of the events helps her much to get the clues of the life in the metros with compassion and humour. In the very beginning of the novel, she presents the picture of the infrastructural development of Delhi in these words with a touch of reality:

The university. A gate, a winding road, young faces, straight limbs. The city yields its claims. Delhi, an insatiable amoeba that grows in all directions, recedes.

The novel begins with Shiv and Meena. Meena is the daughter of Shiv's friend who lives in the hostel. Meena has broken her legs and now intends to live in the house of Shiv. But Shiv was not interested because of the reasons behind it. Shiv does not like to provide accommodation to Meena because at mean time, his wife was not in the house. He tells Meena:

'I think we should speak to your parents you would be more comfortable with your mother here. Kamala can be quite elusive if Rekha is not there. But let's see. Let's see how it goes for a few days.'

The personality of Shiv is quite unique. Even though he does not attend his classes regularly, but a unique kind of curiosity can be noticed in his face. The conversation between Arya and Menon is quite apparent in stating the thematic perceptions of the novel. Arya tells the persons present in the meeting with these words:

'Our land has always been a temptation of greedy marauders, barbarous invaders and oppressive rulers. This story of invasion and resistance is three thousand years old. Lakhs of foreigners found their way to India during these thousands of years, but they all suffered humiliating defeat. Some of them we digested. When we were disunited, we failed to recognise who were our own and who

were foreigners, and we were unable to digest them. Today, apart from Muslims, even Christians, Parsis and other foreigners are also recognised as minority communities. But in many of the States the Hindus have been reduced to a minority, and the Muslims, Christians or Sikhs are in a majority.’

Shiv discovers something new in the department. He was highly amazed by the calling of Muslims Mrs Khan or Foreigner Mrs Khan. Githa Hariharan is always conscious about changes in the outlook of the people. This change is not sudden but something inevitable. The novelist writes about these things which seem to be painful and matter of anguish. Shiv also feels the same:

Shiv discovered a nice coincidence: a notice in tray tells him Mrs Khan is going on casual leave from the next day. Obviously, the leave was planned many day’s back. But now she has a week to recover from the new status thrust on her Muslim Mrs Khan, Foreign Mrs Khan, Mrs Khan, a woman who travelled leagues from her grandmother’s and mother’s lives to work in an office and make a modest contribution to the family income. Now she is being pushed back to square one, to the old diminishing religious identity. She has seven days to examine her new status and hopefully, shed it. To come back the same sweet, helpful secretary they know, incorrigible only when it comes to telling n’s and u’s apart on her typewriter.

Meena was staying in the house of Shiv. Although Shiv was uncomfortable and feeling uneasiness in the company of Meena, but he could do a little to save his comfort and ease. Meena has occupied the room of Shiv. The novelist writes:

Meena is waiting for him in her small room, lying in bed, reading. Already this has become her room. What used to be Shiv’s study table is now covered with her things: books, magazines, newspapers, clothes, a hairbrush, an alarm clock. The ceiling fan hums furiously.

Meena also begins to take interest in Shiv. Meena becomes anxious about Shiv who takes care of her with good interest. The novelists write about the growing interest of Meena in Shiv in these words:

Meena is transparently pleased to see him; Shiv finds something touching about this. Whatever she thinks or feels is there on Meena’s face, not just faithfully mirrored but multiplied in identity –as if her face has captured the potent essence of every passing emotion.

The poster found in the room of Meena is quite disturbing. The poster was bought by Meena’s roommate. In the poster, there have been mentioned of something which are the outcome of Meena’s feelings and thoughts. Like Shiv, Meena is also progressive in her attitude towards society and holds good views on some of the critical issues related to the contemporary life. The poster reads:

In Germany, their first came for the communist, and I did not speak up because I was not a communist. Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak up because I was not a Jew. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak up because I was not a trade unionist. Then they came for the homosexuals, and I did not speak up because I was not a homosexual. Then they came for the Catholics, and I did not speak up because I was Protestant. Then they came for me... but by that time there was no one left to speak up.

It is the beauty of the narrative of Githa Hariharan that many contemporary events take place at a time with artistic excellence and beauty. For instance, Meena is preparing her thesis on the women’s stories related to the anti – Sikh riots after the assassination of Mrs. Indira Gandhi. She would like to conduct the interviews of many Sikh women who suffered a lot during those riots in Delhi and other parts of the country. In her novel, *Fugitive Histories*, Githa Hariharan has presented such documentations of the victims of the communal riots and violence in Gujarat after Godhara train burning incident. Her description is full of pathos and compassion. In this novel, one of the Sikh victims of that riot in Delhi says in her interview to Meena in these pathetic words:

“Behan, I will help you, I do not know what you will do with your tape of our stories. What use of our empty lives will be to you in your studies. But I have lost so much – I have nothing left in my

stomach but anger. I also have a hunger that says, tell your story, tell it again and again to whoever will listen.

The real problem starts in the life of Shiv when a controversy takes place on one of her articles prepared by him for the graduate students of the correspondence course related to some historical facts in which he has the mastery. A journalist from the *Current* calls him and makes an enquiry. The journalist believes in the fact that Professor Shiv is on leave because of the controversy on his article. Shiv believes this as quite strange and out of context:

“That is the strange part. This man seems to think I have gone on leave because of something I wrote – because there have been protests against it. He said something about Basavanna. I have written a course module on social reform movements in medieval India, where there is a lesson on Basava – usually referred to as Basavanna or Elder Brother Basava – but why would anyone protest about that?”

The Head of the Department Dr. Sharma says to Shiv about the problem and its side effects as raised by some organisations in the name of Hinduism. Dr. Sharma seems to be in mood of compromising the situation. He says to Shiv:

‘It seems you have implied that Basavanna’s city, Kalyana, was not a 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 Basavanna was much more than an ordinary human being. There are people who consider him divine, you know.’

Dr. Sharma’s attitude does not suit to the class of the intellectuals. His is in the mood of compromise and makes efforts to persuade Shiv to give an apology for his article on Basavanna. It also shows the fate of intellectualism in India for many reasons altogether. Dr. Sharma has some compulsion or he is considering all these in order to make administration smooth and controversy free. But the freedom of intellect cannot be lost for mere administrative point of view. Dr. Sharma, being the head of the department, suggests Shiv to do whatever he is suggesting:

‘Well, Shiv, we will have to act swiftly to stop this from growing into a controversy. A full apology or retraction from you will be best we can decide what to call it so that it is not too embarrassing for the department – or for you of course. And we may have to send instructions to all over study centres to discontinue use of the booklet that contains this module.’

Shiv tells Meena about this controversy. But on the other hand, Meena is more furious and angrier regarding all these problems. She is also a girl of progressive attitude and she cannot tolerate all these things which might affect the free progress of intellect in our country. She says to Shiv these words:

‘What are you going to say tomorrow? You will have to chalk out a plan. Obviously, you can’t apologize or take back a word of the lesson.’

Shiv’s articles deal with the life as well as the revolutionary contribution of Basavanna whose life was the symbol of transformation and change in the society. He was the treasure of Kalyan and apart from this work; he also looked after many affairs of the kingdom with much freedom. He was highly critical of the traditional approach of the people and he was not afraid of introducing such affirmative reforms. The novelist writes about Basavanna:

The treasure of Kalyana was a man called Basavanna. This man was no ordinary Finance Minister. He had too much passion and charisma, too much vision, to remain a mere government official. Basava was plagued by questions; he needed to examine and think and criticize everything that was traditional, sanctioned, as much as he needed to breathe. Basava gathered around him a unique congregation of mystics and social revolutionaries, together they attempted a creative, courageous experiment: a community that sought to exclude no one – not woman, 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.

Basava was a man of immense talent. He would like to bring transformation in the contemporary society. He would like to intimate people in this direction. Basava took the help of the people to bring such a transformation in the society. The novelist writes:

Basava and many of his followers took on the caste system, the iron net that held society so firmly in place; that reduced the common man and woman to hopeless captives. Thousands of these 'ordinary' men and women took part in Basava's egalitarian dream... The people became a movement; the movement swelled and surged, a wave that threatened to swallow social conventions and religious rituals, staple diet of tradition. The king, Bijjala, an old friend of Basava's, was under tremendous pressure from the pillars of society. Not surprisingly, the relationship between the king and his finance minister soured.

The real problem took place when the marriage of children two veerashaiva couples was arranged. It was extremely beyond imagination to arrange the marriage of the children belonging to two different castes. The society was so traditional in its approach that such marriage brought violence and bloodshed. The novelist beautifully narrates the whole story as discovered by Shiv:

The bride – to – be was Brahmin. The bridegroom – to – be was the son of cobbler. This marriage is more the stuff of legend and folklore than stern history. But so apt a symbol was it of the crisis Kalyana was heading towards that every subsequent popular account took it for granted. The marriage is the ineluctable climax of the story in popular memory.

On those days, it was beyond even imagination that a girl belonging to Brahmin caste could marry a boy belonging to the untouchables. The entire city was in uproar. People became furious and they tried to protest the king and in response, the king had to condemn the incident. The novelist writes about the dilemma of king in these words:

King Bijjala was pressured into the joining the condemnation of the marriage. He sentenced the father of the bride and bridegroom (and the young untouchable bridegroom) to a special death. Tied to horses, they dragged through the streets of Kalyana; then what was left of them was beheaded.

Thus, this novel of Githa Hariharan seems to be a powerful voice in the realm of writing in such a way which shows the beautiful intermingling of intellect and emotions, thoughts and feelings, and above all the linking of human passions with the myth and contemporary life both. Both Meena and Shiv are the typical victims of time and space. The novel contains some serious social as well as historical issues which always harm the composite culture of India. The novel throws light on the freedom of thought and expression which should not be suppressed at all as it happens in the case of Shiv's article on Basava and his contribution. On the other hand, like free thoughts and expression, human relationship, especially man – woman relationship is also uncontrollable as it also happens in the case of Shiv and Meena. Meena fulfils the emptiness of Shiv both intellectually and emotionally. This novel seems to be the perfect combination of intellect and romance in the context of serious social issues as highlighted by the novelist. A critic rightly remarks in *Deccan Herald* in these words:

An absorbing book, and important for our times because it turns attention to the individual's terrifying vertigo faced with loss of history, and because it takes us through the landscape of this loss with frightening immediacy ... Hariharan does this with such dexterity that the book reads almost like a well-crafted thriller.

Certainly, *In Time of Siege* is an outstanding piece of literary perfection in which internal and external conflicts and dilemma run simultaneously without any effort. In this novel, we find the perfect combination of fact and fancy, and imagination and reality. The life of Shiv is not singular in nature rather it symbolizes a type which is evident everywhere in the vast domain of life. There is a unique sense of emotion, ambition, compassion, hopes and aspirations in the life of Shiv. In this

way, this novel fulfils the inevitable desires of the readers in multiple ways by showing people the real essence of human feelings.

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