

## GITHA HARIHARAN'S *IN TIMES OF SIEGE*: A REALISTIC PORTRAYAL OF INTOLERANT INDIA

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### ABSTRACT

*The history of intolerance, hate, the disparity has divided the country into volatile segments at a war with each other. The 'freedom to express' has become the farcical conjoint of words in Indian democracy. We don't need any colonial force now to inject the spirit of disharmony since ironically we are the creators of this disharmony in abundance. The politics of religion, race, and region has infiltrated into the education system also, finding faults with what is taught. In this time of siege, there is a need for weeding out the restrictors of India's progress. There is a need for making the democratic space more spacious, by removing the encroachments of casteism, regionalism, and religion.*

**KEYWORDS:** *History, Intolerance, Hate, Disparity, Freedom, Farcical, Democracy, Disharmony, Religion, Race and Region*

### INRODUCTION

Born in 1954 in Coimbatore, India, Githa Hariharan grew up in Bombay and Manila. After completing her education in these two cities and in the United States she became a renowned author and activist advocating for the rights of women. Her published work includes novels, short stories, essays, newspaper articles, and columns. She won the Commonwealth Writers' Prize in 1993 for her first novel, *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1992). *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* (1994), *When Dreams Travel* (1999), *In Times of Siege* (2003), and *Fugitive Histories* (2009) are her other novels. Her collection of essays, *Almost Home: Cities and Other Places*, was published in 2014. She has authored a collection of short stories under the title *The Art of Dying* published in 1993 and a book of stories for children, *The Winning Team*, in 2004. She has also edited a volume of stories in English translation from four major South Indian languages, *A Southern Harvest* (1993), co-edited a collection of stories for children, *Sorry, Best Friend!* (1997), and a collection of essays entitled *From India to Palestine: Essays in Solidarity* (2014).

### INDIA IN THE TIMES OF SIEGE

Hariharan by way of her novel *In Times of Siege* (2002) has portrayed India choked up with the idea of fundamentalism, spite, and mistrust. She has used the word 'siege' in the title of the novel which metaphorically refers to

the whole world at war and realistically to incidents of unrest in contemporary India. Whether it is a case of 9/11 terrorist attack in Mumbai, Babri Masjid demolition in 1992, Godhra riots in 2002 everywhere India seems to be burning in the flames of communal unrest. At this time she mediates with her narrative to act as a mouthpiece to this misanthropic existence in India. In her article "New Voices: New Challenges", she views her role as both a commentator and a writer, she 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).

There is an indicative intolerance shown towards the basic right of freedom of thought and expression. There is a territory within a territory narrowing the space to flutter the wings of freedom. Even Hariharan has time and again referred to the shrinking spaces in her articles and interviews. These shrinking spaces referred are not the external geographical boundaries but are actually the psychological spaces. The psychological spaces are suffocated with the age-long orthodox and stereotypic doctrines. These doctrines are societal relics which have survived in our 'collective unconscious'. M. H Abrams explains the traces of past practices and ethics as our 'collective unconscious' in *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (1999). He illustrates:

"the "primordial images", the "psychic residue" of repeated patterns of common human experience in the lives of our very ancient ancestors which, survive in the "collective unconscious" of the human race and are expressed in myths, religion, dreams and private fantasies, as well as in works of literature" (Abrams,13)

*In Times of Siege* reflects contemporary India obsessed with the over belongingness to region, religion and race. This obsession leads to regional, communal, and racial wars. The battlefield for such conflicts and wars can be the workplace, residential areas or in recent times the social networking channels/websites also. The setting of the novel is an open space, a university. This open space is assumed to be a reservoir of knowledge, rationality, value, and ethics. At this place, the disagreement and agreements to each other's point of views co-exist naturally. But when the caste, creed, color, gender, language and minority are the propelling agents for disagreements then, chaos, disturbance, and siege are expected. The incidents in the novel sarcastically present the sorry state of the contemporary world. It reflects how stagnant, hollow and self-engulfing is the social setup of the present times. The narrative reflection is more of black/dark humours which in the words of M. H Abrams "occurs in satiric works whose butt is what the author conceives to be the widespread contemporary condition of social cruelty, inanity, or chaos."(Abrams, 278).

## SHRINKING SPACES

Githa Hariharan in one of her interaction Lal, Preeti Verma, "Our Spaces are shrinking all the time" has expressed the reason for writing the narrative *In Times of Siege*, She states:

"When writing *In Times of Siege*, I felt compelled to take the most direct approach available to a writer: to meet what we are living through head on and turn it into fiction. The landscape is far from "invented" - and the ideas and emotions are equally real and contemporary (Literate World, 21/03/03).

Shiv, a Professor of History is caught up in a controversy over his lesson on 12th-century poet and social reformer Basava. Since it hurts the sentiments of the Hindu watchdog group 'Ithihas Surksha Manch', they find fault with Shiv for his intentional distortion of Indian medieval history and demand an apology. Shiv laments on the imposed subjectivity of history by the so-called protectors of history, who are rather the uneducated goons propagating fanaticism.

"...some crazy group has got hold of a lesson I wrote for the medieval history course...they are objecting to the fact that I have not made the heroes heroic enough, and that I have made the villains too villainous. At any rate, they claim the lesson distorts history, It seems I have not sung enough of a paean to the glory of Hindu kingdoms; and that I make too much of caste divisions among Hindus... 'The group is called the Ithihas Suraksha Manch. The protection of history! Whoever heard of history having to be protected?'" (ITS, 55)

The professor neither apologizes nor withdraws his lesson. His lesson is sent to a Review Committee and his resignation is evident. The Manch President and Vice President call for the revival of Hindu courage. In an anonymous letter written to Professor Shiv Murthy, the right-wing Hindu supporters even ask Shiv to shift to Pakistan.

"It is a tragedy that an educated person like you should indulge in ignorant and unpatriotic acts...If you want to rewrite Indian history with our Hindu saints as cowards and failures in exile, why not go to Pakistan and do it? They will welcome you and give you all attention and praise you are desperate for."(ITS, 7)

Shiv is totally shattered that how one's existence, love, and respect for one's country is decided by the ill-gotten fundamentalists,. On the other side, eminent Leftist historians condemn the acts of KGU and launch their fight against Hindu organizations. Ideological war runs in newspapers on the 'discrimination and biased approach of the leftist historians' especially in a letter to the editor column. An intellectual lobby of secular interest comes out openly in support of Shiv. An old historian Amir Quereshi, puts his opinion as :

"The nationalism practiced by these sullen, resentful, intolerant men is very different from nationalism of the freedom struggle. This new brand of nationalism is monstrous."( ITS,133)

At the KGU campus, a mob tries to attack Shiv, and his colleague Menon luckily saves him but his office room is totally vandalized.

"A shower of glass, a flying chair, paper confetti. His room, his books, stripped naked. A sullied place, no longer anyone's refuge. His room has been pushed to a no-man's land. Like other disputed structures, it has a lock on the door. All it takes, it appears, is a simple little lock to keep the history safe...There are torn books everywhere, cupboard and files mouth-opened and in shambles. A jumble of crumpled paper. His nameplate is on the floor in a heap of little pieces, like a jigsaw puzzle that will need patience and imagination to put together again."( ITS,130-31)

As a consequence, the fight between the Leftists and the Right wing intensifies. Shiv receives many letters from Manch sympathizers. He also receives a life threat to his wife and daughter from an anonymous caller. He gets many newspaper clippings, and letters to the editor protesting against his distortion of a historical fact. In reply, some like-minded people assemble to plan for a public meeting and a rally. Shiv, a common man who had always remained contented with his silent life and had never confronted with anyone becomes a reason for a war-like situation in the country. Through him, Hariharan portrays how even 'the cautious, silent, middle class' voices will be raised during the times of

siege. In her 'Acknowledgements' offered in the novel, Hariharan calls *In Times of Siege* as a work of fiction but still, it has a semblance of ignorance, prejudice, and intolerance prevalent in real life. She says:

"...*In Times of Siege* is a work of fiction. It has used a variety of sources to imagine a life of Basava in a way meaningful of our times. Any resemblance to real individuals, places, and events is purely coincidental. The same, alas, cannot be said for the resemblance to real-life ignorance, prejudice or bigotry."( *ITS*,206)

## CONCLUSIONS

To conclude, *In Times of Siege* is an attack on the age-long practice of dividing India on the basis of region, race, and religions. The politically motivated fundamentalists even don't spare the sacred institutes of education. Looking back into the history, it can be observed that nothing has changed in the present as well. India has become intolerant and suffocated and the writers like Githa Hariharan advocates for the freedom of speech and expression. By using her pen instead of the sword has fearlessly presented the need for isolating education from the pressure tactics of race, region, and religion.

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