

IN TIMES OF SIEGE: A MANIFESTATION OF CAMPUS POLITICS AND AN IDEOLOGY BATTLE

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ABSTRACT

In the novel *In Times of Siege* Githa Hariharan's focus has an apparent shift towards history and campus politics rather than the mythical aspects that are seen in her other novels. The so-called conflict between 'religious intolerance and liberal dissent' takes place in ever controversial history class on the campus of a university. She presents a direct war between two student-faculty groups of different ideologies in the novel. The twelfth century social reformer Basava's portrayal provides major plot for the novel. Apart from this, a full length debate on Fundamentalism, Fascism, Secularism and political issues on the campus is also figured in the novel.

Key words: campus, politics, ideology, history, fundamentalism, secularism.

Githa Hariharan's novel *In Times of Siege* is "a subtle dissection of the contest between religious intolerance and liberal dissent in modern day India. Fittingly enough, this contest takes place on familiar ground, the ever controversial history class room" says Shahbano Bilgrami, a renowned Pakistani writer. Veteran novelist Kushwant Singh feels that Githa Hariharan writes with anguish, pain and anger about what is happening in our country and so he puts this novel on the top of his list of books.

The novel *In Times of Siege* is woven around history. Githa Hariharan takes up the real life instance from Karnataka. Some years ago, a play written on Basava, the medieval social reformer, and founder of Veerashaivism, by H.S.Shivaprakash was attacked by some so-called preservers of history. The Shiva Prakash has his reincarnation in Hariharan's novel as Shiv Murthy, a professor of history. She also created a young student activist, Meena and her radical

friends to represent the Left wing. Many fictitious characters in both the sides are also formed in the novel in the corollary of the original incident. Created stories by media, emotional mobs and mayhem are further added in the novel to focus the heated strategies of both the sides.

Story line of the novel:

Githa Hariharan picks up her protagonist from the academia for the first time. Shiv Murthy, a middle aged and mild mannered history professor of Kasturba Gandhi Open University (KGU), Delhi, visits Meena, the daughter of his childhood friend Sumathi, who has broken her leg in an accident. He takes her, in the capacity of her local guardian, to his house for a few days stay, until the cast is removed. In the absence of his wife Rekha, he makes all arrangements for Meena's stay in his study room and helps her in daily chores. The professor's study room has got a new political look with Meena's presence and the anti Nazi posters brought by her friends. Moreover, she is a sociology student of Kamala Nehru University (KNU), studying about the women who were affected by anti-Sikh riots after Indira Gandhi's assassination in 1984. Being an 'activist', she frequently attends meetings and talks of causes and street theatre, gender and invites arrest with the ease of a veteran. (Hariharan 31). Meena's activist and like-minded friends Amar, Jyothi, and Manjar visit her time and again.

Meanwhile, the 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 for that. Following Meena's advice, the professor neither apologizes nor withdraws his lesson. To counter the attack of the Manch, Shiv comes up with an action plan in consultation with all his colleagues. At this juncture, while Shiv trying to derive emotional support from his freedom fighter father's teachings and his private mythology, Meena extends her full support to Shiv by involving her friends- Amar who has been a committed member of several citizens' groups, and his comrades.

Subsequently, Shiv is informed by his colleague Menon that his lesson has been sent to a Review Committee and his resignation is evident. But, Meena is quite against to this. She makes all arrangements for a Press conference with the help of her friends. At this moment, the university calls back medieval history lessons booklets from students. The Manch President and Vice President call for the revival of Hindu courage. On the other side, eminent Leftist historians condemn the acts of KGU, and launch their fight against Hindu organizations. Meena, with the help of Amar and his radical friends, arrange a TV show; prepare a leaflet attacking RSS and their ideologues. Ideological war runs in newspapers on the 'discrimination and biased approach of the leftist historians' especially in a letters to editor column.

At the KGU campus, a mob tries to attack Shiv, and his colleague Menon luckily saves him but his office room is totally vandalized. 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 editor protesting against his distortion of a historical fact. In reply, some like-minded people have assembled to plan for a public meeting and a rally. The Vice Chancellor in a TV interview expresses his concern about the security of the University. He writes a letter to Shiv informing him that the recent incident has brought disrepute to the university. Shiv's father's philosophy becomes a walking stick for him. Meena and Shiv go to the doctor where the cast is removed finally Meena leaves for hostel accompanied by Amar and the walking stick of Shiv's father.

Shiv is a common man who is content in his daily life and used to avoid confrontation whenever possible. But Meena, a student belonging to the younger generation, is able to infect enthusiasm in this middle-aged cautious professor Murthy and established a kind of awakening in him when his personal and professional lives are shaken. Besides that, Basava's ideals, support of his father's ghost help him emerge as a hero out of an ordinary man. Through him Hariharan portrays how even 'the cautious, silent, middle class' voices will be raised during the times of siege.

Politics on Campus

On campus, we come across politics mainly with student unions, election of leaders, fights among different student groups during elections, organizing dharnas and making rallies etc. We also find students' affiliation to different political parties and other social, religious outfits fight in groups leading to bloodshed and cause police intervention or action. Students convene and conduct programmes based on the call given by their political and religious or community mentors. We confront some of the above things happen at the fictitious KGU campus created by Hariharan.

Unpredictably, she has brought a political and social issue, worthy of debate at national and international levels to a university campus. To a question on why Githa chose the university as the scene of action, she said -

"Well, for me the campus is not central but the outside. If in a university set-up, debate, free and frank, is stifled, then that shows the insidious nature of communal forces." But does it not show that academic culture and values are already atrophied and academia had already become somewhat redundant? "Well, yes, I do recognize and foreground the fact that there is a return to a sense of fear, persecution and ghettoisation. There is the atrophy of intellectuality and a decline of the romantic veneration of the teacher figure." (The Hindu)

This revelation explains she is well aware of the degrading values in academics and decline in the value of a teacher. She also wants to present the impact of external communal and political forces on academic set up as well as debate.

Though, she herself declares and concedes that she is an admirer of Lodge but her novel does not belong to the genre of campus novel, it is, indeed, a novel deals with campus and its politics to the core(The Hindu). Her choosing a campus as back ground is intentional but her idea is not to create a campus novel. She has successfully shown the replica of ideological war between two different parties on the small screen of campus.

Viewed from one angle, the novel appears to be perfectly suited for academicians. The novel written in defense of true academicians is an ego booster for them. The atmosphere of the University faculty meeting, state, the pull and push among faculty members repetitive and boring Addenda of the meetings and most strikingly the comic cunning vice chancellor of the university give a familiar feel. (Saxena)

The involvement of students in the controversy and their activities further aggravate the situation to the end. It completely takes the shape of political war. Releasing leaflets and pamphlets, calling for urgent meetings, staging dharnas, organizing rallies and planning processions, shouting slogans, displaying placards, making public statements by mocking the

leaders and their ideologies on either side, media making the crazy news, telecasting interviews on TV, vandalizing offices, brick batting, is the picture one witnesses in the novel.

The KGU campus is generally free from regular students and class work as it offers courses in distance mode. But to our surprise we see the mobs attacking professor's office. This is an example of intrusion of external world into university campuses. The campuses have become dens for all social and anti social activities. We also come across activities and activists of both sides Manch and the leftist groups.

Ideology battle

Hariharan obviously wanted to draw attention to what essentially amounts to thought policing, to dramatize the chilling implications of political control over intellectual freedom, feels Madhuparna Mitra. In times of siege, the protagonist Shiv Murty becomes the mouth piece of the author's ideological position (Mitra 141). Arya articulates the foundational premise of Hindutva, the ideological position that Islam (and indeed Christianity) are a 'foreign' religions and that Muslims are not truly Indian.

But one can see the shadow of author Hariharan in the character of Activist Meena. Hariharan is very much active in human rights activities. She is the one who challenged the Hindu Minority and Guardianship Act as discriminatory against women in 1995. The case, *Githa Hariharan and Another vs. Reserve Bank of India and Another*, led to a Supreme Court judgment in 1999 on guardianship. Meena also works for the women who were affected in Anti Sikh riots. She frequently attends meetings and talks of causes and street theatre, gender and invites arrest with the ease of a veteran as Hariharan in real life.

The novel is built on ideological war existed in the late 90's in 20th century in India. When NDA (National Democratic Alliance) came to power in 1999, the government tried its level best to replace the then established Marxist minded intellectuals with right wing scholars in curriculum development agencies at the nation level. The chief conflict of the story i.e. the fictional Shiv's experience is similar to that of a real life Play-Wright H.S. Shiva Prakash, whose play on Basava was condemned by self appointed protectors of history some years ago. In the same lines, the presentation of medieval Basava, in History study material, leads to a controversy in the novel.

Division among the staff is clearly seen as Left and Right wings. Dr.Arya is leading the Right whereas the Left by the Dr.Menon and others. Professors backing and hailing different ideologies confront each other and make the peaceful university, a place of controversy. It is evident at the department, in a staff meeting, Dr. Arya raises objections regarding editing of a history lesson in an important section: 'Problems of the country and their Solutions' by Dr. Menon.

Meena persuades Shiv to plunge into her own world of risk, danger, choice and commitment. When the fight between Left and Right wings grimes up, stalwarts from both sides like Guru Khote, Prof. Fraudely, Arya, Amar, and Ameer Qureshi, all get involved in the fight. Meena executes her well thought-out plan by preparing Shiv for a TV show. And later some twenty like minded people have assembled to plan for a public meeting and a rally.

Hariharan has expressed her lineage of Marxism in the interview. She says that she is a feminist and with several other things. It is revealed indirectly in an interview as:

"Am I a writer particularly concerned with "women's issues"? And am I a feminist? ...And anyway, however you define yourself, all our work is informed in some way or the other by feminism, along with the ideas of

Freud and Marx. So ...I am a writer (as opposed to a woman writer) who is a feminist, along with several other things!”

So, Hariharan presents secularism that is being practiced by people under the effect of various ideologies and isms, right in the sacred secular place, a university. She highlights the feelings of Mrs. Khan when Dr. Arya raises objections regarding editing of a history lesson-

“...Our land has always been a temptation to greedy marauders, barbarous invaders and oppressive rulers.....but in many of the states Hindus have been reduced to a minority, and the Muslims, Christians or Sikhs are in a majority” (Hariharan 19).

She depicts how the reading creates an uncomfortable silence in the department. The secretary Mrs. Khan, hurt by the use of words ‘foreigner’ and ‘Muslim’, goes out of the room. All members of faculty except Dr. Arya sympathize at her. The author, being an ‘activist’ and a secularist uses the novel as a medium to attack her ideological opponent- Hindutva Brigade. One may wonder at her great skill of creating as many names as possible to haul RSS over the coals. She frequently uses a new name -Fandoo for a fundamentalist.

‘Fundoos. How familiar Meena’s generation with the word fundamentalist. So much a fact of life is that a nickname, fundoos, rolls off Meena’s tongue with ease. A nickname for a pet, a pet enemy’ (Hariharan 57).

Throughout the novel we find many other appellations like- fundamentalist, fascist, obscurantist, terrorist, made-in-India brand, communalist, other community haters, scum, lumpens etc. (Hariharan 57). The author’s over powering hatred against her enemies is evident and reflected through the characters of both the groups in the novel several times.

In the course of attack on the RSS, the author does not leave the theoretical inspiration Madhav Sadasiv Golwalkar. Golwalkar subsequently became the second sar-sanghachalak of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, and steered the organization for the 33 years. His speeches and thoughts have been published in the name of ‘Bunch of Thoughts’. She quotes from ‘now disowned and out of print’ book ‘*we or the Nationhood Defined*’ which describes the past, present and future for India-a Hindu Rastra.

“...foreign races in Hindustan must either adopt the Hindu culture and language, learn to respect and hold in reverence the Hindu religion and must entertain no ideas but those of the glorification of Hindu race and culture ...or may stay in the country wholly subordinated to the Hindu nation” (Hariharan 100)

We find this reference, very often, in the writings of communists and other so-called secularists. There is a supposition that the book was not written by M.S.Golwalkar but by Babarao Savarkar, the brother of V.D. Savarkar of Hindu Mahasabha. And Golwalkar only translated it from Marathi to English. Obviously, the translator cannot be held responsible for the ideas of the original writer. Her selected reference cannot explain why the same M.S.Golwalkar assures all guarantees to the minorities in the Hindu Rastra. He propounds that in the following lines in *Bunch of Thoughts*:

As such, the so-called minorities living here have nothing to lose but everything to gain by the rejuvenation of Hindu Rastra. It is the Hindu thought alone which, in this wide world, has recognized the immanence of one Supreme Power in the entire humanity and has respected and even protected and encouraged all types of cults and creeds to grow and

blossom to their fulfillment. All these factors point to the fact it is only a strong and resurgent Hindu Rastra that can stand guarantee to the free and prosperous life of the so-called minorities here sharing equal opportunities as the proud children of the motherland. (Golwalkar, 161)

This shows the glaring contradiction in presenting Golwalkar's notions regarding minorities and their safety. It is an instance where the author attacked her ideological 'pet enemy' in a biased fashion. She does lot of mockery with the name of the then HRD minister Prof. Murli Monohar Joshi. She has changed it slightly and puts it as Prof. (Shri) M.M.Behoshi (failed oxon, 1942) for person who writes a letter to the editor of a paper (Hariharan, 118).

In another context, Meena and her friends make lot of fun with the statement of senior historian of the Manch, A.A.Atre. It is related to ancient Sanskrit sloka from Eesavasyopanishat-Poornanamadah poornamidam poornath poorna mudatchate - Poornasya poornamadaya poornamevavasishyate. Jyothi reads the interpretation in a very sarcastic tone stressing 'L' in fullness while Meena supplies the required musical effect. The meaning goes –“that is fullness, this is fullness, from fullness comes fullness. When fullness is taken away from fullness, fullness remains”. (Hariharan, 148) They call the historian a 'clown' and describe his interpretation as 'Great Brahmin Foolness'.

Conclusion

The above instances articulate the verbal attack and its severity on author's ideological opponents. The plot, the write-up and the style used in the novel altogether present a never ending ideological war between Left and Right wings and the live politics on campus. As campus is a miniature form of real world, it also reflects politics of real world in toto. Githa Hariharan, the author of the novel, is skilled enough to portray campus life and campus politics in a picturesque and lucid manner for her multifarious readership.

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