

Academia under Threat: A Study of Githa Hariharan's In Times of Siege

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Abstract:

Githa Hariharan's *In Times of Siege* deals with the attack on academic freedom and of history under scrutiny of contemporary India. The novel covers the period 31st August to 15th October 2000. Khushwant Singh appreciates Hariharan and the novel, "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." (Hariharan, 2003, *The Blurb*) Michael Ondaatje puts it, "Githa Hariharan's fiction is wonderful—full of subtleties and humour and tenderness." (The Blurb) J. M. Coetzee marks her as "an outstanding writer." (The Blurb)

Keywords: threat, campus, professor, history, student, sociology, research, syllabi, fundamentalists, prejudice.

Discussion:

The protagonist of the novel, Shiv Murthy, is a history professor at Kasturba Gandhi Open University in New Delhi. He is fifty years old. As he works in an open university, only the teachers are available in the campus and the students are on the far end of receiving through distance mode. The responsibility given to him is to coordinate different resources and also prepare the study modules for his course.

At a time when his wife flies to Seattle to settle their daughter, Shiv receives a phone call from Jamuna Girls' Hostel and gets the news that his ward, an old family friend's daughter, has got her leg fractured. Shiv goes to the hostel to receive the girl of whom he has been the guardian in Delhi. Shiv Murthy brings the girl, Meena, to his house and keeps her in his house under his supervision for he thinks it his responsibility to care of her. Meena's fractured leg has been plastered. She seems to be unable to move by herself. Though it is for the first time that Shiv and Meena meet each other, Shiv takes every care to provide her with every comfort to her. Shiv

informs the maid servant, Kamala, about the situation and orders her to take care of her in the absence of his wife, Rekha.

The next day when he reaches his department, he finds a sort of hatred and prejudice in the comment of Arya, his colleague. Listening his comment, Shiv feels upset and nervous. Amita Sen, Shiv's another colleague catches the moment and offers him to go for lunch somewhere fifteen kilometers away from the campus so that Shiv could feel relaxed. The narrator also describes that Amita and Shiv have slept with each other a few times. This gives ample evidence about Shiv's disloyalty to his wife. Shiv, this time, rejects Amita's offer on account of Meena's presence at home. He also informs Amita that he has applied for leave as Meena's parents have asked him to look after her.

At the same time, Kamala falls ill and there has been no one to care for Meena. As an honest and caring guardian, Shiv has to perform everything for Meena. He does the things which he has never done before in his life:

And Shiv—for the first time in his life he makes breakfast for two; tea for two; snacks for two. He goes to markets he has not been to for years, unlikely shopping lists in hands. A white plastic stool for Meena to sit on while bathing. A shower head and a tube he attaches to the bathroom tap so that Meena does not have to bend for a bucket bath. Girlish skirts because Meena cannot wear her salwars and jeans. Ice creams, chocolates, fruits, even flowers. (Hariharan, 2003, p. 28)

Shiv, as a matured and grown up man, tries to take care of Meena as if he is her real father. In reality, he is concerned towards Meena as a small girl. The fact is that Meena is also a grown up girl. She is a sociology student. She is writing a thesis on what she calls women's stories, stories of women affected by the anti-Sikh riots after Indira Gandhi's assassination in 1984. She has already completed her field work of

conducting interviews and thinks it proper time to write down the thesis. His care not only confines to taking leave but it goes beyond as well that he helps her wash her head. House maid, Kamala's illness has been one of the reasons for him to look after Meena. Kamala's daughter, Babli informs Shiv that her father will work for him instead of her mother. Shiv Murthy doesn't believe in him as—

Kamala's husband is one of those men who seem to have been created only to prove that appearances are deceptive. He has the graceful, elegant body of a dancer. His features are borrowed from an exquisite, romantic miniature painting. But there is a bull lurking in his pretty picture. If a thing is breakable, he will break it. If it cannot break, he will spill it, tear it dent it. (p. 42)

Shiv Murthy perceives him as a man who is born to break and mar domestic things. His observation of Kamala's husband is that to anything he touches, it is bound to break or to be out of order.

Shiv Murthy's sense of being a good nurse disappears when, one day, he receives a telephone from some of the journalists talking about some of his articles—a module—which has been caught up in controversy. At first, Shiv could not understand about what is said to him. The journalist stresses, 'It's an article on the twelfth century poet and social reformer Basavanna.' (p. 51) He also wants to know whether he is on leave or he is trying to avoid the protest against schedule of coordinating resources, he has prepared a module on the medieval poet-reformer, Basava.

It is alleged by certain fundamentalist organization that he has distorted history by representing Basava in a bad light. Instead of praising the glory of the Hindu kingdoms, Shiv has found fault with harping too much on the caste divisions in the Hindu society and thereby belittling Hinduism. This charge has been put upon Shiv by a fundamentalist organization called Itihas Suraksha Manch. This organization, indirectly, has been fed by one of Shiv's colleagues, Arya. The irony of the fact is that the protesters happen to be all outsiders who don't have anything to do with the university and its syllabi.

The very event becomes instrumental for the meetings of the department. The head of the department, the dean and the vice-chancellor indulge in meetings after meetings. The newspaper has been

used as a medium of propaganda against Prof. Shiv Murthy. Even the television, interviews have been broadcasted. All these things really unsettle Shiv Murthy. He is not been a man who could let the things go so easily. He is not in a mood to accept his defeat. In a meeting with the head and the dean, Shiv tries to clarify his own side:

The lesson is part of a module for medieval Indian history paper, which carries three credits. Since the medieval period is my area, I preferred not to commission an outside expert to write the module. Though Basava is so many things, so many people rolled into one—poet and mystic, finance minister and political activist, man of the people and man of god—the lesson itself is quite straightforward. It traces the life of Basava. The growth of his radical ideas and his struggle against caste divisions and the temple establishment, the tensions that grew between the court and the brahmins and the merchants on the one hand, and on the other, the low caste artisans and the untouchables who made up a large part of Basava's veerashaiva movement. The lesson ends with the crisis these tensions led to, and the dispersal of Basava's followers; and his own departure from Kalyana and his death shortly after. (p. 67)

The dean listens carefully to what is said by Shiv but the head seems to be thinking about the implications of what Shiv Murthy has written as a module. He is of the opinion that any sort of meaning can be sought out of the lesson by reading between the lines. Suddenly, Shiv shatters all the respect of the head. The head seems to have said goodbye to his timidity only to criticize him.

Shiv cannot believe he has thought of the head as a different man all these years. As pompous but timid, perhaps pompous because he is timid. The man, having said goodbye to timidity, continues his harangue. (p. 68)

Instead of supporting Shiv Murthy, the head shows before the dean a good list of drawbacks in Shiv's writing wherein he recommends three suggestions as Shiv Murthy must apologize for hurting sentiments of the people. Secondly, the lesson should be retracted and the study material be recalled from the students. Thirdly, the rewritten lesson should be submitted to the Manch before it is sent to the press unit. Shiv Murthy does not show his favour to the suggestions:

I will not apologize...I do not say anything about the other two demands, partly because they do

not involve just me...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 historian. (p. 70)

It has been decided that the alleged lesson is to be put before a panel of so called historian who do not have any academic recognition as such. This act of the head and the dean shocks Shiv Murthy.

At home, Meena has been there to boost courage in him. She has been a grown up and matured girl. The character of Meena is sketched in a greater detail when compared to his wife's and daughter's who are supposed to be abroad. Meena, a sociology student writing her thesis, has been observed by Shiv Murthy as—

Almost a girl, except that she seems more worldly-wise sometimes than he. She talks of causes and street theatre, 'gender' and 'courting arrest' with the ease of a veteran. She too, he has discovered, is a frequenter of meetings; though her meetings are played out in a world where a different language is spoken, where it is possible to feel passions foreign to him. (p. 31)

When Meena comes to know that Shiv is under attack for his lesson on Basava, the former poet, by Itihas Suraksha Manch and other fundamentalist organizations, she is furious and calls her friends for help. Prominent among them are Amar, the activist and a member of so many organizations. It is Meena who becomes instrumental in directing the meetings and actions from home itself. She informs Shiv Murthy that—

I have called Amar...You remember Amar, he came to see me the other day. He is an activist and a committed member of several citizens' groups. We have discussed the Current article and he thinks a citizen's forum should take it up. I am supposed to ring him up and confirm when we can have a meeting here. (P. 79)

Meena's friends counter the protest by preparing their own leaflets, by sloganeering and speeches. Murthy also refuses to apologize or to resign as is suggested to him. His room in the university is ransacked and he receives hate mails, instigated by his departmental colleague, Arya. Shiv Murthy is even threatened of life by the fundamentalist organizations.

Shiv Murthy receives so many hateful mails, calls and news articles but he doesn't seem to be

bend or shaken before them. He proves to be a hard nut to crack down. He seems not a bit shaken when his cabin in the university department has been destroyed rather he expects it to happen.

His savaged room: even its memory, the imagined memory of its ruin, suggests that all hope—of pretending it did not happen, that such a thing could not happen—is an illusion. Shiv's room in the university has been left in shambles, shards of glass and splinters of wood mingling with the remains of his books and files. (p. 150)

Instead of protecting the facts, Itihas Suraksha Manch has spoilt the department and has also taken the militant role that of beating Shiv Murthy at the hands of the agitators. At this juncture, Shiv Murthy thinks that Amar's support will be enough to resist and stick to his own decision. He contemplates about Amar:

Shiv recognizes Amar, the tall young man who seems to be their undisputed leader, as the friend Meena described as a 'committed activist'. Everything about Amar is on a big scale. All his features are drawn with bold, well-defined strokes. From a distance, he looks like one of those monolithic idols carved out of a single, powerful rock. (p. 88)

After the attack on Shiv, he remains confined to house from where each and every activity is being continued. He turns into a fugitive. This is just to avoid any harsh step against himself.

Shiv is a full time fugitive. Housebound, his own house feels like exile. And the inevitable flurry of reactions has set in—phone calls, meetings, newly set up committees...She feels like a body that has been taken over. A body that has somehow unlearned the law of gravity. (p. 131)

Though one feels that his dwelling is in a democratic country where everybody should feel safe and secure but Shiv doesn't feel so. He becomes a victim where he is teased and tortured as if being in a lawless country.

Shiv Murthy seems to be a conformist who does not surrender himself to the demand of the fundamentalist organization. This fact, Shiv's wife, Rekha, knows very well. She tries to convince him and suggests to take a back as these gundas can go to any extent.

I do see you can't give in so easily...It's not as if I don't see the principle of the thing. But to be idealistic at such a time, and with such

people?...Don't forget, you're dealing with hoodlums who have pulled down mosques and churches that have stood for so many years. They've engineered riots, for god's sake, what's a little violence to them? And they're so powerful now. What can we do—Shiv, don't you understand? I'm afraid. (pp. 154-155)

Rekha could see that Shiv's idealism cannot stay for long because Shiv is facing such people to whom humanistic attitude is not taken for grant. They do not bother to kill a person any time. These are the people who don't bother to demolish a church, a mosque or a temple. Rekha could see that Shiv could get himself indulged in a critical situation. She thinks that she should be there assisting him. She even drops out her idea of remaining in Seattle till her stipulated time. She plans to return much before the time. Her decision to come back to India seems to be an Indian woman's decision to be at the side of her husband in his time to need.

Though acting as the ward to Meena, Shiv Murthy's closeness with her creates in him the feeling of intimacy with her. At the time when the fuss over his module on Basava cools down to some extent, Shiv tries to establish physical relationship with Meena though it is not a sexual intercourse. At this time, Meena also doesn't disallow his fondling her body. It seems that they have come to some unwritten contract between themselves. All this happens in the absence of his wife. Shiv feels totally obsessed by Meena. Towards her recovery of the leg, she prepares to leave Shiv's house and go back to her hostel. She informs Shiv Murthy about her departure and also about Amar's arrival to take her. Prof. Shiv has learnt to miss her presence. When Amar comes, Shiv feels the jealousy of a man for the other for the same female partner. Shiv thinks:

Then he thinks of Amar spiritng her away. Confident Amar, who knows what it is to act, whether it is in love or on the streets. Ruthless Amar, so-very-young Amar. It's not a simple jealousy Shiv feels for Amar, not the age-worn, sexual jealousy of one man for another, or shop-soiled age for youth. What Shiv finds puzzling is that he is almost as fascinated by Amar as he is by Meena. That he is as intrigued by Amar, and perhaps, as afraid. (p. 199)

Shiv Murthy has been actually much impressed by Amar and his association with the activist groups. Amar has helped Shiv on the request of Meena.

Now, when he comes to receive Meena, Shiv's jealousy is aroused. He feels as if Amar is behaving like a villain but Shiv can't do anything on account that he is married and is in his middle age. Shiv finds Amar's behavior to be that of a modest and well-cultured human being:

Amar gets up when Shiv enters the room and greets him courteously. He calls Shiv sir. He is smooth, this champion of Meena's who has both words and passion at his fingertips. Politically committed and a gentleman if the occasion calls for one. (p. 201)

Shiv hands over Meena a cane stick so that she could use it till she is fully recovered to walk by herself. Shiv is left behind to face his problem alone. Talking about the condition in the novel and the prevailing concept of democracy in the country, Pramod K. Nayar writes:

Here suggest, Hariharan, democracy which is primarily a multiplicity of ideas and opinions— itself is threatened. Truth emerges in the exchange of ideas; it does not rest with one or other side, but somewhere in between. This in between space is carved out by the culture of interrogation, of dissent. (Nayar, iv)

The blurb of the novel *In Times of Siege* describes it as—

New Delhi, in the year 2000. Staff meetings, lesson modules, a half-hearted little affair with a colleague—this is the bland but comfortable life of Shiv Murthy, a history teacher in an open university. Gut disruption and change are on their way—an outspoken young woman with a broken knee comes into his life and turns it upside-down; the Hindu zealots attack his writing on Basava, the reformer-poet. With fundamentalism landing on his own doorstep, Shiv discovers that the ideas he has inherited—about history, nations and patriots—are shrinking day by day. And the time of siege is not exclusively Indian; prejudice different languages, but has the same destructive message: 'Only trust those of your kind.' With love, lust and a perverted nationalism at his heels, Shiv is forced to confront the demands of his times and choose a direction for the future. But first he must come to terms with his own incomplete past, his fears, and his obsession with the strength he seeks. (Hariharan, 2003, *The Blurb*)

Conclusion:

Githa Hariharan has presented in this novel how the academic activities are at stake for the personal interest of one community. At the same time, she has made an attempt to bring to the forefront how political interference in the academia has not only disturbed but destroyed the academic autonomy. Characters portrayed by her are shrewd, a few diplomatically and politically aggressive and a few are loyal to their own profession.

References:

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