

Time and Space in Geetha Hariharan's *In Times of Siege*

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Abstract: In this paper, an attempt will be made to show how Githa Hariharan deals with the contemporary burning issues such as freedom of expression, academic politics, communal violence, the rise of the Hindutwa Brigade and so forth. With the University Campus as backdrop, Githa Hariharan takes up academic issue in this novel, *In Times of Siege*. The novel exposes the follies of academic life, where non-academic and un-academic activities take place. Universities are meant for free debate and plurality of opinions. Instead, they are marked by mistrust, caste-politics, religious-hatred, extremism, nepotism, suppression of intellectuals and censorship. The intellectual has to live always under constant threat of communal and ethnic violence. Githa Hariharan attempts to prove that the Fundamentalists' extremism, no doubt, is a perennial threat for academic freedom as well as for a civil society.

Keywords: politics, chauvinism, Hindutwa, academic politics, fundooos, fundamentalism, bigotry.

Githa Hariharan (1954) is one of the major contemporary Indian women novelists, known for her experimental themes and techniques. She is an activist, is very much aware of the social and political anomalies of contemporary Indian society, politics and culture. Githa Hariharan's *In Times of Siege* (2003) deals with the contemporary burning issues such as freedom of expression, communal violence, academic politics, the rise of the *Hindutwa* Brigade, social injustice, so on and so forth. With the University Campus as a backdrop, Githa Hariharan in her third novel, *In Times of Siege* takes up an academic issue. It is a topical novel discusses plainly as a response to the growing influence of Hindu fundamentalism in India. The novelist closely examines how the 'freedom of expression', one of the fundamental rights sanctioned by the constitution of India, is invariably under threat. The novel exposes the politics of academic life, where non-academic and un-academic activities take place and spoil the academic atmosphere. Universities are meant for free debate and plurality of opinions. Instead, they are marked by mistrust; indulge in caste-politics, religious-hatred, extremism, nepotism, suppression of intellectuals and censorship. Githa Hariharan attempts to prove the Fundamentalists' extremism, no doubt, is a perennial threat for academic freedom as well as for a civil society. In such situations, the

intellectual always has to live under constant threat of communal and ethnic violence.

Githa Hariharan takes up quite a different issue for her *In Time of Siege* unlike other women writers do. She dares to take up a controversial issue such as campus politics deliberately because she perhaps wants to expose the university politics along with the rising fundamentalist organizations in India. What inspired Githa Hariharan is a Kannada play, *Maha Chitra*, by H.S.Shivaprakash, Basavanna, which created controversy in Karnataka because the people of the state particularly one dominant community alleged that it hurts their feelings because of the distortion of Basavanna's character. The Government had to ban the book to pacify the protesters. Githa Hariharan tells what compelled her to write this novel in one of her interviews,

I was midway through my novel *In Time of Siege*. I was writing about a historian who is victimized by a group called the *Itihas Suraksha Manch* for a lesson he has written on the reformer-poet Basava. I felt a tremendous compulsion to write about what these sorts of *manchs* are doing to us. I wanted to write not about a specific aspect of the fundamentalism-or conservatism-we are seeing around us, but the insidious ways in which minds are being shrunk. This is why I set the novel in a university. The process of learning is supposed to break down walls and enlarge the student's world, not shrink it by encouraging the irrational or reinforcing prejudice, or inculcating hatred of anything or anyone that is different from the self. Most of all, it is supposed to encourage debate and disagreement. How do you learn to think for yourself if you swallow all the answer someone (and someone ill equipped) has cooked up for you. (Litcrit 6.)

In Times of Siege presents a typical Indian university academic world. Githa Hariharan handles the contemporary sensitive academic issues such as professional jealousy, (who are apparently friendly), mistrust, suppression of intellect, casteism, nepotism, politics, religion, opportunism, hatred, backstabbing, and infighting in a subtle way. Hariharan satirizes professional stereotypes, educational system, and the problems of intellectuals in Higher Education. She also highlights how religious fundamentalists have crept into academic circles as well. Academic politics as well as the fundamentalism is 'tearing apart the multicultural fabric of Indian society' (ITS 207). The author dedicates this novel to 'all those who speak up in times of siege'. Murthy, the protagonist of the novel becomes a mouthpiece of the author's ideological position who 'speaks up' at the end.

In Times of Siege covers a span of two months in the life of Shiv Murthy, a middle-aged, humble professor of History at the fictional Kasturba Gandhi Central University, an open university in Delhi, 'who no longer teaches students' but prepares 'module' for B.A. History students. Murthy's life revolves around his wife, Rekha and a daughter, Tara, who are now away from Delhi, in Seattle, in USA as his daughter got a job. His everyday activities, includes, Department meetings, preparing modules for students, along with an affair with a colleague, Amita Sen, as an escape from his routine conjugal life. Two unprecedented incidents disturb his quiet and routine life. First, his written module on Basava, a South Indian poet and a social reformer of the twelfth century, draws the ire of right-wing political functionaries. Basava's social emancipation and casteless society creates a sensation in the local paper and also reflects on his own Department of History. A group of self-proclaimed Hindu extremists, known as *Itihasa Suraksha Manch*, "a Hindu watchdog group" (ITS 55), an independent social and cultural organization, opposes Shiv's secular treatment of the lesson. The organization treats it as distortion and vandalizes his room. It seems unnatural to Shiv, because he had prepared the modules five years ago. Now all of a sudden the incident disturbs his mental peace. He is left alone to face these religious *Fundoos* (fundamentalists), as his department colleagues do not come to his rescue at this crucial hour. Second, Meena, a twenty-four year old woman, a Ph.D. student in a different university, happened to be the daughter of his friend, comes to stay with Murthy, as she had broken her leg, till she gets recuperated she stays with Murthy when his family is away from Delhi.

Only Meena, a student activist comes to Murthy's rescue. Murthy, 'an idealist', as she calls (154) tries to negotiate personal passions and unexpected political exigencies. She forces him to take a political stance against the forces of '*Hindutva*', as Hindu chauvinism, the increasing parochialism and jingoism are gaining an unprecedented foothold in the academia. As the novel unfolds with a meticulous details, the fight between the Hindu fundamentalists and the secularists' visions of history, it leaves in the minds of the reader that the author wants to warn not just against the enormous power of Hindu fundamentalism to shape academic debate, but also its ability to cover the fabric of a pluralist indian society. Githa Hariharan perhaps wants to draw attention to what essentially amounts to thought policing, to dramatize the chilling implications of political control over intellectual freedom. She does not spare the department colleagues who were indifferent to the incidents and some of them want Murthy to be punished for his controversial writings of modules. The head of the Department, Dr.Sharma, a weak and timid person, has consensual approach to things, (always oscillating

in his stands), Arya, a colleague and a *Hindu* fundamentalist who manhandles Murthy, is the person behind all the untoward happenings. Dr. Lal and Amita Sen, his colleagues, very close to Murthy support him morally. The Vice-chancellor who is portrayed as a comic figure speaks more but conveys less. It shows how the persons holding responsible position behaves like buffoon. The infighting among the faculty members is phenomenal, they were divided on grounds of caste, ideology, and religion. What Githa Hariharan intends to say perhaps is that universities which were meant for free debates and plurality of opinions, do not provide scope for open discussion and open debates. Murthy is as a humble in nature avoids confrontations. When Murthy is called by Dr. Sharma, the head, who believes in consensual approach to things requests Murthy to tender apology to the *Manch*. As the media sensationalizes the issue, hate mails and telephone calls pour in and protests against Murthy take place. The *Manch* in its press release note observes:

We will not allow our history to be polluted like this. Fifty years after the independence, we cannot have Indian historian brainwashed by foreign theories and methods depriving us of our pride in Hindu temple and priests (ITS 76).

Anant Tripathi, the leader of the *Manch* says that, Murthy's lesson on Basava is part of a deep-rooted conspiracy to defame *Hindu* saints in particular and Hindu History and culture in general" (ITS 90). He also gives a call to revive *Hindu* courage: 'We want to make the *Hindu* strong and courageous again' (ITS 90) *puts* three demands before the Head of the Department.

The first is an apology for hurting their sentiments... Second, lesson should be retracted and the material recalled from all the students registered for the course, and from the study centers and libraries. Third, the rewritten lesson should be submitted to the *Manch* before it is sent to our printing unit (ITS 69).

The *Fundoos*, as the novelist terms the religious fundamentalists, object to Murthy's secular treatment to the history. However, the *Munch* considers it a religious subject. Ironically, the People, who are protesting, might not have read the modules written by Murthy that too the modules were prepared five years ago. It is to create trouble for Murthy, his colleague might have intrigued through the Hindu fundamentalist who start creating problem all of a sudden. Murthy has allegedly misrepresented Basavanna, the reformer poet, and has not given due credit to the past heritage, and this hurt the sentiments of a certain sect of people. At the outset Murthy is not heroic but a passive sufferer.

Courage, strength and inspiration however, come to him in the form a girl, Meena, whom Murthy helped in recuperating her leg. Meena, with the help of her radical friends protests against the *Manch*. She encourages Murthy to commit and fight against injustice says, "Obviously you can't apologize or take back a word of the lesson (ITS 55). At the end, he says to the Department Head, "I will not apologize, I do not say anything about the other two demands, partly because they do not involve just me" (ITS 69). Murthy not only resists his antagonists, but also the timid university administration, which would or ready to compromise its principles according to situation. He is able to overcome his fears and obsession with Meena, who is a source and strength in his struggle. In *Times of Siege* ends with optimistic note that even 'an ordinary man can be a hero if he remains true to himself'. Murthy is an ardent follower of Basava because, his dead father, a freedom fighter had inspired him to follow the footsteps of Basava and stand up for conviction. His father too disappeared in his middle age in the same way Basava did.

Freedom of expression is one of the themes of *In Times of Siege*, which is under constant threat. Chauvinism and jingoism are obviously the cause and consequence of communal disturbance. Unexpected convulsions rising from severely uneven social developments are gripping the country. In recent times, they have come to signify self-proclaimed superiority by one group over the other based on caste, language, region, religion and race. The religious supremacy of 'isms', divide people instead they unite them. Being an intellectual and a social activist, Githa Hariharan, responds to political and religious issues such as demolition of Babri Masjid, Gujrat Carnage, the murder of Australian Missionary, Graham Steins and his two children, the RSS chief Madav Sadashiv Golwalkar for the glorification of *Hindu* race, Hindu and Muslim fundamentalist organizations etc. She compares the Hindu religious leaders to fascists of Germany who were responsible for the genocide. She also tries to prove in this novel, *In Times of Seize*, shows how fundamentalists' extremism is a threat to secular and democratic fabric of Indian society. Kushwant Singh quotes Qazim Abdul Sattar's words in his *The End of India*, 'communalism has more arms than an octopus' (77). Rewriting the idea of a plural and secular India in the ferocious image of communal and dominant forces constitutes a recurring theme in recent Indian English novels. Throughout the ages, the parochial religious extremists have been responsible for a disproportionate share of the world's horrors. In the present age, as Githa Hariharan so adeptly shows, fundamentalist extremism can be a major threat to intellectual and academic freedom, as well as to the civil society. Hence, this has more political reasons than religious. When religion is brought into every

aspect of life that would lead to the division of the society into religious groups and communal violence. The extremist's real agenda is the suppression of any conflict in Indian history, historical revisionism, creating the illusion of a perfect, homogenous society. Their methods of bullying and intimidation are not an issue.

In Times of Seize, is not without some shortcomings, as most of the views expressed in the novel appear to be attitudinal. The fundamentalism in other religions is not looked at. Threatening letters that are written to Murthy, one of the writers sponsored by Arya, his department colleague, religious chauvinist questions Murthy;

Dear Sir, if the Muslims can have their fundamentalists, why can't we? Have you forgotten that Hindus have stood the test of time like no one else? Our fundamentalists have been around longer than theirs have. So we have to show the world we are superior to them in every way (ITS 135).

Hindu fundamentalism took shape during the freedom movement due to the British colonial politics. Its force could be seen at Naukali in Bengal at the time of partition which took toll thousands of people. The novelist targets only the *Hindu* fundamentalists who are responsible for the communal and religious disturbances and the destabilization of Indian democratic fabric. She does not look at the other religious fundamentalists who appear to be more violent.

In Times of Seize offers a critique of religious extremism. One can notice a link between *Hindutva* and Fascism: "The link between fascism and the ugly faces of *Hindutva* unveiling themselves around us is the regimentation of thought and brutal repression of culture" (ITS 101). Both fundamentalism and extremism would be perennial threat for academic freedom as well as civil society. In such a situation individual must take a stand. Otherwise, it would be a great threat to the democratic and secular fabric of the country. In the end one wonders whether strong resistance towards fundamentalism and 'speak up before it is too late' attitude may inspire people in order to ensure no political and religious interference in academic spheres. Incidentally, *In Time of Siege* is a perceptive social critique and of the anomalies of contemporary life. Thus, the novel deals with the complexities of a society, which is under continual threat of communal and ethnic violence. The world is shrunk in many ways because of mutual suspicion and the arrogance of pride has never brought happiness to man in his limited span of time. Thus, caste, region, religion, language, race, and ethnic chauvinisms have come into prominence and these have the capacity to polarize and divide people and nations. India for all its political unity and basic cultural oneness, the religious chauvinism has compartmentalized the structure of the nation. It is in fact a constant regression even for the educated Indian society.

In this globalised world, the issue of belonging to a community and citizenship are subject to distortions driven by ignorance, chauvinism and bigotry. It is unfortunate that the contemporary world is facing violence and hatred. Religious fundamentalism and chauvinism are not a recent phenomenon in India and they are more active now in India than before. Self-proclaimed groups- moral police attempt to preserve their distinctive group identities- always try to retrieve the past beliefs and a practices, which, are considered by them, sacred. Even the ancient physical structures are becoming contested sites where memories are erased or re-mythified or new memories invented to target certain communities. The religious places claimed by certain groups that they belong to them and make people believe that such and such a place was the birthplace of such and such Gods. For instance, Ram Jnamabhoomi, Mathura, the birthplace of Krishna, Ramasetu, the natural bridge between India and Srilanka, etc. Even the field of art is not an exception to this fundamentalism. F.M. Husain had to quit India as the Hindu militant groups alleged that he had distorted the paintings of Hindu Goddesses. The Movies like, *Fire*, and *Water* related to lesbianism as well as freedom of expression, the books of Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, Taslima Nazreen's *Lajja*, Jaishree Misra's *Rani* and others had to face the protest from the organizations, who claim the self-appointed contractors and protectors of Hinduism. In a way, the freedom of expression is curtailed as well as it is misused. Life has become more and more difficult for the creative writers and artists because everything is bound to get politicized and they have to articulate not only the bewilderment and pain of those who live through the times of siege; and have to look at the personal costs, the fears and confusions. But nobody has the courage to say 'it is wrong' in a democratic and secular country like India. Fusing fact and fiction Gita Hariharan gives us yet another perspective on the unresolved crisis of our times and dedicates this novel to all those who speak up in times of siege.

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