

CONTROVERSY BETWEEN FUNDAMENTALISM AND LIBERALISM IN GITHA HARIHARAN'S IN TIMES OF SIEGE.

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Abstract:

Gita Harihara is a well-known writer in English. She adopted her unique style of writing to record her own experiences of hurt and humiliations. Githa as a conscious women writer produces a body of Indian literature that is committed to feminism as well as social problems and issues. Githa Hariharan has presented the women who dared to go beyond the limit set for them. Through her novels Githa Hariharan urges for this type of equality for the betterment of the society. 'In Times of Siege' Githa Hariharan raises her concern about this very notion of religion influencing and shaping politics. The novel is a critique of the homogenizing notion of the forced religious and cultural fundamentalism in academia and its injustice towards the religious minorities.

Key words: Humiliation, conscious, feminism, urges, influencing, critique, homogenizing, notion, fundamentalism, academia, injustice.

Introduction:

Among other novelists in postcolonial era, Hariharan has taken up the issue of growing intolerance as her thematic concern and critiques the religious fanaticism that is exciting violence in the name of preserving culture. There are many horrific instances of fundamentalist violence across ages. Demolition of Babri Masjid in Ayodhya in 1992, Gujrat carnage in 2002, exodus of Kashmiri Hindus in 1990 and Godhra train burning in 2002 are some of the examples of religious intolerance prevalent in modern India. By taking university campus as the backdrop of her novel, In Times of Siege, Hariharan articulates the intrusion of religiopolitical aspects in academia, which poses a serious threat in free thinking. In this novel, Hariharan has shown how academic freedom has been set at naught and the concept of a pluralistic society is thrown to the winds because of an upsurge of religious fanaticism. A heightened sense of fundamentalism is delineated in this work of Hariharan to prove that one has to adhere to certain set of beliefs and principles, and if they are not obeyed, one is subjected to severe opposition from the extremists. The religious fundamentalists make it a point to lay stress on everything that glorifies religion and religious practices. They keep on propagating the fact that true nationalism signifies the promotion of a particular religion.

Controversy between fundamentalism and liberalism:

In the novel In Times of Siege, the word 'siege' connotes a place which is obstructed



from all sides and the besieged gets no route for an escape. Siege is dealt with at two levels-the clamorous siege of the street and the quieter but far more dangerous siege of the mind, where the airing of prejudice has become almost acceptable". This refers to action on the street as well research in the archive. It is important to attend to the multiple sources of historical facts and explore their various meanings. History should be unbiased in its study as far as religious and cultural compulsions are concerned; it should be guided by a free thinking. What is disappointing is that severe obstacles are always set in the path of free thinking by very many forces and elements like religious fundamentalism and cultural nationalism. Hariharan has referred to the rising phenomenon of Hindu fundamentalism, but, as Monika Gupta says, "It applies to every kind of fanatic and fundamental following of any religion" (Gupta 104).

The protagonist of the novel, Shiv Murthy, is a professor of history at an Open University in Delhi. His life revolves around the university, that is, academic meetings, lesson modules, research work related to historical articles etc. Since his wife Rekha is in the US with their daughter, Tara, he lives all by himself in his home near the university. All of a sudden, his ward Meena, who studies at Kamala Nehru University, comes to stay with him with a broken knee. Meena is an independent girl who does not bother to inform her parents regarding her injury. As a matter of fact, she does not even hesitate to live with a quite unknown man. In addition to this, Shiv's otherwise tranquil life faces a storm when the cultural group called Itihas Suraksha Mancha accuses him of distorting history and historical facts. Shiv's module on Basava, the 12th-century saint-poet at the court of King Bijjala in the city of Kalyana, incurs the wrath of the self-proclaimed preservers of history. They begin blaming him for undermining Hinduism and portraying Basava as an ordinary person.

Moreover, Shiv is also charged with exaggerating caste inequality in ancient India and with showing the Brahmins and the priests in a not-so-positive light. Things get worse when Shiv's department fails to provide moral support to him. Furthermore, he gets a call from the Head of the Department, who repeated the charge: It seems 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 (Hariharan 53-54). Shiv has delineated Basava as a man who sought to establish an egalitarian society. As he showed, Basava tried hard to bring about a revolutionary change in society.

Following the marriage between a Brahmin girl and a cobbler's son, the city of Kalyana became a place of agitation. People from conservative strata of the society burnt the city and Basava left the place in despair. Such a depiction of Basava excites an uproar among the upper caste section of the people. At this juncture, Shiv gets perturbed at the "thought of confronting fists, threats, physical danger in any form at all" (Hariharan 55-56). Meena takes the lead in providing the much-needed mental support and strength to in Shiv. It is due her constant support that he could stand firm and fight for his ideals. She works as a positive catalyst in Shiv's battle to create his own space. It can also be said that Meena is the official spokesperson of Hariharan. Despite having a cast in her leg, Meena possesses the indefatigable spirit and extreme self-assurance in her ideals and beliefs. Meena, who is writing a thesis on the plight of women after the 1984 anti-Sikh riots, believes in a quote by the German theologian Reverend



Martin Niemoller: "Speak up! Before it's late".

Hariharan's novel reiterates this idea in some way or other. Meena inspires Shiv to take a solid stand, "Why pretend you are a professor if you can't stand up to someone telling you what to think? Shiv, do you imagine an ordinary man cannot be a hero?" (Hariharan 64). Infused with a new determination, Shiv decides that he will neither apologise for his interpretation of history nor will he retract his lessons or views for revision. This new facet of Shiv is praiseworthy when he says, "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 historians" (Hariharan 69-70). The Hindu fanatics started maligning the professor in their own way of holding meetings, processions, newspaper articles, and so on. People like the president of Itihas Suraksha Manch and retired professor Shri A.A Atre makes use of this opportunity to occupy the centre stage of power and authority. This novel exemplifies how the battle between extreme culturalism and liberalism can create pressure on creativity like art, history, and culture. Politics of surveillance is potent enough to create violence in the civil society. In these trying times, Shiv utters, "Only a sanitized Basava is allowed to remain, a 'saint-singer', a singer with a saintly face. This toothless man is safe enough to be hung on walls, a bland calendar memory" (Hariharan 86). It has often been found that academic writings which include historical and mythological figures, fall into a web of controversy.

Conclusion:

Therefore, Githa Hariharan's *In Times of Siege* highlights the issue that is the controversy between fundamentalism and liberalism. Shiv Murthy, a central character, is a professor of history at Kasturba Gandhi Central University and Meena, the student of Delhi University are representatives of liberalistic attitude. When Shiv writes a course module on social reforms movements in medieval India in which there is a lesson on Basava who works for liberty and equality, the Itihas Suraksha Manch attacks Shiv. Both Shiv and Meena is the staunch follower of liberalism. They are academicians who endeavour to correct the evil dwelling in terms of traditional thing and practices. Thus, the controversy between fundamentalism and liberalism in India in particular and world in general is detrimental for the welfare of human beings.

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