



Man-Woman Relationship in Githa Hariharan's In Times of Siege

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Abstract

In Times of Siege is Githa Hariharan's fourth novel. Her stories are replete with recounting of various kinds of inequalities and powerstruggles. They all in some way or the other emphasize the individual's assertion for an identity. Giving voice to her beliefs has always been her strong point. In this novel she weaves some of her own experiences, like the broken leg or life in the university campus. Laid up in bed with a broken leg was a time of reckoning for her of coming to terms with what she must do as a writer she felt that she had to face what is happening directly. This concerted attempt to reduce the dichotomies in our Multicultural society is a matter of rising concern for all of us. The story of ordinary lives of men and women struggling to make sense of hatred, ignorance, love and loyalty to individuals, ideas and the nation. It holds up an uncompromising mirror of India today.

Key Words: Relationship, Multicultural, Ambulatory Narrative, Ambulatory Narrative, Historiography, Fanatical Religious, Fundamentalism, Parochialism, Insularity, Primitivism.

Githa Hariharan, an epoch making star in India fiction in English was born in Coimbatore, grown up in Bombay and Manila. She continued her studies in the US and worked with Public Television there. Returning to India in 1979, she worked in Bombay, Madras and New Delhi, initially as an editor in publishing house and later as a freelance writer.

Here she has abandoned her earlier elliptical or ambiguous techniques of storytelling to a clearer cut treatment of her material. The slow ambulatory narrative seems to be appropriate for her purpose. It is quiet in tune with the cerebral numbness experienced by the main protagonist, the mental paralysis produced by events beyond one's control. The setting of the novel is in two

universities in Delhi called KNU and KGU. The book is a combination of fact and fiction that tease each other. It's partly a joke to have Kasturba Gandhi University and Kamala Nehru University as Kamala Nehru and Kasturba Gandhi would only have universities named after them in fiction. The novelist has created a teasing space, which is familiar but not bogged down by photographic reproduction.

The characters in the novel are Shiv Murthy a middle aged professor of History at Delhi's 'Kasturba Gandhi University'. His co-ordinates resources for his educational clients. He is a decent man, a good husband and father. His wife Rekha is in Seattle visiting their daughter Tara. Meena his ward, whom he barely knows, is the daughter of his childhood neighbour Sumati. She calls on him for help when she fractures her leg and comes to stay in the absence of his wife. Meena is a sociology student, writing a thesis on what she calls Women's stories of women affected by the anti-Sikh riots after Indira Gandhi's assassination in 1984.

The other characters are Dr. Sharma, the head of the department, Arya who is described as "ugly, bigoted Tyrant" (ITS, 30) referred to as the descendent of the Nazi's and each time he says the word "foreigner" or 'Muslim' he spits them out like something sour in his mouth (19). The other characters are Lai, Menon and Amita. Amita and Menon, the two colleagues are allies of Shiv.

Meena though laid up in bed with her leg encased in a cast she is far from being powerless. She talks of causes and street theatre; gender and courting arrest with the ease of a Veteran (31). The cast around Meena's leg is also employed as a metaphor. It is asymptomatic of the three R's-restriction, regression, repression a women is subjected to all her life. What the novelist wants to emphasize is that despite the cast, Meena has indomitable spirit and is not mired by the constricting conditions. The communal fascist forces also function as cast incapacitating and ruthlessly paralyzing people's rights. Pastor who was a victim of the Nazi concentration camp, in screaming red: "Speak Up! Before It's Late." This poster speaks volume for the message and agenda of Hariharan's work.

As a historian of medieval India Shiv leads a quite life teaching courses at the University department, meetings and writing articles and class outlines. His involvement with campus politics is usually a question of getting administration to approve the department budget or repair the photocopier. Shiv's father was a freedom fighter for whom the freedom movement didn't end in 1947.

The burdens of the New World the travails of Free India sat heavy on his shoulders. He was a brave man but could not keep up with the anarchy 'loosened upon the world' which finally broke him down and he did not return after a Congress Workers meeting in Indore. Shiv's father's ghost constantly spurs him on to positive action in the face of crumbling values: "All that matters is that you are free thinking. That you have moral courage"(40).

Shiv's life is thrown into turmoil when his medieval history lesson is deemed controversial by a Hindu watch group, the Itihas Suraksha Manch. The lesson being targeted is based on Basavanna, the legendary 12th century treasurer of the Vijayanagar Empire. For a while, Basava had dared question the caste system before being overrun. The movement, he founded, Veerashaivism ran strong for sometime before floundering. Such history lessons do not go down well with the contemporary "Protectors" of India's history. Shiv is accused of distorting history and historical figures. He is charged for deliberately exaggerating the problem of caste written in a biased way about Brahmins and temple priests. It is dubbed as an ignorant and unpatriotic act, rewriting history with Hindu Saints as cowards and failures in exile, which they believed, undermines Hinduism and hurt their sentiments.

As Shiva muses, the group of fundamentalists probably 'Fear that our (Indian) history will force people see that our past, like our present has always been critics of social divisions that masquerade as religion and tradition. So they whitewash historical figures (and) they seize history' (92). Saffronization of education is the peg on which the novel is hung. Incorporating the hindutva view point at the level of academic discourse is vital at the popular level. No wonder the Sangh Parivar (caricatured as Itihas Suraksha Manch in the novel) has had to resort to blatant misuse of power to make teaching of and research in history conform to its ideology. Central to its project is the vulgarization and aggressive denigration of all those trends in history writing which run counter to the ideological premises of the hindutva world view.

The attack on left wing historiography has been sharp and unrelenting. This is not to suggest that left wing historiography should not be critiqued but then one needs to distinguish between interpretations on the one hand and historians as individuals on the other. What has been happening is that the Marxist or left wing tradition of history writing is being critiqued in terms of the personal careers and political leanings of historians who are or were of that tradition; there is an outburst of intolerance and violence with each other and against each other.

One more illustration of the fissiparous trends are the fast burgeoning preservers of our culture and tradition out to impair and enfeeble national cohesion: It's true that whether people are talking about culture, history or women's rights, protection has become a much abused word. A cover up for all bullying tactics" (55). These scourges cannot be fought without a clear idea of what kind of nation we want for ourselves. There is a "method in madness" which the zealots have perfected over the years through many no so glorious experiences: "campaign against Christians, murder of Australian missionary Graham Staines and his two children, attack on artist M.F.Hussain for painting Hindu goddesses in the nude.

Teachers in Goa having their faces blackened for setting “politically incorrect” exams...the disruption of the shooting of a film on the plight of widow’s in Beneras, the list is endless” (100). Ironically as we know that history of almost every nation state is a “millennium of patchwork”. This point is made forcefully by the German poets Hans Magnus Ezenberger in his book Europe...Europe (Ezenberger: 1987). Asserting the same idea Edward Said in an interview says: “We live in a world of interdependent mongrelized societies. They are Hybrids, they are impure” (46)

The unscrupulous politicians in league with some fanatical religious group now have the Pandora’s Box open before us. Such incidents can be understood in the light of what Edward Said writes in Orientalism, the return to “native religion and primitive nationhood” (338). In various parts of the world this is giving rise to a disgraceful thing like fatwa against the celebrated writer Salman Rushdie and the gory events cited above in the Indian context. Such moves as the Iranian Fatwa and Indian nativism are premised on fundamentalism, parochialism, insularity, primitivism, and what not.

These should not be played up to an extent where it begins to threaten certain basic human values, intellectual freedom, tolerance and broad - mindedness. “To accept nativism” Said writes is to ‘accept the consequences of imperialism, the racial, religious and political divisions imposed by imperialism itself (276). This gives birth to acrimony, alienation and conflicts. It is high time we got over these divisions for a better humanity. Said term’s nativism “the metaphysics of essences.” (48) Nativism distils the essence of a race, a people, or a religion such as Negritude, Irishness, Islam Catholicism, or Hinduism. Such “essentialization” has the power to turn human beings against each other. Using Meena as her mouth piece Hariharan writes: “The link between fascism and the ugly face of Hinduism unveiling themselves around us is the regimentation of thought and brutal repression of culture” (101). Our foremost challenge comes from those forces hell-bent on striking at the root of our efforts to survive and emerge as a modern nation state.

Meena belongs to the newer politically aware generation: “don’t get batteries made by those murderers, union carbide” (95). When crises befall on Shiv she itches for a fight: “What’s the plan of action? How do we beat your fundos at their game? (97). It is Meena who gives Shiva crash course on how to live and not give up laughter. She is portrayed as girl matriarch. She goes about proposing leaflets, posters, arranging a broad front rally in a bid to rescue Shiv. She does not flinch at the prospect of violence. Her brief history is the history of doing” (III). She drums up support for Shiv, they put up a sea of placards: “Stop Talibanization of India” to History Destroyed! To who’s Afraid of the Manch?” (145).

There are attacks and counter attacks. The Manch is vociferous in their condemnation and assertion of their own ‘truths’: “the truth is that minorities will be safe in India only if they share our vision of our country and culture” (118). These nativists as Said points out imagine a world without any “warring essences” (277) and such a world is only a figment of imagination

because in reality no such pristine and uncontaminated world exists today.

Further such nativism leads to universalism whose upshot is the belief that “all people have only one identity...that Irish are only Irish, Indians, Africans and so on nauseam” (279). These fundamentalist target liberal minded people like Shiv and they are derogatorily referred to as: “These foreign lovers, nationals of our land. We will accept only people whose loyalty to our tradition and our heroes down the centuries are undivided and unadulterated”(133). In the text, the erudite old historian Amir Quereishi expresses his views that counter this ideology of the Manch: “Identities are never permanent. This obsession with identity uses the past to legitimize the political requirements of the present” (132).

After Deconstruction, we are told, the center cannot hold. All totalizing nations of identity (imperial, colonial, and national) are to be submitted to rigorous scrutiny in the name of an irreducible play difference (Derrida 280). To the extent we can speak here of a political community as it is one which “Always remain in statue nascendi or moriendi, always keeping open the issue of whether or not it actually exists” (Lyotard 39). It is in other words, a community where identity is part of a permanent process of narrative retelling, where each citizen is in a state of dependency of others. Any concept that fixes identifies stabilizes meaning or resolves the nature of society is improper and politically dangerous (Laclau, 85).

A cast like one on Meena’s leg is being wrapped around Shiv, a cast that immobilizes him completely (88). Shiv had taken for granted as part of his inheritance the values, which his freedom fighter father fought for all his life. He suddenly finds these values to be reclaimed in his incipient middle age truth, freedom, secularism, debate and the right to know. In times when paranoia lives in the same air everyone must breathe, it is difficult to say who is ‘going soft’ and who is simply a man who dislikes trouble (67). This situation is comparable to Eugene Ionesco’s play *Rhinoceros* (1962) where the hero Berenger is caught up in a world in which everyone is changing into a rhinoceros. By the end of the play he is the only human being left. This can be seen as an allegory a mass hysteria with occasional specific reference to the rise of the Nazi’s. In times like these when fair is foul and foul is fair, it is not easy to bare the truth: it needs a lot of courage.

Shiv caught up in a strange predicament feels that ‘he is in a play, a miscast’ (143). He longs to go back to being a simple teacher. He loses count of interviews, meetings, telephone calls, and hate mails. He feels like a “body in a lawless country, a body that has somewhat unlearned the laws of gravity’ (131). His books, rooms are stripped naked it becomes a sullied place, no longer his place of refuge (130). Shiv asks his confounded self: “What makes a fanatic? A fundamentalist? What makes communities that have lived together for years suddenly discover a hatred for each other” (129).

And he tries to discover what Basava would have done in his situation. Shiv has no answers to the absurd state of affairs he is caught in. Shiv's room is in shambles the legacy of the vandals. His room joins its grand monumental ancestors. Basava links 1168 and 2000. The distance between imaginary lands of literature and the prosaic city of history has shrunk. Hariharan also tells the Basava's story well. It is a poetic evocation drawing from A.K.Ramanujan's translations of the hymns to the "Lords of the meeting rivers", the story of 'a saint who cared enough for the world he lived in and want to change it, the message of the iconoclast of the 12th century saint poet Basava, whose life and works Shiv had made his own. Basava, a man of his times but also a man whose questions remain relevant 800 years later. He helped to create a new community, a new ethos that provoked people to dare experiment" (104). His father's words resonate in his mind: "You must mine the truth. If you settle for safety, if you choose to go along with whatever makes your life comfortable, truth will escape you completely (82).

Booklets containing the module are sent for review to an expert committee, Shiv is asked to co-operate to bring the unfortunate controversy to an end. The Manch has three demands, first apology for hurting their sentiments, separate apologies from Shiv, Department and by extension the University. Secondly the lesson should be retracted. Thirdly, the rewritten lesson should be submitted to the Manch (69). The Head tries to make Shiv relent. 'We are middle aged professors not stuntmen' (70). However Shiv refuses to apologize and resolves to stand firmly for the values he cherishes and the values he has inherited from his father.

The world, which collapses so abruptly around Shiv, is the world we see coming apart in India today. The polarization is total, and the divide absolute. To be a liberal is asking for trouble, to try and teach the values of liberalization might cost you your life as Shiv learns. This work is a progressive criticism of communal fascist forces. It is prophetic work, which envisages and predicts our present day's violation of human rights under various pretensions, which has virtually taken the whole world under siege and turned it into a heart of darkness. We need to evolve a more generous and pluralistic vision of the world, a world where people of different origins, nationality and background do not clash with and denounce and denigrate each other, but live in perfect harmony and amity: The text implicitly concludes that basic human rights must be protected not only for the sake of the individuals and countries involved but to preserve the human race.

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