
**PERILS OF BESIEGEMENT: A STUDY OF SOCIAL AWAKENING IN GITHA HARIHARAN'S IN
TIMES OF SIEGE**

M. ILAYA KANMANI NANMOZHI, DR. SURESH FREDERICK

Abstract: Githa Hariharan, the winner of Commonwealth Writers' prize in 1993 is one of the leading novelists of the post-modern Indian Literature in English. She uses her novel *In Times of Siege* as an awakening source of social consciousness. She enables the readers to be aware of the problems, difficulties and hardships that a society faces on a day-to-day basis. She suggests powerful methods of approach to the problems not only through her writings but also her deeds. This is a study of social awakening in Githa Hariharan's *In Times Of Siege*

Keywords: Githa Hariharan, Indian Writing in English, social awakening, social consciousness.

Introduction: Human beings often prove themselves as social animals as they have been socially retarded in terms of treating each other humanely ever since entering the power hierarchy. They with their separate beliefs and identities compete with each other for supremacy. To live with each other in a more viable sustainable way a shift in their thinking is essential. All revolutions begin with the transformation of consciousness. As long as rapid change remains part of the human landscape more open minded believing is needed. It involves seeing with more awareness which can lead everyone to be better without negating aspects of being human that are connected to being individuals in relationships. Only with his or her potent knowledge of the world, in general, and awareness of the self in particular human could challenge the miseries and overcome the problems in the society since his or her affairs are regulated not only by himself or herself, but also by the social standards, by the collective reason or mind as the individual is a link in the chain of the generations. This paper which focuses solely on those aspects related to increased awareness, attempts to analyse how the novelist, Githa Hariharan, alerts the people by creating an awareness among them about the dangers of - besieged space to speak and write, homogenized version of everything, threats to the survival of plurality and co-existence - and most important of all, the danger of silence in *In Times Of Siege*.

Githa Hariharan, the winner of Commonwealth Writers Prize in 1993 is one of the leading novelists of the post-modern Indian literature in English. She uses her novel, *In Times of Siege*, as an awakening source of social consciousness. She enables the readers to be aware of the problems, difficulties and hardships that a society faces on a day-to-day basis. She suggests powerful methods of approach to the problems not only through her writings but also her deeds. When she approached the Reserve Bank of India to open an account for her eleven year old son the bank informed that a mother has a right of guardianship over her children only when the father is dead or she is a divorcee. She was shocked to observe that the mother not being natural guardian of her children to whom she has given birth especially in a society in which the mother is highly esteemed. She

challenged the law by filing a case along with her husband and prompted the Supreme Court to make an amendment in the Law declaring the mother to be the natural guardian of her child. Thus, she paved the way to change society's laws and structures to solve the problem for the majority as an awakened individual.

The attack on the mosque at Ayodhya and its traumatic events led to rash of violence across the country and clearly exposed the chasm that had been created between the two communities by communal forces. Moreover, the burning of coaches of the Sabarmati Express at Godhra that was carrying Hindu pilgrims returning from Ayodhya resulting in the most devastating riots in Gujarat where mobs went on a rampage, destroying Muslim homes and businesses, expressed a systematic attack against various expressions of religious and cultural plurality and in which the human rights of the innocent victims are under threat. On apprehending the approach of an apocalyptic social climate with the rise of the fundamentalists and fanatics in nation's spurious politics who take religion to be ultra - patriotic, Githa Hariharan has been earnest to awaken everyone to understand the necessity of realizing the futility of violence.

The contemporary world encounters the threat to even the basic human rights as "the globalization imposes merging universalism, the cultural nationalism imposes monolithic, homogenized version of what is Indian", comments Githa Hariharan in an interview. She showcases the present socio-cultural content of India in the novel *In Times of Siege* (2003). The novel is believed to arise as a response to social injustice experienced by the individual. In the novel, Shiv Murthy, an epitome of bland middle class, is a professor of history in an open university located in Delhi. His sedate and peaceful life revolves around the lesson modules he prepares for B.A History students of distance education mode, his routine meetings in the department, his occasional furtive and desultory affairs with colleague AmitaSen. In to this world comes Meena, the student ward of Murthy. Since she has broken her leg she is taken to Murthy's household and is temporarily ensconced there in the absence of Rekha, Shiv's wife.

Murthy's world succumbs to a full blown quake and this

fumbling middle aged academic is confronted with fearsome forces of fanaticism when an innocuous course module he has written about Basavanna, the Cannadian medieval poet, triggers a battle of ideas on nationalism and its relationship to history. The attack comes from an obscure but menacing "Itihas Suraksha Manch", a Hindu committee to protect history. It accuses Shiv of distorting history and historical figures pointing out that his course module has not made "the heroes heroic enough, and he has made the villains too villainous and has not sung enough of a paean to the glory of Hindu kingdoms"(ITOS 55). The leader of the Itihas Suraksha Manch describes the lesson on Basavanna as 'part of a deep-rooted conspiracy' to defame Hindu saints in particular and Hindu history and culture in general. He says that fifty years after Independence, they could not have Indian historians brainwashed by foreign theories and methods depriving them of their pride in Hindu temples and priests and great Hindu past.

There is a call from the fundamentalist group to the people to 'revive Hindu courage': "We have to shed the cowardice that has grown in us with Muslims, then Europeans storming Indian shores. Though Hindus were among the bravest of the ancient peoples, repeated outside conquests have made them cowards.... We must return to our old militant spirit if the Hindu nation is to become great again (ITO 90). Since proponents of the authoritarian world views and moralities try to return to the past or preserve the status quo by sacrificing tradition and they cannot cope with or adequately compete in the modern reality. There is an attack of words on Shiv almost on all days in a new form. The newspapers supporting these fundamentalists flash the front page news as "who will teach the teacher?" and there is a call to protest against the professor's distortion of history. The pressure of fundamentalists is from all directions as threatening phone calls from the unknown, front page flash news in newspapers and magazines, provocative statements from the manch leaders, call for revival of Hindu courage in notices, enquiry meeting with the higher authorities in the university, confronting fists, threats, physical dangers in many forms make Shiv feel that his eloquent thoughts about the complexities of history have been drying up and his ordinary life has been besieged. He struggles to make sense of the raging political turmoil. Thus, the novel unfolds the story of ordinary lives besieged, of men and women struggling to make sense of hatred, ignorance, love and loyalty.

Shiv's room in the University has been ransacked by the agents of fundamentalist group. Thought-policing touts of the Itihas Suraksha Manch and the devastating condition of his University room have forced Shiv to 'see'. Tradition and history are important, not as a vice to squeeze the present into, but rather as stepping stones to grow from. In his attempt to mining the truth Shiv looks back into the life of Basava and examines the heritage chapters of the Virashaiva movement of the 12th century in Kalyan city of Karnataka, the 16th century sacking of the Vijayanagara empire, the

Freedom Struggle Movement of the 20th century and the current rise of the 'fundooos' i.e., fundamentalists of the 21st century to arrive at some understanding of his legacy when he meets with crisis. Shri Basavanna (1105-1167), was a statesman by profession, a humanist by sympathy and a social reformer by conviction. He made popular the school of Veera Shaivism which consisted of all the members of the society insisting on the equality among human kind, and condemned all barriers of caste, creed and sex. There was an upsurge of political chaos and non-violence when a Brahmin and a Sudra of that school married. Then, he left for Sangama and shortly thereafter died at the age of 62 under mysterious circumstances. Ironically, in the centuries, following these days of reform, Veera shaivism gradually reabsorbed much of what Basavanna had rejected -- caste hierarchy, social inequality and the soul stifling practice of untouchability forming the base for fundamentalism.

The zealots of Basava unfolds the haze of legend that it was Lord Siva who sent his bull to earth in the incarnation of Basava to save people on earth. The numerous contradictory accounts of Basava's life makes Shiv analyze which is really history and which is myth and which "slivers of myth will cast light, and insight, on dull historical fragments" (ITOS 87). In that attempt, he tries to segregate both history and myth, to see who is who and to understand the composite reality. He realizes the importance of his indispensable investigation which in turn would induce him to delve deep into the mysterious death of Basava as well as his father and the causes for the upsurge of fundamentalism in current India.

Shiv recalls the life of his own father, who was a freedom fighter and for whom the freedom movement did not end in 1947. In fact, the burdens of the new world, the travails of a free India sat heavy on his shoulders. He was the bravest man but still he could not keep it up and had finally broken down. He went to Indore for a meeting of Congress workers but he never returned home. Shiv finds himself and his father, who has been his quiet, but critical listener, bound together through remembrance. His father's end also remains mysterious like the end of Basava. His personal visit to Hampi, a fortress capital city of the Vijayanagar Empire in medieval India which has been an epitome of Hindu might exhibit to him grandeur coupled with a single minded quest for power and imperial glory intimidated with the landscape of the battlefield.

Being house bound, Shiv, a full-time fugitive for whom his own home feels like an exile could very well understand the position and feelings of both the father and Basava. From their histories, Shiv himself imagines and reconstructs the last day of both of them. He assumes that standing at the river, with his fed-up mind, Basava could have constantly watched the movement of the two rivers flowing down their separate courses, then meeting, parting...till they come to a point of union, a union deep enough for them to emerge flowing as a

composite third river. Shiv could imagine Basava thinking as “that cross currents can co-exist and that rapids and the most placid of waters are fellow travellers” (ITOS 107). He seeks the clues he so desperately needs, picks up those fabled lessons of history so that the same mistakes are not made again. Humanity’s evolutionary advantage is the ability to learn from the past. Githa Hariharan deconstructs the past to reconstruct a more meaningful present by building up alternative worlds of private power. She makes Shiv perceive parallels and contrasts of the twelfth century and the current situation. Shiv compares his own march and their clamorous claims to Basava’s legacy though they are ignorant of him and his times, with Basava’s march which stands for everything Basava fought against until his last breath. He is astonished to see the parallels between his (Basava’s) time and the present and could very well understand the position of Basava and his followers who “Just as Shiv’s history march has taken apart his world and has challenged him to put the pieces together again” (ITOS 161) could have tortured Basava. He detects that terror and bloodshed in the two settings overlap and human suffering does not change that much, with time and circumstance.

Shiv is in dilemma of what to do when the fundamentalist group compels him to resign and the higher authorities question his ambiguous statements. At times, he feels as though he is inside a dark forest and at some times he feels that he has to dazzle the Head and the dean into submission with Basava’s courage and passion. The other man in him argues that he is just a gentle academician and not “some rabble-rousing activist. He is a professor, after all, not a two-inch newspaper-column hero”. However, Basava’s man persuades him saying: “Why pretend you are a professor if you can’t stand up to someone telling you what to think? How to think?” (ITOS 64) At last, he musters courage from the words of Basava and his father and starts his analysis which paves the way for his progressive understanding of the truth.

Shiv summons Basava’s words for courage: “Cripple me, father that I may not go here and there. Blind me, father that may not look at this and that deafen me, father, that I may not hear anything else” (ITOS 156). He remembers the words of his father: “If you want to get hold of something and learn all about it, know it, it doesn’t matter whether that something is in the past or the present. All that matters is that you are free thinking. That you have a moral courage” (ITOS 40). His father advises him that mining the truth is more important than leading a comfortable life. A world of spiralling change demands feedback oriented instead of tradition –dictated solutions. In these dangerous life and species threatening times it is necessary for all beliefs to be subject to honest re-examination. He has encouraged Shiv to study history in order to know the past with all its riches and terrors. Being inspired by both Basavanna and his father Shiv tries to find answers to the questions of “What makes a fanatic? A

fundamentalist? What makes communities that have lived together for years suddenly discover a latent hatred for each other?” (ITOS 129) “If this can happen to an ordinary, cautious man like me, what about you ideology wallas? (ITOS 137).

Shiv observes the withering history. Though no history book tells in detail what exactly happened to Basava’s Hall of Experience, Shiv could better perceive the plunder through the recent examples of vandalism-desecrated, burnt or broken down mosques and churches in the latest decade and more personally his own ransacked room at the university. The present experience helps him to understand the past. The entire baffling scenario amidst the crowd confounds Shiv: “His supporters, grateful as he is to them, unsettle him. The others, the fanatical revisionists, terrify him, bewilder him. What has happened to history, the history his uncle thought was a dull, safe choice of subject? It has become a live, fiery thing, as capable of explosion as a time bomb” (ITOS 134). However, Shiv feels sad about the fact that it is not the dissident leader who is the critical link but the hate mongers. In this analysis of history he comes to the conclusion that people have fear of history, “A fear that our history will force people to see that our past, like our present, has always had critics of social divisions that masquerade as religion and tradition. So, these frightened people whitewash historical figures, they seize history and restructure notions (ITOS 97).

Different analysis of the situation flickers within him, a moment of discovery that the external helps of his father and Meena and his friends and even Rekha are superfluous and he alone has to decide whether to resist or give up. There is an interwoven tension between individual freedom and group cohesion that cannot be ignored in any solution that addresses the problems we face. Though he is a reluctant one, finally he decides to act courageously, not to give in but to continue to teach, to read, and write as he thinks right despite government or mob censorship. He develops the toughness to disagree with them. Shiv could extend his leave, resign then slip out of sight. Yet, he takes a stand realizing the truth in the statement of Basava “throw away the mind and the heart rusting from disuse.” When the dean frowns at him, Shiv says clearly, “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” (ITOS 70).

Conclusion:When the Head of the Department, Dr.Sharma, questions Shiv’s controversial involvement in debates, he replies boldly that he can hardly pretend that the chaos in Kalyana was not the result of a movement for social change saying: “I realize you are concerned about damage control and I share this concern.... But I don’t believe the problem is historical method” (ITOS 71). Thus, he actively resists power and authority. The focus of discontent and action is over the right to be visible, to have choice, or to be self-

determining. Shiv is made to look at, see, understand, and at last act on what he has learnt, which really matters. He is ready to maintain a sense of peace and balance in their lives but at the same time, not to compromise on his values and an intrusion into his personal lives and space. Thus, Githa Hariharan projects Shiv's increasing positive self-image and makes him

capable of overcoming stigma by his discreet thinking which on the whole highlights his awakened consciousness of both self and society that leaves him with respect as finally he proves to be a good steward of the life, liberties, possibilities and opportunities, prevailing over immense challenges.

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Assistant Professor of English, University College of Engineering,
Anna University, Pattukkottaikanmaniilaya@yahoo.com
Associate Professor & UG Head, Department of English,
Bishop Heber College, Tiruchirappalli
sfheber@gmail.com