

SHIFTING SHADOWS IN GITHA HARIHARAN'S IN TIMES OF SIEGE

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Abstract

This research paper explores the theme of identity crisis in Githa Hariharan's novel "In Times of Siege." The novel, set against the backdrop of political and social unrest in India, delves into the multifaceted dimensions of identity and the challenges faced by individuals in defining themselves amidst conflicting cultural, political, and personal forces. Through an analysis of characters and narrative elements, this paper aims to unravel the complexities of identity and its crisis as portrayed in the novel.

Key Words : *identity , multifaceted, political, crisis*

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Githa Hariharan's 'InTimes of Siege' is the first book of hers to appear on a major U.S. publishing house (Vintage). Hariharan's stories are complete with recounting of different sorts of disparities and power struggles. They all in some ways or the other emphasize the individual's assertion of an identity. In Times of Siege is structured around the ethnic identity of the individual in connection to the larger aspect of his identity the novel unfolds numerous layers of human psyche as an individual along ethnic and nationalistic dimensions. In Times of Siege deals with the problems that the common man faces. Fundamentalist or the 'fundoos' (TOS 57) try to quell the voice of people who are scholarly and proficient for the purpose of cheap publicity. In this novel it is Shiv Murthy who experiences identity crisis. Hariharan tries to depict Shiv Murthy's resistance and invokes the readers to reach a sensible conclusion.

Shiv Murthy is a middle-aged professor of history at Kasturba Gandhi University an Open University in New Delhi. He coordinates resource for his educational clients. He is a respectable man, a good husband and father. His wife Rekha is in Seattle (U.S.A) visiting their daughter Tara. Meena his ward, whom he barely knows, is the daughter of his childhood neighbor Sumathi. Shiv gets a phone call from his ward Meena's friend, who is studying in Kamala Nehru University, to inform him that Meena is lying in the hostel with a broken leg. He has been asked to pick Meena from hostel so that she can recover. Meena, a sociology student, writes a thesis on women affected by the anti-Sikh riots after Indira Gandhi's assassination in 1984.

As a historian of medieval India, Shiv leads a quiet life at the university department, attending meetings, writing articles and class outlines. He is a peaceful man but suddenly his life gets brimming with confusion. There is a storm in his life. In a text book of B.A. History, he writes a lesson on a twelfth century poet and reformer named Basava. A controversy is created over the positive depiction of a 12th century social reformer and mystic poet Basava, who was exiled by a powerful king for his anti-brahmanical Hinduism. A fundamentalist group Ithihaas Suraksha Manch [History Protection Forum] or a "Hindu watch-dog group" (TOS 53) claims that the lesson distorts history, Shiv is charged for deliberately exaggerating "the problem of caste and written in a very biased way about Brahmins and temple priests" (TOS 54). The Ithihas Suraksha Manch tries to deploy administrative and political pressures on the professor to change his history text book.

Shiv has another part of his personality. Initially he is a passive escapist but, he somehow picks up courage and makes some tough decisions. He wants to rebel against the infringement upon his academic pursuits and hates the dead-end pressure from the munchies. He does not resort to physical violence. Hariharat has strikingly depicted the difficulty of a true academic who is being blackmailed by the rightists.

Shiv becomes a victim of circumstances and has to make some extremely difficult decisions. His lessons on "Basavanna's movement for social reform has been leaked somehow to the press" (TOS 53). He learns the astringent lesson that however he has genuinely written a lesson, he, instead of being appreciated, has been informed that "... the lesson has hurt the sentiments of a Hindu watch-dog group" (TOS 53). He has been accused of distorting history and historical figures. Shiv is shocked when the Head of the History Department Mr. Sharma becomes dejected with the dreadful turn of events: "you know our policy is to steer clear of controversy". (TOS 53).

Shiv cannot believe his ears when he is told that he has to go on leave because of the controversy. The Head says that he does not want to enter into any kind of controversy since he is year short of retirement, "wants his last years unsullied by controversy" (TOS 69). He is tormented when the head tells him that he will have to render an apology and let the Dean decide to republish the lesson. The fundamentalist tells the university administration that Shiv ought to render in an apology and withdraw the lesson from the course. "The fundamentalist himself is the biggest threat to the spirit of the religion he claims to protect (Tiwari 67). He is in a dilemma whether he should stand up for his writings or yield to religious tolerance and render an apology much against his wishes. His instinct is to apologize, but the voice inside his head keeps asking "Do you imagine an ordinary man cannot be a hero?" (TOS 64). The question he asks will incite the readers to ask themselves the same question.

Shiv wavers between the memory of his father and Basava. Shiv's father who was a freedom fighter did not return after the congress workers meeting in Indore. He feels akin to them in the sense that like him they also faced so many accusations in their times. Basavanna, a saint of the medieval age, was a revolutionary who overhauled the caste system and overthrew it during the reign of Kalyana. He was an extra-ordinary man with a great vision.

Basava and many of his supporters took on the caste system, "the iron net that held society so firmly in place" (TOS 61). Thousands of these ordinary men and women took part in the 'egalitarian dream' (TOS 61). The dream spread and took hold of people. The people became a movement, a wave that threatened to swallow social conventions, religious ritual and staple the diet of tradition.

The wave peaked when the proposed marriage between a Brahman and a bridegroom of cobbler prompt posed between edas tratalyst (TOS61) for violent clashes beted distres.

This maneasava, called the veershaivas, and the adherents of the conservative position. Hanhanan writes "egalitarian ideas are bad enough, but a cobbler and Brahmin in the same bed? As well bomb kalyana and its vigorous trade, its prosperous temple and place out of existence!" (TOS 62) Basava himself "died under mysterious circumstances" (TOS 62), possibly committing suicide. Basava's dreams broke up a long time ago; it no longer stands.

As Dr. J. Ravindranath in an article says "Shiv is neither an Achilles nor a Don Quixote but a man of contemplation. He vacillates between the ideals of his father's generation that preferred values to comfort and the present generation that seeks comfort more than conflict (1). Shiv sways between the memory of his dead father and Basava and derives inspiration from them. For Shiv, his father is a source of inspiration and additionally symbolizes a loss of hope. Despite the fact that the riddle of his vanishing is never clarified, it seems likely that he deliberately strolled far from his familial obligations and maybe even committed suicide. Hariharan makes it clear that for Shiv, his father and Basava merge into one another, "both idealists and dreamers, who fought for a radical re-alignment of their respective societies, but whose ends are shrouded in mystery" (TOS 107).

Meena though laid up in bed with her leg encased in a cast. She is far from being powerless. She has dauntless spirit and is not mired by the constricting conditions. Meena puts up a huge poster in her room by Reverend Martin Niemoller, the German pastor who was a victim of the Nazi concentration camps, in screaming red: "Speak Up! Before It's Too Late" (TOS 27) this poster speaks volume. Shiv tells Meena regarding the protest against him is "not made the heroes heroic enough" and "made the villains too villainous" (TOS 55). Hariharan has attempted to depict effectively the rigidity that weaves the political life.

Meena knows an activist called Amar and tells Shiv that he is a dedicated member of several citizens' groups. She is portrayed as a "girl matriarch" (TOS 110). She goes about proposing pamphlets, posters and rally to safeguard Shiv. Shiv's passive resistance is felt by Meena. Shiv wants to avoid a confrontation but Meena tells him that he will have to meet everyone. She eggs him on to confront Arya. Arya one of the fundamentalist bigots has a blind child and showers all his tenderness upon him but at the same time he abuses Shiv at a departmental meeting and throws allegations at him that he has criticized Hindu sentiments. The passive resistance of Shiv is felt by Meena, who tells him "I know your wimpy head is avoiding you but what about the rest of them? Can they be persuaded to take a stand-come out and say something against the Manch and the head what's his name? The department fundoo?" (TOS 119) The young people such as Meena and Amar who seems to be confident and innocent teach him the nature of life.

Meena is "Shiv's young mentor, an unlikely reincarnation of his father" (TOS 168). Shiv is so passive in his resistance. His resistance is not easy as he has to face the opposition and even his own daughter contradicts with him. She is humiliated by her father's sudden

reactive behaviour. Shiv has suddenly developed the guts. He all of a sudden gets valiant because of Meena and his sudden Tearless conduct is unbelievable. She stands by Shiv and helps him to develop the moral courage to plan things gradually and she tells him not to revert back from lush ideologies, Hariharan is against intolerance in any form and tends to favour resistance in a passive manner. She has depicted Meena as her mouth piece and she in her own particular way has had the capacity to motivate Shiv to expose with incredible zeal. Using Meena, Hariharan in an interview with Luan Gaines says:

I think a writer would finally want each character to speak for her yes; Meena is representative of a particular kind of young person- not the yuppie sort, but the kind passionately engaged in the world she lives in and wanting to change all the inequities it breeds, tolerates and promotes.

Shiv's sudden transformation is unbelievable, His Dean and Head of the department cannot believe their eyes when they see this new Shiv. They are stunned and astonished to see Shiv oppose which is quite unlike his typical method for responding. The Dean is more tolerant and provides for him time to think things over as he feels Shiv may change his decision at some point of time. However Shiv declines to apologize and determines to stand firmly for the values he cherishes and the qualities he has inherited from his father: "His own little trouble has not been resolved, but he has taken a stand of resistance" (TOS 198). Githa Hariharan in her interview to Luan Gaines writes "Shiv, like most "heroes" of our times, is a reluctant one, His act of courage, finally, is simply not to give in, to continue to teach to read and write as he thinks right despite government or mob censorship. It sounds mock-heroic almost, but from our own experience, we know it's not all that easy to do. "Hariharan is interested in fleshing out the transformation with one person, in tracing the process by which Shiv comes to take a stand of resistance" (TOS 198). Shiv opposes injustice and confronts all kinds of abuse dauntlessly. Thus his heroic actions leave a newly empowered Shiv to fight his own battles.

Crisis is the period of time that warrants immediate action because it is the period of threat or instability: Crisis can emerge due to one's faults, lack of attention of unforeseen circumstances. It can be in any area like economic crisis, political crisis or even a family crisis. Presence of mind and timely execution of a good plan are the keys to get out of crisis. A Chinese proverb goes thus, "a crisis is an opportunity riding the dangerous wind". But crisis is welcomed by some people because it offers a different sort of experience and this would help later on to come over other similar crises. Thus Githa Hariharan deals with human issues and problems which are of high concern. Her works, therefore, makes an outstanding contribution to Indian literature in English.

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