

# Existential Quandary: Struggle for Power and Space in Githa Hariharan's *In Times of Siege*

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India is known and appreciated for its mosaic culture. The diverse cultural patterns of the land are decided by different religions, castes, classes and creed which divide the people of India into various strata. There is constantly a cultural pull, a power-play among the people of these diverse groups for their existence and in this power-play the affluent people try to occupy the centre thereby driving the weak to the periphery. This centre-margin paradigm is one of the characteristics of Postcolonial Literature which faithfully reflects hegemony and suppression co-existing in the society. The minorities are marginalized in all respects and socially committed writers give their voice against this through their literary works. Thus emerged the Subaltern Literature, which addressed the sufferings of the minority as the part of their struggle. Githa Hariharan, being a Post-colonial writer, addresses this conflict that prevails in the Indian society in her critically acclaimed novel *In Times of Siege*.

Githa Hariharan is quite aware of these discriminating pulls of the country which hinder the progress and growth of a developing country like India, and registers them faithfully in her fictional narratives. She also highlights commendably how such discriminations have a strong cultural endorsement and she gives her voice against these discriminations. She seems to believe in the words of Gramsci who opined that "Through the existence of small and different circumstances, a larger and layered hegemony is maintained, yet not fully recognized by many of the people who live within it" (qtd. in Jamuna 123).

The author of *In Times of Siege* accentuates how Indian culture promotes the power-play and there exist always the two extreme sides – the weak and the powerful occupying the periphery and centre respectively. She utilizes the History of Arabs, to bear out the verity that weak in any respect is distorted and destroyed by the powerful in the society and the "political power can be claimed by anyone who can wield the sword that goes against the legality of inheritance to the throne. It also encourages intrigues, plots, rebellions, and assassinations of father by son, brother by brother, rulers by military commander or minister, and above all, master by servant, nay even by slave" (118).

Hariharan lists out in her novel *In Times of Siege* several factors that bring about discrimination in the society. She unveils how cultural institutions like the *Ithihas Suraksha Manch* exploit the religious beliefs of the common people and establish hegemony. Such cultural institutions pounce on the weak and try to mop them out if they dare to question them or their beliefs. Hariharan implicates this through *In Times of Siege*. The protagonist Shiv Murthy's history lesson invites

agitation from the cultural group who calls themselves as *Itihas Suraksha Manch* meaning protectors of history. They assail him for undermining Hinduism and reducing its saints to ordinary men and accuse him by calling him a traitor who is loyal to Pakistan and Muslims. It also threatens to harm his wife and daughter who are far away. The letters they have sent proclaim the hegemonic and violent attitude of the members of the Manch, who await the opportunity to marginalize weak persons like Shiv. He feels himself highly vulnerable and tries to take reprieve from this agonizing and dominating world to live temporarily in the calm and comforting world of the children Babli and Meena. However, he realizes that he cannot linger there for long. Hariharan writes how petrifying the outside world is: “His brief hour of reprieve, the comforting calm before the storm, spent in secret garden of wise children. Then it all begins again. The world outside the small room stirs, raises its hood” (84).

Hariharan also uses this opportunity to strip the selfishness of these people who occupy the centre of the society. They, especially the president of the *Itihas Suraksha Manch*, utilize this chance to earn fame. The president also sows the seeds of violence in the society to oppress the weak and the marginalized. He tries to wake up the Hindus in the name of revival and thus paves way for agitation. Through this incident Hariharan attempts to drive home the truth that in a multicultural country like India such agitations in the name of religion can lead to chaos. She repeatedly takes effort to uphold her view that man is always interested to prey upon his weaker counterpart and the conflict between centre and margin is a common social and cultural phenomenon in the Indian society. While the protagonist Shiv presents himself for panel discussions on his history lesson, he encounters another panelist whom Shiv calls as “big wig”. He looks at Shiv very avidly like “a hawk waiting to swoop down on a delectable mouse” (116). Arya, the colleague of Shiv also gloats over the misfortune of Shiv. His “face looks bloated as if he has been feasting on Shiv’s misery.... No wonder Arya was an unexpected accomplice; he wanted the meeting so he could gloat in public over the Manch’s new victim” (125).

People who consider themselves superior and hence in the centre revel over all they do. They take pride even in the language they speak. Fraudley is one such creation of Hariharan who states that his language Sanskrit is a divine language. He calls it “not a dead or elitist language. It is the symbol of cultural unity, and the ancient wisdom that helps us read horoscopes. Besides, computer scientists agree that Sanskrit is the ideal language for software” (133). Thus people at the centre strive to establish hegemony in all that they do and possess and thus ensure the maintenance of the centre-margin paradigm.

Further, Hariharan enunciates how the economic condition decides the status and locus of a person. Economically affluent people wait only for an opportunity to wield their power and are the least bothered about the weak whose life they rout in order to establish their hegemony. They can easily afford to get the economically poor to accomplish their wish. The agitators who come to destroy Shiv’s room and its belongings know nothing about what they are up to. They are men hired

by Arya, Shiv's colleague and through Shiv the author articulates how aggressive these hired agitators are. She enumerates their atrocious deeds thus: "the tables and chairs and book shelves are broken, the wall defaced. There are torn books everywhere, cupboard and files open-minded and shambled" and they ultimately have made the history professor "a full-time fugitive" (131) just because he wrote the truth. The irony is that "it's the easiest thing in the world to hire protesters. All it takes is the price of meal. Hungry touts are unlikely to ask what they are protesting against. They are also unlikely to shy away from violence" (129). The author calls them "blood-thirsty munchies - will break and devour everything" (135). Their concern is not to uphold their country's culture and tradition and "It's got nothing to do with history - They're just goondas looking for publicity" (134).

The agitators, besides indulging themselves in violence also contribute considerably to bring about segregation in the multi-religious community. They kindle the religious feeling in order to bring chaos in the society. Very cunning questions are put forth by them like:

If the Muslims can have their fundamentalists why can't we? Have we 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 (135).

These impinge on considerably the social harmony of a multicultural and religious country like India where everyone aspires to achieve ascendancy. Such an attitude as Hariharan aptly insinuates "has to be viewed as part of a larger process to deny the composite nature of Indian culture" (169). Such depiction fingers at the unhealthy state of India where there is little hope that exist for the weak and marginalized.

Religion is an equally delicate issue that can instill discrimination in the minds of the highly vulnerable Indian society. The politicians like Atre stimulate a breach among the people of India in the name of religion. Though people like him assert themselves to be the protectors of history, they in truth kindle discrimination in the minds of the sensitive mass. Atre is successful in arousing the minds of his members with these highly provocative words: "Texts which over emphasize caste divisions and project the Hindu religion and Hindu culture in a poor light should not be allowed.... People feel free to revile Hinduism with impunity, but they do not dare criticize Islam, because then the swords would be cut" (99-100).

Hariharan promulgates that in a multicultural country like India revolt, takes place and much violence happens in the name of caste too. A historic lesson written by Shiv gets distorted and a lot of hue and cry occurs in "exaggerating the problem of caste" and accusing him with a false allegation that he has "written in a very biased way about the Brahmins and temple priests" (54). Here the author gives a realistic picture of the social and political set-up of India. The social group called *Ithihas Suraksha Manch* claims that "the lesson distorts History" (55) and Hariharan comments sarcastically through Shiv that "The group is called the *Ithihas Suraksha Manch*. The protection of history. Whoever heard of history having to be protected" (55). But the real motive of

the social group is expressed by Meena. “Protect? Says Meena with a knowing sneer. The minute they use the word you know they mean attack” (55). Actually these are the words of the narrator herself and her words give a spot on picture of the political and social state of India where people try to inflict segregation in the name of caste and religion and “whether people are talking about culture or history or women’s right, protection has become a much-abused word. A cover up for all kinds of bullying tactics” (55).

The novelist asserts that the problem of caste prevailed in India even in the 12<sup>th</sup> century through analyzing the history of Basava, the poet of that period. Basava along with his followers, “took on the caste system, the iron net that held society so firmly in place; that reduced the common man and woman to hopeless captives” (61). Hariharan exemplifies that caste division and discrimination are now a raging problem as in the past. Much of the atrocities are committed due to this social vice. Hariharan gives a historical account of the destruction of Kalyana which was the outcome of an inter-caste marriage between a Brahmin and a cobbler. The touchable society could never imagine “a cobbler and a Brahmin in the same bed?” As a result the “King Bijjala was pressured into” condemning the marriage. “He sentenced the fathers of the bride and bridegroom to a special death. Tied to horses, they were dragged through the streets of Kalyana; then what was left of them was beheaded” (62). The poet and social reformer protested against that inhuman practice.

This being history, the dedicated history professor presents it candidly in his course material. But it invites a plethora of agitations which helps the writer to highlight the political condition of India. She unfolds how for personal benefits, organizations like *Ithikas Suraksha Manch* create chaos in the country in the name of caste and accuse the historian like Shiv for his dedication as a teacher. Its leader Anant Tripathi accuses Shiv of polluting Indian history. He avers, “Fifty years after independence, we cannot have Indian historians brainwashed by foreign theories and methods depriving us of our pride in Hindu temples and priests” (76). He equals Shiv with Muslim invaders like Ghazni to Ghorie. He writes to commence another struggle in the name of religions. Tripathi also challenges those who try to demean Hindu pride and civilization saying that just like the foreign invaders they will not allow the “modern invaders pretending to be historians” (76) to attack the Hindu tradition and “way of life that have stood the test of time” (76). He also proclaims that their “history remains a way to show the world examples of our great Hindu past” (76).

The spirit of Tripathi spreads to other Manch members and one among them demeans Shiv by calling him a traitor who is loyal to Pakistan and Muslims. He attacks Shiv for undermining Hinduism and reducing its saints as ordinary man. It also threatens to harm his wife and daughter. Violent nature of the mob spreads fast and here Hariharan unveils the highly vulnerable state of the Indian society where meek and weak are marginalized like the protagonist Shiv. Hariharan utilizes this opportunity to rebuke the society and its people “who can’t hiccup without consulting caste rules don’t want it talked about in text books” (88).

The outburst of Shiv when asked about India's past gives the true picture of India which is split into different parts in the name of caste and religion in which the marginalized people suffer a lot. If anyone dares to propel the issue, his life is doomed. Shiv avers that this is due to "a 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 what do these frightened people do? They whitewash historical figures, they seize history ..." (97-98). The unhealthy historical perspective of an average Indian is thus striped naked here by the author.

Foreign invasions and century old subjugation and despotism have resulted in the violent outburst of the patriotic and religious feelings in the minds of the natives. These natives repeat the act of suppression and teach the same lesson of marginalization and repression to the weak. Hariharan uses Madhav Sadashiv, one of the Manch's members as a mouthpiece to drive home the Hindu's vehement quest to assert dominance over other minority group as a means of expressing their protest. She writes such people have the unquenchable thirst to establish Hinduism with its due respect:

Foreign races in Hindusthan must either adopt Hindu culture and language, learn to respect and hold in reverence the Hindu religion and must entertain no ideas but those of the glorification of the Hindu race and culture... or may stay in the country wholly subordinated to the Hindu nation. (100)

Amar, one of the characters who represent how a young citizen should think in a heterogeneous country like India, expresses his anger against the intolerance shown by the majority towards the minority. He enlists,

"Campaigns against Christians, the murder of Australian missionary Graham Staines and his two children", assault on a teacher, "The disruption of the shooting of a film on the plight of Hindu widow in Benares" and as Amar says "The list is endless" (100).

The educational system has become the constant butt of ridicule for Hariharan. Being an unbiased and socially committed teacher, she could not shut her eyes against this sacred institution that cultivates discrimination in the minds of youth, thereby paving way for this centre - margin conflict. In *In Times of Siege* which itself is a story of a professor, she voices out her protest against many of the social problems that takes root in the educational institutions. The unhealthy practice of awarding doctorate to undeserving persons is attacked by the novelist through her central character Shiv. He criticizes his colleague Arya who is unjustly awarded doctorate: "Shiv still doesn't know where the man got a doctorate from, or even if he has one in the first place" (17). He could get it just because he is politically affluent and hence in the centre. Hariharan also grouses the attitude of the teachers especially that of the historians that "many of them only edit what other historians write, the word historian- something of a touchstone, ..." (17-18) and if at all anyone shows the sincerity to present the truth like Shiv, they are mercilessly abused.

The author observes how the educated elite particularly the teachers who are expected to teach the society the need for equality, spit out venom and enjoy in discriminating people and afflicting them. Dr. Arya becomes the representative of one such teacher who very often talks about division and separation venomously and does not mind how it affects the marginalized people. Hariharan criticizes Arya for talking contemptuously about Muslims in the presence of Mrs. Khan, a Muslim secretary. She expresses that “Arya must remember this too, though each time he says the words ‘foreigner’ or ‘Muslim’ he spits them out like something sour in his mouth”(19). Such words do irredeemable harm to Mrs. Khan and she goes on casual leave from the next day. Shiv says that she needs the leave as she has to recover from the new status thrust on her – Muslim Mrs. Khan, Foreign Mrs. Khan”. She has blown to wind so many obstacles that come on her way for being born in a traditional Muslim family, the restriction imposed upon Muslim women in crossing their threshold, “to work in an office and make a modest contribution to the family income. Now she is being pushed back to square one, to the old diminishing religious identity” (20). Her suffering is so intense that she does not know if she would be able to “come back the same sweet, hopeful secretary” (20) after the leave.

The list of oppressors of the society is also enumerated by Hariharan through Meena, a representative of the younger generation who displays some guts in fighting against these oppressive agents. Her list of discriminators goes like this:

“Fundoo, fundamentalist. Fascist. Obscurantist. Terrorist. And the made in-India brand, the communalist - a deceptively innocuous - sounding name for professional other community haters”. (57)

Hariharan registers her protest against all sort of marginalizing forces and shows how they shatter the growth of a great country and split it into pieces. She fumes out “Now it is all specificities a chaos of small pictures. Only caste, or only gender or only environment. Next it will be a movement devoted just to the right to have an orgasm. All funding is for fragments of the big picture” (133). She hammers out the significance of the people occupying the periphery and their “‘little’ traditions that are critical of the mainstream tradition, have also contributed to the country’s social, cultural and political life” (170). Hariharan also cautions that when people at the centre, unmindful of the significance of the marginalized inflict subjugation, which is hard to bear on them, they, like Shiv will take a lead to march towards the centre, thereby contributing their own share in maintaining the power struggle.

Thus Hariharan in her novel *In Times of Siege* has attempted to pronounce the problems of the weak and the marginalized thereby highlighting the vital truth that this power struggle, this conflict between the centre and margin is an eternal social condition from which no society can escape and anyone can encounter a time of siege as part of their existence, like the protagonist of *In Times of Siege* in this highly vulnerable society.



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