

Feminist Elements In Githa Hariharan's *In Times Of Siege*

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Abstract

Contemporary women writers in Indian English Writing have made significant contributions to literature. Many writers have won international awards. Their writings no longer portray the stereotypical images of women as a submissive house wife, doting mother, village girl waiting for her prince or women revolting against women. Their writings deconstruct myth that degrades women. Githa Hariharan is one such writer whose discourse shows resistance and questions every aspect of social order. Her stories deal with inequalities, power struggles and women asserting their identity.

*Githa Hariharan has produced a body of Indian Literature that is committed to feminist and social issues. Githa Hariharan shows in this novel *In Times of Siege* how women are superior to men like Shiv. They are Meena and Shiv's wife Rekha. Rekha is another heroine of the modern age. She has gone abroad without any anxiety about her husband. She is fully capable of controlling the uncontrollable. When they moved to the house, it was a jungle. She is as brave a woman as Meena is. These women are born warriors. Meena waits for Shiva to give a befitting reply to the fundamentalist's attack on him for showing what Basava was a man bent upon bringing reform in society by granting equal status to the down trodden brethren of society. This bitter pill could not be swallowed by the so called Hindus. Their movement swelled and surged to swallow social convention and religious ritual. Such people came to attack Shiv, and like a courageous tigress Meena's waiting for Shiv to come so that she wants to give him her head full of plans. She thinks that he will pick up a spear and shield and rush headlong into battle. In this novel, Meena is developed as a feminist character that fights against communal forces.*

Keywords: *stereotypical, submissive, social convention, down trodden, identity*

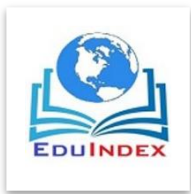
Feminist approach of Githa Hariharan is an important phenomenon prevailing in all her novels. Githa Hariharan is one of the leading women writers in India who has proclaimed philosophy of feminism in all her novels. Her progressive prototypes have been reflected directly or indirectly in her works. Das and Mahapatra have observed that, "There are several subtypes of feminist ideology have developed over the years." (Das Krishna 249)

Githa Hariharan does not present a feminine map to show-case woman's assertion over man's ability. She rather takes for granted that early feminists focused upon gender. The

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sexes, according to them are culturally formed, and not just biologically. The decade from 1920 to 1960 was a period of protest movements-civil rights, peace, the New Left, anti-poverty. For the theorists the new feminism is not about the elimination of differences between the neither sexes nor achievement of equal opportunity: it concerns the individual's rights to find out the kind of person he or she is and to strive to become that person. A theorist like Janet Rediffe Richards thinks that women suffer from systematic social injustice because of their sex.

Githa Hariharan's *In Times of Siege* describes communal events in New Delhi happened in 2000. Staff meeting, lesson modules, a half hearted little affair with a colleague is the blank but comfortable life of Shiv Murthy, a history teacher in an Open University. But disruption and change are on their way in his life. An outspoken young woman with a broken knee comes into his life and turns it upside down. During this time, Hindu zealots attack his writings on Basava, the reformer poet. When fundamentalism lands on his own doorstep, Shiv discovers that the ideas he had inherited about history, nations, and patriots change in the course of time. These bitter realities are evoked by Githa Hariharan in this novel. Moreover, Githa Hariharan's feminist ideas are indirectly reflected in this novel. Krishnan Das and Deepch and Patra have rightly pointed:

Female voices who have wielded the writer's pen to present forth literature which not only highlight women's plight in society, but have also enriched the field with brilliant narratives, styles, techniques and themes, enchanting generations of readers, and immortalizing their own agenda in penning their works. (Das Krishna 1)

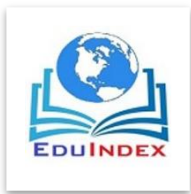
Githa Hariharan's novel is not exception to this phenomenon. The feminism in this novel is unique: Shiv, the hero of the novel, is seeking inspiration from Meena. Under her suggestions, Shiv is forced to confront the demands of his times and choose a direction for the future. But first he must come to terms with his own incomplete past history, fears and his obsession.

Feminist in the present day destroy masculinity hierarchy but not sexual dualism. It is pro-woman but not anti-man. In fact this is what Githa Hariharan is out to display in her novel *In Times of Siege*. Githa Hariharan shows in this novel how women are superior to men like Shiv. They are Meena and Shiv's wife Rekha. Meena waits for Shiva with her headfull of plans to give a befitting reply to the fundamentalist's attack on him for showing what Basava was a man bent upon bringing reform in society by granting equal status to the down trodden brethren of society. This bitter pill could not be swallowed by the so called Hindus because, it reduced the common man to hopeless captives. Their movement swelled and surged to swallow social convention and religious ritual. Such people came to attack Shiv, and like a

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courageous tigress Meena's waiting for Shiv to come so that she wants to give him her head full of plans. She thinks that he will pick up a spear and shield and rush headlong into battle.

The novel begins in a silent manner, totally unmindful of the conspiracy of silence. The quietness in the sedate life of Prof. Shiv and is very deceptive as it symbolizes the ill-omened calm before an intensified fury. In the beginning, Prof. Shiv's lonely and sedate life hits a new change when fish-eyed Meena, the daughter of Shiv's childhood friend Sumathi comes to stay with him in the absence of his wife Rekha who is away in Seattle (U.S.A) visiting her daughter Tara. Meena gets her knee broken in an accident while staying at the hostel in Kamala Nehru University where she is studying sociology. "She is writing a thesis on what she calls women's stories, stories of women affected by the anti-Sikh riots after Indira Gandhi's assassination in 1984" (TOS 28). She is more like an activist and regularly attends meetings. "She talks of causes and street theatre, gender and courting arrest with the ease of a veteran" (TOS 31). Her activist and like-minded friends like Amar, Jyothi, and Manjar also shares her political, feminist and anti-Nazi views and keeps on visiting her time and again. She is more like a spokesperson of Hariharan giving a new edge to the plot – "Like Rekha, Meena names things with ferocious certainty. Communalist fundamentalist, these women warriors seem to know exactly which cities they want to raze to the ground, which they want to raise in their place" (TOS 60).

Meena, Rekha, Amita, Priya, and Tara all are strong enough to deal with the world. They are different from one another but the common thing among them is their frank nature and assertion. They make the world a place worth living by their powerful presence. Meena, a young college student, is very frank, self-sufficient and assertive. It is Shiv who is a little hesitating and uncomfortable before her. Shiv is her local guardian still she rarely visited him; she is self-dependent: 'the girl (Meena) seemed self-sufficient was not dependent on them rather she was always too busy to visit them on Sundays' (TOS 5) She was able to manage and handle all the situations herself except the things beyond manageable.

Meena asserts by putting up their ideas freely and act according to their own will. Both the women assert their priorities, wishes and perception throughout the novel. The friend of Meena talks to Shiv over phone in a very frank manner. She asserts her will instead of requesting him modestly. She tells him, 'She wants you to come and get her from the hostel. Jamuna Girls' Hostel, Room 15.' (TOS 5) The novel illustrates innumerable instances of assertion by women.

In Times of Siege, the novelist is bold enough to portray a young modern girl Meena and Prof. Shiva's wife, Rekha. Meena is staying in a hostel. When she gets her leg broken while getting down from the bus, she does not go to her parents. Nor is she a whimpering and whining hussy. Shiv brings Meena home as she is an old family friend's daughter. And her parents have asked him to look after her. Meena does not belong to the stereotype Indian woman who calls Shiv 'uncle'. She calls him 'professor'. Meena belongs to the modern



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generation of women who have their own perception and thinking. They could select and reject things and ideas accordingly. The spark of Meena's eyes attracts Shiv. He is 'getting addicted to this sparkle' (TOS 47). Meena is noticed for her spirit--'how to live with power and not give up laughter' (TOS 47).

In the novel it is woman who influences man; woman is not seen affected by man. Meena dominates Shiv and his house. It is Shiv who changes himself for her. It happens spontaneously as Shiv has certain affection for her. He cares for her and her likings. Even the eatable nourishments brought by him are according to her choice: 'chocolate, biscuits, a large packet of chips and a one-litre bottle of coke.' (TOS 140) Meena is not a victim of circumstances who surrenders herself against the sexual yearning of Shiv.

In Times of Seige flows as gently as the river where Basava stands in contemplation. It begins in a lucid manner and strong visualization. The characterization is vivid and the narrative is quite realistic. Real life examples are a reminder of racial prejudices and horrific sense of bigotry among the religious zealots. Hariharan is not really interested in people who are full of certainties. She has used male and female voices. Shiv's voice is not the typical male voice. It crosses all boundaries of gender bias, His ward Meena, a student activist with sectarian ideas, is visualized as a normal human being with normal desires at the end. Shiv has high flown ideas about liberalism but they remain theoretical. Hariharan feels that ideas can get tested only in times of siege.

Hariharan's novel depicts the changing status of women in India. Women are shown as opening the windows and breaking the barriers. In *Times of Seige*, Meena is the voice of Hariharan. She is the one who forces Shiv to fight against the pseudo-secularists.

Hariharan portrays that it is impossible for a simple, honest person to live on the same plane with prejudiced and biased religious bigots. She lays bare the naked realities of self-destruction within different groups in Indian society. They can terribly be divisive and brutal. As of today people are in the vortex of volcanic violence. Religious fundamentalists all over the globe have been responsible for the horrific destruction of the world. Though Hariharan has written about Hindu fundamentalists, it applies to every kind of fanatic and fundamental following of any religion. Though the novel is small, there is a lot in it that makes one contemplate. It is a work full of parallels and Meena is Shiv's catalyst.

Hariharan has closely observed all ups and downs in Indian society and she has witnessed that the struggle made by Indian woman is of manifold nature. She has to understand the social systems around her and has to mark her pathway for bringing total change in her life. The approach of the novelist is individualist's feminism means to speak about frustration of middle class women. It emphasizes on liberating of women. This novel has depicted individualist feminism through the character of Meena. Like, "Shiv can do nothing but agree, he is so bewildered by it all. A morning so far back in time that he can hardly believe he planned to tell the story of the polygamy line drawing to entertain Meena.



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Meena breaks into his confused thoughts and goes, in her special way, straight to the heart of the matter. 'It's Arya, isn't it?' (TOS 54) Meena's character belongs to the voice of women who wants freedom from the banding of the society. Meena's help to Shiv fight against history protection moment and supported when Shiv was in difficulties shows that Meena is the character that has her own choice and individual persona. In this novel Shiv and Meena are two characters who turn the tables. Meena is developed as a feminist character that fights against communal forces. She is a woman with daring and confidence who is described as champion of feminism.

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