



PERCEPTION OF RELIGION AND GENDER IN THE SELECT NOVELS OF GITHA HARIHARAN

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Abstract

Githa Hariharan's novels can be divided into two groups: the novels of art for life's sake and that of art for art's sake. The novels *The Thousand Faces of Night*, *In Times of Siege* and *Fugitive Histories* fall into the first group, whereas other two novels *Dreams Travel* and *The Ghost of Vasu Master* belong to the second group. The present study aims at exploring religious and gender discrimination as found in Githa Hariharan's select novels: *The Thousand Faces of Night*, *In Times of Siege* and *Fugitive Histories*. The novelist is an atheist who thinks that religion and tradition are delusive. Further, she assumes that religion and tradition are instrumental in making women to be inferior to the opposite gender; it gets reflected in her novel *The Thousand Faces of Night*. The novel explores Indian women's life experiences through a few women characters belonging to different status. Interestingly, it covers three different generations: Devi, the protagonist of the novel represents the modern women; Sita, Devi's mother stands for the previous generation while Mayamma and Parvathiyamma bring out their life experience of the early part of the 20th century.

Keywords: Githa Hariharan, women, religion, tradition, myth, society and discrimination

The people used to believe and follow the instructions of the religious Books like the Ramayana and the Mahabharata as their forefathers did. Devi's psyche is occupied by the stories extracted from the Books. Her grandmother implies her to follow the footsteps of the women characters of the Books. The impact of the stories in the mind of Devi is explicit throughout the novel. Githa Hariharan is a postmodern novelist who does not present every incident in a detailed manner. The reason for the impact of the narratives of Sita and Parvathyamma are not much explored, but it is implied that each woman of Brahmin families is influenced by the stories. Important incidents of the novel are followed by the stories from the epic, which are in a way or another connected with the incidents. Sita's negation of the veena is a very fine example for that matter; the negation finds similitude in Gandhari's story of self-denial. Each and every woman of the novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* has conceived dreams. Their experiences teach them the stern realities of the real world. By having experienced with the male-centred world they realize the fact that in reality the status of heroine is not going to be viable to them.

Further, the novelist sees the stories as malecentred, which means harmful to the second sex. The novelist finds women's multi-faced responsibilities in India. The status of being a daughter, wife, daughter-in-law, mother and grandmother is examined. Devi explores the first three of them. Except the status of being daughter there is no other shelter for Indian women to escape from the possible dangers of the patriarchal society. Mayamma has to suffer a lot in the hands of her son; through it the novelist implies that even motherhood is not celebrated in India. Devi's foreign education becomes nothing in her married life with Mahesh, her husband. Sita's talent in playing veena is not recognised after marriage. Through these two talents the novelist depicts the way in which Indian women's popularity is eclipsed for family life.

Githa Hariharan questions the value of arranged marriage in Indian society. Searching a right spouse for the young Indian woman is not an easy task since she has to live in a joint-stock family. Sita is too cautious in selecting her father-in-law to Devi as she herself had suffered a lot in the hands of her father-in-law, but in the selection of son-in-law she fails to select the right one for Devi. The novel indicates that Githa Hariharan is the spokeswoman of her gender. She does bother about the social vices. In an interview she had stated that her works reflect her contemporary society; so that we can come to the conclusion that the gender discrimination found in the novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* should have been extracted from the Indian society, which she knows well. Githa Hariharan is known for her variety. Hence, unlike *The Thousand Face of Night* the novel *In Times of Siege* does not speak much about gender discrimination.

Githa Hariharan makes her readers to remember the fact that religious fundamentalism is dangerous in India. Some Indian political parties aggravate the situation. Dr. Shivmurthy, professor of history, is the central character of the novel. His lesson on Basava, a twentieth century historical figure becomes controversial as his reconstruction of the history hurts the sentiments of a religious group. The entire narration revolves around the particular crisis of the lesson. The criticisms received for the lesson help the readers to measure the danger of the crisis. The people who stand against the professor are so strong with their religious as well as political background. Githa Hariharan implies that Indian politics and religion existed in India are inseparable. The religion 'Hindu' sounds more than any other religions in India as it is the religion of ethnocentric group. Pronouncing the names of religion for getting votes is an obvious truth in India.

When one reads the novel *In Times of Siege* in the light of Madhuparna Mitra's "Whose History is it Anywhere? The Politics of Hindu Nationalism in Githa Hariharan's *In Times of Siege*" he/she will find out the allegorical qualities of the novel. The name of the course module 'modern India' seems a deliberate usage of the novelist. Madhuparna Mitra said that the book entitled *Ancient India* got serious treatment in the hands of Dr. Shiv's critics like people. Hence the name 'Modern India' can be seen as a paradoxical and allegorical representation. Further, the novel examines the violence practiced by the fundamentalists and the protagonist's isolation. Githa Hariharan seems to take side with nonviolence as the protagonist stands with passive resistance for the active ones. The conflict between secularism and Hindu fundamentalism is the leitmotif of the novel *In Times of Siege*. Dr. Shiv represents secular ideas and the ISM (Ithika Suraksha Manch), and Dr. Arya, colleague of Dr. Shiv represents Hindu fundamentalists. Critics claim that Dr. Shiv is the mouthpiece of the novelist. So that the novelist's reputed strand of secularism is reiterated through the protagonist.

Even secular people are not portrayed as safe in India, which shows the dominance of religion on secularism. Mrs. Khan represents Muslims as well as woman in general. Further, she says that during the government's rule historical texts, especially the texts which are meant for school education were controlled; presumably, the novel must be the reflection of the Indian socio-political background, moreover the novel *In Times of Siege* exposes the way in which some media behave in India. The newspaper named, 'Current', is instrumental in aggravating the crisis of Dr. Shiv. The novel shows religious fundamentalism as a strong weapon and it is sharpened by the "hired" people of the society, who does not know much about the impact of religious fundamentalism on the society. According to Githa Hariharan one cannot expect bare truth in the text Books of ancient times and she believes that they are normally religious and

male centred. It should be the reason why she does not provide any concrete and authentic information related to the Basava's lesson. She seems to stand against the notion of the fundamentalists. On the contrary, she seems to take side with Dr. Shiv, who believes that Basava is a social revolutionary. To her Basava is made more as a poet than a revolutionary. According to the novelist the reliability of literary texts and uncertain biographies has to be enquired and they require reinterpretation. *Fugitive Histories* is known for its complexity; through the novel Githa Hariharan tries to explore as many societies as possible. *Fugitive Histories* have been divided into three chapters. The stream of consciousness technique, employed in the novel is suitable to explore the subject matter.

The novel covers more or less five generations of women's experience. Bala, the grandmother of Mala represents the beginning of 19th century women. Her revolutionary thoughts show that even the women who lived long ago were not satisfied with their patriarchal society. The possible fusion of religions is explicated through the marriage of Asad and Mala. Like the novel *In Times of Siege*, *Fugitive Histories* also provides the conflict between religious fundamentalism and secularism. Sara, Mala's daughter seems to be the mouthpiece of the novelist who explicated the merits found in the interreligious marriage. Her own love affair with a Christian shows one more possible fusion of religion. No woman of the novel is harmful to other women; it indicates the function of female bonding. It is always said that old women are instrumental in making their next generation women to be suppressed; it becomes a wrong notion in the novel *Fugitive Histories*.

India is known for its multicultural heritage. It is multi-cultural in its nature and is not balanced as the quantity of one culture is not as equal as that of other cultures. Ultimately it leads to the suppression of one culture by another. Here in this multi-cultural nation the quantity of any culture is measured by the quantity of people who follow one particular culture. In India culture and religion are inseparable, so that religious conflict is unavoidable. Each and every religion has its own notion and it tries to make it common to the nation. As a result of which they become active in politics. Obviously, the religious people whose population are more than other religious people only can rule the country. It is the starting point of fascism. The reflection of the religious conflict is present in the novel *Fugitive Histories*. The violence practiced by the ethnocentric group has its political value and they are Hindus.

The violence presented in the novel seems exaggerated. The existentialist themes like freedom, identity are explicated. The suppressed mind's behaviour is also delineated. The novels of Githa Hariharan spend too much of pages in complaining the negative side of the Hindus. Religious violence is exposed a lot in the novel *Fugitive Histories*. Her notion of

exposing the society as it is, must be remembered; she could have exposed the religious violence of some other religious people as she has written five novels which are more than enough to do that. Hence it gives an impression that the violence of other religions is eclipsed by exposing the violence of Hindus. According to Githa Hariharan a novelist must expose the pleasant and unpleasant things of his or her society. The novels *The Thousand Faces of Night*, *In Times of Siege* and *Fugitive Histories* prove that they are the acute or exaggerated reflections of her society. The novels are preoccupied with explicating religious and gender discriminations. She is not uniform in her writings; *The Thousand Faces of Night* examines Brahmin women's survival. *In Times of siege* revolves around Hindu fundamentalism and *Fugitive Histories* pasteurizes religious violence. Nowhere in the novels of Githa Hariharan has delineated the violence of Muslims. It provides an impression that by exposing the religious violence of Hindus she consciously or unconsciously hides the violence of Muslims.

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