

# Githa Hariharan's *In Times of Siege*: Exploring Cultural Narrative

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## Abstract:

*Githa Hariharan's In Times of Siege presents a critical engagement with contemporary cultural and intellectual debates in secular India, particularly within academic spaces. The novel interrogates the ways in which power and politics intersect to influence historical interpretation and restrict intellectual freedom. Set against the backdrop of a university, the narrative highlights the growing pressures exerted by fundamentalist ideologies on scholars and institutions, revealing how dissenting voices are marginalized or silenced. The protagonist, Professor Shiv Murthy, undertakes a scholarly project on the twelfth-century reformer Basava, only to encounter resistance that challenges both his professional integrity and personal security. Murthy's predicament foregrounds the ethical dilemma faced by intellectuals when confronted with external coercion and ideological conformity. His decision to uphold historical truth places him and his family at risk, while the support offered by Meena underscores the significance of solidarity in moments of crisis. This paper examines the novel's representation of political intervention, religious orthodoxy, and academic autonomy, and explores its broader implications for freedom of expression within India's democratic framework.*

**Key Words:**Secularism, fundamentalism, reinterpretation, representation and History.

## Introduction:

*In Times of Siege*, GithaHariharan explores the complex intersections of politics and intellectual life in contemporary India. The novel depicts how a university scholar, Professor Shiv Murthy, becomes caught in a climate of intolerance and ideological control within a democratic nation. Hariharan critiques political interference in universities-spaces traditionally associated with free expression-and comments on the intellectual surrender that often results from political pressure and fear. Shiv Murthy is compelled to summon moral courage in order to confront political injustice. Meena supports him in resisting injustice and helps him grow into a more mature and independent individual. The act of rewriting history, which should signify freedom of expression and commitment to truth, becomes for Shiv Murthy a metaphor for resistance. The novel thus exposes the ways in which political forces perpetuate injustice and silence dissent. Those in power-whether political, intellectual, or economic-often determine what is valued and what is dismissed, and through education, media, and institutions, dominant ideologies are naturalized as "truth."

*In Times of Siege* is a highly political contemporary Indian English novel that interrogates intolerance and ideological control exercised through political power. The novel resonates with Antonio Gramsci's concept of "hegemony," illustrating how political forces are transformed into legal and institutional agendas. Hariharan explores the controversy surrounding a history lesson on the twelfth-century reformer Basava, demonstrating how democratic institutions are compromised by political interference

that threatens intellectual freedom. Professor Shiv Murthy author is an online lesson on Basava, which is opposed by the group “ItihasSurakshaManch.” In democratic India, Shiv’s scholarly discovery and his freedom of expression are replaced by fear and guilt. Hariharan’s ideology is grounded in the belief that history, knowledge, and education must remain free from political manipulation. Through the conflict surrounding Shiv Murthy’s lesson on Basava—a reformer who challenged caste hierarchies and religious orthodoxy—she exposes how ideology shapes what is remembered, erased, or glorified within the national narrative.

Hariharan criticizes Shiv Murthy’s earlier intellectual complacency and underscores the responsibility of intellectuals to defend their beliefs and oppose injustice. Meena inspires Shiv to confront the fanatics who disrupt his life. Shiv Murthy’s predicament is, to a significant extent, a consequence of his prior inaction; however, his transformation from a passive observer to an active agent enables him to challenge dominant narratives and confront injustice. From an ideological perspective, Hariharan emphasizes the ethical responsibility of the individual intellectual to resist oppression. Shiv’s transformation from a detached academic to an engaged citizen reflects Hariharan’s call for moral courage and active resistance. His awakening suggests that neutrality in times of injustice is itself ideological, as it serves dominant power structures. The novel thus promotes an ethic of engagement, urging scholars, teachers, and citizens to challenge propaganda and uphold reason, compassion, and truth. Hariharan’s ideology is therefore not merely political but profoundly ethical, asserting that the struggle for truth and justice begins within individual conscience.

The Open University in the novel symbolizes free and secular education, where all individuals ostensibly possess the right to express themselves. Shiv’s character illustrates how intellectual freedom is threatened by ideological extremism. Although he is a university fellow with the right to express truth, pressure initially prevents him from fulfilling his responsibilities as an intellectual. His eventual transformation from a passive academic to an engaged citizen reinforces Hariharan’s insistence on moral courage and resistance. The novel challenges intellectuals to remain committed to truth, emphasizing that the struggle for justice begins with individual ethical responsibility.

Another significant ideological representation in the novel is the university as an institution under siege. Political pressure leads to the silencing of Shiv’s voice, reflecting a broader societal failure in which intellectuals are not protected but suppressed. Hariharan comments on the shortcomings of democratic secular India and the dominance of political ideology over intellectual autonomy. In the absence of Rekha, it is Meena who supports Shiv in his pursuit of justice. Both women are portrayed as independent and socially conscious, embodying gender awareness and resistance. Rekha advises Shiv not to withdraw or compromise, emphasizing intellectual integrity over personal fear. Through Meena and Rekha, Hariharan challenges patriarchal norms by presenting women as active agents of resistance. Patriarchy, as defined by Okoroafor, Ejike C., refers to “the hierarchical system of social organization in which cultural, political, and economic structures are controlled by men” (113). Meena’s political awareness and Rekha’s intellectual independence contrast with Shiv’s initial hesitation, reinforcing the novel’s ideological conflict between truth and propaganda, courage and complicity, and memory and manipulation.

*In Times of Siege*, Hariharan examines culture as a site of ideological struggle in contemporary India. The novel is situated in a society where dominant forces control education and identity through cultural narratives. Culture, as the novel suggests, is not natural but produced, and its meanings are generated and accepted through power relations. Shiv Murthy’s historical research represents truth, while the meaning imposed by the “ItihasSurakshaManch” reflects religious orthodoxy. Shiv’s pursuit

of historical reality is perceived by orthodox groups as an act of distortion, exposing the tension between scholarship and ideological dogma.

Hariharan critiques historical discourse shaped by cultural power, drawing on Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony to show how political forces control cultural institutions. She also engages with questions of subjectivity and identity through Shiv's character development. Shiv's transformation from an academic to a politically conscious individual represents a process of cultural resistance. Stuart Hall's notion of the "politics of representation" helps explain how Shiv negotiates meaning through media intervention, particularly when Meena urges him to seek public support. The novel thus highlights how identities and meanings are culturally produced and contested within everyday life.

Hariharan portrays the rewriting of history, censorship of thought, and control of education as cultural practices that sustain political dominance. The novel represents both political interference and cultural resistance, depicting a society in which state and nationalist forces manipulate religion, history, and heritage to establish ideological control. Basava's challenge to caste and class orthodoxy, as revealed through Shiv's research, threatens Hindu nationalist groups invested in fixed meanings and exclusionary narratives. Drawing on Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism*, the novel exposes the relationship between culture and nationalism, illustrating how cultural nationalism reproduces hierarchies that resemble colonial domination. The rewriting of history becomes a form of internal colonization, silencing subaltern voices. By reclaiming marginalized figures like Basava, Hariharan participates in a contrapuntal reading of history that recovers suppressed narratives within dominant discourse.

Hariharan further reveals how cultural practices are shaped by material power structures. Shiv Murthy's lesson, targeted by Hindutva activists, exemplifies the oppression of intellectuals by dominant ideologies. By glorifying a monolithic Hindu identity, these forces transform culture into a mechanism of control, erasing plurality and dissent. In contrast, Hariharan's narrative restores suppressed voices and asserts culture as a dynamic site of resistance. Rekha, an independent scholar working abroad, symbolizes intellectual and emotional autonomy, while Meena represents youthful political consciousness and activism. Together, these characters illustrate how networks of power marginalize those who challenge dominant ideology.

From a Marxist perspective, *In Times of Siege* offers a critique of ideology, class domination, and the commodification of knowledge in modern India. Through Professor Shiv Murthy, Hariharan dramatizes the conflict between intellectual labour and state ideology, revealing how educational institutions serve dominant class interests. When a newspaper reporter questions Shiv about his leave, he realizes that decisions affecting him have been made without his knowledge. His department head later informs him, "Your lesson on Basavanna's movement for social reform has been leaked somehow to the press" (55). This episode exposes institutional complicity and the mechanization of education under political pressure.

Such political interference reveals how education in a capitalist society loses its transformative potential and instead reinforces dominant ideology. Hariharan aligns with Marx's critique of capitalism, demonstrating how creativity and intellect are subordinated to institutional control. The demand by the "ItihasSurakshaManch" that Shiv apologizes or withdraws his lesson further illustrates ideological coercion. Meena and Rekha's support introduces a Marxist-feminist dimension, emphasizing how class struggle intersects with gender and ideology. Their political awareness contrasts with Shiv's initial complacency, suggesting that resistance often emerges from marginalized positions.

Through Shiv Murthy and other characters, Hariharan affirms that identity is not fixed but historically and socially constructed, echoing Stuart Hall's assertion that identity is "not an accomplished fact but a production, always in process." The controversy surrounding Shiv's lesson on Basava exposes how collective identity is manipulated for political purposes. Hariharan portrays attempts to fix Indian identity within a singular religious framework as ideological violence that suppresses the nation's pluralistic past. As the novel asserts, "It is the right of a people to a complex, pluralistic history... attempts to 'rectify' it have all too often been camouflage for the doctoring of history." (172)

## Conclusion

In conclusion, Githa Hariharan's *In Times of Siege* reveals the pervasive influence of power and politics on social and intellectual life. The novel revisits the historical legacy of Basava while exposing ideological conflicts between right-wing nationalism and liberal intellectualism. It also narrates Professor Shiv Murthy's ethical dilemma: whether to defend historical truth or submit to religious orthodoxy. Hariharan foregrounds the vulnerability of intellectuals under political pressure and critiques their failure to resist injustice. From a feminist perspective, the novel subverts patriarchal norms by portraying Meena and Rekha as protectors and enablers of resistance. Ultimately, *In Times of Siege* asserts that the struggle for truth, justice, and intellectual freedom must begin with individual courage and ethical responsibility.

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