

Warring Fundamentalism: Githa Hariharan's New Women Transcending the Past**Dr Ranjana Tripathi**

Associate Professor, Dept of English, Rajarshi Tandon Mahila Mahavidyalaya, University of Allahabad,
Allahabad, (U.P.) India

Abstract

Fundamentalism is rapidly spreading across the world. The women writers of India are efficiently and aggressively bringing before the world the rise of the New Woman in India who facing all odds in a patriarchal society has set herself towards confronting and uprooting the fundamentalism which has been growing largely under political shelter. In this paper I shall analyze two novels of the twenty-first century written by Githa Hariharan *In Times of Siege* (2009) and *Fugitive Histories* (2002) which throw light on the women of this era indomitable, confident, persevering and brilliant forging ahead to create a history. The portrayal of this new woman in the novels sends a message to the world that the society is evolving and women are freeing themselves from patriarchal bondage, encompassing new areas and winning new grounds.

Key Words : Fundamentalism, Women , Activism

Introduction:

Fundamentalism has spread its vicious wings across the world. Realizing its contemporary relevance and that women too can play a vital role in destabilizing fundamentalism Githa Hariharan has in two of her novels focused on the issue. Educated in India, Manila and the United States Hariharan worked in Media both in newspaper and Television. She was awarded the Commonwealth writer's Prize for her first novel, *The Thousand Faces of Night*. Since then, she has published a collection of short stories, *The Art of Dying*, and two novels, *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* and *When Dreams Travel*. Her last two works *In Times of Siege* (2002) and *Fugitive Histories* (2009), have voiced her concern over the rising fundamentalism, ideological polarization and sectarian conflict widely prevalent in our society. Presently she lives in New Delhi. In this paper I propose to discuss the changing feminine

sensibility, their determination to overthrow the bonds enforced by the patriarchal society we live in and their venturing into the areas that have not been trespassed quite often by women. Both the novels are thematically very different but both deal with women who are strong headed and determined to dismantle fundamentalism. A close scrutiny of the two novels rings a bell that the times have changed and that the women are emerging in new roles striding in directions not traversed earlier. Her female protagonists in these two works strongly protest the voices of dissent in a pluralistic society where people living together for centuries suddenly realize "the latent hatred for each other". The paper shall also focus on Gita Hariharan's attempt to show how different the two generations of women are and how the voice and efforts of the new woman-- the woman of substance, are giving her the long awaited deserved position.

In *In Times of Siege*, Shiv Murthy is a professor of Medieval History at an open university located in Delhi. The professor leads a comfortable life, writing modules, attending staff meetings, Taking life easy and also in a sort of relationship with a colleague. But life takes a turn when a friend's daughter Meena, a college student, breaks her leg and is unable to negotiate around her college dormitory. She requests temporary shelter in Shiv's home for a few weeks as he is the local guardian, even though his wife, Rekha is away in Seattle visiting their daughter. Shiv Murthy takes Meena into his home and she doesn't think her parents need be informed of her problem. Shiv is forced to do shopping for her, washes her hair, pours her a drink, and buys her ice cream and Asterix comics. Since Shiv works for correspondence classes writing down lectures so it is possible for him to work from home thus also enjoying being the guardian of a young girl and taking care of her "Wherever he is in the house, whatever he is doing, Shiv is aware of another presence. The woman in the narrow bed in his study, a young woman."²

Meena is a girl who is politically motivated, intellectual, self-possessed and sexually aware young woman. Murthy's life is thrown into turmoil when one of his medieval Indian history lessons comes to limelight and a group objects to the facts depicted in the lessons *Itihas Suraksha Manch*. Their hidden agenda is the removal of any apparent flaw in Indian history. In effect, the purpose is historical revisionism, and an image of a perfect, homogenous society. His department his friends all are unconvincing and are cowed down by the extremists. They charge him of distortion of historical facts: portrayal of

a twelfth-century poet/reformer Basava who raised a voice against caste system Shiv is stunned and studiously avoids confrontation at any cost. The university responds by giving Murthy the opportunity to apologize publicly. But increasingly influenced by Meena's political convictions, Murthy takes an plunges into politics: he defies the university and the fundamentalists. Meena's indomitable spirit, her confidence in truth demands that Shiv take a stand. She gathers her college comrades in the professor's defense.

With Meena at the center of their small world, Shiv is not much concerned about the happenings in his surroundings. Yet Meena is the very catalyst that enables Shiv to step up to the challenge of his finer self. It seems Hariharan has purposely chosen Meena to be with Shiv in times of siege. His wife could have been with him but maybe her company did not have the same impact as Meena had. Hariharan has highlighted the difference between the two generations of women in these two novels. Meena, the new woman, alone had instilled in him the spirit to fight back fundamentalism. She arranges a march which is even larger than that of the *manch*. There is a sea of placards and names of the organizations are even larger than the slogans on the placards-*Secular Women Against Patriarchy* (SWAP) Forum Against Hindu Terrorism (FAHT), People's Association of Secular Scientists (PASS). The slogans being "STOP TALIBANIZATION OF INDIA", "HISTORY DESTROYED", "WHO'S AFRAID OF THE MANCH?" Meena is aware of her being .She has the ability to take action against all sorts of hooliganism and has a group of friends who can stand by her at all odds. Her social networking is

at par with that of her male counterparts. She is independent in thought, word and action. She mobilizes him to react strongly against fundamentalism. These efforts of Meena make Shiv realize the significance of his position. Contrasting the similarities of the poet's struggle in 1168 and his own in 2000, Shiv speaks out against the bullying of the fundamentalists and his right to teach the truth. Thus the image of the woman of today as depicted in the novel has an important role to play in today's society. The country today is frequently facing turmoil where similar issues are cause of confrontation between different groups which are often politically motivated. The new women have the ability to take a stand which is a positive sign, they take up issues motivate men around and can fight against fundamentalism.

The second book to be discussed is *Fugitive Histories* (2009), presents the impact of the riots at Godhara, Gujarat in 2002. Gita Hariharan has taken up a political issue that marks a turning point in the history of Gujarat. On 27th February, 2010 the Sabarmati Express was attacked at Godhara Station in Gujarat and two of its carriages set on fire. The train was carrying 'Hindu activists' on their way back from Ayodhya. Godhara was a 'Muslim locality'. In the days and weeks that followed, the Muslims of Gujarat became the target of brutal violence. The statements of survivors' eyewitnesses and relief workers suggest that state officials and the police connived with the attackers. The concern of the novel is truly political and is meant to highlight the discrepancies in the government

policies, the two faces that may not be otherwise visible to the common man. There is a tendency of the people to forget even the most gruesome incidents like the Godhara carnage and it is the writings like *Fugitive Histories* that will never let such issues be wiped out from our minds.

Fugitive Histories is in three parts, "Missing Persons", "Crossing Borders" "Funeral Rites." The novel focuses on the changing image and role of women today. Gita Hariharan has placed Asad at a pivotal point and the other major characters- Mala, Sara and Samar revolve around him. His ideals affect all his family members but their reactions are very different. Asad's influence on both Mala and Sara can be perceived all along the novel. He is a rebel Muslim, who married a Hindu, read Marx, earned his living through his creative art and has questioned all that the society naturally accepted. He is an idealist but brakes down after the Godhara Riots. His paintings are symbolical of his journey of life. He has left behind diaries, his notes to himself, strong words a captions, an occasional paragraph, the detailed drawings poems, an occasional rough draft, pencil, pen charcoal or water colour. Asad has always been secular to the core. He married a Hindu, named his children Sara and Samar, and did not believe in the strictness of his religion. He was a socialist with the influence of Marx. Asad had a dream, the dream that made him say "you didn't have to worry about whether you were Indian Muslim or Muslim Indian, or part Hindu, or atheist by default, it was enough just to be you?"³

Asad was always concerned about the needs of world and was a nationalist. His reaction to his son's announcement of going to the US clearly shows this. Samar says:

"When I said I was applying for this job (at the U.S.) he lectured me on anti Vietnam war movement - as if that had anything to do with it ... Go, go to America and become a *Jihadi* if that is what you think the world needs." ⁴

Asad was constantly confusing the world's needs with different people's needs, a person's needs. When Sara said about her going to take up a job to fight against social evils he says:

"You don't know what it is to fight for something, You've never had to fight for anything. Freedom struggle, the Emergency, all the old movements for rights even the Cold War, they've all been fought whether we have won or lost it is all over. It's finished'. You had nothing to fight for now you do there is a battle going on. A war The every wants to tell people whether they are Muslim or Hindu or Christian or something else, as if people no longer know themselves. Let's see how your do in this new war". ⁵

After the Godhara Riots his life is shattered. It is as if his faith in man and life has been threatened. His ideology takes a turn and he feels that times have changed. He says to his wife Mala:

All the day we never used the word "Secular' to describe ourselves, all the days when the world was only divided in to the progressive and the backward, were we right then? or

just innocent? But then they two began using secular like a staple, ... it makes me feel I don't know myself any longer. It makes me wonder if I was only playing game all the time-painting playing at being a committed citizen of a larger braver world." ⁶

The two generations of women, Mala and her daughter Sara, both have confronted challenges in life but their attitudes are quite different. Mala, a south Indian Brahmin married Asad Zaidi and is totally dependent on him. When the novel opens Asad is dead and Mala is deeply engrossed in her husband's thoughts. All through the novel we find her absorbed in his thoughts. She has been a friend, critic, and a consort of Asad. Her sole concern is her husband's paintings' his cupboard, his letters his trunk. Asad has left behind him "What she can only think of as an artist's diaries" (p 7) She is docile, not the type who would have any opinion about anything and even if she has it will not be enforced on anybody. As her son Samar says about her, "You know how Amma is, she always says to do what you want to even if she is dead against it. Not like Asad" (p.99).

Sara, their daughter is an enthusiastic young girl infused with her parent's secular ideology. On reaching Bombay she notices:

"There is, for instance an open Mosque nestling among tall trees, the profusion of leaves making jalis behind the dome. Not far from it Hanuman is being bathed in milk with a dash of haldi and kumkum.

So he's turned a more photogenic Mosque and Hanuman harmohise.⁷

Sara's independent thinking, though a legacy of Asad's ideology has made her creativity the basis of her zeal to reform society. She is involved in the mission of bringing up the voice of the marginalized, the minority. She is a documentary film maker. Sara is moving out from her home with the skill of her father and poise of her mother to knit a yarn from the entangled "fugitive histories" of the Godhara riots. She visits Ahmadabad to become a spokesperson for the riot victims. Though brought up in the same environment, she is very different from her brother, Samar. Sara being in ideology likes her father. Samar is a rebel against his father who believes "Asad may have told us we're not Muslim or Hindu, but the rest of the world only has to hear our last name. Anyway, I'm happy to be seen as a Muslim. I want to be one" (P.99). Both Sara and Samar love their father. While Sara ideologically is convinced by Asad, Samar cannot accept his thinking and so Samar becomes a fundamentalist and Sara a social activist. Sara feels "how difficult it is to have a brother, a person you can't help loving and hating at the same time". Before Sara leaves for Ahmadabad he comes to meet her and shares his golden handshake with her.

On reaching Ahmadabad at the relief camp Sara meets Yasmin, a Muslim girl, whose brother Akbar is missing after the riots. The journey through the harrowing streets of riot hit Godhara with Yasmin, one amongst the many

Muslims displaced from their homes, living in slums managing somehow and searching missing ones in hospitals and mortuaries. Yasmin has gruesome memories of the riot. It is the indomitable spirit of Yasmin's mother to make her study that has kept her spirits alive in spite of the trauma. Gita Hariharan here makes us realize that women can share women's woes effectively and voice their concerns to the world. Sara interacts with the women of the area. Hariharan has not only made Sara a social activist, but as against her brother Sara's devotion to a cause proves her ability to impart social responsibility better than men. There are no hurdles in her way, she can through, her determination to do what she chooses to do. This strength of the Indian women in Indian English fiction has rarely been seen. The changing trends of the society are a witness to the fact that women are independently transcending unparalleled heights.

The writer through her novel has brought to light the images of the carnage; she has voiced her opinion about the shameful event, her own experience on her visit to the riot hit area. Here is a picture that is not coloured by politics, untouched by any vested interests, but it presents the reality after the unpleasant and unfortunate event. There are images that bring out the truth about the carnage. The writer emphasizes that women play an important role in recreating and rebuilding society. They are working hard to move ahead and are fully aware of the political and social situation. When Sara and Nina

reach the school where Muslim women were working for their livelihood, a woman called Reshma says “They could’ve built another school instead of such a big mosque.” Such a comment clearly hints at the attitude of today’s woman who sets aside age old ,fundamentalist views, is practical and need based. She considers the rehabilitation of the riot affected minority section more urgent than the construction of the mosque.

The real causes of dissatisfaction of the minorities have been pointed out by Hariharan. Jainab Bano, mother of a young boy with high aspirations, says

“my son has left his School..... we wanted him to study in an English Medium school so he could be an engineer but for the principal. He’d ask Nasir in front of everybody else, ‘Aren’t’s you from Pakistan?’ then he’d say ‘you’re not fit for an English medium school’. He kept calling my Nasir a terrorist till the child wouldn’t bear it any more. The loud speakers kept calling us Pakistan’s, terrorist, And what happened to us, was it not terrorism.”⁸

We realize that such comments can be heard quite often and normally and the writer makes us feel that these can bear far reaching consequences.

Another woman Razia says: “Go to Pakistan, go back to Pakistan? Why should we go to Pakistan? What do we have to do with it?” It is a fact that those who chose to stay back in India during partition are an integral part of our country. We do not have the right to hurt the feelings of the minorities as

it can eventually lead to rebellion amongst the youth creating havoc around the country. The writer truly warns us, making us realize the gravity of the situation and holds our irresponsible comments responsible for the rise of fundamentalism in the minority section of our society .Samar, as a young boy faced such marginalization several times. Even his best friend in school says “your tiffin stinks.” Such marginalization at a tender age touches the most sensitive chords of the heart and has an everlasting impact. The child makes such revelations to his mother only. Only a woman can confess it, and a woman writer alone can sense it and beautifully and effectively convey it to the world.

The heart rendering scenes of the carnage pictures the atrocities that the minorities faced:

“First there were a hundred people, then there were more- countless people they had swords, pipes, hockey sticks, soda lemon bottles, Saffron flags, all kinds of sharp weapons. They had petrol bombs and gas cylinders. They broke the dargah down the street and put an idol there. They came to our houses, they were shouting ‘kill them, cut them, burn them alive’ Then they blasted apart our lives...”⁹

The anger of the mothers, sisters, is clearly perceptible when they are interrogated by Sara. “How can you enter our homes and kill us? Is there no government? ... We’re orphans; We have no one, no police, no government, no country? Whom does this land belong to? Weren’t Muslims

also in the freedom struggle? ... We'll never feel safe again" P107

Gita Hariharan has dared to bring the voice of the marginalized, the minority to the world. "First they asked for jewellery, money. Then they started cutting so people couldn't run away. I saw a woman's foot being cut....She fell, she was raped and she was cut some more then she was burnt."(p.159) Another girl Zakia speaks up "I saw it with my own eyes the little boy next door. They poured petrol in his mouth. They put a lit match stick in his mouth as if it was a lollipop. He just burst". (p.159)She has thus also given us the impact of this gruesome act on Minorities like Asad who took to illness and the misery of his mind soon consumed him and Mala could never get over the shock. What they had believed all along was proved wrong. The only respite is that they are the parents of Sara. After all it is the ideology of people life Asad that brings forth activists like Sara.

In both the books the writer has questioned the very precepts of civilization by questioning the entire system and putting questions which rebuke the system, the entire democratic form of our government, our security system and administration of our secular state. Both the books

References:

1. Gita Hariharan *In Times of Seige*. Penguin: New Delhi(2003). p.101
2. Ibid p.98
3. Gita Hariharan. *Fugitive Histories*. Penguin: New Delhi(2009). p. 79
4. Ibid, p.100
5. Ibid, p 100
6. Ibid, p. 247
7. Ibid, p.99
8. Ibid, p.106
9. Ibid, p. 107

have compared men and women- their thought processes, their reactions and action at strategic points of time, their ability to organize and their desire to think in a new way their zeal to change the society. The new woman is potentially at par with men and dares to even visit riot ridden sensitive areas where even men may hesitate to tread. The new woman has stepped out of the four walls of the home. She has moved beyond self to the service of the outer world, paving her own way towards success, choosing careers that were not once her domain, not hesitating to confront odds and truly for the first time establishing her position in society earning applause not only as a mother, a sister, a daughter, a wife, a friend but as one who can lead the society, set examples and build foundation of a new era awakening it with her charming deftness and approach to life. This wave in novels is fast developing. There is a need to create 'positive' images of women, to act as a counterweight to the dominant images circulating in popular culture and to raise women's consciousness out of their oppressions. These images are a reflection of life today and more than that they are role models to infuse enthusiasm in the mind of women to walk at a pace that has never been witnessed before.