

Characters and Themes in Hariharan's Novel *Times of Siege*

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Abstract

Times of Siege, have a host of characters and the majority of them representing the academic world. The protagonist, Prof. Shiv Murthy is a Professor of History at Kamala Nehru University. A comprehensive study of the themes and characters of Hariharan's novels leads to convincing conclusions about her writings. This article explains her highly influenced Indian culture as she has attempted to adopt different techniques and themes to highlight her feminist views.

Key words: characters, techniques, fascination,

In Times of Siege, have a host of characters and the majority of them representing the academic world. The protagonist, Prof. Shiv Murthy is a Professor of History at Kamala Nehru University offering a distance education course. He represents the 'respectable and a decent middle class who respects people irrespective of their identity. And his attempt to reconstruct the past by writing a lesson on the poet Basava enrages the fundamentalists. Basava, the mystic poet, social reformer, Finance Minister and political activist all rolled

into one, who was discussed throughout the novel. The lesson by Shiv Murthy traces the life of Basava, the growth of his radical ideas and his struggle against caste divisions and the temple establishment and his Veerashaiva movement which ignites and enrages the Hindu fundamentalists. The projection of Basava in his lesson is seen as an attempt to reconstruct the past and it leads Shiv to discover that the ideas he has inherited about history, nations and patriots are changing day by day.

He come across with all kinds of fundamentalists, war mongers, rabble-rousers and people who are against war, hatred etc. transforms him. Aspects of the Novel E.M.Forster define a round character as one that is well developed and closely involved in and responsive to the action. Shiv Murthy appears to be a complex and fully developed one. The involvement of character of Shiv was possible only when the reader is aware about the character - his strengths and weakness or his likes and dislikes. Shiv's initiation into writing a history lesson on Basava is guided by his father's ghost.

He wants to ensure that everyone in society can go about their business and enjoy basic freedom to think, speak and ask questions. Shiv's reflection and instincts are more or less balanced, which is justified by his age and position. He is cautious in his relation with Meena because he is being challenged for the first time on both personal and political fronts. Meena, on the other hand, is a passionate, outspoken young girl. She is the daughter of Shiv's childhood neighbour, Sumathi. Shiv is obsessed with her because of his fearful fascination for everything her world stands for: risk and danger, choice

and commitment. Meena was the central character of this novel. She is a Sociology student who is writing a thesis on women's stories: the stories are based on the life of women affected by the anti-Sikh riots after Indira Gandhi's assassination in 1984. She talks of causes and street theatre, 'gender' and 'courting arrest' with the ease of a veteran.

Meena's personality is demonstrated through the two pictures she put up on the wall. One is a feminist poster; just an image of match-stick women holding hands to make a perfect circle. The other has a grey line drawing of a face of indeterminate gender in the background. Meena represents the assertive, independent and outspoken image of contemporary woman. On the other hand Shiv thinks it is his responsibility to amuse and entertain Meena in his wife Rekha's absence. The bonding between Shiv and Meena gets stronger day by day with childhood games with words: rector as rectum, adult education as adultery education. Shiv is taking a crash course from Meena on how to live with power and not give up laughter. Apart from conversation and games Shiv also helps Meena in her works.

Hariharan has accomplished the task of portraying strong and independent women in her novels with a view of changing the general perception of women as weak and docile. The women in India have started to move towards self-perception, self-expression and self-determination, slowly indeed and not entirely against tradition, within the family ties. Hariharan's works dwell on this "difference" of postmodern feminism. Shiv's dependence on Meena is strategically highlighted in the novel to indicate the changing

position/status of women in Indian society. Her portrayal as an activist student and her concern for the widow's plight is emphasized in the novel. It shows her as a dogmatic and thinking individual. Shiv represents the contemporary man who independently handles the house and plays a perfect guardian to Meena, a daughter of an acquaintance.

Meena's arrival totally transforms Shiv; he cares for her when she got fractured her leg. Also, in the absence of Shiv's wife, it is Meena who becomes a pillar of strength to Shiv. He was deeply, emotionally stunted by a childhood experience, the sudden disappearance of his father, when he was just thirteen years old. His father had been a frustrated freedom fighter, who taught Shiv to speak his mind fearlessly; he was forced to face the worst consequences. He was attacked from all fronts for his attempt to write about Basava.

In Times of Siege is a warning tale for placid 'liberals'. Hariharan is deeply affected by the various politically backed issues like the Emergency, demolition of Babri Masjid and the Gujarat riots. Hariharan has attempted to portray the multi-cultural nation, reduced to crude dichotomies. In order to exemplify the contemporary society a host of minor characters are created by the author. Amar is an activist and a committed member of several citizens' groups. Shiv misses his wife Rekha and daughter Tara terribly, when he was attacked by Hindu fundamentalists. With tension building up in Delhi, Rekha vehemently voices her protests and imagines the worst scenario that her husband Shiv has to face. A worried wife, Rekha, displays her emotions which surprises even her husband.

In both her novels, *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* and *In Times of Siege*, Hariharan has developed her male protagonists and the female characters do not have much role of significance. It is the life of Vasu Master and Shiv Murthy that takes a prominent place in both these two works of fiction. The novel deals with divisive politics, religious animosity and fundamentalism as its major issues. The educational campus is deliberately chosen as the hub of anti- social activities. The novel depicts the sad state of the country completely seized by fanaticism, hatred and mistrust. Shiv and Meena's relation depict the vacillating nature of man-woman relations. The concerns of the novel also include moral degradation and extra-marital liaisons prevalent in the society. Through this novel Hariharan the writer-cum-activist appeals for peace.

A comprehensive study of the themes and characters of Hariharan's novels leads to convincing conclusions about her writings and was highly influenced by her Indian culture as she has attempted to adopt different techniques and themes to highlight her feminist views. In her first novel, *The Thousand Faces of Night*, Hariharan has generated accurate representations of women for the present by exposing misrepresentation of women in patriarchal culture. Hariharan also attempts to retell old stories in different ways. Whether it is Mahabharata, Panchatantra or Arabian Nights, *In Times of Siege*, Hariharan's narrative calls attention to its representational rather than presentational status.

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