

Githa Hariharan and The Contemporary World of Challenges

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Abstract

The present article attempts to critically examine and evaluate as to how long Githa Hariharan has been able to take up the growing challenges faced by India in particular and by the world in larger scenario. Her fictional world hails like a powerful rocket that nips straightway in the bud of many a contemporary burning issues, and one is taken aback, for instance, in the case the contemporary Indian world was seized about while she was amidst her journey across her fourth novel – In Times of Seize (2003) wherein a self styled Itihaas Suraksha Manch hails itself as the sole guardian of historical facts compelling an open university authorities to coerce its history professor Shiv Murthy to apologize for the so called distortion of historical facts, and even to put his resignation; who, however, musters the courage to respond to his conscience and affords to decline. An attempt has been made to examine as to how robustly she takes up the contemporary challenges like fundamentalism, communalism and marginalization, and various economic, political, social, and cultural ways that end women's equality.

Keywords: challenge, culture, milieu, synchronicity, communalism, inequality.

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Introduction

Challenges are the part and parcel of life: be it a human being, the society, the nation or the world as a whole- all have their due share of challenges. The world is a huge pool housing human beings - undoubtedly of various ethnic races with variegated cultures and interests. India in itself is a rich sea housing various cultures and socio-politic-geographical milieus; and its interaction with the contemporary world do count in more than one way; and more so in the light of its growing needs and role in this cosmopolitan world.

Githa Hariharan is no stranger to literary acclaim in her native country or even abroad. She thus requires little introduction to the reader of contemporary Indian English fiction. Her novels have been translated into a number of European and South Asian Languages. Her works *The Thousand Faces of Night* and *In Times of Siege* have also been published in English in England and the United States. She had been a regular columnist for the major Indian newspaper ‘The Telegraph’. It is in the wake of her concern about the contemporary world of challenges that makes the author remark that “a writer particularly in India has to unlearn pretty much everything you learn” (Web). She, on the other hand, is a fearless working woman willing to take the system dashingly, as she did in 1995 when she challenged the Reserve Bank of India on the guidelines that denied her to be a natural guardian of her own son: “It meant a great deal to me, personally”, remarks a dignified Hariharan, “to challenge the Hindu laws – highlighting the fundamentally anti-women nature of personal laws” (Web). Interestingly and naturally her life as a citizen predates her life as a writer, and she has a very neat agenda of untidy, large and almost unsolvable items. Top on the list in the Indian context is communalism, women’s issues – various economic, political, social, and cultural ways in which more and more newer manifestation of old obstacles are constructed to end women’s equality; and “in the larger sphere”, says the novelist, “this new, extremely unhealthy and dangerous situation of one power in the world versus the rest of us” (Rodgers, *Deccan Herald*, 3/05/2003).

Githa Hariharan, together with Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Meena Alexander, Arundhati Roy and Nayantara Sahgal, “has been hailed as one of the women writers producing a body of Indian literature that is committed to feminist and social issues” (Web). The literary production by this segment serves as the intersection between women’s individual identity and the identity of the community, two mutually implicated dimensions whose bonds are rather complex. These women writers “are constructing narrative mappings of alternative India” through their novels and short stories, and are in turn “contributing to create a set of representations of

India which confront the reader with diverse regional national problems, while suggesting direction for change and improvement, in synchronicity with women's issues" (Web). This view of feminist Indian literature, attuned to the social dimension of texts, seems to invite feminist readings based on 'gender', as a tool to describe the position of women inside local patriarchies and the extent of the psychological damage inflicted on them as second-class citizens of repressive social order. Hariharan's fiction, along with that produced by the others of this segment, when viewed from this angle, is a strong commitment to women's issues wherein the analysis of social and political problems is directed first and foremost at the position of women, revealing how these social problems are specifically felt by a group of individuals of that society; and as a matter of fact, she does question strongly and authoritatively the validity of the assumptions of our tradition bound society which still largely go unquestioned. It directly indicates the social ethos that "operated in India over millennia to regimentalize lives and insensitize the community to the marginalized individual's personal rights and aspirations" (Web).

A bulk of postcolonial New English literature has been generally preoccupied with the marginalized and the underdog. In India the focus naturally falls on women and backward classes who represent the case of the underdog in this tradition-abiding society. Hariharan, along with Tasleema Nasreen and Arundhati Roy, "form a literary segment of remarkable young women writers in the Indian subcontinent" which appear, what Rama Kundu observes, "to have registered their realization that tradition could not only prove a dubious heritage for the oppressed, but even dangerous and crippling for the backward and the downtrodden" (Kundu 171). These writers show how the women are treated as impersonal and subjugate objects in our social structure.

Hariharan's first novel, *Thousand Faces of Night*, compels the reader to undergo an enigmatic experience straight from a woman's life. She ferrets out the struggle of Indian women in her affiliation with society and man for the sake of preserving her identity. The novel brings alive the underworld of Indian women's lives – "where most dreams are thwarted and the only constant is survival" (Trikha 169). The sharper relevance of the whole issue is, however, on universal suffering of women in the subcontinent. Hariharan "delineates significance and relevance of their sufferings to the great epic periods of *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* because from them Indian women draw their life model" (Ibid). Besides, the novelist has, what Pradeep Trikha observes, "a gifted pen that is able to dip itself into a trove of refined observations of life and all the pain and plunder it can inflict on the unsuspecting wanderer" (Ibid). To the reader of the contemporary world of literature she is a

conscious experimentalist, who like Kamala Markandaya, Bharti Mukherjee, Nayantara Sahgal and Anita Desai adds a new dimension to psychological complexity of Indian women; and “in order to decipher her feminist concern”, observes aptly Pradeep Trikha “she seems to have identified herself with Devi (the heroine of her first novel)” (*ibid*). That a woman has been the victim of sexual crime is reflected by Hariharan in her fiction times and again: Amba, Ambika and Ambalika of *The Thousand Faces of Night*, for instance, are abducted and insulted by Bhishma, and Devi’s relationship with Dan, Mahesh and Gopal is entirely centered on her sexual appeal. In *The Ghosts of Vasu Master Mangala*, Vasu’s wife has ever been ‘awful and unknown’ to him, and he never bothers to know her real self. Lakshmi, Vasu’s mother, remains ‘the sixth daughter of female weary loins’ and could never get over her inferiority complex. Jameela, Mangala’s friend, has always been remembered by Vasu for her full body ‘warm and alive’; and Rita-Mona – the young actress whose picture filled three-fourth of the calendar in Vasu’s father’s room - her hypnotic, piercing look, and the breasts which swelled out of the calendar to smother him - being the only sights in the world which moved Vasu to the point of constipation; and Shahrzad, the beautiful daughter of wazir in *When Dreams Travel*, has to offer herself as a martyr – to save her life and her fellow citizens’ from the ruthless, blood-thirsty, insatiable Sultan who, wreaking vengeance on his licentious ex-wife for cuckolding him with his own slaves, ravishes a virgin every night and executes her at the dawn.

Hariharan strongly believes that woman is full of immense possibilities that remain ‘mysterious’ to man for he never tries to realize it. That preoccupation with physical charm of woman amounts to the denial of woman’s intelligence is vividly brought out in her fiction. “She is averse to such a wrong representation of woman”, observes Jaiprakash A. Shinde “in pictures and advertisement media” (Shinde 127). Her fiction highlights how dependence on man causes abnegation of woman’s personal self and disruption of normal life. The unequal status of woman and her pathetic condition in patriarchal society thus remain one of the paramount issues that takes a pungent and piercing turn in her heart, and the result is the outcome of the characters like Mayamma, Uma, Gauri, Sita, Mangala, Devi and Shahrzad – to name only a few.

Marginalization in any form often becomes the target of her genius, and she protests strongly against any kind of trivial obsession: “It is always ‘difficult’ to be a member of any group”, opines an astute Hariharan “that has been marginalized or oppressed in some way over a long period of time”, and “when one belongs to two or three of these groups simultaneously – as in the case of a poor Dalit woman in

India or a poor African-American woman in the US- things can get doubly difficult” (*Literate World*, 21/03/03). To her, it is perfectly legitimate exercise to look at women’s writing, women’s voice, or Dalit voices, Afro-American voices in order to study the history of literature. She, however, is against such categories becoming ‘labels’. She strongly and legitimately believes that the rights co-exist, and “repression in one area will not leave other areas unaffected” (*Ibid*). It was thus imperative for her to legally challenge the infringement of her rights as a mother when the bank, where she wanted to open a savings account for her one year-old son, told that unless she had her husband’s approval, if their marriage ever broke up, she would, as a matter of course, forfeit the money to him. And finally the apex court held that the mother would undoubtedly be the “natural guardian” of her child according to the Indian constitution.

Hariharan is nevertheless cannot restrain herself to be a symbol of any one role – that of a writer or of an activist. “The agenda for the rest of my life”, comments the author proudly “would include women’s rights, communalism and the peculiarly lopsided global situation of today, above everything else” (*Dastidar Telegraph* 9/4/2003), that amounts to say that she would rather like to be a socially and politically aware citizen. In her literary career, therefore, she could be seen playing different roles and doing different things who duly cares for the worth of ample span of time and energy spent on commenting on the context of the texts we create, read and write about: “We spend a lot of energy working out the diverse and universal frame works of a text” opines the author, and continues, “the complex coexistence of the particular or diverse and the universals not only allows our texts to travel and endure, but they also give rise to a range of criteria that helps us judge the value of a text.” (Web)

Hariharan’s pen, when meets paper with its little powerful deft strokes, remains aware of the cultural and cross-cultural audience: “I was curious to know”, she comments “how people outside India reacted to them (her works)” (Web). She, however, doesn’t worry about what to write or how to write, so it travels. She, on the other hand, considers it a mistaken notion for a writer to be an ethnic representative, something like international face of a culture. To her, there is a relationship between English and power. In her opinion Indian academics in English get more attention, so do papers and TV news channels in English. She is, therefore, often keen to try and find ways of moving towards a point where Indian literatures are, as a matter of routine, represented by a multiplicity of voices and languages. She, like a conscious and aware citizen, advents her concern towards language versus school and college

education and the cross translation of the languages books as she herself remarks: “Ideally there should be more than one translation of certain books that are considered breakthrough in the different languages”. She strongly opines to “have translation among the Indian languages, as well as into English and back into an Indian language, as part of school and college education” (Web). This is a sensitive way to learn language, literature, and partake of more than one strand of our literatures as “a lot of the talk about multiple literatures” in her opinion “would make more sense to our young people if we are actually engaged in translation in a formal sense in the course of being educated” (Web). She believes that a writer should have a group in his head that he writes for, that helps keep one from repeating himself, and it also keeps him cussed enough to keep writing.

That marginalization in a form or the other particularly in India and generally on global scenario occupies a paramount place amongst various challenges taken up in Hariharan’s fictional canvass, can be easily located in what she opines about the traditional laws: “The important thing to remember is that all the personal laws in India are anti-women, anti-lower castes, anti anyone who was marginal to the scheme of things when these traditional laws were formulated” (*Literate World*, 21/03/03).

CONCLUSION

Githa Hariharan hails as an ardent thinker and a representative of responsible literary segment who believes that well-being does not come piecemeal, for rights co-exist, and repression in one area will not have other areas unaffected. Her composed demeanour hails to meet the challenges of the time, and to her, it does not matter if the writing is finally flawed. Instead what is necessary is that it would have taken those important risks. Her fictional craft hails as a robust embodiment of various challenges like fundamentalism, communalism and most importantly the sheer concern for the marginalized ones, particularly the women. She is a legitimate representative of the present day woman who dare to take on and highlight the various economic, political, social, and cultural ways that end women’s equality. In the larger sphere, however, she is judiciously concerned about the extremely unhealthy and dangerous situation of one power in the world versus the rest of us. She often tries and finds ways of moving towards a point where Indian literatures, for instance, are represented by a multiplicity of voices and languages. In her opinion the political attitude must come through in the writing and that a good writer is not someone who is making something perfect, but someone who can meet the challenges of the times.

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