



## Manifestations of Social Behaviour: A Study on Personality Traits in Githa Hariharan's *In Times of Siege*

### KEYWORDS

Psychology, Githa Hariharan, Indian Writing, Fiction, History, Literature.

**G.Rashmi**

Assistant Professor, Department of English,  
Government Arts College, Ooty.

**Dr.D.Anand Kumar**

Assistant Professor, Department of English,  
Government Arts College, Ooty.

**ABSTRACT** *Individualistic attributes of every human being is decided by his or her behaviour in the society. This primal behaviour of people may be broadly classified into four different categories or temperaments namely sanguine, choleric, melancholic and phlegmatic. Applying psychological approaches to literature would help people understand how "language and symbols operate by demonstrating their ability to reflect unconscious fears or desires" through its characters. Githa Hariharan's novels propagate such real-life behavioral patterns. In Times of Siege is one of her works that exhibit her skill of portraying different types of people. The whole novel deals with the problem created by a module, a history lesson on Basava, designed by Shiv for his Open University students. Githa Hariharan has put meticulous efforts to highlight the step-by-step development of the problem. The battle continues in various forms and finally Shiv's patience yields him the desired result. All the characters in the novel picture the image of real-life incidents in the minds of readers. As a whole, Githa Hariharan has made In Times of Siege as the best place to search for the nature of human character.*

Individualistic attributes of every human being is decided by his or her behaviour in the society. This primal behaviour of people may be broadly classified into four different categories or temperaments. According to proto-psychological theory, these four basic personality types are termed as sanguine, choleric, melancholic and phlegmatic [7]. Sanguine depicts people who are optimistic in their approach and those who socially mingle with others without any difficulty. Choleric is a type that includes the group of people who are short-tempered and always feel irritated about their daily happenings. Melancholic people are those who analyze their problems without emotional attachment to it, and most of the times, they seem to be hushed. Phlegmatic category of people always seems to be relaxed and peaceful [6]. They do not bother much about their surroundings or the situation of their livelihood. Most people would possess a mixture of these qualities but in different proportions. Henceforth, character of a person can be distinguished as bold, courageous, fearsome, cruel, ignorant, sympathetic, shy, funny, aggressive, introvert, extrovert and alike.

Psychologists and physicians like Hippocrates, Nicholas Culpeper, Rudolf Steiner, Alfred Adler, Erich Adickes, Hans Eysenk, Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung have come up with their own theories about human behaviour and all these theories have their own intensity of propensity towards the four temperaments of proto-psychological theory. Applying these types of psychological studies to literature would help people understand how "language and symbols operate by demonstrating their ability to reflect unconscious fears or desires" [4] through its characters. Githa Hariharan's novels propagate such real-life behavioral patterns. *In Times of Siege* is one of her works that exhibit her skill of portraying different types of people in the contemporary world.

Shiv, the protagonist of the novel, who works as a History Professor in an open university, travels throughout the plot without being completely aware of the happenings around him, even though they are closely associated to him. Prob-

lems due to a history lesson written by Shiv represent the postmodern society. Shiv's character as a whole outlines the contemporary world through his inability to comprehend the ongoing situation or to make any firm decisions to overcome it. He seems to be just under the guidance of Meena and Amar throughout the entire struggle. Hariharan also hints at the generation gap when there is a mention that Shiv and Meena has never spoken a word with each other till the time he came to pick her up from the university after she has broken her leg. Shiv also is seemed to be worried about many things including Kamla, his servant maid, and Rekha, his wife. His real concerns start with a phone call from a journalist in response to his article about Basava. His fear haunted him to the extent that he remained silent being unable to speak during the conversation or after that.

Meena, a young adult pursuing her graduation, serves as the best example for boldness and courage. This stands evident when she gallantly says Shiv not to call her parents and that she would manage the situation on her own. Her every move with the issue that Shiv's course module has created displays her courage and brilliance. At times, even Shiv admires her valor comparing her character with that of his daughter's. This in turn makes the bonding between Shiv and Meena more remarkable. The swiftness in her decisions despite her young age makes her distinct among other characters in the novel.

Amar, Meena's friend of same age group, is known for his aggressiveness. Being an activist, he rises to the situation offering a helping hand to Meena and Shiv. He is capable of rationalizing the issue into tiny bits to make it easier for him to tackle. His ability to take right decisions consistently with the issue makes his character unique. His capacity to come up with leaflets, posters, rally and meeting at the university gates stands testimony to the fact that he advocates activism.

Amita Sen, a friend and colleague of Shiv, represents an ordinary woman who is concerned about her fellow be-

ings. She always seems to be bothered about her fear of boredom. Rekha, Shiv's wife, too is known for her botheration for Shiv and the plants in her garden. The character of Menon, another friend and colleague of Shiv, is portrayed as a person who readily reacts to the situation. This is well evident when he rescues Shiv and escapes him from the mob that demolished Shiv's room in the university department.

Arya is being symbolized as a man of conflicts. Githa Hariharan has judiciously sculpted his character right from his introduction during the department meeting. She introduces him by hinting at the change in his behaviour over time that he has become more aggressive and gruesome. His belligerence is portrayed at its peak when he pounces on Shiv during their department meeting.

All these characters put together into the thread of a single plot brings in the right platform for the author to showcase the behaviour of people. The whole novel deals with the problem created by a module, a history lesson on Basava, designed by Shiv for his Open University students. Githa Hariharan has put meticulous efforts to highlight the step-by-step development of the problem. The readers are mentally prepared to get involved in the plot by the author with the glimpses of other similar incidences in the beginning of the novel.

The actual problem in the novel starts with a telephone call to Shiv by a reporter of a newspaper named *Current*. At first, the problem was incomprehensible to Shiv and he was surprised to hear that his article on Basava has become "controversial." Shiv's revelation increased after hearing that people protest against his article. He was unable to respond to the reporter's question—"Are you denying that you went on leave because of the protests against the article, sir?" [3]. Shiv received a call from his department head instantly regarding the ambiguous nature of his lesson, which is accused of distorting history. Instantaneously, after an abusive letter from a Hindu watchdog group, the Head of the Department and the Dean decided to hold a department meeting.

In the meeting, Shiv explained the dean that his lesson is straightforward and it traces Basava's life, including his contribution to the city of Kalyana, up to his death. The head became restless with this explanation and expressed his concern regarding its implications. He was also afraid that there may be phrases and sentences which are prone to be misinterpreted by the activists. The head also listed the most significant drawbacks of the lesson. The dean and the head expressed their disquiet about the demands of Itihas Suraksha Manch which stated "'The Manch has three demands. The first is an apology for hurting their sentiments. They want separate apologies from Dr Murthy and from the department, by extension the university. Second, the lesson should be retracted and the material recalled from all students registered for the course, and from study centres and libraries. Third, the rewritten lesson should be submitted to the Manch before it is sent to our printing unit'" [3]. Shiv's refusal to apologize shocked the dean and the head.

Then, the article in the first page of *Current* surprised Shiv. The article accused Shiv of distorting history and that he has gone on leave because of the protests. It also indicted Shiv for his irresponsible behaviour of refusing to talk about the duty of a historian. Consequently, the next problem started with a telephone call from Menon where

he informed about a letter from the vice-chancellor to the head. Shiv's lesson on Basava is sent to an expert committee for a review and they have decided to call back the course material from students. It was also felt that Shiv's resignation from the job may be the only way to end the controversy.

The problem of a history lesson gradually developed into the problem of Muslims, Christians and other religions. Meena and Amar decided to help Shiv with this issue. Menon reminded Shiv of a similar controversy in 1994. At that time, the victim was a play on Basava which was published in 1986. "It won a state award and was prescribed as a textbook in a couple of universities. Then eight years late, some group in Karnataka—cousins, or ancestors, of Shiv's Manch—woke up to the possibilities of the book. They accused the play of portraying Basava as a coward; implying that he committed suicide; casting aspersions on the 'chastity' of some women saints; and letting some characters use obscene language" [3]. Even at that time, the group demanded revoking the play from the university syllabus.

The interviews and phone calls went unnumbered to Shiv. The situation worsened with the letters to editor by the professional hatemongers. Shiv found everything to be abnormal in the department. In a department meeting, Arya pounced on Shiv and had him by the collar. There was clear indication to Shiv that the problem is not yet over. The very next day, Shiv saw a mob in the parking lot through the window. Subsequently, Menon came for his rescue. He took Shiv to the parking lot through the back door and as Shiv left the parking lot, he could see the chairs and glasses showering. Shiv's room and his books were stripped off. With this act, Arya has made sure that Shiv cannot go to his room in the department.

The battle continued in various forms. "In the middle of this dizzying circle, in the lone eye of the storm, Shiv waits with clammy hands and a weak heart. The beast is preparing to charge him, the beast with many heads, many masks, many voices" [3]. Shiv's patience yielded him the desired result and everyone seemed to have forgotten the issue as days passed by. Finally, Shiv's life regained its normalcy after the letter from the Vice Chancellor about the unfortunate incident. All these actions and reactions of different characters at various situations picture the image of real-life incidents in the minds of the readers. As a whole, Githa Hariharan has made *In Times of Siege* as the best place to search for the nature of human character.

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