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### The burden of a message

Githa Hariharan is a good novelist but she is a better activist and Times of Siege is marked by that peculiar feature of IWE, the need to convey a message, says KESHAV DESIRAJU.



AS summer creeps closer, one slowly begins to remember what the North Indian summer is all about. The long, hot dusty afternoons, where time hangs still, and dry leaves fly in sad whirls before collapsing to the ground, the inertia and sloth that drives even the most energetic into a huddle, the sense of despair. The evocation of this mood is the best part of Githa Hariharan's new novel. One can almost feel the heat rising up from the ground, the cool of the arched corridors lined by doors leading into rooms where no one is working, the birds' nests on top of the coolers, the tea in chipped cups, the dust, the tiredness, the waste of it all... .

The setting is one of India's newer universities, and the same hopelessness has also taken over Prof. Shiv Murthy. The fixed points in his life are fast changing, the angrily nationalist father who got off a train one day and never returned, a mother whose frenzied devotions did not bring her husband back, the unimaginative but briskly efficient wife, and above all, the message of the iconoclast 12th Century saint-poet Basava, whose life and work Shiv has made his own.

Shiv is a well-meaning teacher of history, a decent man, a good husband and father. The turmoil of the summer of 2002 starts when Meena, his ward, the daughter of a distant family connection, a girl he barely knows, comes to stay in the absence of his wife. Shiv has a long way to go, but is stoically resigned to the knowledge that he will never get anywhere. Meena is the original child from hell; unpleasant, exploitative and uncaring about most things other

than those that matter to her comfort. Strangely, she becomes an ally when the mob turns on Shiv for allegedly anti-Hindu comments in his writing on Basava.

Hariharan also tells Basava's story well. It is a poetic evocation drawing intelligently from A.K. Ramanujan's translations of the hymns to the "Lord of the meeting rivers", the story of a saint who cared enough for the world he lived in to want to change it.

Githa Hariharan writes with feeling, but her other characters are less well drawn, and are often caricatures, though possibly this is intentional. Shiv Murthy is her masterpiece. She makes Shiv's dilemma her own, and she writes in his hand. The confusion in his mind, the longing for the safety of his wife's world even as he clumsily fondles the hellish ward, his inability to comprehend her manipulation of him, his disbelief as he appears on television, or addresses a public meeting, his helplessness before his superiors in the university; all of this is beautifully caught.

It is a peculiar feature of Indian writing in English that so much of it is burdened with the need to convey a message, and if there is a weakness in Hariharan's novel, it is this. It is almost as if the writing has been undertaken for the sole purpose of stating the message. Admittedly, political statements can be made in different ways, and a novel is a way of reaching out to a wider audience. After all, if Githa Hariharan wanted to write about the lack of integrity amongst Indian academics, and of the perils of being a liberal in degenerate times, and further wanted to talk directly to you and me, people similar to her protagonists, caught up in our own middle class confusions, a novel it has to be. Not many of us Vasant Kunj types muddling through life are exactly rushing out to get the latest *Economic and Political Weekly*. Yet, for all that, one longs for the novel which tells a story, and which may or may not have a message, and which in any case lets the reader figure it out. There is no such delicacy in Githa Hariharan's novel. Starting from the dedication, "For all those who stand up in times of siege", it is clear that one is in for the long haul.

Having said this, it is probably the case that the novel with a message is probably the only kind of novel Githa Hariharan could write. We live in dangerous times, where the voice of the mob, loutish and pig ignorant, is the only one that is heard. In this din, Hariharan's voice rings clear. She might take herself very seriously but she has much to be serious about. The world which collapses so abruptly around Shiv Murthy is the world we see coming apart in India today; the polarisation is total, the divide absolute. To be a liberal is asking for trouble, to try and teach the value of liberalism might cost you your life, as Shiv Murthy learns. Githa Hariharan is a good novelist and a better activist. She has her priorities right. Read this book.

**In Times of Siege, Githa Hariharan, Viking, 2003, Rs. 295.**

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