



# Githa Hariharan's *In Times Of Siege* Through The Lense Of Existentialism: Identity, Truth, And The Suppression Of Intellectual Freedom

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## ABSTRACT

Githa Hariharan's *In Times of Siege* (2003) offers a critical examination of contemporary India's political and cultural climate, focusing on the rise of fundamentalism and its debilitating effects on intellectual freedom and personal identity. The novel centers on Professor Shiva Murthy, a historian whose academic work is targeted by extremist groups for allegedly distorting historical facts. This paper explores the existential crisis of the protagonist, highlighting the tension between individual freedom and the forces of hegemonic control that suppress intellectual and artistic expression. Drawing on theories of existentialism, power dynamics, and cultural hegemony, this analysis demonstrates how Hariharan critiques the political and social pressures shaping identity, truth, and freedom of expression in post-colonial India.

**Keywords:** - Existentialism, Secularism, Identity, Communalism

## Introduction

Githa Hariharan's *In Times of Siege* (2003) delves into the complex intersection of political turbulence, intellectual freedom, and identity in contemporary India. As a postcolonial author, Hariharan examines the forces that shape marginalized identities, while also interrogating the tension between personal autonomy and societal pressures. At the heart of the novel lies the character of Professor Shiva Murthy, a historian whose academic work comes under attack from extremist groups, embodying the larger crisis of truth and intellectual freedom in a nation riven by ideological battles. Through Murthy's story, Hariharan critiques the political manipulation of historical narratives and the existential toll that ideological conformity can have on individuals.

*In Times of Siege* centers around Professor Shiva Murthy, a historian at a university in India whose research on the 12th-century social reformer Basava is targeted by a Hindu nationalist group, the Itihas Suraksha Manch (History Protection Committee). The group accuses Murthy of distorting historical facts, particularly in his depiction of Basava's stance on casteism and untouchability. The group's protest against Murthy's work is not just about historical revisionism; it becomes a wider political attack on intellectual freedom and the right to academic independence.

Murthy's struggle embodies the tension between truth and power. As Murthy reflects, "History, like the human mind, is a complex body with many strands" (Hariharan 97). His insistence on the multiplicity of historical narratives and his critique of rigid, ideologically-driven interpretations of history position him against not just the fanatic group but also the institutional powers that suppress dissent. Academic freedom, once seen as a pillar of intellectual integrity, is jeopardized when it is subjected to political and ideological agendas. Murthy faces increasing alienation both in the university and in society, as his work, once respected, is now regarded as dangerous.

Murthy's struggle becomes a personal existential crisis, as he must reconcile his identity as a historian with the forces of ideological conformity that demand unquestioning allegiance to a singular, nationalistic history. His refusal to retract his work or to apologize for his historical analysis illustrates the existential courage to resist oppressive forces, which is central to the novel's critique of authoritarianism and intolerance. The political intervention in Murthy's work points to a larger trend in which intellectual freedom is undermined by powerful political and religious groups seeking to control the narrative of history.

Murthy's experience resonates with key themes of existentialism, particularly the ideas of alienation and the absurd. Drawing on existentialist philosophy, especially the works of Albert Camus, Murthy's internal conflict

mirrors the absurd struggle of individuals attempting to find meaning in a world that often appears indifferent to their personal efforts. As Camus writes in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, "The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart" (Camus 121). Murthy's refusal to yield to the political pressure to rewrite history reflects a form of existential defiance, where he chooses authenticity over social acceptance.

The pressures Murthy faces—both from the extremist groups and from within academic institutions—intensify his sense of alienation. His intellectual identity, once defined by a commitment to truth and historical accuracy, is now in jeopardy, as he faces the threat of being ostracized. His refusal to apologize, despite the increasing hostility and professional risks, is an act of rebellion against the conformity demanded by the forces of political correctness and religious orthodoxy.

Murthy's crisis of identity is compounded by his relationship with the media, which sensationalizes his academic work, distorting it to fit the agenda of the Hindu nationalists. The media, in this sense, serves as a tool of power, reinforcing the ideological narrative of the extremists and turning Murthy into a political figure rather than an intellectual one. His internal struggle and alienation mirror the existential notion of being trapped in a world that does not allow for individual freedom or truth.

Hariharan critiques the mechanisms of cultural hegemony, which Antonio Gramsci identifies as the ways in which ruling powers maintain control through intellectual and cultural domination, rather than just through economic or military power. In Murthy's case, the Itihas Suraksha Manch attempts to control historical narratives to serve a narrow ideological agenda. The group's attack on Murthy's academic freedom and its attempt to rewrite history are manifestations of cultural hegemony, where knowledge is shaped to support political power.

The role of the university and academic authorities further complicates Murthy's position. Figures such as Dr. Sharma and the Dean of the university are depicted as passive or complicit in the face of political pressure. They prioritize institutional stability and political expediency over intellectual integrity. Murthy's colleagues, concerned more with their own professional security than with defending academic freedom, betray him, leaving him isolated in his struggle. The academic world, once a bastion of free thought, is now portrayed as compromised by political and social pressures.

Murthy's struggle, however, is not only against the political forces outside the university but also against the systemic failure of institutions that are supposed to protect intellectual autonomy. The university, once a place for the free exchange of ideas, has become yet another site of ideological control.

In *In Times of Siege*, the media plays a crucial role in shaping public opinion and distorting the truth. The media's sensationalization of Murthy's academic work transforms it into a political scandal, amplifying the pressure on him. This media frenzy exemplifies Hariharan's critique of how the media can be complicit in the suppression of intellectual freedom, serving as a mouthpiece for the dominant ideological forces in society.

The media's distortion of truth deepens Murthy's alienation. His academic work, grounded in historical analysis, is reduced to soundbites, disconnected from its original intellectual purpose. As the media amplifies the voices of extremists, it contributes to the larger social and political forces that undermine intellectual freedom and suppress dissent. The novel critiques the complicity of the media in the manipulation of public opinion and the distortion of truth for political gain.

Meena, a central character in *In Times of Siege*, plays a pivotal role in Murthy's personal transformation. Meena is described as a young, passionate activist, a "mouthpiece" for Hariharan's own beliefs, who encourages Murthy to resist the forces of intolerance and fundamentalism. Through her, Murthy begins to find the courage to confront the forces that seek to suppress him. Meena's unwavering commitment to secularism and equality serves as a powerful inspiration for Murthy. She is described as "the young mentor, an unlikely reincarnation of his father" (Hariharan 168), someone who pushes Murthy to take risks and to embrace his intellectual freedom.

Meena embodies a new generation's desire to challenge the status quo and fight for social justice, secularism, and intellectual autonomy. She helps Murthy realize that in order to fight against the forces that suppress intellectual freedom, one must take a stand, even at great personal risk. Meena's influence leads Murthy to embrace the responsibility of defending his work and truth. Her guidance becomes a metaphorical "stick" for Murthy, helping him navigate the turbulence and challenges in his life.

## Conclusion

In *In Times of Siege*, Githa Hariharan offers a powerful critique of the forces that seek to control knowledge, suppress intellectual freedom, and distort truth. Through the character of Professor Shiva Murthy, she explores the personal and professional consequences of standing up for truth in a world where ideological conformity is increasingly demanded. Murthy's existential crisis, compounded by political and social pressures, reflects the broader struggle between individual autonomy and authoritarian control.

Hariharan's novel serves as a poignant reminder of the fragility of intellectual freedom in the face of rising political extremism and media manipulation. Through the character of Meena, she calls for resistance against oppressive forces and emphasizes the importance of defending intellectual integrity, even at great personal cost. The novel is both a critique of the rise of religious fundamentalism in India and a broader meditation on the challenges faced by intellectuals who seek to speak truth to power.

Ultimately, *In Times of Siege* is a call to resist the forces that seek to control knowledge, and to safeguard the freedom of thought and expression in an increasingly polarized world. Through Murthy's journey, Hariharan

emphasizes the importance of standing firm in the face of ideological pressures and fighting for a society where truth, intellectual freedom, and individual identity are not dictated by political or religious agendas.

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