



Sahitya Akademi



India International Centre

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meet the author

Githa Hariharan





"Am I a writer particularly concerned with 'women's issues'? And am I a feminist? The answer to both questions is, 'yes'. I want to make it quite clear that in my life my choices have been dictated by what I perceive as the feminist choice.... And anyway, however you define yourself, all our work is informed in some way or the other by feminism, along with the ideas of Marx and even to some extent, Freud. And this goes for both men and women, of course. My work grows out of my feminism as well as my other political beliefs. Which doesn't mean a novel I write is some kind of handmaiden to ideology."  
— Githa Hariharan in an interview to Arnab Chakladar

Githa Hariharan, one of the most significant contemporary Indian fiction writers in English, was born in Coimbatore. She grew up in Mumbai and Manila where she received her education. She had her higher education in the United States, where she later worked as a staff writer in WNET-Channel 13 in New York. Since 1979, she has worked in Mumbai, Chennai and New Delhi as an editor, first in a publishing house and then as a freelancer. Githa Hariharan now lives in New Delhi.

Githa Hariharan's first novel, *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1992) won the Commonwealth Writers Prize. Githa feels that it is very much a first novel with a lot of 'apprentice work' in it, but that it has the virtue of spontaneity, even a kind of

innocence, which perhaps characterizes only a first work. The next book she published was a collection of stories, *The Art of Dying* (1993). This is what the author says about it: "I consciously tried out different things – these stories were exercises in finding my writer's voice.... That burst of energy, and that single-minded phase of self-conscious experimenting, may not come more than once in a writer's life. I am only grateful it happened to me at the right time. Now I am not sure I would write the same sort of short stories at all – if and when I go back to them."

About her next novel, *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* (1994) Githa comments that it is the most autobiographical of all her novels, though obviously not in a literal way. This work is concerned with well being on all levels: the ailing body, the political mind, and the philosophical soul. All these come together as the retired school teacher, Vasu Master, tells his final pupil, Mani, a series of fables about teaching, learning, and healing.... It turns out to be a fascinating, exhilarating and thought-provoking work.

Her next novel, *When Dreams Travel* (1999) addresses power politics in relation to gender. To do this, it uses the *Arabian Nights* as "an ancestor", especially the inclusive nature of the *Nights*, what Borges calls its labyrinthine quality. Githa says, "I love the story within a story format. It allows you to take a theme, in this case power and sexuality, and construct a series of Chinese boxes. You open one box to find another and another and another till your narrative has penetrated to the smallest box, the kernel of the matter... I wanted my novel to acknowledge the *Arabian Nights* as an ancestor, not as a model. All the stories in *When Dreams Travel* are my inventions and they have very real links with contemporary lives. Finally, what I wanted to do was create modern myths with the *Arabian Nights* as my point of departure.



*In Times of Siege* (2003), perhaps the most acclaimed of her novels, deals with how one handles one's cultural past, which is most relevant in the present times when even at the slightest provocation, communities clash, citing something that they claim to be their legacy, which really has no significance now, in its archaic form. Ostensibly, it is about a Professor of History in a Distance Education University who writes a lesson on the 12<sup>th</sup> century saint-poet and social reformer Basavanna of Karnataka.

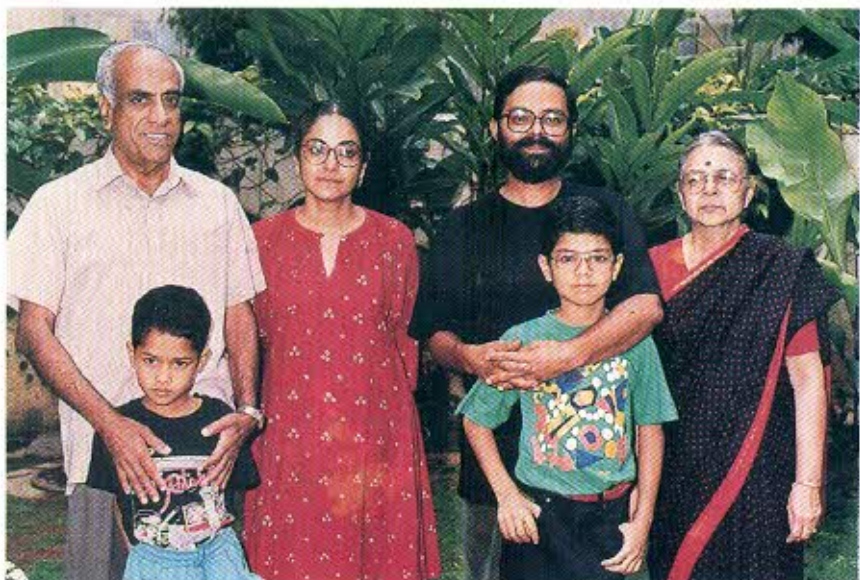
"Hariharan writes with anguish, pain and anger, about what is happening in our country. I put *In Times of Siege* on top of my list of books that must be read", says Khuswant

Singh in his column in *The Hinduistan Times*.

*In Times of Siege* has been a huge success in the West, although Githa Hariharan's earlier works have also been accepted well abroad. The thinking western reader seems not to fail to get right down to the crux of the work. Caroline Leavitt, writes about the book in *The Washington Post*: "Does the past create the future, or can we make up the past we need, to get the future we want? That's the question George Orwell addressed in his classic *1984*, and the one Githa Hariharan revises in her wonderfully sly and subversive allegory, *In Times of Siege*. (...) Offering up fascinating details about Indian history, *In Times of Siege* is heartbreakingly funny, moving and as relevant as today's headlines."

Her next book was a collection of stories for children, *The Winning Team* (2004). She has also edited *A Southern Harvest*, a volume of stories in English translation from four major South Indian languages, and co-edited a collection of stories for Indian children, *Sorry, Best Friend!* Githa's work has been translated into French, Spanish, Italian, Dutch, Greek, Urdu and Malayalam.

About Indian English



With Family



Inaugurating a Book Festival at Springdales School, Delhi

writing, Githa Hariharan has interesting observations to make: "Within India the official line on representation seems to often get reduced to writing in English versus other Indian languages. The English vs. the other Indian languages discussion — and I'm not going to say controversy or quarrel — has not been taken to a second phase. I don't think it is very interesting or useful to go on and on about how Indian writers in English get more attention and so on. Obviously, there is a relationship between English and power; Indian academics in English get more attention, so do papers and TV news channels in English — it is like saying the upper class gets more attention. So it is something you should acknowledge quickly and move on to more interesting issues: such as what are some of the ways we can actually not throw out English but counterbalance it with more attention to other languages, more ways of sharing power."

Apart from being a writer, Githa Hariharan's role as a social activist is accentuated by the case she filed in the Supreme Court of India, by which the right of a woman to be the natural guardian of her minor children was established in a landmark judgement in 1999.

Githa Hariharan publishes short stories, essays and features

in national and international publications of repute. She has also held readings and delivered lectures at Universities and important cultural centres around the world. Recipient of the Commonwealth Writers Prize, Senior Fellowship of the HRD Ministry, Govt. of India etc, she was also Montgomery Fellow, Dartmouth College, USA, Charles Wallace Writer in Residence, University of Kent, Canterbury, Kent, UK, and Writer in Residence at Hedgebrook Retreat for Women Writers, Washington State, USA; she underwent Writer's residency at the Rockefeller Foundation's Study and Conference Centre at Belagio, Italy. She has been jury member for important literary prizes and awards.

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Speaking at a function in Goa

## A Select Bibliography

### Novels

- The Thousand Faces of Night*, Penguin India, 1992; The Women's Press, UK 1996; (In Translation) Editions Zoe, Switzerland 1996; Van Gennep, Netherlands 1996; Ediciones del Bronce, Spain 2000; Philippe Picquier, France, 2006.
- The Ghosts of Vasu Master*, Viking, Penguin India, 1994.
- When Dreams Travel*, Picador UK, Picador India, 1999, Empiria, Greece 2001.
- In Times of Siege*, Viking, Penguin India 2003, Pantheon, New York, 2003, Vintage, New York, 2004. (In Translation) Mashal Books, Lahore, 2004, Editions Zoe, Switzerland, 2006, Il

Saggiatore, Milan (forthcoming), DC Books, Kottayam, Kerala, (forthcoming), Rajkamal, New Delhi, (forthcoming).

### Short Stories

*The Art of Dying and Other Stories*, Penguin India, 1993.

### Children's Literature

- Sorry, Best Friend!* (co-edited with Shama Futehally), stories for children, Tulika, Chennai, 1997.
- The Winning Team*, Rupa, New Delhi, October 2004.

### Edited Works

*A Southern Harvest* (ed.), Katha-Rupa, New Delhi, 1993.



At Internationale Literaturtage, Erlangen, Germany, in October 1997

## Chronology

- |         |  |                             |  |
|---------|--|-----------------------------|--|
| 1954    | Born in Coimbatore, Tamilnadu                            | University, Connecticut, US |  |
| 1957-67 | Educated in Mumbai                                       | 1978-84                     | Worked in publishing in Mumbai, Madras and Delhi |
| 1967-72 | Educated in Manila                                       | 1982                        | Married Dr Mohan Rao                             |
| 1974    | B.A. (Hons.) in English Literature, University of Bombay | 1984                        | Son Rishab was born                              |
| 1977    | M.A. in Communications Media, Fairfield                  | 1985                        | Began writing her first novel                    |
|         |  | 1987                        | Son Nishad was born                              |



Neustadt International Prize for Literature, 1994 Jury  
 Standing L to R: Alan Cheuse, Wlad Godzich, Zoya Boguslavskaya,  
 JM Coetzee, Angel González, Nuruddin Farah  
 Seated L to R: Chris Wallace-Crabbe, Githa Hariharan, Djelal Kadir,  
 Elli Peonidou, Kofi Awoonor

- |      |   |      |   |
|------|---|------|---|
| 1992 | First novel, <i>The Thousand Faces of Night</i> published                               |      | Neemrana, Rajasthan   |
| 1993 | <i>The Art of Dying</i> published. Attended Commonwealth Writers Prize week, Singapore  |      | —Special lecture, Graduate School of Literature and Literary Theory, Blekinge Institute of Technology, Karlskrona, Sweden   |
| 1994 | <i>The Ghosts of Vasu Master</i> published;   | 2003 | <i>In Times of Siege</i> published  |
| 1995 | Charles Wallace Writer-in-Residence, University of Kent, Canterbury, England            |      | —Jury member, Public Hearing on Girl Child Labour, Mysore; Panel organizer and participant, “Voices of Resistance: Real Lives, Imagined Lives,” House of World Cultures, Berlin |
| 1996 | Senior Fellowship in Literature, Government of India                                    |      | —Readings and panel discussions, Japan-India Writers Caravan, Tokyo and Yamagata  |
| 1997 | Commonwealth Writers Prize.   |      | <i>The Winning Team</i> published; World Literature Residency, George Washington University, USA  |
| 1998 | Conference in House of World Cultures, Berlin   |      | 2003-06   |
| 1999 | <i>When Dreams Travel</i> published.  | 2004 | Wrote a monthly column called “Second Thoughts” for the <i>Telegraph</i> , Kolkata  |
|      | —Supreme Court judgement on writ petition filed challenging the Hindu Guardianship Act. |      | 2006  |
| 2000 | Lecture at the University of Cyprus and readings in Nicosia.                            |      | 2006  |
| 2002 | Panel discussions, “At Home in the World”: International Festival of Indian Literature, |      | Member, Board of Trustees, India Foundation for the Arts  |