

An analysis of the women characters - Rukmini and Nandini in the novel *The Collector's wife* by Mitra Phukan.

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Abstract: Literature from the Northeast India has reflected the realities, challenges of their region. The issues related to politics and insurgency have been the backdrop of most writings. The recent body of works apart from depicting the political unrest deals with other issues too. The women of this region have been the worst victims of such political unrest. The ugly picture of Politics and insurgency is that they have turned the world of women upside down. Issues of Politics and insurgency are somehow inseparable from women's lives. Mitra Phukan in her novel *The Collector's Wife* portrays the plight of women when they become the victims of insurgency apart from the social customs, traditions, norms. The projection of woman in search of new identity, facing adversaries, surviving is some of the new emerging themes apart from the existing themes on the region's political unrest, bloodshed and so on. This paper is an attempt to analyse the characters - Rukmini and Nandini amidst the backdrop of political unrest and being victims to it.

Keywords: *insurgency, violence, customs, identity.*

Introduction

North-east literature, the emerging literature is one of the new bodies of work. It has gained recognition for its different themes. It abounds in stories from the political unrest, insurgency, bloodshed and so on. The contemporary writers from this region have focused on diverse issues too, which were not in the limelight before. But, in most of the writings, the political scenario remains as a backdrop.

Assam has also seen a rise in the category of women writers writing in English. One of the prolific writers is Mitra Phukan. She is one of the well-known literary voices from Assam. She dons multiple hats as an author, translator, and also a columnist. She is also a trained classical singer. She has contributed to the children's literature and has won the UNICEF-CBT for her work *Mamoni's Adventures*. Novels like '*The Collector's wife*', '*A Monsoon of Music*', '*A Full Night's Thievery*' have added to the realm of literature.

The Collector's wife

The novel *The Collector's wife* can perhaps be read from the concept of 'Gynocriticism.' Elaine Showalter introduced the term in *Towards a Feminist Poetics*. Basically, the term 'Gynocriticism' deals with having "a female framework for the analysis of women's literature". The representation of female characters in the writings of women is the main concern. The novel *The Collector's wife* is written by a female writer Mitra Phukan and has focused more on her female characters, the

protagonist Rukmini, Nandini Deuri and so on. The narration is also from the perspective of Rukmini. She is portrayed as the opposite of a conservative stereotypical Assamese woman. The story revolves around the protagonist Rukmini. As the name of the novel itself suggests, she is the wife of SiddharthBezbaruah who happens to be the District Collector of the imaginary town called Parbatpuri. She teaches English literature at a local college on a temporary basis.

The Collector's wife is set in an imaginary place Parbatpuri in Assam. It is based on the Assam Student's agitation of the 1970's and 1980's. A movement which began in search of identity when the huge influx of illegal immigrants posed grave dangers to the identity of the people of Assam. This movement then took the shape of insurgency leading to abductions, extortions, killings and political unrest. This scenario is presented in the novel, 'Every week, reports of fresh incidents of extortion or looting, or gunning down unarmed citizenry, appeared in papers.' The ugly picture of insurgency and its adverse effects on the characters can be seen as the novel unfolds. Amidst the backdrop of insurgency, Mitra Phukan draws on a picture of the society where the social customs and norms often troubles a woman emotionally and psychologically. Phukan very skillfully describes the personal conflicts and the efforts of the different woman characters, their journey to become liberated, emancipated and the struggle to achieve an identity of their own.

Rukmini

The novelist begins her novel with the description of a wedding which the protagonist, Rukmini attends. The character Rukmini represents the modern educated urban woman. She is mistaken to be unmarried by the elderly woman as she seems not to follow the traditional image of a Hindu married woman. She doesn't seem to abide by such norms as vermilion is not visible on her forehead. As the bride, Rita intervenes and informs them about her marital status their reaction is of disappointment,

"Married! Their looks of astonishment rapidly changed to disapproval. They scanned Rukmini's

head for signs of vermilion powder, found none, and arched their eyebrows as they look in her loose, wavy shoulder-length hair."(14)

For Rukmini, the vermilion should not be the base to symbolize a woman as a wife. Every community have different customs and it is sad to say that its mostly meant for women. They have to face discrimination in the name of customs, norms set by the society for women. When the elderly women came to know that Rukmini is childless for ten years, they are quick to assign her to the category of a barren woman. They treat her as inauspicious and restrict her to touch the bride. One of them even comments on the changing times as she recalls that during her days a bride was kept away even from a barren woman's shadow.

The narrator depicts that it's not just men who perpetrates the norms and beliefs of patriarchy but it's the women also, especially the elderly women. Internalization and fostering of the patriarchal social norms can be seen through the characters of the elderly women. Rukmini is portrayed as a woman having self-restraint as her reaction is quite normal during this uncomfortable episode. She seems to be a strong and practical woman which is evident from her actions as she stands up quickly but is also careful not to touch the bride and without creating a scene tells Rita that she understands and manages a little laugh and walks away. She turns out to be a very sensible woman who managed the situation tactfully.

Rukmini, though handled the situation normally but this incident had a great impact on her mind. Deep down she was affected by what had transpired then. The voices of the elderly women echoed in her head for a long time. Her feeling of resentment and agitation is stated in the novel thus,

"She had felt, not hurt, but angry. Angry that they, smug in their own fecundity, surrounded,

probably, by at least half a dozen children each, should dare to even assume that she, childless, was inferior. Flawed." (41)

Dr. Rabha's report that she won't be able bear any children added to her distress. Rukmini is not deterred though but searches for solutions in the recent developments of science. She is presented as an educated, independent woman who trusts the modern scientific aids. Her husband, Siddharth doesn't seem to take any interest in her distress. He is a workaholic and indifferent towards her. Throughout the novel, there is a sense of loneliness that surrounds the protagonist Rukmini. She, being the Deputy Collector's wife, her house is situated on a hilltop, far away from the city. She doesn't have many friends and her teaching job too is not permanent. She is unable to go in for a permanent job due to her husband's transferable job. Though she is engaged in teaching English Literature in a college but isn't keen on it. She is dissatisfied as the students aren't even able to speak the language grammatically correct. But she wants freedom, an identity of her own: "I can't be a total housewife...I have to do something".(116) She finds it quite boring to stay alone throughout the day in a big house with the servants, supervising their chores. But, "she decided to do something positive"(194) and so she is keeping herself engaged even though halfheartedly. She wishes to change her job.

She does have a desire to go into advertising or journalism but unable to bring it into reality due to her husband's transferable job. Her wish for this profession is an example of her modern outlook and also projects her desire to have her own identity. But it was only after a chance meeting with Manoj Mahanta her life started to change. Learning to use the typewriter is the first nascent step that she took and acquiring the skill in a month is commendable. She started composing and typing out letters to the Editor column in one of the prominent English dailies, The Parbatpuri Herald. Her new borne habit found its way in the weekly letters to her parents instead of the handwritten one. She started to be more creative and "Each week, as she twirled the finished letter off the machine, she felt a sense of satisfaction," (198) also sending resumes for jobs where she would be satisfied working. She tries to find a purpose in her life and in her later part of her life she is portrayed as an emancipated and a liberated woman. She feels alive in the company of Manoj Mahanta.

Rukmini also becomes the victim of state violence. The student's movement, abduction, extortion, killing, fight for an independent homeland by the extremist group, Movement for an exclusive Homeland, known as MOFEH is active in Parbatpuri. Rukmini's personal life is interlinked with the political unrest in the place. The fear and uncertainty after every incident in the place affect the protagonist's life. MOFEH's violent insurgency which forms the backdrop adversely affects her life. During an agitation by her students against the illegal immigration, she is wounded. The violence is depicted as,

.....The stone continued on its trajectory. Jagged and sharp, she saw it coming towards them, rolling forward head over heels on its longitudinal axis like a meteorite homing in on one planet below. It moved over Manoj's and Rukmini's heads as they continued to race forward.....there was a sudden flare of pain above her right eyebrow.(217)

She falls unconscious and when she wakes up, finds herself in a hospital. Undergoing several medical tests leads her to the discovery of her pregnancy. She realizes she is pregnant with Manoj Mahanta's baby. Realization dawned on her about the biased report of Dr. Rabha who is a friend of her husband, Siddharth. She is strong enough to face and discuss with her husband, his infidelity with Priyam and as well as her incident with Manoj Mahanta and about her pregnancy. Rukmini decides against abortion even if her marriage falls apart. Rukmini's decision to embrace motherhood even if it means losing the status of the District Collector's wife somehow finding her self-identity. Phukan through Rukmini's decision glorifies motherhood. She can be seen as a rebellious liberated woman whose struggle is to achieve an identity of her own.

The news of abduction of Manoj Mahanta by MOFEH for a huge ransom doesn't break Rukmini instead she thinks of his safety. But her whole world collapses when she gets to know that the two important men of her life have lost their life. Both of them died during an encounter between the insurgents and the police. Rukmini is unable to come to terms that her husband has been shot down

and that “many bullets had pierced his body” (332). She refuses to see the body of her husband. These two personal losses are huge and tragic for Rukmini. Her situation is painful as depicted in the novel,

“Rukmini is dumbfounded; her mind is cloudy like the sky outside. She feels neither grief nor pain, only a strange kind of numbness.” (345)

Suddenly, the feeling of agony, insecurity, loneliness engulfs her. She is shattered, feels for her unborn baby and cries as the unborn baby is now deprived of two fathers at the same time. The one who is biological and the other adoptive both killed at almost the same time. She also cries for the two men who had been an integral part of her life. One died unaware that he was going to be a father and the other ‘who had been prepared to be a father to an unborn child, not his.’ (348)

The insurgency has suddenly shaken the very existence of Rukmini shattering her world. The novelist, towards the end portrays her as a courageous woman who rises like a ‘Phoenix’ to face the reality. The blood-stained body of her husband is asked to be brought inside the bedroom. She faces her two tragic losses at the same time courageously. Her singing of an elegy for all the innocent victims is an expression of her revolt against insurgency which victimizes the common people but woman in particular.

The novelist, Mitra Phukan, hints at Rukmini’s future career as a creative writer. Rukmini’s new identity as a creative writer would somehow overpower her present identity/ status as the Collector’s wife or his widow and liberate her. Rukmini is depicted as a modern, educated, strong willed, courageous, rebellious, emancipated woman by Mitra Phukan.

Mitra Phukan, through yet another incident portrays the cruelty of insurgents on woman. The wife of the Manager of Bagkhuli Tea Estate is another victim of insurgency. The demand for huge ransom by the insurgents is refused by the manager and so in return they have been murdered brutally, tied to the bedposts before shooting them. The manager’s wife was “raped before she was shot. Repeatedly. In front of her husband!” (26)

Nandini Deuri

Nandini Deuri, in this novel is portrayed as the wife of Hrisikesh Deuri who is the Superintendent of Police of Parbatpuri and is a mother to three children. An image of a traditional Indian woman. She is portrayed as a dutiful wife and a loving and responsible mother who looks after the household chores mostly by herself in spite of having a lot of domestic help. She is unlike other police officer’s wife. She doesn’t leave her work exclusively to them. She wakes up early around five every morning to “supervise the milking and feeding of her cows, and never went to bed before eleven-thirty at night.... She scorned afternoon naps, preferring to spend her time gainfully, making *mithai* and *ghee* from the buckets of milk that her cows provided, morning and evening” (165).

Nandini Deuri is projected as a happy, contented woman within her domestic sphere. She is the image of the typical Indian married woman,

“A huge red bindi rested in the middle of her forehead, making a definite statement, and a not-to-be- ignored streak of vermillion always ran down her centre parting, like a ripple of blood” (165).

She always wears gold jewellery. She is also the typical Indian wife who hesitates to take her husband’s name. It is evident when Nandini refers to the surname of her husband in front of Rukmini,

“I have to rush home. The children have been pestering their father to take them out for a meal at that new Chinese restaurant.... Deuri has agreed to take us today-they must be waiting for me. Deuri has managed an evening free after a long time” (167).

Nandini Deuri too becomes a victim of insurgency by the MOFEH outfit at Parbatpuri. Her husband, Hrishikesh Deuri is gunned down right in front of her eyes during their marriage anniversary celebration in a restaurant. Nandini is left shellshocked at the horror, sitting motionless with her children around the table. She waits alone for the doctor and the police to arrive without anyone by

her side till Rukmini arrives. With tearful eyes, disoriented broken words she speaks of the incident still unable to fully comprehend the full magnitude of the horror,

“...So sudden. We were laughing-we were just beginning to eat... Deuri was sitting there, just opposite the door that leads outside-he seemed to see something, I mean he stopped laughing, and his eyes, they became frightened. I turned around but I could see a hand with a gun, coming out from the door-I saw a finger press on the trigger, yes, I saw it distinctly. There was a terrible sound. When I looked back again, Deuri wasn't anywhere. He was on the floor...With a tear-stained convulsive face Nandini utters, “It was our anniversary, you know. Our fifteen wedding....” (172)

Nandini shows a range of emotions which brings out her complete helplessness. She is traumatized at the horror that happened in a matter of seconds right in front of her eyes. But she comes out to be a strong character after her husband's death. A woman completely dependent on her husband till her husband was alive becomes strong, practical as she had the responsibility of running the household as well as the children's responsibility. She has to leave the official residence and move out. She makes up her mind to bear the responsibilities alone. She decides to go to her parents' house but only for a short span then rent a place to stay as she doesn't want to stay with her parents always and burden them. She decides to do something once her children are settled a bit.

Nandini represents the widowed woman who have the courage to start life afresh. She doesn't sit back and lead a life of a widow as is expected of her. But take the reins in her hands for the sake of her children's future. She is clear with her vision when she says,

“I'm not qualified enough. Not an M.A with a good percentage like you. Besides, I'm probably too old to get a new job. No. I want to set up something on my own. May be a small shop, or, perhaps, a bakery. I've always wanted to have a small bakery, full of specialty cakes and pastries.....I've always wanted to own a shop, be an entrepreneur, you know, but, of course, after marriage it wasn't possible. Now I'll need an income too...”(192)

The brutal killing of her husband by the MOFEH outfits does cripple her life for a while but she is a strong, practical woman. She carves a path for herself, for her own identity, starts a new life independently. Nandini says, “every woman, at some point of her life, is faced with having to make decisions of this kind”(301). She wants her children's future secured and so again she says, “I don't want to touch our savings, and the insurance money and the family pension that I got, that's for the children”(299).

Nandini had the courage to move out to the outer world instead of staying within the boundary. She is happy that she has created an identity for herself through her little shop,

“...The fact that I'm gradually being known as the lady who owns that place where they have those heavenly pastries. I'm thankful that the bakery is slowly, but definitely, beginning to erase my other identity” (210).

Nandini has become more practical, stronger after what she had gone through. She justifies her reason behind wishing to erase her other identity as,

“I was happy being Deuri's wife, sharing his life. But that was then. Now, with his death.... without this new me that I'm trying to create, I would have been known, forever, as that poor lady, the widow of that police officer who was killed in front of her eyes while they were celebrating their wedding ceremony, that level would have clung to me forever, and through me, to my children” (302).

Nandini Deuri, due to her prevailing circumstances have progressed from a dedicated housewife to becoming a courageous entrepreneur.

Conclusion

Mitra Phukan projects her female characters in her fictions as powerful, in search of identity, in search of emancipation and so on. Through her fictional world she has brought in different dimensions of a woman which was unexplored by an Assamese writer before. She has dealt with a wide range of feminine identities and emotions, various social and political issues. She advocates the idea of liberation of a woman through self-realization and search for an identity. She believes in having an independent identity. Through the characters Rukmini and Nandini the novelist has brought to the fore her ideas.

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