

REMAPPING THE POLITICAL AND THE PERSONAL SPACES IN MITRA PHUKAN'S *THE COLLECTOR'S WIFE*

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Abstract

*In a relatively short span of time, writings in English from North Eastern India have attained a legitimate and powerful voice by articulating their sense and sentiments, and focusing on some of the core contemporary issues of the region. Amidst the galaxy of fresh voices, Mitra Pukhan has emerged as one of the most powerful literary voices from Assam. Her debut novel *The Collector's Wife*, set against the Assam agitation of 1970s and 80s, is an authentic portrayal of political turmoil, social instability, trauma of insurgency and the resulting personal loss and devastation.*

This paper attempts to explore how the fragmented socio-political structures disrupt the personal spaces via analyzing Rukmini, the protagonist of the narrative. Pukhan intensely interweaves the bleak political backdrop and an equally dismal and barren personal life of the female protagonist. Rukmini is the District Collector's wife residing in Parbatpuri, a small town which is insurgency ridden. A young, educated and well-placed woman is torn between two horrifying and empty worlds. Her lonely and loveless life pushes her beyond conventional space to seek solace and fill out her physical and emotional vacuum. By tracing the journey of the protagonist, the paper seeks to further lay bare gruesome realities of a terror-stricken state to analyze how the wounded psyche nurtures a conscious voice of resistance as well as assertion.

Keywords: *political turmoil, personal space, resistance, assertion, insurgency.*

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Literature is the foundation of humanity's culture, belief and traditions. It serves as a reflection to human life. Since ages it has been the most influential medium of representation of human race. Indian English Fiction has created its imprints in literature with the changing social and cultural scenes. In a relatively short span of time at the turn of the twentieth century, writings in English from Northeast India began to emerge into the literary scene without a splash and with extreme modesty. Long overshadowed by the growing dominance of a 'mainstream India-centered' Indian writings in English, a new generation of Northeast writers with a new kind of sensibility and sensitivity attained a powerful and legitimate place in the contemporary literary sphere. With quicksilver imagination, supple language, rooted and contemporary, these writers have made sure that this is a literature that is here to stay boldly and beautifully, a distinctive literature which is socially more conscious and politically more sensitive.

Northeast India has been a witness to many forms of violence throughout history. In the context of a turbulent history of the region and the diversity of cultures, trauma has been articulated in many forms. The new literary genre of the region has become the voice and identity of the margins. It presents the contemporary ethnic and social conflicts of the Northeast region. D.P. Barooah writing about the predicament of the subaltern communities stated that "ethnicity does not necessarily have to give rise to violence and yet, one could easily manipulate ethnicity to throw people against one another" (vii).

The term Northeast India is the easternmost region of India representing both a geographical and political administrative division of the country. It comprises eight states – Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura. Many tribes and ethnic communities live in these eight states of Northeast India. All the states have gripping stories related to geographical, political, social, cultural and ecological issues. The new and the vibrant contemporary writing from the

Northeast draws a realistic and vivid portrayal of suffering, conflicts and crisis. According to Tilottoma Misra the writings reflect

...an intense sense of awareness of cultural loss and recovery that came with the negotiation with 'other' cultures ... Each small community or linguistic group has responded through its oral or written communication to the majoritarian cultures from either mainland India or from outside the borders of the country, in its own distinctive manners (Misra 3).

The present paper focuses on Mitra Phukan's debut novel *The Collector's Wife* and attempts to explore how the fragmented socio-political structures disrupt the personal spaces via analyzing *Rukmini*, the protagonist of the novel. Mitra Phukan is one of the most prominent literary voices in English from Northeast India. She is a noted Assamese writer, translator, columnist and trained classical vocalist. *The Collector's Wife* (2005) is one of the notable works that very intensely portrays the political turmoil, social instability, trauma of insurgency and the resulting personal loss and devastation.

It presents a realistic and painful picture of the turbulence of an insurgency and protest-ridden Assam. The narrative courses through the political agitations, kidnappings, extortions and students' demonstrations with the impact of such a strained environment on the personal lives of the Assam. Phukan tackled the issues of ethnic insurgency and resulting violence from the feminist's viewpoint. Through the protagonist's nerve-shattering experiences of students' violence against cross border infiltration, one witnesses the aftermath of the Assam's students' agitation of the 1970s and 80s, the resultant loss, pain, unrest, bloodshed, fear and many more gruesome realities of a terror-stricken state "especially here in Parbatpuri, now with all these horrible murders and kidnappings ..." (60). "Every week, reports of fresh incidents of extortion or looting, or of gunning down unarmed citizenry, appeared in the papers" (81).

The narrative revolves around Rukmini Bezboruah, a highly placed woman, wife of the District Collector Siddhartha residing in Parbatpuri town in the eastern most tip of Assam. She lives with her husband in a beautiful bungalow set high on a hill. "It was a

place of peace and beauty, startlingly at variance with the atmosphere just below, a different world from the files that dealt with cases of violence and murder that filled the office room beyond the garden” (68).

Rukmini is a well qualified modern woman, a part time lecturer in English in a private college and lives a luxurious life owing to her status of the District Collector’s wife. Apparently her life seems settled and safe, far away from the toil and suffering of the common folk living around her. However, on a deeper level, one comes across a lonely, unhappy and discontented soul who suffers much from the insecurities of her life. She and Siddharth have been married for ten years and they are still childless. The inability to become a mother deeply affects her personal and social life. She continuously turns to Siddharth for emotional companionship and solace but finds him constantly over busy with the administrative work-load. Her unfulfilled desire to have a child disturbs her family life and an extreme sense of barrenness overpowers her physical and emotional being “...As for sleeping together – they hadn’t shared a bed in months” (203). Phukan intensely interweaves the bleak political backdrop and an equally dismal and barren personal life of the female protagonist. A young, educated and well placed woman is torn between two horrifying and hollow worlds.

The terror and the surrounding unrest adversely affect the personal and social fronts of Rukmini and Siddharth . Amidst the disturbing situations they are forced to lead a dismal and gloomy life. Rukmini yearns for her husband’s companionship, love, and attention but due to the rising pressures of the bureaucratic work Siddharth gradually drifts away from her. Rukmini says satirically “... I think he sometimes forgets he even has a wife. His PA sees more of him than I do” (60).

Rukmini is deeply affected by the violent state of affairs around her. Each time there is an incident or sad happening in the district that brings fear and uncertainty in her personal life. The activities of the extremist group MOFEH have drastically changed every habit of the residents of Parbatpuri.

Parbatpuri was almost at the center of the most active insurgency in the area. Tension, palpable and omnipresent, strained even the most settled friendships. As for making new friends, it was almost impossible. There was an atmosphere of suspicion

everywhere. Nobody spoke their deepest thoughts aloud, nobody gave their opinions. People clammed up as soon as opinions were sought. And without the exchange of opinions and ideas, how could friendships be forged?(70).

With the rising insurgency the socio-political conditions got completely shattered. MOFEH's activities have terrorized both the administration as well as the common man. The whole town is in the grip of violence and terror right from the topmost ladder of bureaucracy to the common innocent man at the bottom. The failure, helplessness and frustration of the top most officials like the District Collector and the S.P. can be clearly seen when the personal driver of Rukmini is discovered to belong to MOFEH.

The attack and fatal end of the Police Superintendent Mr. Deuri shows the extent and intensity of violence and threat in the town. The brutal action shows the power and control of the militancy over the administration of Assam. So easily and freely the MOFEH manages to gun down the best police officer of the district, when he is busy in a family celebration. No one dares to speak out against the MOFEH brutality. Amartya Sen's theory on the idea of social justice directly relates to the increasing violence and terrorism in the Northeast India. He aptly says "...that the problem is most severe in the eastern states of India. The reason behind the problem is that the region is dominated by the tribal populations and they are sidelined by the country's development agenda"(web).

Rukmini and Siddharth are among the first that visit Nandini after her sudden widowhood. How difficult it becomes to eye witness the murder of one's own husband. All of a sudden the laughter and joys turned into tears and sufferings. Nandini recalls the tragic incident to Rukmini

So sudden. We were laughing—we were just beginning to eat . . . he seemed to see something, I mean he stopped laughing, and his eyes, they became, became frightened. I turned around but I could only see a hand with a gun, coming out from the door—I saw a finger press on the trigger, there was a terrible sound . . . he was on the floor. He didn't even speak. He looked at me, but, I think. . . God, what's happened! What! (172).

Rukmini's world too is pervaded by the ever-present threat and fear of violence. She finds it very difficult to breathe under surveillance and security.

With each new incident, the previous ones that had caused such furore, were all but forgotten. It seemed to Rukmini that the people of Parbatpuri had a memory recall of only a week or at most, ten days. The latest horror was discussed and commented upon from every possible angle. But when a fresh atrocity burst upon the town, the previous incident was forgotten with a promptitude that never failed to amaze her (82).

The brutal murder of her friend Nandini Deuri's husband Mr. Deuri, the S.P. of the town brings a severe jolt to Rukmini. She feels pathetically marginalized in such a space where violence and terror define the codes of personal and social relationships. She too starts worrying about her and Siddharth's safety amidst the violent insurgency that destroys human life, dreams and aspirations. She is deeply scared by the despair, anxiety and insecurity towards life. Rukmini feels a sense of dejection.

She was fed up anyway with sylvan greenery behind which bristled acres of AK-47s. She wanted to talk of something new and different, more than the gossip about fellow teachers . . . about the latest killing or the latest extortion demand. She was tired of all this, tired also of trying to have a baby with a husband who, in the past so many weeks, had not even touched her...(163).

The dramatic and fateful encounter with Manoj Mohanta, a tyre salesman in CTF Company brings a new meaning to Rukmini's life. Their blooming friendship brings joy and happiness to her monotonous state after a decade. The joy of companionship and physical intimacy brings excitement and completeness in her life. Rukmini gradually moves out of her shallow life to seek solace and fill her physical and emotional vacuum. "She felt quite at ease with this man. She hadn't felt this carefree in a long while. She felt as reckless as she had as a young girl, when life hadn't yet settled into its predictable grooves of small-town, middle-class living" (112).

The ever growing intimacy between Manoj and Rukmini is played against a web of terror and violence. The new bonding of their relationship and her one night stay with Manoj colors her faded existence as she gets pregnant. She realizes that the problem of

infertility is not with her but it is related to her husband. She ultimately feels relieved of the heavy burden of social expectations and the personal desire to be a mother. Her mother-in-law always wished “...Raise a family. It adds to the richness of life. At least that’s what I feel” (74).

Through the journey of Rukmini’s life Phukan illustrates the slogan ‘the personal is political.’ Rebecca Sultana comments “The novel reveals how the private space can be appropriated by the public as we discover the personal enmeshing into the political with tragic consequences” (1). Phukan presents the experiences and observations of the feminine world through the eyes of Rukmini whose life is constantly been thwarted by a sporadic violence and atrocity in the name of ethnic insurgency. Women suffer a lot over the loss and pain of their near and dear ones and face various forms of oppression, violation and insecurities. To quote Spivak “The women are victimized throughout modernity between the twin poles of neocolonialism and indigenous patriarchy...the figure of woman disappears not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shutting which is the displaced figuration of the third world women caught between tradition and modernization”(Spivak 306).

Rukmini emerges as non-conformist female who wants her freedom and liberty and achieves an identity of her own. She stands for her individuality and strives for her existential survival. The discovery of Siddharth’s extra marital affair with her colleague Priyam makes Rukmini frustrated and demoralized. But she accepts the reality and moves on positively “...her voice as normal as though the discovery of a husband’s faithlessness was an everyday affair” (275). She fearlessly and strongly accepts her relationship with Manoj in front of Siddharth. She is not at all ashamed of herself to reveal the truth that she is having in her womb, a child whose father is not her husband. Phukan presents her protagonist as an unconventional, liberal transgressor who moves beyond her defined marital bonds and feels quite happy and comfortable. Rukmini emerges as strong, confident and liberated soul. When Siddharth talks about aborting the child she in a very impulsively replies “...I have no idea what I’ll do, how I’ll raise this baby. But I’m going ahead anyway...Even if it costs me my marriage...I am going ahead. I’m having the baby” (315).

Phukan very skillfully weaves Rukmini's personal agonies and sufferings with the present socio-political realities of Northeast region. Oblivious of the future threats Rukmini enjoys the warmth and emotional freedom but the sudden abduction of Manoj reminds her of the ever-present threat of violence and death. The news makes her feel completely broken and her all dreams are shattered as she faces the dark and stern reality of Manoj's kidnapping. Siddharth takes the responsibility of rescuing Manoj from the insurgents. But the final collapse of the personal and the political spaces in Rukmini's life emerges in the unfortunate deaths of both Manoj and Siddharth in a terrorists encounter. Rukmini's entire world bursts like an empty bubble and she is left with absolutely nothing. "Her mind was cloudy like the sky outside. She felt neither grief nor pain, only a strange kind of numbness" (347).

The novel ends on a very sad and heart touching note by Rukmini. She laments for the people who are victimized by the hatred and abomination of insurgents and terrorists. She grieves over her ironical state "Tears for two men. One who had died, not knowing that he was going to be a father. And another who had been prepared to be a father to an unborn child, not his" (349).

It is high time for Northeast India to do away with the pervaded violence and terrorism and restore peace and harmony in the region. Phukan's narrative in a way offers an antidote for violence and tries to restore sanity in a world of disorderliness. The desired peace that we are vehemently searching for is scripted in our beings. "Justice must be more concerned with the elimination of removable injustices rather than defining a perfectly just society" (Web. Sen).

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