

# Crossing the Thresholds: The Portrait of Rukmini as a New Woman in Mitra Phukan's the Collector's Wife

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**Abstract-** According to the belief system of conventional Indian patriarchal culture, the roles of women are firmly entrenched with the notions of chastity and motherhood. A woman is never considered as a life partner, who shares her life with her male counterpart. Rather, she is looked down as an unpaid servant, or a mere sex object who has to weigh down and take responsibilities for an entire family. She is always commodified as an asset which is transferred from the hands of her father to her husband. She is indebted to look after the children and a full grown male who couldn't look after himself. Several Indian women authors have incarcerated this double standard of the misogynist, patriarchal Indian society in their works. The predicament of their fellow females who are suffering under this gender biased system has prompted the women authors like Kamala Das, Arundhati Roy, Shashi Deshpande and Kamala Markandeya etc to fight against mainstream patriarchal Indian society. North East Indian women authors have also tried to highlight the predicaments of women through their literary works. Mitra Phukan, an Assamese writer, in her work *The Collector's Life* has reflected the attempts made by the lead protagonist Rukmini to attain individuality and freedom from her security bound, disciplined, lonely life. At the fag end of the novel she transforms herself from a dutiful wife to a new woman who bravely stands against the traditional notions of chastity and purity. My paper seeks to analyze the journey of Rukmini from the self proclaimed loneliness to the actualization of her own identity and individuality as a woman.

**Keywords-** Patriarchy; Commodification; Misogynist; Female Predicament; Mitra Phukan; Individuality; Freedom;

The North East Indian literature, which is often accused of solely concerned with the portrayal of violence and conflicts, takes a different turn with Mitra Phukan's *The Collector's Wife*. Women writers from North East India such as Tamsila Ao, Easterine Kire Iralu, Indira Goswami and Anjum Hasan have all written about the conflict of being 'the other' in a masculine, misogynist society. In the novel *The Collector's Wife*, though the presence of socio-political conflicts can be felt throughout, it more visibly depicts the situation of women belonging to the ethnic minorities in North East India. The political and the personal life of the central character, Rukmini is perfectly juxtaposed by the novelist. She highlights the double marginalization faced by women of North Eastern states; on account of their ethnic status and also their gender. She explores the psychological and gender based oppression faced by the women of North East Indian states. As Simon De Beauvoir says "The situation of woman is that she – a free and autonomous being like all creatures – nevertheless finds herself living in a world when men compel her to assume the status of the other". (17) Mitra Phukan's *The Collector's Wife* has explored such a construction of gender, which leads women to experiences of alienation and isolation.

Mitra Phukan is a prominent columnist, novelist, vocalist and children's writer from Assam writing in English. She has two novels, *The Collector's Wife* and *A Monsoon of*

*Music*, four children's book and some other minor works to her credit. Her acclaimed novel *The Collector's Wife* probes into the a plight of the titular character, Rukmini Bezbaruah, along with the details of other issues like, Assam agitation, students' movement, immigration and insurgency. The central character of the novel, Rukmini lives a secluded life unlike her bureaucrat husband. Rukmini is the wife of Siddhartha, the District Collector and is an upper caste woman living in a small village called Parbatpuri in Assam. Rukmini is the product of an English Medium convent school and she teaches English literature in a local college. As the wife of the District collector, she is respected in the socio-cultural milieu. But often she is harassed by the public for being barren. Instead of showing concern for an agonized lonely woman, the society adds more fuel to the fire that is burning within her. When she attends the wedding party of her colleague, Rita, she gets tormented by other women for her presence at the wedding "What times we are living through! In my days even the shadow of barren woman wasn't allowed to fall on the bride" (15). Author here mirrors the social predicament of women in Indian life that offers little choice for a woman who yearns for mere happiness and respect. As Lynne Segal rightly observes "a woman in a male dominated society is thus conditioned into emotional and cognitive traits of subordination and dependence". (82) Even Rukmini's life schedule was determined by her

husband's social position. Classes were assigned to her from eleven to one, "in deference to her husband's exalted position in the town" (17). She couldn't obtain a permanent job as she was obliged to move with her husband whenever he got a transfer. Her sole aim of sticking to the job, in which she was least interested, was just to secure the interests of her husband. Also, her job was somehow helping her "shed the persona of The DC's Wife" (28). Even her social position didn't help her to establish a healthy relationship with the common people, where the notion of being a woman was defined in the terms of her capability to produce children. The people around her hesitated even to talk to her because of her barrenness. Mitra Phukan narrates this situation in the following way: "Her very own identity dependent on her ability or otherwise, to contribute a brood of children to a waiting world". (41)

When her in-laws searched for a wife for Siddharth they just wanted, a highly educated, well - cultured, trophy wife who could be an asset to him as he climbs up the rungs of his occupation. They wanted someone who would shed all her personality just to be a wife for their offspring. Her husband's demanding life schedule makes her a social recluse in that huge town. Due to the nature of her husband's job it was always impractical for her to have contacts. For others, she was a lucky wife, the wife of the District Collector; well settled and safe under the protection of her bureaucrat husband and his security forces. However she was living a life filled with despondency and loneliness. To showcase the inner loneliness endured by Rukmini, Mitra deploys the metaphor of a Cuckoo, who has fallen silent because of the unresponsive call of her mate. Likewise, Rukmini is gradually growing silent, due to the mental distance between her and her uninterested husband. He always brooded over his professional life and had forgotten his responsibilities and duties as a husband towards Rukmini. He was not a loquacious person. Whenever Rukmini tried to open up a conversation, he managed to divert his attention to something else and it left her to utter loneliness. "In any case, her desire to talk to somebody, who could listen sympathetically, without judgement, was gradually seeping away." (154)

She was forced to ignore her own needs, wishes or even her individuality for the sake of her husband and it became the prime reason for their physical and mental separation. All these struggles for recognition and existence compelled her bit by bit to have an illicit affair with Manoj Mehanta, the manager of CTF Tyre Company, whom she had met at a wedding. He was a friend, or a better companion to her with whom she was quite comfortable. Mitra describes the change of attitude in Rukmini with the arrival of this new companion in the following words,

"Rukmini caught the mood. Sudden for no reason, she felt happy. The heaviness in her mind, which, over the last few weeks, had communicated itself to her limbs, lifted as swiftly as the winter mist on the Red River before the rays of the sun." (207)

In a patriarchal society where women are obliged to keep their marital bond divine and strong, even looking at a stranger was considered a sin. But Rukmini breaks it by having an extramarital affair with Manoj. She becomes pregnant with his child. Finally when she is able to enjoy this unexpected motherhood, she comes to the realisation that Manoj has been kidnapped by an insurgent group during his visit to a tea planter. However this relationship had given her an identity as she was no more a barren woman. She also became aware of her rights as a woman. More than being the other of someone, she used the opportunity to traverse her gender identity and it brought her to self realisation.

This new bliss of motherhood gifts extraordinary courage to Rukmini. She confronts Siddharth and talks to him about her relationship with Manoj. When Siddharth asks her the reason for her conduct, she replies to him that it is, "Loneliness", companionship. A shared sense of what appealed to our sense of humour. He was - is lonely too"(313) She also lets him know that she is pregnant with Manoj's baby and also her determination to have the baby with or without his consent. It doesn't matter to her who the father is. What matters to her is the fact that she has proved that she is no more a barren woman. Readers can see the emergence of a new woman in Rukmini when she says to Siddharth that,

"I know I've never really been very decisive about anything. But on this I'm firm, I'm having this baby. Not because I'm in love with Manoj, or anything like that. I'm not. I like him a lot, but getting married to him – no. In any case, he doesn't even know about the baby. Of course going ahead will be... I have no idea what I'll do, how I'll raise this baby, but – I'm going ahead, anyway."(315)

She lets him know her firmness regarding this matter and adds, "Even if it costs me my marriage". (315) The relationship with Manoj thus transforms her into a free thinking woman. She also decides to leave her teaching job and applies for a job interview in the advertisement field, supposedly, her dream job of independence. Thus the author skilfully portrays the transformation of an obedient, self sacrificing, caring wife of a District Collector into a free thinking, independent, self- righteous, and secured woman. At the fag end of the novel the readers come to a horrifying realisation that both men in Rukmini's life, Siddharth and Manoj had died in an encounter with the insurgents. Thus her child is going to be born without her/ his fathers. Certainly, this incident will make Rukmini capable to get rid of a life of mere existence, struggle and gender oppression.

Mitra Phukan's *The Collector's Wife* is a masterpiece which depicts female alienation as it carefully examines and explores the despair and disappointment that emerges out of an upper class, educated woman living in Parbatpuri. Her isolation caused by the seemingly emotional detachment from her husband forces her to create a bubble of self alienation. She neither gains the pleasure of conjugal life nor the access to complexities of social interaction. Her husband's social status and the

socio-political circumstances of Assam, forbids her from interacting with other members of the society. The insurgency ripened hills invades her life like a disease and silences her further. Though the resolution of the novel might appear jarring to the readers; it's the demise of her husband and her lover that frees her from the fetters of social estrangement. Thus the protagonist, Rukmini undertakes a journey from self- alienation to self identification. Mitra Phukan explored how the protagonist transforms from her alienation to a becoming based on her natural belonging.

### Works Cited

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