

**The Portrayal of the Political and Inner Turmoil from the
Perspective of Rukmini in MitraPhukan's *The Collector's Wife***

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Abstract:

This paper attempts to exhibit the agitation, people face in their day to day life through terror, insurgency, violence, exploitation in northeast India which nobody can ever ignore. These are all the common themes reflected in North-East Indian writings. However, the writers from their place never state anything inappropriate. They expose everything irrespective of virtue and vice. The novel, *The Collector's Wife*, brings out the problematic political situation, exploitation, kidnappings and the hopeless situation of the people in a small town of Assam called Parbatpuri. MitraPhukan's character Rukmimi, being the wife of the District Collector, undergoes numerous conflicts in her life. She struggles both inwardly and outwardly longing to lead a peaceful life, thrives to stay happy yet is desolated.

Keywords: agitation, exploitation, problematic, hopeless

Dr.Ananya S. Guhain's work, *Violence and Literature – Realities of North East India* rightly points out the present scenario of North East India. He further states,

Much of the discussion today in the literature of North-East India focuses on violence as a thematic interest. The literature of North East India which has gained a lot of ascendancy in the last three decades and especially in the last one and a half decades has shown a glut of interest in the remaining parts of the country due to this 'new' ontology and cult of violence (Ananya).

MitraPhukan, a popular writer, translator, columnist and trained vocalist has published children's books, short stories and novels. Her works reflect the themes of death and violence. *The Collector's Wife* revolves around the character RukminiBezboruah. The author throws light on the inner conflicts as well as the

political agitation that prevails in the fictional town of Parbatpuri, from the perspective of Rukmini, the protagonist.

The first reason for her inner turmoil is “Isolation”. Being the wife of a District Collector, she craves for her husband’s companionship yet she gains only seclusion. To avoid that and to while away the time, she even joins in a college as lecturer. She feels neglected and alienated in the hilltop residence. There were only a few officials’ houses and with those people she didn’t have much connection. Besides Rukmini’s mother-in-law, RenuBezboruahrightly points out the secluded atmosphere which her daughter-in-law encounters while she is in her residence. She says,

How quiet it is here. There’s no sound of traffic, no voices, nothing. It’s a beautiful place, but isn’t it a bit isolated? I mean, don’t you feel cut off from life up here?” Rukmini looked at her mother-in-law with surprise. That was exactly how she often felt, especially during the long, lonely evenings and empty nights when Siddharth was away, or busy. (CW 69)

Rukmini is not able to live a full-fledged life that she always craved for. Her husband Mr.SiddharthBezboruah, lives a busy life, spends little time with Rukmini. She seeks solace from nature listening to the “cooing of a koel” (CW 21)and “views of surrounding landscape”(CW 19). Political instability is also the cause of Siddharth’s work pressure. His table is loaded with khaki files whenever he is at home. The recent murder of the manager of Bhaghkuli Tea Estate and his wife gets him into more stress. If he is at his residence, he is fully occupied with his official duties.

The compound was full of vehicles, many of them with the red light of officialdom atop them. Several petitioners had already got wind of the DC’s arrival, even before his wife had. They hovered around the entrance to the office in the eastern wing of the house, where Siddharth often worked when he was at home(CW 44).

Rukmini has the notion of her husband’s disregard towards her is because of his work pressure. Eventually, the fact is revealed when she discovers her husband’s relationship with one of her colleagues, PriyamDeka, whom she thinks to be her friend. Rukmini feels desolated and depressed by his negligence towards her. She states,

Pressure of work she had assumed foolishly, was what had made Siddharth uninterested in her, lately. Having to deal with violent and unnatural deaths constantly, with the repugnant underbelly of a terrorist-infested district had in some way, she had thought, emasculated him. And she had been, for the most part, understanding. But obviously, his reason for not coming near his wife had been a different one. (CW 259,260)

The second reason for the protagonist's inner agitation is her "Barrenness". She always finds it troublesome when she exhibits herself in any public events. She has been facing so many embarrassing moments since the day she got married. When Rukmini visited the wedding reception of her colleague, Rita, she met three elderly ladies and they inquired and humiliated her for her presence in an auspicious occasion. One among the elderly women remarked, "What times we are living through! In my days, even the shadow of a barren woman wasn't allowed to fall on a bride" (CW 15). This statement by the elderly woman shatters her. It pricked her inside yet it is not new for her. She has met with many such situations.

Rukmini and Siddharth have visited the fertility clinic in Guwahati to cure her malady, "barrenness". She decides to take fertility drugs. But it does not affect her husband much. She is ignored by her husband who is not bothered about her emotional feelings. He neither intervenes on these medical issues nor discusses her present situation in Parbatpuri. It is she who has the burden of giving birth to a child for Siddharth, as her husband is the only son for his parents. On the other hand, Renu Bezboruah, Siddharth's mother cares Rukmini as a daughter. She gives her an amulet which she got from Mahamaya Temple to have a fertile womb which increases her mental stress and agony.

Apart from her inner struggle, she has to endure political turbulences also. Parbatpuri is filled with insurgency, kidnappings, extortion and threat for the lives of the people. As the novel states,

Every week, reports of fresh incidents of extortion or looting, or of gunning down unarmed citizenry, appeared in the papers...many of these organizations merged into each other, their identities a clone of the most successful one is MOFEH or Movement For an Exclusive Homeland....(CW 81)

The present situation in Parbatpuri is even more complicated than before. There arises a new crisis each day, Siddharth, being the district collector trying to sort out the confusions which prevailed in the town. The situation becomes worse when the SP of Parbatpuri, HrishikeshDeuriis shot by the MOFEH. After his death, killing and shooting the people becomes very common. It is because, “they had gone straight into the lion’s den, and had come out triumphantly, leaving the Big One dead” (CW 174).

Rukmini is constantly affected by the outer agitations in the town which makes her mind a bit insecure. Having been isolated from her friends and relatives, she often turns to Siddharth for a good companionship but he fails to understand her. He distances himself from her, concentrates more on his work. Eventually, the couple has stopped living as husband and wife staying amidst such political turmoil in Parbatpuri.

The novel also points out the agitation which goes on among the college students where Rukmini is working. Some students are protesting against the illegal immigration of infiltrators. Rukmini is deeply distressed to see them that they are sacrificing their education to protest for the sake of the upcoming generation. She even worries about their future life in case of unemployment and wonders, “Perhaps some would end up in clerical government jobs and would count themselves lucky...A few would no doubt swell MOFEH’s ranks, or join another, similar organization”(156). The story keeps on revolving around these political disturbances in which Rukminimentally connects herself and suffers inwardly.

Apart from the outward perplexities, Rukmini has conscious of her inner self also. She confronts Manoj Mahanta, a divorced man, in her colleague’s wedding reception and gets gradually attracted towards him. They meet one another occasionally but still, she feels happy in his presence. As the writer points out, “She felt surprisingly at ease with Manoj even after their embarrassing collision on MGRoad. She found him engaging, easy to talk to, with a frankness that was rare in the kind of people that surrounded her in Parbatpuri”(117). She compared Manoj with Siddharth that the latter “always gave the impression that he was burdened with weighty matters, even while watching a sitcom on TV”(CW 111). She realised that she is attracted to him. Eventually, they shared some intimate moments on the way to Bhatiya’s garden. He offers her all that she craved for. But then, he too leaves her without providing her with the constant warmth of relationship.

There comes a twist in the life of the protagonist when she comes to know that she is pregnant and Manoj is the cause of her pregnancy. She is perplexed whether to be glad or grieve for it. Her journey rushes to a chaotic situation when Manoj is abducted by MOFEH. The end of the fiction delineates the pathetic death of Manoj and Siddharth during the terrorist attack. When she sees the dead bodies,

...tears had come. 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. Tears for her child, who would never know either of them. And tears for all the other deaths, the ones before, and the ones to follow. (CW 349)

The Collector's Wife is truly a picture of the protagonist's both outer and inner turmoils she faces in her life. The novel highlights the realistic situation of terror and violence which grips the people of Parbatpuri and shatters the life of the protagonist completely.

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