

**Beyond Violence: Emotional Resistance in Mitra Phukan's
'The Collector's Wife'**

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Abstract

The Collector's Wife is, in an exemplary way, a reflection on Mitra Phukan's analysis of the socio-political context of Assam in its insurgency-stricken late-twentieth century setting, touching on themes of gender, trauma, and resistance. The novel is set in the imaginary town of 'Parbatpuri' where Assam is like to experience during the era of political tension, militarization, fear and ethnic tension. In this volatile context, the novel focuses on private moments of terror rather than on public outbreaks of violence, especially those faced by female victims who are seldom mentioned in the news or political sphere.

The novel is centred on Rukmini Bezboruah, the wife of Siddharth Bezboruah, the District Collector (DC) of the fictional town of Parbatpuri in Assam, whose inner dreams and emotions are becoming a space of the conflict, of silence, and of subtle resistance. Despite meeting with the social norms and her status as a wife, teacher and the spouse of an administrator, Rukmini is extremely lonely, suffering from loss, and having an inner psychological leper that affects her. Her trauma stems from the loss of her child and emotional estrangement in marriage, which signifies the state of disunity of the socio-political condition of Assam. The narrative shows how violence in the public sphere can creep into the house, relationships, memory and identity through her character.

Innovative and unconventional in its concepts of resistance, the novel addresses silence, contemplation, memory and emotional endurance as forms of political action. Representing the ordinary lives of women whose personal experiences are eclipsed or overlooked in conflict-related media, Phukan safety lines women rather than focusing on women's passivity as victims or revolutionaries. It addresses theoretical ideas provided by scholars like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Judith Herman, Cathy Caruth, Cynthia Enloe, and Elaine Showalter, and analyses concept of female subjectivity, trauma, subalternity and gendered resistance. The basics of an attempt at resistance are redefined when *The Collector's Wife* prioritises the psychological and

emotional aspect of conflict, and resistance becomes an inner and ethical struggle to find one's humanity and one's self in oppressive social and political systems. The novel provides a strong indictment of patriarchal and state-centred narratives while foregrounding the silent but unyielding strength and endurance of women and girls in a period of violence and uncertainty.

Keywords: societal norms, resistance, psychological conflict, political systems, violence, female trauma, subalternity, etc.

Introduction

The Collector's Wife (2005) by Mitra Phukan is set during a complex political decade in the '90s in Assam, when a highly nuanced insurgency and a State Battle Group of its counteraction burst on to the scene. The novel is set in the fictional town of 'Parbatpuri', symbolizing several other Assamese towns which were plagued throughout the turbulent period by terror, violence, militarisation and social unrests during the period of political unrests. The events of this novel are also true to the historical incidents of Assam during the '70s to '90s when there were various campaigns launched on the issues of illegal immigration which ultimately culminated in the demand for political independence and recognition of Assam. Up to this day, curfews, disappearances, police supervised security and armed conflicts have been a regular way of life, creating an environment of uncertainty and emotional turmoil.

Phukan recreates the fear and instability such as they are in Assam's everyday life. The narrative is repetitive; it expresses inhabitants' uncertainty in an environment of politically violent events. Fearing was something people had learned to do; it had become a part of their life along with rains and floods as the novel says, "People had learnt to live with fear, it had become as much a part of their life as the rains and the floods" (81). This can be understood as an illustration of how the violence and insecurity of it is gradually normalized in society. The sense of being under surveillance and suspicion further adds to the emotional stress people may suffer under war-like conditions. Additionally, in the novel, every stranger who came into contact, "the possibility of danger" came along with "every passing vehicle, [and] every unknown face, [and] every late night knock on the door" (Phukan 73). In relation to normal settings, these tales are examples of how political domination falls short of a normal life, of vibrating times where one's normal day-to-day activities is disrupted in normal settings and because of subversion.

Rukmini's journey is a most vivid and a most emotional portrait of the impact of conflict. An overlaid portrait of the inner and outer world, public violence as intruding into private spaces and relationships. For one moment, Rukmini thinks, "the silence in the house seemed heavier than words" (112) adding to the feeling of emotional containment and repression she finds in her family. Similarly, the novel tells of grief pervasively, insidiously, and quietly seeping into her life for her own lifetime, as she launches into her education, marriage, and adventures with Billy:

Grief had settled quietly inside her, refusing to leave. Likewise, grief is omnipresent, insidious, and quiet in its pursuit of the reader's life through her own: 'grief had settled quietly inside her, refusing to leave (Phukan 156).

Phukan reveals that not only are there wounds in public life as a result of political conflict, there are feminine and psychological lives, too.

It's not the political scenario at large that is merely background to the novel but the idea of the battle resonates in the characters' emotional and psychological reactions. In certain privy locations, ones that are public, public violence works in, and as the novel suggests, into the relationships, families and personal identities is, in a manner. Indeed, as the novel finds out, public barbarism spreads into some of the public spaces, and similarly, it helps and does its work on relations, family, individual identity, and here in the novel. Like the story of Rukmini Bezboruah who is the wife of an elder official in the government, the family duties imposed on woman in political crisis is portrayed and their emotional impact on them. The narrative dispassionately outlines the conflict through a male point of view and mostly in political terms, but does not speak to probable unspoken, psychological impacts on women, who remain marginalised and voiceless both at home and in the public sphere.

The Collector's Wife is set amidst the turbulent political climate of Assam in the late 1980s and early 1990s, battered by insurgency and state counterinsurgency activities. The story follows the events in the fictional town of Parbatpuri, which takes the place of a few towns in Assam where terror, violence, militarization and social turmoil occurred during the period of political turmoil. The setting of the novel is very much a reflection of the real struggles of the Assamese community since the 1970s to evict aliens and gradually move on to demand for political freedom and recognition. Historical aspects have influenced the novel and those events experienced by Assamese community from the 1970s to 1990s are very much reflected in the backdrop of the novel, where movements and protests against aliens shifted to a stage of militant call for political autonomy and recognition. Curfews, disappearances, police state and armed conflict were a part of daily life and galvanized uncertainty and emotional tension.

“People had learnt to live with fear. It had become as much a part of their lives as the rains and the floods” (Phukan 48).

Towards the end of the novel, the political backdrop is not just transformed into or used as a backdrop for the story, but becomes the very fabric of the characters' emotional and psychological lives. This novel is an effective illustration of the public violence that penetrates private spaces, into relationships, families and personal identities.

“Every passing vehicle, every unknown face, every late-night knock on the door carried with it the possibility of danger” (Phukan 73).

The story unfolds through the perspective of Rukmini Bezboruah, a wife of one of the senior officials in the government, and uncovers the unseen emotional burden on the shoulders of women in the time of political turmoil. It has been talked about mostly politically through men's points of view, but there is a psychological side to the conflict which women had suffered as silent ones both in private and in public life. As the Indian state failed to give importance to political, cultural and economic functioning of a section of Assamese society, a feeling of alienation and dissatisfaction led to the rise of a movement like United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA). The government's military response was also reinforced the fear and mistrust of the common people. The novel's Parbatpuri is a place of suspicion, anxiety and silence where people must try to live their lives normally amidst the constant violence.

“No one knew anymore whom to trust; suspicion had entered every home and every conversation” (Phukan 89).

Phukan reflects this reality in the portrayal of individual's emotional loneliness and mental fatigue in the midst of protracted political tension.

“Life in Parbatpuri went on, but beneath its ordinary rhythm lay fear, exhaustion and uncertainty” (Phukan 134).

Rukmini's life shines a light on gender aspects of conflict. Men wield their power in public spaces through violence; women suffer emotional violence in private space. Men do Act when it comes to violence, power, and political action, while women do suffer when it comes to emotional trauma in private space confines. For Cynthia Enloe (2000),

“Nationalism has traditionally emerged from a masculinist memory, masculinist humiliation, and masculinist hope”. (44)

This observation is particularly pertinent in relation to the novel since it stands as one of the primary reasons for the political conflict is the male notion of power and identity while the women are only mute objects of fear, loneliness and emotional displacement of the conflict. The emotional isolation and self-deception of

Rukmini, and her inability to directly confront the society around her, exemplify how women become silent victims of violence as they have little agency in changing things. The novel also emphasises on the vulnerability of human relations in the times of political chaos. The proximity of the fear is not only seen in the collective but also in between persons: emotional distance. Judith Herman (1992) observes,

“Traumatic events destroy the sustaining bonds between individual and community” (Herman 51).

Rukmini's delicate relationship with her husband and feelings of isolation represent the psychological divisions individuals suffer due to the unceasing violence and insecurity. Cathy Caruth (1996) argues that

Trauma is the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur (Caruth 91).

Chosen as a character, Phukan offers a subtlety of resistance, expressing it in emotional endurance, and moral reflection. *The Collector's Wife* brings in the concept of political warfare beyond flashy actual violence, and emphasizes emotional dimensions of the conflict experienced by the women of Assam in the many years of its insurgency. Elaine Showalter (1977) remarks that

Female experience in literature is often represented through silence, fragmentation and repression (Showalter 13).

The book is an exploration of the interconnectedness of gender, trauma, and silence, and the effects of political strife are felt far beyond the scope of public or political spaces and place in the novel. Through this, Phukan offers a sophisticated examination of issues of identity, survival and resistance in a world dominated by fear and conflict.

The notion of resistance other than rebellion, protest and violence, is addressed in *The Collector's Wife*. Rather, the novel is given resistance as personal, emotional and gendered. It considers how the social and political systems enable and disable the movements of women, a character like Rukmini Bezboruah and the strategies they use to gain entry thereto, as embodied in Phukan's character. It looks at how women can be placed in oppressive social and political arrangements despite their individual desire for: speaking, remembering, reflecting and feeling as in the case of Rukmini Bezboruah, the protagonist of Phukan. These actions are often subtle, indeed sometimes invisible, and they can become very powerful means of political opposition in the midst of a patriarchy and a society riven by conflict.

James C. Scott (1985) describes that

The forms of resistance as “everyday forms of peasant resistance” that operate quietly beneath dominant structures of power (Scott xvi).

Rukmini's personality is not completely political and bureaucratic, and hence, her defiant character of not being swept by her husband's politics and colours Siddharth Bezboruah too. As a wife and woman with a position of authority and influence with the government, she is expected to live up to her role in the social status through her actions and presence at governmental functions and seeing to social appearances and internal arrangements of power. Outwardly it is right tribute to God, but there is a nuance; there is a feeling of dissatisfaction and a yearning for individuality in it. By teaching, in collaboration with her colleagues, and in her own individual time and space, she could come up with a definition of herself, apart from the definition that applies to a housewife. These may seem mundane decisions and choices are choices of self-assertion in a society which undervalues women merely in terms of family responsibilities.

She has been involved closely with one of the progressive political thinking related lecture Manoj Mahanta, which enriches knowledge and expands her scope of out of the world. It presents Rukmini with new political and ethical concepts and notions that clash with those of Rukmini's sheltered life; it is not romantic, though. He realises the complexities of the moral dilemmas affecting the conflicts she is grappling with and begins to question the passive silence and lack of feeling of her home life. So, it is not Manoj's appearance which matters more, but because he gives her a chance of being awakened intellectually, and being conscious of herself.

“What trauma survivors seek is not merely the telling of facts but the reconstruction of a shattered self” (Herman 175).

Resistance is also depicted as Rukmini's emotional strength in Phukan. She experiences suffering and lives without feeling attached in her marriage, but she doesn't allow herself to be consumed by bitterness and apathy. Rather, she goes inside, and performs an introspection, attempting to process the differences between herself and the concept of self as role. Instead, she closes her eyes and does introspection thereby knowing what are the differences between her “real” and her “role” self. In patriarchy, women's own needs, emotions and vexed expectations of family harmony are often met by covering up with a self-effacing, non-explicit expression. Given that, reflecting is reclaiming the emotional and psychological space that is a radical act itself when addressed by Rukmini.

Elaine Showalter (1977) argues that women's writing often becomes “a double-voiced discourse that always embodies the social, literary, and cultural heritages of both the muted and dominant groups” (264).

One other aspect of her resistance is how she has refused to forget the trauma experiences. Unlike Siddharth, Rukmini is more aware of the factors, which cause

suffering and pain. Her recollections are not only a lament of her own but an awareness of what is right and wrong. Traumatized, Cathy Caruth (1996) writes, is “just to be possessed by an image or an event” (4). The utility of the concept is particularly crucial to Rukmini's character because it is a way to normalize traumatic situations and to somehow re-sensitize those situations to living through them so as to grow into a moral resistance to normalization and indifference. She stands up to the system she can't help but remember, she stands up to the system, her stillness and bottled-up emotions.

It presents in the fluctuation of Rukmini's psyche that to resist is not just to resist blatantly and openly, or to engage in revolutionary action. Yet at other moments, however, in the individual moments of memory, emotional authenticity, moral questioning and searching for identity. The novel, however, opens up new avenues to politics of agency that women develop through their resistance to it, their ability to simply endure and how they go into practices of introspection in extremely constricted political and social environment.

James C. Scott (1985) notes that

Everyday forms of resistance make no headlines, but quietly challenge structures of domination through silence, endurance, and hidden acts of defiance (Scott xvi-xvii).

Mitra Phukan's assertion of the female subjectivity is going against the stereotypical images of women in political novels. Rukmini Bezboruah does not come across as a hero, a popular theatre personality or a rebellious personality. Instead, her character is created by emotional depth and inner turmoil and silenced strength. In public, as a good and loyal wife, a type of well-accepted teacher, and as a beautiful wife of an important government official, Rukmini fulfills her statutory commitments for her husband, her family, and her society. Though Hanneman initially seems calm on the outside, the novel is suffused with an undercurrent of sadness, isolation and emotional isolation that is important to his character.

Judith Herman (1992) observes that

“The conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud is the central dialectic of psychological trauma” (1).

One crucial part of her emotional life though, was indeed that Rukmini never had any children and was infertile. These experiences become personal tragedy and a metaphor for being devoid of feeling and a piece of the psyche has been broken. The personal tragedy which she experienced is an indication of the socio-political deadlock in Assam during the insurgency. The unrest and the violence in the outside world disturb Rukmini's mind and her self-possession is also disturbed. By this way,

Phukan tries to draw a parallel to the political conflict in the outer world and the inner fight within the person. Rukmini's emotional disenfranchisement bears a mark of the vexed social situation in the state Assam. Rukmini's inner state is an expression of Assam's disintegration of its social fabric. Rukmini's emotional realities reflect that of the society's that has been affected in Assam.

The crying fits and the numbness in responding to the trauma and loss in her mind are examples of the 'gendering of the trauma' by Rukmini. Violence against women isn't primarily carried out through their direct engagement in politics and bureaucracy but rather by means of emotional containment, disenfranchisement, mental anguish and suffering.

bell hooks (2004) states that

Patriarchy demands of men that they become and remain emotional cripples while women are expected to silently absorb emotional suffering (66).

Clearly such a quietness is not seen as a sign of weakness and/or passivity. In response in turn, it mutates into a natural expression of rebellion and self-esteem in a system dominated by men and which offers few chances to express emotions. Rukmini is sullen, introspecting and striving to keep inducing disruptions in an emotional void within a seemingly broken life. Phukan also illuminates the meaning of 'post-Colonialism' and 'patriarchy' as a framework that gives shape to 'Femaleness'. Rukmini seemingly is a well-rounded version of a cultured and educated, and socially gracious and well-behaved bureaucrat's wife. Emotional neglect and emotional not resolved issues, however, will be a great life that is inside her. Siddharth is emotionally distant, adding to her isolation, communication and emotional connection is all but impossible. The fact that she is not able to describe her plight is another form of the silence of women, a silence in politics, society, and institutions.

Elaine Showalter states in *Literature of Their Own* (1977), that "female subjectivity in literature is trapped between silence and madness" (12). It is noteworthy in particular the personalities of Rukmini. She experiences her life in a mental world of no articulation of pain and always denied feelings. She is not completely emotionally disconnected, but she becomes so overwhelmed by feelings and disassociates and withdraws, her broken mind is a result of unexpressed trauma. These facts have a lot to do with the invisibility of woman in the nationalist movement and in the state-centred narratives in which woman's sufferings are erased or minimised.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) argues:

The female subaltern is frequently denied the space to articulate her suffering because her voice is continually mediated through dominant power structures (287).

The concept of resistance and subjectivity in Phukan's description is further extended through the emotional and psychological strengths, silences and traumas of women's lives. The novel concludes by revealing that the personal and the political, the inner and the outer of women's lives are inextricably intertwined.

Prior to this book, in her work "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Gayatri Spivak makes a plea for the idea of "subaltern woman." A consideration of the nature of Rukmini in *The Collector's Wife* will take into account her *Rite of Marriage: A Festival Life Story* (1988). As it is characterized through the dominant and patriarchal and political voice, the voice of the female subaltern becomes insignificant or is insentient. Her "real" voice is denied in the female subaltern; either it is not listened to or it is heard via the dominant and heteropatriarchal and hetero-political systems. As Spivak (1988) puts it "the subaltern cannot speak" (104). In the novel, the situation is represented by Rukmini, who is the avatar of this state, the state of silence. She may be educated and socially 'privileged,' but she has got to stay within the confines of her 'genders' of marriage, bureaucracy and politics. The tongues of men, heads of state power, her husband Siddharth - men grasp her thoughts, her feelings and her experiences.

The silent Rukmini is thus not only personal, but also political. She should look like someone who is calm, encouraging and well-mannered to contain her emotions and fear; which is what the ideal bureaucrat's wife is expected to do. Inability to articulate her sadness and dissatisfaction reflects the voicing of women's voice to be silenced by patriarchy. Even within marriage, she is not a woman with depth to her emotions, or agency. Instead, her identity is mediated by social expectations as well as those held by those institutions, such as Siddharth that are within her sights.

The Assamese society depicted in the novel is a society which is immersed in insurgency and it does not only signify the social engagement of public space, but also the psychological and emotional space for Rukmini. Her inner negativity engenders an inner conflict; conflict of trauma, grief, emotional isolation. Losing her child is one of her experiences that has a wound as its apex and never gets resolved because of not being able to confront or heal the pain. This unresolved trauma adds to the difficulties of feeling emotional void in her husband's marriage. Proudly serving, dutifully and yet not completely having imbibed the warmth and the humanity of others in the private realm, Siddharth is still a responsible and dutiful

man in the public realm. He is also a very cerebral individual in his private life and manages the emotional aspects of these situations in a similar manner to the way that he handles his political and job responsibilities.

Judith Herman's lessons from *Trauma and Recovery* (1992) are revelations of what can be learned from Rukmini's case. During times of atrocity, what happens is that ordinary citizens try to whitewash it out of their minds, Herman explains, but it does not go away. It is seen in Rukmini's behaviour throughout this novel. Snip, painful memories, emotional separation, frequent headaches; inability to satisfy the needs of spouse and intimacy are symptoms of PTSD. Her emotional pain, suffering and stress are trapped in her body and mind but she tries to go about her life in a normal way.

An important and ill prefacing though, Rukmini's trauma can't just be a personal trauma. Her trauma reflects the collective trauma as Assam had faced in the days of insurgency and militarization. A climate of fear has been set in the region, kidnaps, violence, and suspicion slowly creep into household intimacy, and relationships. Phukan illustrates the ways through which politics can spill over into the private sphere of violence, marriage, sentiment, as well as mental health. Not all people who live in these areas are direct victims of violence but they may suffer the psychological impact of being exposed or the victim of violence or living in fear of it.

Rukmini experiences the direct linkages between gender, trauma and political conflict. Phukan says women are subject to violence through silence, emotional suppression and the psychological disintegration, focusing on a person's sense of self. In *The Collector's Wife*, these quiet moments of pain are placed in continual public narratives of war, ones that have largely forgotten the psychological, familial, and emotional costs of war borne by women.

The Collector's Wife is also a significant work of reflection upon the place and work of women in nationalist and insurgent history. Then the concept of discourses of freedom and of discourses connected to women is conceived, most of the time, in a political and conflictual manner and women are depicted in a narrow and stereotyped manner. At other times, they might not be shown as things that are being sacrificed to make something salubrious to the nation, or as someone who is being sacrificed for one's culture, or someone to protect one's culture. Women that do not abide by these rules, however, are regarded as ungrateful and/or trouble-makers. Rarely have women been portrayed as complicated creatures with an inner emotional life, personal issues or political consciousness in such a portray. In contrast, Mitra

Phukan's rendition of Rukmini is a more complex, lonely and troubled character, and one that is not dynamic enough to be a politician.

Rukmini is not a “revolutionary”, not have people been “active” members of the powers-that-be. But she can't be immune to the violence and turmoil of the world around her. In her character, Sara Phukan foregrounds what she aims at representing, the manila women, which are no part of the official political narrative in Malaysia, but are all deeply affected by the political turn. None of these women have been dubbed as heroes and there is no revolutionary but none of these women. Rather they suffer the emotional and psychological effects of war inside their homes and hearts. Rukmini is, instead, a figure for the silent majority of women, to be left to deal with emotions of loss, fear, loneliness and unravelled relationships, while bigger political players engage in public discourse.

This novel is neither a partaker of the prevailing taken-for-granted nationalism and insurgency, which has narratives tied to the oratory of men. These are the subjects discussed in the public sphere and they typically emerge when there is a conflict over issues of armed struggle, ideology and state-power—and those are spaces of masculine power and action. But Phukanan's interest is focused more in the subpersonalities and emotions of war. So she demonstrates that the scars of political brutalities do not put on of a display only on the battlefield, but they are visible in the house, marriage, memory and identity. Violence and conflict come in many forms that may not always be apparent and it may impact Rukmini.

As if purposefully, her book's journey is in the subjectivity of being a feminine and emotional survival. She has a fragmented sense of self, bottled-up emotions in her marriage and the trauma of losing her child add to that. But, if she does not have one, this doesn't mean that she is not strong and powerful. Instead, it was “silent” protest against the society which does not permit the woman to voice her dissent, her emotional hurt etc. This too is an act of rebellion, she is turning her thoughts to revolutionizing herself to thinking about herself and meditating on herself, which is different from how she is supposed to see herself or differently than she sees herself.

Then when it comes to stories of resistance it's not one of those stories since it's Phukan's story of resistance. It is an endurance place of memory and self-awareness, it is a place which can be a political performance, as well, in a society in which structural violence is part of the picture, as is emotional alienation. Rukmini's reluctance to become totally insensitive or conformist demonstrates her struggle against the establishment of power in her. Rukmini's refusal to be "feel the fear" or

passive to the roles that reinforce that disregard challenges the power dynamic(s) that surround her.

“Memory, therefore, becomes not only a site of pain but also a form of resistance against forgetting and erasure” (Hirsch 9).

The Collector's Wife insists that it is not always resistance that is loud and obvious; at times it is resistance that is introspective, silent, accomplished silently, even in context of violence and oppression, even in absence of violence and oppression; resistance in the never-ending attempt to keep humanities alive.

Conclusion

The Collector's wife is not just about the war of liberation and the political chaos in Assam; it is also about a deep sense of belonging. Unlike public violence and militant conflict, the novel expands on the latent emotional and psychological impact of political instability and notes this specifically in the context of women. Rukmini Bezboruah in Phukan embodies resistance as a subtle, personal fight against emotional annihilation, as selfhood, and as moral sense.

Rukmini's journey through loss, solitude, disconnection and contemplation exposes the internalized trauma in women in androgyn societies wrought by patriarchs and conflict situations. Unable to express the pain on her own in an open manner, her situation symbolizes how the voices of women are hindered in both the domestic sphere and in politics. However, her silence is an expression of resistance and attacks structures that require emotional downplay and passive appropriation. Phukan foregrounds woman subjectivity to challenge acts of nationalism and insurgency, which are usually created by men, and expose women's unseen emotional labour during violent uncertain times.

The novel also proves how the power struggle finds its way into families, love, past and collective identity. Themes of trauma, emotional endurance, and ethical insight, *The Collector's Wife* expands the range of understanding what resistance means and how it can express political agency. In the end it's the quiet moments, the absence of screaming, the moments when he remembers, the moments when he understands, the moments when he will fight and fight and fight to preserve humanity in the face of fear, violence and emotional dis-solution.

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