

**THE PERSONAL AND THE POLITICAL: THE NORTH-EAST INDIAN
SCENARIO IN MITRA PHUKAN'S *THE COLLECTOR'S WIFE***

Dr. Payel Dutta Chowdhury
Vice Principal & HOD
Department of Languages
Garden City College
Bangalore, Karnataka

Abstract

The portrayal of the violence and terror which reigns in several pockets of the North-East India has been a common theme in many literary texts of the region. However, many contemporary writers, unable to bear the burden of such stereotypical representations, have chosen to consciously break free from such images and have wonderfully brought out various under-represented facets of the region. Nonetheless, the anxieties and terrorism present in several parts of the North-East India are realities which can hardly be ignored. Mitra Phukan's book, *The Collector's Wife*, delineates the troubled political situation in a small town of Assam named Parbatpuri where kidnappings, extortion, and political instability are the order of the day. Set in such a hopeless backdrop, Phukan's protagonist, Rukmini's life undergoes tremendous turmoil. This paper is an attempt to study the inter-relation between the personal and the political in Phukan's book and how the collapse of one affects the other.

Keywords: bureaucrats, terrorism, family, social, agitation, companionship, kidnapping, political

North-East Indian literature abounds in tales of the troubled political situation, bloodshed, underdevelopment, backwardness and the ever-present image of the gun. However, contemporary writers of the region seem to have consciously taken it upon themselves to bring out many more diverse issues pertaining to the culture and tradition of the North-East Indian states which have been hitherto not in the limelight. Writers from various pockets of these states have focused their works on portraying the myths, legends, beliefs and rituals of their tribes. The writers from the North-East have to "meet the double challenge of truth and liberty, of identity and unity, of cultural loss and recovery, of ethnic specificity and aesthetic universality." (K. Satchidanandan) In this context it is imperative to understand that the political scenario of the region remains in the background of most of these writings. Mitra Phukan, noted Assamese writer, in her novel, *The Collector's Wife*, shows how in the heightened political climate of the region, the personal, the familial, and the social relationships are disrupted too. Phukan's

protagonist, Rukmini Bezboruah, the wife of the District Collector, is caught in the strain of this political turmoil affecting her private life as much as the lives of every resident of the small town of Parbatpuri. The novel highlights the juxtaposition of the personal and the political, a situation which is inevitable in Phukan's fictional world. The book courses through the kidnappings, extortion, and political instability which characterize life in Parbatpuri and the inexorable impact of such a strained environment on the personal lives. Phukan's book exposes how the strong political awareness, issues related to identity and ethnicity, violence in different forms, and above all the shadow of the gun are some of the common realities of North-East India which hardly any writer of that region can ignore in their works.

The Collector's Wife is set in Parbatpuri, a small district town in Assam. The place is notoriously famous for terrorist activities. News of such activities fill the television channels and local newspapers as well as is the primary topic of discussion at all gatherings. In such an environment, it is hardly a surprise that the various locations in the town are all affected by the political anxiety and trouble. Phukan's protagonist, Rukmini, feels like a fish out of pond being unable to truly become one among the Parbatpuri residents, matching their spirit of gossip and slander. The geographical divide – the hill where the District Collector's residential bungalow is situated – also seem to add to the assumed sense of superiority that others feel would characterize the DC's wife. Looking from her hilltop residence, Rukmini is truly awed by the despair, anxiety, and insecurity that loom large in the lives of the people living in the town. The cremation ground at the bottom of the hill seems to mock at the security measures taken by the bureaucrats to protect their lives with a multitude of armed guards while common men died every day. The divide between the residents of the small locality is marked not only by the geographical positioning of the town, but more importantly by the social set up. The club where Rukmini's husband goes to is frequented by other bureaucrats and is a no entry zone to other civilians. Another important setting in Phukan's book is the college where Rukmini works. A hub of political discussions, the teachers' common room represents the anxiety that envelopes the mind of every Parbatpuri resident. However, interesting to note is Phukan's depiction of Rukmini in different settings in the book; she is as much a misfit among the other high class wives in the club as with her middle-class colleagues.

Focusing primarily on Rukmini and her life amidst the disturbing locale, the novelist showcases her plight, being cut off from her immediate family and forced to live in a desolate place heightened by terrorist activity. Stamped as the DC's wife, Rukmini gradually seem to lose her individuality, as expectations mount on her ways of life and conduct. Having absolutely no kith and kin around, she continuously turns to Siddharth, her husband, for companionship and solace, who has distanced himself from her citing work pressure. Siddharth is always on the move, and whenever in town, is surrounded by his officials even at home, which serves as his makeshift office. The couple has long since stopped living as husband and wife. The failure of her decade-long marriage dawns heavily on Rukmini who also has to bear the brunt of everyone for being barren. Having nothing much to do at home, which always in great order is run by a battalion of official staff, even without her supervision, Rukmini chooses to teach English in the town college. Clearly not her calling and not a career she would have chosen under normal circumstances, Rukmini does her job half-heartedly. As she listens to the animated discussion of her colleagues in the staff room, she seems to stand on the periphery of the Parbatpuri existence, forced to be a part of the conversation but away from the common care and concerns. Her social life too is dictated by her status as the DC's wife rather than an individual, thus, forcing her to be a part of the circle of the high class officers' wives with whom she hardly has anything in

common. The only people with whom Rukmini has a deep connection are her in-laws, who deeply care for her, but then are only rare visitors. Manoj, who suddenly comes to her life, offers her all that she had been craving for – fun, companionship, friendship, and physical intimacy – but then he too, is unable to provide her the constant warmth of relationship. The emptiness that Rukmini feels from within and without as she voyages her journey in Parbatpuri seems to represent the meaningless existence of individuals in such scenario where the personal and the political tensions have created a void beyond repair.

Phukan's story is of course a personal tale, but its poignancy is achieved by placing Rukmini's ups and downs amidst the saga of political disturbances in the town. The presence of terrorism in Parbatpuri seems to be the only unifying element in the lives of the people living there. The kidnappings by the militant group, MOFEH, has created a disturbance so very profound in the small town, that the everyday lives of Parbatpuri residents stand still amidst such tension and anxieties. It is the violence and terrorism in the town which are the only topics of discussion everywhere. Highlighting the inter-relation between violence and North-East literature, Dr. Ananya S. Guha says, "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." Phukan's protagonist, Rukmini's marital life is disturbed to a great extent due to these heightened terrorist disturbances. The clutches of the terrorist activities touch even those who are top in the bureaucratic ladder. With a great extent of security measures reserved for the DC and his family, it is ironical that the personal driver of Rukmini is discovered to be a MOFEH man. Even the DC is helpless in such a situation and is unable to get hold of the driver once he escapes. The attack on the SP and his instant death also portray the ever-presence of terrorist activities and the hopeless situation of the town. Rukmini's confrontation with such political disturbances disrupts her mental equilibrium and alienates her from her immediate environment. She is deeply disturbed to see her students getting involved in political agitations and rallies and she is left with thoughts of the meaninglessness of such activities which would only result in hampering the careers of these bright students. Phukan has portrayed the aftermath of the Assam students' agitation of the 1970s and 1980s which has in the present set-up grown into a full-blown insurgent movement. Rukmini's students are involved in protesting on the issue of illegal migration from across the border and what starts as an innocent rally becomes a full-fledged violent revolt, resulting in many people being injured including innocent ones like Rukmini. Living in her hilltop bungalow, it seems that the DC's wife is untouched by all that happens in the valley to the common folks. But the truth lies in the fact that Rukmini's life is greatly affected by the fear and uncertainty that grapples the town with the non-stop kidnappings and political disturbances. The violent insurgency that grips Parbatpuri forms the backdrop of the novel and Rukmini's world is invaded by this ever-present threat.

Phukan's fictional world is severely strained and as the novel progresses we realize the breaking down of any sense of harmony in the personal life of the protagonist as well as the political situation of the town. The open attack on the SP in a restaurant and his death cast a sense of helplessness in the minds of every resident. It seems to be the final proof of the total envelopment of terrorism in the town where even the highest in the law and order cannot escape the clutches of violence and threat. If the attack on the SP shows the organized and planned terrorist activities with the purpose of causing fear in the minds of common people and the government, the kidnapping of innocent people like Manoj, a mere sales executive, portray the

meaninglessness of such terror. Much alike the political situation of the town, Rukmini's life too undergoes great turmoil and collapses ultimately. Her shocking discovery of her husband's relationship with her colleague and the only friend that she had in Parbatpuri comes at a time when her marital life is already going downhill. More shocking than this discovery is the knowledge of her pregnancy, the result of a one-night stand with Manoj. Rukmini's mind goes through fleeting emotions, at crossroads with two men in her life – one, her husband with whom she had lived for ten long years and yet not developed a satisfactory relationship, and the other, Manoj, whom she barely knew but shared a great companionship. The final collapse of the personal and the political in Phukan's book come with the unfortunate deaths of Manoj and Siddharth in the terrorist confrontation with the police. The final denouement is indeed horrifying but it seems to be the only possible and authentic ending to such an impossible situation, where the personal is so intricately interwoven with the political.

The Collector's Wife is successful in delineating an authentic political situation in Assam. The merciless killings, kidnaps, and terror that reign the town have cast a gloom and sense of helplessness in the lives of the Parbatpuri residents. In such a hopeless backdrop of violence, Rukmini's story lends credibility and the final break down of the personal and the political situation too seem the only way possible. Phukan's book drives home the fact that issues related to identity and ethnicity, violence in different forms, and above all the shadow of the gun are realities of everyday life in the North-East India. No doubt, it is truly said that the rich literary traditions and "...the written word from North-East is suddenly attracting the attention of big publishing houses and even legendary agents like David Godwin like never before." (Borpujari) However, even though many contemporary writers of the region are consciously trying to break free from these stereotypical themes, the truth of the political violence cannot be ignored and thus, looms large in the backdrop of many literary texts. *The Collector's Wife* thus, traces a realistic situation of fear and uncertainty that grips the small town leading to a complete collapse of the twin threads of the personal and the political in the novel.

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