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## Gender and the North East India: A Postcolonial Feminist Reading of Mitra Phukan's *The Collector's Wife*

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### **Abstract:**

In the discourse of post colonialism, the centre and the margin maintains a dichotomous relation and India's Northeast offers a potential space for narrativizing internal colonization and dispossession from a gendered praxis. My paper seeks to address these issues as touched upon in her novel *The Collector's Wife* by well known Assamese writer and columnist Mitra Phukan, by making a symptomatic reading of the text through a postcolonial feminist lens. The gendered realities existing amidst insurgency issues, student unrest, border crossing, trouble in the tea gardens is the main thrust of the novel that makes possible a probing of feminine experience in terms of identity, ethnicity, gender, language and dispossession.

**Keywords: Gender, Dispossession, Post Colonial Feminism, North East**

In the discourse of post colonialism, the centre and the margin maintains a dichotomous relation and India's Northeast offers a potential space for narrativizing internal colonization and dispossession from a gendered praxis. My paper seeks to address these issues as touched upon in her novel *The Collector's Wife* by well known Assamese writer and columnist Mitra Phukan, by making a symptomatic reading of the text through a postcolonial feminist lens. The gendered realities existing amidst insurgency issues, student unrest, border crossing, trouble in the tea gardens is the main thrust of the novel that makes possible a probing of feminine experience in terms of identity, ethnicity, gender, language and dispossession.

The focal point in Phukan's narrative is the small town, middle class, upper caste educated woman Rukimini who examines gender constructs that marginalize woman from her vantage point of being a bureaucrat's wife. Her own social identity as the part time lecturer is diminutive to that of her husband's status as the District Commissioner. The paper seeks to enquire Rukmini's subject position in terms of inhabiting the margins of being a postcolonial, subaltern and further a north eastern woman in co- relation with the concepts of postcolonial feminists like Spivak, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Kwamme Anthony Appiah, Trinh Minha and so on. Postcolonial feminism, often referred to as Third World feminism, is a form of feminist philosophy which centers around the idea that racism, colonialism, and the long lasting effects (economic, political, and cultural) of colonialism in the postcolonial setting, are inextricably bound up with the unique gendered realities of non-white, and non-Western women (Weeden:2002) Postcolonial feminists disagree with Western feminists because of their tendency of globally universalizing women's issues, which risks their discourses of often being misunderstood in offering a univocal representation of women. Sara Suleri in an essay critiquing postcolonial feminism says that the context of contemporary feminist discourse must be read both as a free floating metaphor for cultural embattlement and as an obsolete signifier for the historicity of race. The fact can't be undermined that the post colonial feminist position has its own ambivalences in representing the categories of 'woman' and 'race'. Pioneering postcolonial

critics like Chandra Talpade Mohanty raises her voice against the marginalization and the ghettoization of the third world women by the west; however, she is not in favour of 'women' as a category for analysis. Rather she argues in favour of a feminist solidarity pedagogical model of anti globalization that can tell alternate stories of difference, culture power and agency (*Feminism without Borders*, 244). In another post colonial feminist text *Woman, Native, Other* Vietnamese writer Trinh Minha relocates her gendering of ethnic realities on the theory of postfeminism which seeks to posit an alternative to the anthropological twist that constitute the archaism through which nativism have been apprehended. Many postcolonial feminists are critiqued for reducing biologism to the literal structures of the racial body over gender. In the opening section of her text *Woman, Native, Other* Minha attempts to outline an alternative realism within post colonial feminist mentality:

Today the growing feminist consciousness has made it increasingly difficult for women of color who writes of turning a blind eye not only to the specification of the writers as a historical subject.... But also to writing itself as a practice located at the intersection of subject and history a literary practice that involves the possible knowledge (linguistic and ideological) of itself as such.... She must chose from among three conflicting identities. Writer of color? Woman Writer? Or woman of color? Which comes first where does she place her loyalties? (WNO, p.6)

Thus, one of the central ideas in postcolonial feminism is that by using the term 'woman' as a universal group, they are then only defined by their gender and not by social classes and ethnic identities.(Narayan, Uma:2000) Post colonialism can provide an outlet for citizens to discuss various experiences endured during colonialism. These can include: "migration, slavery, suppression, resistance, representation, difference, race, gender, place and responses to the influential discourses of imperial Europe." Postcolonial feminists see the parallels between recently decolonized nations and the state of women within patriarchy - both take the "perspective of a socially marginalized subgroup in their relationship to the dominant culture."(Kramere and Spender: 2000) Postcolonial critics like Chandra Talpade Mohanty raises her voice against the marginalization and ghettoization of the third world women by the west, she is not in favor of "women" as a category for analysis." According to Spivak throughout modernity, between the twin poles of neocolonialism and indigenous patriarchy it is the woman who is victimized:

....the figure of the woman (forever) disappears not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the third world women caught between tradition and modernization. (Spivak, 1988: 102)

Spivak's theory of 'masculinist imperialist ideological formation' that constructs the third world women pays little attention to how the contemporary subaltern must come into voice, hence her theory is politically pessimistic. The idea of an "authentic victim subject" in India operates along two assumptions: first, Indian women are a monolithic victim group who are all similarly oppressed, and that there is an essentialized Indian culture and Indian woman. The result is that Indian feminism has essentialized the very category of gender that it has, along with others, critiqued Western/First World/white feminists for producing. Their position has resulted in the exclusion of other subjugated identities. Some Indian feminists have also essentialized culture by setting up "Western culture" against "non-Western culture." The essentializing of discourses that have presented such difficulties for the women's movement during the colonial period has produced contradictory results for feminists in post-colonial India.

A similar idea also applies for the north eastern women when they are seen as a monolithic victim group, despite their multiple ethnicities and varied concerns. The fact that feminists have come to inhabit a highly contradictory space is not in and of itself problematic, since many spaces feminism inhabits are contradictory. The problem arises when that space is inhabited unreflectively. My paper directs attention to certain facets of postcolonial feminism in face of apparent and self acknowledged victim positions with reference to the different groups of women represented in the selected novel. The paper attempts to negotiate the levels and the labels or the stereotypes of dispossession and marginality and seeks to examine its multiplicity and plurality in a gendered context. The novel depicts women of class like Rukmini and Nandini Deuri, who later share the dispossessed fate of widowhood (dispossessed from the seat of power being a bureaucrat's wife), single women like Priyam for whom marriage is no license for sexual behavior (yet she was dispossessed of her secret sexual entourage with Siddharth through Rukmini's discovery), and strugglers like Bobita whose language was threatened to be dispossessed against which she struggled as a student leader and risked her own career before the cause of motherland threatened by infiltrators.

In challenging the universalizing and disempowering implications of foregrounding the victim subject in feminist politics, I do not seek to revert to the fragmenting politics of identity. Instead, I argue in favor of recognizing different subjectivities and peripheral subjects, primarily to counter the fictitious homogeneity and sisterhood created through the victim subject. I don't locate Rukmini within the exclusiveness of victimhood as a north-eastern marginal and dispossessed woman subject. Rukmini who is married to the District Collector of a small town in Assam, and teaches English Literature in the local college is not the 'silent interlocutor' which Spivak talks of in her essay "Can a Subaltern Speak?" as she seeks agency beyond the overpowering identity of being a bureaucrat's wife. Living in a big and beautiful bungalow set high on a hill complete with many servants, having understanding and very kindly in-laws who visit her and treat her well, and having an intellectual, gentle, sensitive, if somewhat ascetic and aloof husband, the main trouble area for Rukmini is her inability to have children. Rukmini herself comes across as a very gentle character, a little inclined to be conservative, but careful, balanced, considerate, refined. The beginning of the novel presents Rukmini as a loner cocooned in the comforts of the D.C.'s bungalow in Parbatpuri whose immediate crisis in life was impending motherhood and lack of job satisfaction. Not so much was her own lack but the cultural taboo of being barren victimizes Rukmini. Moreover her husband Siddharth is seldom home and is constantly busy with the burgeoning workload at the administrative level. Thus, Rukmini's desire to have a child is met with a barrenness of passion in bed and an engulfing loneliness which eventually leads to a secret clandestine affair. Fertility rites and myths related to the same comprise a major section of folkloristic narratives. The novelist here touches upon the problem of infertility of the central protagonist Rukmini and gives an insight of curing the same through social medicine. The amulet given to Rukmini by her mother-in-law stands as an example for the same. But during the course of the narrative we find that Rukmini the wife of a bureaucrat in a small hillside fictional town named Parbatpuri, conceives outside wedlock with an extremist leader which dismantles the traditional belief apparatus held by her mother-in-law where the amulet functioned as a sign. On the surface her life is settled and safe, yet each time there is an 'incident' in the district, the fear and uncertainty that grips the town is reflected in her personal crisis, especially because she had the privileged position of being a bureaucrat's wife which was ironically instrumental in her emotional dispossession. The following excerpt from the novel vividly captures the political and personal trauma centering Rukmini's life:

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, or fellow club-members, or 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, let alone slept with her.(163)

Set in the turbulence of an insurgency and protest-ridden Assam, the book gives Rukmini a ringside view of the abduction and killings by the extremists. The violent insurgency that grips Assam runs like a dark river through the novel and forms its backdrop. The Assam students' agitation of the 1970s and 1980s that began as a movement for self-determination has grown into a full blown insurgency. The extremist group MOFEH stands as a substitute for ULFA in the novel. Kidnappings, extortion and political instability are the order of the day. The issue of illegal migration from across the border has spread mistrust and bitterness among the people of the region and Rukmini's world is pervaded by this ever-present threat of violence. A chance meeting with a tyre salesman, Manoj Mahanta, their blooming friendship and an inevitable moment of physical tenderness bring color and joy to Rukmini's life for the first time in almost a decade. This relationship fills the lacuna in Rukmini's life and she finally becomes pregnant, but not without guilt for transgressing the codes of wedlock. But her feeling of remorse turns into sense of betrayal when she discovers her spinster colleague Priyam in an act of copulation with her husband.

Postcolonial issues of hybridism and bilingualism are also touched upon in the novel. The hybrid nature of Phukan's language is reflected in the occasional use of Assamese words like *bota*, *phul gamosa* etc. There is also a reference to diasporic existence in terms of Rukmini's correspondence with her parents in the Carrebean islands through a series of letters and occasional phone calls. This trans-border, transnational contact lacks emotional content leading further to Rukmini's sense of dislocation. The use of English in a multilingual setting like Assam is one of the chief concerns of Rukmini as a teacher in English. Rukmini is skeptical about the relevance of teaching canonical English literature in marginal pockets like Parbatpuri in postcolonial times. Mitra Phukan with Rukmini as mouthpiece questions the contextual importance of British Literature among students whose cultural orientation is built up through bihu and other folk songs, notwithstanding the fact that it cannot even offer them a secured job. Thus teaching literature was never her passion. It was with Manoj's insistence Rukmini revived her lost art of creative writing and aimed at craving a professional career for her own beyond part time teaching. Phukan's postcolonial feminist position can be located from a theoretical praxis which comes close to the views expressed by black feminist writer, bell hooks. For hooks, colonization is the conquering of mind and habits of oppressed people so that they themselves internalize and accept their inherent inferiority. While the process of decolonization is a "disruption of the colonizer/colonized mindset", a letting go of white supremacist capitalist patriarchal assumptions and values which enables rhetors to look at themselves and the world around them critically and analytically.(*Outlaw Culture* 5) Bell hooks locates racism, sexism, classicism, capitalism and heterosexism as interlocking systems, grounded in the same ideology of domination, and thereby suggests that sexism and the struggle to end patriarchal domination should be the primary importance to men and women globally.(*Feminist Theory*, 35). Individual experience of patriarchal oppression, according to hooks leads to realization and subsequently accentuates the struggle for resistance for self renewal and recovery

The paper also focuses upon the self-conscious attempts of the writer to be a voice of the nation's mainstream and not just remain a marginal voice as a North eastern writer alone, as

suggested by the use of the mainland Indian jargon for DC, i.e Collector, in the very title of her novel. Nonetheless the language languorously revels in the picturesque beauty of the hilly terrain, where hills are the centre not merely margins, and plainness seem an aberration. The book is quite beautifully contextualized, the flora and natural surroundings of Assam are a quiet but constant background, and the political commentary is present and clear while remaining non-judgmental and non-acerbic. The following excerpt, provides insight about the protagonist, and a flavour of Phukan's tone and style while trying to describe the racial features of the crowd of students taking part in protest against illegal migration:

“As she [Rukmini] looked at the eager, bright young faces of the boys and girls, she couldn't help noticing the facial features and contours before her. The almond eyes, the golden skins of the Mongoloid, the curly hair of the Austric, the dark complexions of the Dravids, the fine features and fair colouring of the Aryans, were all present in the crowd of young faces before her. And they wanted to rid the land of foreigners!(p.91)

The victim subject counters the atomized, ahistorical subject of liberal rights discourse, but it is not sufficiently disruptive of naturalized and universalized assumptions about gender and culture. The challenge is to disrupt and dispute the naturalness and originality of the victim subject. It is precisely at this point that we can contemplate the production of an inclusive politics. Among the student leaders of Parbatpuri was a young girl Bobita who also bears the agenda of a resistive marginal subject in the text. However, the claims made by the resistive subject may not necessarily be successful or even heard. In this context the inhuman atrocities meted out to Bobita and her group may be mentioned. In fact, the more marginalized and subversive her politics, the more reluctant the state will be to cede her any ground. Another stereotype of victimhood is the status of a widow which is demystified in the novel. Nandini Deuri, a typical housewife, the spouse of the districts' SP turns out to be prospective entrepreneur after the death of her husband. Her success or failure is contingent on the interplay of dominant familial, cultural, and sexual ideologies and the particular claims she puts forward. She may fail because of social, economic, or historical constraints and oppositions. By resorting to an exclusive focus on the victim subject and on women's experience of violence, feminists fell back onto an understanding of power (one that has also informed traditional human rights standards) as monolithic and emanating from a coherent sovereign.

Mitra Phukan has not stereotyped or imposed complexes on any of its characters, has not depicted any character as victim, and has instead simply allowed the characters to develop very convincingly and naturally, appreciating and making room for inconsistencies, magnanimity of spirit, complexities of motivation. The plot does build up to quite an interesting but poignant 'climax', ending in a scene of death. The horrors to which Rukmini was but a mute viewer quickly seep into her life as Siddharth and Manoj both get pulled into the web of the terrorist violence. The final denouncement is horrifying and yet true - for there can be no other 'end' to such a tale, where the personal is so densely interwoven with the political.

The challenge for feminists has been to think of ways in which to express their politics without subjugating other subjectivities through claims to the idea of a “true self” or a singular truth about all women. The re-envisioning of the subject of women's rights discourse leads to a reformulation of the notions of agency and choice. It is an agency that is neither situated exclusively in the individual nor denied because of some overarching oppression. It is situated in the structures of social relationships, the location of the post colonial subject, in the edifice of gender and culture. Thus though Rukmini lost both male supports- her husband and lover, she is not without choice. The writer had offered a premonition about Rukmini's future plans of an

editing career and a singlehanded effort to raise her ensuing child, although she has taken the narrative convenience of keeping an open-ended conclusion by singing an elegy for all the innocent victims of this insurgency prone land.

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