



DEPICTION OF NEW WOMAN IN MITRA PHUKAN'S *THE COLLECTOR'S WIFE*: A STUDY OF THE CHARACTER OF RUKMINI

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ABSTRACT A woman is treated as 'second sex' in patriarchal society and placed at different disadvantageous position due to gender difference. Women are always found themselves hidden behind a mist of illusions and misled by the imposed ideal of womanhood. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, breaking the traditional norms and stereotype gender roles laid by the patriarchal society, the women began to enter into a new space with new roles. Such a woman who breaks the traditional image of "the angel in the house" and seeks freedom is termed as new woman in literature. This paper is an attempt to analyse the character of Rukmini as a new woman in Mitra Phukan's *The Collector's Wife* as the fiction depicts the journey of the protagonist Rukmini from a meek, gentle, obedient housewife to a self-sufficient individual who rebels against male domination and thrives for self-identity.

KEYWORDS : new woman, patriarchy, non-conformist, rebel, insurgency.

1. Introduction

"In" 1960s with rise of feminism, there emerges the concept of new woman, who is completely different from her traditional counterpart. This new woman is self conscious, confident and assertive who realises her inner potential, asserts her independence and identity of her own as a liberated woman. To acquire a new identity, the new woman struggles hard amidst various odds. She is aware of her position, she seeks to free herself from the clutches of unjust taboos and customs imposed on her by the male dominated society and hence occupies the central position instead of being the "other". The term New woman was first popularised through Irish writer Sarah Grand's essay "*The New Aspect of the Woman Question*" published in 1894, in North American Review. She uses the term to signify the woman who is above the man and has found the problem with the idea of Home as the woman's space. The new image is the feminist, educationist, independent, career oriented woman. She has control over her life and exerted autonomy in domestic and private sphere. She has no fear of independence and solitary life and considered marriage as a fetter. Later on, the British American writer Henry James propagated the term to describe the metamorphosed women in Europe and the United States that defied the conventional gender roles and acclaimed themselves as educated, autonomous and feminist. This New Woman pushed the limits set by a male dominated society.

- The portrayal of New woman in English Literature begins during the later half of nineteenth century in both drama and fiction. In drama, they appear primarily in the works of Henrik Ibsen, Henry Arthur and George Bernard Shaw. In fictions, the works of Sara Grand, Olive Schreiner, Annie Sophie Cory and Ella Hepworth Dixon signify a new era of emancipation for women in their representation of New woman. The other side of the emergence of the image of New Woman is that the depiction of such non conformists was ridiculed as one that propagates disorder and rebellion.

"In" the Indian context, the New women are empowered by education, career and the right to choose and are active in personal and public life. They are more aware about the world, their rights and support system. They are not worry about social taboos. They have no constrains of class, gender or religion. They are bold and strong enough to face life with all its ups and downs with all their efforts to solve their problems themselves. This image is found in many Indian English fictions. However, most of the protagonists, like in real life are those who try to negotiate a middle path of co-operation rather than a rivalry. Therefore, the western idea of new woman is different from the Indian image. In the context of Indian English literature, writers like Shobha De, Githa Hariharan, Arundhati Roy, Shashi Deshpande present the image of new woman who is conscious of her place and position in the family and the society. Turning the point of focus towards the women writers writing in English from the northeastern part of India, Indira Goswami, Mitra Phukan, Tamsula Ao, Easterine Iralu depict a number of memorable non-conformist, unconventional female characters who are vibrantly alive in terms and feelings, intellect and emotions in their fictions. Mitra Phukan in *The Collector's Wife* presents the characters of Rukmini Bezbaruah, Nandini Deuri, Priyam and Bobita as recognized non-conformists female who thirst for their freedom and liberty and

achieve an identity of their own. They emerge as individuals rather than "other" and strive for their existential survival.

2. Objective

The main objective of the paper is to study the character of Rukmini Bezbaruah as the representation of New Woman in Mitra Phukan's fiction *The Collector's Wife*. In the fiction, the protagonist Rukmini Bezbaruah's life can be seen through three phases- her warmthless married life with her husband Siddharth, life after her meeting with Manoj Mahanta with whom she finds companionship and life after the sudden death of two men of her life-Siddhartha and Monoj in an encounter of insurgent outfits. In all these three time frames of her life span, readers notice the rebellious instincts of Rukmini that leads to her emancipation and thus she is representation of rebellious, emancipated new woman.

3. Analysis

"Mitra" Phukan is one of the most well known literary voices writing in English from Assam. An author, translator and columnist, she is the winner of UNICEF - CBT award for children's writing for her book *Mamoni's Adventure*. A prominent member of the Northeast Writer's forum, Mitra Phukan has carved a niche among the readers for her Like fictions like *The Collector's Wife*, *A Moonson of Music*. Being a feminist writer, Phukan has explored the female psyche, the conflicts of the self with the cultural and social dimensions defined by the patriarchy. The women characters play major roles in her fictions through which Mitra Phukan brings out the emotional and psychological clashes of middle class married female experiences when their set roles restrict self development. Her fictions are characterized by the struggle of Indian middle class women characters striving to establish an identity of their own in the male dominated social set up.

"*the Collector's Wife*" is a unique fiction which brings forth the socio-political condition of Assam and Northeast as its essential backdrop. The movement of outlawed extremists' organizations, political agitations, kidnapping, extortion and student's demonstrations form the powerful background of the novel against with a tenderly woven woman's tale of loveless marriage. The main thrust of the fiction is the gendered realities existing amidst insurgency issues, student unrest, border crossing etc. Mitra Phukan portrays social instability, conflict -personal as well as political, political idealism, violence of outfits, pain, agony, trauma of insurgency, loss, fear of death, bloodshed, hypocrisy, bureaucratic functioning and customs, love and sacrifice in the fiction. The fiction depicts the hard times of hatred and violence along with the prejudices against women which paralyze normal lives. Apart from describing this grim social reality of unrest, it is about the feminine experiences in terms of identity intertwining both the public and the private. The writer very skillfully delineates the personal conflicts of different women characters and their efforts to become emancipated and liberated through Rukmini's thirst for emancipation.

Rukmini Bezbaruah - a highly placed woman is the protagonist in the fiction. Rukmini, is the wife District Collector of Parbatpuri, Siddharth Bezbaruah who is always in the limelight and the object and focal point

of the public eye. Rukmini works as a part time Lecturer in Dinanath College. At the surface level, Rukmini is an aristocratic, beautiful, rich, modern, well educated lady. Being the wife of the District Collector, Rukmini has everything a modern woman needed- high educational qualification, dignity, high social status, luxurious lifestyle, a beautiful bungalow set high on a hill complete with many servants. Inwardly, Rukmini is confined to the narrow circumference of loveless marriage, devoid of mutual understanding, happiness and pleasure as her workaholic husband never involves with her emotionally and physically. She resents: "Men, dashing around, doing the world's work, while she waited in, of all the places on the globe, Parbatpuri, for them to spare a look, or sometime for her." (TCW, 160) Rukmini seeks response, companionship and touch from her husband which she rarely receives. In addition to it, Rukmini's childlessness for long ten years is the major cause of her personal suffering. To her distress, Dr. Rabha says that it would be difficult for her to produce any heir, male or female. Yet Rukmini is not discouraged. She does all possible attempts to conceive a child to shed the name of barren woman. Being highly educated, Rukmini makes herself acquainted with the recent scientific developments in fertilisation: "It was almost always Rukmini who brought home magazines and articles on infertile couples becoming parents, She would cut out newspaper articles on GIFT (Gamete Intra Fallopian Transfer), on test tube babies, on petri-dish infants, or fertility enhancing drugs and even on, surrogate motherhood and show them to Siddharth." (51) Rukmini writes to several fertility specialists and coaxes Siddharth to accompany her for a few. Siddharth has done so more to please her than out of any great desire for fatherhood. She even thinks to frame an advertisement for a female ovum donor if the doctor suggests that an ovum donor is the only chance for Siddharth to father a baby who will be legitimately his in the eyes of law.

"Rukmini" is the representative of the modern urban educated Indian woman who defies traditional norms set for a woman. She refuses to conform to the traditional *pratikranta* image of a Hindu married woman by putting vermilion powder on her head. In traditional Indian Hindu society, the use of vermilion by married Hindu woman in their hair parting and a dot on the forehead is regarded auspicious. Every Hindu married woman must wear vermilion powder which is a visible expression of their desire for their husband's longevity. In traditional Hindu households, one cannot imagine a married Indian Hindu woman without *sindoor*. Rukmini does not follow such strict rule of male dominance. Vermilion is not visible on Rukmini's forehead while she attends Rita's wedding reception. She is mistaken as an unmarried lady by an elderly woman with a tight hair bun scraped back on her head who asks her, "whose daughter are you?" (14) As Rita intervenes, "Rukmini is married, mahi", the reaction of the elderly women are that of disappointment: "Married! Their looks of astonishment rapidly changed to disapproval. They scanned Rukmini's head for signs of vermilion powder, found none, and arched their eyebrows as they took in her loose, wavy shoulder-length hair." (14) Rukmini has a choice of her own to decorate herself. She believes that the vermilion powder on her forehead should not be the basis on which she is judged as a wife. Rukmini follows her choice fearlessly.

"Rukmini" is taunted by elderly women in Rita's marriage ceremony for her barrenness who treat her inauspicious. They debar Rukmini to touch the bride. But she has the power of self-restraint as she reacts normally to this uncomfortable situation. Rukmini is strong and practical enough to get emancipated from orthodox role of women- "Rukmini stood up quickly. Being careful not to touch the bride, Rukmini said, "Don't worry Rita, I understand." She tried a little laugh, and was pleased with the way it came out. Gay and careless. That was the right note to hit." (15) Her mind is full of resentment and agitation: "She had felt, not hurt, but angry. Angry that they, smug in their own fecundity, surrounded, probably, by at least half a dozen children each, should dare to even assume that she, childless, was inferior. Flawed." (41) Rukmini is quite assertive in spite of husband's negligence and her so called physical inability. Her ultimate decision to take fertility enhancing drug for regular ovulation without much discussion with Siddharth presents her as a modern, educated, independent woman who accepts such scientifically-aided option to increase her fertility rates without any hesitation.

"In" such a situation of loneliness, lovelessness, frustration, the steady routines and predictability of Rukmini's life are little shaken when she meets Manoj Mahanta, a well educated, handsome, recently divorced gentleman, the first couple of times by chance and subsequently by choice. Rukmini's accidental collision with Manoj during her

shopping at MG Road of Parbatpuri urges her physical desire for touch a male body. Rukmini feels excitement at the touch of a new man as she is in dearth of romance. Rukmini rebels against Siddharth and remembers the feel of Manoj Mahanta's body during her long wait for Siddharth: "Her body longed for the reassuring warmth of a male body beside her, for a voice to tell her that it wasn't her fault that she was still childless. Unaccountably, she remembered how Manoj Mahanta's torso had felt as it had come into brief contact with her on the pavement on MG road almost a month ago." (76) Rukmini crosses the *lakshman rekha* in search of self fulfilment by moving around with Manoj without Siddharth's knowledge. She longs for the oxygen of understanding which she finds in her friendship with Manoj. As a self realised person, Rukmini feels quite happy and comfortable in the company of Manoj: "She didn't want to be thought of as a small-town housewife with a narrow outlook. She had felt surprisingly at ease with Manoj even after their embarrassing collision on MG road. She found him engaging, easy to talk to, with a frankness that was rare in the kind of people that surrounded her in Parbatpuri. He was, in any case, one of the few people she had met recently who was outside the circle of Siddharth's official friends, her own colleagues, or the members of the Parbatpuri Club to whom she did not, for the most part, relate in the least." (117)

"Rukmini" is unconventional, liberal, transgressor who moves outside her comfort zone with another man quite happily. It is in Manoj that Rukmini finds a better companion to relieve her inner conflicts. The stay of Rukmini and Siddharth at Ranijan Club for few hours due to storm led to the circumstances of having their physical consummation. Rukmini, devoid of any fear, shares a room with Manoj and comes close to him: "His touch was pleasant, like a soft, cool breeze on her skin on a hot summer day. His hand on her hair continued to brush the strands back from her face. She closed her eyes. Almost involuntarily, she moved closer to him." (141) Rukmini describes the union reciprocal: "as though their bodies had known each other for a long time. Whenever his mouth touched her, her skin felt as though it was fire." (141) Dizzying sensations whirls around her mind as "it was a long time since she had felt anything like this, even with Siddharth." (141) She feels that, "he had given her infinitely something precious: a glimpse into her innermost soul." (142) This frank acknowledgement of her sexuality presents Rukmini as bold and transgressor.

"Rukmini" does not blame Manoj for the incident, rather Rukmini's self-actualised portrayal reflects her longing to initiate and regulate her own emotion herself. She tells herself that she knows that she will be led to this situation. She can rationally feel that her physical union with Manoj is involuntary and a natural progression of the events of that day that lead to the passion filled Saturday afternoon at the Ranijan Club. Rukmini has not any regret for her infidelity because her husband Siddharth is never physically demonstrative with her. After her physical intimacy with Manoj, Rukmini sometimes wonders whether she can face Siddharth. But her irritation flares up when Siddharth intentionally avoids the talk about Dr. Rabha or their plan for a baby. Rukmini rebels, "What did he think she was, a harridan?" (159) Instead of being guilty for her infidelity, Rukmini is annoyed with Siddharth for his coolness and distraction from the real issue. Rukmini is an emancipated woman who feels happy for the circumstances leading to disapprove her infidelity. She stumbles on a truth that she is pregnant with Manoj's child. The feeling of her happiness, of triumph to shed barrenness persists. She finds excitement in the thought that she will be a particularly maternal type: "perhaps she was going to be the first-a barren woman, suddenly diagnosed, as being weeks pregnant after a blow to her head had rendered unconscious. She resisted the sudden urge to laugh hysterically." (222) This transformation in her body makes her fulfilled and self possessed. Rukmini feels 'vital and alive'.

Rukmini's sudden discovery of Siddharth's adulterous relation with her colleague Priyam makes her more rebellious and she accepts her pregnancy as an affirmation of her self. She is prepared for the calculations, the recriminations and the discoveries that Siddharth will do in unveiling the news of her pregnancy to him. But a woman of strong conviction, she is fortified and strengthened by her day of solitude. Rukmini convinces her man about the reasons for her infidelity and discusses on their mutual infidelity without any note of embarrassment and with clear cut statements, sitting across the table. When Siddharth questions her whether it is love that draws them close to each other, Rukmini very frankly answers that lust or love cannot be the right terms to define such a relationship. Rukmini calls it friendship which may not

repeat to have such physical closeness. Her attraction for Manoj has been "friendly rather than sexual." (275) Rukmini is not ready to call it an affair that continues between Siddharth and Priyam. She compares both the relationships: "she hadn't brought Manoj into her bedroom and made love right on the marital bed, right under the noses of Biswanath and the houseboys." (260) Because of her unfruitful and disgusting experiences with Siddharth, Rukmini is not at all ashamed to reveal the truth that she is carrying in her womb, a child whose father is not her husband. When there is a long conversation between Siddharth and Rukmini to decide on their future whether to divorce, separation or to bring up together the child of another man, Rukmini refuses to abort the child, "even if it costs me my marriage...she continued..." "I am going ahead. I'm having the baby." (315) Mitra Phukan glorifies Indian motherhood through the representation of Rukmini's decision to lose her life as the DC's wife for the sake of her child in womb. Rukmini's search for self identity leads her to shed the persona of the Collector's wife. Thus Rukmini is a rebellious emancipated new woman who struggles to have an identity of her own.

"Rukmini" wants freedom, an identity of her own, a new existence. She joins a local college as a temporary lecturer so that she can go beyond the threshold of her big bungalow. She finds it quite dull to stay all day alone in a big house with a number of servants, supervising their routine works as DC's wife: "I can't be a total housewife. Though part time lecturing is not much of a career, still it's better than nothing. Besides, Siddharth's away most of the time, the servants here are well trained, and I have no children. I have to do something." (116) Rukmini is dissatisfied with her job. She expresses Manoj about her desire to do something that gives her satisfaction: "I wish I could change my job. I don't want to teach English Literature for the rest of my life to students who can't even speak English grammatically." (139) Her wish to write or join an ad agency is an example of her modern outlook, her desire to establish an identity of her own. Manoj assures her that she can pursue a career of her own and establish her own identity other than just being the DC's wife and engaging in a job in which she is least interested. It is Rukmini's decision to try something completely new that can make her feel light hearted and upbeat and happy- "Rather than sit endlessly in the large, empty house, waiting for Siddharth to return, she decided to do something positive." (193-194)

"Her" decision to learn how to use typewriter is the nascent step of her search to litigate her "intellect-deadening rut." She buys Pitman – a precise guide of typewriting – and practices on Siddharth's office after the departure of his staff. Within a month, Rukmini is able to acquire the skill. Rukmini composes and types out letters to the Editor of *The Parbatpuri Herald*, one of the more prominent English dailies of the town. Her newly borne habit of typing her weekly letters to her parents staying at Trinidad, instead of writing by hand, decreases her mistakes each day and hence encourages her to do more creative- "Each week, as she twirled the finished letter off the machine, she felt a sense of satisfaction." (198)

"Rukmini" wants a faster-paced of life. She imagines to become a journalist, "with, perhaps, her own column, for which her readers would wait impatiently to influence the thinking of many people, to make her readers sit up and take note of her point of view." (162) Rukmini may become a busy journalist in future because she has already sent resumes to such job. Thus Rukmini transforms from a quintessential small town housewife doing a half hearted job into a self reliant individual starting a real career of her own choice.

"Mitra" Phukan reinforces her plea for women's liberation amidst conflict ridden situation through the representation of Rukmini. The violent insurgency that pervades Parbatpuri like a black river has an adverse effect in Rukmini's life- "In Parbatpuri death and grievance injury, accidental or intentional lurked at every step". (108) MOFEH creates an atmosphere of frightened silence. he students agitate to stop illegal migration of foreigners into the state. The high ranking government officers of the district ever venture out of doors without full security men. Siddharth is not an exception. But Rukmini's courage makes her exceptional. Rukmini finds it distasteful to remain under constant surveillance by gun wielding, security men. She argues with Siddharth when he asks Rukmini to move around under escort when she goes out for shopping, or to college, or to one of the many social functions to which she is invited as Chief Guest: "Is it necessary? I mean, why should I be a target? You know MOFEH has never kidnapped or killed a woman. I'm quite safe. I don't think I'll be harmed." (175)

MOFEH does not lead her towards pessimism. Rukmini does not lose heart. As the child grows in her womb, Rukmini begins to think of Manoj and his safety. She is caught in a web of thoughts regarding how Manoj will react if he knows about the child in her womb, whether he will suggest her to divorce Siddharth or what Siddharth will do once Manoj is back.

"Towards" the end of the novel, Rukmini is presented as a more emancipated woman who has the courage to face two deaths –her husband Siddharth is killed in his attempt to save Manoj, her companion from the insurgents while Manoj is shot dead in the encounter. Life becomes tragic for Rukmini, when she loses her husband and companion. Rukmini sheds "tear for two men-one who 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." (349) Rukmini also cries for the unborn baby who will unknown to both of them. Finally Rukmini rises like a Phoenix as she requests the security men to bring the dead body of Siddharth to their bed room and put him gently on bed. She follows them into the room as they walked slowly in with the blood –stained stretcher on their shoulders. Though Rukmini loses both male supports-her husband and her companion, Rukmini is not without choice. Mitra Phukan hints a premonition about Rukmini's future plans of an editing career and a singlehanded effort to raise her ensuing child. Rukmini is optimistic that good times will come. She sings elegy for all the innocent victims of this insurgency prone land. Thus Rukmini expresses her rebellion against insurgency that victimizes the mass in general and women in particular. Phukan hints that Rukmini's new career of a creative writer will erase her identity as the collector's wife or his widow. This is how Rukmini can get away from the clutches of insurgency.

4. Conclusion

"Mitra" Phukan projects the ideas of liberating woman through self realisation and the quest for self identity. Phukan believes that women should have an independent identity and entity by being aware of the choices open to her. Pathetic, suffering women of Phukan's fictions do not accept meekly their marginalisation. Instead of passively accepting her suffering, Rukmini tolerates, protests, struggles, and challenges the patriarchal norms. Rukmini struggles to find meaning in her loveless marriage, to shed the name of barren woman, to search for a better job. Her discovery of the illicit relation of her husband with her colleague Priyam makes Rukmini rebellious. Rukmini friendship with Manoj, her pregnancy outside her wedlock, her decision to begin a career of her choice amidst adverse situation gives her emancipation and liberation. Rukmini has passes through the emotional turmoil that her married life has offered to her and she arrives at tranquillity to some extent through her strength of mind, self realisation. The emergence of Rukmini from a silent sufferer in loneliness and lovelessness to an independent thinker to decide her future presents her as a new woman. Throughout the novel, Mitra Phukan presents the protagonist Rukmini Bezbaruah as a strong willed, rebellious, emancipated new woman craving for good companionship, aspiring for a better career and longing for the joys of motherhood.

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