

Impact of Insurgency on Women in Mitra Phukan's Novel: The Collector's Wife

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Abstract

The consequences of insurgency and armed struggles affect differently on men and women. The scar of insurgency is not the same for all. Women often become the silent victims of armed struggles and insurgency. The uprising and political tension in the region have turned the private life of women in the family upside down. "The Collector's Wife", is a novel written by Mitra Phukan against the historical background of Assam Student's agitation of 1970s and 1980s. The novel emphasizes women as the victims of insurgency. The novel opens up the hard realities of insurgency and the way it influences women focusing on the character of Rukmini. Her life seemed safe and settled on the peripheral level, but faced turbulence and agitation, whenever there was an uprising in the district. This paper attempts to explore the impact of the insurgency on women, particularly on the protagonist in Mitra Phukan's novel "The Collector's Wife". The paper analyses and describes the physical, social, mental, emotional, and psychological trauma of Rukmini and their resilience through the eyes of the author, Mitra Phukan.

Keywords: Women, Insurgency, Political Unrest, Complexity, Violence

Introduction

Literature from North East India has gained popularity for the divergent themes it enveloped. It covers the stories of political unrest, insurgency, ethnic conflicts, and so on. The writers have focused on the various issues faced by the people of this region and brought them to light. North East area is one of the most culturally diverse areas in the world. This part is encouraged and appreciated for its natural scenario. It has turned out to be a home for various tribes and ethnic groups respecting their tradition, culture, devotion, multi linguistics, culinary, attire, etc... People live together in harmony and peace. The people in this region are more hospitable and accommodate migrants from other parts of the country who move toward various rationales. As a result, in some parts of this region, the native people are treated as aliens in their land. In their struggle to preserve their culture and ethnic identity, violence and insurgency break out in different parts of North Eastern states. Gradually it has grown into a major political issue. Ethnic clashes became a common issue in Northeast India. Gradually this confusion and misunderstanding led to a serious disaster in the past as well as the present.

Mitra Phukan is one of the self-empowered women writers from the Northeast. She writes boldly about the realities of life. Her writings are marked by the bitter realities of life. Mitra Phukan who is hailing from

Assam is not wavered to present in her novel, the ugly realities of insurgency that took place in Assam. The Collector's Wife is a historical novel written by Mitra Phukan which is entirely grounded on the Assam Student's agitation of the 1970s and 1980s.

The ground-level reality of life is canvassed in the fiction "The Collector's Wife" by Mitra Phukan. The readers could feel through the novel, the troubled political situation in a small town of Assam named Parbatpuri where kidnappings, extortion, and political insecurity have become a monotonous issue of the day. The novel portrays social instability, conflict both 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. Rukmini, the collector's wife as the title denotes, undergoes a lot of inner pressure even though her life seems secure on the surface.

Literature Review

The critics tend to read and criticize the novel "The Collector's Wife" as a piece of literature dealing with insurgency, politics, violence, kidnapping, and issues related to women and fertility.

Punyashree Panda and Panchali Bhattacharya (2019) in their article "Oriental Ecofeminism Contrasting Spiritual and Social Eco-femininity in Mitra Phukan's The Collector's Wife and Manjula Padmanabhan's Escape" states that the novel Collector's Wife by Mitra Phukan demonstrates a strong eco-consciousness and equally sensitive attitude towards the insecurity of women. The novel not only portrays violence and terror but also focuses on nature, landscape, and the attitude of the people towards the environment. The author excellently merges the identity crisis of the women characters with her concern for nature.

Dikshita Bhuyan (2019) in her article titled, "Depiction of New Woman in Mitra Phukan's The Collector's Wife: A Study of the Character of Rukmini" declares the journey of the protagonist Rukmini from the conventional idea of the society of a Woman to the modern women who fight for their rights and search for their own identity. She breaks down the stereotype mentality of the patriarchal society of gender roles and their belief system.

Anjela Daimari, (2021) in her article, "An analysis of the women characters - Rukmini and Nandini in the novel The Collector's Wife by Mitra Phukan" illustrates the way women characters have turned out to be the victims of the political unrest in the place. The insurgency has enormously shuffled the lives of women. The women facing all these adversaries were in a continuous search for a new and better identity for themselves.

The Aim of the Study

The main aim of this paper is to explore the impact of the insurgency on women depicted in Mitra Phukan's novel "The Collector's Wife".

Research Objectives

- To analyze the lifestyle of Rukmini and the marginalization of women in 'The Collector's Wife.'
- To identify the connection between insurgency and the struggles of women.
- To describe the physical, social, mental, emotional, and psychological sufferings of women and how it influences their personalities.

Research questions

- How does insurgency affect the daily lives of the Women?
- What are the physical, emotional, and psychological trauma women undergo during the insurgency?
- What are the impacts of insurgency on the marital life of women?

Methodology and Data Collection

This research paper is based on the literature review and case study analysis is done on the novel ‘The Collector’s Wife’ written by Mitra Phukan. In this article, the researchers are trying to investigate the impact of insurgency on the lifestyles and the privacy of women. This paper elucidates various dimensional aspects of women’s experience particularly the physical, mental, sociological, emotional, and psychological trauma of Rukmini and other women coping with their issues, resilience, and inner struggle through the perspectives of Mitra Phukan. Data Collection for this article is purely based on the reading the primary source of data is the novel “The Collector’s Wife” by Mitra Phukan. The researcher has also referred to some secondary data such as printed journals, articles, and book reviews for a better understanding of the theme.

The Collector’s Wife

Mitra Phukan has carved a niche for herself as a writer in English from Assam. She lives in Guwahati at present. She is a reputed author, translator, and columnist and she is a trained classical vocalist. Mitra Phukan in most of her writings explored the theme of women’s psyche, emotional conflicts, and the influence of society over the life of women. The fiction is mainly focusing on the women characters and their craving for freedom. Some of the major women characters are Rukmini Bezbaruah, Nandini Deuri, Priyam, and Bobita. These women characters in the novel are self-sufficient and well-empowered. They are capable of standing on their legs. They enjoy a high status in society with reputed careers. Mitra reveals Rukmini, the protagonist as the replica of the modern woman who undergoes the inner struggle in a wedded relationship along with the social issues. The psychological, emotional, and inner longing of women in a conjugal relationship is ignored or neglected in the face of insurgency and violence in the locality. The novel reveals the struggle women have undergone to create their own identity in the patriarchal society.

The Collector’s Wife is a fiction that reveals the socio-political condition of North East particularly of Assam. The novel is a knit-together subjects of agitation, insurgency, kidnapping, violence, marriage, infertility, and loveless relationships. Even though the insurgency is the central background in which the story remains rooted, it is the portrayal of its characters trying to search for love and companionship that makes the fiction an interesting one. It introduces the readers to the strife in Assam through Rukmini, the married and settled wife of the district collector of Parbatpuri. There are a couple of times the novel raises the question of having meaningless conflicts that destroy and affect many people’s lives and lead the youth to conflicts and violent movements.

Historical background of “The Collector’s Wife”

“The Collector’s Wife” narrates the story based on an imaginary insurgency area known as Parbatpuri, a hill town of Assam. The famous historical Assam movement in post-independent India was mainly led by the students of Assam which started in 1979 and ended up on 15th August 1985. The inspiration behind this movement was to prevent the illegal immigration of foreign nationals to Assam mainly from

Bangladesh and Nepal and their participation in exercising franchise in the electoral process in Assam and to exile all foreigners living illegally in Assam. The movement began with the notion of preserving their own identity amidst the situation when migrants are more in number than the natives resulting in the deterioration of the original culture. The movement which began with a noble purpose gradually changed its peaceful approach and took the shape of insurgency that led to abduction, extortions, killings, and political unrest. This movement is highlighted in the novel. The novel which is rooted in this background of insurgency throws a glimpse of fear and insecurity among the inhabitants residing in the conflict area. Mitra Phukan in her novel retells the most sensitive issues like immigration, the Assam Movement, insurgency, and terrorism in her unique way. The individuals residing in the conflict-ridden atmosphere are gripped with fear and tension which changed their routine life. She introduces two types of patriotism in the fiction. First, the patriotism of the native people who are attached to their homeland cared to preserve their culture and tradition. The students at Deenanath Saikia College are examples of such people. Secondly, the people who boast of doing patriotic activities as service to the people known as 'Desh Sewa'. "Every week reports of fresh incidents of extortion or looting, or gunning down unarmed citizenry, appeared in papers".

Impact of Insurgency on Women and Their Privacy

Mitra Phukan in her novel "The Collector's Wife" presents the women as against the conception of the traditional Assamese women. As the novel unfolds, the readers get a clear glimpse of the effect of insurgency on its women characters. Mitra Phukan opens up a society where social traditions and norms often trouble a woman physically, emotionally, and psychologically. She describes through her women characters the personal conflicts and the struggles they faced in their drive toward liberation to create an identity of their own. The protagonist Rukmini is conscious of herself, realizes her potential, and tries to be independent. She also develops a new identity for herself. The women in the novel are educated and career-oriented. They stand on their own and are aware of their rights in private and public life. The fiction reveals three different stages of life that Rukmini undergoes in her life. First, her loveless married life with Sidharth, secondly her life after meeting Manoj with whom she was able to find companionship and lastly her life after the death of both Sidharth and Manoj.

Mitra Phukan presents the inner turmoil of Rukmini in her novel. The major reason for her inner suffering is the isolation. She often remembers the words of her mother-in-law.

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

Rukmini was often feeling insecure and affected by the agitations in the town. She was isolated from her relatives and friends. Rukmini, like any other woman craves love and companionship from her husband but what she gains is seclusion from Sidharth. She was left alone in a big bungalow. She took up a job as a lecturer at Deenanath Saikia College to overcome this isolation.

Rukmini, being the wife of the District Collector has been blessed with everything a woman needs. Physical beauty, richness, high educational qualification, dignity, high social status, luxurious lifestyle, a big bungalow set on the hilltop, and many servants at her service. She had everything to make her happy but in her heart of heart, she could not experience that happiness in her life. Sidharth and Rukmini had

differences in their interest and Sidharth was a failure in satisfying the inner needs of Rukmini. Being the DC of a conflict-stricken area, he was always out with overtime duty and he was not available to Rukmini whenever she needed him. What she expected from him were true companionship and loving touches from him which she rarely received from him. Rukmini felt his absence of him on various occasions in her life. The novel opens up with the occasion where she went alone for the marriage and her colleagues were discussing Sidharth's busy schedule. The married woman is expected to go with their partner for such functions. She is taunted by elderly women in Rita's marriage ceremony for her barrenness which is discouraging. They even prohibit Rukmini from touching the bride.

“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.... “So how many children do you have, then?” “Children? None” She was careful to keep the smile from slipping.... “What times we are living through! In my days, even the shadow of a barren woman wasn’t allowed to fall on a bride” (14 - 15).

Rukmini's childlessness for long ten years is another major reason for her suffering. She was not discouraged by the words of Dr. Rabha that she couldn't give an heir to Sidharth. She did all possible things to shed the name of the barren woman from her. Most often Sidharth was not a supportive husband and he left her alone to handle her bareness and he didn't show any interest in meeting the doctor for the treatment. It was Renu the mother of Sidharth was a solace for her in her distress. She used to speak of adoption and test tube babies as a remedy for her infertility. Renu gave Rukmini an amulet of fertility which she wore all the time around her neck. However, her desire to have a child remained with her alone. Rukmini in such a situation of loneliness, frustration, and hopelessness was shaken by the presence of Manoj Mahanta, an educated, handsome, gentle man whom she met at a wedding party of Rita. Manoj was a businessman and divorced from his early marriage. She found him open, easy to talk to, and different from other people in Parbatpuri. Rukmini recalls in her distress her accidental collision with Manoj during her shopping on MG Road in Parbatpuri.

“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 found happiness and comfort with Manoj and they moved around without the knowledge of Sidharth. After her physical intimacy with Manoj, Rukmini wonders how she can face Siddharth. But her irritation flares up when Siddharth intentionally avoids the talk about Dr. Rabha or their plan for a baby. Her inner suffering became severe as she realized Sidharth's adulterous relationship with Priyam Deka one of her colleagues and whom she considered to be her friend. She was shattered at the realization that Sidharth was avoiding her not because of the work pressure but because he had a relationship with Priyam Deka. She felt that she failed to understand the taste of Sidharth even after a decade of marriage. Out of her disgusting experiences with Siddharth, Rukmini was not at all guilty of revealing the truth that she was conceived with a child whose father is not her husband. Rukmini showed her courage to go forward with her pregnancy glorifying her motherhood. She was ready for any risk for it “even if it costs me my marriage. She continued... “I am going ahead. I'm having the baby.” (315)

The novel openly draws the inner and outer turmoil of the protagonist along with other women characters. It shows the reality of terror and violence and its impact on the lives of women sitting at home. Their inner

struggle is at times ignored by the men as they are too busy in stopping conflicts and bringing peace.

Marriage, Women, and Infertility

Marriage is one of the most sacred institutions in Indian culture that unites both men and women. Some of the major themes in *The Collector's Wife* are women, marriage, sex, loneliness, adultery, etc... The novel also exposes the various issues of marital relationships a woman needs to encounter in her life. It reveals the problems of arranged marriage, loveless marital knots, sex, adultery, motherhood, and infertility.

Kamala Das (1965) in her poem “**Introduction**” writes, “Dress in sarees, be girl, be wife, they said. Be embroiderer, be cook, be a quarreler with servants. Fit in. Oh, Belong, cried the categorizers.” These lines declare the stereotyped attitude of society toward married women in the Indian culture. Society makes sure that they fit into a particular frame made by them. Whether it is in South or North, or East or West it is the same practices of our country. The men in the marital life enjoy the freedom of movement as women are bound to be behind the four walls of the home engaging in what the society is dictating to do.

Rukmini's experience of her married life was that of loneliness and rejection from her husband. Like any other woman of her time, she also tried to fit into the image of a typical married woman. She developed a good relationship with Siddharth's family and longed to be a mother. Like any other woman, she wanted to give birth to a child but often it ended up in despair and helplessness. She felt her husband was not much interested in the treatment which added to her pain. There were moments when she was left alone to answer to society about having no child. She was even rejected from touching the bride for the reason she was unable to produce a child after her ten years of marriage. Thus the novel declares that not only men oppress women in society but there are women themselves who ill-treat other women.

The novel reveals the attitude of society toward a barren woman. Rukmini was carefully avoiding the topic of children to some extent. She was rejected from the gathering where they speak about their children assuming it will be adding oil to her pain and sorrow. But their negligence was the real pain for her. As she was getting aged along with society her mother-in-law also persisted in her having a baby soon. There was some superstitious belief the people had about the barren woman. “When a childless female took an undue interest in one's offspring, it was time to ward off the evil eye by going home as soon as possible, roasting mustard seeds on an open fire, and murmuring mantras over the head of the child whose name was taken by the barren woman.” (167)

The novel gives more importance to the issues of motherhood and infertility. Rukmini, who always wanted to liberate herself from the clutches of traditional society, was exceptional in her thinking and actions. She moved outside of her comfort zone as the wife of the collector and went to college for teaching. Being the wife of a collector from the trouble-stricken area, she was not able to spend quality time with him. The couple had no open conversation until the last chapter. Rukmini felt Siddharth was avoiding her presence. In these situations of loneliness, lifelessness, loveless, and frustrated relationship with Siddharth, she meets Manoj Mahanta, a well-educated, handsome, and divorced gentleman. Gradually she moves with him and spends time in a hotel without any fear. She feels closer to him than her husband.

“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 to him... Her thoughts were drowned in a sea of sensations. It was a long time since she had felt anything like this, even with Siddharth.”

Parts of her body that had almost forgotten had existed, came to alive to his touch.”
(141)

Rukmini was shocked to determine her husband’s adulterous relationship with Priyam who is her colleague. The incident made her more rebellious and she realized the real reason why Siddharth was not willing for fertility treatment and left all the pain and shame on her to bear. It made a feeling of revenge in her and she decided to accept her illegal pregnancy from Manoj. Being a strong woman of convictions she took courage to speak up to Siddharth over their mutual infidelity. She openly admits the pain and suffering she underwent for being labeled as a barren woman by society and the lack of interest and support shown by Siddharth to overcome this shame made her feel no shame to reveal about her pregnancy from Manoj.

Mitra Phukan glorifies motherhood in her novel. For a woman to be a mother is something greater than everything. She is happily ready to give up whatever she has for the sake of her child. Both Siddharth and Rukmini had a long conversation over their future whether to separate or to own up the fatherhood of a child from another man. Rukmini daringly reveals her decision to keep her child even at the cost of her life as the wife of the District Collector. It shows her strong decision and longing to be a mother.

“I am going to have the baby. No matter what. I know, of course, that things would be so much simpler if I had had an abortion... But I, well... know I’ve never really been very decisive about anything. But on this I’m firm. I’m having this baby... Not because I’m in love with Manoj, or anything like that. I’m not. I like him a lot, but getting married to him. In any case, he doesn’t even know about the baby... I have no idea what I’ll do, how I’ll raise this baby, but - I’m going ahead, anyway... Even if it costs me my marriage.” (314-315)

Results and Discussion

Objective one is justified in this article. Mitra Phukan highlights in her novel the lifestyles of women such as; the marital lifestyle of Rukmini with her husband, her struggle for education, economic status, the victim of lovelessness and companionship from her partner, the stigma of infertility in Indian culture, discrimination and isolation in the society, the unfulfilled need of women due to unfaithfulness of their husband and their struggles for liberation and empowerment.

Mitra Phukan emphasizes the plea for women's liberation amidst a conflict-ridden situation through the representation of Rukmini. Rukmini being the wife of the District Collector, well-educated, beautiful, sociable, royal, and modern was not satisfied with her private life. There was a vacuum feeling in her throughout her life with Siddharth. Though she was blessed with all the luxurious things of her time, she realized that these material things didn’t add any happiness and satisfaction to her life. None of these make her life a fulfilled one. She is the replica of many of the Indian modern women who suffer silently over their marital issues in physical, social, psychological, emotional, personal, and public spheres of life. There are thousands of women around us becoming a victim of loveless marriage, devoid of mutual understanding, loneliness, frustration, and lack of companionship from their partner.

In this research article, the second objective and the research question are validated and recognized by the following themes. Some of the themes that are identified by the researcher are; social isolation, loneliness, lack of companionship, lack of freedom, patriarchal lifestyle, suppression of feelings of women not only in family but also in society, sense of shame and guilt, fear and anxiety, unfaithfulness and illegal pregnancy.

Infertility in Indian culture is considered as something disgraceful even today. Dr. Rabha says that it would be difficult for Rukmini to produce any heir, male or female. Rukmini was not disappointed rather she tried all possible means to shed the unpleasant name 'barren' from her. As an educated person, she gathered knowledge from newspaper articles about advanced medical technology like, test tube babies, petri-dish infants, fertility-enhancing drugs, and even surrogate motherhood. She tried to convince her husband about these which he paid the least interest. She even went to the extreme that she thought of finding a female ovum donor if the doctor suggested that it was the only chance for Siddharth to become a legitimate father.

The novel "The Collector's Wife" presents in front of the readers the pain and isolation of the protagonist Rukmini who is well educated and enjoying a high social status. She is well protected from the violence that took place in her surrounding villages. Her suffering is not because of a lack of basic needs but a lack of love and attention from her husband. Rukmini was in a constant fight with her infertility. The society where she lived was so stereotyped that they couldn't accept women having no child after ten years of marriage regardless of their education and status in life.

Objective number three is fulfilled in this research article depicting various themes of the physical, social, mental, emotional, and psychological sufferings of women. Physical dimensional elements in this article are violence, murder, bodily restriction of physical love, and its expression. The social theme that the researcher could identify in the novel is the social pressure by the traditional and orthodox patriarchal society often prevents women from enjoying their identity. Mitra Phukan underlines the mental suffering of the women characters in the novel. The entire female characters undergo certain kinds of emotional and psychological trauma.

The novel "The Collector's Wife" concludes with a melancholic atmosphere and it communicates a message to the world about the violence of hatred and massacre. The author expresses her sympathy for all men and women who have been victims of hatred and insurgency. She concludes her writing as:

"And tears for all the other women who had stood over still pale bodies, as she was now standing. Nandini Deuri and so many others, all coalescing into a single figure of tear-shrouded grief, as they looked down at the slain bodies of their husbands, their brothers, their sons, wrapped in blood-blotched sheets." (349)

Conclusion

Women have become the worst fatalities of violence and insurgency in India. Even though there are some special privileges organized for women in our country such as; government programs and various schemes for their liberation, it has not reaped the expected outcome. It is sad to declare the reality that it has become a land where women even in this 21st century live in fear because of the unhealthy atmosphere within and outside their homes, communities, and society at large. The violence and insurgency that are disturbing women need to be stopped and eradicated from our society by all means. It is also recommended to all the writers in the world and particularly to all the Indian writers of literary works to bring out the best resilience method, coping strategies, skillful techniques, practical women policy programs, and their implementation for the empowerment of women. The article also suggests that all the stakeholders of all the government departments, governmental and non-governmental organizational and to all civilians to recognize women, respect their rights, and uphold them as relevant role players of the social transformation in their family, tribes, communities and at large in society. All legal protection is to be provided for all girl children and women for their overall development and well-being.

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Informed Consent

For this research article, there was no need of getting informed consent since it is not directly in concern with the participants.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest in this paper.

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