

Mitra Phukan's Perspective of a Woman during Insurgency all through 1980s Assam as Depicted in *The Collector's Wife*

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Abstract

This paper explores Mitra Phukan's portrayal of women during the insurgency in 1980s Assam as depicted in her novel "The Collector's Wife." Through an in-depth analysis, the paper identifies and explores the recurring themes and stylistic elements that define Phukan's literary oeuvre. Phukan's narrative delves into the complexities of a woman's life amidst political turmoil and social unrest, presenting a nuanced view of the challenges and resilience of women in this era. By analyzing the central character Rukmini's experiences and interactions, this paper highlights how the novel reflects broader societal issues and the particular impacts of insurgency on women's roles and identities. The paper also throws light on themes such as gender dynamics, cultural identity, and social transformation. Her stories are not merely reflections of personal lives but are intertwined with the broader historical and cultural contexts. Phukan's ability to portray complex characters, her use of evocative language, and her incorporation of local traditions and landscapes make her work a vital part of contemporary Indian literature.

Introduction

Mitra Phukan's writing is characterized by its deep engagement with the socio-cultural fabric of Assam. The decade of the 1980s was a tumultuous period in Assam, a northeastern state of India, marked by significant political unrest.

The political instability and violent insurgencies that profoundly affected the region's social fabric. Mitra Phukan's novel "The Collector's Wife" provides a vivid depiction of this turbulent period through the lens of its female protagonist, Rukmini. This paper examines Phukan's perspective on the plight of women during this era, focusing on how the insurgency influenced their lives, identities, and roles within society.

The 1980s in Assam were characterized by the Assam Agitation (1979-1985), a mass movement against illegal immigration, primarily from Bangladesh. This period saw widespread protests, strikes, and clashes with the state machinery, culminating in the Assam Accord of 1985. However, the agitation also paved the way for insurgent groups like the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), which sought an independent Assam through violent means.

The insurgency led to a climate of fear and uncertainty, disrupting everyday life and instilling a pervasive sense of instability. The socio-political upheaval had profound effects on all strata of society, but its impact on women was particularly acute. The traditional roles of women were challenged, and they were often caught between the demands of insurgent groups and the state's repressive measures.

The Assam Movement, also known as the Assam Agitation, was rooted in the long-standing ethnic and cultural anxieties of the Assamese people, who feared being overwhelmed by the influx of immigrants. The signing of the Assam Accord in 1985 between the leaders of the movement and the Indian government was intended to address these issues, yet it also left many challenges unresolved.

The primary cause of the Assam Movement was the perceived threat to the Assamese identity due to the continuous influx of immigrants. This period was characterized by widespread protests, strikes, and civil disobedience. The movement also saw violent clashes, resulting in numerous casualties and a deep-seated sense of mistrust among different communities.

The consequences of this period were profound. The agitation disrupted everyday life, with schools, colleges, and offices frequently shut down. Economically, Assam faced setbacks due to halted industrial and agricultural activities. Politically, the movement led to a significant realignment of power, eventually resulting in the formation of the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) government.

Mitra Phukan's "The Collector's Wife" is set against this backdrop of political turmoil. The novel provides a vivid portrayal of the unrest through the experiences of its characters, particularly the protagonist, Rukmini Bezboruah, the wife of the District Collector. Set against the framework of insurgency, the novel explores Rukmini's internal and external struggles as she navigates her roles as a wife, daughter-in-law, and individual. The narrative provides a poignant commentary on the emotional and psychological toll of living in a conflict zone.

Rukmini lives a life of relative privilege and isolation due to her husband Siddharth's high-ranking position. As the political situation deteriorates, her life begins to unravel, mirroring the chaos outside. The novel delves into her emotional and psychological state, juxtaposing her struggles with societal turmoil.

The characters in the novel represent various facets of Assamese society during the 1980s. Siddharth Bezboruah, as the District Collector, is a symbol of the bureaucratic response to the agitation. His interactions with local politicians, activists, and ordinary citizens reflect the complexities of governance during a crisis. Other characters, such as Rukmini's friends and household help, provide insights into the diverse perspectives of those affected by the unrest.

"The Collector's Wife" explores several themes, including identity, displacement, and the personal costs of political conflict. The political unrest serves as a backdrop for the exploration of these themes, highlighting the interplay between the personal and the political.

The novel employs various symbols to enhance its themes. The Brahmaputra River, flowing through the narrative, symbolizes the continuity and change in Assamese society. The river's

turbulence mirrors the political and emotional upheaval experienced by the characters. The recurring references to traditional Assamese culture, such as Bihu dances and local cuisine, underscore the cultural richness threatened by the ongoing conflict.

The novel addresses several key themes like the conflict between personal desires and societal expectations, the impact of political violence on everyday life, the search for identity and self-fulfillment amidst chaos, the resilience and agency of women in adverse circumstances etc.

Depiction of Political Unrest

Phukan's depiction of the political unrest is marked by a high degree of realism and authenticity. The novel meticulously portrays the fear and uncertainty that pervaded Assam during the 1980s. Incidents such as bomb blasts, curfews, and encounters between protesters and the police are depicted with stark realism, grounding the narrative in the historical context.

The author's attention to detail, such as the description of the deserted streets during curfews and the tension in the air, helps readers understand the pervasive sense of insecurity. Through Rukmini's eyes, the readers experience the constant anxiety of living in a conflict zone, where violence can erupt unexpectedly.

Personal and Social Impact

"The Collector's Wife" emphasizes the personal impact of the political unrest on individuals and families. Rukmini's growing sense of isolation and her deteriorating relationship with Siddharth reflect the strain that the political situation places on personal relationships. Her feelings of helplessness and disconnection are mirrored by the broader social fragmentation occurring outside her home.

The novel also explores the social impact of the unrest. The community's fear and suspicion, the breakdown of social norms, and the disruption of everyday life are vividly depicted. Through the experiences of Rukmini's friends and acquaintances, the novel highlights how the agitation affected people from different walks of life, from government officials to ordinary citizens.

Analysis of Key Scenes

One of the key scenes in the novel is the bomb blast that shatters the semblance of normalcy in Rukmini's life. This incident not only underscores the omnipresent threat of violence but also serves as a turning point for Rukmini's character. Her shock and subsequent emotional turmoil reflect the vulnerability of civilians caught in the crossfire of political conflicts.

Another significant scene is the imposition of a curfew following escalating violence. Phukan's description of the silent, empty streets and the eerie stillness captures the oppressive atmosphere of a society under siege. Rukmini's restlessness and claustrophobia during the curfew mirror the broader societal suffocation caused by the political unrest.

The flood scene towards the end of the novel serves as a metaphor for the overwhelming and uncontrollable nature of the political turmoil. As the waters rise, so does the tension, culminating

in a crisis that forces Rukmini to confront her fears and uncertainties. This scene encapsulates the novel's central theme of survival amidst chaos.

Assamese Identity and Cultural Heritage

Phukan's novel intricately weaves in elements of Assamese culture and identity, reflecting the broader cultural context of the political unrest. The portrayal of traditional festivals, customs, and local dialects serves as a reminder of the rich cultural heritage that the Assamese people sought to protect during the agitation.

The story also touches upon the cultural conflicts arising from the influx of immigrants. Through the characters' dialogues and interactions, Phukan subtly addresses the cultural anxieties and the desire to preserve Assamese identity against perceived dilution.

"The Collector's Wife" also sheds light on the role of women during the period of unrest. Rukmini's character represents the struggles of women who, despite being on the periphery of the political movement, are deeply affected by its consequences. Her journey towards self-realization and empowerment amidst the chaos is a poignant commentary on the resilience of women in conflict situations.

Phukan employs a third-person limited narrative perspective, focusing primarily on Rukmini's experiences. This perspective allows readers to intimately experience her inner turmoil and evolving consciousness. The narrative's introspective nature effectively conveys the psychological impact of the political unrest on individuals.

The author's use of language is another notable aspect of the novel. Phukan's prose is evocative and richly descriptive, bringing to life the landscapes and atmosphere of Assam. The use of local terms and phrases adds authenticity to the narrative, immersing readers in the cultural milieu of the region.

In this context, Symbolism and metaphor play crucial roles in enhancing the thematic depth of the novel. The Brahmaputra River, with its unpredictable currents, serves as a powerful metaphor for the political unrest. The recurring motifs of silence and noise reflect the underlying tension and sporadic outbursts of violence that characterize the period.

Conclusion

Mitra Phukan's "The Collector's Wife" offers a compelling description of a woman's life during the insurgency in 1980s Assam. Through its nuanced portrayal of Rukmini, Phukan highlights the complexities and challenges faced by women, their resilience, and their quest for identity amidst political turmoil. The novel serves as a poignant reminder of the multifaceted impact of insurgency on women's lives and the enduring strength they exhibit in navigating such adversities. Phukan's detailed and authentic depiction of the period, different characters and their personal struggles combined with her evocative narrative style, makes the novel a significant contribution to contemporary Indian literature. The book offers profound insights for exploring complexities of identity and displacement as Phukan's narrative is not just a reflection of a specific historical period but also a universal exploration of women's struggles and triumphs in conflict zones. "The

Collector's Wife" thus contributes to a deeper understanding of the gendered dimensions of political violence and the resilience of women in the face of turmoil.

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