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Whispers of Dissent: Resistance and Silence in The Collector's Wife by Mitra Phukan

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Abstract

Mitra Phukan's The Collector's Wife (2005) *explores the turbulent socio-political landscape of 1990s Assam through the lens of a seemingly ordinary protagonist named Rukmini Bezboruah, the wife of a senior bureaucrat. Beneath its surface narrative of personal grief and civil unrest, the novel constructs a quiet but compelling portrait of resistance. This paper examines how* the collector's wife *articulates dissent not through overt rebellion, but through nuanced portrayals of* ***silence, emotional detachment, and internal conflict****. Rukmini's position as both an insider to power and a silent observer of its abuses makes her a powerful figure of contradiction and resistance. The novel interrogates the complex realities of living amidst insurgency, where violence becomes normalized and moral certainties blur. Rukmini's reluctance to conform to the expectations of her public role, her emotional withdrawal from a strained marriage, and her empathy for victims of state and insurgent violence collectively represent subtle forms of resistance. Silence becomes a method of survival, but also of protest marking a refusal to be complicit in a system built on fear, disappearance, and dehumanization. This paper argues that* The Collector's Wife *challenges the dominant binaries of resistance by foregrounding* ***female subjectivity, personal trauma, and ethical introspection*** *as legitimate sites of political engagement. Rukmini's inner world, shaped by unspoken grief and subdued rebellion, becomes a powerful counter-narrative to both state hegemony and revolutionary violence. Through this, Phukan redefines resistance not as loud defiance but as* ***the whisper of dissent that survives in silence****.*

Keywords: personal trauma, internal conflict, domestic space, subaltern woman, and female resistance, assamese conflict

Introduction

Mitra Phukan's *The Collector's Wife* is set against the backdrop of insurgency-ridden Assam during the late 20th century. The novel is set in a fictional town named Parbatpuri during the peak of insurgency and counter-insurgency operations in Assam, reflecting the tensions that engulfed the region from the 1970s through the 1990s. These were decades of intense agitation, first against illegal immigration and later against perceived central neglect marked by violence, disappearances, curfews, and fear. This framework is not merely decorative but integral to the story. It shapes the characters' behaviors, choices, and limitations. Parbatpuri, although fictional, mirrors the reality of many Assamese towns where militarization, surveillance, and insurgent activities redefined the landscape of everyday life. In this context, Phukan skilfully shows how public conflict infiltrates private lives, blurring the lines between the personal and the political. The Assamese conflict, particularly during the late 20th century, was characterized by ethno-nationalist uprisings, insurgent activities, and a heavy-handed response from the Indian state. This period saw the ascent of groups such as the United Liberation Front

of Asom (ULFA), which sought independence for Assam from India. Parbatpuri, the novel's setting, reflects the atmosphere of fear, uncertainty, and surveillance that dominated Assam during this period. Though the conflict is primarily political, its ramifications are deeply gendered**.** As Cynthia Enloe asserts,"nationalism has typically sprung from masculinized memory,masculinized humiliation, and masculinized hope" (Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases*, 2000). In *The Collector's Wife*, the violence is mostly male-perpetrated and male-experienced in public discourse, but its most enduring psychological impact is borne by women like Rukmini, who live in its shadow without voice or agency.

Traditionally, resistance is associated with public acts of protest or violence. In *The Collector's Wife*, resistance assumes a different form. Through Rukmini, Phukan crafts a narrative of gendered resistance that manifests in personal choices, emotional boundaries, and redefined relationships. This form of resistance is subtle, almost invisible, yet profoundly political. Rukmini's resistance lies in her refusal to be completely absorbed into her husband's bureaucratic world. Though she attends social events and plays the role expected of her, she also seeks a life of her own through her teaching, her relationship with colleagues, and her moments of introspection. Her friendship with Manoj Mahanta, a lecturer involved in left-leaning political activities, is especially significant. While not romantic, the relationship introduces her to alternate political realities, compelling her to re-evaluate her own sheltered existence.

Gendered resistance also emerges through her reclamation of emotional space. Despite being emotionally neglected by Siddharth, Rukmini does not collapse into bitterness. Instead, she turns inward, beginning a process of self-reflection that allows her to recognize the chasm between her identity and her roles. In a society where women are taught to subsume their desires and traumas in service of familial duty, such introspection becomes a radical act. Moreover, her resistance lies in her *refusal to forget*. Where Siddharth compartmentalizes and moves on, Rukmini remembers. She remains haunted by the past, not in a pathological way, but as an ethical position. In this, she embodies what Cathy Caruth describes in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996): "To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event." Rukmini's refusal to repress or deny becomes her form of political agency which is silent, internal, but no less radical.

Female Subjectivity and the Internal Conflict

Phukan's portrayal of female subjectivity resists stereotypes. Rukmini is not a revolutionary in the conventional sense. She performs her social roles with diligence, as a wife, teacher, bureaucrat's spouse, but beneath these performances lie unresolved grief, loneliness, and yearning. Her infertility and the loss of a child become central axes around which her emotional world revolves. These are not merely personal tragedies; they symbolize a deeper internal conflict, one that mirrors the socio political rupture around her. The conflict outside between the state and insurgents finds its echo in Rukmini's inner world. Her quiet breakdowns, moments of numbness, and emotional detachment reveal how women internalize trauma in gender-specific ways. Her silence is not passive; it is an expression of gendered resistance, an assertion of control in a world that denies her agency. Rukmini's character is emblematic of female identity shaped in a postcolonial and patriarchal landscape. Although she appears to be the ideal bureaucrat's wife who is gracious, composed, intelligent, her inner life is fragmented. Her grief over the loss of her child, the emotional detachment of her husband Siddharth, and her inability to articulate her pain reveal a complex inner world struggling for coherence.

Elaine Showalter, in her seminal work *A Literature of Their Own* (1977), explains that "female subjectivity in literature is often caught between silence and madness." Rukmini hovers in that space as she is not "mad" in the clinical sense,

but her frequent dissociation, emotional numbness, and inability to connect with others suggest a psyche at war with itself. Her pain is internalized, repressed, and largely invisible, mirroring the invisibility of women's roles in nationalist movements and bureaucratic systems.

Similarly, Gayatri Spivak's notion of the "subaltern woman" in *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988) becomes relevant here. Spivak argues that the subaltern, especially the female subaltern, "cannot speak" because her speech is either ignored or co-opted by dominant structures. Rukmini is the quintessential subaltern in this sense; it is not because of her class, but due to her gendered positioning within both marriage and political discourse. She is spoken for by her husband, by society, by the state but rarely permitted to express herself.

The novel's real terrain is internal conflict, Rukmini's private battlefield. Her emotional life is shaped by the loss of her child, a past that she cannot bring herself to fully confront, and a marriage that offers no emotional refuge. Her husband Siddharth, while civil and dutiful, is emotionally sterile. He serves as the state's administrative face, treating his wife with the same impersonal detachment he applies to the insurgency. Judith Herman, in her ground breaking book *Trauma and Recovery* (1992), notes: "The ordinary response to atrocities is to banish them from consciousness. But the act of repression does not erase the memory. The feelings live on in the form of somatic symptoms, anxiety, depression, and interpersonal difficulties." Rukmini's character manifests precisely this. Her repeated headaches, her aversion to certain memories, her withdrawal from intimacy, and her compulsive need to 'function' mirror Herman's description of trauma survivors. Her trauma is not limited to the personal; it is enmeshed in the collective trauma of a region haunted by disappearances, militarization, and suspicion. The novel shows how trauma circulates in domestic spaces and how conflict penetrates homes, minds, and bodies, leaving scars not only on victims of direct violence but also on those living in proximity to it.

Conclusion

The Collector's Wife also comments on the larger issue of women's roles in nationalist or insurgent movements. In many such narratives, women are either romanticized as nurturers of the nation or vilified as betrayers. Rarely are they seen as complex individuals with their own traumas and perspectives. Phukan disrupts this binary by offering a character that neither participates directly in the conflict nor remains untouched by it. Rukmini represents the silent majority of women whose lives are irrevocably altered by political upheaval. They are not martyrs, nor are they activists; they are the ones left behind to pick up the pieces. Their stories often go untold, but through Rukmini, Phukan insists on their inclusion. In doing so, she challenges the dominant, male-centric narratives of both state and insurgency politics. Rukmini's journey is marked by female subjectivity, shaped by her experiences of personal trauma and internal conflict, all within the context of the Assamese conflict. Her silence, far from being passive, becomes a mode of resistance; her introspection, a form of rebellion. In a world dominated by violence, both structural and emotional, *The Collector's Wife* reminds us that the most profound acts of resistance are often the quietest ones.

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