

Motherhood and Infertility in Assamese Culture: A Study of Mitra Phukan's *The Collector's Wife*

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Abstract: This study is an attempt to analyze the themes of motherhood, alienation, familial relationships and superstitions regarding infertility in Assamese society as represented in Mitra Phukan's novel *The Collector's Wife*. This novel deals with the character of Rukmini, the wife of the District Collector of a small town in Assam, who goes through series of unwanted events throughout her journey towards becoming a mother. The novelist is able to bring forth the image of a 'new woman' within the patriarchal set up of Assamese society through the character of Rukmini. This research focuses on the psychological condition of the chief protagonist as well as the socio-cultural status of women in Assam.

Index Terms - Assamese Society, Motherhood, Infertility, Patriarchy, Alienation, Family, Superstition

Women's ability to reproduce is often regarded as their greatest accomplishment. The image of the mother is highly glorified all over the world. In Indian culture, women are expected to carry on their husband's lineage by giving birth to healthy children, preferably sons. In Hinduism, a woman is compared to Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth. This belief is based on the idea that the woman will fill the house with the greatest treasure of the family, their heir. The patriarchal society expects the women to find emotional satisfaction and economic security by raising their children without trying to fulfill their own dreams and desires. Therefore, the family as well as the society neglect and many a time oppress those women who cannot give birth. The same situation occurs when a woman is not ready to take the responsibility of a mother. However, these rules of the society usually do not cause any harm to men as they do to women.

From killing girl child to dowry system, there are many social evils dwelling in some parts of Indian society. Though North-East India is known for its lenient patriarchy, Assamese culture is not free from superstitions regarding infertility of women. Assamese society also has various norms and regulations related to women and motherhood. The older generation used to consider infertility similar to a sin as the woman cannot fulfill her duty as a wife by giving birth to her husband's children. In the past, it was common for the kings, princes and other officials to marry more than one woman to get powerful successors and strong political connections. Moreover, there are numerous rituals in Assamese culture which celebrate fertility of both women and the mother earth.

As the age old traditions of the society are deep rooted in every woman's mind, it is difficult for them to overcome the image of a typical woman. Even the well educated and economically independent modern women are not free from the fake notions of women's need to become a mother. The emphasis on women's fertility can lead an infertile woman to anxiety, depression and alienation. Most of the time, the society's cruel response make the woman lose believe in herself. There is, therefore, a vital need of rational understanding and systematic study to help the society to look at women as individual beings without considering their capability of becoming a mother.

Assamese writer in English, Mitra Phukan's works deal with various issues from familial relationships to the problem of insurgency in Assam. Her novel *The Collector's wife* also includes a wide range of themes. One of the important themes of this fiction is motherhood and infertility. This theme is present from the beginning to the end of the novel. The narrative of *The Collector's Wife* is set in Assam during the anti-foreigner student agitation movement of the 1970s and 1980s. In this novel, Mitra Phukan tells the story of Rukmini Bezboruah, the wife of the District Collector of a small town in Assam called Parbatpuri. Rukmini's husband Siddharth Bezboruah is a duty-conscious and hardworking civil servant who is often too busy to keep his wife's company. Whereas Rukmini is unable to engage in any permanent job as she needs to move from one town to another every few years with Siddharth, she works as part time English teacher in colleges and higher secondary schools wherever she goes. Rukmini is not content in her married life as her husband keeps travelling leaving her alone at the DC bungalow. It leads her to loneliness and alienation. Moreover, the constant change in Siddharth's work places does not allow Rukmini to make any good friends. By the time she makes a friend she has to leave that city with her husband. At the same, Rukmini is dissatisfied with her teaching jobs, as it is really difficult to teach the students something they cannot relate to. The students of these colleges are neither fluent in English nor they have any idea of the European culture and society. The lack of Indian works in the syllabus makes the teaching learning process more tedious and one-sided. But she is not prepared to stay away from her husband to go to a different city and get a suitable job for herself. Though Rukimani Bezboruah's life looks like a perfect one on the surface, she is suffering from both outer and inner turmoil.

Apart from her dissatisfaction in her job and her constant loneliness, Rukmini also has to go through uncomfortable situations because of her childlessness. Rukmini is married for ten years at the beginning of the novel, and both Siddharth and Rukmini do not really feel the necessity of a child to make their family complete. Nevertheless, Rukmini consults with various doctors to get solution and finds out that they are not entirely incapable of becoming parents. The doctors also suggest that the little problems in Rukmini's part can be solved by

taking some fertility-enhancing drugs. But Siddharth is reluctant to continue that treatment as it can lead to multiple births. He is not ready to become a father to more than one baby.

Unlike most men, Siddharth does not demand an heir to continue his bloodline. He is most of the time uninterested in Rukmini's conversations about different possibilities of becoming parents. Rukmini is grateful for Siddharth's attitude towards their childlessness but she craves for some direct assurance from him instead of his indifference. Though they share the same bedroom; the mental distance between them remains unchanging like the distance between their beds. The bond between the husband and wife becomes weaker as Siddharth stops spending quality time with Rukmini. "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." (Phukan 76)

Mitra Phukan tactfully presents the different predicament of man and woman in Asamese society. Rukmini realizes that Siddharth does not show interest in having a child because he does not have to go through public scrutiny all the time. He does not get to hear insulting comments because of their childlessness. His masculinity and his position as an IAS officer make up for any other incapability. Moreover, the patriarchal society does not blame the man in any failure or incompleteness in his married life. On the other hand, Rukmini, "being a woman in a small, backward town, was sometimes fair game for veiled, caustic references to her childlessness..." (Phukan 52)

In the very first chapter of the novel Rukmini encounters an uncomfortable and disrespectful situation when she attends one of her colleague Rita's wedding. Rita's aunts assume Rukmini as unmarried as she does not wear a vermilion mark on her head. When she informs them that she is married for ten years, they show their disapproval on her short heir and the lack of any sign of marriage on her forehead. But their disapproval turns into distaste and disgust after knowing that she does not have a child. The orthodox old generation regards childless women as inauspicious and therefore does not allow them to attend important ceremonies, such as marriage. They cannot accept Rukmini's presence right beside the bride. One of the women comments, "What times we are living through! In my days, even the shadow of a barren woman wasn't allowed to fall on a bride." (Phukan 15)

This incident shows how the society is unable to progress even after so much of scientific and technological developments. Clearly Rukmini is in a far better position than these women in terms of her education or carrier. But all those qualifications are overlooked when they judge her success with the number of children she could give birth to. It would be really nice, if this incident were only a part of fiction; but in reality there are still many Rukminis who have to bear the discrimination of the patriarchal society on the basis of her biological condition.

The novelist draws the contrast between the rural hardworking women and the upper-middle class women like Rukmini. The village women know their secure place in their homes as they are indispensable for sowing, weaving and child-rearing. Though they do not bring any dowry with them, they make their own fortune by "making the hut a home" (Phukan 123). On the other hand, Rukmini needs to indulge in affairs like judging garden competitions though she never enjoys them. Besides, the well educated people around Rukmini are not as supportive to her as the seemingly uneducated women of the villages are to each other.

As the story progress, the readers can notice Rukmini's careful avoidance of the topic of children. People around her do not include her in their conversations about their children thinking she might get upset. But it makes her more uncomfortable and keeps reminding her that she is different from them. Interestingly, if Rukmini inquires about the wellbeing of someone's children, that person will be immediately alarmed. Because there is a superstition that if a childless woman took interest in a child, he or she will be in grave danger in near future. Therefore, they immediately go back home and try to ward off the "evil eye" by "roasting mustard seeds on an open fire, and murmuring mantras over the head of the child whose name was taken by the barren woman." (Phukan 167)

As Rukmini reaches the age of thirty-four, the doctors and other people urge her to hurry and get a baby by any means. Her mother-in-law Renu Bezboruah reminds her that "middle age is not the time for the responsibility of parenthood." (Phukan 71). But Rukmini wonders about the different life-cycles of the various organ of same human body. The womb loses its capacity faster than other organs, but the brain keeps developing for a longer time. The maturity should help the person to be a better mother at forty-five than a fertile age of twenty. Through Rukmini's judgement, Mitra Phukan addresses the issue of the much needed maturity and independence to handle the complex responsibility of a mother: "Women at forty-five were nowadays in peak physical condition....And intellectually as well as economically, and also, almost always, financially, weren't forty-five-year-old women better able to cope with the demands of new motherhood than girls barely out of their adolescence ever could?" (Phukan 85)

Moreover, Rukmini is not really fond of babies; rather she doubts her ability to handle newborns. She herself admits that the fragile newborn babies terrify her and she prefers babies who are at least six months old. But the constant criticism and sharp gazes of the people she meets leave Rukmini no option but to consider taking fertility-enhancing drugs. Rukmini wonders, "Would she have subjected herself to the indignity of all those internal examinations...if she hadn't seen such a premium being placed on motherhood?" (Phukan 52). Rukmini is not yet ready to adopt a baby because she is aware that it is "more or less expected of her to produce a couple of babies at least." (Phukan 53). Though Siddharth or his family never demanded her to continue the bloodline, she believes that in their dowerless society she needs to be a devoted mother to her husband's children to show her duty towards her new family. It is the only asset she can give her husband. As V. Geetha writes, "If a woman cannot be a mother, she feels guilty, as if it is her fault, as if her body has betrayed itself and her. Women also imagine that whatever else they are or may do, their ultimate destiny is linked with motherhood" (Geetha 123).

Surprisingly, in spite of all the loneliness and sufferings she does not seek to find happiness doing something for her own self. Not until another man, Manoj Mahanta reminds her about her hobbies and dreams. Mahanta comments, "Women *do* have careers, you know, in this day and age. I mean real careers, not the kind of half hearted thing that you're doing." (Phukan 161). Rukmini's need for such assurance is rarely fulfilled, as most of the time she is left alone in the DC bungalow at the top of the hill away from other inhabitants of the town.

On the other hand, she goes into a dilemma when she thinks about surrogacy. The idea of another woman bearing Siddharth's child disturbs her. She knows that the process will be impersonal without any feelings involved. Though there is nothing sexual about the act of conception, she cannot cope with the fact that her husband's sperm will fertilize another woman's ovum. She wonders if this is equivalent

to taking a second wife in biological terms. But the irony is that at the later part of the novel, it is Rukmini who ends up carrying a child of another man, Manoj Mahanta.

But, until she gets pregnant both Rukmini and her mother-in-law consider various ways of getting a baby, including Petri-dish babies and test-tube conceptions. Renu Bezboruah even gifts a gram of gold at Mahamaya Temple in Rukmini's name and brings her an amulet from the goddess whose blessings are believed to be very powerful. Rukmini is asked to wear the amulet all the time to help her to get pregnant as soon as possible. Neither Rukmini nor Siddharth believes in those offerings and amulets but she has to wear for the sake of her mother-in-law. Rukmini reasons, "...in this battle to conceive, every little bit of help, whether medical, religious or merely superstitious, was welcome." (Phukan 79). She is also relieved to be able to talk about her condition with another woman. It is a rare moment in her life as she does not have any close companion. Renu Bezboruah understands her lonely state but unlike Manoj Mahanta, she does not advise her to do something enjoyable, but to get a baby for fulfillment.

An important cultural element of Assamese society described in the novel is the Bihu festival which is a celebration of fertility. As the part of agriculture based society, the Assamese people celebrate the three stages of rice cultivation as three Bihu festivals. Before sowing the paddy fields, they celebrate Bohag or Rangali Bihu to wish for the fertility of the land and well being of the cattle that help them in sowing. Earlier, the Bihu dance was not performed in public but in the paddy fields in the hope of making the land more fertile. In this novel, Rukmini observes the joyful Bihu dance performed by the young men and women of a village. Even though "the symbolic gestures, the pelvic thrusts and the heaving breasts were all toned down to levels that were acceptable to the villagers", (Phukan 123) the Bihu dance is a fertility dance; and this image foreshadows Rukmini's pregnancy.

Another local belief regarding motherhood is presented through Rukmini's driver Anil's revelation that he is a member of MOFEH, the powerful insurgent group of the area. When she asks him why he revealed such a crucial secret to her, Anil replies, "...Because you are going to be a mother. In our tribe, that means the Spirit is now within you. And Truth will always reveal itself to the Spirit." (Phukan 273). He also believes that she found out about her husband's affair because of the Spirit residing within her.

According to G. L. Christie, "clinical experience suggests that a link can exist between unexplained infertility and a deep sensitivity within the individual, at an unconscious level, to some situation rendering it an unsuitable time or place to allow the arrival of a baby." (1). Though this idea of deep readiness is not completely scientific, it fits in the case of Rukmini's sudden pregnancy.

The issue of motherhood and infertility is given so much importance in the society that even a rational person like Siddharth is massively affected by it. His fear of becoming a father of multiple babies and other consequences of the fertility drugs makes him evade the whole topic of having children. This distance eventually led them to such a distance that they were not able to have a heartfelt conversation until the last part of novel. Moreover, as the District Collector of Parbatpuri Siddharth has to deal with deaths all the time. There never has been any positivity in the town to compensate the sudden and cruel deaths of the officers, militants or the common people. After two years of working in Parbatpuri, Siddharth starts to believe that they "had been contaminated by death" and the proximity to death had made them "incapable of creating, nurturing, a new life." (Phukan 315)

The Collector's Wife successfully portrays the condition of an upper-middle class childless Assamese family. The pressure of the traditional patriarchal society restricts women into prescribed roles that leave the protagonist no room for her own identity and individuality. Mitra Phukan exposes that not only men but women tend to oppress other women whenever they get a chance. In most of the societies, women are expected to carry on the culture by wearing traditional dresses and abiding by the age old rules and regulations. Men are often free to follow their own judgment. Similarly, it is women who usually make sure that other women follow the rules set by the male-dominated society without questioning. The constant domination by the society and lack of scientific knowledge make many women cunning and tyrannical who find pleasure in mistreating other women. The only woman who discusses Rukmini's childlessness with empathy is Renu Bezboruah. Rukmini has a mature relationship with her mother-in-law which does not fall into the stereotype of the cruel mother-in-law trying to dominate her naive daughter-in-law in every possible way. Without any criticism, she offers her the support which Rukmini desperately needs.

This novel also brings forth various issues of marital relationship including arranged marriage, love, sex and adultery. Rukmini's lonely married life, the negligence of her husband, her struggle to fit into the stereotyped image of a married woman, society's prejudices and the pressure to produce a son leaves her with a sense of helplessness and despair. Among all these negativity and uncertainties, Rukmini's decision to try a new job and her will to raise her child on her own indicates her strength and the rise of a 'new woman' who is determined to break through the oppressive sphere of patriarchal society. Moreover, Siddharth's acceptance of Rukmini's child as well as his own faults shows a way of looking into the matter more positively. It proves that proper communication with a rational outlook is the key to solve the problems created by the patriarchal society.

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