



Perspectives of Women of the Northeast and Gender Discrimination: An analysis of Select Novels and Short Stories of Mitra Phukan and Jahnavi Barua

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Abstract:

The gender issues have been prevailing in the Northeastern states since time immemorial. This paper is going to discuss the inequality status of women, gender discrimination and its consequences. If we analyse the meaning and significant of the term 'Status of Women' we can consider easily that it is a comparison to the position or category in between man and woman in society. In the history, the Vedic period is better known as the Golden Age regarding the status of Indian women and during the period they enjoy high status. It is true that geographically men and women occupy the same space, but the women are not treated equally in the society in acquiring education, taking care of health, participating in the political activities like decision making, and social, cultural and economic matters. Thus, women of the Northeast in particular and women of India in general are awarded always a lower status than men. Nobody can deny the fact that women in Northeast India have been facing various social, economic and political problems amidst continuous struggles against illiteracy, poverty, landlessness, poor health, eve-teasing, domestic violence, gender bias, discrimination of wages, prejudice in democratic participation in decision making etc. as forbidden by the customary laws.

In this article, deeply rooted unwritten men-made customary laws like gender discrimination, exploitation of women, domestic violence, inequality status of women in society, crisis of identity of women, economically dependent on others like their husbands or heads of the families, victims of domestic violence both physically and mentally accusing women of all household conflicts, willful lack of care and attention to

them either by their husbands or other in-law members of their family, deprivation of inheritance of property, decision making etc. are termed as major concerns of the women of the Northeast in particular and India in general are analysed sincerely studying selected novels and short stories of Mitra Phukan and Jahnabi Barua giving emphasis in the writings of some notable Indian women English writers like Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande also.

Key Words: Gender Discrimination, crisis, identity, women, subjugate, barren etc.

Introduction:

The Northeast India is one of the most ethnically and linguistically diverse regions in India. The region is rich in natural beauty, natural resources, folk culture, art, glorious and rich heritage, festivities etc. The Northeast regions in India are bestowed with picturesque milieu and unstoppable culture. This paradise of tranquility, the peaceful environment and healthy climate of the region attracts the writers, poets to express their thoughts and feelings through their creative writings covering various aspects of life, society, nature as symbolical representative. The States of Northeast have numerous indigenous people and languages, identities with different cultures and expressive varieties of living styles.

Despite having adequately rich in primitive culture, natural resources and natural beauties, the trend of the Northeast is considered as a disturbed and violent geographical zone. This classification has brought two different scenarios—one side is its attractive landscape, myths preserved by the surrounded hills and rivers, natural beauty, rich culture, unity of the people in diversity and on the other face the impacts of gender discrimination, inequality status of women, political instability, threat to the people by various political, social and economic issues, violence, terror and turmoil, agitation created by the insurgency groups and government machineries stand as a strong impermeable rampart. The cultural diversity, traditional belief, women's hard involvement in productive activities and discovered and undiscovered various social issues in the traditional societies have contributed a lot to attract many women writers, poets of the Northeast in particular and many other writers outside the Northeast even from abroad in general for their creative writings based on literary works.

Human being is considered and regarded as the best creation of nature, who possesses super brain with firm ability of thinking with proper justification of consequences to come for any doings. Considering the significance of household and social activities on the basis of abilities to perform them perfectly the social system is constructed and thus human beings are classified as men and women respectively as the two kinds of divine power. Their equal participation can easily build a good family, good society and good nation creating the atmosphere of good living by dint of their co-efforts in all aspects as classified their respective roles with their abilities given by the creator.

Swami Vivekananda quotes, "There is no chance for the welfare of the world unless the condition of women is improved. It is not possible for bird to fly on one wing."

According to Wikipedia, “Gender inequality is the social process by which men and women are not treated equally”.(*Gender inequality – Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gender_inequality*). Thus, where gender inequality exists traditionally, the female persons are excluded or disadvantaged in connection with achieving proper education, social status, decision making, access to economic, political, social resources, properties and certain social and religious activities. Our religious beliefs, customary laws and patriarchal theory have constructed orally and strengthened this system by men generation after generation and chronologically people use to believe it to be legal one.

The paper intends to discuss about various major issues and concerns of women basically on gender discrimination, inequality status of women covering social, political, economic, culture and religion etc. found in the writings of Women English Fictionists from the Northeast in their selected novels already published viz. Mitra Phukan’s *The Collector’s Wife*, Jahnvi Barua’s *Rebirth* . In this paper, it also attempts to highlight similar issues of women depicted in the writings of some prominent Indian women writers like Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai etc.

Women of the Northeast India and Gender Discrimination:

It is true that geographically men and women occupy the same space, but the women are not treated equally not only in the society but also everywhere in acquiring education, taking care of health, participation in the political activities like decision making, social, cultural and economic matters. Thus, women of the Northeast in particular and women of India in general are awarded always a lower status than men. Nobody can deny the fact that women in Northeast India have to face various social, economic and political problems, gender injustice etc. in traditional society. However, “Man and woman are the two power wheels to pull the Life-Chariot.” (*Neeta Sharma and Arindam Borkataki, Women Issues and Perspectives, p-2*). After analyzing various impacts of the patriarchal society, Shashi Deshpande, a prominent Indian women English writer has attained to a firm decision that in the patriarchal society women have been derogated. The women writers in their writings portrays the role and image of women as what men want them to be in real life. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru has termed the condition of a nation as, ‘You can tell the condition of a nation by looking at the status of its women’. “In India women idols are worshipped as goddesses in temples and at home women in flesh and blood are beaten up by their husbands. While we have had a woman as the President of India, common women are struggling for a place in their family in decision making.” (*Sailen D.Das and Rubul Patgiri, Gender Issues in Northeast India : Bridging the Gap, P-113*). But in real life, women’s ‘proper place’ and ‘identity’ are not recognized by the patriarchal society. These categories of people breathing in the society always possess a misconception. By tradition, they believe that daughter’s birth in a family is not a matter of blissful to recognize or accept it but a root of annoyance in the family on one hand and a woman who gives birth to a son is dignified in the society that the woman has fulfilled her life’s ‘great mission’ as a woman on the other hand. “They have grown intolerant of women’s exploitation and victimization by men and they revolt against the marginalization of women.” (*Sangeeta Sharma Gender Issues: Fictional World of Shashi Deshpande -p-2*). Vulli Dhanaraju and Kh. Narendra Singh view that gender is socially constructed. After

birth, gender decides the course of life of a child. Gender refers to male and female distinction including the social construction that separates 'female' bodies from 'male' bodies.

“Women are integral part in every society. The status of women in society is directly linked with social and cultural traditions, stages of economic development achieved, educational levels, attitude of the society towards women, social and religious taboos, women's own awareness and political attainments for women in society. Such factors affect the national and also regional characteristics of the status of women.”
(*Ram Krishna Mandal and Minto Ete, Women in North East India, P-1*)

Mitra Phukan, a renowned English novelist from the Northeast has delineated some traditional laws showing discrimination of gender prevailed in the society in her novel, 'The Collector's Wife'. 'Birth belonged to women. But death, in Parbatpuri, had been appropriated by men.' (*Mitra Phukan, The Collector's Wife, P-50*). Only male persons irrespective of age can take participation in the funeral procession making long lines by way of walking towards the cremation ground where women are never allowed to join funeral procession since it is prohibited for women. They are also forbidden to flame the dead body in the cremation ground. Rukmini has experienced and feels wonder that if the dead body is of some female, is consigned to flames amidst a crowd of men where no woman is permitted even to stay there. More importantly, if the woman has had no son of her own, her mouth will be put ceremonial fire on her face before lighting the funeral pyre by a male relative of her husband's, possibly somebody whom she has not even liked him. Thus, Rukmini feels trembling in her mind thinking that how the male dominated society has neglected the woman who always thinks of her husband, her children and her in laws' family members. Here, the writer explored her great concern about the inequality status of women in the patriarchal society because 'Women are considered as subordinate to men.' (*Sailen D. Das and Rubul Patgiri, Gender Issues in Northeast India: Bridging the Gap, P-219*).

One of the important issues of gender discrimination is crisis of identity of women. It is quite evident the fact that women English fictionists from the Northeast have brought to light major concerns like crisis of identity of women of the northeast as well as similar issues found in the writings of some prominent Indian women English writers apart from the Northeastern states of India. The women of the Northeast have been suffering both mentally and physically for the loss of their real identity parried by the dreadful hands of the traditional laws based on patriarchal society. While going through various writings of the Northeast English fictionists including women English writers of our country it is clearly exhibited in their writings about those women who have not been conferred their self identity of their own in the traditional society. Rukmini, the protagonist in the novel, *The Collector's Wife* by Mitra Phukan and Kaberi, the protagonist in the novel, *Rebirth* by Jahnvi Barua have to surrender their personal identities that have been before their marriage and to accept their new identity of their husbands. They have no direct self identity, they are better known as somebody's wife, mother and daughter. This is the outcome of oppression by both patriarchal and female patriarchal social system. The character of Rukmini is portrayed to be highly educated with sound personality and talents but after marriage her real identity is not recognized by her husband. Her educational degree is the only factor that qualifies her to get into the marriage bondage with a District Collector and thereafter she is known as the wife of Siddharth Bezbaruah, District Collector only and nothing more personal identity is there

during her entire life. It means that in traditional society a woman is not known by her 'self identity' but she is known through her husband's identity only because a woman's identity what she holds before marriage is automatically extinguished, ignored, overlooked and disowned. Similar treatment is found in respect of Kaberi, the key protagonist of the novel, *Rebirth* by Jahnavi Barua who is a young woman from the blue hills and lush green valleys of Assam and after her marriage with Ranjit (Ron) finds herself lost in the rather concrete and hypocritical life in the metropolitan city of Bangalore. She tries hard to assimilate into the life in the corporate city culture where her husband is a part of. Kaberi leaves no stone unturned to prove her allegiance to the whims of her husband, who on the other hand is someone who is just too conventional in his adoption of the air of urbanity. Yet, there is something totally wrong in their marriage. There is no cordial relationship between Ron and Kaberi as husband and wife during her married life. Thus, Kaberi has to surrender and lose her 'self identity' and her husband has never felt to recognize her individuality and for this reason, she has to spend her life amidst great repentance.

As regard to the concept of marriage all the girls are bound to believe the fact that marriage is the only end. In our society, it is believed that the main purpose of marriage for a woman is to bear children especially sons to her husband as descendants of the family. If a woman fails to bear a child she is termed as 'barren woman' not the male who can be definitely responsible for her 'barrenness' and thus sole burden and obloquy go to the woman only not the husband and the woman is responsible for her inability. "If a woman is unable to conceive a child especially a *male* child, then she is held solely accountable for this inability." (*Sangeeta Sharma, Gender Issues: Fictional World of Shashi Deshpande, P-15*). Similarly, Mitra Phukan in her novel, *The Collector's Wife* has portrayed a clean scenario of mental disturbed faced and suffered by Rukmini, the protagonist, who has followed her husband everywhere, wherever he moved with his postings for which she couldn't possess a permanent regular job of her own in spite of having sufficient qualification and up to the mark of personality, talent etc. because of the only fact that she is a woman. "Deshpande proves that in Indian Patriarchal system, a woman can survive only by negating her own personality. And this negation of her own personality makes her completely powerless in the patriarchal order." (*Sangeeta Sharma, Gender Issues: Fictional World of Shashi Deshpande, p-169*). Secondly, at the end of about ten years of their marriage, she has found her life in a great dilemma with full of wear and tear of their marriage life, very shameful for her being a barren woman. After passing of days, gradually, Rukmini has felt and realized an uneasy strain in the relationship, a feeling of isolation from each other, lack of communication between the husband and wife grew day by day. Similarly, Shakutai, mother of Sulu is depicted in the novel *The Binding Vine* suffering from mental agony that her daughter Sulu married to Prabhakar bears no child. She has thought that her daughter is very lucky one married to Prabhakar who never touches drink not even cigarettes. She expresses her repentance to Urmi. "I thought my Sulu was lucky. I thought, when she married Prabhakar she at least would have a good life. He's a good man; he doesn't touch drink, not even cigarettes. Yes, I thought her luck is great. But who knows what is hidden in our fate? She says, after a pause, 'God has given her no children.'" (*Shashi Deshpande, The Binding Vine, P-144*) To quote in the line "In Indian patriarchal society, woman is always blamed for issuelessness as if it is her fault only. Now, even science has proven that there may be some disorder even in the husband; it is also possible that the wife may not be able to give birth to child

because of that.” (*Sangeeta Sharma, Gender Issues: Fictional World of Shashi Deshpande, P-68*). Similarly, Anita Desai, one of the Indian English Novelists has highlighted gender issues in her novel, *Cry, The Peacock*. The women characters portrayed in her novel are not ordinary characters but they are women of sense and sensibility. In her novel, Maya has played a unique role who is despaired by her helplessness, sufferings, loneliness in her life. She has also been suffering silently with the cry of an agonized woman’s feelings of loneliness at the hands of men. “Social experience clearly points to the fact that all blame for alleged inadequacies in the processes of child birth, from actual conception to the sex of the child and its safe delivery is attributed to woman only” (*Sangeeta Sharma, Gender Issues: Fictional World of Shashi Deshpande, P-15*). There are many real incidents happened in our societies believed by the common men and even women as well who supports female patriarch that husbands discard their innocent wives blaming them only because of the fact that they are inability to bear a son and for this failure women are fully responsible.

Now at Parbatpuri, at the end of about ten years of their marriage, Rukmini is able to manage the job of a lecturer in the English Deptt in a local college. But an uneasy strain in the relationship, a feeling of isolation from each other, lack of communication between the husband and wife grow day by day. She has not taken it seriously at the beginning considering the fact of the dreadful law and order situation in the district. In the meantime, very surprisingly and unexpectedly, Rukmini has to bear a severe hurt in her heart as if a big hammer hits her like a bolt from the blue when she has found her husband having illicit relationship with some other woman, caught red handed, that too, with her own colleague in the college. Here, the novelist portrays that Rukmini; however, being a wife accepts the situation with great endurance and maintains her existence in relation to her husband and her family. She is bound to spoil her own hope under the cruel circumstances.

Jahnavi Barua is a “Writer by profession, a doctor by education and a birder and gardener by passion.” The issues relating to gender discrimination and insurgencies are efficiently portrayed by Jahnavi Barua in her novel, *Rebirth*. The story describes about a woman, named Kaberi, the protagonist that a mother ‘reborn’ through her ‘unborn’ child. It is a journey of life of a mother who delineates to her unborn child various incidents and experiences of her life and vivid memories and thus during the course of performing her journey over a period of nine months, she herself is reborn in many ways, many times. Here, the novelist depicts the picture of a male dominated patriarchal society where women are always the victims in the society. In a male dominated society women are at all times subdued by their fathers before marriage and husbands after marriage. The exact incident has been happened in the life of Kaberi. As an individual or a daughter of the family she is never given the freedom of likes, dislikes and choice in marriage and is wedded to Ranjit (Ron) according to the desire of her parents. “While Bidyut’s mother, with moist eyes, anointed Joya with the sacred sendur, her best friend, Jeuti Bora, noticed me in the circle of young girls around Joya and instantly chose me as her son’s bride.” (*Jahnavi Barua, Rebirth,P-69*). Since she is originated from the strict patriarchal society, it is not felt necessary to know the formal consent of the bride by her parents and it is not a matter of due consideration because it rests strictly upon the head of the family not the bride. “There are significant subplots in the novel that contribute to the understanding of Kaberi’s transformation from a vulnerable wife to an

independent woman who refuses to succumb to her husband's self centred demands.” (<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/life-style/books/features>).

The writer has portrayed in her novel the role of Kaberi, the protagonist suffering a lot pathetically after marriage with Ron and at the same time the brutal role played by Ron who assures himself of his wife's inability to reproduce a child, he abandons her and falls in love affairs with Lakshmi even after his marriage on one hand and his selfish return on learning about Kaberi's pregnancy later carrying baby in her womb on the other hand. Moreover, once the married life of Ron and Kaberi has raised to climax and reached up to the stage that Kaberi could not but attain to declare divorce only for the fact of his illicit love affair with Lakshmi that has brought a great dilemma and mistrust shocking mentally in the life of Kaberi and thus she has been pushed to suffer a lot mentally might it be domestic violence. However, “Hopes and aspirations for the unborn child encourage Kaberi to become strong and face the realities of life with great courage” (*Creatcrit, ed. N. Pattanayak, Nature and Self: A study of Jahnvi Barua's Rebirth, Chayanika Roy, P-107*).

The structure and construction of identity in the traditional societies exhibits that the woman holds less important position to men before marriage as well as after marriage since a woman gets her identity and position moved to her husband's clan. But in practice, a woman in such traditional society has to surrender her 'self' and 'identity' earned before marriage from her parental side on one hand and she is not given the proper status and identity by their husbands after marriage on the other hand. In such patriarchal society, daughters are not allowed to inherit ancestral property. Dr. Ranga Ranjan Das, a prominent writer has described clearly the social system regarding inheritance of property in his book, “Society, Culture and Heritage”. By tradition, the custom of Inheritance is enjoyed fully by the males only not the females. A woman can possess property but she cannot inherit it. Moreover, in comparison to men, women have less intellectual capabilities, logical mind and farsightedness. Traditionally women are very easily influenced by others and they are unable to think justifiably to a great extent and to take a reasonable decision by nature. “It is thought that they do not have the efficiency to take important decisions.” (*Dr. Saraswati Mishra, Status of Indian Women, P-111*). Thus, in the traditional society important decisions are taken by men only not women.

Conclusion:

The gender inequality has created great issues amongst males and females in most of the cases those bring unequal distribution of actual status, wealth and property, power, privilege, benefits and participation in various activities amongst men and women, boys and girls due to unequal position of women in the society and this widespread gender inequality is still alive and sensitive in the Northeastern states of India for which various development in the fields of social, economic and political cannot attain to the satisfactory stages. Due to non-existence of gender equality and women's empowerment the sustainable development of this region has not come into force. However, the issue of gender inequality could be resolved if both male and female have equal and direct connectedness in all aspects of social, political and economic lives to achieve the sustainable development. The development of society is possible only if all sections of people are united together and take participation in all societal affairs to bring development of potentialities of women. It cannot

be denied the fact that development of society in all aspects without the active participation of women is not possible and the society will not be termed as 'complete' one. So, it is to make certain to confer the women their legitimate constitutional rights and rightful position in the society, then it is possible to set up the right and logical gender policy that will bring gender equality strengthening and implementing law-enforcing system to create a forward-looking and well-developed society of well cultured human beings. Here, a good education can play the vital role in uplifting the status of women. Thus, only the systematic and impartial education can bring about positive changes in the societal attitude towards women as well as girls. The role of women in present society is being re-defined. At present a woman is no more confined to the boundaries of home. They have become literate, well understood and above all they are working as researchers to find out their real and equal status as of birth right. Once, Jawaharlal Nehru has observed the significance of the role and activities of women and quoted, "To awaken the people, it is the women who must be awakened. Once she is on the move, the family moves, the village moves, the nation moves." Today, girls and women are well aware of their surroundings about the day to day happenings. In this connection, the women folk must be conscious and aware about their constitutional rights, responsibilities and their right status as a whole to fight against the traditional men-made laws.

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