



# “Feminist Perspectives in English Fictions of women writers of North East India: a study of Mitra Phukan and Mamang Dai ”

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## **Abstract:**

Feminism is not a cohesive set of ideology but contains many conflicting elements. Though the word “feminism” came to use in 1980s, but modern feminist thinking found its expression as early as in 1792. Since then feminism has been explained from different angles by different philosophers and as a result we have found different sub categories like Black feminism, Marxist feminism, Eco- feminism, Post colonial feminism and so on. Post colonial feminism states that third world countries like India have to face domination of both colonial exploitation and patriarchy. The present paper attempts to explore the women’s social and mental conditions through the writings of North East women writers, Mitra Phukan from Assam and Mamang Dai from Arunachal Pradesh.

Key words: Feminism, Women, North East.

## **Introduction:**

Feminism is not a cohesive set of ideology but contains many conflicting elements. Though the word “feminist” came to use in English during 1980s, modern feminist thinking found its expression as early as in 1792. Since then feminism has been explained from different angles by different philosophers and as a result we have found different sub categories like Liberal feminism, Marxist feminism, Black feminism, Postmodern feminism, Eco feminism, Multicultural feminism, Post colonial feminism etc. However, a common starting point for all feminist ideas is the belief that women are disadvantaged in comparison with men, and this disadvantage is not a natural and inevitable result of biological difference but something that can and should be challenged and changed (Bryton 206).

Post colonial feminism states that as the third world countries experienced colonial oppression and exploitation. Women in these countries have to face domination of both colonial powers as well as patriarchy. In many third world countries, this process is still going on which didn’t come to an end with the end of colonial rule. This colonial experience has been unique – which the Western and European countries can’t understand. In the 1980s, the Western feminism came under severe criticism from various parts for its Eurocentric biasness

and its assumption that gender can be an unifying force which can mitigate sociopolitical, cultural, geographical and other differences among women.

Bell Hooks in her work *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Centre* lamented the fact that “White women who dominate feminist discourse today rarely question whether or not their perspective on women’s reality is true to the lived experiences of women as a collective group”.

An influential critic of Western feminism Chanda Talpade Mohanty – who puts a significant postcolonial challenge to Western feminism through her typical essay “ *Under Western Eyes: Feminist scholarship and colonial discourses*”. She criticized Western feminism on the ground that it tries to ignore the specific cultural differences among women and tries to naturalise all women’s oppression under widely differing manifestations of patriarchal domination into European models. Regarding the matter of representation, Mohanty criticized the Western feminist scholar’s view who believed that the third world women can’t represent themselves. On the other hand, she argues that the representation of the average third world women as ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition bound, domesticated, family oriented etc. actually simplifies the self representation of western women as educated, modern, as having control over their own bodies and freedom to make their own decisions.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has been another prominent critic of Western feminism – who in her famous work ‘*Can the subaltern speak?*’ focused on cultural differences between women in the third World and women in the first World. Spivak was critical about the claims of the Western feminism as universal and opined that the specific material conditions, histories as well as struggles of the third world women are often overlooked by western feminism.

From the above explanations, it is clear that the third world women are subjected to both inferior and marginalized views of first world feminist and patriarchy of their own society. They faced discrimination as colonial subjects- which implies that women in formerly colonized societies were doubly colonized by imperial powers on one hand and patriarchal ideologies on the other. Thus, post-colonial feminism aims to understand and undo the legacies of colonialism. It evolved as a reaction to the western feminism- which focuses on White women’s lives, rights and experiences. It not only tries to decentering the White, western experiences, but also seeks to interpret day to day local experiences through post-colonial perspectives.

## Statement of the problem

Women in women author’s literary texts have significant importance as it is often recognized as a tool to understand social change and women empowerment. However, English fictions in the North-Eastern region have not yet received adequate critical attention at the national level. Research on women’s representation by women authors in English fictions from the North eastern region has been relatively less. Though some works have already taken place, there is lack of feminist analysis of women characters in English fictions of women writers of North-East India. Thus, it has remained largely unexplored area. The present paper attempts to focus the knowledge gap.

## Objectives of the study:

The main objectives of the study are-

- I. To understand women through the discourses of feminism.
- II. To examine the feminist perspectives as displayed by the authors in the selected English fictions.
- III. To critically examine the representation of women characters in the selected English fictions.

## Scope of the Study:

Two women fiction writers from different states of the North eastern region of India have been selected for the study. They are Mitra Phukan from Assam, Mamang Dai from Arunachal Pradesh. Though they belong to different socio-cultural background, these writers have some remarkable commonalities in the sense that they portray women who are torn between their culturally conditioned images and feministic aspirations for selfhood. The present paper incorporates two works - Mitra Phukan's *The Collector's Wife*, and Mamang Dai's *Stupid Cupid*.

## Methods of the study:

The present work follows a qualitative research methodology, based on critical use of both primary and secondary sources. Primary source includes three selected English fictions of the chosen women writers. Secondary sources include books, journals, articles, dissertations, e- resources concerning the analysis of selected texts.

## Women characters in Mitra Phukan's 'The Collector's Wife':

Mitra Phukan is a prominent literary voice of Assam. She is a novelist, fiction writer, translator, columnist and a trained classical dancer. She has contributed to the children's literature and novels like *The Collectors Wife*, *A Monsoon of Music*, *A Full Night's Thievery*, a collection of short stories have added to the realm of literature.

The setting of the novel *The Collector's Wife* is based on the Assam Students' agitation of the 1970s and 1980s that began as a movement for the quest for identity and for self determination in the midst of huge influx of the illegal immigrants into Assam. This movement then took the shape of insurgency leading to extortions, abductions, political unrest and so on. Amidst the backdrop of insurgency Phukan has mainly focused on the women characters like Rukmini, Nandini, Priyam, Bobita etc.

Rukmini is the protagonist of the novel, *The Collector's Wife*. She is the wife of Siddharth Bezbaruah, the District Collector of a small town called Parbatpuri. The author has depicted her as a modern educated woman who teaches English literature on a temporary basis in a local college. She lives a privileged but lonely life, as her husband is often busy with his administrative duties and their marriage is childless and passionless. She finds solace in her relationship with Monoj, a tyre salesman that brings happiness to Rukmini's life. However their happiness is short lived, as the political turmoil in Assam affects both Siddharth and Monoj in different ways. Rukmini has to face harsh realities of the conflict and its impact on her life. The novel shows how Rukmini's affair with Monoj is not only a result of her emotional and sexual needs but also a way of expressing her rebellion against the norms and expectations of her society.

Nandini, another female character of this novel, is the wife of Hrisikesh Deuri, SP of Parbatpuri. She is portrayed as a dutiful wife and a loving and responsible mother of three children. Though she is the wife of a police officer, yet she lives a simple and easy going life. She is the image of a typical Indian married woman. Like Rukmini, Nandini also becomes the victim of insurgency at Parbatpuri. Her husband is shot dead in front of her eyes during their marriage anniversary party in a restaurant. Suddenly her life becomes dark without her husband. But she can come out from this trauma as a strong courageous woman. She starts a new journey of her life by opening a little shop for the sake of her children's future and creates a new identity. She has the courage to move out to the outer world instead of staying in a boundary.

Thus, Mitra Phukan has strongly delineated female characters in her fictions in search of self identity, in search of emancipation and so on. Even though these women are deeply saddened by the death of their husbands and beloved, as a feminist without complaining about the situations, they rise out to establish a new identity of their own. Through her fictional world she has extracted different women from different corners of the society which was unexplored by an Assamese writer before.

### **Women characters in Mamang Dai's 'Stupid Cupid':**

Mamang Dai is an Indian poet, novelist and a journalist from Arunachal Pradesh. Her notable works are poetry collections *Midsummer Survival Lyrics*, *River Poems* etc. She published her first novel *Legends of Pensum* in 2006 followed by *Stupid Cupid*(2008) and *The Black Hill* (2014). She received Sahitya Academy award in 2017 for her notable work *The Black Hill*.

In *Stupid Cupid*, the novelist Mamang Dai has focused a new arena of women characters of Arunachal Pradesh like Adna, Mareb, Jia and so on. They wish to live a peaceful life to make themselves free from the patriarchal power. Adna, the protagonist of the novel shifted to New Delhi leaving her home town Itanagar, Arunachal Pradesh after completion of her Hotel Management course in Guwahati and Calcutta. She had a dream to live a decent life having a peaceful meeting place where lovers and friends could freely exchange their feelings. The author has portrayed Adna as a broadminded progressive character who inherits property by her aunt in Delhi and transform it into a lovely nest and named it as Four Seasons. Adna has liberal views of life and she loves the liberal ways of Delhi. Adna falls in love to a non tribal man from Delhi, who is already married. She believes that she has found love, freedom and independence in Delhi.

Mareb, another woman character of *Stupid Cupid* is a free styled woman. She did not want to live the kind of life like her mother restricting herself to the four walls of her home. In spite of her liberal views, she finds herself trapped and moulded herself by the traditional ways of thinking. She agrees to marry a man of her father's choice. But later she is encouraged by her ex-lover, Rohit to fall in love again and start an affair with him. Mamang Dai has projected these women as liberal women with modern views of life, who believe that religion, caste and cultural differences never become the barrier in love. Unfortunately both Adna and Mareb are dissatisfied in love. The men they love are only interested in having a secret affair with them. But they never wanted to carry their relationship to the next level. It is hinted that women from North east who are deceived in love as they are not accepted may be for religion, caste or cultural differences.

Thus, through these women characters Mamang Dai voices out the unique experiences of Northeastern women who are discriminated and exploited in their own country.

### **Conclusion:**

Though the literary tradition in English of North East women writers are in its infancy yet they have gradually emerged in this literary field. Through their perspectives these women writers have addressed different issues that faced to the region and offer glimpses into the lives of women in the region.

Mitra Phukan and Mamang Dai have portrayed the liberating women through self realization and quest for identity. All the women characters depicted in their respective fictions are bold and courageous though they have faced pathetic and painful sufferings in their life. They believe that women should have an own independent identity and entity by being aware of the choices open to her. Every women characters in these fictions have tolerated, protested, struggled and challenged the patriarchal norms for liberation.

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