

Complexities and Contradictions in Mitra Phukan's *The Collector's Wife* and in Aruni Kashyap's *The House with a Thousand Stories*

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Abstract

The association of reality with depictions of harsh realities and social issues is a result of the desire to address and confront uncomfortable truths. Realism aims to offer a candid view of society, prompting readers to engage with the issues presented and foster empathy and understanding. Realism can be seen as part of a broader cultural effort to grapple with the complexities of an increasingly fragmented and uncontrollable world. In the face of rapid social change, realism attempts to provide a sense of coherence and understanding. It offers a way to comprehend and analyze the intricacies of society, thereby providing a means to gain control over seemingly chaotic or incomprehensible aspects of life.

In examining "realism" within the contexts of "social change" and "the representation of class difference," this paper seeks to understand how the two writers mirror realism in their respective novels. By delving into the themes of their works, the paper aims to explore how these writers use realism to portray and critique societal issues, class dynamics, and the challenges faced by ordinary individuals. Through this analysis, the paper intends to observe how realism in literature serves as a powerful tool to offer profound insights into the human condition, provoke thought, and contribute to broader discussions on social change and class representation. By exploring the authors' perspectives and techniques, the paper aims to shed light on the enduring relevance and impact of realism in contemporary literature.

Key words: realism, human condition, social issues, class differences, harsh realities etc.,

Introduction

Ian Watt, in his important work *The Rise of the Novel* (1957), examines the development and popularity of the novel as a literary form throughout the nineteenth century and beyond, specifically focusing on the advent of 'realism' as a major literary trend at this time. According to Watt, the novel is an attempt to accurately reflect reality by providing an unbiased account of human experiences (54). However, one may argue that all three types of institutions and practices—dominant, residual, and emergent—are always interwoven. To illustrate how traditional romantic themes can be combined with contemporary genres to create a captivating picture of realism, see Charles Dickens' novel *Hard Times*.

Malti Agarwal, in her 2007 editorial "New Perspectives of Indian English Writings," argues that Indian English Literature has strong ties to the country's indigenous cultural character. It gives a platform to the problems and wrongdoings that are still very much a part of modern India. Some of the most celebrated authors of all time include Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, R.K. Narayan, Khushwant Singh, Nirad C. Chaudhary, Manohar Malgonkar, Amitav Ghosh, Salman Rushdie, and many more for their ability to accurately portray modern society through their writing.

Even though only a small number of Assamese English writers are included in the canon of contemporary Indian English Literature, those that are work tirelessly to address issues of violence and regional bias in the state of Assam. In her acclaimed 2005 novel *The Collector's Wife*, Mitra Phukan, who is both a translator and children's author, trivialises the Assam Movement. Debut author Aruni Kashyap depicts the darkest period in modern Assamese history, replete with representations of state terrorism, brutality, counter memory, and ethics, in *The House with a Thousand Stories* (2013). Through their thorough and precise portrayals of human experiences, settings, and societal conventions, literary writings establish a social reality that can be recognised as fidelity to actual life or the way things are. The goal of realist fiction is to reflect reality as it actually is, with a particular emphasis on the mundane activities of regular people. Realistic texts seek to reflect the intricacies and challenges of society by depicting its less attractive features, such as harshness, sordidness, and lower-class existence.

History is a treasure trove of life's intricacies, making it essential to revisit the past to comprehend the present. Peter Barry (2008), in his work *Beginning Theory*, mentions that postmodernists believe in revisiting the past with irony and experimentation. This trend is evident in post-colonial literature, where authors seek to reclaim and reinterpret their history. Frantz Fanon argues that for colonized people to find their voice and identity, they must reclaim their own past. Assam, with its diverse culture, traditions, languages, ethnicities, and rich history, has experienced both cultural richness and conflicts marked by violence and bloodshed. The past's realities continue to haunt the people of Assam. Being a part of colonized India, Assamese writers strive to reclaim their past and assert their voices in the canon of postcolonial Indian literature.

One significant historical event in Assam's post-colonial era was the Assam Movement, led mainly by students of Assam (All Assam Students Union) and active from 1979 to 15 August 1985. Dr. Manirul Hussain's book *The Assam Movement: Class, Ideology, and Identity* defines the movement as one that sought to curb illegal immigration of foreign nationals, particularly from Bangladesh and Nepal, to Assam, their participation in the electoral process, and the deportation of all illegal foreigners living in Assam. This movement's impact is highlighted in Mitra Phukan's novel *The Collector's Wife*, set in Parbatpuri, an imaginary insurgency-ridden hill town of Assam, with a striking sense of reality. The protagonist, Rukmini Bezboruah, bears witness to the consequences of the Assam Movement:

"... she looked at the eager, bright young faces of the boys and girls, she couldn't help noticing the facial features and contours before her. The almond eyes, the golden skins of the Mongoloid, the curly hair of the Austric, the dark complexions of the Dravids, the fine features and fair colouring of the Aryans, were all present in the crowd of young faces before her. And they wanted to rid the land of foreigners!" (91)

Another conflict that has dominated Assam's political landscape is the establishment of the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) on April 7, 1979, led by Bhimkanta Buragohain and others. The ULFA aimed to establish a sovereign Assam, leading to the Indian government banning the organization in 1990, labeling it as a terrorist group. In response, the government resorted to clandestine tactics involving surrendered ULFA members to carry out extrajudicial killings, specifically targeting the relatives of ULFA members. These extrajudicial killings were referred to as the "Secret Killings of Assam."

Mrinul Talukdar's (2009) book *Secret Killings of Assam* defines these secret killings as acts conducted by the state government using SULFA (Surrendered ULFA) members and security forces under the guise of counter-insurgency operations. The government justified these actions as retribution for ULFA-sponsored terrorism, particularly targeting the SULFAs, or surrendered ULFA members. The secret killings spread horror and uncertainty among the people of Assam as innocent relatives of ULFA members lost their lives. The term "secret killings" signifies the darkest period in Assam's political history, a time that the people of the state would prefer never to revisit.

Between 1998 and 2001, these two words, "secret killings," terrorized and tormented the people of Assam. The atmosphere was filled with horror, and uncertainty engulfed their lives. They lived in constant fear, unsure if they would see the next day's sunrise. The extreme brutality of the killings affected innocent lives deeply, leaving a lasting impact on those who witnessed the abductions and killings. The memories of bloodshed haunted them, with the words "secret killings" sending shivers down their spines.

Aruni Kashyap powerfully integrates his imagination with the reality of the secret killings as a backdrop in his novel *The House with a Thousand Stories*. By doing so, he skillfully brings attention to the horrors of this dark period in Assam's history and the lasting impact it had on the lives of its people.

The novels *The Collector's Wife* by Mitra Phukan and *The House with a Thousand Stories* by Aruni Kashyap are both deeply rooted in Assam's recent history, particularly during times of political turmoil. These novels reflect sensitive issues such as immigration, the Assam Movement, terrorism, and extortion, painting a devastating picture of the social milieu filled with fear, apprehension, and hope among the people of Assam during the late seventies and the entire eighties.

In *The Collector's Wife*, Mitra Phukan boldly presents two contrasting types of patriotism prevalent during the era of political insurgencies in Assam. The first type is genuine patriotism, exemplified by individuals like the students of DS College who genuinely care about their homeland. The second type is pseudo-patriotism, portrayed by characters like the English lecturer Arnob Chakravarty, who claim to serve the nation but are more concerned with personal gains and use the pretext of patriotism for their own ulterior motives.

The socio-political environment of that time significantly impacted the youth of Assam, diverting their minds and leading them into aimless and inhuman activities. Many youths joined various terrorist outfits, indulging in armed robbery, extortion, and kidnapping, highlighting the degradation of values in the society.

The novel also sheds light on the presence of Surrendered Ex-Ultras, former militants who officially surrendered their arms but continued to engage in violence and criminal activities under the guise of being part of the mainstream. This prevalent environment created an apocalyptic and dystopian society in Assam, with fear, surveillance, and mistrust becoming pervasive elements in people's lives. The concept of totalitarian

patriotism, where the so-called patriots exert tyranny under the pretext of furthering the cause of a "Golden Homeland," is a central theme in the novel. The common people have been brainwashed into believing that the money extorted from them is for the greater good, perpetuating a cycle of misinformation and propaganda.

Overall, both novels provide a poignant reflection of Assam's socio-political reality during that period, delving into the impact on individuals, society, and the notion of patriotism itself. Through their compelling narratives, these novels serve as mirrors to the dark times Assam faced and raise important questions about identity, values, and the consequences of political upheaval on the lives of ordinary people. The conflict between ULFA and SULFA is also prominently depicted in Aruni Kashyap's novel *The House with a Thousand Stories*. The novel provides a portrait of contemporary Assam, where violence pervades the societal landscape. Set against a backdrop of alleged extra-judicial killings by the Indian government in the late 1990s to suppress armed dissent, the novel challenges the official narratives and delves into the internal conflicts of the human heart. Aruni Kashyap focuses on the violations of human rights rather than critiquing government policies, highlighting how individuals become puppets in the hands of government authorities.

The novel exposes the truth behind the conspiracy, portraying the secret killers not as clandestine figures but rather well-known actors in the state. This emphasizes the lack of secrecy surrounding their actions and the complicity of those in power. With socialist realism in mind, the novel explores the struggle between different economic classes in society, particularly the oppression of workers by bourgeois capitalists. The author justifies this approach by comparing the actions of the Indian government to that of the colonial British, indicating how the marginalized in Assam have suffered from human rights violations, similar to how subalterns were oppressed by colonizers.

The novel sheds light on the long-standing neglect of the North-East by the central government, which has contributed to the oppression faced by the people of Assam. Equality, security, and stability are sought by the characters, mirroring the aspirations of the larger community. The novel's concluding lines express a sense of finality, but the question lingers whether the story truly ends there. The metaphor of leaving imprints on the soil and crushing dry leaves suggests that the impact of these events is enduring, raising doubts about whether justice has been truly served. In reality, the struggle for justice and equal rights continues, and the echoes of the past still resonate in the lives of the people of Assam. The novel's portrayal of the dark period in Assam's history serves as a poignant reminder of the need for lasting change and a society free from violence and oppression.

Representation of Women

The portrayal of women in Assamese society during the period depicted in the novels is characterized by conservatism and marginalization. Both Mitra Phukan's *The Collector's Wife* and Aruni Kashyap's *The House with a Thousand Stories* highlight the struggles and exploitation faced by women at the hands of their male partners and within the societal norms based on religion and customs.

In *The House with a Thousand Stories*, characters like Oholya-jethai and Moina-pehi represent the stereotypical women in Assamese society. Oholya-jethai, a victim of racial prejudice, faces abuse from her

boyfriend's affluent family. To escape her past sorrows, she lives a strict life as part of the Bishoya family. Women like her face societal gossip and judgement when they fall in love, emphasizing the oppressive nature of traditional beliefs. Moina-pehi, the youngest aunt of Pablo, suffers due to the contemporary political upheaval, and her death remains shrouded in mystery. The novel also portrays the harrowing experience of Mamoni, a girl raped by four military men, showcasing the brutal realities women face.

Mitra Phukan's *The Collector's Wife* can be seen from a gyno-critical perspective, which focuses on the representation of women characters in works by women authors. The protagonist, Rukmini, challenges stereotypical gender roles and societal norms. She refuses to be defined solely as the collector's wife and subverts traditional notions of domesticity and motherhood. Rukmini's thoughts on a "male ovum donor" highlight the gender dichotomy prevalent in society and the patriarchal norms that objectify women.

Both novels emphasize the importance of understanding women's experiences and perspectives in the context of Assamese society. Mitra Phukan's approach to gyno-criticism enables a deeper exploration of women's psyche and challenges conventional portrayals of women in literature. Through their female characters, both authors shed light on the struggles, resilience, and resistance faced by women in a society shaped by tradition, politics, and oppression.

Rukmini's character in *The Collector's Wife* initially challenges patriarchal norms and societal expectations, and her boldness seems to diminish as the story progresses. The humdrum of day-to-day life, along with the political turmoil and insecurity, takes a toll on her, causing her to lose herself and struggle to negotiate with her environment. As the central character and narrator, Rukmini provides a lens through which the story unfolds, but the other women characters are not fully developed, leading to a lack of their emotions and perspectives. This absence could be attributed to Rukmini's upper-class background, having been born and brought up outside Assam, which may limit her understanding of the struggles and concerns of common women, especially those in rural areas.

Rukmini's return to conforming to traditional roles, such as desiring to have children to erase the label of being barren, highlights the societal pressure and expectations placed on women. Despite her initial defiance, she eventually succumbs to these pressures, showcasing the influence of societal norms on even strong-willed individuals. Rukmini's lack of confidence and boldness when consulting a gynecologist reflects the deeply ingrained cultural taboos and stigmas surrounding women's health and reproduction. This hesitation further exemplifies the impact of patriarchal norms on her actions and decisions. It is important to recognize the complexities of Rukmini's character and the societal context in which she exists. Her struggles and vulnerabilities portray the challenges faced by women in navigating a society that upholds traditional norms and expectations. Through Rukmini's experiences, the novel sheds light on the complexities and contradictions of women's lives in Assamese society during that time.

“...Rukmini was a barren woman...when a childless female took an undue interest in one's offspring, it was time to ward off the evil eye by going home as soon as possible, roasting mustard seeds on an open fire, murmuring mantras over the head of the child whose name was taken by the barren women.” (167)

Indeed, Rukmini's character in *The Collector's Wife* reflects the complexities and challenges faced by women in society. Despite her married life, she experiences loneliness and a deep longing for motherhood, which adds to her sense of loss and identity crisis. Her struggles resonate with the universal experiences of women who grapple with societal expectations and the desire for personal fulfillment and recognition beyond their roles as wives or mothers.

Rukmini's external affair and desire to take breaks outside of her marriage illustrate her quest for independence and a sense of self. The novel highlights her longing to create a space for herself and assert her own identity, beyond being defined by her relationships with others. Mitra Phukan, through Rukmini's character, aims to challenge traditional societal norms that often limit women to their roles within the family or as extensions of their husbands. The novel advocates for women to be recognized as individuals with their own aspirations, desires, and complexities. The characters of Rukmini and Oholya-jethai not only portray the social reality of Assamese society but also resonate with women's experiences across different cultures and backgrounds. Their pain and suffering reflect universal themes that women face in their pursuit of self-discovery, autonomy, and fulfillment.

Through the depiction of these women's struggles, the novel advocates for a more inclusive and empowering space for women in society. It calls for recognition of their individuality, agency, and rights as human beings, rather than being confined to predefined roles and expectations. Mitra Phukan's portrayal of these female characters serves as a powerful reminder of the need for gender equality and the importance of women's voices and perspectives in literature and society.

Conclusion

In conclusion, both Aruni Kashyap's *The House with a Thousand Stories* and Mitra Phukan's *The Collector's Wife* successfully portray the social reality of their contemporary Assamese society. While Kashyap's novel focuses on ordinary village life, Phukan's work delves into urban life. Despite these differences, both novelists effectively capture the nuances of human relationships, parental behavior, friendships, and the challenges of love and discrimination. Moreover, both authors display an ecological consciousness in their writings, emphasizing the relationship between literature and the physical environment. The settings of their novels in the Brahmaputra valley highlight the deep connection between the daily lives of common people and the river.

The authors' commitment to depicting society as it truly is, without idealization, makes their works a microcosm of the suffering and struggles of people affected by political turmoil and exploitation. They delve into themes of class and caste, man-woman relationships, conflicts, protests, and compassion, all with a focus on realism. By shedding light on the contemporary issues and representing the lived experiences of their characters, Kashyap and Phukan contribute to social change and challenge societal norms. Their portrayals of the underrepresented and marginalized sections of society awaken readers' conscience to work towards eradicating social injustices. In this sense, both Aruni Kashyap and Mitra Phukan can be considered true social

realists, as their works aim to reflect the reality of their society and inspire positive transformation. Through their insightful storytelling, they provide a glimpse into the lives of people caught in the complexities of Assamese society, shedding light on the struggles and triumphs of ordinary individuals.

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