

Women's Struggle for Emancipation in Selected Novels by Mitra Phukan: A Postcolonial Feminist Reading

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Abstract

*Women's emancipation in contemporary Indian English fiction is inseparable from questions of gender, social authority, cultural tradition, and individual agency. In the literature of Northeast India, these concerns acquire particular significance because women's lives are shaped not only by patriarchal domestic structures but also by region-specific histories, political unrest, community surveillance, and culturally embedded social expectations. Mitra Phukan's *The Collector's Wife* (2005) and *What Will People Say?* (2023) offer significant representations of women negotiating these intersecting structures of power. This paper examines the struggles for autonomy, identity, emotional fulfilment, and self-recognition experienced by Rukmini Bezboruah and Mihika Borthakur. Drawing primarily on postcolonial feminist perspectives, particularly Chandra Talpade Mohanty's critique of the homogenization of women's experiences, and supported by feminist approaches to identity, patriarchy, and representation, the study argues that Phukan does not portray emancipation as a simple movement from oppression to freedom. Rather, emancipation emerges as a continuous and context-specific negotiation of patriarchal authority, marital expectations, infertility stigma, widowhood, social surveillance, religious boundaries, and emotional desire. Rukmini's search for professional and bodily autonomy and Mihika's resistance to the social regulation of widowhood demonstrate different forms of female agency within Assamese society. The paper seeks to explore how Phukan's fiction reconfigures emancipation as an ongoing process of self-definition through which women challenge identities imposed upon them by marriage, family, community, and patriarchal social conventions.*

Keywords

Women's emancipation, postcolonial feminism, female agency, patriarchy, identity, widowhood, infertility, social surveillance, Northeast Indian literature

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Introduction

The representation of women's emancipation has occupied a significant place in Indian literature, particularly since the emergence of social reform movements and the development of women-centred literary discourse during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Questions concerning women's education, marriage, widowhood, domestic confinement, economic dependence, sexuality, and individual identity have gradually moved from the margins of literary discourse to the centre of literary criticism. Shabnum Ara and Aashaq Hussain Zargar, in their discussion of Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*, similarly foreground women's struggle for identity, autonomy, and freedom within patriarchal structures (Ara and Zargar 415–19). Such concerns have remained central to Indian women's writing because women's individual aspirations frequently encounter familial, marital, and social expectations. The question of identity is particularly important to feminist literary discourse. Erik H. Erikson's discussion of identity emphasizes the relationship between individual selfhood and social positioning (Erikson 147–48). From a feminist perspective, however, women's identities cannot be separated from the gendered structures through which society assigns them particular roles. Marriage, motherhood, domesticity, and social respectability frequently become mechanisms through which women's identities are defined and regulated. Ara and Zargar's analysis of women's struggle for identity in *Difficult Daughters* demonstrates the continuing relevance of this conflict in Indian English fiction (Ara and Zargar 415–19).

In Indian English literature, writers such as Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Arundhati Roy, Manju Kapur, Anita Nair, Bharati Mukherjee, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and many other writers have explored women's struggles against restrictive domestic and social structures. Similar concerns are visible in the literature of Northeast India. Writers such as Easterine Kire, Indira Goswami, Arupa Patangia Kalita, Mamang Dai, Jahn timer Barua, and Mitra Phukan have represented women's experiences within particular regional, cultural, historical, and political contexts. Adenuo Shirat Luikham's "Examining the Emergence of Feminist Consciousness in the Select Fiction of Contemporary North East Women Writers" is particularly relevant to this context. Luikham observes that women writers of Northeast India write from positions in which gender significantly shapes their experiences, and she argues that their fiction reveals "the gendered experiences of women from the region" (Luikham1). She further identifies an emerging feminist consciousness through which the silenced voices of women claim a dignified existence within the region's complex geopolitical conditions. This observation is directly applicable to Phukan, whose female characters are situated within the social realities of Assam rather than within

an abstract or culturally homogeneous patriarchal structure. Shyamoli Borah, an academic researcher and literary critique of Northeast India who examines feminist perspectives in the English fiction of women writers of Northeast India, including Mitra Phukan and Mamang Dai. Such scholarship establishes that women's writing from the Northeast needs to be examined through its regional specificities. The women represented by these writers encounter gendered oppression through family, community, political conflict, cultural expectations, and historically situated social institutions. The regional specificity of this literature is particularly important from a postcolonial feminist perspective. The experiences of women cannot be treated as homogeneous because gender intersects with culture, class, religion, history, ethnicity, political circumstances, and local social practices. Phukan's fiction is significant in this regard because her women characters are situated within the social realities of Assam rather than an abstract patriarchal world.

Mitra Phukan's *The Collector's Wife* and *What Will People Say?*, provide compelling examples of this context-specific female experience. *The Collector's Wife*, published in 2005, centres on Rukmini Bezboruah, an educated woman and English lecturer who is married to Siddharth Bezboruah, the District Collector. Her professional identity is repeatedly overshadowed by the bureaucratic position of her husband. Shyamoli Bora's study of Phukan's novel identifies Rukmini as a representation of the "New Woman," while Nityananda Patanayak examines Phukan's narrative technique in *The Collector's Wife* (Bhuyan; Patanayak 204-18). Suresh Kohli's contemporary review of the novel also provides an early critical response to Phukan's narrative treatment of the social world represented in the text (Kohli 214-16). The novel is also situated against the background of political unrest in Assam. George et al. examine the impact of insurgency on women in *The Collector's Wife*, thereby drawing attention to the connection between political violence and women's personal lives (George et al.). The political setting is important because Rukmini's experiences cannot be separated from the broader social insecurity surrounding her. The Assam Movement and the politics of regional identity constitute an important historical context for understanding the social atmosphere of Assam during the period represented in the novel.

The students of Assam have a long history of struggle since the colonial rule. They had been involving the polity as well as the socio-economic and cultural aspects of Assam. After Independence a series of massive movements had been launched by the students of the region on the issue of ethno-cultural identity, economic backwardness and migration (Baruah 304).

Arup Borbora's *The Assam Movement: A Struggle for Identity* is therefore relevant as a historical source for situating Phukan's fictional world within the larger politics of Assamese identity.

Phukan's representation of Assamese society has also attracted scholarly attention. Kalyai Naveen Dubey and Akhilesh V. Peshwe examine the depiction of Assamese society in Phukan's prominent fictions, indicating the importance of social and cultural context in interpreting her work (Dubey and Peshwe 2464–69). Thus, *The Collector's Wife* should not be read merely as a domestic feminist novel; it is also a narrative situated within the changing social and political environment of Assam. In *What Will People Say?*, Phukan shifts attention to Mihika Borthakur, a fifty-six-year-old widow and college professor. Her experience demonstrates that professional and financial independence does not necessarily eliminate patriarchal social control. Her relationship with Zuhayr Rahman, a Muslim divorcee, challenges conventional expectations concerning widowhood, age, religion, sexuality, and social respectability. The novel therefore expands the discourse of emancipation beyond economic independence to include emotional companionship, bodily autonomy, and the right to make personal choices. The present paper argues that Phukan's women are not simply passive victims of patriarchy. They negotiate, resist, compromise, and sometimes transgress the social boundaries imposed upon them. Emancipation therefore emerges as a process of constructing the self within, against, and sometimes beyond patriarchal structures.

Statement of the Problem

A considerable body of feminist literary criticism has examined women's oppression, domestic confinement, and struggles for autonomy in Indian English literature. Existing scholarship on Mitra Phukan has also examined feminism, patriarchy, Assamese society, insurgency, and the representation of women in *The Collector's Wife* (Bhuyan; Borah; Chetia; Dhileep and Baisel; George et al.; Luikham). Dhileep and Anu Baisel, for instance, examine patriarchal oppression and the predicament of women in Phukan's *The Collector's Wife* alongside Arupa Patangia Kalita's *Felanee* (Dhileep and Baisel). Chetia similarly discusses the representation of women and violence in Phukan's novel (Chetia). These studies establish the significance of gender and patriarchal oppression in Phukan's fiction.

However, a comparatively underexplored dimension is the manner in which Phukan constructs emancipation as a process of negotiated agency. The issue is not simply whether women are oppressed but how educated women attempt to reconstruct their identities within social systems that continue to define them through marriage, motherhood, widowhood, professional status, religious identity, and community

expectations. The present study therefore investigates how Phukan represents women's emancipation as a complex negotiation between social conformity and individual agency. It particularly examines the ways in which Rukmini and Mihika attempt to reclaim identities that have been defined or restricted by patriarchal and communal expectations. The paper also explores the psychological consequences of such restrictions, especially loneliness, emotional isolation, and existential dissatisfaction.

The study is significant because it reads Phukan's women through a postcolonial feminist framework rather than interpreting their experiences exclusively through a universalized model of feminism. It recognizes that women's agency in Assamese society is shaped by local histories, cultural values, social hierarchies, and political circumstances. The paper consequently examines how women negotiate emancipation when their personal desires conflict with family and community expectations.

Research Objectives

1. To analyse Rukmini Bezboruah's struggle for professional identity, personal autonomy, and freedom from infertility-related patriarchal stigma in *The Collector's Wife*.
2. To examine the relationship between widowhood, social surveillance, emotional desire, and female agency in *What Will People Say?*

Research Questions

1. How does Rukmini negotiate professional, domestic, and bodily autonomy in *The Collector's Wife*?
2. How sociological issues of gender, class, marriage, and surveillance function as a patriarchal mechanisms of power to control, regulate, and subjugate female identity in *What Will People Say?*

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive, and textual research methodology. The primary texts are Mitra Phukan's *The Collector's Wife* and *What Will People Say?* Phukan's *A Monsoon of Music* is also considered as part of the broader context of her fictional engagement with identity, society, and cultural experience, although the principal textual analysis remains focused on the two selected novels. Secondary sources include scholarly books, journal articles, literary criticism, reviews, interviews, and relevant academic resources concerning postcolonial feminism, feminist literary criticism, women's writing, identity, patriarchy, Assamese society, and political unrest. The analysis is primarily textual

and interpretive. Selected passages, characterizations, narrative situations, and dialogues are examined in relation to the study's theoretical framework. Postcolonial feminism functions as the principal theoretical lens, particularly its emphasis on cultural specificity, the critique of homogenized representations of women, and the relationship between gender and historically situated structures of power. Intersectional considerations are used as a supporting analytical approach to understand how gender interacts with age, marital status, religion, class, professional identity, and cultural expectations.

Women's Emancipation in *The Collector's Wife*: An Analysis

Mitra Phukan's *The Collector's Wife* is situated within the socio-political turbulence of Assam and centres on Rukmini Bezboruah, the educated wife of District Collector Siddharth Bezboruah. Rukmini teaches English literature at a local college, yet her professional identity remains overshadowed by her husband's administrative position. The novel establishes a significant contradiction between social privilege and personal marginalization: Rukmini occupies an elite social position as the Collector's wife, but her privileged location does not necessarily provide her with autonomy.

George et al. similarly describe Rukmini as an educated woman with social status and professional capability who nevertheless experiences psychological and emotional isolation within her marriage (George et al.). Previous scholarship has repeatedly recognized the feminist significance of Rukmini's character. Rukmini is portrayed as non-conformist woman character who is often thirst for freedom and liberty. Dikshita Bhuyan writes: "Rukmini Bezboruah, Nandini Deuri, Priyam and Bobita as recognised non-conformists female who thirst for their liberty and freedom and of the public eye" (Bhuyan 76). Shyamoli Borah's broader study of feminist perspectives in Northeast Indian women's fiction similarly places Phukan within a literary tradition concerned with women's consciousness and social restrictions. The present study develops these arguments by examining Rukmini's emancipation through professional dependence, personal identity, reproductive stigma, and political insecurity.

Professional Dependence and the Problem of Female Identity

Rukmini's professional life reveals the contradiction between education and actual autonomy. She is educated, teaches English literature, and possesses an identity beyond the household; nevertheless, her professional position remains limited. Her employment does not provide the degree of economic or social independence that might enable her to challenge the domestic hierarchy within which she lives. Her position in the Parbatpuri Ladies Club demonstrates the institutionalization of patriarchal identity. Membership is determined not by women's own accomplishments but by the professional rank of their husbands:

Though it was called the Parbatpuri Ladies Club, memberships were strictly restricted to the wives of the government officers.... there was a definite pecking order there, which depended not on the achievements, age or even qualification of the member, but upon the rank and position of her husband. (*The Collector's Wife* 164)

The passage exposes a crucial mechanism of patriarchal social organization: women appear to occupy public spaces, but their identities remain derivative. Their social status is calculated through their husbands' occupational hierarchies. The situation is consistent with Dhileep and Baisel's argument concerning patriarchal oppression and the predicament of women in *The Collector's Wife* (Dhileep and Baisel). Rukmini's problem is not merely that she is prevented from working; rather, her work is deprived of the social value that would allow it to function as an autonomous identity. From a postcolonial feminist perspective, this is significant because gender oppression is not represented independently of social and institutional structures. Rukmini's experience is produced through the interaction of marriage, class position, bureaucratic culture, gender expectations, and the political environment of Assam. Rukmini's statement, "I can't be a total housewife, though part time lecturing is not much of a career. Still, it's better than nothing. Besides, Siddhartha's away most of the time, the servants here are well trained, and I have no children..... I have to do something," marks an important moment of self-consciousness (*The Collector's Wife* 116). The statement expresses her refusal to allow marriage to erase her professional and intellectual identity. Her desire to work is therefore more than an economic necessity; it represents her need for recognition as an individual subject.

Personal Identity and the Search for Self-Recognition

One of the central concerns of *The Collector's Wife* is the tension between a woman's individual identity and the identity assigned to her through marriage. Rukmini is socially recognized primarily as the wife of the District Collector. Her own professional qualifications and intellectual interests remain secondary to the symbolic status attached to her husband's office. This condition demonstrates how patriarchy operates through representation. Rukmini is visible within elite society but is not fully recognized as an autonomous social subject. Her identity is relational rather than independent: she is the Collector's wife before she is Rukmini the lecturer, intellectual, or woman with individual desires. The issue of identity connects Phukan's narrative with broader feminist discussions of women's selfhood. Erikson's conceptualization of identity provides a useful background for understanding the relationship between individual self-definition and social recognition (Erikson 147–48). This concept can be applied cautiously to Rukmini. Unlike the racial identity

discussed by Erikson, her problem is gendered and marital. Nevertheless, the underlying mechanism is comparable: a socially dominant identity is imposed upon the individual, reducing the complexity of the person to a socially sanctioned category. Rukmini's individuality becomes submerged beneath the title of her husband. In Phukan's novel, however, the problem becomes explicitly gendered because Rukmini's social identity is repeatedly mediated through her husband.

Patanayak's study of the technique of *The Collector's Wife* "A Study in Technique" is relevant because Phukan's narrative does not construct Rukmini solely through external action. The novel repeatedly moves between social events and Rukmini's inner consciousness, thereby allowing the reader to perceive the difference between her socially secure appearance and her psychological loneliness (Patanayak 204–18). Rukmini's movement towards self-recognition begins when she questions the limitations of domesticity. The desire "to do something" becomes a symbolic refusal of a socially prescribed identity. Emancipation consequently begins not with complete independence but with consciousness-the recognition that the identity assigned to her is inadequate to contain her aspirations.

This technique is particularly important in representing emancipation because Rukmini's resistance initially occurs at the level of consciousness. The external world sees the Collector's wife, while the narrative gives readers access to the woman who experiences loneliness, frustration, sexual deprivation, reproductive anxiety, and the desire for recognition.

George et al. provide further evidence for this reading by describing Rukmini's inner suffering and quoting the novel's description of her isolation: "How quiet it is here. There's no sound of traffic, no voices, nothing. It's a beautiful place, but isn't it a bit isolated?" (Phukan qtd. in George et al. 69).

The narrative technique therefore transforms physical space into psychological space. The hilltop bungalow, apparently a privileged domestic environment, becomes a symbol of isolation.

Nandini and the Emergence of Economic Agency

The theme of female agency is extended through Nandini Deuri, the wife of a senior police officer and a mother of three children. Nandini's life initially appears to be defined by domestic responsibilities. After her husband's death, however, she begins to consider establishing an independent livelihood. Her desire to start a confectionery business becomes a practical expression of economic agency: "I think I can manage a small confectionery. I h've always wanted to own a shop, be an entrepreneur, you know, but of course after marriage it wasn't possible. Now I'll need an income, too...." (*The Collector's Wife* 192).

This moment demonstrates that marriage can suppress women's aspirations even when the household appears socially secure. Nandini's desire to become economically active is not presented as a rejection of family but as an attempt to reconstruct her identity after the loss of her husband. Her experience complicates the conventional understanding of emancipation. Economic independence does not necessarily mean abandoning domestic relationships; rather, it can enable women to participate in family and society from a position of greater agency.

Patriarchal Stigma of Infertility

Phukan represents infertility as one of the most powerful mechanisms of patriarchal social judgment in *The Collector's Wife*. Rukmini's childlessness becomes a source of social humiliation despite the absence of any legitimate basis for attributing infertility exclusively to the woman. When Rukmini attends Rita Choudhury's wedding, an elderly woman remarks: "What times we are living through! In my days, even the shadow of a barren woman wasn't allowed to fall on a bride" (*The Collector's Wife* 15).

The statement demonstrates how patriarchal culture transforms reproduction into a measure of female worth. The term "barren" does not merely describe reproductive status; it becomes a stigmatizing social identity. Rukmini is judged not according to her education, profession, intelligence, or emotional qualities but according to her ability to reproduce. The stigma also illustrates the gendered control of the female body. Rukmini's reproductive experience becomes a matter of public discussion, and her body is subjected to social surveillance. The patriarchal community claims interpretive authority over her private life. Her husband Siddharth's emotional and sexual distance intensifies the problem. Rukmini's desire for motherhood and emotional intimacy remains insufficiently acknowledged within her marriage. Her later relationship with Manoj Mahanta should therefore be read not simply as a moral transgression but as a complicated act of agency arising from emotional deprivation and social confinement.

Her declaration, "I am going ahead. I'm having the baby," represents a decisive assertion of bodily and reproductive agency (*The Collector's Wife* 315). Her decision does not necessarily conform to conventional moral expectations; instead, it demonstrates her attempt to reclaim authority over a life that has repeatedly been defined by others. The representation of infertility can therefore be connected with the broader feminist concern with women's bodies and patriarchal regulation. The social pressure surrounding Rukmini's reproductive capacity shows that women's identities may be reduced to biological functions. Phukan challenges such reduction by presenting Rukmini as thinking and desiring subject.

Assam's Political Unrest and Female Vulnerability

The political landscape of *The Collector's Wife* adds another dimension to women's emancipation. The novel is set against the background of political unrest and insurgency in Assam, which affects both public life and domestic existence. George et al. specifically identify insurgency as a significant factor affecting women in Phukan's novel. The study further observes that Parbatpuri is characterised by "kidnappings, extortion, and political insecurity" and that Rukmini experiences inner pressure despite her apparently secure social position (George et al.). The political violence is not merely a backdrop; it penetrates the intimate sphere. The official status of Siddharth as District Collector connects Rukmini's private life to the political machinery of the state. His occupation places the household within a dangerous political environment.

Rukmini therefore experiences a double form of restriction: patriarchal control within marriage and political insecurity outside it. Her mobility is affected not only by domestic expectations but also by curfews, violence, and fear generated by insurgency. The death of Siddharth transforms her social and emotional position. Yet this loss also creates the possibility of a different form of selfhood. The transition from being the Collector's wife to becoming an individual responsible for her own survival can be interpreted as a painful movement from dependence towards resilience. The intersection of political violence and gendered vulnerability is also consistent with George et al.'s observation that insurgency has consequences for women's lives in the novel (George et al. 147-49). Phukan consequently connects the personal and political: Rukmini's emancipation is shaped by the larger structures of political instability, state authority, and social insecurity.

Widowhood and Emancipation in *What Will People Say?*

If *The Collector's Wife* examines the limitations imposed on a married woman, *What Will People Say?*, extends the question of emancipation into the later stage of a woman's life. Mihika Borthakur is a fifty-six-year-old widow and college professor. Her age, education, professional identity, and economic independence might suggest that she has already achieved considerable autonomy. Yet Phukan demonstrates that financial independence does not automatically dismantle patriarchal social control. The novel is particularly significant because Mihika's desire for companionship after widowhood challenges conventional expectations concerning women's sexuality and emotional life. Her relationship with Zuhayr Rahman, a Muslim divorcee, crosses boundaries of religion, age, widowhood, and social respectability.

The concern with female identity in this novel can be placed within the broader critical trajectory of Phukan's fiction. While studies of *The Collector's Wife* have emphasized feminism and patriarchal oppression (Bhuyan; Borah; Dhileep and Baisel), *What Will People Say?*, extends the question to the experiences of an older woman whose professional and economic independence fails to guarantee freedom in her personal life.

Widowhood as a Gendered Social Identity

Mihika's experience demonstrates that widowhood can become a socially imposed identity rather than simply a personal condition. The community expects her to behave according to particular codes of dress, food, sexuality, and social interaction. Her status as a widow is therefore accompanied by a regulatory system that attempts to control how she should live. The title itself—*What Will People Say?* - functions as a metaphor for communal surveillance. Social control does not always require direct physical coercion or legal authority. Gossip, moral judgment, reputation, and community pressure can regulate behaviour just as effectively. Phukan's representation of Assamese society is consistent with the broader concern identified by Dubey and Peshwe regarding the importance of social and cultural structures in her fiction (Dubey and Peshwe 2464–69). Mihika's social environment regulates her behaviour through community expectations rather than through formal law.

Age, Sexuality, and the Politics of Respectability

Mihika's character is particularly important because she challenges the assumption that female emancipation is primarily a concern of young women. Her age exposes the persistence of patriarchal control across the life cycle. Her desire for companionship after the death of her husband challenges the notion that older women should become sexually and emotionally invisible. The community accepts neither her desire nor her decision to pursue it independently. Her relationship with Zuhayr also creates a religious dimension to the conflict. Mihika is a Brahmin widow, while Zuhayr is Muslim. Their relationship therefore crosses both gendered and communal boundaries. The opposition they face is not reducible to patriarchy alone; it is produced through the intersection of gender, religion, age, widowhood, and community morality. This intersectional dimension strengthens a postcolonial feminist interpretation. Mihika is not oppressed in a single, uniform way. Different social identities become activated at different moments, creating a layered system of surveillance.

“What Will People Say?” as a Mechanism of Social Control

The title's question captures the ideological power of communal opinion. “What will people say?” is not simply a question; it becomes a mechanism through which individuals discipline themselves. Mihika's relationship is initially a private

matter, but it becomes public through gossip. Her neighbours and the wider community transform her personal decision into a social issue. The community consequently claims the authority to determine what kind of emotional and sexual life is appropriate for a widow.

Phukan's representation of conservative social values demonstrates how cultural traditions can become oppressive when they regulate personal choices. The novel observes that when conservatism becomes rigid and dictates how people should behave, dress, and conduct relationships, it becomes a "prison" (Phukan, *What Will People Say?*). This formulation is significant because it distinguishes culture from coercive tradition. Phukan does not reject tradition in its entirety. Instead, she questions the point at which cultural continuity becomes social domination. This approach is particularly compatible with postcolonial feminist criticism because it avoids presenting non-Western culture as inherently oppressive while still exposing oppressive practices within specific cultural contexts.

Emotional Autonomy and the Right to Companionship

Mihika's struggle demonstrates that emancipation extends beyond education and financial independence. A woman may have a profession, income, adult children, and social respectability and still be denied emotional autonomy. Her relationship with Zuhayr represents a claim to the right to companionship after widowhood. The importance of this relationship lies not simply in romance but in the recognition that older women possess emotional and sexual desires that should not be erased by widowhood. Her uncertainty about marriage is also important: "The curtailment of freedom, in many ways. Sometimes, in those panicky moments that struck when she was alone in her flat, lying in bed, she wondered if she was ready for this thing called marriage" (*What Will People Say?* 147).

The passage reveals that emancipation is not a linear process. Mihika wants companionship but fears that formal marriage may reproduce the restrictions from which she has gained freedom. Her preference for a "Living-Apart-Together" relationship can therefore be read as an attempt to imagine intimacy without surrendering autonomy. Phukan's portrayal is significant because it moves the discourse of women's emancipation beyond the conventional concerns of education and employment. Mihika is already professionally established; what remains contested is her right to determine her emotional and intimate life.

Cross-Communal Relationship and Female Agency

Mihika's relationship with Zuhayr also challenges the boundaries of religious identity. The social opposition to their relationship becomes particularly intense because it involves a Hindu widow and a Muslim man. The relationship therefore

creates a space in which gender and communal identity intersect. The social response to Mihika's choice demonstrates how women's bodies and relationships can become sites upon which communities reproduce their collective identities. Mihika's decision to continue the relationship can consequently be understood as an act of agency. She refuses to surrender her personal desires entirely to community expectations. Yet Phukan avoids presenting this resistance as an effortless triumph. Mihika experiences anxiety, fear, uncertainty, and concern about her daughter Veda's future. Her emancipation is therefore neither absolute nor uncomplicated. It is negotiated through relationships with family and community.

Female Solidarity and Alternative Communities

Another significant dimension of Mihika's emancipation is the support she receives from women around her. Female solidarity creates an alternative social space in which her choices can be recognized rather than condemned. This dimension may be connected to the feminist consciousness visible across contemporary Northeast Indian women's writing. Luikham's study of contemporary Northeast Indian women writers emphasizes the significance of feminist consciousness in literary representations of women's experiences. Similarly, Borah's examination of feminist perspectives in the fiction of Phukan and Mamang Dai demonstrates how women writers of the region engage with gender and social structures through culturally specific narratives. Phukan consequently contrasts two forms of community: the conservative community that regulates women's behaviour and the supportive community that enables women to negotiate autonomy.

Postcolonial Feminism and the Politics of Female Agency

Postcolonial feminism is essential to this study because the experiences of women cannot be understood independently of history, culture, colonial legacies, race, class, religion, nationality, ethnicity, and local social structures. It emerged partly as a critique of forms of Western feminism that treated "woman" as a universal category and assumed that women across different societies experienced oppression in identical ways. Mitra Phukan is a well-known writer and columnist whose fictions can be studied through the postcolonial lens. Phukan's protagonist Rukmini's position is analysed through the concepts of postcolonial feminists like Spivak, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Kwamame Anthony Appiah and so on. Phukan's protagonists are conceptualised in "postcolonial feminism, often referred to as Third World feminism, is a form of feminist philosophy which centers around the idea that racism, colonialism, and the long lasting effects (economic, political, and cultural) of colonialism in the post colonialism setting" having feminine experiences of identity, gender and ethnicity (Ahmed 270). Chandra Talpade Mohanty's influential critique

of Western feminist discourse is especially relevant. Mohanty argues against constructing "Third World women" as a homogeneous, passive category whose oppression can be explained without attention to historical and cultural specificity. Her intervention requires feminist scholarship to examine women in relation to the particular political, economic, cultural, and historical conditions in which their lives are lived. This theoretical position is directly applicable to Phukan. Rukmini and Mihika cannot be understood simply as "Indian women" oppressed by patriarchy. In *The Collector's Wife*, Rukmini's experience is shaped by Assamese political unrest, bureaucratic culture, marriage, infertility, professional identity, and social class. "The gendered realities existing amidst insurgency issues, student unrest, border crossing, trouble in the tea gardens is the main thrust of the novel that makes possible a probing of feminine experience in terms of identity, ethnicity, gender, language and dispossession" (Ahmed 270). Mihika's experiences are shaped by widowhood, age, religion, sexuality, family expectations, and community surveillance. Postcolonial feminism therefore enables the study to ask not merely whether women are oppressed, but how particular social and historical structures produce particular forms of oppression and resistance.

Rukmini's experience demonstrates the intersection of gender with class, marriage, bureaucracy, political conflict, and reproductive expectations. She is not economically destitute. She is highly educated and socially privileged. Yet these advantages do not protect her from patriarchal regulation. Her husband's bureaucratic status becomes more socially valuable than her professional identity. Her infertility becomes a public stigma. Her sexuality is constrained by marital expectations. Her movement is further affected by political unrest. A conventional feminist reading may identify male domination as the principal problem. A postcolonial feminist reading goes further by asking how marriage, class, bureaucracy, Assamese social customs, political unrest, and gender interact. Rukmini is victimised and marginalised by the traditional customs and gender conflicts as Spivak states: "the figure of the woman (forever) disappears not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shutting which is displaced figuration of the third world women caught between tradition and modernization"(Spivak, 1988: 102).

Her position in the "Parbatpuri Ladies Club" is a useful example. The institution is ostensibly a women's social organisation, yet its hierarchy is determined by the professional rank of husbands. Patriarchy therefore operates through a social institution that appears to provide women with public participation. Her infertility provides another example. Rukmini's body is treated as a site of community judgement. Her reproductive status is transformed into a social identity. This is a

culturally situated form of gender oppression rather than a universal or abstract experience. Her pregnancy decision represents the counter-movement: she reclaims bodily authority from social and marital expectations.

Mihika's experience illustrates the importance of intersectionality within postcolonial feminism even more clearly. She is financially independent, professionally educated, and socially established. Yet widowhood subjects her to cultural expectations. Her age challenges the assumption that women's desire belongs exclusively to youth. Her relationship with a Muslim man introduces a communal dimension. Her daughter's marriage creates another layer of family pressure. Her emancipation is therefore negotiated among several identities: a woman, a widow, an older adult, a professor, a mother, a Hindu/Brahmin social identity, a potential partner of a Muslim man. These identities interact rather than operate independently.

The social question *What will people say?*, becomes the mechanism through which these intersecting identities are regulated. Postcolonial feminism consequently allows Mihika's story to be interpreted without reducing it to a simple binary between "traditional Indian culture" and "modern Western freedom." Mihika is not attempting to become culturally Western. She is negotiating autonomy within her own cultural environment.

The application of postcolonial feminism produces three important analytical conclusions. First, women's oppression is culturally specific. Rukmini's infertility stigma and Mihika's widowhood cannot be separated from Assamese social expectations. Second, women's identities are intersectional. Gender interacts with class, marital status, age, religion, profession, reproductive status, and political context. Third, emancipation is negotiated rather than absolute. Rukmini and Mihika do not simply escape society. They negotiate with it, resist particular expectations, and create alternative forms of selfhood. This framework also avoids treating all women as passive victims. Both protagonists possess agency, although their agency operates under unequal conditions.

Phukan's Feminist Narrative and Literary Technique

Phukan's treatment of women's emancipation is strengthened by her narrative representation of social spaces. Patanayak's analysis of the technique of *The Collector's Wife* is relevant to understanding how Phukan constructs the relationship between character, setting, social environment, and political reality (Patanayak 204–18).

The domestic space, bureaucratic environment, ladies' club, college, wedding ceremony, and politically disturbed town are not merely backgrounds. They become spaces in which women's identities are negotiated and regulated. The contrast between public visibility and private loneliness is particularly significant. Kohli's

early review of *The Collector's Wife* also confirms the novel's importance within contemporary Indian literary discussion (Kohli 214–16). Phukan's own interviews provide an additional authorial context for understanding her interest in social interaction and the observation of human behaviour (Phukan, "I Love Interacting with People"; Phukan, "In Conversation with Navish Alam").

Her wider fiction, including *A Monsoon of Music*, demonstrates that social relationships, identity, cultural memory, and human interaction remain recurring dimensions of her literary practice. The present study, however, focuses specifically on the ways these concerns intersect with women's emancipation in *The Collector's Wife* and *What Will People Say?*

Emancipation, Loneliness, and the Reconstruction of the Self

An important contribution of Phukan's fiction lies in its connection between social restriction and psychological loneliness. Neither Rukmini nor Mihika is completely physically isolated from society. Both are educated women with access to social and professional spaces. Yet they experience emotional isolation produced by the inability to express their desires freely. Rukmini's loneliness develops within marriage. Her physical proximity to her husband does not guarantee emotional intimacy. Her professional identity is also insufficiently recognized. She therefore experiences relational loneliness—the loneliness of being socially visible but personally unheard.

Mihika experiences a different form of loneliness after widowhood. Her economic independence does not eliminate her need for companionship. The social condemnation of her relationship threatens to transform personal grief into continued emotional isolation. The two novels consequently suggest that emancipation must include the right to emotional fulfilment. A woman cannot be regarded as emancipated merely because she is educated or employed. Genuine autonomy involves the ability to participate in decisions concerning work, family, body, sexuality, companionship, and identity. The representation of identity in these novels thus connects with the broader theoretical concern that selfhood is constructed through interaction between individual consciousness and social recognition (Erikson). Phukan demonstrates, however, that the process is gendered: women must often negotiate identities already defined by family and community.

Conclusion

Mitra Phukan's *The Collector's Wife* and *What Will People Say?*, offer nuanced representations of women's struggle for emancipation within the socio-cultural contexts of Assam. Through Rukmini Bezboruah and Mihika Borthakur,

Phukan demonstrates that female emancipation is neither a uniform nor a completed condition. It is an ongoing negotiation with structures of patriarchal authority, social expectations, cultural traditions, professional hierarchies, reproductive stigma, widowhood, communal surveillance, and emotional dependency.

Previous scholarship has established the importance of feminist consciousness, patriarchal oppression, Assamese social representation, and political violence in Phukan's fiction (Bhuyan; Bora; Dhileep and Baisel; Dubey and Peshwe; George et al.; Luikham). The present study extends these arguments by placing emancipation as negotiated female agency at the centre of a comparative reading of Rukmini and Mihika. Rukmini's experience reveals how education and professional participation do not automatically guarantee autonomy. Although she teaches English literature, her identity remains subordinated to the bureaucratic status of her husband. Her struggle for professional recognition, experience of infertility stigma, desire for motherhood, and assertion of bodily autonomy reveal the complex relationship between patriarchy and female agency. Her circumstances are further complicated by the political violence and instability surrounding her life in Assam. Mihika's story extends this exploration into the life of an older widow. Her financial and professional independence does not prevent society from regulating her emotional and sexual choices. Her relationship with Zuhayr becomes a challenge to multiple structures of social control involving gender, widowhood, age, religion, and respectability. Her resistance demonstrates that emancipation must include the right of women to seek companionship and emotional fulfilment beyond socially prescribed roles.

The postcolonial feminist framework is particularly productive because it situates these women within their specific cultural and historical contexts rather than treating them as interchangeable representatives of an abstract category called "woman." The existing critical literature on Phukan supports such a contextual reading by connecting her fiction with feminist consciousness, patriarchal oppression, Assamese society, and the effects of insurgency (Borah; Dhileep and Baisel; Dubey and Peshwe; George et al.; Luikham).

Phukan's fiction ultimately redefines emancipation as a process of self-recognition, negotiation, resistance, and self-determination. Rukmini and Mihika do not simply escape patriarchal structures; they challenge, negotiate, and sometimes transgress the boundaries imposed upon them. Their experiences demonstrate that women's freedom must include not only economic and educational independence but also the right to define one's identity, body, relationships, desires, and emotional life. The study therefore argues that Phukan's representation of women is significant

within contemporary Northeast Indian literature because it connects the intimate politics of women's lives with the wider socio-cultural and political realities of Assam. Her fiction makes visible the psychological costs of patriarchal regulation while simultaneously foregrounding women's capacity to resist imposed identities. Emancipation, in Phukan's fictional world, is consequently not the final attainment of an uncomplicated freedom but the continuing struggles to become an autonomous subject within—and sometimes against - the structures that seek to define her.

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