



## **Trauma of Exile: Diasporic Sensibility in Mitra Phukan's *The Collector's Wife***

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### ***Abstract***

*The post-colonial discourse on 'diaspora' and 'exile' have found ample importance in the writings of numerous writers across the globe. The advocates of post-colonial theories deploy 'exile' as a concept beyond simply a forced removal from a given physical location. In common words, exile brings in images of individual or group of people sent overseas or banished to foreign lands forming different 'diasporas'. The exiled people try to form allegiance with the new place in which they have settled, yet they carry or retain a sense of belonging to the real or imagined homeland. They are in constant search of the lost 'home' and try to form a new home through locating and dislocating it time and again. Sometimes, this exile is a self-exile as Edward Said (1994) stresses, exile can be both "actual" and "metaphoric," "voluntary" or "involuntary" (39). The last point indicates that physical violence is not the sole force to cause exile, but subtler sorts of compulsion can cause an equivalent as well. Mitra Phukan's *The Collector's Wife* (2005) portrays the story of a woman exiled in an unknown land amidst compulsion. She tries hard to adjust herself with the new home but fails to do so. The trauma of exile compels her to search for a new allegiance in the alien land. She starts a new relation with an unknown person which leads her towards a life of mere struggle and void.*

**Keywords:** *Exile, Diaspora, Location, Home, Trauma, Violence, Alien Land.*

### **Introduction**

The post-colonial discourse on 'diaspora' and 'exile' have found ample importance in the writings of numerous writers across the globe. The advocates of post-colonial theories deploy 'exile' as a concept beyond simply a forced removal from a given physical location. The Merriam Webster dictionary defines 'exile' as "the state or a period of forced or

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voluntary absence from one's country or home". The Cambridge English Dictionary defines it as "the condition of someone being sent or kept away from their own country, village etc., especially for political reasons." In simple words, exile brings in images of individual or group of people sent to distant lands or banished to foreign lands forming different 'diasporas'. The exiled people try to form allegiance with the new place in which they have settled yet they carry or retain a sense of belonging to the real or imagined homeland. They are in constant search of the lost 'home' and try to form a new home through the process of location, dislocation and re-location. Sometimes, this exile is a self-exile as Edward Said (1994) stresses, that exile can be both "actual" and "metaphoric", "voluntary" or "involuntary" (39). The last point indicates that physical violence is not the sole force to cause exile, but subtler sorts of compulsion can cause an equivalent as well.

Stuart Hall in his seminal essay "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" (1997) has emphasized that the cultural identities of diasporic persons reflect the common historical experience of migration, trans-national movement and the test of exile. A diasporic person shares a cultural code of being one people under the banner of exile and conceives the imaginary world of home and space which points to a third world theorized as 'third space'. The diasporic person carries the lost home in their minds, they feel traumatized, dislocated. The new culture is difficult for them to adopt and accept. They can neither go back to their homeland, nor accept the new culture wholeheartedly and thus leading to a cross-cultural crisis. They constantly search a new identity amidst the odds of the new 'homeland'. In this search, sometimes they lose their own identity, trying to acquire new identities through assimilation. But their hearts do not find the sought-after abode and consequently feel victimized or traumatized, leading them towards an eternal identity crisis.

Mitra Phukan's *The Collector's Wife* (2005) is a novel set in a small town of Parbatpuri in the North Eastern state of Assam. The district is well known for its terrorist activities like any other place of the Northeast. Stories of kidnappings, extortion and political instability characterize life in the small town and invariably affect the personal lives of the people living in the town. Phukan's chief protagonist, Rukmini feels a state of exile in the new town where her husband is the Deputy Commissioner, the chief bureaucratic officer of the town. Her position is like that of a fish out of pond trying in vain to adapt herself to the spirit of gossip amidst trouble and anxiety. The political turmoil of the town affects her personal life and she lives a life of loneliness and depression.

*The Collector's Wife* (2005) highlights the geo-political divide between the bureaucrats and the civil people living in the town. Being the wife of the DC, Rukmini lives in the DC's bungalow located on a small hill protected by security guards all the time. It's far away from the reach of the common people who live amidst anxiety and insecurity. By the location of the DC's bungalow above the hill top, Phukan mocks at the so called superiority of the high officials separating them from the normal way of living of the poor citizens of the district. The cremation ground just below the hill seems to highlight this geo-political divide more intensely. At one side, there is the armed officials living a lavish life and on the other the common men with their struggle to earn their daily bread amidst fear and insecurity. Even the Club where Rukmini Bezboraah, the DC's wife goes with her husband is a prohibited zone for the civilians. Rukmini cannot adjust herself in the elite gossip of the high officials'

wives nor is she able to mix up with the common people being the DC's wife. She feels to be exiled in her own land.

Rukmini's husband Siddharth spends most of his time outside the bungalow looking after his duties as the DC of the district. This makes Rukmini lonelier and crawls inside her shell. She teaches English literature as a part time teacher in DS College, a semi urban institute in the heart of the town for a meagre thousand rupees. The money is less important to Rukmini, more important is the business that the part time job provides her. But, she works half-heartedly even in the college. She feels:

Rukmini had realized several years ago that teaching was not her vocation in life. She did not enjoy presenting the tortured soliloquies of Hamlet to small-town teenage minds, or Jane Austen's polished prose to those whose knowledge of English grammar was, at best, merely adequate. It was an uphill task to lecture on Keats' odes to a roomful of adolescents whose cultural world consisted of Hindi and Assamese films or folk songs and dances based on an agricultural, semi-tropical economy. The gap between Parbatpuri and the world of the English dramatists, poets and novelists that she taught was too great for her to bridge with her lukewarm enthusiasm for the activity of teaching. (Phukan 27)

Her part-time teaching job, though not adequate to give her job satisfaction, at least gave her something to do and also an identity, however frail, of her own. She could shed off the persona of the 'DC's wife' for a couple of hours every day. Phukan remarks:

In any case, teaching was one of the few avenues open to women in her situation....while many of the wives of Siddharth's colleagues found fulfilment in busying themselves with 'good cause' whenever they found themselves, Rukmini found the idea of doing social work even less appealing than teaching. (Phukan 28)

Rukmini's aloofness engulfs her more due to another factor haunting her for years, her barrenness, not having a child since 13 years of her married life with Siddharth. Her infertile womb is just like a nightmare which chases her round the clock. Siddharth has become almost indifferent on the topic, but she knows his wish to become a father has remained unfulfilled for all these years. The fact has become an open secret in both the families now and her mother-in-law often asks her to consult a doctor to find a remedy to it. She has always been a caring and friendly mother-in-law who never treats Rukmini as the daughter-in-law, but even dearer to be her own daughter. Rukmini openly discusses her secrets with her and always finds an ever solacing mother beside her, giving her suggestions, encouraging her to complete the course of medicine she has started to take lately. In social gatherings, Rukmini has to face comments on her childlessness, but every time she tries to swallow them with an air of indifference. In Phukan's words:

She knew that yet she could not shrug them off or dismiss them. She was sensitive to these comments, these significant glances which she knew were

exchanged every time talk veered around to babies in her presence. She tried not to show her feelings, disguised them rather well in fact, with a veneer of gaiety and indifference. She knew that her sensitivity sometimes made her imagine a barb in an innocent remark. But motherhood was the only cure for this condition. (Phukan 53).

Rukmini's married life is also disturbed up to a great extent due to the constant terrorist activities affecting the town of Parbatpuri. Siddharth, her husband, being the DC of the district is busy all the time handling such disturbances. He has to spend much time in his official works even engaging himself in the DC's bungalow with high level officials all the time, thus often making his residence a makeshift office. He has little time left for Rukmini which makes her lonelier in the big residence meant for the chief administrative officer of the town.

Phukan delineates the violent insurgency that grips the town of Parbatpuri in particular and the whole region of North East in general through Rukmini's story in the novel. Terrorism grips the town in every aspect of its day-to-day life and it seems to be the only element that unites the townsfolk living in Parbatpuri. The regular kidnappings by the militant group, MOFEH (Movement for an Exclusive Homeland) has brought the everyday lives of Parbatpuri residents to a standstill amidst tension and anxieties. Violence and terrorism has become the central topic in everyday discussion everywhere. The cruel hands of terrorism have also stalked the officers who top the bureaucratic ladder. The sudden attack on the SP and his instant death portray the engulfing presence of terrorism in the town. The DC and other top officers become helpless in such a situation as it reveals their hollow preparedness to confront terrorist activities and retaliate it.

Rukmini's life becomes topsy-turvy amidst such tension due to personal and political anxieties. She was in constant search of a new identity as an individual, but everywhere she is facing the trauma of exile. Living in a place far away from her kith and kin, she feels traumatized, alienated missing the warmth of love and care of family and home. Be it her college staff room, any social gathering or the elite Parbatpuri Planter's Club, she could not actively take part in the social gossips that take the course of popular conversation. In her constant search of an escape, Rukmini accidentally meets Manoj Mahanta, a businessman who visits the town of Parbatpuri on official tour. Mahanta turns to be a caring friend to Rukmini who gives her companionship, fun and friendship and most importantly physical intimacy. Very soon, Manoj Mahanta becomes Rukmini's paramour. One intimate moment spent with Mahanta makes Rukmini fulfil her lifelong desire of conceiving a child in her barren womb, unexpectedly, Rukmini becomes pregnant. Rukmini's relationship with Manoj Mahanta may be termed as an 'alienation' from her 'self' because a woman of her social status would not have developed such an illicit relationship in a normal situation. The emptiness Rukmini feels within compels her to fill the void created amidst personal and political tensions looming large all around the town of Parbatpuri. Consciously or unconsciously, she enters into the adulterous relationship with Manoj Mahanta.

To her great surprise, Rukmini discovers her husband Siddharth in the lap of her colleague Priyam, a so-called environmental activist who often make fuss over the "alarming

rise in the environmentally hazardous practice of using non-bio-degradable bags” (Phukan 33). In a frenzy of emotional outburst, Rukmini storms out of the DC’s bungalow and walks down to the adjoining forest and spends hours amidst pristine beauty of the mother Nature. Here, Phukan makes an attempt to bring in the concept of “spiritual eco-feminism” (Tollefsen 91). Rukmini discovers the peace of mind in the lap of nature that she was searching for so long. Her spirit becomes one with nature and she gets mental poise and inner satisfaction. Phukan describes nature to be the guiding soul to Rukmini amidst which she becomes aware of her ability to conceive a child in her womb. She decides to bear the child and give it birth against all odds. Thus Rukmini’s trauma of exile, alienation and marginalization from home amidst terror of violence, hatred, bloodshed and killings finds a rediscovery of the self in a new and bold form, to fight for the rights of a long desired motherhood.

Phukan ends the novel with the death of Siddharth and Manoj Mahanta, both shot by the militants and leaving Rukmini all alone to face the world all alone again. But, the present Rukmini is not the one the readers met earlier. She is quite bold now to accept the decisive crisis. Tears rolled out of her eyes spontaneously for both the men whom she has lost forever. In Phukan’s words:

She (Rukmini) hadn’t been aware that the tears had come. Tears for two men. One who had died, not knowing that he was going to be a father. And another who had been prepared to be a father to an unborn child, not his. Tears for the child, who would never know either of them (Phukan 349).

Death coming to any self in Parbatpuri or any other town of the North East is very common. The political tensions, terrorist activities, kidnapping, violence and bloodshed have destroyed the peace of every house who have lost their family and relatives. Many women like Rukmini have lost their husbands and become widows, many mothers have lost their children, many sisters have lost their brothers. No machinery has been able to stop this extortion so far, only some negotiations such as bilateral talk etc. has reduced it up to some extent. Nevertheless, her own traumatized self gets to rise to a new sublimation in compassion at the end. Phukan the writer intends to underline that through loss and suffering one earns a wider vision of solidarity with the deprived and traumatized selves. Phukan feels sorry for all such mishap occurring all around every day. She pays her tribute to all such deaths:

Tears for all other deaths, the ones before, and the ones to follow. Tears for the boy with hardly any down on his face whose finger had pulled the trigger...ears for the others who had been on that boat, for the ones who had died on the shores... Tears for them all, who had left home and hearth in pursuit of an ideal that had turned to ashes....And tears for all the other women who had stood over still, pale bodies (Phukan 349).

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