

Realism in Mitra Phukan's *The Collector's Wife*

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Abstract: Realism in literature is real thing happening in and around the society as depicted in literary works. In reality novel, the novelist creates a convincing environment and personae that picture his world-view and interpret his experience. Mitra Phukan's novel *The Collector's Wife* is a realistic novel for it depicts social, political life of a people in a particular juncture of its history. Ms. Phukan captures the certainties, troubles and tribulations in the life of individuals both born and to be born, through the characters like Rukmini, her husband Siddhartha, Manoj who helped her to bear child. To throw the colour of realism, Ms. Phukan uses resisters and some local words.

Keywords: realism, insurgency, terrorism, subalternity, obsessions

Realism in literature is real thing happening in and around as depicted in literary works. The writer while embodying realism in his work uses common conventions of representation. Realism implies "truth of detail, the truthful reproduction of typical characters under typical situations." (Engel 313). In reality novel we can transfer our own identity to some of the characters portrayed in the work and while continuing to live our own life we share to the full experiences of characters. In such novel the novelist creates a convincing environment and personae that picture his world-view and interpret his experiences. As Weimann says, "... literature and society are seen to be inter-related in the sense that literary values are social values and that social values, if they are to be values will in the last resort come to terms with the workings of the imagination and the telling of the stories" (57). Should we take realism as naturalism? There is a difference between the two. Naturalism is that where the outside world is only perceived. But realism is perceived as well as it is thought. As Gary Zukav has observed, "Reality is what we take to be true. What we take to be true is what we believe. What we believe is based on our perception. What we perceive depends upon what we look for. What we look for depends upon what we think. What we think depends upon what we perceive. What we perceive determines what we believe. What we take to be true is our reality" (328). So the narrated events in a narrative when taken to be true since they are objectively experienced in the real world and also believed existent in the inner world they constitute elements of social realism. This kind of narrative gives us a vicarious pleasure that is more pleasing than the pleasure derived from romance or detective novels. "The pleasure of reading a realistic novel is certainly, more mature, sophisticated and lasting than the one derived from the reading of a romantic novel. It has been compared to an intelligent person's listening to symphony of Beethoven, or sitting quietly in a great cathedral, or

conversing earnestly with a friend on an issue of real interest to them both..." (Berkley328). After situating the concept in its proper perspective let us see how the theory applies to one of the well known literary pieces of the time *The Collector's Wife*. This paper thus aims at studying elements of realism present in Mitra Phukan's *The Collector's Wife* (2005). The novel is set against the background of "the Assam Students' agitation of the 1970s and 1980s that began as a movement for self-determination, which later grew into a full blown insurgency. Kidnappings, extortion, and political instability are the order of the day. The issue of illegal migration from across the border has spread mistrust and bitterness among the peoples of the region," (blurb) and "world is pervaded by this ever-present threat of violence. The meaninglessness of it all, the complexities that divide "them" and "us" merge at a point. The novel explores all this. And the story is of Rukmini who is married to the District Collector of a small town in Assam, and teaches English literature in the local college. On the surface her life is settled and safe, ...yet each time there is an "incident" in the district, the fear and uncertainty that grips the town is reflected in her own life. The violent insurgency that grips Assam runs like a dark river through the novel and forms the backdrop." (About the book-blurb) As Tiwary says, "she dwells upon the issues of insurgency, student's agitation, illegal migration, kidnapping, extortion, murders, killings, etc." (199). Thus like post-colonial novelists Phukan dwells upon the social and political issues.

The decades 1980s and 90s saw how Assam was engulfed in acts like kidnapping, extortion, killing etc. The atmosphere thickened by the spread of rumours that too changed colour with each passing day:

We were talking of that murder at the Bagkhuli Tea Garden... "They say both the husband's and the wife's fingernails were ripped off while they were still alive, and their soles were burnt with cigarettes!...that the list of abominable tortures inflicted on the unfortunate couple, was growing rapidly after their death. In the college common room gossip this morning, there had been no mention of torture. Within a couple of days, more gruesome details would do the rounds of the town... Conflicting accounts had put the sums variously at fifty, sixty, and seventy lakhs. One rumour had it that the figure was a neat one crore. (57-58)

In such somber atmosphere looting, killing, exchange of fire take place. That which generally happens in an insurgency affected area also happened in Assam during the time. Every week, reports of fresh incidents of extortion or looting, or of gunning down unarmed citizenry, appeared in the papers. "One or the other of the many terrorists, or pseudo-terrorist outfits that the district teemed with, unashamedly claimed the "credit" for these incidents within a few days (81). Under such circumstances violent activities on the streets creates a fear psychosis among the people. Freedom is stifled, people look at friends as foes fear to speak the truth, withdraw themselves, and live in an atmosphere of mistrust, suspicious of one another as happens in insurgency infested land. And this too happened in Assam of 1980s and 90s.

...The streets of Parbatpuri were almost empty, even though it was just past ten o'clock. These days people shut themselves indoors by eight every evening. Till a decade or so ago, Parbatpuri had slept with windows wide open; often doors were left carelessly unlocked throughout the night....A knock on the door at night caused panic, even if it turned to be a neighbour.... For, these days, who knew what would follow the knock? Gunshots, extortions, kidnappings, or perhaps a request for shelter by armed men who had the police hot on their heels. (64)

Human rights violation is common during the days of insurgency. Both sides, the state and the insurgency groups, resort to fire exchange and kill others indiscriminately and get killed. This results in cascading effect; state machinery goes on combing the area after the incident violating human rights and the insurgents call for bandhs, blackouts etc. in protest of it. This reality has been caught by the novelist in a vivid manner.

Rukmini remembered with relief that blackout call that had been given by MOFEH. It had become quite a popular means of protest in Parbatpuri lately. What was the protest about this time? Rukmini couldn't remember. Probably something to do with the gunning down of two extremists by the army last week. And people responded to the call not because they grieved for the dead, but because the living had guns. (145)

In these highly charged situations public are gripped in fear, even government servants fail in their duty as fear psychosis grips them. This is grimly reminded in the narrative.

Either the Electricity Board sympathized with MOFEH's goals, or they had buckled under MOFEH's threats. Probably the latter, for who wanted a bullet in one's back? (145)

In every such movement immediate victims are women and children. Women lose their husbands, children their fathers and both lose their bread earners. Not less are affected the students that ultimately push back the society to some years. Classes are not held regularly, students fail to attentive and frequent bandhs and strikes vitiate educational atmosphere. This also happened in Assam when students lost one precious year and many left their studies due to volatile social situation. Phukan has captured this situation vividly.

But she (Rukmini) knew that if she had been in their (students') place she would not have had the mental energy to shift gears and sit down to Chaucer and Hardy at the end of a day spent in organizing agitations and demonstrations. There was no link, none whatever, between the lives that they led and the prescribed syllabus. (156)

Movements of such kind fail to distinguish what is good and what is bad. Sometimes innocents, honest and conscious people, people widely respected become victims to time. Such a situation has been recreated in the novel when the narrator recounts an incident where a Gandhian was killed.

Fleetingly, she remembered the gunning down of a well-known social worker, an elderly Gandhian, who had been vocal in his contempt for MOFEH and its methods. He had been shot down on a street near his

house at eleven in the morning just as he was returning from the market. (170)

Insurgency affects rights to freedom. Freedom of Press is severely restricted. State power puts pressure on the press not to publish such things that may boost the moral of insurgents and insurgents too warn presspersons not to write such things that may demoralize their cadre and wean away mass from them. As a result, facts are suppressed or twisted, hearsay is given prominence. This reality is reflected in the novel when the narrative reads:

Careful to protect themselves from libel cases by using “apparently”, “alleged” and “it is said that,” the papers were full of descriptions of how Deuri was involved in a gun-running operation on the side for MOFEH under cover of his official status. (Ibid.)

This kind of photographic realism found in the novel helps one to read the time and circumstances of the work, to read it in the light of New Historicism because New Historicism is based on the assumption that a literary work is the product of the time, place and circumstances of its composition. Phukan is not content depicting only social realism because it cannot delve into the inner recess of a character. It is also not the aim of the writer only to chronicle social and political developments of the time because, she knows, a novel can last long only when the reader discovers him/herself in its characters. So she adopts the technique of psychological realism to portray her protagonist. This method brings out existential dilemma of the protagonist and makes her dear to us. Rukmini's relationship with Manoj was fraught with difficulties. She was aware of her negative role in her external and internal worlds. Even though Manoj's companionship gives her immense pleasure yet, simultaneously, a part of her mind goes on saying, “...going out with a strange man... what will Siddharth say” (101) and later she wonders, “if she would be able to face Siddharth” (159). No doubt, she gets pleasure from Manoj, their idioms are common yet she is tossed between her wifely duty towards Siddharth and emotional attachment to Manoj. At a critical moment in the narrative she mused: “His feelings seemed to have atrophied. Perhaps it was the nature of his work that had deadened his emotions and passions. After all, who could not be affected by having to deal with...deep seated disquiet all around? It was self-preservation, perhaps, which had caused him to grow a protective shell around himself, a shell which now excluded even her.” (202). This double consciousness makes Rukmini a real-like character for in her we see tussle between individual desire and social values.

Phukan uses such language that evokes an atmosphere felt real-like. She renders a regional flavour to her work by using chaste Assamese words like *Baideoo*, *mekhalasador*, *phulam gamosa*, *japi* etc. Again, when the narration shifts to tea-garden areas we notice the change in register. Words like *bastivallahs*, *gorey log* etc. evoke local atmosphere. The above analysis proves my earlier point that Mitra Phukan is a socially conscious artist who has been able to capture the happenings of her time and portray it artistically in her work. The eternal subalternity of women has been proved by the obsessions and sufferings of Rukmini. Though the

steps taken by her may not be appreciated by the male dominant society, yet they are bold and experimental and give enough strength to her character.

References :

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This COSMOS

- Rosaline Jamir

The Sol, his dazzle knows
Yet shy, at twilight
For the gleam of,
The scaling, silvery Moon
The jungle wild lie a-wait
Deep the foggy forests,
Comrades, in food and fight
In habitats restrained.
The titchy bug, befriends
The mighty elephant
Picking on tetchy ones
Aloft the lofty back

That birdie, a- flap
A grain tossed in air
Chirps, knowing a meal
The donor, an unknown hand
The bullocks a-reined, rotate
For, Man's granary to brim
The best of manna,
Elixir, next to mamma's
Those udders, they ooze.
The scavengers Crow, and Jackal
Rush-pick to clean
The Eco- friendly game
They referee.

Terrifying tsunamis at birth
Upheaval, land and water
For fertility or futility
Needless; shakes no Man.

Man, the multi-sense being
With tastes of dependence
A life on Nature's breast
Alive in sin, sloth and slay;
Such as,
The over-ground befriends
The underground
And vice-versa
Harbouring no good
Sensibilities amiss

Man, in command
Empowered....
Eden to reign and rhyme
Now, away, away for him
For those beneath him
Rule the roost and realm
This Cosmos!
Why this, de- Cosmos!
Man, he disarrayed so.

