



THE PARADOXES OF VOICING AND SILENCING: RE-READING MITRA PHUKAN'S THE COLLECTOR'S WIFE FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF CROSSING CLAUSTROPHOBIC BOUNDARIES, CONFINEMENT AND CONTROL

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ABSTRACT

North-east has faced political tensions prevalent in various parts of the enclosed marginalized land. The characters in The Collector's Wife feel entrapped and a recurrent plot device of confinement (both physical and psychological) is interwoven through the protagonist, Rukmini's life. In Northeast, expression of 'voicing' and 'silencing' has undergone major paradoxical positioning because of the politics of language and situation. This paper shall reflect on how Phukan tries to portray Parbatpuri as a place of entrapment, and how the characters are silenced under various circumstances. Even when they try to voice out their problems, they are controlled and confined under the political situation. From the confined and claustrophobic spaces, how the characters try to voice themselves and try to cross the social, political boundaries of society, shall be studied in this paper.

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“My love, what shall I do?

I am thinking how I may lose you to war, and big issues
more important than me...

And they are talking about escape, About liberty, men and guns, Ah! The urgency for survival.

But what will they do

Not knowing the sorrow of women.”

-The Sorrow of Women, Mamang Dai.

The recurrent plot device of crossing claustrophobic boundaries that confine the characters, leaving them perplexed whether to voice out their issues or to remain silent (both physical and psychological, as means of establishing control through power equations) are explored within the novel *The Collector's Wife*. The protagonist, Rukmini primarily views herself in relation to others. Her acts of confinement, her compromising and tolerant nature become self-destructive as Siddharth silences her role as a wife; her mother-in-law silences her role as a woman. On the contrary, her lover (with whom she has had an extra-marital affair) tries to make Rukmini feel strong. This finally pushes her out of the societal boundaries- to voice out, to realize her value, to feel the importance of her desire and helps her transgress the patriarchal boundaries. Throughout the novel, Rukmini feels confined among all the relationships and confesses that “she had probably spent too many years in the claustrophobic confines of her immediate circle” (Phukan, 2005, p. 134). Whenever she tried to take control of situations, she found herself in more entangled ones. Besides this, the novel also reflects upon the historic movements once prevalent in Assam. The protests of All Assam Students Union which started in 1979 and officially ended on 15th August 1985 demands a check on immigration, especially from Bangladesh and Nepal. The novel portrays how Parbatpuri was confined and the lives of the people were controlled by the terrorists, silencing their normal lifestyle. The paper shall focus on the issues related to the collector's wife- whose life was ‘silenced’ by the situation, by her husband, by her relatives, by her friends and colleagues, and above all by herself; but the question remains unresolved till the end of the novel- was she ‘silencing’ herself or she was ‘being silenced’.

Based on the Silencing the Self theory, Jack and Dill comments (1992) how a group of women

“began to silence or suppress certain thoughts, feelings, and actions that they thought would contradict their partner's wishes. They did so to avoid conflict, to maintain a relationship, and/or to ensure their psychological or physical safety. They described how silencing their voices led to a loss

of self and a sense of being lost in their lives. They also conveyed their shame, desperation, and anger over feelings of entrapment and self-betrayal” (Jack, 2021) and feels that even though this process

“feels personal to each woman, it is in fact deeply cultural. A male-centered world tells women who they are or who they should be, especially in intimate relationships. Self-silencing is prescribed by norms, values, and images dictating what women are “supposed” to be like: pleasing, unselfish, loving” (Jack, 2021).

These are part of socialisation. The society creates spaces for women that tries to define the role of women and they are always expected to remain silent. Through centuries women have developed their own ways of protesting, as reflected in the novel. The characters, especially Rukmini is used as a medium by Phukan to challenge the patriarchal matrix that always try to control the female. Phukan tries to initiate a discussion on voicing and silencing surrounding around Parbatpuri, the geographical space that breeds political tension. ‘Silencing’ someone signifies that she has lost the power to ‘voice out’ herself whereas ‘being silenced’ can be a matter of choice. When one chooses to remain ‘silent’, she necessarily does not want to remain quiet. Maybe she chooses ‘being silent’ to be a process of ‘voicing’ out her choice of not responding to the external pressure. She chooses not to succumb to what others want her to do. She chooses to remain silent because for her this is a medium of resistance and protest. Her silence is her act of voicing that she will speak only when she chooses to and she wants to speak for herself, at her desire, when she feels the right time to speak against the situation.

Through the novel, Phukan voices out the most sensitive issues surrounding terrorism, immigration, agitation, political turmoil, etc. Khammoun Phukan claims that during the times of political insurgencies, there are generally two types of patriotism found lurking among the people of the state. One who feels that they should not remain silent and should voice out to protect their homeland, like the students of DS College; and others who boast of their political activities but in reality, does nothing like the teacher Arnob Chakravarty. Phukan highlights throughout the novel, how the Bengali Arnob Chakravarty who never did anything constructive for the land but at the same time, was never silent to brag about himself; was just an activist wearing the mask of a false nationalist. Without using any political rhetoric, the writer takes up the issues of immigration (of the Bengalis inside Assam) as a sword, voicing strongly to create a space for regional identity. This is one of the reasons why Bondona, Rukmini’s student says,

“My mother knows what I am doing- running around organizing processions, moving out on the streets at all hours of the day and night, spending so much time with men who are not related, she knows that this will jeopardize my chances in the marriage market, probably quite irrevocably. But she supports what I do. So does my father.” (Phukan, 2005, p. 181) The spiral of silencing theory reflects how an individual’s public reaction is directly proportional to the popular opinion. Glynn (1955) claims that an individual always tries to estimate the majority and minority opinion, then she tries to socially interact with everyone as it is an inherent nature of an individual to blend with the people of the society, then she puts her opinion in public, but if she feels that a minority opinion might isolate her then she becomes silent so that she does not have to take a side. She is not interested to show that she is unsupportive towards the majority opinion neither would she prefer voicing for the minority opinion in fear of getting sidelined by the majoritarian group. Thus, when getting silenced she keeps going down the spiral, that is, more and more inside the shell. This is exactly what has happened with Rukmini and the other characters inside the text. Interestingly, the issues of homeland, identity, hostland and the feeling of belongingness were no doubt critical but the reader hardly finds any Bengali character inside the novel from a contrapuntal view. Just as the readers find no African’s voice inside Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, though the story was centred on them; similarly, the reader finds the same in *The Collector’s Wife*. No immigrant’s voice is heard, though one major issue inside the text was to establish a society without the immigrants being part of Assam; and though one Bengali representative is found, he is portrayed as being shrewd, cunning and an opportunist. Yet, there is another type of patriot- people like Animesh Dutta who silently reports everything to the common mass under disguise. Still, Animesh Dutta is criticized and marginalized everyday by his colleagues in the common staffroom but again, ironically the same colleague praises his disguised identity. Under the pen name Mukul Madhav of ‘Amar Desh’, Animesh Dutt like an ethically responsible reporter reports only facts and figures “without using masala”. This responsible man proves to be a responsible friend too, when he comes to Rukmini towards the end of the novel and reveals her- “It’s your husband. Mr Bezboruah. He was shot.” (Phukan, 2005, p. 332)

The loyal friend, on the other hand, was moving around in the city with a masked identity. Revealing his real identity would not let him voice out strongly against the political scenario of Parbatpuri and thus he preferred to keep his real identity under veil. Parbatpuri seemed to be a claustrophobic place, a place of confinement where everyone is silenced.

Phukan, like an omniscient narrator, notices how the nature of Parbatpuri “had changed dramatically” (Phukan, 2005, p. 18) since the past two decades. She further adds that it “was now an uneasy mix of colonial charm and unplanned, chaotic development”. Even, after coming to Parbatpuri, Rukmini’s marital life changed dramatically. Rukmini always felt confined within her room, her house, and her marital life. She often begged several times for the windows to remain open through which she could enjoy the scenic beauty of Parbatpuri. The open window, as a metaphor, is the only escape away from her married, confined, and powerless life that suppresses her voice, a patriarchal universal struggle for women to break free from the so-called societal expectations. Like the Victorian lady in Alfred Tennyson’s *The Lady of Shalott* (1832), Rukmini too would dream to move out from the confinements of the “claustrophobic” space. Rukmini always felt powerless inside her married life and was always found disturbed by the fact that “she had been unable to fulfil her part of a social contract” (Phukan, 2005, p. 54). Here “social contract” are the norms of a patriarchal society where “childless women- barren women and widows” aren’t expected to attend “auspicious occasions” (Phukan, 2005, p. 42); a handsome civil servant, the only son of parents is considered to be an eligible bachelor in the “marriage market” (Phukan, 2005, p. 53); the woman is subjected to ogling when she goes to the market to buy a tyre and the people around makes her feel that there is a “sharp divide between the women’s domain and the men’s”; probably these are the reason why the mother-in-law does not hesitate to insist her daughter-in-law to wear an amulet which she got from the Mahamaya temple believing Goddess Mahamaya to grant “all kinds of wishes. Especially babies” (Phukan, 2005, p. 75). The superstitious belief system of people like Renu Bezboruah is made fun of and in Arun Kolatkar’s poem, the poet voices out about how the

ignorant devotees become prey to the socially constructed religious belief. In *Yeshwant Rao*, Kolatkar hysterically comments that the “Gods who put a child inside your wife” are too “symmetrical” and “theatrical”. Kolatkar’s lines are quite ironic for the barren woman Rukmini and the mother-in-law Renu Bezboruah.

Perhaps it is because of this society, for which Mukul Madhav confesses,

“I suppose, in the beginning, I used pseudonym because I was a coward. Writing under an assumed name meant I could hide behind the shield that it afforded. And then I wanted to

keep my college-lecturer identity separate from my ‘investigative reporter’ one” (Phukan, 2005, p. 249).

It is this society who silences Animesh Dutta and silently forces him to remain under the masked identity of Mukul Madhav. Mukul Madhav, who had to voice himself because he has visited the MOFEH training camps and felt their pain and suffering too. He feels how the junior recruits were exploited by the top leaders who enjoyed an

“unimaginable luxury in faraway cities, only communicating with the rank and file through messages brought in by hand. He talked of idealism, of disillusionment, of broken promises, of compromises, of how gradually, a lofty vision slowly crumbled till what remained in the ruins was a travesty silvered over with a thin veneer of patriotism” (Phukan, 2005, p. 250).

He might be expressive in his writings but when people used to make fun of him, he always preferred to remain silent. The silence of “patriotism” is yet oxymoronic in nature as the feelings are very regional- the feelings of protecting the region from the hands of immigrants, not because they are inhuman by nature, but only because they want to secure their culture, heritage, identity, aesthetics, and values. The regional issues which were never addressed by those top leaders made the people form a secretive group to protect the identity of their land. Perhaps, these were the issues which got reflected through the character Mukul Madhav who was sympathetic towards the trainers as they were made to stay in camps where “the leech and snake infested surroundings that turned to bog and marsh when it rained, the mindset of the young members, their dreams, the exploitation of the junior recruits by the top leaders” (Phukan, 2005, p. 250). Those trainers whose “dreams” were silenced- each time they tried to voice out their patriotic feelings, but were confined and controlled by the top leaders who constantly exploited them.

Under such a political situation, the relationships were suffering inside the “claustrophobic” Parbatpuri. Perhaps the hints of these sufferings were provided by Phukan from the very beginning of the novel. In chapter 1, when Rukmini prepares herself to attend a marriage ceremony without Siddharth’s accompany; instead of reading “Rita weds Mohan”, she reads “Rita weds Moron”, as the tuberoses used for decorating the names of the wedding couple have “fallen slightly ashew” (Phukan, 2005, p. 2). Rukmini’s marital relationship seemed to have been echoing the silence of her own confined relationship which she was silently visualizing as a transferred epithet through the word “moron”. Though they were husband and

wife according to the “social contract” but Rukmini many a time claims that the charm of a happy couple was missing in their marital life. Again and again, in the novel, Rukmini shows how deeply frustrated and emotionally detached she felt from this relationship. This is

envisioned through the descriptions of the marriage which is having fairy- “lights, huge neon bulbs, and sparkling chandeliers glittered everywhere, bravely bright in the face of the mighty roar of the generators that surrounded the area. The air was thick with diesel fumes that the noisy machines spewed out in great black clouds” (Phukan, 2005, p. 3). And even on the happy occasion, the people are found gossiping about kidnapping cases, abduction issues, riots, etc. which is no less than “black clouds”, for the political situation of Parbatpuri that was becoming worse day by day. These issues are never addressed and often silenced by the government. Phukan thus tries to throw light on the political unrest of Parbatpuri through the minor characters too, while they are found busy gossiping and spreading rumours that also reveals the deep-seated societal issues. Many times, in the text, the tensions prevailing in Parbatpuri have been expressed through the dichotomy of colours by Phukan where the brighter colours against the darker ones represent the conflict and unrest and the novelist successfully expresses those through the English guest lecturer, Rukmini.

Rukmini almost always in the novel confesses to have been feeling confined and trapped under the stereotypical notion that a woman, “whose husband could more than afford to support her, teaching in a college was still perceived in many circles in Parbatpuri as a hobby to be indulged in, till she reached the acme of her career as wife, and became a mother” (Phukan, 2005, p. 17). She ironically observes that the Parbatpuri below the hills has acculturated two different lifestyles. The hill-top of Parbatpuri was well-administered and “symbolically as well as literally, high above the ‘native’ masses below” which even after fifty years of independence, ironically, “had spread itself out in all directions except one upwards” (Phukan, 2005, p. 18). Phukan even observes the paradoxical human behavioural nature where,

“[s]oft-spoken, old-style townspeople who liked to be called ‘cultured’ had, perforce, to rub shoulders with boisterous, energetic people whom they viewed as upstarts, people who had an “If you have it, flaunt it” attitude to their newly- acquired money. Even while the older citizens talked of the deterioration of values and morals, they looked, somewhat wistfully, at the flashy Esteems and zippy Zens of the ‘Other Class’, while they themselves drove around in battered Fiats or Ambassadors.” (Phukan, 2005, p. 18)

Unlike the others, Rukmini never enjoyed this geographical aloofness which created the cultural gap. Like a complaining wife, she irritatingly shares how she finds it difficult to move down the hillock as she must depend on the cars for the trip up and down, rickshaws and autos could never climb up, vendors and hawkers selling fresh food items were never found on the hill-top, etc. But our romantic Rukmini like Tennyson's Lady of Shalott was never tired "of gazing at the tiny boats that floated past" (Phukan, 2005, p. 19) but she mysteriously observes that there "was something forbidden about these hills" (Phukan, 2005, p. 20). For belongingness to proper Parbatpuri, the omniscient narrator observes that-

"Parbatpuri proper began as soon as the hill ended. The town's cremation ground stood beside the road as it straightened out. The people of Parbatpuri had, decades ago, subtly had revenge on their colonial masters by making sure that the smoke from their funeral pyres rose up in the direction of the DC's house." (Phukan, 2005, p. 21)

The entrapment always made a mode of escape through the use of letters by different characters. Whenever the characters were suffering, letters provided an escape root for expressing their feelings, especially for Rukmini. When she felt sad, thinking about her parents staying far away from her, on the Caribbean island, letters would be at her refuge to help her communicate with her dearest ones. After Siddharth and Rukmini had their revelation about their "mutual infidelities", Siddharth used to write notes to her, for comfortable communication. As comic relief, towards the end of the novel, when a letter was getting circulated in the staffroom, where the Chowkidar, Ram Singh writes that due to "my pregnancy", he wants to leave as "the infant will be out anytime" (Phukan, 2005, p. 294), everyone is found mocking the poor watchman. It was only Rukmini, the English teacher who was sympathetic towards Ram Singh and avoided the humorous jokes rather distastefully. Again, the readers find that Rukmini is quite sensitive towards the downtrodden. The third last chapter made the most important revelation in the life of Rukmini. A letter brought by Anil from Manoj- the news of Manoj's whereabouts, the condition in which he was trapped in, the messages for his dear ones to be passed by Rukmini; made the protagonist feel at least relieved that her lover and the father of her child is still alive. Letters in the novel have always, thus, been found providing space for breathing; out of the confined situation, in which the characters were suffering inside the novel. The paradoxical nature of Parbatpuri resonates through Rukmini's professional life too. To avoid the "theatrical words" (Phukan, 2005, p. 23) of her colleagues, she would prefer to knit or to embroider clothes but much to her annoyance, colleagues like Duara would not hesitate to break off her silence bypassing

stereotypical pinching comments, “Ah, Mrs Bezboruah, how nice to see you putting your housewifely skills to use. Mere men like us can only bow ourheads in shame before ladies such as you” (Phukan, 2005, p. 23). It is only colleagues like Priyam whom Rukmini’s eyes would hover for. Rukmini was always very polite with all her colleagues and always avoided

“underlying friction between the Science and Humanities faculties. This was in addition to the bickering and back- stabbing that went on routinely. And even among the Humanities faculty, the teachers of some departments knew, without even having to say it, that they were superior to the others. Naturally, the ‘others’ didn’t take too kindly to this, and tries to get their own back by indulging in a crude power play of their own. Rukmini found it too mentally exhausting to follow all the thrusts and parries that took place around the common room table.” (Phukan, 2005, p. 24) Rukmini also had colleagues like Mr.Chakravarty who would draw the attention of others for remaining busy and would boast off for having being engaged in works related to “*Desh sewa*” (Phukan, 2005, p. 24). It is people like Arnob Chakravarty who is always busy discussing political issues, arranging for protests, etc. which led to the formation of an organization named- the Forum for Citizen’s Rights in a Democracy, to be in the town’s newspaper almost every day. On the contrary is Mukul Madhav who wrote the truth and who accepted to Rukmini that it is due to society’s pressure that he had to keep his identity hidden. The “‘convent educated’ types” (Phukan, 2005, p. 249) are always preferred over First Class Masters Degree (of Animesh Dutta) which “in the eyes of the Department, worth less than Arnob Chakravarty’s lowish second. All because of my accent” (Phukan, 2005, p. 249). Even a sound reporter like Animesh Dutta had to hide “behind the shield” (Phukan, 2005, p. 249) because he was confined within the false stereotypes of society. This is the reason which forced Animesh Dutta to remain silent and to voice out through Mukul Madhav, who knew that Parbatpuri people are interested in rumour-mongering facts rather than “unvarnished” truth. Animesh, finally, while revealing his real identity, narrated to Rukmini about his visits to the MOFEH training camps. Through their conversation, Phukan reflects upon the role of newspaper in the contemporary situation- how the notion of reality is always challenged; as the fact undergoes multiple narrations through characters like Mr.Charavarty, the content of newspapers are based on false notions weaved by people like Mr.Chakravarty, whereas true journalists had to work veiled, to reach out to the greater audience. All the characters seem to be confined mentally and psychologically, so that, the one confined, is always under control.

Rukmini even felt confined to her stamped identity- to be the DC'S wife. Whenever in Parbatpuri, she had to be aware and conscious of her image and position as a DC'S wife. Her identity as Rukmini was always under control and silenced. Even the title of the novel did not provide space for her name. When attacked in Parbatpuri, everyone, including the newspaper, voiced out that DC's wife is one of the victims of a riot. Perhaps this is one reason which made critics compare Rukmini with Bankimchandra's *Rajmohan's Wife* protagonist, Matangini; who like Rukmini was confined under the identity of her husband. Might be there is the parallelism of Rukmini with many feministic protagonists who fought for women empowerment, but I feel this endeavour of the critics, confines our Rukmini. She definitely finds herself confined within stereotypical gender roles but Rukmini was transgressing the boundaries of all the gender roles and gave vent to all her desires whenever she felt necessary, even at the sake of her marriage and society. She was rather found to have been becoming stronger like Elizabeth of Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. Even her husband was found to be compassionate, towards his wife who was carrying another man's child inside his wife. Thus, if one would read the text from a feministic point of view; Rukmini, Bondona, Priyam Deka, Siddharth, Manoj and many others were found very much supportive towards providing a voice for the females and are never found getting subjugated. Hence, my preference shall not be to read the text from a feministic perspective alone. As Ibsen pointed out in many interviews that Nora in *Doll's House* was not a feministic character but rather a humanistic character, the same applies in the case of the protagonist Rukmini. This act in the hands of the scholars would broaden the horizon of literature and would not confine the humanistic characters like Rukmini to voice out for themselves, both, in the imaginary world and reality.

Rukmini knew that even a strong male character like Animesh Dutta undergoes victimization of society. Thus, it is not the stereotypical gender roles but rather the narrow mindedness of the society that traps both men and women, irrespective of gender biases which need to be silenced and controlled, to make characters like Rukmini stand straight as an independent character. Rukmini in that respect is perhaps silenced by a male character (Siddharth) but again another male character (Manoj) provides space for Rukmini to make her enjoy her freedom. Again, though Siddharth never gave time to Rukmini, he was never found controlling Rukmini in the novel but paradoxically that is sheer ignorance of his responsibilities towards his wife. Only later in the novel, she was allowed her space and towards the end of the novel, Siddharth was the one who tried to console Rukmini, made her accept the unborn child and

supported her not to think of abortion. When Siddharth realized that he should have been guilty of his infidelity, he took proper care of his wife. Though he disowned Priyam Deka (another female), for his wife, he did not leave Priyam all of a sudden. Though infidelity towards his wife is not morally justified, still, he made sure that Priyam is satisfied with his decision and he communicated the last whereabouts about Priyam to his wife too. Even before he came to know about his infertility, he did respectfully accept Rukmini with Manoj's child inside his wife's womb. On the other hand, though Rukmini had undergone the same "mutual infidelities" (Phukan, 2005, p. 288), still she was dwindling between Manoj and Siddharth. Thus, the readers never found the male characters to be exploiting the females in the text. Neither did the minor male characters ever was found exploiting any female characters in the novel. It was instead all the female characters, found subjecting each other and themselves to the stereotypical gender roles even though they were much educated. After Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics*, the world provided enough space in the Western countries for women empowerment. The wave got spread all over the world and if the females subjugate themselves, it is not the failure of a feministic voice or feminism. Feminism stands for equal rights for the women at par with the males and not to rise above each other. Unlike the western countries, in North- east India, females have always been given enough space and respect as compared with the rest of the nation (Mahanta and Nayak). It is rather an individual failure on human grounds where a female even though lives in an educated society, enjoys the facilities of being literate, still, prefers to exercise the narrow-minded stereotypical notions. Educated women like Nandini Deuri should not wait for a mishap to happen in her life to realize the importance of living their dreams. The characters were instead subjugated, confined, and controlled by various political scenarios prevalent inside Parbatpuri. This control is applied primarily by Phukan through the characters who operate through the entrapment of society and conventions, entrapment of one character by the will of another. It is perhaps this entrapment that the closed Parbatpuri signifies some form of confinement: confinement of relationships, confinement through politics, confined within gender roles, etc.

It is this confinement that made Rukmini run away from her house into the jungle when she discovered her husband's extra-marital affair with her own colleague Priyam Deka. She wondered that she should have felt a sense of

"...anger, betrayal, jealousy...? Instead, what she had felt, mostly, had been compassion, surprise and regret. Compassion for Siddharth, surprise that she hadn't tumbled on to the affair

earlier, and regret that she had caught on to it in such definite manner, which left no space for graceful half-lies or face-saving half-truths” (Phukan, 2005, p. 275).

Oscillating between the “half-lies” and “half-truths”, just like her oscillating feeling for Siddharth and Manoj; she realized that even she had to have a sense of guilt carrying “another man’s child”. Having caught her husband with her colleague inside her unlocked bedroom made her introspect that even she “too, could be civilized about” (Phukan, 2005, p. 275) knocking at the room before she stepped inside the bedroom. This reverberates the emptiness of their relationship, the fakeness of the civilized people staying above the hill-top of Parbatpuri. But again, in the next moment, she was perhaps wondering why at all being Siddharth’s wife, she would think of knocking and entering! She kept reiterating and re- thinking that it was her bedroom, her bed, her house! Under the cloud of dismal, she wondered, as for how “long had it been going on, this relationship- this *affair*- between Siddharth and Priyam? Priyam! Of all people! Did the others know? Obviously, the household help had been dismissed for the afternoon... surely they knew what was going on.” (Phukan, 2005, p. 259) Still, she felt cheated and though she got back what she “had done what Siddharth had” but the hurt wife’s ego kept lurking inside her and she felt assertive that like Siddharth she had not “brought Manoj into her bedroom and made love right there on the marital bed, right there under the noses of Biswanath and the houseboys” (Phukan, 2005, p. 260). She kept feeling cheated and her ego made her feel imprisoned under false relationships. The confining spaces of her life become so restrictive that she felt that even her own body became a prison to her, and in search of freedom from her body, her life, her marriage, and everything that she feels is confining her- she thinks to end her life.

Rukmini, like Cathy of *Wuthering Heights*, finds it very difficult to synthesize the fragments of her life as she finds that the situation around her is beyond her control and she is unable to accept that. Running away from the microcosmic world, she was enjoying the silence of the pastoral macrocosmic world, which was perhaps an abode, a shelter for the MOFEH activists and unknowingly she enters into the terrorist activists’ space. Here too lies an irony and paradoxically, the seemingly macroscopic world for Rukmini is actually a space of illegal activity. Away from the hustles of the city where hardly any sunshine penetrates, Rukmini was enjoying the greenery, the birdsongs which sounded like opera, the narrow paths, and the butterflies around her. The little girl in Rukmini was completely engrossed like Wordsworth’s *The Solitary Reaper*, when she jumped with a familiar voice, calling her Baideo. It was Anil, the driver who followed her as she was stepping inside the forest (unaware of the surroundings). It was this Anil, who

understands that it was an “obvious agitation” (Phukan, 2005, p. 271) through which Rukmini was going through. Again, it is this Anil who confesses to Rukmini that he is an active MOFEH activist. Later, it is this Anil through whom Rukmini gets the information of Manoj Mahanta (her lover and the father of the child, she was carrying inside her womb). It is this Anil who silences the agitated wife’s wrath, brings her out of the confinement of her married life and makes her voice strongly against Siddharth. Quoting Jean Baker Miller, James S.Crouse observes that women have the ability to build and to develop attachment towards others and their sense of self finds accomplishment when they feel satisfied with maintaining affiliations and relationships and this nature of women is a part of their gender role. Perhaps Miller’s observation fits correct for our protagonist Rukmini too. She tries to secure a place for herself within the web of relationships (even she establishes a friendly relationship with Anil the MOFEH activist, who is her assigned driver) and particularly with Manoj for whom she has the strongest attachment. Throughout the novel, the more she tried to have control over her desires and tried to remain attached to Siddharth, the more she gets confined inside the entangled relationship. Like Hardy’s heroines who are always subjected to Immanent Will, our Rukmini is subjected to more sufferings.

The spaces which Rukmini enjoys are very secretive in nature always. Away from the tensions of city life, Rukmini agrees to go for a ride with Manoj Mahanta. They create a space for themselves, away from the control of Siddharth, which is a mile away from Parbatpuri. The freedom they find there creates a strong bond between the two and for the first time in the novel, the readers find Rukmini being very bold which is in sharp contrast to the Rukmini, the readers find inside Parbatpuri. Away from Parbatpuri, she feels like a free bird and soaring high in the sky, taking the plight of her desires, she gives voice to her wishes and develops such strong relation with Manoj that makes her the mother of Manoj’s child. The child, Bezboruah family was longing for! The amulet given by her mother-in-law did work but ironically, it was not Renu’s son, Siddhu (Siddharth) who made Rukmini come out of the confinement of her barrenness. Instead, the same incident proved Siddharth being incapable to make his woman fertile. Still, Rukmini had to remain silent about her child’s real father’s identity. While announcing the Bezboruah family about her motherhood journey, she failed to disclose Manoj as the real father of her child. To keep Renu happy, both Rukmini and Siddharth were confined under circumstances and preferred to remain silent. Rukmini, at this stage, was drawing parallelism between her situation and

Maya’s, the ex-wife of Manoj. She relates to Maya not as a strong woman but as a co-sharer of her grief-stricken situation. Though Rukmini could never have had an opportunity to establish her

career she always admired women who could stand for their dreams. Rukmini was happy for Maya, who met with a failed marriage, got re-married and successfully ran her own business. Secretly, even though Rukmini never liked to attend the bureaucratic wife's get-together parties and kitty parties, still she had a secret admiration for Nandini Deuri, who was always an efficient homemaker. After the incident (where Nandini's husband, an able police officer was shot in front of his family, in an open restaurant) Nandini decided to voice out her entrepreneurial skills. Though Nandini always nurtured the dream to open a cake parlour, she could never chase behind her dreams which were silently made dormant under her husband's service days as a police officer's wife. It is only after her husband's death that she gave vent to her inner wishes and crossing all the hurdles she concluded that "every woman, at some point in her life, is faced with having to make decisions of this kind. As for me- Deuri's death thrust the decision on me" (Phukan, 2005, p. 301) which left Rukmini to wonder whether being Hrishikesh Deuri's wife made Nandini regret after so many years of married life. It is through these asides that the readers are made to feel that Rukmini tried to relate herself with all the women who had to face some failed married life, suppressing their dreams, desires and wishes. Ironically, like the silent Nandini Deuri, Rukmini was also weaving tales of false dreams in front of society. Rukmini, who was often questioned about her barrenness in public, is found by the readers, to have been bragging about her pregnancy to Nandini. The news of pregnancy made her guilty in front of Renu, on the contrary, made Rukmini proud in front of Nandini. Thus, Rukmini was always dwelling in between paradoxes. Rukmini always feels confined when she tries to relate herself with the other woman and in the web of relationship, she always ends silencing herself. Thus, she is never silenced but chooses to 'be silent' from the beginning of the novel.

Under such confined situations, all the characters voiced out, helping each other to come out of the dualities of life. Anil brought a letter of Manoj to Rukmini, informing her about his confinement under the MOFEHs. Anil, though he was confined under the norm that he cannot share any information about the MOFEH, still, risking his own life, he brought the letter written by Manoj addressing Rukmini. Again, as Anil was made a messenger to pass a message, Rukmini also was made a medium of passing a message to Manoj's parents- to comfort them and to make them accept the reality (that Manoj may not be with them forever). Manoj also made a last request to convey his gratitude towards Maya. These messages play a vital role as the characters finds a way to voice out for themselves and finds a medium to express their feelings; breaking through all kinds of confinements. Ironically, Siddharth, who is guilty of getting engaged to Priyam, tries

hard to find Manoj. He ardently tries to compensate for his actions by searching for Manoj and tries to unite his wife with Manoj. It is Siddharth's care towards Rukmini which made her always feel a sense of attachment towards her husband. She might have been found wondering that it was easy "enough to reach across the physical distance between the beds and wake him, but the emotional distance that had grown between them over the years was so great" (Phukan, 2005, p. 325) that they could never cross the distance. Immediately the wife's conscience would lurk her from within,

"But if Manoj had been here, would things have been all that different? Would she run to him? Would she have talked to him about the darkening of her nipples, the thickening of her waistlines, the return of her appetite, the changes in her skin? Probably not. But she would certainly have told him that it was his child within her. That fact would have altered the colour of his life, though not its circumstances. Not yet." (Phukan, 2005, p. 325)

She always felt controlled by Siddharth, both emotionally and physically, thus confining her inside her married life.

It was only when she was with Manoj that she did not feel confined. Manoj never tried to control her. This is perhaps because even Manoj felt confined, within his relationship and career. It was Manoj's job, for which he could never give his time to Maya thus resulting in the end of their married life. Nor was he satisfied with his job! Rukmini always used to find a kind of solace in comparing Manoj to Siddharth. She felt Manoj's job as a sales executive to be a better job than holding the position of a collector. A collector, for her, never gets time to share with their family members. Ironically, Maya felt the same for Manoj. Rukmini remembers how Siddharth was always busy inside his cabin, at home, working day and night, discussing critical cases with his colleagues, running out of bed even at midnight, which made her realize that she was always lonely and led a boring life when in Parbatpuri. Since the beginning of the novel, the readers find Rukmini attending parties alone and whenever Rukmini had to accompany Siddharth for his official parties, she always felt left out and lonely. It was Manoj's company which made her feel comfortable inside the "claustrophobic" Parbatpuri. When with Manoj she wanted to cross the boundaries of the societal norms and her feelings for Manoj makes her transgress the role of 'being a wife'. When asked for a date and ride, she would wonder that Siddharth is too busy with his work and he "won't say anything because he won't know, said another voice inside her mind" (Phukan, 2005, p. 101). She notices the colour of Manoj's eyes, she observes his style of speaking,

she checks on his way of walking. Never had the wife Rukmini similarly spoken for Siddharth throughout the novel. She always felt for Manoj that “there was something about this man’s face that invited trust” (Phukan, 2005, p. 104). The reader finds Rukmini cherishing her time with Manoj always, on the contrary, she is found complaining about Siddharth, “I think he sometimes forgets he even *has* a wife. His PA sees more of him than I do” (Phukan, 2005, p. 60). Manoj is always a provider of comfort for her.

To her surprise, Manoj even is a student of literature. She always felt that teaching literature as an alternative subject (but a compulsory one for everybody) to the DS College students made her “spirits sink” (Phukan, 2005, p. 27). She always felt deeply sad-

“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 poets or novelists, with whose concerns, perhaps, the students could have identified. As it was, the syllabus stopped uncompromisingly almost fifty years before, at 1950, with mere hint of Eliot and a nod at a couple of war poets of the forties” (Phukan, 2005, p. 27).

Neither was she satisfied with the “paltry” salary “because she was obliged to move with Siddharth whenever he was transferred to another district” (Phukan, 2005, p. 27). Both the teacher and the students always felt confined within the class and felt controlled by the backdated syllabus which none for the past many years felt a need for up-gradation.

It is interesting to note how Phukan makes Rukmini feel aloof everywhere- among the high-class wives in the club, as well as amidst her middle-class colleagues, as a wife, as a teacher, as a woman, everywhere... Only when with Manoj, the reader finds an expressive Rukmini and even the light senses of humour found common amidst the literature students were brought to light by Phukan. A common error which is found in the hoardings of the Indian restaurants and on the menu cards is “snacks turning to snakes” (Phukan, 2005, p. 102), or, analysing why a portion of fast food had to drag a poor practitioner and named it “kibiraji chicken cutlet”! Though these are petty issues, perhaps both- the readers and Rukmini were enjoying the conversation. The

<https://eijhss.com/index.php/hss/index>

pleasure of meeting with Manoj was such satisfying for Rukmini that she was bound to re-think, “did going out with a man constitute infidelity? In the eyes of Parbatpuri’s moral brigade, it probably did” (Phukan, 2005, p. 116). The ride out of Parbatpuri and off Parbatpuri, inside Hatibagan, made both the characters feel at an ease. Both were partially sharing each other’s issues related to their married life.

Marring the borders of Parbatpuri, the weather (“bordoisila, storms which were ferocious as they were sudden” (Phukan, 2005, p. 130)) began to treat them so harshly that they had to confine themselves inside a single room in Ranijan Tea Club. Though Rukmini initially was hesitant, Phukan made her confess that her “imagination was getting out of control. She reflected that she had probably spent too many years in the claustrophobic confines of her immediate circle” (Phukan, 2005, p. 134). Discussing over the chores of her household works- her life with Siddharth, electricity cut down, inside the gloomy room almost “involuntarily, she moved closer to him” (Phukan, 2005, p. 141) and she found Manoj’s “harsh breath fell sweetly on her ears. Gently disengaging her hand from his, she stroked his back, soothing him with calming movements, as his breath tore through his body, till he gradually quietened above her.” (Phukan, 2005, p. 142) But she was smiling and though confined within the small room, she enjoyed the confinement and for the first time, she was not complaining to have been made to wear the amulet given by Renu Bezboruah which was perhaps a “sign of her fertility” hanging heavy on her breasts. Returning home, she enquired from Siddharth whether he had been to meet with Dr.Rabha but when Siddharth kept ignoring her instead of being “guilt-ridden for her infidelity, she was, in fact, annoyed with him” (Phukan, 2005, p. 159). She at once even wondered whether she should leave Siddharth for Manoj. Rukmini was found transgressing all boundaries of her married life but Manoj made the silent Rukmini come out of her shell and voice out for herself and her inner voice kept giving her confidence that if the lonely wife transgressed her boundaries, it was Siddhath’s fault and not her alone.

Unaware about the ironic situation, when Rukmini was satisfied within her new secretive world, like Nandini Deuri, it was the political scenario of Parbatpuri which would destroy her life soon and like Hardy’s Tess, Rukmini was victimized by the Schopenhauerian Will. Ironically, Nandini Deuri (with whom Rukmini always related herself to) killed all her desires, tried to keep her husband happy, always found time to do the household chores, took care of her kids, attended all the social invitation unattended by her busy husband, was found in tears when she was

celebrating her fifteenth anniversary. As Cassius said in Act V, scene III (line no. 23-24) of *Julius Caesar*, “Time is come round,/ And where I did begin, there shall I end.” It seems ironic for Nandini and Hrishikesh Deuri too. A group of MOFEH activist went inside the restaurant and in front of Deuri’s wife and children shot the SP while they were celebrating their anniversary. Rukmini always felt that the “townspeople were contemptuous of the bureaucrats who, having failed to provide safety to them, had instead surrounded themselves, with armed security men” (Phukan, 2005, p. 175) and this incident would surely reaffirm that the protection provided by the police inside Parbatpuri was “unreliable and flimsy”. It was perhaps because of these incidents that Anil being a member of MOFEH did not hesitate to reveal his real identity. The novel’s protagonist, Rukmini, who was taken aback, was shattered, and felt broken and confined inside the unsecured Parbatpuri, was again found happy when she met Manoj. Manoj’s selection of food in small tea-stalls and restaurants reminds her that she

“had read somewhere quite recently, that men who relished their food and took their time over it made the best lovers, considerate and patient. Well. And Siddharth? These days, her husband was always in a hurry. He had breakfast on the run, lunch while he signed files, and dinner in an absent-minded haze as he watched the news on TV. As for sleeping together- they hadn’t shared a bed in months.” (Phukan, 2005, p. 203)

It was only after the self-confession to each other (Rukmini to Siddharth about carrying Manoj’s child inside her womb and Siddharth being caught with Priyam) that they started sleeping in the same bed again, not as husband-wife but on a sheer realization that both underwent the act of infidelity on the other (which made their relationship strong). They broke the silence of their dead relationship only to support each other when Rukmini was pregnant. Out of the confinements of awkwardness, Rukmini’s trust over Siddharth was again reconstructing the relationship between the husband and the wife and the reader finds in the twentieth chapter of the novel that Siddharth for the first time (since they had come to Parbatpuri) asking about her welfare. Perhaps, Renu Bezboruah was correct while she remarked that a child will make their relationship stronger. But Rukmini kept wondering- what exactly was love, whom at all she loves; the more she thought, the more she was finding herself more confined. She felt confined, strangled, and entangled amongst her true feelings for Manoj- the space which she enjoyed and longed for. Even Siddharth understood her strong attachment for Manoj and would often give her the latest official news regarding Manoj who was kidnapped by The People’s Freedom Movement Group/ The Valley Liberation Eagles. Now Rukmini realizes that she is confined inside the claustrophobic Parbatpuri

where life “is so cheap here. Death is everywhere”. She confesses to Siddharth that she loves Manoj and did not want to abort the baby. Much to her surprise Siddharth, who was silently listening to his wife’s confession, spoke up saying, “Abortion is an ugly word. I don’t like it myself. It’s like imposing the consequences of the parents’ action on the unborn child.” (Phukan, 2005, p. 315) Ironically, the omniscient narrator claimed- “Death was all around them in Parbatpuri, but until it struck home, it remained a distant thing, something that would never enter their lives, at least in the foreseeable future.” (Phukan, 2005, p. 171) All the characters inside Parbatpuri were confined by Time and many were silenced by Death making them silent forever.

Though Rukmini was aware that Siddharth has grown compassion towards her, still, she realized that staying under the same roof as Siddhartha’s wife would make him carry all the responsibilities of another man’s child. This made her confess-

“I’m not asking you to do anything, Siddharth. If we- the baby and I remain here, it must be because you wish us to. Not because of me, not because I’ve asked you to. Certainly not because I don’t seem to have anywhere else to go, not now, not at present” (Phukan, 2005, p. 316).

The reader gets to see the silent Siddharth being a broken man who realizes that he has always kept Rukmini in utter loneliness, inattentiveness, boredom, and ignorance and thus he does not hesitate to walk to her and to embrace her, assuring her not to “worry- if we do stay together, as a family- it won’t be an act of charity on my part towards you” (Phukan, 2005, p. 317). Siddharth leaves no stone unturned to find the father of the child who was growing inside his wife’s womb. This nature of Siddharth made Rukmini’s feeling for Siddharth grow strong again. When Siddharth was leaving home, Rukmini was found worried for the first time and enquired whether it was at all very necessary for him to go out of the house, if not, then to stay back. Perhaps the wife was running impatiently as she could assess an ominous approaching tragedy that would strike the Bezboruah family. Her fright turned into a nightmare when Animesh Dutta came to her with the news of Siddharth being shot to death. She ironically remembers Nandini Deuri- how even she had to accept the death of her husband. She felt confined within questions that would forever remain unanswered- what would be the baby’s identity, what would she say to Renu Bezboruah and others who thought the baby to be Siddharth’s. She kept wondering about Siddharth who perhaps would have had taken the baby’s responsibilities- the dreams were silenced forever. The child would never know how deprived it would perhaps have been-

“Deprived of not one but two fathers in one go, biological and adoptive, killed at almost the same instant... 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” (Phukan, 2005, p. 348- 349).

The mother of the child, desperately, tried hard to have control over the situation around her but all in vain. Therefore, all the characters, even the unborn child inside Rukmini is found under confinement; each time they try to exert power to control the situation around them, each time they are made silent by the political scenario of Parbatpuri. When Siddharth discovers Manoj, both were killed; thus, they never got a chance to find a way to have control over their life. While Mitra Phukan made the readers envision that Rukmini would have had control over her life and would have had freedom from the confinements of the political scenario of Parbatpuri, this, in reality, she shows, does not exist in real life. Phukan reflects how the students’ agitation in Assam controls and confines the education system and how it controls the life of the people of Parbatpuri, keeping them silent always. The personal saga of a simple woman is shown to have been under control, have been silenced- always under webs of confinements, under power-driven people and political scenario. This necessitated Phukan to write a novel voicing out the problems of the women living in Assam. Left lonely by her husband, Siddharth and the lover, Manoj; Rukmini did not prefer to remain under the control of harsh situation anymore. Like Nandini Deuri, even she transgresses the boundary of hard reality and re-affirms to the reader that she was cherishing plans of an editing career (the confidence was once provided by Manoj) and she would raise her child singlehanded. All the characters are thus found confined, under the paradoxical situation where they kept oscillating- whether to voice out or to remain silent, only to realize that they were ‘getting silenced’ and were ‘being silenced’ and were forever kept under the confined control of “claustrophobic Parbatpuri”.

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