



## **Trauma and Women in the Late Twentieth Century Assam: A Reading of Mitra Phukan's *The Collector's Wife***

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**Abstract:** This paper aims to deal with the representation of common people's sufferings in the late twentieth century Assam, through Mitra Phukan's *The Collector's Wife*. The paper shall attempt to look at the crisis from women's perspectives who often struggled silently as a result of the demands of sub-nationalistic fringe groups of dissatisfied people in Assam for sovereignty and freedom from the Indian Union ('Swadhin Asom'). Because of the unresolved conflict and violence between these groups and the Centre which reacted quite strongly to their demands, there was fear and trauma, and eventually a disillusionment towards the cause. Cathy Caruth traces the link between trauma and external violence which shall be used as a theoretical framework in this paper, to understand the manifestations of trauma in the novel. In addition, Caroline Garland's theories of trauma and Judith Butler's discourse on violence shall also be alluded to in this context.

**Keywords:** Trauma, violence, power, sub-nationalism, sovereignty

### I

The processes of policy-making, nation-building and governance with regard to Northeast India have led to the creation of multi-dimensional problems. Several causes may be attributed to their rise. For instance, the Partition in 1947, in addition to creating the landmass called 'Northeast India', also turned the region into a landlocked area in which the problems of immigration, land, identity and language were paramount. Not only was the region's link with the entire nation disrupted, but its trade and commerce were also affected by the creation of international borders between India and Bangladesh. To add to this, problems of discrimination, unequal distribution of resources, poverty, unemployment and many such others rose exponentially in the years after the Partition. Therefore, the linear direction of policy-making in the region has often proved to be quite inadequate for the people's needs and demands.

As a fallout of the Partition and demarcation of borders, previously legitimate migrations now became illegal. Several northeastern states had to deal with the pressures of a continuous string of migrations which became a critical issue in the newly independent country. This has unfortunately remained a problem till date. The region, which was already separated due to the colonial policies, began to develop an isolationist mindset. Movements demanding the separation of the region from



the Indian Union were not uncommon. Udayon Misra writes that the “fight for the rights of the small nationalities which took on a new edge in post-Independence North-Eastern India had their beginnings in the issues of financial and political autonomy which figured during the Constituent Assembly debates” (21). Among many such nationalistic groups/fringe organisations which rose to prominence, the ULFA (United Liberation Front of Assam) formed in 1979 at Sivasagar gained perhaps the maximum amount of popularity since they appeared to represent the issues of the people very clearly. Nani Gopal Mahanta writes, “ULFA is the culminating point of a movement that craves for a separate voice and identity for Assam” (xviii). The organisation soon came to acquire a violent colour in their functioning and agenda - as a result of which there were also measures taken by the Centre to curb them. In spite of initial support, the trauma that people underwent due to the violence adopted on both sides led to an eventual choice for peace. This issue has been one of much discussion and continues to be so, although the violence in the region has now reduced considerably.

## II

This paper intends to deal with Mitra Phukan’s *The Collector’s Wife* (2005) which is a representation of trauma on common people’s lives, particularly from the women’s perspectives. The novel narrates the story of Rukmini, a young woman married to the District Collector of a small fictitious town named Parbatpuri in Assam. It is set in this troubled period in Assam during which the violent functioning of these groups and the Centre’s equally aggressive retaliation impacted the socio-cultural lives of the people severely. People were traumatised due to the violence, which is represented through various literary and non-literary works of the region. In this novel, Rukmini’s life is outwardly protected and sheltered from the violence that goes on around her, since she lives in a bungalow atop a hill. There is a cremation ground just below the hill, which is witness to several deaths in the small town. However, it is not possible for her to stay unaffected for a very long time as she gets inadvertently drawn into it and like many other women in the novel, she is also a victim of trauma in Parbatpuri. The fear and uncertainty that grip the town each time there is an outbreak of violence is reflected in her own life too. Additionally, being the wife of the District Collector, she is exposed to news of violence almost on a first-hand basis. The mobility from one place to another without being able to settle in any one place due to her husband Siddharth’s transferable job is an indispensable part of her life. However, Siddharth is quite reticent and hardly has time for his wife, which makes Rukmini’s near-solitary sojourn in Parbatpuri even more lonely.

Rukmini teaches English at the local DS College, but it is not a job that she particularly enjoys since most of her students have no inkling about the intricacies of English literature. The student body is more inclined towards participating in movements that demand an independent homeland. The events in the novel are almost a microcosmic representation of the larger movement in Assam of the 1980s, which demanded a sovereign homeland (‘Axom for the Assamese’). The movement in Parbatpuri during that time is called MOFEH, or the ‘Movement For an Exclusive Homeland’ which is quite akin to that carried out by ULFA in Assam in the late twentieth century. It seems to be insinuated that some people engaged in this movement of MOFEH were not exactly sure of their wants and demands; they are called “terrorist-out-of convenience groups” or “fake terrorists, who were little more than gangs of dacoits, thinly disguised as insurgents” (Phukan 81). There is also a



mention of 'Surrendered Ex-Ultras', who are a representation of SULFA or the Surrendered ULFA in Assam - who were welcomed into the mainstream after they were urged to lay down their arms. In many cases, such surrendered people sided with and took aid from the government to secure their futures. In the process, they also gave rise to a different kind of atrocity in the region, which people often suffered from. Sanjib Baruah mentions the testimony of Angshuman Choudhury in his book *In the Name of the Nation*, who points out that this amnesty policy of the government "triggered a camouflaged form of lawlessness and political violence" (131). Thus, the condition of common people in Assam was quite complicated since they were being terrorised from all quarters.

In the mid to late nineteenth centuries, 'trauma' was conceptualised as a 'disease' of the mind, which was evoked by railroad accidents. This then came to be related to 'shell shock' and PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder). Along with this, trauma began to be explored through biomedical and psychiatric intervention. A traumatised person was not only physically wounded but also began to be psychically wounded, vulnerable, un-whole. Gradually, there were other epistemological shifts in the concept of trauma and its scope extended to include narratives of memorialization, cultural representations of trauma and genealogies of trauma. This has established trauma within the purview of humanities and social sciences, helping to recognize it not only as a condition of broken bodies and minds but also as a cultural object. Thus, trauma is a product of history and politics, subject to transformations, contestations and reinterpretations. Colin Davis and Hannah Meretoja write that the impact of trauma is so widespread that over the last few decades, our culture has sometimes been characterised as traumatic or post-traumatic (1).

Notwithstanding the discussions of psychic breaks and cultural representations, the material body has been a part of the imaginings of cultural trauma studies; even if not completely theorised, the body and the impact of trauma on it has been closely considered time and again. Perhaps, one of the most tangible impacts of trauma has been on the human body. The field of trauma studies, now called critical trauma studies, is a set of intellectual ideas about ruptures in lived experience and transformations of self and being. It asks fundamental questions about human relationships with one another, the "natural" world and other species. The novel is replete with examples in which the human body becomes a site for attack - there are often recollections of incidents involving violence and mutilation of the body. Often there are reports of tea estate managers being abducted and looted; in Rukmini's college staffroom, one of her colleagues reports that there was a demand for money from the manager of Baghkhuli Tea Estate:

Each one spoke with authority as though they'd been eyewitnesses to the murder.  
'Both the Manager and his wife were tied to the bedposts before being shot.'  
'They used an AK-47. That means this was no ordinary robbery.'  
'The wife was raped before she was shot. Repeatedly. In front of her husband.' (26).



Such incidents were not uncommon in the late twentieth century Assam. Additionally, there was also an intellectual shift towards the ideology of the MOFEH since several of Rukmini's students seem to harbour a similar perspective too. There was also, on the other hand, the silent disapproval of the activities of MOFEH as there was displeasure towards ULFA's activities.

Cathy Caruth calls trauma a direct link between the psyche and external violence. Trauma is not simply an effect of destruction but also an enigma of survival. Recognising this paradoxical relation enables one to understand the incomprehensibility at the heart of traumatic experience. An impact of trauma, according to Caruth, "is the sudden catastrophic blow to the mind, which leads to an uncontrolled, repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other disturbing phenomena. Through these repetitions, one is able to explore what it means to survive. Often the mind is unable to confront the possibility of death directly, so survival becomes an endless testimony to the impossibility of living" (62). In the novel, the innumerable deaths induce in people's minds the possibility of the proximity to death - that they are alive is a constant reminder of how close they are to death due to violence on an everyday basis. Caroline Garland writes that trauma aids in confirming one's worst fears:

The external event is perceived as confirming the worst of the internal fears and phantasies - in particular the reality and imminence of death, or personal annihilation, through the failure of those good objects (internal and external) to provide protection from the worst. (11).

When there is a knock on the door late at night in Parbatpuri, people panic because their worst fears seem to be confirmed. This could be a call for ransom, extortion, abductions or worse, "perhaps a request for shelter by armed men who had the police hot on their heels" (64). To make matters worse, state-aided violence and surveillance seem to trap people in a 'panopticon' - where all activities are monitored at each point. Rukmini is often escorted by a PSO (Personal Security Officer) as she goes out on visits and car-rides in the town. Even though she is the wife of the DC, such surveillance at all times seems to stifle and humiliate her at the same time. This comes into direct conflict with the functioning of such organisations with sub-nationalistic demands. Benedict Anderson in *Imagined Communities* defines 'nation' as an imagined, sovereign, limited and horizontal comradeship which allows people to not so much as kill, but to die willingly. The activities of organisations such as ULFA may be said to have a sub-nationalist fervour, since there is a strong anti-Delhi stance in their politics and ideology. Their idea of nationalism is also limited to an extent, since they focus on the idea of attaining sovereignty in a limited and finite space within the greater landmass known as India. The 'golden homeland' that they aim at achieving would also potentially exclude all 'foreigners', people who are illegal immigrants after the Partition. Sanjib Baruah, deriving from Prasenjit Duara mentions, "Its (ULFA) rise underscores the fluidity of relations on which national identities are founded, as well as the neighbourhood or spillover effects of armed conflicts" (128). These are reflected in the novel through the MOFEH, as they are also found to emphasise on local items that uphold their Assamese regional identity, like *mekhela sador* and *gamosas*. Rukmini, however, is able to determine the limitations of these activities too, as she is often found questioning her students as to the validity of such beliefs:



The girls in the group, who usually wore the ubiquitous and practical salwar-kameez to college, were now dressed in simple yet traditional mekhela-sadors to emphasise their regional identity. The almond eyes, the golden skins of the Mongoloid, the curly hair of the Austric, the dark complexions of the Dravids, the fine features and fair colouring of the Aryans, were all present in the crowd of young faces before her. And they wanted to rid the land of foreigners! (91).

Unfortunately, on one occasion, she also gets caught up in a brawl between the students and the police - which may be seen as a representation of the conflict between the Central administration and the local groups. Her student Bondona is ill affected by this clash. Rukmini visits her in the hospital later - but to her dismay she realises that Bondona's non-violent idealism would soon lead to violence, as she questions, "How long would idealism sustain them?" (182).

On one of her visits to a local wedding, Rukmini meets Manoj Mahanta, who works with a company named Calcutta Tyre Factory. Mahanta is also on a job that requires him to be out of Parbatpuri for quite some time, even though he spends a considerable amount of time here too. Manoj Mahanta talks to Rukmini about a slightly older Pranab Bishaya, who is a manager at a tea estate, but unfortunately has hardly any money. However, Bishaya is abducted once for ransom, although he is unable to provide any. This incident of Bishaya being a victim to violence and ransom demands is an occurrence that scares his close aides, Mahanta being one of them. Since many people in the town of Parbatpuri are also liable to be exposed to similar threats, their trauma arises not only in the direct imposition of violence on them but also in realising that they too, are vulnerable to abduction and death at every moment. Rukmini also shares a cordial relation with wives of other government officials who suffer under similar pressures.

Rukmini begins to spend time with Manoj Mahanta on various occasions and with this, begins a relationship that is furtive but friendly at the outset. Rukmini's loneliness is in a large part responsible for this, since she also has no company in Parbatpuri and also no children who can occupy her time. When she visits weddings, traditionally patriarchal views are imposed on her, as she is considered inauspicious for she has not been able to bear a child as yet. A large part of this novel focuses on the discrimination towards women, and the trauma they face while dealing with the violence in Parbatpuri. In fact, women in the novel are often doubly marginalised - primarily due to their gendered identity and secondly, due to the situation of violence and trauma in the secluded town. It is in this respect that Rukmini finds her relationship with Manoj to be quite liberating. Together they are able to rise above parochialism, discuss their schooling and likes and dislikes. It is Manoj who inspires Rukmini to send in her resume to advertising and copywriting firms so that she may be able to discover a new life. Women discovering a new avenue and identity for themselves is also presented as a possibility in the novel.

Robert Eaglestone writes that it is difficult to express trauma in language, for the registers of language may prove to be inadequate in particular cases: "the representation of trauma is a kind of "limit case" of language - the representation of an event so overpowering that just naming it is already to be profoundly engaged with it" (288). This element of silence being an integral part of the representation of trauma, is seen to be reflected throughout several works of fiction in Assam. In





some cases, people even forget the importance of one abduction after a few days of discussion - it all seems to settle in a kind of lull after discussions regarding ransom etc have been completed. Once the abducted man returned from captivity, he would also refuse to engage in any conversation regarding his experience.

He would, however, also insist that he was unable to identify his abductors, even after all these months in captivity. He would pose with the *phulam gamosa* given to him by his abductors for the benefit of press photographers. This piece of woven cloth, symbol of goodwill and friendship, would sit around his neck throughout, but nobody would comment on the irony of the gift (58).

There is hardly any furore created about the impact of such abductions and deaths on the family members of such people, but in fact, women and children in such households are severely disturbed and affected, which shall be seen in some instances in the novel.

Kai Erikson mentions the difference between collective and individual trauma, as he mentions that collective trauma indicates a blow to the basic tissues of social life, by which the bonds among people and the sense of communality are destroyed (456). Individual trauma, on the other hand, signifies a blow to one's psyche with such brutal force that one cannot respond to it effectively. The impact of the revolution demanding an independent sovereign Assam, albeit supported by people in the initial years, soon stirred up trauma in people's lives, both on the individual and collective levels. Rukmini is not the only affected in the novel, but there are many women like her who experience collective trauma of abductions, ransom or killings. The intense collective trauma of people was represented by the fact that people in Parbatpuri do not venture out of their homes after sundown since it was unsafe to do so. People also had to pay the extra 'tax' which were similar to donations which made the prices of essential commodities soar. Many government officials also had to engage in underhand activities to keep the system afloat, although Siddharth is quite conscious of his privileges and the distinction between public and private property. People also refer to the activities of these organisations secretly, in fear of being victimised by them: "People invariably lowered their voices and looked around stealthily as though they, and not the organisation that they were talking about, were the ones indulging in lawless activities" (109).

Rukmini's association with Manoj soon materialises into something more than friendship. It happens out of a need for company as well as solidarity with each other's lives. Manoj offers to take Rukmini out for a day to Hatibagan, where Pronob Bishaya is the manager. Rukmini quite looks forward to it since it means moving away from the solitary life that she leads at Parbatpuri. It also appears as one of the ways in which to deal with Siddharth's lack of interest in their marriage. It is on this trip with Manoj that she comes to know why he had divorced his wife; she also happens to engage in a relationship with him that would yield results soon. However, on the way to Hatibagan, Rukmini is exposed to first-hand scrutiny and surveillance by khaki-clad men, who view her and Manoj with a great deal of suspicion. Also, this is a new experience for her because on this visit, she is unaccompanied by her PSOs and the frisking makes her aware of the difficulties of common people, who go through it almost on a daily basis. Besides, her being a woman makes her more unsure and uneasy, even if she is accompanied by a male. As Rukmini travels with Manoj, she is intimidated:



So this is how it felt. This frisson of fear that ran like a swift-moving spider down her spine, this tightening at the back of her neck. This feeling of an invasion of privacy. No wonder the papers were full of angry editorials that thundered on about the high-handedness of securitymen. (125).

This happens despite that these securitymen were comparatively polite. Rukmini understands why people across the region respond so badly to state surveillance at the current time. Particularly, for people living in a conflict-ridden zone, violence becomes a way of life and it is also common to note the loss of control over their own bodies. Judith Butler in *Precarious Life* writes that our bodies do not necessarily belong to ourselves. Since the body is mortal, it is also tangible, and thus exposed to the gaze, touch and violence inflicted by others - "at risk of becoming the agency and instrument of all these as well." (26). The body has also a public dimension and thus, constituted as a social phenomenon in the public sphere, one's body is and is not one's own. Butler writes,

Violence is surely a touch of the worst order, a way a primary human vulnerability to other humans is exposed in its most terrifying way, a way in which we are given over, without control, to the will of another, a way in which life itself can be expunged by the wilful action of another. (29).

Additionally, by engaging in violence, one human is always acting on another, putting the other at risk and thus, one lives with this vulnerability as a part of life. In Assam of the late twentieth century, people's bodies were unsafe and exposed to the touch of violence, since it became an intrinsic part of their lives. Women's bodies are also exposed to violence in the form of assaults, rapes etc which is one of the central issues in fiction of this era. In this novel, women are indirect receptors of violence and trauma. This becomes apparent in the series of mishaps and killings that take place in the novel, in Rukmini's immediate vicinity. Nandini Deuri is the wife of Hrishikesh Deuri, the SP of Parbatpuri. Her association with Rukmini is not extremely close, but not very distant either. In fact, most of their conversations take place in the Parbatpuri Ladies' Club where Nandini is an important member and quite active in social work too. After one such meeting, when Nandini returns home, she comes to know of the gruesome murder of Hrishikesh Deuri. Siddharth is also present that day unlike other days, and he is also extremely shocked. Once again, it is a murder that seems to have been committed by extremist groups. This incident explicates the impact of violence on human bodies.

As Rukmini makes her way to visit Nandini after the incident, she looks at the cremation ground just below the hill which seems to mock her. Deuri's death is surreal, almost impossible to grasp because only that afternoon Nandini had told her about a dinner at a Chinese restaurant that Deuri's family would be attending after a long time. It is incomprehensible how something so joyful as a family dinner could turn into something so horrific and spine-chilling. The trauma undergone as a result of this only reminds one of the proximity to death - the fact that they were alive almost seems to be impossible: "The burning field was indeed waiting with patient good-humour to welcome them all into its yawning jaws. Deuri's time had come. Theirs would too. If not by violence, then by a natural process" (169). Death and the trauma surrounding it seem to bring everyone on an equal level - it does not spare even the most powerful people in Parbatpuri. Rukmini is reminded of the death of



an elderly Gandhian social worker earlier, who had been shot down due to his vocal protest against MOFEH and its methods. On that occasion, the onlookers had been so scared to say anything against the shooters that everyone fled the scene and no one had even thought of informing his wife or children. The killers were confident of Parbatpuri's confounded silence, so they had not even bothered to hide their faces while committing the murder. Nandini and her three children can be seen sitting around a table that still had remnants of the food that they had ordered. Nandini is the only female member in the crowd of people guarding Deuri's body and she is relieved and glad to see Rukmini. Nandini is no longer as efficient as before, she is shell-shocked. As an effect of the trauma, Nandini's hands fidget and tremble. When Rukmini holds Nandini's hands, she breaks down immediately. Her children also begin to cry once they see their mother. Nandini tries to hold on to herself but "the words came out in tumbling gasps. She had to talk, so that she could begin to understand, so that she could try to make sense of the senseless thing that had happened right there, in front of her" (172). Women's trauma due to violence is reflected in Nandini's actions, and it becomes representative of many other women's trauma throughout Parbatpuri. Unwittingly, Rukmini also becomes part of the process and her life is no longer cloistered to the boundaries of her bungalow atop the hill and cremation ground.

Since Rukmini and Siddharth do not have a child, everyone naturally seems to consider that it is Rukmini's prerogative and responsibility to bear a child and her mother-in-law Renu Bezboruah even gives her an amulet to aid her in child-bearing. However, no one knows that Siddharth and Rukmini do not share a conjugal relationship and both of them indulge in affairs outside of wedlock. Rukmini eventually does become pregnant with Manoj Mahanta's child rather than Siddharth's. Surprisingly however, Rukmini does not know anything about her pregnancy till she goes to a hospital after being caught in an unrest involving student agitators and the district administration. She collapses on the ground, later develops a concussion on her head. When she wakes up, she hallucinates about being back in a missionary school. Rukmini's trauma here is not only physical but also psychical. It is also here that she comes to know of her pregnancy. But she refuses to let anyone know of it just then, primarily because she is apprehensive of how Siddharth would react to the news. Since Manoj travels most of the time, she cannot share the news with him either. However, she does feel the need for feminine protection in this state. This also explains Rukmini's predicament as a woman, as she feels the need to be surrounded by women several times in the novel - while she handles the crisis inside and outside home.

The fact that Rukmini's life in Parbatpuri is guarded and sheltered only on the outside, while it is actually under surveillance at all times is understood from the mysterious circumstances in which she comes to know that her driver, Anil is a member of the MOFEH. One afternoon after she has discovered the shocking affair between Siddharth and her own colleague Priyam, Rukmini takes a turn about the town, goes down the hills to take shelter in a park, away from her bungalow. Anil discovers her there, brings her back home and reveals to her that he was, in fact, assigned as a bodyguard to Rukmini by MOFEH. This organisation believed that it was their prime duty to protect the DC's wife from other groups of terrorists or pseudo-terrorists. In this case, the surveillance happens from the other side - ironically, the most feared people turn into protectors and infiltrate into the highest ranks of civilians in the town. Panopticon in Parbatpuri works both ways. Anil





belongs to an indigenous tribe that believes that any woman about to become a mother is endowed with the Spirit and thus, she must know all truths. Of course, Anil goes underground after this incident, but it is heartening to see a camaraderie develop between Rukmini and Anil in such a terrifying ambience. On the other hand, power and security almost become farcical in terror-ridden Parbatpuri. When Rukmini tells Siddharth about Anil's identity, he is desperate, for he realises the very thin line between 'Us' and 'Them'. He comments on the shallowness of security, where a MOFEH member is able to creep in and out with ease, "If my own home is so easily accessed, what hope is there of my ever being able to catch up with them?" (323). It is therefore, chilling to think of the possibility of Anil being privy to private conversations within the car until a few weeks back, and the constant exposure to danger that they had been living through.

To Rukmini's immense surprise, the relationship between her and Siddharth improves slightly after the revelation of his affair. He also comes to know that Rukmini is carrying Manoj Mahanta's child. All the distance between the two seems to disappear and both of them begin to understand why they had eventually grown apart. Shockingly, Rukmini is told that Pronob Bishoya had been kidnapped once again and along with him Manoj Mahanta was taken hostage at gunpoint.

In the slowly developing friendship between Rukmini and Siddharth, both of them come closer than they were ever before. The novel in this context, also gives the readers an insight into the experience of a bureaucrat who sees the other end of the crisis. Siddharth confesses that it has been a tough ride for him too and precisely because of such experiences, he has come to respect life all the more. He says to Rukmini: "Long-drawn-out deaths, agonising ends, as life seeps out, drop after painful drop, through bullet holes in the body" (315). It makes Siddharth aware of the precarity of their own situation. Thus, the trauma of people in Parbatpuri and by extension, in the entirety of Assam during this period is inherently connected with the violence of the gun. This trauma is also all-pervasive.

While Rukmini spends each day trying to enquire about the well-being and whereabouts of Manoj Mahanta, Siddharth assists her in this matter too. However, all the while, Rukmini's trauma increases with each passing day. She doubts whether the captive had been able to identify with the captors' ideology, which prevents him from communicating with her. She also wonders what would happen to him if he is unable to pay the ransom. The rich who were targeted for the money would be able to pay it off, but for the others it would not be possible. Thus, victimhood in this case spreads across social strata and is not restricted to class boundaries.

Cathy Caruth mentions the effects of PTSD (Post-traumatic Stress Disorder) on human minds as the overwhelming experience of a sudden or catastrophic event, which leads to an uncontrolled, repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other disturbing phenomena (58). Rukmini is often found hallucinating and having nightmares about Manoj and with the baby being in her womb, she also is scared of dire consequences quite often. It almost feels like she is in hospital again with a bump on her head. The tension associated with imminent motherhood along with being alone make it more complicated for her. She craves for a woman's presence during this time, just as Nandini Deuri had during her husband's murder - "to a greater or a lesser degree, all women were essentially alone



during the forty weeks that they nurtured life within them. They were alone in a way that was inevitable, in a way that men never were" (325).

The novel soon takes a grave turn. Rukmini receives a call late one evening which tells her that Siddharth had been caught in an exchange between MOFEH and the administration which reportedly has him in a disadvantageous position. At first of course, she is unable to comprehend the gravity of the matter but then she comes to know that he had in fact, been shot. It takes her quite some time to believe what had transpired since she thinks that she must be hallucinating once again. But then the sound of fast approaching sirens and men clad in khaki uniforms clarifies the matter to her. It makes her realise that the worst had really happened. The trauma of her husband's death is compounded by the presence of all these men as she thinks "If only there were women - one woman - someone who would hold her, allow her fears to engulf her. But there weren't any women here. Only gun-carrying, heavy-booted, khaki-clothed men." (335). She is reminded of the pervasiveness and immutability of Hrishikesh Deuri's death that night as she finds herself in a similar situation: "All she knew was that the monster had suddenly entered her very home" (357). She realises that she had been foolish to assume that it would spare her. To make matters worse, she then comes to know that Siddharth had gone to negotiate with MOFEH to free the captive, Manoj Mahanta, when a round of firing had killed both men together.

Rukmini's first reaction to all this is stunned silence - she is unable to react or even cry. It is very common for trauma victims to retreat into silence when they are confronted with trauma. It is only after Siddharth's body is brought back from the site that she realises that her cheeks are wet. She sheds tears not only for Siddharth but for Manoj as well. Trauma in Rukmini's case manifests into a feeling of loss for the unborn child in her womb, who would not know a father. She also cries at the irrevocable loss of those young people who leave home for a cause and yet, see nothing but its eventual failure.

Therefore for Rukmini as also for many other women in Parbatpuri, the violence associated with nationalism comes with its price. She thinks of Nandini Deuri and several other women including herself, "all coalescing into a single figure of tear-shrouded grief, as they looked down at the slain bodies of their husbands, their brothers, their sons, wrapped in blood-blotched sheets." (349). Trauma transformed into a reality for people in Assam during this time, and for women particularly, it assumed even vaster proportions.

### III

In the final analysis thus, it may be concluded that people in Assam chose peace over ideology, primarily because of the violence that unfolded in the region. The sub-nationalistic demand of 'Swadhin Asom' was ultimately reduced to only securing the comrades and retaliating against the Centre with little consideration of the impact it had on common people. As a result, there was a gradual fizzling out of the movement. Although ULFA insisted that their change in policies from violence to relatively peaceful ones was made in consideration of people's wishes, yet, the loss of the ideological strength was perhaps the most important reason for this decline. For women, the trauma and the crisis of violence has begun to be documented through works of fiction. Thus, a recognition



of the problem is now underway - particularly the impact on women who indirectly were one of the most ill-affected. The violence has undoubtedly reduced considerably, and people in Assam now often consider it a bad dream. One only hopes that there is no repetition of this crisis and peace prevails in India's Northeast.

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