

The Womanist and Feminist Characters in Indira Goswami and Mitra Phukan's Novels

Bulen Chutia

¹ Research Scholar, Department of English, Nagaland University, Kohima, Nagaland

ABSTRACT: Womanism is basically concerned with the suppressed and exploited lives of the women of colour. The womanists are seen making peace with the pitiable forced situation imposed on them by patriarchy, social, economic and political conditions. The term 'womanism' was coined by famous African-American feminist writer Alice Walker in her work *In Search of Our Mothers' Garden*. A womanist character in fictional work is a female who possesses almost all the womanly qualities. This research work aims at exploring those qualities in novels of two female writers from Assam, Northeastern part of India. Indira Goswami's *The Man from Chinnamasta* and Mitra Phukan's *The Collector's Wife* have been taken into consideration. Both the female protagonists of these two novels give the readers sufficient hints to understand the concept of 'womanism' and 'feminism'. Though these characters are not black or coloured they share the same subjugation and oppression in society. But at some points the concept of Indian feminism or womanism seems quite different from the West. The paper also tries to focus on some such issues.

KEYWORDS: Northeast Writing, Feminism, Womanism, Indira Goswami, Mitra Phukan, Ideology, Society.

Date of Submission: 08-05-2019

Date of acceptance:25-05-2019

I. INTRODUCTION

The term 'womanism' was coined by the famous African-American feminist, Alice Walker in her prose work, *In Search of our Mothers' Gardens*, published in 1983. Womanism is basically concerned with the suppressed and exploited lives of the women of colour. The womanists are seen making peace with the pitiable forced situation imposed on them by patriarchy, social, economic and political conditions. They are in a pact with their suppressed state. They are not in a position to retaliate because of their degraded social and economic condition and also because of their colour. They do not even have the support of their fellow white American women. Alice Walker has given a few definitions of Womanism in her *In Search of our Mothers' Gardens*:

1. From womanish. (Opp. of "girlish", i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, "You acting womanish," i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior. Wanting to know more and in great depth than is considered "good" for one. Interested in grown-up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: "You trying to be grown." Responsible. In charge. Serious.

2. Also: A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally universalist, as in: "Mama, why are we brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige, and black?" Ans.: "Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented." Traditionally capable, as in: "Mama, I'm walking to Canada and I'm taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me." Reply: "It wouldn't be the first time."

3. Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. Loves the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. Loves the Folk. Loves herself. Regardless.

4. Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender. (xi-xii)

Ikechukwu Orjinta rightly says about womanism:

Part of the view that the womanists want is the struggle for equality between women and men. An equality that will be zero hypocritical, absurd and contradictory. Women activists observe racism, injustice, arrogance and incompatible conditions, leading to all forms of discrimination: xenophobia, sexism, racism, caste, class system, fanaticism, ethnic cleansing, apartheid, etc. The person who violates one should not complain if he is the victim of the other. (64)

The sufferings of women are immense. Feminism and womanism are the modes of protests amidst millenniums of silence with the aspirations for some changes. In the present work deliberate attempts have been

made towards depiction of the womanist characters in Indira Goswami's *The Man from Chinnamasta* and also Mitra Phukan's *The Collector's Wife*.

II. METHODOLOGY

The study is based on both primary data and secondary data. Primary data includes chosen works of the author. The secondary data includes critical references, journals and internet sources. All the collected sources will be used to analyse the proposed objective of the study. The theories to be applied for this study are Feminism and the concept of womanism propounded by Alice Walker.

III. DISCUSSION

India is a hive of diversely great tradition and heritage. The innumerable myths present the religious and social texts, contribute to the rich ethnicity of India. India- the epitome of 'Unity in diversity' has vibrant scholars, philosophers who have taught us the art of living. *The Mahabharata* and *The Ramayana*, the great epics of India, including the Vedas and Upanishads teach us the values and principles of life. One can find great sayings on respecting women and on providing equal status to them, only in India. The mythological figures of India, responsible for fabricating the holy social texts, have lots to say on women. To start with, we can take the example of the Indian mythological woman character, Sati, as cited by Goswami. The mythological stories have deep impact on the lives of the people. The actions of these mythological characters shape the ideologies of the common man. These ideologies assign different attributes to both the sexes of the society. At the very beginning of the story of her novel, *The Man from Chinnamasta*, Indira Goswami has made a commendable attempt in citing the example of Sati, wife of Shiva. The story of Sati proves to be one of the feminist attributes of women, revolutionary in tone. The tone of protest and the action following the protest, upholding the feminist traits, are perfectly proved in this example. Indira Goswami says:

Sati, the incarnation of Parvati- she who is worshipped both as mother and as symbol of erotic love- once lived here with Shiva. She had married Shiva against the wishes of her father, Raja Daksha. And now, unable to ear her father's taunts- the way he called her husband a beggar, a haunter of Shamshans- she could not do less than throw herself on his yagna fire. (6-7)

Acting against the wishes of her father and ending her life as a revolt against the tantrums of her father, Sati proves to be one of the mythological feminist characters of India. She refuses to give in to the patriarchal hegemony. She breaks herself free from the shackles of patriarchy, thus enlightening the dark and hideous tunnel of ignorance of the power inherent in women. Again, the status of women is highly elevated in the Indian scriptures, and, Goswami has quoted one of the great sayings from the Mahabharat through her character Dorothy in *The Man from Chinnamasta*. One of the innocent men brought to the police station to be identified as the attacker of Dorothy Brown says: "This country is our mother and superior even to heaven. Janani janmabhumscha swargadapi gariyasi..." (73)

Dorothy Brown, the protagonist of *The Man from Chinnamasta*, is both a womanist and feminist character. At the initial stage of the novel, Dorothy seems to be a womanist, but she eventually turns to be a feminist, raising her voice against the dominance of patriarchal stereotypes. At the beginning of the novel, we see her dissatisfaction and inner revolt against the injustice made towards her by her husband, Henry Brown. She does not revolt against him directly, rather, leaves him to stay in the Darbhanga House, being a disciple of the Jatadhari, a scholarly hermit from Torsa. But, in due course of time, Dorothy emerges as a feminist, who takes both the verbal and physical action against the wrongs made to her. The following line proves her meek personality, generally attributed to a woman, "The woman's lips quivered, her eyes brimmed over as she turned to the munshi." (13)

There are many other examples in the novel of women subjugation, and of womanist characters who, despite their hatred for the patriarchal dominance, do not raise a voice or do not speak for their rights. They literally cry over their helplessness thus expressing their lack of courage in taking a strong and bold step against their injustices and difficulties faced. A beautiful comparison can be drawn between Mother Nature and women because both of them act as the progenitors. And, in return, both of them are subjected to exploitation. Nature is in a continuous process to heal the living beings taking shelter in her abode. Like Nature, women, in spite of their pitiable condition imposed by the patriarchy, always try to protect their abusers in every way possible. The women's inner voice of retaliation is muted by the incessant misery and pain caused by the men folk, thus proving to be womanist by behaviour. In this context, Ikechukwu Orjinta, quotes Andrea Trumann (Feminist Theory) in her dissertation:

The idea that woman has a closer relationship with nature, if not identical with it is not an invention of the women's movement, but has a long history [...]. For the German speaking area, the belief in a particularly close relationship between nature and woman can be traced back to the pre-Christian period of the Germanic tribes. Because of their ability to give birth, the woman was absolutely associated with fertility and nature, whereby the un-understandable process of birth has been streamlined. Nature was conceived as being ruled by

demons, and so was the woman seen during pregnancy and childbirth as dominated by demons. On the other hand, they should also only be able to drive out the demons by ritual incantations. Due to their proximity to nature, she possesses clairvoyant ability and magic. This notion corresponded to the time when the human causation of copulation and birth is not known, certainly, the real power position of women. (50-51)

Goswami, being an ecoconscious writer, in her novel *The Man from Chinnamasta* has given an adroit presentation of not only the plight of animals but also women who submit themselves to the bitter situations of their lives. The following paragraph taken from the same novel, proves this very womanist features of the subaltern folk of our society:

A woman in the front, who had come to seek help to mend her drunken husband's waywardness, made a futile attempt to lose herself among the devotees. The man, pounced on her, and grabbed her by the hair, hurling abuses. "You bitch! You should be pounding the paddy at home. How dare you come to this charlatan who has abducted a foreign woman? You whore." (27)

This very extract depicts how women are abused not only verbally but also physically for no fault of theirs. The woman's faint trail to cure her husband strikes her back. Here, the woman, even though she takes a step to get rid of the difficulties caused by her troublesome husband, is crushed down by the harsh grip of her abusive husband. Now, she is unable to strike back at her husband because the womanist features dominate her. The following conversation between Dorothy Brown and two women, wives of the priests, regarding the latter's sore- hands, also highlights the same pitiable condition of women who succumb to the agony and ache enforced upon them:

One of the women took off her achal. "It's because we spend all our lives in the kitchen, cooking."

"Cooking?"

"Yes. If we don't cook for our jajmans- our patrons- who will?"

"Jajmans' meals?"

"Yes, for sixty to eighty people every day." (31)

This strain of hard work and a poor physical condition are utterly disliked by the women. Yet, they perform their job as a sense of obligation and do not revolt, thus portraying their strong womanist traits. The similar condition is expressed by another important woman character, Bishnupriya, mother of Ratnadhar:

All her life Bishnupriya had been cooking for her husband's patrons. Her skin was chapped and black from constant contact and exposure to the heat of the kitchen fires. (81-82)

Bishnupriya, again fails to take any revolutionary action against the practice of child marriage, even though she hates the very idea of it. The eleven year old daughter of one the jajmans, was brought to carry out the superstitious beliefs of animal sacrificing in order to marry an old already married man. She felt pity for the poor little girl but, being a person of strong womanist traits, she could not raise her voice against this injustice. The following lines express the utter helplessness of Bishnupriya:

Bishnupriya's heart went out to Bidhibala. The very thought of this lovely young girl being married off to an old man was disturbing. But nothing could be done about it now. These things happened. A forty year old man would marry a child of eleven. (96)

In another incident in the novel, *The Man from Chinnamasta*, Dorothy, the protagonist, reveals both her womanist and feminist traits. While executing her feminist traits, she portrays her feminist characteristics as well. The soft-hearted nature of the woman is depicted in the following conversation with her friend, William, regarding the beneficiary of her property. When she is asked whom she wants to be the beneficiary of her property, Dorothy says:

"It's for the Khasi woman's child by Henry Brown, who until the other day, was my husband."

"What!"

"You heard what I said!"

William was losing patience. He fumbled for words. "But unlike Henry Creed or Arthur Brown, he has not married the woman! You see, he still hasn't married this Khasi woman!"

"I shall still make the will even if the child is a bastard." (65)

Dorothy Brown is the embodiment of water and fire. The stern reply to her friend, regarding her stubborn decision of making the son of the Khasi woman the beneficiary of her will, proves her as a feminist character. Whereas, her decision regarding her will delineates her inherent womanist feature, a delicately soft heart.

The work of fiction *The Man from Chinnamasta* by the author and social worker of Assam, Indira Goswami, deal with both the types of women, womanists and feminists. These characters' traits are moulded by the situations imposed on them by the patriarchy.

Another woman fictionist of Assam, Mitra Phukan, in her novel *The Collector's Wife*, has presented a few strong womanist characters. All the events in the novel unfold at the perfect amalgamation of insurgency and women's silent search for identity, having several adverse impacts on the lives of the characters. These women, in the novel, are found to be unhappy by the prevailing condition of their lives. They are in a constant complaining mood about their situations that they dislike. But, unlike the feminists, they don't take any

necessary steps to change those situations. Rukmini Bezboruah, the protagonist of the novel, is a hard core womanist who engages herself in silent observation of the injustice done towards the society, women in particular and also of the injustice done to her. She, in her monologues, complains about her existing situation, the superstitions that affect her, her husband's attitude towards her, and everything that shapes the course of her life. The taunts that she receives from the society for being a barren woman affects her mentally and hates the way she is being taunted, but, unfortunately, she remains silent and rather she expresses her fake apologies to those people. In the very first chapter, we come across such a situation where Rukmini attends the marriage ceremony of her colleague and is embarrassed by the bitter confrontation of two elderly ladies who look down upon her for her barrenness. The bride, who is the witness of this insult directed towards Rukmini, apologises to the latter for such an embarrassment in her own wedding reception. But, surprisingly, Rukmini had a womanist reply to her colleague's apology:

"I don't mind, really, I don't," said Rukmini quietly. "In fact I should have thought of it myself. It was inexcusable for me to sit so near the bride." (16)

The very confrontation she had with those two ladies disturbs her a lot and she is unable to have a proper sleep that night. She despised the way she was looked down upon by those two elderly women. But her silence, rather we should say it as her fake humility, bounds her to accept the fault of her barrenness. She accepts the mental injustice acted upon her by the society, even though she dislikes it.

There are many more instances in the novel that proves Rukmini being a strong womanist. Rukmini, the wife of Siddharth Bezboruah, the District Collector of a small town, Parbatpuri, compromises her career for the sake of her husband's transferable job. She works as a part time English lecturer in government colleges, shifting herself from one college to another in different places according to her husband's places of transfer. She does not receive any job satisfaction. Mitra Phukan has beautifully put the commotion regarding her job, going on in the mind of Rukmini:

Rukmini had realized several years ago that teaching was not her vocation in life. She did not enjoy presenting the tortured soliloquies of Hamlet to small-town teenage minds, or Jane Austen's polished prose to those whose knowledge of English grammar was at best merely adequate... It wasn't as though the money was very attractive either. Rukmini was paid a paltry Rs 1,000 for efforts, for she was a 'part-timer'. Regular teachers were paid about six times as much. But regular teachers were expected to stay rooted in Parbatpuri. Rukmini couldn't apply for a permanent post, because she was obliged to move with Siddharth whenever he was transferred to another district. (27)

In spite of the job dissatisfaction she has, Rukmini makes peace with the situation by justifying her compromise in career. Her thoughts are perfectly reflected in the following lines:

In the meantime, her work gave her something to do and also an identity, however frail, of her own... In any case, teaching was one of the few avenues open to women in her situation. Operating a business for instance, would be impossible for the wife of a man in a transferrable job, a wife who was expected to accompany her husband wherever he went. (28)

This proves Rukmini as a womanist who keeps on ranting about her situation but does not take any action. Even though she does not have any fault in her barrenness, she is mentally depressed and feels guilty of her condition. The guilt she carried within her is expressed by Phukan in the following words:

These days Rukmini was always burdened with the feeling that she had been unable to fulfil her part of a social contract. That she had not kept a bargain. That she had regened on a promise of vital importance. (54)

The guilt of her barrenness engulfed her in such a way that, it had become a habit to compromise with the situation without even letting others know about her disliking. This has been beautifully put by Phukan:

Indeed, after all these years of childlessness, she had become so at fielding questions and hiding her feelings and pursuing on a cheerful face, that the mask had almost moulded itself to the skin of her cheeks. (104)

Again, another character in the novel, like Rukmini, is also a womanist. Mitali has also made a peaceful compromise with her career. Her high educational qualification seems to be futile because of her husband's transferrable job and thus, she has to work as high school teacher. This was the question put up to her by Rukmini:

"... And you're a PhD in biotechnology. You could have got an excellent teaching job somewhere, and made waves in academia. Or gone in for a corporate career with a big firm, doing genetic engineering. And won heaps of laurels, not to mention career satisfaction. Instead of which, you're teaching high school students the basics of science. How do you feel about it?" (115)

Mitali's humble reply proves her satisfaction she seems to enjoy in the compromise. She justifies her current state of being as a high school teacher, whereas she could have done wonders with the educational qualification she had. She says:

"Honestly, I don't think about my PhD much these days," she said slowly. "It's all a question of attitude, isn't it? Of course I'm embarrassingly overqualified for the job I do, but I don't mind teaching at that level. Really," she emphasised, seeing the doubt in Rukmini's eyes. "It's quite restful, explaining the fundas of

science to a branch of small-town schoolgirls. In any case," she added ruefully, "I've lost touch with my subject completely. I know nothing of the latest developments in biotechnology except what is reported in the press." (115)

Mitali, being a womanist, further adds:

"In any case, I was brought up in the belief that a woman's career is secondary to her husband's." (115)

Siddharth, the husband of Rukmini, did not have the least interest in having a baby. He tried to avoid all dealings related to Rukmini's pregnancy. This was very annoying to Rukmini. But she chose to remain silent and preferred to engage herself in silent complaining. In the words of Mitra Phukan:

Rukmini said nothing. But she couldn't help feeling a twinge of annoyance. Surely he could at least have telephoned the doctor? After all, it was possible to have this baby all by herself. (158)

Another character in the novel, Bondona, a student of Rukmini, has a few feminist traits in her. She, belonging to a poor family, is the victim of the large number of migration taking place from different parts of the country and from the neighbouring country, Bangladesh to her own state, Assam. Even though she knows, that her protest against this immigration can hamper her future, she continues with it. Justifying the fight for her motherland, she says to Rukmini:

"... Can you imagine girls of my age from conservative Brahmin families doing what I do- thirty, forty years ago? Luckily, I won a merit scholarship- yes, I wrested it through sheer hard work. We have no reservations for poor Brahmin girls, no quotas in college seats for children of priests, no matter how poor they may be. My mother knows what I am doing- running around organising 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." (181)

After introspecting the situation of Nandini Deuri, wife of the SP who was killed, Rukmini wonders about herself. Even though she wants changes in her life and wants to bring about necessary deviations in the course of her life, she hesitates to take any necessary moves. She wonders about her future, and it is reflected in the following lines:

And what about her, Rukmini Bezboruah? What would happen to her? Where would she be, ten, twenty years from now? What would she be doing? Still teaching desolately in colleges in backward districts, and trying to get Siddharth to agree to let her begin to take fertility drugs under Dr Rabha's guidance? (193)

The following conversation between Nandini Deuri and Rukmini has a lot to speak:

"... I'm thankful that the bakery is slowly, but definitely, beginning to erase my other identity."

"Other identity?" Rukmini wondered whether Nandini was implying that she regretted those busy years as Hrishikesh Deuri's wife.

... Nandini replied, "Don't misunderstand me. I was happy being Deuri's wife, sharing his life. But that was then. Now, with his death... without this new me that I'm trying to create, I would have been known, forever, as that poor lady, the widow of that police officer who was killed in front of her eyes while they were celebrating their wedding anniversary. That label would have clung to me forever. And, through me, to the children." (302)

The above conversation depicts the self-satisfaction of Nandini Deuri at her new identity she formed after her husband's death. Even though she is deeply saddened by the death of her husband, she, as a feminist, does not complain about her situation, rather, uses her talent and rises out of the situation to establish a new identity of her own, not the poor wife of the deceased SP. This action of Nandini Deuri depicts her as a feminist who fights herself out of an undesirable situation.

The title of the novel *The Collector's Wife* itself is very womanist in nature. Whole throughout the novel, Rukmini, the protagonist, is identified as the wife of the district collector. Even till the pathetic end of the novel, she fails to establish a desirable identity of her own. She is left as the poor, helpless wife of the district collector, Siddharth Bezboruah who was shot down and as a desolate being who lost her friend, Manoj Mahanta. Right from the beginning of the novel, till the end, Rukmini portrays her womanist traits and thus hesitatingly submits herself to all the unwanted situations that ascend in her life.

IV. CONCLUSION

Feminism and womanism are the modes of protests amidst millenniums of silence with the aspirations for some changes. Indira Goswami and Mitra Phukan have done a commendable depiction of the womanist and feminist characters in their selected works of fiction. The womanists and feminists with a theoretical framework are offered by these two authors in fictitious accounts of lives, situations, and emotions similar to their own. After a thorough critical analysis of the content of the two novels, it can be concluded that:

1. Womanist and feminist literature talk about the interests of women and the main course of action is carried out by women.

2. With the sense of tradition and convention deeply rooted in the minds and hearts of the people of India, these fictitious female characters tend to be both womanist and feminist in nature and in their dealings with the contemporary men folk.
3. These two writers, through their stylistic and literary approaches, have illustrated the situation of Indian women, quite different from the women of the West.

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Bulen Chutia" The Womanist and Feminist Characters in Indira Goswami and Mitra Phukan's Novels" International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Invention (IJHSSI), vol. 08, no. 5, 2019, pp.28-33