

Quest for Feminine Identity in Mitra Phukan's *The Collector's Wife*

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Abstract: This paper aims to analyze Rukmini's self-identity in Mitra Phukan's *The Collector's Wife*, a work of fiction that shows Rukmini's transformation from a submissive, kind, and meek housewife to an independent person who defies male dominance and strives for self-identity. This essay explores the search for feminine identity in Mitra Phukan's *The Collector's Wife*, placing the book in the sociopolitical setting of Assam, which is plagued by insurgency. The research looks at how the protagonist's journey illustrates the conflicts between self-realization and home expectations. The study examines how political upheaval, emotional estrangement, and patriarchal systems influence female subjectivity via a feminist and sociocultural viewpoint.

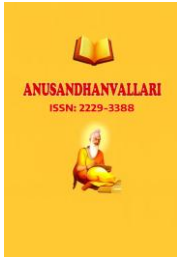
Rukmini Bezbaruah, the main character of Mitra Phukan's *The Collector's Wife*, goes from being a submissive, childless housewife in 1980s Assam to an assertive person who asserts her individuality in the face of severe sociopolitical instability.

In the end, she reclaims her agency as a "new woman" in a culture rife with conflict by rebelling against patriarchal restrictions, the stigma associated with infertility, and a chilly marriage. Rukmini, a contemporary, well-educated English teacher, opposes the conventional, subservient position that is expected of her as the wife of a District Collector. Phukan challenges conventional ideas of "chastity and purity" by using Rukmini and other characters like Nandini to present a nuanced portrayal of women discovering their own identity and voice. Rukmini changes from a "meek" wife to a self-sufficient person who forges her own path, exhibiting strength and resilience in both her personal life and the unstable environment of Parbatpuri. In patriarchal societies, women are viewed as the "second sex" and are positioned in disadvantaged ways because of their gender. Women are constantly deceived by the enforced ideal of womanhood and are concealed behind a cloud of illusions.

Women started to take on new responsibilities in the second part of the nineteenth century, defying the patriarchal society's established conventions and stereotypical gender roles. In literature, a woman who defies the conventional notion of "the angel in the house" and pursues independence is referred to as a "new woman." Phukan depicts feminine identity as a dynamic process of self-assertion, resistance, and negotiation rather than as a fixed construct.

Keywords: Social conflicts, emotional equilibrium, societal norms, feminine identity, and Selfhood.

Introduction: - The experiences of women in intricate sociopolitical contexts have become more prominent in contemporary Indian English writing. In *The Collector's Wife*, renowned Assamese author Mitra Phukan provides a complex examination of gender, identity, and conflict. The novel, which is set against the backdrop of an Assamese insurgency, tells the story of Rukmini Bezbaruah, the wife of a district collector, whose seemingly affluent life belies deep emotional emptiness and internal strife. The protagonist's effort to balance her socially given position with her own goals, intellectual aspirations, and emotional needs gives rise to the novel's quest for feminine identity. This article looks at how Phukan challenges patriarchal conventions and presents feminine identity as an ongoing journey of self-discovery.



The advent of feminism in the 1960s gave rise to the idea of the "new woman," who is entirely different from the conventional lady. This new woman is self-aware, self-assured, and aggressive; she recognizes her own potential and proclaims her identity as a free woman. The new lady fights hard against many obstacles to develop a new identity. She holds the primary position rather than being the "other" because she is conscious of her status and works to break free from the unfair taboos and conventions placed on her by the male-dominated society. Irish author Sarah Grand's essay "The New Aspect of the Woman Question," which appeared in the *North American Review* in 1894, is credited with popularizing the phrase "new woman." She has identified the issue with the notion of home as a woman's domain and utilizes the phrase to denote the woman who is superior to the male. The new image is the independent, career-focused, educationist, feminist woman. She is in charge of her life and exercises autonomy both at home and in her personal life. She views marriage as a constraint and has no fear of living alone or being independent.

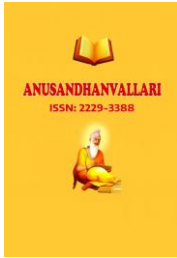
The phrase was later popularized by British-American author Henry James to characterize the transformed women in Europe and the US who rejected traditional gender norms and declared themselves to be intelligent, independent, and feminist. The boundaries of a society ruled by men were stretched by this New Woman. In both play and fiction, the representation of the New Woman in English literature started in the latter part of the 1800s. They are mostly found in the plays of George Bernard Shaw, Henry Arthur, and Henrik Ibsen. The fictional works of Sara Grand, Olive Schreiner, Annie Sophie Cory, and Ella Hepworth Dixon depict a new period of women's liberation.

The portrayal of such nonconformists was mocked as spreading chaos and disobedience, which is another aspect of the rise of the New Woman stereotype. In the Indian setting, the New Women are involved in both private and public life and are empowered by their education, careers, and freedom of choice. They have a better understanding of the world, their rights, and their network of support. Social taboos are not a concern for them. They are not limited by gender, religion, or class. They are courageous and resilient enough to deal with life's ups and downs while making every attempt to find solutions on their own. Numerous works of Indian English fiction have this picture. But as in real life, the majority of the heroes attempt to find a middle ground between antagonism and cooperation.

As a result, the Indian conception of a new woman differs from that of the West. In Indian English literature, authors such as Shobha De, Githa Hariharan, Arundhati Roy, and Shashi Deshpande depict a new woman who is aware of her role in the family and society. Focusing on women writers from northeastern India who write in English, such as Indira Goswami, Mitra Phukan, Temsula Ao, and Easterine Iralu, their works feature several memorable nonconformists, unconventional female characters who are vibrantly alive in terms of feelings, intellect, and emotions.

Mitra Phukan portrays Rukmini Bezbaruah, Nandini Deuri, Priyam, and Bobita as acknowledged nonconformist women who want their freedom and liberty and forge their own identities. Instead of emerging as "others," they become unique people who fight for existential survival. Three stages of Rukmini Bezbaruah's life can be observed: her cold married life with her husband Siddharth; her life following her encounter with Manoj Mahanta, with whom she finds companionship; and her life following the unexpected deaths of two important men in her life Siddhartha and Monoj during an encounter with rebels. Readers see Rukmini's rebellious tendencies during all three of these periods of her life, which ultimately result in her freedom; as a result, she serves as a metaphor for a rebellious, liberated new woman.

Being "the collector's wife" is a major aspect of Rukmini's identity. Her husband's standing determines her social prominence rather than her uniqueness. She is limited to ceremonial responsibilities and social obligations despite her education and cultural inclinations. There is no emotional closeness in her marriage. Her spouse is emotionally aloof due to his administrative responsibilities and political conflicts. This alienation supports Beauvoir's claim



that patriarchal marital systems frequently deny women subjectivity. In addition to being personal, Rukmini's discontent is a metaphor for the larger suppression of women's voices.

Rukmini's internal conflict is reflected in the Assamese insurgency, which serves as much more than just a political backdrop. She feels more vulnerable and helpless in the violent, unstable, and fearful environment. Traditional systems become unstable due to political upheaval, which makes it possible to doubt one's identity. But Rukmini feels more alone as a result of the turmoil. Her conscience is indirectly shaped by the insurgency, which forces her to face questions of moral duty, loyalty, and belonging. Rukmini's attempts to recover a lost self are reflected in her memories of her early years, music, and previous relationships. In particular, music becomes a symbol for independence and artistic expression. Her desire for approval and affirmation, rather than moral weakness, is shown in her attraction to emotional connection outside of marriage.

Phukan portrays the feminine gender as both connected and independent in these instances. Rukmini wants recognition of her uniqueness rather than revolt for its own reason. Instead of being overt, Rukmini's opposition is subtle. She negotiates her household duties rather than outright rejecting them. Acts of quiet resistance include her introspection, emotional decisions, and declaration of wants. Phukan refrains from depicting her protagonist as a revolutionary or a victim. Rather, she portrays a genuine lady negotiating a rigid environment with few alternatives. Binary classifications of subservient vs emancipated women are challenged by this complex representation.

Mitra Phukan, a well-known participant in the Northeast Writers' forum, has made a name for herself among readers with works such as *A Moonson of Music* and *The Collector's Wife*. As a feminist author, Phukan has examined the female mind and the tensions between the ego and the patriarchal cultural and societal elements. The female characters in Mitra Phukan's works play significant roles in highlighting the emotional and psychological conflicts that middle-class married women encounter when their predetermined roles impede personal growth. The struggle of Indian middle-class female protagonists to forge their own identities within the male-dominated societal structure is a defining feature of her writing. "*The Collector's Wife* is a singular work of fiction that uses the geopolitical situation in Assam and the Northeast as a crucial setting. A woman's story of a loveless marriage is skillfully woven against a compelling backdrop of political agitations, kidnapping, extortion, student protests, and the movement of illegal extremist organizations. The gendered realities that exist among insurgent problems, student unrest, border crossings, etc., are the fiction's central theme.

Mitra Phukan depicts societal instability, conflict, political idealism, brutality of attire, pain, suffering, trauma of insurgency, loss, dread of death, carnage, hypocrisy, bureaucratic working and customs, love, and sacrifice. The terrible times of violence and hostility, as well as the biases against women that cripple everyday life, are shown in the novel. It is about the experiences of women in terms of identity entwining the public and private spheres, in addition to depicting this somber societal reality of turmoil. Through Rukmini's desire for freedom, the author deftly illustrates the personal struggles of several female characters and their attempts to achieve liberty. The protagonist of the book is Rukmini Bezbaruah, a powerful lady.

Rukmini, the wife of Siddharth Bezbaruah, the Parbatpuri District Collector, is constantly in the spotlight and the center of attention. Rukmini is employed by Dinanath College as a part-time lecturer. Rukmini appears to be an aristocratic, attractive, wealthy, contemporary, and well-educated woman. Rukmini, the wife of the District Collector, possesses every modern woman's need: a high level of education, dignity, a high social standing, an opulent lifestyle, and a stunning home perched on a hill with several staff. Because her workaholic spouse never engages with her emotionally or physically, Rukmini is internally limited to the little circle of a loveless marriage, devoid of mutual understanding, happiness, and pleasure. Rukmini laments, "Men, dashing around, doing the world's work, while she waited in, of all the places on the globe, Parbatpuri, for them to spare a look, or sometimes for her" (Phukan 160). Rukmini looks to her spouse for touch, responsiveness, and company, all of which she



hardly gets. Furthermore, the main factor contributing to Rukmini's personal misery is her 10 years of childlessness. Dr. Rabha tells her that it would be hard for her to have a male or female heir, which distresses her. Rukmini is not deterred, though. To avoid being known as a childless lady, she makes every effort to become pregnant.

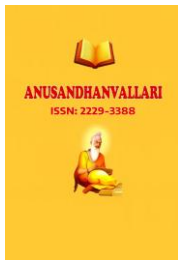
Highly educated, Rukmini familiarizes herself with the latest scientific advancements in fertilization: "It was almost always Rukmini who brought home magazines and articles on infertile couples becoming parents, She would cut out newspaper articles on Gamete Intra Fallopian Transfer, on test tube babies, on petri-dish infants, or fertility enhancing drugs and even on, surrogate motherhood and show them to Siddharth" (Phukan 51). Rukmini writes to several fertility specialists and persuades Siddharth to go along. Rather than out of a strong desire to become a parent, Siddharth has done this more to appease her.

If the doctor says that an ovum donor is the only way for Siddharth to father a child that would be legally his, she even considers framing an advertisement for a female ovum donor. "Rukmini" is a symbol of the contemporary, educated, urban Indian lady who challenges gender stereotypes. By applying vermilion powder to her head, she defies the conventional pratibhata image of a married Hindu woman. The application of vermilion on a married Hindu woman's hair parting and a dot on her forehead is considered auspicious in traditional Indian Hindu society. Hindu married women are required to wear vermilion powder as a visible sign of their wish for their husbands to live long lives.

A married Indian Hindu woman without sindoor is unthinkable in traditional Hindu families. Rukmini does not adhere to the rigid rules of masculine supremacy. While Rukmini is at Rita's wedding celebration, there is no apparent vermilion on her forehead. "Whose daughter are you?" asks an old woman with a tight bun pulled back on her head, mistaking her for an unmarried woman (Phukan 14). When Rita steps in and says, "Rukmini is married, mahi," the older women respond with disappointment: "Married! Their shocked expressions quickly gave way to contempt. They raised their eyebrows at Rukmini's flowing, wavy shoulder-length hair after searching her head for any indications of vermilion powder (Phukan 14). Rukmini may choose how she wants to adorn herself. She feels that she shouldn't be evaluated as a bride based on the vermilion powder on her forehead.

Rukmini makes her decision without hesitation. During Rita's marriage ceremony, older women make fun of "Rukmini" for being infertile and treat her unfavorably. Rukmini is prohibited from touching the bride. She exhibits self-control, though, as she responds to this awkward circumstance in a typical manner. Rukmini's strength and practicality allowed her to break out from the traditional position of women: "Rukmini stood up quickly." "Don't worry, Rita, I understand," Rukmini remarked, taking care not to touch the bride. She gave it a shot and was happy with how it turned out. "That was the appropriate note to hit" (Phukan 15).

Resentment and anger abound in her thoughts: "She had felt furious, not harmed. Enraged that they, arrogant about their own fertility and likely surrounded by six or more children per, would even consider her childlessness to be a sign of inferiority (Phukan 41). Despite her husband's carelessness and her alleged physical limitations, Rukmini is fairly aggressive. Her eventual choice to take a fertility-enhancing medication for regular ovulation without any debate with Siddharth portrays her as a contemporary, intelligent, self-reliant woman who readily embraces such a scientifically supported alternative to boost her fertility rates. The normal routines and predictability of Rukmini's life are somewhat disrupted when she meets Manoj Mahanta, a well-educated, attractive, recently divorced guy, initially by accident and then voluntarily. Rukmini's unintentional run-in with Manoj while shopping on MG Road in Parbatpuri makes her want to touch a man's flesh. Because she lacks romance, Rukmini gets excited when she touches a new man. During her protracted wait for Siddharth, Rukmini rebels against him and recalls the sensation of Manoj Mahanta's body: "Her body longed for the reassuring warmth of a male body beside her, for a voice to tell her that it wasn't her fault that she was still childless." Unaccountably,



she recalled the sensation of Manoj Mahanta's body as it briefly touched her on the pavement on MG Road about a month prior (Phukan 76).

Without Siddharth's knowledge, Rukmini travels with Manoj across the Lakhsmān Rekha in pursuit of self-fulfillment. She yearns for the oxygen of understanding that her connection with Manoj provides. Rukmini, a self-aware individual, is content and at ease with Manoj: "She didn't want to be thought of as a small-town housewife with a narrow outlook." Even after their awkward encounter on MG Road, she had felt remarkably comfortable with Manoj. He struck her as having interesting, approachable, and honest qualities that were uncommon among the folks of Parbatpuri. In any event, he was one of the few persons she had lately met who wasn't among Siddharth's formal buddies, her own coworkers, or the Parbatpuri Club members, with whom she didn't really connect (Phukan 117).

"Rukmini" is an unorthodox, liberal, transgressor who joyfully ventures beyond her comfort zone with another man. Rukmini finds a more suitable friend to ease her inner turmoil in Manoj. Due to the storm, Rukmini and Siddharth had to spend a few hours in the Ranijan Club, which resulted in their physical consummation. Fearless, Rukmini approaches Manoj in their shared room: "His touch was pleasant, like a soft, cool breeze on her skin on a hot summer day." He kept brushing the strands of hair away from her face with his hand. She shut her eyes. She approached him almost unconsciously (Phukan 141). According to Rukmini, the connection is mutual, "as though their bodies had known each other for a long time." Her skin felt like it was on fire every time his tongue touched her (Phukan 141). "It was a long time since she had felt anything like this, even with Siddharth," she says as dizzying feelings race through her head (Phukan 141). She believes that "he had given her infinitely something precious: a glimpse into her innermost soul" (Phukan 142).

Rukmini is portrayed as daring and transgressive by this open admission of her sexuality. "Rukmini" does not hold Manoj accountable for the event; instead, her self-actualized representation expresses her desire to control and start her own emotions. She assures herself that she is aware that she will end up in this predicament. She may logically perceive her physical union with Manoj as an inevitable consequence of the day's events leading up to the intense Saturday afternoon at the Ranijan Club. Because her husband Siddharth never makes physical contact with her, Rukmini has no regrets about her adultery.

Rukmini occasionally questions her ability to confront Siddharth following her physical contact with Manoj. However, when Siddharth purposefully avoids discussing Dr. Rabha or their pregnancy plan, her annoyance escalates. "What did he think she was, a harridan?" protests Rukmini (Phukan 159). Rather than feeling bad about her adultery, Rukmini is irritated at Siddharth for his indifference and diversion from the true problem. Rukmini is an independent lady who is content with the situation that led to her adultery being condemned. She discovers that she is carrying Manoj's kid. She continues to feel happy and triumphant about her infertility. The idea of being a particularly maternal type excites her: "Maybe she was going to be the first—a barren woman, suddenly diagnosed as being weeks pregnant after a blow to her head had rendered her unconscious." She forced herself not to giggle uncontrollably (Phukan 222). She feels content and self-possessed as a result of this physical change. "Vital and alive" is how Rukmini feels. Rukmini becomes more rebellious after learning about Siddharth's adulterous relationship with her coworker Priyam, and she embraces her pregnancy as a self-affirmation. When Siddharth tells him she is pregnant, she is ready for the calculations, the accusations, and the revelations.

However, as a lady with strong convictions, her day of seclusion strengthens and fortifies her. Sitting across the table, Rukmini persuades her partner about the reasons for her adultery and talks about their shared infidelity without showing any signs of shame. When Siddharth asks Rukmini whether love is what brings them together, she responds rather bluntly that neither passion nor love can adequately describe their connection. Rukmini refers to it as friendship, even if such physical intimacy may not recur. "Friendly rather than sexual" is how she describes her attraction to Manoj (Phukan 275).



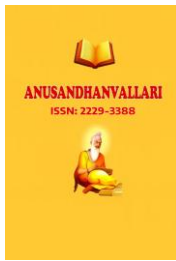
Rukmini feels hesitant to refer to Siddharth and Priyam's ongoing relationship as an affair. "She hadn't brought Manoj into her bedroom and made love right on the marital bed, right under the noses of Biswanath and the houseboys," she says in comparing the two relationships (Phukan 260). Rukmini is not at all embarrassed to disclose that she is having a kid whose father is not her husband because of her unsuccessful and repulsive encounters with Siddharth. Rukmini refuses to abort the kid, saying, "Even if it costs me my marriage, I am going ahead," after a lengthy discussion between Siddharth and Rukmini on whether to divorce, separate, or raise the child of another man. "I am expecting a child" (Phukan 315). By depicting Rukmini's choice to give her life as the DC's wife to protect her unborn child, Mitra Phukan exalts Indian motherhood. Rukmini gives up the Collector's wife persona as a result of her quest for self-identity. As a result, Rukmini is a newly liberated, rebellious woman who fights for her own identity. "Rukmini" desires independence, her own identity, and a fresh start. In order to leave the confines of her large home, she takes a temporary teaching position at a nearby college. As DC's wife, she finds it tedious to spend the entire day by herself in a large home with several staff, overseeing their daily tasks: "I can't be a total housewife." Even if teaching part-time isn't much of a job, it's still preferable to nothing. In addition, I don't have any kids, the staff here is well-trained, and Siddharth is away most of the time (Phukan 116).

Rukmini is unhappy at work. "I have to do something." "I wish I could change my job," she tells Manoj about her intention to pursue a fulfilling career. For the rest of my life, I don't want to teach English literature to pupils who can't even speak the language correctly (Phukan 139). Her drive to create her own personality and her current worldview are demonstrated by her desire to write or work for an advertising firm. Manoj tells her that instead of merely being the DC's wife and working at a job she doesn't particularly enjoy, she may pursue a profession of her own and create her own identity. "Rather than sit endlessly in the large, empty house, waiting for Siddharth to return, she decided to do something positive" (Phukan 193-194).

Rukmini's choice to do something entirely new might make her feel carefree, optimistic, and joyful. The first stage in "her" quest to overcome her "intellect-deadening rut" is learning how to use a typewriter. After Siddharth's employees leave, she purchases Pitman, a detailed manual for typewriting and office procedures. Rukmini can learn the ability in less than a month. Rukmini writes and types letters to the editor of The Parbatpuri Herald, one of the town's most well-known English-language newspapers. Her new habit of typing her weekly letters to her parents who are staying in Trinidad rather than writing by hand reduces her daily errors and inspires her to be more creative: "Every week, as she twirled the finished letter off the machine, she felt a sense of satisfaction" (Phukan 198). "Rukmini" desires a life that moves more quickly. Her dream job would be as a journalist, "possibly with her own column, for which her readers would wait impatiently to influence the thinking of many people, to make her readers sit up and take note of her point of view." (Phukan 162) Given that she has previously submitted resumes for such positions, Rukmini could end up working as a busy journalist in the future. As a result, Rukmini changes from a typical small-town housewife performing a mediocre job to a self-sufficient person beginning a legitimate profession of her own choosing. Through Rukmini's portrayal, "Mitra" Phukan reaffirms her call for women's emancipation in a conflict-ridden environment.

Rukmini's existence is negatively impacted by the violent insurgency that runs through Parbatpuri like a dark river: "In Parbatpuri, death and grievous injury, accidental or intentional lurked at every step" (Phukan 108). The students fight to prevent outsiders from entering the state illegally. The district's top government officials never leave the building without full security guards. This also applies to Siddharth. But what sets Rukmini apart is her bravery. Rukmini finds it repulsive to be constantly watched by security guards brandishing guns.

Siddharth requests that Rukmini be escorted whether she goes shopping, attends college, or attends any of the several social events to which she is invited as Chief Guest; she disputes with him, saying, "Is it necessary? Really, why should I be a target? You are aware that MOFEH has never murdered or abducted a lady. I'm safe. I don't anticipate any danger (Phukan 175). Rukmini starts to worry about Manoj's safety as the kid develops inside her.



She can't stop thinking about what Manoj would do when he returns, if he will advise her to divorce Siddharth, and how he will respond if he finds out about the kid in her womb.

"Towards" the book's conclusion, Rukmini is shown as a more liberated lady who has the guts to face two deaths: Manoj is shot dead during the encounter, and her husband Siddharth is killed while trying to save Manoj, her friend, from the rebels. When Rukmini loses her spouse and friend, her life turns terrible. "Two men-one who 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," Rukmini laments(Phukan 349).

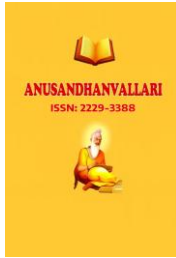
At last, Rukmini rises like a Phoenix and asks the security personnel to carry Siddharth's corpse to their bedroom and gently place him on the bed. They entered the room slowly, carrying the stretcher covered in blood on their shoulders, and she trailed behind them. Despite losing all of her male supporters, her spouse and her friend Rukmini still have options. Mitra Phukan alludes to Rukmini's future aspirations of pursuing a profession in editing and raising her child by herself. Rukmini believes that wonderful times are on the horizon. She sings an elegy for all the innocent people who have died in this country, plagued by insurgencies. Rukmini thus expresses her revolt against an insurgency that targets women in particular and the entire public in general. Phukan suggests that Rukmini's identification as the collector's wife or widow will be erased by her new profession as a creative writer. Rukmini can escape the insurgency's grasp in this way.

Conclusion: - Mitra Phukan portrays feminine identity in *The Collector's Wife* as a complicated negotiation influenced by marriage, patriarchy, sociopolitical upheaval, and individual desire. Rukmini's journey emphasizes that identity remains in tension between responsibility and selfhood and is never completely suppressed nor totally emancipated. In the end, the book implies that the pursuit of feminine identity is a continuous process of reflection and compromise within constrictive societal structures. Phukan makes a substantial contribution to Indian English feminist writing by extending feminist discourse beyond urban or metropolitan contexts by placing a woman's internal turmoil into a politically unstable territory. The concepts of freeing women by self-realization and the pursuit of self-identity are projected by "Mitra" Phukan.

According to Phukan, women should be informed of their options and have an autonomous personality. Phukan's fictional ladies are pitiful, suffering, and do not submit to their marginalization. Rukmini tolerates protests, fights, and questions patriarchal conventions rather than acquiescing in her pain. Rukmini battles to shed her reputation as a childless lady, find purpose in her unhappy marriage, and look for a better career. Rukmini becomes rebellious after learning about her husband's extramarital affair with her coworker Priyam. Rukmini is emancipated and liberated by her friendship with Manoj, her unwed pregnancy, and her choice to pursue her chosen vocation in spite of difficult circumstances. Through her power of mind and self-realization, Rukmini overcomes the emotional turbulence that her married life has brought her and, to some measure, achieves peace. Rukmini is seen as a new woman as she transforms from a quiet victim of loneliness and love to an autonomous thinker who makes her own decisions about her destiny. Rukmini Bezbaruah, the heroine of the book, is portrayed by Mitra Phukan as a strong-willed, rebellious, liberated young woman who yearns for positive company, a better profession, and the pleasures of parenthood.

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