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On

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LITERATURE”**

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Editors

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Organized by



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Organized by Department of English, Annai Veilankanni's College For Women 81, V.G.P Salai,
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**Situating Women in Mitra Phukan's *A Full Night's Thievery*****Dr. Ramdinthari****Assistant Professor****Govt. Aizawl North College, Aizawl, Mizoram**

Abstract Decades have passed Since Mary Wollstonecraft rejected the established view that women are generally weaker and inferior to men. With the emergence of the 'New Woman' women's experiences are articulated boldly and become a significant mechanism by which the unequal power relations in the society are verbalized as well as naturalized. However, gender issues continue to be a critical topic to this day and the concept of gender equality is still very much in transition. Woman is still seen as the 'Other', a passive and a submissive being whose existence is merely for servitude. The societal concept of woman is problematic. Simone de Beauvoir in her ground breaking work, *The Second Sex* formulates, "The destiny that society traditionally offers women is marriage...Marriage is the reference by which the single woman is defined, whether she is frustrated by, disgusted at, or even indifferent to this institution." (451) The paper is an attempt to situate women in Mitra Phukan's collection of stories titled *A Full Night's Thievery* (2016). Phukan weaves the stories of Assamese women from different backgrounds who are united in the same predicament. These women are determined by a male defined culture that are docile and treated merely as sex-object or a procreating machine. In their world of male hegemony, the humiliations of unfaithful husbands; these women find means for their emancipation. The Rudra Veena and the Tabla are considered to be 'male instrument' Mitra Phukan narrates stories on how these instruments serve as gender barriers in the household of musicians.

Keyword gender, marriage, male hegemony, Mitra Phukan, Mary Wollstonecraft, Simone de Beauvoir

In 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft published *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* where she explored the concept of gender inequality. She rejected the established view that women are naturally weaker or inferior to men and the gender roles are artificial. With the emergence

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of the 'New Women' womanist writers articulate women's experiences boldly and become a significant mechanism by which the unequal power relations in the society are verbalized as well as naturalized. However, gender issues continue to be a critical topic to this day and the concept of gender equality is still very much in transition. The woman is still seen as the Other, a passive and a submissive being whose existence is merely for servitude. The societal concept of a woman is problematic. The paper is an attempt to situate women in Mitra Phukan's collection of stories titled *A Full Night's Thievery*. Phukan weaves stories of Assamese women from different backgrounds who are united in the same predicament.

Mitra Phukan is one of the most prominent literary voices in English from Assam. Apart from being a renowned writer, she is also a translator, a columnist, and a trained classical vocalist. She has won UNICEF-CBT award for her children's book *Mamoni's Adventure*. Her works on fiction like *The Collector's Wife* and *A Monsoon of Music* earned her literary fame across the country. Phukan's work explores the female psyche, the conflicts of the self with the cultural and social dimensions defined by the patriarchy. In Indian society, the concept of marriage and family holds the foundation. For the women, marriage becomes the topmost priorities and her worth is defined by the success of her marriage. Simone de Beauvoir in her groundbreaking work, *The Second Sex* aptly comments, "The destiny that society traditionally offers women is marriage...Marriage is the reference by which the single woman is defined, whether she is frustrated by, disgusted at, or even indifferent to this institution." (451) What is apparent here is that women have to silently accept the reality of their situation and accept that their salvation is possible only through submission and servitude to their husbands. Mitra Phukan's women characters are identified only as their husband's wife centering their lives in domesticity, giving birth, and nurturing. In their world of male hegemony, the humiliations of unfaithful husbands, these women find means for their emancipation and they become challenges for the stereotypical women in Assamese society.

A Full Night's Thievery (2016) consists of thirteen stories where "The Reckoning", "Jogeshwari" and "The Revenge of Annapurna" narrates significant issues between husbands

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and wives. Phukan tells stories of strained relationships inflicted with issues like adultery and mental and emotional cruelty which become crucial points for a study. Being a woman writer, Phukan gives importance to her portrayal of women characters in her works. In “The Reckoning” Shrabana is the wife of a manager in a tea estate. She has channeled all her energies into becoming a perfect wife, “Her home, her garden, her parties were the talk of the tea circles...She was the woman behind his success.” (Phukan 24) However, her husband Ranjit Choudhury, after all the sacrifices she made for him, decided to wander and have an affair with a woman twenty-seven years his junior. The story opens with a ransom letter from an insurgent group who kidnapped their son. However, the story is not about insurgency. After suffering humiliations and psychological angst, Shrabana, in a fit of resentment and anger, decides to get even with her husband by sending him ransom notes.

“The anger that has festered within her had burst its skin and come rolling out at that moment. The humiliation of being cast off for a younger woman, the pain and insecurity that had followed Ranjit’s unemotional announcement that he wanted a divorce, the sleepless, tortured nights spent imagining Ranjit together with Noyona...” (Phukan 23)

Marriage is a holy sacrament and Shrabana is disgusted with the fact that her husband unapologetically cheated on her. The only way to avenge her husband is by adopting a tactic used by the terrorists. She is an educated woman who has “given up a promising career, a job with a multinational company in Mumbai and followed him here, to this remote, terrorist-infested place.” (Phukan 23) Refusing to give her husband a divorce, she focuses on ways to punish him for his infidelity. It is through this carefully plotted plan that she takes revenge on her husband.

“Jogeshwari” is another extraordinarily woven tale of an unfaithful husband. The protagonist undergoes psychic pressure due to the impact of forces with which her mind comes into confrontation. These forces are nothing but problems that she faces in her life due to the infidelity of her husband. Taking up an alter ego ‘Jogeshwari’ she resorts to black magic to get rid of her husband. The bitter truth of the condition of married women is



reflected when the narrator laments, “But at least she had a husband. And now she has none...But then a husband is needed...” (Phukan 98) A woman is defined by a husband and not by that she is made of. Simone de Beauvoir reflected, “marriage is the reference by which the single woman is defined, whether she is frustrated by, disgusted at, or even indifferent to the institution.” (Phukan 451) A woman is subjected to oscillate within the masculine universe and is not seen as a complete being on her own. Although marriage was her only means of survival and the only justification of her existence, the narrator in a state of resentment takes a bold step and finally makes a conscious decision to free herself from the humiliations. The story is a reflection of a conflict personality who has suffered humiliations and abandonment due to the husband’s infidelity.

“The Revenge of Annapurna” is a powerful story of a woman who decides to become like the goddess of plenty ‘Annapurna’ in a way of dealing with a husband who took another lover. The story is in a first-person narrative voice and the narrator is known only by her pseudonym “Annapurna’. She carries her duty perfectly as a wife, a mother and a daughter in law. She has mastered her culinary skills which often earns her praises from her family members except her husband. She even admitted, “Other women ensnare and charm with beauty, with wit, with brains, with their sexuality. Me, it’s my ability to turn the most mundane dish into ambrosia that makes all look at me adoringly. Correction. Most people, not all...I glance sideways at him as he sits there.” (Phukan 185) Phukan shows her mastery in creating a passive yet strong woman who is able to elevate her role in the household and earns her place and experiences the joy of contemplation in doing so. With a twist of irony, Phukan shows how the wife perfectly mastered hiding her emotions to her indifferent husband, “He just shakes his head, not even saying anything...Oh yes, I know how this evening will end for him, all right. But I looked around, satisfied that none of that knowledge is showing on my face.”(Phukan 185) Annapurna becomes symbolic of a feminine, nurturing, a co-operative woman who is sensitive to the needs of others who is bold enough to stand up for injustice in terms of her husband’s infidelity and finally lives with dignity as she rejoices, “Inside the house, I am Annapurna I am she around whom this world revolves. As my power



grows here, he moves more and more into himself. His own parents, his son, are closer to me than to him. It has taken me three years, but I have achieved what I set out to do.” (Phukan 196) A common theme runs through these three stories. Confined to the domestic domain, these women feel devalued as their husbands take on new lovers. Phukan expresses their pain and frustrations in a male-dominated societal set-up. The patient, tolerant and uncomplaining wives finally emerged as strong individuals who decided to become the object as Simone de Beauvoir theorized, “The ‘real woman’ is required to make herself object, to be the Other.” (283). Negotiating and subverting their role, they are finally able to take a bold step which alters their lives forever and challenges the stereotyped character in the society.

The other stories are diverse in terms of their thematic content. However, stories like “The Choice”, “The Tabla Player” and “Homecoming” provides an interesting study from a feminist perspective. The world of music dominates these three stories and offers binaries between art and human values. On the surface, “The Choice’ appears to be a story of a Rudra Veena player who has devoted his life to playing the instrument although aware of the consequences. When the curse materializes in his family, he has no choice but to dispose of it. The irony of the story is that even though the Rudra Veena is referred in the feminine term, this revered instrument is reserved for the male solely for the women were not, “taught the secrets of the art, for daughters move away and take the knowledge to enrich the homes they marry into – homes that house competitors..” (Phukan 11) The Rudra Veena is passed down only on the male side of the family and Mitra Phukan, a trained vocalist who often writes on music is consciously writing on the gender-prejudice of a society. “The Tabla Player” is a story where the struggling artist chooses his career instead of attending to his pregnant wife. Ram Kumar is hesitant to turn down the invitation for the evening’s performance although he is aware that his wife Bhanu Devi is due to give birth at any moment. Bhanu Devi in desperation questions her husband for the very first time, ““Will you be late?” she murmured. It was the first time, in the year since they had been married, that Bhanu Devi had asked such a question of her husband. Ram Kumar was surprised.” (Phukan 115) Not wanting to lose his fees “unnecessarily” he tells his wife that he will be back in time



to take her to the hospital. Bhanu Devi dies while waiting for her husband who is reluctant to leave his performance and take his wife to the hospital as she refuses to go to the hospital without her husband although, “she knew the end was near.” (Phukan 123) In “Homecoming”, Somnath Babu is an instrument maker. He has been dependent on his wife Nandini physically and emotionally until her sudden death. Although Somnath Babu is a music maker, this art is never taught to his only daughter Shanti as it is ‘male music’ reserved only for the male sex. In the backdrop of this story, is Shanti the daughter who takes up a local goon Anup as her husband. Anup imbibes the stereotyped gender role of domination and control and constantly beats up his wife. “He’s been using his fists on her. There, it was out. People say he beats her up every time he comes home drunk, which is often.” (Phukan 138) Shanti, through all her sufferings, remains a passive victim and alienated herself from her parents and even resisted seeking refuge in her father’s house although they live not far away from one another. Beauvoir elucidates;

“But what can a woman – for whom the man is both the only means and the only reason for living – do without masculine help? She has no choice but to endure all humiliations; a slave cannot understand the meaning of ‘human dignity’; for him it is enough if he manages to survive.” (659)

What becomes apparent is that Shanti knows no other options but to remain with her husband and suffers his treachery in silence.

Mitra Phukan as a woman writer is sensitive to issues involving women. Her works highlight agony and suffering experienced by the female protagonists. Her characters are acutely aware of injustices that befall them; however, they are often obligated to live the life of suppression. The women in “The Reckoning”, “Jogeshwari” and “The Revenge of Annapurna” are creative in determining methods to fight the humiliations and trauma inflicted on them by their unfaithful husbands. Beauvoir challenges to women is elucidated by Pramod K. Nayar in *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory* ;

“to take charge of their own choice. Instead of being the negative, inferior Other, they must become Subjects in their own right. They need not be



restricted by or to the roles and identities fostered or imposed on them by patriarchy. . . De Beauvoir thus offers feminism two key ideas: (1) the social construction of gender, where women accept their men ordained roles as women and (ii) the necessity for women to take responsibility and choose for themselves. When women choose for themselves, they choose for the entire society. Thus, the woman's choice is about social transformation. (88).

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