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Reclaiming Nature and Womanhood: An Ecofeminist Reading of Mitra Phukan's The Collector's Wife

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Abstract: The paper explores Mitra Phukan's (1953-) *The Collector's Wife* (2005) through an ecofeminist lens, examining the interconnections between women's oppression and environmental degradation. It is set against the political unrest in Assam during the 1970s and 80s, and analyses how the novel intertwines the female character Rukmini's internal conflict, infertility, and identity crisis with the exploitation of nature, reflecting broader themes of resilience and oppression. The paper employs Indian environmental activist and ecofeminist Vandana Shiva's (1952-) ecofeminist theory, and highlights the spiritual and empowering link between women and the environment, positioning Rukmini's journey as one of resilience and transformation. Additionally, the paper employs literary analysis alongside cultural ecofeminism and incorporates Samkhya philosophy's *prakrti*- nature as a dynamic feminine principle symbolising regeneration and resistance to explore Rukmini's transformative journey. Through her journey, the novel suggests that women's resilience and nature's regenerative power are deeply intertwined. By examining these intersections, the paper critiques the patriarchal structures that perpetuate parallel disempowerment of women and ecological oppression and advocates for the recognition of their shared strength and regenerative potential of women and nature, and emphasises the need for ecological harmony and gender equality.

Keywords: Literature; Ecofeminism; Environmental consciousness; Environmental degradation; Patriarchy

1. Introduction

Ecofeminism explores the connection between the exploitation of women and nature due to patriarchal dominance and works toward their protection for the welfare of humanity. According to Bina Agarwal, there are important connections between the domination and exploitation of women and nature [1] (p. 97). Ecofeminism makes connections and conceptualises the historical connections between women and nature. Ecofeminism's "basic premise is that the ideology that authorises oppressions such as those based on race, class, gender, sexuality, physical abilities, and species is the same ideology which sanctions the oppression of nature" [2] (p. 1). Cultural ecofeminism relies on the psychological and intuitive factors in understanding the oppression of women instead of focusing merely on the materialistic analyses of institutions. They construct identification with nature as a deliberate rational choice, a political manoeuvre, rather than an acceptance of patriarchal ideologies about nature. They critique dualism that legitimises power imbalance and attempt to resolve this hierarchy by demonstrating the positive side of those characteristics traditionally deemed inferior while stressing the importance of women-nature connections to the survival of nature [3] (Buckingham 35). They believe that celebrating the naturalness of the body - human beings, especially women - reinforces the connection to nature. They advocate for a revival or

revitalisation of traditional ecological knowledge and practices often associated with women. Ynestra King asserts that life on earth is an interconnected web, not a hierarchy. There is no natural hierarchy [4] (pp. 19-20) Human hierarchy is projected into nature and then used to justify social domination. Therefore, ecofeminist theory seeks to show the connections between all forms of domination, including the domination of non-human nature. Ecofeminism sees itself as a global movement that is decentralised and based on common interests of the world but at the same time celebrates diversity and opposes all forms of domination and violation [4] (pp. 19-20). Thus, ecofeminism seeks to build a value-based society that interconnects nature, men, and women in non-hierarchical ways. It seeks to deconstruct dominant ideologies of patriarchy that have been responsible for the devalued systems, whether environmental or human societies. Ecofeminism thus works towards an idealised notion of the earth with all its living and non-living beings in harmony.

Mankind has been intricately connected by nature and has interacted with it since its inception. Northeast India is one of India's most ethnically, linguistically, and ecologically diverse regions, and its inhabitants have traditionally maintained a close relationship with nature, animism, and nature worship. Over time, the interaction between human beings and nature started transforming as humans started transgressing the boundaries of nature and exploiting nature for their selfish motives. Human consumption has escalated at a disproportionate level and they have become responsible for the degradation of the environment and rapid depletion of natural resources. As Lynn White aptly remarks, “Quite unintentionally, changes in human ways often affect nonhuman nature” [5] (p. 4). Human involvement in the environment contributed to several environmental problems like pollution, climate change, water scarcity, and deforestation. Though the northeastern region is marked by a rich heritage of natural wealth and cultural values, it also holds a dark, gloomy, troubled, and tumultuous past. It has endured significant bloodshed, violence, socio-political instability, insurgency, environmental degradation, and identity crisis. These problems usually escalate due to an offshoot of unequal power dynamics between the ethnic groups in the region. Assam, a land rich in culture, tradition, language, and history, has also been scarred by conflict, violence, and political unrest, particularly during the turbulent years of the *Assam Movement* (1979–1985), one of the most vibrant democratic mass movements in India. This period forms the socio-political backdrop of The Collector’s Wife. The unrest not only shaped the public atmosphere of fear, surveillance, and displacement but also deeply affected the private lives of individuals. By placing Rukmini’s personal crisis within this historical moment, the narrative reflects how large-scale political turmoil permeates common citizens' psychological and emotional lives, especially women, whose voices often remain unheard amid dominant narratives of nationalism and insurgency. During these years, there was a growing wave of immigration, that was “likely to alter permanently the whole future of Assam and to destroy more surely than the Burmese invaders of 1820 the whole structure of Assamese culture and civilization” [6] (p. 89). As stated in Dr Monirul Hussain's The *Assam Movement: Class,* Ideology and Identity (1993) the *Assam Movement* demanded to stop this influx of immigrants of foreign nationals to Assam using illegal means, especially from neighbouring countries like Bangladesh and Nepal; their participation in the electoral process in Assam; and the deportation of all foreigners living illegally in Assam to enable the people of Assam which comprises ethnic minorities with diverse cultural identity and distinct ways of coexisting with nature to protect their distinct identity in their traditional homeland from the threat of foreign nationals [7] (p.

7).The influx of foreign nationals into Assam posed not only a threat to Assamese cultural identity but also to the ecological stability of the region. From an ecofeminist standpoint, this demographic expansion intensified the exploitation of natural resources, leading to deforestation, encroachment on riverine ecosystems, and overuse of land and water. The newly settled populations, often pushed to ecologically fragile zones, placed immense pressure on the environment, accelerating the degradation of Assam's rich biodiversity. Furthermore, the displacement and marginalisation of indigenous practices of ecological stewardship—many of which are woman-led—undermined sustainable living systems. Thus, the environmental crisis depicted in Phukan's novel is not only symbolic but also grounded in the real and pressing ecological threats brought on by demographic and political shifts [8]. It was estimated that the number of illegal foreigners in Assam was as high as 4.5 to 5 million, or 31 to 34 per cent of the total population of the state in 1971 [9] (p. 118). Another significant conflict that has shaped Assam's political landscape is the formation of the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) in 1979 [10] (p. 23). ULFA sought to create a sovereign Assam - a goal that eventually led the Indian government to ban the organisation, designating it a terrorist group. In retaliation, the state used surrendered ULFA members to conduct extrajudicial killings, often targeting the family members of active ULFA militants [10] (p. 23).

Mitra Phukan's novel titled The Collector's Wife, set against this volatile backdrop, powerfully captures the socio-political turmoil of the time, highlighting how the 'anti-foreigner movement', led by the All Assam Students Union (AASU)[1], gave rise to militant groups like ULFA and culminated in the Assam Accord of 1985[2]. During this period, 1979-1985, almost two million people lost their homes as a result of violence [7] (p. 10). In The Collector's Wife the narrator—external to the story yet closely aligned with Rukmini's inner world, explores the impact of these tensions on individuals, particularly through the protagonist Rukmini, whose personal struggles reflect a broader societal breakdown where fear, distrust, and a sense of dystopia prevail. Through Rukmini's focalised perspective, the narrative reveals a dual vision of patriotism—one grounded in sincere love for the land, and the other masked by self-interest and violence, where personal or political agendas are pursued under the guise of nationalism. . The narrative, through Rukmini's internal focalisation, critiques the pseudo-terrorist outfits and their seamless blending with criminal gangs, revealing a society where youth are drawn into insurgency, extortion, and abduction as means of survival or rebellion. Through vivid imagery and sharp commentary filtered through Rukmini's perspective, the narrative constructs a grim portrayal of a society plagued by propaganda, surveillance, and fear.

Phukan is an Indian novelist from Assam, widely recognised for her contributions as a writer, translator, columnist, and Hindustani classical music vocalist. The Collector's Wife recounts the story of Rukmini Bezboruah, wife of - Siddharth, the District Collector of a small village, Parbatpuri, a fictional insurgency-ridden hill town in Assam. After her wedding, Rukmini finds herself enclosed in the trap of insurgency and violence in Parbatpuri. Rukmini enjoys the privileges of being the wife of a DC, but she suffers from an identity crisis as she knows that there is "no getting round what had become the central fact of her existence in this district town, the DC's wife" [11] (p. 28). As Simone de Beauvoir says "The situation of woman is that she –a free and autonomous being like all creatures –nevertheless finds herself living in a world where men compel her to assume the status of the other" [12] (p. 17). Rukmini's married life is like a roller-coaster ride. She looks up to her husband for love, comfort, and support, but he does not have adequate time for her. Rukmini does not have any children even

after ten years of marriage, which adds to her dismay. In an attempt to break away from the empty life, Rukmini befriends a man named Manoj Mahanta, whom she meets at a wedding and gradually finds comfort and a sense of satisfaction in his company. Rukmini's life spirals into mayhem and breakdowns after she discovers that her husband is having an affair with her colleague, Priyam, followed by the shocking discovery of her own pregnancy- the result of a one-night stand with Manoj. As she tries to process all the new information and the effects that it would have on her married life, she is confronted with the news of Manoj and Siddharth's death at the hands of MOFEH[3], a fictional insurgency group. The novel ends with a moving scene of Rukmini receiving the dead body of her husband.

In The Collector's Wife, Mitra Phukan employs a poignant third-person narrative that is both heterodiegetic and extradiegetic[4] [13] (pp. 245-248). While the narrator remains outside the story world, the narrative is closely centred around Rukmini, allowing intimate access to her inner world. This perspective offers insight into both her emotional turmoil and the socio-political unrest of Assam during the 1970s and 1980s. Phukan parallels Rukmini's internal distress—marked by childlessness and emotional isolation—with the external insurgency, weaving a narrative that interlinks the personal and the political. The calm, observational tone reinforces Rukmini's quiet struggles within a masculine bureaucratic framework. The narrator's ability to shift between her personal experiences and the larger political context adds depth and complexity to the narrative. By employing a heterodiegetic narrator with internal focalisation, Phukan enables readers to engage with the protagonist's emotional journey while maintaining a broader perspective on the historical forces shaping her world. The symbolic weight of the title, The Collector's Wife, reflects the broader erasure of female identity within patriarchal and institutional systems. It reveals how Rukmini's identity is subsumed within the bureaucratic patriarchy — she is not addressed as an individual but as an extension of her husband's official title. This symbolic erasure highlights the masculinist structures that dominate her world, where state authority and masculine rationality eclipse female agency and emotion. Through the narrator's internal focalisation on Rukmini, the narrative explores how a woman's crisis is shaped by wider socio-political forces, leading to a denouement that is as shocking as it is inevitable.

2. Materials and Methods

The paper employs a qualitative literary methodology, combining close reading with contextual analysis of Mitra Phukan's The Collector's Wife through an ecofeminist lens. It draws on Vandana Shiva's critique of the exploitation of environmental resources and indigenous women, as well as the spiritual connection between women and nature, and incorporates Greta Gaard's concept of the naturalisation of women and the feminisation of nature (p. 5). Cultural ecofeminist frameworks are used to explore how the interconnectedness between women and nature becomes a source of healing and empowerment for the protagonist, Rukmini. The paper also critiques the intersection of patriarchy, insurgency, and ecological degradation, drawing parallels between gendered oppression and environmental destruction within Assam's socio-political context. Additionally, it engages with the Samkhya philosophy of *prakrti*, interpreting it as a symbol of regeneration and resistance that mirrors Rukmini's transformative journey. This interdisciplinary approach offers a nuanced understanding of ecofeminist themes in the novel.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Tranquillity and Turmoil: Nature's Dual Role

The novel represents the beauty of Assam vividly through Rukmini's internal perspective. Her house is located on a hillock, with a "view" that is "marvellous" [11] (p.19). The house is "spacious and well-maintained... Every window opened to heart stopping views of the surrounding landscape. To the north, below… the Red River or the Luit… snaked its way past Parbatpuri in deceptively lazy loops" [11] (p. 19). Rukmini loves to sit on the front lawn, a place of peace and beauty. However, despite the serene environment, Rukmini often sits there in solitude as Siddharth hardly has the time to enjoy the "tranquil surroundings" [11] (p. 68-69). Nature, thus, becomes Rukmini's constant companion as it fills the void created by her marriage. Humans, other species, and the environment are intricately intertwined in a complex and interdependent web of relationships, but we often struggle to comprehend this interconnectedness because we suffer from a form of blindness, an "individualistic perspective" and a "self-delusion" regarding our superiority over nature [14] (p. 20). Phukan, through a third-person narrator, portrays characters who are aware of the pressing need for natural preservation but fail to translate this awareness into meaningful action. This is exemplified through another female character in the novel, Priyam Deka- a social activist and Rukmini's colleague- who has "several 'causes' to fight, such as AIDS, the environment, and child prostitution" [11] (p. 39), but her behaviour contradicts her professional ideals. For instance, without any hesitation, she crumples a used tissue and tosses it "carelessly out of the window" which lands up "amidst the mud and the slime" [11] (p. 187). The narrator further highlights degradation by drawing attention to the environmental activism in Parbatpuri and the Forum for Citizens' Rights, who "periodically made noises about the alarming rise in the environmentally-hazardous practice of using non-bio-degradable bags, [but] the citizens of Parbatpuri always pestered their shopkeepers to give them a couple of extra bags free with every purchase" [11] (p. 33). These actions exemplify the disparity between theoretical concern for the environment and the failure to implement sustainable practices in daily life, reflecting the challenge of reconciling human conduct with ecological awareness. The description of the town as filled with "dirt and squalor" [11] (p. 21) reflects a broader disregard for environmental well-being. Humans have allowed this "damage to the Earth's ecosystems" because they often see "nature as something external… something to be conquered and used" [14] (p. 155). However, this destruction will "accelerate our destruction: the more environmental damage we cause, the more susceptible we become to extreme weather events, invasive species, pandemic disease, and food insecurity" [14] (p. 156). The narrator poignantly explores such disasters in her novel through Rukmini's perspective, as she witnesses a scene from her window in which she sees a girl being "swept away" by the floods" [11] (p. 282). The water levels rise silently and enter the "compounds, schools, hospitals, offices, homes, making no distinction between the dwellings of the rich and poor" [11] (p. 282). The narrative emphasises the powerlessness of humans in the face of nature's fury, there was "nothing that anybody could do to beat the river back, no power on earth could push down the level of the muddy, swiftly-rising, waters" [11] (p. 282). The water not only posed an immediate threat of drowning but also "carried disease, and to drink from the river in spate would mean as inevitable an end as drowning", underscoring the perilous consequences of unchecked environmental destruction [11] (p. 282).

3.2. Science, Capitalism, and the Female Body

Carlassare argues that material ecofeminism reveals how capitalism perpetuates oppression and ecological degradation [15]. “For most materialist ecofeminists, capitalism can not be separated from the domination and oppression it perpetuates, and must be replaced – whether by a form of socialism or some de-centralized version of grass roots democracy and small-scale economies” [15] (p. 92). In her book, *Ecofeminism,* (2014) Vandana Shiva stated that the natural agricultural seeds and women’s bodies are reduced from creative regenerative power into “passive” sites where the expert “produces” and adds value [16] (pp. 51-52). Ecofeminism asserts that this devaluation and reduction of women and nature stems from an androcentric worldview that prioritises male domination and technological advancement over life-giving processes [16] (p. 13). Merchant argues that the more-than-human realm was perceived as passive, resulting in the loss of agency for nonhuman nature whereby living entities—nonhuman animals and plants—are reduced to an object-like ontological status [17]. This mechanistic view of nature regards women's bodies as passive instruments for reproduction rather than as independent entities. Mary Daly further asserts that “the agents of patriarchal evil have invaded women and nature with more and more virulent attacks... The new reproductive technologies have developed at an alarming rate, taking on forms that reduce women to subhuman ‘subjects’ of experimentation” [18] (p. xxv). This is exemplified in the novel, where Rukmini’s infertility makes her the subject of medical intervention, and the doctor provides her with different medical options such as “GIFT or Gamete Intrafallopian Transfer, and ICSI, or Intracytaplasmic Sperm Injection” [11] (p. 83). In the novel, women are portrayed as objects that can give birth to children, and failing to do so is seen as a crime, as a societal failure. Rukmini is made to feel that without embracing motherhood, there is no personal growth. The trauma of infertility makes Rukmini doubt herself. At her colleague Rita’s wedding, Rukmini is subjected to social ostracisation, overhearing whispers of disapproval: “What times are we living through! In my days, even the shadow of a barren woman wasn't allowed to fall on a bride” [11] (p. 15). The narrator, through internal focalisation, presents Rukmini’s emotional response—her sense of humiliation, self-doubt, and anger—as she is met with “distaste”, “disgust”, and “dislike” from the elderly women [11] (p. 15), reinforcing the deeply ingrained traditional patriarchal belief that women are only valued for their reproductive ability. Rukmini is stressed and disheartened. The feeling is sharpened as their words echo in her mind. Though she is unable to express it, she is filled with anger and frustration, silently questioning the assumptions imposed on her by society. How did they “dare to even assume that she, childless, was inferior? Flawed. Inauspicious, her very identity dependent on her ability… to contribute a brood of children” [11] (p. 41). However, instead of resisting, she internalises the blame, saying: “I should have thought of it myself. It was inexcusable of me to sit so near the bride” [11] (p. 15). The narrator’s use of focalisation allows readers access to Rukmini’s unvoiced emotional landscape and reflects the deeply ingrained societal expectations that women are expected to embrace, even at the cost of dehumanising them. Through this, the narrative attacks the reduction of women’s identity to mere reproductive machines, much like the way capitalist-patriarchal systems reduce nature to an economic resource. Rukmini undergoes psychological oppression and is ready to undergo medical procedures where modern science will decide her fertility rather than the natural process. The heterodiegetic narrator, through internal focalisation, captures Rukmini’s apprehensions as she

reflects on the implications of undergoing fertility treatment. She realises that taking the "fertility drugs" would mean "placing her body completely in the hands of Science," and that the resulting child would be as much the "offspring of Dr. Rabha" — the doctor guiding her and Siddharth through their infertility — and the "white-coated technicians," as it would be hers and Siddharth's [11] (p. 84). The private, intimate act of conception is thus transformed into a clinical, laboratory-controlled process. This tension mirrors the broader ecofeminist critique of how agriculture and natural ecosystems are similarly industrialised and commodified under capitalist systems. The narrator further reveals how she suffers silently at the hands of the male gynaecologists with their "prying and the prodding and the probing" as they study "her womb, her vagina, and her ovaries" and ends up with a feeling of "a sense of violation after each examination" [11] (p. 83). The reproductive technology "alienates women" from the "most intimate process in which they normally co-operate with their own nature, which they want to experience as creative, productive, and spontaneous" [16] (p. 139). This segment of the novel echoes the ideals of material ecofeminism, which challenges and critiques the medicalisation and commercialisation of women's bodies, highlighting the links between the exploitation of nature and reproductive labour.

> "The female body's generative capacity has now been discovered as a new 'area of investment' and profit-making for scientists, medical engineers and entrepreneurs in a situation where other areas of investment are no longer very promising. Reproductive technologies have been developed not because women need them, but because capital and science need women for the continuation of their model of growth and progress… technologies are… based on exploitation and subordination… historical fact that technological innovations lead to an intensification, not attenuation, of inequality… [16] (p. 175)"

3.3. War, Women, and the Wounded Earth

The novel highlights the parallels between political violence, environmental degradation, and the subjugation of women. Ecofeminists connect military technology with "rape, genocide, and imperialism, with starvation and homelessness, with the poisoning of the environment, and with the fearful lives of the world's peoples-especially those of women" [4] (p. 26). In the novel, the heterodiegetic narrator, through focalisation on Rukmini, portrays the insurgency, violence, and trauma prevalent in Assam, which not only disrupts social life but also exploits the land. The narrative portrays the plight of people, especially women, whose lives are irrevocably altered by insurgency. Women like Rukmini often become the silent victims of armed struggles and insurgency. Her personal life is interlinked with the political unrest prevailing in the region. During an agitation movement, she is wounded. During her visit to the hospital, she realises that she is pregnant with Manoj's child. Eventually, insurgency claims the lives of her husband and Manoj, and shakes and shatters the very existence of her life. Another character, Nandini Deuri, the wife of the Superintendent of Police of Parbatpuri, and a mother, too, becomes a victim of insurgency when her husband is killed in broad daylight, on the day of their anniversary, in front of her eyes, leaving her shellshocked. The narrator, while maintaining narrative distance, focuses on the emotional fallout experienced by these women, underscoring the futility and brutality of violence. Mies argues that "militarization of men… implies violence against, and the degradation of women" [16] (p. 123), highlighting how armed conflict reinforces patriarchal dominance and ecological destruction. By

incorporating Gaard's concept of the naturalisation of women and the feminisation of nature [19] (p. 5), it becomes evident that the marginalisation of women mirrors the exploitation of the natural world. Gaard argues that in patriarchal cultures, women are linked to nature through traits such as passivity, dependency, and sexuality, which render them as objects open to control and violation (p.5). In the novel, this conceptual framework is evident in the portrayal of women's bodies as natural landscapes- vulnerable, penetrable, and controllable- especially during times of political unrest and insurgency. The acts of rape and abduction discussed by Rukmini and her colleagues highlight how women, like the environment, become casualties of male violence and domination in conflict zones. Just as nature is feminised and treated as an object to be tamed or conquered—described through metaphors like "virgin land" or "rape of the earth" [16] (p. xvi) —women are naturalised; their bodies are seen as terrain to be occupied or violated. This reinforces their subordinate status and legitimises violence against them under the guise of control and conquest. Susan Brownmiller states that there is a "close connection between warfare against foreign peoples and warfare against women in the form of rape" [18] (p. 123). One such moment in the novel, when a woman is "raped before she was shot" [11] (p. 26) during a robbery, underlines the brutality women endure in conflict. The landscape, which was once a symbol of pristine beauty, becomes a site of conflict and deterioration due to the terrorist groups taking shelter in the hills and the dense forests, transforming the place into a battleground. The ongoing war and conflict marked by the use of ammunition and guns make the land barren and infertile. This barrenness and destruction of nature are mirrored in Rukmini's infertility, as she undergoes invasive medical treatment. This captures King's critique of militarisation, where war and state violence are inherently tied to the exploitation of natural resources and the repression of marginalised communities, particularly women:

> "Ecofeminism is about connectedness and wholeness of theory and practice…(it sees) the devastation of the earth and her beings by the corporate warriors, and the threat of nuclear annihilation by the military warriors as feminist concerns. It is the same masculinist mentality which would deny us our right to our own bodies and our own sexuality and which depends on multiple systems of dominance and state power to have its way" [16] (p. 46)".

Nature, as well as Rukmini's body, undergoing medical treatment, has become a place for conquest owing to human intervention, patriarchal control, and medical intervention. The systematic destruction of nature amid political unrest parallels Rukmini's experience of being denied agency over her own body, thus emphasising how militarisation, ecological devastation, and gendered oppression are interconnected. Nature is portrayed as feminine through its nurturing qualities and is often depicted as Mother Earth. This feminisation of both women and nature allows patriarchal ideologies to dominate and oppress them. These forms of oppression, as Gaard's framework suggests, are interconnected, particularly in the context of war and conflict, where the destruction of human bodies and natural landscapes are inextricably linked. The novel's reflection of the brutality meted out to women echoes the destruction of nature. Hence, militarism poses a threat to human civilisation as well as to the surroundings.

3.4. Prakrti as Resistance

According to Samkhya philosophy[5], *prakrti*[6] represents the foundational, feminine principle of nature — the source of all creation and transformation [20] (p. 11). In ecofeminist thought, this notion resonates strongly, as *prakrti* symbolises the nurturing, life-giving force

that stands in contrast to patriarchal hierarchies which seek to dominate both women and the environment. This alignment makes *prakrti* a powerful metaphor for resistance and regeneration. Drawing from this tradition, the novel reflects the spiritual and ontological ties between womanhood and nature, particularly through the character of Rukmini. *Prakrti* is the "original 'something' or 'ground' or 'stuff' from which all products come" [20] (p.10). It is the "realm or dimension of pure being"; it is "unconscious" [20] (p.11). The *prakrti,* along with *purusa*[7], the "pure consciousness", leads to the "creation of the world" [20] (pp. 11-12). Thus, though *prakrti* and *purusa* are different, separate, and unconnected, they "[…] mutually interact to bring about the process of creation, self-awareness and, finally, enlightenment. According to a well-known simile of the Samkhya, *prakrti* and *purusa* interact for each other's sake as do a blind man and a lame man" [20] (p.13). This association fosters a sense of sanctity and interconnectedness in relationships between the human and non-human realms. According to *Indian cosmology*[8]*, purusa-prakrti* is a "duality in unity… every form of creation bears the sign of this dialectical unity, of diversity within a unifying principle, and this dialectical harmony between the male and female principles and between nature and man, becomes the basis of ecological thought" [21] (p. 40). Drawing on these philosophical foundations, Shiva states that *prakrti* should be a source of inspiration, as it challenges oppression and hierarchies of any kind. By embracing *prakrti,* we can move towards a more equitable and sustainable world that respects and nurtures the diversity of life. Shiva's perspective advocates for a holistic approach where the environment is not considered as an external resource to be dominated but as an integral part of human existence. This holistic, non-hierarchical relation, one which is recognised by its unity and totality, finds resonance in the novel through the internal focalisation on Rukmini. Though Rukmini faces several ups and downs in her married life, the narrator reveals that she finds comfort and solace in nature, particularly in the beauty of the sight of the hills that are visible from her window. She does not view nature as a separate entity; rather, she is one with nature, and by embracing the wholeness present in nature, she rises towards her independence, self-empowerment, freedom and resilience. She liked "being surrounded by the hills" [11] (p. 20). The love for hills signifies her strong desire to rise above the constraints of her current life, reflecting her yearning for personal liberation. It relieves her of her pain and soothes her anxiety and wounds, thus illustrating the ecofeminist principle that personal and environmental liberation are intrinsically linked.

3.5. Nature, Empowerment, and the Interconnected Struggles of Women and the Environment

The sudden arrival of the male character Manoj in Rukmini's life brings renewed hope and vitality. Her newfound happiness echoes the changes in the natural surroundings around her. She feels awake when the "cool breeze of water on her body as she stood under the shower" [11] (p. 144), and the "leaves looked clean and fresh. Everything was a luminous green" [11] (p. 144). According to K. J. Warren, the "arrogant eye" interacts with nature to dominate and conquer it. It assumes that beings deserving of moral consideration are similar, while those that are different are subject to lesser or no consideration. In opposition, the "loving eye" recognises that humans and nature are different and acknowledges the relationship between them [22] (pp. 136-137). It creates a distinction between the self and the other, between humans and nonhumans, in such a way that the perception of the other is an expression of love for one who/which is recognised at the outset as independent, dissimilar, or different. An ecofeminist perspective involves a change in attitude from an "arrogant perception" to a "loving

perception" of the non-human world [22] (136-137). This notion of looking at the environment with the "loving eye" is reflected in the evolving relationship between Rukmini and Manoj, both of whom display a deep appreciation for nature. In contrast, Siddharth's detachment mirrors the "arrogant eye," symbolising an indifferent relationship with nature that lacks emotional engagement. The narrative, focalised through Rukmini, observes that when he is at the house, the "atmosphere on the hilltop always appeared more solemn, more serious", and the "craggy mountains in the northern distance" turn "purple with disapproval" [11] (p. 44).

Phukan skilfully employs natural elements to portray Rukmini's inner feelings, thoughts, and emotions. Through a third-person heterodiegetic narrator with internal focalisation, the reader is closely aligned with Rukmini's perspective as she gazes at the river and contemplates her life and choices. Rukmini feels connected and aligned to the "Red River" [11] (p. 84) that placidly flows below the house. In one moment of introspection, she reflects on her decision to accept motherhood with the help of science and technology. She wonders whether she wants a child badly enough to endure all that would take place once she takes the route charted out for her by Dr. Rabha. Her inner musings extend to the river itself, wondering whether the river is happy to be fertile at the cost of floods, using the river's cycles as a metaphor for her fertility struggles. She notices that the Red River is a

> "Tamed… with barren wastes of empty sands… After the monsoon deluged the earth… these banks would be swamped by the fertile flood of water which would bring life-enhancing slit from the hilly regions… how did the stretches of sand feel about the floods that obliterate their very existence every year… To be drowned by science, or the river, for the sake of fertility." [11] (p. 84)

Rukmini's reflections reveal a deep identification with the river. Due to her communication gap and inability to articulate her emotions, she feels voiceless like the river. The river becomes a metaphor for her own sense of powerlessness. As she contemplates the possibility of undergoing medical treatment for infertility, she silently negotiates with herself — whether this scientific remedy can adequately handle the profound emotional and psychological ramifications of such a decision.

Cultural ecofeminism, according to Merchant, sees spirituality ''as a source of both personal and social change'' [23] (p. 202). It is rooted in the spiritual essence of life and encompasses the interconnectedness of all existence. It is a rediscovery of life's sacredness and celebrates the harmonious relationship with Mother Earth founded upon the principles of harmony, coexistence, and mutual care. It is "characterised by a spirituality that is grounded in the earth and acknowledges that we are all a part of a larger community that is interrelated'' (p. 5) and is based on the principles of kindness, compassion, and nonviolence'' [24] (p. 5). This spiritual connection with nature is awakened in Rukmini after she spends a few hours amid a forest and lets it soothe her. Upon discovering her husband's extramarital affair with Priyam, she refrains from seeking any explanation. Instead, she seeks refuge in nature, she moves "out of the compound" and ventures "for a walk on the hill road" [11] (p. 261). The natural beauty of her surroundings comforts her and alleviates her anxiety. As she ventures deeper into the forest, she realises that the "quietude settled softly on her, soothing her agitation… As her focus shifted from herself to her surroundings, she became aware of the vibrant, lively atmosphere" [11] (p. 261). The beauty of nature that surrounds her captivates her sight and senses, rendering her averse to any external disturbances. All alone in the forest, she cherishes the restorative power of nature. The gentle hum of the birds acts as soothing

music, and she forgets all the complexities of her life. “The complications and complexities of their lives, the hatred, the violence, the suspicion and pettiness that coloured Parbatpuri were dwarfed in the face of this marvellous, all- encompassing melody all around her” [11] (p. 262). Through this scene, the narrator projects the therapeutic effects that the natural world can have on the human psyche, effectively relieving stress and anxiety. Thus, it is imperative to consider this blessing and resist engaging in activities that adversely affect the natural world. Rukmini’s sense of comfort and peace in the lap of nature is deeply significant from an ecofeminist perspective. This incident espouses a return-to-nature ideology that the modern world has destroyed. It encourages spiritual practices that honour the earth and recognise the divine femininity that exists within and through nature. Rukmini celebrates this woman-nature connection and imbibes the unique personality of nature; she transforms into a woman who can embrace and endure her circumstances while retaining her individual personality. She emerges as a new woman who is in control of her choices and is unapologetic for its consequences. She tells Siddharth, “I know I’ve never really been very decisive about anything. But on this I’m firm, I’m having this baby” [11] (p. 315). She gains confidence and asserts her firmness as she states that she will keep the child even if “it costs me my marriage” [11] (p. 315), thus challenging the patriarchal system that defines a woman’s relationship with her husband and motherhood.

Rukmini goes through an emotional epiphany in nature. However, the silence is laden with a deeper meaning, as she understands the value of life in a world that is marred by hostility and demolition. The forest where she takes refuge helps her reflect and organise her thoughts; it eventually helps her reconcile with her husband and rebuild their relationship. The natural world exerts a positive influence on her, which in turn, enlightens Siddharth, and they are able to confront their emotional struggles together. The communication gap that once distanced them gradually narrows as they begin to open up about their feelings and discuss the circumstances surrounding their extramarital affairs, thus fostering a better and deeper understanding between them. However, this happiness is short-lived, as towards the end of the novel, Rukmini receives the devastating news of the death of both the men in her life, and she goes numb: “her mind was cloudy like the sky outside. She felt neither grief nor pain, only a strange kind of numbness” [1] (p. 347) Fluttering her hands to the folds of her sari that covered her pregnant belly, she reflects on the irony of the situation, “Poor baby. Deprived of not one but two fathers in one go” [11] (p. 348). This sudden, life-altering incident changes Rukmini’s life in an instant, but the strength she imbibes from nature helps her to accept reality with resilience, and she emerges as a strong, self-reliant woman.

Phukan weaves the tales of environmental degradation and the personal struggles of the characters into the novel, illustrating that the oppression of women and environmental degradation are not isolated issues but deeply intertwined struggles. In Staying Alive: *Women, Ecology and Survival in India*, (2009) Shiva asserts that “Women in India are an intimate part of nature, both in imagination and practice. At one level, nature is symbolised as the embodiment of the feminine principle, and at another, she is nurtured by the feminine to produce life and provide sustenance” [21] (p. 37). This profound aspect of the interconnectedness and mutual nurturing between women and the natural world provides Rukmini with a healing sensation, despite being disgruntled with her subsistence. She draws the strength needed to embrace her capacity to nurture a child, who is yet to be born, from her intricate bonding with nature. Such resilience and resistance against patriarchal and capitalist

destruction of nature are also seen in the real world through movements like the Chipko Movement[9], where women physically protected trees from deforestation, and Wangari Maathai's Green Belt Movement10, which linked environmental conservation to women's empowerment. This aspect of fighting against all kinds of resistance gracefully bestows a universal sense that transcends the limitations of time and place in the novel. Rukmini's journey- her reclamation of her body, her choices, and her future- show more widespread environmental feminism than just personal emancipation.

4. Conclusions

Northeast India is renowned for its rich biodiversity, boasting an immensely rich archive of rare species of flora and fauna, mineral resources, and subsistence livelihoods. This abundance is reflected in the literary fabrication of the region, which propagates how its people, especially women, live in accord with the natural world. Karen Laura Thornber, in her book, *Ecoambiguity: Environmental Crises and East Asian Literatures* (2012), discusses how literature from Asia celebrates the beauty of nature and the intrinsic existence of the people in the natural world [25]. Similarly, in Phukan's novel, whatever mental mayhem the protagonist goes through resonates in the natural world. The natural landscape becomes a poignant backdrop against the protagonist's identity crisis in a world overshadowed by insurgency and terrorism. Every stage of Rukmini's life corresponds to the various phases of nature that envelop her. For instance, the emotional relief Rukmini experiences in her relationship with Manoj parallels the arrival of rain that brings respite from the stifling, oppressive summer heat. When both her husband and the father of her unborn child fall victim to the acts of insurgency, their deaths parallel the ravaging flood by the Red River that creates havoc in Parbatpuri. However, it is undoubtedly her inherent womanhood that enables Rukmini to form a spiritual connection with nature and comprehend the sacredness of humanity. By aligning herself with nature rather than societal expectations, Rukmini embodies the principles of Samkhya's *prakrti* which Shiva interprets as a force of resistance against oppression. Just as nature experiences cycles of growth, decay, and regeneration, so does Rukmini as she moves through stages of despair, relief, and eventual empowerment. The novel thus illustrates how personal and ecological traumas are interconnected, affirming the ecofeminist premise that the subjugation of women and the exploitation of nature arise from the same systemic structures. Rukmini's eventual reclamation of her voice, her body, and her maternal agency directly challenges this system, offering a model of spiritual and ecological resistance. Through her character's alignment with nature, Rukmini reclaims a space of autonomy and healing, demonstrating that the path to liberation is rooted in interconnectedness rather than dominance. The paper thus concludes that ecofeminist resilience offers a powerful framework to reclaiming both the environment and women in the face of systemic violence and supports better ecological knowledge in which survival depends on mutual respect between women and the surroundings.

Notes

[1]**All Assam Students Union (AASU):** AASU emerged as the leading organisation in the *Assam Movement* (1979–1985), mobilising mass protests against illegal immigration. It represented the voice of Assamese youth and civil society, advocating for the protection of indigenous identity and resources. While initially rooted in non-violent, democratic mobilisation, the political vacuum and unmet demands that followed the movement's peak laid the groundwork for the emergence of more radical factions such as the ULFA. This evolution from peaceful protest to armed struggle forms the socio-political backdrop of *The Collector's Wife*, where the lingering tensions and disillusionment of this era permeate the narrative. The fictional setting of Parbatpuri reflects the real-world consequences of this unrest — including surveillance, fear, and the erosion of idealism — all of which deeply affect the protagonist's psychological and emotional state. (Source: Wikipedia)

[2]**Assam Accord of 1985**: Signed on 15 August 1985 between AASU, the Government of India, and the Government of Assam, the Accord marked the end of the *Assam Movement*. It promised the detection and deportation of illegal immigrants, socio-economic development, and constitutional safeguards for Assamese people. (Source: Wikipedia)[4] **Movement for an Exclusive Homeland (MOFEH):** MOFEH is a fictional insurgent group mentioned in the novel. It bears strong resemblance to real-life organisations such as ULFA, which emerged in the aftermath of the *Assam Movement*. MOFEH symbolises the radicalised factions that arose from the disillusionment with the Assam Accord and reflects the atmosphere of political unrest, fear, and insurgency that marked Assam's socio-political landscape during the late 20th century.

[3i]**Extradiegetic-heterodiegetic:** It is a narrative paradigm where the narrator, in the first degree tells a story he is absent from. The narrator observes the protagonist Rukmini's life and actions from an external standpoint and is not a character in the main story. (For a theoretical overview, see Gérard Genette's *Narrative Discourse.)*

[4]**Samkhya philosophy**: Sāṃkhya is one of the six orthodox schools of Indian philosophy, offering a dualist metaphysical system. As explained by Larson, it posits two fundamental, eternal realities — **Prakṛti** (Nature) and **Puruṣa** (Consciousness) — whose interaction accounts for all phenomena. (For a theoretical overview, see *Classical Sāṃkhya*, Larson, 1969)

[5]***Prakrti****:* In Sāṃkhya, Prakṛti is the unmanifest, unconscious, and dynamic principle — the source of all material existence. Larson describes it as composed of the three guṇas (sattva, rajas, tamas), which, when disturbed, give rise to the cosmos. (For a theoretical overview, see Classical Sāṃkhya, Larson, 1969)[6]***Purusa****:* **Puruṣa** is the passive, conscious witness — pure awareness, multiple and eternal. According to Larson, Puruṣa does not act but enables cognition and experience by its mere presence, distinguishing it from the active Prakṛti. (For a theoretical overview, see Classical Sāṃkhya, Larson, 1969)

[7] **Indian Cosmology:** Indian cosmology is a philosophical and metaphysical framework that seeks to explain the structure, origin, and evolution of the universe. Rooted in ancient traditions such as the Vedas and Sāṃkhya philosophy, it emphasises the cyclical nature of time, the concept of the cosmic egg (*Brahmāṇḍa*), and the profound interconnectedness between the macrocosm (the universe) and the microcosm (the individual self). It offers a holistic view that integrates metaphysical insight with, in modern times, elements of scientific interpretation. (Source: Wikipedia)

[8]The **Chipko Movement**, initiated in the 1970s in Uttarakhand, India, was a non-violent protest against deforestation. Villagers, notably women like Gaura Devi, embraced trees to prevent logging, highlighting the community's reliance on forest resources. The movement not only curbed deforestation but also emphasized the pivotal role of women in environmental conservation. (Source: Wikipedia)

[9] The **Green Belt Movement (GBM)**, founded by Wangari Maathai in 1977, is a grassroots organization in Kenya that empowers women through tree planting initiatives. GBM addresses deforestation, environmental degradation, and advocates for human rights and environmental justice. Since its inception, the movement has planted over 51 million trees and trained more than 30,000 women in various sustainable practices. (Source: Wikipedia)

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The authors declare that the article has been prepared without the use of AI tools.

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