CHAPTER-V

EXTREMISM AND WOMEN

‘ENGLISH NOVELS IN THE NORTH-EAST OF INDIA - A CRITICAL ANALYSIS’
Chapter - V

Extremism and Women

"One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" - Simone de Beauvoir, (Waugh 319)

Feminism is "the belief and aim that women should have the same rights and opportunities as men." (Hornby 565) It is seen that feminism is not so prominent in the English novels written by NE writers. Still there are occasional remarks or hints from which we can feel little bit of presence of feminism in the novels. Wadikar quotes from K.R.Srinivasa Iyengar's writing in the article The Disintegration of the Family as theme of Anita Desai's novels about Anita Desai's novels.

K.R.Srinivasa Iyengar stated, "In her two novels - Cry, the Peacock (1963) and Voices in the City (1965) - Anita Desai has added a new dimension to the achievement of the Indian women writers in India." (Iyengar 464)

What Anita Desai did in 1960's, we see this in 2000's in NE writers like Mitra Phukan and Jahnavi Baruah in Assam and Easterine Kire in Nagaland, Mamang Dai in Arunachal Pradesh and Anjum Hassan in Meghalaya have also added new dimension to the achievement of the NE women writers with their own novels. There are some similarities of plot and style of writing of the other Anglo Indian writers although they are more popular and earlier writers than the writers of the NE.
We find that the women of the North East are not lagging behind than that of the men in writing English novels; in fact they are ahead of men. This proves that they are getting advantage and rights than other states of India. As it is mentioned that in some states of the NE women are more privileged than men as in such states matriarchy is prevailed. In some of the North East English novels also we find that women are predominant characters. In Mamang Dai's *Stupid Cupid* Adna is the prominent character, in Easterine Kire's *Life on Hold*, Nime is the main character, and in Mitra Phukan's *The Collector's Wife*, Rukmini is the main character, and in *A Monsoon of Music*, Nomita is the main character, in Anjum Hassan's *Lunatic in My Head* Fridaus Ansary is the main character. In the novels written by women the heroines overshadow the heroes.

It is also notable that in the first generation English of novels in the North East we find women writers are emerging earlier than the men writers. For example in the North East although Arup Kumar Dutta has written English novels from the 1980's his novels are children novels. The novels for the adult or grown up readers begin with the publication of *The Collector's Wife* by Mitra Phukan in 1995. In the way in Nagaland Easterine Kire is the first novelist and still a prominent novelist. In Meghalaya also Anjum Hassan is one of the prominent novelists till date. In Arunachal Pradesh Mamang Dai writes first English novel, *'Stupid Cupid'*'. We cannot say that they have faced problems like Virginia Woolf to write. The brief quote will help to illustrate the point:

"...in 1929 the novelist Virginia Woolf had written a powerful account of the social and economic restrictions faced by women writers in her celebrated essay 'A Room of One's Own'". (Waugh 26)
We find some hints of feminism in the novels. In *The Collector's Wife* we find that the heroine tries to become a writer and wants to go to the city to become a writer with her type writer. But she only dreams. She could not dare to start such a life by staying aloof from her family. May be she thought about her economic problem. An extract is given in this regard form the book *Trends in Indian Literature*:

"Most of the recent Indian women novelists have shown that in the changing socio-economic scenario educated Indian women are no longer ready to bear any kind of exploitation. They have become aware of the demands of their self and are committed to struggle for the fulfilment of these demands." (Kaur 76)

This is reflected in *TCW* and in *Rebirth* where the protagonists are female and they are not ready to bear any kind of exploitation. In the novel, LIMH also we find the same kind of spirit on the part of the heroine Firdaus Ansary.

In the novel, *Surface* by Siddharth Deb we find casual description of the society of Manipur. The society of Manipur like many other tribal societies is matriarchal. There is the mention of the market run by women. In another non-fiction book by another NE writer we find more detail about the market. An extract from that book named, *Che in Paona Bazaar*:

"The Ema Market (Ema means mother), an all-women market in the heart of Imphal, can surprise you. From a seamstress to a potter, a vegetable vendor to a shoemaker, this huge township of a market has everything run by women." (Baruah 162)
Generally we find patriarchal society. But in some state of NE we find that instead of patriarchal society we find matriarchal society. The society of Shillong is a matriarchal society. In the novel *Lunatic in My Head* by Anjum Hasan also we find a glance of the society when Sophy's mother told her about Elsa's family.

"Daughter's, of course...in their community inherit the property. Parents will have to depend on their daughters when they grow old. But sons? Sons will marry and move away." (Kumar 1061)

In *The Collector's Wife* we find a tinge of feminism. The heroine, Rukmin's feminist attitude is seen in some pages. We see this in the lines:

“Rukmini reflected that there was still a sharp divide between the women’s domain and the men’s. So while there was an appreciable number of women drivers in Parbatpuri, ladies who zipped around in Marutis and Fiats, when it came to buying tyres, or, indeed, any mechanical parts for vehicle, the matter was left to the men. Seat covers and cushions were the only car parts that Parbatpuri’s women drivers ever bought”. (Phukan 95)

Rukmini tells this when she went to choose a tyre for her car. Women do not go themselves to buy tyres for a car. They do it with the help of their male relatives and friends.

Rukmini observes that women are not allowed to attend in cremation rites. She thought the following thought when she saw a funeral procession when she was going for outing with her husband Siddharth:
“There were never any women in the funeral processions. Males of all ages, would form long, straggly lines as they walked towards the cremation ground. Women were forbidden to witness the actual act of the body being consigned to flames ...Rukmini sometimes wondered if the souls of the just–dead women missed the company of other women at this juncture.’’ (Phukan 50)

Rukmini was a rebel against the traditional way of life like the heroine of Shashi Deshpande's *A Matter of Time*. Dr.Ruby Milhoutra writes in an essay named, *A Search for Identity and Culture* about the heroines of Shashi Deshpande as the following:

"Her young heroines rebel against the traditional way of life, its rituals, ceremonies, and patriarchal values" (S.Prasanna)

We see the same qualities in Mitra Phukan's heroines, like Shashi Deshpande's. Rukmini is not happy with her life. Her husband's indifference towards her makes her thinking about her own self. She realises that she is lonely. The following extract from the novel shows it:

"Yes, I'm lonely in this town. 'She had not even voiced this to herself earlier, but loneliness had dogged her constantly in Parbatpuri. 'It's not just the inaccessibility of this house. 'She paused, and considered.'” (Phukan 70)

In another place also we find this type of emotion of the heroine Rukmini. She dreamt to leave the place. But she could not.

Rukmini was married to a DC named Siddarth who remained busy all the time with his work. She had no financial problem. But she felt lonely inside her big house
with the servants around. She felt bored. Her condition is comparable to the heroine Jaya of *That Long Silence* (1988) of Shashi Deshpande. The following extract is about Shashi Deshpande's heroine Jaya which is somewhere similar to Rukmini:

"Shashi Deshpande's fifth novel, *That Long Silence* (1988), marks her emergence as a major novelist. The narrator Jaya, an upper middle class housewife in Bombay, with two teenage children, is forced to take stock of her life when her husband is suspected of fraud, and they move into a small flat in a down-town locality. Deshpande shows up the hollowness of much of modern Indian life - the convenient, arranged marriage, with the upwardly mobile husband and the children studying in 'good' schools. The repetitiveness and boredom of a woman's life come through forcefully. She shows how the silence imposed on women is partly of their own making, though society and tradition have a hand." (Bora)

In the novel *TCW* we find that the heroine Rukmini has tried to come out of the boredom. She went out with her friend Manoj and took the wrong steps. She did this out of monotony or boredom in her life. She had money but not company for her heart. Had her husband given her time she would not have taken such a wrong step. Regarding extra -marital relationship in Shobha De's novel what N.K.NEB writes is worth mentioning here. The passage is-

"Men in De's fiction consider the matters concerning women simply insignificant. Fed up with the self-absorbing, indifferent
and male supremacist attitude of their husbands women either
switch themselves off in kitchen or stop waning to share anything
with them. In their frustration, they often decide to move out of
marriage or to the direction of having extramarital relationships."
(N.K.NEB 260)

*Rebirth* by Jahnavi Barua is a feminist novel. Here the heroine, Kaberi does not
protest resonantly. But her silent protest and ignoring her husband's misbehaviour till
the birth of her unborn child presents her to be a bold lady. She is not worried about her
future. She even prepared herself to live without her husband. When her husband
repeatedly told her about divorce then for some time she forgot to take care of her. It
was not good for her unborn child. She was dependent on her husband till the birth of
her child only. She wished that the child can introduce her husband as his/her father. In
the context of feministic attitude of writing of some feminist writers come to mind. One
such writer is the American radical feminist Shulamith Firestone. The following excerpt
from *Literary Theory and Criticism* by Patricia Waugh where she writes about the
feministic attitude:

"Like de Beauvoir, Firestone believed that technology could be
employed to free women from the restraints placed upon them by
their biology. This became a widely accepted premiss in the
feminist fight for free access to abortion and contraception, but
Firestone's text went much further, advocating not only
contraception, but also artificial gestation and communal child
rearing. These developments, she argued, would free women
from the tyranny of motherhood that made them dependent on

men. Once biological difference was overcome, the cultural differences that it supported would fall away, and woman would prove herself equal to man.” (Waugh 323)

Thus in the novel, Rebirth we find some elements of feminist novel although in explicitly we do not find such elements. But from the behaviour and silent protest and indifference attitude towards her husband's betray we come to know that she is not happy although she is not panic about her present state and worries about her future. Kaberi's mother has also problem like her. Her mother's marital life was also not happy. Her father loved someone else but as she belonged to different religion he could not marry her. He was not happy. Her mother told:

"He would throw things, break things, you know, you heard, shout and yell.” (Baruah 162)

Her mother told her that she would support her if her husband left her. She could return to her mother and stay with her. Here we find that only the daughter is not the victim. The mother also had suffered almost the same kind of treatment from her spouse. The situation of Rebirth is somewhere similar to the situation what Ranu Uniyal writes about motherhood in her article named Between Allegiance and Angst: Motherhood in Contemporary Indian Fiction. Let us see it:

"Both mothers and daughters are seen in a double bind-double jeopardy-of allegiance and angst-a neurotic collusion-between her story and mother's story. In the process of looking and telling, there is much that remains unexplored unshared and here unavailable.” (Uniyal 35)
Feminism aspect can be perceived in some small occasion in the novel, *Lunatic in My Head*. Although in the modern age people do not differentiate a boy or a girl. A boy or a girl gets equal opportunities in modern society. This is a good trend which people try to follow. But there are still many people who don’t like it in practicality. The wish of a father towards his unborn child is expressed through Mr Das's wish. Though we cannot generalise it, yet we can say that most people think like this. Mrs Das's outburst shows it:

"You always wanted a boy. A thousand times you told me this when I was carrying her. A boy, a boy. As if getting a boy will end all our troubles." (Hasan 162)

The Khasi society is matriarchal society. We find about this in the novel, *LIMH*. The following passage shows it:

"Daughters, of course...in their community daughters inherit the property. Parents will have to depend on their daughters when they grow old. But son? Sons will marry and move away." (Hasan 162)

This is from a conversation between Mrs Das and her daughter Sophie regarding the arrival of the son of a neighbour. She asked Sophie whether the neighbour Mrs Elsa, the neighbour was happy at the arrival of her son from Bombay. Mrs Das thought that she might not be happy as sons will marry and move away. In a book named *The Tribes of Meghalaya* also we find the same kind of thing. The following passage shows it:

"Women are respected and are far from subservient. The woman's husband's family, her children's paternal relations are the 'kha'
and always very highly respected. Kha literally means 'to give birth'. The women do not participate in administration, legislation and judiciary in the traditional set up." (Kumar 1061)

In the novel, *LIMH* we find the writer expresses some bad elements of society. Through the heroine of the novel she expresses bad behaviour of some men towards women. Firdaus Ansary is an M.Phil research scholar. Her guide is Dr.Thakur. Dr.Thakur tried to misbehave her in a taxi. The following extract describes the incident:

"Thakur was upon her at once, his hands grabbing, squeezing, pressing, his mouth reaching for hers, trying to keep her head bent so that he could not force his lips on her......

She jumped onto the pavement and kept running." (Hasan 277)

This is really a curse of the society. It is a hindrance to women in the path of success. Women should be treated with respect and dignity in society.

In the novel *Stupid Cupid* we find a girl from Arunachal Pradesh named Adna who runs a hostel for lovers in Delhi. She named it *Four Seasons*. In a new place Adna, her friends and her relatives had to face many obstacles. One instance where her feeling is seen is given below:

"Everything was the opposite here, I told her. Don't smile at people as soon as you meet them. Sometimes you smile even if you don't feel like it." (Dai 27)

In the above dialogue she advised her cousin Jia how to live in Delhi.
In Delhi they met some adverse situations also. Some people treated them as foreigners. This attitude is also a hindrance to the path of progress not for a woman but for all from the NE. Adna and her cousin faced such unexpected treatment when they tried to hire a taxi. The following conversation with a woman shows this:

"Hey you! Jao! JAO! Go back to your own ...DESH!"

But Adna also replied:

"How dare you say such a thing? Do you think I'm Chinese, huh? I am Indian. Do you know where I come from? Do you know where that is, you idiot woman?" (Dai 52)

Challenges are always there. Especially in a new place like Delhi, people from NE have to face many obstacles. Such harsh treatments had to face by Adna and her relatives. But Adna overcame all. Her business was running with difficulty. The following extract shows it:

"The demands of running a business and the daily needs of looking after Four Seasons were enough to tire the strongest hearts. I saw my little business move in fits and starts as couples and lovers sheltered for a night or two then left quietly sometimes never to be seen again." (Dai 109-110)

Adna remained in Delhi as a successful girl from Arunachal Pradesh. So many people visited her. When she met a newly elected minister and his wife in Delhi then after knowing what she was doing there then he praised her with the following words:
"Well, it is indeed an achievement that a girl from our place is running such a big establishment here." (Dai 111)

In the novel, *Stupid Cupid* we find the condition of love and marriage. The extramarital relationship is also shown in the novel. How someone takes one's spouse away from someone's life by fraud love is described in the novel. For love, even extramarital people are not wholly responsible. Because cupid is also responsible for love. The narrator writes:

"I wondered if this was an inborn trait or something one acquired after being wounded by Cupid's arrows." (Dai 109)

In the novel, *SC Mareb* lived a dual life. She is the wife of Dayud but she loved Rohit. Still at last she reunited with her husband Dayud. The following lines show her state of mind:

"She was Dayud's wife and they lived, laughed, ate and talked together, and no one would have known that all the time everything she said and did, she did for someone else. Sometimes she worried about this dual life, she said, but only in terms of how much she missed the moments of love with Rohit." (Dai 79)

The presentation of extramarital life in the novel can be said is the impact of modern city, materialistic life which ignores the earlier values and tie of relationship. But the reunion of the husband and wife shows the realization of the value or bond of relationship. In *Khanduma's Curse* feminism is expressed when the heroine Passang went to the village council of male to say something about her father. Then the Tsorgan, the Head of the council became angry as she violated the taboo. The attendance of
female members in the village council is a taboo. Passang's speech in support of her action is given below:

"My salutations to the Tsorgan, so experienced, a man of wisdom, one of a kind on this entire earth...also my regards to all the elders here who are equally wise and rational, but I falter to state that it is shocking and painful for me to hear offensive and rabid remarks against us women folks. I personally feel that feel that whatever the learned Tsorgan had stated about women is his own personal view, perhaps he was taught in his monastery to loath women, but intentionally forgetting or feigning forgetfulness about the fact that he too had descended on earth via the womb of a woman is unacceptable." (Bapu 38)

In the novel, *Life on Hold* also we find little tinge of feminism. The heroine feels herself weak to protest a decision which she dislikes. The heroine, Nime's feelings of love with Roko, her adjustment with her husband is clearly presented in the novel. She was a tender lovable girl and later became a dutiful wife. Her worldly wisdom helps her to take a right decision in right time. When Zeu, her brother told her to marry a rich man to help their family then she tells like this:

"It's not that, it is the fact that I am a woman, and I am weaker than a man and that makes me more liable to be reasonable." (Kire 72)

Nime's father was a dreamer. He did many businesses but he did not succeed. But Nime's mother-in-law Lhouno was a practical woman. She was not a dreamer. She
is a practical and self-reliant woman. This we can say that it is an example of woman-empowerment that we find in the novel. She knew how to do business and how to save money. The lines show this:

"Nime, in turn, could understand Lhounuo's outlook on life. For instance, how she saw making money as a necessity. It had been the key to survival for her. She still saw it as the answer for many problems." (Kire 72)

In the novel, *Bitter Wormwood* we find how women take active part in agriculture and in other works even in underground movement. Neilhounuo is such a woman who did many works in the underground. Mose married her in the course of time. We find that women take active part in all domestic work. It is seen that women do many works in forest as tribal people depend heavily on forest. We find many instances in the novel, *BW* where women are working in the field. They have even helped the underground cadre by offering them food. (p-88) An extract from an article Gender Issues in forestry is given below:

"The tribal people living in the forest depend heavily on forest for their survival. The women take much more active role in collecting fuel wood, food, medicines and fodder from the forest." (Kire 32)

In *BW* we come to know how Mose's grandmother was shot dead by military when she was working in the field. In the hills of North East women like Mose's grandmother who work in forest take active role in forestation. In this regard an extract from a book is given below:
"The Environmentalists believe that women and children take much more active part in plantation programmes launched by various groups. It is also believed that women can be better watchdog for illegal felling as the same leads to more misery in their lives." (Waugh 326)

In the novel BW we find how mothers feel when their sons joined in the underground group. They cannot stop their sons' decision. However some of them become ready for such big sacrifice. Mose, one of the underground cadres joined in the underground organisation after witnessing the killing of his grandmother by the military. He told his mother that he would joined the group. Like other mothers she did not cry. She thought that her son would serve the country. She thought that it was his destiny to join the movement.

"Vilau knew that a woman could not stand between a man and his destiny, even if the man was her son." (Kaur 76)

The sacrifice is a great one. A mother has to be brave enough to take such decision. Like Mose's mother Vilau, Neituo's, Mose's friend's mother also had to endure such pangs. But like Mose he did not tell his mother. He joined the underground group secretly. So she wept loudly when she discovered her son's action.

Not only boys but girls also joined in the underground group. Mose and his friend Neituo found some girls cadre there. The lines describe it:

"Both Mose and Neituo were very surprised to see girls amongst the cadres. Months of training had built up their muscles and they
deftly handled guns, something that Mose and Neituo were yet to learn." (Kire 86)

Such a skilled and active girl was Neilhounuo whom Mose married during the course of time.

In the same novel we find the empowerment of women as there are some references of economic activities of women which help them to live self confidently. We find Mose's daughter Sabunuo who is a self employed woman. She liked to be self-employed. The following extract from the novel, BW shows how the woman employs herself and gives employments to others.

"Sabunuo preferred to set up her own weaving business, rather than be employed by someone else. She was good at her work, and in a few months had already hired two girls from the Dimasa Kachari tribe of Assam. The girls wore woollen body-clothes which had a ready market in winter. Sabunuo keenly observed what items people used and she extended her weaving into school bags and table-mats, which the wives of officers liked to buy."

(Kire 154)

In the underground organisation also women get an honoured position. In a recent book review (Crime, Women and Justice by Indrani Raimedhi) the Assam Tribune writes the following:

"Women leaders and cadres in the ULFA had an "honoured position and were, in general, free from the fetters of the
traditional patriarchal society,” claim the rebel group's leaders in a new book.

"On joining the ULFA, we lost all sense of being the weaker sex as we wore the same uniform, followed the same chores assignments,” ULFA lone woman executive member Pranati Deka, who belongs to the faction currently in talks with the Government, is quoted in the book Crime, Women and Justice by journalist-author Indrani Raimedhi.” (The Asrsam Tribune)

Women are also harassed during the army operation in search of ULFA. We got such news at that time. At that time army's operation for the ultras was very strict. However they did not spare the relatives of the insurgent member. When they could not give any information about their underground relative then they had to face bodily harassment. Some of the armies even acted in civilized manner while they saw women. Such things are appeared in the novel, *The House with a Thousand Stories*. The following extract is taken from the novel:

..."thought that she was no longer concerned if the groom's brother was an ULFA member. If she would be raped during combing operation by army men, whom she feared more than death, more than the taste of phenyl" (Kashyap 191)

In the time of Assam Andolan also many women had to face harassment along with men. In the novel, *Rebirth* we find who the heroine Kaberi had to run away along with her cousin Bidyut at the time of Assam Agitation from the police and military.
Works Cited


