

eISSN 2394-6075 | Vol 5, No 2, CLRI May 2018 | p. 64-82

“Death” and “Violence” in Mitra Phukan’s Writings: Unraveling an Aesthetics of Pain in *The Collector’s Wife* and *Hope*

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Abstract

In Mitra Phukan’s *Hope* (2006) and *The Collector’s Wife* (2005), the concept of death is imbued with strong significances. In *Hope*, there is an incessant reproduction of the terrorist’s (Shankar’s) violence, by casting his death into a viable “definition.” By the act of lending an identity to the terrorist, we tend to mourn a situation of loss, of peace and well-being. The fatality is there in the construction of such an identity; it lies at the core of the reconstruction of the terrorist’s life. Therefore, a profound morbidity is inherent here. Violence ceases to be an external event, or eventuality, and becomes instead the closeted content of a person’s identity. As such, death can no longer be termed as the guarantor of eternal peace, nor is it the secret truth of a person’s identity. In

Shankar’s case, elimination through death is akin to the act of religiously contriving to kill. This is an act that kills the essence of a being. Rukmini, in *The Collector’s Wife*, upholds the viewpoint that in order to know what living is, one must negate it. In the similar vein, we can say that the measure of a thing is the effort made to destroy it. Here, death is a signifier with a varied and characteristically paradoxical function at work.

Keywords

Death and Violence, Writings from North-East India, Terror Politics of Identity, Mitra Phukan, Dr. Namrata Pathak.

1. Introduction

Death has been a constant theme in Mitra Phukan’s writings. For her, death is a strategy that hangs suspended, neither affirming nor assuaging anything. We can trace an urge to signify the power of death in almost all her texts. This stance further embodies death as the absolute destruction of truth and meaning. Juxtaposed against this is the urgency to “laugh at” death. Maybe it is because death is totally a strange yet familiar experience. For her, death is at once both enabling and cursed. For Phukan, death is essentially a political issue. Furthermore, in Mitra Phukan’s writings, the vision of death is inscribed in contemporary discourse largely as an image that collapses into its own heart. If seen from a different angle, death becomes a liberated transformation, irresistibly comical. Power, in a way, is always hidden at the bosom of

death; but rightly enough, existence is also power. This mode is in favour of two kinds of power, the power to act and the power to suffer action. The sum of these two is both constant and constantly effective, a fact that adds to existence as an act of expression. But, can death be another way of living, existing, and simply, expressing oneself? If yes, then Mitra Phukan uncovers interpersonal interaction that both reveals and creates death as an actuality.

How can death be criticized if we cannot correct it? We know that death is inevitable and in this sense how can it be resisted? In *Identity and Difference* (1969), Heidegger says that only individualization that results from facing up to one’s own death makes it possible for one to establish one’s own identity and integrity in one’s life. In *The Gift of Death* (1995), Derrida says that the concept of death has no borders because it exceeds conceptual demarcation or closure. The question is whether this distinction between a concept and the reality of death can be drawn as a contested issue? Death is beyond the units of phenomenological description insofar as one’s own experience of death cannot be explained because one is dead. Moreover, influenced by Philippe Aries’s history of death, Derrida insists that death is central to the very idea of “culture.” It is because with changing cultural contexts, national borders, currencies and languages, we also have the changing notions of death (Hoy, 2005:165-7). The question is whether we are trivializing death by making it merely a social construction or valorizing it as a culturally

variable phenomenon? Defined in contradistinction to its ethics and the dense history of Assam, the concept of death acquires a nuanced significance. We need to consider at length how death has organized itself into different schools; how it has assembled specific knowledge of itself, its divisions, and its theory of aesthetics. Moreover, we are framed by a necessary yet impossible desire to go further, to defy death. This is a stance that displays an urge for political awareness and commitment. More than this, once death crosses its limit there may be no going back. Can one follow it any further? Or is it going beyond “the limitless reign of the limit” as Foucault calls it? (1982: 32). On the other hand, death becomes a dance on a limit over which no one steps. In the process, death is endlessly reiterated as a predicate in the sense that it becomes virtually meaningless. We can further contend that it is a concept that cuts across, not beyond. Death, as a term, does not cross the threshold of one form of knowledge or nature, into another; neither does it “reinscribe” the same knowledge or nature into a “perverted” form (Dollimore, 1992: 33-5). Death contests absolutely the discursive categories and fields of knowledge. These are the fields that map and delimit the terrain of “the possible.”

2. Contextualising Death in Phukan’s Writings

Phukan’s gamut of writings unfold atrocious incidents like the mass killings in Assam during the students’ agitation movements, the violence of the banned outfit ULFA, the

TADA terror, the always newly devised land-framing policy, the migration of the outsiders, to name a few. Mitra Phukan’s *Hope* intricately ties down the concept of “death” to the science of sensuous perception. For both Sewali Barua and Nandini Barua death is what you perceive to be true as they are not sure whether the person they are looking for is dead or alive. They are willing to take either version depending on what they perceive. Coming from a place like Parbatpuri validates their identity as victims. Parbatpuri is a small town “surrounded by hills on three sides, and bordered by the vast expanse of the Red River on the fourth.” The place has something about it. In this context, Phukan contends:

Encircled by mile upon mile of lush tea-gardens, it is the headquarters of one of the remoter districts of our State. But though it is a picturesque town, it is not for its beauty that Parbatpuri is in the news these days. We at the newspaper office where I work come upon the name often in the news dispatches that come in. Parbatpuri, these days, is at the very nerve-centre of the ferocious unrest that roils all around the district, the insurgency and violence that threatens to rip apart the very fabric of our lives even in this distant capital-city of the State where I live (2005:85-104).

The narrator in *Hope* looked at both the ladies with greater attention. She heaved a sigh of relief when she realized that these two respectable ladies “cannot be” terrorists. The narrator comments that “these days, it is getting more and more difficult to ascertain, just from first glance,

who wields a gun. Young girls have them, yes, even middle-aged ladies have been known to possess firearms” The younger woman, Nandini Barua, took out a magazine from her worn leather bag. She held it out, and enquired whether the story “Death of a Dream” was written by the narrator. Strangely enough, we can draw a parallel between the missing husband of Nandini Barua and the protagonist of the piece of fiction, “Death of a Dream.” The tightly-structured tale of “Death of a Dream” revolves round Shankar, an escapee from prison, where he had been incarcerated for terrorist activities. Written in unadorned language, the story lays bare the unfulfilled desires of the protagonist. During the night of escape, Shankar happened to take shelter in the unoccupied house of a music teacher. He read the diary of his absent host, full of longings for a time of peace. The policemen tightened their cordon outside the house. Finally, at dawn, Shankar, freshly bathed and dressed in the absent musician’s *kurta*, went out of the house. Bullets rained all around him. Still humming his favourite “Imagine” by John Lennon, he fell flat on the ground. Shankar’s violent death, herein, becomes a mode of philosophical inquiry concerning the theory of creation. The terminology of death here describes the structural coherence in which Shankar’s identity is deadlocked. Being subjected to constant probing and uneasiness, the narrator is strung out on a tightrope and made to spin, teetering on the edge of non-knowledge, absence, silence and a possible

death. However, this young man’s death in *Hope* is risked, not fated.

Hope by Mitra Phukan emphasizes on the production of terror that is committed to effecting change by analyzing the thematic, artistic, social or ideological aspects of a community. In part, this discourse of terror entails a skepticism and a critique of the ways in which the land and people have been looked at. In *Hope* terror becomes a narrative of the characters’ life; it tries to encode a broader worldview or a complex message in both diluted and focused/ accessible form. This modern vocabulary of representing violence, as not being a transcendental phenomena but a temporal event interspersed with subjective contaminations and ellipses, give way to an insider’s act of looking at his or her world. The text not only borders on a shattered and fragmented culture, but in the text, the communal relations of the characters are thoroughly based on violence and mourning. The concept of violence determines whether these relations are accepted or assumed, resisted or refused, and indeed appropriated or transformed by it. Violence, in a way, creates the role of these characters in Assamese society.

3. Desire and the Body

The death of Shankar might have been an outcome of the deviant body’s productive effects or desires. The body’s desires are many; there can be a desire to change, to impose, to negate, to terrorize, to suffer, to adjust, to victimize or to die. During the course of the night, Shankar

realized that violence is not the only weapon for creating a just society. Shankar reads the diary of his absent host, full of longings for a time of peace, all of which awakens an echo in Shankar’s mind. He, too, harboured a dream just like the unknown musician. But unlike the musician, he had resorted to arms in pursuit of that dream, a dream which now lay shattered under the onslaught of a thousand bullets. However, this view falls back upon the supremacy of the individual. The body or the individual represents a community and is a part of it. One fascinating principle is the fact that communities cannot be based on the very thing that defines them. However chimerical or strategic the relation between the individual and his community might be, the community attempts to homogenize itself in order to establish itself as the norm. It produced and, in spite of itself, facilitated, through its violent exclusion of Shankar’s desire, an extraordinary diversity of responses to that exclusion. Shankar’s desire to die would be so much in excess of imposed, derogatory, appropriated, affirmed, and invented definitions that it would perpetually exceed definitions altogether. Shankar’s community is at once limited and delimited, a community established within the boundaries of other communities yet also external to them, without boundary. By keeping a track of the protagonist’s deviant actions we can say that this community can never be a “community for those who do not have a community,” or for someone like him (Scott, 1995: 213). But Shankar tries to lay bare the arbitrariness and limitedness of this community by forcing

his entry into it. Shankar, different, invisible or otherwise, becomes the internal Other of the society. Strangely enough, the “common” factor upon which any community could be founded works towards the exclusion of those that could be “un-common.” This sense is predicated on the shedding of Shankar’s identity or his de-individuation. This loss of identity becomes a non-basis that makes possible, in the first place, the inauguration or repetition of a new identity. But, how open is Shankar to this transformation? In practice, a community needs to “absorb the deaths of its subjects in order to realize the infinite value of its communion” (Wilson, 1995: 23). Similarly, Jean-Luc Nancy has much to comment in this regard. Jean-Luc Nancy contends that a community “fills or absorbs all finite negativity, draws from each singular destiny a surplus value of humanity or an infinite super humanitythis presupposes, precisely, the death of each and all in the life of the infinite” (1991b:13). The fate of such an absorption is seen in the death of the protagonist, Shankar in *Hope*. In this context Mitra Phukan retorts:

The means had become an end in themselves. The goal was still a distant chimera, which had often disappeared from his field of vision as he had systematically conducted raids, killed people, all in search of a more just and better society. His dream, he realized as he paced around the musician’s small, one-roomed house, listening to the strains of John Lennon’s “Imagine” on the cassette-player of his host, his dream had crumpled and died under the weight of violence...(2005:85-104)

An ecstatic urge to transform the self is at work here. Death, according to Derrida, is singular and must be taken upon oneself; and this recognition of mortality as irreplaceability leads to responsibility and a sense of the self. Death is related to responsibility because everyone must assume his/her own death. On the other hand, a specific sense of the self evolves from the concept of death. Derrida contends:

The sameness of self, what remains irreplaceable is dying, only becomes what it is, in the sense of an identity as a relation of the self to itself, by means of this idea of mortality as irreplaceability (1993: 45).

But to what extent Shankar is successful in changing himself is the ultimate question. In an ecstatic relation to art and death, we need to confront Shankar as a pervasive cultural image of a doomed rebel. Quite interestingly, he aims to situate death as a representation of infinite fulfillment. His love for death synthesizes and exceeds his experience.

4. Violence and Terror

In *The Collector’s Wife* (2005), the threat of violence creates a structural enclosure. For Rukmini and her District Collector husband, Siddharth, who are very much in such an enclosure, there is refusal of the necessity of coming out. This enclosure can be termed as deceptive and precarious. This enclosure symbolizes an imprisonment through death. The place where Rukmini lives has a strange insularity. Metaphorically, “death” is the only

means of connection between her inner orb and the external world:

The people of Parbatpuri had, decades ago, subtly had their revenge on their colonial masters by making sure that the smoke from their funeral pyre rose up in the direction of the DC’s house...Still, when the occasional cholera or gastro-enteritis epidemic raged through Parbatpuri, the mourning relatives of the victims felt, even in their grief, a sense of subtle satisfaction that disease-ravaged bodies were being cremated at the very feet of the one person who was supposed to be responsible for the well-being of the district. All attempts by successive DCs to shift the cremation ground to another location had met with firm opposition by the town’s leading citizenry, whose unity at such times was surprising, given the discord that raged between them on most other occasions (Phukan, 2005:21-22).

In *The Collector’s Wife* (2005), violence proclaims negative determinations of irreversible death and destruction. But also crucial is its ability to blur the line between the living and the dead, the real and the simulacrum, the true and the false, and the material and the ideal. Falling in love with Manoj, a sales manager who works with the CTF tyre company is an act of transgression for Rukmini, the prim and proper wife of the powerful Collector. Rukmini teaches English Literature in a local college and everything in her life is settled, at least on the surface level. Set in the 1970s and 80s, the novel showcases the grim events of insurgency which were a direct offshoot of the students’ agitation in Assam. At the backdrop of deaths,

kidnappings, extortion, and social instability, the novel captures the ostensible reformulations of power and resistance, both in personal and political terms. The ever-growing physical intimacy between Manoj and Rukmini is played against a world that underlies the impact of the fear factor in times of violence, the acceptance or rejection of a new group of people, such as in an individual’s change of social status, or an entry into a different category of social membership. The latter fact is highlighted by the activities carried out by Arnob Chakravarty, both a leader and a teacher, and his likes. These people incite the mob and are really good at it. However, Rukmini’s transgression, her affirmation of other alternative modes of existence, and her constant trepidation for atrocity remould her now and then in the text. This self-consciousness, however, is a crucial and necessary condition of the sensitive understanding of transgression in the cycle of social relations. In *The Collector’s Wife* (2005), this mode of transgression is based on an effect of traces and remnants, marked by a ghostly logic of death and survival.

In the final denouement of *The Collector’s Wife* (2005), Mitra Phukan shows how violence has the power to legitimate the secret, and harden it into truth. Both Manoj’s and Siddharth’s violent death is precisely the point where the secret is sealed as an authentic truth. Secrets are many in *The Collector’s Wife*. There is an index of impropriety about the tie between Manoj and Rukmini; the fling that Siddharth is having with Priyam, Rukmini’s colleague; the

fact that Rukmini is carrying Manoj’s child; the biological truth of the baby that Rukmini is hiding from her mother-in-law and others; the true identity of Anil, Rukmini’s driver etc. But what is conjured up for Rukmini at the end is a secret too – she has to live this secret, not fearing its disclosure. She was oblivious of the fact that Siddharth scarified his life in order to rescue Manoj from the clutches of the insurgents. This revelation can be an entrapment for her or rather a condition that enables her to realize a different identity. By casting her eyes on the dead bodies of the two important men in her life, she immersed herself in a deluge of tears:

Poor baby. Deprived of not one but two fathers in one go, biological and adoptive, killed at almost the same instant. She had been a fool, she thought hazily, to have imagined that she could get away with it. That it was going to be okay. That she could carry one man’s child, and expect another to be the father. Her audacity must have tempted Fate, who, in a fit of irritation, had decided to destroy both men...She realized that her cheeks were wet. She hadn’t been aware that the tears had come. Tears for two men. One who had 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 (Phukan, 2005: 348-49).

Violence, as entrenched in the double deaths, can also paradoxically reveal the sphinx as having no secret at all. However, such an act shifts identity to another elaborate surface. The closet herein can be the entire space of the society, not at all impervious to sight. Time and again, this

old closet is always emptied out for new contents. The closet structures death as a violent law. The multiple secrets in the text are confined in sealed compartments, in exquisite cabinets, and within a private chamber that boasts of a ritual of intimacy. But can such elaborately choreographed veiling hide anything? Are such ingenious preparations to secrecy enough to conceal the identity of these characters? Moreover, secrecy, encrypting, and enciphering are various forms of surface patterning that are characteristically ambiguous. The intricacies of these signifying practices seem to acknowledge, in different contexts, the desire to hide and reveal.

The final scene of *The Collector’s Wife* captures the “impossibility” of death if we tend to highlight the experience of the mother, Rukmini, in this context. The impossibility of death turns into an inner experience for the mother in pain, anticipating the birth of a progeny. Motherhood is something which is interpreted through social construction. Motherhood is a legal fiction, from which it draws and has drawn its authority. The interlinking concepts of birth and death undermine the fact that to know the father, we need reason, whereas to know the mother, we need sensible perception. The text captures both the experiential quotient and surrogate factor as important constituents of the word “mother” and “father.” If seen from a different angle, a vision of liberation is apprehended in Rukmini’s life now. The language of creation is always centered, is always selective and restrictive. Also, representation of death becomes a

matter of intentionality. Nature preserves the violent and sometimes murderous intentions of the creator. Quite simply, this act of negation or death is conserved at the heart of every act of creation.

5. Conclusion

As portrayed in both *Hope* and *The Collector’s Wife*, what is integral to the performance of violence is a sense of mourning. This kind of mourning in time and space is also tied to a sort of emotional display. In these texts, the writer considers death as a part of political and moral judgment. There is also an attachment of death to the site of grieving. It is a site that is not necessarily separated, both spatially and temporally, from that of pleasure or “merriment.” In *Hope*, Shankar’s setting of death provided relief and succor to him. Metaphorically, he was unchained in the musician’s home. In *The Collector’s Wife*, in Rukmini’s home, the boundaries between pain and pleasure, mourning and levity, are fluid and nowhere to be found (Eng and Kazanjian, 2003: 211-12). This is an affront to the assumption that grief is inseparable from its inward privacy. The uncertainty attached to the characters/victims not only portray a peculiar intensity that is inseparable from a larger unsettlement, but it also shows an understanding of the victims’ expression as spontaneous, “dictated” by grief. Mourning and wailing in the text make us face the concealed content of the mourner. An acknowledgement of this gives rise to a kind of disturbance, or a disposition of the subject in the longer

narrative of power and resistance. Both the texts portray a civilization that assimilates cultural difference in itself. In the emergence of this narrative, the shift from death to mourning is doubtless of immense significance. It also marks a transition from fatalism to outcry, especially with a reference to the moral codes of bourgeois Assamese civility. Central to it is the victims’ tendency to substitute a rational discourse with a rhetorical excess, as is evident in both *Hope* and *The Collector’s Wife*.

In both *Hope* and *The Collector’s Wife*, the concept of death is imbued with strong significances. In *Hope*, there is an incessant reproduction of the terrorist’s (Shankar’s) violence, by casting his death into a viable “definition.” If the majority culture grants no notice of his death, then why does it incline to recognize everything else about it? Secondly, by the act of lending an identity to the terrorist, we tend to mourn a situation of loss, of peace and well-being. The fatality is there in the construction of such an identity; it lies at the core of the reconstruction of the terrorist’s life. Therefore, a profound morbidity is inherent here. Violence ceases to be an external event, or eventuality, and becomes instead the closeted content of a person’s identity. As such, death can no longer be termed as the guarantor of eternal peace, nor is it the secret truth of a person’s identity. In Shankar’s case, elimination through death is akin to the act of religiously contriving to kill. This is an act that kills the essence of a being. Rukmini, in *The Collector’s Wife*, upholds the viewpoint that in order to know what living is, one must negate it. In the similar

vein, we can say that the measure of a thing is the effort made to destroy it. Hence, death is a signifier with a varied and characteristically paradoxical function at work. What baffles us is the question itself – what does it mean to kill something? For that matter, can we really kill people and things, and push truth and the body to the grave?

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