

A Study Of Resilience And Pain In the Sociocultural Landscape of Tiniguan In “What Will People Say” By Mitra Phukan

Yogita Bajaj

Associate Professor - English

Research Scholar MRIRS

ORCID - 0009-0001-5000-5956

Abstract

Mitra Phukan's latest work, “What Will People Say,” depicts the restrictions and expectations imposed on women, particularly women of the Northeast. The phrase ‘What Will People Say’ portrays the central conflict of the novel and the fear of societal judgment influencing an individual’s choice. The book takes up the story of 56-year-old Mihika, who explores a romantic relationship with a Muslim divorcee after her husband died in the small town of Tinigaon. The prying eyes of Tinigaon are juxtaposed with the open-minded city dwellers since they welcome the idea of middle-aged women’s right to seek happiness with a partner again. The novel acknowledges the preciousness of cultural heritage and the desirability of change. It gives a compelling portrayal of the prying eyes of the town dwellers in the valley in the middle of Assam. The paper titled “A Study of Resilience and Pain in What Will People Say by Mitra Phukan aims to examine how the characters of Mitra Phukan show resilience and go through silent pain and trauma in the sociocultural environment of Tiniguan. The novel raises certain questions for readers:

The plot showcases an interesting interplay of different perspectives on how such a society, which bases its perception on rituals and traditions, responds further to relationships that discard marriage as a norm. The story is devoid of with seeming simplicity, but each is fitted into the composition to create a fiction that touches your heart. The structure of the novel presents the reader with darker shades of drama that delves into serious themes with a feathery touch.

Keywords: Cultural resilience, Preciousness, Sociocultural, Patriarchal, Structure

Mitra Phukan is an Assamese author, translator, columnist, and trained classical vocalist who writes in English. She has written four children’s books, a biography, two novels, *The Collector’s Wife* and *A Monsoon of Music*—and a collection comprising fifty of her newspaper columns titled *Guwahati Gaze*. Her story collection *A Full Knight’s Thievery* is one of its kind, exploring the range of human emotions. She has translated the famous work *Blossoms in the Graveyard* into English, originally written by Jnanpith Awardee Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya as *Kobor Aru Phool*. Her works have been translated into various languages and are taught in universities. Her latest novel, *What Will People Say*, provides a compelling look at the clash between tradition and the forces of change in the sociocultural framework of a society.

This paper titled, " A Study of Resilience and Pain in *What Will People Say* by Mitra Phukan,"

aims to examine how the characters of Mitra Phukan show resilience in the socio-cultural environment of Tiniguan. The American Psychological Association states, “Resilience is the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, and significant sources of stress such as family, health, etc.” Resilience is not a trait that people either have or do not have. It is the act of ‘bouncing back’ despite barriers and setbacks. Resilient people still feel frustrated and sad but find ways to move forward to tackle these challenges with hope and a positive attitude. The process of resilience leads to conflict and a clash in the personality of an individual where one keeps negotiating and questioning one’s identity, finally showcasing the strength and adaptability of individuals and communities confronting societal challenges and transformations. Resilient people still feel frustrated and sad but find ways to move forward to tackle these challenges with hope and a positive attitude. The novel intricately weaves through the lives of its characters, particularly the protagonist, who constantly faces the weight of personal dilemmas against the backdrop of rigid societal expectations.

The novel is set in Tiniguan, surrounded by three cities. The city is nestled in the valley of Assam. The novel subtly portrays the complex socio-cultural landscape of Tiniguan, weaving the love affair between Mihika, a woman in her fifties, and Zuhayr, a friend of her late husband Aditya. After her husband's death, Mihika seeks to fill the emptiness of her life by seeking a love and companion in Zuhayr. Mihika is not just any individual; she is also carrying the tag of a widow. This tag draws a ‘Lakshman Rekha’ around her, pushing her into social isolation, fear, and pain. Society raises its eyebrows and questions the righteousness of her actions. The protagonist’s journey is emblematic of a broader struggle—a delicate balance between upholding conventional cultural norms and embracing modernization. Mihika keeps negotiating her roles to strike a balance. The conflict between these two forces creates tension and serves as a reminder of the resilience displayed by the character as she endeavors to preserve her identity. Through her characterization and subtle art of storytelling, Phukan masterfully illustrates that culture is not a static entity but an evolving one, shaped by individual choices and experiences. Raymond Williams in "Culture is Ordinary" says:

“Culture is used in these two senses—to mean a whole way of life, the common meanings, and the special process of discovery and creative effort. Culture is a process, not a product.”

He views culture as dynamic, not static. To understand socio-cultural dynamics, one must analyze complex ideological negotiations. Phukan captures the contours of society, familial bonds, and customary flavors through her characters. Her major and minor characters demonstrate that their existence is firmly rooted in a rich cultural heritage, yet they are ready to adapt and thrive despite social pressure. However, the process of adapting, evolving, and transforming creates conflict in the personalities of the characters, leading to pain. The very title of the novel reflects the theme of the story, *Kuch To Log Kahenge* (What Will People Say). We have all heard and enjoyed Kishore Kumar’s famous lyrics, *Kuch to log kahenge, logon ka kaam*

hai kehna; Chod do aanchal, jamana kya kahega, especially when we try to stretch our limits of what is acceptable in society. The protagonist constantly goes through two conflicts: internal and external. On the one hand, she tries to encounter the social stigma of being a widow by resisting rigid societal norms, and on the other, her character reveals an unwavering inner strength and determination by being resilient in the face of societal judgment on her affair with Zuhayr. As Gayatri Spivak in “Can the Subaltern Speak” about female agency: “throughout modernity, between neocolonialism and Indigenous patriarchy, it is the woman who is victimized. When a woman becomes a widow, she carries the burden of this social stigma of being a widow, while the same does not happen for men in Indian society”. The writer says in the prologue that keeping belief in the sanctity of the past is illuminating because it preserves the precious heritage of the past. However, when conservatism becomes rigid, it hinders societal progress. The relationship between Mihika and Zuhayr becomes a topic of gossip in Tiniguan, as society believes Mihika, as a widow, cannot have a relationship with a Muslim divorcee. Mihika understands that the problem lies in being a widow, challenging the stereotypes of patriarchal society. In Chapter 13, she reflects:

“It's not you; it's the whole concept of you. A widow. Brahmin. Not doing the expected things, then gadding about with a man, a divorcee, and a man from another religion. They can't even say the word clearly. Muslim. They use euphemisms, like the C word, Cancer. The big one. The biopsy disease. It's completely out of her sphere...” (p. 192).

The real conflict arises when the people of Tiniguan refuse to evolve. In actual life, they have no personal connection to her, yet they choose to scrutinize her life. There is no sympathy or empathy for Mihika; rather, they make her life harder. The people of Tiniguan have strict rules for widows about what is ethically right and wrong for them. Widows are prohibited from eating non-vegetarian food or lentils because it allegedly aggravates their emotions. Moreover, they are forbidden to wear red or maroon, only stark white.

“The primary aim, cleverly disguised no doubt, was to get rid of them, starve them to death. Deny them protein in any form... Masoor dal was particularly a no-no because of its red color. Red is the color of life, menstrual blood, fertility, of sex... and deny them color too, so if their bodies didn't wilt and die, their spirits would.” (p.217)

Mihika is a dynamic personality. In the early stage of her life, she fulfilled all her responsibilities as a mother, wife, and daughter-in-law. Now, when she seeks to fill the emptiness of her life by seeking a lover and companion in Zuhayr, it is unacceptable to the people of Tiniguan. Mihika feels lonely after the death of her husband, and she is very comfortable in the company of Zuhayr:

“The loneliness is a terrible thing, a thing that was soul-numbing, making everything seem meaningless and hollow. Much of the emptiness had gone now that Zuhayr was in her life.”

Gradually, Mihika starts feeling suffocated because she cannot enjoy this relationship openly in a small town like Tiniguan. She keeps negotiating her roles as a lover and mother. She is ready to end this relationship because it may create obstacles in her daughter Veda's marriage to Damo, whose parents are narrow-minded. Mihika's character highlights the challenges faced by individuals seeking to assert their own identity and choices within a cultural framework. She has the inner strength to face the challenges posed by society, but she is also a loving mother who does not want obstacles in her daughter's marriage. The fear and pain linger in her heart as she understands that her daughter may pay the price for her mother's relationship. She feels guilty, assuming her mother-in-law will taunt her about it. While talking to her friend, she reveals her fear:

"The daughter of a shameless woman, who, at her age, behaved worse than a love-struck teenager... What would people say? They lived in a social setup; they could not suddenly make individualistic decisions that would defy the norm.

Phukan highlights the preciousness of culture and tradition through the matrimonial process of Veda and Damo, but at the same time, she showcases the inevitability of change through Veda and Mihika's characters. Phukan uses subtle storytelling to examine how social opinions and expectations shape individual lives. The spying eyes of the Tiniguan people frustrate Mihika, though she does not bother much about the gossipers who try to peer into her life, both physically and through social media. Mihika's visit to Zuhayr's house becomes a matter of concern for neighbors, including the street guard, who is a witness to these visits. In Chapter 10, Mihika's conversation with her daughter reveals that younger generations are clear about their principles and ethics, while her generation remains confused by social behavioral expectations. In this chapter, she refuses to accept a friend request from a neighbor trying to intrude into their lives through social media. She expresses her desire for personal space as well as understanding the importance of family and community.

Phukan's characters struggle with the desire for individual freedom and autonomy, facing the weight of community expectations. Mihika is a symbolic representation of characters grappling with the challenge of forging their identity amidst the competing demands of tradition and custom. The novelist highlights the importance of family and community in traditional Assamese culture, as well as the tensions that arise when individual desires conflict with the collective. The visit of Damo's parents to Mihika's home reveals that Damo's parents' choices, customs, and thoughts are prioritized. Mihika accepts this for the sake of preserving tradition. However, she feels upset when she realizes that the patriarchal structure gives more power to the male family members. This relationship becomes suffocating, and Mihika feels relieved when they leave. She does not want her children burdened with worries about the future, especially since Damo's parents might discover her relationship with Zuhayr. People in Tiniguan never do anything openly, but gossip freely behind their back. One day, Mihika finds a social media post from her friend Tuloxi that resonates with her; she values her root, her home, and her place, but at the same time, she loves her liberty with Zuhayr. These two aspects of herself are in constant conflict, and

it is a source of pain and guilt:

“I am two women: one wants to have all the joy, passion, and adventure that life can give me. The other wants to be a slave to routine, to family life, to the things that can be planned and achieved. I am a housewife and a wanderer, both of us living in somebody and doing battle with each other.” - Paulo Coelho (p. 140)

That is the reason Mihika does not want to disclose her trip to Kerala to anyone. Her trip with Zuhayr gives her true joy and passion. Mihika cannot openly express her emotional fulfillment when she talks about the touch of Zuhayr and the feel of his naked body. Her daughter requested her to send her beach photos via WhatsApp. The best part of these trips is that no one judges them for being unmarried. Mihika and Zuhayr directly go to her son's place after their visit, where her daughter Veda discusses her decision to stay in a live-in relationship with Damo, as opposed to committing to marriage, since Damo's mother objects to the relationship between Mihika and Zuhayr. Mihika feels responsible for the development of their relationship. Veda and Damo are adaptable in their approach and happily accept their live-in relationship. It is the most crucial decision of Mihika's life, as she keeps navigating between her two roles. Ultimately, her children decide that she should choose her happiness over outdated traditions and societal rules. Mihika is grateful that her children always support her, accept her choices, and respect her decisions.

“...Yes, the resilience of the youth. Everything seemed possible, hurdles did not exist at that age... The outlooks, ideas, and ideals of youth should be unlined and fresh as their faces. Not tired like those of their parents and grandparents, who had made the world unnecessarily messy and cruel with its meaningless rules and strictures and boundaries.” (p. 207).

Through her subtle storytelling, Mitra Phukan addresses sensitive issues in Indian society, like childless marriages. The writer highlights how some social setups are overtly conservative while others are subtly so. The irony is that the pressure is ultimately worn away by women. Mihika's friend Sita tells her cousin's story, who has been married for five years but remains childless.

Relatives suggest that Sita's brother discard his wife and marry Sita's younger sister. Mihika easily relates to a society that creates a fuss about childless marriage. Sita says:

“It's about my cousin, my uncle's elder son, and his wife. They've been married for five years now and are childless. Can you imagine, Baideo, in a household like that, in a community, a village, to be childless?” (p. 224)

The idea is welcomed by the whole family, including Sita's brother. It is clear that Tiniguan does not have khap panchayats, but society has set clear rules and terms for divorcees, widows, and

childless women. The situation becomes more problematic when Sita's bhabhi does not raise a voice against it. The writer subtly conveys through her storytelling that some social setups are over in their conservatism, while others are more subtle. However, the core issue remains: the pressure is ultimately borne by the woman. Society takes pride in creating these boundaries but is unaware of the fact that change is the law of nature, and it is gradually seeping through the invasion of technology and migration, especially in the case of the younger generations who are leaving their homes to work in cosmopolitan cities, the boundaries set by their hometown are no longer relevant. Once they leave their homes, they do not carry the weight of the societal rules their hometown imposes on them. They no longer care about what society has decided for them. For the younger generation, marriage is not viewed as a stable and strong institution; instead, they prefer to stay in relationships without informing their parents. This socio-cultural setup offers them more freedom from the outdated customs of silent negotiations in marriages. Their parents are well aware that their children are living with their companions without marriage

.“Mihika's mood lightened. Young people! No wonder India was changing. It was only the beginning of their watch, and yet the changes were everywhere. Twenty or thirty years down the line, who knows where they would take this country? Somewhere better, she was sure, better than what it had been for so many decades now.” (p. 266)

Parvin Sultana, in her book review *Challenging Taboos and Stereotypes - What Will People Say*, comments that Mitra's works are deeply rooted in Assam's culture and sensibility. Through her storytelling, she addresses issues that have often been overlooked, such as the emotional needs of the older generation and the various social taboos that seem to have disappeared from society but are still prevalent in small cities like Tiniguan. Mihika's story ends on a hopeful note, symbolizing a beacon of hope for those negotiating between two identities. Mitra Phukan has not painted her protagonist as a victim; rather, she has allowed her characters to develop fully and convincingly, leaving room for inconsistencies, magnanimity of spirit, and complexity of motivation, even in the face of pain and suffering.

References

1. Phukan, Mitra. *What Will People Say*, New Delhi: Speaking Tiger Books, 2023.
2. Williams, Raymond. “Culture is Ordinary”: *Culture and Society: Essential Writings*. Wiley-Blackwell, paperback, 1958.
3. Sultana, Parvin. “Challenging Taboos and Stereotypes,” *What Will People Say*. Creative Book Review.