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**STATE VERSUS INSURGENTS: EMERGENCE OF DICTATORSHIP IN ARUNI KASHYAP'S *THE HOUSE WITH A THOUSAND STORIES* AND MITRA PHUKAN'S *THE COLLECTOR'S WIFE***

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**V. Manimekalai,**

aResearch Scholar in English,

School of English and Foreign Languages,

Gandhigram Rural Institute-Deemed to be University,

Dindigul – 624302.

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Abstract

The threat to indigeneity usually provokes the natives. Having to share the land and culture that had once been exclusively theirs is difficult for them. The resultant rebellion of the people leads to two forms of dictatorship. One is by the government which would try to control the rebellion and another by a group of people, who choose to take up arms against the government to assert their claim to the place. In both the forms, in an attempt to be in full control of the situation, the government and the insurgents turn to violent means. Each wants to be the supreme power in a particular region.

In Assam, there used to be a time when the democratically elected government acted like a dictator and the extremists, who claimed to be fighting for people's rights, wanted people to obey their orders. This new form of dictatorship is explored in Aruni Kashyap's *The House with a Thousand Stories* and Mitra Phukan's *The Collector's Wife*. While Kashyap's novel is about the administration's dictatorship over the people through the army, Phukan's novel explores how the insurgents ran an almost parallel government in Assam. The paper aims to look at how, despotism, by whoever it is, will eventually profit none.

**Keywords:** *indignity, dictatorship, insurgents, disposition.*

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Dictatorship emerges by subverting democracy totally. *Britannica.com* defines dictatorship as a "form of government in which one person or a small group possesses absolute power without effective constitutional limitations." According to different societal conditions and positional constraints, new kinds of dictatorships have emerged. A country need not have a dictator. But it may impose a dictatorial situation within a democracy. It may choose to do this in a particular state and not the whole country.

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In India, Assam, due to its proximity to Bangladesh Myanmar and China has been a scene of unrest for some time now. Though the situation at present is comparatively better, the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), whose activities have more or less subsided, used to be involved in the killing of innocent people. It also indulged in kidnapping and extortion to sustain and strengthen itself. On the other hand, the army's presence and the free hand that it gets through the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA) is horrifying. These two forms of dictatorships in Assam is the subject of Aruni Kashyap's *The House with a Thousand Stories* (HTS) and Mitra Phukan's *The Collector's Wife* (CW).

While Kashyap writes about the army's high hand over innocent people in a village, Phukan speaks about the insurgents' total control over the people, and sometimes, over the administration too, in a small town. HTS is written from Pablo's point of view. He comes to Mayong, his father's ancestral village to attend his aunt's wedding. The novel elaborates about the extra-judicial killings, allegedly by the army, that happened around Assam in the 1990s. It also discusses the army's constant bickering and invasion of privacy. Pablo says that in the name of controlling insurgency, the soldiers would kill anyone randomly. "... whenever they needed a body to prove to the officials that they had killed an insurgent, they would just shoot anyone at sight, plant grenades or an AK-47 beside it and call the press" (HTS, 37). To make the ULFA surrender, the army would go to any length. They have started targeting the relatives of ULFA rebels so that the insurgents are compelled to stop acting against the government.

Mridul, Pablo's cousin talks about one such incident that terrorized the whole village. The brother of a ULFA member was taken away from his house. The next morning he is found hanging in an electric pole. "... we saw the body first. Only in his red underwear. He didn't have legs. They had been chopped off. He didn't have fingers. They had been cut off too... It was such a horrific sight! Hanging from the electric pole like a dead, electrocuted bat" (HTS, 52). People would not want to support or help the extremists because they fear that the army has the power to brutalize them too. And it does not stop with the relatives of ULFAs alone. If someone who has nothing to do with the insurgency, just runs away seeing the soldiers out of fear, if a small crowd is seen in front of a house or if someone tries to speak confidently with the soldiers, these will be perceived with suspicion by the army. Dhoroni, a young man, "was shot dead because he had started to run after seeing soldiers one morning" (HTS, 110).

Women are the most affected party when the soldiers are around. "They stood up, as if ready to run. But they were too scared to run. They must have thought if they ran, they would be shot down" (HTS, 109). Mridul's friend's sister, Mamoni is raped by soldiers when she goes to wash clothes in the Pokora River and this has created fear among all the women in the village. This is a ploy – killing men and assaulting women – used by the army to threaten the ULFA. So when Pablo's uncle's family realizes that the soon-to-be-married Moina's brother-in-law is a ULFA rebel, who had joined the banned outfit because "he was tortured by the army" (HTS,

210), they are scared for Moina. She refuses to get married. She drinks phenyl. "Better to die than getting married into such a family,' she moaned. 'Let me die please, I don't want to suffer later, I don't want to be killed by unknown assassins! You can shoot me dead here, right here in my head—in this house!" (HTS, 189) She is going to be a direct target of the army, which will stop at nothing to keep the extremists under control. And the news had been brought in only as a rumor. The extent of dictatorship is such that even a rumor cannot be taken lightly. "...with the *girip garap* sounds of the boots, with the fratricidal violence in the state, I guess such rumors became verdicts, alternative realities, faceless voices turned real" (HTS, 190).

Apart from controlling the state with an army, Kashyap feels, Assam has undergone "internal colonization" (*guardian.uk.in*, May 19, 2010) by the central government to take advantage of its natural resources. "Sooner or later, if I loved my state, I would discover why Assam was rich in natural resources but one of the poorest states in the country; why Assam was the richest province in British India and one of the poorest states in independent India" (HTS, 23).

Though the novel is a fiction, Kashyap provides some historical facts about the high hand of the army, to make the reader understand the seriousness of the situation. The entire family of Mithinga Daimary, the publicity secretary of ULFA, was killed, allegedly by the army. So, naturally, nobody likes the presence of the army, as people often refer to them as "Mean-eyed soldiers" (HTS, 92), who threw "raven-mean glances" (HTS, 93) at them. They feel "the peace of the village was lost since the army camp was built in Mayong" (HTS, 108).

Perceptions differ. It depends on which vantage point the writer sees from. Mitra Phukan, in her novel, *The Collector's Wife*, looks at the issues in Assam from the administration's point of view. While she empathizes with the public for the inconveniences caused by the security men, Phukan explores the limitations within which the administration has to work. The protagonist, Rukmini, is the District Collector's wife. Her husband, Siddharth, is posted in Parbatpuri, a small town, ridden with the insurgency. Phukan focuses more on the upper hand of Movement for an Exclusive Homeland – MOFEH (ULFA fictionalized) rather than the security forces. MOFEH's activities have managed to terrorize both the administration and the people. They have penetrated everywhere and it is difficult to single them out. In Parbatpuri, people's most popular opening line is commenting on the weather, because "Almost any other opening sentence could be misconstrued here" (CW, 167). The novel explores MOFEH's kidnapping expeditions carried out on wealthy people for money. The kidnapped person will not be a free person even after he is released by them.

He would emerge from captivity looking pale, thin, haggard, and sick, but would remain tight-lipped about the whole incident. He would deny that any ransom had been paid, and would insist that he had been treated extremely well in captivity.

He would, however, also insist that he was unable to identify his abductors...  
(CW, 58)

Such is the fear of the hostage for his captors. And this happens in a place where the army is supposed to have good control of the situation. While Pronob Bishaya, a tea estate owner is kidnapped, Rukmini's friend Manoj Mahanta is also taken along with him because he is an employee of the CTF tire company. While the rich can pay the ransom, middle-class people cannot afford to do so and the company they are working for may not feel obliged to pay the ransom for them.

Even the local newspapers referred to the insurgents as "'anti-socials'" (CW, 81) to be careful or they may earn their wrath. When a murder happened, some terrorist group "unashamedly claimed the 'credit'" (CW, 81) for it. The MOFEH collected money from people, businessmen, and shop owners in the name of the tax, making them believe that "the money looted from them was used to further the cause of what was romantically called their 'Golden Homeland'" (CW, 82). They also insist that theirs is a "'Peoples' Movement'" (CW, 96). While the student's organization is the base for later militancy, the author feels as terrorists, who gradually climb up the ladder of power, they will change. "'self-aggrandizement'" (CW, 89) will replace ideology. "As they climbed the ranks of the terrorist organization, they would increasingly feel the need for luxury and personal wealth. Within the space of a few years, there would be little to differentiate them from common criminals..." (CW, 89).

People openly criticize the administration and its pitfalls but they tend to be careful when they talk about MOFEH and its activities. "People invariable lowered their voices and looked around stealthily as though they, are not the organization that they were talking about, were the ones indulging in lawless activities" (CW, 109). When the MOFEH wanted a blackout because a comrade of them was killed by the security forces, the Electricity Board obliged. People cooperated too.

... people responded to the call not because they grieved for the dead, but because the living had guns. Not only were the shutters down on all the shops that they passed, but not a ray of light escaped from under the doors of residences. Even street lights had been switched off.

The MOFEH has also managed to gun down the top police officer of the district, the Superintendent of Police, Hrishikesh Deuri when he is in a restaurant with his family. All the customers and waiters in the restaurant had run away. Everybody maintained that they had not seen anything. And MOFEH proudly claims responsibility for the incident. Deuri's reputation is further tainted when the press blatantly lies that he "was involved in a gun-running operation on the side of MOFEH under cover of his official status" (CW, 176). They publish rumors and false stories to appease MOFEH. "... MOFEH managed to create an all-pervasive atmosphere of fear and terror in the district..." (CW, 171). Security is tightened for all the higher administrative

officers. And the greatest revelation for Rukmini is that her driver, Anil, is a MOFEH rebel. He was appointed by the organization to protect the collector's wife from "pseudo-terrorists" (CW, 272). After revealing this, he vanishes. But he meets Rukmini again in the collector's bungalow and leaves without anybody noticing him. Siddharth, as the collector, expresses his inability to do anything about this. "So much for security. A hilltop residence, lots of gunmen positioned all around, and still he manages to slip in and out easily.'... 'If my own home is so easily accessed, what hope is there of my ever being able to catch up with them?'" (CW, 322-323)

While Kashyap's and Phukan's perception may be different, they are clear in stating that violence is not going to develop Assam in terms of economy, employment or education. The insurgency has been controlled in Assam due to the vigorous hunt the army launched, but many innocent lives were lost and many people were terrorized beyond imagination. Kashyap himself says that his generation never knew "what it is to live outside the shadow of the gun" ([nelitreview.blogspot.com](http://nelitreview.blogspot.com)). On the other hand, in their effort to gain cessation from India, the insurgents have put people's lives at risk. Many lives have been lost. If what the army does to people is a human rights violation, then what extremists do is also the same. Decades of insurgency and counter-insurgency operations have seriously affected people not only physically, but also emotionally. Both the novels do not end on a happy note. The authors seem to be indicating that regression, by the state or the rebels, will not benefit anyone.

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