

**Violence and Marginalization of Women in Arupa Patangia Kalita's
*The Story of Felanee***

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Abstract

Literature from the North East India represents a complex region and difficult times that the states had experienced. The history of Assam is rough and narrates different movements and insurgencies that are ethnic, linguistic, cultural, and violent in nature. The consequence of violence and war and impact of the same on women starting from the Language Movement in the 60s of the last decade till the devastation caused by the “freedom fighters” and Indian militants is the focus of the paper. To analyze and understand my point I have taken Arupa Patangia Kalita’s novel (translated from Assamese to English) *The Story of Felanee* into consideration. During the emergency the entire state became a conflict region with making no distinctions between private and public. Homes raided and people were killed, some became homeless or were traumatized with fear which caused a great loss of livelihoods and less economic prosperity. One the one hand there are people and groups who benefit from such conflicts and emergency while on the other hand there are ordinary civilians who become poverty stricken, displaced and deserted from their normal life and native place. Keeping violence and conflicts in the background, Arupa Patangia Kalita in her novel documents the life, experiences and personal loss of her protagonist “Felanee” meaning trash or

“to be thrown away”. Throughout the novel, the writer involves the fortune of a group of displaced women who are directed from fear, violence and marginalization to an atmosphere of empathy, sisterhood and self-discovery that comfort, provide security, stability of mind as well as healing.

Key Words- Ethnicity, Conflict, Violence, Empathy, Sisterhood, Healing.

From generations war has always been a man's game. Traditionally it is the man who always fights, die and achieve glory or shame in the battle field. Many war literatures around the globe have glorified the involvement and ability of male and created a male dominated impression of war that demonstrate courage as well as defend one's community till date. But the involvement of women during war is at multiple levels because they are the worst sufferers and victims--- wives become widows, sisters lose their brothers, mothers lose their sons and most importantly some are raped, molested and traumatized. Set in the midst of violence and terror in Assam during the late 70s of the last decade up until the present, Arupa Patangia Kalita in her book *The Story of Felanee* 2011(original, *Felanee* 2003) in a nutshell documents the life of her protagonist "Felanee" and the recent political imbalance in Assam that had changed the socio political and economic scenario of the state forever. During this mindless game of bloodshed and violence in the name of ethnicity, identity and autonomy what got sandwiched were the ordinary civilians. People looked for little peace and stability in life rather than the desire to live in 'sovereign golden Assam'. Tilottama Misra in her book *Writings from North-East India* writes, "for a region marred by decades of violence, its literature is not just a social and historical map of events, but also a medium of telling its story to the world." Based on real life events *The Story of Felanee* is a 'historical novel' in which characters are "both subjects of history and subjects to history, events in real time" that the state had gone through. (*Contemporary Critical Essay*) Keeping violence and conflicts in the background of the novel, Arupa Patangia responds to the emergency in her own way and depicts the life, experiences and personal loss of the *dirty* womenfolk. *The Story of Felanee* analyses female friendship, empathy and healing as well as the challenges that the protagonist Felanee and her friends had to face due to violence, political instability, tradition and institutions like patriarchy, caste etc. The paper explores the issue like marginalization of women, sharing and common experience of violence at mental, physical and emotional level as well as the sisterhood and self-discovery that comfort, empathize, provide security, stability of mind as well as healing.

The novel begins amidst the Language Movement of the 1960s when the Assamese speaking majority developed a fear that their identity will be washed away because of Bengali influx and

considering Bengali as the official language of Assam. This fear of deprivation from one's own identity and motherland branded the non Assamese speakers as foreigners and thus started the larger political instability in the state whose main aim was to drive away foreigners out of the state and turn the state into a golden Assam. The protagonist 'Felanee' or 'Falani' meaning a 'trash' in English was born during the violence of 60s when there were fire, gun and death all over. Right after birth she was thrown in a pond by someone but survived therefore symbolically meaning her life was a struggle yet she have to survive from the pyre find peace and take the path of non-violence.

The Story of Felanee portrays a detailed and successful bond between a group of displaced women during the agitation of the late 70s that allow building new identity, comfort, support each other and survive their estranged lives. Kali Boori, Felanee, Jon's mother, Minoti, Ratna's mother, Nabin, Jaggu etc., are the group of destitute and helpless people with having no idea of their caste or creed were may be the refugees like Felanee came to form a settlement who somehow earn their livelihood and assimilate themselves with the greater Assamese identity. The writer in her novel criticizes the general understanding of identity as a single unit and presents a multi ethnic protagonist who is a Bodo, a Bengali as well as an Assamese. When asked about her caste and identity she wondered about the various people whose genes ran in her blood "Felanee thought of her grandmother, Ratnamala's gold chain, and the dokhona woven by Kinaram's mother. She had her mother's shell bangles set in gold. She had the muga clothes that Moni's father had given her when Moni was born. What should she wear? What should she keep? Baishya had asked her to take off the shell bangles lest people mistook her for a Bengali. If she wanted to live she should discard her shell bangles, he'd said. Bulen, on the other hand told her, if she wanted to survive, she should wear a dokhona. And the two boys with their guns told her that if she kept company with 'these mixed people' she wouldn't be alive for long. What could she do now to keep alive?" (185-6) Keeping quiet for a while she uttered only one word 'human'. Her response challenges and questions the dominant cultural view of identity as well as nationhood--- identity can be multiple and barriers are artificially created.

Arupa highlights in her book the struggle of women for livelihood and survival, female friendship and sincere commitments towards each other agreeing to the social reality of the environment. Felanee survives the fierce massacre and bloodshed but loses her husband, unborn child and her home. She redefines the role and position of women and emerges triumphant from the hard life; accumulate and embrace the women folk around her, teach them to live life during conflicts at all levels. Kali Boori declared, instead of shedding tears “Women have to be like chilli...tiny to look at but real fire once in mouth.” (66) She gives the example of powerful goddess Kali who has ultimate control over man, which Felanee made the ultimate goal of her life--- to stand alone in distress and cry like a winner inside without any help from man. Due to this power inside her, during bloodshed and ethnic conflicts Felanee could literally develop survival strategy, embrace and empower the women like Minoti, Mira’s mother, Jon’s mother, Ratna’s mother, Sumola, Jaggu’s wife etc., and bind them together with the thread of sisterhood who continue to long for a family centered existence and loving companion. What Felanee found common is that happiness eluded these women folk yet they smiled. “Suddenly, she realized that all these people here had beautiful smiles that touched people’s hearts...Thinking of all these different people, each with their unique lovely smiles, something seemed to melt in Felanee’s heart and her own face too become radiant with a brilliant smile. (98)

In *The Story of Felanee* the author implicitly encourages women to work for economic sustenance and overcome obstacles in life. Felanee made puffed rice while some others took greens and stool to sell in the market. During the tension, turmoil and curfew of long hours and days that took place in the name of ‘golden Assam’, ‘change and progress’ and demand for independent law and Bodo state what ordinary civilian wanted is only food and shelter for survival. Strange words like foreigners, agitation, AASU, Constitution, Iandabu Treaty, student’s body etc, were heard. “Kurma,” she said. “You know it doesn’t even take a night to destroy a home, but to build it...” “It is really hard to make a living. All that I ask of you is, please don’t block the avenues to our daily bread” (181). Although the novel acknowledges the power of friendship yet it deliberately chooses to portray failed relationship, victimization, tensions and inner turmoil. When the Assam Agitation and demand for independent state were at its peak who benefitted from it were the

politicians and leaders of the group whereas the worst sufferers were the women, children and elderly. Some boys shouted slogans of “Long Live Assam, Long Live the Assam Accord, Long Live Bhriгу Phukan, Long Live Prafulla Mahanta” (112) and started looting the shops. Bulen leaving his mad wife and child went away to receive training in the hills---training to kill people. These ‘freedom fighters’ extort money from businessman as well as civilians and raise funds for their organization. People shiver with fear because “anyone refusing their demands would find his head blown off” (260) and hand over huge amounts of money without thought. Minoti’s prince charming who is an ULFA and had deserted her once giving a child in her belly comes to her bed for his sexual pleasure and fulfillment. Jun’s mother and Jaggu’s wife tremulousness is due to marital rape and domestic violence. They loss their mental and physical peace, get abuses and beatings from their respective husbands. They are the examples of what man can do to woman’s physiques to fulfill their inhumanly desire. Jun’s mother laments, “It’s for my blasted body, don’t you understand...his own juices have dried up. When he can’t perform at night, this is what he does to me...the woman’s firm black breasts were scarred with numerous wounds, that looked red and raw” (80). Jaggu’s wife’s stomach-turning health and later death is the witness of work load, unwanted pregnancy and abortion. Her uterus has come out of her vaginal passage and she repeatedly tries to keep it back on its place intact. “Felanee could see something like a big chunk of flesh, hanging down to touch the gunny bag. It was her uterus!” (117). Feminist writer Kate Millett in her book *Sexual Politics* writes, “Women in patriarchy are for the most part marginal citizens when they are citizens at all, their situation is like that of other minorities, here defined not as dependent upon numerical size of the group, but on its status.” Sumala was raped and disfigured till death. “Her naked body had distinct signs of brutality...in place of her breasts they were two raw bleeding wounds. Her emaciated genital passage was a huge open wound” (246). Through these women Arupa Patangia Kalita, give instances of their personal lives and their status at home and bedroom who is considered less important economically and do not possess any right over her own body. They belong to marginalized group, who do not have a voice of their own; yet work hard for survival and economic sustenance but are rewarded with rape and violence at all levels.

Although violence, degradation and paralyzed human life of the last century are the central theme of Arupa's novel yet the writer constantly displays protagonists' empathy and concern about the happenings around her. She was worried when Indira Gandhi, the former prime minister was shot dead. In her mind's eye she saw a picture of an elegant woman with her short hair and thought about the hard life of all womenfolk. Felanee thought about her children, her husband and parents. During the conflicts and quest for identity Felanee emerges as a fighter and participant, leader and activist. She critiques the bloodshed, revenge and the concept of boundary that is going on at the cost of innocent people's lives. "Who will live in their independent country? And who will live in Bulen's state? What will they divide? Could they divide the water in rivers; the trees, the land, the people? (184). She further adds "I neither need a separate dress, nor a separate state. All I need is something to wear and one square meal" (212). Through the friendship between Felanee, Minoti, Jon's mother, Meera's mother, Arupa foregrounds the success and solidarity which make them ready to face challenges related to race, class and gender oppression and leads to healing and survival. They found relief in each other sharing tales of their broken life, individual experiences and wounds. The tension going on in the background could not become a barrier or difference to their sisterhood but made their friendship and togetherness intact. All of them sat beside each other remembered the past, continued to worry about the future and shared sorrow; their heart was shredded into thousand pieces and was utterly broken. They literally gathered the broken pieces and stood for their menfolk who were arrested by army. "We have come to take our men back to their homes..." "Hamaar aadmi..." one of them said. "Amader lok..." said another. "Hamaar marad..." "Hamara beta..." (301). They have the power to do and decide whatever good they feel for themselves and people surrounding them without the afraid of subjugation from other forces.

Insurgency has made these women strong enough and ready to face the challenges of life. Arupa allows the voices of women to speak about their experiences in the realms of home and the world. There is a group of women, who are affected at all levels during the conflict and insurgency; who do not take caste, class or economic status into consideration. They decide to choose patience raise their children, run their business, liberate themselves and self-develop from different forms of

oppression; assimilate to fight back prejudice. In spite of all trauma and violence the womenfolk hope for survival, a better world with peace and prosperity.

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