

A STUDY OF THE IMPACT OF THE ASSAM AGITATION AS DEPICTED IN ARUPA PATANGIA KALITA'S THE STORY OF FELANEE

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Received: 03 Dec 2018

Accepted: 07 Dec 2018

Published: 17 Dec 2018

ABSTRACT

*The ordinary people of third world countries often undergo intense pain and mental agony as a consequence of the recurring civil wars and insurgency. The lives of the people living in North East India: indeed, is trauma filled as they face war-like situations, regular bloodshed, massacres, ethnic tensions, communal pogroms, and other violent conflicts. The authors belonging to the North East Indian literature have impeccably grasped these wounds inflicted upon the psyche of these people during several violent bloodsheds. Arupa Patangia Kalita is one of the most famous writers of Assam. As a writer she has more than ten novels and several short stories to her credit. Her novel *The Story of Felanee*, originally written in Assamese was translated into English by Deepika Phukan in 2011. This novel unwraps the hidden agonies and mental tortures of a group people which were concealed by authoritarian powers for centuries. The novel unravels the life of Felanee, a woman traumatized by the murder of her husband and the loss of her unborn child when her whole village was burnt down during the language riots in Assam. She is left alone with her only kith and kin, her son, to fight against the odds that these ever growing ethnic conflicts have brought upon her life. This novel also portrays the lives of several other women, on whom unending cruelties are unleashed during such protests. Rape, molestation poverty etc doom their life from everything to nothing. Arupa points out how women have become the greatest victims of all the aggressive conflicts that have occurred in Assam during the Assam agitation movement. She fruitfully depicts their struggle for existence in such times. The intention of the paper is to analyze the sufferings of these people, especially that of women during such movements.*

KEYWORDS: *Third World Countries, North East India, Ethnic Conflicts, Trauma, Arupa Patangia Kalita, Assam, Language Riots, Violence, Plight of Women*

INTRODUCTION

Assam has been a hotspot of various agitations, insurgent movements, ethnic cleansings and communal clashes in the post-independence period. The illegal migration, especially of Bangladeshis to Assamese soil generated certain quarrels with native tribes. Later, it was pursued by numerous ethnic killings and clashes between distinct tribes. J.B. Bhattacharjee comments on the background of this issue "The anti-foreigners movements in the 1970s and 80s, though peaceful and democratic in contents, were coupled with mutual distrust, social alienation and sporadic violence in Assam, Tripura, and Meghalaya" (10). The Assam agitation, conducted by All Assam Students Union (AASU) began at some point in the 1970s ended with the signing of the Assam Accord with the central government of India. The prominent leaders of this movement

started a party and came to power. However, certain prominent tribes like Bodos felt left out from the political control of Assam. Further, the imposition of several government policies in a multi-ethnic, multicultural and multi-religious society triggered their emotions of separate political identity. Hira Moni Deka Comments that “Under ABSU (All Bodo Students’ Union) lead the Bodoland Movement emerged as a reaction to the Assam Government’s (AGP) policy of Assamese cultural nationalism through the imposition of the Assamese language” (5). To safeguard their community and interests they gathered and demanded a separate autonomous state. The turmoil that followed resulted in the slaughter of innocent people and merciless violence between Bodos and non – Bodos. During all these conflicts, the worst sufferers were women. Though, they never took part actively in any of these conflicts they are always persecuted either by the insurgent groups or by the various armed forces. They had to give up all the essential requirements of their existence such as food, shelter, etc. They had to deal with numerous hardships throughout this phase; they are subjected to sexual assaults, rape and they were the victims of the violation of basic human rights. They were often forcefully stripped off their clothes and were made to walk naked in front of the whole village in the name of the search for militants. They always lived on the verge of constant threat and fear for life. They were unable to sleep, properly educate their children and were badly stricken with joblessness, poverty, starvation, poor income, and constant conflicts.

North East Indian authors from the region have certainly taken some effort to reveal these untold stories of misery to the public. For them, these are not just some stories, but the factual and authentic delineation of their life itself. Authors like Temsula Ao, Easterine Kire, Mitra Phukan, Rita Chowdhury, Indira Goswami, Birendrakumar Bhattacharya, Siddharth Deb and Arupa Patangia kalita all have taken the keen pursuit of these gruesome incidents of North East in their works. All these writers have tried to chronicle the incidents that made peaceful life impossible in their native place. Through the medium of literature, they strived to seize some attention to the so far unheard cries of their fellow human beings. They discussed how the clash between the central government and that of the insurgents snatched the peaceful life of native people of North East frontier. While the Central Government of India desires to establish their commanding power over the territory, the insurgents want to establish ethno-nationalism, and sovereignty. In between this ruthless violence, both of them almost forgot to look after the needs and desires of the common public. Most of the writers from the North East region address this issue faced by ordinary people and their unanswered pleadings for peace.

Arupa Patangia Kalita is a celebrated Assamese writer and academician born in Golaghat, Assam. She is a widely acclaimed personality for her short stories and novels. Her books have been translated into various languages from Assamese including Bengali, Hindi, and English. She also received certain prestigious awards during her literary career and that includes Sahitya Academy award for her short story collection *Mariam Austin Othoba Hira Barua* (2014), Katha Award(1998) and Bharatiya Bhasha Parishad Award(1995). Her stories are remarkable as it narrates the culture, history and socio-political scenario of her homeland, Assam. The major concerns of her works are related to women, insurgency, armed conflicts, separation etc. Her Novels include *Mriganabhi*, *Ayanta*, *Marubhumit Menaka Aru Anyanya*, *Kaikat Keteki*, *Millenniumar Sapon*, *Rongamatir Pahatro*, and *Felanee*. Her novel *Felanee* has been translated into English by Deepika Phukan, residing in Guwahati. This English translation has been shortlisted for the Crossword Book Award. Her novels depict the sociopolitical tensions of Assam from a feminist perspective. Her novels always care to talk about the hapless women who have to suffer certain heinous activities committed by several armed forces and insurgents. She showcases how the life of the ordinary human beings especially women and children are torn in between such conflicts thereby giving an authentic voice to these voiceless people. Prof. Gobinda Prasad Sarma in his foreword to the English

translation of Arupa Patangia Kalita's short story collection, *The Musk, and Other Stories* praises the fine artistic qualities of her works. He comments on her writing skills by saying, "Arupa Patangia Kalita, imbued with progressive ideas of the time, shows in her short stories and novels an unabated and unwavering sympathy for the hapless, suffering humanity. And yet, her fiction never smacks of propaganda born out of a political agenda".

Arupa Patangia Kalita's novel *The Story of Felanee* was originally written in the Assamese language. Later, it was translated into English by Deepika Phukan in the year 2011 and was published by the feminist publishing house Zubban. This work unfolds the life story of the female protagonist Felanee, and some other women like her, who had to bear countless hardships during the Assam agitation movement. Felanee's story begins with the tale of her grandmother, Ratnamala, the daughter of Chandradhar Mauzadar, working as a tax collector under the British Empire. After the demise of her first husband, she was sent away by her family to live with her uncle, Kuladhar Barua, who was the head clerk of a tea garden in the foothills of Bhutan. There, she fell in love with the caretaker of an elephant, the mahout boy called Kinaram and they run off together. But her life was too short, and she died giving birth to her only daughter, named Jutimala. After some time, Kinaram was also killed by someone. Jutimala was looked after by her father's relatives. She got married to Khitish Ghosh, a sweet-shop owner. Unfortunately, their life was also filled with troubles. The nightmarish violence of the 1960s engulfed their village and wiped out everything. "Everything that bloomed was destroyed, the fragrant sandalwood forest was plundered by illegal traders, the peacocks and spotted deer were mercilessly killed for their flesh until they were extinct. All that remained now was emptiness, despair, wanton destruction, a deep silent void" (9). Khitish was shot dead and his wife Jutimala was set to fire by the agitators. Their newborn baby was thrown into the pond by someone else, who later on was saved by Khitish's relative, Ratan. This newborn baby, a girl is called as Felanee, which literally means 'the thrown away – all her life' (9).

Felanee carried the trauma all these worse incidents with her. She often asked the elders who lived during the period about her mother and how it all happened. She was married to Lambodar, and they had one son together, named Moni. When the riots against the foreigners and on the question of autonomy reached their village, Lambodhar had to ask his pregnant wife to pack all things that they could carry to escape from their village. The atmosphere was so disturbed and tense that no one was at peace. For a pregnant lady like Felanee, it was the time to get some peace at mind, but the fate was aiming at something that she was so worried about their future and life. "No one could sleep that night. The sounds of people screaming, as their homes and fields burned, filled the air" (10). The trigger for the riots was the encounter between agitators and law enforcement service. Police fired at the young people for protesting against women contestants standing for elections.

The language riots of the time had burned most of the villages and people were living on the grip of fear. Felanee used to hear the gruesome tale of her birth and the incidents of that nightmarish night from an old woman. She told Felanee, how a group of men arrived with a truck full of guns and killed everyone who came before their sight. Whenever she listens to this story articulated by this old woman she hears a "Splash as though something had been thrown into the water" (19). This is a constant image that appears in her memory throughout the narrative. Though she was just an infant at that time when this tragedy struck her life, and she could hardly remember any of the incidents of this particular occasion she could vividly feel that splash. The memories of her lost child also began to haunt her. She often panicked when she kept hearing lullabies from nowhere. Soon everyone left the camp and Felanee too was forced to leave along with one of the surviving neighbor called Bulen and his mentally broken wife Sumala. He also arranged a place for Felanee to live;

Kali Boori offered her house to her for a rent of fifty rupees. Somehow, she managed to earn a living by making mooris with Kali Boori and others from the settlement. They started going together to the market to sell the food items they made. When they were all trying to make a life out of nothing, things again turned upside down. Students start rallying and organizing movements against foreigners like Bengalis and their illegal migration. Thus, tensions rose again. People were shot down, women were molested and raped, army camps started to function and the situation became worse. Chants like “Long Live Assam, Long Live the Assam Accord, Long Live Rajeev Gandhi, Long Live Bhriгу Phukan and Long Live Prafulla Mahanta” (112) filled the air. One day on her way to home from the market, she witnessed an upsetting sight of a kind professor being attacked by a group of violent boys. Her body got paralyzed, and it brought back all the nasty events of the past to her mind. The sight of a professor being attacked traumatized her in such a manner that her friends had to carry her away from the sight.

Another woman who suffered during these worst times is Sumala. She is the sister of well-known leftist, Madhab Das and is married to Bulen. On, the day of her son’s rice tasting ceremony Madhab Das along with his friend was killed by some boys who accused him as a traitor. The sight of her brother’s fingers was cut down and fed to the dogs had a profound impact of Sumala’s mind that she fainted out of shock. These boys also burnt Bulen’s house; thus, he was forced to reside in a refugee camp along with his child and mentally broken wife. When her husband Bulen joins the Bodo movement this mentally ill woman was all left alone to roam around. For some time, Felanne looks after her. But one day she suddenly disappears from the settlement. Later, the people from the settlement find out her body near the army camp. It was accused that army raped her and killer her during the process.

Felanne established a friendship with some of the womenfolk in the settlement. Many of them arrived there during the agitation and when they left with no other choice. The settlement was almost filled with families who have to run away for the sake of their life and children. One woman, whom Felanee was befriended during her stay in Kali Boori’s house, was Minoti. Minoti has a son, whose father is unknown to others. She got pregnant because of her relationship with a person from a wealthy family, where she was a servant. Later, on it is relieved that he is also a member of the party which stands for separation and autonomy of the state. She was forced to leave that household, as this pregnancy would be a bad reputation for him. Later, in a public meeting, Minoti came into contact with her son’s father and private meetings became frequent between them. He gradually used her as a sex gratification object and used her home to hide his guns, and he also became a refugee in her home. After, obtaining all his necessities he again pushed her out of his life like a chewing gum. During such movements, men consider women to be an object for attaining sexual pleasure. Whereas a woman who hopes to maintain some kind of emotional bond with her partner, loses every hope at the end.

Jaggu’s wife, whose name is unmentioned in the novel, suffers from her prolapsed uterus. Because of the agitations, they couldn't make much money and unavailability of good doctors in an insurgency-hit area also led to her worst condition. Felanne often noticed her act of pushing her uterus inside and she was so shocked. When Felanne asks her what is her disease, she replies by showing her prolapsed uterus “You have now seen for yourself the ruin of all womenfolk” (116). Jaggu wife has been dragged into such a situation because of her several pregnancies and three abortions. The doctor who treated her has warned her from doing any jobs. But in order to feed her family, she has to do her it and it worsened her physical condition. All the money her husband has been saved for treating her was either looted away by some agitators or they were forced it to spend it during protests called by several groups.

The former members of ULFA who promised to create a separate land for indigenous Assamese broke their promise and began to enjoy the ecstasy of political power. The boys who took part in Assam agitation movement plundered and even killed ordinary people for money. Felanee's neighbour Bulen, who helped her during the worst times, joined in the Bodo movement. He scolded Felanee for wearing sari instead, of dokhona which is the dress of their community. When she questions him why can't she wear what she likes, he replies in anger "You have Boro blood in you. You are Kinaram Boro's granddaughter don't forget!" (174). She also receives a threat from the boys who joined the Bodo movement for supporting and living with mixed communities. When Bulen and other members of her clan keeps on reminding her to wear traditional Bodo attires and need for a separate state, exhausted Felanee shouts at them by saying "My own dress is this piece of cloth that covers me adequately. I neither need a separate dress, nor a separate state. All I need is something to wear and one square meal" (212). Violent explosions, exchange of gunfire between different groups, raid of armies for insurgents and utter chaos became the order of the day in Assam. To tackle the several protests' army camp was set up and forest areas were cleared near to their settlement. Fear took over everyone's mind. Each of them thought of the scenario where all inhabitants of the settlement will be killed by people belonging to other communities. Army group who came in search of supporters of the insurgents took all the men away from the settlement. The womenfolk, who had lost their kith and kin, took a firm decision to confront the army. They firmly lined up behind Felanee and demanded the release to their men. The army was unable to resist the strong defense put up by these women, and they finally, released the men from the settlement. The last phase of the novel thus demonstrates the transformation of the womenfolk. The novel ends on a positive note that everything can't be plucked away from life because life will always find its way.

Arupa Patangia Kalita's *The Story of Felanee*, beyond any doubt, offers an engrossing journey to its readers, and it unleashes the trauma and consequences that the insurgency has set upon Assamese people during Assam agitation movement. She demonstrates the suffering of women, and the internal wounds that such movements have caused to them. Felanee, throughout the novel, is haunted by past events in the form of nightmares and dreams. Even single words like 'attack' and 'agitation' could create trouble in her mind and she remains still at a place without any movement or sensitive feeling. The novel not just portrays the life of a single woman, but multiple stories related to the worst conditions experienced by people of Assam are expressed by the writer. This fruitfully showcases the consequences of communal and ethnic pogroms that traumatize a person's mental and emotional psyche. In between these violent occurrences, Felanee along with others strongly fights back to regain their lost life. All they want is to rebuild a life, and a decent shelter to sleep off all the worries. But how far, Arupa's novel finds out and bestows an absolute solution to this recurring problem of violence is an unanswered question. Indeed, her novel educates or rather reminds her readers of these atrocities committed against the people of North East India during such aggressive agitations. She leaves the opportunity to her readers to decide what should be done to restore their land from all these bloodletting activities conducted in the name of separatism and freedom. She makes everyone to think about the importance of restoration of peace through the portrayal of several vivid lives. However, the author deliberately leaves the final note of the novel with the hope of the resurrection of Assam by implying that new seeds can "germinate" even in a "barren soil" (312).

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