

Trauma of displacement in Arupa Patangai Kalita's novel Felanee

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Abstract

Arupa Patangia Kalita, a renowned novelist from Assam, highlights the experiences of women and marginalized groups. She specifically explores the challenges faced by women in different aspects of life. In her novel "Felanee" (2011), Kalita examines the issue of homelessness, drawing inspiration from real events in Assam during the late 1970s. This time frame was defined by noteworthy social and political unrest. The novel delves into Felanee's experiences, shedding light on the impact of displacement, ethnic identity, and resilience in difficult situations. Displacement, which involves being forcefully uprooted from one's home, may potentially lead to significant emotional, psychological, and physical consequences. This research article aims to analyze these themes in Kalita's work, offering insights into the complexities of trauma and resilience within the context of Assamese ethnic conflict.

Keywords: Resilience, Identity, Ethnic Conflict, Displacement, Assam,

Introduction:

The trauma of displacement is a profound and often devastating experience that has been explored in literature and studies throughout history. This pertains to the emotional, psychological, and physical ramifications of being forcibly uprooted from one's home or community due to a variety of factors, such as conflict, political upheaval, or environmental catastrophes. This traumatic event disrupts an individual's sense of belonging and security, resulting in enduring wounds. As Judith Herman, a prominent psychiatrist, emphasizes, "Traumatic events destroy the sustaining bonds between individual and community. Those who have survived learn that their sense of self, of worth, of humanity, depends upon a feeling of connection to others." This underscores the profound disruption of one's sense of self and belonging, as well as the critical importance of community ties for psychological well-being.

Arupa Kalita Patangia is a highly esteemed Indian novelist and writer of short stories, renowned for her extensive contributions to Assamese literature. Her literary ventures have garnered numerous prestigious accolades, thus highlighting her aptitude and unwavering commitment to the art. She received the Bharatiya Bhasha Parishad Award (1995), Katha Award (1998), Sahitya Sanskriti Award (2009) and Lekhika Samaroh Sahitya Award (2011) for her incomparable literary contribution to Assamese literature. She was the recipient of Sahitya Akademi Award (2014) for her short stories book titled "Mariam Austin Othoma Hira Baruah (2012). Kalita was recently awarded The Assam Valley Literary Award (2016) for her literary contribution to the field of Assamese literature.

Arupa Kalita Patangia's literary creations have exceeded linguistic barriers. Her works have been translated into English, Hindi, and Bengali. Notable interpretations comprise of "Dawn: A Novel," an English version of "Ayananta" by Ranjita Biswas, as well as the transformation of "Felanee" into English by Deepika Phukan, which obtained acknowledgment by being shortlisted for the Crossword Book Award. Additionally, "The Invitation," an English interpretation of Patangia Kalita's Assamese piece "Handpicked Fictions," illustrates her impact on a broader readership. In 2020, "The Loneliness of Hira Barua," translated by Ranjita Biswas, further amplified the extent of Patangia Kalita's narrative prowess. This expansion into translated works affirms the universal impact of her storytelling, surpassing linguistic boundaries to resonate with a diverse and global audience.

Arupa Patangia Kalita explores the rich history and culture of Assam in her works. She endeavours to shedding light on the lives of people from various strata of society with a focus on women's challenges, including violence and insurgency. Her writing primarily centers on women and marginalized communities, addressing a wide range of contemporary social, political, and economic issues in Assam. In an interview, Kalita admits that she has an element of empathy for the women engrossed in her texts. She says –“ I am a woman and hence, I write about women in my society. In this uneven society that I belong to, I always feel I have a lot to say about women as a woman.. I take a gendered view of it.... Women are thrown away like garbage, oppressed, marginalized, rejected, but even in the midst of this are vibrantly asserting life. And I glorify their existence. (Kalita, 8. Jan. 2017)

Objectives of the Study:

- To examine the portrayal of resilience and survival strategies in the character of Felanee amidst the backdrop of ethnic conflict and violence.
- To analyze the nuanced representation of ethnic identity and its instability in Felanee's narrative.
- To assess the impact of displacement on Felanee's sense of belongingness, identity, and overall well-being.

Research Methodology:

This study employs a qualitative research approach, mainly focusing on analyzing the text "Felanee" through literary analysis.. It looks at how characters are developed, narrative techniques, and the themes explored in the text. The study also considers secondary sources like interviews with the author, Arupa P. Kalita, and critical analyses of the novel to give more context.

Discussion:

Kalita's novel "Felanee" (2011) is firmly rooted in the actual occurrences that took place in Assam during the latter part of the 1970s. This period was characterized by a series of socio-political upheavals, encompassing demonstrations, rebellions, communal conflicts, and ethnically-driven hostilities. The book delves into the

psychological anguish endured by ordinary individuals who found themselves entangled in the chaos of ethnic disputes, insurgency, and the consequent displacement.

Felanee, the novel's main character, comes from a mixed background, with a Bengali father and a Boro mother. Her birth coincided with a tragic event, as her father fell victim to the violent Assam Language Movement. Unfortunately, the same night her father died, her mother also passed away during childbirth. In these early moments of her life, Felanee's survival was uncertain. The chaotic upheaval led to her being thrown into a pond, a harsh fate meant to end her life. However, fate intervened through Ratan, a distant relative of her father, who saved her and later adopted her, giving her the name "Felanee," which carries the poignant meaning of being 'the thrown away' (9).

Felanee faced continuous challenges because of the Assam Anti-Foreign Movement. The Assam Movement (1979-1985) was a popular uprising led by the All Assam Students Union (AASU) and the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP) to expel illegal immigrants from Bangladesh. This troubled period left her without family and a home, deeply impacting her emotions. During this troubled period, she not only lost her husband but also the possibility of having a child. At the same time, her beloved home suffered a similar fate. This profound loss deeply affected Felanee, leaving her marked by the haunting memories of her past experiences. Felanee held a deep attachment to her ancestral home and village, which were filled with cherished memories. The thought of leaving the place where her family had their significant moments was emotionally difficult. It was where her grandparents first met, where her parents fell in love, and where she grew up and got married. There were also practical concerns about whether she could return once she left. The entire region was under heightened stress due to the ongoing unrest.

In her interview, Arupa P. Kalita had commented on the women characters in the novel. She had remarked, "In Felanee, I wrote about a group of marginalized women. I picked up my characters from my devastating times . . . I have tried to decode the mindless violence. My canvas is very big. It is a canvas of unrest" (Kalita "Urvashi").

In the novel "Felanee," the author skillfully depicts a character who has endured profound physical, psychological, and structural forms of violence. Over the course of their nine-year marriage, Felanee and her spouse amassed a multitude of belongings, deepening their emotional bond with their residence. The decision to depart became a multifaceted and profoundly emotional one due to the strong attachments they fostered towards both their material possessions and the profound memories associated with their dwelling. This choice was not solely about relinquishing a physical space; it entailed parting with the tangible representations of their shared existence and the recollections tied to each individual item. These belongings served as significant mementos of their collective journey, and relinquishing them denoted a profound transition in their lives and a separation from a location that held immense significance for them. So, it was a difficult decision for her to choose, "what should she leave behind, piece by piece, like raindrops? What does she need to bring?" (10-12).

Felanee had the misfortune of witnessing a truly devastating fire that tragically consumed her humble abode, while also claiming the lives of two unfortunate neighbors. On that fateful night, her beloved husband

mysteriously vanished, leaving a haunting void and an assumed sense of loss. In an attempt to shield themselves from the chaotic violence that surrounded them, she and her young son Moni sought solace in a humble pond, symbolizing the perilous depths they found themselves in. Felanee found herself in a state of deep psychological distress as a result of these distressing experiences. While undergoing rehabilitation in the limited space of the relief camp, she struggled with hallucinations, where she was tormented by vivid images of attackers from the aggressive crowd. The heart-wrenching cries and gruesome scenes of violence continued to haunt her as she embarked on the difficult journey to the nearest station.

The possibilities of Felanee's potential return to her ancestral home were greatly limited by the long-lasting conflicts and unresolved disputes regarding land, property, and territorial claims. The mere thought of revisiting her former village remained a formidable idea for survivors like Felanee, who carried deep scars from their distressing experiences. However, it is important to acknowledge that a significant number of those who had sought refuge in the relief camps ultimately decided to go back to their original homes. Some found shelter within the embrace of their family households, while those with financial resources embarked on the pursuit of new residences in urban areas.

Felanee couldn't go back due to lack of support and means. Visiting her in-laws would be awkward as a widow and outsider, with little familiarity between them. "How could she go to her husband's home which she had neither visited nor seen before? She belonged to different community, and was a widow-would they give her shelter?" (2011: 61) In these touching lines, we are able to sense the burden of Felanee's doubt and vulnerability. The idea of entering her husband's unfamiliar residence, being a widow from a different community, is a daunting exploration into the unfamiliar. It is a testament to the strength she must gather, and the bravery it requires to confront such a situation on her own. The pain of her isolation is noticeable, yet she possesses the resilience of a woman who has overcome challenges in the past.

They set up a new community in a place called Rabha village, located on the outskirts of town. The government didn't officially allow living in this area, so they were essentially trespassing on a designated forest reserve, and there were already residents from Nepali, Bengali, and Assamese backgrounds. There Felanee had noticed that, "All the roofs had similar bamboo slats and bricks on top and the same number of sheets. People inside the huts also look alike. It seemed as though cyclone had hit a colony of ants and they were trying to build new anthills." (2011: 55)

Felanee managed herself in this new community. She made an effort to distance herself from any form of violence here. Felanee, along with fellow settlers like Minoti, Kali Boori, Nabin, Jon's Ma, and Bulen, had to work for wages to support themselves. However, a different sort of trouble arose due to insurgent activities, introducing an additional layer of complexity to their daily lives. Bhulen and Hari Bhangura's son made the decision to participate in armed resistance, aiming to advocate for the establishment of a Boro Autonomous Council. This development gave rise to tension and disagreement within the village. Once again her life is disturbed by the ongoing conflicts like strikes and curfews that resulted her displacement.

Felanee's life is intricately woven with the concept of displacement and identity crisis. Ongoing conflicts, like strikes and curfews, create more problems for Felanee. These conflicts disturb any stability she may have found in Rabha village, making her feel even more out of place. Losing a stable home intensifies this feeling of not belonging. Despite these challenges, Felanee demonstrates remarkable strength. She shows how people can adapt and grow, even in difficult circumstances. Her story is a powerful example of how displacement and an identity crisis shape her life.

Arupa P. Kalita's novel examines the complexities of ethnic identity in the context of the Assamese ethnic conflict. It challenges the idea that ethnic identity is solely based on biological lineage. Felanee's experience highlights the inconsistency and instability of ethnic identity. She emphasizes her fundamental humanity instead of choosing just one label. This shows her resistance to being confined to a single ethnic identity. Felanee's confusion reflects the push for autonomy and the scrutiny of ethnic affiliations. This led to upheaval in a society that once valued harmony and peace. The narrative highlights the contrast between personal experiences and societal ideas about ethnic identity.

Conclusion:

Arupa P. Kalita's "Felanee" vividly portrays the suffering endured by both men and women during times of violence. This includes painful losses like the death of family, destruction of homes, and loss of livelihoods. Homelessness, especially for women, causes significant emotional and psychological distress, affecting not only individuals but the entire community. Through Felanee's experiences, the author sheds light on the violent upheaval in Assam during the late 1970s. The novel also highlights the struggles of marginalized individuals who became refugees in their own state. It brings attention to pressing social and political issues in Assamese society. The narrative emphasizes the strong bonds formed among a group of displaced women during this tumultuous era. Felanee, along with others like Kali Boori, Jon's mother, Minoti, Nabin, Jaggu, faced adversity together, transcending social divisions in their quest for survival. These women eventually integrated into a designated settlement area and continue to work towards becoming part of the broader Assamese identity. The story is a powerful testament to human resilience, adaptation, and strength in the face of socio-political upheaval and displacement.

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