The Days of Trial: Textualization of Conflicts in Arupa Patangia Kalita’s - The Story of Felanee

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Abstract
Insurgency-related conflicts in Assam have been a never ending condition in the region. These conflicts have often been seen as a consequence of the tension between the Central and the State Government. The perception is that the governance practices of Central Government of India has led the people of Assam believe that their land and people have not been acknowledged and looked after well even though they belong to the same country. The main two reasons behind this notion of the native Assamese people is due to the unaddressed issue of influx of illegal immigrants from Bangladesh and the lack of socio-economic development. These conflicts are seen to be largely impacting the writers and the writing practices of the region. Assamese writers represent the ongoing conflicts in the form of fictional narratives. The works of these writers generally engage with the themes of insurgency, self-assertion, identity issues, cultural turmoil or political concerns, where violence is the most dominant issue. Their works largely vocalizes their opinions and experiences of the conflict through the medium of language and writing. These works written about the self, encapsulate the themes of aspiration, dejection, hopelessness, frustration and anger. According to Nandana Dutta, in her essay ‘Narrative Agency and Thinking about Conflicts’, such writing that foregrounds the feeling of negligence and betrayal of the Central Government of India towards the land of Assam as well as Northeast are called ‘Narratives of Neglect’ (Dutta 2009:127). The paper thus makes an attempt to examine the novel The Story of Felanee by closely in the context of Dutta’s thesis.

Keywords
Assamese writers, Fictions, Narrative of Neglect, Assam, Northeast, Conflict

I. Introduction
The beautiful land of Northeast India with diverse cultures and multiple languages is seen as a region of multiple conflicts which are mainly attributed to insurgency. Among the eight states of Northeast India, the state of Assam is considered as the most affected region, both culturally and politically. It is believed that after the British colonization, the state of Assam saw an acute escalation of violence and conflict. As insiders who have both lived and experienced the events of conflict, the writers from the region of Assam often express their fear, trauma and grief in the form of writing or story telling. The conflicts in their works are seen as a consequence of the negligence of the mainland India towards the region of Northeast. According to Nandana Dutta in her essay, ‘Narrative Agency and Thinking about Conflicts’, conflicts in Northeast are a result of lack of attention given by the Central Government of India towards Northeast region or the dissatisfaction at the ruling mind-set of the Centre. Further the Centre’s inadequate understanding of Centre-periphery relationships and unaddressed issues of socio-economic and ethnic problems are commonly perceived as ‘exploitation’ of north-eastern states as expressed below by Dutta in her essay:

Conflicts in Northeast have been the result of a dissatisfaction with the ruling mind set at the centre-with the centre’s inadequate understanding of centre-periphery relationships. (2009:126)

Besides, the demands of the people of the region with respect to the issues of illegal immigrants-free region and autonomous state also remain unacknowledged by the Central Government of India. As a result, it is observed by the native Assamese people that the Indian Government has failed to understand the angst experienced by the citizens of the land. Consequently, these issues resulting out of the alleged negligence of Centre towards the Northeast Indian states’ relationship have impacted the fictional works of the writers belonging to this region. The Assamese writers fictionalize the conflicts resulting out of this tension in the form of a fiction or story. The narratives of the writers belonging to the state of Assam, encompasses the theme of aspirations, rejection, despair, remorse, dejection, helplessness, frustration and resentment. The stories in such fictions are written about the self or their land or people where conflict becomes the main focus of the narrative. Such narratives or works of fictions represent the real life experiences of the native Assamese people about the conflicts prevailing in their state. According to Nandana Dutta in her essay, ‘Narrative Agency and Thinking about Conflicts’ these narratives are called the narratives of the neglect. One such work of fiction that reflects the events of conflict prevailing in the land of Assam is The Story of Felanee by the Assamese writer Arupa Patangia Kalita.

II. Textualizing Conflicts
Arupa Patangia Kalita in the novel The Story of Felanee portrays the lives of the common people who have both experienced and endured the turmoil in Assam. The text imprints a multiple number of events of murder, kidnappings, demonstrations, extortion and the murky politics that prevails in the region of Assam. The novel largely articulates the situation of hostility prevalent in the state while narrating in fictional terms the real life experiences of the native people and their stories of survival and existence. Set in the backdrop of the Assam Agitation, the novel depicts the scenario of the failed economy as a result of the conflict and the brutal acts of the insurgent groups. The protagonist of the novel, Felanee’s life parallels the struggle of common people caught in the labyrinth of the turmoil.

Kalita begins her novel with a reference to the state of unrest prevailing in the region. A girl in her room is seen making rag dolls for her brother-in-law’s daughter when this harmless and peaceful activity is violently interrupted by the sudden appearance a group of people in her room. The people in the group begin to pull off all her jewelry and clothes leaving her clothed in white. This incident which appears at the beginning of the novel foregrounds the kind of unrest that will be reflected throughout the text. The young girl foreshadows the character of the female protagonist.
Felanee, who is later introduced to the reader speaking about her bitter experiences of life caused by the various tumults in the land of Assam. The intruders coming into the girl’s room reflects the act of the group of insurgents who invade the villages. Additionally, the taking off of her clothes and jewelry denotes the various sinister deeds like rape, murders and kidnapping and extortion taking place. These acts have largely impacted the lives of the common people. The white cloth also foreshadows the life of the protagonist who will soon lose her husband in the course of this violence.

In the novel, we come across incidents taking place during the fearful dark hours of night and even during the daylight where groups of people armed with burning flares, knives, swords and guns charging into the homes of the villagers to kidnap, murder and loot. One such incident is portrayed in The Story of Felanee:

The boys from students unions went from door to door, coaxing people out of their houses, and on the streets… Everyone talked of curfew, nomination papers, election, army and police… The police started beating up people. Suddenly there was the sound of gunfire. The police was firing, the road was deserted (Kalita A P 2011:88).

These lines are a comment on the practice of the young rebels who come out into the open and create an environment of fear and terror. These groups of rebels carry out demonstrations and also barge into the houses of the people leaving them devastated.

Felanee is often racked with the memory of merciless killings which she has witnessed the brutal killing of her family members and friends. The sight of the innocent blood spilling their bodies is vivid in her mind. She has lost not only her friends, relatives but her husband too. The evening on which she has seen all these people killed is her darkest day of her life. She recalls how the houses were burnt down leaving people dead and homeless (Kalita A P 2011:22, 23). Such occurrences were commonplace occurrences in the region during Assam Agitation and Insurgency movement of 1970s and 80s.

The novel is replete with the narration of incidents that leave no doubt in the minds of the readers as to how the writer is consciously setting the novel in the backdrop of actual events that Assam witnessed:

I went down to the ditch and covered myself with water hyacinths. And then, they set fire to Shibani and Shibani’s father in your house Moni’s Maa! And in the morning there were dogs and foxes. And there were bodies like burnt fish!

Dadu, Dida…under the silk cotton tree the two heads… goat’s head…Biren butcher’s shop…and red, red blood. More Blood. (Kalita A P 2011: 39)

The allusion here is to an incident that took place place in Tinsukia, a district of Assam on October 13, 2018 where five innocent people were killed by suspected ULFA militants. The allusion to real incident here is not a stray example. There is also a mention of another incident that occurred in the year 2011 in which the militants burnt down 19 houses in Dima Hasao, a hill district of Assam. Again, in the year 2005, there was another report of 379 houses being burnt by Dima Halam Daogah militants in almost six villages in KarbiAnglong.

The novel in literary term portrays a picture of the brutality of the situation by giving a detailed description of the event. Kalita depicts how the corpses were lying everywhere with no eyes and heads but was only black cloth. The group of people without eyes and heads came approaching along with the beating of temple drums. At this the people tried to escape and save their own lives. Soon after the group of people who came into the village, the houses on fire. And in the morning there were dogs and foxes feeding on the corpse that looked like burnt fish (Kalita 2011: 39). These clearly indicate Kalita’s attempt to represent the violence in a realistic manner. These events in the story echo the incidents that took place in 2014 in Kokrajhar and Sonitpur District of Assam where the Bodo insurgent groups brutally killed 78 people and burnt down their houses (Firstpost 2019).

The novel, as mentioned earlier is replete with allusions to incidents of violence initiated by the insurgents. Thus, there is very little doubt that Kalita’s attempt to weave a tale while locating it in the factual realm is a conscious narrative strategy that she adopts to fictionalize facts.

Kalita in The Story of Felanee also portrays the acts of the aggressive and enthusiast young insurgents who prowled around in the market places and settlements, demanding huge amount of money from the people. They would demand money from the shopkeepers or people in the settlement to pay a ransom amount from these economically drained villagers. People like Felanee, Minati, Kali boori and Moni’s Ma who earned their living selling spices, pulses and making murhas, were the ones who suffered the most as a result of such acts of extortion. Failing to fulfill their demands resulted in the abduction and death of these innocent people.

Arupa Patangia Kalita by textualizing the factual events in the novel tries to reinforce the idea that the conflicts in the land of Assam engendered by the group of insurgents that largely impacted the lives of the common men remained unaddressed by the Central government. However, the attempts of the writers to draw the attention of Centre has not gone in vain as Karishma Saurabh Kalita in the article ‘Assam Strives to Tell its Tale’ suggests:

But the only good thing that resulted from it was the highlighting of the region’s problems, which forced the Centre to pay more attention to it.(Kalita, S K, 2017)

The above line suggests that when the problems and hostility prevalent in the land is highlighted it paves a way for exposure of the situation. Therefore these representations of conflicts in their writings are attempts to compel the Centre or the Central Government to acknowledge and pay more attention to their plight.

Writing as for such writers is a strategy to draw the attention of the government and the other parts of the world. They write in the belief that their story will have a voice and their suffering will have a name. Their works act as a resistance to the discomforting environment created by insurgency- induced violence which has shattered the peaceful lives of their own people and land.
The Story of Felanee is not to be seen as a unidimensional novel. The novel is multilayered as it makes an attempt to document the communal clash between the Bengali speaking Muslims and the indigenous Assamese people also. The novel is set during the time of major agitations that took place due to the illegal immigration; Kalita reflects this issue of communal clash in her writing. The protagonist Felanee as an individual having a mixed origin experiences an incident in the relief camp where she is refused treatment by an Assamese doctor during her time of delivery as she was wearing white shell bangles that was traditionally worn by the Bengalis. This reflects the prevalence of the resentment towards the foreign settlers (Bengali Muslims) who have infiltrated their homeland. For instance:

"...Do you call these locusts human beings? It is because of people like you that Assamese people are in this plight‘, the boy said accusingly.” (Kalita 2011: 31).

The above line reflects a strong feeling of anger and hatred towards the Bengali Muslim community as they are considered as locust that lived in swarms. Their existence in swarms will only make the native Assamese people weak leaving their culture, identity and land at stake.

While tracing the root cause of the formation of insurgent groups in the land of Assam, the rationale can be drawn that the rising conflict is a result of the continuous act of illegal immigration from Bangladesh. It can be understood from the fact that the works of these Assamese writers embeds the feeling of negligence exerted by the mainland India towards the land of Assam. In this context Nandana Dutta opines that,

Acknowledging the sensitive nature of national-regional relationships-basic to the situation of conflict and providing the occasion for the emergence of the kind of identity noted in the Northeast is an entry point into the modes of talking and thinking about conflicts. (2009:132)

These lines suggests that the rationale behind the sensitive nature of conflict prevalent in the state of Assam and the entire Northeast region is prompted towards national and regional relationship. This tension between the nation and state has also further resulted in the emergence of awareness with regard to the native Assamese people’s ethnicity and identity.

The conflicts represented in the text are premised on the basis of the most neglected issue of the region which is the problem of continuous illegal immigration. The works of these Assamese writers foreground not only the physical conflict but also revolve around the mental agony that a survivor experiences. It is in this context that this article posits the idea that The Story of Felanee can be considered as inclining to such narrative.

III. Conclusion

It is often observed that the thoughts of the writers are reflected at the heart of their writing. In an article ‘Assam Strives to Tell its Tale’, Karishma Saurabh Kalita talks about the impact of the ongoing violence in the lives of the writers. According to her these Assamese writers have also endured and experienced the tumultuous days of their land like any other ordinary men. She quotes Arupa Patangia Kalita who opines that whenever they start writing, they are carried back to the sordid memories of the disturbed times which haunts them. Consequently the themes and characters of their writing are often overdone and iterative in nature. Yet they do not cease to write nor hold themselves from telling their stories to the world (Kalita 2017). Therefore, the writers tend to engage with these issues of conflict running through their mind in the form of fragmented events which has a great relevance to their real time experiences. The stories narrated or told by these writers are the stories and incidents that are streaming and at the same time haunting their mental state. The stories of the endurance that the writers write about are, perhaps, the tales of the writer themselves.

Despite the traumatizing situation Felanee as a woman survives and endures the cruelty of the conflict as a single mother succeeding in setting aside all her fear and gender differences in overcoming the trial. As the name suggests the word ‘Felanee’ denotes the state of being thrown away or unwanted, Felanee is a widow and is looked down upon by the other people in her village. Enduring the political and cultural conflict is not the only thing that she has to surmount.

References

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