

Vol. 8, Issue-II (April 2017)

ISSN: 0976-8165

THE CRITERION

An International Journal in English

Bi-monthly, Peer-Reviewed, Open Access eJournal



UGC Approved Journal [Arts and Humanities, Sr. No. 40]

Editor-In-Chief - Dr. Vishwanath Bite

www.the-criterion.com

About Us: <http://www.the-criterion.com/about/>

Archive: <http://www.the-criterion.com/archive/>

Contact Us: <http://www.the-criterion.com/contact/>

Editorial Board: <http://www.the-criterion.com/editorial-board/>

Submission: <http://www.the-criterion.com/submission/>

FAQ: <http://www.the-criterion.com/fa/>



ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

www.galaxyimrj.com

Centring the Decentred: Reconceptualization of History and Female Identity in *The Story of Felanee*

Monalisa Konwar
Assistant Professor,
Department of English,
Moran College.

Article History: Submitted-05/04/2017, Revised-24/04/2017, Accepted-27/04/2017, Published-30/04/2017.

Abstract:

Postmodernism contests the monology of metanarratives especially the linearity of history in the name of plurality and alteration. So, most of the recent postmodern/postcolonial narratives express scepticism on the monolithic nature of history and with a critical vision in enunciating and reconstructing history offer different alternatives and plural histories to reinterpret and subvert the historical accounts and incidents they allude to. They foreground or augment the events that monolithic history discards, retell the stories of the marginalised mass whose history never peeps through the official history and compose alternative histories recovering the lost voices in history. Arupa Patangia Kalita's novel *The Story of Felanee* (2011) exemplifies the same inkling by situating a marginalised character Felanee at the centre of the novel and thereby resuscitates the history of the peripheral subalterns whose voice has been denied any ear in the official history of Assam. Cast against the backdrop of Assam Movement the novel brings to the fore myriad of untold tales of the different ethnic groups being rootless and outcasts in their own land. Keeping violence and conflict in the background, Arupa Patangia Kalita in *The Story of Felanee* documents the life, embittered experience and personal loss of her protagonist Felanee whose very name meaning "thrown away" insinuates into her displaced position and identity which is often thwarted in a multi-ethnic and multi-lingual land at an inapt conflict-ridden time. As the historical record has consistently written the peripheral "others" including women out of history the paper attempts to analyse how in the novel history is refracted by placing the gendered subaltern at the centre and how the female identity is re-cast under the aegis of ethnicity and history.

Key words: Centre, identity, marginalised, monology, postcolonial, postmodernism.

"I define postmodern as incredulity towards metanarratives." (Lyotard, xxiv)

Such 'incredulity towards metanarratives' prompts postmodernism to deny the fixity of the past and the very notion of 'centre'. Wesseling describes the attempt of centring the peripheral on part of the postmodern narratives as "to inscribe the losers of history in (our) historical memory. To counter canonised history with apocryphal versions aimed at...strengthening the position of subordinated groups in the present and at suggesting possibilities for equality in the future" (206). Linda Hutcheon's concoction 'historiographic

metafiction' also verbalises the quietened histories of marginalised groups by means of refracting the undisputed monologic interpretation in order to compel it out of the centre and to resuscitate the decentralised histories of the ex-centric others. Hutcheon declares that historiographic metafiction "note the dispersing interplay of different, heterogeneous discourses" enabling the readers to "get the histories of the losers as well as the winners, of the regional as well as the centrist, of the unsung many as well as the much sung few and ...of women as well as men." (66). Such liberating peculiarity of postmodern historical fictions generates a resurgent interest for such groups as political and other minorities, women and the colonised who have long been denied an official voice and ear by hegemonic ideologies. Therefore, postmodern writers specially postcolonial and feminist writers often arm this genre as a liberating tool in countering canon, to rebut colonial constructed history and rewrite alternative history to locate themselves in the erased past. A good number of postmodern/postcolonial women authors too exhibit a marked inclination to historiography veering around the untold stories of the peripheral or the subaltern 'other's including women. The term 'subaltern' denotes subordination or marginalisation in terms of class, caste, gender, race, language and culture and the resultant centrality of dominant-dominated relationship in history. So the subaltern emerges not as a positive identity but as a product of a network of differential, potentially contradictory identities. In her influential essay "Can the Subaltern Speak" Gayatri Spivak explains the subaltern women's position as something "even more deeply in shadow" (308) - a shadowy figure on its margin who is often voiceless. Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn views the revisionist attempts of some women writers as assertion of "a sense of historical locations" (2) by means of reclaiming lost histories of such dominated shadowy figures and recreating personages from them as subjects and participants in their fictional accounts.

Arupa Patangia Kalita's novel *The Story of Felanee* (2003, tran. 2011) set against the backdrop of Assam Movement chronicles the most ever conflict-ridden time in the history of Assam (late 1970s and 1980s). The novel documents the predicament of a gendered subaltern, Felanee, situating her at the centre of the novel and thereby retrieves the historical episodes of those peripheral ethnic communities whose stories have always been of invisibility and amnesia. The history of Assam has been convulsed by numerous socio-political movements, insurgencies either ethnic or linguistic in nature, armed rebellions and state supported armed coercions, time and again. These issues are often conceptualised in the narratives emerging from this region. Tilottama Misra aptly recapitulates, "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 retelling its story to the world. In the yarn of such a region one often finds anger, fear, and pain but also endurance, restraint and hope intricately woven". *The Story of Felanee* is also set in one such turbulent time in Assam's history and extends across a time period which witnessed several movements and ethnic conflicts and rebellions such as the "bhasha Andolan" or the Language Movement of 1960, The Assam Movement of late 1970 spearheaded by the AASU, known as the anti-foreigner agitation which coincided with the emergence of ULFA in 1979, the formation of All Bodo Students Union (ABSU) in demand of separate state leading to much violence and sporadic clashes between the Bodos and the non-Bodos. There was violent mass killings, huge displacement and people had to take refuge

in relief camps for several months before the process of rehabilitation began. The aftermath of such violence is well documented in the novel by tracing the existential predicament of one such violence-torn woman Felanee who loses her parents, her husband, her unborn child and her home in a fierce scene of carnage and bloodletting. The eponymous character Felanee whose name means “cast away” eventually represents all the forced out people from the centre to the periphery. The novel encapsulates the sense of displacement of a group of ‘homeless’ people ironically in their own homeland leading to their reconstructed fractured identity and making them oscillate between ‘home’ and ‘homelessness’, memory and the restructured selves.

Identity in itself is a complex term to be deciphered as one’s identity is not something static but is a constant flux. As identities are constructed through multiple specificities such as race, ethnicity, gender, class etc. we need to rethink the very idea of identity in terms of ethnicity and gender here, where identities can be recast. Felanee is the worst victim of communal riots, ethnic unrest and state sponsored violence where her identity gets suspended. Her plight begins with her birth at the time of riot in 1960 - the historic Language Movement of Assam. Led by AASU stirred up emotions against Bengalis as outsiders, the Assamese speaking majority developed a malignant fear that their identity would be thwarted with the Bengali influx and the Assamese language would be replaced by the Bengali as the official language of Assam. This fear of deprivation from one’s own identity and mother tongue marked the non-Assamese as foreigners and thus started the atrocious political instability in the state whose prime objective was to drive away foreigners out of state to build an “Assam for Assamese”. The protagonist Felanee was born during the violence of 1960 amidst the fatality of gunpowder and fire. Being the granddaughter of the elephant-keeper Kinaram Bodo and Ratnamala, an upper caste Assamese and the daughter of Khitish Ghosh, a Bengali sweet seller and Jyotimala, Felanee’s identity is as complex as the poly-ethnic demography of her society. She loses her parents at the time of her birth in the 1960 riot as they become victim of the violence because of Khitish Ghosh’s Bengali identity. The new born baby (Felanee) is thrown into a nearby swamp and left to die but after the bloody horror abates is rescued by her uncle Ratan Ghosh. So she is named Felanee meaning ‘the discarded’ and survives as symbol of all the discarded and decentred like her. Her marriage with Lambodar Koch adds another tangle to her multiple ethnic identity. When in the 1984 riot her home gets wrecked and her husband is killed, Felanee’s position and her very identity is demoted to a refugee in her own homeland. “Who am I?” is the perturbing question that inclusively goes on enshrouding her life. Being an inexplicable answer to the query “what you are?” this question echoes throughout the novel, repeated sometimes verbatim and sometimes in other form. But her attempt to grope for an answer to that question leaves her more diffident about her own identity. When the doctor in the refugee camp asks her about her identity she is in utter fix as the images of her grandparents Ratnamala and Kinaram (Bodo), her parents Jyotimala (Assamese) and Khitish Ghosh (Bengali), her husband Lambodar (Koch) starts wavering before her mind.

“What are you anyway?” stunned at this question she kept looking at him. The boy stared back at her. Why she was taking so long to answer such a simple question, he thought. ‘What are you?’ Yes she thought, what am I?”(32).

At this moment of accusation no word exists in Felanee’s perplexed world of multi-ethnic lineage that could give her identity fixity than what drops from her quaking lips-“human”. Felanee who could be an ideal trope of the ‘Assamese identity’ having an integrated poly-ethnic character, ironically transformed into a social outcast in her own home. The monolithic ideology of the Assam Movement has imposed such restraints upon the selves that not only Felanee but all the marginalised characters in the novel suffer the same crises of identity. The disruption caused by violence in the name of Assamese nationalism has been so dismal and devastating that it has caused fragmentation of happy homes, disintegration of family, trauma of disbelief and alienation in society at large. The Assam Movement was the consequential upsurge of the aspiration called ‘Assamese Sub nationalism’ (a concept of Sanjib Barua). It was “initially formed to redress the grievances against the ‘foreigners’(Bangladeshi immigrants) who seem to be increasingly shifting the demographic and socio-economic prominence of the indigenous population and the state’s role in exploiting both this new migrant population post the formation of Bangladesh in 1971 as well as natural resources from the region (tea, oil, timber, coal etc; it had slogans such as “*tez dim telnidio*”/ we shall give blood but not oil) while giving very little back to the people. Though it began by voicing the angst of a large section of the society it acquired a chauvinistic edge, at times alienating certain sections, particularly Muslims and increasingly other ethnic groups such as Bodos, Karbis, Mishings etc.” (Hemjyoti Medhi). This chauvinistic ideology of the Assam Movement is grounded on the disharmony between the natives and the outsiders and all non-Assamese people are defamed as outsiders by its essentialist narrative. On the aegis of this the activists to found an ‘Assam for Assamese’ realised every possible brutal means to force out the outsiders from Assam. But the exclusionist policy of the agitation also imperils the lives of the natives who oppose the ideology of the movement. The active left-wing party worker Madhab Das’s brutal killing therefore poses the question “who is a native then?”

“The boys tied Das and Baishya with ropes and dragged them for about a kilometre over the gravelled stretch of road until they reached the party office. On the way they chopped off their fingers and toes to feed the stray dogs...the first fingers that they chopped, belonged to Madhab Das. They flung them at a stray dog shouting, ‘Oi, eat this, it’s a traitor’s meat; it is tasty’...in the party office, the boys skinned Baishya and Das, and rubbed soda and salt into their bodies. They then dug out their eye balls. In a little while the two men were still.”(50).

Hence at times such separatist convictions of the movement make its ideology reductive as it gives no heed to the poly-ethnic demography and the alternative ideological positions eventually forcing indigenous people like Felanee to live a life of a displaced exiled in their own land. The author actually critiques the constructed and arbitrary nature of the markers of identity in her choice of a multi-ethnic protagonist and this criticism makes even the most ardent calls of regionalism sound hollow and misleading.

Kalita poignantly presents the pathetic situation of a group of oppressed and marginalised womenfolk as well as the prominent resistance these women put forth with extraordinary courage and solidarity against the bewildering and engulfing spirals of violence. Felanee's existential predicament teaches her to continue her sustenance by living collectively with the other rootless inhabitants of the refugee camps and makeshift shanties such as Kali Burhi, Ratna's mother, S umola, Minoti, Jagu's wife etc. The novel eloquently depicts the many tales of women's struggles searching for ways of a dignified though poor life. Felanee with her small son survives by frying puffed rice with Kali Burhi initially, learns to make *moorhas* from Ratna's mother and selling these in the nearby market. She is in awe of Kali Burhi who has survived the big nasty world by transforming herself from the social outcast Arati to the revered Kali incarnate. After Kali Burhi's death Felanee also takes recourse to the same tactic by finding herself artificial *jota* or matted hair and taking incarnation of Goddess Kali. Towards the middle of the novel we see how Felanee's fractured identity resonates with her life when Bulen, who has joined a Bodo militant group asks her to wear her own traditional dress reminding her that she has Bodo blood in her (being Kinaram Boro's grand daughter). His words "we will get our own state ...wear your own dress or else you too will be finished"(180) leave Felanee dumbstruck.

"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, that 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).

Here Arupa Patangia Kalitaad equately reinforces how to establish women's community identity society deploys shifting markers like her dress also. But the author's conviction in the novel is to reveal a plane where identity is less important than the drive to keep alive. In crucial moment of the novel she projects a situation when the demands for autonomous power and independent statehood and the rights and advantages of these political achievements come in direct confrontation with basic human rights which is constantly threatened and denied. Hence the novel depicts how violence and terror of the Assam Movement has devastated myriad of happy homes by slipping into their lives to the extent of alienation of selves and society. Though certain historical events of the Language Movement(1960s), the killing of the Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi(1984) or signing of the Assam Accord(1985) propel the narrative action of the novel, the author is more interested in tracing their disjunctive impact on the lives of the beleaguered marginalised's lives such as the severance of filial and ethnicities, the fragmentation of personal identity, disintegration of families, alienation and segregation, marginalisation and other disastrous eventualities that invariably accompany dislocation. In a condition where their identity gets suspended as ethnic nomenclature Felanee negates all modes of identity formation with such questions:

“What all will they divide? Could they divide the sky over their heads? Will they divide the water in the rivers; the trees, the land, the people? Will they separate Kali Boori from her, and Minoti from Sumola?...would they be cut into pieces and divided...will these boys, so keen on destroying and dividing, allow the birds to fly from one state to another?...what about the fragrance of the flowers? Would all communities be allowed to enjoy their fragrance? And would the bees be allowed to carry pollen between the borders?” (184).

These questions are nothing but the corollaries of the chauvinistic ideology of the Assam Movement which in the process of constructing Assamese identity ends up by deconstructing it.

With the group of other uprooted, destitute women having same stories of suffering Felanee moves forward in her life sharing with them an instinctive urge for survival against powerful, destructive and separatist forces and discourse. The one-thousand hour long ‘bandh’ called by the Bodo extremists do not inspire them with any ambitious dream of living in a free state but leave them terribly worried to procure the sustenance which might keep them alive. Here we hear mute Felanee speak. With uncared boldness the subaltern speaks not only for herself but for all the decentred, “All that I ask of you is, please don’t block the avenues to our earning our daily bread...you know it doesn’t even take a night to destroy a home, but to build it...” (180-181).

Tilottama Misra in an emphatic statement shows how this issue of identity politics is really an intricate and perpetual one in a multilingual and multi-ethnic landscape like Assam when she says, “the story of violence seems to be a never ending one in this region and yet people have not learnt ‘to live with it’.” Thus the closing of the novel also echoes Misra’s optimistic brooding, “...human values will triumph some day and a new dawn of peace would emerge out of this trial of fire.” At the end of the novel Felanee emerges triumphant, irradiated with the radiance of a mother, a woman and of course a survivor. Arupa Patangia Kalita ends the novel by bedecking Felanee and the other destitute women like her with new identity of survivors as their lives are analogous to *Kanhi* reeds which keep on growing in profusion along the banks of rivers, no matter how many times they are mowed down or thrown away but cling on with tenacity to take root again and again.

Works Cited:

Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn, eds. *Metafiction and Metahistory in Contemporary Women’s Writing*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. Print

Hutcheon, Linda. *The Politics of Postmodernism*. London: Routledge, 1989. Print

Kalita, ArupaPatangia (trn. By DeepikaPhukan). *The Story of Felanee*.New Delhi:Zubaan,2011.Print

Loomba, A.*Colonialism/Postcolonialism*.London:Routledge,2009.Print

Lyotard,Jean-Francois. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*.Trans.GeoffBennington.Minneapolis,MN:Minnesota University Press,1984.Print

McLeod, John.*Beginning Postcolonialism*.New Delhi:Viva Books,2010.Print

Medhi, Hemjyoti. “Gender and Identity Politics: ArupaPatangiaKalita’s*Felanee*(*The Storyof Felanee*) and Rita Choudhury’s *EiSamaySeiSamay* (*Times Now and Then*)”. *ASIATIC*10 (2016):43-53.Print

Misra, Tilottama. *The Oxford Anthology of Writing from North-East India*.2 Vols.New Delhi:Oxford UP,2011.Print

Wesseling,Elizabeth.*Writing History as Prophet:Postmodernist Innovations of Historical Novel*.Amsterdam: John Benjamins,1991.Print