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Women and Children in Times of Crisis: Reading *Mari* and *The Story of Felanee*

Kabeen Teronpi
Assistant Professor
Diphu Govt. College, Diphu.

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Abstract:

The representation of women in North-East Indian fiction reflects the varied women experiences which express their felt and lived experiences. The effect of prolonged existence under constant militancy, ethnic clashes and sexual abuse has been and continues to be felt on the lives of the women and her children. In a situation of conflict, women's experience is multifaceted: it means separation, loss of relatives, physical and economic insecurity, increased risk of sexual violence, wounding, detention, deprivation and death. In all conflicts, women suffer in ways specific to women. The paper would highlight the physical and psychological anxiety and vulnerability of women and children who witnessed continuous sounds of gunshot, bloodshed, and kidnapping in the long arm-struggle that the region faced through the reading of Easterine Kire's *Mari* and Arupa Patangia Kalita's *Felanee*.

Keyword: Assault, Disruption, Wartime atrocity, Vulnerability, Violence, Trauma.

Sanjay Hazarika in *In Times of Conflict the Real Victims are Women* observes

...how women fare in these virtual war zones.....the State has failed them. Take any conflict or potential conflict: women are the most vulnerable and marginalized from either side. (Gill 73)

Hence in times of crisis women along with her child/children experiences anguish of the highest order as they remain traumatized by painful events and experiences they have undergone. As trauma is defined as an extremely distressing or emotionally disturbing event, this distress could be described as a disruption of normal everyday experience. Such disturbances maybe brutal and unexpected death of a healthy life partner, rape, or torture by the security personals which undercuts the usual, slashes unspoken assumptions to shreds, and attacks the very meaning of one's life (Larrabee et al 354).

Where the meaning of one's life is disrupted, there remain no words to be told. Such stories tell the listeners a portion of the life and experience of wounded persons which might have occurred

due to political torture, sexual assault, wartime atrocity, abrupt and untimely loss, that leave him undergo feeling of chaos that disintegrate.

In the long arm struggle that the North East region of India faced, the worst sufferers are women and children. The constant disturbance in the region adds to the woes and problems of the womenfolk as they suffer physical and mental abuse at the hands of the paramilitary forces and, at times, in the hands of the militants thereby doubly marginalizing them. In this part of the country, the rapists are typically members of the Indian armed forces deployed to curb insurgency. Most of these men hail from the strictly patriarchal societies of mainland India, which are extremely prejudiced against women. Coupled with this, in North East India they enjoy elevated status as security forces. They usually carry out rapes during combing operations in residential areas, when they compel the males to come out of their homes and gather them at one place, while women are forced to stay indoors. Anyone who tries to intervene is severely beaten. Generally, the perpetrators go completely free, as they acquire immunity from prosecution under the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act of 1958 (AFSPA), which has been imposed in the whole of North East India for decades. It has become a common practice among the security forces engaging in the counter insurgency operations to do away with the safeguards accorded to women by the Criminal Procedure Code. After the crime, the army also always tries to cover it up by using any available means. The fear of rape is common to all women, however among North East Indian women this fear is heightened by the situation in which they live. It stems not merely from the horror of physical assault, but from the subsequent social stigmatization and many other inexpressible feelings. In fact, in Manipur the literal meaning of the word to describe rape is elimination of one's esteem. Imposition of AFSPA has aggravated the condition of women making them feel unsafe and insecure in their own houses. Daily life has been routinely affected by arbitrary house searches, body searches, questioning threats and harassment of sorts. The encounter killings, crack down, identification parades, house-to-house searches, nightly raids, disappearances are some of the instruments of humiliation. In fact, in the North East region where much of the conflict is linked with the question of ethnic identities, the pressure on women is tremendous.

One of the most prominent voices in contemporary Assamese literature, Arupa Patangia Kalita with unflinching honesty, savage brutality, and passionate humanity reflects upon women, conflict, and marginalization in her 2003 novel *Phelani* translated into English by Deepika Phukan as *The Story of Felanee*. Violence, in gory details figures prominently in the novel which is reflected through its effect on common people living in those rough, unstable times. Encompassing a time span of more than 50-60 years, the book tells us about a group of marginalized women; people being skinned alive, their fingers fed to dogs; of baby corpses split down the middle; of entire villages being massacred; homes raided and many became homeless; several were traumatized with fear affecting livelihoods and economy of the state. A few benefits from such conflicts and emergency while the ordinary civilians who form the majority of the

populace, become poverty stricken, displaced and isolated from their normal life and native place. Such violence has remained as a wound in the Assamese mind.

In the 60s, during the language riot in Assam, one after the other the surrounding villages were burnt, and smoke and fire filled the air. Dida, Rati Saha's mother recalls that on that awful day Felanee's mother was pregnant, just as Felanee was now. Her water had broken, the baby's head descended and the birth pains started. Kshitish and Ratan saw a truck load of gun wielding men arrive with their faces covered. Kshitish had to do something to save his pregnant wife. So he boldly walked on the road and that was the last anyone saw of him. Groaning in pain, his wife, Jutimala, managed to crawl to Ratan's house where she birthed a baby girl and became unconscious. Someone, maybe one of the marauders threw the baby into the pond and here follows the story of Felanee, the thrown away, castaway and displaced. Kalita, the feminist says about such marginalized women that their existence itself is a struggle. Now the same situation seems to be repeated. Felanee was the mother of a son and was pregnant again and the riot had started once more.

No one could sleep that night. The sounds of people screaming, as their homes and fields burned, filled the air. Last night, there had been at least six such bursts of noise. Groups of villagers kept watch through the night (10).

Lambodar had asked their son, Moni to look after his mother while he was away though he was much too young for such responsibilities. Boys his age should be sleeping like a log, with not a care in the world but he had witnessed the vile actions of men which remained a scar in his tender mind as external violence sometimes results in psychic disorder. This produces an "overwhelming experience of sudden, or catastrophic events, in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, and uncontrolled repetitive occurrence of hallucinations, flashbacks and other intrusive phenomena" (Caruth 24). Hence, Moni had disturbed sleep with muttering and thrashing. Lambodar went out to keep watch with the other villagers as usual. That particular night loud screams filled the air with firecrackers bursting with smell of gunpowder everywhere, and the flames spreading and engulfing the houses. Holding Moni she stealthily hid them in the mosquito infested garbage dumping hole which was stinking. Felanee heard footsteps and the sound of an approaching jeep. She peeped out from between the leaves and in the light of the flames saw Shibani's brother and father run into her house. The older man opened the back door but a crowd of unknown people with strange faces and clothes followed them. They poured petrol and kerosene, and torched her house to flames burning the two men alive whose screams rent through the air. A woman running down the road trying to escape fell to the ground death due to a sharp slash on her body. They chopped her half death body and threw her baby into the flaming house. The scene in front of her eyes was so brutal that Felanee felt the baby in her belly turned and give a piercing pain which shot through to her chest. Holding her belly with one hand and Moni with the other she tried her best to keep themselves concealed. At dawn when they came out of the swamp and moved towards the jute field dead bodies and pools of blood greeted

them. Her's and Moni's body were covered with leeches and the son's face was pitted with cuts and wounds. Extreme fatigue and the repellent scene made the pregnant Felanee dropped to the ground in a faint.

The crisis came in such a whirlpool that they could not locate where Lambodar was. In a matter of two nights, a prosperous and content village had been reduced to a cremation ground. Most houses turned to ashes. Biren Baishya came with fresh information that the army was planning to take some people with them to the village, to look for the missing. Baishya was going with the group to look for his three missing children. Felanee desired to accompany them to search for her husband. But Baishya didn't think it wise as it would be risky in her condition. She replied

Felanee: For my men, yes... !

Baishya: What if something happen to the baby?

Felanee: It doesn't matter. As it is, I can feel no movement. If the Maker wants the baby will live: if not, then it is His will. But my husband... (33)

It was the unsteady walker with lispng speech, retarded Raghu who informed them what had happened. The men without faces set fire to Shibani and her father, poured kerosene on Subhas Master and set him on fire too. When Lambodar cursed and abused them for this heinous act they poured kerosene all over him and set him on fire silencing him forever.

The abnormality of the situation brought all these people to the relief camp. Children of Moni's age should be in school studying and playing with friends. But for them books and play are far away now. They cannot spend another shift of the day without food. These days he was always on the lookout for small jobs. The jobs that fell into his hands were odd because he was very small and unskilled too. Like the other boys, Bijoy, Kulu and Jogen, Moni too worked for the girls who did prostitution and brought 'pepsi' (liquor) for the men who visited them because that was the only job which brought good profit. At such a tender age these boys are exposed to that kind of life which society deemed it unfavorable and disrespectful. Earlier this business did not exist but now it is thriving and Bijoy explains

They have almost stopped giving rice in the camps. When they were giving free rice this business did not exist. But now it's on the rise (46).

When Moni asked about his family, whether his father was there he replied

Yes but not my mother. Both my mother and my sister were killed. My father had bullets in his legs that the doctor here took out. But gangrene has set in, and they say nothing can be done. I have a kid sister now (46).

So they both didn't have a father. Bijoy continues

What can one do, tell me? Most people have gone half crazy. Our Maina is also like your mother. She goes on pointing at people and things, muttering to herself. She saw my mother and sister being... (46-47).

Bijoy couldn't continue anymore because it was too painful.

A distant relative of Felanee, Bulen Sarania and his wife Sumala had invited her brother, Madhab Das for their son's annaprasana. Das, a well-known leftist was accompanied by a friend, Baishya. Most people liked him but he had several enemies too. When the boys came to know about Das's arrival they came to Bulen's village, went to his house shouting 'traitor'. Wounding Bulen, they forcefully took Madhab Das and Baishya with Sumala running after them and pleading to let go of her brother and his friend. But instead they cut off a finger of her brother and threw it at the dogs. Seeing this, Sumala fainted. The boys took them to the party office where they

skinned Baishya and Das, rubbed soda and salt into their bodies. They then dug out their eye balls. In a little while the two men were still. ... That day in Bulen's village, not a fire was lit. The villagers kept watch over Bulen, Sumala and the baby through the night. It was as though the silence of that night was transmitted to Sumala. She never spoke after that. The happy-go-lucky girl was frozen (50).

She was so traumatized with the deep pain received and the guilt that she went into a withdrawal syndrome culminating into insanity and sometimes went berserk with lunacy. She was oblivious to the existence of her child. Even the caring husband loath her after he became member of the Bodo underground outfit. Later she was brutally gang raped and gruesomely murdered.

Sumala was found lying dead in the reserve forest below a Sissoo tree, just a little distance from the road. Her naked body was disfigured and there were distinct signs of brutality on her person. In place of her breasts there were two raw bleeding wounds. Her emaciated genital passage was a huge open wound (246).

There is insinuation that this hideous act was the handiwork of security personals deployed near the settlement because the place she was seen last was near the military camp.

One day when Bulen brought a dokhona for Felanee to wear for safety, she stepped on the verandah when she heard a groaning sound. As she peeped in, she saw a young girl around thirteen or fourteen lying there. She was covered with a thin quilt. Beside her was a middle aged woman in a dokhona fanning the girl. When asked, the old woman said

‘Look at what your Government, your police have done. They devoured our tender girl like crows and vultures.’ As the woman removed the quilt from the girl’s body Felanee screamed in horror. Chunks of flesh were bitten off from her breasts. There were teeth marks all over her body. A bloody stained rag was packed into her vagina (179).

Felanee didn’t understand why the old woman said ‘your Government, your police’ with venomous expression directed at her. The groaning young girl who was Bulen’s niece was amongst the group of people who went out in a procession. Felanee asked the cause of the procession taken, to which Bulen replied,

Just as your people went in processions during the Assam agitation. The policemen fell on our girls and ravished them. If they didn’t have the government’s backing, could these dogs have the guts to do what they did? (180)

The excesses being carried out in the name of controlling law and order in the state had created a deep divide between the masses and the security personals with the later practicing atrocities on the weaker lot, comprising of women. The history of oppression of woman had revealed that man had always used force and might to control and silence women. The enactment of outrageousness carried out on women who participated in the procession is a case of history being repeated. As most of the security personals were men their thought process would be ruled by patriarchic notions of exercising hegemony over the less powerful people in order to control chaos.

Common folks like them revered the leaders of the Assam agitation. The women were returning from the market when Minoti stepped on a large crumpled sheet of paper. The picture on the paper was that of the bearded, bald man with a round face. She jumped up, as though she had just stepped on something sacred. She knelt and flattening the creases, she folded her hands in utter respect. She then picked up the paper gently. Her face registered shyness and her eyes dampened with unshed tears. Jon's Ma and Felanee were sure she was going to say something about the man as her man worshipped him. They believed that this was the only person who could drive out the infiltrators from Assam. He was the one person who could change the face of Assam and bring progress and happiness in golden State of Assam. And these folks equally trusted all the boys who worked for that cause. But what they did in turn showed the hideousness engulfing their mentality for prolonged practice of brutality, butchery, carnage, aggression and massacre that the beast in them were on the front foot. What they did to Ratna had reduced her to a pathetic figure. The leader of this group of boys, Minoti’s Prince charming, had already ruined her life and now eyeing the youthful Ratna who left the village in his car and after the elapse of almost a month she returned to the village with a pregnant belly. She was physically abused not only by Minoti’s Prince charming, but by his boys too, who were extremely brutal. She was in a quandary now and her poor mother had no choice but to abort the unwanted thing. The young

Ratna had to endure the painful process of traditional abortion which affected her tender womb and uterus to such an extent that initial signs of prolapsed uterus can be noticed. Her youth, dreams, and innocence are shattered forever. And this catastrophe was caused not by some foreign element but by those boys who belonged here and who claimed that they are soldiers vested with the sacred duty of creating golden Assam. But they had no qualms damaging the mind and body of one of their own sister's.

Another day Felanee, Minoti and Jon's mother were returning from the shop when they saw four boys on motorbikes stop in front. At once ten or fifteen boys from inside the shop charged at the boys on the motorbikes with sticks, knives and steel rods. The three women ran past an almirah and entered a godown. In the midst of the stack of garments they remained pressed together like sardines. None of them had the guts to close the door. Today, once again, Felanee relived the nightmare she had survived and saw herself hiding in a pond filled with dried banana trees. She relived the anxiety when the boys poked the barks with their spears to see if anyone was hiding; a raging fire engulfed her home; and the screams of two people burning house alive.

Phool, the tailor's wife had to start brewing liquor to make a living for the two of them, though it was not a respectable profession because of the injury caused on her husband by the boys. They had brought a big load of colourful materials to tailor and asked him to begin sewing. They specified a time for the delivery of the tailored garments. The old man was bewildered because he had never stitched any garment for the young. After a few days, the boys came and broke the old man's shop, destroyed his sewing machines and hit him. When he fainted they left him for dead and went away. The excruciating pain in his spine left him almost crippled.

The long thousand hour bandh had turned many of them to prostitution to support the hungry bellies at home. Kali Boori and Minoti were no exception. Minoti's son was running a severe temperature and there was no money to purchase medicine which forced her to take men in thereby providing opportunity to the sharp-tongued driver's wife to hurl insults like slut to her. During one such humiliating incident Minoti's son came and stood by her side. It was a pity that the child never smiled. There was something very sad about his face; as though something was tormenting him. He was a child going through trauma. To be known as a bastard and called son of a harlot could do huge damage to the tender mind and this is what had happened to him stealing joy away from his life.

One night the armies conducted search operation on the banks of the river and asked the men folk from the settlement to assist them by bringing torches and look for dead bodies. The last was the corpse of a tall young man. The ring on the finger indicated that it was the body of Minoti's prince charming. In the morning the place was teeming with police and army personnel. Suddenly, the army men came rounding up Minoti. They were trying to put her in an army van. She was resisting with all her might, screaming and howling as she knew exactly what they

would do to her. Her little boy held fast to her. The men and women of the settlement stared silently, unable to speak.

One of the jawans pushed her with the butt of his gun. Another abused her in uncouth language and a third grabbed her by her hair and was trying to drag her out. Her screams increased (275).

Felanee couldn't stand any more of this. Trembling with rage she walked up to the group of men and asked what she had done, whether she was responsible for the death of those men who were buried in the mud. Seeing Felanee, the other women came closer to Minoti and encircled her. Slowly the menfolk too came closer. One of the army men shoved her again with the butt of his gun. Minoti held on to Felanee and sobbed. The rows of people encircling Minoti grew steadily. More and more people joined in and the circle grew from strength to strength till it was impervious to the army men. The communal resistance by the people of the settlement forced the police and army to leave the spot.

Despite the presence and patrolling of security personals a huge explosion took place in the driver's yard. They heard a moaning sound from inside. In a pool of blood laid the driver, his body riddled with bullet and Ratna's father dead. The driver's wife was taken away. A stifled sob from under the bed drew everybody's attention towards it. They looked and found the driver's daughter holding on to her brother who was shot as well. When they tried to make her stand she fainted due to the shock and fright received seeing the violence in front of her eyes. A child's tender mind encounters scar and wound seeing and experiencing cruelty, bloodshed and massacre.

Nagaland, the most ravaged states of all the North East Indian states, had been under armed duress for an extended period. As a warring tribe there were several inter-clan wars. The region saw both the British and Japanese army as Kohima was the place where the Japanese advance into India was stopped during the Second World War. Then came the atrocities practiced upon them by the Indian security personals. Frustrated by the step-motherly treatment meted out to them the region rebelled with a demand for a separate homeland. Fierce struggle between the Naga rebels and Indian army started and it continued for several years. The horrific life experienced by the folks is best captured by Easterine Kire in her novels and revealed the impediments endured by the people, more so the women and children under such time of crisis.

In *Mari*, everyone knew there was a war going on in Europe but it seemed a distant thing for the folks out here. In 1943, the war that had seemed such a distant thing for so long, finally reached Kohima. It began with hordes of refugees that the Japanese invasion had pushed into Nagaland. Happy times leave no scar but memories of loss are the ones that searingly remain. Loud roar of guns, sound of grenades and bombs exploding were the growing up experiences of almost all the children during early 40s, 50s, 60s, and 70s. Kohima folks left their home and

town for fear of safety. Within the span of a few days their peaceful and charming little town and home went up in flames and everything ravaged. When the Japanese marched into the village, people stopped what they were doing and stood still. They dared not stare at them openly because they felt intimidated. It became apparent that the Japanese were going to stay on in the village. Mari and her siblings sat along with the villagers who fell into the Japanese hands. They laughed and stuffed the clothes and food into their backpacks while Mari and her sisters, looked at one another with tears glistening in their eyes. That evening Mari's uncle told them,

It will be better if you are taken to the woods. The Japanese presence will surely attract British bombing and it won't be safe for anyone. Your aunt will take you to a shed for the night (61).

In the woods after eating, they gathered straw and jungle leaves together to make mattresses for makeshift beds. As they were preparing to go to sleep, they heard a tiger growling outside. It terrified them as it was a low angry rumbling sound. The night was moonless and they couldn't see the animal but hear its growling at short intervals. They put more wood into the fire to keep the beast away. The next day, after hours of walking, they came upon a thatched hut roofed shelter with bamboo poles and mud walls where they found a woman with her three young children. She offered to share the hut with them. The woman told them that the Japanese had taken her husband away and she was not sure if they would release him. It was in the months of April and May, the dry months and the worst month to be camping out in the woods. There was no fruit in this season and no fish in the partially dry rivers.

We were hungry and lonely. The cold at night added to our woes...The wind blew in through the walls and the chill would wake us up frequently. I felt nauseous all the time and thought it was the lack of food and shelter. I struggled to keep down food after every meal and certain smells were repulsive. It was actually morning sickness but I didn't know this then (66).

It was only later she came to know that she was pregnant with Vic's child.

Talks of Japanese atrocities on the simple folks and molestation of women were spoken of in whispers among elders, because rape was considered the most heinous of crimes which was absent before the advent of Japanese. These men looking at them now were men of that race. The soldier sitting closest to Mari leaned forward suddenly and peered into her face. Frightened she winced and turned away. They wanted food and the woman told them through gestures that there was none. They ignored her and kept on sitting for a long time making Mari, her sisters, the woman and her children feel vulnerable because the only man with them, young Jimmy would not be in a position to protect them. After Easter Sunday their food supplies ran low. As her husband was back, Vikieu decided to leave her baby with him and go to Kohima village to

scavenge for food taking Mari and Zhabu along with her. While they were still looking around one of the houses,

a Japanese soldier came in and signaled to Zhabu to follow him. She ran back into the kitchen to Vikieus father-in-law and grabbed his hand. The old man begged the soldier to leave her alone but he picked her up effortlessly, slung her over his shoulder and walked off (72).

Zhabu was only fifteen but she was a sturdy young girl and very brave. She bit down on the soldier's arm till she drew blood making him roar in pain and threw her to the ground. Zhabu sprang to her feet and ran to the back door of the house where the old man was just coming out with a stick to hit the soldier. The pair ran back to the jungle footpath where they met Vikieu and they ran all the way back to our hideout without any food.

The next day they camped at another hut. Marina was with them and that was a huge comfort because she helped them look for food. Finding a papaya plant she plucked it for them. As it was not ripe yet it tasted bitter. Though bitter they consumed it as there was no other food available. Besides, the sounds of battle could be distinctly heard. Mari worried,

I wished I could take my sisters and go away somewhere, anywhere, so long as it was away from the present suffering and the deaths all around, away from the constant echo of gunfire. Human life seemed so meaningless in the face of war. I felt nauseated at the sight of fresh blood on wounded men, their bandages soaked through. We had seen so much in such little time (80-81).

After a few days they received information that Vic was killed on the 18th of April by a sniper's bullet. Her world collapsed. Mari wanted to scream – but a choked cry was all that came out of her throat. Vic killed on the eighteenth of April – that was the same day that the bee had hovered around her for hours.

Everything hurt so much inside me. I felt as though my heart was to burst from the pain, and I hoped it would. This could not be happening. Vic had said he would come back to me. He had promised. He had always kept his promises in all the time I had known him (86).

Mari had a difficult pregnancy and that made her miss Vic more. Her daughter was born on the 19th of December on a cold winter's night. She had her father's eyes. With joy mingled with grief, they greeted her into the world. They wept because she was fatherless but rejoiced that they had been given a healthy baby, a life to replace the one they had lost. They were happy but her happiness was tinged with a pain and sadness that sometimes stopped the laughter welling up

in her throat. Before Mari being Vic's legal wife she became his widow and the child in her belly half-orphaned.

Six months later Dickie, a young British soldier came into her life. Soon a daughter was born to them. He intended taking Mari to England as his bride but it was not to be. He was not permitted to take his small family to England. Neither did Mari's father and brother consent to the union of Mari with Dickie. So, both her daughters grew up without seeing or knowing their father.

In time of crisis women and children undergo multiple suffering. Women lose their husband and children, family members, become victims of abuse, rape, stigmatization and trauma. For children the crises in their land forces them to remain detach from education and normal play. Their vulnerability risk is doubled as they are exposed to contemptible elements which are extremely unfavourable for the normal growth of the child. The prolonged conflict situation had taken away the joy of living and thus a meaningful existence is shattered due to the abnormality of the situation.

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