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“Gendered Margins and Ethnic Silences: A Subaltern Reading of Arupa Patangia Kalita’s “The Story of Felanee”

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Abstract: Arupa Patangia Kalita, a renowned Assamese writer, is celebrated for her socially engaged fiction that highlights the voices of marginalized women and ethnic minorities. Her novel, *The Story of Felanee*, originally written in Assamese and translated into English by Deepika Phukan, depicts the complex interplay of gender, identity, and exclusion in conflict-ridden Assam. This paper examines how Kalita's narrative focuses on the life of Felanee, a woman of mixed ethnic heritage, to illustrate the intersectional marginalization of gender, ethnicity, and class. Through a subaltern feminist lens, the study investigates how women are silenced or erased in nationalist and insurgent discourses, and how Kalita restores agency through narrative voice and communal solidarity. The novel acts as a counter-discourse to hegemonic representations of Assamese identity, challenging dominant historiographies.

Keywords: Gender, Subaltern, Ethnicity, Marginalization, Assamese Literature, Identity, Conflict

Introduction

Arupa Patangia Kalita's *The Story of Felanee* offers a unique literary perspective on the gendered and ethnic margins of Assamese society during the tumultuous decades of insurgency and counterinsurgency. Kalita's protagonist, Felanee, embodies the silenced and fragmented identities of women who are both victims and witnesses of sociopolitical violence. Felanee's mixed heritage and her ambiguous status within society situate her at the intersection of exclusion, defined by ethnicity, gender, and class. Through her narrative, Kalita critiques the prevailing, male-centered history of Assam and underscores the resilience of women who persevere through memory, silence, and solidarity. This paper examines how Kalita recovers subaltern voices and questions the socio-political structures that sustain erasure and violence.

Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative, analytical approach rooted in postcolonial and feminist literary theories, especially drawing from the works of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and the Subaltern Studies collective. A close reading of Kalita's *The Story of Felanee* analyzes character portrayals, symbolic motifs, and narrative strategies that emphasize marginalization. The study also engages with secondary critical sources, including scholarly essays by Hemjyoti Medhi and Shibani Phukan, to situate the novel within Assamese literature and subaltern discourse. The methodology highlights intersectionality as an essential tool for understanding how multiple axes of identity, ethnicity, gender, and class intersect in Kalita's depiction of the subaltern woman.

The Setting and Context of Marginality in the Novel

Set in Assam during the peak of ethnonationalist unrest in the late 20th century, *The Story of Felanee* explores the tensions between cultural belonging and political exclusion. The novel places its characters in a volatile environment characterized by insurgency, displacement, and fractured identities. Felanee, the titular character, is born to a Bodo mother and an Assamese-Bengali father. Her mixed ethnicity makes her ineligible for acceptance in any dominant cultural framework, reflecting the socio-political alienation faced by many real-life individuals during Assam's conflict.

Kalita's Assam is marked by ruptured relationships and burned bridges among ethnic communities, between genders, and across classes. The refugee camps, bomb blasts, and torn families that punctuate the narrative illustrate not just the violence of politics but also the violence of erasure.

Gendered Silences and Feminist Resistance

The novel's most compelling critique is found in its depiction of how gendered experiences are systematically silenced in both state and insurgent narratives. Felanee's silence, often seen as submission, serves as a form of resistant reticence. Kalita employs her female characters—Jutimala, Minoti, Sumola, and Kali Buri—to illustrate a matrilineal network of memory and resilience.

Women in the novel suffer various forms of violence: dislocation, abandonment, economic hardship, and sexual threat. However, Kalita does not reduce them to mere victims. Instead, she emphasizes their resourcefulness and emotional strength. Through caregiving, storytelling, and solidarity, these women assert their presence in a society that seeks to erase them.

Ethnic Ambiguity and the Politics of Belonging

Felanee's ambiguous ethnic identity becomes a symbol of fluid, non-essentialist belonging. When pressed to adopt a clear ethnic identity, whether Assamese or Bodo, Felanee famously says, "I don't need a separate dress or a separate homeland... I need one square meal a day" (Kalita 45). This response directly challenges ethnonationalist ideologies that prioritize identity over human survival.

Kalita critiques the violence of ethnic absolutism and advocates for a more inclusive understanding of belonging. The novel suggests that identity is not a fixed label but a lived experience shaped by memory, need, and social relationships.

Results and Discussion

The Story of Felanee offers a counter-hegemonic narrative that highlights subaltern women as carriers of alternative histories. Kalita's depiction of ethnic and gender marginalization opposes the prevailing discourses of both the Indian state and Assamese nationalism. The narrative technique, which shifts between voices, memories, and silences, illustrates the fragmented reality of its subjects.

The novel also serves as an ethical reminder that storytelling can be an act of survival and resistance. Felanee's character does not fit into any heroic mold; instead, her very existence testifies to the need for narratives that acknowledge complex identities and lived experiences of oppression.

Conclusion

Arupa Patangia Kalita's *The Story of Felanee* is more than just a regional novel—it is a critical intervention in representing subaltern lives. Through her nuanced depiction of gendered and ethnic silences, Kalita offers a feminist reimaging of Assamese history that acknowledges the struggles of those often excluded from dominant narratives.

The novel urges readers to listen to silences, to interpret memory as resistance, and to view storytelling as political. In doing so, Kalita contributes to a literature of dissent that challenges structural violence and affirms the dignity of marginalized voices.

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