

Broken Bodies, Fragmented Selves: Trauma and the Feminine Experience in *The Story of Felanee* by Arupa Patangia Kalita

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ABSTRACT

This paper critically explores the intersection of trauma, gender, and identity in Arupa Patangia Kalita's novel *The Story of Felanee*, set against the backdrop of ethnic violence in Assam, particularly the 1983 Nellie massacre. Through a feminist and trauma theory lens, the article examines how women's bodies and identities are inscribed with violence, displacement, and silencing, reflecting the gendered dimensions of socio-political conflict in Northeast India. The novel portrays how trauma fractures both the physical body and psychological self, especially in the lives of women who are doubly marginalized by both ethnicity and gender. Felanee, the titular character, is born of violence and raised in the shadows of collective trauma, embodying the consequences of historical erasure, communal strife, and patriarchal neglect. The article investigates how domestic spaces, female relationships, and cultural silences become both sites of trauma and survival. Women in the novel are often voiceless, yet their resilience surfaces in acts of caregiving, memory-sharing, and solidarity. The concept of "fragmented selves" is used to articulate how gendered trauma resists closure but fosters new modes of resistance and redefinition. Ultimately, Kalita's narrative is not just a recounting of feminine suffering but a radical act of remembrance and empowerment.

Keywords: Trauma, Feminine Experience, Northeast India, Gendered Violence, Ethnic Conflict, Fragmented Identity.

Introduction

In the multifaceted tapestry of Indian literature, Northeast India remains a space that continues to assert its cultural and political identity through storytelling. Arupa Patangia Kalita's *The Story of Felanee*, originally written in Assamese and translated into English by Deepika Phukan, offers a vivid depiction of the lives of women amidst ethnic tensions, displacement, and socio-political marginalization. Arupa Patangia Kalita's *The Story of Felanee* (2011) unfolds in Assam's politically charged landscape, recounting decades of ethnic conflict and gendered violence through its protagonist, Felanee, whose name signifies "discarded." The story begins with her grandmother Ratnamala, a child widow from a Mouzadar family, who elopes with Kinaram Bodo. After their deaths, their daughter Jutimala is raised by villagers, later marrying Khitish Ghosh. As Assam's language movement escalates, both Jutimala and Khitish are killed in riots. Just before dying, Jutimala throws her newborn into a pond to save her. The baby, rescued by Khitish's brother, grows up as Felanee.

Felanee's adult life is shaped by the Assam Movement against illegal immigration. Her husband, Lambodar Koch, is killed in the violence, forcing her and her son Moni into hiding. They end up in a refugee camp, where Felanee's fragmented identity is laid bare. When asked about her origins, she is unable to answer, recalling her diverse heritage like

Assamese, Bengali, Bodo, and Koch. Her only reply is "human" (Patangia 2003: 32). Much like Saadat Hasan Manto's short story *Toba Tek Singh*, Felanee's identity crisis reflects the absurdity of imposed borders and ethnic divisions. Yet, unlike Bishen Singh, she embraces her hybrid lineage. Ironically, it is precisely this diversity that makes her vulnerable to violence and suspicion; she has been forced into Bodo customs and targeted in the Assam movement. Felanee's resilience transforms her into a symbol of survival and resistance, honoring those who endure trauma, displacement, and fractured identities at the margins of society.

Trauma and the Feminine Body as a Site of Inscription

The body, especially the female body, is central to Kalita's narrative. It functions not merely as a biological entity but as a text upon which history, violence, and ideology are inscribed. Felanee's birth is itself a product of rape during the Nellie massacre, a fact that renders her body doubly marginalized, as both a result of ethnic violence and a symbol of female dishonour.

Cathy Caruth writes in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, "Trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event...but rather in the way it's precisely not known in the first instance." Felanee's trauma is not her own in the conventional sense; it is inherited, spectral, and intergenerational. She lives the trauma of her mother, whose name and identity remain erased. In Felanee's case, her body becomes an embodiment of unspeakable history, bearing witness to a violence that defies complete articulation. Elaine Scarry, in *The Body in Pain*, contends that "physical pain destroys language." Kalita's women, who are subjected to rape, displacement, and widowhood, often retreat into silence. This silence, however, is not emptiness but a site of resistance. As Felanee navigates refugee camps, homes, and workplaces, her body is repeatedly inscribed with suspicion, desire, rejection, and neglect. Yet, these wounds do not make her invisible; instead, they make her a witness. Her brokenness demands that we read the feminine body not as passive victim but as active archive.

Fragmented Selves and Dislocated Identities

The concept of a fragmented self is central to both trauma studies and postcolonial feminist critique. In Kalita's narrative, fragmentation is psychological, cultural, and existential. Felanee lacks a stable identity; she belongs neither entirely to the Assamese nor the Bengali community, finding acceptance in neither. Her hybridity, instead of empowering her, marginalizes her further. She becomes a perpetual outsider. Judith Herman in *Trauma and Recovery* notes, "Traumatic events destroy the victim's fundamental assumptions about the safety of the world." Raised in an environment of patriarchal tyranny and social distrust, Felanee lives in a world where nothing is safe, not even her name, her house, or her body.

She internalizes this instability, resulting in a fractured sense of self. Her identity is not her own but a by-product of historical violence and social abandonment. The socio-political environment of Assam, which is divided along linguistic, ethnic, and religious lines, is reflected in this fragmentation as well. The personal is political in Kalita's world. Felanee's psychological dislocation echoes the territorial anxieties of Assam, where 'insider' and 'outsider' labels govern access to dignity, rights, and belonging. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's

insightful query, "Can the subaltern speak?" strikes a profound chord in this context.

Felanee, as a subaltern woman, speaks not in grand gestures but in silent endurance, in small acts of survival.

The Gendered Dimensions of Ethnic Violence

The Story of Felanee uncovers how ethnic conflict disproportionately impacts women, rendering their trauma both invisible and unspeakable. Thousands of Muslim women of Bengali descent were raped and slaughtered during the Nellie massacre; these crimes have not garnered much political or popular attention. Kalita foregrounds these women, positioning their trauma as central rather than peripheral. Sexual violence in the novel is not incidental; it is structural and systemic. It is a tool of ethnic cleansing and patriarchal control. As scholars like Veena Das and Urvashi Butalia have noted in the context of the Partition, the woman's body often becomes the battleground for asserting male honor and ethnic superiority. Both a victim and a symbol, the raped woman is silenced because she represents too much of the truth. Felanee's mother, for instance, disappears from the narrative after her pregnancy, unnamed and unremembered. Her silence is emblematic of how gendered trauma is excluded from national memory. Felanee, as her daughter, carries the weight of this erasure. Her very existence is a challenge to the sanitized versions of history that ignore the feminine cost of conflict.

Memory, Silencing, and the Politics of Remembrance

Trauma literature frequently interrogates the struggle between the urge to remember and the desire to forget. In *The Story of Felanee*, memory is fragmented, transmitted through stories, silences, and dreams. Official histories erase events like the Nellie massacre, but Felanee's story becomes a counter-memory, a feminist archive. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing* emphasize the role of storytelling in trauma recovery. They argue that "the listener of the testimony comes to be a participant and co-owner of the traumatic event." Kalita writes with this ethic in mind. By narrating Felanee's life, she compels the reader to become witness, to bear responsibility for remembering what history wants to forget. Felanee's voice, hesitant, fractured, and often confined to her inner world, emerges as a powerful means of reclamation. She narrates not just her story but that of countless women like her. In doing so, Kalita critiques the politics of remembrance that valorise male martyrdom while erasing feminine suffering.

Postcolonial Displacement and the Feminine Subaltern

Being born to a Bengali mother and an unidentified father, Felanee's status as a child of indeterminate ethnic background makes her an outsider forever. This condition of postcolonial displacement mirrors the anxieties of the Indian state, especially in Assam, where citizenship and belonging are deeply contested. Spivak's notion of the "subaltern" is particularly significant in this context. Felanee does not possess political agency or a recognized voice. Yet, through Kalita's narration, she is re-inscribed as a subject, not merely an object of pity or shame. From being unwelcome to accepting her duty as a caregiver and storyteller, her journey represents a profound subversion of subaltern silence.

Felanee's body, voice, and memory become instruments of both trauma and resistance. She may not engage in protest or political speech, but her existence itself becomes political. As Sara Ahmed notes in *Living a Feminist Life*, "To live a feminist life is to make everything into something that is

questionable.” Felanee’s life questions history, silence, and the narratives of purity and exclusion that dominate Northeast India’s socio-political discourse.

Conclusion

Arupa Patangia Kalita’s *The Story of Felanee* is a profound meditation on trauma, feminine experience, and the costs of ethnic conflict in Northeast India. Through the figure of Felanee, Kalita interrogates the political, social, and psychological implications of gendered violence, while exposing the intricate ways in which identity can be fragmented by birth, community, and memory. Drawing on trauma theory and feminist thought, this article has explored how Kalita’s novel transforms personal pain into a collective call for justice. The novel resists a definitive conclusion, presenting instead a narrative of survival in which women not only endure violence but also remember, nurture, and persist. Felanee is more than a symbol of suffering; she is a testament to survival. The novel serves as a storehouse of shattered, strong, and uncompromising female voices negotiating a world of violence, patriarchal pressures, and psychological trauma.

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