


Life of Women Adversely Affected by Communal Frenzy in Felanee by Arupa Pathangia Kalita

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ABSTRACT

The adverse consequences of war and violence are always more on women and children. Men are always the active participants in violence, and women are invariably observed as the passive receiver of the same. Women have to face the harmful effects of war and violence in the form of lost husbands and loss of self-respect. This paper explores the life and struggle of a single woman who lost her husband during the ethnic conflicts. Arupa Patangia Kalita is a famous Assamese novelist who lives in Darrang, Assam. Her novel Felanee was originally written in Assamese in 2003 and translated by Deepika Pukan in 2011. The story of Felanee reveals the awful experiences of a woman, Felanee in the midst of ethnic riots and frenzy atmosphere in Assam. The events mentioned in the novel relate to the real lives of the people living there. Through her protagonist, the writer describes some of the adverse experiences of people during ethnic conflicts, especially the women living in such places. At the time of Felanee's birth, she was thrown into damp to die but somehow, she survives and starts her battle against all odds. The paper reveals how women sustain their families, especially children, while facing many troubles due to ethnic violence and bloodshed. It also explores how they are marginalized in society and how they support each other in difficult times. Felanee has to face all the brutal consequences of the communal frenzy. She lost almost everything she had, including her loving husband. She was once a queen, but after the riots, she was forced to live like a laborer.

Keywords: *Women, Ethnic violence, struggle, Felanee, Arupa Pathangia Kalita.*

Ethnic violence took an adverse form during India's Independence when Hindus and Muslims indulged in utter bloodshed against each other in the name of religion. Dirty politics was the leading cause of the frenzy created at the time by people of various groups and religions. In 1946, the Muslim League used the dirty trick of indulging innocent people in ethnic violence in order to gain political profits. "The Muslim League . . . raked up the communal frenzy to such a height that the ignorant Muslim masses could not stop the deluge of communal passion unleashed by the League" (Saxena 913). Since then, various political leaders have used religion as a weapon for their own political agendas by using innocent people. Organized gangs frequently disturbed local tranquilly, leading to movement from neighbourhoods with diverse

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populations to those with similar populations as individuals fled in search of physical protection. Large-scale rioting and tens or hundreds of murders are highly implausible without the involvement of organised gangs, and without the cover provided by politicians, such criminals cannot evade the reach of the police. "A number of political scientists argue that the root causes of ethnic conflict do not involve ethnicity per se but rather institutional, political, and economic factors." And:

Scholars argue that the concept of ethnic war is misleading because it leads to an essentialist conclusion that certain groups are doomed to fight each other when in fact the wars between them that occur are often the result of political decisions (Wikipedia).

The arrival of Muslims in India is frequently blamed for the beginning of the country's religious strife. However, this type of theorization is incorrect because communalism is a contemporary socio-political phenomenon. Before colonial control, there had been tensions between Hindus and Muslims because the Muslims had appropriated or displaced the Hindus' power. However, the British establishment of electoral policy and the imperialist divide-and-rule strategy later heightened these conflicts. This later came to pass with the rise of the Muslim League, which later resulted in the creation of Pakistan. Let's examine a few instances of ethnic strife that have a clear religious basis. "Based on fieldwork and extensive research, it gives the reader an insight into the growth and sustenance of identity politics from the grassroots level in Gujarat and politicisation of social divisions" (Berenschot 2012). It has been observed that it is the male group that takes the active part in such violence, while the females and children mostly become the passive receivers of the revenge over other community members.

"Traditionally it is the man who always fights, die, and achieve glory or shame in the battle field" (Choudhury 572). As Arupa mentioned at many places in the novel as well, "the armed men would arrive to kill them" (Kalita 2011, Chapter 5, para. 12) and "Surrounding them were the men in olive green fatigues, armed with guns" (Kalita 2011, Chapter 5, para. 18). So men are always seen as active participants in any sort of bloodshed while females have to bear the consequences of the same as "hundreds of thousands of South Asian women experienced multiple forms of gendered and sexual violence during the Partition" (Kavita 65). Women are considered easy victims to take revenge over their opponent. As Habib and Soomro points out:

Among highly detrimental factors impacting women in violent zones are rape and other sexual crimes as major tactics and weapons to undermine the enemy and to destabilize opponents . . . In less developed countries, rape is considered taboo, and victims consider themselves deprived of self-esteem and honor. As such women neither speak out, nor avail help because of loss of self-image and confidence. (2021)

In her novel *The Story of Felanee*, Arupa Pathangia Kalita depicts a similar situation of ethnic violence and bloodshed caused by communal frenzy in the Darrang district of Assam during the 1970s and up to the present. In 1972, riots broke out in Assam between the immigrant Bengali Hindus and the local Assamese population. These conflicts must be viewed within the economic and political structure of Assam. As Routray writes, "Darrang district has had a volatile history of tension between indigenous ethnic communities and Muslim migrants" and in the late 90s, "Between 1996 and 1999, several deaths were reported and large internal displacement of the population occurred due to prolonged ethnic clashes between and Bodos and Santhals" (Routray 1-2). The main protagonist of the novel, Felanee, lost her husband, her home, and everything except her two children during the outbreak of riots in her hometown. When males in the family pass away, women frequently experience a role reversal since they suddenly find themselves in charge of the home and the bread provider. During all this mindless bloodshed of revengeful actions, the innocent common people have suffered the most without any fault of their own.

As Arupa describes in the novel, "Among the dead the majority were women and children" (Kalita 2011, Chapter 7, para. 8) and "She saw a woman running down the road trying to escape . . . crowd surrounded her and chopped her half-dead body into pieces. They threw her baby into the flaming house" (Kalita Chapter 4, para. 6). This paper looks into Felanee's struggle and survival while she was alone with her young son Moni during riots caused by false political agendas. The masses, who had been bought and brainwashed by politicians to participate in the riots, were destroying everything. "No, it was angry leaders from the city. They had gone on a rampage, killing and destroying. There wasn't even a goat left alive in the village! (Kalita Chapter 5 para 3). The ruthlessness of the rioters was beyond anyone's expectation as they were not even sparing innocent babies. To quote Arupa's words, "it was a baby; or rather half a baby. It was split through the centre in such a way that only half the head, nose, stomach and legs remained" (Kalita Chapter 5 para 7). As a result, the most adverse effects of such riots, for whatever reason, disproportionately impacted women and children. "The impact of armed conflict on children, especially infants and young children, cannot be considered in isolation from women. Because women are the primary child caregivers, when they are affected by war, so are children" (McKay 381).

The paper mainly focuses on the struggle of the protagonist and the marginalisation of women from a broader perspective. Arupa has deftly depicted Felanee's Life and struggle during the communal upheavals and riots that shook Assam in the 1970s. Felanee lost everything,

including her loving companion, in the hateful flames of religion and regional politics. Arupa has given a clear and fluent description of the violence that took place in Assam and destroyed the peaceful lives of many people, who lost their families and near and dear ones in the cruel fire of mindless masses under the fake influence of dirty politicians. The article will try to highlight the minute details provided by Arupa in her novel to represent the negative impacts on the lives of thousands of innocent people, especially women and small children who are dependent on their parents. Women are the primary victims in such riots, as they are the easiest targets for the rioters to take their revenge on each other. Such was the Life of Felanee in the midst of the communal frenzy that took place in Assam.

Struggle for Survival Since Birth

Felanee's struggle started on the day of her birth, as she was born on the day of the riots in her village when she was in her mother's womb. On the day of her birth, when labour pains started for her mother, her father went out in order to find anyone but died as an innocent victim in such a communal frenzy, and her mother died while giving birth to a baby girl all alone at home. The gang of rioters also came into their village and destroyed their homes. One of her father's friends, Ratan, found the newborn lying in the pond of water as her mother threw her while dying. Hence her name was Felanee, which means throw-away, and she remained the same throughout her struggling Life. Felanee magically survived even after being thrown into the pond by the dying mother in order to save her from the gang of rioters, and Ratan took her with him when he found her in the pond of water near her parents' destroyed house. Such was the pathetic situation due to communal riots in Assam when she was born, and a similar outbreak of such incidents happened in her future as well when she was married and had a young boy of six and one in her belly. All these incidents happen because political leaders mislead the masses to do evil to achieve their political goals. As Arupa writes, "Two senior leaders held a meeting in the school field. They told the Assamese people to forget words like humanity, love and compassion" (Kalita Chapter 3 para 20). So often, these politicians brainwash innocent people in order to advance their own political interests.

Politicians always use the masses in order to achieve their own political and financial goals by creating a false rift between people of different classes, castes, or religions. As Jaytilak writes in an article, "Communalism exploits parts of religious dogma for expedient political gains. Communalism seeks to confirm arbitrarily religious tenets, traditions and values to suit the exigencies of current political Life and tactical interests" and further, "The major threat to

secularism comes not so much from religion as from religious fundamentalism which culminates into communalisation of politics (Roy 440-442). Politicians, being aware of the religious rigidity of people of different classes and religions, always try to use the radical nature of such false religious agendas.

Later, the state government deployed the army to control the communal riots, and ultimately, those who lost their homes due to the havoc were brought to a refugee camp. Felanee was in the camp with her son, and she was in a very bad condition. In the camp, one woman also pointed out the dirty politics prevailing in Assam when she was shouting at doctors in the camp who are not attending Felanee just because she was wearing the bangles of her marriage, which highlights that she is Bengali. The women said:

Your revolutionary leaders want to lord over the common people. To sit on thrones and deprive them of their hard-earned money. You people call for blackouts in the name of revolution. There will come a time when Assam will have a perpetual blackout; do you understand? (Kalita Chapter 6 para 7)

Arupa further points out, "Your leaders are playing this game in order to enjoy princely comforts at the cost of the Assamese people!" (Kalita Chapter 6 para 8). Therefore, communal politics always play a vital role in ethnic bloodshed. In the camp, Felanee met with Biren Baishya, one of her husband's best friends. He took Felanee to the other camp, where his family was. Over there, she met with Baishya's wife and other women, and they started crying over their losses due to the riots.

One of them has lost her three children; the other has lost his one and only son, and suddenly, Felanee also started to think about her husband. Therefore, women have always gone through the worst experiences due to communal riots or violent bloodshed. The next day, an army truck took some of the villagers, along with Felanee to the village to identify the corpses lying there. They noticed some devastating scenes over there, and the majority of the corpses were women and children. As Arupa points out, "Dangling from the branches of the tree were chopped hands and feet, and two babies without heads" and further ", Among the dead the majority were women and children" (Kalita Chapter 7 para 6). Over there in the heap of dead bodies, she found her husband's body, who was holding the headless body of a small child to his chest.

Felanee's Life after The Havoc

The conditions weren't good at the camp, so after some time, Felanee left the camp along with Bulen and his wife to another village, where Bulen made a wooden log house for himself and hired a room for Felanee in Kali Boori's house. Kali Boori was staying alone because she was

deserted by a priest after he made her pregnant. After aborting her child, she stayed alone in the settlement, claiming that she is possessed by the goddess Kali. People come there to worship her with offerings, with which she is making her livelihood. She sustained Felanee in the bad times and helped her start her small business. Before that, Felanee was worried about managing the house as she also wanted to send Moni to school. She has used all the money she earned while living in camp by doing household work around the neighbours' houses. Kali Boori helped her by giving her rice to prepare puffed rice (moori) to sell in the market at her home. She said, "Early tomorrow morning we will have to go to town to sell the moori . . . This will give you a living; it will also give my old bones some rest!" (Kalita Chapter 11 para 30). Thereby she helped Felanee to start her small business to sustain herself and her son Moni.

Following that, Felanee began making moori every evening before going to bed and then selling it at the market with her friends. She was doing a lot of hard work to increase her business, and she was slowly earning enough to send Moni to school. Her son Moni was also helping her by accepting odd jobs in his free time, and he also learned to drive with one of his friends. Once Felanee had a wealthy family and a loving life partner. However, due to the communal frenzy and bloodshed, she lost everything, and now she is even devoid of basic things. "She was just about enjoying this warmth when suddenly, a raging fire burnt everything down," and now "There were so many things she needed to buy . . . she did not have even a piece of cloth to cover herself with a cold night!" (Kalita Chapter 12 para 30-31). After such havoc and communal frenzy, it is only the women of the house who have to take care of the family further, as either the men die in such mindless bloodshed or they get seriously injured.

"During and after wars, women are instrumental in providing a sense of family and community continuity that supports children's healing from war-related trauma. Women's physical and psychosocial health and survival are therefore critical to the well-being of children, both during and after armed conflict" (McKay 381).

Even after doing all the hard work all alone, the man in her house will try to control everything, even if he is helplessly lying on the bed, as one of the women says, "Reaching home, the first thing that I'll see will be the old man sitting wheezing in the yard and grumbling..." (Kalita Chapter 12 para 15). The incidents mentioned in the novel by Arupa clearly show that women had to suffer the most during such a communal onslaught and after the devastation. "What awful anguish these women have had to go through...!" (Kalita Chapter 12 para 18). Felanee and the womenfolk around the neighbouring areas are also struggling to sustain their own family after the frenzy. As Mehta and Shah describe some women's experiences, "Women have the responsibility for keeping the household running; nearly all the women spoke of difficulties

in getting milk and vegetables during riots" (Mehta and Shah 2523). "Women's responsibilities during and after armed conflict are formidable. They hold families and communities together through their key roles in food production, economic activities, caring for children and other family members" (McKay 383).

All the womenfolk mentioned by Arupa in this novel are the victims of communal frenzy, and all of them are struggling to sustain their families without any support. Not only are they earning their own bread and butter but they are also taking care of their husbands who are either ill or handicapped in any sort. Under most such circumstances, women are always being marginalized and targeted as an easy capture by the rioters who are indulged in religion/region-based communal bloodshed. "Although statistics are increasingly available on sexual violence against women during warfare, they are not generally available for the other ways that women suffer during armed conflict" (McKay 384).

Despite her hard work and dedication, Ratna's mother has to face a lot of abusiveness from her husband, who was always shouting at her, "If only I had a young son; I would have a great time doing nothing" (Kalita Chapter 14 para 34). This shows that men always want a son to be the heir to their property and feel that it is only the son who will support them in their hard times, as the girl will go away to her in-laws after her marriage and won't support them after that. Moreover, people also feel that women are weaker and can't support their families as economically as men can. Therefore, most people, especially males, always want to have a son instead of a daughter.

Arupa points out another incidence of male dominance over females when she informs the readers about Jon's mother, who tells Felanee about Jaggu that, "he gambles away playing cards . . . and of course he goes home and beats his wife!" (Kalita Chapter 15 para 5). All women were marginalised and struggled, yet they sustained and helped one another to support their lives. As the writer has depicted in her descriptions through first-hand narratives, men can take out their frustrations due to adverse situations in their lives, but women have no such options. Men are always seen as active participants in such communal riots as Arupa points out, "You don't know these men. They have blood on their hands. Once they have tasted blood, they are greedy for more" (Kalita Chapter 30 para 25). Therefore, it is always women who become the passive sufferers during such communal frenzies. Men are active participants in violence. They always target women either directly or indirectly by demeaning their life partners.

Conclusion

Felanee, like the other womenfolk in Assam, has suffered greatly during the outbreak of communal riots and has had to struggle greatly to support their families after losing everything they had. Dirty politics always plays a major role in the outbreak of such bloodshed for their political agendas, and due to this, police forces also remain passive in such situations, as Mehta and Shah express in an interview of a woman during such riots, "She believes the riot was instigated by a leader of a communal political party . . . government fails to arrest anti-socials and the police remains passive" (Mehta and Shah 2523) Along with many innocent men, women have to suffer the most during such violence, and they are the ones who are being marginalised the most. Therefore, it won't be wrong to say that by observing the adverse experiences of Felanee, who has to endure so much after the communal frenzy in her village. She lost everything, including her loving husband, due to the bloodshed that occurs in the area, and ultimately she is left with nothing except her son Moni.

After the devastation, she has to rebuild everything to meet her daily needs and even raise her son on her own, leading a good and healthy life. Purna Banerjee and others express their concern about the violence against women during a similar communal frenzy in Tripura during the 1980s. They conclude with the lived experiences of women:

Although the blood spilled in Tripura is not exclusively that of women, it is women who bear the brunt of the most horrifying violence, sexual and otherwise. And when men become the targets of violence, the women become single-handedly responsible for the family. (Banerhee et al. 55)

Therefore, as depicted by the writer and various researchers, it is quite evident that women and children are the easiest victims for criminals. Women have to face multiple problems during such adversities as they have to fight both internally at home and with outsiders. Felanee has to face all the brutal consequences of the communal frenzy. She lost almost everything she had, including her loving husband. She was once a queen, but after the riots, she was forced to live like a laborer.

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