Creative Saplings, Vol. 03, No. 08, Aug 2024
ISSN-0974-536X, https://creativesaplings.in/
Email: editor.creativesaplings22@gmail.com
DOI: https://doi.org/10.56062/gtrs.2024.3.8.674

Gender, Culture and Countering Narrative: The Fiction of Arupa Patangia Kalita

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ABSTRACT

Raymond Williams states that towards the last decades of the eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth century, certain words gained currency in the English language and one of them was "culture." Williams goes on to explain that during this time, the meaning of the word accrued certain changes and began to mean '"a general state or habit of the mind," having close relations with the idea of human perfection,' "the general state of intellectual development," of a society as a whole, "the general body of arts," and finally as a "whole way of life, material, intellectual, and spiritual." Thus, the materiality of culture, its close relationship with literature, society, politics, history was established. In a paper titled "Gender, Culture and Countering Narrative: The Fiction of Arupa Patangia Kalita," one seeks to examine Kalita's novels titled Dawn and The Story of Felanee, along with some of her short stories to demonstrate how Kalita's fiction complicates one's understanding of Assamese history, society and culture. The paper will explore how the viewpoint of marginality put forth by Kalita's stories and choice of protagonists challenge a homogenous construct of Assamese society and illustrate its polyphonic voices. The paper will endeavour to study how characters who occupy marginal and interstitial spaces challenge and reshape one's understanding of dominant history, politics and culture of Assam. The fiction chosen for perusal will thus offer not just a gendered perspective on Assamese society and therefore a critique of a patriarchal viewpoint, but also make an intervention in terms of foregrounding perspectives arising out of one's ethnicity or community. The paper will thus hope to establish that Kalita's fiction by focusing on the continuities as well as the discontinuities of Assamese society succeeds in capturing the divergent and polyphonic voices and concerns of the people who come to be known as the Assamese.

Keywords: *Society. Culture. Dominant. Marginality. Gendered. Women. Feminist. Intervention. Plurality. Polyphonic. Colonial modernity.*

Raymond Williams states that towards the last decades of the eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth century, certain words gained currency in the English language and one

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Received 20 Aug 2024; Accepted 21 Aug 2024. Available online: 25 Aug 2024.
Published by SAFE. (Society for Academic Facilitation and Extension)

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of them was "culture." In Keywords, Williams writes about how originally the word "culture' was associated with the tending of crops or animals but gradually from the eighteenth century onwards, it began to be associated with the spiritual or moral growth of man. Williams goes on to explain that during this time, the meaning of the word accrued certain changes and began to mean '"a general state or habit of the mind, having close relations with the idea of human perfection,' "the general state of intellectual development," of a society as a whole, "the general body of arts," and finally as a "whole way of life, material, intellectual, and spiritual" (91). Dollimore and Sinfield maintain that the analytic use of the word 'culture,' "seeks to describe the whole system of significations by which a society or a section of it understands itself and its relation with the world" whereas in the evaluative sense, they say, culture implies to be somebody in possession of "superior values and a refined sensibility" (262) usually manifested in how engages with literature, music, art and so on. With the establishment and growth of Culture Studies, the materiality of culture, its close relationship with literature, society, politics, history was reaffirmed. One of the key outcomes of the growth of Culture Studies was the dismantling of the position wherein only the dominant and what they perceived as highbrow was mostly viewed as culture. Consequently, what was and continues to be categorized as popular culture or even lowbrow, gradually made its way from the margin to the centre and the subversive often embedded within it came to be studied and analysed for providing an insight into society at a particular point of time. One of the most significant contributions of culture studies was in its foregrounding of the material conditions in which culture is produced. Such a focus shifted one's examination to the political, social, economic conditions in which culture is produced and how the study of the latter was integral to one's understanding of culture as "… culture does not (cannot) transcend the material forces and relations of production" (Dollimore and Sinfield 262). Much has been written about the decline of Culture Studies from being a politically charged theoretical standpoint or even an academic department to it being reduced to just another analytical tool or department of late. However, in countries such as India, Culture Studies continue to retain a sharp political and polemical edge and mark its relevance as this paper will demonstrate during its development.

In an India mapped by cultural diversity, culture becomes both a defining factor for a country and its people, and contradictorily a ground for contests born out of a need to protect one's cultural identity. While several cultures juggle for recognition and acceptance, the hegemony of one and the marginalization of others provide great insight into how notions of Indianness are constructed, the hierarchy of powers and relations at work, the ideological underpinnings

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of what is perceived as constituting Indian culture, the constitution and dissemination of knowledge of what is recognized as knowledge of Indian culture. What is both important and interesting to note is that even during British colonialism and its initial acceptance by the colonised, there prevailed a belief that while British superiority in science, economic, and military prowess could not be questioned, there was also a continued belief in India's superiority in the realm of culture. In fact, even during the period of the freedom struggle against British colonialism, the writings of those like Mahatma Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore endorse such a viewpoint. Gandhi states in Hind Swaraj, "I believe the civilization India has evolved is not to be beaten in the world … India … has nothing to learn from anybody else." Without rejecting the worthiness of imbibing anything from western civilization, Tagore in a more nuanced articulation states in "Nationalism in Japan," that "Eastern Asia has been pursuing its own path, evolving its own civilization, which was not political but social, not predatory and mechanically efficient but spiritual …" (35). While neither Gandhi nor Tagore categorically declare the cultural superiority of India over that of the West, a binary outlook wherein the material is aligned with the West and the spiritual is seen as the repository of the East, is quite evident in their articulations, and one would be correct in maintaining that the spiritual was firmly seen as belonging to the realm of culture. Thus, to preserve and celebrate one's culture became a pressing concern for Indians especially with the rise of nationalism, and the urgency to establish its superiority even more pronounced. Historians such as Partha Chatterjee make an interesting observation about how even while India embraced colonial modernity and the superiority of the British in many spheres, the realm of Indian culture was viewed as one which needed to be protected from British and hence any Western influence as our culture was seen as a defining aspect of our civilization and heritage. Therefore, a binary of home and the world, private and public, spiritual and material was created whereby while influence and interference was seen as tolerable in spheres that belonged to the world, the same was seen as undesirable and something to challenge in the realm of the home. In patriarchal cultures, the burden of bearing the weight of one's culture is primarily imposed on women and this practice becomes a fiercely pursued one especially in times when one's culture is seen as under threat of invasion or corruption. This was true of India during the period of colonial modernity as well as it was felt that exposure to western culture and ideals would negatively impact women and the hitherto practiced gender normative behaviour, leaving especially their virtue and morality vulnerable to corruption. However, what was interesting in the Indian scenario was that complicating this trend of adhering to traditional culture was the growth of a

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parallel one due to the influence of British colonialism in places such as Bengal which resulted in an exposure to western ideas of liberty, equality, freedom, amongst others. Such influences were catalysed by an English education or the reading of Western literature in their original or in translation, and this in turn began to have an impact on the worldview of those reached. This translated into the beginning of certain social reform movements, especially pertaining to women and increasingly social reformers such as Raja Rammohun Roy became advocates for widow remarriage and women's education that led to the emergence of the new and modern Indian woman. But this notion of the emergence of a modern Indian woman was deceptive because as Chatterjee argues, this new modern woman then was reconstructed as sharply distinguished from the Westernised woman as well as the reverse of the common Indian woman who was viewed as coarse, loud, quarrelsome and so on, and ironically, "The new woman defined in this way was subjected to a new patriarchy" (127). Sumit Sarkar addresses this new woman as the bhadralok woman [who] was revered as a figure of motherliness and selfless service to the family. She was made to embody the 'mother'-land, but she remained at home …" (132). But these were fractured times and while women did not necessarily become completely autonomous or emancipated subjects, the bhadralok woman did get access to an education. This development had immense bearing on women and women's writing and the question of self-representation for women as Tanika Sarkar explains. Sarkar writes, "Women's writings … proved an unprecedented capability, one that patriarchy had strenuously denied women of possessing. This was the presence of a critical mind, an intelligence, an authorial function of their own … all that constituted the fundamental gender divide" (30). As women's writing developed in India, thus slowly did not only voices of women begin to emerge but even more significantly, these voices often scripted narratives different from that of the dominant one and at times challenged them too in a variety of ways.

The impact and influence of Western ideas and social reform movements in Bengal's culture is well established but what is perhaps relatively unknown outside of Assam is the impact that they had on Assamese society and culture. The impact was brought about mostly due to the initiatives of a select group of Assamese people who were privileged enough owing to their class and caste, to go to Calcutta for an education. Those such as Anandaram Dhekiyal Phukan among others, then came to be influenced by the social reform movements and the consequent Bengal Renaissance as Tilottoma Misra elaborates, and they sought to bring about changes in Assamese society. These initiatives received a further thrust with the setting up of the American Baptist Mission in Sibsagar in Assam which resulted in two significant outcomes. The first was

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the advent of the missionaries who in order to further their proselytizing mission, set up schools in Assam. The other was the setting up of a printing press which not only printed the Bible in local languages but whose cascading effect was to usher in the era of journal publications that became instrumental in shaping Assamese society and culture. Assamese literature, especially the genre of the novel, demonstrates a dominant tendency towards literary historiography. Such a trend is also adequately reflected in the fiction of Arupa Patangia Kalita's fiction which comprises both novels and short stories. Patangia's fiction came to be appreciated outside of Assam after her Sahitya Akademi award-winning novel The Story of Felanee came to be translated into English, but her oeuvre of work is extensive and sheds much light and perspective on the history and culture of Assam and the Assamese, often from a gendered and marginalized perspective. Further, Patangia's fiction offers a viewpoint that is not just feminist but also intersectional, and often complicates and challenges the dominant socio-political-cultural narrative about Assam. A detailed exploration of Patangia novels Dawn and The Story of Felanee, alongwith a variety of short stories will hopefully establish the significance of the writer's work in this stated direction. Kalita's novel, Dawn, is situated at the historical juncture when colonial modernity starts making inroads into Assamese society and brings about changes in the traditional way of life and mindset. Kalita's novel delineates not only a society caught in the crossroads of modernity but importantly captures the anxieties with regard to change and the resistance to it, especially with regard to issues pertaining to women's issues such as education, marriage or even freedom in their daily life. The novel traces the trajectory of history and politics in Assam beginning with the British colonisers and missionaries sharing a relationship of peaceful coexistence with the Assamese, with a certain benevolence ascribed to the former, but delineates the progression to growing resistance against the British and ultimately the clamour to oust them from India, thus ushering the possibility of a new dawn, freedom for India. It is made evident in the novel though that the influence of the missionaries was a limited one even at the beginning wherein their efforts to establish schools or provide medical facilities were welcomed but any attempt at proselytizing usually met with failure. But Dawn reflects how the impact of colonial modernity combined with that of the social reform movements was deeply felt in parts of Assamese society. One comes across characters such as that of Darhiya Gossain who embodies the spirit and ideology of the Western educated, emancipated intellectual who champions not only the cause of women and those at the margins but provides a scathing critique of British colonialism at a time when resistance to it was

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minimal, and many from within Assamese society, especially from the privileged class were often in cahoots with the colonial masters.

What is significant to note is that parallel to this trajectory of Assam's history runs the journey of its protagonist, Bina's life, from innocent girlhood to a married woman, a journey that reveals the travails and challenges that women encounter daily in their lives. More importantly, Bina's journey also reveals the irony of a people fighting for their freedom while denying the same to the women of the very same family or society they belonged to. The hypocrisy of Bina's family lays bare what Sumit Sarkar says when he observes that "Emancipation for women meant "the 'freeing' of women by benevolently motivated men … but not really the emancipation of women as fully autonomous human subjects" (Sarkar 144).

However, once again, one notes figures such as that of Darhiya Gossain who not only display a rare sensitivity towards the women but also seek to empower them through education and by advocating for women to take decisions regarding their own life themselves. But the novel repeatedly shows how Gossain's attitude was an aberration, and the norm was one of stiff resistance towards any kind of emancipation for women, or paths that would facilitate the same, or one in which any show of support towards the woman's cause was just tokenism at best. This is brought out poignantly when Bina is stopped from attending school on attaining puberty and despite several attempts at rebellion, she is forced to capitulate to the norms of a strict patriarchal society. In fact, Bina is seen in need of disciplining right from her childhood and is sent away to live with her grandparents as she is seen as constantly challenging boundaries, norms and beliefs through her words and actions. As Bina is viewed as a rebellious girl, one therefore finds that she is almost constantly made to live under surveillance with every small movement made by her monitored and often censured. Bina's journey is also intersected by her relationships with women of varying ages in her own family and outside of it, women with varied access to power and privilege, as well women ostracized by or at the margins of society. These relationships that Bina forges with a variety of women such as the maid, Boggi, Jeuti who acted in a film and is thus ostracized, and Ruma who descends into madness after a violent marriage; not only reflects the heterogeneity of Assamese society but the diversity of issues that women from different strata and walks of life faced from a conservative society that steadfastly opposed any change from a strictly gendered and approved way of life. In fact, the very fact that Bina forges relationships with these women who do not belong to her caste or class, or are seen as deviant, becomes a contentious issue for her family to deal with as her relationships are seen as breaking the strict norms of the society she belongs to. Throughout

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the novel, one witnesses Bina struggling to come to terms with what is demanded of her by a regressive patriarchal society, a struggle that is only heightened by her growing awareness of the hypocrisy and injustice meted out by society against the backdrop of a changing world that now enables her to comprehend and articulate them. The fact that these injustices and inequities are practiced by a society fighting against the injustices of British colonialism, along with the fact that most of the perpetrators of repressive measures, or worse, are members of one's family or respected members of society, only make the irony that much more apparent. This pressing needs to ensure that women stay bound by cultural constraints of what constitutes the ideal Assamese woman also needs to viewed in the larger context of the cultural ferment that Assam was witnessing in those times. This period of colonial modernity and the freedom movement also sees the emergence of Assamese "jatiodabad" or subnationalism as a response to Bengal's attempt at cultural and linguistic hegemony over Assam and Assamese. Thus, a greater impetus was seen in the need to protect Assamese identity and culture, and expectedly, women were made to pay the price of this pursuit.

The growth of Assamese jatiodabad or subnationalism sees a steady growth post-Independence and the partition of Bengal, further catalysed by the referendum in Sylhet and its decision to part ways from India. As a result of this partition, Assam saw an influx of refugees from Sylhet settling down in various parts of Assam. As Samrat Choudhury analyses, the increase in the population of those who spoke Bengali combined with the perceived attempt at linguistic hegemony, and the scanty employment opportunities going to the Bengalis, resulted in increased tensions between the two linguistic communities. This scenario also gave impetus to further discussions, debates on Assamese identity and ultimately escalated to the language riots that broke out in Assam in the seventies and eighties. An important fallout of this crisis was the rise of ethnonationalism in Assam and the growth of the Bodoland movement. Kalita's Sahitya Akademi award-winning novel, The Story of Felanee is situated in this volatile period of Assam's history and provides a much-needed view of the history, politics and violence that erupted in this period from the perspective of a marginalized woman, Felanee. At the very beginning the novel throws one into scenes of complete devastation brought about unspeakable violent acts resulting out of ethnic and linguistic clashes. At the very same time, the novel also throws ample light on the multi-ethnic composition of Assamese society. Felanee whose name can be literally translated as the one who was thrown away is a Bodo woman married to a man named Lombodor, from the Koch community. Felanee's grandmother belonged to a rich Mauzadar's family and was married to a Bodo, and her mother, Jutimala, was married to a

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Bengali. Felanee's complex and complicated family tree is neither incidental nor uncommon, but representative of the multilingual, multiethnic, multireligious fabric of Assamese society. Kalita's choice of such a protagonist therefore needs to be seen as a deliberate one that at once presents a metonymic representation of the Assamese and makes a statement heavy with irony about the quest for and the fight to impose a homogenous Assamese identity on such a heterogenous community of people. This ground reality of multiculturalism only heightens the sense of meaningless tragedy which the novel depicts as cyclical in nature with both Felanee's grandparents as well as her parents having been victims of violence and ethnic clashes. As the novel progresses, Kalita provides a scathing critique of man's inability to learn important lessons from history whereby those who had lost their home and loved ones to senseless ethnic clashes that uprooted them from their homes and reduced them to living in refugee camps; themselves become instigators and perpetrators of similar acts of othering and resultant violence. Kalita however sees hatred, divisive politics and ensuing violence because of masculinist chauvinistic and muscular nationalism wherein both the nation (or the state in this case), and nationalism is envisaged in a gendered manner and thus sees a domination of masculine interests and ideology. Once again, the truth of that observation is borne out by Bulen's participation in and furthering of a hateful and repressive agenda of Bodo ethnonationalism despite the fact that his wife, Sumala had lost her sanity after witnessing the violence of ethnic clashes that burnt her home to the ground. Bulen's newfound ethnic affiliation sees him targeting and threatening Felanee for not wearing the dokhona, the traditional attire of the Bodos, completely forgetting the ties of a past when they were both victims of an ethnic clash and reduced to being refugees in their own land. But Bulen's sarcastic comments to Felanee about how she should focus on wearing her clan's clothes and not his affairs is met by Felanee's powerful remark that "My own dress is this piece of cloth that covers me adequately. I neither need a separate dress, nor a separate state. All I need is something to wear and one square meal" (212). Felanee's statement is important not only in terms of how it articulates a stance of resistance towards an imposition of bearing the burden of cultural identities on women, but also how it draws attention to the ground realities of everyday existence for a woman fighting poverty and a society indifferent to her basic needs. What is also significant in Kalita's Felanee is the portrayal of a sisterhood amongst the women, cutting across ethnic, linguistic, or other barriers, one that posits a narrative of peace to combat the violence resulting out of chauvinistic nationalism. Whether it is Felanee looking after Sumala, or Kaliburi offering both a place of refuge and a means of livelihood to Felanee, or

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Jaggu's wife who continues to work with a prolapsed uterus being nurtured by the women living in the neighbourhood, or in the final instance of resistance when the women collectively and peacefully are able to free Felanee's wrongly arrested son from the jail, Kalita's novel repeatedly posits a culture of peaceful coexistence as the only viable alternative to the narrative of chauvinistic nationalism that constantly pits one community or ethnicity against another and brings in its wake violence and destruction. In doing so, Kalita also throws a challenge at the dominant culture of muscular nationalism masquerading as patriotism under whose refuge women especially are targeted, a culture that either seeks to erase the diversity of the Assamese community or compel one to choose one identity and repeatedly prove one's allegiance to that identity in a variety of way including cultivating a hatred towards anybody who did not possess the same ethnic, clan, caste, religious or linguistic affiliation.

This tendency to flow against the current, to challenge and interrogate the dominant narrative and the culture it perpetuates and approves, to offer instead a worm's eye view of the world, to bring marginalized and oppressed voices to the foreground and thus challenge the dominant culture and its narrative has been a constant in Kalita's work. If Dawn and The Story of Felanee gave voice to dissident and suppressed voices of those hitherto silenced on account of their gender, ethnicity, caste or class; this attempt is not limited to Kalita's novels alone but extends to her shorter works too such as her short stories, and the critique extends to the culture prevalent in more contemporary times. One of the darkest periods of Assam's history is the period that witnessed the rise of the United Liberation Front of Assam and thus one of insurgency. While the ULFA claimed to be fighting on behalf of the people of Assam, to protect the interests of the state and its people, and in fact had a wide support base and sympathy in its initial years, and thus those killed were viewed almost as martyrs; the movement soon changed gears and became increasingly about using violence and terror to gain money and power. As Sanjoy Hazarika writes about the ULFA, "Its writ ran unchallenged, watched by a cringing state administration and the ruling Asam Gana Parishad, whose members were hand-in-glove with it …The police were outgunned and leaderless, a helpless organization cowed by the political clout of their opponents … (189 – 191). Many of Kalita's short stories powerfully evoke this period of unprecedented terror in Assam and the suffering it brought to ordinary people, especially women who were never treated as equal stakeholders in this quest for independent Assam. In stories such as "The House of Nibha Bou," Kalita brings out the devastation that is brought in the wake of a member of one's family member joining a militant outfit leaving the family vulnerable to scrutiny and attacks by both the state and the society.

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The tragedy brought upon the family is poignantly brought out in stories such as "Arunima's Motherland" too in which Arunima is literally left holding her newborn baby while surrounded by the mangled remains of her husband, a fate that summed up powerfully the reality of the motherland that one was inheriting in a violent Assam drenched in the blood of militancy. Stories such as "The Half-burnt Bus at Midnight" reveal the price of ethnonationalism wherein every bandh call that was given to support the cause of a state's independence ended up killing the very same people whose betterment the militant outfits claimed to be fighting for. The story titled "Suagmoni's Mother, The Storyteller," which delineates the unimaginable pain of a mother who has lost her daughter in a bomb blast was triggered by a blast on Independence Day carried out by the ULFA that killed thirteen people including ten schoolchildren. Through these stories Kalita highlights how the insurgency destroyed the lives of ordinary people who were often caught in the crossfire of forces they were neither participants in nor had any control over. More importantly, in painting a graphic canvas detailing the violence unleashed, the writer shatters the silence that Assamese literature had largely maintained about this dark period of history and compels one to confront the collective trauma of a people and a state held to ransom by ULFA's reign of terror. This trauma is well reflected in the poignant story titled "Aai, the Mother," in which Pomeela Bengi, is trauma-induced into a state of non-comprehension after the eldest son joins the "jungle party with a gun on his shoulders," (72) the second son joins the same outfit but returns only to be shot dead, and finally the death of the only surviving son breaks through her subconsciously erected barrier sand she breaks into "spasmodic, heartbreaking sobs" (82). In the final analysis, Kalita's short stories about this period of insurgency unambiguously interrogate the narrative of ethnonationalism put forth by the terror outfit and in doing so dispels its so-called ideals and patriotism and a culture of maintaining a deathly silence about the ULFA born primarily out of fear, a fear of the outfit and the ghosts that continued to haunt the people of Assam.

This brief perusal of Arupa Patangia Kalita's literary oeuvre has tried to establish how through her writing Kalita challenges not only any attempt at a homogeneous and a dominant view of the Assamese and thus of Assamese culture, but also interrogates a culture that perpetuates and supports a muscular and chauvinistic nationalism, one that often masquerades as patriotism. In doing so, Kalita, in the final analysis emphatically makes a statement that culture, especially in the Indian context of such diversity, can always only be spoken about in the plural. The choice of protagonists in Kalita's novels and short stories also undercuts any attempt at looking at culture only in terms of the dominant and especially emphasizes through a gendered and

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marginalized perspective, a view of culture that is closer to the ground, a culture that is representative about the people she writes about. It is also remarkable to note about Kalita's fiction that it does not provide a mere critique of dominant culture and thus a dominant view of history. The writer's fiction suggests a pathway whereby culture need not necessarily be defined in terms of language, religion, one's clothes or beliefs. Kalita's fiction ultimately champions a culture that upholds humanity above divisive politics, one that suggests sisterhood as a viable pathway to build resistance to patriarchy and patriarchal repressive measures, and a culture that is not just inclusive but also not anthropocentric. The last concern of the writer which extends beyond the anthropocentric is evident in many of her stories in which the destruction of lives and shedding of blood of innocent lives is seen reflected in the destruction of the environment, the innocent blood shed, seeping into and soiling the very land one is supposedly fighting for.

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