



## Patriarchy and gender violence in Arupa Patangia Kalita's novel *the story of Felanee and Ayananta*

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### Article Info

**ISSN (online):** 2582-7138

**Volume:** 03

**Issue:** 06

**November-December** 2022

**Received:** 27-09-2022;

**Accepted:** 15-10-2022

**Page No:** 84-88

### Abstract

Patriarchy controls and shapes each and every sphere of a woman's life, whether it is social, cultural, economic or religious. It is perpetuated as the most hostile form of gender discrimination and gender violence. Patriarchy has a great impact in constructing the psyche and determining the actions of a woman's life. It often creates a gap between the two, opens up socially legalized scope of discrimination which strategically reduces the power and position of women. Arupa Patangia Kalita – one of the prolific voices of contemporary Assamese literature, draws very realistic picture of women characters who are affected by gender discrimination and power relations in family, community and in other spheres of socio – political and socio – economic life. The socially constructed gender norms alienate women and makes them victim of physical and psychological traumas. Adopting a feminist perspective this research article attempts to discuss the reflection of gender violence in Arupa Patangia Kalita's two novels. The marginalized section of the society is brought to light who are the victims of socio – political unrest. By giving strong voice to her women characters the author expresses her social sense and inspires them to resist patriarchal gender barriers.

**Keywords:** Patriarchy, gender violence, women, marginalized, society, novel

### Introduction

The history of humankind consists of the struggle, development and survival of both men and women. But history has the tendency to tell more about the men's contribution, achievements and struggles. With full dignity history acknowledged the attainment of men. Contributions or achievements of the women are often ignored and denied to be given the desired position. A distinct imbalance is seen in the representation of womankind. They have been considered inferior to men and the subordinate sex. This strategically designed system of social hierarchy is known as the system of patriarchy, where the biological category of man determines the role or position of the category of women, which is extended to every sphere of the universe. The patriarchy designed culture, traditions and laws have placed women in a subjugated and oppressed position in relation to men. In most of the time women's voices and actions are controlled, suppressed and policed under the rules designed by males. There is a marked imbalance in enjoying social power and or in the utilisation of the space or rights of men and women. From the physical division up to psychic, mental attitudes; women turn out to be victims of subjugation. Men are master, dictator and authority while women are subordinate, inferior and 'other'. To mark their superiority felt, they have created or produced bunches of 'culture', 'custom', 'regulations' which are strategically established to be the "real", "desirable" norms.

According to the French feminist Simone de Beauvoir gender inequalities are social not natural and men purposefully create such imbalances to dominate women and thereby sustain men's power. Beauvoir in her *Second Sex* argues "The woman herself recognizes that the universe as a whole is masculine; it is men who have shaped it and who still today dominate it." (Beauvoir, 639) In patriarchal society a woman writer's writing is gendered and categorized on the basis of sex. In order to oppose the representation of women by men, Helen Cixous asserts, "Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing from which they have been driven away as violently as from men bodies."

(Cixous, 875) Glorifying the perspectives of women, a number of Assamese women writers have been contributing greatly in the growth of women's writings, with an attempt to deconstruct gender roles and to challenge patriarchal culture. After the 1980, issues of gender equality emerged as a dominant and a critical thematic concern in Assam. This period witnessed the lines of writers like Nirupama Borgohain, Mamoni Roisom Goswami, Anuradha Sharma Pujari, Arupa Patangia Kalita, Nilima Dutta who took up the question of women oppression and gender discrimination under the patriarchal set up.

Arupa Patangia Kalita is one of the most powerful novelists and short story writers of the contemporary Assamese literature. She is also a well known translator. She translated *The Bluest Eye* of Tani Morison into Assamese. Kalita's novels and short story collections are *Mriganabhi* (1987), *Ayananta* (1992), *Maru Jatra aru Anyanya* (1992), *Morubhumit Menaka aru Anyanya* (1995), *Millenniumar Sapun* (1992), *Pass Sotalar Kotakatha* (2000), *Felanee* (2003), *Tokora Bahor Beji* (2014) and *Jalatarangar Sur* (2016). Some of her novels have been translated into English. She has also published a good number of fictions in Assamese magazines. For her sheer observation and honest analysis of the issues related to women, Kalita is considered to be a powerful feminist voice. She has raised numerous unexplored, unheard issues of women in her works.

In this study, two of her novels – Felanee and Ayananta are brought into discussion. In both the novels *Felanee* and *Ayananta* the author portrays very vividly the gender discrimination in the domestic sphere. Men in the family have very limited domestic responsibilities. They know about it but do not want to bear it. Men always consider themselves superior and keeps away from domestic activities. Moreover, there is a socio-psychic tendency to demarcate household activities as feminine responsibility. Both the novels portray the picture of conflict affected villages of Assam due to insurgency of ethnic conflict during the language movement in the 60s and 70s. The region was suffering from socio – political disturbances socio – economic upheavals. The ethnic conflicts have raised identity issues. Assam movement was started by various unions and organizations like All Assam Students' Union (AASU), United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) and All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU). The north east India is culturally and politically isolated from the rest of India by the British administration. The political unrest in this region is the result of that marginalization of the region. These two novels bring to light the exploitation of the marginalized by the colonial power and the political leaders. The stories of the novel *Felanee* and *Ayananta* are narrated by the marginalized women characters like Felanee, Kaliboori and Binapani etc. It is seen that women are deprived of their freedom and rights in a society dominated by patriarchy, ethnic conflicts, violence and insurgency. The woman characters in the novels *Felanee* and *Ayananta* have to face gender violence in different forms. But the inner and external conflicts cannot resist their indomitable will to struggle confidently and to survive sorrow and loneliness of their lives. The protagonist Felanee in the novel *Felanee* shows her courage and confidence by bringing out a group of displaced and deserted women from their marginalized position into the light of self-discovery, sisterhood and security. In the novel *Ayananta* the protagonist Binapani shows her utmost effort to live her life during the conflict of Assam movement. She on one hand tried a lot to live an

ethical value based life and on the other hand to save herself from the lustful society. In both the novels Arupa Patangia Kalita narrates that due to the control of patriarchal power over women and due to the conflict ridden situation women fail to take a place of human dignity as free and independent existence.

### Analysis

Arupa Patangia Kalita's novel *Felanee* presents the victimization of the protagonist Felanee in the patriarchal culture. Since her birth, the protagonist was strategically rejected or thrown away by the society. While in her teens, she was a victim of the male dominated identity crisis, in her youth and matured state, she had to fight with the cultural patterns along with the external conflict. Throughout her journey Felanee realizes various male strategies of exploitation and domination of women. Through this novel Patangia Kalita exposes very vividly the politics of gender such as emphasizing gender roles, devaluation of women's creativity and categorization of women such as wives and mistresses. Moreover, the projection of images of women as goddess and seductress is portrayed vividly in the novel through the character of Kaliboori. The woman character Kaliboori is the symbolic reinterpretation of goddess Kali who is powerful and has control over man. Amidst the unimaginable trauma and sufferings, characters like Kaliboori, Felanee or Jonar Ma, dared to retain their identity and existence by breaking certain gender norms. For example, they opted for their own economic enterprises (selling puffed rice, selling vegetables in the market), built their make shift houses by themselves or roamed here and there without a male company. The role or presence of male figures are very minimal in their lives. It indicates how the novelist tried to deconstruct the gender norms.

“The novel is the recreation of some of the most gruesome and devastating events that took place during that period both at the time of the anti-foreigner agitation and then later ethnic clashes between Assam's diverse communities.” (Kalita, 2011: 314).

The protagonist of the novel, Felanee is thrown away, oppressed, marginalized during that ethnic conflict. She suffers from mental conflict but the sufferings and desertion that Felanee experiences cannot keep her away from her responsibility for the poor village women. She generates strength and freedom inside her to develop the condition of a group of poverty stricken displaced and deserted women like Kaliboori, Jon's mother, Minati, Ratna's mother etc. To speak about women's subordinate position Gerda Lerner in *The Creation of Patriarchy* argues “where women have relatively more economic power, they are able to have somewhat more control over their lives than in societies where they have no economic power.” (Gerda Lerner, 217). In the novel *Felanee* we feel the echo of Gerda Lerner's argument, especially in the portrayal of the character of Felanee. Felanee struggled a lot and had to face challenges in the field of economy due to patriarchal tradition and political instability. She teaches the deserted and displaced group of women to live life, earn money and stand alone in distress. By empowering women Felanee encourages women to work for economic sustenance and overcome patriarchal control. Felanee used to sell puffed rice and encouraged other women to take green and stool to sell and earn their livelihood. So, in

the novel *Felanee*, as argued by Gerda Lerner the existence of women groups, economic networks and associations is a positive sign which can increase women's freedom and the ability of women to counteract the dictates of their particular patriarchal system.

In the novel *Ayananta* the author narrates the life of the protagonist Bina, who had to survive in a devastating world of armed conflict. Bina, the protagonist is portrayed as a traditional woman who does not want to go against her parents. The reason behind it is her economic dependency on her parent. Bina does not have control over her own life in the patriarchal society. She cannot take even the important decision of her marriage independently because she does not have economic power to live a secured life without her parent's favour. So, we can say that like Felanee, in the character of Bina too Gerda Lerner's argument is apparent very vividly. In the novel *Ayananta* the male character Ratan with whom Bina wants to get married asks Bina: Are you studying Bina? Bina says: Who will provide for me books? My father and my uncle want me to get married with Chaliha. (Kalita, 194) In this system the women like Felanee, Minoti and Bina are socialized by the family into patriarchal ideology's prescribed attitudes, behaviors toward the definite categories of role, temperament and status. They through formal or informal learning source are informed to follow subordinate status. In the novel *Felanee*, Felanee after finishing household works offers food to her son Moni and goes out to sell puffed rice. Consoling her child she says: "Moni, I will bring to you a book today. You do not go out and stay safe at home." (Kalita, 67) Thus, Felanee is trained by the society to play the role assigned to her. To speak about the women's subordinate position Gerda Lerner in *The Creation of Patriarchy* again argues "In the patriarchal family, responsibilities and obligations are not equally distributed among those to be protected..... The subordination of female children and wives is life long." (Lerner, 220) In the novel *Felanee* Gerda Lerner's argument is apparent in the character of Felanee who struggles a lot for survival but the society permits her none at all. Motherhood and homemaking are the prescribed gender roles for the women because the patriarchal society makes a woman conscious and aware of her duties and responsibilities. The oppressed and marginalized women are presented as garbage to be thrown away. The unending agitation of the state during the Assam Movement have been depicted through the lives of the rejected, lower class women, living from day to day and they continue to live in the absence of their husbands who due to socio – political unrest have disappeared. The socially and culturally constructed gender bias has made women powerless, less important economically and even deprives them of any right over their body. Women had to suffer in their personal as well in social life during socio – political unrest. They are raped and violence at all levels by masculine authority. Felanee in the novel express her mental conflict and reacts when Minoti provides shelter to her husband at night who has left her with her son long ago. She says "He has used you and left you hollow. Yet, you have taken him back to your bed. He has given you nothing but agony... He was receiving training in the hills..... to kill people.... what will he achieve by killing people?" (Kalita, 147 – 148) The novel *Ayananta* depicts the subordinate position of the protagonist Bina where we hear the echo of Gerda Lerner's argument about women's subordination. Though her family knows that they are doing

injustice for their children but they agree to the ideology which leads Bina to oppression. Bina is expected to do and act that which pleases her parents. Her subordination first as a daughter and second as a wife is lifelong. Bina thinks about her marriage with Chaliha, which is an injustice to her but she agrees to it as she is sure that this will make her parents happy. Her grandmother puts in her neck a gold chain with a locket and prepares her to be the bride of Chaliha who is fourteen years older than Bina. Bina states:

"Grandmother, are you all going to get me married with Chaliha really?" (Kalita, 223)

Women during the days of violence show their compassion and help for their men and try to understand her prescribed social position as other. This apparently compassionate and stable 'self' of the women in the novel can be explained by Kate Millett's view in *Sexual Politics* that "women are a dependency class who live on surplus. Their marginal life frequently renders them conservative, for like all persons in their situation they identify their own survival with the prosperity of those who feed them. The hope of seeking liberating radical solutions of their own seems to remote for the majority to dare contemplate and remains so until consciousness on the subject is raised." (Millett, 38)

The women are socialized by the family and society to be less violent. But as the story progresses, readers discover the instances of dissatisfaction and a slowly developed restlessness among the marginalized section of women who as a reward get humiliation, torture and rejection from the society for their sacrifice, love and motherhood. So, they are waiting for an opportunity to express their tormented soul. During that social unrest they start to reveal their insecurities and deprivation of rights. In the novel *Felanee* those group of displaced women under the leadership of the protagonist Felanee try their best to bring a transformation to gender biased society. In the beginning these women fall victim because they let themselves become victim. But the experiences within the patriarchal gendered norms make them gradually confident enough to face the reality rather than escape from it. It is primarily reflected in their economic independence, freedom of mobility and more particularly in developing the mentality to live a life without a 'male' as their 'savior'. As argued by Millett the displaced women in the novel *Felanee*, Felanee, Minoti, Kaliboori, Jon's mother, Ratna's mother etc. remains subordinate and submissive until consciousness is raised about their humiliated existence. They become aware of their rights, freedom, justice and equality. The protagonist Felanee throughout her life struggles silently with betrayal, loss and grief. But her experiences teach her to question the reason of her subordination. She very boldly fights to become a subject in her own right. Kaliboori says "instead of shedding tears, women have to be like a chilly tiny to look at but real fire once in mouth." (Kalita, 169) Binapani in the first part of the novel *Ayananta* reflects Millett's marginalized and conservative prototype of a woman who remains silent because she is not aware of her dependent position in the society. The patriarchal society taught Bina in her childhood that she should follow her parents and try to fulfill their expectations. Bina has been compelled to believe that disregarding her parent is a crime. Bina's family, which can be called as the symbolised collective of the tradition, has trained her to play the role assigned to her. After her marriage

with Chaliha Bina has lost her liberty. Chaliha tortures her brutally. Bina starts to think about Tagar, Bogi, Ruma, Jashoda and Jeuti. She tries to change the destiny of these strong women. Bina develops the capacity to realise the politics of patriarchal power structure. Towards the end of the novel she is able to rediscover her purpose independent of her family, husband and sons and comes out of the patriarchal control. Bina leaves her husband and decides to live with Tagar, the adopted girl who works as a nurse in missionary hospital.

#### **Bina states**

“I have seen the lives of women under the control of father, husband and son. I have a bitter experience. I want to live alone.” (Kalita, 263).

Bina discovers the worth of Ratan, her first love, who is considered a social outcaste because he is a Christian. Thus, Bina as rebellious and determinant girl comes out of marginalized situation.

The women not only fight for social injustice and inequality but also feel a presence of their individual aspirations, responsibilities and needs in their hearts. Narrating women's position in the patriarchal society Simone de Beauvoir in her *The Second Sex* comments, “she – a free and autonomous being like all human creatures – nevertheless finds herself living in a world where men compel her to assume the status of the ‘other’” (Beauvoir, 29) In the novel *Felanee* the protagonist Felanee tries to empower the poor village women and thereby engages herself to shift their lives from the state of ‘struggle’ to the stage of ‘development’. The women in the novel are shown as simple and dutiful and at the same time free and autonomous who deny to assume the status of the other. They are not weak, subordinate and submissive. Throughout the novel women face various gender based violence, including domestic violence, broken home, sexual violence and these women lose their family members in the conflict.

The conflict related to insurgency, gender and class make them able to face the reality. All the women gathered and stood to bring back their men folk who were imprisoned by the army during agitation. The woman Kaliboori, Felanee, Jon's mother, Minoti, Ratna's mother together state:

“We have come to take our men back to their homes.” (Kalita, 244).

They have the courage and confidence to do and decide whatever they feel and think good for the welfare of themselves and others. They are not afraid of domination and subjugation from any other force.

Beauvoir's argument is apparent in the life of the protagonist Binapani in the novel *Ayananta*. The theme of gender discrimination is set early in the novel in the speech of Jashoda, Bina's grandmother:

“You are a girl, you should not get on a horse. This is not a girl's task.” (Kalita, 23).

Her words are nothing but the production of a social culture which was under the tight hold of patriarchy. In the patriarchal society the female is of less value than the male and she is considered his subordinate and inferior. Bina says:

“I want to study” (Kalita, 25).

#### **Niranjan, Bina's cousin, says**

“You want to study. But who will send a young girl to school? This is not the way to bring up girl children. (Kalita, 25).

The domestic affairs are considered to be the job of women in patriarchy. Bina's husband Chaliha who is a blind follower of patriarchal norms had charged Bina “with conjugal and parental obligations.” (Focault, 2008 : 121) He reminds her about her duty as a wife and mother. He himself forgets his own responsibilities as a husband, father and as a son. But Bina is unmoved. Chaliha states:

“Let's go home. Why should you stay with this half mad girl for so long? I don't like it.” (Kalita, 261).

#### **Bina states**

“I also don't like some of the things that happened at home.” Bina is portrayed in the novel as a courageous woman who dares to come out of patriarchal gendered norms. Bina was under the social tradition where a woman is compelled by men to assume the position of ‘other’. But Bina, after a certain period of time, finally decides to meet Ratan, her first love and to live a live an independent life. This decision of Bina is the symbol of indomitable courage to come out from the patriarchal society by breaking the chain of subordination. She could realise the worth of her own self, own existence.

#### **Conclusion**

Both the novels focus on the issues of gender violence, which is one of the major causes of human misery. Arupa Patangia Kalita aspires for a genderless society where everybody can have rights and freedom to enjoy a happy, free and healthy life. Kalita by analyzing gender based violence prevalent in patriarchy shows how the women victims fight for their freedom and decide to become the voice of the victimized and oppressed women throughout of the world. As a result of the challenges that they face and struggle that they continue, the women are able to overcome all the crisis and gain identity, individuality, human rights and recognition. Kalita's protagonists rebel against gender system and are aware of their strength and show their refusal to be victims anymore. The hard reality that they pass through teaches Binapani and Felanee to face the complexities with confidence. They come to know that woman should give up passivity to deconstruct the exploitative power structure. The institutions of marriage and the responsibility of motherhood are nothing but oppression and exploitation in relation to women. The author brings to light the fact that for their own marginalization, not only men but women themselves are responsible. Through the portrayal of courageous women characters the author emphasizes that women have to resist their victimization and subordination through the revolt against the existing power structure. The performance of women in overcoming gender violence is a path breaking attempt for empowering women.

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