

Homelessness in Arupa Patangia Kalita's *Felanee*

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Abstract:

Many people associate the term "home" with a formative living environment as a place of origin and return. However, from a postcolonial perspective, home is a place of insecurity, haunting memory, and sentiment that elicits trauma. Homelessness causes a series of problems, including physical and psychological trauma for both the individual and the community. The loss of a home, a source of income, and other factors that contribute to homelessness harm a person's psychological and mental health. This paper examines 'homelessness' as found in Arupa Patangia Kalita's novel *Felanee*.

Keywords: *Ethnic conflict, home, identity, internally displaced people, trauma, and violence*

“Are you going to stay by yourselves in the state? Or, will you allow others in as well” (Kalita *Felanee*, 178)

This question is asked by the main protagonist of the novel whose whole life is affected by the continuous ethnic-conflict and violence in Assam. A home is a place where one lives. Ideally, it represents a formative living environment that usually signifies one's place of origin where one feels safe. However, from a postcolonial perspective, home is also a place of insecurity, haunting memory and sentiments that trigger trauma. The situation of 'homelessness' arises when an individual, family or community leaves their home without any stable, safe or permanent place to live in. This state of uncertainty is a traumatic experience as it results with displacement, loss of livelihood and identity. Arupa Patangia Kalita is an Assamese novelist and short story writer from India, who writes about the experiences of the women and the deprived sections of the

society. She deals with various subjects in her literary works, such as, contemporary social, political and economic conditions of Assam, but the central theme in most of her writings is about the plight of women. This paper examines the experience of homelessness in Arupa Patangia Kalita's novel *Felanee* (2011) which is based on real life occurrences that took place in Assam in the late 1970s. During this period Assam was affected by series of agitations, insurgencies, communal strife, ethnic killings and bloodshed. The novel deals with the psychological trauma of the common people who were victims of ethnic-clashes, insurgency and the consequent migration. The novel, thus, addresses the experience of home of internally displaced people who are considered as outsiders in their own State.

Internally Displaced Persons or IDPs are person or people who are forced or obliged to leave their home under political crisis or natural disasters. They flee from their home state and are forced to live as refugees within their own country. *Felanee*, the main protagonist of the novel becomes a victim of series of violent movements that render her homeless. She is forced to leave her own home and this makes her an internally displaced person (IDP). There are diverse concepts of 'home' for displaced people like *Felanee*. In fact, the idea of home varies from one experience and situation to others. There is not much documentation on the exodus of IDPs in contrast with refugees who migrate to other neighbouring countries. That also probably explains why their plights are not well addressed. Homelessness has a negative impact on the lives of individuals and communities. Being homeless brings with it a lot of personal challenges including physical and psychological trauma for the displaced people. In the case of women, homelessness causes emotional and physiological health problems which aggravates in cases of sexual, psychological, or physical abuses.

Felanee was born to a Bengali father and a Boro mother. She was born on the day when her father succumbed to the violent attacks of the agitators of Assam Language Movement. Unfortunately after her father's death; on the same night, her mother also died at childbirth. Soon after her birth, the rioters found the baby *Felanee* and threw her in the pond to die. But she was saved by her father's distant-relative Ratan. He brought her up as his own child and named her *Felanee*, which means "the thrown away" (9). Years later, *Felanee* became a victim of Assam Anti- Foreign Movement. In this agitation marked by ethnic violence, she lost not only her husband and her second unborn child but also her home. Thereafter, throughout her life, *Felanee* was haunted by the painful memories of her past experiences.

Felanee was reluctant to leave her house and her village as a result of the agitation because of the memory that was created there. She could not imagine of abandoning the place where her grandfather had met her grandmother; where her father had first seen her beautiful mother; where she had spent her childhood and also got married. Furthermore, she was also concerned about her ability to return back to her home once she leaves it. The entire State was put in a state of emergency because of the unrest. *Felanee* and her husband had accumulated so many things in the nine years of their married life. So, it was a difficult decision for her to choose, "what should she leave behind, piece by piece, like raindrops? What does she need to bring?" (10-12). In this way, the novelist has painted a moving picture of a traumatized character born of physical, psychological, and structural violence in *Felanee*.

In her interview, Arupa P. Kalita had commented on the women characters in the novel. She had remarked, "In *Felanee*, I wrote about a group of marginalized women. I picked up my

characters from my devastating times . . . I have tried to decode the mindless violence. My canvas is very big. It is a canvas of unrest” (Kalita “Urvashi”). The character of Felanee is a textbook case of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). She had witnessed the burning of her own house as well as the death of two of her neighbours inside her house. Her husband had disappeared on that fateful night and was presumed to have been murdered. Felanee and her son Moni was forced to hide inside a pond because of the rioters. She had witnessed the destruction of her home and the entire village destroyed in conflagration as a result of the gunfire. She had heard the screams of dying people and had witnessed numerous instances of bloodshed and murders on her way to the station. The intensity of the violent experiences was such that she was traumatized and would have hallucination of being attacked by those vicious agitators during her rehabilitation in the relief camp. She would panic every time she saw blood or heard the word “attack” as she was reminded of the violence committed in her village. For Felanee, the home where she had spent her childhood and had experienced marital bliss was lost forever.

The chances of Felanee returning back to her home became limited due to the protracted conflicts and unresolved disputes over land, property, and territories. Thus, one can notice that ‘home’ for the IDPs, just like the Diaspora community, exists only in fragments of their memory. In the case of Felanee, home represented the traumatic memory that mingled with violence and an insecure past. Returning to the old village for the survivors like Felanee was out of the question as they were scarred for life. However, more than half of those who had sought refuge in the relief camps did return back to their ancestral home. Some took shelter at the homes of their relatives while those with money purchased new homes in cities. Felanee, on the other hand, could not decide where to go:

“How could she go to her husband’s home which she had neither visited nor seen before? She belonged to different community, and was a widow-would they give her shelter?” (2011: 61)

She did not have money nor family members. She could not visit her in-laws because she would be perceived as a widow and an outsider because they were not well-acquainted to each other. Thus, she saw a bleak future for herself in a state of helplessness. So, like others she also tagged along with the few camp dwellers and settled down in a new place –called, Rabha village, at the outskirts of town. This particular area was not allotted to them by the government but was encroached by the settlers. It was a reserve forest. In fact this area was already inhabited by some early settlers who were, namely, Nepali, Bengali and Assamese. All of them were either displaced by natural or man-made calamities. There Felanee had noticed that,

“All the roofs had similar bamboo slats and bricks on top and the same number of sheets. People inside the huts also look alike. It seemed as though cyclone had hit a colony of ants and they were trying to build new anthills.” (2011: 55)

Along with the other people in the settlement like Minoti, Kali Boori, Nabin, Jon’s *Ma* and Bulen, Felanee also worked as a wage earner to fend for her daily needs. In this new settlement, she tried to stay away from all sorts of violence. But somehow, a new kind of violence because

of Insurgency started affecting their lives. Bhulen and Hari Bhangura's son chose the path of violence in order to achieve their demands of Boro Autonomous Council. As a result of that there was fear and disharmony in the village. The continuous bandh calls and curfews also started affecting their livelihood. These developments made Felanee concerned for her son's life. She wondered why people could not live in peace with each other as she became a constant target of the ethnic conflict since the agitations began. Being homeless has its own consequences as the person concerned loses his sense of belongingness and is traumatized by isolation and identity crisis. Along with the problem of homelessness Arupa P. Kalita's story of *Felanee* delineates on ethnic identity issues against the backdrop of Assamese ethnic conflict; with the ethnic-Assamese desiring complete dominance or even independence; the Boros claiming a separate state; and the Bengalis, who belong nowhere, facing existential crisis, demand to be recognised as one of the ethnic groups of Assam.

The novel reveals the complicated ethnic inheritance and ancestry of Felanee. It challenges the underpinning concept of ethnic identity in the society such as "the preconceived notion of biological descent" (Ghose 160). The concept of consistent and homogeneous ethnic identity in *Felanee* is revealed to be inconsistent and unstable. For instance, when Felanee was questioned in the hospital about her identity whether she was a Kshitish or a Boro or a Bengali or a Koch, she became speechless. All she could remember and respond to was that she was just a human being. Her identity could not be defined by a biological concept of ethnicity based on blood descent. She could not imagine herself as having one identity over another. Therefore, Felanee could not understand the continuous demand for autonomy, power and question on ethnicity that led to violent unrest in a peace loving society.

Therefore, Arupa P. Kalita's *Felanee* shows that in times of violence both men and women suffer heavy loss including loss of family members, home and source of income. Homelessness causes lots of stress for women and the community as a whole. The novelist, through the experiences of Felanee tries to rationally explain the shocking and violent agitations in Assam that had led to the death of many people. The novel also addresses the situation faced by the marginalised people who became refugees in their own home state. It highlights the pressing social and political issues confronting the Assamese society. The novelist successfully narrates the story of bond that develops between a group of displaced women during the late 1970s agitation that allowed them to build new identities while they comforted and supported each another. Felanee, Kali Boori, Jon's mother, Minoti, Nabin, Jaggu, and others became destitute and helpless as a result of the agitations but they managed to survive with no idea of their caste or creed. In the course of time they became a part of a settlement area and to this day the effort to assimilate themselves with the larger Assamese identity continues.

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