

**Patriarchy and Economic Empowerment of Women in Arupa Patangia  
Kalita's *The Story of Felanee*****Rashmita Devi**

Student, M.A in English

Department of English

Assam Women's University

Jorhat, Assam

**ABSTRACT**

Patriarchy has always been working as the barrier for the development of women in the society. In most of time women have to be dependent on their husbands but sometimes they have to move on their own way to earn money and to sustain livelihood; sometimes they are also forced to move because of violence, war, poverty, political instability etc. The woman of the Northeast India also has to face different issues like marginalization, domestic violence, mental trauma etc. while living her life. The main aim of this paper is to explore the economic stability of a group of deserted womenfolk resulting from the struggle for their existence. Taking into consideration Arupa Patangia Kalita's novel, *The Story of Felanee*, the proposed paper would attempt to analyze how women, being directly or indirectly marginalized, fight for their existence which has resulted in their economic development in a conflict ridden situation.

**Keywords:** patriarchy, Northeast India, marginalization, economic stability, womenfolk.

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### 1. INTRODUCTION:

Literature has always been playing a crucial role in mirroring the society as well as time. Among the various forms of literature, novel is also one to mesmerize its readers by occupying a special place in their heart. Feminist writings from India particularly focus on the life of women, their submissive status, self-assertion, quest for identity, their role in the society etc. In such writings, the socio-economic status of women is also well portrayed. Manu in his book writes, “A girl, a young woman, or even an old woman should not do anything independently, even in (her own) house. In childhood a woman should be under her father’s control, in youth under her husband’s, and when her husband is dead, under her sons’.” (Doniger & Smith, 115) From this, it is clear to understand the subordinate position of women; it is patriarchy that compels women to assign a submissive role in our society.

As Northeast India is a land of different insurgencies and agitations, women of this region are devastated economically and psychologically and deprived of any active participation and social position in the ethnic conflicts in the society as they are considered inferior. Therefore, the feminist writers from Northeast India in the recent time focus on the issue of socio-economic status of women in the male centric society which have gained the attention of the readers. Arupa Patangia Kalita’s female life-centred novel, *The Story of Felanee* (translated from Assamese into English) is also one among such novels where along with the pitiable plight of women, their active participation in the economic field with a positive attitude has been portrayed.

Although the making of a society is credited to men, the role of women in this ground is no less than a man. But she receives no value or significance. The woman is considered weak, she is only eligible for nurturing children and doing household deeds; this kind of patriarchal concept has been proved wrong through their works by the contemporary women and the feminist writers are concerned about such positivity of the woman. Although society has assigned women a secondary place than men, women are now able to stand in their own feet, to compete with men and to challenge the norms and orders of society. From cloth-weaving to working in officials, from reaping crops to flying planes, women have been contributing to the economy of the country. In contrast to the empowered modern women leading a luxurious life, in the novel, Patangia has presented a group of women who if do not work hard, their family will not have a full meal, whose effort in economic activity to sustain their life is endless. A beautiful picture of women’s will power has been portrayed which provides the determination and change in the present woman compared to the traditional woman.

#### **1.1 Objective:**

The main objectives of the paper are:

- a. To elide the negative views of the society regarding the woman that she has to be dependent on her husband for survival. When there is a need, she can go alone or parallel with her husband to earn bread for the family.
- b. To project the empowerment of the woman characters in the novel.

### **1.2 Source:**

Both the primary and secondary data have been used in preparing the paper. The primary data includes the theoretical book, *Sexual Politics* by Kate Millett and the practical book, *The Story of Felanee* by Arupa Patangia Kalita. The secondary data are collected from various essays, articles published in various books, journals and websites.

### **1.3 Methodology:**

My research methodology consists of close reading and analysis of both primary and secondary sources which are supported by a significant writings dealing with the subject. Thus, the paper is based on analytical method. In some context, the comparative method has also been adopted.

### **1.4 Literature Review:**

A literature review is used to show what the other researchers have done and what the present research presents. It is important to show the relationships between the work already done and the work which is going to be done by surveying the books, scholarly articles and other resources relevant to the area. At this point, Arupa Patangia Kalita's novel, *The Story of Felanee* has already been discussed by several research scholars and academicians from different point of view. So, the review proves the relevance of my study. Arupa Patangia Kalita in her work presents the concept of 'New Woman' which proves her a feminist. By depicting the unending struggle of a few women from different background and culture, she presents her female characters as strong fighter against fate and circumstances.

In her article "Violence and Marginalization of Women in Arupa Patangia Kalita's *The Story of Felanee*" (Vol.2, Issue 5, September, 2014), Mompi Choudhury observes that the novel is a detailed portrayal of the successful bond between a group of displaced women during the agitation of the late 70s Assam which allow them to build a new identity, comfort, support each other and survive their estranged life. She further says that the novel highlights the struggle of women for livelihood and survival.

Monalisa Konwar discusses in her article, "Centering the Decentered: Reconceptualization of History and Female Identity in *The Story of Felanee*" (Vol.8, Issue 2, April 20017) that Arupa Patangia Kalita, keeping violence and conflict in the background, documents the life, embittered experience and personal loss of her protagonist Felanee in a multi- ethnic and multi- lingual land at an inapt conflict- ridden time.

Sandipan Ghosh in his article titled "Violence, Resistance and Survival in North-East Indian Insurgency Literature: A Study of Arupa Patangia Kalita's *Felanee* and Indira Goswami's *The Journey*" (Vol. 4, Issue 4, July 2015) writes, "Weaving her story around the eponymous character, Felanee, whose very name denotes 'rejected' or 'cast away', Kalita poignantly presents the pathetic situation of a group of oppressed

and marginalized womenfolk as well as the prominent resistance these women put forth with extraordinary courage and solidarity against the bewildering and engulfing spiral of violence.”

Although the novel has been discussed from various points of view, we find no one to throw light on the economic life of the womenfolk yet. This has been shown by the following literature review and therefore a small attempt has been made to discuss womenfolk of the novel in this light.

## **2. ANALYSIS:**

In *Sexual Politics*, Kate Millett says, “*In modern capitalist countries women also function as a reserve labor force, enlisted in times of war and expansion and discharged in times of peace and recession.*” (Millett, 40) But in the countries like India too women participate equally in both social and economic field in making of a society and yet a little importance is given to them. In the novel, *The Story of Felanee* Arupa Patangia Kalita discussed the different social, cultural, economic ways through a group of working- class women. A woman’s duty is not limited to the domestic service only, e.g. nurturing children or satisfying her husband, she also has to play the role of the source of family income whenever there is a need and this idea has been vividly presented in the novel. The protagonist of the novel is Felanee. How after the death of her husband, with the hope to live with her son Moni, she begins her life in the settlement along with Bulen and being assimilated with the people of the locality she too begins to earn her livelihood the way the others earn have been beautifully described in the novel. Also we find how the Assam Movement has affected the lives of people, how the leaders, the politicians betrayed the common people and also we find the reference of the demand of a separate Bodoland State and how this creates a conflict among the people who once lived united. In this way, in the course of the story of the novel filled with violence, each of the women character’s economic life has been depicted.

### **2.1. Women Characters in the Novel and Their Economic Life:**

In *The Story of Felanee*, Arupa Patangia Kalita has created several women characters through which we understand the way women struggle to sustain their livelihood as well as to keep their family going. At this point, I would like to quote Millett, who said, “*The toil of working- class women is more readily accepted as “need”, if not always by the working- class itself, at least by the middle- class.*” (Millett, 41) These women in the novel represent those thousands of women, mothers who struggle even in the period of turmoil for the bread of their family.

**Kali Boori:** Kali Boori is an important character in the novel that challenges the patriarchy; pretends to be possessed by the goddess Kali- the goddess of power and destruction to survive in a society which compelled her to be a social outcast because of the gender norms constructed by it. This act of getting possessed provides her a means to get empowered economically. Being an alone and old woman in the novel, she further has chosen the business of selling ‘moori’ (puffed rice) in the market. With this business of selling ‘moori’, she has earned her living as well as has provided the livelihood to Felanee and Moni also.

**Felanee:** Felanee is the central character in the novel that has been devastated by the ethnic conflict, Assam Movement. Being humiliated by her fate and destructed by

society, she has the indomitable spirit within herself to live life and as a result of which she has learnt to overcome obstacles. To become economically strong, to stand on her own feet, she has learnt to make 'moori' from Kali Boori, to make 'murhas' from Ratna's mother, sells those things in the market and manages her home. A woman can survive without any support from her husband in the midst of conflicts and violence has been clearly proved by the protagonist of the novel.

**Ratna's Mother:** Ratna's mother is another character in the novel that has been abused and humiliated constantly by her husband and daughter, Ratna because she could not give birth to a male child. Although she feeds her family by making 'murhas' and puffed rice and sells those in the market, the character proves that it's completely a misconception that only a son or a male can run a family; women are also not inferior in this ground because Ratna's mother was also once a daughter of someone, not a son.

**Minoti:** Minoti is a character that has become the victim of low mentality of a middle-class man; a sexual toy unknowingly. A young man involved in the Assam Movement has impregnated her and left her alone. Later on, she becomes a single mother. Carrying her baby with her, she also goes to market to sell puffed rice, paper bags and greens and is bringing her baby up.

**Jaggu's Wife:** Jaggu's wife is presented as a physically weak woman due to overwork. She has been portrayed as a character that has to suffer a lot because of her husband's sexual amusement and her unnecessary pregnancies and abortions. She helps her husband in his business by grating and grinding coconuts and making sweets during which has resulted in the serious disease of her uterus. Although her workload has made her diseased, she does not detach herself from their means of earning money.

**Jon's Mother:** Jon's mother too has the same profession like the other women. She sells 'moori', 'dal bori', spices and greens in the market and has proved herself as the only source of income of the family. With her little income she manages their livelihood as well as the medicines of her ailing husband.

**The Driver's Wife:** The driver's wife has been portrayed as a prostitute. She has chosen the profession of prostitution to remain alive. Whatever her husband earns from driving, he spends in drinking and revelling. Therefore, to earn money, she has taken the wrong path and sells herself to other men.

## 2.2 Real Women versus the Women in the Novel:

Human society is dynamic. Along with the change in the society, there's the change in human life too. While the people in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century did not want to educate women and allow them to work, at present women are capable enough to compete with men in every sphere of life. In the field of economy women are no longer inferior to men. Women are now empowered and it should not be misinterpreted that the women from the poor background only are attempting to get empowered but rather women from the developed society are equally advanced in this field. Apart from the jobs in offices, women are now establishing themselves in the greater field of business too. Women have challenged and proved the statement wrong by Manu who said, "*A woman is not fit for independence.*" (Doniger & Smith, 197) But the womenfolk in the novel are different at this point; they work neither for achievement or success, nor for position in the society. They simply fight for their own existence.

The novelist, Arupa Patangia Kalita has collected each character, particularly the women characters from the real world. These women are the representatives of those women of Assam who work hard day and night to lighten the burden of poverty. There are thousands of Felanee, Kali Boori, Jaggu's Wife and Minoti in the society who work no less than a man to have a full meal. Like these characters working in others home, selling greens, lemons and other things in the market, the real poverty- stricken women also manage food for their children. Perhaps, Kalita has created these characters to represent the real sufferings and life of the poor working- class women. These women work for their own need, not to strengthen the economy of the nation.

There are many women who work for their self- satisfaction or for respect in the society but behind this there is always a will for economic independence. But in the novel, there is not a single woman who works for respect or position because behind their participation in the economic activities there is some reasons; someone has her sick husband, someone is widow having no support in life, someone is a young outcast whereas another one has to work because of the drunken husband. Still they have not given up their spirit to fight against poverty and have become the models of original women of the real society because instead of depending on any male member, they have led their life on their own way.

### 2.3. Society and the Status of Women in the Novel:

Generally, we assume that an empowered woman is independent and happy but this is not the reality. In many times, even the highly educated and high positioned woman is also subordinated. In this sense, do the uneducated and low class women like Felanee have any identity? Only in an educated society a woman receives respect and honour equal to men. Therefore, despite being economically independent, these women are humiliated again and again. Almost every character in the novel faces humiliation and violence from males. Though they work so hard to manage their family, they have no respect in their family. Family is the main institution to reform a society and if they have no value in the family, they will definitely have no status in society. They have to face both physical and mental torture although they are the main source of family's income. Jon's mother faces domestic violence and verbal as well as physical abuse from her husband. While sharing her grief to Felanee, she shows her breasts to her and narrates her plight,

*““It's for my blasted body, don't you understand?” She shouted in anger. “His own juices have dried up. When he can't perform at night, this is what he does to me; look, see for yourself.” Just then, there was a flash of lightening. In the brightness, Felanee saw that the woman's firm breasts were scarred with numerous wounds that looked red and raw.” (Kalita, 80)*

Kalita poignantly presents the pathetic as well as the marginalized condition of the womenfolk in the society. Like Jon's mother, Ratna's mother also has to tolerate the mourning of her husband and her daughter for not having a son in the family. The way she expressed her disgust for her husband clearly shows her subordinate position in the family:

*““Why,” she wanted to ask, “isn't it your daughter who is slogging to keep you clothed and fed? I've heard enough of your bragging about your betel leaf expertise!” But then,*

*these were thoughts that she couldn't air. Her frail body was scared of his strong kicks. His abuses and laments continued. When he is able to kick so hard viciously how come he is too weak and frail to work? The wicked scoundrel! "You eat from the earnings of your women, and you kick them, you dirty dog!" she muttered under her breath and spat on the ground.*" (Kalita, 137)

Even the words used to greet the women characters are indeed evident to show how women are disgraced. A part of the fight between Minoti and the driver's wife proves this:

*"Addressing the fair woman, she shouted, "Hey, you bitch, why do you abuse my guest?"*

*"I know all about your so called guest. He has come to share your bed, I know. Let him lick you clean. But why does he eye decent women?"*

*"You whore, I'll cut your tongue off; you just wait and watch."*" (Kalita, 83)

Also in the course of the story we notice that most of the women characters do not have their own name; they are being addressed either by their children's or husbands' name: Moni's Ma, Ratna's mother, the driver's wife, Jon's Mother, Jaggu's wife etc.

#### **2.4 Prostitution as a Means of Economic Empowerment:**

"Wife or a whore?" the choice is always of a woman. Generally, prostitution is adopted by a woman for economic sustenance. Some adopt the profession willingly while some others are forced by circumstances. In the novel we find two such characters that are related to this profession: the driver's wife and Lata Didi. Both the characters are involved in prostitution not by choice but because of poverty. Through these characters Kalita reveals the real cause behind accepting such professions. Because the driver's wife adopted prostitution only for her survival first but later on, it has become the means to her to lead a luxurious life. What his husband earns from driving the car, wastes on his own pleasure of drinking. Through this profession she has earned enough money for her and she is able to send her son to an English medium school and has established herself as the wealthiest among the other women in the settlement. Like the driver's wife, Lata Didi has also chosen the profession only for her survival while living in the refugee camp during the devastation of the agitation.

#### **2.5 Significance of the Women in the Novel:**

In *The Story of Felanee*, the women characters bear great significance in terms of their involvement in the economic field. Their role in running the family as well as the society is indeed remarkable. If the women did not struggle actively, most of the families of the settlement would have extinguished.

If Felanee did not work hard, both Moni and she would not remain alive and also Moni would not be educated. In the same way, if Ratna's mother did not earn money, the family would have faced its extinction. So like the other characters, Jon's mother, Jaggu's wife, Minoti etc. are also by no means different from these two because each family is directly dependent on the income of the women.

But Kali Boori is somewhat different from others. Her own empowerment has helped to empower other characters too. Along with managing her own survival, she has sheltered Felanee and Moni too.

### **3. CONCLUSION:**

To sum up, it can be said that the novel not only presents the woman as the survivor and puts her to the equal position of the man but also sarcastically attacks the society which still believes that women are weak because each character in the novel is capable enough to stand alone for her family.

With the above discussion we further find out that the contribution of the novel in casting the women as strong, courageous and self-reliant is immense. It is proved that when a woman is empowered, a family and a society also get strong. Felanee, Kali Boori, Ratna's mother, Jaggu's wife, Minoti etc. are only the representatives of the woman of the real world. In this contemporary society, there is the change and development in the personality and thinking capacity of the woman. Today, there are lots of such Felanee who are completely able to stand up for the society along with the family.

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