

Fire on the Soul -Quest for Freedom through a Silent Revolt: Exploration of Women Psyche in Dawn and Felanee by Arupa Patangia Kalita

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History scarcely mentions her. Occasionally an individual woman is mentioned, an Elizabeth, or a Mary; a queen or a great lady. But by no possible means could middle class women with nothing but brains and character at their command have taken part in any one of the great movements which, brought together, constitute the historians view of the past. Nor shall we find her in any collection of anecdotes...

- (Virginia Woolf)

Yes, quest for 'identity' by women in patriarchal bondage is always a conflict - a silent revolt that has been there from time immemorial. In such a situation women writers try to focus on the predicament of women in the society as they themselves have experienced the conflict at some point in their lives. Through women writers we can see a different world, with their assistance we can map out the problems in a woman's world. In India too, Women writers, pioneered by Anita Desai and Arundhati Roy, have written about their native women, their conflicts and predicaments against the contemporary society. While doing so they have analyzed the socio-cultural modes and values that have given Indian women their image and role towards themselves and towards the society. The trend got extended to regional level too. Hence we have seen a feminine discourse that is popularised in Assam by the writers like Arupa Patangia Kalita. Personally, I have sensed the scent of Anita Desai in her, while exploring the emotional world of women and bringing to light the various deeper forces at work in feminine sensibility. Arupa tries to give her women characters their own psychic world, where they are empowered. In an interview, taken by Aruni Kashyap, Patangia says that she always feels she has said a lot about women, as a woman. And so, she has

given a voice to the revolting consciousness of the womenfolk. In the current case study Arupa Patangia has performed a significant function of instilling a positive "feminine" identity rather than a female identity into the role model women who reject the dependency on men. She lets her characters to project silent suffering, revolting and finally making way for them.

Patangia's novels create evocative and deeply moving narratives of individual lives caught in the socio-cultural and existential dilemma. She examines certain pertinent facets of this school of thought through her protagonists, treating the predominant themes like, alienation, quest and conflict with all her mature and sensitive story telling panache. In *Dawn*, we find Bina, who revolts against her family, as the epitome of her strong sensibility. She is sensitive but courageous. She can not withstand injustice, and as she grows up, and experiences the evil society around her, she tries to improve other people's lives as well as her own fate by defying and shaking off the age old customs and superstitions. She helps her needy neighbours and takes the responsibility of Ruma's daughter, who loses her sanity, on being brutally tortured by her much older husband.

Throughout the novel, women are both sexually and mentally tortured by the males. Jashoda, Bina's grandmother, who says of herself as a 'woman confined to the kitchen', remains as the constant supporter of the system throughout her life. She fears her husband, even her sons, but she allows the Christian boy, (who is considered an outcaste) to rewrite the ancestral holy books, in spite of the opposition of her husband and sons. She knows well that she is being treated respectfully in her family only as the mother of three sons and without this identity she would have faced the same brutality of her husband as Karuna Baruah's wife does.

However, Bina experiences the fragility of a woman's body and mind. At the age of fourteen only she has to marry Chaliha, a much older man whom she has always disliked. But she has turned to a complete family woman who desires to 'transform her house into a temple of peace'. Suddenly she is made biologically, emotionally and socially weak for her role as child bearer and homemaker. She even fails to protest when she finds that Tagar is molested by Chaliha. Yes, the girl, who was very outspoken in her childhood, is made voiceless in patriarchal bondage. As an ideal woman confined to womanhood in the patriarchal order, she is expected to reinstate and redefine herself.

Ruma is introduced by the author as a girl with rare beauty and charm. Her physical beauty and talent is presented before the readers through the observation of the protagonist of the novel Binapani who is her great admirer. Bina is mesmerised by Karuna Barua's eldest daughter Ruma's beauty : "...how pretty she was! With her slim figure, fair complexion and the long hair fanning out on her back, Bina could compare her with none other than the goddess Lakshmi." (*Dawn* 45). Ruma is also a good singer. She falls in love with Jatin. One

day Bina finds a portrait of Ruma drawn with colour pencil by Jatin. While Bina appreciates the drawing, Ruma snatches it away from the hand of Bina with trepidation. She forbids Bina to mention about the portrait to anyone else, for in that case, she fears, she might be punished. With tears in her eyes Ruma says with fear: "...They'll kill me. My father will shoot me." (*Dawn* 46). Exactly it happens in her life. When Ruma's father fixes her marriage with the brother of Bina's Bormami (aunt), Bina also gets hurt sensing the impending disaster in her favourite sister's life. When Bina reaches Ruma's house with a heavy heart after hearing the news of marriage, she hears the sound of weeping instead of the sweet notes of organ which she has usually experienced while coming to her house. Moreover she hears Haitha Sarai, scolding his daughter with a stern voice: "Shut up! I don't want to hear anything." (*Dawn* 92) There is also a gun in his hand. Ruma's father has fixed her marriage with a man who according to Bina is an ugly demon. Karuna Barua, popularly known as Haitha Sarai compels his daughter Ruma to marry the man against her will. Ruma's plea and her tears fail to melt her father's heart. Bina also notices ? "her fair cheeks showed the red marks of five fingers" (*Dawn* 92). Bina asks Ruma : "Why don't you marry Jatin dada?" (*Dawn* 92) . Bina, a small girl is ignorant of the helplessness of Ruma. She has been forced to marry a wicked man leaving her love apart and as a result one day she loses her mental balance. That beautiful goddess becomes insane under the pressure of patriarchal autocracy. One day Bina finds Ruma tied with a chain used for tying elephants. The beautiful fair girl looks dark, her hair coming off in places. She laughs without cause and then she cries pitifully.

Jeuti's character exposes the gender discrimination of the contemporary society. She is socially boycotted because she has acted in a film where she had to rest her head on 'Rupkumar's chest'. Society treats her like a street dog. She is not even allowed to fetch water from the same 'ghat' which is generally used by the villagers. Bina meets this beautiful girl in the riverside. Not only the village women and her mother but Jeuti herself warns Bina against talking to her. Jeuti says: "I told you to go...If you stick to me, you too will be stamped as a bad girl." (*Dawn* 191).

Bina's aspiration to be a free soul finds inspiration while she is with her lover, Ratan, a Christian boy, who becomes a Father - Father Ratan McPherlin. It is in his company she feels - "as if she had wings and was flying in a wide, blue sky." (*Dawn* 241). Bina prefers to be a Sister like Sister Louisa. She asks Ratan- "Can't I become like Sister Louisa and the other in your school? I'll teach the small children, I can sweep the country yard and wash the cloths. Will you take me?" (*Dawn* 243) She also begs her father- "I wouldn't get married, Deuta. I want to become like Sister Louisa. I'll go away with him." (*Dawn* 243)

Bina shares her story with Jashoda, Jeuti and Tagar, hogging the limelight and enjoying the status of the chief protagonist at regular intervals. This novel brings forth the existential

angst and the utter fatalism as reflected in the marginal and challenged life of Tagar. The character of Tagar, reminds us of Fowles' Sarah Woodruff of *The French Lieutenant's Women*, who decides for herself and directs the course of her life on her own terms. Tagar's search for identity and freedom is evident from the fact that she does not want to live under the dominance of a male figure. When the curious Bina asks Tagar if she would bear the child without its father's identity, Tagar's reply is positive. Bina asks- "Aren't you afraid of society?" (322) Tagar replies- "Society?" she smiles a ridiculous smile. And this smile is none other than a discovery of her own self. And finally Bina too, being fed up with the familial bondage steps into the world of her own self. When Tagar asks- "won't you miss your sons?" Bina says, "Of course I'll miss them... but they must come to me, looking for their mother. If they look for an old woman whom they can dominate in the name of providing her food and shelter, they won't find me." (326) Bina, finally rediscovers her purpose, independent of the patriarchal structure.

"I have experienced the horror and insurgency in my pulse" (Arupa Patangia Kalita) - *Felanee* is the outcome of this experience faced by its author. The novel documents the life of the protagonist, Felanee or Falani (a 'trash' in English) who was born when there was fire, death and social conflict everywhere. Right after birth she was thrown into a pond by someone though she survived that brutality. Thus from the beginning her life was a struggle. Having a tormented soul she had to survive the pyre, find peace and take the path of non-violence.

The novel is set in the backdrop of the Language Movement of the 1960s when the Assamese speaking majority developed a fear that their identity might be jeopardised by the Bengalis by establishing Bengali as the official language of Assam. This fear of deprivation incited the Assamese to brand the non-Assamese as foreigners and thus started the larger political instability in the state.

In the novel, Felanee is going through an identity-conflict as a multi ethnic protagonist who is a Bodo, a Bengali as well as an Assamese. When asked about her caste and identity she wonders about the various people whose genes run in her blood.

Felanee thought of her grandmother, Ratnamala's gold chain, and the dokhona woven by Kinaram's mother. She had her mother's shell bangles set in gold. She had the muga clothes that Moni's father had given her when Moni was born. What should she wear? What should she keep? Baishya had asked her to take off the shell bangles lest people mistook her for a Bengali. If she wanted to live she should discard her shell bangles, he'd said. Bulen, on the other hand told her, if she wanted to survive, she should wear a dokhona. And

the two boys with their guns told her that if she kept company with 'these mixed people' she wouldn't be alive for long. What could she do now to keep alive? (*Felanee* 185-6)

Keeping quiet for a while she utters only one word 'human'. Her response challenges and questions the dominant cultural view of identity as well as nationhood-identity, which can be multiple and where barriers are artificially created.

In the novel *Felanee*, there is a distinct revelation of the status of women in the Assamese society. Here Ratnamala, the grandmother of Felanee, is introduced as a widow who lost her husband at a very young age. But we also find that the death of her husband does not make her depressed; she feels a kind of relief living alone. The author says- "She was relieved when the man that she was married to and whom she was so afraid of, had not come to her for almost a month...Each night she was alone she slept peacefully, her little heart singing songs of joy." (*Felanee* 1). Ratnamala tries to forget everything that has happened to her. She tries hard to keep herself busy making rag dolls out of frayed bits of cloths. But her relatives do not allow her to live her life. They use to come to her and hug her and cry. Unknowingly the whole situation makes her melancholic and she begins to "weep as she sits forlorn, her head down, in hidden corners" (*Felanee* 2). But, the new generation woman, Felanee succeeds in making a status for herself. Though she is poor, she has freedom in her household. Hence her identity is known to the society with her name not as a 'wife', nor as a 'mother'.

Minoti is dumped both physically and mentally being deserted by an ULFA after making her pregnant. He comes to her only for his sexual pleasure and fulfilment. Jon's mother and Jaggu's wife lose their mental and physical peace due to marital rape and domestic violence. Jon's mother laments: "It's for my blasted body, don't you understand...his own juices have dried up. When he can't perform at night, this is what he does to me...the woman's firm black breasts were scarred with numerous wounds, that looked red and raw" (*Felanee* 80). Jaggu's wife's falling health and subsequent death bear the witness of work load, unwanted pregnancy and abortion. Her uterus has come out of her vaginal passage and she repeatedly tries to keep it back in its place: "Felanee could see something like a big chunk of flesh, hanging down to touch the gunny bag. It was her uterus!" (*Felanee* 117). Feminist writer Kate Millett in her book *Sexual Politics* writes:

"Women in patriarchy are for the most part marginal citizens when they are citizens at all, their situation is like that of other minorities, here defined not as dependent upon numerical size of the group, but on its status."

Sumala was raped and disfigured till death. "Her naked body had distinct signs of brutality...in place of her breasts there were two raw bleeding wounds. Her emaciated

genital passage was a huge open wound" (246). Through these women Arupa Patangia Kalita, depicts the status of women in their domestic environment where they do not even enjoy any right over their own body. They belong to the marginalized group, who do not have a voice of their own but have to work hard for survival and economic sustenance. Their hard work is rewarded with rape and violence at all levels.

Though the background is polluted with violence, the author continuously encourages her women characters to work for economic sustenance and overcome obstacles in life. Felanee makes puffed rice while some others take greens and stool to sell in the market. Insurgency has made these women strong enough and ready to face the challenges of life. The author allows the voices of women to speak about their experiences in the realms of home and the world. They are outspoken as they are affected at all levels during the conflict and insurgency that do not take caste, class or economic status into consideration. They decide to choose patience, raise their children, run their business, and liberate themselves from different forms of oppression, trauma and violence. Despite violence being the pivotal force in her work, the author projects the resistance and survival of her characters rather than their mere victimization. In the end of the novel, Felanee and the destitute women like her are equated with 'kanhi', the reeds which keep on growing again and again, no matter how many times they are mowed down or thrown away.

Felanee belongs to the lower class, yet she is stronger than Bina in *Dawn*. Bina is literate and have knowledge about the society around her. But she cannot revolt against the patriarchal bondage in the true sense. She cannot liberate her soul. She has confined herself within the world of domesticity. But in *Felanee* women are brave enough to live life during conflicts at all levels. Felanee survives with dignity even after the fierce massacre and bloodshed where she loses her husband, left with an unborn child and her home. Kali Boori declares, instead of shedding tears "Women have to be like chilli... tiny to look at but real fire once in mouth." (66) She gives the example of goddess Kali who has ultimate control over man, which happens to be Felanee's goal of life. She is lonely but not dependent on any man to support her. By virtue of this power inside her, during bloodshed and ethnic conflicts Felanee could literally develop a survival strategy, embrace and empower the women like Minoti, Mira's mother, Jon's mother, Ratna's mother, Sumola, Jaggu's wife etc. Even, Felanee has a very strong conscience, which raises the pertinent questions :

What did they want to do? Who will live in their independent country?
And who will live in Bulen's state? What all will they divide? Could
they divide the sky over their heads? Will they divide the water in
the rivers; the trees, the land, the people? Will they separate Kali
Boori from her, and Minoti from Sumala? Will they divide Jon's

mother, Jaggu's wife, Kali Boori and Phool? How would they be divided? Will they be cut into pieces and divided? (*Felanee* 184)

Arupa's success as a woman writer is a landmark in the struggle for female emancipation and assertion of sexual identity of women. In both of the novels, women are used only for sexual pleasure. The male ego overpowers them. They are rewarded with rape and violence at all levels. Both the stories of Bina and Felanee are deliberately chosen to portray failed relationship, victimization, inner turmoil and silent revolt.

The author always chooses a woman as her protagonist. Her feministic attitude is seen in her own words: "women thrown away like garbage, oppressed, marginalised, rejected, but in this state also, vibrantly asserting life. And I glorify their existence..." Her characters are rebellious by nature. They are going through a struggle throughout their lives. In case of Bina, it is a mental struggle and for Felanee it is both mental and physical. And for the author- "Their existence is itself a struggle; just the fact that they have been able to survive amidst all this, is rebellion itself." But after that struggle the women are gifted with a space and freedom, and thereby they are promoted as the successors who deconstruct the traditional societal structure.

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