

## Gender and Identity Politics: Arupa Patangia Kalita's *Felanee (The Story of Felanee)* and Rita Chowdhury's *Ei Samay Sei Samay (Times Now and Then)*

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### Abstract

This paper explores how two contemporary women writers in Asamiya refract the question of identity politics through a gendered prism in a multiethnic and multilingual landscape of the Brahmaputra valley in the late twentieth and early twenty first centuries. The period since the late 1970s has been one of intense sociopolitical movements, armed rebellions and state supported armed repressions in large parts of northeastern India. While a few women (including the writer Rita Chowdhury (1960-) discussed in this paper) have been at the forefront of some of these movements such as the Assam Movement (late 1970s and 1980s), women in general have been at the receiving end of the violence unleashed both by armed rebels fighting against the Indian state as well as by the state's armed machinery. An understanding of this context is crucial to conceptualise the terms through which we shall approach the texts *Felanee* (2003) and *Ei Samay Sei Samay* (2007) as both texts are situated in conflict-ridden times. While Rita Chowdhury's *Ei Samay Sei Samay* draws on the author's experience of being closely involved in the Assam Movement, *Felanee* spans a time period which saw several movements and rebellions, sometimes running parallel to each other as ethnic groups increasingly claimed nationhood within or outside the political borders of the Indian state. Finally, the article gestures towards another issue – the question of whether writers in Asamiya engage with identity politics differently from Northeast Indian writers writing in English. While most writers writing in English have received critical attention, I believe it is equally important to understand how writers in the vernaculars have engaged with similar questions.

### Keywords

Northeast Indian writing, Asamiya women writers, gender, identity politics, socio-political movements, conflict

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It is important to mention right at the outset that the texts I engage with in this article were both published in the early years of the twenty first century (*ei samay*/times now) looking back at years (*sei samay*/times then) which were formative of a complex constituency sometimes called “Assamese subnationalism” in academic parlance (Baruah, *India Against Itself* xii) or simply as Asamiya *jatiyatabad* (Asamiya nationalism) in the Asamiya everyday public sphere. The term *jatiya* (one possible translation is national) is complex as Partha Chatterjee has glossed in a different context; it has connotations of nation, community, caste, creed, tribe and may sometimes act simply as a classifier. I would like to argue that because the novels were written in times when other engagements with nationality and territoriality became more prominent, say claims for separate homeland by both the Bodos and the Karbis (late 1980s, 1990s continuing till present times) residing within the political borders of the state of Assam but now increasingly claiming homelands outside and separate from Assam, the “times then” will always be interpolated by the ideological imperatives of “times now.” This is not a simple case of writer’s location distant in space and time, say George Eliot’s nostalgia for the humble weaver’s country life in *Silas Marner* at a time when large scale industrial strikes struck mills across England. This is a more complex entanglement of the Asamiya middle class in aspirations which are sometimes rejected as chauvinistic or read as assertions of regional identity. I believe that a careful calibration of the ideological prisms of the writers is important as we enter these texts.

The term “identity politics” gathered momentum internationally in the 1970s and the 80s to articulate difference and to mobilise constituencies defined in terms of sexuality, race, ethnicities, community, religion and so on, primarily drawing on the idea of cultural identity (Marshall and Read 876). While it strengthened ethnic mobilisation in the Soviet and feminist movements in the United States, Nancy Fraser and a few others have foregrounded how an essentialised notion of identity may subsume questions of material reality (“Rethinking Recognition”). In the context of Northeast India, two major strands around identity politics have gained currency. Sanjib Baruah in his book-length study has engaged with this question over nearly three decades, articulating the aspiration of what he calls Assamese subnationalism. Hiren Gohain on the other hand has always maintained that identity politics as expressed during the Assam Movement may set a dangerous precedent (the volatility of the situation may be gauged from the fact that Gohain was threatened during the Movement for his critical comments on it). This article enters this question through two women’s texts published within a few years of each other and explores if writers in the vernacular evolve a different sensibility.

Rita Chowdhury (1960-) is the current Director, National Book Trust, India. She has taught at the prestigious Cotton College, Guwahati for more than

two decades and is a celebrated novelist and poet. Her publications include more than a dozen novels and several collections of poetry apart from a coffee table book and a documentary. Her first novel *Abirata Jatra* (*Incessant Journey*, 1981) received the prestigious *Asam Sahitya Sabha* (Assam Literary Association) award. She is also the recipient of the Sahitya Akademi Award in 2008 for her novel *Deo Langkhui* (*The Divine Sword*, 2006) for an innovative retelling of a Tiwa tribal lore. She won international acclaim for her novel *Makam* (2010) for documenting the arrest, detention and deportation of the members of the Assamese-Chinese people during the Sino-India War 1962. *Makam* has been translated into English (*Makam* by Deepika Phukan) and Marathi (*Makam* by Vidya Sharma).

While *Makam* explores transnational issues and the impact of cross border strategic relations in everyday lives of ordinary people, her earlier novel *Ei Samay, Sei Samay* (2007) is largely embedded in the conceptualisation of a greater Asamiya identity; the trials and tribulations of even an attempt to write such a history; one of the characters in the novel claims:

Aditi will study the period from the Assam Movement till the present. Though there is an identity of an Asamiya society today, it no longer has the earlier *composite* and *liberal form*. Today various *ethnic groups* have started claiming *autonomy* from *cultural* and other forms of domination of the *mainstream* caste Hindu Asamiya society to safeguard their identity and very existence. (151, emphasised words are English in the original)<sup>2</sup>

Aditi Chowdhury, the protagonist in the novel, teaches at a famous college and has received a project from a prestigious international institution to “write a socio-political history of Assam.” Aditi, a single mother of two daughters, was an active leader in the Assam Movement during her college days. She was married to another leader of the Movement, Chandan Phukan, who later became a minister in the new political dispensation and they were separated soon after Aditi embraced motherhood. The story begins at a crucial point in Aditi’s life when she encounters the change that time has unleashed as she sees the outside world anew through the eyes of her daughters and their unconventional friend Sukanya. Aditi is forced to come out of the cocoon of her memory of the Movement, living in the past as she always did, and she grapples with the terms in which she will measure herself in this new world.

One of the significant aspects of this novel is the characterisation of Aditi Chowdhury and her daughter’s friend Sukanya, as both seem to inherit the legacy of the woman who defies all norms. Aditi’s separation from the normative elite woman is highlighted by her colleague Jayashree in no uncertain terms. Jayashree says:

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<sup>2</sup> All translations from Asamiya to English quoted in the article are mine.

You had a different life altogether Aditi! Tell us sometime. I was married by then [when the Assam movement started] and spent my days in the kitchen. What strict in-laws I had! We were allowed to join in the picketing on a day or two simply to avoid the Student Union's pelting stones at home. We obeyed the blackout, gave donations. That's it.... My parents would say that respectable families' girls do not loiter around with young men. Once a girl's reputation is spoilt it is gone forever. (7)

Aditi is marked by her difference even as a new bride, "Aditi is not the regular coy and shy new bride. She has travelled across Assam, been jailed, she is a female rebel. This rebel self is in conflict with her new identity of a bride" (20). She is conscious of her distance from the normative aristocratic society women such as her husband's newfound friends' wives who answer with a smattering of English when Aditi asks if they took part in the Assam Movement and her husband intervenes that they may not find such talks interesting. One of them says, "No, no – why shall we not be *interested?* *In fact* we would love to hear from such a *dedicated agitator* [sic] as your wife. You have such *interesting experience...* *we have a different life, much away from mainstream Assamese society*" (21, emphasised words are English in the original). Aditi's journey begins as an idealist who sacrifices her marriage and brings up two girls; the elder, Kajari's, mother Shyamoli died while giving birth to her in a rebel camp and father Aranya Barua has taken up arms against the Indian state frustrated with the failed political results of the Assam Movement. The younger one Kasturi was found on the roadside. Aditi finds herself through motherhood when Kajari was left with her as a sick baby. Her husband Chandan Phukan refused to shelter a rebel's daughter. "If it is proved that a rebel's child is in a politician's home – his political career would be completely ruined" (445). Aditi continued to claim Kajari as her daughter but walked out of Chandan's life, "I forgot that you were not my child. My life acquired new meaning. I felt liberated from the narrow confines" (445). While Aditi's decision to take charge of her life is celebrated, the novel also creates a parallel dichotomy; the good mother vis-à-vis the bad mother. Sukanya's mother who dresses up for the evening and expresses her sexual desire is the quintessential other of the idealist, Aditi. Ambitious Nibha is equally a suspect who can "manage" a college seat for her son with an obedient husband tagging along. The stereotype of the ambitious power hungry women characters is prominent compared to the weak, alcoholic secret killers such as Arun Bora and others. Therefore, though the novel ostensibly valorises a female protagonist who crosses the confines of a middle class life, the values that the text seems to enshrine are a certain middle class sense of respectability where female desire remains at best contested if not entirely condemned.

However, the text does raise important questions about the relationship between a popular movement such as the Assam Movement (1979-85) led by

All Assam Students Union (AASU) and the making of realpolitik as Aditi's husband, once a student leader and now a minister, tells her, "You do not know – Oh the kind of politics. There were three candidates in my constituency.... I had neither lobby nor money.... Jayanta and the others poured money and managed, I got involved with them" (22). The idealist Aditi asks, "But they were not involved in the Movement, how could they decide the candidates?," and the reply is, "Oh Aditi, this is a big game. You could never imagine the forces at play or the internal dynamics of politics" (22-23). Aditi is disturbed but now that she is a minister's wife, and not the celebrated leader of a movement, she realises she has little role to play. The Assam Movement is not an exception when it comes to the marginalisation of female leaders during the formation of a political party after the movement on the street is over; the parallels are too huge to count. The Assam Movement was initially formed to redress grievances against the "foreigners" (Bangladeshi immigrants) who seem to be increasingly shifting the demographic and socio-economic prominence of the indigenous population, and the state's role in exploiting both this new migrant population post the formation of Bangladesh in 1971 as well as natural resources from the region (tea, oil, timber, coal etc; it had slogans such as "*Tez dim tel nidiô*" /We shall give blood but not oil) while giving very little back to the people. Though it began by voicing the angst of a large section of the society it acquired a chauvinistic edge, at times alienating certain sections, particularly Muslims and increasingly other ethnic groups such as Bodos, Karbis, Mishings etc. The leadership of the movement signed the Assam Accord with the then Prime Minister of India Rajiv Gandhi in August 1985, which among other things pledged to safeguard "the identity and heritage of the Assamese people" (Baruah, *India against Itself* 116). The movement led to the formation of a new political party, the Axom Gana Parixod (AGP) which won a substantial number of seats in the Assembly elections to form the State Government in 1986. Cracks which had already appeared during the Movement years finally came to the foreground. AGP's failure in addressing the illegal immigrant issue, among others, led to the rise of the radical group, United Liberation Front of Axom (ULFA). Though ULFA was formed in 1979, it gained momentum in the years of the AGP rule during 1986-90. With ULFA a different terror mechanism was unleashed; state sponsored repression of people remotely associated with the ULFA (popularly called the *sangathan*, the organisation) ran parallel to the rebels' attacks on para-military forces as well as the general public. The Congress-led state government in the early 1990s facilitated a different terror economy where a large numbers of ULFA cadres were lured to surrender, creating another problematic category of the SULFA (Surrendered ULFA) in the Asamiya socio-political discourse.

Rita Chowdhury is able to capture the nuances and the multilayered realities of these times in a new context where for Kajari, Kasturi and many of

their generation, “ULFA, SULFA, Congress, AGP, BJP, AASU are so many different words!” (67-68). The troubled times of several decades of political unrest in the Brahmaputra valley can be summed up in just a few words for the new generation. This however does not mean that this generation is not socially aware or conscious; in fact, Sukanya represents a reality and astuteness that even Aditi Chowdhury cannot help but praise. Sukanya is the new age girl, one who does not hesitate to ride a bike, use slang and declare her interest in boys openly to ogle at them without the traditional sentimentality of love. It is interesting that amidst a growing disenchantment with the younger generation in the Asamiya public sphere in general, Chowdhury is able to sense that their realities are different from their parents’ generation and so are their priorities. Some of these young people would still stake personal life and reputation for the sake of others – take, for example, Sukanya’s exemplary sacrifice of her own name for Assam’s sake. The text does indicate that there is another side to the so-called consumerist young generation after all.

However, the disparate resolutions to people’s lives in the closure seem forced, even melodramatic: Kajari’s discovery of her parentage; old friends of Aditi’s coming together; Amit and Bikram, both students, reconciling to their family’s past (one’s father killed by militants right in front of his eyes and the other’s family completely annihilated because of his uncle’s association with the banned ULFA). The sound of Aditi’s violin (which has been tucked away in a corner ever since her home was burnt on a fateful night rendering her an orphan) brings joy and a sense of renewed hope in the end.

To come back to the question of historiography, it has been remarked that the germs of some of the later separatist movements (Bodo, Karbi, among others) lay in the Assam Movement. While it is true that these movements gained momentum after the failed promises of the newly formed government of the AGP, we must also go a little back in history to see how divisive identity formations were already at play in colonial times. This is so that we address the material reality behind identity politics, asking whether self-determination/autonomy without adequate control over resources and a radical transformation of socio economic institutions would unleash change, or replicate endless nations within nations. One is reminded of Nadine Gordimer’s Rosa Burger in *Burger’s Daughter* who tried hard to escape her father’s legacy of the black consciousness movement in South Africa. Gordimer’s novel problematises the act of writing history itself, particularly the question of truth in a biography of Lionel Burger; similarly Rita Chowdhury is also engaged in the question of writing history. What are the sources for and the ideological imperatives of this historical fiction? Does incorporating voices of a Rashbihari here and a Jumma Ali there redeem the Assam Movement as secular or the Asamiya society as composite? (303). Towards the end of the novel, Aditi Chowdhury begins to understand why people who were wholehearted

supporters of the Movement got disenchanted gradually as they got absorbed into their everyday struggle. But the novel does not explore the aspect of material reality in people's lives extensively. This question is raised in Arupa Patangia Kalita's novel *Felanee* (2003).

Arupa Patangia Kalita (1956-) teaches English at Tangla College and is a familiar name in Asamiya literature. She is the recipient of several awards including the “*Sabitya-Setu*” *Purashkar* (1993), followed by the *Bharatiya Bhasa Purashkar* (1995) and the Katha Award (1998). Her creative works include *Mriganabbi* (1987), *Maple Habir Rang* (1989), *Ayananta* (1994), *Deopaharor Bhagnastupot* (1999), *Kaitot Keteki* (1999), *Arunimar Swadesh* (2000). *Ayananta* has been translated as *Dawn* by Ranjita Biswas and published by Zubaan books, as is *The Story of Felanee* (translated by Deepika Phukan). In this article, I have referred to the Asamiya text.

Felanee – “thrown away” – is the name of the protagonist of the novel. The text's landscape traverses several decades starting with the journey of a child widow Ratnamala, daughter of a Mauzadar family. Ratnamala elopes with a mahout<sup>3</sup> Kinaram Bodo, away from the wrath of the Mauzadar family, and settles in a village in the foothills. She dies after giving birth to Jutimala. Kinaram's bullet stricken body is discovered soon after. As Jutimala grows up to be a beautiful girl, a shopkeeper Khitish Ghosh spots her in a local *mela* and they marry. Meanwhile, trouble begins, houses are burnt and bullets are fired and Jutimala lies in a pool of blood after the birth of her daughter as riots break out in the 1960s. The Bhasa Andolan or the Language Movement during the 1960s stirred up emotions against Bengalis as outsiders; the attack on Khitish Ghosh's house may be seen as a manifestation of those times. The baby, which was thrown away in a nearby pond, is rescued by Khitish's brother Ratan – she is Felanee. When Felanee grows up and marries Lambodar Koch and becomes mother to a son, Moni, another set of troubles brews. Lambodar asks her to pack up their belongings as she looks sadly at her home and hearth, “What could she pack?... the *kordoi* tree that is sweet even when it is tender, the short *jahaji* tree laden with bananas till the ground? Or the blooming red rose? The pond with the fishes up and about?” (11). Felanee's story starts from here. The day after the fateful night when she and her son escape a riot, Lambodar goes missing. The terror of that loss can never be fully expressed in language; it only comes to her as the stutterings of Raghu, the orphan who has speech impairment. It is appropriate that such violence has no language. While it is difficult to capture the nuances of Raghu's expression in translation, in the original the violence spreads to language itself rendering impaired speech the only possible medium to express Lambodar's violent death.

<sup>3</sup> A person who takes care of and rides an elephant

The novel makes an important departure from the Asamiya tradition of novel writing as it enters the territory of the lives of the working class through communal riots, ethnic unrest and state sponsored violence where identity is too fluid to be fixed. Felanee is asked in the refugee camp, “What are you?” Felanee cannot answer but in her mind’s eyes “She can see the Bodo mahout Kinaram, the bejewelled Mauzadar’s daughter Ratnamala [Asamiya], the Siliguri [Bengali] youth Kshitish, and the attractive Jutimala, Ratankhura-khuri who raised her and Lambodar [Koch] who married her” (32). Felanee carries her multiple ethnic lineage as a passport to be able to mix with everyone around her; particularly the Bengali Kali Burhi who thinks she is Bengali like her, or Bulen who claims her grandfather’s Bodo identity. In response to Kali Burhi, Felanee starts to say, “I am not a Bengali, my son’s father...” and stops. During the 1984 riot when Felanee loses her husband she is warned about wearing *shakha-pola* (red and white bangles) the sign of the Bengali married woman, as the Assam Movement defined itself against so-called outsiders, particularly against the Bangladeshi immigrant. There were moments when the difference between the Bangla-speaking immigrant population and the Bengali people who have long settled in the Brahmaputra valley was erased. Towards the middle of the novel Bulen, who has joined a Bodo militant group, asks her to wear her own dress, reminding her that she has Bodo blood in her (her grandfather was Bodo) (150). Felanee is left then wondering:

What shall she wear? What would she take? Baishya had asked her to remove the *shakha-pola* if she wanted to be alive. Bulen says she must wear the *dokhna* if she wants to live. The young men with guns have warned her against mixing with outsiders. How shall she live.... To live.... She has to first make do with this coarse cloth tearing on the edges, fry the puffed rice and finish making the two *moorbhas* before cooking some rice. Her son Moni will be here soon. The smell of her puffed rice engulfed the air.” (155)

Felanee’s life gives lie to any fixed notion of identity. In the above passage it is the material struggle for survival which is the key. The shifting markers establishing identity through women’s dress is not new to these times. As I have explored elsewhere women’s dress is invoked at specific moments in the Brahmaputra valley even during the colonial times not only as repository of tradition but to invent new traditions of clothing (Medhi 23). Both the *mekhela-chadar* and the *dokhona* would be invoked at selected moments in postcolonial times to reinforce community identity. As Asamiya women are asked to wear only *mekhela-chadar* and do away with the sari, Bodo women may be asked to don the *dokhna* in all public spaces.

Unlike Aditi in *Ei Samay*, *Sei Samay* who is fully convinced about the goals of the Assam Movement if not its means through realpolitik, Felanee is distant



from any sense of affiliation with one or the other. Human attachment is the key to her survival. She is in awe of Kali Burhi who has survived the big bad world by transforming herself from the social outcast Arati to the revered Kali incarnate. After the death of Kali Burhi, Felanee cleans her home and finds the artificial *jota* (matted hair) which Kali Burhi used to wear to transform herself into the incarnation of Ma-Kali.<sup>4</sup> Felanee is not scornful, but rather she fully understands the significance of what Burhi had once said: “Women should be like these chilies [*mem jalakia*; small white hot chilies]. These may look tiny but can burn your mouth with fiery sharpness” (61).

Women’s collective survival remains central to the *Felanee* story; how women sustained themselves and their families, taking care to feed and fight if necessary. Felanee survives by frying puffed rice with Kali Burhi initially, learns to make *moorbas* from Ratna’s mother, receives help from Bulen and helps him in return by taking care of his wife Sumola who had lost her sense of balance after the riots, and emotionally connects with Minoti who has been duped by her employer’s son. The novel eloquently depicts the many lives of women’s struggles, particularly the struggle with their bodies. Jagu’s wife has severe prolapse of the uterus yet she is forced to grate twenty to thirty coconuts daily and make paste of them with a mortar and pestle to run the family business of a tea shack that sells her famous *sandesb*. Felanee realises the bitterness of the life that creates such exquisite sweets when she sees Jagu’s wife who tells her how the doctor has strictly warned her against using the tube well, lifting heavy objects, or sitting for a long time and grating coconuts and so on (101). Similarly, Ratna’s mother somehow makes ends meet but is always scorned both by her daughter as well as her husband, whose constant refrain through the text is “If only I had a son.”

One of the ways in which identity is asserted is through violence and violence has a different tenor in these women’s lives. Their everyday world of domestic violence or violence on the street slips into the larger instances of violence that strike the landscape. If the novel marks its timeline through events such as the language Agitation (1960s), the killing of the Indian Prime Minister (Indira Gandhi, 1984) or the signing of the Assam Accord (1985), it also carefully plots how the everyday lives of the daily wage labourers have a seamless existence irrespective of the *bandh* call on one day or the bomb blast or protest march on another. The political economy of terror seems to impact lives in myriad ways: while it may rob people of homes, it may open new avenues out of poverty for a select few such as Bulen or Ratna, or it may project some people in the forefront of public life, creating a heroic image for a short while. But the final message the text sends out seems to question all modes of identity

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<sup>4</sup> Ma-Kali is the fiercest form of the Mother Goddess in Hindu tradition. Kali worship is very popular in eastern India.

formation. “What will they divide? What else? The sky above the head? The water in the river? The trees? The Land? And its people? She and Kali Burhi? Sumola and Minoti?... Will they allow the bumblebee to pollinate from one tree to the next?” (154). In the text the answer to identity politics and mindless violence lies in the seamless natural world of the sky, the river, the trees and the beautiful landmass.

In conclusion, at a simple level, the two novels may seem to complete the picture of these trouble torn years, one ideologically driven to find meaning in the Assam Movement and the other challenging identity politics and engaged with material questions. However, this is too simplistic a binary to posit. While *Ei Samay, Sei Samay* recognises that material questions have brought in changes in the perspective of the new generation, *Felanee* seems to escape into the world of nature. Except for a brief period when the women come together to rescue their sons/husbands from the army camp, the novel’s distancing from the ideology of identity politics also erase questions which have been at the centre of much bloodshed in this valley and surrounding areas. The novel tries to resolve these complex questions by taking recourse to the natural world; invoking one sky and the freely overgrown reeds. However, the question remains whether identity politics could indeed be subsumed as *Felanee*’s closure seems to indicate.

Secondly, novels written in English about these times, say Mitra Phukan’s *Collector’s Wife* (2005), Aruni Kashyap’s *House with a Thousand Stories* (2013) and others have sometimes been stereotyped as “selling conflict.” Sanjeeb Baruah has mentioned how M.S. Prabhakar argues that Northeast India’s “durable disorder” has increasingly come to serve the vested interest of the middle class (*Durable Disorder* 15). Tilottoma Misra however has pointed out that the connections are not so simple: “Violence features as a recurrent theme [in literature of this region] because the story of violence seems to be a never-ending one in this region and yet people have not learnt ‘to live with it,’ as they are expected to do by the distant centres of power” (xix). In a multiethnic and multilingual landscape like the Brahmaputra valley identity politics remains an easy form of appeal though there are limits to this politics as social scientists have often argued (Giri). Unlike some other movements where identity politics cement solidarity, we have to be wary of essentialised identity in a fragile landscape like the Brahmaputra valley without losing sight of what it might entail. So I am wary of a blanket rejection of identity as has increasingly become fashionable in postmodern times but at the same time remain aware that essentialised identity without taking cognisance of material reality may serve the vested interests of dominant groups. Finally, reading identity politics in Assam through a few selected novels in English or even Asamiya may be a limiting exercise. After all, Asamiya is still the dominant language in the Brahmaputra

valley. A truly holistic understanding would emerge when we juxtapose writers from diverse ethnic locations engaged with a varied range of issues.

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