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History, Memory and Trauma in Selected Works of Arupa Patangia Kalita

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Abstract

India's North East, including Assam, has a history of militancy arising from various socio-political causes. Writers have responded to this aspect of the history of this region by producing works that record and commemorate particular events and experiences for posterity. Of particular significance in these works is the record of the impact of the disturbances on the everyday lives of people, many of whom, though unaware of the main issues being debated, are affected beyond measure by the turn of the events. Arupa Patangia Kalita's short stories collected in *Written in Tears* (2015), *The Musk and Other Stories* (2017), and *The Loneliness of Hira Barua* (2020) document a momentous phase in the recent history of the North-Eastern region of India especially Assam, marked by student agitation and militancy which mobilized the people around particular issues on the one hand and inflicted sufferings of various kinds on innocent people on the other. A writer is, among other things, a recorder of the experiences of a region who investigates in the form of a narrative the fallout of social upheavals on the everyday lives of people. The proposed paper will look into the aspects of the recent history of the North East touched on by the writer in her short stories using insights from studies on history, postcoloniality, memory and trauma. It will focus especially on the documentation of women's experiences during that phase from a woman's perspective.

Keywords: agitation, militancy, poststructuralism, postcolonial feminism

Introduction

Engaging with the events in the history of a region has been a major concern of literature in recent times. There has been a historical turn in fiction writing especially, an exercise in memorialization since the Second World War. The past has been delved into to unearth little-known aspects of it, record individual memories, and find out the genesis of particular problems so as to shape the future. The past, the present, and the future are now seen as inextricably intertwined as a continuum. Alan Robinson (2011) talks about "the present past" (4) and argues that "at any given moment several dimensions of time coexist in present consciousness" (4).

Like other regions of the world, the North-eastern region of India has its own unique history; militancy and violence rooted in various geographical, socio-economic and cultural factors constitute a significant feature of the histories of many of the states of the region. With the signing of various accords, the normalcy of a sort has returned to the region, but the events of the past are stored in the individual and collective memories of the inhabitants of the region and provide the background to much of the literature produced here. As Anne Whitehead remarks, "The desire

among various cultural groups to represent or make visible specific historical instances of trauma has given rise to numerous important works of contemporary fiction" (3). A number of writers from Assam writing in English and the regional language Assamese, have recorded the experience of agitation and militancy in Assam in the 1970s and 1980s. Mention may be made of Mitra Phukan (*The Collector's Wife*, 2005), Arun Sharma (*Sankalpa*, 2008), Aruni Kashyap (*A House with a Thousand Stories*, 2013) and Rita Choudhury (*Abirotajatra*, 1981) and *Ei Samay Sei Samay*, 2007). Arupa Patangia Kalita has carved a niche for herself in the echelon of Assamese writers with her strong portrayals of the social-cultural life of Assam in her works like *Felanee* (2003), *Oyonanta* (1994), *Written in Tears* (2015), and *The Loneliness of Hira Barua and Other Stories* (2020). She has first-hand experience of the days of agitation and militancy in Assam. In an interview, she has talked about how as a teacher of Tangla College she saw insurgency from close quarters; she was affected by the shooting down of the Principal in front of the college and the death of many students, and the money that the teachers and other government employees were forced to pay to the militants¹. Among the works of Patangia Kalita which look back on the happenings of the past in the North-Eastern region, especially Assam, are the stories included in the collections *Written in Tears* (2015), *The Musk and other Stories* (2017), and *The Loneliness of Hira Baruah and other Stories* (2020). Originally written in Assamese, many of the stories in the collections were translated into English by Ranjita Biswas. The stories throw light on different aspects of militancy in the region, especially its impact on the everyday lives of the common man. Arupa Patangia Kalita is known for her belief in the connection between literature and life as it is lived, and her concern for the underdogs as she was influenced by the Marxist thought of the 1970s. Many of the characters in her novels are people she had met in real life and she articulates the voice of the silent and the strength of the neglected mostly women and the oppressed. This paper aims to analyze how a woman writer looks back on the events of the past, what aspects of agitation and militancy are remembered and recorded for posterity, and what individual and collective trauma people suffered. The focus will be on the experiences of women during times of unrest.

I

Historiography has attracted a lot of attention from scholars in recent times. Dominick LaCapra (2014) talks about two approaches to historiography; one is the documentary research model which involves collecting evidence and making truth claims based on that. Capra claims that, as opposed to the documentary method, "narratives in fiction may also involve truth claims on a structural or general level by providing insight into phenomena such as slavery or the Holocaust by offering a reading of a process or period, or by giving at least a plausible 'feel' for experience and emotion which may be difficult to arrive at through restricted documentary methods" (2014, p. 13). Toni Morrison's *Beloved* on the aftermath of slavery falls in this category. In other words, fictional narratives also provide useful insights into the history of a period by making creative use of individuals and collective memories. Although history and memory are seen as binary opposites and history is valorized as the realm of critical rational inquiry and memory is regarded as simplistic and confused, a critically tested memory can serve a useful purpose and light up many dark alleys of the past.

Poststructuralist ideas which have swept across academia have emphasized the histories of the margins —women, blacks, and ethnic minorities. "History from below" has become the buzzword.

Postcolonial feminism too lays stress on the stories and experiences of women in the developing or the third world. Ours has been termed the catastrophic age. The field of Trauma Studies which developed in the 1980 and 1990s focused on studying trauma associated with catastrophic events like the World Wars, the Holocaust, anti-colonial movements, civil wars, and militancy in different parts of the world. Dominick LaCapra observes, "Trauma and its causes may indeed be a prominent feature of history, notably modern history which should not be airbrushed or denied" (LaCapra, 2014, p.xi). There is a growing realization that there has been too much focus on studying the experiences of the white western world and that the events of the non-western world need to be recorded so that some link can be established between cultures. Craps and Buelens (2008) talk about "the risk of ignoring or marginalizing non-western traumatic events and histories and non-western theoretical work which may "assist in the perpetuation of Eurocentric views and structures that maintain or widen the gap between West and the rest of the world"(2). The colonial experience and the movements for national independence, for instance, thus got to be written about and the cultures and histories of the non-western world were inscribed. There is an increasing recourse to the anecdote or the story to recover the voice of the marginalized and the abject. Mass movements which often give rise to militancy have weighty causes, but most often the toll that they take on the lives of the people, especially the vulnerable sections, is overlooked. Literature is one of the ways in which the sacrifices and sufferings of communities like women and ethnic minorities can be commemorated and resistance to acts of terrorism and brutality can be built up and this is what Arupa Patangia Kalita does in her collection of stories.

II

A distinctive feature of the largely patriarchal societies of the third world is women's association with home, with the inner space. The stories in the collection *Written in Tears* by Patangia show how the inner space is destroyed by the outside conflicts which leave women lonely and destitute. A number of stories in the collection deal with the destruction of the home. The story "Arunima's Motherland" is a narrative of how a family pays the price of having a son as a member of an outlawed organization. Not only is a wedding engagement of a daughter of the family cancelled because of this, but the entire family is annihilated by a bomb hurled at their house with the daughter-in-law and her infant son having a providential escape because they happened to be elsewhere at the time of the blast. In the span of a few moments, a wife loses her husband and the protection he provides to the family, an infant loses his father and the love of the doting paternal grandparents, uncles, and aunts. What is very poignant here is the picture of cozy domesticity in the early part of the story —the endearing relationship of the members of the family, their everyday life as they go about cooking, tending to the flowers and vegetable gardens, and preparing the bride's trousseau in anticipation of a wedding —all of which give way to a gruesome picture of a burnt house with the mangled remains of bodies strewn all over as the daughter-in-law comes back with her newly born son to be welcomed by her husband's household. Preceding this catastrophe is a phase of acute fear and anxiety as the younger brother of the sought-after militant, who is pursuing his studies in a college, is picked up for questioning and the house seems to be haunted by strange people who have their faces covered with black clothes even as a series of secret killings, bomb blasts, derailments of trains, demands for food and money by the outlaws, and constant army surveillance induce a fear psychosis among the

people. The family becomes the butt of caustic remarks by the neighbours who blame them for the army's presence in the locality. Arunima is pitied by a neighbour for marrying into a family of criminals—"What bad luck that you have to live with this family of criminals!" (28). They are not invited to social functions and no doctor agrees to come to their house to examine Arunima's aged father-in-law. What is seen in the end is the uncertain future before the daughter-in-law with an infant in her arms. She had ceased to be welcome in her mother's house as quite some time had passed after the birth of her son and she sensed that her sisters-in-law would be happy to see her gone. What she faces when she returns to her in-law's house is something she could not have imagined in her wildest nightmares. The author deftly uses contrasts — pitting the warmth of family relationships against the chilling devastation of militancy. Metaphors are also used -of bees building their comb when Arunima enters the house as a daughter-in-law and then of them flying away from the honeycomb before the destruction of the home that Arunima cherished. Women are the givers of life as is put forth by the image of Arunima and her newly born child; it is the cult of violence mostly perpetrated by men that destroys life and relationships.

The other stories in the collection deal with the different ways in which women suffer during times of unrest. Almost all the stories talk about hard-earned money and resources taken away by the militants or the army. The simple villagers are caught in the crossfire between the army and the militants and are unable to decide whom to obey. Teachers are served notices to pay huge amounts from their salaries. There are gruesome acts of violence —the hurling of bombs, blowing up of bridges and vehicles full of people, molestations of women, stillbirths due to the stressful lives of expectant mothers, army atrocities on the villagers who are herded into open fields and punished for helping the militants, and an overall fear psychosis which permeates into the everyday life. "They could not breathe, they could not eat, they could not sleep" (29). It is as though they were suffering a death-in-life existence, an aspect discussed by Amit Baishya in his *Contemporary Literature from Northeast India* (2019) where he considers the representations of the effects of political terror in the contemporary necropolitical literature from the North-Eastern region.

Women often bear the brunt of militancy and the diktats of the agitationists. They issue instructions regarding women's dress and Mainao in the story "The Girl with Long Hair" has her hair cut off when she defies the instructions in order to have some fun with her friends. As a result, not only is her beautiful hair chopped off in public view but she is also forced to marry the boy who cut her hair as it is a tribal custom for a girl to marry a person who touches her in any manner. It is the most drastic punishment meted out to a fun-loving girl. Women are compelled to be the bearers of the culture of the community as there seems to be no strict dress code for the males.

The story "Surabhi Barua and the Rhythm of Hooves" deals with the way people who opposed the Assam *andolan* were harassed. Surabhi Baruah, who works in a college and has leftist leanings, writes articles opposing the movement. She and another of her colleagues, Professor Bordoloi, have to bear the brunt of the students' ire for opposing the *andolan*. Students walk out of their classes, there is hooting, and Professor Bordoloi is attacked and injured. Surabhi Barua's engagement is called off by her fiancé's family and she is forced to apply for a fellowship and move out of the town. She becomes a liability even to her own family so much so that her own mother does not try to dissuade her from moving out of town. Her story bears testimony to the ways people who opposed the movement were harassed and became socially ostracized.

"Kunu's mother" is another story that testifies to the vulnerability of women especially women who are without the support of men. After the death of her husband, Kunu becomes the centre of her mother's world. Kunu grows up to be a beautiful young woman who begins to attract the attention of young men. A particular young man, a militant, enamoured by her beauty starts visiting her house and demands that he be allowed to marry her, sending alarm signals to her mother. She decides to send the girl away to live with relatives. When she returns after leaving her daughter at a relative's house, she faces the anger of the young man and all the people of the village who told her that if she wishes to live in the village and retain her plot of land there, she will have to abide by the wishes of the community and in this case, that means marrying her daughter off to the young man who wanted her. Kunu's mother finds herself alone and absolutely helpless, unable to decide on a course of action.

The last story "Ayengla of the Blue Hills" bears testimony to the trauma induced by army atrocities on women. Cathy Caruth (1995) defines trauma as "The pathology consists, rather, solely in the structure of its experience or reception: the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it. To be traumatised is precisely to be possessed by an image or event" (4-5). The story is a tragic narrative of a young woman who is happy with her family and who does not understand much about the happenings in the outside world, but as fate would have it, she is raped by the army and the trauma of the incident leaves her crippled for the rest of her life. She becomes frozen in time and is unable to assign the incident to her past and to move on with her life in the present. In spite of the efforts by her husband and the other members of the family, Ayengla does not recover. Her husband marries another woman and starts a new life, and Ayengla lapses into gloom, loneliness, and finally death. Her story shows the damaging psychological effects of oppression, especially when it involves the violation of the body in case of a woman. Another story, "The Face in the Mirror" deals with the impact of an aunt's rape on a little girl from Nagaland named Zungmila. The rape left her disturbed for the rest of her life so much so that she suffered from periodic fits when she would pour out her hatred for the Indians who occupied their land and could go to sleep only with the help of injections, "mumbling about her aunt and her distended breast" (131).

The stories are based on characters who belong to different communities —Assamese, Bodo, and Naga. The customs, beliefs, and everyday lives of these communities differ as also the problems which give rise to militancy in different places. What holds the stories together are the similarities in the experience of militancy and the sad plight of women in times of unrest. As a woman writer, Arupa Patangia Kalitahas given us a collection of tales that are to a great extent women-centered and represent the myriad ways in which militancy affects women. While women are, by and large, left destitute, helpless, and in a state of mental and emotional shock, there are also positive developments that help them to be self-reliant and earn an income. Mainao in the story "The Cursed Fields of Golden Rice" is forced by circumstances to learn to make snacks, weave shawls etc. and sell them in the market to earn a living. She is helped in her endeavour by women's cooperatives which supply her yarn and help her to sell her products. Women thus adopt various survival strategies to pull out of difficult situations.

The cultural distinctiveness of the non-western world is also inscribed in the stories even as they record the experience of agitation and militancy. The women belong to different communities and locales— hills, plains, tribal and non-tribal— are part of various customs of the community.

"Arunima's Motherland" shows a typically Assamese household with a kitchen, flower garden and Assamese food cooked with great care by the women of the house. The landscape of the hills is celebrated in "Ayengla of the Blue Hills". In the story, "The Girl with Long Hair", the tribal custom of a girl having to marry the man who happens to touch her is alluded to. Names of the characters (Arunima, Zumgmila, Alari), food items and drinks (*zuma*), articles of clothing (*dokhana*), kinship terms (*mami, bou, khuri*), names of places (*botabari chowk*), ceremonies (*ghargochoka*) gods and goddesses, beliefs like the belief in spirits and witches, in the afterlife, and a number of songs (e.g. *names*) locate the stories in the cultural landscape of the North-East. The centrality of western culture is thus undercut by the inscription of the local modes. The patriarchal structure of these societies is borne out by the fact that all the women, whether they are literate and employed or not, are alike victims of different kinds of oppression. Women are associated not with the outer world but with the inner space — the home — which is destroyed by the violence of militancy: "They had helped Mainao set up home. Those evil men had destroyed it within one year. Only a woman understood how much effort it took to set up a home, and now in front of their eyes the beautiful house had disappeared" ("The Cursed Fields of Golden Rice" p.116). It was the 'jungle party' that destroyed the house ("The Cursed Fields of Golden Rice" p. 113). After Mainao left for Delhi where her husband had found work, her house was taken over by the outlaws who finished off everything there was in the house. They kept abducted people in the house till they were driven out by the military, but by then there was no trace of the beautiful house that Mainao had set up.

Insurgency and the common people's miseries resulting from it is a theme that Patangia Kalita keeps returning to in her works. "Two Days from a Phantom's Diary," a story included in *The Musk and Other Stories* (2017) deals with the predicament of individuals suffering untold hardships owing to extortion and exorbitant demands for money by the militant organizations which target the passengers of the buses, as also people making both ends meet with great difficulty. People refusing to pay would be gunned down mercilessly. On the other hand, people paying the terrorists like Chandan Saikia would also be in danger of getting arrested for helping the insurgents. There is mention of residents having to keep a vigil in certain strategic spots like bridges; they are treated by the military as "bonded slaves" (21) who could be slapped and subjected to other abuses by military men. "A Precarious Link" is another story that deals with the miseries of a fruit vendor named Manohar who faces serious economic hardships as the fruits he wants to sell are spoilt due to disturbances related to insurgency and counter-insurgency operations. There are references to bandhs, killings of army men as well as the extremists, bomb explosions, and the difficulties faced by a family in getting medical help following disturbances that turned a "sweet, fresh, fragrant and colorful"(58) town into something "totally putrid"(58) and into a "valley of death,"(64) with the well-to-do escaping to trouble-free places.

The Loneliness of hira barua (2020) is another collection of stories by Arupa Patangia Kalita. Some of the stories here deal with insurgency. The story "The House of Nibha-bou" for instance, narrates what befalls an otherwise happy household because one family member happened to join an insurgent outfit. Much of the story deals with the description of the life of a household centred on Nibha bou, who enters the household as a bride, gives birth to two children, and wins everybody's admiration because of her skills in running the household with meticulous care. Nibha bou's qualities are traced back to her childhood – even as a child, she had exhibited great acumen

in the orderly arrangement of things and in taking charge of the family matters in case of a mishap like her mother's ill-health.

The family's life moved on at the usual pace. The only thing that was disturbing was Nibha's brother-in-law Bijit's joining the ULFA when he was sent to study at the university. He used to visit the family after his joining under cover of darkness. Dressed in fatigues and carrying a haversack with a heavy gun, he had become unrecognizable even to his family. There was a rumour that he had become a dreaded militant leader involved in a few killings and was carrying a huge price on his head. His visits stopped after some time and the family members moved ahead with their lives. Nobody could imagine in their wildest of dreams that Bijit's being in the ULFA would one day spell disasters for the family though they were used to being visited by the security personnel now and then looking for the outlawed.

All of a sudden, on a certain day the family was surprised to see a group of men getting down from two vehicles in front of their house and asking them how much money their outlawed son had hidden in the house. They were asked to hand over the money immediately. When they said that they had no money, the men themselves set about the task of searching every nook and corner —dismantling things and turning the house upside down. The family sits in a corner, terrified and pained by the way their cherished objects were thrown asunder by the unfeeling strangers. The house wore a picture of devastation when the men left. Nibhabou's father-in-law was in danger of suffering a collapse under the strain and his son had to go out in search of a doctor.

The story "Scream" is a different kind of narrative where the hill functions as a symbol that obstructs the light that metaphorically represents goodness, happiness, kindness, and other positive sentiments: "Who doesn't want the warm rays of the sun? But the cruel hillock shuts it out and casts a shadow over all" (100). The hill is different in different sections of the story. In the first section of the story, it is the heap of newspapers carrying the news of massacres, bomb blasts, dowry deaths, floods, bandhs, and rape. The narrator says that newspapers, TV, and the radio conspire to build up the hill in front of him and he desperately looks for sunlight. Sometimes, the hill takes the form of extortion threats, of young men swooping down and misbehaving with girls out on a picnic with their professor, or of unfeeling men felling trees to construct buildings. The last snapshot is of the people of a village observing a fast every *uruka* because on that day the terrorists swooped down on the village and killed innocent people preparing to have the customary feast on *uruka* night in the month of Magh after a good harvest. While the rest of Assam celebrates, the people of that particular village fast in memory of those killed: "their resentment, their grief, slowly create a dark hill. An angry hill bereft of water, lacking a cool shade under which to rest" (116).

In "The Half-Burnt Bus at Midnight", a half-burnt bus is being dragged to a garage by a truck — "this terrible bus, destroying everything on its way" (127) becomes the symbol of the destruction that terrorism unleashes. The bus full of passengers had entered an area where a bandh was in force, which resulted in the supporters of the bandh setting it ablaze and killing everybody inside.

The short stories in the three collections *Written in Tears*, *The Musk and other Stories* and *The Loneliness of hira barua* look back on a tumultuous phase in the history of the North- East India and record the myriad ways in which agitation and militancy affected everyday life and the coping mechanisms adopted by the people. Many works coming from the postcolonial world, commemorate the strengths of women—their participation in movements for national independence and other causes. But “Written in Tears”, the collection which has the largest number of stories centred on women, focuses largely on the victimhood of women; women are sufferers not only when they keep to the boundaries set for them, but also when they are bold and speak their minds out as in the case of Surabhi Baruah. It emerges that while chalking out programmes of action for various causes, the fallout on different sections of people, especially women and other subalterns, is not considered that resulting in tragic consequences in their lives. Patangia Kalita’s language is lucid and sometimes poetic in its use of images, metaphors, and symbols as the image of the hill in “Scream” which has symbolic significance. Patangia Kalita does not experiment much with style confining herself to the social realist, omniscient narrator mode combining it with descriptive felicity and an eye for detail, but occasionally, in stories like “Scream” and “A Precarious Link” there are some attempts at narrative innovation and the use of the anecdotal, fragmentary, and snapshot mode. The stories are, on the whole, stories of dispossession, economic hardship, forced migration from one place to another, segregation and isolation, destruction of family relationships, loneliness and unforgettable violence to the body and mind especially of the womenfolk. Inscribing human agony in words can be seen as the writer’s attempt to raise voice against brutality in the name of different causes. LaCapra and Cathy Caruth, in their studies of traumatic experience, offer valuable frameworks for analyzing such experience in different parts of the world in different periods of history, while the importance of integrating such analysis with the peculiarities of the local context shall always remain. Third world experience can offer valuable insights to studies of history, memory and trauma.

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¹See Bedabrat Bora’s interview with ArupaPatangiaKalita, June 10,2017.youtube.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FitY1cOw_fm>

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