

The Insane Women- A “trauma” Reading of *Felanee*

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Abstract:

This paper attempts an analysis of the elements of trauma in Felanee by Arupa Patangia Kalita. It examines how the origin, identity and development of certain characters of the novel are defined and determined by trauma. Though trauma cannot be called the central subject of Felanee, it does have significant impact over the story and the formulation of certain characters –mostly women. The so called insane women of our societies often are victims of silenced history of violence and trauma. This is what happens with the ‘insane’ women of Felanee. This paper looks into the root of those traumatic experiences and their subsequent expressions in the characters of the novel. This paper puts special emphasis on the aspect of post traumatic stress disorder in developing the discussion.

Keywords : *violence, conflict, identity, relationship, trauma, post traumatic stress disorder*

Dr. Arupa Patangia Kalita, writer of the Assamese novel *Felanee* is known for her incantatory narrative skills, gritty social realism and sensitive portrayal of human psyche. The story of *Felanee* revolves around two agitations that the state of Assam has gone through and been presented as experienced by Felanee, the mixed-race girl whose parents were killed in one ethnic conflagration. *Felanee* hits home the reality of violence, and excels in its portrayals of women and men from the bottom of the volatile vicinity. The novel is considered to be a bold and bare portrayal of the fragile *history of the state* which saw several movements and rebellions, sometimes running parallel to each other as ethnic groups either increasingly claimed nationhood within or outside the political borders of the Indian state or fought for the deportation of illegal immigrants..

The novel is entitled after the protagonist whose name literally translates as ‘thrown away’ or ‘discarded’. Felanee and her fellow characters stand for the people of the periphery. All the characters of the novel belong to the periphery of the society, not to the poll-centred centrality of the conventional socio-cultural framework. While going through the novel, readers do not know much about the caste, race or religion of them. Even in case of Felanee too, the bio-physical details reveal that Felanee cannot be confined to a particular racio-religious identity. The novelist does not think it necessary to inform the readers much about the racial or ethnic origin of Jonar Maa (mother of Jon), Minati, Kali Budhi, Naveen, Ful or Jagu. Readers find them just as human beings, victims of the socio-political conflicts borne out of the progressive and nationalistic mass movements, as projected by the respective movement leaders.

Critics describe *Felanee* as a naked narrative of the unimaginable sufferings of the underprivileged communities of the Assamese society which was the byproduct of the separatist or ethnic movements that had devastated the socio-economic fabric of the state. These sufferings range from the very physical to the very intense psycho-social ones, women being the major victims. Dr.Kalita has been considered as a commanding craftsman who has a good hold over exposing the female psyche. Here too, she is found to be exposing what is absent rather than what is present, reflecting concern with the silencing and marginalisation of women in a delicate phase of the time and history. In this process, reading of trauma offers a new dimension. *Felanee* is a tale of struggle for survival. In this journey,

most of the characters have gone through numerous traumatic experiences in different forms and intensity. Thus it constitutes a major pillar in the formation and development of the story as well as of the characters of the novel.

Violence and trauma are integrally interrelated concepts. Violence is basically characterised by two dimensions-physical and psychological. Physical violence works on body while psychological violence works on the soul. But it is also true that, though distinctions have been made for the sake of study, both physical and psychological violence are interrelated. Rather they are complimentary to each other, one leads to the emergence of the other. As Galtung said, "The borderline between physical and psychological violence is not very clear, since it is possible to influence physical movements by means of psychological techniques, and vice versa: physical constraints certainly have mental implications". (1969:175). Study of trauma should encompass both the physical/visible and psychological/ mostly latent manifestations. The emerging aspect of human rights principles into conflict resolution process also intensifies the need to look into the studies of physical violence and consequent traumatic disorder.

The defining characteristic of a traumatic event is its capacity to provoke fear, helplessness, or horror in response to the threat of injury or death. People who are exposed to such events are at increased risk for Post traumatic stress disorder as well as for major depression, panic disorder, generalized anxiety disorder, and substance abuse, as compared with those who have not experienced traumatic events (Halsall, 2017: 2). They may also have somatic symptoms and physical illness, particularly hypertension, asthma, and chronic pain syndromes. Medical science proves that events that give rise to traumatic stress disorder typically involve interpersonal violence (eg, rape, assault, and torture) or exposure to life-threatening incidents or violent action (fires, earthquakes). Traumatic disorder occurs in people who have witnessed a brutal injury or the unnatural death of another person and those who have learned that a near and dear one was involved in such an event, provided there is sufficient associated terror or shock (Yehuda, 2002:109). In short, post traumatic stress disorder refers to that condition where a person develops symptoms of physical or mental disorder, or both as a consequence of some traumatic experiences. The diagnostic and statistical manual of Mental Disorder (DSM-III) defines post traumatic disorder as the "development of symptoms which involve re-experiencing the traumatic event "numbing of responsiveness to, or reduced involvement with, the external world; and a variety of automatic, dysphonic, or cognitive symptoms" (1980).

In *Felanee*, the novelist portrays a moving picture of traumatized characters borne out of physical, psychological and structural violence. Felanee, the central character of the novel, is a perfect example of post traumatic stress disorder. Felanee was an eye witness to the burning of her own house and how two of her neighbours were burnt alive. Her husband went missing on that night who was assumed to be killed. Felanee along with her son Moni had to hide herself in a pond and witnessed how her home and the entire village were burnt into ashes. The surroundings were filled with fire, sounds of gunfire, screaming of dying people. Even on her way to the station, Felanee came through numerous instances of bloodshed, murder and assaults. These intensely violent experiences made Felanee a traumatized soul. Throughout her days in the relief camp, Felanee used to visualise those vicious scenes. She couldn't sleep nor could she sit tranquilly. Everytime Felanee dreamt of a burning man running alive, the half burnt body of a baby or the burnt houses. Moreover, she started developing the symptoms of insomnia. She could hardly have a sound sleep.

"Jimanei tair sakuhal jap khai pare, shimanei tai chabibor besi spastakoi dekhilaloi arambha kare...kuhiyaranir patal andharar majat bharit lagi sitiki para afal kesuar komal deh...praye Moniye

taik jokari jokari uthai diye- 'Ma,ma oi'tai hahisa kia?ma,anekoi kandisa kia?ma siyarisa kia? Tai koba noare.Moniye gam pay,makak sakei adhapagali buli koboloi loise'(Kalita ,2002:42).

(Though she tries to close her eyes, those scenes appear more and more visibly before her eyes...she remembers the dead body of the baby lying amidst the sugarcane plantation...Moni often wakes her up and asks, "Mummy, why are you laughing? Why are you crying? Why are you shouting this way? Moni is already aware of the fact that his mother has been considered as a mad woman by others").

Felanee started behaving unusually due to the shock she had gone through. Within that traumatic phase, she also gave birth to a dead child. It increased the degree of possession by the traumatic events or images which got expressed in repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, unusual behaviours or thoughts. Experiencing or learning about traumatic event challenges a person's sense of safety, leading to feelings of vulnerability or powerlessness. When it gets imprinted on one's memory, the person recounts those events and eventually develops the symptoms of physical and behavioural disorder. Losing her husband, baby and her own house, Felanee too suffered from sheer lack of safety and loss of power. The horrific scenes were so deeply rooted in her unconscious mind that getting rid of their clutch became impossible for the lady.

Readers can easily relate the dreams of Felanee to her insecurity .She often dreams of a baby crying alone, heaps of ashes, dead bodies of chicks, dry banana leaves – signifiers of her loss, insecurity, sufferings, pain and joylessness. It stands for all the symptoms of the post traumatic stress disorder as the mind revokes the emotions associated with the trauma and the sensations such as touch ,taste ,sound ,smell all of which can present as nightmares or dreams or flash backs (Halsall, 2017: 2). In the first few chapters, Felanee appears to be a mystical character, mostly in a hallucinated stage who often fails to connect with the reality .It resulted in her loss of the human capacity to connect with her surroundings .Therefore she couldn't adjust herself to the situation of the relief camp though Moni, her son , could adjust himself with the new surroundings. Felanee was an innocent woman, nurtured and guided under the love and care of her husband. The sudden absence of that guiding force was an unexpected shock which was heavy to be accepted by Felanee. Besides, Felanee experienced the death of her familiar ones in front of her own eyes. These loss and pain led her to a state where she started having nightmares and flashbacks which are particularly vivid moment and memories while she is awake and make her feel and act as if the event is recurring. "Traumatic memories lack verbal narrative and context; rather they are encoded in the form of vivid sensations and images which evoke the frozen nature of such memories"(Costello ;2018: 35) .

Traumatic neurosis is marked by the 'compulsion to repeat' the memory of the painful event with the hopes of mastering the unpleasant feelings .The emphasis on narrative recall for normal integration of memory and the general idea of memory as a storehouse of experience are important points for the literary-critical conceptualization of trauma.(Juda;1983-354-356) .Medical Science states that traumatized person has difficulty falling or staying asleep and has developed exaggerated startle reactions in response to sounds or movements associated with the incident. This was something happened with Felanee.Whenver she heard the word "attack",Felanee started behaving abnormally and reacted to the word in a dreadful way. The traumatic memories reminded her of that horrible night in the railway platform where she used to stay after her house was burnt alive. She was already in a state of panic by losing everything. Then suddenly she heard the word "attack" and saw large number of houses burnt away. That word, hence, stuck on her mind like a symbol of loss, violence, insecurity , fear and helplessness. Later on, when Naveen used the same word to refer to the murder of the Marwari shopkeeper, Felanee again experienced that somatic horror. It was such an appalling experience that Felanee could not even utter a single word. Trauma thus often leads to the gradual

inability to normal reaction. Minati, the victim of sexual abuse too developed this inability and there are certain instances where readers experience her failure to respond rationally to situations, sounds or behaviours identical to her previous world .She could not even protest when the same man exploited her for the second time.

Sumola , another character of *Felanee* too suffers from post traumatic stress disorder .After witnessing the brutal killing of her elder brother in her own house ,Sumola changed into a silent ,insane ,traumatised entity .Her elder brother was brutally lynched and killed when he was attending a religious function in her home. Since that day, Sumola stops conversation, cooking, eating and taking care of her baby boy. It was like a ‘freezing on the spot’ impact on her leading to a state of acute numbness. Like Felanee, she also turns out to be a ‘*pagoli*’ –for the neighbours and the other villagers. Sumola bears all the symptoms of the state of constriction- numbing, withdrawal ,indifference, acute passivity or surrender. Traumatic events “call into question basic human relationship. They breach the attachments of family ,friendship ,love and community .They shatter the construction of the self that is formed and sustained in relations to others .They undermine the belief systems that give meaning to human experience”(2015:45). For her, the stressor is a deliberately caused disaster – the killing of her brother by a group of young men .But the result of this physical violence turned out to be psychological one –Sumola withdrew herself from her surroundings and developed a sense of avoidance along with sudden aggressive –impulsive behaviour.

The character of Kali Budhi offers another dimension how trauma is internalized and expressed differently in the individual level. It echoes the Cathy Caruth statement where she talked about a structure of experience or reception of trauma. It may vary from individual to individual. Unlike Sumola or Felanee, Kali Budhi reacts to her traumatic experiences in a different manner for which the novelist brilliantly introduces the mythical character of Kali – one of the rare unconventional and rebellious images of women deities of the world. Kali Budhi was the victim of sexual exploitation by two different persons who left her alone during her pregnancy when she was only seventeen years old. When Felanee met Kali Budhi ,she was an old women of fragile frame but commanding voice .At certain moments ,Budhi behaves as possessed by Goddess Kali and acts in a supernatural manner .It can easily be assumed that this mystical incarnation is nothing but her self-created mechanism of security as she was a beautiful women of strong sensual appeal (2002:140-141) .All her traumatised memories get expressed in her possessed moments where she behaves like a deity with superhuman capacity .It was also used as a carefully crafted shield of sexual and psychological safety of a tender soul who had to bear the intensity of sexual trauma at the very initial stage of her life. Her identity of displaced, homeless women too compelled her to take refuge in Kali, as the authoritative influence of Kali is hard to be denied by common men. Caruth’s formulation that what follows trauma is not simply an effect of destruction but also an enigma of survival is best reflected through the exploration of the character of Kali Budhi.

Felanee does not belong to the specific genre of a ‘trauma novel’- a kind of novel where both subject and method are adopted to develop trauma as the central concern. But certain significant portions of the story and their consequent impact over the formulation and development of the characters like Felanee, Sumola ,Kali Budhi or Minati does demand a ‘trauma’ reading of this novel. Significant features of these so called ‘insane women’ are defined and determined by Trauma. In a wider perspective, such reading can also be used to illustrate how violence and trauma engender a new trajectory in the field of fictional production by Assamese writers.

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