

Exploring Women's Resistance to Adversities amidst Insurgency in Assam in Arupa Patangia Kalita's short story *The Girl with Long Hair* and Mitra Phukan's novel *The Collector's Wife*

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Abstract

This research paper examines the adversities faced by women amidst the tumultuous period of insurgency in Assam and their resistance to it. While insurgency affected all people living in the state of Assam, irrespective of age, class, caste and gender, its devastating clutches gripped women worse than others. Women were the ones who had to bear the brunt of the oppressive structures of a patriarchal society while navigating their way through the overarching political turmoil in the state. However, as the chronicles of the time bear witness, women have showed determined resilience during such trying times and have resisted any kind of suppression, discrimination and oppression by bravely standing up for themselves. Women, over time and space, have been fighting for and trying to break free from the shackles of patriarchy. Assamese women, too, have been a part of this struggle, especially during the challenging period of insurgency, yet, they did not lose hope. Rather time and again, women have asserted their autonomy and agency by showing unflinching resilience and immense resistance to such oppressive forms of discrimination against them. This paper explores the experiences of women amidst the backdrop of insurgency in Assam through Arupa Patangia Kalita's short story *The Girl with Long Hair* and Mitra Phukan's novel *The Collector's Wife*. The paper also analyses how Kalita and Phukan present stories of women's resilience amidst adversities faced by them through their works, and provide a critique of the oppression of women by the patriarchal setup of the society as well as insurgency.

Keywords: insurgency, patriarchy, gender discrimination, intersectionality, resilience, resistance

Introduction

Stories of resilience and resistance against unjust practices and oppression abound in literature throughout time and space. Almost every society deals with some form of injustice and discrimination meted out against certain groups of people. Writers find a medium through literature to voice their concerns over such issues of injustice and to subtly critique these forces of oppression. Their works often highlight issues of subjugation, exploitation and sufferings of people such as colonial domination, racism, gender discrimination, marginalisation of certain minority groups of people, horrors of partition, untouchability,

etc. Assam, a North-eastern state of India, suffers from the grave issue of insurgency which started around 1980s with several groups of people fighting for greater political autonomy. Insurgency led to several protests and armed rebellion in the state. There was complete political chaos. At such a challenging time, women were the worst affected as they were already burdened by the oppressive structures and discriminatory norms of a patriarchal society. And now their condition grew even more grave and complicated as they found themselves amidst immense political turmoil.

Writers from Assam like Arupa Patangia Kalita and Mitra Phukan have penned down several poignant narratives of women's struggle, strategies of survival, resilience to withstand adversity and powerful resistance to oppression and exploitation against all odds, thereby, highlighting and critiquing the trauma faced by the women living in Assam due to the socio-political chaos caused by insurgency. Arupa Patangia Kalita and Mitra Phukan are two eminent writers from Assam highly acclaimed for their works. Their stories often deal with the plight of women highlighting their pain and sufferings. Their works have a feminist approach challenging the male-dominated approach to narrate the experiences of women.

Arupa Patangia Kalita's short story *The Girl with Long Hair* is from her collection of stories called *Written in Tears* which was published in 2015. It is a heart wrenching story of a young, innocent and cheerful girl named Mainao who finds herself trapped in the flames of insurgency. Her story shows how many innocent and lively girls lost their happiness and how their dreams were shattered by the diktats of the society imposed by the agitating men during insurgency. It also shows Mainao's resilience and brave resistance against the unjust proceedings against her by the elders of her community.

Mitra Phukan's novel *The Collector's Wife* was published in 2005 and it is also a story of unflinching resilience in the face of adversity to assert one's own agency and take control of their own life. Its protagonist, Rukmini, suffers from more of internal struggles than external pain, however, situations become extremely complicated when she finds her private life intertwining with the larger political issues. Her loneliness, and unhappiness of being in a loveless marriage gets veiled under the guise of her life being perceived as full of privileges and highly comfortable by the onlookers. Phukan, explores this complex intermingling of Rukmini's emotional and psychological trauma against the backdrop of insurgency highlighting how it affects Rukmini and what changes it brings in her in order to navigate her way out of this perpetual state of emotional suffering burdened by the expectations of being a "perfect wife" in a patriarchal society.

Literature Review

There are several scholarly works examining the impact of insurgency on women and how they respond to these challenging issues. For instance, Reena P. George, Dr. A. Amaladoss and Dr. Shabih Abbas Jafri's article titled "Impact of Insurgency on Women in Mitra Phukan's Novel: The Collector's Wife" (2024) explores how women are the worst affected during insurgency as compared to men. It analyses how women suffer emotionally and psychologically and are victims of patriarchal oppression even during insurgency, such as, how Rukmini's childlessness is a constant source of emotional trauma for her.

Moreover, Om Prakash Pokhrel, in his research paper titled "Theorizing Fearism: A Critical Study on Arupa Patangia Kalita's Short Stories Written in Tears" (2023), analyses Kalita's *The Girl with Long Hair* with the help of theoretical perspective of the philosophy of "Fearism" propounded by Desh Subba. He explores how fear grips Mainao, drastically influencing her decisions, as she increasingly becomes aware of the socio-political environment around her. He writes how Mainao, who was excited to attend the Durga Puja festivities, is now in a dilemma to attend the festivities or follow the diktat of the society, thereby,

highlighting how insurgency and its socio-political implications give birth to intense fear in the minds of people, especially women, hampering their daily choices and activities of life.

Moreover, Manashi Bora in her article titled “History, Memory and Trauma in Selected Works of Arupa Patangia Kalita” (2022), writes about the grave punishment Mainao is subjected to by the elders of her community as a result of defying the diktat imposed by the men involved in the protests, while also referring to several other works by Arupa Patangia Kalita in her article. She explores the trauma women experience and the consequences of socio-political unrest in their daily lives.

The aforementioned scholarly works, thus, throw light on how the discriminatory practices of a patriarchal society deteriorates a women’s well-being and lowers their self-esteem by means of public humiliation. Even in times of socio-political conflicts, the society does not spare women, but rather, makes them the target of violence and oppression.

Textual Analysis

Arupa Patangia Kalita’s short story *The Girl with Long Hair* is a narrative showing the struggle of women living in a patriarchal society against the backdrop of insurgency in Assam. Its protagonist, Mainao, is described by Kalita as being a happy, cheerful girl who enjoys doing the household chores likes sweeping and weaving. She is extremely proud of her beautiful and long silky hair. Her long hair is a symbol of femininity which, as the story progresses, is snipped off by the oppressive forces, thereby, symbolically crushing down Mainao’s agency and autonomy as an independent woman. Just like many other girls of her age, she romanticizes being with a young handsome man who courts her while she imagines herself as mimicking a beautiful heroine with long hair. Kalita writes, “The image of the young man is vague... Sometimes he seems to look like the son of the headmaster of her father’s school”. (Kalita, 2015, pp.182) However, little does she know, her dreams are going to be crushed by the unjust practices of patriarchy when she finds herself engulfed in the flames of insurgency.

The processions and “andolans” were a thing which Mainao, in her innocence, thought of being as something which will not affect her. However, when the diktat is passed by the agitating men that women of her community can only wear “dokhanas” and that the people of her community cannot take part in the Hindu puja celebration, she finally feels the sparks of insurgency reaching up to her too to affect her life. She was extremely excited to wear a churidar and attend the Durga Puja with her friends Binuma, Champa and Reema. However, she remembers the consequences of defying the instructions laid down by the men for the women of her community. Her father’s sister had once dared to wear salwar-kameez to college as the dokhana was not so comfortable while cycling to reach to the college. She was, thus, met with public humiliation as the men cut down her clothes for daring to defy their orders. Mainao’s heart, thus, filled with terror upon even thinking to defy the diktat.

However, she gives in to her desire of dressing up and attending the Durga Puja tempted by her friends’ idea that they would hide her among themselves and take her to enjoy the festivities. Yet, Mainao’s defiance invited immense pain and humiliation for her. As a result of her defiance, she had been tagged as a criminal by the protesters and one of their leaders ordered that her hair be cut off as a punishment for her disobedience to their instructions. An arrogant boy, thus, arrives with scissors to snip off her hair in front of everyone. Nobody stops him, everyone becomes silent watchers of injustice, including her parents as they also believe that it is their innocent daughter who has committed a grave mistake by defying the diktat. However, Mainao, refuses to be a silent victim. She struggles and tries to resist her hair from being cut. Yet, in the scuffle between the two, her clothes come off. And as Kalita writes, “Now another crime

had been added to Mainao's original sin. Her virgin body had been touched by a man in public view." (Kalita, 2015, pp.188)

Mainao, hence, was subjected to another punishment as she was ordered to marry the boy who was the persecutor of her dignity and self-esteem. Mainao's world, hence, crumbled down by just an innocent action of attending the Durga Puja. Within a span of one day, her entire world turned upside-down, all her dreams and desires meant nothing to anyone, not even to her anymore as it all had been crushed down by the oppressive forces of the society she was living in. Yet, Mainao, still subtly shows her resilience to resist the injustices she is subjected to. She resists the oppressive norms of the society by refusing to kneel down to seek the blessings of her elders. After all, those blessings, of course, did not mean anything to her anymore, as her voice had been silenced and her dignity stripped off in front of all those elders who did nothing to protect her despite witnessing the ordeals she had been put through. What can ever bring her happiness and lively nature back as her autonomy and agency was restricted by the men around her. Yet, she stood there still, symbolically resisting to bow down and accept her predicament, thereby, showing her resilience in grave adversity.

Likewise, Mitra Phukan's *The Collector's Wife*, is a powerful narrative showing how women are affected emotionally and psychologically as they are constantly being crushed under the weight of expectations of a patriarchal society. Rukmini, who is married for almost a decade, is childless and this childlessness is more of a concern to others around her rather than to herself. She is constantly being labelled as a "barren woman" by people around her, pushing her to the fringes of feeling inferior. Even her mother-in-law, though supportive by nature, too keeps on nagging her by asking about having a child. Though, Rukmini, too desires to have a baby, it is more of external pressure by the society she lives in rather than an intrinsic desire.

However, what everyone fails to notice is that Rukmini is stuck in a loveless marriage and the growing distance between her and her husband, Siddharth Bezbaruah, leads her into a state of immense loneliness and sense of alienation. Everyone around her assumes she is living a comfortable and privileged life being the wife of the District Commissioner. Yet, it was far from being true. Moreover, she lives in Parbatpuri, a fictitious town in Assam, which is wrapped in the clutches of insurgency. Every now and then, there are news of protests, kidnappings, extortions and killings. And, in the absence of any kind of genuine companionship, Rukmini finds it hard to voice her concerns and discuss her feelings with anyone.

As the story progresses, Rukmini's outlook in life changes. Her friendship with Manoj Mahanta, who works at the CTF tyre company, helps her in coming out of her self-made cage of being submissive and always a subordinate of her husband. He encourages her to learn typewriting. Rukmini finally finds a companion with whom she feels free. She leads a monotonous dull life teaching English literature to a bunch of disinterested college students at a local college in her area. She, thus, learns typewriting to fill her empty time with something meaningful. Yet, situations become complicated when she gets pregnant with Manoj's child. At the same time, another shocking revelation dawns upon her that her husband has been having an extramarital affair with one of her colleagues, Priyam.

Rukmini's world falls apart. Yet, she refuses to be a victim of her life circumstances and, rather decides to take control of her life. She declares to her husband that she will give birth to Manoj's child even if it meant risking her marriage. She was determined to stay resilient and asserts her autonomy, thereby, breaking free from the oppressive shackles of patriarchy and the expectation of being a "dutiful wife". She was well-educated and independent enough to make such critical decisions about her own life. She was also inspired by Nandini Deuri, the wife of Hrishikesh Deuri - the Superintendent of Police at Parbatpuri

who was shot dead by the insurgents. Nandini, after her husband's death, had decided to pursue her dreams and opened a bakery shop, rather than being a helpless widow who lived the rest of her life labelled as a victim of the violence of insurgency. Rukmini, thus, makes independent decisions and takes a stand for herself. Her resilience and resistance to oppression and emotional turmoil against all odds stands out. She does not give up in the adverse situations too and takes full control of her life rather than being a silent victim.

Mainao and Rukmini, thus, face forms of oppression, both physical and emotional oppression, in a conflict-ridden patriarchal society. Their sufferings are accentuated by the fact that they are of a certain gender and belong to certain class or community. For instance, Mainao's predicament is worse as she is a woman belonging to a community who is instructed not to attend the Durga Puja. However, other girls of her age were allowed to enjoy the festivities as they were of a different community. Likewise, Rukmini's emotional turmoil is heightened by the fact that she is a childless woman in her thirties. And, her loneliness and sufferings often are neglected or dismissed by people around her assuming she belongs to the bureaucratic class and possibly is living a privileged life devoid of any hardships which the common people face. This intersectionality of gender, community and class, heightens their torment and gravely affects them. The term "intersectionality" was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw to describe how a person's different social categories like gender, class, caste, race etc intermingle to create unique experiences for individuals. This analytical framework of "intersectionality" can be applied to Kalita's *The Girl with Long Hair* and Phukan's *The Collector's Wife* to understand how different aspects of the characters' identity such as gender and class in the narrative interact to make their situation worse and puts them in a more disadvantaged situation.

Conclusion

Thus, Arupa Patangia Kalita's *The Girl with Long Hair* and Mitra Phukan's *The Collector's Wife*, present strong and resilient independent women characters. Their stories inspire all those women who are oppressed and exploited by the patriarchal norms to fight for themselves. Women's sufferings are heightened by the overarching socio-political conflicts of their time and age, yet, Kalita and Phukan show through their narratives that freedom lies in constant resistance with determined resilience and refusal to accept to be mere victims. Hence, Kalita and Phukan strive to redefine women's social and economic position in society in their works with a pervasive underlying theme of bringing in a social change for the development of all. Kalita and Phukan present dauntless women who speak up for themselves when they are subjugated under male dominance or any other external force which curtails their freedom. Both the writers provide vivid descriptions of the beautiful landscape of Assam and, at the same time, also aware their readers about the social issues embroiling in the state. They, therefore, write their stories bearing close semblance with reality with an aim to subtly critique the society's injustices against several marginalised communities and women. Though Kalita's short story *The Girl with Long Hair* and Phukan's novel *The Collector's Wife* the readers are made aware of the grave issue of insurgency and discrimination based on gender which permeates in Assamese society and culture. They explore these critical themes with the issue of insurgency as the backdrop of their texts, thereby, skilfully integrating history and socio-political issues in the state, as well as its impact on the lives and personal experiences of the common people affected by it. Their stories end with an inspiration for women across time and spaces to fight for their rights and reclaim their agency whenever it is challenged by oppression or domination of any kind.

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