

Research Article

Mapping Ethnic Conflict and the Fluidity of Indigenous Identity in Arupa Patangia Kalita's *The Story of Felanee*

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Abstract: Questions of indigeneity, identity, and ethnic conflict are essential to the socio-political history of Northeast India, where cultural plurality often overlaps with disputes regarding land, language, and cultural identity. Arupa Patangia Kalita's *The Story of Felanee* (2011) provides a compelling literary depiction of this turmoil through the experiences of a woman born amidst the violent upheavals of the Assamese language movement. The paper explores how Kalita's novel presents ethnic identity as unstable, layered, and shaped by historical realities rather than a static cultural core. This research study utilises theoretical perspectives from Stuart Hall, Frantz Fanon, and other postcolonial theorists to analyse how insider-outsider discourse, linguistic politics, and cultural symbols delineate and regulate ethnic boundaries in Assam. The research illustrates through meticulous textual analysis that Felanee's mixed heritage—Assamese, Bodo, and Bengali—subverts the concept of racial purity that drives political unrest. The narrative illustrates the human toll of ethnic mobilisation through displacement, dehumanisation, and disrupted communal relations. Simultaneously, Kalita's work provides a profound humanistic critique of exclusionary nationalism by highlighting common human connections that transcend rigid ethnic divisions. The present study locates the text in the context of the Assam Movement. It demonstrates how literature serves as a valuable tool for understanding the lived experiences underlying identity-based conflicts in Northeast India.

Keywords: Indigeneity, Ethnic Conflict, Assam Movement, Identity Politics, Northeast India

Introduction

The subject of identity has long been integral to the social and political life of Northeast India. Unlike many other regions of the country where a more or less similar culture promotes a sense of belonging, the Northeast is home to numerous diverse ethnic communities with their own languages, traditions, and history. This diversity has given the region a distinct cultural identity, but it has also posed challenges related to migration, land, political rights, and cultural survival. In Assam, the problems are typically linked to the question of who owns the land. Colonial policies, migration, and linguistic changes throughout time increasingly led to anxieties among many indigenous populations of losing their cultural identity and political authority. Thus, identity increasingly became an important political issue in the region. These anxieties about language, land, and demographic shifts fuelled movements like the Assam Language Movement of 1960 and the Assam Movement. However, these initiatives were intended to protect Assamese identity and culture, but they also sparked conflicts between communities. Bengali migrants and other non-Assamese communities were typically considered outsiders, even if they had resided in Assam for centuries. Identity politics gradually began to influence everyday social relations, fostering an atmosphere of suspicion and exclusion. Against this socio-political backdrop, Arupa Patangia Kalita's *The Story of Felanee* (2011) comes into its own. Instead of concentrating on political developments, the story depicts the impact of ethnic conflict on ordinary people's everyday lives. The story is about a woman named Felanee, who has Assamese, Bodo, and Bengali blood. Her identity mirrors the composite cultural past of Assam itself. However, in a society that has become increasingly divided along rigid racial lines, this mixed identity is both a hardship and a challenge to the whole idea of ethnic purity. Kalita analyses how identity politics impacts human relationships, belonging, and survival through Felanee's experiences. The novel challenges fixed notions of ethnicity and reveals how political battles often fail to capture the complicated realities of experience. This study, therefore, investigates how *The Story of Felanee* represents identity and belonging in the socio-political history of Assam. It also examines how the novel questions notions of ethnic purity and reveals the real costs of ethnic violence. The study states that Kalita's depiction of identity is neither fixed nor pure but flexible, multifaceted, and influenced by history, relationships, and shared human experiences.

Literature review

The question of identity and belonging in Northeast India has been a subject of great academic interest across various disciplines, such as history, political science, and literary and cultural studies. Scholars of the region have consistently pointed out that identity movements in the Northeast cannot be understood as mere political conflicts but arise from complex historical experiences, influenced by colonial administration, migration, economic transformation, and cultural anxieties. Sanjoy Hazarika's work is particularly influential in understanding the region's socio-political dynamics. In *Strangers of the Mist*, Hazarika defines the northeast as a space where land, migration, and cultural identity are inextricably linked. He says that the region's political conflicts often arise from the intersection of identity, territory, and memory, and the complex

strife that results. This perspective shows that the conflicts in the Northeast are not only about struggles over power but also about historical memory and cultural legitimacy. Udayon Misra's analyses of Assamese nationalism examine how identity movements evolved from questions of cultural survival. The claim for Assamese identity, according to Misra, has to be understood against the backdrop of historical struggles over language, land, and demographic shift. He argues that many political movements in Assam were rooted in a sense of historical insecurity about the survival of the Assamese language, land, and culture. Usually, these initiatives were driven by the desire to safeguard indigenous cultural traditions, but at times they created new forms of exclusion. As a result, other communities living in the region are also affected by these identity politics.

In addition to the specific placing of Northeast India, wider theoretical discussions on identity offer substantial insights. These frameworks facilitate understanding of the themes examined in Kalita's novel. Stuart Hall's contributions are among the most significant in this domain. Hall contests the notion that identity is a stable or intrinsic category anchored in a static past. He contends that identity should be perceived as a continuous process influenced by historical events and cultural representations. He notably states, "identity is not as transparent or unproblematic as we think...it is 'production' which is never complete, always in process" (Hall 222). This viewpoint posits that identities are perpetually contested rather than being inherited in unadulterated or fixed forms.

Henri Tajfel's social identity theory offers a valuable basis for interpreting ethnic belonging. Tajfel defines social identity as that "Part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the emotional significance attached to that membership" (Tajfel 64). This approach allows us to understand the ardent attachment that communities have to collective identities and why perceived threats to those identities can lead to intense conflicts.

Benedict Anderson's notion of the nation as "imagined communities" is a crucial perspective on how identity politics operates. Anderson contends that nations are not inherent but social constructs. They are constructed from common narratives, symbols, and communal memories. These things foster a sense of connection among people who may never meet. According to Anderson, a nation is "an imagined political community – and imagined as inherently limited and sovereign" (Anderson). This theory contributes to understanding how political movements produce narratives of belonging. Such narratives generally emphasise unity within the community and exclude individuals who are deemed outsiders.

Postcolonial theorists have also emphasised the role of land and colonial history in shaping identity. Frantz Fanon, writing about the experiences of colonised societies, highlights the symbolic importance of land in defining cultural identity. According to Fanon, "for a colonized people the most essential value...is first and foremost the land, which must provide bread and dignity" (Fanon 9). In this sense, conflicts over land are inseparable from conflicts over identity and dignity.

The Subaltern Studies school deepens this discourse on identity by concentrating on marginalised voices. These scholars investigate communities whose experiences are frequently omitted from prevailing historical accounts. Ranajit Guha, in his *Selected Subaltern Studies*, contends that conventional histories often overlook the experiences of ordinary individuals whose lives are influenced by political upheaval, yet whose viewpoints remain unacknowledged. Likewise, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak questions whether the subaltern can genuinely articulate their voice within power institutions that suppress marginalised perspectives. These observations are especially pertinent in the context of ethnic conflicts because the perspectives of marginalized people are frequently eclipsed by political discourse.

Partha Chatterjee offers an additional perspective on this discourse. In *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (1993), he points out that nationalist movements often construct a cultural unity by advocating selective historical narratives. Consequently, they frequently overlook the internal diversity present within communities. Chatterjee elucidates that nationalist discourse tends to oversimplify intricate cultural histories to establish a cohesive political identity.

These theoretical perspectives demonstrate that identity is not a natural or unchanging category but rather a socially constructed phenomenon shaped by historical, cultural, and political processes. Nevertheless, these scholars have offered valuable insights into the broader dynamics of identity formation. However, there has been relatively little inquiry into how literary narratives from Northeast India challenge essentialist notions of ethnic belonging. *The Story of Felanee* (2011) by Arupa Patangia Kalita is particularly significant in the context of this outcry. The novel demonstrates the instability of fixed identity categories by featuring a protagonist whose ancestry transcends multiple ethnic boundaries. Kalita demonstrates the impact of identity politics on everyday life and the frequent disintegration of the concept of ethnic purity when it is confronted with the realities of human relationships, as seen in Felanee's experiences.

Research gap

While scholars like Sanjoy Hazarika, Udayon Misra, and Amalendu Guha have thoroughly investigated the historical origins of ethnic conflict, migration, and identity politics in Assam and the broader Northeast, most analyses focus on political history, demographic concerns, and socio-cultural movements. Similarly, theorists such as Stuart Hall, Benedict Anderson, Henri Tajfel, Ranajit Guha, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak have significantly contributed to the broader discussion of identity, nationalism, and marginality by showing that identity is socially constructed and shaped by power, representation, and historical development. However, comparatively little attention has been given to how literary texts from Northeast India engage with these complex questions at the level of lived human experience. Literary narratives often reveal the emotional and psychological realities hidden behind political debates, especially in societies affected by violence and exclusion. In particular, there remains limited critical work on how literature from the region challenges the rigid notions of ethnic belonging and exposes the instability of categories such as “insider” and “outsider”. It is within

this context that Arupa Patangia Kalita's *The Story of Felanee* (2011) becomes important. Through the life of Felanee, a woman whose ancestry crosses multiple ethnic boundaries, the novel questions essentialist ideas of identity and highlights the fragile, layered, and deeply human nature of belonging in a conflict-ridden society. This study therefore seeks to examine how Kalita's narrative represents identity, marginality and conflict, while also exploring how the novel challenges rigid political constructions of ethnic ethnicity in Northeast India.

Objectives of the study

This study seeks to analyse the representation of identity, belonging, and marginality in Arupa Patangia Kalita's *The Story of Felanee* (2011) within the socio-political framework of Northeast India. The character Felanee illustrates how the novel challenges strict notions of ethnic identity and exposes the emotional and social implications of identity politics in everyday life. This study aims to demonstrate how Kalita's novel challenges essentialist notions of belonging and portrays identity as intricate, multifaceted, and profoundly influenced by lived experience.

Identity and exclusion in *The Story of Felanee*

Arupa Patangia Kalita's *The Story of Felanee* (2011) presents a powerful portrayal of identity, marginalisation, and survival against the backdrop of ethnic violence in Assam. Through Felanee's life, Kalita explores how rigid ideas of ethnicity and belonging create fear, exclusion, and violence in society. The novel is not merely a story about one woman's suffering; rather, it becomes a representation of the larger socio-political tensions that shaped Assam during the language movements and ethnic agitations. Felanee's life reflects the condition of those communities that are constantly viewed as "outsiders" despite generations of coexistence.

From the very beginning, Felanee's identity is marked by instability. She belongs to multiple ethnic lineages – Assamese, Bodo, and Bengali – and therefore cannot be neatly categorised within rigid communal boundaries. Her mixed ancestry itself becomes symbolic of the cultural interconnectedness of Assam, a reality that is often ignored by extremist identity politics. The text explains that Felanee's grandmother, Ratnamala, was Assamese and married Kinaram, a Bodo, while her mother, Jutimala, married Khitish Ghosh, a Bengali sweet-shop owner. Through this lineage, Kalita demonstrates that identities are rarely pure or isolated. Instead, they are historically mixed and socially layered. This idea closely reflects Stuart Hall's understanding of cultural identity. Hall argues that identity is not fixed or natural but continuously shaped through history and representation. As Hall famously writes, "identity is not as transparent or unproblematic as we think...it is 'production' which is never complete, always in process" (Hall 68). Felanee's character embodies this process because her identity constantly shifts according to the political atmosphere around her. At different points in the novel, she is seen as Assamese, Bengali, or Bodo, depending on society's fears and prejudices. Kalita therefore challenges the essentialist belief that identity can exist in a pure and stable form.

The violence surrounding Felanee's birth immediately establishes the destructive consequences of ethnic politics. She was born during the language agitation of the 1960s, when anti-Bengali violence spread across Assam. Because her father, Khitish Ghosh, belonged to the Bengali community, the family became a target of mob violence. The novel vividly describes the horrifying scene when rioters attacked their village: "watched from a distance as people entered the small house and set fire to it. He saw Jutimala lying unconscious in the backyard...Suddenly, he heard a splash. Someone had thrown the newborn baby into the pond" (Kalita 9). The scene is deeply symbolic. Felanee survives only after being literally thrown away into water, which explains the meaning of her name – "the thrown away." Her life begins with displacement and rejection, making her existence itself a metaphor for marginalized communities in Assam.

Kalita further shows how fear transforms ordinary human relationships. During the agitation, Bengali cultural markers become dangerous signs of identity. Felanee's shell bangles, traditionally worn by Bengali married women, become objects of suspicion. Biren Baishya angrily warns her: "Why haven't you taken those off? They will be your undoing, I tell you!" (9). This moment illustrates how ethnic violence forces individuals to erase visible aspects of their cultural identity in order to survive. Identity here becomes not a source of pride but a matter of life and death. Henri Tajfel's Social Identity Theory helps explain this atmosphere of exclusion. Tajfel defines social identity as "that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership" (Tajfel 64). In the novel, Assamese identity becomes emotionally charged because communities fear losing their language, land, and cultural dominance. As a result, non-Assamese groups are viewed not as fellow human beings but as threats to collective survival. Kalita captures this dehumanisation when one character refers to Bengalis as "locusts," asking, "Do you call these locusts human beings?" (31). The use of such language reveals how ethnic hatred reduces entire communities into objects of fear and disgust.

The novel also exposes how institutions themselves participate in this discrimination. When Felanee is pregnant and suffering in a relief camp, doctors refuse to treat her because of her Bengali identity. A woman protests angrily, asking, "Why hasn't she been given any treatment? ... Is this the reason for neglecting her?" (31) while pointing to Felanee's Bengali shell bangles. This moment reveals how deeply communal prejudice has entered social structures. Even healthcare and compassion become conditional upon ethnic belonging. Such experiences connect strongly with the concerns of Subaltern Studies. Ranajit Guha argues that traditional histories often ignore the experiences of ordinary people whose lives are shaped by political violence. Similarly, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak questions whether marginalized individuals can truly speak within systems that silence them. Felanee's suffering reflects this condition of subalternity. She rarely has the power to define herself; instead, her identity is constantly interpreted and judged by others. Her voice exists at the margins of dominant political narratives.

Kalita also highlights the role of political organizations in intensifying ethnic nationalism. The arrival of movements like AASU changes the atmosphere of the village, filling it with slogans such as “Long Live Assam” and “Long Live Assam Accord” (112). Gradually, everyday life becomes controlled by strikes, bandhs, and political propaganda. The dream of a “golden Assam” is repeatedly invoked by leaders who encourage hostility against “foreigners.” Kalita suggests that these political movements often manipulate ordinary people by transforming cultural anxieties into hatred.

The idea of protecting ethnic identity becomes even more complicated when Bulen asks Felanee to wear a “dokhona,” the traditional Bodo dress, telling her: “If you want to survive, wear this...you have Bodo blood in you; that is why I am telling you all this. Wear your own dress or else you too will be finished. You will end up in ashes too – I tell you” (178-182). This scene powerfully demonstrates how survival depends on performing the “correct” identity in response to changing political situations. Identity becomes flexible and strategic rather than fixed. The moment also reflects Homi K. Bhabha’s concept of hybridity, which argues that identities emerge in “in-between” cultural spaces rather than through pure origins. Felanee’s life itself represents this hybrid condition. Despite all the violence and division, the novel ultimately emphasizes shared humanity over communal boundaries. This becomes most visible in Felanee’s emotional reflection: “Could they divide the sky over their heads? Will they divide the water in the rivers, the trees, the land, the people?” (184). These questions challenge the logic of ethnic nationalism. Through Felanee’s voice, Kalita suggests that political divisions cannot erase the deeper human connections that bind communities together.

The Story of Felanee critiques the destructive nature of rigid identity politics. Through Felanee’s suffering and resilience, Kalita reveals how ethnic conflicts dehumanize ordinary people and reduce identity to narrow political categories. At the same time, the novel offers a quiet resistance to these divisions by emphasizing coexistence, empathy, and shared humanity. Felanee’s life becomes a reminder that identities are not fixed boundaries but lived experiences shaped through history, relationships, and survival.

Findings

The study illustrates that Arupa Patangia Kalita’s *The Story of Felanee* (2011) problematizes strict notions of ethnic identity by depicting identity as historically fluid, relational and socially negotiated rather than fixed or physiologically pure. Through Felanee’s mixed Assamese, Bodo and Bengali ancestry, the novel unpacks the fragility of insider-outsider binaries that hold sway in Assam’s identity politics. The analysis shows how the novel deploys ethnic nationalism through language, cultural symbols, and collective fears, turning everyday social relations into zones of exclusion and violence. The study draws on Stuart Hall’s idea of identification as a continuous process. It illustrates that Felanee’s identity is always transforming as political conditions change, thus demonstrating the constructed nature of ethnic belonging. At the same time, Tajfel’s Social Identity Theory accounts for the communal hatred and dehumanisation driven by collective anxieties about land, language, and cultural survival. The work also reflects the concerns of Subaltern Studies scholars,

foregrounding the plight of the underprivileged whose voices are not heard in dominant political narratives. Importantly, the study indicates that Kalita pushes beyond political binaries by emphasising coexistence, empathy and shared humanity. In the end, Felanee's experiences of displacement and survival attack exclusionary nationalism and imply that human identity cannot be reduced to specific ethnic categories. Thus, the novel occupies an important literary and critical niche by laying bare the emotional and psychological aspects behind ethnic violence in North-East India.

Conclusion

Arupa Patangia Kalita's *The Story of Felanee* (2011) offers a profound inquiry into identity, belonging, and survival within the tumultuous socio-political history of Assam. The narrative illustrates how fixed notions of ethnicity and cultural purity engender fear, exclusion, and dislocation among common individuals through Felanee's experiences. Through the depiction of a protagonist with ancestry spanning Assamese, Bodo, and Bengali cultures, Kalita challenges the confining insider-outsider dichotomies that often shape identity politics in the region. The narrative illustrates that identity is not static or singular but rather flexible, multifaceted, and influenced by history, memory, and personal experience. The novel simultaneously reveals the emotional and psychological dimensions of ethnic nationalism, including how political movements and communal anxiety influence daily human interactions. The narrative of Felanee's experiences with violence, marginalisation, and social mistrust challenges the brutal aspects of exclusionary politics, while also highlighting empathy, coexistence, and shared humanity. Ultimately, *The Story of Felanee* (2011) transcends political rhetoric and underscores that human lives and relationships cannot be confined to rigid ethnic classifications.

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