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Confronting Violence: Narratives and Women's Agency

The nation-building and state-building project of India faces daunting challenges in North-East India. This part of India resists any simplistic, linear and development-centric approach of scholars from 'mainstream' India. The almost 'forced' rendering of a homogenous structure leads to the cropping up of a number of issues, which largely remain unresolved. The first issue being the unaccomodative nature of the Indian state which does not seek to entertain 'difference in opinion' leading to disaffected groups, which have grievances against the established order of the state. The militant organisations of the North East India primarily seek to bring certain structural changes in the behaviour and functioning of the Indian State. However, it is to be noted that while seeking to do so, they adhere to violence and bloodshed leading to mass casualties. Nani Gopal Mahanta in his analytical study on insurgency in the North East *Confronting the State: ULFA's Quest for Sovereignty* writes thus:

> The ethnic groups of Assam face twin challenges – one from the unchecked illegal immigration across the border and the other from the internal migration from mainland India – which have posed serious questions to the representation and identity of the smaller communities. Their greatest fear is that they have become alien in their own historical homeland and the groups have no mechanism to give vent to their grievances" (p xvi).

It is this and also the insensitivity on the part of the government which have led to alternative steps being taken by young men with restless spirits and lot of enthusiasm. The Assam movement grew out of a fear of losing one's motherland to outsiders,i.e., foreigners whose number increases everyday thereby putting the economic and cultural interest of the native population at stake. It addressed the crucial issue of illegal migration and tried to assure Assamese people of their supreme rights and authorities in their own land, which they repeatedly claimed for themselves. Though originally it was a non-violent movement, for obvious reasons it witnessed escalation of massive violence with the passage of time. Nani Gopal Mahanta sees "this massive violence as having been triggered by massive state violence and police atrocities" (Mahanta 2013: 47). It was such acts of state sponsored terrorism, which compelled some workers of Assam Movement to turn into rebels and join ULFA or support it directly or indirectly. Assam also witnessed bomb blasts and mass killings and similar other

mindless and heartless acts of terror and bloodshed, which increased manifold with the ULFA rising in power and in number. The Post Assam Movement period witnessed "the legitisation of violent/terrorist techniques by means of which the newly created radical group could claim an independent Assam" (Mahanta 2013: 47). ULFA's main aim was established as "to liberate Assam, through armed national liberation struggle, from the clutches of the illegal occupation of India and to establish a sovereign independent Assam." (Mahanta 2013: 61)

ULFA arrived at the Assam scene right after the Assam Movement (1979-85) led by the All Assam Students' Union, which was a resistance to the issue of illegal immigration of 'foreigners' into the state. During the early years, the Assamese public extended their full support to ULFA's ideological positions. There was nothing misguided or misplaced in their eyes about the banned outfit's public positions. The whole rebellion was an engagement at expression of grievance shared by the Assamese community at large against the pan-Indian neglect and marginalization. However, this condition did not continue for long and very soon, Assamese society realised that the struggle had lost its initial fervour, intensity and focus. The idea of an alternate idea of nationhood separate from pan-Indian nation did not remain long in the imagination of the Assamese people for a very long time. At the same time, a number of separatist outfits in an ethnically diverse community were also claiming the status of nationhood for themselves. Amidst this chaos, the common people simply became toys in the hands of the militants of various banned outfits on the one hand and the conflict management undertaken by the State leading to suppression and oppression on the other hand.

There is a strong presence of this complex context in the body of literature produced from this region. Writers from this region have been able to engage with the feelings and emotional experiences of the people facing violence and of the rebels who are involved in these acts of violence. These fictional accounts present the grim reality of the situation thereby contributing to the creation of a discourse which seeks not only to define terrorism (one man's 'terrorist' is often another's 'freedom fighter' thereby leading to complications in defining the term) but also to identify its various forms. Writers have distinguished acts of insurgency from other crimes and have also identified the evils of counter insurgency organised by the state leading to terror-like situations for its own citizens. This article deals with a significant body of literature, which addresses the feelings and experiences of the society/people/individuals and women in particular, in their response to the rebels, their actions and the State intervention. These narratives do not just narrate acts of terror, of violence, but consciously point towards the havoc generated by State sponsored terrorism. Terrorists occupy the background of these

narratives, hiding in the jungles, lurking amongst the trees, hitting at innocent victims uncannily. However, there are other dangers as well, other authorities who with their language of power determine the lives of the people. As Rakhee Maral puts it "the existing social structures are steeped in a terror-producing chain of circumstances, the underbelly of which is up starkly for view in this moment of anticipation of the militant's return and possible capture" (Baruah :107).

In this regard, Manorama Das Medhi's "Nadiburor Dore" (As the River Flows) is the story of a woman in her deathbed perhaps yearning for the return of her prodigal son (in Biswas 2012: 157-165). The story textualizes the subject of terror and its impact on the lives of Anu, Binu, Bubul and their dying mother. The story may be read as a case of how terrorism and counter-terrorism result in the terrifying life that a family leads. "It would have been nice if she could see him, even if just once" – this is what others feel while what the mother feels is not depicted by the narrator. Bakul Bora's mother was denied the last rites due to her on the ground that she was the mother of a dreaded militant. The dead body lay unattended as the government unleashed a new state of terror on the innocent villagers.

> "Every house was in the same state. Kicked, punched, the people lay about in pain. They did not even ask what their fault was. The only thing that broke the silence was the wailing of the children" (in Biswas 2012: 163).

The desecration of the last rites of the woman by the guards may be treated as a symbolic intervention by the State in the lives of the innocent people. State-sponsored terrorism is something, which poses a greater problem for the masses than the actual act of the rebels: Bakul Bora was wiped out of the memory of the villagers and especially his mother. However, his memory was evoked repeatedly to justify the cause of the armed personnel who wreaked havoc on the innocent villagers. The very fact that ritualistic last rites were denied to his mother's dead body speak volumes regarding the state of terror that prevailed because of the confrontation between the rebels and the military.

It is interesting to note the manner in which women writers present the lived lives of their female protagonists. It is a celebration of all those little things, which build a woman's life, the little things she nurtures which may be considered 'trivial' and 'ordinary' by her male counterparts. Arupa Patangia Kalita's "Arunimar Swadesh" (Arunima's Homeland) is the story of a young bride Arunima who takes simple pleasure in gradually learning the ways of her new home and its members after marriage. There is nothing significant about Arunima and her life

and yet the writer creates an excellent expression of "terrorized lives" under continuous threat of annihilation. "Arunima's new abode was like the beehive in the ou tree – tidy, orderly, with everything in place." However, this abode is destroyed by the absence of her elder brother-in-law who left his home to join the separatist groups, and became their ally, which resulted in the prevalence of "a sense of dread" everywhere in their house and in the whole town. The father feared the return of his son from the jungle or his militant friends who used to come for an occasional meal. The army personnel invaded their otherwise quiet and quaint household leaving it in a state of confusion. Arunima's sister-in-law's wedding was called off as one of her brothers was a militant. Amidst this chaos, Arunima gave birth to a baby boy in her mother's home. Eager as she was to return to her own sweet home with a garden full of flowers, she urged her husband and other family members to take her away. Finally, one fine day she boarded a car and left for that abode of dreams, which she had created for her seven months' old son. On reaching the place, she only found the burnt remnants of what had previously been her home. There was no sign of life anywhere and she was left only with charred remains of her dear ones. The writer ends the tale with a reference to tears rolling down from Arunima's eyes at her utter helplessness and loneliness. This story reveals the ugly face of terrorism as a bitter truth of everyday life, where the demarcation between the private and public spheres of life are eradicated and the 'domestic' too is left broken with the evil impact of the turbulent political forces over which these innocent people have no control. Arunima's tears speak volume not only about her present loss but also about her son's terribly insecure future in this terror-infested world.

Arupa Patangia Kalita's "Ewa Xutar Xaku" (The Raw-yarn Bridge) is the tale of Manohar, a Hindi speaking fruit vendor whose business flourishes in a small town of Assam. It is a place where, according to the narrator of the story, people belonging to different religions and speaking various languages reside peacefully. Suddenly, the situation changes as one fine day Manohar is confronted with the news of bloodshed and violence in a nearby town named Roumari on his way home from Guwahati where he has gone to get supplies for his shop. Terrorists supposedly planted a remote controlled bomb, which has killed seven army men including a high-ranking officer. Not a single terrorist has been caught and army men are now deployed in every nook and corner of the surrounding area in search of the culprits. Military men, on the lookout for the terrorists, have ruthlessly killed innocent people instead. The dead bodies of four innocent ploughmen along with two women who have been raped and assaulted are lying in the blood-soaked fields of Roumari. Hundreds of men and women are stranded on

their way back home. Manohar is amongst them. He has spent nearly 63 thousand rupees on his supplies, which are on the bus he has boarded. Now the bus has been evacuated and left on the roadside. Manohar too boards one of those three buses, which the military officers have permitted to leave. However, he is unable to get off the bus, as it is too crowded. The people, too, are in a terribly confused state of mind. They are excited and frightened now, as they have come to know about the havoc wreaked on shopkeepers and other common people by the military. If anyone dares to oppose or question them, he will be beaten up mercilessly. One shopkeeper who has dared to speak out and resist them is now lying on his deathbed. Manohar wonders who that boy was.

There is chaos everywhere in Roumari. On the one hand, there is the fear of the terrorists' bombs lurking in the background, and on the other hand, the atrocities of the military men on the common masses who are not only non-combatants but also innocently ignorant of the ways of the world of terror. Their lives are tremendously affected because of these unexpected political upheavals. Suddenly the once serene and beautiful town has started to rot like overripe mangoes and Manohar feels that everything is in a 'rotten' state. The writer in this story elicits the unmistakeable feeling of unease and disquiet that is associated with any attempt to write terror and write about people's lost lives because of terror. This 'terror' may be described as having at least three levels or dimensions of meaning– one where the rebel is to be termed as a terrorist and an outlaw; the second being the even more terrifying agenda of state-sponsored terrorism which comes in the guise of lawful authorities combating terrorism. The third being the uncanny lives of the ordinary men and women whose world turns topsy turvy like that of Manohar, the fruit vendor. He says, "my fate is burning" which corresponds to the fate of all other men and women who are mercilessly beaten, chased away and even killed by the protectors of law in the pretext of curbing and combating terrorism. The story is gripping as it strikes at the heart of all these ongoing debates of peace process aiming at bringing the militia to the negotiating table. Manohar and his townsfolk live such ordinary lives that the causes of the rebels mean nothing for them and yet insecurity and uncertainty loom large in their lives.

Violence perpetrated by various militant outfits as well as by the armed forces in their counter insurgency operations is a recurrent and dominant theme of Assamese short stories by women primarily because of its strong presence in the lives of the people. It is, indeed, the disturbed and maimed psyche of a whole lot of people, which is depicted through such writings. Women writers depicting violence and its impact on the general population do not

merely depict the traumatic experience of a section of people living in the midst of terror and fear. They, most importantly, delve deep into the problem leading to violence and of human rights violation of any kind. Despair and hope, hatred and love, fear and fearlessness, bondage, and freedom, selfishness and selfless sacrifice, reality and dream, co-exist in the depiction of terrorism in short story literature by Assamese women writers of the first decade of the twenty first century. Lives struggle to move on and a number of stories try to carry this message forward.

One such tale is that of Manorama Das Medhi's "Xambhaibya Kaal" (A Time to Come) which narrates the story of a birth, taking place in difficult times and against all odds. Jaba, the would-be mother and her family comprising of a strict and dominant mother-in-law and a caring yet helpless husband had to run from door to door in search for a doctor or a nursing home or even a government hospital in order to deliver the baby. Terrorist activities have placed them at the crossroads of modernity and progress on the one hand and pre-historicity and superstitious beliefs on the other hand. When doctors and modern medical facilities fail them, the helpless mother-in-law takes charge of the situation, summons the aging doctor of the village, the local mid-wife in order to assist her daughter-in-law to give birth in the inner quarters of their home. The doctors have all fled because of the huge demands made by the extortionists failing which one is sure to be killed leaving the common people helpless. It is as if they have travelled back in time to those ancient days when there were no doctors and no hospitals.

> "Massaging the weak baby with warm oil, the midwife was telling her stories...stories of magic charms and amulets, of charmed water, of spells and incantations. Stories that transported them both to some primordial times in that smoke-filled room" (in Misra 2011: 120).

The birth of "the weak baby" is an indication of the hope that despite all odds, despite the violence and bloodshed, life will go on. The writer places 'nurture' at the opposite pole of nature and destruction. The mother urges the little one to live, to struggle, to respond to life. And while doing so, she subscribes to primeval, ritualistic practices of the ancient belief system. Considering the perilous condition created by the terrorist forces, this, however, is the only alternative available in the secluded world she and her likes live in. Terrorism creates a vicious cycle in the sense that, fed by unreason, it throws modernity into the background and sponsors in turn a system that obstructs all possibilities of democratic and fresh thinking. The

metaphor of the weak infant in this sense works as a sign of a trouble-infested future for the human society where reason and good sense fail to work.

"Dolongor Uporor Kathupokathan" (An Intimate Dialogue Over the Bridge) is a story by Mousumi Kandali in which she describes the fears of a pregnant woman while carrying her child in her womb, getting to know the life that is growing within her, comparing it with the outside fears that lurk in every nook and corner. These fears of terror, of violence of death, of hatred are like the eggs of the mythological bird, Harpi, which symbolically stands for violence and terror. The foetus taking shape inside her womb, moving up and down, is trying to grow, to develop. The harpi bird, a winged monster, is being compared to the terror-stricken situation created by bomb blast, fire, burning of flesh, screaming of innocent people, an unforgettable visual imagery of death and destruction. The reference to those few men who ran away into the mountains is a recurring one as it is those nameless men who come down the mountains and wreak havoc in the plains bringing a disorder into the otherwise simple rural way of life. The narrator refers to the political strategy of creating dividing lines in the name of ethnic cleansing, a form of terrorism active mostly in some hilly terrains of Assam. The hills are forever lost for the non-tribal people and a safe haven where people lived without any discrimination has been turned into one where others are not allowed to survive. Suspicions have replaced trust, hatred has taken over love and the hills are no longer safe for everyone. Life has become treacherous, full of fear, terror and violence. It is no longer a world of possibilities; it is rather a place where superstitions, hatred, suspicions and violence alone reign supreme. As an expectant mother, she imagines that the life inside her may not have an opportunity to survive in that claustrophobic state. However, as a mother it is also her responsibility to create a safe shelter for her yet unborn child. She feels that the fears inside her and the ones lurking outside are capable of creating other blood-sucking monsters, ready to pounce on living beings and suck their souls out. She could visualize that these monsters created and recreated in every mind multiply to linger around, putting the very prospect of life at stake. References to violent acts which led to mass killing and bloodshed once again pose a question whether life is possible or not. The mother expects that the dialogue, which she has had with her unborn child, will remain in the child's memory to be evoked at a later stage of the life of her yet to be born child. These words, which they have exchanged, might protect it from the winged monsters who might try to lead it astray. There is an attempt by the writer to create a hope, which reminds one of a better life where the winged monsters symbolising terror and violence would no longer be strong enough to assert themselves. This hope amidst utter

hopelessness and chaos, which this writer and others like her celebrate through their narratives, indicate the importance of the female power of nurturing life, which is a prerequisite for the survival and sustenance of our universe. These narratives specify that a disorderly public sphere may be reformed and protected with the help of female agency otherwise regarded as ordinary and trivial.

The series of stories in "Ashrulipi" (Written in Tears) by Arupa Patangia Kalita is a blend of short narratives on the issue of exploitation women face in the society every time a terrorist activity or socio-political uprising occurs. The writer zooms in and out between individual experience of violence at their most poignant and intimate, and broad cultural and political sources and implications of gender violence. Almost every woman in her lifetime goes through a period of time when she has been forced to write her journey of life with tears. The author here highlights the struggle of women for livelihood, survival, protection of herself and her dignity during the times of fierce massacre and bloodshed. These stories narrate a disturbing saga of conflict, aggression, hatred and violence that have been plaguing Assam for decades. The protagonists of each of these little narratives have been affected directly or indirectly by horrible acts of violence changing their lives irrevocably and leaving them broken in agony and anguish without any ray of hope of rehabilitation. The story "Ashroy Xibiror Baishyakeigoraki" (The Prostitutes of the Refugee Camp) is based on the Sino-Japanese war of 1937 and the plight of people especially women who went through excruciating suffering during that period. The protagonist of the story Hing Chao described a woman Ludhumi Bai who was suffering from obesity. She was an elderly woman and despite her age and physical condition, Japanese soldiers raped and killed her. The other women tried desperately to save her but because of her size she could not be moved to a safe place. Later Hing Chao and her group took shelter in a rest camp. This camp was organised by a white woman and the Japanese soldiers were unable to do any wrong to her. However, when few women of bad reputation came to stay in the camp the other women were highly displeased. Meanwhile, when Hing Chao approached these women to ask why they came to the camp, their reply was quite an unexpected one. They said that these soldiers were unfamiliar and they regarded them as enemies of their own motherland. These women were allowed to stay in the camp. When Japanese soldiers attacked the camp in search of women for sexual abuse, they sacrificed themselves for the sake of the other women of the camp. Hing Chao was left with tears in her eyes for the manner in which these women offered themselves as sacrificial goats. It is the woman's body, which becomes a contested site for different power groups leading to terror and

violence during critical times. The spectre of the female body desecrated by the male hand is a painful and humiliating reminder of female vulnerability. What works at these difficult times is their strong sense of female alliance as is seen in case of the women of evil reputation in this story.

The other stories in "Ashrulipi" are North East-centric, each one focussing on personal narratives of few women interwoven with social and political issues highlighting a clash of interests. "Xilpora Kopou Ayengla" (Ayengla of the Blue Hills) is the story about another young woman from the hills who led a life of contentment with her husband and her little children (Biswas 2015: 203-209). Her dwelling place was surrounded by high mountains and there was a small stream near her home. She was very much attached to her place. There is a vivid description of the stream in the story, which was very close to her heart. However, even this place full of scenic beauty and tranquillity had a dark side to it. An insurgent group lived in the dark forests of the mountains and army troops frequented the hills in search of them. The hills and the non-combatant inhabitants witnessed a continuous clash between the two groups. The men had to stay in the safe haven of their homes to avoid being taken away by army men. The women had to do all the household chores and even work outside their homes near the forest and the stream while fear and uncertainty loomed large in the background. One day when Ayengla was washing clothes beside the stream, a group of army men dragged her to the forests, raped her and left her there to die. She lay unconscious for several hours and when she recovered a little, she returned home in a semi conscious state. People took her to the hospital and her family tried hard to bring her back to her senses but to no avail. Her husband remarried and went back to a normal life. She remained dumbstruck for the rest of her life. One day her co-wife took her to the same stream for a bath, which took her back to those painful memories. She broke down in tears like never before. The writer Arupa Patangia Kalita engages in dealing with the woman's body and how it is affected by the violence in the surroundings. Army men torturing innocent men and molesting and raping women in violence-affected areas is a common feature, which people in the North East have always been witnessing either as helpless spectators or as poor victims.

The imagination of identity has been problematised amidst issues of migration, hybridity, separatism and ethnic conflicts. The homogeneities of the nation state into which many ethnicities are fitted in further aggravate the situation and further problematise the complex arena of identity where in Centre-State, intra-state and inter-community tussles exist.

In a similar context, Apurba Baruah, while addressing the problem of inter community tussles and their attempt to co-exist with each other or at times to avoid doing so, writes thus:

> The movements of various communities to assert and protect their, what is commonly called, 'ethnic' identity, are the most significant aspects of the contemporary socio-political reality of India's North East. (Baruah: 2005: 17)

It is this concern with ethnicity that led to the Assam Movement which remains till date one of the most important chapters in Assam's identity narrative. Migration was regarded as one of the primary targets of the Assam movement and a major concern among the Assamese. Assamese intellectual Hiren Gohain explains this in two levels, the first describing the fear of the outsider deeply embedded in the Assamese middle class mind, the second being the fear and suspicion of the tribal communities towards the Assamese on grounds of neglect and exploitation. However, this is just the beginning of the problems. Gohain identifies this problem in one of his profound statements published in an article he had written for the magazine *Frontier*, "Roots of Xenophobia in Assam"

> The reason for a stunted nationalism is the difference by the center to economic claims even if it shows sympathy for its cultural aspirations. (p.148, *Questions of Identity*)

Thus, various narratives of identity compete against one another. Nandana Dutta in her theoretical engagement with location and its interpretation in understanding Assam and its identity 'problems' in *Questions of Identity in Assam: Location, Migration, Hybridity* writes about the continuous fear of erasure that the little narratives face against the all encompassing master narratives:

> The Assamese little narrative is pitted against the nationalist master narrative, the tribal little narrative is pitted against the Assamese grand narrative, a little narrative of a tribal component against the tribal grand narrative, and so on, as other components of each tribal group, which are often multiple groupings, brings in their own perceptions of these relativized relationships (Dutta 2012: 148)

And it is these struggles at different levels which lead to identity movements also termed as separatist movements as they are basically concerned with guarding and preserving national and ethnic history, and celebrating the 'difference' which makes them unique. 'The violence of all identity movements has cultural, political, economic, and demographic explanations' (Dutta 2012: 149). At the same time, women and their bodies become contentious sites from where

patriarchies function and perform. In one of the stories of the series by Arupa Patangia Kalita "Ashrulipi" discussed below, Mainau, the young, cheerful girl full of life, faces the wrath of the young Bodo men of her village for not complying with the behavioural code prescribed by them for their community. The obsession with a behavioural as well as dress code is equated with love for one's 'culture' or even cultural patriotism which is seen as necessary for survival. Amartya Sen in *Identity and Violence* tries to bring about a deep-rooted connection between violence and a sense of identity. A sense of identity according to him can be a source of immense pride and joy as strength and confidence. At the same time, he states "identity can also kill." He further mentions "a strong-and exclusive-sense of belonging to one group can in many cases carry with the perception of distance and divergence from other groups" (Sen 2006: 1-2). A sort of cultivated violence associated with identity politics seems to have dominated many parts of the world including Assam and Assamese women writers have adequately dealt with this politics in many of their stories. In "Keshabati Kaynna Mainao" (The Girl with Long Hair) Mainao was an attractive and vibrant girl with beautiful long hair and zest for life. She loved her friends, loved shopping and loved Hindi films. She did not bother about the disturbed political scenario of her place. The 'andolan' had changed so many things around her but it was not able to change her. When her aunt was apprehended and misbehaved by those 'andolan' boys who considered themselves to be moral police, she sat beside her to comfort her. "Her pehi was mortally insulted at the treatment meted out to her in broad daylight and in front of so many people." (Biswas 2015: 185). From then on, she dismissed the idea of wearing anything but the 'dokhona.' Durga puja was just around the corner when the news spread that Hindu puja celebration was banned for people of their community. Anyone who defied their cultural diktat would be punished. People consented to such orders with the belief that very soon their dream of living in a state of their own will be fulfilled. Even after resisting the urge to go out and enjoy puja with friends, on the last day she joined them wearing a hand-woven red dokhona. She hid herself among her friends but those boys identified her and stamped her as a criminal. People gathered in her courtyard and the punishment was announced. Her long hair was to be snipped off. A young man held her close to him and forcibly keeping her under his grip, he cut off her hair. Another crime had been added to Mainao's original sin: a man in public view had touched her and hence she would be married off to him. Myths about female chastity were recalled, judgements passed, but no one asked how she felt and what she wanted. She deserved a better life than this but that life was denied to her. The marriage took place at the temple courtyard. A young man and woman who had touched each other had committed a crime, which needed to be corrected through the ritual of

marriage. "Streams of tears flowed down her cheeks. She wiped them, but they flowed again; she wiped them, but they flowed again; she wiped them again, but they flowed nevertheless." (Biswas 2015: 190). Here again the position of subjecthood is denied to women and terrorism in the guise of cultural essentialism is glorified keeping women at the position of muted objects.

"Sohorkhonot Majnixa Xumua Adhapura Buskhon" (The Half-burnt Bus at Midnight) is the story of a bus, which passes through a newly settled colony charring everything alive and beautiful in its wake. The bus had its own story to narrate. This bus, full of passengers, was attacked in a 'bandh'-stricken area, by the self-proclaimed saviours of a community, which was demanding its own separate statehood and burned the bus with all its passengers trapped inside. Not a single passenger survived and the half-burnt bus smelled of charred flesh of men, women, and children. The charred body of the bus, a chilling reminder of this horrific episode, approached De Babu's garage and turned everything in its stride to lifeless beings or objects; the young workers of De Babu's garage were also turned into lifeless statues, a surreal happening, depicting the grimness of the episode and the vulnerability of innocent human beings to mindless acts of violence. The beautiful landscape of the town, which changed completely as soon as the half-burnt bus carrying the burnt souls of its innocent passengers – the innocent victims of a terrifyingly inhumane act – stepped into its vicinity, merely reiterates the way violence leads to lifelessness and hopelessness. It also illustrates the way nature revolts against such indiscriminate killing. The symbolism employed by the writer may be explained as the expression of a female impulse reiterating the need to redefine terror and its outcome in a manner which noted feminist critics Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar define as 'feminist poetics' – a transparent expression of women's experiences and in this case political awareness. In their magisterial study of women writers, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) Gilbert and Gubar proclaim a new feminist poetics that would expose and defy the phallic myths of literary history. Feminist poetics summarizes women's method of writing and expressing rendering an independent authorship and 'imaginative autonomy' free from the dread of patriarchal authority.

"Podulit Duta Bakul Gosere Ghortur Niva Bou" (Niva and Her House with Two Bakul Plants) is a story about a young woman named Niva who used to remain very neat and tidy when she was a child. As a child, she did not play with dolls or cars but with pebbles in a systematic manner. She belonged to a family, which nurtured her orderly behaviour and accepted her uniqueness. She got married to a man whose family was as systematic as she was.

They liked to look after the minute details of arranging their household – the shed made of seashells, the snail chandelier, the wall hangings, the flowerpots and the night queen plant in their garden etc., which rendered a superior aura and elegance to their home. However, even amidst such beauty and tranquillity there was a concern which enveloped the minds and hearts of each member of the household. The concern was regarding Niva's brother-in-law, Bijit who left his home to join a terrorist group and became an outlaw. One day a huge armed police force came to inquire about Bijit as they had information that he was in contact with his family. They searched the house, turning everything upside down for clues, which will give them a lead to Bijit. They rampaged the house, its garden and lawn damaging every plant including the night queen in search of 'money' and ammunitions' which, they suspected, Bijit and his group might have hidden. They did not listen to the pleas of the family members who insisted that they had no connection with Bijit any longer. Niva was heartbroken to see her sweet home in this devastated condition. The story ends with Niva and her pair of frightful eyes filled with tears, tears of panic, of pain, of helplessness.

"Pitha Khuwa Rakhyaxir Xadhu Kuwa Suwagmonir Maak" (Suwagmoni's Mother) is the tale of a young mother who loses her precious daughter in a bomb blast during the Independence Day celebrations at her school. There are strong allusions to a similar incident of bomb blast in Dhemaji where as many as 15 children lost their lives on 15th August 2004. On the previous night, Suwagmoni went off to sleep only after listening to her favourite story of the demoness who kidnapped little children and ate them up. In the story there was a young boy named Bharat who was able to kill the demoness and returned home to his mother to eat his favourite rice cakes. Suwagmoni too demanded that her mother should make rice cakes the next day for her and her friends. Her mother promised her to do so. The next morning she went to school bidding her mother goodbye. However, on that ill-fated morning the demoness in the form of a bomb had already entered their village and their school premises. When the blast took place, the children of the village were singing chorus in order to celebrate Independence Day. None of them escaped the clutches of the demoness and no one returned home from school that afternoon. Suwagmoni too did not return to eat her favourite rice cakes. It took a long time for her grief stricken family to overcome her loss. The mother always tried to seek relief from the irrepairable loss of her child by repeatedly reliving her last night spent with the daughter. She caressed a pillow in the absence of her daughter and kept on repeating the story of the demoness and how she was killed. She imagined how her daughter would have reacted to the end of the demoness who loved kidnapping children. Every night she cried holding the

pillow, with tears flowing down her cheeks. She rubbed them off repeatedly but they came back profusely; those tears defined her life after her daughter was gone. Once again the writer deals with an extremely painful narrative of a real event which took place in a real world where real lives of little ones were lost to the whims of a banned outfit who were seeking 'freedom' and an independent statehood. The writer draws a parallel between the demoness of the folktale who derived uncanny pleasure in killing children and the terrorists who masterminded the blast that nipped the innocent lives in the bud. The folk narrative inscribed in this grim tale of terror is a sad commentary on the contemporary politics of insurgency the driving force of which is nothing but sadism and mindless terror, a demoness that continues to live on innocent blood.

The definition of 'freedom' sought by the rebels actually convolutes the distinction between insurgency and criminal terrorism. Indiscriminate killings by the insurgents make matters worse for the civil society and its functioning and the simple act of writing on the part of these women writers highlight this crucial fact. Purabi Barmudoi's "Swadhinata" (Freedom) is the tale of a young rebel who moves about in search of the meaning of freedom. The 'quest for freedom' however has ironically made him a captive of violence and bloodshed. He and his rebel companions, the so-called outlaws, reside inside thick, dense forests away from the reaches of civilization. They are away from the regimented modern lives and are free to dream and to wander. The young rebel is reminded of his childhood and the numerous childhood stories he used to hear. Imaginatively locating himself in those days of peace and happiness, he meets the hare and the tortoise who participate in a race to decide who is faster. This imaginary encounter is an eye-opener for him. Then he realises that the entire universe is full of similar competitions –competition for happiness, misery, wealth, name and fame, power and above all the competition to kill, to become more and more inhuman. The protagonist along with his companions earlier tried to disrupt the Independence Day celebrations; three of them were killed and he was the only one who escaped unhurt. Even nature and its living objects bemoan the degeneration, which has taken over the human civilisation. During his sojourn in the thickets, he overhears two birds in conversation that finally leads to the conclusion that in order to know what 'swadhinata' (freedom) means one has to kill his fellow human beings. The conversation of the birds too makes him realize the fact that terrorism involves both the use and the threat of violence. The forest has made him realise that he has forgotten his identity – who he really was and what he has been seeking. The serenity and tranquility of the forests have compelled him to rethink about what he means by 'swadhinata'. He and his militant outfit are fighting for freedom but what sort of freedom is it that they aspire for? The writer questions the

false premises upon which the crucial issue of being a 'freedom fighter' is rested. During his sojourn in the forests he also meets the legendary "Ou Kuwari" (The Princess Named after the Elephant Apple) who claims that she cannot be possessed by anybody, not even by the prince who wanted to marry her desperately in Lakshminath Bezbaruah's story with the same name. Although in the original story the prince marries her and tricks her to remain in her human form with him forever, Barmudoi releases the narrative from its overtly patriarchal dimension. In fact, dismissing the aspect of violence in the narrative, which makes the Ou princess powerless in the folktale, she gives a new edge and importance to it by re-reading the character from the feminist perspective. The meeting of the rebel and the Ou princess also highlights the fact that she is the one who understands what the meaning of 'freedom' is and that violence can never lead to freedom. By blending the fantasy world of folktale with the morbid reality of the terror-infested world, Barmudoi creates a narrative space to rethink the subject of terrorism from a female point of view. This female point of view disempowers the male by exposing the truth behind the myth of male power in the world of terrorism, the truth being that the males are the helpless puppets in the hands of terrorism created by them.

These writers explore in their writings how amidst male-authored violence the importance of human life becomes lost. Whether it is the identity seekers, the rebels, or the army men who have arrived at the scene to counter terrorism, all of them perpetrate violence in one form or the other and women knowingly or unknowingly withstand the worst of these disturbances and violence. These women writers treat the impact of violence on women with much intelligence and sensitivity. Setting out to answer the question "how are we to prevent war?" Virginia Woolf in *Three Guineas* (1938) argues that the inequalities between women and men must first be addressed. Virginia Woolf states that men are fond of wars and battles; they are more engaged in the nation building and other political matters while the women who have already been deprived of education are hardly regarded as citizens. They are the neglected lot whose voices hardly matter in issues of war and conflicts. *Three Guineas* represents the third phase of extreme scepticism as to the public sphere's capacity to represent or include women. Woolf's concern was as much with making her voice heard in the male-dominated mainstream as with the recovery of the lost voices of women.

The very act of writing renders these women writers with a power of expressing their socially and politically inclined selves. These women writers do not merely write about their respective imaginative worlds. This article has tried to recognise and map the culturally and politically charged real worlds where they attempt to acquire their agency through the very act

of writing and which they represent in their narratives by appropriating varied approaches reflecting their multiple subject positions. These fictionalised versions of the real world, where lot of things are taking place, beautifully crafted by each women writer depict the dilemma each women character faces throughout. There is no overtly expressed sense of rebellion but a mere submission, which certainly is not to be mistaken as complicity, to their respective fates with tears in their eyes and pain in their heart. This, however, may be taken as the first phase in the long path of resistance against the male-scripted drama of terrorism. Instead of a New Critical mode of reading which focuses on the internal structure and aesthetic achievement, these texts respond well to readings engaged in what it means to be a woman amidst negotiations, debates, protests and struggles. These texts address real tasks and issues in a real world and may therefore be treated as documents, which bring forth newer understandings of identity, nationhood, and citizenship among others. In fact, real and authentic female voices emerge out of these short stories, which can be heard specifically in works by women writers. We as readers clearly become participants in these fictional worlds where these women writers engage in an adequate 'representation' and 'resolution' of the issues of terror and violence from which they are primarily 'excluded' in the real civil space they occupy along with men more as 'passive' recipients.

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