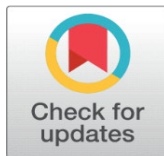
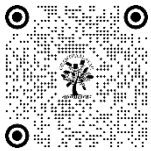


SCARS IN SILENCE: GENDERED NARRATIVES OF THE ASSAM AGITATION AND INSURGENCY IN CONTEMPORARY ASSAMESE LITERATURE

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DOI

[10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i1.2024.4923](https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i1.2024.4923)

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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ABSTRACT

The period of Assam Agitation (1979-1985) was a period of severe socio-political unrest that had a deep emotional and physical impact on the vulnerable and the marginalised. This paper will investigate the representation of Assamese women in contemporary Assamese literature, especially in the works of Arupa Patangia Kalita and Aruni Kashyap. It will understand their work through the theoretical lens of feminist literary criticism, subaltern theory and trauma studies. Through this lens, the focus is on understanding the representation of women as grieving mothers, survivors of violence and silent witnesses. This period was profound with emotional anguish and grief. The authors in discussion often analyses the political implications of grief on women. As these women navigate trauma, loss, anguish, abuse, relocation and grief, their stories are used as a counter to official narratives where their participation in pain is often absent. Their literature gives a voice to the experiences of these women giving a profound and intimate documentation of their suffering.

Keywords: Counter-Narrative, Insurgency, Assamese Literature, Survival

1. INTRODUCTION

The Assam Agitation (1979–1985) and the insurgency that followed after was an era of socio-political unrest. It was a mass movement against undocumented migration. It was an era of ethnic strife, armed resistance, and militarized governance (Baruah, 2005). This lens is imperative to look at the ability of literature in understanding violence, memory and marginality.

These narratives foreground women's experiences to the centre instead of the periphery. They emphasize women's role in understanding the human costs of conflict. Thus, literature functions as a powerful counter narrative to the dominant narrative, which often leads to suppression, marginalization, or erasure of woman's voice (Phukan, 2015).

The paper looks into how contemporary Assamese literature addresses the Assam Agitation and insurgency through gendered arguments. It will look into the representation of gender in contemporary Assamese literature and how this reflects the socio-political unrest in the society. It inquires the role of these literary texts in its reception of emotional, physical and psychological implications on women during conflict. This paper explores the works of Kalita and Kashyap and claims that literature can be a gendered archive: the archive of memory, silences, and their resistances that historiography or politics claim to dismiss in their writings.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The paper employs an interdisciplinary framework as its theoretical perspective. It will combine feminist literary criticism, trauma theory, and subaltern studies to understand its scope. It is important to understand the scope of Assamese literature and how it analyzes gendered representations of conflict. It articulates a nuanced knowledge of the gendered experiences of violence, memory, and marginality that are often omitted from official narratives.

Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003) attacks the practice of applying a single woman experience to all women while showing how specific identification of multiple social elements remains vital for women situated in conflict areas and former colonies. Feminist literary theory aims to understand how literature represents women's physical encounters as well as their emotions versus their realities through an exploration of power dynamics. The research explores how Assamese writers represent women's pain by resisting simple victimization. They are documenting a women's ability to navigate grief alongside survival and resistance. The research uses Judith Butler's (2004) concept of grievability to understand how specific lives are assigned different levels of mourning. The concept of grievability addresses the issue of whose life and pain are worth grieving.

Trauma-related literature shows the concepts Cathy Caruth (1996) called "unclaimed experience" since the effect of trauma appears in fragmented storylines and empty spaces or repetitive patterns. The authors implement destabilized chronology and subjective states of escaping or narrative absences in order to depict survivor psychology following traumatic experiences.

The work of Dominick LaCapra (2001) separates trauma response into two types known as acting out and working through which helps identify how literature serves as trauma origin and documentation. Through their characters these texts demonstrate a pattern between emotional non-responsiveness and extreme emotional release thus portraying the endless cycle of trauma that occurs in prolonged conflict zones.

The political position of Assam remains complex from mainland India because of its geographical and ethnical difference with India. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's (1988) foundational question- "Can the subaltern speak?" is pertinent in exploring how gendered voices in Assamese texts are twice marginalized: first, by national and insurgent discourses, and second, by patriarchy within their own communities.

Spivak's emphasizes on strategic essentialism. Its representation is crucial to navigate and understand fictional narratives by Kalita and Kashyap that serve as a mediated platform through which subaltern voices emerge. It might not emerge as direct testimonies, but as crafted, imaginative reconstructions of silenced realities.

3. HISTORICAL AND POLITICAL CONTEXT: ASSAM AGITATION AND INSURGENCY

The Assam Agitation started as a need to address the cultural threat and the political negligence of the region. The Assam agitation began in 1979 and continued till 1985 under the aegis of All Assam Students Union (AASU) and the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP). These organizations were against the illegal Bangladeshi immigrants that were posing a threat to the culture, language and resources of the state according to Baruah (1999).

It was primarily the economic and cultural threats that was the key concern of the movement. This resulted in a demand to deport the illegal immigrants to preserve the identity of the land. The movement destroyed its democratic and peaceful nature eventually resulting in the Nellie massacre that killed 2,000 Bengali Muslims in a span of hours (Weiner, 1983).

The Assam Accord of 1985 ended the Assam Agitation but failed to resolve the core issues of identity and citizenship and the demand for regional sovereignty. This failure led to frustration amongst the Assamese population and lead to the birth of the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) in 1979. The primary aim of ULFA was to create an independent Assam through military action. The failure of this led to an era of terrorism. What started as an imperative requirement to safeguard its own people turned on their own. The ULFA turned into insurgents and waged frequent conflicts with bomb blasts, abduction, extortion and assassination of targeted individual (Misra, 2000)

The political and economic instability of the state was intervened through Operation Rhino (1991) and Operation Bajrang (1990) which became the corridor for extensive Indian Army involvement that drew the enforcement of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) into the region. During these operations widespread human rights abuses

such as executions, sexual violence, forced disappearances and systematic physical violence were reported to the public (Manchanda, 2001). This abuse generated massive fear and trauma primarily affecting women and children.

For women, this period was particularly devastating. They bore the brunt of violence both as direct victims—through rape, displacement, and loss—and as silent witnesses to the breakdown of families and communities. Yet, their experiences often remain peripheral in political analyses of conflict, making literature a vital medium for voicing these silences.

4. GENDERED IMPACTS OF THE ASSAM AGITATION AND INSURGENCY

The Assam Agitation and the insurgency that followed have mostly been studied through political, ethnic, or nationalist lenses, but not enough attention has been given to how these conflicts affected people differently based on gender—especially women.

Women in Assam actively faced both the active violence during the unrest along with its consequent aftermath through their bodies and emotional and sexual abuse. They experienced severe anguish, survived and remained silent because all these aspects merged with the socio-political aspects of conflict.

Women in took part in public demonstrations and community assemblies during the Assam Agitation through various civic organizations and groups established by students. Official histories and records failed to recognize the vital efforts of women during the Assam Agitation according to Baruah (2013). The prevailing discourse focused on masculine nationalism which glorified martyrs along with armed resistance and ethnic purity while dismissing women's multifaceted contributions and suffering.

The insurgency period brought an even more brutal turn. Militarization of civilian spaces under counter-insurgency operations created what anthropologist Cynthia Enloe (2000) calls a “militarized femininity,” where women’s roles were reduced to grieving mothers, widows, or keepers of peace at home. Gender-based violence became normalized because of the ongoing military presence together with checkpoints and surveillance operations. The Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act enabled soldiers’ absolute power with legal protection that allowed them to commit instances of rape and torture and arbitrary detention specifically among rural and marginalized women (Manchanda, 2001).

Being forced to move away from their homes along with being unable to find proper channels of communication became basic characteristics of their traumatic experience. The insurgency caused men to go missing through arrests or forced evacuations which made women perform leadership roles in these dangerous post-invasion conditions. Caring for families while managing crises through police and militant negotiations plus child protection became crucial but unobserved ways that women demonstrated their resistance and resilience.

Women took on a new role after conflict ended by serving as keepers of memory. The life experiences of these women were recognized through their intimate narratives of storytelling and their traditional cultural expressions which proved more substantive than basic political structures. Many present-day Assamese literary works use female characters as vessels to express collectively experienced pain and fear which continue to shape Assamese communities today.

5. LITERATURE AS COUNTER-NARRATIVE: CHALLENGING STATE AND INSURGENT HISTORIES

Literature is a counter-narrative to official histories—both of the state and insurgency movements. The outlined framework serves how literature conveys emotional and gendered aspects that political dialogues tend to disregard.

Writers create counter-narratives to question accepted historical records and introduce new frameworks for understanding and remembering the past through literature. As Urvashi Butalia (1998) has argued in the context of Partition, personal narratives and literary testimonies enable the emergence of what she calls the “history from below”—a people’s history that documents pain, silence, and resilience. The connection between fiction and memory in literature enables authors to present concealed emotional responses and personal experiences of violence and survival which are hidden in official state documents and insurgent propaganda (Pandey, 1992). In a similar way, contemporary Assamese literature provides a gendered, emotional, and ethical archive of insurgency, where the boundaries between history, memory, and imagination blur to reveal deeper truths.

The literary creations of Arupa Patangia Kalita and Aruni Kashyap craft storytelling that disrupts standard historical narratives by bringing forward the broken yet circular personal experiences of conflict survivors. Both writers focus their stories on gender and vulnerable voices which tend to become absent from insurgent narratives and governmental systems. In this way, literature functions as both resistance and a documentation of memory for preserving what official archives fail to record or erase.

In Kalita's short stories, for example, we encounter mothers whose sons are "picked up" by the army and never return; women who carry the weight of multiple griefs with stoic silence; and homes fractured by fear. These stories rarely offer closure, but they invite readers to witness. In Kashyap's novels and short fiction, silence becomes a motif—not just a lack of speech, but a political condition shaped by fear, trauma, and the impossibility of justice.

Thus, literature does more than reflect conflict—it reframes it. It challenges the binaries of victim/perpetrator, insurgent/soldier, citizen/outsider, and instead focuses on ambivalence, complexity, and the emotional residues of violence. In doing so, literature restores agency to those who are rendered voiceless in political discourse.

6. ARUPA PATANGIA KALITA'S REPRESENTATION OF GENDERED CONFLICT

The writings of Arupa Patangia Kalita's, particularly her short story collection *Written in Tears* (2015), explore a deeply moving examination of the gendered remnants of the Assam insurgency. This explores this through characters who inhabit the rural and semi-urban landscapes of Assam. Kalita creates a literary archive of grief, silence, and survival. Her work exemplifies what Judith Butler (2004) calls the politics of grievability, where certain lives, especially women's and the impoverished and displaced communities remain invisible in dominant narratives of conflict.

One of the most haunting stories in the collection is "The Cursed Fields of Golden Rice", which depicts a mother searching for her "picked-up" son, likely detained or killed by security forces. Kalita never names the perpetrators directly, allowing the narrative to evoke a climate of structural fear rather than point to specific actors—mirroring the indistinct but omnipresent violence of counter-insurgency. This ambiguity is consistent with Caruth's (1996) notion of trauma as a rupture in understanding—what cannot be fully known or narrated becomes a central motif of the story.

Kalita's writes strong female protagonists. Her female protagonists are not militant revolutionaries or political leaders; instead, they are mothers, wives, widows, and daughters who experience conflict in intimate, embodied ways. In the story "Face in the Mirror", the protagonist's personal trauma, which arises from the loss of a loved one, is interwoven with the societal trauma of militarization. Her psychological distress is never medicalized; instead, it is rendered through silence, hallucinations, and broken conversations, echoing LaCapra's (2001) concept of "acting out."

Kalita critiques both the state and the insurgents through her creations and narratives. On one hand, the military is exposed as a brutalizing force on the other, the militants are absent and rogue who turned their back on their own, suggesting that the community bears the brunt of a war it neither initiated nor controlled. This dual critique affirms Spivak's (1988) idea of the subaltern woman who are caught in overlapping systems of domination, often spoken for but rarely allowed to speak.

Moreover, Kalita uses everyday imagery of broken homes, tear-stained saris, the silence of dusk to give an idea about trauma without sensationalizing it. Her writing becomes an act of feminist witnessing, allowing suppressed emotions and undocumented histories to surface.

In *Written in Tears*, *Felanee* and *The Loneliness of Hiya Baruah* Kalita creates a context-specific feminist consciousness rooted in the realities of Assamese women (Mohanty 2003). Her stories resist the exoticization of Northeast India and instead insist on slow, textured storytelling to convey how women endure, and sometimes quietly resist, systemic violence.

7. ARUNI KASHYAP'S GENDERED PORTRAYAL OF CONFLICT AND SILENCE

Aruni Kashyap's fiction, particularly his novel *The House With a Thousand Stories* (2013) and his short story collection *His Father's Disease* (2019), foregrounds the intricate entanglement of violence, silence, and gender in the sociopolitical landscape of insurgency-era Assam. Kashyap's literary voice is deliberately subdued, marked by quiet intensity, where the unsaid often reveals more than what is spoken, a narrative strategy that resonates deeply with trauma theory and the subaltern narrative.

In *The House With a Thousand Stories*, the protagonist Pablo returns to his ancestral village in Assam. He eventually encounters a place riddled with unspoken traumas, mysterious disappearances, and the heavy presence of political violence. The domestic space often traditionally coded as feminine, becomes a site of cultural haunting, where memories of the insurgency linger in whispers, coded language, and long silences. Kashyap's use of the house as metaphor parallels the emotional architecture of the women who inhabit it. These women become containers of grief and protectors of memory.

The insurgents and military forces operate on the periphery of the novel's narrative. Their presence is deeply felt through the experiences of women who have lost sons, husbands, or brothers, echoing Judith Butler's (2004) idea of a grievable life. Women in Kashyap's world carry the burden of public silence and private mourning, illustrating Spivak's (1988) observation that subaltern women's voices are often submerged beneath patriarchal and nationalistic discourses.

Kashyap also uses male characters to explore the emotional toll of toxic masculinity and inherited trauma. In his short story "Skylark Girl," a teenage boy becomes entangled in a web of gender anxiety, military fear, and adolescent desire against the backdrop of insurgency. The story critiques how patriarchal nationalism moulds young boys into emotionally repressed vessels of aggression, while women are rendered either sacred (to be protected) or suspicious (to be interrogated). This directly aligns with Mohanty's (2003) idea about the gendered construction of "community" in nationalist struggles.

Kashyap's refusal to offer closure in his stories mirrors Caruth's (1996) idea that trauma cannot always be resolved or explained. Trauma cannot always be resolved. It often sustains through surviving with everyday existence. Trauma must be witnessed, lived with, and narrated through gaps and silences. The narratives often end on ambiguous notes. This leaves the reader with a sense of incompleteness, which echoes the real-life absence of justice or reconciliation for conflict victims in Assam.

Both the writer writes against the state's sanitized histories and the insurgents romanticized heroism. Kashyap positions literature as an ethical space, where the politics of memory, loss, and love can unfold with complexity and empathy. In doing so, he contributes to a feminist subaltern archive—one that cannot be erased.

Aruni Kashyap's literary corpus—especially *The House With a Thousand Stories* (2013) and *His Father's Disease* (2019)—offers a layered and intimate portrayal of life in Assam during and after the insurgency years. His fiction resists both the glorification of militant nationalism and the statist narratives of counterinsurgency, instead presenting an emotionally textured, gender-conscious portrayal of violence, silence, and grief.

Kashyap's narrative method relies on interior monologue, fragmented storytelling, and subtle symbolism to explore the enduring scars of political violence. In *The House With a Thousand Stories*, Pablo returns to his village in rural Assam during a time of militarization, only to discover that the most potent legacies of the insurgency are embedded in everyday life—in the muteness of his aunt, the whisperings of village women, and the oppressive silence that surrounds "pickups" and disappearances. Here, Kashyap demonstrates Cathy Caruth (1996) identifies as the inability to access traumatic experience to coherent narration. Therefore, memory is haunted, non-linear, and embedded in spaces and silences rather than speech.

Women in Kashyap's world do not speak the language of resistance or militancy and their silence in personal spaces is political. His portrayal of female characters—mothers who grieve in silence, daughters who carry the burden of family shame, wives who live with the suspicion of betrayal—reveals how women's bodies become both sites and witnesses of structural violence. Kashyap adds to a counter-narrative of the Assam insurgency—one influenced not by ideology but by lived recollection and emotional disruption. Literature serves as a medium of resistance and testimony. It is a reverberation for those whose narratives are too dangerous and distressing to articulate. These characters echo Spivak's (1988) conception of the subaltern woman. The agency of these women is systematically erased, yet they continue resisting through affective, embodied forms of memory.

In *The House With a Thousand Stories*, Kashyap's male characters struggle with their allegiance to their community. Kashyap challenges hegemonic masculinity, as the young men struggle with the speaking the truth and voicing their opinion out of fear and questionable patriotism. These young men reflect LaCapra's (2001) idea of "acting out" where they are often conditioned to silence, aggression and forced nationalism. They often act out this way because their trauma is not conditioned to introspection. Kashyap's story universe is inhabited by fragmented masculinities—individuals who cannot openly mourn, articulate opposition to injustice, or restore connection.

Kashyap's story "Skylark Girl" captures the transition of a young boy's fascination with a charismatic girl in a town grappled with insurgency, a dive into hegemonic masculinity. An innocent love story transitions into an exploration of masculinity, state-sanctioned violence and profound gendered anxiety. Kashyap sketches his female characters as real that experiences deep psychological pain and grief. They are not mere symbols or bystanders to conflict.

Kashyap's female characters are not only symbolic; they are profoundly real, characterized by psychological anguish and subtle fortitude. The "skylark girl" becomes a symbol of the troubled relationship between gendered perceptions and identity sanctioned by state violence. These stories have no representation in political discourses but Kashyap asserts these truths in the unseen suffering and silent woes of the women. This resonates with Chandra Mohanty's (2003) portrayal of post colonial women. These women are not emblems of a monotheist cultural purity or emotional suffering. They are autonomous actors within the context of their own stories. The literature of Arupa Patangia Kalita and Aruni Kashyap acts as counter-narrative to the existing political and historical narratives during the Assam insurgency. Their focus on the gendered realities of conflict gives a strong profound insight the stories of women that are often neglected in the dominant discourses. They provide subtle insights that foreground the silent resilience of women, their embodies experiences of grief and the navigation of trauma.

Kalita and Kashyap identify the emotional and psychological aspects of conflict then create alternative historical representation. The subaltern woman becomes voiceless according to Spivak (1988) through both patriarchal institutions and violent political programs which claim dominance over her independence. The representations often negate the simplification of complex human events into ideological statements. These authors demonstrate that personal memories together with individual traumatic experiences represent authentic historical information. These information delivers a realistic interpretation of insurgency and its concluding phases.

The feminist literary criticism enables the understanding the operation of memory and the construction of identity at the backdrop of violence. Judith Butler (2004) "grievable" lives examine the experiences of women, especially their intricate emotional and psychological terrain that is often dictated by violence, loss and survival. Kalita portrays the stories of women as often mothers, wives and daughters. These women are trapped in an unending cycle of unspoken grief that captures the gendered effects of militarization and insurgency. These women turn into silent bearers of suffering and loss and the unsung witness to history. Aruni Kashyap, on the other hand, vehemently criticizes the emotional toll hegemonic masculinity confers upon both men and women. It subjugates both men and women under the threat of nationalism and political unrest.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

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