



Abhijit Ghosh:

**Marking The Genes in the Blood:
Exploring the Problematics Of Ethnic
Identity in *The Story of Felanee***

Abstract:

Ethnic identity as the primary attribute of a human being and ethnicity as genetically determined, as primordial, is a predominant notion in several nationalist and separatist discourses. An ethno-cultural conception of nationality lays emphasis on a community of believed common descent with a common history to which the members are bound by birth. In recent times, ethnic identity has emerged as the primary mobilizing force in the struggle for power and resources especially in third world spaces. *The Story of Felanee*, delineates the problematics of ethnic identity in the backdrop of ethnic conflict in Assam, between the ethnic-Assamese desiring complete dominance or even independence, the Boros claiming a separate state, and Bengalis who belong nowhere. I wish to demonstrate, through an analysis of the text, how the novel challenges the reification of human beings into ethnic subjects. The novel questions the preconceived notion of biological descent and therefore challenges the essentialist underpinnings of the notion of ethnic identity. The concept of ethnic identity, which usually confronts us as uniform and homogenous, is exposed as inconsistent and unstable. I also wish to discuss how ethnicity functions as a discourse of power propagated by dominant groups and therefore counter primordialist notions and argue in favour of constructivism as the basis of ethnicity. The analysis also reveals how ethnic ideologies construct signifiers of difference to recognise, isolate and identify the other and how the reducing of the human to the non-human, a migrant into a “locust”, facilitates the justification of violence against the ‘other’.

Keywords: ethnicity, identity, primordial, ethnic violence, Assam

The emphasis on ethnic identity and the violence it generates in Arupa Patangia Kalita's *The Story of Felanee* (2011) compels a deeper consideration of the phenomenon of ethnicity and its consequences on individual life and subjectivity. Ethnic identity as the primary attribute of a human being and ethnicity as genetically determined, as primordial, is a predominant notion in several nationalist and separatist discourses. In discourses of nationalism, an ethno-cultural conception of nationality lays emphasis on a community of supposed common descent with a common history to which the members are bound by birth. The view had its origins in German romanticism and in organicist ideas of immemorial biological character of nations. Recounting the origins of ethnic nationalism, Stefan Wolff says that its roots may be traced back to the ideas generated in the writings of philosophers like Herder and Fichte and popularised by the German Romantic movement (53). The ideas of ethnic nationalism developed around cultural markers and language as these were regarded as "the embodiment of a people's 'essence'" (Wolff 53). Even in the age of globalization and the inevitable cultural mixing it brought about (or due to these very factors), these ideas continue to be emphasized in nationalist and separatist ideologies alike. The cultural domain as a site of power is increasingly exploited by such ideologies. Clifford Geertz, arguing that the people of newly formed states are more susceptible to primordial attachments, claims that a political consciousness centred on the structure of a state produces such sentiments: "it is the very process of the formation of a sovereign, civil state that, among other things, stimulates sentiments of parochialism, communalism, racialism, and so on, because it introduced into society a valuable new prize over which to fight and a frightening new force with which to contend" (270). Ethnic identity has therefore emerged as the primary mobilizing force in the struggle for power and resources.

The Story of Felanee delineates the problematics of ethnic identity in the backdrop of ethnic conflict in Assam, between the ethnic-Assamese desiring complete dominance or even independence, the Boros claiming a separate state, and Bengalis who belong nowhere. I wish to demonstrate, through an analysis of the text, how it challenges the reification of human beings into ethnic subjects. The novel was originally written and published in Assamese in 2003 and subsequently translated into English by Deepika Phukan and published in 2011. The plotline traces the story of Felanee from the brutal attack on their village, killing her husband and others and burning down the houses, to her impoverished condition in the rehabilitation camp, and finally to a meagre existence at the settlement at a forest beside a Rabha village where others like her had found a shelter.

The novel questions the preconceived notion of biological descent and therefore challenges the essentialist underpinnings of the notion of ethnic identity. The first chapter reveals Felanee's ancestry and complicated ethnic inheritance and in this the seemingly uncomplicated novel locates its central problematic. The concept of ethnic identity, which usually confronts us as uniform and homogenous, is exposed as inconsistent and unstable. An ethnic group is generally conceived as a group perpetuated by descent. Max Weber held ethnicity to be a belief in common descent: "We shall call 'ethnic groups' those human groups that entertain a subjective belief in their common descent . . ." (35). In the words of Fredrik Barth, an ethnic group is a population that is "largely biologically self-perpetuating" (75). A common descent or at least a belief in common descent is, therefore, a founding principle of an ethnic group. The investment in the idea of biological continuity is so widely accepted that it goes almost unquestioned. This is where one finds the intervention of a novel like the present one so singular and important. Felanee's ancestry is sketched out in the first chapter of the novel, a sort of 'prelude' that situates the novel in its narrative context. The

story of two generations, Felanee's grandmother Ratnamala and her mother Jutimala, are compressed within a few pages. Ratnamala, who belonged to a prosperous and powerful Assamese family had eloped with a Boro 'mahout' Kinaram, and Jutimala was born of their union; Ratnamala died during childbirth and Kinaram was killed by Ratnamala's family. Jutimala, brought up as a Boro by Kinaram's family, married a Bengali trader Khitish Ghosh and both were killed in a brutal act of ethnic cleansing on the night Felanee is born. Felanee, therefore, borrows her 'genes' from Assamese, Boro and Bengali ancestors. She reflects on her own mixed antecedents after some boys belonging to an extremist group at the Settlement warn her against getting involved with "mixed communities":

While rubbing the blood stains in her sador, she wondered about the various people whose genes ran in her blood.

Her Grandmother, Ratnamala's?

Her grandfather, the elephant mahout Kinaram Boro's?

What about her mother? Did she have more from Ratnamala or Kinaram? And what about herself? Did her blood have stronger genes from Khitish Ghosh? And what about the man who put the baby in her lap and decorated the parting of her hair with red sindhur? What about Moni's blood? (185)

A biological notion of ethnicity that involves an insistence on blood descent, fails to circumscribe Felanee's identity. She cannot conceive of herself as having one identity in preference to others, and therefore the warning issued to her and the expression "mixed communities", leads to unresolved ambiguities.

The problem centres around Felanee's ethnic affiliation: to which ethnic group does she 'belong'? Is ethnicity a matter of choice? If ethnicity becomes for someone a matter of choice, is it then a matter of political or affective choice? Or, to put it in another way, is the fact of making such a choice a political act? Apart from all these considerations, however, the most significant intervention achieved by the novel is that the incorporation of choice deconstructs the fundamental basis of ethnic identity. The matter of 'blood descent' which is so consistent in the discourse of ethnicity fails to impose on Felanee a distinctive identity. As people belonging to different ethnic identities claim her as one of their own, ethnic identity, within the person of Felanee, becomes a fluid notion of belonging, and not something static and stable. The problematisation of ethnic identity reflects the turn in critical thinking about subjectivity: "While nineteenth- and early twentieth-century expressions of identity politics often separated out a single defining characteristic as a point of powerful and practical emphasis, late twentieth century theorizations of subjectivity often brought to the foreground complications and plural social engagements" (Hall 110). These words point towards the widely held perception of a gradual waning of essentialist tendencies in the conception of identity, and evolution of a plural notion of identity, a movement towards the conception of hybrid subjectivity. The perception has been subsequently revealed to be overly optimistic in view of the persistence of the violent and atavistic passions generated by ethnicity. This novel, however, foregrounds the postmodernist position of rejecting essentialism and conceiving identity as plural and hybrid. But it also goes a step further in re-establishing the primacy of the much critiqued liberal humanist conception of the individual 'human' essence.

Assamese nationalism is primarily based on ethno-linguistic identity and its violence is directed at "outsiders" on the basis of linguistic difference and place of origin (Baruah, 44-90). In the novel, however, we find that such an insistence on an exclusionary group identity

is largely uneven among the Assamese. It did not exist among the Assamese families in the village where Felanee had lived happily with her husband; it is rather the external forces that disrupt and destroy the peaceful local world of the village. Violence, it is hinted again and again, attacks and affects people irrespective of ethnicity: “Most people had locked their homes and left. In most of the Assamese, Boro and Bihari homes the men remained behind while their families had left. In the Bengali homes even the men had gone” (16). Felanee, in spite of belonging to an Assamese household is asked by her husband to get ready to leave the village along with the other Assamese and Bengali families, but unfortunately they are not spared. In a gruesome recurrence of the violence that had marked Felanee’s birth about two decades ago, the village is attacked by marauders and while Felanee and her son Moni barely manage to escape, her husband Lambodar is killed and her house burnt. In the interpersonal relationships depicted within the village, between the families of Biren Baishya, Rati Saha, Haren Das and theirs, or in the settlement, between Kali Boori, Jon’s mother, Minoti, Ratna’s mother and Felanee, ethnicity never becomes important enough to affect interpersonal relationships, and the incidents of violence are seen as external disruptive forces, threatening their meagre existence. Therefore, it may be argued that the uncritical notion of uniform attitude, feeling and sentiment within the ethnic community that usually attends the discourse of ethnicity is challenged in the text.

Besides, the text also responds to the inhumanity, often justified in identity politics to malign, reduce or eliminate the ‘other’. In the discourse of ethnicity, the ‘self’ is constructed on the basis of the ‘non-self’, or, to put it in another way the ‘other’ is ‘made’ to be the ‘non-self’. Here the legitimacy of the Assamese ‘self’ is constructed as opposed to the illegitimacy of the Bengali or Boro ‘other’, the “locust”, the parasitic ‘non-self’. Contributions to the psychoanalytic examination of ethnic and racial hatred includes similar categorisations such

as Mary Douglas's concept of the "slimy" and Zygmunt Bauman's concept of the "stranger" (Clarke 14-15, 4). Douglas shows that the boundaries of the body are symbolic of societal boundaries and illustrates how the discourse of 'otherness' constitutes the 'other' as dirty, polluting and dangerous that may contaminate and ultimately cause disorder in society; the emphasis on difference is used to preserve order, which in turn sustains the difference (Clarke 14-15). Bauman formulates the concept of the 'familiar stranger' who like the 'slimy' is a psychosocial character, "a manifestation, a projection and internalisation of our fear of difference, of being polluted, of being psychologically invaded by otherness" (Clarke 4). Ethnic ideologies often work by portraying the 'other' or the 'non-self' as the 'non-human', undeserving of human feeling, and therefore justify the use of violence against them. It is the propagation of this psychology of hatred by ethnic politics that the text portrays, such as the instance when "two senior leaders" leading the ethnic cleansing "told the Assamese people to forget words like humanity, love and compassion" (20). This dehumanizing aspect of ethnic politics is elaborated in the episode at the refugee camp where the doctors refuse to treat Felanee, who is at an advanced stage of pregnancy and sick with exhaustion and trauma, as they suspect her of being a Bengali and therefore an 'outsider', and enemy, due to the shell bangles in her hand:

She held up Felanee's wrist with the white shell bangles, traditionally worn by married Bengali women, and asked, "Is this the reason for neglecting her?" Another boy in a white coat flung angry words at her, "Why do you have a such a soft spot for these people?"

"Because they are human beings," she retorted.

"Do you call these locusts human beings? It is because of people like you that the Assamese people are in this plight," the boy said accusingly. (30)

Ethnicity as identity politics is generally contemplated as providing a selfhood to people, but it may also be revealed to be a cruel force that reduces 'other' human beings to objects. When Felanee, lying down helpless and sick in the refugee camp, is charged about her identity by a doctor, she stares at him quite uncomprehendingly, almost unable to reply. The text reveals that ethnicity, especially in times of conflict, becomes so overwhelming that it seeks to subsume every other aspect of a human being, it does not recognise sickness or gender or even motherhood, so that a doctor, blinded by this overpowering discourse, may question a pregnant woman, "What are you?". The uncomprehending reaction of the doctors to the word "human" uttered by Felanee in response further emphasizes the power of the discourse of ethnicity, its power to render the category of the 'human' meaningless.

Another boy in a white coat, examined her, and remarked that the baby's condition was not good. He then asked her, "What are you, anyway?" Stunned at this question, she kept looking at him. The boy stared back at her. Why was she taking so long to answer such a simple question, he thought. She, in turn, muttered the question to herself. "What are you?" Yes, she thought, What am I? "Just a human being, what else?" she said. Biren Baishya and the boy just heard that one word: "human". (32)

There is, we notice, an objectification inherent in the framing of the question: She is asked "what are you", instead of "who are you". Felanee's reply challenges this objectification. Felanee's resistance to a "true Assamese" identity being imposed on her, albeit in order to escape being labelled a 'locust' outsider, shows her as retaining a subjective essence. She is unwilling to surrender her subjectivity to definitions available from society; rather she wills to resolve the question of her ethnic identity herself.

The text, it may be argued, considers ethnicity as a discourse of power propagated by dominant ideologies. It is akin to the view highlighted by theorists like Wan and Vanderwerf: “Ethnicity based on people’s ‘historical’ and ‘symbolic’ memory, is something created and used and exploited by leaders and others in the pragmatic pursuit of their own interests” (7). The text’s correlation of the politics of ethnicity with wilful lawlessness and display of raw power is evident in the depiction of the local events at the Settlement. The signing of the ‘historic’ Assam Accord in 1985 is represented in the following manner in the text:

Suddenly there seemed to be utter chaos in the market place. A group of boys arrived and started grabbing the ducks, pigeons and fowl that were left in the market. They also snatched all the meat at the butchers, as though the entire place belonged to them. It was obvious that these boys had no intention of paying what they had taken. Shouting slogans of “Long live Assam,” “Long live Assam Accord”, “Long live Bhriгу Phukan”, “Long live Prafulla Mahanta”, they started looting the shops. (112)

The text also constitutes in an ironic mode the rhetoric of a “golden” era promised by ethnic ideologues through the representation of a deceiving, manipulative and devious personality of Minoti’s lover. Minoti, one of the women Felanee befriends at the Settlement, had been exploited by this man, the spoilt son of a rich household. This man later becomes a political leader and subsequently joins a secessionist outfit. His manipulation of Minoti with the dreams of “a happy home in the golden State of Assam” (113), can be extended as equivalent to his role as a political leader selling dreams of a golden future to people. Through the paralleling of Minoti’s naive hopes and the incident encountered during the conversation, the text undertakes a virulent subversive attack on the desire for power and dominance that such

manufactured dreams conceal and reveals how even Assamese dissenters are turned into ‘traitors’ by the self-aggrandizing discourse of power:

[Minoti:] “He used to say that this was the only person who could drive out the infiltrators from Assam. He was the only person who could change the whole face of Assam and bring progress. And then the two of us could have a happy home in the golden state of Assam. . .

As they walked home amidst the turmoil, a scene in the corner of the road shocked them. An elderly man was arguing with a group of boys. . . . “You must take back your words about the future of the Assam Accord.”

[Old man:] “No, I won’t. I tell you nothing is going to come of this Accord.”

[Boys:] “Why not? It is traitors like you that talk thus!”

[Old man:] “Your leaders will be busy amassing wealth; Assam will soon become a graveyard.”

[Boys:] . . . “Beat him up.”

[Boys:] “Finish the traitor.” (113-114)

On a similar note, the confrontation between the Assamese lady and the young doctors at the medical camp reflects on the psychologically deadening power of a violent ethnic discourse that renders both humanitarian feelings and professional responsibilities redundant. The Assamese lady who comes to the rescue of Felanee, lying sick, traumatised and untreated by the doctors at the camp, severely criticises the Assamese leaders for propagating ethnic hatred for selfish gains:

Your revolutionary leaders want to lord over the common people. To sit on thrones, and deprive them of their hard earned money. You people call for blackouts in the name of revolution. There will come a time when Assam will have a perpetual blackout; do you understand?" The woman was trembling with rage.

With his hand raised, one of the boys came charging at her. She too walked up to him aggressively. "Yes, come along! What do you want to do? If you kill me it would be like killing an ant. You want to break that person's skull and throw him onto the road. You want to destroy anyone who wants to take Assam on the path of advancement. Your leaders are playing this game in order to enjoy princely comforts at the cost of the Assamese people!" (31)

The imposition of an Assamese identity that is 'naturally' violent to Bengali identity is therefore rejected in the text and a view of ethnicity as politically directed creation of difference is highlighted.

The text highlights the importance of ethnic markers and their symbolic value and the consequent objectification of the human. Ethnic ideology constructs signifiers of difference to recognise, isolate and identify the other. A strategy of the dominant ideology of reducing the human to the non-human, a migrant into a parasitic "locust", facilitates the justification of violence against 'it'. There are several instances in the novel when ethnic markers assume primary importance, relegating the human being to secondary status, objectifying the individual subject. Bulen, a distant relative, warns Felanee of dire consequences if she fails to show herself as a Boro by wearing a traditional Boro dress, a dokhona, as Bulen reminds her, "You have Boro blood in you. You are Kinaram Boro's granddaughter, don't forget!" and orders, "No one should wear the dress of other communities. As of now, all Boros must wear

their dress only” (174). The text illustrates how the display of wrong ethnic markers might spell danger and right ethnic markers could help in being spared, how such markers help in differentiating between a native and a “traitor”, a local and an ‘outsider’. Biren Baishya, a neighbour at the village, scolds Felanee for holding on to her mother’s white shell bangles and pleads with the Assamese doctors not to mistake her as a Bengali, for she was a ‘true Assamese’: “ ‘Didn’t I tell you that they would be your undoing. You belong to a Koch family, yet here you are, with these Bengalis! Take off those wretched bangles at once, I tell you!’ . . . Addressing the boy in the white coat, Biren bemoaned Felanee’s plight. She was a true Assamese, a Koch!” (32). However, the text points out, just being a “true Assamese” was not sufficient, one’s legitimate identity had to be broadcast in times of conflict in order to be distinguished from the ‘outsiders’ and escape violence: when rumours of murderous acts of ethnic cleansing reach the village, Biren Baishya had suggested to Felanee’s husband that “both houses should fly an Assamese gamosa like a flag” in order to be identified as Assamese and therefore spared from violence (17).

Felanee challenges the essentialisation of identity that tries to devour her humanness. She does not wish to part with her shell bangles because she feels an inclination to her Bengali roots; she clings to them in spite of repeated warnings because they bear the memories of her mother: “brushing her lips against her bangles she tried to smell her mother’s fragrance” (15). The ‘otherness’ inflicted upon her cannot overpower her, neither does it inhibit her natural human sensibilities. The gruesome violence she faces does not induce feelings of vindictiveness within her. The text does not prop up any belligerent antagonistic identity as a reaction to the violence. Felanee, along with the other women depicted here, are all survivors, surviving the onslaught of belligerent ideologies, ideologies of conflict and hatred.

The politics of vendetta that ethnic ideology propagates justifies any kind of brutality against the dehumanized ‘other’. However, it may be argued that in text’s foregrounding of the battle between the humanistic attributes of the self with the vicious political ideologies, there is an attempt to depict the rioters, the ‘insiders’ who have imbibed the ideology of ethnic difference, as really the dehumanized beings. The depiction of the violence is so graphic that it seems to project a notion of ethnicity as pathological, not only irrational but as a sort of insanity, at least in its extremes (18-19, 22-24, 38-39). To these rioters symbols of the sacred become profane: the mob of murderers and arsonists had chosen the temple precincts and the temple drum for declaring their ethnic war: “Who would have imagined that the ‘doba’ would turn into a war drum? Who would associate the drum beats with blood, fire, brutal killings and death? (36). The incoherent blabbering of the dim-witted Raghu reveals the incapacity of language to render the horror of the event. However, seemingly meaningless expressions like “people without faces” or “people without eyes and heads” (39) could be interpreted as the text’s oppositional strategy of exposing the rioters as transformed into ‘monsters’ by ideological brainwashing,

He looked retarded with his lisping speech and unsteady walk. But anyone who had seen him work realised his worth. He had basic intelligence.

. . . Lisping more than usual, Raghu started lamenting. “I was in school, Moni’s Maa,” he said, “There were so many people without faces that came at night. . . .”

In the temple the drums went dhoom, dhoom, dhoom and it was full of these people without eyes and heads. I went down to the ditch and covered myself with water hyacinths. And then they set fire to Shibani and Shibani’s father in your house, Moni’s Ma! And in the morning there were dogs and foxes. And there were bodies

like burnt fish!” After this incoherent and staccato delivery he started howling loudly. Slowly his crying turned into a sobbing moan as he continued, “Dadu, Dida . . . under the silk cotton . . . the two heads . . . goat’s head . . . Biren butcher’s shop . . . and red, red blood. More blood.” (38-39)

Biren Baishya, who describes these faceless men as really not men, but ghosts, evil spirits, further underlines this strategic demonization of the rioters: “Come, let’s get out of here,” he said. “This is a ghost village now. Didn’t you hear what Raghu said? By nightfall the place will abound in faceless ghosts” (40).

The text’s rejection of a general overemphasis on ethnic identity is in congruence with its insistence on our primary identities as human beings. Felanee was marked at her birth as the rejected one, by her name “Felanee – the throw away” (9), and in her turn, one may argue, she rejects the forces that try to subsume her subjectivity within the narrow confines of an ethnic identity. The image of her birth, her mother Jutimala throwing the new born away from the fire engulfing their house, is also an apt image, as the fire serves as a metaphor for the fires of vengeance that fuel ethnic violence. It may be said that in spite of several identities trying to claim her, she remains “just a human being”. Felanee may be considered as a representational figure in the text that takes an oppositional stand against ethnic ideologies, but her uniqueness lies in her genealogy – combining “true Assamese”, Boro and Bengali roots in one body and one consciousness. Her subjectivity is never represented as fragmented, or divided along the cultures she has inherited, but as stable. Considering Felanee as an individual, it is possible to trace in her a developing subjectivity in the course of the text. Just as the carnage at her birth had left her an orphan, the burning of the village and the killing of her husband leaves her destitute. It marks a transformation in her: from the

circumscribed though content life that she had led, she is thrown into a larger world. From the identities that had defined her previously – Ratnamala and Jutimala’s progeny and Lambodar’s wife, she can proclaim herself as “just human”. It is the self-sufficiency inherent in the words that also leads her, in her subsequent life at the Settlement, to a greater realisation of being a woman. In the Settlement she comes across a community of women – Kali Boori, Jon’s mother, Ratna’s mother, Jaggu’s wife and Minoti – who strive everyday against the dual shackles of poverty and patriarchy. In their empathy for each other they find the courage for a united act of resistance against the armed forces that threaten to disrupt their lives again. Their individual stories create a narrative of humanity against the powerful discourse of ethnicity that encompasses their lives.

The novel has thus deconstructed an essentialised notion of ethnic identity and the unthinking valorisation of blood descent in the conception of ethnicity through the representational figure of the protagonist. Such ethnicity becomes revealed in the text as an instrument of power in the hands of devious politicians for mass mobilization. The most important aspect, however, seems to be the text’s critique of the dehumanization provoked by the discourse of ethnicity that encourages violence against the ‘other’. Ultimately, however, it is the indivisibility of the self, and the sanctity of being ‘human’, in the face conflicting pulls of identity, that is proclaimed through the character of Felanee:

Felanee kept looking at the boys. What did they want to do? Who will live in their independent country? And who will live in Bulen’s state? What all will they divide? Could they divide the sky over their heads? Will they divide the water in the rivers; the trees, the land, the people? Will they separate Kali Boori from her, and Minoti

from Sumala? Will they divide Jon's mother, Jaggu's wife, Kali Boori and Phool?
How would they be divided? Would they be cut into pieces and divided? (184)

The ostensibly glorious dreams of emancipation broadcast by ethnic mobilizations for an “independent country” or “separate state” are challenged by the persistent questioning that underlines the vacuity and deceit of such claims. The interspersed rhetorical questions highlight the impossibility of achieving a ‘golden era’ by dividing human beings and sowing the seeds of hatred. The desire for an ethnically pure space could be a psychological problem, which can only lead to endless dissection and bloodshed; but equating such an imaginary space with a dream of development, economic self-sufficiency and cultural harmony is downright deceit. This deception is concealed in every ethnic ideology that seeks to eliminate the other. *The Story of Felanee*, therefore, presages the peril of subsuming the human under the ethnic.

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