

# Writing Violence in Postcolonial Assam Ethno-Nationalism and Armed Insurgency in Contemporary Works of Fiction

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**Abstract:** This paper aims to study the unresolved conflict between the popular ethno-nationalist demand of ‘Swadhin Asom’ and counter-nationalist commands of the Centre in postcolonial Assam, by considering the effects of insurgent activities on common masses towards the end of the twentieth century. Primarily, the narratives of conflict in Aruni Kashyap’s *The House with a Thousand Stories* and Arupa Patangia Kalita’s *Written in Tears* shall be read using and critiquing Benedict Anderson’s ideas of the ‘nation’. Besides, reading academics from Assam – Nandana Dutta, Udayon Misra and Sanjoy Hazarika will help to contextualize and understand the political and social situation better as it prevailed in the Northeast.

*Keywords:* insurgency, nationalism, migration, homogeneous homeland, counter-nationalism

## I

“Armed rebellion in the North Eastern region is a medium – a language, a voice – to express their grievances... represents a mindset, a suppressed voice which is deeply engrained in Assam’s psyche” (Mahanta xv, xvi)

The idea of ‘one Indian nation’ which became popular during India’s freedom struggle, received many challenges in the post-independence period from India’s Northeast. On being suddenly relegated to the ‘margins’ of India’s mainland, the Northeast in post-independence era began to encounter problems of slow, uneven development and economic backwardness. Since many tribes and indigenous communities across the region had their separate and unique set of demands and problems, they wanted the creation of separate independent ethnic states which would represent their demands. They also refused to comply with the pan-Indianism which believed in the existence of a single, sovereign, democratic country and rather focused on their own brand of nationalistic fervour. This was soon assumed by extremist groups who also began to represent the people’s voice and their needs. In Assam, these demands were replicated and the foremost radical group was ULFA. In his essay, ‘Separatist Militants and Contentious Politics in Assam, India: Limits of Counterinsurgency’, Sanjib Baruah writes that even after three decades of militant nationalism in Assam, the appeal or attraction of insurgent politics is not reduced at all; in fact, as an ideology, the politics of ULFA is “more powerful than its actual operativeness” (953). He also points out that a political resolution between the Centre and the State still remains elusive.

That being said, I wish to draw attention to the eventual weakening of the promise and attraction of the ideology in Assam in recent years due to the ruthless violence, unleashed in the course of conflict between the nation-state and the militants. The body of literary works of Assam betrays a significant contradiction between chastising the violence of nationalism and implicitly approving of the ideology of militants, which demands a 'Swadhin Asom' with none of the problems that plague the region. This might also be taken to represent the view of most people in the state who struggle between the Centre's counter-nationalist diktat and the ethno-nationalism of the militants. The two texts that I consider in this paper – Aruni Kashyap's novel *The House with a Thousand Stories* and Arupa Patangia Kalita's collection of short stories, translated by Ranjita Biswas as *Written in Tears*, aim to look at the pronged attitude of the common man towards insurgency and its impact on them.

Aruni Kashyap's *The House with a Thousand Stories* considers the effects of militant nationalism and conflict in the everyday lives of people. Set in a remote village in Assam, Mayong – also the narrator and protagonist Pablo's ancestral village, it is narrated in a period of severe political and military strife in Assam. In the summer of 2002, Pablo visits Mayong to attend his aunt Moina *pehi's* wedding. Pablo lives in Guwahati with his parents and Mridul, his cousin accompanies him to Mayong. The past years of conflict between the separatist militant nationalism and the ruling Centre as a sovereign republic resurface in Pablo's narration, drawing upon his own reflections on terror and conflict. This conflict is a *leitmotif* throughout the story. Although he is relatively distant from it now, yet this troubled history never really goes away; it bears an indelible effect on his psyche as well as that of other common people in the state.

The story is irregularly set between 1998 and 2002 – focusing on the decadence that was gradually becoming a part of the social, political and cultural life in Assam. One of Pablo's relatives, Proshanto-*da* tells him that he must leave Assam and India once he had the opportunity, since nothing good could come out of remaining in a place where only violence has happened in the name of revolution. Proshanto-*da's* frustration at being deprived of advanced facilities and inability to get past the red-tape are only some of the examples of the problems that people faced in Assam in these decades. This is also the time when many young people joined militant nationalist groups with the dream of achieving independence from the Indian union. ULFA or United Liberation Front of Assam was thus formed in 1979 at Rang Ghar, seeking liberation or freedom of their motherland from "colonial" India. Initially, there seems to have been support to the cause and a certain pride in the young men who joined it. But the reactions of the people to the militant activities have undergone many phases of change; the ideological poverty of their struggle was soon evident in the dominance of the armed wing (Misra 214) and its gradual distance from the Assamese civil society increased by the repeated kidnappings, ransom collection and internecine killings that wing carried on.

Benedict Anderson's definition of nation as an imagined, political community that envisions a comradeship despite differences can be evinced to begin with also in ULFA's brand of nationalism that was looking for this very comradeship among people that it considered uniform in language and culture. Also, the idea that "nationness" is the most universally legitimate value in the political life of our time and that each successful revolution since World War II has defined itself successfully in "national" terms, is rooted spatially and temporally in the ULFA ideology. Naturally the movements which it carried on may also be considered sub-nationalist struggling to shed their 'sub-ness' someday,

as it were. This agenda inspires the militant outfit to create the necessary the nationalistic fervor – comradeship with fellow members for instance – despite differences within them as a people. This sense of community has enabled people across generations “not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings” (Anderson 7). ULFA’s attacks on people and their deaths in encounters thus were the results of the consolidation of nationalism that almost verged on cruel jingoism. However, sub-nationalist demands in Assam did not arise in Anderson’s homogeneous idea of time, but was rather born in the interstices – where neither the state government nor the centre was able to fulfill their demands. The disillusionment associated with the “revolution” did not come until much later, when the state government also failed to cater to all of the nationalists’ demands.

The news of Moina *pehi*’s in-laws that froze everyone in the family by its menace is alluded to from the beginning and revealed only towards the end. The entirety of the novel draws subtle references to this climax, almost building up to its sinister effects; in fact, it would have a lot to do with the terror of military control that people spent their lives in. In the decrepit, decaying family house at Mayong, Pablo experiences events that change his perception of life forever and also aid his growth. His romantic stint with Anamika and also Proshanto-*da*’s wedding to a divorced woman Onulupa are subplots in the text. Pablo’s comment on the gradually crumbling corners of the house seems to draw a parallel to the condition of Assam during the time – what was once beautiful and pristine is now punctured and infirm from within. The social fabric of Assam at this time is rent apart not only by violence but also superstitions, poverty and bigotry. Even at this point, people were not sure about the final consequences that nationalist struggle would lead to, but they hoped that it would lead to something. He remembers the discussion between his father and his first cousin Bolen-*bortta* about the expensive car of Hiren, a SULFA member. SULFA in Assam were ex-ULFA militants who surrendered arms and went back to the ‘mainstream’, as it were. ULFA or the United Liberation Front of Assam demanded freedom from what they called Indian imperialism; while ULFA struggled with fever, jaundice, malaria and malnutrition, SULFA openly roamed about with arms and were close to politicians. Pablo mentions that ULFA was frequently mentioned in local newspapers and journals, and their respect towards women and initiatives at educating poor students of Assam were given due respect – indicating perhaps that the ideology of ULFA militants still had a considerable support base in Assam. “Asomiya Swaraj” which was different from “Bharatiya Swaraj” even in pre-independence times continued to be regarded separately and was strengthened by contemporary writings in favour of nationalist ideology.

The problems began to arise after dreams and sentiments of a thriving and developed Assam were capitalized by nationalist groups who began to adopt violence to achieve their goal. Some other militant organizations, National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), Karbi Longri NC Hills Liberation Front, Dima Haram Daoga (DHD) grew in Assam along with other Northeastern states. The spirit of independence was always prevalent in Assam and originated possibly in the 600-year-old independent Ahom regime in Assam. Udayon Misra mentions that ULFA’s struggle for an independent Assam was a part of the “Assamese middle class’ quest for a homogeneous homeland” (156). Pablo’s father tells his mother that she would never be able to ‘understand’ why educated young people deserted their families, homes and careers to join the cause of overthrowing Indian rule in Assam. However, although ULFA attracted young men and women and garnered support from almost all sections of the society, they failed to “create a common united

national platform” for the people of Assam. One of the principal reasons for this would be the Assamese perception of their national identity being limited only to the question of language which overpowered the cause eventually (Misra 157). This rather one dimensional quest for achieving linguistic dominance came into conflict with the ever-expanding poly-ethnic and heterogeneous socio-cultural base of Assamese society. Thus, for their own purposes, Assamese nationalism now included not only Assamese speaking people but also sections of tribal populations and immigrant Muslims. These immigrant Muslims, called “Na-Asamiyas” or the “new Assamese” had chosen Assamese as their mother tongue for political reasons or otherwise, which gave the Assamese nationalists a renewed hope at reviving their culture, language and heritage. Even before Partition, there was a “deep-seated dislike” (172) for the Bengali Hindu who were considered the biggest impediment to the creation of a linguistically and socially homogeneous Assamese land. However, Assam had participated actively in the Freedom Struggle, voicing at the same time an unequivocal demand to stay out of the Cabinet Mission’s grouping plan. Following this, the secession of Sylhet, a pre-dominantly Bengali speaking province from Assam made the demands for homogeneity stronger. But, in Post-Partition India, unabated migration in addition to the growing hiatus between the state and the Centre with regard to political and economic questions, concerning revenue earned from tea and oil infuriated nationalist sections of the population. Very soon, insurgent nationalism opposed the state leadership too. Given this situation, the choice for people was difficult – they hoped for a prosperous Assam but were generally perplexed by the demand for secession.

To add to this, the violent means adopted by militant groups now created unrest both at the political level and in the minds of the common people. The demands for sovereignty within the political control of the nation-state began to be equated to a breach of law and order, to curb which the Centre imposed the control of army. Its direct effects were on common people for whom, the presence of the army in the vicinity seems to have become a constant. The army could harass and arrest young men without reason, and this is also something that Pablo’s mother cautions him against, when he decides to go to Mayong to attend the wedding.

When Pablo and his cousin Mridul journey towards Mayong, they are stopped midway by an Assam *bandh*. It was common for militant nationalist organizations in Assam to call strikes and shutdowns in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, as it was usual for people to follow these complete shutdowns, because no one wanted their shops and restaurants burnt down. Common people in Assam had found ways to deal with the onslaught of violence – some even celebrated these days of closure with “chicken curry and Hindi films and drinks” (Kashyap 35). That army personnel frequently patrolled villages and towns seemed to turn into an everyday occurrence; Pablo’s narration brings to light this subtle contradiction of fact and fiction. It wouldn’t, after all, take a lot for the army to shoot down innocent people at sight, or carry out fake encounters, to “plant grenades or an AK-47 beside it and call the press” (37), just to prove that they had gunned down an insurgent. References to the inhumane activities of the army, mostly encounter killings are drawn in various other works too. The figure of encounter killings in Assam in 2011-12 crossed that of even Kashmir or Manipur and was recorded at 87, which steadily rose from 31 deaths in 2009-10 to 54 in 2010-11 (Misra 159). Sanjoy Hazarika recounts an incident in a household in Assam where a beloved son was picked up, beaten and thrown into an army truck while everyone watched in horror. “That nightmare”, Hazarika writes, “in many parts of the state lasted much of the 1990s but, even today, sometimes, victims wake in fear” (Hazarika 128).

Pablo describes poignantly a similar scene witnessed by him in Mayong which stayed with him for many days afterwards. This image would also be representative of the terror that people lived through every day in Mayong. While Pablo and Mridul take a walk in the village they come across a lamppost which Mridul cautiously avoids. On being asked why he did so, Mridul is initially reluctant to answer but gradually Pablo comes to know that a brother of an ULFA militant was killed and hanged over the pole about three months back. His legs and fingers had been chopped off and his face was twisted. He had been butchered because his brother had refused to take the government's money to set up his business and return to society. The horror in the incident stays in the minds of all the people in Mayong, yet the sheer reluctance to mention and the silence accompanying it explains the tremendous impact it bore on them. This had clearly been carried out as part of the encounter by Indian army, thus concentrating on the very important dichotomy – while ULFA had engaged in killings and collection of ransom for the progress of their land and people, there was no reason for innocent people to be killed in retaliation in such a merciless manner. The role of the Centre was questioned. The killers consisted of not only army personnel but also SULFA members.

Pablo notices that there are more army men than local youth all about Mayong which shows that people had internalized the fear and preferred to stay indoors, to avoid being interrogated by the army. The army keeps people entangled in a panopticon, as it were, simply staring and casting “raven-mean glances” at them, doing nothing. Hiren Das, the surrendered ULFA militant and his family are killed by unknown people. Brikodar, a friend of Mridul's is a Karbi young man living in the same village. His sister, Mamoni is a cheerful young girl, attending to her brother's friends sincerely, when Pablo sees her first in 1998. The same girl in the year 2002 is drastically changed and her easy, carefree self vanishes. Pablo later comes to know that she had been raped and tortured by army men when she had gone to bathe in the river for no fault of her own. She permanently loses her sanity by this. When Pablo visits their house, he is interrogated on the way by the army who are prone to questioning any gathering that they witness. After the army men leave, Mamoni shrieks out loud and soils herself, an impression which Pablo would never forget for years to come. It is the ambience of violence and alarm perpetrated by both the army and the militants that terrorizes the people, and although militants are armed with weapons, it is the army that people are more afraid of. The turmoil experienced by people in these years due to conflict of insurgents and the Centre perhaps made them desire peace more dearly than anything else.

Pablo's Moina *pehi* comes to know that one of the groom's brothers is a “terrorist” who shelters himself at her in-laws' house. This piece of information which shocks everyone is the news that has been indicated at from the beginning. The faceless terror of army raids turns into a tangible reality, in which women and girls recount with horror the effects of army operation on other people of the locality. The terror makes everyone believe the rumours and be cautious of army raids and operations that would follow soon after – as they curse their luck for the misfortune, which invariably spoils the mood of the wedding. Moina *pehi* had attempted suicide twice, just to escape police raids and armed atrocities. Finally she died in her husband's home on the day just after the wedding and the family was cruelly affected by it. It was an irreparable loss for the family, serving as a topic of gossip. People hoped that one day, conflict and unrest carried out by ULFA, SULFA, Bodo or Karbi rebels would vanish from Assam but they did not know how many families they would lose in the process. It was difficult to say

how many women the army would strip during search raids, during secret killing operations by masked gunmen who shot mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters-in-law, brothers-in-law, uncles of ULFA members who had not surrendered before that blessed day arrived. (Kashyap 211)

The problem between the two parties worsened too by the Centre's imposition of pan-Indianism over regional patriotism(s). Both government officials and nationalist parties argued that the Centre has always been unsympathetic to the issues of the Northeast. Thus, trying to suppress movements with strong historical roots, as in this case has led to India's "Northeast Experience" (Misra vii). Even after 70 years of India's independence, the history of India's Northeast is inextricably related to the Partition and the string of migrations that accompanied it. The crisis of borders and the term 'foreigner' are contentious in Assam and may be understood as the principal cause of contemporary citizenship debates. Immigration into Assam became even more complicated with the demarcation of an international border between East Pakistan/Bangladesh and Assam. The common Assamese perception was that they would turn into minorities if more 'foreigners' seeped into Assam from Bangladesh and caused a demographic imbalance. The Assam Agitation (1979 – 85) and its agitators and subsequently ULFA complained against illegal migration and enfranchisement of non-citizens. That the two communities were essentially different made any possibility of amalgamation a far-fetched one – a crisis that the Centre has not tried to consider. Yet, there are many people in the state with a hybrid identity – at once, dual and mixed, as Nandana Dutta mentions, which are situated at a juncture, unable to take sides but dreaming and hoping for a prosperous land all the same. There seems to be a consensus about the fact that the main cause of problems for Northeast India is migration. The phenomenon of migration led to the creation of these hybrid identities which found it difficult to place themselves and if they could at all find their "location" per se, they could not support the violence that ULFA engaged in. The conflict, as Dutta writes, was between the self and the other, the host and the migrant – as violence infected this space 'in-between'. In the practices that emerged from the Assam Movement, the migrant ended up being whoever was different from the self. The crises of identity therefore poses a direct challenge to the demand for homogeneity which the comparative majority tries and imposes upon the others and which eventually leads to serious problems for social, economic and political spaces. Nandana Dutta also talks of her preference of English over Assamese or Bengali, because English in Assam is a language of anonymity. The constant grappling with identity becomes easier when one speaks and writes in English – the chances of being identified by language alone become much thinner. Thus, writing in English or at least, translating works into English has brought the issues of the margin to the centre and given the writers from Northeast India a voice that writes back to the centre, as it were and one which enables the rest of the mainland a glimpse into the Northeast.

To get back to the previous argument then, the response to violence has been read in two ways, which merged into each other as days progressed. The initial response of approving of ULFA and considering them as the moral police was gradually subsumed into one of indifference – in which the ULFA alienated and distanced itself more and more from the civil society of Assam by their violence. Over time, people have cherished peace more than their dreams of a 'Swadhin Asom' as ULFA lost to their inner conflicts and the consequent failure of their cause.

## II

When one talks of women as being doubly colonized and marginalized in Northeast India, one is obviously mentioning how women are affected additionally by militancy because of their gendered identity, besides facing postcolonial crisis immensely. Arupa Patangia Kalita, one of the most respected contemporary writers in Assam has always considered the position of the marginalized and downtrodden, especially women. Ranjita Biswas's translation of her short stories, *Written in Tears*, portrays this situation poignantly. The distinctive contradiction of supporting the ideology of militant nationalists but not their violence earned Kalita a lot hostility. She clarifies that she "couldn't accept the jingoism and chauvinism that accompanied that demand" (Biswas 215).

The protagonist in her first story, Arunima ("Arunima's Motherland") therefore, is such a character set at an objective distance from militancy and one who tries to be happy in her marital life. Like Pablo's Moina-pehi, one of her brothers-in-law is a member of ULFA. His is a spectral presence throughout the story – an absent signifier – unsettling the otherwise happy household of her in-laws who are all caring and loving to each other, tending plants and almost making up for the absence of their elders in their pretty gardens and the bees that swarm the trees. Arunima and her in-laws are stigmatized too, although they never sheltered their insurgent son. Yet his presence wreaks havoc on their lives, leading to questionings and harassment by the army. As she loses all her family in a blast, she is left wondering at the implausibility of ever having a home again. Thus her "motherland" remains a myth, as for most other common people and though she tries to stay away from violence, it proves to be an inevitable part of everyone's lives in Assam.

Arupa Patangia has been very vociferous in her stand against the violence and this is perhaps best encapsulated in her story, 'The Half-Burnt Bus at Midnight' as she writes – "The real danger is heralded by the ones with two legs. They could shoot down everyone in sight as if people were birds; they could put the houses on fire if they fancied" (Kalita 153). The bus in the story is the metaphorical representation of the nationalistic vehemence in the state and its consequences which carries its impacts everywhere it goes. Yet this bus was once fresh and unspoiled, as were the dreams of the people. But since it catches fire on its journey from a land that had literally returned to its horrific past, its remains were destroyed with not a single surviving passenger. The irony of the situation was such that the *bandh* called by people who "wanted to establish its right over others" (160) could not stop the bus from being saved, as people kept indoors in order to secure themselves from the violence. The story also mentions instances of violence – a young boy being abducted for ransom, bomb blasts here and there and then its effects which include temporary slowing down of lives of people, only to gear up a few days later.

The hopelessness of the situation gets clearly expressed in Kalita's writings as she writes in another of her stories "Face in the Mirror" that the condition of demanding separation was a self-destructive one, which was "devouring its own body" (131). People were made to pay ransom without understanding the cause or risk gunshots. These years of turmoil saw the growth of hatred in a random manner when innocuous common people were victimized again and again. Kalita had herself faced severe antagonism for not supporting the violence when the Northeast was under a period of severe strife and unrest. The narrator of this story reminisces how a revolutionary young man had darted into her bedroom many years ago demanding money and how on being refused, had reacted with anger and hatred. She has clarified that in spite of her support to the cause of

militants, that is, driving the illegal migrants away and demanding the land for themselves, she couldn't accept the xenophobia associated with the cause. This stand of hers is best explicated in "Surabhi Barua and the Rhythm of Hooves" which visualizes a young teacher at a college, much like Kalita herself – who is cornered and alienated for her divergent opinions on the reckless violence. The dire circumstances force her to escape surreptitiously from the town where she is working, hence the "rhythm of hooves" that take her far away from the town. Her engagement to her fiancé gets cancelled owing to the wrong impressions everyone has of her. One is made to question the idea of the nation and what it entails. This idea resonates with another one of Kalita's unforgettable characters – Zungmila, a Mizo girl in a boarding school ("Face in the Mirror"), who detests the idea of the Indian nation, since army activities at the behest of the Centre have destroyed the peace of their land, tortured and assaulted their women and never acknowledged the differences that they had with the rest of the country. Arupa Patangia Kalita also translated Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* into Assamese and a portion of the story (the tale of Black Cholly and Darlene) has been included in this collection of stories. This episode may be understood with reference to the attacks on the innocent and helpless people across countries. Kalita makes a very important intervention in that she exposes the fact that the common people are victimized for no fault of their own but because, as it were, they are witnesses to the impotence of perpetrators of violence. Just as Black Cholly did not have the capacity to hate white men and so he hated the girl, insurgents too kill common men since their hatred does not find proper expression and because they are unable to oppose the army.

Ayengla is a simple hill woman in "Ayengla of the Blue Hills". She is happy and content in her tiny family, but can never understand why people in the surrounding regions are so engaged in creating a separate land for themselves. But when one of these men turns up at her doorstep demanding food, she cannot refuse him. She continues to supply food to him quietly. The army men raid Ayengla's home in search of the '*deshlaga dushman*' – the enemies of the nation but cannot find any. The jawans set fire to huge areas of agricultural produce to stop either the village men or separatists from reaping the benefits of the produce. Indeed, the villagers become the symbolic blade of grass between two warring buffaloes, between the '*deshlaga dushman*' and '*basti laga*'. Like Brikodar's sister Mamoni, one day Ayengla is raped by the army beside the brook although there is really no reason for it. Ayengla is muted into numbness, only reacting, crying and gnashing her teeth, when she is taken for a bath at the brook. The responses to such armed atrocities are therefore copious and at the same time, extremely complex and distressing.

Arupa Patangia Kalita and Aruni Kashyap, as well as other authors of Northeast India – Jahnvi Barua, Mitra Phukan, Dhruba Hazarika, Tamsula Ao, Easterine Kire – who incidentally write in English, are discerning witnesses to the disturbing unrest in the region, which has gone through years of unmitigated conflict born out of demands for separatism and the refusal to blend with the "mainland". The failure to accomplish their demands in the face of armed repression perhaps gave the insurgents the frustration which took away a lot more than it had initially bargained for, and therefore, this has affected the private and public lives of people in the society through these years. These writings give us the much-needed perspective on the English writings from India's Northeast which had remained an enigma to many. They help to contextualize and draw into theoretical focus much of the post- and trans-national issues that still plague one of the vast uncharted regions of postcolonial India.



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