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Marginality, Hypermasculinity, and the Women of Assam: Parag Das's *Sanglot Fenla* as Chronicle

By Uddipana Goswami¹

Abstract

This article draws on critical feminist methodologies and approaches to focus on hypermasculinist violence against marginalized populations—specifically women—in the geopolitical peripheries of modern nation-states. It treats Assam, one of the eight states of Northeast India, as a textbook case, lending itself to a gendered study of hierarchical, hypermasculinized structures in hegemonic postcolonial nation-states. Basing its analysis on the portrayal of women's bodies in Parag Das's *Sanglot Fenla*—one of the most iconic Axamiyā novels written against the backdrop of insurgency and independentist violence in Assam—it discusses themes of postcolonial masculinities, relational marginalization, and the mutation of gendered relations in the context of ethnonationalist conflicts. At the same time, it also examines how the novel shows a way forward toward resistance and reclamation of power by marginalized entities, particularly women. Underscoring the article's critical analysis of the role of women (and other marginalized constituencies) in violent conflicts are the theoretical assumptions of literature as witness and the writer as chronicler.

Keywords: Marginality, Hypermasculinist violence, Assam, Literature of witness, Ethnonationalist conflicts, *Sanglot Fenla*

Introduction

The 1970s were a decade of tremendous upheaval in India's Northeast periphery, comprising Sikkim and the seven contiguous states: Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, and Tripura. The bloody Bangladesh Liberation War, fought on its borders, often spilled over into the seven "sister" states. A massive exodus of refugees rekindled long-held local resentments against migrant populations, especially since the government on the Indian mainland seemed unwilling to address the issues of demographic swamping and resource alienation that the people of the region were facing. Assam was among the worst affected, and the people here responded with the Assam Andolan that lasted six years between 1979 and 1985.

The Andolan, a mass civil disobedience movement, put Assam on the global conflict map for the first time (Weiner, 1983). It forced the central government on the mainland to sit up and take notice. The covert and overt measures that the government subsequently took to address the uprising targeted the already fragile ethnic fabric of this state. This set into motion a process of ethnic fragmentation; the dominant Axamiyā-speaking Hindu people who were

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providing leadership to the movement were alienated from the other communities of Assam. In the aftermath of the Andolan, many ethnic groups raised their own banners of revolt, mostly against the dominant community but also against the Indian State. And ethno-nationalist conflicts remained endemic here for decades. In recent decades, Assam – and most parts of the Northeast – have entered a post-insurgency period following the signing of ceasefire and suspension of operations agreements between the State and multiple insurgent groups. However, violence has become quotidian here in a region that can best be defined as conflict-habituated (Diamond, 1997).

The cause is not far to seek. The Indian State's response to the conflicts in the region has been typically marked by a lack of empathy for the ethnic aspirations and political demands of the people. This response follows a set pattern: political dissent is met with violence, and overtures for peaceful resolution are made only after brutal suppression has enervated the ethno-nationalist movements and made them amenable to political settlements on the State's terms (Goswami, 2014; Bhaumik, 2009). Thus, benign paternalism follows on the heels of an aggressive approach. Meanwhile, prolonged exposure to State-sponsored violence – legal and extra-legal, lethal and extra-lethal – and the attendant disregard for human rights and civilian safety legitimizes violence in society at large. A culture of militarism has filtered into society, and warlike, exaggerated machismo has become the norm. Crimes against women and using sex as a weapon of war is commonplace. Society is criminalized as violence gets legitimized, and women, particularly, bear the brunt of such violent criminalization (Goswami, 2010).

This article is motivated by my own experience of growing up in Assam during the peak years of militancy and militarization of society. Enloe (2000, p. 3) defines militarization as “a step-by-step process by which a person or thing gradually comes to be controlled by the military *or* comes to depend for its well-being on militaristic ideas.” I have observed, firsthand, the growth of an arrogant, andro-centric militarized culture in Assam. I also witnessed how militarization ties together political violence and criminalization of society. The changing structures and cultures of violence that directly impacted me, as a woman living in a conflict zone, spurred my study of how ethno-nationalist conflicts play out in the person and body of a woman in a warzone, where growing machismo and changing ideas of masculinity and femininity are intricately tied together.

I begin this article, therefore, by looking closely at the tumultuous relationship that the Northeast periphery has shared with the mainland for most of India's post-independence history. In the process, I find that when disparate nationalities and sub-nationalities with varying levels and structures of patriarchal control collide in violent conflict, gender-based relations mutate in conflict-affected societies. Such mutation reshapes existing patriarchal structures: when the newer, stronger patriarchies of the mainland were superimposed on the periphery's patriarchy, they collided and colluded with – and are transformed through – interaction with the mainland. The implication this has on the women of the periphery is the focus here.

Relying heavily on postcolonial, pro-feminist masculinity studies, this article connects shifting gender dynamics to growing (and/or solidifying) hierarchical, hypermasculinized structures in those peripheries of hegemonic postcolonial nation-states that are characterized by violent intractable conflicts and militarism. It bases its analysis on the portrayal of the woman and her body in Parag Das's *Sanglot Fenla*—one of the most iconic Axamiyā novels written against the backdrop of insurgency and independentist violence in Assam. It discusses the novel's depiction of the central themes of the article, namely, postcolonial masculinities, relational marginalization, and the mutation of gendered relations in the context of ethnonationalist conflicts. Additionally, the article also examines how *Sanglot Fenla* shows the way forward toward resistance and reclamation of power by marginalized entities: particularly women.

***Sanglot Fenla*: Testimony and Truth in Fiction**

To establish my argument about the strengthening of patriarchal structures and consequent mutation of gender-based relationships in conflict-habituated societies, this paper analyzes the depiction of the same in a work of fiction. The underlying assumption is that literature is an act of witness: “it can’t help it” (King, 2017). When the works of Latinx writers – like Miguel Barnet’s *Biografía de un cimarrón* (Biography of a Runaway Slave) (1966) and Rigoberta Menchú’s *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia* (*I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*) (1983) – are analyzed as *testimonio*, or literature that testifies to the truth, it is because such narratives are “marked by the urgency to make public a situation of oppression or injustice and/or of resistance against that same condition (and therefore a narrative that accounts for the construction of collective subjects and emphasizes agency)” (Forcinito, 2016, p. 239). *Sanglot Fenla*, indeed, comes close to the guerrillero testimonios of Che Guevara and the former Sandinista Omar Cabezas (Baishya, 2011). The “aesthetics of witness” in the Anglophone literature of Northeast India has been studied critically (U. Goswami, 2020; Saxena, 2022, p. 140). Increasingly, academic focus has also been turned upon the testimonies in the literature written in the local languages of the region (S. Choudhury et al., 2021; Baishya, 2018). This article places itself in the latter category.

The article is also motivated by the belief that the writer’s fiction, as a “responsible human [...] within a social context,” tells the truth; as Nobel laureate Nadine Gordimer (1991), who fought apartheid in South Africa, stated, “nothing factual that I write or say will be as truthful as my fiction.” Growing up in Assam in the 1980s and 1990s, as I did, was to witness the rise and fall of the armed independentist movement led by the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA). A vastly popular Axamiyā novel we all read was *Sanglot Fenla* (Das, 2021)². It is one of the earliest chronicles of the ULFA’s struggle for an independent, sovereign Assam. Written in a fictionalized form by one of the front’s earliest ideologues, Parag Kumar Das, the narrative is woven around the protagonist, Digonto, portrayed as a middle-rung leader of an ULFA-like (but unnamed) guerilla army. The main significance of the novel lies in its capacity as witness literature, written by a writer who witnessed – from within – the rise and gradual decline of the ULFA’s revolutionary ideals. The novel captures the rise of the revolution (“sanglot fenla” loosely translates as “revolution’s soldiers”) in the face of the Indian State’s apathy for a peripheral region where all democratic means of demanding constitutional rights and human dignity are exhausted so that violence becomes the only resort.

At the same time, though, *Sanglot Fenla* is not a glorification or justification of the armed movement, nor does it glamorize the revolution. The novel truthfully – and responsibly – documents the gradual degeneration of the widely-supported insurgent movement into a game of control and power played between (and within) the State forces and the top leadership of the movement, where the movement’s leaders get co-opted and begin to reflect the qualities of the very State they set out to challenge. *Sanglot Fenla* reveals how the use of violence – and the power that comes with it – brutalizes the perpetrators, whether they are State agents or insurgents (Baishya, 2011). At the same time, it also depicts how such brutalization habituates the peripheral patriarchies to violence and induces them to collude with the postcolonial nation-state to create further marginalized and brutalized peripheral constituencies. In this, it testifies to both the necessity and the futility of the ULFA’s armed resistance. This duality—inherent in each other—is best captured not in academic treatises, but in fiction, because it needs to be captured with empathy, not judgement.

² For an account of the popularity of the novel and how the publication of *Sanglot Fenla* became a ‘cultural moment’ in Assam in 1993, read Kashyap, 2011.

Fiction, after all, allows us “to function as more than self-obsessed individuals” and to build empathy (Gaiman, 2018). Social psychological research has established how reading fiction helps reduce prejudice and negative biases (Galinsky, Ku, & Wang, 2005). Affective factors like empathy and perspective-taking have also been studied in feminist peace research for their impact – which is higher than that of cognitive knowledge – on reconciling (Porter, 2016) and addressing prejudices between different groups of people (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008). The hope is that by using *Sanglot Fenla* as the lens through which the reader approaches the post-independence conflictual relationship between the peripheral state and the Indian mainland, they will better understand the inevitability – in the 1970s – of the violent Indo-Assam conflict (as the ULFA formulated it). At the same time, they will also be able to discern the long history of conflict, marginalization, and militarization that has constructed the post-insurgency reality of Assam since the turn of the century, where society has become largely criminalized and dehumanized under the influence of hyper-masculinist systems and structures. This article will focus on the women depicted in *Sanglot Fenla* to trace the gradual rise of these systems and structures. In doing this, it will illustrate *Sanglot Fenla*'s intrinsic value as a text emanating from a conflict zone that bears witness to the mutation of gendered relations and patriarchal structures in its specific location in particular. Universally and in general, it bears testimony to how the matrix of power is in constant flux in conflict-habituated societies that are characterized by an interlaced environment of militarization, hyper-masculinization, and gendered violence.

Real people get enmeshed in such societies characterized by quotidian violence. To find ways out of this web of violence, it is important to view the conflicts through the eyes of the multiple actors, victims, and agents involved. It is easier to do this in fictional or narrative writing – as Das does in *Sanglot Fenla* – where the aim of the writer is to help the reader merge the self with the other through identification with the story's characters (Mar & Oatley, 2008). The novel succeeds in inspiring solidarity and a sense of alignment with these marginalized entities by inviting the reader to view the conditions of marginality — of the people of Assam or its women, for example — from within. This is the first step in effecting reconciliation in fragmented societies so that the marginalized constituencies can work together toward emerging from violence and conflict habituation.

I demonstrate the truth in Das's fiction using empirical evidence drawn from my own field research. During my fieldwork in Assam, for my primary documentary sources, I collected and consulted pamphlets, constitutions, demand notes, journals, and newsletters from militant organizations. My analysis relies on these and is also informed by grey literature, including NGO reports, policy documents, working articles, newsletters, government documents, speeches, and white papers. Newspaper articles and books in the local languages have been invaluable sources. Additionally, in 2012, I interviewed the former ULFA leader on whose experiences the novel was overwhelmingly based; though preferring to remain unnamed, he corroborated the “truths” and some of the facts in the novel.

Postcolonial Masculinities and Ethno-Nationalist Conflicts

Written by a self-proclaimed *rastradrohi* (anti-national) (Das, 2014) who also drew up a blueprint for a sovereign Assam independent of India (Das, 1995), *Sanglot Fenla*, however, is *in no way* a separatist treatise. Rather, it demonstrates how, at that moment of Assam's history in which its story begins, an armed revolution against the state had become inevitable: all democratic means available to the citizens for demanding their rights and dignity within the postcolonial nation-state had been exhausted.

The novel is narrated from the point of view of Digonto, who, as mentioned earlier, is depicted as a middle-rung leader of an unnamed armed organization fighting against the mighty Indian State. Early in the novel, Digonto finds himself debating the rationale behind an armed

insurgency. He questions one of the top-ranking leaders of the organization who had been instrumental in recruiting him: “Can’t we fight for our independence without weapons?” (Das, 2021, p. 55). In response, the top leader, Gohain, explains: “Picketing, hunger strikes, satyagraha: these days New Delhi does not care about any of these” (Das, 2021, p. 56). Such disregard or disrespect for nonviolent means of resistance had manifested itself repeatedly in several incidents during the Assam Andolan by 1987, when the incidents narrated in this chapter unfolded. From police and paramilitary atrocities on peaceful demonstrators in Duliajan, which killed four and injured several others, to the rape of 17 and molestation of 23 more women in a single incident in North Kamrup (Barthakur & S. Goswami, 1990, pp. 219-220), several instances of brutal reprisal are recorded in Assam’s history of the tumultuous 1980s. Such brutality was committed against the people who resorted to democratic means and non-violent civil action – like picketing, demonstrations, political rallies and marches, as well as blockades – to have their legitimate political demands heard.

Gohain additionally reveals himself to be more acutely attuned to the Kautilyan nature of the Indian State that does not merely use force (*danda*) as a means of subjugating the people. Kautilya – “the man who helped Chandragupta build India’s first trans-regional empire just after Alexander’s invasion” – propounded four principles of “realpolitik statecraft” that the Indian State follows till today: “*Sham* (Reconciliation), *Dam* (Monetary Inducement), *Danda* (Force), and *Bhed* (Split)”. These have been used in varying measures to “control and contain the violent movements in the North East” and silence the resistance of recalcitrant factions (Bhaumik, 2009, p. xvi).

They do not mind too much if the leaders of the Andolan become ministers and MLAs after signing treaties, etc. So long as their oppression continues unhindered, who sits in the seat of power at Dispur is not a big deal for them. And that is why, in such circumstances, when we take a superficial look, it might seem as though non-violent methods are also succeeding. Aren’t our own people feeling a huge sense of achievement that we have our own government at Dispur? The State also does not mind. Because the Assam Andolan has not raised the fundamental issues. But our struggle is directly against the State. We’re seeking rights over our own land, we’re asking for control over our own natural resources, we’re seeking independence in the true sense of the term. (Das, 2021, pp. 56-57, my translation)

This is why, he says, they need to resort to armed resistance; because “so long as our struggle does not strike directly at the State, the State is not so brutal.” To reveal the true nature of the Indian State and to gain real independence, then, violence becomes necessary: “We have to learn how to fight. If they only understand the language of the gun, then we must be prepared to reply using the same language” (Das, 2021, pp. 56-57, my translation).

Like Gohain’s fictionalized organization, the ULFA too took up arms to fight the same causes and acquire the same rights (more or less), almost simultaneously with the Assam Andolan. When they additionally declared their independence, the entire military might of the Indian State bore down upon the people of Assam in its full capacity. The Indo-Assam War (as the ULFA designated it) was an asymmetric one, with the smaller fighting force, the ULFA, inevitably adopting guerilla tactics to wage war against the mighty Indian Army. Not being trained in such asymmetric warfare, the Indian Army, meanwhile, lacked the capacity to fight “below (its) own potential” (Olivetta, 2008, p. 45). As a result, in its operations against the ULFA’s firepower, it caused a lot of collateral damage; the war spilled over into the civilian domain.

More often than not, the transgressions into civilian space were also intentional, as when atrocities were committed on entire villages and communities on suspicion of harboring

insurgents or in search of information on them. The bodies of these people became the battlegrounds. Young and old men alike were tortured, maimed, and killed in an effort to enervate the armed resistance and demoralize the insurgents. In the novel, an insurgent recounts to Digonto how, during operations in Lakhpathar, “finding none of the boys [from the organization] the army destroyed all the villages in the area. They indiscriminately terrorized whoever they could find, and wherever, thus showing off their masculinity” (Das, 2021, p. 162). A middle-aged man named Mokheswar “was beaten with the barrel of a gun, taken to the field, and shot in the thigh. Then he was carried to a pond and left in it” (Das, 2021, p. 162). Mokheswar now has a limp for life. Such incidents of torture and military barbarism are borne out by my field interviews with people all over Assam who lived through the peak insurgency years.

Such aggressive machismo that accompanied the Indian Army’s counter-insurgency operations has its roots in the State’s characteristic violent response to the people of Assam and the Northeast. The deployment of military and paramilitary forces “for the maintenance of ‘peace and order’ in the region” itself attests to the State’s adoption of strategies applicable in International Relations, similar to an “interventionist policy” in an “alien space” (Oinam & Thangjam, 2006, p. 74). Such alienation facilitates the violent oppression of the Other who is, in this way, distanced and dehumanized. What is more, securitizing the Northeast has allowed the Indian State to consolidate its patriarchal control over the periphery. Securitization, after all, is “a strategic (pragmatic) practice” that is ensconced “in the social context, a field of power struggles in which securitizing actors align on a security issue to swing the audience’s support toward a policy or course of action” (Balzacq, 2005, pp. 172– 173). As Gohain (and by extension, the novelist) understands, those sections of the rebellious communities that can be co-opted or controlled are co-opted and controlled by peaceable means. The muscular approach is reserved for the recalcitrant elements and opposing ethnic groups who are kept violently engaged by the security establishment. Either way, the masculinist State wins the war.

Women’s bodies, particularly, are transformed into grounds for waging this war: the Indian army used rape as a weapon of war and sexually violated countless women in an effort to hurt the national or ethno-national sentiments of the people of Assam. Their intent, in this, was to symbolically emasculate the men who failed to protect their women, and by extension the honor of their community. That their intent succeeded is borne out by Digonto’s sense of shame when asked to meet with Bina Gogoi, one of the three women in the novel who were raped by the Indian Army in Lakhpathar. These women, the novel’s narrator states, had to pay the “ultimate price in life” for having sheltered members of the organization: “However, Digonto could not gather the courage to lift his head to look at the woman’s face. It was as if, in his heart, he only gave his word to Bina *baideo*, one day we will surely give a fitting reply to this dishonor done to you” (Das, 2021, p. 162).

Countless real, non-fictional women were also raped by the Indian Army during their counter-insurgency operations against the ULFA. Some, like Bhanimai Dutta and Raju Baruah, were also killed after being raped. They were hailed as “martyrs” in the fight for Assam’s liberation. During the Assam Andolan also, it was proposed that the women raped and molested in North Kamrup should “be given the honour of martyrs as they sacrificed what was dearer to them than life, their chastity, for their country” (Mahanta, 1998, p. 47). In the valorization of these women, and in the attachment of the collective, national honor to their individual bodies, lies the deeper question of competing masculinities and the key to understanding how patriarchal structures mutate in peripheries of power that have been habituated to intractable conflicts. The following section delves into these issues.

Peripheries of Power in Conflict-Habituated Societies

When the army rapes civilian women in their fight against insurgents, they are turning women into symbols of the nation/ethno-nation that the insurgents claim to represent and are fighting for. In hailing the raped/violated women as martyrs, the insurgents and the civil society that the women belong to are also subscribing to the same symbolism. Like all forms of nationalism, ethno-nationalism also springs “from masculinized memory, masculinized humiliation and masculinized hope” (Enloe, 2014, p. 93). Public politics centered around national/ethno-national sentiments are also, therefore, “men’s politics” (Connell, 2005, p. 204): the men take up arms against the various hierarchies of masculinity and power above them; they decide the course of the ethno-nationalist struggles, whether as armed fighters or civil society leaders; and it is they who negotiate peace when the patriarchies that dominate them offer negotiations in the end. Meanwhile, the women who play pivotal roles in both the civil and armed movements for ethno-nationalist assertion are not made to feel like an integral part of the process. They are left out of the decision-making processes and their issues become non-issues.

In Assam, women have a strong historiography of political activism (A. P. Hazarika, 2021). They played crucial roles in the Assam Andolan and the ULFA movement equally, often resisting, protesting, and fighting alongside their male counterparts, or “the boys” as they are commonly referred to. However, their participation “was limited and internal discussions with ‘the boys’ or strategic planning with the leaders was scant” (Behal, 2021, p. 184). The Assam Andolan ended with the signing of the Assam Accord in 1985, and the former leadership of the Andolan formed a new government in Dispur, the capital of Assam. However, only one out of 126 legislative assembly seats went to a woman in the new government formed by “the boys” (Barthakur & S. Goswami, 1990, p. 227). Similarly, at the height of armed conflict in Assam in the 1990s, when the Indian Security Forces used rape as a weapon of war, victims like Bhanimai Dutta and Raju Baruah were hailed as “martyrs.” In post-insurgency Assam, as former male insurgents enter mainstream politics, these martyrs are forgotten.

The women, who were treated by the Indian Armed Forces as mere bodies representing the physical markers of community honor, were used to punish, intimidate, coerce, humiliate, or degrade the entire community (Kumar, 2002, p. 129; Kirk, 1992, p. 55). Meanwhile, the community that is represented by its overwhelmingly male leadership also subscribes to the same sexism and misogyny that reduce women to mere “symbols of national victimhood and of the barbarity of the enemy” (Helms, 2013, p. 198). Digonto’s sense of shame in meeting Bina Gogoi springs from this same sexism that his creator, the novelist, fails to recognize or acknowledge. Where warrior masculinity is involved, the victimized ethno-nation can only effectively combine victimhood and heroism in the body of the martyr (Helms, 2013, p. 233); the raped women, therefore, become the means of claiming this unique status for the leadership. It also gives the victimized patriarchy a way to claim a high moral ground.

The patriarchal system in post-independence Assam is grounded on the assumption of superiority over the more rigid patriarchies of the Indian mainland. This is because the periphery’s patriarchy habitually claims that women here enjoy a more elevated status as compared to the women of the mainland. They hold up Assam’s rich history of women’s public activism and social mobility as evidence. What is not foregrounded, however, is the fact that gender divisions are nonetheless “quite deeply entrenched through traditional notions of patriarchy that equate women with carrying the burden of caregiving, subservience to the spouse, and regulated mobility” (Behal, 2021, p. 182). This is very strongly reflected in *Sanglot Fenla*, where the idealized women characters are mothers or maternal figures, who are alternately wise and naïve, or sisters and sisterly figures who are brave but still require male protection in a land terrorized by the stronger, more brutalized patriarchy of the mainland. The women with agency, meanwhile, are either demonized or idolized. But, without exception, all

of the women are reduced to their symbolic meanings and are only there to support or contrast the male characters.

For example, Digonto's mother's naivete about public politics becomes the vehicle for the narrator to justify the need for the armed struggle at times. At other times, her justified (but politically uninformed) anger is depicted as a reflection of the hurt sentiments of the simple and unsophisticated masses of Assam who are ripe for rebellion, but need to be led into it by strong, decisive, battle-ready male leaders like her son. When led by these leaders, even simple boys and common, hardworking but oppressed and poor people like Gonesh are inspired to join the fight for freedom. Gonesh is a lower-rung cadre in the organization whose sister (who remains unnamed) is depicted as being a determined young woman who also wants to join the fight. When Digonto visits their home on one occasion, she stays awake all night guarding the house from the Indian forces. In the morning, she serves tea and appeals to Digonto: "Dada (elder brother), when you start your girls' force, do take me in" (Das, 2021, p. 84). Digonto lovingly rebukes her and tells her to continue with her studies. While the men are away fighting, the women must take care of the homefront.

The ULFA did allow women's membership into their organization eventually. The former male cadres of the organization whom I interviewed felt it was a mistake and the cause of the organization's downfall. The women I interviewed, meanwhile, said when they joined, they found themselves replicating their habitual gendered roles in the day-to-day functioning of the rebel camps. Field interviews and conversations with female cadres reveal that their role "underground" was to cook, clean, launder, and look after the children. The highest female functionary in the ULFA's organizational set-up was Pranati Deka, the cultural secretary. Women were also appointed as teachers and instructors on political ideology to the cadres. Teaching is considered a safe profession for women in mainstream society as well. The strongest female character in the novel, Anju, who is Digonto's childhood friend and love interest, is strong and decisive in her own right, and Digonto's moral compass. She is also a teacher.

Meanwhile, in mainstream society, within political parties and processes, women "do not have the freedom to seek participation in elections and take on leadership roles" (A. P. Hazarika, 2021, p. 196). These women are nowhere to be seen or heard, particularly in post-insurgency public platforms of political reconstruction and ethnic reconciliation (U. Goswami, 2021). Additionally, both in public and private spaces, women are increasingly facing multiple forms of violence. In Assam's criminalized society, women no longer enjoy the same mobility and sense of security as in the pre-insurgency days. What is more, according to data released by India's National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), Assam has led India in crime statistics on crimes against women for four consecutive years. In 2020, the state's crime rate against women was 154.3, almost thrice India's national average (Ramesh, 2021).

Sanglot Fenla, of course, is set against the historical backdrop of the late 1980s and early 1990s, when conversations about the mutations of gendered relations and the rising crimes against women had not yet begun: that social context was only just unfolding. The allegations of violent crimes against women committed by members of the ULFA began to surface a while after the creator of the novel had himself fallen prey to the rising criminalization, normalization of violence, and accompanying culture of impunity in Assam: he was assassinated in 1996 by unknown miscreants, presumed to be surrendered members of the ULFA, or SULFA. In 1998, newspapers reported the torture and murder of a 16-year-old girl, Roshmi Borah, by ULFA cadres (The Sentinel, 1998). The novelist did, however, bear witness to the growth of the culture of violence that made such a crime possible in real life.

Seeking refuge at a teacher's house to escape an army patrol in the village, Digonto senses the fear that had taken root among the common people by the 1990s: this fear was not of the Indian armed forces, but of the organization that had sworn to represent them and fight

for their rights. The teacher's wife warns him against speaking up about the ills plaguing the organization for fear of being punished and publicly humiliated by its cadres: "If they hear you, they'll make you kneel down at the crossroads. Have you forgotten Tonko mastor's plight?" (Das, 2021, p. 147). Digonto is saddened that a section of the 'revolutionaries' had grown averse to paying heed to the constructive criticism of well-wishers. "This is on the path to becoming Pol Pot's dictatorship" (Das, 2021, p. 147).

A few days later, while stock-taking at the now-abandoned camps of Lakhpathar in the wake of a massive army operation, Digonto is confronted by another, far more brutalized face of the organization he had dedicated his life to. As two young cadres who were part of the camp operations tell him, Lakhpathar housed jails and enclosures for people deemed enemies of the nation. These enemies were summarily tried and then tortured and killed in the most brutal ways imaginable. When Digonto is captured by the Indian army later in the novel, he faces such brutalization. At the moment, in his own organization's camp, he reflects: "The leadership had already reduced these promising young men from revolutionaries to the level of killers. The answer to this wholesale degradation of the organization can only be given by the leadership, not by boys like Rana or Naba" (Das, 2021, p. 166).

Astutely, the writer reveals the true potential of power to corrupt. Power, after all, is not a top-down flow. It is a matrix in which each component has agency and is "in a position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power" (Foucault, 1980, p. 98). If the mainland's patriarchy flexes its muscles and subjects the patriarchy of the periphery to barbarism, the periphery's patriarchy also adapts to and adopts hyper-masculinist violence, getting brutalized in imitation. Barbarism, after all, legitimizes "violation of the laws of war in pursuit of a military or political objective" and the "depredations against noncombatants (viz., rape, murder, and torture)" (Arreguin-Toft, 2001, p. 101). It is a conscious strategy of war developed "to destroy an adversary's will and capacity to fight" (Arreguin-Toft, 2001, p. 101).

That the Indian State succeeds in destroying the periphery's patriarchy's will to fight is evident in the large-scale co-option of its cadres. The SULFA, comprised of former members of the ULFA, was granted amnesty for all crimes committed during their insurgency years (Sahni & Routray, 2001). With impunity thereafter, they indulged in anti-social activities, like extortion, intimidation, and other forms of violence, behaving like "a gigantic organized crime conglomerate that [...] abandons its political intent, and that operates substantially under the protection of, and in collusion with, the state and its agents" (Sahni & Routray, 2001). The State also enlisted them to play a significant role in the extrajudicial "secret killings" of active ULFA members and their civilian family members and to act as informants against their former comrades (A. Choudhury, 2016). Digonto is captured by the Indian Army because of the co-opted members of his organization. His creator, P. K. Das, fell prey to their bullets just a few years after the publication of the novel, in 1996.

In the climate of fear that reigned over Assam in the years following the creation of the SULFA, and in the face of the terror unleashed upon the common people by the ULFA as well, violence became quotidian, and women its worst sufferers. Increasingly, they found themselves at the receiving end of violence from the State, the militants, and a corresponding escalation of domestic violence. Because the State allowed the insurgents it co-opted to retain their weapons "to protect themselves", small weapons and illegal arms remained in circulation all over Assam (A. P. Hazarika & Sharma, 2014). Testimonies of women who suffer domestic violence from husbands who are former insurgents corroborate the link between institutionalized and personal violence: "Violence is his ideology for self-determination and he uses it as a tool to determine everything on the personal front" (A. P. Hazarika & Sharma, 2014).

Besides, the structural and cultural changes wrought by years of violent conflict have also created an atmosphere that is permissive of abuse and violence against women. Women experienced Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and other mental and emotional problems

that manifested as a result of violent acts like rape, sexual abuse, and assault. Displacement, trafficking, disinheritance, and disappearance became rampant. Other consequences of the conflict years on Assamese women include increased economic burdens despite loss of social legitimacy, a breakdown of socially sanctioned behavior leading to an escalation of human rights abuses, and diseases such as HIV/AIDS (S. Hazarika & Gill, 2011).

All of this is evident now, in hindsight, during the post-insurgency period. The creator of *Sanglot Fenla*, however, had no means of holding up these conversations at the time. He does, however, presciently depict how the distinction between State and non-State actors was getting increasingly blurred. His protagonist constantly agonizes over the rise of a militarized culture in Assam characterized by easy money and a disregard for ideology and hard work. In tracing these developments, he attests to how power operates in conflictual relationships between centers and margins of power in postcolonial nation-states: through hierarchies of masculinity that replicate themselves at multiple levels even as sub- and ethno-nationalist identities and cultures are constantly constructed and reconstructed in multiple ways, “hegemonic, complicitous, marginalized, and subordinated” (Ouzgane & Coleman, 1998). Such construction and reconstruction take place in confrontation, imitation, competition, or co-option.

Women’s Agency and Reflexivity

It has already been mentioned that *Sanglot Fenla* bears witness to a time before conversations about the gendered impact of conflict on women were initiated. However, women remain at the center of the novel’s discourse on the legitimacy of “necessary” violence and the need for an armed revolution. As Digonto explains to his mother: “We won’t kill just about anybody, anywhere. We don’t like killing people. But if someone harms the common people and the government, instead of punishing them, protects them using their police-military forces, then we will punish those people” (Das, 2021, p. 54). Like Digonto’s mother, the people of Assam had also welcomed the promise of a revolutionary new future promised by the ULFA. An old woman from Tingrai welcomes Digonto and his comrades into her house with the traditional *xorai*, the symbol of respect and reverence in Axamiyā culture, when they stop for a drink of water. She sends them off with the words: “Children, we have a lot of hope from your organization. Our blessings are with you always” (Das, 2021, p. 45).

The women in the novel also testify to the futility of the revolution and the operations of power that redirect the revolution away from its necessary goal of fighting for the legitimate rights of the people, while transforming the revolutionaries themselves into brutalized, barbaric killing machines that only understand the value of money. The fear expressed by the teacher’s wife, as discussed in the previous section, was a legitimate one and it leads Digonto to realize the futility of “the dream of a revolution” in Assam: “What purpose will it serve to create an independent Assam with these boys?” (Das, 2021, p. 147).

While a section of the revolutionaries still strived to hold on to their ideologies, “these boys” had been led astray by the allure of easy money and comfortable lifestyles, subscribing only to the glamor of a revolution that was being controlled from the living rooms of affluent city dwellers, middlemen, businessmen, political touts, and politicians. When the legitimate struggle gets co-opted and moral degradation sets in, it is once again the women who become the symbols of this degradation. These are women like Bindu *baideo*, in whose opulent living room delicacies and fine food are served while press releases of the insurgent organization are being written, and where women like herself and her daughter flirt with the “revolutionaries” that come and go using their home as their base in the city. In the novel’s masculinist imagination, they often become very real threats to the integrity of “the boys” while symbolically signaling the descent of the revolutionary struggle into hedonism, mere pantomime.

In the end, though, despite the loss of direction, despite the many setbacks, and notwithstanding those who had forsaken the revolutionary's way, the novel is not without hope. It ends in the middle of the night, with the line: "Outside, light was still a long way away" (Das, 2021, p. 281). Notwithstanding the seeming despondence inherent in the long wait for the dawn, there is yet a thinly disguised message of hope in Digonto's final act of refusing to be co-opted by the lackeys of the Indian State: his former comrades who were also responsible for his recent incarceration and torture in Army custody. The promise of a new dawn remains, however far away it might be, because throughout the novel, the writer has emphasized the rightness and morality of Digonto's fight, which is the fight for the legitimate rights of the people of Assam.

Indeed, the novel has, at its core, a strong sense of morality that informs the actions and thoughts of its protagonist and those who, like him, believe in the legitimacy of the cause. The keepers, or guardians, of this morality are also women. Before Digonto decided to join the organization, his inspiration was Anju, the daughter of a tea plantation worker who drinks himself to death. Poverty-stricken, she gives up school and takes to picking leaves at the plantation with her mother. She loses her job when she resists an assistant manager's sexual advances. The manager is shielded by the establishment. Anju earns her living as a seamstress and educates herself enough to be appointed a teacher at her former school. She shares with Digonto her dream of a future where the workers own the tea plantations.

Before he takes up arms to fight for the country, Digonto checks in with Anju, who would not allow him to kill birds with his catapult when they were young children. She asks him if he can stay away from his family. He says he can. She inquires if he would fear death. He says no. Finally, she cautions him to think things over but agrees that the organization promised to be different from the leadership of the Assam Andolan who had already been co-opted (Das, 2021, p. 29). Years later, when he returns to visit his father, who has been maimed and bedridden by army atrocities, he visits Anju again. She tells Digonto how the members of the organization in Assam were giving it a bad name:

Seeing the new boys flaunt their money, affluence, cars and all, I sometimes feel you all faced so many challenges for nothing. The organization is slowly moving away from the people. The leaders believe that knowing the organization's ideals and intentions is sufficient. As if there's no need to inform the masses about it all [...] It's as if a few boys alone have taken over the contract to fight for independence (Das, 2021, p. 179, my translation).

She criticizes Digonto and others like him who are still committed to the people: "The fight is here, how does it help if you are in Kachin?"³ (Das, 2021, p. 179). Finally, she vocalizes what many people of Assam silently felt at the time, in 1991: "It's good the army operation happened. The organization will at least learn a lesson" (Das, 2021, p. 179).

The final message of the novel is that the struggle must continue for the "real" people in the villages and in the margins of urban, mainstream existence. The novel repeatedly emphasizes the importance of mass participation in order for the true revolution to occur and succeed. To make this happen and to bring the masses closer to the revolution, it must be made relevant to them. It is a woman, again, who shows the way. Digonto spends the night at Dinonath's house in Bilasipara. Dinonath is the son of poor landless peasants who are oppressed by landowners and moneylenders. Their homes are under constant threat of being eroded by the river. In the morning, his mother chides Digonto and his organization:

³ The first generation of ULFA fighters received their weapons training in Kachin, Burma.

When our son said he was leaving us for the sake of the nation, we let him. But we have not clearly understood what it is you all want. Our people have not seen oil wells or tea gardens in their lives. So, if you all keep talking about oppression there, what will our people understand? If you explain things in a way that the people understand, then they will stand with you. When you liberate the country, will our Moghessor and the other people get rights over the land? Will the bloodsucking moneylenders get any punishment? Will you be able to stop land erosion? Only if you explain to us in that way, we will understand (Das, 2021, p. 230, my translation).

Although the omniscient narrator gives us constant glimpses into Digonto's reflections about the state of the revolution throughout the novel, it is in the latter half of the novel that the narrative itself also begins to focus on the need for reflexivity in the organization in an effort to right the wrongs. Like Dinonath's mother, other characters also begin to either verbalize these reflections or underline the need for them. Anju, for instance, clearly states: "You will have to critically reflect on the situation. Only then will the weaknesses of the organization be revealed" (Das, 2021, p. 179).

***Sanglot Fenla* and Peacemaking**

In the process of feminist knowledge-making and seeking, such critical reflexivity is highly encouraged (England, 1994, p. 251). Feminist research programs relate agency to action; in developing the intimate relationship between thinking and acting (Crouch & Pearce, 2012, p. 33), reflection and reflexivity become central to practice and praxis. In advocating such a praxis, *Sanglot Fenla* is definitely a feminist project. Perhaps if the novelist, Das, had not been assassinated when he was, he could have helped develop in Assam a new revolution where action is driven by reflection and reflexivity draws upon praxis.

As it stands, though, the novel remains, at its heart, a man's novel. Despite the central emphasis on a quintessentially feminist practice, it is a novel built on the ideals of masculinity that most societies are built on. In particular, it depicts a militarized society characterized by "hyper-masculinized identity investments, arrogant ideological claims, and excessive—arguably depraved—military practices." Such societies construct or reproduce "feminized others who must be protected, controlled, detained, or eliminated by masculinized agents of ruling states" (Peterson, 2010, p. 28). The State and its agents as well as the anti-State elements engage with each other on masculinized public and political platforms, while women are reduced to symbols. Public politics, as already mentioned, is, in any case, men's politics, where masculine hopes and aspirations play themselves out.

To find ways out of the conflicts that such militarized societies have become habituated to, it is essential that the women in these societies are not relegated to the margins of the conversations around power, patriarchy, politics, and conflict. As real victims—and the worst-affected ones at that—of political conflicts, women's voices and experiences must be foregrounded if conflict-habituated societies are to break away from the cycle of violence and culture of hypermasculinity that have them in their grips long after active combat has concluded. Today, Assam is in a post-insurgency state, with ceasefire agreements and memorandums of understanding having been signed between the Indian government and almost all the insurgent organizations in the state. However, violence, especially violence against women and marginalized communities, has not abated. Rather, as the preceding discussion reveals, it has escalated in an increasingly criminalized and brutalized society where

humanity and humane behavior are in short supply. If Assam is to emerge into a future characterized by organic peace,⁴ engendered narratives must be produced, and with intention. Engendering, in feminist knowledge-making exercises, involves two simultaneous processes. The first requires deconstructing the gender bias in existing knowledge claims by revealing the entrenched androcentrism “in fundamental categories, in empirical studies, and in theoretical perspectives.” This article is an effort in that direction. The second process is something this article will end by advocating: it involves the reconstruction of “a gender-sensitive theory and practice (i.e., exploring theoretical implications of taking gender seriously)” (Reimann, 2001, p. 22). The reflexivity in *Sanglot Fenla* must pave the way for more such narratives to emerge, but as part of a conscious gender-sensitive praxis. More literature of witness that places women’s experiences at the center of their exploration must be produced in an attempt to locate the “invisible” women and reclaim their “activities, experience, and understanding” (Reimann, 2001, p. 22).

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⁴ Organic peace comes from peacebuilding processes that are “participatory and work at exactly the community and local levels that top-down peace-making may fail to reach” (Mac Ginty, 2008, p. 158)

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