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The Depiction of Insurgency in Assam in Selected Short Stories by Assamese Writers

Dr. Shashank B. Mazur
Associate Professor
Dept. of English
Tuljaram Chaturchand College, Baramati

Abstract:

In the 20th century, India witnessed several separatists' movements at different parts of the country. There were organizations such as ULFA (United Liberation Front of Assam) who wanted a separate nation for the Assamese. These organizations wreaked havoc in Assam, disturbing the public life. These rebels were waging an armed insurgency to topple the established government in Assam. Youths joined this revolutionary organization in huge numbers which was eventually curbed down with force by the central government. Assam was, thus, in the grip of violence for more than 30 years - from 1980s to 2010. Looking back at the insurgency period, the writers in Assam wrote about the tumultuous traumatic past of the state. They wrote about the undaunted account of a war India has been fighting against terrorism. The present paper is a study of selected tales of the insurgency period in Assam, which narrate how the war affected individuals as well as the public.

Key words: Insurgency, trauma, war, short story

India has entered the 75th year of its independence in 2021. The journey of India's independence has been rather difficult as the country had to face challenges of separatism and insurgency. Many states or parts of the country felt neglected and did not consider themselves as parts of the country. The north-east states in India, especially, had the strong feeling of being culturally and linguistically very different from the rest of the country. Thus, in the North-East the insurgencies were born out of desires for separate countries; every state in the region wanted to build a homeland for their tribes. They were angry with the neglect and apathy from the decision makers in New Delhi. In Assam separatist tendencies emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s; it got momentum in 1980s when the ULFA became stronger, gaining control over the majority parts of the state. The ULFA's objective was to attain an independent, sovereign Assam - 'Swadhin Assam' (Prabhakar 72). The central government tried to appease the insurgent group and later took military action against them when they denied to surrender. Eventually, the separatists' tendencies died away and Assam joined the mainstream of India.

Assamese writers have been writing about the insurgency period since the 21st century. More recently writers like Tamsüla Ao and Jahanavi Barua came up with many stories of insurgencies which depict the tumultuous traumatic experience of individuals as well as of the community. The trauma of war had a profound effect on the minds of Assamese. The writers from the region set the stories in the insurgency period and narrate how it affected the lives of the people who were involved in it. In the recent anthology of the short stories *How to Tell the Story of an Insurgency* (2020) Aruni Kashyap, the editor of the collection, brings together several stories of the disturbing era of the state. These stories are originally written either in Assamese, Bodo or English language highlighting the polyphonic conditions



in Assam. On the cover the publisher writes: '[the book] attempts to humanize the long-lasting Maoist conflict that the rest of India knows of only through facts and figures or reports in newspapers and television channels'. The present paper deals with the two short stories from *How to Tell the Story of an Insurgency* to show the effects of insurgency on individuals and society. Anuradha Sharma Pujari's 'Surrender' and Jahnvi Barua's 'The Vigil' have been selected in the paper to study the effect of the trauma of war.

The recent human history has been traumatic. The World Wars, the holocaust and the terrorist attacks in different parts of the world have made the human life miserable and uncertain. The word 'trauma' comes from the ancient Greek, meaning 'wound'. In the present medical and psychiatric terms, 'trauma' is understood as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind. It is the powerful emotional shock which breaches the experience of time, self and the world in dreams and flashbacks. The actual past incident haunts the person in his/her present time. Trauma is the impact of shocking occurrences which profoundly affect an individual's life. The inner tragedy leaves wounds and scars that cannot be easily erased and which influence later behavior in unsuspected and unpredictable ways. The repressions of the incidents in the memory often prove mentally disturbing for the person. Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) first associated trauma with hysteria in women. Later he used the term in the treatment of victims of trench warfare during the First World War. Thus 'trauma' refers to a real physical or emotional blow that surprises the senses and against which the mind and body must defend itself. (Eyerman 43)

The warlike situation in Assam for several decades proved fatal for the citizens of the state. In 'Surrender' the narrator presents the story of Dipok, a former militant in Assam, who has now given up arms and wants to live a normal life. But his past, his former connections with the Assam liberation militants make his life unbearable in the present. The mark of the 'militant', it seems, could not be erased on him. Anuradha Sharma Pujari weaves the plot of the story on the idea that 'once a rebel always a rebel'. The lives of the surrendered militants are not easy in the present time. They are humiliated, distrusted and the complete integration of these former rebels in society is not possible. The narrator states: 'Though he had returned to the mainstream, he had never received a warm welcome from all his members. None of his neighbors would welcome him warmly' (7). Dipok has not been accepted by the society as a common citizen. He is considered as the 'other' and constantly lives in the 'web of suspicion'. Dipok's wish to lead a normal life of a civilian is never fulfilled. Although he has cut himself off from the revolutionaries, he is still considered as 'one of them'.

Dipok is aware of the fact that policemen, neighbors, and even his wife - Sondhya - distrust him. Whenever something wrong goes in the town, the police would interrogate him first. Thus, Dipok is utterly devastated as he realizes that no one trusts him. He wanted to live a respectable life like his neighbor Neelkantha Barua, hence cut himself off from the revolutionaries. He believes that his daughter Moumon would remember him as 'a good person'. Shantonu, his brother-in-law, often argues with him on his surrender. Shantonu finds fault with the revolutionaries and humiliates Dipok for the life he has been living. Dipok is thus torn between the past and the present. He realizes that it is impossible for him to lead a normal life. The narrator depicts his mental condition as: 'If he had known life after giving up the gun would be like this, he would never have surrendered, never given up the path of violence' (11).

Dipok realizes that neither the militant group nor the government would let him live freely. The police suspect his involvement if there is some attack somewhere by the insurgent groups in the town. Dipok is



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for it! The insurgency in Assam literally affected everyone in the state. The trauma of war was devastating that people were just bewildered with its experience. They realized that they were fighting against each other, cutting their brother's throats to earn freedom.

Thus, the selected stories in the paper reveal effects of insurgency on the lives of the Assamese. The war-like situation in the state kept every citizen disturbed. People were caught in such situations from where they could not escape. There was no future for the insurgents and they did not have the people's support. The writers artistically depict the disturbed period of Assam in front of the readers.

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called first for interrogation if such attacks take place. His former colleagues in the organization rely on him in case they need help. When the group kills two military officers, they ride the motorcycle used in the attack at Dipok's house. When the insurgents inform Dipok he is devastated because he knows that the police will never believe him; he will be held responsible for the murder. He laments to his wife: Sondhya, is going to let me live. One day, I left the comforts I was used to with the resolution to achieve freedom. I wanted to live like a free bird and reside in the abode of my dreams, but now I live like a small, insignificant spider, hanging from a cobweb. . . . I know police won't believe me, but what can I do to earn their trust? (13)

In order to prove his innocence, he gives details of his former colleagues to police. The rebels ultimately murder Dipok for being the informer of the police! Thus, Dipok was caught in a situation from where there was no escape. Anuradha Sharma Pujari shows a different facet of insurgency. Once you are associated with the rebels, you are always considered as rebel; no matter what you do the society will never accept you as a common citizen!

In 'The Vigil' Jahnvi Barua explores a mother's emotions as she has to balance her affection between her two sons – a police officer and an underground rebel. Both of them fight on opposite sides of the war and Nirmala being the mother of Moina and Bapukon cannot take sides. Moina, the elder brother has joined the rebels 9 years ago, since then he visits his mother secretly during night. Through Moina the narrator presents the life of an underground militant during the insurgency. Both the brothers loved each other when they were young. However, Bapukon after getting into police services has cut off any relations with Moina. He feels that his brother is fighting a losing battle. He knows that the rebels will never succeed. He tells his mother:

but these boys. . . what on earth has got into them? No government is going to give them independence; yet they continue to fight, appearing from nowhere and disappearing like ghosts into mist. (23)

Bapukon, thus, is aware of the futility of his brother's attempts in fighting for a free Assam. He being the part of the state machinery knows its plans for the insurgents. He informs his mother that the government had been patient with the separatists for a long time but now 'there is to be a crackdown on the insurgents; the army is baying for blood, straining like a dog at its leash'. (27) The mother, too, is aware that the Moina has selected a wrong path and she cannot dissuade him from his motives. She Whenever she hears the siren of an ambulance, she feels that she has lost her son.

The complications in the family arise because of the growing tensions between the two brothers. Although at dapper level they still love and care for each other, they cannot face each other, hence Moina cannot visit his mother while Bapukon is at home. Secondly, Bapukon refuses to get married first. He feels that his older brother should get married before he does. But Moina has no such plans; also, it is highly impossible for Moina to get married because no girl would choose an underground militant as her husband. Later in the story Bapukon who has crossed 30, decides to get married as he realizes that his brother will never surrender and live a normal life. On his wedding day Nirmala secretly receives the news of Moina's death; she is caught in a dilemma now. How would she react now?

The narrator projects the troubled period of insurgency in Assam when people were divided on the issue of the separate country for the Assamese. Several separatist groups were vehemently fighting to gain freedom, while many believed that the dream of the separate land will not come true; there was no need

