

Emotional Consequences of Gender-Based Violence: Influences on Ratnamala's Decision-Making in *The Story of Felanee*

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Abstract

This study analyses how the emotional consequences of gender-based violence (GBV) shape Ratnamala's decision to elope with Kinaram in Arupa Patangia Kalita's novel, *The Story of Felanee* (2011). Focusing on the sociocultural practices of 1940s Assam, this research reveals how GBV, particularly the oppressive norms of widowhood prevalent in Ratnamala's patriarchal, upper-caste Hindu community, profoundly impacts her emotional landscape and ultimately fuels her act of resistance through elopement. By integrating the decision-making framework of Ernst and Paulus with Damasio's Somatic Marker Hypothesis and Kahneman and Tversky's Prospect Theory, this paper provides a nuanced understanding of the interplay between GBV, emotional responses, and Ratnamala's pursuit of autonomy and happiness.

Keywords: gender-based violence, decision-making, emotion, Ratnamala, The Story of Felanee, autonomy, Assam, prospect theory

1. Introduction

Literature not only showcases the beauty of human societies but also reflects their harsh realities, including the devastating effects of gender-based violence (GBV) on individuals. In this regard, Arupa Patangia Kalita's Assamese novel *Felanee* (2003), translated by Deepika Phukan as *The Story of Felanee*, serves as a compelling case study. Set against the backdrop of 1940s-1980s Assam, the narrative centres on three women from the same family lineage: Ratnamala, her daughter Jutimala, and her granddaughter Felanee. Among them, Felanee is the central character, while Ratnamala's story plays a significant role in the narrative. Kalita captivately presents Ratnamala's life within the first chapter. Although her narrative occupies only a fraction of the entire book, it remains crucial for understanding the pervasive and enduring impact of GBV on individuals. Her story sets the atmospheric tone of the novel at the very beginning, which persists until the end.

This paper focuses exclusively on Ratnamala, a young Kshatriya widow navigating the oppressive sociocultural norms of her patriarchal, upper-caste Hindu community in 1940s Assam. The narrative reveals how the emotional pain inflicted by these norms, particularly those related to widowhood, leads Ratnamala to develop a deep affection for Kinaram Bodo, a mahout in her father's household. Their elopement just before the end of World War II becomes a powerful act of resistance against the GBV she endures. However, their union, transgressing the entrenched societal prohibition against widow remarriage, is met with censure and rejection. Deemed a disgrace to her family, Ratnamala and Kinaram are forced into hiding, highlighting the deep-seated power imbalance that defines their world. Ratnamala and Kinaram remained in hiding in the hills even during the birth of their child. Ratnamala died in childbirth. Kinaram returned to his village with the baby. A few days later, Kinaram was found shot dead near the river pool where he and Ratnamala used to fish. Their baby, Jutimala, was kept hidden by Kinaram's relatives. Their tragic story underscores the brutal consequences of challenging patriarchal control and the limitations of individual actions in dismantling deeply entrenched systems of oppression.

Building upon this story, this study seeks to understand how GBV and its emotional ramifications impact Ratnamala's decision-making and autonomy within the oppressive structures of her society. Historical contextualization and textual analysis are used as methods in this study. Through the lens of modern emotion theory, specifically Antonio R. Damasio's Somatic Marker Hypothesis, and decision-making science, including Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky's Prospect Theory, this paper provides a nuanced understanding of how Ratnamala's emotional responses to GBV shape her pivotal decision to elope.

In light of recent events such as the violence in Manipur and other conflicts in Northeast India, exploring the impact of GBV on individuals' decision-making is essential. These events powerfully highlight the pervasiveness of GBV and its devastating consequences for people and communities. Thousands in Manipur have been affected by GBV, and survivors will carry this trauma throughout their lives, influencing their subsequent choices. The legacy of violence persists, leading to both antisocial behaviours and potential acts of resilience. Understanding how survivors cope and what decisions they make next is critical for establishing peace and stability in Manipur in the near future.

The emotional and psychological trauma inflicted by GBV transcends time, affecting decision-making in both past and present contexts. By examining historical contexts, such as Ratnamala's experiences in 1940s Assam, we can draw parallels with contemporary events. This highlights how entrenched gender-based norms and societal structures continue to impact women's autonomy and decision-making. These factors are as relevant today as they were in the past.

Hence, this research is crucial as it provides a framework for understanding the complex interplay of GBV, emotion, and individual agency in the real world, thereby informing effective interventions and support systems for survivors while raising awareness about this global issue. It offers a platform for critical reflection on traditions and customs, fostering empathy towards those affected by GBV.

2. Research Gap

A comprehensive search using keywords such as "gender-based violence," "decision-making," "Prospect Theory," "emotion," "Somatic-Marker Hypothesis," "The Story of Felanee," and "Arupa Patangia Kalita" yielded limited results within internationally recognized databases, including Web of Science, Scopus, and JSTOR. Consequently, the scope of the literature search was expanded to encompass various research on related themes, such as the impact of violence on women, patriarchal oppression, gender, social norms, and the experiences of individuals in conflict settings depicted in this novel. For this purpose, three keywords—"violence," "The Story of Felanee," and "Arupa Patangia Kalita"—were used. A Google Scholar search with these three keywords yielded fifty-one (51) articles and four (4) books (last verified on 17-04-2024 at 10:11 p.m.). However, there remains a lack of research specifically examining Ratnamala's decision-making process through the combined lens of gender-based violence (GBV), Antonio Damasio's neurobiological theory of emotion and feeling, and the Prospect Theory—a behavioural economic decision-making theory developed by Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky.

Although researchers have exhaustively explored themes of GBV and its societal implications, the application of modern neuroscience and decision-making theories is expected to offer a fresh perspective on understanding the complex interplay of emotions and cognitive processes that shape characters' decisions. Such an interdisciplinary approach, in the context of gender and oppression, can provide deep insights into the underlying mechanisms of decision-making. The results of such a study can enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of interventions and support strategies in real-world scenarios.

3. Research Question

How do Ratnamala's emotional responses to the gender-based violence (GBV) inherent in her patriarchal, upper-caste Hindu community's sociocultural practices, particularly those related to widowhood, inform her decision to elope with Kinaram in Arupa Patangia Kalita's novel, *The Story of Felanee*?

4. Literature Review

Existing literature on this novel mainly focuses on Felanee, with less attention to Ratnamala, who is crucial for understanding patriarchal challenges faced by upper-caste Hindu women in pre-independent Assam. These studies explore social dynamics, cultural elements, economic conditions, female subjugation, and violence from the 1940s to the 1980s. Researchers like Biswas and Das (2023) discuss ethnicity, cultural hybridity, and female solidarity in Assam's patriarchal society, highlighting the marginalization and dehumanization of women as depicted in this novel. Medhi (2016), Swami (2020), and Dhileep and Baisel (2024) examine patriarchal oppression and the intersection of violence with ethnic identity. Choudhury (2014) analyses social, cultural and political factors in ethnic conflicts, revealing how they marginalize women. Devi (2018) highlights economic empowerment as a resistance mechanism. Sharma (2020) and Krishna (2018) focus on the impacts of violence and displacement on women. Kashyap (2021) discusses subaltern women characters depicted in this novel. However, the emotional consequences of GBV on Ratnamala's decision-making remain inadequately explored, especially through modern affect theory and decision-making theory.

5. Theoretical Frameworks

To understand Ratnamala's decision-making process, this study integrates four theoretical frameworks: the UNHCR's concept of GBV, Damasio's theory of emotion and feeling, Kahneman and Tversky's Prospect Theory, and the decision-making theory by Monique Ernst and Martin P. Paulus.

5.1 Gender-based Violence

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) defines GBV as-

...an umbrella term for any harmful act perpetrated against a person's will and based on socially ascribed (i.e., gender) differences between males and females. It includes acts that inflict physical, sexual, or mental harm or suffering, threats of such acts, coercion, and other deprivations of liberty. These acts can occur in public or in private. (UNHCR, 2020, p. 5)

According to UNHCR (2020), GBV originates from patriarchal power dynamics and gender discrimination. It is a form of violence perpetrated most commonly against women and girls. It occurs due to inequality, which exists worldwide between the genders at the level of social organization structures or systems. It is a form of violence committed to punish those who are perceived as defying established gender norms.

5.2 Damasio on Emotion

Antonio Damasio (1994) challenges the traditional view of rationality as solely cognitive process by arguing that emotion and reason are

not inherently antagonistic or disruptive to each other. Instead, he posited that they both participate equally in reasoning, and emotion often supports rational decision-making. To elaborate on this concept, Damasio introduced the Somatic Marker Hypothesis (SMH), which integrates his notions of emotion, feeling, and somatic markers.

Damasio (1999) states that “*emotions* are mental states that are characterized by physiological arousal, subjective feelings, and expressive behaviours” (p. 37). While “*feelings* are the subjective, conscious component of emotion” (Damasio 1999, p. 37), “*somatic markers* are physiological responses that become associated with specific emotional experiences. They are the feeling of what happens in the body when we experience an emotion.” (Damasio, 1999, p. 126). Apart from this physiological aspect, somatic markers also have a neural aspect too. These markers work as a kind of representation of these bodily sensations at the neural level in the brain (Damasio, 2003). These markers can be either positive or negative, where positive emotive experiences are associated with positive somatic markers, for example, joy or happiness, but fear and sadness, which are negative emotional experiences, are linked to negative somatic markers (Damasio, 2003). These markers can take various forms, such as posture or facial expression, which are observable and unobservable changes like endocrine releases, muscle tension, heart rate fluctuations, or skin conductance (Damasio, 2010).

Damasio (1999) argued that somatic markers develop through a learning process known as classical conditioning. In this process, a specific stimulus or situation is repeatedly associated with a positive or negative emotional experience. Due to this repeated pairing process, the physiological response to that specific stimulus or situation gets linked to that particular emotional experience. As time passes, this correlation or tie becomes so strong and automatic that a physiological change or response can trigger that specific emotional experience even when the original stimulus or situation is absent.

In our daily lives, when we need to make a decision, the diverse choices available to us automatically trigger or activate different corresponding somatic markers or emotional responses associated with those respective options and thus generate the respective corresponding feeling for each option (Verweij and Damasio, 2019; Overskeid, 2021). By providing a quick gut feeling for each option, the somatic markers help us or bias us towards selecting an option; it, in turn, makes the decision-making process fast and efficient which happens often unconsciously (Damasio, 2010). Thus, Damasio asserts that people decide through this process and not based on reason or intellect alone. Rational decision-making in that context has an emotive part.

Damasio’s SMH can be elucidated through the following example. Consider Ratnamala’s situation. The prospect of finding love and companionship with Kinaram might evoke positive somatic markers, such as feelings of hope, excitement, and happiness, potentially biasing her towards eloping. Conversely, the fear of social stigma, rejection from her family, and the potential dangers of defying societal norms could generate negative somatic markers, such as anxiety, dread, and a sense of entrapment, influencing her to remain a widow.

According to Damasio, the interplay between these positive and negative somatic markers will shape Ratnamala’s final decision. If the positive markers outweigh the negative ones, she may experience a strong ‘gut feeling’ that eloping with Kinaram is the right choice. Conversely, if the negative markers are more compelling, she may feel unease and choose to stay within the confines of her societal role. This example demonstrates how somatic markers, influenced by past experiences and conditioning, provide intuitive guidance during decision-making.

Damasio’s theory offers a valuable framework for studying the influence of emotion on a character’s decisions. In the context of textual analysis, applying Damasio’s somatic marker hypothesis provides a solid foundation for examining the emotional consequences of GBV on a character’s decision-making process. However, while SMH is a neurobiological theory with a detailed functional description of neural correlates, this paper does not aim to explore these neurobiological processes in detail. Instead, it uses Damasio’s concepts of emotion and feeling as a lens to gain a deeper understanding of Ratnamala’s motivations and actions, particularly concerning her decision to elope. Thus, neural correlates are not discussed in this paper.

5.3 Prospect Theory

In 1979, Kahneman and Tversky developed the Prospect Theory. This theory offers a crucial perspective that helps us to understand how individuals weigh losses and gains and decide in times of uncertainty. It is a fascinating concept of economics that gives us insights into our decision-making process. To simplify their theory, if, for example, an individual is playing a game where one can gain or lose money, according to this theory, that particular individual will feel the pain of loss more intensely than the joy of gaining money. It means an individual might take more risks to avoid a loss rather than to achieve a gain. It is known as *loss aversion*. If the individual has two choices that lead to the same outcome, but one is presented as a loss and the other as a gain, the individual will generally choose the option offered as a gain. It happens because a loss often generates a more emotional effect on the human mind than a gain of the same amount. Furthermore, *Prospect Theory* suggests that individuals exhibit *diminishing sensitivity* to changes in outcomes (both gains and losses) as those outcomes increase in magnitude. For example, saving Rs. 5 feels more impactful when it’s a significant portion of a smaller purchase like Rs. 15 (1/3) than when it’s a fraction of a larger purchase like Rs. 125 (1/25), even though the absolute amount saved is the same, Rs. 5. This phenomenon is now popularly known as ‘diminishing sensitivity’. Moreover, this theory asserts that individuals often overestimate the possibility of rare events, and this overestimation explains why individuals buy lottery tickets or insurance policies. This theory refers to this overestimation as ‘probability weighting’.

This theoretical framework is instrumental in understanding Ratnamala’s perception of personal gains and losses. Here, gains include emotional relief, autonomy, family, love, and companionship, while losses encompass emotional pain, trauma, social stigma, isolation, and the loss of autonomy. By applying Prospect Theory, we can explore how these perceptions influence Ratnamala’s choices, particularly

in the context of GBV.

5.4 Generic Framework of Decision-Making

Ernst and Paulus proposed a generic framework for understanding decision-making that comprises four stages: input, process, output, and feedback. In this framework, the feedback stage can also serve as input, indicating a cyclical process. Therefore, this framework essentially consists of three distinct stages: input, process, and output. This flexible framework mirrors the actual decision-making process of human beings and allows for the integration of other theoretical frameworks (Ernst & Paulus, 2005). These stages are universally applicable, and Ratnamala, being human, is no exception. To analyse her decision, it is essential to consider these stages. Moreover, identifying the various inputs or stimuli behind her decision to elope is also necessary.

5.5 Integration of Theories

Understanding behaviour as a response to violence necessitates exploring an individual's decision-making process within their specific sociocultural context. This study argues that to fully grasp Ratnamala's decision to elope with Kinaram, we must consider how she assesses her personal gains and losses in relation to the GBV inherent in her community, and crucially, what role her emotions play in this process. Therefore, this research utilizes an integrated theoretical framework to analyse Ratnamala's choice, drawing upon insights from each of the previously described theoretical frameworks. Without these theoretical frameworks, our analysis and response to the research question would remain incomplete. Thus, we develop an integrated framework using these theories, aiming for a more comprehensive understanding of Ratnamala's decision-making process. This integrated framework is described below.

5.5.1 Stage 1: Forming Preferences

GBV Framework: Ratnamala's experiences of GBV will be examined to understand how they shape her preferences. Instances of physical, sexual, and psychological abuse, as defined by the UNHCR, will be identified and analysed for their impact on her decision-making.

Damasio's Theory: The role of emotions and somatic markers in forming Ratnamala's preferences for eloping with Kinaram will be explored. Emotional responses to GBV experiences and their influence on her choices will be assessed.

Prospect Theory: Ratnamala's perception of gains and losses in the context of GBV will be evaluated. Her sensitivity to potential outcomes and risk preferences will be analysed.

5.5.2 Stage 2: Execution of Action

GBV Framework: The influence of GBV on Ratnamala's actions will be considered. Her responses to patriarchal power dynamics and gender discrimination will be analysed.

Damasio's Theory: The impact of somatic markers on Ratnamala's action selection will be investigated. The role of emotional states in guiding her actions will be examined.

Prospect Theory: Ratnamala's motivation to act based on her perception of gains and losses will be assessed. The decision to elope as a reflection of her risk preferences will be analysed.

5.5.3 Stage 3: Experiencing the Outcome

GBV Framework: The outcomes of Ratnamala's actions in the context of GBV will be evaluated. The consequences of her decisions on her emotional well-being and future choices will be considered.

Damasio's Theory: The role of emotions and somatic markers in Ratnamala's experience of outcomes will be examined. The influence of her feelings on her learning and adaptation will be analysed.

Prospect Theory: Ratnamala's reaction to gains and losses resulting from her actions will be assessed. The evaluation of outcomes in light of her previous experiences and expectations will be analysed.

6. Method

This research employs a qualitative methodology, combining historical contextualisation and textual analysis of Arupa Patangia Kalita's novel, *The Story of Felanee*. To understand the societal forces behind Ratnamala's experiences, this study explores the historical context of socio-cultural and religious practices imposed on Hindu widows in Assam during the early to mid-20th century. Drawing from scholarly works, we explore the prevalence of child marriage, restrictions on widows (including dress, diet, social interactions, and remarriage), and the economic and social vulnerabilities they faced. Our analysis then shifts to the novel, examining how it portrays the impact of GBV on Ratnamala's decision-making process. We identify instances of GBV, such as physical acts, fear, and systematic deprivation of agency, by reading specific textual cues in terms of the UNHCR's concept of GBV, as already described previously. For example, Ratnamala's fear is palpable in her relief at her husband's absence, expressed through phrases like 'she slept peacefully, her little heart singing songs of joy' (Kalita, 2011, p. 1). This suggests an underlying fear of marital relations due to her young age. This aspect will be explained in detail in the upcoming textual analysis section. The deprivation of agency is evident in the forceful removal of her jewellery and the imposition of mourning attire: 'A horde of people suddenly rushed into her room, pulled off all her jewellery, her beautiful clothes and left her clothed in white' (Kalita, 2011, p. 1). These textual instances demonstrate the pervasive presence of GBV in Ratnamala's life. By tracing emotional responses and significant decisions—like Ratnamala's pivotal choice to elope with Kinaram—we aim to reveal the intricate interplay between GBV, emotions, and life choices within this specific socio-cultural context.

7. Historical Background

To fully grasp Ratnamala's position and motivations in time and space, we must first understand the historical context of widowhood in early to mid-20th century India, a period marked by evolving social norms and deeply entrenched patriarchal structures.

Traditionally, upper-caste Hindu widows in India faced severe sociocultural restrictions, which can be categorized as GBV. Due to the prevalence of child marriage, widowhood frequently occurred early in life, yet remarriage for these women was generally prohibited and considered taboo or even sinful (Malik, 2013; Das, 2017; Brick, 2023). They were faced with the choice of living a stigmatized life of extreme asceticism or committing sati—a ritual of self-immolation on their husband's funeral pyres, often glorified as an act of wifely devotion (Brick, 2023). Those who chose to live were compelled to adhere to a socioculturally prescribed way of life that served as a constant reminder of their social status and personal loss. This lifestyle effectively prevented any return to their pre-widowhood normalcy, making widowhood a defining and inescapable aspect of their identity. Restrictions included the avoidance of coloured garments and any form of jewellery, including the mangal sutra and other ornaments symbolizing marriage (Dipanwita, 2021; Brick, 2023). The only permissible attire was plain white cloth—a stark symbol of mourning (Dipanwita, 2021). Furthermore, they were often forced to remain perpetually tonsured (Brick, 2023).

Moreover, as Dipanwita (2021) emphasizes, widows experience severe psychological distress. They were considered inauspicious and required to cover their faces when speaking to anyone outside their immediate family. Believed to bring misfortune with just a glimpse or touch, they were barred from participating in religious activities and joyous occasions like wedding celebrations. A widow was expected to suppress any desire for physical or emotional intimacy and was forbidden from having a lover. Their diet was also restricted, excluding spices, onions, or garlic—foods thought to be aphrodisiacs and thus unsuitable for their perceived status. Their lives were expected to be defined by strict asceticism. Frequently disowned by their families, widows often sought refuge in *Bridhha Ashrams*. There, they lived in solidarity but faced a life of prayer and solitude. To earn a living, they often resorted to begging for alms and singing hymns in temples—activities that provided only a meagre income.

Transgression of these rigid boundaries resulted in disgrace and a perceived loss of family honour for the widow and her kin. These customs and practices made the lives of many widows unbearably painful and pathetic, mirroring Ratnamala's vulnerable position.

Widows generally face four types of social exclusions: exclusion from adequate income, exclusion from the labour market, exclusion from services, and exclusion from social relations (Bhattacharya & Singh, 2018). Traditionally, women were denied property inheritance rights by their deceased husband's family or their own parents, resulting in a loss of economic independence. The 2005 amendment of the *Hindu Succession Act* finally granted them equal rights, although this change occurred long after Ratnamala's time. At that time, services for women were scarce due to underdeveloped labour markets and service sectors. This scarcity left widows with limited income sources, constituting a severe and perpetual form of GBV.

In 1829, the British abolished Sati practices, and in 1856, the *Hindu Widow Remarriage Act* legalized the remarriage of Hindu widows (Brick, 2023). These legislative acts gradually shifted societal norms and attitudes toward widows. Despite these changes, old attitudes and norms persisted due to the gradual nature of the transition and it continued to impact widows negatively. Evidence of such GBV exists in the life histories of notable figures such as Nalini Bala Devi, her aunt Dharmada Devi, and the elder sister of Lakshminath Bezbarua (Das, 2017). For a detailed account, please refer to Trikha Ranin Das's article listed in the references.

However, the practice of Sati was extremely rare in Assam (Das, 2017). Only a single case is documented to date, recorded in the *Orunodoi* magazine. The May 1846 edition states that on April 26th of that year, at Kalugaon near Sivasagar, an attempted widow burning involving the widow of Lambodar Majumdar's elder brother was thwarted by administrative intervention (Das, 2017).

In short, becoming a widow in the upper-caste Hindu society of Assam during that era not only signified personal loss but also marked the onset of unbearable psychic and physical pain. Although Ratnamala herself was not at risk of Sati, her experiences reflect the broader context of vulnerability and limited agency faced by widows in Assam. Her era witnessed a gradual transformation of Hindu social norms, as evidenced by her father reclaiming custody after her widowhood. However, the cultural violence, particularly GBV, that Ratnamala endured significantly influenced her subsequent decision to elope with Kinaram, which we will explore further in the next section.

8. Textual Analysis

Kalita's novel vividly portrays Ratnamala's lived experience of GBV, underscoring its impact on her emotional well-being and her ultimate decision to elope. Her suffering is largely enabled by the oppressive sociocultural norms of her patriarchal upper-caste Hindu society of 1940s Assam as described in the previous section. These norms are so pervasive and stringent that they govern every aspect of a widow's existence, resulting in profound suffering and limitations that disregard personal autonomy and individual rights. GBV is inherent in these sociocultural practices, thus becoming a systematic and perpetual issue. The opening scene establishes her widowhood, describing her as “young..., enveloped in stark white, ... sorrow-filled eyes” (Kalita, 2011, p. 1). This portrayal not only signifies her widowhood but also highlights the specific lifestyle imposed upon widows in her community, regardless of their personal desires. This aspect of GBV is further demonstrated by the subsequent description:

One morning, just as she finished dressing the little rag dolls she'd made for her brother-in-law's daughter, she heard the sound of loud wailing. A horde of people suddenly rushed into her room, pulled off all her jewellery, her beautiful clothes and left her clothed in white. They then forced her to sleep on the ground. (Kalita, 2011, p. 1)

The practice of wearing plain white cloth, a compulsory custom in her society, signifies mourning for the deceased husband and the renunciation of worldly pleasures, reflecting both spiritual beliefs and cultural norms within Hindu society. Had Ratnamala willingly chosen to wear plain white cloth, the context would have been different. However, the passage's description and tone emphasize the shock and forcefulness of this imposition. Her jewellery, which symbolizes marriage, is forcibly removed, and she is compelled to sleep on the ground, conforming to the sociocultural practices of her time. The dolls she meticulously crafted, symbolically representing her own state, are "crushed carelessly and thrown away" by the patriarchal society, leading her to pitiable condition irrespective of her personal will. These restrictive and oppressive practices serve as manifestations of GBV, inflicting psychological pain on Ratnamala, as evidenced by her "sorrow-filled eyes."

Ratnamala experienced GBV throughout her life. In a society like Ratnamala's, every woman is inevitably subjected to gender-based discrimination. Such disparities are inherent rather than chosen. Details of her marriage life reveal it. Although the text never explicitly states Ratnamala's exact age at marriage, but it heavily implies she is a child bride. The narrative highlights it (more prominently in Assamese version) through subtle, yet powerful, means, relying on descriptions of Ratnamala's innocence, youthfulness, child-like behaviour, relatives' attitude towards her and the lack of agency in her marriage. The author frequently refers to her as "young Ratnamala" or "the girl," emphasizing her vulnerability. It raises two crucial questions: Why is Ratnamala so young, and is the marriage her personal choice? The answer seems to lie in the sociocultural norms of marriage prevalent in her society. At that time, upper-caste Hindu society in Assam (and throughout India) preferred to marry off girls before they reached puberty to men two to three times their age (Das, 2017). In such scenario, Ratnamala's marriage seems an imposition on her rather than a personal choice because the elders of the family take such decision where the girl has little to no say in the matter and thus has no autonomy.

Another factor supporting this interpretation is the text's portrayal of Ratnamala's fear of her husband:

She was relieved when the man that she was married to, and who she was so afraid of, hadn't come to her for almost a month. He had been taken somewhere for a change of climate, to cure him of his tuberculosis, she was told. Each night she was alone she slept peacefully, her little heart singing songs of joy. (Kalita, 2011, p. 1)

At first glance, the relief described in this quotation might appear unremarkable. However, analysing the roots of this fear, particularly in light of the prevalence of child marriage practices, reveals a darker undercurrent. The English version of the novel subtly hints at this, but the original Assamese version makes it more intriguing:

Whose glance terrifies, of whom, she prays to God so that he should not come to her at night, that man had vanished. (Kalita, 2003, p. 1)

This translation, while striving for accuracy, highlights the challenges of conveying subtle cultural nuances across languages. The narrative raises a critical question: Why would Ratnamala resort to prayer for protection from her own husband? Is it merely a dislike for her husband, or is there something else at play? Due to her young age, Ratnamala's body may not be well-developed for adult activity and motherhood. This situation often occurs in child marriages (UNICEF, 2005), leading to fear of her husband. While there is no explicit evidence, we assume this vulnerability is highly unlikely; nevertheless, it underscores the potential for sexual coercion and marital rape. Thus, this text hints at the practice of child marriage and indirectly reveals specific forms of GBV that Ratnamala may have endured. Moreover, the tone of this quote is characterized by an emotional distance between Ratnamala and her husband hinting her marriage as an imposition and she is a child bride. Her husband is referred to as 'the man she was married to,' rather than as her beloved husband (Kalita, 2011, p. 1). Such an expression suggests that at heart, she neither loves her husband nor has compassion for him. Consequently, following her husband's death, the restrictions and lifestyle imposed upon her as a widow becomes painful, suffocating and meaningless custom. Further, the description of her feelings about her husband's absence resembles how a child bride might view an adult groom. Additionally, Ratnamala's exclusion from decisions regarding her husband's healthcare underscores her lack of agency within the marriage. Despite her role as his wife, she is neither informed of his condition nor involved in his treatment, suggesting a dynamic reminiscent of child marriages. This treatment reflects her position and importance within her husband's family and express her ignorance of the world outside, a common feature of child marriages where elders make every decision. These oppressive, discriminatory, systematic, and perpetual practices are inherent in her society's marriage practices, making life unbearable for less fortunate individuals like Ratnamala. Such practices rob women of their human rights, autonomy, and well-being, inflicting significant harm.

Due to prevailing sociocultural practices, norms, beliefs, and the stigma associated with widowhood, each widow endures loneliness, confinement, and psychological pain. Among these afflictions, the prohibition of widow remarriage, the stigmatization of widows as emblems of misfortune, and their ostracization as ill omens are particularly problematic. These factors inflict untold suffering not only on the widow but also on her entire maternal family. Furthermore, the sexual exploitation of widows is a significant issue within her community, casting a perpetual shadow of fear over the widow's family. Consequently, having a widow in an upper-caste Hindu family brings sorrow to the entire household. Ratnamala and her family are no exception to this predicament. Nevertheless, Chandradhar Mauzadar, being her father, reclaims custody of her and brings her back to the parental home. But the atmosphere in her parental home remains far from comforting, lively, or happy due to her widowhood. Instead, the family is engulfed in sorrow. Ratnamala's efforts to cope with her grief by keeping herself occupied, such as making rag dolls, are met with the constant mourning and pitying gazes of relatives, exacerbating her pain. This is evident from the following lines of the novel:

Trying to forget what had happened, Ratnamala tried hard to keep herself busy, making rag dolls out of frayed bits of cloth. But

each day more people arrived and seeing her they would hug her and cry. Soon her eyes lost all trace of life and became like two pieces of burnt-out black coal. Her family saw her weep as she sat forlorn, her head down, in hidden corners. Unknown to her they too wept. (Kalita, 2011, p. 2)

This quote clearly shows that her widowhood caused discomfort for her family. Therefore, they decided to relocate Ratnamala to provide her with some relief and to bring a change to her parents' household. This decision, while seemingly caring, actually underscores the process of isolation. At the tea garden, "She felt terribly depressed. She felt as though no one cared about her. Her parents seemed to have abandoned her" (Kalita, 2011, p. 4). Because of Kala Azar, before her widowhood, her father often did not allow her to come to the tea garden. But now, he has sent her to the tea garden for such a long period. She understood that her value in her family had reduced, and this realization brings tears to her when she swallows the quinine tablet. These experiences, a consequence of her widowhood, led to severe psychological distress and a profound sense of loneliness, and worthlessness as evidenced by her cries. The narrative captures the societal stigma and the lack of mental support for women enduring such losses. Emotional responses such as despair and alienation are evident, along with a yearning for empathy and support. Thus, Ratnamala's pitiable state is entirely a product of the sociocultural practices of her time. Despite legal reforms aimed at improving conditions for widows, societal attitudes and cultural practices regarding widowhood persisted in Assam during that era, leading to their continued exclusion and causing psychological violence. Her family's actions reflect this societal context.

As a young girl, Ratnamala's inner self yearns for happiness and autonomy. These facts become evident through her youthful spirit and the effective use of symbols—marked by comparisons and contrasts—in the narrative. Despite constant sorrow since her husband's death, Ratnamala experiences a sudden change in mood while returning to her parents' home by ferry. The sight of 'a couple of wagtails' playing on the sandbank of the Brahmaputra brings a smile to her face, offering comfort and relaxation. This transformation reflects her youthful spirit's longing for carefree joy. The wagtails, in this context, symbolize conjugal bliss, autonomy, naturalness, carefreeness, and happiness. Their presence stands in stark contrast to Ratnamala's personal life, where these elements are conspicuously absent.

The text describes the wagtails' 'constant movement of their tiny legs' raising 'a fine silver dust' (Kalita, 2011, p. 1). Like the 'silver dust,' Ratnamala's life as a girl could have been beautiful and radiant. However, the "silver-sand she had left behind had reminded her of her own silver dreams which now lay shattered. Her mind was empty" (Kalita, 2011, p. 1). This poignant contrast is established early in the second paragraph, signalling to readers that these symbols carry a deeper meaning and deserve close attention for a better understanding of Ratnamala. The sociocultural norms and structure of her Hindu society, which dictate her life, shattered all her beautiful dreams. This quote expresses regret—a powerful emotion that shapes her subsequent decision to elope. What happens in between this transition is the whole story. This journey shows how Ratnamala's agency intersects with the GBV inherent in the sociocultural norms and structures of her society.

The prospect of a better life for Ratnamala is conveyed symbolically through her arrival timing at the Palashtoli Tea Estate. The narrative illustrates, "The bright, flame-colored flowers of the palash were in full bloom in the month of February when Ratnamala reached there. It looked as though the whole place was on fire" (Kalita, 2011, p. 2). The Palash, with its vivid, flame-hued blossoms, symbolizes hope and transformation. The striking imagery of the blooming flowers, suggestive of passion, vitality, and a new beginning, contrasts sharply with Ratnamala's enforced mourning, hinting at her longing for a life filled with colour and joy. This symbol underscores her quest for happiness and foreshadows a new beginning that contravenes the constraints placed upon her as a widow.

At the tea estate, Ratnamala finds solace in the company of youth Kinaram Bodo, the mahout, and the elephant named Ratnamala. She joins Kinaram in fishing by the river and observing deer hunting. Their shared experiences in the natural world of Palashtoli provide Ratnamala with a much-needed respite from her sorrow and loneliness, fostering a strong bond between them. A pivotal moment in Ratnamala's life occurs when she and Kinaram share a moment of intimacy amidst the beauty of nature near the tea garden. The text describes this moment in the following way:

The girl followed and dipped her creamy white feet in the clear water. Seeing this beautiful young girl with her flowing black hair and creamy complexion, Kinaram stood rooted to the spot. Then suddenly he heard a sound. There was a sudden rush of water in the mad river. As the waves rushed in, Kinaram quickly picked up Ratnamala and holding her close to his chest, he raced to the bank.

They were totally drenched with the spray. Their bodies were covered with the sparkling sand. The image of the beautiful black and silver fish still fresh in their minds, they stared into each other's eyes. They made not a sound lest it scare the fish away! (Kalita, 2011, p. 6)

This narrative effectively captures the blossoming of their affection and their mutual yearning for a life unbound by societal restrictions. This moment signifies not only a romantic bond but also may unconsciously empower Ratnamala to challenge the societal constraints imposed on her as a widow.

A few days after the incident, they eloped, fearing the wrath and retaliation of Ratnamala's father. Seeking refuge in the nearby hills, they remained hidden even during the birth of their child. Tragically, Ratnamala died during childbirth without any medical assistance. After her death, Kinaram returned to his village with their baby. However, a few days later, Kinaram was found shot dead near the river pool where he and Ratnamala used to catch fish. Their baby, Jutimala, was kept hidden by Kinaram's relatives, out of fear for Ratnamala's father.

Ratnamala's life in the tea garden is characterized by emotional markers such as comfort, companionship, love, and an aspiration for a better future. By juxtaposing human Ratnamala with elephant Ratnamala, the narrative powerfully criticizes the sociocultural norms of Ratnamala's upper-caste Hindu society. Even in a domesticated state, an elephant can live according to its natural urges, while Ratnamala, being human, is denied the freedom to choose her own path by her society. It highlights the unnaturalness of these sociocultural norms and thereby exposing its drawbacks. Moreover, it symbolically suggests that the human Ratnamala, like her counterpart, also yearn for a contented life, a harmonious marriage, and a supportive companion. It underscores the stark difference between her painful existence and the happiness she experiences with Kinaram. Although not explicitly stated in the text, the positivity and joy she feels with Kinaram should make the choice of eloping with him a smoother path, leaving room for interpretation.

The narrative does not mention any property inheritance rights that Ratnamala possesses from her deceased husband's family or her own parents. In terms of material possessions, she has only a starfruit gold chain. This highlights her lack of economic independence and thereby reveals an economic discriminatory practice within her society—a form of GBV.

Drawing from the sociocultural factors outlined earlier, Ratnamala's decision to elope with Kinaram emerges as a direct response to the GBV she has endured. This GBV was inherent in the sociocultural fabric of her community. Consequently, her elopement becomes a form of rebellion against the prevailing norms and structures of her society. However, this act of defiance was met with disapproval from her society, resulting in shame and damage to her parental family's reputation. The narrative provides further insight:

Quickly, she covered up the jewels with a pillow. How had she dared to take this chain out? Within it was enveloped the history of her grandmother, Ratnamala's, life—a history that the Mouzadar family had wanted to erase. (Kalita, 2011, pp. 13–14)

Ratnamala's courageous and determined choice to elope with Kinaram challenged the patriarchal dominance over women's lives and sexuality. Their elopement symbolized the rejection of societal expectations and the restrictions imposed on women, especially widows who often faced marginalization and exclusion. Their story sheds light on the harsh realities of a society that punishes those who defy its norms. Furthermore, this narrative underscores the entrenched power imbalance and patriarchal control within the upper-caste Hindu community of Assam during that period, revealing the pervasive influence of patriarchal dynamics.

While Ratnamala's decision to elope with Kinaram was motivated by a longing for a life free from pain, sorrow, and the harsh constraints of widowhood, she was also aware of the potential consequences of her elopement and therefore remained hidden from her family. Nevertheless, she chose to take the risk. How was this possible? What role did GBV play in this decision process? How did various emotions elicited by GBV influence it? In the theoretical integration section, a framework has been established to address this question. This integrated approach will now be applied to analyse Ratnamala's decision, and it will be described in the next section.

9. Results

9.1 Application of Integrated Theoretical Framework

9.1.1 Stage 1: Forming Preferences

GBV Framework: Ratnamala's experiences of GBV, including forced marriage and the sociocultural restrictions and expectations placed upon her as a widow, profoundly shape her yearning for autonomy and happiness.

Damasio's Theory: The emotional responses to her experiences of GBV create both negative and positive somatic markers. The fear, sorrow, and sense of entrapment associated with her marriage and widowhood generate negative markers, while moments of respite and joy, such as observing the wagtails and finding solace in Kinaram's company, create positive markers. These contrasting emotions influence her preferences and ultimately guide her actions.

Prospect Theory: Ratnamala's decision-making is influenced by her perception of potential gains and losses from a personal perspective. Her choice to elope with Kinaram can be seen as a 'loss aversion' strategy. Living as a widow abiding by the harsh and oppressive sociocultural norms of her upper-caste Hindu society entails enduring unbearable pain—a significant personal loss that outweighs the potential gain of finding happiness by remarrying Kinaram. Because individuals experience the pain of loss more intensely than the joy of gaining, Ratnamala prefers to take more risks to avoid personal loss rather than to achieve a gain. This decision overrides her fear of the negative consequences of transgressing the established norms of her society.

9.1.2 Stage 2: Execution of Action

GBV Framework: Ratnamala's decision to elope with Kinaram is a reaction to the GBV she has endured. It is an act of resistance against the oppressive sociocultural norms of her patriarchal society. By choosing to run away, she reclaims her agency and freedom, defying both the sociocultural norms and the patriarchal dominations imposed upon her first as a female and then as a widow.

Damasio's Theory: The negative and painful somatic markers associated with widowhood played a crucial role in motivating her. Additionally, these feelings were further intensified by the positive somatic markers associated with the prospect of happiness and autonomy through Kinaram. Both emotions converged unidirectionally, decisively leading her to execute her decision to elope.

Prospect Theory: The perceived loss of autonomy and happiness as a widow outweighs the potential gains associated with Kinaram in Ratnamala's risk assessment. Her strong desire to avert this personal loss motivates her final action, even in the face of potential harmful consequences.

9.1.3 Stage 3: Experiencing the Outcome

GBV Framework: While Ratnamala initially finds temporary refuge from direct GBV, the pervasive nature of societal structures and patriarchal sociocultural norms continues to impact their lives. Living in hiding and fearing retribution demonstrates the enduring influence of GBV, even when escaping its immediate forms. The tragic deaths of Ratnamala and Kinaram highlight the brutal consequences faced by those who challenge the established order and the limitations of individual actions in dismantling deeply rooted systems of oppression.

Damasio's Theory: The initial joy and love experienced by Ratnamala and Kinaram create positive somatic markers, reinforcing their decision. However, the constant fear and uncertainty of their situation also generate negative somatic markers, contributing to a complex emotional landscape that is not fully described in the novel. The tragedy of their deaths underscores the devastating impact of societal forces and the enduring consequences of GBV.

Prospect Theory: The tragic outcome deviates significantly from Ratnamala's initial risk assessment. The unforeseen consequences underscore the complexities of navigating a society steeped in GBV and the challenges of achieving individual freedom and happiness within such a context.

10. Discussion

Ratnamala's decision to elope with Kinaram in *The Story of Felanee* serves as a complex case study for examining the intricate interplay of devastating GBV, emotional responses, and individual autonomy. In this context, the generic decision-making framework developed by Ernst and Paulus (2005) provides a valuable structure for exploring Ratnamala's choice. However, its original form, which focuses on detailed neurobiological functions and their correlates, may not be directly applicable to literary character analysis. Therefore, for the present research, we adapt this framework by extracting its core principles and integrating it with three key theories: Damasio's theory of emotion, feeling, and Somatic Marker Hypothesis (SMH); the UNHCR concept of GBV; and Kahneman and Tversky's Prospect Theory. Our adaptation recognizes that, in analysing a literary character's decision, the focus lies not on the underlying neurobiological processes but rather on general insights and theories that neuroscience can provide as a lens for interpreting Ratnamala's motivations, decisions, and actions in a nuanced and comprehensive manner. This integrated theoretical framework enables us to analyse Ratnamala's decision to elope with Kinaram, considering her emotions, personal gains and losses, as well as the sociocultural restrictions associated with widowhood, all within a single study. Such an interdisciplinary approach aligns with our aim of generating fresh insights by integrating perspectives from various disciplines.

The application of emotion theory foregrounds the pivotal role emotions play in guiding Ratnamala's decisions toward choices that align with her personal values and well-being. It highlights how negative somatic markers linked to her forced marriage, oppressive restrictions of widowhood, and societal stigma create a sense of entrapment and a yearning for escape. Conversely, positive somatic markers associated with Kinaram, their shared connection, and the promise of a life filled with love and freedom shape her decision. These somatic markers, both negative and positive, significantly influence her assessment of options and become decisive factors in shaping her choice.

While negative experiences within her marriage may have instilled negative somatic markers associated with the institution, Ratnamala's decision to elope with Kinaram reveals that she did not entirely reject marriage or resign herself to a solitary life as a widow. This illustrates the intricate interplay of emotions and individual autonomy in navigating challenging circumstances.

Understanding the sociocultural practices prevailing in Ratnamala's upper-caste Hindu society during her time is essential. Without this context, her elopement risks being misconstrued as a purely romantic act—a simplistic narrative of a young widow finding love again. The weight of her decision, her desperate grab for autonomy in the face of systematic oppression, would be lost. The gender-based violence inherent in her enforced widowhood and the potential for further abuse within its confines would be overshadowed.

However, it's crucial to remember that Assamese society, with its diverse ethnic groups, is not solely Hindu. While this factor could have been a liberating force for Hindu Ratnamala, Kinaram's Bodo ethnicity is not explicitly portrayed as a liberating factor in her decision to elope.

Prospect Theory sheds light on Ratnamala's decision-making process by emphasizing her aversion to further suffering and the restrictions imposed upon her as a widow. It underscores how the pain of personal loss motivates her to take greater risks, overcoming the fear of potential negative consequences associated with transgressing established norms.

Although Damasio's SMH and other theoretical frameworks offer valuable lenses for exploring the potential influences on Ratnamala's decision, we must acknowledge their limitations and the enduring enigma surrounding human choice. Geir Overskeid (2021) argues that the SMH may not fully account for the complexities of human decision-making, particularly when considering reasoning and individual autonomy. Damasio (1994) himself concedes that 'logical competence does come into play beyond somatic markers' (p. 196). This suggests that Ratnamala's decision involves conscious deliberation influenced by a complex interplay of emotional and cognitive factors, rather than solely being driven by emotional responses. Therefore, this study utilizes Prospect Theory to examine both aspects: reason and emotion.

Moreover, decision-making in daily life is marked by relevance, attention, and individual differences. While a single reason may lead to a particular choice, other factors and past experiences may have limited to zero influence. Therefore, Ratnamala's case may be interpreted as being guided by romantic love alone.

Given our limited access to Ratnamala's internal thoughts and motivations, our understanding of her emotional state and reasoning relies

solely on textual evidence and inferences. We consider all textual evidence, recognizing that every word serves a purpose. Despite these insights from the integrated framework, Ratnamala's decision remains an enigma.

11. Conclusion

Ratnamala's tragic story in *The Story of Felanee* serves as a poignant reminder of the enduring impact of GBV and the complexities and deprivations of women's agency within patriarchal societies. By illuminating the emotional weight of her decision to elope with Kinaram, this analysis underscores the urgency of dismantling oppressive systems that perpetuate such suffering. Literature, in this regard, can serve as a powerful tool for raising awareness, fostering empathy, and sparking crucial conversations about the insidious nature of GBV. By shedding light on the experiences of those who have endured such violence, even within historical contexts, we can challenge the deeply ingrained societal norms and inspire action towards creating a more just and equitable world where women are empowered to make autonomous choices about their lives and destinies. Ratnamala's story, though rooted in the specific sociocultural context of 1940s Assam, resonates with contemporary struggles against GBV, highlighting the need for continued vigilance and collective action to challenge and dismantle the structures that perpetuate such violence across generations and cultures. By engaging with narratives like Ratnamala's, readers and scholars alike can gain a deeper understanding of the multifaceted nature of GBV and can contribute to a better future where individual autonomy and well-being prevail.

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