



THE PANORAMA OF NORTH EAST INDIAN LIFE: A STUDY OF JAHNAVI BARUA'S NEXT DOOR

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Article Info:

Article Received: 22/07/2014

Revised on: 1/08/2014

Accepted on: 7/08/2014

ABSTRACT

The North East India comprising of Assam, Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh, Tripura, Nagaland, Mizoram, and Manipur is also called seven sisters with its special geographical conditions and cultural diversity that has a distinct identity and unique character. This is a troubled region since independence of India. The origins of discontent have their seeds in the British rule. The literature of this region was over looked for many years by the rest of India as it was inaccessible and found its expression mainly in local languages. However the shift gradually changed after 1980's which marked the change of socio and political happenings. The political upheaval in Assam brought the attention of the world, and subsequently the struggles and insurgency began to acquire prominence. The struggles provided the subject matter for a variety of literary works.

The literature of North East India acquired prominence after the emergence of talented writers in English such as Mitra Phukhan, Siddharth Deb, Jahnavi Baruva and Aroopa Thagadia kalitha whose works were translated from Assamese into English. The close examination of literary works from this region leads to conclude certain broad features. There is a tranquility and stillness in the life of the North East India. Another is serene and vast stretching nature in the narration. There is an unfailing reference to insurgency in the region. The narration sometimes has a strong protest element against the political establishment. Many of the characters from the works are guileless peasants, who work hard to earn their living. Women characters as they are everywhere in any social set up are suppressed and looking for salvation. This literary production was under research and required attention and critical enquiry. Of the many upcoming writers Jahnavi Barua's works invite critical study as a representative of the region.

This paper is a study on the works of Jahnavi Barua that serve as a link between North East region and India.

keywords: *(Assamese, Culture, Dilapidated, Tumultuously, Insurgency)*

Jahnavi Barua was born in Assam and practicing as a doctor in Bangalore. She published her first collection of short stories *Next Door* in 2008. In 2010 she published her second book *Rebirth*. Her *Next Door* was published by Penguin publishers. Her stories are set in Assam and have an unmistakable flavor of North East India. Her stories unveil the life of the North Eastern people on a larger canvass. She not only presents the individuals of the region but generalizes the passions of human beings. In her stories she reveals the characteristic charm associated with the North Eastern Indian life. One critic opines "Jahnavi's stories are woven with intricate emotions and complex patterns that define human relationships. And just as the mighty Brahmaputra River, known for its flash floods, yet is the lifeline of the Assamese people, so also it flows through her stories quietly and at times, tumultuously. There's also a sprinkling of Assamese words throughout, which though hard to understand, gives it a unique flavor"ⁱ.

The stories are drawn from diverse walks of life. They characters are a wife and husband, an unmarried girl waiting for marriage, a mentally retarded child, a sick mother, a rebel fighting the government forces, farmers, and drunken characters. Shashi Deshpande remarks "Like the Brahmaputra, Jahnavi Barua's stories are rich, full and flow with ease, with sudden startling glimpses of turbulence under the placid surface. A powerful and confident voice."ⁱⁱ Janavi Barua in one her interviews says "human relationships and the human experience are what interest me most and thus, how all of the above disparate elements influence or impact this experience."ⁱⁱⁱ Her experiences as a doctor shaped the stories of *The Magic Spell*, *Holiday Homework*, *Honeybees* and *Awakening* in the collection of short stories *Next Door*.^{iv}

The first story *Magic Spell* brings out agony of a child who is unable to bear her loneliness and wants a sibling for company. Jiu the only daughter of Nilima and Gautam grows up in the household feeling bored and lonely. Both the parents work and the child feels neglected. Gautam wants to bring his sick mother from Shillong but Nilima objects saying she wanted to do the job. Though the income of Gautam is enough for the family to live

comfortably, Nilima is unwilling to look after the old lady. The uneasiness continues between Gautam and Nilima who make life miserable for Jiu the little girl. One day Jiu consumes poisonous seeds and falls seriously ill. This makes the parents realize their negligence towards the child and decide to mend their ways.

In *Sour Green Mangoes* the ageing working girl Madhumita is perpetually unhappy because of the parental control. She is earning and looks after her parents. Her old parents are unable to understand her longing for a companion and marriage. Though her impatience is not explicit her body language shows her frustration in life. She finds the life sour, because without freedom and a lifetime companion the spring in her life would vanish. In *Holiday Home* a sick mother yearns for her child as she is steadily progressing towards death. She feels that her child would live alone after her death, and this very idea brings gloom in her life. Amrita, the mother of Siddhartha suffering from chronic Tuberculosis leads a wretched life worrying about the future of her son, though she is well assured of her husband's love and affection towards the boy. Shiva Prasad Barua, their neighbor closely watches their sorrow and shares their agony and lends emotional support.

River of Life is the story of a mentally retarded boy whose mother dies giving him instructions. Santanu the boy whose mother died recently understands very little and thinks a lot. Everyone calls him 'mad' He can write and read a little. He heard about '... flying vehicles that alighted on the moon and circled the stars; sheep that halved themselves to make more sheep, exact copies of themselves; guns fired in America that landed on targets half a world away.'^v He goes by the words of what he has heard and his plight moves the readers. Chandras has says that "many of Barua's characters either feel trapped by their houses and live in bitterness and resentment, or else love their homes and their gardens intensely, and can be found in their vicinity all day long."^{vi}

The land is a major issue in Assam. Many of struggles and conflicts are centered around the land. For the people it has an emotional and enduring relationship. Anupam Kalita is a young man in the

story *Honeybees* who wants to make a living by the little farm land he possesses. However he finds that he must earn money to purchase another piece of land thereby he can he can make decent living. He decides to join the police force which fights the insurgency. His family is apprehensive of his safety and well being. He too while discharging his duty becomes nostalgic: "The same Sun would be setting over their river, gilding the land, the water, his hut with gold. May be his mother was sitting, this very moment, watching the same sun sink behind the dark hills of Bhutan."^{vii} Another story which has reference to insurgency is *The Patriot*. Dhiren Majumdar is a retired employee who lives along with his wife. His son is a civil servant whose perception about many things he does not share. Dhiren's old dilapidated house accidentally gives shelter to an injured rebel. Out of compassion Dhiren helps him with medicines and food. He willingly allows him to escape, in fact for that very insurgent his son has been looking for. A novel hardly concludes without any reference to the fighting in the North Eastern Region. Jahnvi Barua explains the reasons: "A conflict that was fuelled by the sense of marginalization that people of the region often feel, a feeling of being distant from the centre of things. The tensions of a conflict zone, where everything seems harder than anywhere else, do find their way into my writing. This is, perhaps, more pronounced in my short story collection, '*Next Door*'. Also, the sense of being on the periphery, of being on the margins, of being alienated works its way into my fiction"^{viii}.

Another critic writes about Jahnvi Barua's stories: "whether lonely individuals are more common to the North-East. I guess not, but this is the form and content that Barua has chosen to deal with; this is her canvas...the reality that she has chosen to work with. And she does fill a need...the North-East has found another voice and one which writes in English to project the experiences of its people."^{ix} The story *A Fire in Winter* describes the pathetic story of a woman who marries a man for the sake of security and family life. She kills her husband along with his mistress only to save her children and family.

Of all the stories of Jahnvi Barua *Next Door* is the shortest and has a peculiar ending, in which the narrator tells the story of a people staying next door.

Three people live in the house, a mother, an obedient daughter, a reckless, irresponsible and cruel elder son. Every day the day starts with the shouting and bullying of the brother much to the resentment of the ever hard working mother. Though it is not clear it is evident from the cries of the daughter that the brother molests his sister and makes her pregnant. The neighbors are curious to know the events in the *Next Door* but reluctant to help sister. Jahnvi presents the ever present onlookers and their morbid curiosity.

Parbina Rashid says that her collection of stories "is a heavy dose of the Assamese culture, expression, simple and uncomplicated desires of the people of this region that comes through her 11 short stories. She takes inspiration from everyday life and events and manages to touch her readers' heart with simplistic narration."^x The language used by Jahnvi Barua is effortless and lucid. She writes in *Holiday Home* "There was entire pharmacy stuffed into the drawers of my bedside table. Through the long years I had grown to be an expert at ministering to myself; I dug out some paracetamol and some and antihistamines. A cocktail of that would do the trick. No need to send for a doctor. I had less and less patience with their probing and prying these days."^{xi} Another example of her writing is *Sour Green Mangoes*: "Madhumita bends down to pick up a piece. She puts it into her mouth. She closes her eyes. The flesh of the fruit is soft against her tongue. It is soft and tart and salty and her mouth is flooded with tiny fluid. An unexpected warmth spreads through her whole being."^{xii} After reading Jahnvi Barua's *Next Door* it gives an impression about the region in her own words "However, more than this recent conflict, what I find informs my writing are other things about the region: the magnificent natural beauty; the gentle, calm people who live here. Many things have changed with the years of relentless conflict and violence appeared in valleys where it was once unknown, but still the land is beautiful and the people gentler than many."^{xiii} The upcoming works like Barua's work serve as a link between North East region and India. Her work reiterates that North East Indian literature has finally entered the global stage as well as main stream Indian literary scene.

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