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Women Novelist from North East India: A study of Jahnabi Barua's Rebirth and Undertow

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Abstract: The writings from the North East India have captured much popularity in the contemporary times. The writings with its varied themes of multi-ethnic and multi-lingual cultures have raised curiosity and attracted the readers from all over the country and abroad. In the emerging writings from the North East India, women novelists have contributed a lot to enrich the literature from different aspects. The women novelists like Easterine Kire, Tamsula Ao, Mitra Phukan, Jahnabi Barua, Mamang Dai and others have enriched the literature of the region with their contributions. The novels produced by these women novelist carry different concerns like love for nature, myth, tradition, culture, conflict, violence's, and silenced voices, etc., which are true to the region. This paper attempts to focus on the different themes of Jahnabi Barua's novels Rebirth and Undertow.

Keywords: North East, Women, Novelist, Literature, Novels.

Introduction

The North East Region of India is known for its complex, multilingual and multiethnic cultures and diverse races. Since the last few decades, the North East region has been witnessing its development and emergence in the various field of literature. The writers from the region came up with their own distinctive and dominant themes and enriched the literature of the North East India. The women writers of the region did not lack behind in their contributions to the writings from the North East India. In the recent times, there has been an increased in the writings of novels, poems and short stories. The women writers in English like Easterine Kire, Tamsula Ao, Mamang Dai, Mitra Phukan, Jahnabi Barua, Anjum Hassan, Daisy Hassan and many others have contributed a lot to the literature from the North East region. Their writings are of various distinctive and complex thematic concerns like feminist consciousness, gender issues, silenced voices, oppression, ecological degradation, peace, conflict, violence and so on. Dr. Luitkham is right to say: In the surge of literature from North East, many contemporary works are by women writers. The contribution shows the interest and development of women in the field of literature. In the past, literature of the North East region was as observed by the people from outside or from the eyes of men. Dr. Luitkham further says, these contemporary women writers are therefore essential.... through their literary works. (Luitkham 2020, p 2). With the start of the writings by women writers, various issues related to women and children came to light which always remained suppressed.

The present paper is confined to the major themes of Jahnavi Barua's novels, *Rebirth* and *Undertow*.

Jahnavi Barua's *Rebirth* is a story of a young woman, Kaberi, who is obedient, meek, and passive and hails from Assam but later on, settles in Bangalore with her husband. The story is a wonderful narration of the protagonist to her unborn child. One of the major themes of the novel is marriage. Kaberi as an obedient daughter marries Ranjit (Ron), as arranged by her parents. After their marriage, both Kaberi and Ron settle in Bangalore. Kaberi narrates her situation when she is to meet her husband, Ron for the first time:

I suppose any young girl prodded into a marriage arranged by her parents would be apprehensive. In this case, I was paralysed by anxiety. You see a wide and deep chasm stretched between your father's family and mine. While my family was solidly middle-class, my father a poorly paid school teacher, your father's family was a prosperous one. (Barua 2010,69-70)

All parents wish that their daughters to get married to man who is financially sound and have higher status than theirs. Kaberi, no doubt is married to a rich family but suffers from a dissonant married life. During her stay in Bangalore, she discovers her husband's extra marital affair who every now and then threatens to leave her. Kaberi says he has abandoned his bed for a new one, without a thought. Does he ever miss the bed, I wonder? That he does not miss me yet goes without saying although he calls every week to ask if I was all right for money and if I needed.... after all is an arranged marriage. (Barua 2010, 6). Kaberi is betrayed by her husband which she never expected and as the marriage was an arranged one Kaberi's husband, Ron was careful, and he calls her every week if she needed anything.

Kaberi's husband, Ron, not only betrayed her but also tortured her physically and mentally. Kaberi, like all other traditional wife, bears everything silently and tries to adjust herself with the hope that one day her unfaithful husband will come back to her, care for her and love her. Kaberi discovers her pregnancy and thought of not disclosing it to anyone, even to Ron. She says to her unborn child: My first thought, as I sat up, was to call and tell your father; after all I still loved him, it was he who had said that he had stopped loving me and besides I knew how much he would love you. I almost called, the cell phone was in my hand, but I didn't. (Barua 2010,7).

Ron comes to know about Kaberi's pregnancy, he changed his mind and he says that he would like to live with her but at the same time he also says that he won't leave the other woman. Kaberi remains suppressed for a long time but her transformation towards motherhood changes her. She gathers courage and now no longer remains silent which results in arguments between them, 'That won't do', I say, my voice stiff. 'What do you mean, won't do?'.....'Who are you to tell me what to do? Ron's voice is rising now but I am not afraid. (Barua 2010, 85). Their arguments sometimes become terrible as now Kaberi is no longer afraid nor she remains silent. In the beginning, Kaberi is found to be timid, vulnerable, dependent and powerless but towards the end we find that Kaberi is a

transformed woman. She is fearless and selfredeemed and starts a new beginning breaking the barriers that held her back. In the novel we find another problematic marriage relationship and that is of Kaberi's parents. Kaberi comes to know about the unhappy relationship when she comes to Assam, to her parental house at the death of her father. One night, in course of conversation with her mother, Kaberi's mother said in tears, 'Your father had wanted to marry someone else. But she was of another religion and the family would not let him and found me instead' (Barua 2010, 163). Kaberi's mother further said when she was asked whether her father loved her. She said, what is love Kaberi? Kaberi's mother said that there was no love between them and it was a kind of adjustment and understanding. He only looked after her and in public he showed his respect towards her. The marriage of Kaberi's parents was a kind of adjustment which Kaberi never knew. She feels sad for her mother and thinks how the relationship continued without love and without any complains. Barua beautifully handles the theme of marriage, the traditional, the oppressed and the transformation. In *Undertow*, too Barua handles beautifully the theme of marriage. The marriage is between Rukmini, who is from Assam and Alex from Kerala. The marriage was a love marriage and an inter caste one and Rukmini's mother is fully against the marriage. She says, a man who is not of her religion, let alone her caste, nor of her race, not from any religion remotely nears her, and a man whose skin was dark, to make matter worse You will marry him over my dead body. (Barua 2020,5). She would never accept her daughter's marriage with a man from other caste. After marriage, Rukmini, too moves away to Bangalore with Alex. A daughter, Loya was born to them but Rukmini's marriage did not last long and they got divorced. Rukmini lives with her daughter and she is happy performing her job as a doctor. Her job and her identity as a doctor give strength to face everything.

Self redemption is another major theme in the novel, *Rebirth*. Kaberi, the narrator of the novel, in the beginning of the story was a traditional young woman. She marries Ron according to the choice of her parents.

After her marriage she settles in Bangalore with her husband. She is presented as calm, submissive and timid from her childhood. Barua represents Kaberi with the qualities of a traditional woman who loves wearing traditional dress of her culture and tries to maintain good relationship with her friends and in-laws. I am in a black cotton mekhla sador, one of my favourites, and I feel unaccountably revitalized. (Barua 2010, 98) While living in Bangalore, Kaberi discovers her husband's relationship with another woman but she did not disclose this either to her parents or to her in laws. She tries to adjust herself bearing the physical and mental torture on her by her husband. She was in the hope that one day everything will be alright. Ron begins to stay with the other woman and Kaberi led a lonely life seeking happiness from the green and natural environment of Bangalore. She observes the birds and flowers which gives her peace and tranquillity. She also utilised her lonely time in writing books. My work now forces me to relinquish my bed; I sit every morning in the computer. This is a new challenge, for I wrote my stories longhand

sitting at the dining table. (Barua 2010, 111). Moreover, the reminiscence of her homeland, Assam and the time she spent with her very close friend, Joya, gave her immense happiness. She longs to be in Kaziranga again and again which she beautifully narrates to her unborn child I am seized by an uncontrollable urge to get away from all that has become too familiar. Those trips to Kaziranga always left me feeling resurrected; (Barua 2010, 46).

Kaberi's journey to motherhood gives her immense happiness. The feminine experience and sensibility of motherhood gives courage and power to change Kaberi to a fearless and self redeemed new woman and start a new beginning. Towards the end, Barua presented Kaberi's mother as a changed woman who has broken the traditional barriers. When Kaberi shared her disturbed relationship with her mother during her visit to Guwahati at her father's death, her mother was not in the favour of breaking the relationship with her husband, Ron. 'You never told us, Kaberi' What would you have done if I had told you? Would you have asked me to come back home?' 'I don't know, child, I don't know'. 'What will you do now? What do you think I should do Ma?' 'Should I leave him, Ma?' (Barua 2010, 182-183). Kaberi's mother says: 'No, no, not with the child on its way, it needs a father his name to carry' (Barua 2010, 185). But she is changed now. She gathered courage to tell Kaberi through Bina Mahi and Bipul Moha: "Well, what is wanted us to tell you is that you are welcome to come back and stay with her; there is always a home for you in Guwahati. In fact, she wants to gift it right now to you. For you and the child." (Barua 2010, 195). Rukmini in *Undertow* is a doctor. She is separated from her husband and she earns her livelihood, as doctor. Her job gives her strength to be happy. Rukmini lives with Loya happily in Bangalore. Rukmini has not changed her surname after her marriage as it becomes difficult to change all her certificate. Alex left Rukmini, but she is happy for her identity. She once said to Loya, it was a good thing she had not changed her name after all. (Barua 2020, 55). Rukmini has her self-identity; she is no longer a passive woman but an energetic one to manage everything. Rukmini never visited her native place, her parental house after her departure to Bangalore. Its Loya, Rukmini's daughter, visits Assam for her research works without informing her mother. 'Where are you Loya?' It is late'. Loya wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. 'In Guwahati,' she said. What? You are joking, right?' No Ma. I am in Guwahati. In Koka's house'. (Barua 2020, 53) Rukmini also wanted Loya's visit to her native land where she was born and brought up and also thrown her out. She was also sad at the separation of Loya.

Ecological consciousness forms a prominent theme in *Rebirth*. We find Jahnvi Barua's wonderful handling of the nature and the landscape. The novel has its settings at two places Bangalore is one of the places, where Kaberi settles after her marriage and another setting is in Assam, the native land where Kaberi was born and grew up in the midst of nature. The novelist has beautifully presented the nature and landscape of both the places. Assam is represented by Barua as a home, teeming with

various flora and fauna. The description of the mighty Brahmaputra, the hills and mountains, and the various birds and animals are very attractive. Kaberi was always nostalgic about her homeland and seeks happiness and tranquillity from nature. Kaberi witnessed a variety of flora and fauna and the natural beauty in Kaziranga like wild birds, small animals, etc., the Old Hill, rose up from the flat lands before us a few kilometres away. We were almost there—the jungle was just a whisper away now. (Barua 2020, 37-38). The natural beauty of Kaziranga with its majestic beauty and the variety of flora and fauna have greatly attracted Kaberi.

In Kaziranga, Kaberi and Joya developed friendship with Ganesh, the elephant. Ganesh would touch them with his trunk and they could feel its loving touch. As Kaberi is a great lover of nature, it is not only Assam, the landscape and the beauty of Bangalore too, attracted her. She used to drive her happiness from them whenever she felt lonely. She feels lucky and takes delight in the visit of a pair of purple rumped sunbirds on the fountain grass which she planted in the pot. Kaberi is conscious about the natural degradation. During her visit to Assam, as she passes the Deepor Beel, the wetland glancing at the constructions at the edges of the Beel she felt sad and says, *Bricks kilns grow like cancerous growth along its edges choking it gradually so that one day it will surely give up and die, this wild wetland.* (Barua 2010, 146). In *Undertow* too, Barua beautifully presents the natural environment of Assam. Loya comes to Assam for her research work which was on elephants and Assam's Kaziranga was the perfect place for that. Kaziranga, the home of one horned rhinoceros is also a place teeming with elephants and a wide variety of plants, birds and animals. Assam is a home of beautiful landscapes with full of flora and fauna and the mighty Brahmaputra flowing through it. When Loya arrived at the Yellow House, she heard the sound of a bulbul and as she moved towards the house in the shade of the frangipani trees, she experiences: The intoxicating perfume of their waxy white flowers wafted down to her. From somewhere deep in the undergrowth came the drone of a honeybee, rising and falling languorously, a sound oddly appealing in the hot stillness. (Barua 2020, 41) Loya found that the back garden of Robin Khura's house was full of trees like coconut palms, mango, guava and jackfruit which are common in every house compound of the North East India. While staying in her Koka's house, Loya experienced the visit of a crow pheasant and the scaly –breasted munias built their nest in the hibiscus hedge. In both *Rebirth* and *Undertow*, we find Barua's handling of conflict and violence. In *Rebirth*, Kaberi's had to lose her very dear and close friend, Joya in the political violence. The conflict was aroused because of the adopted policy of the government which aided in bringing the illegal migrants from the neighbouring country. What provoked the unusual mass protest was the government's treacherous policy of aiding the influx of illegal migrants from the neighbouring country so that they could vote for them. (Barua 2010, 88). The ordinary people protested this policy of the government and were successful in making the government change its policy. At the end of six years, the government conceded defeat; the Assam Accord was signed in Delhi where it was agreed foreigners

would be identified and deported but what happened to the historic piece of paper is another story altogether. (Barua 2010, 91).

In Undertow, conflict, violence and insurgency is prevalent. On the day of Rukmini's marriage to Alex, there was bandh in the city called by ASSU. (All Assam Students Union) and Rukmini's father had to organize escort.

The city was to be shut down. Normal life was to be suspended; no one would leave home, no offices or schools or shops would open, no vehicles would be allowed on the streets and those that defy the bandh would do so at their own risk. (Barua 2020, 6)

Jitu's son and Robin Khura's grandson Baba, joined the insurgents, the ULFA (United Liberation Frontiers of Assam). The whole family was in the hope of his retuning but there was no trace of him.

The ULFA is still around, though more subdued, and the people are still aggrieved, but more cynical. They expect little to change, and they go on with life. (Barua 2020, 91)

Conclusion:

The novels Rebirth and Undertow of Jahnvi Barua reveal the realistic picture of life in Assam. She deals with various themes like love and marriage, search for identity, ecological consciousness, conflict and violence, etc., in her novels, which are true to life. The novels show Barua's concern for woman and this feminine sensibility makes her to deal with the problems faced by women. Undoubtedly, she has contributed a lot to the literature from the North East India.

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