Intricate Patterns of Human Relationships in Jahnavi Barua’s Next Door

Dr. Payel Dutta Chowdhury
Professor, School of Arts & Humanities
REVA University, Bengaluru (KN)

Abstract:

Narratives from the North-East India are under much scrutiny for research in today’s time. Much similar to the vibrant culture and life-style of the region, the contemporary writers have brought in a freshness to the much hyped stereotypical writings centring mostly on terrorism, under-development and various other problems typical of the North-Eastern states. Many writers of the region have been successful in bringing North-East literature to the forefront of contemporary Indian writings in English by focusing on various under-represented issues of the region. Jahnavi Barua is one such writer who has been recognized as a strong voice from Assam and has gained popularity by showcasing her keen observation on human life and various unique experiences. Her collection of short stories, Next Door, portrays her deftness at understanding human relationships in all its variety. This paper is an attempt to study the variety of intricate patterns of such relationships woven by Barua which establish her as a master observer of minute details of human life.

Keywords: relationships, complicacies, private worlds, insurgency, metaphors, deaths, family, marriage, stereotypical

Contemporary North-East Indian writers have been successful in bringing about fresh perspectives to the existing body of literature from the region. The stereotypical images of terrorism, under-development, shackles of poverty and the ever-present shadow of the gun have been replaced by various under-represented issues which these writers have felt necessary to bring to prominence. The states of North-East India are known for their lush green nature and this has been a very important topic in many writings of the region. The culture and way of life too have been depicted by many writers. Also, very prominently in contemporary writings from the North-East India, one can see many writers focusing on the myths, legends, and rituals pertaining to various indigenous tribes of the region. Such shift in focus has brought contemporary North-East writings to the limelight and has triggered the interests of researchers and academicians to relook at the vibrant culture and lifestyle of the people from these states. Interesting to note is the freshness in the way several writers from the region are dealing with the stereotypical themes of terrorism and various other typical problems of the states. Noted Ao Naga author, Temsula Ao in her collection of short stories These Hills Called Home, depicts many thought-provoking aspects of the Naga society like the position of women and the roles they play in the family and community. Even when the political environment and terrorism is at the heart of a book like Mitra Phukan’s The Collector's Wife, the focus is more on the personal life of the woman protagonist and her ups and downs in the heightened political scenario. Many such writers like Dhruba Hazarika, Easterine Kire, Siddhartha Deb, Mamang Dai and others have been successful in opening up wide vistas of issues not brought to the limelight in
Jahnavi Barua, a Bangalore-based doctor who has taken up the call of her heart’s passion, writing, occupies a prominent position in today’s North-East literary scenario. She is the author of a highly notable novel, *Rebirth*, which has established her as a well-known figure in contemporary Indian English literature. Breaking free from the shackles of stereotypical topics seen in earlier North-East writings, she too has joined the league of contemporary creative artists from the region who have taken it upon themselves to devote towards the creation of variety in the otherwise easily anticipated themes emerging from the literature of the region. Barua’s book, *Next Door* (2008), a collection of eleven short stories, portrays the deft craftsmanship and excellent power of observation of the author. Focusing primarily on human relationships, the stories bring out the intricate patterns in various relationships within the family as well as outside it. Barua takes her readers into the private, individual worlds of her fictional characters and brings out the complicacies in their lives and relationships. Much alike her contemporaries, Barua too cannot completely ignore the politically charged scenario of Assam and hence, readers are aware of the tensed environment serving as the backdrop in most of the stories. However, what makes the narratives stand apart is Barua’s ability to transcend the boundary of the stereotypical problems typical to the North-East India and focus on the remarkably human snapshots of the various nuances of life.

Barua concentrates much on the relationship between parents and children in the stories in *Next Door*. The different shades of this relationship are deftly handled by the author. The pain of losing a child seems to dominate many of these stories. The first story in the collection, “The Magic Spell”, sets the tempo where a small girl, Jiu, eats poisonous seeds in the hope that this will magically result in bonding her parents. In the ambiguous ending to the story one is not sure whether the doctors can save Jiu or not, but the tragedy is indeed successful in bringing her parents closer to each other. A similar picture is portrayed in the story “Awakening” where the loss of her son is ripe in the mind of the mother even though a year has passed by. The pain is so overwhelming for her that she is cut off from the very act of living. Her immediate family – her mother, in-laws, and her husband – are also not able to comprehend the extent of her grief. It is only towards the end of the story that she finds a companion in her husband, who too had been grieving silently. Barua depicts quite out of the box scenarios too in the relationship between parents and children. It is indeed the author’s keen observation of human relationships which enable her to portray real-life situations. In the story, “Sour Green Mangoes”, Madhumita has lost all affinity with her aged parents, who she feels, have done great injustice by bringing her to this world at a much later phase of their lives. Stuck with the “old people” who are dependent on her financially, Madhumita craves for companionship of people of her age group. Having lived her entire childhood and adolescence in the company of aged
parents who did not allow her to socialize, Madhumita grows up to become a misfit, whom people sympathize but can’t take as a friend. Concealed under the façade of everyday lives, Baruah is successful in bringing out intricate patterns of relationships cloaked under a mesh of emotions. In an interview, the author reveals, “…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.” (Interview with Mark Books) This is clearly seen in all the stories in the collection where the author seems to have brought out real-life scenarios that the readers can even relate to.

Barua’s stories reveal her expertise in understanding the complicated relationship of husbands and wives and the vast array of emotions that go into understanding each other. The tensed relationship between the couple can be seen in the story “The Magic Spell”. The impending visit of the mother-in-law triggers a wave of frustration in Nilima and the readers are aware of the tension at her home as well as in the relationship of the husband and wife. It accelerates to such an extent that even the child, Jiu, is not safe from the suffocating environment. In her own innocent way, Jiu eats some poisonous seeds in the belief that her prayer will reach God and prevent her parents from fighting with each other:

“She thinks of how her stomach aches every time her mother and father argue and fight and of how ugly it sounds and she asks that the fights be stopped and that her mother never again talk of leaving.” (ND, 8)

Similar tensed environment is also noticed in the story “Awakening” where the mother, immersed in the grief of having lost her only son is left lonely and morose. Her inability to share her loss with her husband projects the lack of understanding and bonding between them. It is only at the end of the story that the couple is able to come together and share their grief. Barua is successful in portraying the variety of shades in the relationships of husbands and wives and depicts her power of observation of different delicate situations in life.

Jahnavi Barua’s mastery at creating real-life situations is visible in the way she deals with the intricacies of relationships. Interesting to note is the way she deals with the relationships which do not fall under the normal and expected patterns of the society. Life is truly not always predictable and we come across various situations in life where we interact with people under strange circumstances. Barua takes up this unpredictability as a cue in many of the stories in Next Door. The story “Holiday Homework” presents a very unique situation where an old man, lonely in life, is bereft of the company of his near and dear ones. Reminiscing about his past life and his situation, the narrator says:

“Five solitary years I have spent by myself in this too-big house. The empty rooms mock me; there are too many of them. What had I thought all those years? That I would live to a grand old age surrounded by, cosseted by my progeny? Absurd! How foolish, how shortlisted an otherwise intelligent man can be! Progeny live up to their very name; like the seeds that they are, mine have scattered to
faraway corners of the earth. They were blown there by the winds of their destiny, and there they took root to build their lives. They travel back in time and space to me; they pay their respects, they dole out their love and money, they are good children. But in the end, I am cared for by people who are paid to look after me.” (ND, 14-15)

As the narrator, Mr. Barua immerses more and more into his solitary state, he suddenly gets drawn into the company of his next-door neighbours, a young woman and her little boy. Offering him the solace of true bonding, the mother and son give new meaning to the life of Mr. Barua. The afternoon chats, singing, eating, and household chores in his neighbour’s house, lend a purpose of living to him. The author’s delineation of human bonding beyond the ties of blood relation is well-depicted in this story. Commenting on Barua’s stories in Next Door, a critic says, “…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.” (Bookloversblog) Jahnavi Barua’s ability to bring out the intricate patterns in such relationships is seen in another poignant story, “A Fire in Winter”. The narrator recollects his bonding with the house-maid cum governess, Buri, who had raised him up. His fond memory of this girl, who had been brought to their house when he was a small child, is revived with the news of her death. The news of Buri’s death and the memories of the past, initiate the narrator to take a few immediate steps in life – put an end to the meaningless relationship that he was into with his English girlfriend and visit his mother in Assam. The strong bonding possible beyond blood ties is again brought to the forefront by the author when the narrator reads the note that Buri had left for him along with her will: “‘To my son, Dhrubajeet Mahanta.’ It was her will: she had left me the only thing she had ever owned: the small piece of land in Six Mile that Deuta had bought for her when she married.” (ND, 161)

Barua is successful in presenting unique human relationships to her readers, probing into a variety of emotions which goes to establish her as a keen observer of the snapshots of everyday lives. Stories from the writers of the North-East zone cannot overlook the political situation of the region. The backdrop of Barua’s stories in this collection too is realistically set amidst the turbulent times and insurgency. In the story, “The Patriot”, we see a unique bonding which developed between Dhiren Mazumder, a retired employee and an injured rebel who seeks shelter in his old dilapidated house. The old man’s initial fear subsides as he sees the dangerous situation the rebel is in and out of compassion he helps him with medicines and food. Dhiren Mazumder even helps the young rebel escape from the clutches of the police and his son who is the District Commissioner of Kamrup. Commenting on the backdrop of insurgency in many of her stories in the collection, Jahnavi Barua says, “A conflict that was fuelled by the sense of marginalization that people of the region often feel, a feeling of being distant from the
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.” (Interview with Mark Books)

The stories in the collection, Next Door, present a kaleidoscope of relationships, some momentary and flitting whereas the others lasting and permanent. Barua concentrates a lot on the satisfaction and meaning derived from interaction and communication with one’s own family – siblings, parents, and spouse. The silence between married couples; the inability of children to bond with parents; misunderstandings between siblings, are always disturbing and Barua’s stories reveal the necessity felt by her fictional characters to receive the warmth of familial ties. Interestingly she presents a variety of such relationships which are flitting but are life-changing too – an old man’s chance interaction and bonding with a wounded insurgent who had taken shelter in his home; a frustrated young woman’s first exposure to intimate touch by her next-door neighbour; a lonely man’s life-changing meeting with his neighbours – showcasing Jahnvi Barua’s deftness at understanding the intricate patterns of various human relationships.

Barua’s stories, set in the backdrop of the heightened political situation of Assam, concentrate much on universal themes of death, pain, and the pleasure and difficulties of human relationships. The eleven narratives in the book, Next Door, truly emphasize that Barua’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.” (Book Review)

Notes:
- Interview with Jahnvi Barua. 22nd February 2012, by Mark Books. [http://eleutherophobia.wordpress.com/2012/02/22/interview-jahnavi-barua/](http://eleutherophobia.wordpress.com/2012/02/22/interview-jahnavi-barua/)