

## **Representing Assam as a voice from the margin: Reading the short stories by Jahnavi Baruah in the “Next Door”**

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**ABSTRACT:** *Assam is an underrepresented area in mainstream Indian literature. It is often described as remote. Writings from this region is counted as voices from the margin. Jahnavi Barua has portrayed the Assamese socio-cultural experiences and life as a voice from the marginal space. She has represented Assam in its true to life situations with her debut collection of short stories in the ‘Next Door’.*

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Assam is an underrepresented area in mainstream Indian literature. In the Indian context, Assam is a part of region officially called ‘Northeast India’. It has much more geographical contact with other nations than with the Indian mainland, however, from which it is most often described as ‘remote’. It is due to this fact, voices from the Northeast regarded as voices from the margin, from the periphery. Assam as the gateway to entire northeast, itself becomes a liminal space, marginalized one, in the context of mainstream India. Against this marginalization, a few talented writers from this region has raised their voice through their writings. One of such a talent is Jahnavi Barua. Her “Next Door” is a critically acclaimed collection of short stories specially set in Assam, a region, which is not very commonly represented in Indian fiction in English. Her stories in this debut collection are bound up in the local rhythms of Assam. It is the strength of feeling about the region that distinguishes her stories. Her simple representation of the region’s forest’s and field’s, the surging, life giving Brahmaputra River, all are brilliant. Her concern about the problems of insurgency and violence, conflicts and the power dynamics of Assamese families are wonderfully portrayed in her stories.

This paper intends to explore the issue concerning marginality and Assam in the context of mainstream India. It will try to present a critical reading of Jahnavi Barua’s stories and how she becomes a marginal voice in representing Assam.

### **II. MARGINALITY AND ASSAM**

Marginality, in terms, is exclusion from the center and putting something in a liminal space, where the marginalized are regarded as voiceless subalterns. They are dispossessed of their history and identity based on a perception of difference. The center as the ‘Self’, which privileges itself over the ‘Other’ and then forced to inhabit the peripheral space. Hence, marginalization is a product of the power relationship which operates at different spheres. People who are marginalized suffer isolation, are denied healthy creative life and are victims of erasure of history and identity. The articulation and representation of the position of the marginalized in a given set-up is thus of utmost importance as it is concerned with the question of identity.

The term northeast, is an inappropriate level, pasting an identity over a geographical space remarkably different from mainland India. Ignorance and lack of empathy on the part of the mainstream people lead to the misconceptions and the people of this region are gazed at as outsiders. The blanket term ‘Northeast’ itself, as a marginal space, highlights the difference with main stream people. It is due to this fact northeast remains trapped behind a veil of selective silence for the rest of the country and the outside world. Not only in literature the engagement of main stream Indian private media-both print and broadcast with this region remains marginal. And often representation of this part remains trapped in stereotypes. This is India’s area of darkness, an area of little interest to the mainland people. In metropolitan India the dominant image of this part of the country remains that of a wild frontier.

This constructed identity and the imposed nomenclature of this region generate a site for encounter. As the history and civilization of this region had been pushed to the margins, the people of this region should take up the task of re-creating their past and reinventing their traditions to represent the present and hence resist the colonial project of them.

### **III. REPRESENTING ASSAM: THE SHORT STORIES BY JAHNAVI BARUA-**

Jahnabi Barua has represented Assam as a voice from the margin in her collection of short stories in the “Next Door”. According to her own voice her earnest endeavor is to portray the sense of marginalization that the people of this region often feel.

“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 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 often.”

-Jahnabi Barua in an interview.

She has represented Assamese culture, the simple and uncomplicated desires of the people of this region. She is one of the young talented voice sharing the experiences of her native land in a foreign language.

In eleven superbly crafted stories Jahnabi Barua takes us into the private, individual worlds of a varied act of characters. The stories neatly strings together a multitude of characters and situations, with the varied nuances and settings of the state coloring the background. In this mesmerizing collection the author expertly plays around with words, there by opening up an entirely new dimension for Assamese writers working in English, besides creating the best possible dialogue between the characters and the locale. Assam is brought alive by Jahnabi in her book. The grand river Brahmaputra appears in almost her works. It stands as a leitmotif, a symbol of the incredible beauty of the region. Besides a towering presence the male river stands as life giving force for peoples of Assam in her stories. The Brahmaputra makes an appearance sometimes as metaphor, sometimes as memory, but most often as a matter of fact, like living and breathing.

Her writing style is simple and straightforward. It is very mellifluous, filled with vivid descriptions and rich textures of her homeland, Assam, known for its natural beauty. It is also the characters she brings to her stories that form its artistic core. Another subtle aspect of her story is how she has been able to infuse the rhythms of the Assamese tongue into a foreign language by introducing Assamese words like- Ma, Deuta, Aita, Dada, Nobou etc.

The first story “The Magic Spell” tells us about a young school going girl, caught in domestic dispute, takes refuge in nature and swallows some poisonous seeds, which, she believes, has a magical power. The incident shakes the couple out of their pettiness. It starts with a day in the life of that girl, Jui Das. The story goes on to describe the rest of her day as she gets ready for school, witnesses an argument between her parents about bringing her paternal grandmother home, the walk to the school with her mother and then school itself. As mentioned earlier her day ends rather unexpectedly on a tragic note and does indeed cast a spell on the reader. This story portrays the simple emotional experiences of peculiar school going Assamese girl in a metropolitan city. It also critically brings up the issue how emotional attachments between family members have been broken due to modern life.

Besides her maturity of expression Jahnabi Barua has brilliant command over the English language. It is obvious in her choice of the titles for the stories. They are not just descriptive. They serve either as a metaphor or encapsulate the theme of the stories. In another touching story “Holiday Homework”, she expresses the simple longings of an old man and his psychological trauma. The protagonist, an old man, Mr. Barua, after observing his new neighbours ( a young couple and their son) and the intense love between the mother and the son for a few days, decides to befriend them, and soon discovers that the young lady is suffering from cancer. The rest of the story goes on to narrate the unusual friendship formed between the three of them and then it ends with a moving climax. This story is thus painting the picture of a solitary gentle man whose bond with the little boy next door does help him discover meaning in an empty nest. The writer has been drawing attention to the predicament of an old man in modern Assamese nuclear families.

No Assamese can remain indifferent to the Brahmaputra. In “River of Life”, she tells us the story of a mentally retarded man, how a news item related to the Brahmaputra changes the course of life of that man. As an Assamese, through this story, she has brought up the issue of Chinese efforts to divert the water resources of the Brahmaputra away from India that has remained tense since 1962 Indo-China war. She is brilliant enough to show how the soul of Assam, the mighty Brahmaputra, becomes a case of concern even for a slow witted person, who is extremely worried about China’s attempt to divert the Brahmaputra away from Assam. So, as one would expect, the mighty river and a few of its tributaries namely Pagladiya and Bharalu feature in most of her stories. In “Honeybees”, Pagladiya, the crazy river becomes instrumental in deciding the fact of a simple

guy with simple aspirations in life. The boy, Anupam Kalita, becomes a homeguard so that he may eventually buy a piece of land in his village and dies in the attempt. This story picturises the social reality of poor traditional Assamese society in villages. How unemployed youths of Assam had to join themselves to insurgent groups as the name of fighting for motherland but only to earn their livelihood. Set in the tumultuous background of Assam the leading character becomes a victim of insurgent activities. We get reference of flood, a lifelong sorrow for Assamese people, as the river Pagladiya snatches away life and property of the dwellers by the riverside.

Many other stories in next door also take the relationship between parents and children in urban life of Assam as their theme. In “Sour Green Mangoes”, we experience the frustration of a young woman, Madhumita, at the way her aging parents control every aspect of her life. Barua’s writing works beautifully here to give us a sense of home as prison. It is Madhumita’s parents who, even as they follow her progress greedily, are ‘blind’, oblivious to their daughter’s wants and needs. With time Madhumita has learnt to harass her parents as they harass her, yet even this gives her no satisfaction. She will not let them defeat her now, writes Barua, but what was done was done; she has already become what she is today. At the end of the story it is through Madhumita’s resolution that she will not let her parents ‘defeat her now’ is shown in her sexual awakening. We know that she will take revenge on her parents by going back to the engineer from Jorhat who told her, ‘Anything you want, you only have to ask.’

There are several references to the insurgency faced by Assam in the last two decades as we go on with her stories. One such story, ‘The Patriot’ deals with the relationship of the protagonist, a retired government official, Dhiren Majumder with an insurgent, who takes refuge in his house. Every morning, we are told, Majumder sits down in his compound with a cup of tea, and examines his kingdom as if he were seeing it for the very first time.” One evening Majumdar sees a flicker of movement in his old and dilapidated ancestral house beside his humble two bedroom house. He goes across to investigate, and finds a youth lying in the darkness, badly injured. The boy is an insurgent, and he wants him to get him medicine and food, and to keep his presence a secret. Majumdar, we have already been told, has a grown up son who is a successful civil servant, but somehow there is no feeling between them indeed, Majumdar feels abject before his son, as he used to do before his superiors at work. Now, as Majumdar huffs and puffs under the burden of the arrogant young insurgent’s demands, we feel although Barua never states this explicitly- that he is being fulfilled as a father for the first time. Barua delicately grafts the bloodshed and violence of the insurgency onto the pathos and neediness of the old man’s life

Barua has introduced us with a broad range of characters within each story who are purely Assamese in their colour and taste. The stories evoke an incident or a scene. Only, the scenes and incidents are sad ones. They are centered around loss and often mourning. One of the best stories of the collection “The Favourite Child” tells us about four sisters gather around their dying mother’s beside. After the course of a long decline the four sisters relate themselves as children. Yet their adult destinies have been different and all it takes is one careless question, one hesitant answer, only to shatter the illusion of innocence recaptured. Through ‘Awakening’, another story in the collection, she is intimating us with the act of violence against northeastern students in Bangalore and other parts of India. As an Assamese she is treating the case as a serious one to portray the plight of the northeastern students. The back and forth narration of the story introduces us with the mother’s reconciliation with her son’s death in a campus fight in Bangalore. It stands for the northeastern representation in mainstream India where students from northeast are subjected to harassment.

In Barua’s stories we not only get a panoramic view of the beautiful state but also a robust flavor of Assamese culture. ‘Tiger’ by far is the most favourite story as we get an account of the beauty and grandeur of the Manas National Park. The passionate feelings of the characters have been wonderfully drawn- be they the teenage girls or their middle aged mothers or even their younger brothers and a non Assamese folk, Ashish. Babli, the teenage girl came up bringing to us the subject of adolescent sexuality.

Jahnvi Barua has introduced us with the magnificent natural beauty, the gentle and calm people who live in Assam. Human experiences and relationship of this part of the Indian continent has been represented in a delicate manner in her short stories.

#### **IV. CONCLUSION**

Jahnvi Barua is one among the very few writers who have taken the pains to document the life and essence of the people living here. She is among the most lucid voices to have emerged in the Indian literary scene in recent times. Though she writes in English her stories unfold the life by the side of the Brahmaputra

river and the river itself which floods the novel with its raging glory and untamed passion. To conclude it can be assumed that with *Next Door*, Jahnvi weaves a sensitive portrayal of a varied set of characters, while the universal themes ensure that the compilation, despite its Assam settings, can be transposed anywhere and everywhere.

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