

A Critical Review of the Extensive Works of Jahnvi Barua

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Abstract:

*Jahnvi Barua has emerged as a significant voice in contemporary Indian English literature, particularly for her nuanced representation of the socio-cultural realities of Northeast India. Her literary works, including *Next Door*, *Rebirth*, and *Undertow*, explore complex themes such as identity, memory, displacement, gender, belonging, family relationships, and emotional resilience. This study critically reviews the extensive body of Barua's writings to examine her contribution to regional and national literary discourse. The analysis highlights how Barua intertwines personal narratives with broader social and cultural concerns, offering profound insights into the lived experiences of individuals negotiating tradition, modernity, and changing social structures. Her fiction is characterised by psychological depth, subtle narrative techniques, ecological sensitivity, and a strong focus on women's experiences. Through her portrayal of ordinary lives, she challenges stereotypical representations of Northeast India and foregrounds voices often marginalised in mainstream literary narratives. The study further evaluates her works from feminist, postcolonial, and cultural perspectives, demonstrating their relevance to contemporary debates on identity and belonging. It concludes that Jahnvi Barua's literary oeuvre significantly enriches Indian English literature by creating a bridge between regional specificity and universal human concerns, thereby establishing her as an important contemporary literary figure.*

Keywords: *Jahnvi Barua, Indian English Literature, Northeast India, Feminism, Identity, Memory, Displacement, Postcolonial Literature, Gender Studies, Contemporary Fiction.*

Introduction

Jahnvi Barua has emerged as one of the most significant literary voices from Northeast India in contemporary Indian English literature. Her writings occupy a unique position because they bring together regional realities, feminist concerns, emotional depth, ecological consciousness, and postcolonial anxieties within a refined narrative framework. In a literary culture historically dominated by metropolitan narratives, Barua's fiction expands the geographical and cultural boundaries of Indian English writing by foregrounding Assam and the wider Northeast as complex spaces of memory, belonging, displacement, and identity [1]. Her literary achievement lies not merely in representing a marginalised region but in transforming local experiences into universal explorations of human relationships and psychological realities [2].

The rise of Northeast Indian literature during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries created opportunities for writers to articulate histories and experiences that had often remained excluded from mainstream national narratives [3]. Alongside writers such as Mamang Dai, Tamsula Ao, Easterine Kire, Mitra Phukan, and Anjum Hassan, Jahnvi Barua contributed significantly to the emergence of a distinct literary tradition rooted in the social and cultural

landscapes of the region [4]. However, her work remains distinctive because of its intense focus on emotional interiority and intimate human relationships. While political violence and historical instability form an important background to her narratives, her primary concern lies in examining how such realities shape ordinary lives [5].

Barua's short-story collection *Next Door* established her reputation as a writer of remarkable sensitivity and insight. The collection explores everyday experiences in Assam while subtly addressing issues such as ethnic conflict, migration, loneliness, marginality, and social fragmentation [6]. Rather than presenting dramatic political narratives, the stories reveal how violence and instability infiltrate domestic spaces and personal relationships. This indirect approach allows readers to understand the emotional consequences of larger sociopolitical conditions without reducing characters to political symbols [7].

One of the most compelling aspects of *Next Door* is its representation of silence. Many of Barua's characters struggle to express their emotions openly, resulting in narratives shaped by memory, absence, and unspoken tensions [8]. Silence functions not merely as a narrative technique but as a reflection of psychological and social realities. Through silence, characters communicate grief, longing, disappointment, and resilience. Such portrayals demonstrate Barua's ability to explore emotional complexity through understated storytelling [9]. The collection also highlights the experiences of individuals living at social and geographical margins. Assam appears not as a peripheral space but as a site of cultural richness, emotional depth, and historical complexity [10]. Barua challenges stereotypical representations of the Northeast by portraying ordinary lives shaped by local traditions, family relationships, and social transformations. Her fiction therefore contributes to the broader project of reimagining the literary map of India [11].

The publication of *Rebirth* marked a significant development in Barua's literary career. The novel centres on Kaberi, a pregnant woman whose reflections on motherhood, marriage, memory, and selfhood form the emotional core of the narrative [12]. Although the novel appears deeply personal, it simultaneously engages with broader questions concerning gender, identity, and social expectations. Kaberi's experiences reveal the subtle mechanisms through which patriarchal structures influence women's lives while also illustrating women's capacity for self-reflection and resistance [13].

A feminist reading of *Rebirth* reveals the complexity of Barua's treatment of female subjectivity. She avoids simplistic portrayals of oppression and instead presents patriarchy as a network of cultural expectations, family structures, and everyday practices [14]. Kaberi's struggle is not only against external constraints but also against internalised assumptions regarding duty, sacrifice, and femininity. This psychological dimension distinguishes the novel from more overtly ideological feminist narratives [15]. Motherhood occupies a central place in *Rebirth*. Barua portrays pregnancy not merely as a biological experience but as a transformative emotional journey. Through Kaberi's reflections, the novel examines the relationship between memory and identity, suggesting that motherhood involves a re-evaluation of one's past as well as anticipation of the future [16]. The unborn child becomes both a listener and a symbolic presence through which Kaberi reconstructs her understanding of herself and her family [17].

Memory functions as a crucial thematic and structural element throughout Barua's fiction. Her narratives frequently move between past and present, illustrating how personal identities are shaped through recollection [18]. Memories of childhood, family relationships, lost homes, and emotional experiences continue to influence characters long after the original events have passed. This emphasis on memory aligns Barua's work with broader postcolonial and feminist traditions that view remembrance as a means of preserving identity and resisting erasure [19].

Barua's later novel *Undertow* significantly expands the thematic range of her literary project. The novel traces the interconnected lives of multiple generations of women while exploring questions of caste, migration, belonging, inheritance, and reconciliation [20]. Set partly in Assam and partly in urban India, the novel reflects the social and cultural transformations associated with mobility and modernisation. At its centre lies the search for emotional and familial continuity within changing social conditions [21]. Family relationships constitute one of the novel's most important concerns. Barua presents families as spaces of affection, conflict, obligation, and misunderstanding. Relationships between mothers and daughters receive particular attention, revealing the tensions between tradition and individual autonomy [22]. Through these relationships, the novel explores broader questions concerning gender roles, generational change, and social expectations [23].

The concept of home occupies a central position throughout Barua's literary corpus. Home in her fiction is rarely a fixed or uncomplicated space. Instead, it appears as a site of longing, memory, displacement, and negotiation [24]. Characters often experience emotional attachment to places from which they have become separated, suggesting that home exists as much within memory as within geography [25]. This theme resonates strongly within the context of Northeast India, where migration, political conflict, and cultural change have shaped experiences of belonging and identity [26].

Migration represents another recurring theme in Barua's writings. Her characters frequently move between regions, cultures, and social environments. These movements generate opportunities for personal growth but also produce feelings of uncertainty and alienation [27]. Migration in Barua's fiction is not simply physical relocation; it is an emotional and psychological process that transforms relationships, identities, and perceptions of self [28].

An important feature of Barua's work is her ecological sensibility. The natural landscapes of Assam—its rivers, forests, monsoon rains, and rural environments—play an active role within the narratives [29]. Nature is not merely a backdrop but a participant in the emotional and symbolic structure of the stories. Environmental imagery frequently reflects characters' psychological states while also emphasising continuity amid social change [30].

From an ecocritical perspective, Barua's fiction demonstrates how human experiences remain interconnected with natural environments. Her representations of landscape challenge purely anthropocentric views of existence and highlight the significance of place in shaping memory and identity [31]. Such concerns connect her work to broader discussions within environmental humanities and contemporary ecocriticism.

Stylistically, Barua's prose is characterised by elegance, restraint, and emotional precision. She avoids melodrama and instead relies on subtle characterisation, carefully constructed narratives, and evocative imagery [32]. This understated style enables her to address complex themes without sacrificing emotional authenticity. Readers encounter characters whose struggles feel deeply real because they emerge through ordinary interactions rather than dramatic events [33].

A postcolonial interpretation of Barua's work reveals important insights into marginality, identity, and cultural representation. By centring Northeast Indian experiences, she challenges dominant literary narratives that privilege metropolitan perspectives [34]. Her fiction expands the scope of Indian English literature by demonstrating that regional voices can contribute significantly to national and global literary conversations [35].

The growing body of scholarship devoted to Barua's writings reflects recognition of her literary significance. Critics have examined her works through feminist, postcolonial, psychoanalytic, ecocritical, and cultural studies frameworks [36]. These diverse approaches demonstrate the richness of her texts and their capacity to generate multiple interpretations. Feminist scholars emphasise her representation of women's agency and subjectivity, while postcolonial critics focus on questions of identity, displacement, and regional marginalisation [37].

Despite widespread critical appreciation, some scholars have suggested that Barua's emphasis on emotional interiority occasionally limits direct engagement with political structures [38]. However, this criticism may overlook the subtle ways in which her narratives connect personal experiences with broader social realities. Rather than presenting explicit political commentary, Barua reveals how political and historical forces shape everyday life, family relationships, and individual consciousness [39].

In conclusion, Jahnavi Barua's literary oeuvre represents one of the most significant contributions to contemporary Indian English literature from Northeast India. Through *Next Door*, *Rebirth*, *Undertow*, and her other writings, she has developed a distinctive literary voice characterised by psychological depth, thematic complexity, and narrative elegance. Her fiction explores memory, gender, migration, family, identity, and belonging while remaining deeply attentive to the cultural realities of Assam and the Northeast. By transforming regional experiences into universal reflections on human existence, Barua has expanded the possibilities of Indian English fiction and established herself as an important figure within contemporary world literature [40].

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