



Personal And Political Dynamics In Jahnavi Barua's *Next Door Stories*

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Abstract: This paper attempts to analyse the interrelation of personal and political dynamics in Jahnavi Baruah's *Next Door*, with relation to the socio-political scenario in Assam. The main focus of it will be on the depiction of violence and the sufferings of ordinary people. It also analyzes the power dynamics in relation to the political violence that has trapped the region for decades. It also aims to show how this region has been marginalised and the conflict between the military and the militants has become a quotidian phenomenon and try to point out the functioning of necropower in a democracy. Further, it will try to locate the importance of this book in the larger paradigm of women's writings from the Northeast and highlight the portrayal of women caught in conflicts, not only in the political sphere but also in the personal space.

Keywords- Writings in English Northeast India, Violence, Politics, Women's Writings, Northeast India.

I. INTRODUCTION

Northeast India, a postcolonial state coinage or can be called "an artifact of deliberate policy" to merge together the eight states, namely – Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura, and Sikkim, under an umbrella term (Barua 1). Characterized by armed ethnic conflicts and insurgency, this region has been declared as "disturbed areas" and difficult to govern. The political instabilities in this region can be traced back to the pre-independence period. Even after Independence, this region is in constant conflict with the Indian government in the form of nationalist movement and armed separatist movement. The region witnessed the emergence of a number of extremist organizations challenging the sovereignty and integrity of the Indian state. There is also continuous conflict among the different ethnic groups residing here and its neighbouring states and countries for border issues. The conflict in this region is entangled with complex political and economic issues, such as, demand for autonomy, foreign infiltration, displacement, migration and identity-related issues, social exclusion, border issues, conflict over natural resources, underdevelopment and so on. M. N. Karna in his essay "Conflicts amid the Historical Experiences of Identity, Nation and the State in Northeastern India" examines "The discourse on the nature and extent of conflicts in the Northeast revolves around three major points of reference: politics, economics and culture" (Fernandes 22). However, many of the conflicts witnessed in the region is also due to the geographical location of the region and the unresolved question of land and border. This region shares only two percent of its boundary with mainland India via the Siliguri corridor and the remaining 98 percent with countries other than India. This is one of the main reasons behind the conflicts in this part of the country.

Most of the states in this region were declared 'disturbed areas' and government, as a counter-measure, imposed the draconian Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) in most states. However, this has further worsened the situation as this act empowered the armed forces to arrest anyone suspicious without any warrant and proof, destroy any structure that may be a refuge of the militants without verification and even shoot anyone under suspicion causing to death. "The AFSPA is technically against Article 21 (the right to life) and

Article 22 (protection against arbitrary arrest and detention) of the Indian Constitution" (Baishya 1). Amit R. Baishya, in his book *Contemporary Literature from Northeast India*, highlights this issue,

"Categories like 'life' and 'living' seem to be continuously shadowed by unpredictability, arbitrariness and risk....these zones are not characterized so much by the management and governance of life - the domain of biopower (Foucault *History of Sexuality; Society*) - but rather around the preponderance and distribution of death, what the post-colonial critic Achille Mbembe calls 'necropolitics'" (2).

The term 'necropolitics' was for the first time explored in depth by Achille Mbembe in his essay "On the Postcolony" (2003) and later in his book of the same name published in 2019. Necro comes from the Greek word "nekros" meaning death person or dead, necropolitics then translates to "politics of death." It means the use of social, economic, military and political power to dictate how some people may live and how some must die. The first sentence of Achille Mbembe's essay "Necropolitics" begins with the assumption that "the ultimate expression of sovereignty resides, to a large degree, in the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die" (11). In the essay, Mbembe highlights how in colonial rule, the sovereign has the right to kill anyone or at any time. "Colonial warfare is not subject to legal and institutional rules" (Mbembe 25). He observes that the material premises of colonial imperialism are drawn from the Nazi extermination and "serialization of technical mechanisms for putting people to death - mechanisms developed between the Industrial Revolution and the First World War" (18). People distanced from the dominant norm or "savages" in the eyes of the sovereign are trapped in what Mbembe calls a "death world": a form of "social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of living dead" (40). He further discusses the functioning of necropower in relation to the apartheid regime of South Africa and the contemporary colonial occupation of Palestine. What Mbembe did not mention in his essay is how the state or the government even in a democracy, sometimes acts as the colonial sovereign killing the "savages" without any evidence, which is evident in the rule of AFSPA and the infamous secret killings in Northeast; thus creating "death worlds" and a state of terror and suffering for the citizens and bestow upon them the status of "living death" and stripping away the basic rights of its citizens when felt necessary by the "sovereign". "The militarization of everyday life" has deeply affected the "the ordinary existence in this border zone". (Baishya i) The ordinary people are the victims of the indiscriminate violence perpetrated by the insurgent groups as well as the armed forces. As a result, the public psyche, in general, appears to be deeply wounded and distorted. People seems to be living in constant terror and fear. There are many instances when normal lives are disrupted in this horrifying combat between the military and the militants. Kidnapping, extortion, extra-judicial killings, threats have become a part of everyday life in this region. The rights of the citizens living in this region are frequently violated in the hands of both the insurgents and the security forces.

Another problem faced by this region is the marginalization and misrepresentation by mainland India. This misrepresentation and exoticization of this region and its people is due to the lack of authentic media coverage, 'otherization' in mainland India and limited literary production from this region. The infrastructural needs, economic problems, and events from this region find very little space in the mainstream media and even the little coverage that they get is stereotyped. The violence related stories are often highlighted, portraying this place as a wild frontier inhabited by terrorist, whereas other important stories like the economic underdevelopment or achievements of this region are trivialized. This negative representation results in the creation of a negative image about this region in the minds of the 'mainland people'.

II. VIOLENCE AND LITERATURE FROM NORTHEAST INDIA

In this context, it is imperative to understand that the political scenario of the region remains in the background of most of the writings from this region. Dr. Ananya S. Guha, highlighting the interrelation between violence and Northeast Literature, says,

Much of the discussion today in the literature of Northeast India focuses on violence as a thematic interest. The literature of Northeast India, which has gained a lot of ascendancy in the last three decades and especially in the last one and a half decades has shown a glut of interest in the remaining parts of the country due to this 'new' ontology and cult of violence.

In the last few decades, the writings from Northeast India has gained a lot of popularity not only among the mainland readers but worldwide and has become an engrossing area for many researchers and academicians. Violence and terror is one of the common themes of the literary works produced in this region and it is expected from the writers of the Northeast by a certain readership to write mostly about the political instabilities going on in the region. This is the reason why contemporary scholarship engaging with the Anglophone writing from the Northeast has constantly tried to frame it as 'literature from the conflict region' and 'terror lore'. Cherrie L. Chhangte comments on the term "terror lore" and says,

Terror lore is particularly apt when applied to the northeastern states of India, where such struggles constitute part of each of their very recent histories, and where, as a result, stories and songs and various lores have emerged, reflecting the experiences of entire generations of people who have grown up under the shadow of such terror. (237)

Politics and political conflicts have become an inevitable feature of the human condition in the case of Northeast India, where the political and personal are intertwined together. As literature is believed to reflect society, it is inevitable not to include the cultural, social and political realities of the society. Thus, the literature from Northeast India reflects all these facets of the region. There is an ample amount of non-fiction produced in this region which talks about the various conflicts in the different states of the region, their causes and effects. However, the novels and short stories portray a different kind of picture. They capture the personal sufferings and psychological contours of the people through the characters. Many writers from this region, like Temsula Ao, Easterine Kire, Siddhartha Deb, Aruni Kashyap, Mitra Phukan and many other authors from this region, through their writings, bring into light the socio-political issues of this region and their effect on the lives of ordinary citizens. They have presented the various conflicts as an everyday affair experienced by the people. It is unavoidable to write about the violence since “political conflict is the most natural presence” (Kashyap) in this region. An overwhelming number of writers have themselves witnessed the interminable trauma and violence their homeland is going through. Most of their works reflect the trauma of the people and society as a collective in continuous conflict. They have vehemently raised their voices against the conflicts that is disturbing the peace of their homeland. The writers, through their works, have portrayed the trauma of untold suffering and marginalization of this region. They have portrayed how violence and terror have trammelled up the lives of the ordinary people residing here. Mara Matta in her essay “The Novel and the Northeast: Indigenous Narratives in Indian Literature” writes,

Rather than aggravating the bipolarized status of the Northeastern writer, the novels sensitively present war and conflicts as only part of the reality of daily life for people living around the borders of Northeast India. Novels by Northeastern authors, far from dealing only with the idea of the Northeast as a conflict zone, appear more concerned with discourses that range from the question of identity formation in the borderlands to the performance of indigeneity as ‘frontier people’, from the question of the language to the reconceptualization of the mantra ‘the personal is political’. (201)

The writers from this region are constantly trying to represent this marginalised region in the ‘mainland’ discourse and break away from the stereotypes. Rather than writing on the causes of the violence and shortcomings of the state, they are more concerned with portraying the everyday lives in this conflict-ridden landmark and how this violence has become a part of the personal lives of the people.

III. REPRESENTATION OF PERSONAL AND POLITICAL DYNAMICS IN THE SELECT TEXT

Jahnavi Barua is one of the writers from Northeast India, who in her works, documents the life and the troubles faced by the individuals residing in Assam. She was born in Guwahati and is currently based in Bangalore. She published her first collection of short stories *Next Door Stories* in 2008. In 2010, she published her second book, *Rebirth*, and recently, in 2020, she published her third book, *Undertow*, which was longlisted for JCB Prize for Literature 2020. Her stories are primarily set in Assam and have an unmistakable flavor of her home state, Assam. Through her stories, she attempts to unveil the life of the Northeastern people on a larger canvas. She not only presents the socio-political scenario of Assam but also depicts the different human emotions, different sides of familial relationships and other dimensions of domestic lives of people. What is interesting in her writing is that she focuses more on the personal and mundane aspects of life and presents this place as it is, not in an exaggerated way or as a place of conflict and violence, and there lies the beauty of her writing. Her *Next Door Stories* consists of eleven stories. Most of the stories except one is set in Assam. Through her stories, Jahnavi Barua takes us into the personal and individual worlds of the characters. Most of the characters in her stories are shown to be in some conflict with their own selves or families and some are trapped in the conflict that has engulfed their homeland. Barua explains her concerns while writing this anthology in an interview with Markbooks:

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.

The stories portray different kinds of characters: a child suffering due to her parents’ negligence, a mentally disabled person trying to save the mighty river Brahmaputra, a daughter’s anxiety due to excessive parental control, a young man trying to support his family, the sexual tension of a teenager and many more. Most of

the characters are ordinary people trying to overcome the conflicts in their life. The first story deals with a girl name Jiu and her struggles in a family where both her parents are working and do not have time for her. The story ends on an ironic note on how the suicidal attempt of the child brings the family together. The second story "The Holiday Homework," also deals with a similar theme; the mother-son relationship. Another story that deals with this same theme is "Awakening"; it tells the tragic tale of a mother who has recently lost her only son. In "Sour Green Mangoes," the author has presented how this relationship between parents and child can turn out to be suffocating and lead to anxiety. There are two stories, namely "Honeybees" and "The Patriot", which deal with the political conflict and the effect of this violence on ordinary people. What is noteworthy is that Jahnavi Barua projects her characters in a very realistic way trying to meet their ends in the background of the political scenario of the region. She shows how in the disturbing political scenario of the region, personal and social relationships are disrupted. She grafts gently on the pathos and the necessity of the ordinary people's life amidst the bloodshed and violence of the insurgency.

The first story "Honeybees" in the anthology tells a tale about a young man named Anupam Kalita, who had to shoulder the heavy burden of his family and his only ambition is to make life a little better for all of them. Every year during monsoon season, floods would destroy everything that they have saved, and they even had to leave their house. Intending to earn money to purchase a piece of land in a better area, he joined the police and was assigned as a home guard and was shifted for bungalow duty at the house of the Inspector General of Police, Dijen Sharma. Though life was not miserable in the barrack, he missed his home. After a few months' stay in the bungalow, he was requested by the General's wife to accompany the General in his trips and take care of all his needs. The story ends in a tragic note where both Anupam and the IG got killed in an explosion planted by the insurgents. It is ironic and saddening that the man who refused to join the militant groups, because he could not leave his family and his responsibilities towards them, finally became a victim of this 'war'. This depicts the scenario that is prevalent in most of the northeastern states of India, where innocent people lose their lives in this ongoing war between the militants and the security forces. Though, Barua has not explicitly mentioned the socio-political conditions of the place. However, there are subtle hints which show the sufferings and struggles of people living in this part of the region. She has mentioned about the floods of Assam and the problems the people had to face. Every year the people in Assam have to undergo massive trouble due to floods. There is an immense loss of lives, livestock, food, etc., and sometimes this condition prevails for months. Moreover, added to this problem is poverty; all these losses affect a lot on the financial condition of the people. This side of the story is shown through Anupam's miseries living near the Pagladiya, "The Crazy River". Another instance where the inter-relation of political and personal dynamics in the story is shown through Madan's offer to join the "fight for the motherland" for the money.

Anupam was lost in thought; there was a lot of money floating around in the village, it was true. Mostly in the hands of the young men; some of these boys were among those that Bapu hung around with. It would be easy to tap into that circle, but every time he contemplated it his mother's face drifted before his eyes. He couldn't leave her alone, for such an uncertain future, with his good-for-nothing father. (Barua 57)

This instance brings into light the issue of youths joining the insurgent groups due to their financial conditions; they join it for the money and to support their family.

The ongoing war between the militants and the military has instilled fear among the ordinary citizens, and this has led to an inability to trust anyone and the crumbling of the society as a collective. This can be said as the reason behind the repeated interrogation during the examination. They were repeatedly asked if they had any connection with the militant groups. Barua has shown the inhuman side of living in this conflict zone. People are treated like animals irrespective of their gender. This can be seen in the episode where a girl was arrested and brought to camp by the army. The way her physical appearance was described clearly shows that she was harassed and tortured.

She was no more than eighteen. Her white mekhela sador was discoloured and stained and her blouse was torn at the shoulders, her pale flesh shining through the rents. As she climbed down, she stumbled and almost fell....As the girl stumbled, the soldier behind her prodded her roughly in the back with his automatic rifle and she tottered and fell on her knees. (Barua 68)

Her only crime was that she was suspected to be an insurgent and her brother was a commander in the underground army. The way she was treated and the condition in which she was brought clearly showed the inhuman side of the armed forces. This region can be compared to what Mbembe calls 'colonies' or 'frontiers'. Here the rights of the citizens are withdrawn if the military suspects them to be insurgents or related to any such activity. People who are innocent are also living in constant terror as they might become the target of the armed forces at any time. This is similar to what Mbembe describes as "state of seige" where the military

forces are given special powers to shoot anyone at any time and "entire populations are the target of the sovereign." (30). And often, this type of violence or harrassment is justified in the name of guarding the region or killing the enemies of the nation. Thus, this region is similar to "the zone where the violence of the state of exception is deemed to operate in the service of "civilization"" as Mbembe describes (24). Thus, one lives compromising with all the disturbances and instabilities, where one is treated as an 'animal' by the armed forces if they find any evidence regarding the person's association with insurgents.

Barua, through this story, has depicted the effects of violence on the womenfolk. Women are the worst victims of the violence. There are numerous cases of rapes, kidnappings, killings etc that one comes across in the headlines of news. It is evident in the case of the young woman, as discussed earlier, who was brought in the barracks by the army in a condition which showed visible signs of physical harrassment. However, it is essential to note that apart from being the direct victims of the violence, its impact has also penetrated the domestic space of the womenfolk, affecting their mental space and social lives. It is evident in the anxiety faced by the wife of the Inspector General. The family of the Inspector General was living in perpetual fear and the guards were also suspicious of any change in behaviour among their mates. After receiving numerous death threats and attacks, they were unable to trust anyone and were living a life of terror. Even an unusual sound would wake up the General's wife. She was living in horror and constant fear for her husband's life. She warned Anupam before travelling to look after her husband and himself as it was dangerous times. Amit R. Baishya writes in his book :

Acts of dehumanization like torture and the habitation of quotidian necropolitical worlds force us to experience the existentially devastating situation that we may be helpless at any time, and potentially be reduced to situations of primary dependency. With that sense of helplessness sinking in, our trust in the world begins to break down. (13)

Another story that revolves around this theme of political instability and the terror of living in this necropolitical world is "The Patriot". It is the story of a retired old man named Dhiren Majumdar, whose son is a deputy commissioner. Ironically, his old house becomes a hideout of an injured insurgent and he is forced to take care of his needs. The author has portrayed the helplessness of the youths who join the insurgent groups. The boy in the story states that he joined it due to his family issues. He says, "And then they came to the village, ... the men who told us that it was time to take back what had always been ours – the land, the jobs and our self-respect" (Barua 131). He further adds, "They looked after us well. I began to send money home." (131) These young people are lured to join these groups and are made to romanticize the idea of fighting and sacrificing their lives for their "motherland". What Dhiren Majundar goes through in the story reflects that ordinary people are caught in middle of the war between the insurgents and the government. They are rendered helpless and have to do as they are told to, or else they can lose their lives and risk the lives of their family members. Such an incident is described in the story: "A chill seized him : his school friend Mukunda Goswami, who had later gone on to becoming a minister in the Saikia cabinet had once lived there. Insurgents had gunned him down in broad daylight" (118). Ordinary people are caught in the vicious cycle of death and survival resulting from this 'warfare'.

The author brings in the trope of the insider-outsider dichotomy to portray the socio-political reality of the region. The discourse of identity in Northeastern India is a complex issue since this region has undergone numerous cartographic reconfigurations to become what it is today. These reconfigurations has led to various social, demographic and political tension in the region that are too deep to gloss over and its after-effects are still visible in the unresolved questions of 'land' and ethnic conflicts for their identity. And the only solution considered feasible by the political opportunists was throwing the foreigners or the "outsiders" out. Northeast India "carries with it the weight of a number of haphazard and poorly thought-out decisions made by managers of the postcolonial Indian state as they were trying to turn an imperial frontier space into the national space of a "normal sovereign state." (Barua 2). The ongoing conflict for space or 'homeland' and identity is further intensified by immigrant forces and acculturation. Since Independence, there has been huge number of migration from the neighbouring countries, mostly from Bangladesh, and states in this region in search of better jobs and living space. However, this has further worsened the situation as the ethnic groups of this region were dreadful of being outnumbered by the migrants. Many ethnic groups of this region presumed that this migration from its neighbouring country was a conspiracy to "Bangladeshize" (Hazarika 8) Assam and the Northeast. It is assumed that the migrants will outnumber them and take over their land and resources and the facilities provided by the government. This feeling of insecurity is the sole reason of the hatred between the ethnic communities and the migrants which Sanjoy Hazarika highlights in the book *Rites of Passage* , "Host don't turn against migrants until they begin feeling politically and socially threatened. Or put more simply, until the settlers begin to assume numbers which make the native community feel that they are being undercut, both culturally and physically" (93). This feeling of insecurity has led to various conflicts in this

region. The movements of various communities to assert and protect their 'ethnic' identity, inevitably interlinked with the demand for 'homeland' intensified in some parts of the region during the 1970s and 1980s resulted in numerous killings and communal violence in this region. All these instances of discrimination and the violence raises an important question, that is, who is an insider and who is an outsider in the context of Northeast India. Every ethnic identity is constructed on the basis of common descent, common physical, cultural, and linguistic characteristics and this problematic construction have made it possible for differentiation among the people in this region based on their religion, physical attributes, cultural and linguistic characteristics. For creating and consolidating its respective identity, every ethnic group made an effort to construct its 'other'. Therefore, people with different attributes and characteristics are 'otherised' by the ethnic communities. This differentiation between the ethnic populations and the migrants or settlers can be related to the post-colonial construct of 'self' and 'other'. This feeling of hatred towards the 'outsiders' could be seen in Dhiren Majumdar's repulsion towards Pyare Lal, a Bihari immigrant, who runs a *Dhobi* shop in Majumdar's locality. Pyare Lal was a second-generation immigrant but still Dhiren Majumdar had sometimes hoped that he should go back to from where he came. It is mentioned in the story that his father also used to live here, which means they have been settled in this place for long. But still people like Dhiren Majumdar have not accepted him as one of them. They still want him to leave and go back to the place from where he has come from. This conflict between the insiders and the outsiders is one of the burning issues in the Northeast and Barua has realistically presented it in her story. Majumdar's sympathy towards "the boys" and their cause depicts the ordinary people's attitude towards this conflict. "Maybe the boys have something to say after all. All the talk of foreigners and expelling them and the land reverting to the sons of the soil – that tidal wave sweeping across the state had passed him by" (Baruah 112). His taking care of the insurgent like a father shows a different kind of picture of living amidst the guns where the violence has become a normal affair and people sometimes feel sympathetic towards the innocent youths who joins the group because of their circumstances. Jahnavi Barua always finds a way to inter-relate the personal and political dynamics of people living in this region.

Most of the stories deal with the urban middle-class Assamese household and people struggling over trivial personal issues in a conflict-ridden place. As a woman writer, her stories also portray the conflicts in the domestic space and their effects on women. The women characters in every story of this anthology are striking and prominent. They represent the different types of conflicts in one's life. They are depicted as housewives trying to break away from the patriarchal clutches of the household, or women with repressed sexual desires. The first story, "The Magic Spell", deals with little girl, Jiu, who is left alone most of the times as both her parents, Nilima and Gautam, are working. Barua begins by narrating the daily routine of Jiu and delves into the psyche of a little girl caught in the domestic dispute. The patriarchal hegemony or the tradition of binding the womenfolk in the private space and perform her 'womanly duties' is evident when Gautam expects Nilima to leave her job to take care of his mother when he decides to bring his mother from Shillong, while Nilima is not willing to give up her freedom and sit in the house looking after his aged mother. This leads to tension between the husband and the wife and their daughter, Jiu, feels helpless and lonely. When she comes to know from Mala's maid that the latumoni seeds or 'magic seeds' can cure all kinds of illness and even answer one's prayers, she immediately consumes the seeds praying that her parents never fight again and consumes another seed praying for a baby sister. The poisonous seeds did their 'magic' and she was admitted in the hospital. This incident made Nilima and Gautam realise their mistakes and they decide to spend more time with their family. In the story "Sour Green Mangoes," Barua shows a different side of the parent-child relationship. In this story, Barua tries to bring forward the frustration and helplessness of a young girl, Madhumita, who lives with her overprotective parents. Home, which is supposed to be a safe haven, becomes a prison for her. Her parents' watchful eyes and the conditions at her home make her feel suffocated in her own house and she develops a feeling of repulsion towards her parents and confines herself in her room most of the time. It is due to this lack of freedom that she suffers from social anxiety. She yearns for companionship and a friend. Here the desire is not about sexual desire; rather, she desires a friend or a companion. In the end, when she visits her neighbour's place to pluck a few mangoes, she is sexually harassed by her neighbour, but it is shocking that she does not react to it and seems to enjoy it. The writer aptly portrays the psyche of a young girl and her repressed emotions due to parental control through the character of Madhumita. "Tiger" is another story that deals with the same theme. Babli and her family visit the park where she meets Ashish Singh, Assistant Conservator of Forest and who will be their guide for the next few days, and instantly develops a liking for the young guide. The story touches upon the issue of the feelings of an adolescent girl, her longings and her desires. During the farewell bonfire feast, she gets away from her family and walks towards the river and ends up getting close with Ashish despite knowing that he is married and a father. It is only the sight of the magnificent tiger that brings her back to her senses.

Most of the stories in the anthology deal with the parents-child relationship. One such story is "Awakening," which tells the story of a helpless mother who loses her only son. It depicts Uma's coming to terms with Anuj's Death. Anuj was an engineering student in Bangalore. He was killed in a fight that broke out on his campus. This points to the scenario where youths from Northeast go to distant places in the mainland to study and meet hazardous ends. Barua has described the emotions and trauma of a mother at the loss of her only son so realistically that the readers can visualize the pain Uma had to go through. "When they lifted Anuj's bier Uma had been frantic. She had been seized by an unspeakable terror as if it was her own flesh that they were going to burn..." (Barua 174). Her whole life was centered around him. She remembers how her dull life completely changed after his arrival in her life. Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystic* opines that women suffered under a pervasive system of delusions and false values under which they were urged to find personal fulfillment and identity, indirectly through their husbands and children to whom they were expected cheerfully to devote their lives. Uma too, devoted herself to her son and her life circled around him and his happiness. That is the reason why she became frantic at the loss of her son. She could not forget her son and goes to the city to find out the reason of her son's death as the police did not inform them of the reason behind the fight. She visits his college, where the fight took place.

In "Holiday Homework," an ailing mother and her son changes the life of an old and lonely man. Shiv Prasad Barua, after the death of his wife, is left alone in the house under the care of Romesh, the cook and Sita, the maid and is sometimes visited by his children. After he meets Son, who lives next door with his mother, his life changes completely and always finds himself busy with his next-door neighbour. These three people, despite the huge generation gap, share an indescribable emotional bond. Before her death, Amrita writes a letter to him to take care of her son, and in it she encloses a list of Siddharth's holiday homework. The old man wholeheartedly takes up the task and makes sure to fulfill Amrita's wishes.

"The Favourite Child" explores the psyche of four daughters who meet after a long time at a hospital as their mother is admitted there following an injury. Though they are all tensed about their mother's condition, they try to cheer one another and recall their childhood memories and the sweet recollections of the times spent together. They discuss the distribution of ancestral wealth by their mother and bring up the topic of Ranu and Dhiraj's marriage. Barua brings in the evil practices of a patriarchal society where women are made to believe that marriage is the ultimate goal of their life, and they must train themselves to meet the fulfillments required for marriage. This kind of belief is seen when their mother took the decision of marrying off Ranu to Dhiraj as Junu was beautiful and she could get anyone. The writer skillfully names the story "The Favourite Child," but after reading the story, one realises that it is not about the favourite child, rather it portrays the difficult duty of a mother distributing her affection and accomplish her responsibilities and deciding what is best for their future.

"A Fire in Winter" deals with the scandal in the life of Buri and it is narrated by Jeet, whom Buri brought up. She kills her husband and his lover and in the end, burns herself. He recalls his childhood and how Buri used to take care of him. He could not believe the news, and his 'fierce love' for her brought him back home. It deals with the conflict that Buri goes through. Jeet narrates how a woman, "who had raised me with a tenderness my own mother couldn't match" (Barua 141), could kill someone. Another story that deals with the theme of violence in the personal sphere is the titular story "Next Door". It tells the story about Tengesi, who lives with her son and daughter, Maya and is the next-door neighbor of the narrator. Their continuous fights disturbed the lives of the whole neighbourhood. "From daybreak till long into the restless night, there is a clamour and tumult in the house next door that manages to find its way around the edges of the bamboo wall that separates the two properties" (229). The story ends on a shocking note when the narrator reveals that Maya is pregnant with her brother's child.

IV. CONCLUSION

From the above discussion, it is clearly evident that Jahnavi Barua is not only concerned about the political conflict inflicted in the region. Instead she is concerned with portraying the sufferings of the ordinary citizens and their experiences of living in this necropolitical region. She has pointed out the various problems faced by this region which receives little attention from the media or readers. Her stories highlight the interrelation of political and personal dynamics in these conflict zones. The political and the personal domain seems to intertwine and transgress into each other, which deeply affect the lives of the characters. These two dynamics are correlated in the stories and the author has shown how it affects one another. One can relate to her characters. Her characters mirror the people residing in this region. The retired civil servant fulfilling his fatherly duties, a mother coming to terms with her son's death, sisters bonding over past memories, a teenage girl trying to understand her feelings and many more reflects the ordinary people one comes across and can sympathize with them. Her articulation of the problems faced by the characters due to the conflict in the political sphere is a realistic representation of living in this region. In a way, she has tried to debunk the stereotype that the literary works produced in this region should only write about the political situation or have the theme of violence to qualify as "Writings from Northeast". She has tried to portray that the essence of Northeast not only lies in the violence-related stories, but it is much more than one can define. Her writings are an attempt to break the silence adopted by mainland India in portraying this region and aims to bridge the gap between the Northeast and the mainland through her fictions. Jahnavi Barua, in her essay "Assuming Identities: The Writer from the Northeast," observes that "Fiction will become the bridge that joins the margins to the centre; it will make the unfamiliar familiar, and dispel the fear and anxiety the periphery elicits."

Being a women writer, she has focused more on the women characters. Her women characters as mentioned earlier represents the different facets of living in a patriarchal society. Her stories can be classified into "feminist" phase which Elaine Showalter defines as the criticism of women's role in society and which emphasises in raising voices against the norms of patriarchal society. This can be seen in the characters of Nilima and Buri. Apart from it, she has also portrayed the cultural and traditional nuances of this region. She has also incorporated the rich culture and traditions of the Assamese people and has given a local touch by including many Assamese words in her stories. She has given importance in depicting the scenic beauty of the Northeast and has described the impact of the mighty Brahmaputra, which is considered to be the soul of Assam, the effect of Pagladiya river on the lives of people of this region and the beauty of Manas National Park. It can be said that she has tried her best to portray Assam, a marginalised space in the mainland, and its beauty and tried to break the stereotypes surrounding it.

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