



A Study of Identity and Interpersonal Dynamics : Jahnavi Barua's Undertow

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Abstract:- This study explores the intricate themes of identity and interpersonal relationships in Jahnavi Barua's novel "Undertow." It aims to unravel the complexities of relationships, focusing on self-discovery and the quest for connection and acceptance. Through an analysis of this novel, the study examines how Barua navigates identity formation and the significance of belonging in between these interpersonal dynamics. By scrutinising characters, settings, and narrative techniques, the study reveals the profound impact of these themes on individual lives, relationships, and societal structures. It addresses the complexities of belonging, touching on alienation, displacement, assimilation, and the longing for authentic connections. The paper also considers the intersectionality of identity and belonging, providing a comprehensive understanding of these critical themes in Northeast literary writings.

Keywords: identity, relationship, interpersonal dynamics, homeland, etc.

Introduction

The Northeast region of India indeed boasts a captivating richness in biodiversity and a unique ecosystem. The region is known for its deep and intrinsic connection with nature, characterised by lush green landscapes, dense forests, rivers, and hills, making it one of the most ecologically diverse areas in the country. The North East region is referred to as the eight sisters, comprising Assam, Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Mizoram, Tripura, Nagaland, and Sikkim. Northeast Indian literature often grapples with themes of identity and interpersonal dynamics, reflecting the region's diverse cultures, languages, and histories. Literature from the Northeast showcases a mosaic of ethnic identities, exploring how local customs, traditions, and languages shape individual and communal identities. Women writers from these are often focused on women's roles and gender dynamics within their societies, challenging patriarchal norms and highlighting resilience. In this paper, one of the well-known writers from Assam, Jahnavi Barua, and her complex themes of identity and interpersonal relationships are showcased in her novel Undertow.

Jhanvi Barua is an emerging Indian author from Assam, one of the North-eastern states. She is known for her poignant storytelling and exploration of complex themes such as migration, loneliness, ecological concern, identity, the human experience, etc. Her debut novel, Undertow, received critical acclaim for its rich character development and nuanced portrayal of relationships against the backdrop of contemporary issues. Barua's writing often reflects her own experiences and insights and is thus recognised for her ability to weave personal narratives with broader social contexts, making her work both relatable and thought-provoking.

Undertow one of her finest works that deals with diverse themes like migration, identity, connection with the roots, ecological perspective, and relationships.

The narratives explored the interplay between protagonists' Rukmini and Loya personal experiences and larger cultural narratives, revealing how relationships are shaped by shared histories and values. The characters frequently navigate feelings of isolation due to personal and cultural differences, contrasting with the warmth of familial and community ties. Relationships within tight-knit communities are central, illustrating how collective identity influences personal connections and conflicts. Northeast Indian literature provides a rich tapestry for exploring identity and interpersonal dynamics, offering insights into the region's unique challenges and triumphs. Through diverse narratives, authors illuminate the intricate relationships between individuals and their cultures, contributing to a broader understanding of identity in contemporary literature.

Interpersonal relationship dynamics and identity:

Undertow by Jahn timer Barua is a compelling novel that delves into the intricacies of identity and relationships within the context of contemporary life. The narrative centres on Rukmini and her marriage, which faces disapproval from her mother because she has chosen Alex her partner from outside their community. Defying tradition, Rukmini leaves her homeland behind and relocates to Bangalore, seeking to build a new life with her husband. Through her journey, she confronts the challenges of cultural expectations and embraces her desire for independence and love. As the daughter of a respected civil servant, Rukmini's father, Torun, was an officer of high standing. This background adds complexity to her situation as she navigates her desire for independence against the expectations tied to her father's reputation. Throughout the novel, the author delves into the relationship between Rukmini and her mother, Usha, highlighting the tensions that arise from Usha's disapproval of Rukmini's identity and beliefs. Both Usha and Torun adored their son Arun, and this close bond further complicates their dynamic, emphasising the generational and ideological rifts within the family. This exploration reveals the struggle for acceptance and the complexities of maternal love.

Arun means "morning sun," around which parents revolve.

But Rukmini's relationship with Robin Khura (uncle) and his family was different. She is more close to them. As mentioned, "Robin Khura's family was the balm to Rukmini's wounds." She feels more at home here than in her own house. Rukmini was never reciprocated by her mother, Usha, and she felt somewhere lacking in love. When Rukmini met Alex, she felt her incompleteness complete with him. Her romantic relationship turned out to be the reason she was alive. When Alex kissed her, she was more than okay.

"It was as if she had only now begun to come alive. Under his gaze, she felt beautiful... Her ideas and her opinions were brought out in the open, and, to her astonishment, they were declared intelligent, wise, fantastic even. "

The story takes an unexpected turn when Rukmini's daughter, Loya, returns to Assam to explore her roots. This journey reveals a new layer of interpersonal dynamics, highlighting the evolving relationship between Loya and her grandfather. As they connect, they navigate the complexities of family history and cultural identity. Torun saw in Loya a striking resemblance to her grandmother, Usha. However, Loya vehemently denied the comparison, her anger simmering beneath the surface. She was still hurt by the memory of her mother being cast out of their home due to caste differences. The pain of that injustice fuelled her defiance, pushing her to reject any such connection. But Loya found the same affection as Rukmini with Robin Khura and in his home. She called him "Koka" in Assamese, and this signifies her mother's blood is in her veins. With time, Loya could connect to Torun, and finally she calls him "Koka." In between all these complex relationships, Loya found her roots in the valleys of Brahmaputra. These interpersonal dynamics led to personal losses, suffering, and complicated relationships. Rukmini faced everything on her own; even she

was betrayed by Alex for another woman, which was more afflictive as she left her own homeland for her love. But she stayed bold without returning to her parents' house and true to her identity. Through her daughter Loya, she began to reconnect with her roots.

In "Undertow" by Jahnvi Barua, the theme of identity is intricately woven into the characters' lives, showcasing how personal and cultural identities are influenced by familial ties and societal expectations. Through Loya and her journey, the narratives present the complexities of belonging and self-discovery, particularly in the context of her mother's Assamese heritage. Barua uses nature as a metaphor for identity. The river Brahmaputra, which is considered the blood of Assam and a recurring element, symbolises the fluidity of identity—how it can change and adapt over time. This connection to the natural world reinforces the idea that identity is not fixed but is instead shaped by experiences, relationships, and the environment. This is reflected in Rukmini as well as with Loya. Like her mother, Loya could feel the presence of natural aspects as the connecting link to her roots. After landing, she could feel the presence of home. As said

"Loya had seen many beautiful places... Spent enough time in the hills and forests of south India—but to have a vista before one's own home!"

The narrative delves into the protagonist's internal conflicts as she navigates her place in a society that often imposes rigid roles based on gender and tradition. Rukmini's struggles with self-acceptance and the desire to break free from societal norms illustrate the difficulties trying to forge her own identity. She was never accepted with her husband by her own mother and also by her mother-in-law. When Loya said, "Here, Usha is angry and banishing Ma from home. There, Ammachi is hating Ma, and so shut out of everything there too." The protagonist's interactions with other characters further reveal the impact of external perceptions on her sense of self. Despite facing feelings of alienation and numerous challenges, abandoned by all, she remains resilient, showcasing her unwavering spirit. Her journey reflects not only personal growth but also the power of identity and the importance of standing firm in one's beliefs. As she seeks to understand her identity, her relationships, particularly with her mother, serve as a lens through which she examines her place in the world. Loya, on the other hand, after many years wanted to visit Assam and chose Kaziranga for her research study, signifying her search for belongingness and identity. In this search, she connected to her roots, i.e., Assam. She found the love and affection in this place, highlighting how the tides of change can shape one's identity. Barua's lyrical prose and vivid imagery draw readers into the emotional landscape of her characters, making for a profound and engaging reading experience

Conclusion

"Undertow" presents identity as a multifaceted theme, emphasising the interplay between personal choices and cultural influences. Barua crafts a narrative that reflects the ongoing search for self amidst the tides of tradition and modernity, inviting readers to consider how their own identities are shaped by the forces around them. Through the protagonist's journey, the novel poignantly illustrates the challenges and triumphs of embracing one's identity in a complex world. Both Rukmini and Loya found their identities in between these interpersonal dynamics of relationship in their homeland called "Assam."

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