



AN ECO CRITICAL STUDY OF JAHNAVI BARUA'S UNDERTOW

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Abstract: The novels of the North Eastern writer Jahnvi Barua have gained importance in the recent times. Her writings project various aspects of North East such as environment, relation between humans and nature, conflict, culture, politics, displacement, myth, language. Her novel, "Undertow" which is set in Assam majorly explores the lives of three generation women of a family and their concerns of love towards nature, displacement, politics and violence. The present paper attempts to shed light on the eco critical perspective of the novel by exploring the intervention of ecology in the lives of its characters.

Index Terms - Eco criticism, Jahnvi Barua, Undertow, Eco critical aspects

I.Introduction

North Eastern India is the home of distinctive ethnic groups and is multi lingual, multi cultural and multi religious. It is a land of diverse races, castes, and cultures. The region is also well known for its beauty of landscapes. For decades, the people of North East worship Nature and are well aware of the regions ecology. Ethnic groups, tribes and the people representing various cultures of the region are closely connected to nature. Moreover, the majority of the North East states having geographical proximity with the Himalayan range enjoy their indulgence with nature. Perhaps, this may be one of the reasons that made the writers of the North East come up with literature that is frequently set against the backdrop of the scenic beauty. The literature of the region which is written on dominant and distinctive themes also attributes a striking prominence to environment and Nature. A green perspective towards North Eastern literature helps readers to understand the underlying themes in it which are frequently influenced by ecology of the region.

Indian English poetry from Northeastern part of India is rich in enshrining various aspects of ecology of the region. It has been a fashion with the poets of the region to celebrate the ecological glory of the region and their ecological awareness. (Chandra Das 2004, 35)

Nature and literature have always been closely knit together and such connection can be found in various works of arts since centuries. In the present day world, this close proximity between the natural and social worlds is admired and emphasized in all fields of knowledge. Circumstances of sense of loss, aspects of conflict, struggles with worldly complexities, displacement led to the writings on intervention of environment in human life and love towards nature in modern times. In addition to that, literary criticism which was majorly preoccupied by historical and cultural approaches has shifted its eye towards ecology taking concern to deteriorating eco-system. Reflecting the relationship between literature and nature has gained momentum in the 20th century. Besides, literary critics are also trying to study how writers textualize the link between two interdisciplinary aspects, nature and society in their works. This way of analyzing a literary text with the environment and ecological concerns is called eco criticism. The term 'Eco Criticism' which was coined by William Rueckert is originated from two Greek words 'oikos' which means 'house' and 'krites' which means 'critic'. The reflections of a writer's profound association with nature and environment are put forth in eco critical studies. Harold Fromm and Cheryll Glotfelty define eco criticism in the book, The Eco Criticism Reader,

Just as Feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender conscious perspective and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading texts, eco criticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies. (Cheryll Glotfelty 1996, 6)

Buell defines “ecocriticism’...as [a] study of the relationship between literature and the environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environment praxis” (Buell 1995, 430)

According to Howrath an eco critic is “ a person who judges the merits and faults of writings that depict the effects of culture upon nature, with a view toward celebrating nature berating its despoilers, and reversing their harm through political action. (Howrath 1996, 69)

North East (NE) literature is no exception in having concern for nature. For the people of NE nature is the place where they find their identity. However, the NE is one of the most under-represented regions of India. The troubled political atmosphere, the scenic beauty, and the prevalence of various ethnic groups in the region may have led to the literary writings that are entirely different from the rest of India. Making a critical study of the literary writings of this region, will let us know that most of the authors consciously incorporate the geopolitical and environmental issues like the environmental degradation of the region, the exploitation of natural resources, climate change, deforestation, encroachment, etc. in their writings. . In the writings of the authors such as Jahnvi Barua, Mamang Dai, Easterine Kire, Temsula Ao, Robin S Ngangom and Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih we find the political and environmental aspects of the region. Nature for them is not only considered as a source of sustenance but also an extension of their identity and cultural roots.

Among such writers, the present paper is confined to eco critical aspects of Jahnvi Barua’s novel “Undertow”.

II. Eco-criticism in Undertow

Ecological consciousness and the close association of humans with the natural environment form a major theme in Undertow. We find Jahnvi Barua’s beautiful portrayal of the nature and the landscape. The novel has been set against the backdrop of two places. Barua has wonderfully presented the scenery and landscape of both the places. The first of the novel is Assam, the native land of Rukmini. Bangalore is another place to which Loya, Rukmini’s daughter is brought up after her mother marries an outsider Alex. Barua, sets the novel in these places since she is a native of Assam, but a resident of Bangalore. She discovers the city of Guahati with her nostalgic experiences. The way she narrates the picturesque view of the mighty Brahmaputra and its role in the lives of Rukmini, Loya, Usha and Torun and binds them to their native city makes it a great artistic depiction.

The description of the floating Brahmaputra, the hills, mountains, animals and the chirping of the migrant birds becomes very attractive in the novel. Through the spirits of trees, sky, hills and the river Brahmaputra the characters find their identity. The home of the majority of the characters in the novel, Yellow House has, “the advantage of being situated on the edge of a hill that while not exactly overhanging the river did overlook it as closely as possible”. (Barua 2020, 10) The various flora and fauna with great sensuousness occupy a substantial part in the novel. Rukmini, who was born and grew up in the Yellow House has a close association with her home and seeks happiness and tranquility from nature. She loves sitting beside the window of her room in the Yellow House and enjoying the spectacular view, which was said to be the best in the city of Guahati. Rukmini’s classmates would meet once a week in her house and admire the view. Presenting the sense of loss, complexities, anguish and melancholy of Rukmini on her wedding day, Barua beautifully depicts the indulgence of nature in Rukmini’s life. In the words of Barua,

This river that had run through her life, the Brahmaputra, swept around the bottom of her hill. Even in the dark, especially in the darkness, she sensed the waters racing past her towards the distant

flatlands of Bangladesh and, beyond, to the Bay of Bengal. Black river, dark velvet sky and where they met, dark blue hills, invisible in the night. (Barua 2020, 4)

The Brahmaputra perhaps occupies a great place like any other significant character in the novel, as it witnesses the love, resentment and anguish of Assam. Besides the dominating presence of the majestic river, the novel also allows the co-existence of the central characters and their voices of Torun and Loya; it portrays the dichotomy between an indigenous person who has strong roots in one place (an insider), and a migrant who doesn't have any tangible roots. Therefore, the river is always static in Torun's perspective, and constantly flows according to Loya's view.

When Rukmini was about to leave her home, to marry Alex she could hear the calls of the sky, asking to leave for an unknown land in the flowing waters.

There was something enchanted about the sky on a clear night like this. Rukmini could not help but feel its magnetic pull. As if people and events from afar, but below this same sky, were calling out to her, to leave her safe harbour and sail into unknown alluring waters towards them. (Barua 2020, 4)

Barua also conveys the uncontrollable nature of the river when the city of Guahati is on Bandh not allowing any person to move out of their homes. Rukmini hears no voice, except the murmur of the river and finds it not having any regards or fear about the political siege which prevails all over the city. The novelist wonderfully portrays the emotions of Rukmini on her wedding day while she says,

Rukmini shivered at the window despite her thick quilted gown. Grey clouds floated across the sky threatening rain. Unseasonal in December in this part of the country but what could be more fitting? Rain on her wedding day, rain on this marriage so beleaguered to begin with. (Barua 2020, 6)

Moreover, the novelist continues to present the beautiful nature of Assam through another central character, Loya. Loya who lives at Bangalore comes to Assam for her research work which was on Asian elephants. She found Assam's Kaziranga was the perfect place for carrying out her research and this gave her an opportunity to visit the many beautiful places there. When Loya arrives at her mother Rukmini's home, the Yellow House, she gets connected with nature while she sees the Brahmaputra curved beautifully along the base of the hill. She could have a picturesque view of the glimmering sunlight in the blue waters of the river. At a far distance, she sees the blue-green blur view of the hills on the opposite bank. She has never seen any river which is wider than that of the Brahmaputra. She hears the sounds of the birds and moves around the house in the shade of the frangipani trees.

The intoxicating perfume of their waxy white flowers wafted down to her. From somewhere deep in the undergrowth came the drone of a honeybee, rising and falling languorously, a sound oddly appealing in the hot stillness. (Barua 2020, 41)

Loya finds Robin Khura's back yard with full of coconut trees, trees of mango, palm, guava, jack fruit which are generally there in every house of the NE. She also experiences the visit of beautiful birds such as crow pheasant and scaly-breasted munias nested in hibiscus hedge at her stay in her Koka's house.

III. Conclusion

The Eco critical analysis of the novelist chosen for the study, namely, Jahnvi Barua reveals a literary consciousness informed by a deep love and concern to the culture, traditions and the environment of Assam. Her voice shows us the power of literature to have concern to nature and thereby raising environmental awareness amongst the readers. Her writings besides reflecting the political issues of Assam, serve as an urgent reminder to conserve and sustain ecology.

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