

## Exploring Shifting Assamese Identities in Contemporary Fiction with a Special Focus of Jahnabi Barua's "Undertow"

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### Abstract:

Assam, a state in Northeast India, possesses a rich and complex history, marked by diverse ethnic groups, linguistic variations, and a vibrant cultural heritage. Historically, Assamese identity has often been portrayed as rooted in a shared language, the legacy of the Ahom kingdom, and a strong connection to the Brahmaputra River. However, in the contemporary era, this seemingly stable notion of identity faces increasing pressures from various internal and external forces. Globalization, increased migration, urbanization, and persistent socio-political issues, including insurgency and debates around indigenous rights, have contributed to a more nuanced and often fragmented sense of self among the people of Assam.

Contemporary Assamese fiction, particularly works written in English, offers a compelling lens through which to explore these shifting identities. These narratives move beyond simplistic or nostalgic representations, delving into the intricacies of individual and collective experiences in a world that is constantly redefining what it means to be Assamese. This paper seeks to investigate this phenomenon by focusing on Jahnabi Barua's "Undertow" (2020), a novel that poignantly captures the multifaceted dimensions of modern Assamese identity. Through its exploration of family dynamics, displacement, and the search for belonging, "Undertow" serves as a microcosm for the broader shifts occurring within Assamese society.

**Key Words:** Identity, fiction, relationship, memory, outside, inside etc.

### Introduction:

Assamese identity is a complex, dynamic, and often contested construct, shaped by centuries of historical evolution, cultural assimilation, linguistic distinctiveness, and ongoing socio-political challenges within the diverse tapestry of North East India. It is a prime example of how regional identities are forged, challenged, and re-articulated in a postcolonial, multi-ethnic, and often conflict-prone environment.

The Assamese identity gained significant consolidation during the long rule of the Ahom dynasty (1228-1826 CE). The Ahom kings, originally Tai-Shan migrants, successfully integrated various indigenous Tibeto-Burman and Austroasiatic communities of the Brahmaputra Valley under a common administrative and cultural umbrella. This long process of assimilation created a "Greater Assamese Society." The 15th-16th century Vaishnavite movement led by Srimanta Sankardeva played a pivotal role in solidifying Assamese cultural identity. His philosophy promoted social equality, non-violence, and a distinct devotional practice, fostering a sense of unity and cultural pride among diverse communities through the Assamese language and art forms like Bhaona (traditional plays) and Satriya Nritya (classical dance). Episodes of resistance against Mughal incursions (e.g., Battle of Saraighat) further cemented a collective Assamese consciousness against external threats, laying early foundations for a "nationalistic" sentiment.

### Linguistic Distinctiveness:

The Assamese language, the easternmost Indo-Aryan language, is a cornerstone of Assamese identity. It has evolved by incorporating words and influences from Tibeto-Burman and other indigenous languages. The struggle for the pre-eminence and preservation of the Assamese language has been a recurring theme in identity politics, particularly against the perceived threat from Bengali, especially during the colonial period and post-independence.

Historically, "Asomiya" (Assamese) often referred to the residents of Assam, aiming to encompass the diverse groups within the Brahmaputra Valley under a common cultural and linguistic identity. The three Bihu festivals (Rongali/Bohag Bihu, Kongali/Kati Bihu, Bhogali/Magh Bihu) mark the agricultural cycle and are celebrated with immense fervor, symbolizing the core of Assamese cultural life through vibrant dances, songs, and feasts. Unique crafts like Assam silk (Muga, Eri, Pat), handloom textiles (Gamosa, Mekhela Chador), bamboo and cane work, and traditional jewelry are significant cultural markers. The Gamosa (a hand-woven cotton towel with red motifs), Jaapi (traditional conical hat), Xorai (bell-metal offering tray), and Tamul-Paan (areca nut and betel leaf) are deeply symbolic of Assamese hospitality, reverence, and cultural practices. Assamese cuisine, with its distinctive use of local herbs, less spice, and staple rice and fish, offers a unique culinary identity (e.g., Khar, Masor Tenga, Pitha).

In essence, Assamese identity is not static. It's a dynamic negotiation between a rich historical past, distinct cultural practices, the pervasive influence of the Assamese language, and the continuous challenges posed by migration, conflict, and the struggle for recognition within the broader Indian federal structure. This ongoing process of self-definition makes it a fascinating and complex subject within North East Indian studies.

### **Identity Portrayal in Literature:**

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.

Contemporary Assamese fiction, particularly works written in English, offers a compelling lens through which to explore these shifting identities. These narratives move beyond simplistic or nostalgic representations, delving into the intricacies of individual and collective experiences in a world that is constantly redefining what it means to be Assamese. Jahnvi 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.

This paper seeks to investigate this phenomenon by focusing on Jahnvi Barua's *"Undertow"* (2020), a novel that poignantly captures the multifaceted dimensions of modern Assamese identity and interpersonal relationships. Through its exploration of family dynamics, displacement, and the search for belonging, *"Undertow"* serves as a microcosm for the broader shifts occurring within Assamese society revealing identity as a fluid, often melancholic, and continuously negotiated construct rather than a fixed inheritance. It would also state that this paper examines the complex and evolving themes of Assamese identity as represented in contemporary Anglophone fiction, paying particular attention to Jahnvi Barua's novel *Undertow*.

### **Literature Review:**

Post-independence, Assam has witnessed a series of "language wars," ethnic movements, and insurgencies, all of which have profoundly influenced the sense of belonging and "unbelonging" among its diverse inhabitants.

The influx of migrants, particularly from Bangladesh, has further complicated demographic realities, leading to anxieties about the erosion of indigenous Assamese identity and cultural distinctiveness (*Goodreads review of Undertow, n.d.*). Literature thus becomes a space to register these anxieties, but also to explore resilience and adaptation. Writers like *Temsula Ao (Ao, n.d.)* and *Easterine Kire (Sarkar & Gaur, 2021)* have been instrumental in giving voice to these diverse experiences, often drawing on folklore and oral traditions to bridge past and present. The long history of conflict, insurgency, and state violence in the Northeast has left deep scars on the collective psyche. Literature often functions as a testimonial space, depicting the psychological impact of trauma, displacement, and the struggle for peace (*Sarkar & Gaur, 2021*). This includes exploring how silence, memory, and the "not telling" of stories can distort and perpetuate trauma, profoundly affecting individual and communal identity. Many narratives explore the nuanced sense of belonging, not only to a particular ethnic group or region but also to the larger Indian nation. Characters often navigate liminal spaces, grappling with questions of home, exile, and what it means to be an "insider" or "outsider" (*Imphal Reviews, 2020*). This search for belonging is frequently intertwined with processes of self-discovery and a reconnection with heritage.

### **Problem Statement:**

This paper argues that contemporary Assamese Anglophone fiction, exemplified compellingly by Jahnvi Barua's *Undertow*, illuminates Assamese identity not as a singular, inherited trait, but as a fluid, deeply personal, and often melancholic negotiation between historical memory, the pull of ancestral land, the alienating experience of migration, and the intricate dynamics of familial and societal belonging.

### **Methodology:**

This research paper employs a qualitative research approach centered on textual analysis to explore the multifaceted themes of identity within contemporary Assamese Anglophone fiction. The study's design is primarily a case study analysis of Jahnvi Barua's *Undertow*. The core of this methodology involves meticulous close reading and critical interpretation of the selected literary works. This entails dissecting narrative techniques, character development,

thematic motifs, symbolic representations, and linguistic choices to uncover how themes of identity are constructed and conveyed.

#### **Data Collection:**

**1) Primary Data:** The primary data for this research is Jahnavi Barua's *Undertow* (2020).

**2) Secondary Data:** Secondary data will be gathered from a range of academic sources to inform theoretical frameworks and contextualize the literary analysis. This includes: Scholarly books and journal articles on identity theory, critical essays and reviews specifically pertaining to Jahnavi Barua's works and contemporary Assamese Anglophone fiction, historical and socio-political analyses of Assam and North East India that provide context for the themes explored in the fiction etc.

#### **Discussion:**

##### **Family Narratives and Intergenerational Identity in 'Undertow':**

*Undertow* by Jahnavi Barua is a compelling novel that delves into the intricacies of identity and relationships within the context of contemporary life. The novel is a poignant exploration of family narratives and their profound impact on intergenerational identity, set against the backdrop of a changing Assam. The novel intricately weaves together the past and present lives of three central characters: Loya, a young woman returning to her ancestral home; her mother, Nilakshi, a woman marked by quiet resilience and unspoken grief; and Nilakshi's estranged brother, Torun, whose life choices embody a different kind of burden.

A defining characteristic of the family in *Undertow* is the pervasive presence of silence. The past, particularly the more turbulent aspects related to socio-political shifts in Assam (like the insurgency or personal losses), is often hinted at rather than explicitly narrated. Nilakshi carries a deep, quiet sorrow that she rarely articulates, and Torun's estrangement is rooted in choices and experiences that remain largely unaddressed. This "undertow" of silence significantly shapes the family's dynamics. Loya, the younger generation, inherits not just a legacy of comfort and privilege but also a legacy of emotional reticence and unresolved familial rifts. Her identity is thus partly defined by the gaps in the family narrative, by what has been left unsaid.

The novel demonstrates how identity is intergenerational and often inherited. Loya, though seemingly detached from Assam's political turmoil, is inescapably linked to her family's past. Her mother Nilakshi's choices, her relationship with Torun, and their collective experiences of grief, loss, and survival in Assam directly influence Loya's emotional landscape and her sense of belonging. The family's history, whether explicitly recounted or implicitly felt, acts as a foundation upon which Loya's own identity is built, even as she tries to forge her independent path.

*Undertow* can be read as Loya's attempt to reconstruct and reconcile the fragmented family narrative. Her return to the ancestral home is not just a physical journey but a quest to understand her roots, to piece together the unspoken stories of her mother and uncle. Through her observations, questions, and limited conversations, she tries to fill the silences and comprehend the undertow of emotions that has shaped her family.

The strained relationship between Nilakshi and Torun is central to this. Their individual identities are deeply entwined with their shared past and their inability to bridge their differences. Loya's presence acts as a catalyst, subtly forcing a re-evaluation of these long-held narratives. The ancestral home and the landscape of Assam serve as powerful repositories of family memory. The physical spaces hold echoes of past lives, joys, and sorrows. For Loya, engaging with the land and the house is part of her process of understanding her inherited identity. The sensory details and nostalgic elements embedded in the narrative underscore how memory, place, and identity are inextricably linked across generations.

Ultimately, *Undertow* suggests that understanding one's personal identity is often contingent upon understanding one's family. Loya's journey is one of self-discovery through the lens of her family's untold stories. By grappling with their past, their silence, and their complexities, she begins to solidify her own sense of self and her connection to her Assamese heritage, even if that connection remains tinged with melancholy and a recognition of the lingering "undertow" of history.

In essence, *Undertow* masterfully portrays how family narratives, even those riddled with silence and unspoken grief, form the bedrock of intergenerational identity. It highlights that the past is never truly past, continuing to ripple through the lives of subsequent generations, shaping their sense of who they are and where they belong.

##### **Assamese Cultural References and Traditional Practices in 'Undertow':**

Jahnavi Barua's *Undertow* is deeply embedded in the cultural landscape of Assam, utilizing numerous subtle and overt references to traditional practices and cultural markers that lend authenticity and depth to the narrative. Even as an Anglophone novel, it successfully translates a distinctly Assamese sensibility, allowing the reader to experience the texture of life in the region.

The ancestral home, with its sprawling gardens and specific architecture, is central to the novel. It functions as a repository of family memory and a space where traditional Assamese domestic life unfolds. The daily routines, the layout of the house, and the relationship between family members within this setting all reflect a particular cultural context. The focus on the garden, for instance, evokes a common Assamese connection to nature and self-sufficiency.

Food plays a significant, albeit subtle, role in *Undertow*, serving as a marker of identity and a medium for emotional expression within the family. While not elaborately described with recipes, the mentions of meals, the serving of tea (a staple in Assam), and the quiet act of preparing food for loved ones underpin the Assamese tradition of hospitality and the centrality of shared meals in familial bonding. The simple, comforting nature of Assamese home-cooked food often signifies a return to roots and a connection to the past.

The Assamese landscape is almost a character in itself. Barua frequently invokes the region's distinctive environment – the lush greenery, the sounds of nature, the presence of specific plants and animals (e.g., mention of specific trees, birds). This deep connection to the environment is an intrinsic part of Assamese culture, where life is often lived in close proximity to nature's rhythms. The heavy monsoons, the humidity, and the unique flora contribute to the sensory experience of the novel, immersing the reader in an authentic Assamese atmosphere.

The novel subtly reflects traditional Assamese values. The deference shown to the older generation, even amidst underlying family tensions, is palpable. Despite estrangements, the family remains the fundamental unit of identity and belonging, with deep-seated obligations and emotional ties. The quiet endurance of characters like Nilakshi, who have weathered personal tragedies and societal upheavals with a dignified silence, speaks to a deeply ingrained cultural resilience.

### **'Outside' Identity with 'Inside' Identity:**

Jahnvi Barua's *Undertow* meticulously charts Loya's journey of return to her ancestral home in Assam, offering poignant textual examples of her re-engagement with both her estranged family and the familiar yet changed Assamese landscape. This return serves as a crucial catalyst for Loya's attempt to reconcile her 'outside' identity (formed by her urban, independent life away from Assam) with her 'inside' identity (her inherited Assamese self, shaped by family history and the land).

Loya's 'outside' identity is subtly established through her initial detachment and occasional discomfort with the unspoken tensions within her family. She lives away from Assam, presumably in a metropolitan Indian city, pursuing her own career. Her decision to return is driven by a sense of familial duty and a quiet longing, but not without a degree of apprehension. The narrative subtly contrasts Loya's independent life with the slower, more traditional pace of her ancestral home. While not explicitly stated, her mannerisms, choice of activities, or even internal monologues might hint at a different rhythm of life she's accustomed to.

Loya's interactions with Nilakshi and Torun, though often defined by their silences, are crucial to her re-engagement with her familial 'inside' identity. Loya's attempts to bridge the emotional distance with her mother, Nilakshi, are central. While dialogue is sparse, Barua focuses on shared moments – a quiet meal, Nilakshi's domestic routines, a shared glance. These non-verbal interactions, particularly acts of care and shared domesticity, become the language through which their bond is tentatively re-established. Loya observes her mother's quiet resilience and the subtle marks of her past, beginning to understand the layers of Nilakshi's identity. Loya's interactions with her uncle Torun are even more strained and sparse, yet profoundly significant. Torun represents a hidden chapter of the family's past, a source of unspoken tension. Loya's curiosity about him, her attempts to understand his choices and his distance, are vital to her understanding of her family's complete narrative. Her observations of his quiet routines or his interactions with the land (e.g., his garden work) provide clues to his identity, and by extension, to parts of her own inherited self.

As Loya spends more time in the ancestral home, her initial 'outsider' perspective, perhaps seeking clear answers, gives way to an acceptance of the ambiguities and silences. She learns to appreciate the nuances of her family's bonds and the unspoken histories that have shaped them. This acceptance signifies a maturation of her 'inside' identity.

By the novel's end, Loya doesn't necessarily abandon her 'outside' independent self, but she integrates her deepened understanding of her roots. Her identity becomes richer and more complex, encompassing both her personal journey and her profound, re-discovered connection to her Assamese family and landscape. The reconciliation is not a fusion into one monolithic identity, but an expanded, more holistic sense of self that accommodates both facets.

These textual dynamics in *Undertow* powerfully illustrate Loya's journey back to her roots, showcasing how re-engagement with family and land becomes a deeply personal and often quiet process of reconciling fragmented selves and finding a complete sense of belonging.

### **Conclusion:**

Drawing together the threads of the analysis, this research paper unequivocally reaffirms its central argument: contemporary Assamese Anglophone fiction, particularly exemplified by Jahnvi Barua's evocative novel *Undertow*, consistently provides a complex, fluid, and often melancholic portrayal of Assamese identity, a selfhood profoundly

shaped by the indelible marks of memory, the dislocating experiences of migration, and the perpetual, nuanced search for belonging.

Our exploration has demonstrated that these narratives move beyond simplistic or static definitions, instead presenting identity as a dynamic construct, continuously renegotiated in response to both historical inheritances and present-day realities. Through the intricate familial landscapes and introspective journeys, *Undertow* encapsulates this very essence, revealing how personal narratives of loss and longing contribute to a collective understanding of an identity that is both deeply rooted in the Brahmaputra's soil and yet perpetually in flux, caught in the ebb and flow of change. The melancholic undertone, so characteristic of this fiction, becomes a testament to the weight of collective memory and the bittersweet nature of finding one's place in a world that often demands difficult choices between what was and what is to be.

*Undertow* reveal a profound encapsulation of the complex interplay between historical memory, the protagonist's personal journey, and the inherent tension in defining Assamese selfhood. The novel demonstrates that historical memory, while often unarticulated, is a palpable and shaping force in the lives of its characters. The novel subtly but powerfully conveys the lingering shadow of Assam's tumultuous past—including periods of political unrest, social upheaval, and personal loss—through the silences and emotional reticence of the older generation, particularly Nilakshi and Torun. These unspoken histories, rather than being explicitly detailed, are felt in the characters' present-day anxieties, their guarded affections, and the quiet melancholia that pervades the household. The reader, much like Loya, must piece together this collective memory, understanding its profound impact on the present.

Loya's physical return from her metropolitan 'outside' life to her ancestral home in Assam initiates a deeply personal and introspective journey. Her re-engagement with the familiar landscape, the rhythms of domestic life, and the enigmatic presence of her family members becomes a metaphor for her quest to understand herself. Through her observations, her quiet questioning, and her sensory immersion in the Assamese environment, Loya actively navigates the disorienting gap between her urban, independent identity and her inherited, rooted self. Her journey highlights the active process of defining identity rather than passively inheriting it.

*Undertow* masterfully exposes the inherent tension in defining Assamese selfhood in a contemporary context. Loya's journey represents the clash and potential integration of traditional Assamese values (rootedness, community, quiet endurance) with modern, individualistic aspirations (urban independence, career). The novel underscores the conflict between the explicit, public narratives of identity and the deeply personal, often silent, emotional truths that truly define individuals and families in Assam. Characters, particularly Loya, grapple with where they truly belong—in the rapidly changing homeland, or in the distant, impersonal city. This constant negotiation highlights that belonging is a fluid state, often earned through understanding and acceptance, rather than merely a birthright.

In sum, *Undertow* serves as a powerful testament to how memory—both personal and historical—does not simply reside in the past but actively shapes present identities. Through Loya's poignant personal journey, Barua demonstrates that Assamese selfhood is a perpetually evolving conversation with its own history, its landscape, and the profound, often melancholic, emotional currents that run beneath the surface of everyday life. Barua's "Undertow" contributes significantly to the ongoing literary discourse on identity in Northeast India. It invites readers to consider Assamese identity not as a static, bounded entity, but as a vibrant and continuously evolving mosaic of experiences, histories, and aspirations.

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