

Depiction of Assamese Customs and Rituals in the novel *Rebirth* by Jahnavi Barua

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Abstract

It is noteworthy how in the literary World of India, writings in English have been emerging from the North East. Writers from this part are producing works with authentic qualities and true vision of its people. Customs and Rituals are the basis of a society, which helps people to stay connected to their very roots. And the presentation of the same in literary works allow the readers to delve deeper into the text and to feel the very essence of a particular region. Such attributions on North East Indian writings are developing the interest of readers in this region's writings and on its people from different parts of the mainland India. This paper seeks to analyse Jahnavi Barua's novel *Rebirth* from the above mentioned lense of customs and rituals in the Assamese society.

Keywords : North East India, Assam, Culture, Customs, Rituals, Society

Introduction :

The North East region of India is an amalgamation of multiethnic and multiculture which is clearly reflected in its literature. With the increase in number of publications from this region written in English, readers from different parts of India takes a sheer interest in the region's varied aspects. In this select fiction *Rebirth* by contemporary North East Indian woman writer Jahnavi Barua provides a perspicuous depiction of Assamese rich culture (customs, rituals & beliefs) about which the Assamese people are very particular since forever.

Jahnavi Barua's novel *Rebirth* was published in 2010. She is also the author to the 'Undertow' and the short story collection Next-Door : stories, published in 2008. *Rebirth* is the story of a young woman named Kaberi, who hails from Assam but moved to Bangalore city after her marriage with Ranjit (Ron). This novel primarily deals with the themes like women conciousness, gender study, oppression of woman and female subjugation in the institution of marriage and other related themes. But, here in this paper the emphasis is given to the aspect of Assamese culture in which the protagonist of the novel has been brought up and her roots are connected to. We can not ignore the role rituals and customs play in an Assamese society. Hence, the author herself has included some descriptions in the novel whereby the readers can get a picture of it.

“ But before that, you must be curious about the wedding;...”

(Barua 64)

Kaberi dwelling in the thoughts of her girlhood days in Assam, aspires to share wedding time stories to the baby in her womb. Through her narration the readers can have a clear picture of Assamese weddings.

“ The day of the joron the morol had to be readied;...” (Barua 68)

Here the narrator, Kaberi gives a depiction of the Joron day, a significant part of Assamese wedding. On this day the mother of the groom along with other women from his family comes to the bride’s house bearing gifts like gold jeweleries and silk traditional dresses;

“ ...Once the mother of the groom arrived, she ceremonically placed the jewelery on the bride and draped the silk sadors around the girl’s shoulders.”

(Barua 69)

It is not just only the bride but the other girls and ladies also wear this traditional attire ‘mekhela sador’ on special social and cultural occasions. The indication of which can be seen in the lines, whereby Kaberi is talking about the experience of wearing mekhela on her best friend Joya’s joron day;

“ The dew lay thick and heavy on the grass and drenched the bottom of my cotton mekhela...”

(Barua 68)

The other rituals of this particular day that has been expounded in details are about the decoration of the morol, planting of four banana saplings at the corners of a rough square, use of auspicious strings of mango leaves and the large mirror leaning it against a bamboo murha, in front of which a smaller square on the ground was marked off and filled up with multicolored flowers where the joron ceremony was going to take place. There is also mentioning about ululation of women as the mother of the groom coats the bride’s parting of hair with vermilion sendur.

The narrator also gives a vivid picture of the other rituals of an Assamese wedding. Kaberi reminiscing of her own wedding, let the readers know about the custom of fasting on her wedding day;

“ ...I was hungry for I had to fast;...” (Barua 71)

Again there is a mentioning of ‘Ghor gosoka’ ritual, whereby the bride is welcomed to her new home by the mother-in-law. And after that she returns to her parental home for a few hours. When she finally leaves her parental home in that particular morning for her husband’s house, Kaberi depicts the ritual of throwing rice over her shoulder along with referring to the inclined belief of giving back the rice to parents that they had nourished their girl with all these years.

Looking into the text from the aforementioned perspective, readers can also get the ideas about the rituals and customs of an Assamese society that they follow on the demise of a family member.

“ Bipul Moha calls to say that my father died a few minutes ago.” (Barua 144)

In the beginning of the chapter nine, it has been informed that Kaberi’s father passed away, due to which reasons she had to visit Assam. During her stay at her parental home, she gives short and

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precise depictions of Assamese customs like that of ‘Mukhagni’ of her father, which is supposed to be done only by a son of the family;

“ My father has no son to light the fire that would free his soul, releasing it from the ties of this earth.” (Barua 150)

It is in the Assamese customs to fast on such days by the family members to mourn over the demise;

“ No, yes ... am okay. You know there will be no food cooked here for the next four day.”

(Barua 151)

It is the reply given by Kaberi to Ron, on him asking her if she had lunch. Fruits are the only food that to be eaten in the next four days after the death in the family. But again the married daughters are not required to fast which got reflected in the following lines said by Bina Mahi to Kaberi,

“ ... married daughters are not obliged to fast ...” (Barua 152)

Throughout the narrative, in the narrator’s going back in time and living in the present, Jahnavi Barua has imbibed the novel with different socio-religious instances in addition to the depictions of certain Assamese customs and rituals to avail the readers of an understanding of Assamese culture.

References

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