

Exploring Culinary Metaphors in Jahnvi Barua's *Rebirth: A Novel* and *Undertow*

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Abstract

In literature of displacement, culinary practices have been continuously used as metaphors to reinstate diasporic identities and indigenous cultures. This tendency does not only end in diasporic literature. Contemporary Indian Literature has seen an influx of narratives where the protagonist finds themselves in a land away from their home yet still within the country, thereby undergoing a sense of displacement, rootlessness and alienation in the space which is not their own. In this context as well, food plays an important role in bridging the gap between the past and the present. Particularly noteworthy is the fact that there is no general Indian cuisine, therefore the food associated with their home state is integral to the reaffirmation of their native identities. Jahnvi Barua, an Assamese writer who has written her novels *Rebirth: A Novel* (2010) and *Undertow* (2020) in English, has used the trope of food and culinary practices of Assam as a major aspect of her novels. In both the novels, the female protagonists validate their personal identities as well as their collective identities through the food which is indigenous to the state of Assam. Both the novels witness Jahnvi Barua mapping across the urban spaces of Assam through the food associated with the collective nostalgia of the Assamese society. Intricately linked with this is the memory of the politically unstable Assam of the late 1970s and early 1980s.

Keywords: Assam; Food; Jahnvi Baruah; Memory; Nostalgia; Rebirth; Undertow.

Diasporic Literature, especially those of the Indian diaspora, is interspersed with themes of nostalgia, rootlessness, cultural reminiscence, and memories of the past. In such literature, the memories associated with the homeland is mainly brought out with the memories attached with food of their native culture. In fact, "the tropes of food and eating" has been

used by many South Asian Atlantic authors to explore issues of gender, family ties and relationships (Maxey 163-164). The relationship between the place where one truly belongs and food is quite significant (Hage 416). This is true for the two novels of Jahnvi Barua, where Assamese cuisine is highlighted to show how food forges bonds between people blood-related and otherwise, which culminates with a sense of acceptance and belonging of the protagonists to a place which they had moved away from.

Born and brought up in the state of Assam, Jahnvi Barua's fictions are replete with her own personal memories of her home state. Her two novels, *Rebirth: A Novel* (2010) and *Undertow* (2020) encapsulates the scenic beauty of Assam, the significance of the river Brahmaputra in the lives and culture of the people, the vibrant culture of Assam, and the ever-growing urban space of Guwahati. In both the novels, the female protagonists suffer deteriorating familial bonds and personal trauma, which acts as a microcosm for the traumatic events witnessed in the strife-ridden Assam of the late 1970s and early 1980s. However, both the novels emphasize on mending relationships and moving closer to the sense of belongingness through the trope of food, particularly the food items and dishes which reminds the protagonists of a place called home. It must be noted that "it is nostalgia, that sense of romance and loss, which makes the individual in diaspora want to recreate a small part of home 'out of place' through culinary practice" (Parveen 52). This is particularly true for the protagonist of *Rebirth*, Kaberi, who is married to an Assamese man based in Bangalore. Far away from Assam, she feels out of place in a house which does not belong to her. Emphasis is put upon the fact that she is financially dependent on her husband, Ron, and therefore cannot go against his wishes even if she wanted to. She, therefore, tries to recreate the memories attached to Assam through the food of the state. She loves cooking Assamese food and is not burdened by it. Even after Ron leaves her for his mistress, her ingrained duties as a wife are still visible. Through the conversation that she has with her unborn child, the readers realize her love for food and cooking. For her, cooking and feeding the food that she has cooked for her husband makes her feel wanted and desired, something that she generally never feels. This is stated by Kaberi as such:

That really was no burden for I loved cooking; strangely – I should not be telling you this – but it made me feel desirable in a way I could not really account for. Was it the fact that I was feeding this man I loved food prepared with my own hands? Whatever it was, I adored sitting across from him watching him eat, slowly and carefully, his long, tapering fingers so sure as they went about

their business. (Barua 2-3).

Portraying the wife's role of cooking and feeding her husband, Barua also depicts the imagery of cooking and eating with Kaberi's desire to feel sexually needed by her husband as "...appetite for food is inseparable from sexual appetite" (Andrievskikh 142). Barua has also interlinked amlokhi (gooseberry) with sexual desire. The budding relationship between Kaberi and Bidyut, and the sexual implication of this relationship is connected to the image of the amlokhi, when Kaberi asks Bidyut to fetch her amlokhis from her mother's garden (Barua 180-181). Kaberi tells the unborn child in her womb to taste the tartness of the amlokhi, her child's "...first taste of desire" (181).

Barua does not end with the connection between the trope of food and sexual desire. Using food motifs, she highlights the personal and private memories of Kaberi vis-à-vis the shared and collective memories of the Assam Agitation of the 1980s. The nostalgia that Kaberi feels when she cooks the food related to her childhood in a place far away from Assam, also makes her remember certain horrifying incidents that took place during the Assam Agitation, which she was a part of. The insurgency within Assam after the Assam Agitation has affected her personally; her best friend Joya was killed in a bombing (Barua 22). The memories of Joya are interweaved with her memories of childhood, which are mainly depicted using food motifs. Kaberi, while pregnant, craves for something sour. The gustatory experience of partaking guavas with chat masala makes her remember Assam; she used to munch on brined lemon wedges with Joya when she was younger and unmarried:

The chat masala is tangy and salty and when sprinkled on the soft pulp of the fruit it is heavenly. Like the salted lemon pickle Joya and I would steal from our mothers' kitchens; it was wedges, sometimes even a whole lemon that had been plunged into brine and then dried. It looked unappetizing, black and leathery, but when the first soft piece melted on our tongues we would shudder in delight. (Barua 142).

In most food writing, there is an emphasis on abundance. "Food writing emphasizes abundance, not scarcity; appetite, not abstemiousness; indulgence and overindulgence rather than dieting" (Bloom 351). Kaberi's continuous emphasis on cooking extravagant and large meals for her husband's colleague and wife, something which is very common in the culture of Assam, reflects the symbolism of abundance (Barua 97). This

is perhaps shown by Barua to emphasize upon Kaberi's growing disillusionment with her life in Bangalore and a certain longing which is generally evoked in displaced individuals "...by the smell and tastes of a lost homeland, providing a temporary return to a time when their lives were not fragmented" (Holtzman 367).

The unexpected death of her father takes her back home in Assam. The dejection and loneliness that she experienced while living in Bangalore is almost forgotten when she is surrounded by the people related to her childhood. Food items of her childhood like "two loaves of warm Hussain Brothers' bread" (Barua 170), "joha rice and dail followed by country chicken curry, flavoured with black pepper, and rou fish tenga" (172) makes her relive the things that she had lost while she was staying in Bangalore. The food motifs are incorporated in such a way as to make the protagonist realize the importance of "...cultural identity, ethnic community, family..." (Waxman 363).

The food metaphors in Jahnvi Barua's second novel *Undertow* takes a different turn. The importance of food and the memories attached to culinary practices is much more pronounced in this novel. The protagonist of the novel, Loya, has never been to Assam. Born to an Assamese mother (Rukmini) and a Malayali father (Alex), she has no firsthand experiences of Assamese culture and practices. She visits Guwahati on the account of her research project at Kaziranga, but she subconsciously knows that she has chosen Assam for her research to search for her roots (Barua, *Undertow* 57). The narrative of the story shifts between the past and the present. Loya's story is interlinked with her mother's past, both personal and beyond. Loya has always felt detached from her mother; she reiterates the fact that she and her mother share a very mechanical and formal relationship. Loya however, feels close to her roots, and is therefore able to understand and come in terms with her own identity as a half-Assamese young woman through the food that she enjoys while in Assam. A lot of emphasis has been placed on the abundance of food in the household of the Goswamis, her mother's family. The alienation that she felt while living in Bangalore, amongst her father's family, is something which still haunts her. This is directly contrasted to the warmth and love she receives over her meals in Assam. The food that she partakes in Assam enables her to fully understand her mother. Along with the food that she enjoys with her maternal family in Assam, she also learns about the gory history of the Assam Agitation, the rise of insurgency in Assam and how the youth of Assam were affected by it. The futility of the fight spearheaded by the youth of Assam in the 1980s is stressed upon. Over teatime at Robin's

place, Loya is told about the violence that Assam has witnessed, something which Robin's family has experienced on a personal level. (Barua, *Undertow* 76-77). Families were shattered and several lives were lost for a battle which did not have any result at the end. Barua focusses on the effects of the riots and the subsequent political turmoil, which is still rampant in Assam through Loya, who learns about these while also enjoying the delicacies of Assam that she never experienced while living in Bangalore with her mother. Loya enjoys and appreciates the effort involved in making each meal in the household of her maternal grandfather Torun. The vast spread that she enjoys is reflective of the growing proximity she feels with her maternal family and her mother's birthplace, both of which abandoned her mother.

Food and food metaphors "...establishes an intimate social context of family and friends..." (Bloom 353). This is something that Loya has never enjoyed while living in the hubbub of Bangalore. However, she is able to experience the intimate familial bonds during her stay in Assam. Her initial anger against her paternal grandfather for abandoning her mother slowly starts subsiding as she gradually "...found herself warming up to the hum of this household - where the meals were by the clock..." (Barua, *Undertow* 84). This is in direct contrast to the "frugal life" that she lived with Rukmini in Bangalore (*Undertow* 84). The broken family ties of the past are repaired through the enjoyment of food in the Yellow House.

The concept of a home is closely related to culinary traditions and practices. This is rightly stated by Ghassan Hage as such:

Home food not only provides intimations of security in filling a basic need for nutrition in a culturally determined way, it also intimates familiarity in that one must know what to do with it, how to cook it, how to present it, and how to eat it. (423-424).

This is something which Loya first experiences in The Yellow House. It is in The Yellow House where she first realizes the safety of a space called home. It is mainly done through the food that is cooked mainly because of her arrival in the Yellow House. Romen's hefty preparation of meals, which is done because a daughter has returned home, is described by Barua in the following words:

Food that had not been served these past four years - rice pulaos peppered with raisins and fragrant with saffron; mutton curries rich with apricots and exotic fruit; pineapple puddings and other

desserts – now made their way to the once ordinary table. It was festive food and Torun resented Romen for not cooking these for him. (Barua, *Undertow* 67).

It is, of course, a time of festivity as the once bleak Yellow House is filled with activities because of Loya's appearance. The house has transformed into a home once again, something which disappeared after Rukmini's abandonment and Usha (Torun's wife)'s death. This homely intimacy is mainly brought in through the food cooked and later enjoyed. Every meal was a celebration in The Yellow House, providing Loya with a safe space where she belongs.

The readers are repeatedly reminded of the distance between Loya and Rukmini. From her childhood, Loya has taken the responsibility of food in Bangalore (Barua, *Undertow* 102). However, this distance is bridged when Loya and Rukmini discuss about "chanachur", a street food of Assam. Earlier, Rukmini and Loya did not have a close mother-daughter relationship. But with Loya's arrival in the Yellow House and her experience with Assamese culture and cuisine, the mother and daughter duo share a similar history that they can talk about. It is through "chanachur" that Loya finally feels an emotional closeness to her mother (Barua, *Undertow* 102). Loya and Torun almost devour the chanachur and along with it, Loya gets a lesson on Assam's golden past during the reign of the Ahoms (147-148). Food, thereby, allows "...restoration of ethnic dignity..." and the pride in one's heritage "...operates through culinary enjoyment..." (Gardaphé and Xu 6).

Jahnvi Barua's two novels are replete with metaphors pertaining to the culinary practices of Assam. Like the displaced individuals in Diasporic Literature, the two protagonists are related to Assam, and yet far away. Both the women in the two novels try to negotiate with their personal identities by partaking and engaging in practices which remind them of a space which they call home. Assam's cultural heritage, of which the culinary traditions are a part, is underscored with the conflicting emotions of the Assamese people regarding the Assam Agitation and its subsequent downfall. This political instability, which is witnessed in Assam till this day, has been poignantly delineated by Barua with the protagonists' experiences of food.

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