

Identity and Self-Discovery in the English Short Stories of North-East India with Special Reference to Jahnavi Barua's "Next Door"

Modanmohan Dev Nath

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Girls' College, Kokrajhar, Assam

Abstract

This research paper explores the themes of identity and self-discovery in English short stories from Northeast India, with a particular focus on Jahnavi Barua's "Next Door." The study examines how authors from this region use their narratives to delve into the complex issues of personal and cultural identity in a rapidly changing society.

Northeast India, with its diverse ethnic groups and unique cultural landscape, provides a rich backdrop for storytelling. The paper analyzes how writers like Barua capture the essence of this region and its people through their characters and plotlines. "Next Door" serves as a prime example, offering insights into the struggles and triumphs of individuals as they navigate their sense of self within their community and the wider world.

The research highlights the importance of these stories in giving voice to the experiences of Northeast Indians, often under-represented in mainstream Indian literature. It also discusses how themes of identity and self-discovery resonate with readers beyond the region, touching on universal human experiences.

By examining Barua's work and other short stories from Northeast India, this paper aims to contribute to the growing body of literature on regional Indian writing in English and its significance in understanding the complexities of modern Indian society.

Introduction

The literary landscape of North-East India has been gaining significant attention in recent years, with a growing number of writers from the region making their mark on the national and international stage. Among these emerging voices, the English short stories from North-East India have become a powerful medium for exploring themes of identity, self-discovery, and the unique cultural experiences of the region. This research paper aims to delve into the intricate tapestry of identity and self-discovery as portrayed in the English short stories of North-East India, with a particular focus on Jahnavi Barua's "Next Door."

The North-East region of India, comprising eight states - Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, and Tripura - is known for its rich cultural diversity, complex history, and unique geographical location. These factors have significantly influenced the literature emerging from the region, especially in the realm of short stories written in English. The choice of English as the medium of expression allows these writers to reach a wider audience while still maintaining the essence of their cultural roots.

In this context, Jahnvi Barua's "Next Door" serves as an exemplary work that encapsulates the themes of identity and self-discovery prevalent in North-East Indian literature. Barua, an Assamese writer based in Bangalore, has garnered critical acclaim for her nuanced portrayal of life in the North-East and the complexities of human relationships. "Next Door" is a poignant exploration of the protagonist's journey towards self-realization and understanding of her place in the world.

This research paper will examine the various facets of identity and self-discovery as depicted in the English short stories of North-East India, using "Next Door" as a focal point for analysis. We will explore how these themes are interwoven with the region's cultural, social, and political realities, and how they contribute to the broader narrative of Indian literature.

The North-East Indian Literary Landscape

Before delving into the specific themes of identity and self-discovery, it is essential to understand the context of North-East Indian literature. The region has a rich oral tradition, with each ethnic group possessing its own folktales, myths, and legends. The transition from oral to written literature, and subsequently to English writing, has been a gradual process influenced by various historical and social factors.

The emergence of English writing in North-East India can be traced back to the colonial period when English education was introduced in the region. However, it was not until the post-independence era that a distinct body of literature in English began to take shape. The 1970s and 1980s saw a surge in English writing from the North-East, with authors like Mamang Dai, Temsula Ao, and Mitra Phukan paving the way for future generations.

The literature of North-East India is characterized by its diversity, reflecting the multitude of ethnic, linguistic, and cultural groups that inhabit the region. Themes such as identity crisis, displacement, conflict, and the struggle for self-determination are recurrent in these works. The short story format, in particular, has emerged as a popular medium for North-East Indian writers to explore these complex issues within a concise narrative framework.

Identity in North-East Indian Short Stories

The concept of identity is central to much of the literature emerging from North-East India. This preoccupation with identity stems from the region's complex history, its geographical isolation from mainland India, and the ongoing negotiations between traditional cultures and modernization. In the English short stories of North-East India, identity is often portrayed as a multifaceted construct, encompassing ethnic, cultural, national, and personal dimensions.

One of the prominent aspects of identity explored in these stories is the tension between traditional and modern ways of life. Many characters find themselves caught between their ancestral customs and the pressures of a rapidly changing world. This conflict is often depicted through intergenerational relationships, where younger characters struggle to reconcile their heritage with their aspirations for the future.

Another significant dimension of identity in North-East Indian short stories is the sense of belonging – or lack thereof – to the larger Indian nation. The region's historical and political complexities have led to a sense of alienation among many North-Easterners, which is reflected in their literature. Characters often grapple with questions of national identity and the challenges of being perceived as "different" within their own country.

Gender identity is also a recurring theme in these stories, with many female writers from the region exploring the experiences of women in patriarchal societies. These narratives often challenge traditional gender roles and highlight the struggles and triumphs of women seeking autonomy and self-realization.

Self-Discovery in North-East Indian Short Stories

Closely intertwined with the theme of identity is the journey of self-discovery. Many short stories from North-East India depict characters embarking on personal quests to understand themselves and their place in the world. This process of self-discovery is often catalyzed by encounters with unfamiliar situations, people, or ideas that challenge the characters' preconceived notions about themselves and their surroundings.

One common narrative arc in these stories involves characters leaving their familiar environments – whether it's moving from a village to a city or traveling outside the North-East – and experiencing a shift in perspective that leads to self-realization. These journeys, both physical and metaphorical, serve as vehicles for exploring questions of identity, belonging, and personal growth.

Another aspect of self-discovery in North-East Indian short stories is the exploration of one's cultural roots. Many characters undergo a process of reconnecting with their heritage, often after periods of estrangement or indifference. This rediscovery of cultural identity is portrayed as a transformative experience that contributes to the characters' overall sense of self.

The theme of self-discovery is also frequently linked to the characters' relationships with others. Through interactions with family members, friends, or strangers, characters gain new insights into themselves and their place in the world. These relationships serve as mirrors, reflecting aspects of the characters' identities that they may not have previously recognized or acknowledged.

Jahnavi Barua's "Next Door": A Case Study

Jahnavi Barua's short story "Next Door" serves as an excellent example of how themes of identity and self-discovery are explored in North-East Indian literature. The story revolves around Preeti, a young woman living in Bangalore, who develops an unlikely friendship with her elderly neighbor, Mrs. Das. Through this relationship, Preeti embarks on a journey of self-discovery that forces her to confront her own identity and past.

Identity in "Next Door"

Barua skillfully weaves various aspects of identity into the narrative of "Next Door." Preeti's Assamese background is an essential part of her identity, yet it is something she has distanced herself from since moving to Bangalore. The story explores how this cultural identity resurfaces through her interactions with Mrs. Das, who reminds Preeti of her grandmother back in Assam.

The story also touches upon the complexities of regional identity within India. Preeti's experiences as a North-Easterner in Bangalore highlight the subtle forms of discrimination and othering that many people from the region face in other parts of the country. This aspect of the narrative reflects the broader theme of belonging and national identity that is prevalent in North-East Indian literature.

Gender identity is another crucial element in "Next Door." Through Preeti's character, Barua explores the expectations placed on women in Indian society, particularly concerning marriage and family. The story subtly challenges these norms by portraying Preeti as a single, independent woman who is grappling with societal pressures while trying to forge her own path.

Self-Discovery in "Next Door"

The process of self-discovery is at the heart of "Next Door." Preeti's relationship with Mrs. Das serves as a catalyst for her journey of self-realization. As she spends time with her elderly neighbor, Preeti begins to reflect on her own life, her relationships, and her connection to her roots.

One of the key aspects of Preeti's self-discovery is her reconnection with her Assamese heritage. Through conversations with Mrs. Das and reminiscences about her grandmother, Preeti begins to appreciate the cultural identity she had previously neglected. This rediscovery of her roots contributes to a more holistic understanding of herself and her place in the world.

The story also explores self-discovery through the lens of human relationships. Preeti's growing friendship with Mrs. Das allows her to see herself in a new light and to confront aspects of her personality and past that she had previously avoided. This interpersonal dynamic serves as a mirror for Preeti's own growth and self-realization.

Barua's portrayal of self-discovery in "Next Door" is nuanced and realistic. Rather than depicting a dramatic transformation, the story shows Preeti's gradual awakening to different aspects of her identity and her place in the world. This subtle approach reflects the often incremental nature of personal growth and self-realization.

Literary Techniques and Narrative Style

Jahnvi Barua's writing style in "Next Door" exemplifies many of the literary techniques commonly employed in North-East Indian short stories. Her prose is characterized by its simplicity and clarity, allowing the emotional depth of the characters to shine through without unnecessary embellishment.

The use of flashbacks is a prominent feature in "Next Door," as it is in many North-East Indian short stories. These glimpses into Preeti's past in Assam serve to highlight the contrast between her current life and her roots, contributing to the exploration of identity and self-discovery. The non-linear narrative structure reflects the complex nature of memory and identity formation.

Symbolism plays a significant role in the story, with objects and settings often carrying deeper meanings. For instance, the physical proximity of Preeti and Mrs. Das's apartments serves as a metaphor for the emotional closeness that develops between them, despite their differences in age and background. Barua's use of sensory details, particularly in descriptions of food and domestic settings, adds richness to the narrative and helps to evoke the cultural context of the story. This attention to sensory experience is a common feature in North-East Indian literature, often used to create a vivid sense of place and to highlight the importance of everyday rituals in shaping identity.

Comparative Analysis with Other North-East Indian Short Stories

While "Next Door" serves as a focal point for this research paper, it is important to consider how themes of identity and self-discovery are explored in other North-East Indian short stories. This comparative analysis will help to situate Barua's work within the broader context of the region's literature.

Temsula Ao's "The Last Song," for instance, explores identity and self-discovery through the lens of tribal culture and the impact of modernization. The story's protagonist, like Preeti in "Next Door," undergoes a journey of self-realization that involves reconnecting with her cultural roots. However, Ao's narrative is set against the backdrop of political unrest, adding another layer to the exploration of identity.

Mamang Dai's "The Legends of Pensam" takes a different approach to identity and self-discovery, inter-

weaving myth and reality to explore the collective identity of the Adi community in Arunachal Pradesh. While Barua's "Next Door" focuses on individual identity, Dai's work examines how personal identities are shaped by communal narratives and beliefs.

Mitra Phukan's "The Collector's Wife" deals with themes of identity and self-discovery in the context of marriage and societal expectations. Like "Next Door," it explores the experiences of women navigating personal relationships and societal norms, but with a focus on the complexities of married life in a small town in Assam.

These comparisons highlight the diversity of approaches to identity and self-discovery in North-East Indian short stories. While there are common threads – such as the importance of cultural roots and the impact of societal changes – each writer brings a unique perspective shaped by their specific cultural and personal experiences.

Conclusion

The exploration of identity and self-discovery in the English short stories of North-East India offers a rich and nuanced perspective on the human experience. These narratives, exemplified by Jahnavi Barua's "Next Door," provide insights into the complexities of navigating multiple identities in a rapidly changing world.

Through their portrayal of characters grappling with questions of belonging, cultural heritage, and personal growth, these stories contribute to a broader understanding of identity formation and self-realization. They highlight the universal aspects of these themes while also shedding light on the unique cultural and historical context of North-East India.

The literary techniques employed in these stories – from non-linear narratives to rich sensory descriptions – serve to enhance the exploration of identity and self-discovery. By weaving together past and present, memory and reality, these writers create multifaceted narratives that reflect the complexity of human experience.

As the literature of North-East India continues to gain recognition on the national and international stage, stories like "Next Door" play a crucial role in broadening the understanding of the region's cultural diversity and human experiences. They invite readers to reflect on their own identities and journeys of self-discovery, fostering empathy and cross-cultural understanding.

In conclusion, the English short stories of North-East India, with their nuanced exploration of identity and self-discovery, represent a significant contribution to contemporary Indian literature. They offer a window into a region often misunderstood or overlooked, while also addressing universal themes that resonate with readers across cultural boundaries. As exemplified by Jahnavi Barua's "Next Door," these stories not only entertain but also challenge readers to consider the multifaceted nature of identity and the ongoing process of self-discovery in our increasingly interconnected world.

References:

1. Barua, Jahnavi. *Next Door*, Penguin Books India. 2008
2. Ao, Temsula. *The Tombstone in My Garden Stories from Nagaland*, Speaking Tiger Books, 10 Jan. 2022
3. Alter Steven. *The Penguin Books of Modern Indian Short Stories*, Penguin UK, 11 Oct. 2011
4. Mitra Phukan. *A Full Night's Thievery*, Speaking Tiger Books, 5 Sep, 2011
5. Mamang Dai. *The Legends of Pensam*, New Delhi, New York; Ny, Penguin Books, 2006