

# Feminist Appreciation of Jahnvi Barua's *Undertow*

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## Abstract

Jahnvi Barua in her 2020 novel *Undertow* narrates a family saga where the relations are estranged due to the daughter's decision to marry outside her caste. The novel can be read as the story of three woman characters– Usha Goswami, Rukmini Goswami and Loya Alex. These three women are blood relatives; however, they do not share a common bond of love amongst them. Usha dies without accepting her daughter Rukmini's marriage; thus, Rukmini's daughter Loya does not know her grandmother. Rukmini lives an abandoned life and does not even know about her mother's death. It is Loya who goes to her maternal grand parents' home and claims her mother's place in it. All the three women seem to follow their own ideologies and their thoughts and actions provide a suitable set to explore their position as a woman. Therefore, the aim of the paper is to explore whether their decisions are ignited by patriarchy or not and to study the novel as a feminist text.

**Keywords:** Independent woman, Feminism, Marriage,  
Patriarchal woman, Patriarchy

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## **Introduction**

Feminist literary theory is an amalgamation of various ideas and thoughts. Initially, feminist movement began to seek political rights for women. However, since its evolution the movement did not turn back; instead, its sky rocketed and reached to every possible field where women were suppressed. It is a movement to acquire equal rights for women. The movement also extends its wings to the literary discourse. The ideas and concepts which try to recover women's voices and experiences in the writings of male authors come under the ambit of feminist literary theory. The domain of feminist theory is vast and it produces literary discourse written by women, of women and for women. In the present day, the branches of feminist literary theory are widely extended and it includes the experiences of women belonging to different race, class, caste and so on. Therefore, appropriate feminist theory will be applied to the selected novel *Undertow* and discuss the novel to see the feminist traits ingrained in it.

## **Literature Review**

To complete writing this research article, the following materials were surveyed: Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, Fiona Tolan's *Literary Theory and Criticism*, Sylvia Walby's *Theorizing Patriarchy*, Margaret Walters's *Feminism: A Very Short Introduction*, Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics*, Elaine Showalter's *Women's Writing and Writing About Women* and Edward Said's *Orientalism*.

## **Research Objectives**

1. To study the woman characters of the novel *Undertow*.
2. To analyse whether the woman characters depicted by Jahnavi Barua in the novel succumb to the patriarchal set up or try to surmount the hindrances posed by society to claim their space and identity.

## **Hypothesis**

The premise of the paper is based on the hypothesis that women are subjected as other and they lie at the periphery of the patriarchal society. As the orient is considered as the alter ego of the occident by the colonialist intellectuals; women are described in relation to men and women are mostly seen as parasites in dire need of male support. As the discussion of the paper is premised on the concept of women as other, it is pertinent to remember Simone de Beauvoir's explanation of the other. According to her, "She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental; the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject; he is the Absolute – she is the other" (Beauvoir 16).

## **Methodology**

The research article is carried out on the basis of library work. Collecting data from the internet is also an important aspect of the methodology. The nature of the research article is descriptive and analytical. The research article can be included in the category of qualitative research.

## **Results**

An analysis of the three prominent woman characters of the novel: Usha Goswami, Rukmini Goswami and Loya Alex from the perspective of feminism reveals that these three women are strong willed. The study also exposes that they are equally driven by their own opinions and go their own ways. However, Usha may be said to be a woman who nurtures patriarchal ideology because she sees a woman's freedom to choose her own life partner as an offense; in addition to this, her stand seems to be influenced by the ongoing agitation against foreigners. Usha never approves her daughter Rukmini's marriage to a man outside her community. No one was

able to move Usha's stand. This shows Usha's strong-willed nature. Rukmini, on the other hand, is equally strong willed like her mother Usha. Rukmini is an educated independent working woman who takes her own decisions and stands firm on her decisions in all situations. Her mother's disapproval of the marriage does not hinder her decision to marry her love. Rukmini's daughter Loya is another self-reliant woman who knows what she wants to do. On the virtue of their qualities, Rukmini and Loya emerge as independent and self-reliant women. They are not subordinate to any men and do not succumb to the patriarchal norms. They remain independent women with intellect.

## **Discussion**

The novel *Undertow* basically narrates the story of three woman characters who belong to different generations. The opening of the novel is very significant. The first line seems to foreground the story of the novel; it says "As if things were not bad enough, the morning of her wedding all Assam Students' Union declared a bandh" (Barua 1). This line refers to two major incidents: initially a wedding and secondarily students' agitation. The aforesaid and impending wedding is to be solemnized on third of December, 1983 and it is the bride whose story covers a major portion of the novel. Rukmini Goswami daughter of Usha Goswami and Torun Ram Goswami is the bride on whose wedding day bandh or curfew occurs. Another important aspect of the wedding is the date because it denotes the time when Assam saw aggressive anti-foreigner agitation or Assam movement (1979-85). The movement was ignited over the debate of insider and outsider. The natives of Assam were perplexed to witness the innumerable flow of foreigners into the state. They were highly enthusiastic to turn out the foreigners from their home. Basically, home can be defined as a place where one feels safe and comfortable.

The sense of belonging is the abstract quality closely attached to the notion of home. The concept of home is very crucial in postcolonial literature. Most of the disputes and confrontations may be said to ignite from the unsettled debates over the issue of home. The context of home becomes crucial in the novel because Rukmini is expelled from her parents' home for acting against her parents' wish.

Having stated the background of the novel, it will be easier to deal with the characters and their behaviors. The novel can be said to be a study of the consequences of Rukmini's love marriage. Rukmini is a doctor and loves a South Indian classmate and both agree to marry. Rukmini's decision to marry outside the caste is a challenging stand because her mother is death against inter-caste marriage. Usha warns Rukmini that "You will marry him over my dead body" (Barua 5). However, nothing deters Rukmini's decision. Here, Rukmini can be seen as an independent self-reliant woman who decides her own life and fate. On the basis of this virtue, Rukmini can be described as an independent woman who remains immune to all other factors which try to shake her stand. Rukmini's unshakable resolution renders her more appreciation because it is the time of aggression against outsiders and Alex is not from Assam. During that turbulent time she is called "Desodhrohi... Traitor (Barua 19). To her mother, she is "a traitor, who had betrayed state and race and family" (Barua 19). Usha's hate for Alex, an outsider is so strong that she dies without approving her daughter's marriage. Usha's stubbornness seems to be ignited by two reasons. Firstly, Usha seems to be influenced by the current of the time which is flowing against outsiders and secondly she seems to be a patriarchal woman who considers girls who choose their own spouse as misfit. Patriarchy is a system which paralyses women's liberty and keeps women in a benumbed situation. Sylvia Walby defines patriarchy as "a system of social structures and

practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women” (Walby 20).

Kate Millett may be seen as one of the important feminists who challenge the portrayal of women in male writings. Millett argues that the relationship between men and women should be seen from the point of a complex power structure which includes politics. According to Millett, the patriarchal society “works to inculcate male supremacy through a variety of covert means...” (Tolan 326). Millett further argues that “women are subjected to an artificially constructed idea of feminine. Women’s oppression was achieved by a combination of physical violence and cultural pressure” (Tolan 326). Fiona Tolan in “Feminisms” asserts that literature is a “tool of political ideology because it re-created sexual inequalities and cemented the patriarchal values of society” (Tolan 326). Here, the role of texts comes into play. Most of the texts represent women as fragile, innocent, hardworking, self-sacrificing or in short women are described as Angel in the house. This image of so-called good women is generated and catered to both men and women right from their childhood through folktales, rhymes, and so on. It is this constructed image of women that many feminists seek to dismantle. In the vein of this thought, it can be observed that the author of the current novel Jahnvi Barua follows the feminist tradition of degenerating male domination over women. Through the character of Rukmini and Loya, the author shows the image of independent women who shed away the weight of patriarchal laws.

Jahnvi Barua seems to fall under the tradition of Gynocriticism which is an alternative female-centered criticism which is indeed preoccupied with female voices. Barua as a writer of the twenty first century seems to fall under the category of Female Phase which is actually classified by Elaine Showalter. The Female Phase denotes the feminist tradition which expresses women experiences. This phase

began from the 1920s and the feminists belonging to this phase reject imitation from male authors and also revolt against male authors and critics because they are still forms of dependency on male intellectuals. Barua falls under this category by dint of the subject matter of the current novel. The author portrays strong women characters which fore shadow the male characters of the novel.

In the novel, Rukmini shadows the character of her husband Alex. She is empowered adequately to stand against all ordeals for her love for Alex. She is rendered as a woman of virtue who keeps her promise to her beloved. However, her husband Alex seems to be a weaker person in comparison to Rukmini because he fails to give his wife a comfortable home. Though, Rukmini abandons her family to live with Alex, she is not warmly welcomed by Alex's family. Alex does not possess a firm voice in his family and he is unable to claim a place for his wife. Instead they move out in an apartment. In the apartment, Rukmini builds a home for both of them. However, she finds out that she is cheated by Alex for another woman, Sugandhi. Rukmini's comment at Alex's infidelity offers a deep understanding of her character: "When Alex left them for Sugandhi, Rukmini had said it was good thing she had not changed her name after all" (Barua 55). This statement reveals that Rukmini has not changed her title even after her marriage to Alex. She is Dr. Rukmini Goswami and she will remain till her mortal being breathes. This shows that Rukmini is a woman who wants her own identity intact. She is strong enough to face any challenges in life. Therefore, from the moment Rukmini knows about her husband's betrayal, she moves out from his apartment and lives separately along with her daughter Loya. This is a turning point in Rukmini's life. This aspect of Rukmini's life makes her an independent woman in the actual sense and she does not need a male support for survival. This aspect of Rukmini's character seems to represent the Essential character of women. Fiona Tolan asserts that

“Essentialists believe that because women are biologically different from men, they are also psychologically and emotionally different. Difference, they argue, is not something to be overcome, as though it were shameful not to be a man, but something to celebrate: women should be proud to be women” (Tolan 323). Rukmini as an independent woman never tries to become a man or imitate a man’s character; she remains a very virtuous woman in all dimensions. This aspect of her character seems to suggest that she is exalted to be a woman and believes in the power of a woman. At the same time, her confidence to live with her daughter without Alex’s help seems to derive from the fact that she is a working woman who can provide adequately for herself and her daughter.

Rukmini’s daughter Loya Alex is another significant character of the novel. She is singlehandedly brought up by her mother and she is Rukmini’s home and vice versa. Loya has done well in her studies too and she is pursuing her PhD project. Her supervisor has secured a grant from Eco Watch for her and “all expenses including tickets, with his numerous and weighty connections, Dr Swamy made sure all necessary permits and arrangements were taken care of” (Barua 56). Rukmini is against Loya’s decision of going to Assam; however, she is adamant. The reason behind Loya’s choice of going to Assam is crucial. When Roy, Loya’s boyfriend asks her “if she was going looking for home. For roots...” she feels perplexed (Barua 57). To Roy’s question she replies that it is her research work that is taking her to Assam and nothing concerns her. At this point, another necessary aspect to be noted is that Loya reaches Guwahati a month before the scheduled time. Loya herself does not know the cause of her urgency but “In recent months, an unaccustomed restlessness had descended on her. An urgent sense of losing time, as if it would run out and it would be too late” (Barua 57). Later, she realizes that “She was claiming what she wanted” (Barua 60). Loya like her mother is a



free spirited independent woman who is aware of her own steps and knows where she wants to be and she is determined to negotiate and bring reconciliation between her mother and her parents. Loya is furious at her grandparents for abandoning her mother while Rukmini has accepted her situation. When Loya lands at her grandfather's house, she accuses him for depriving her mother of all her affinities: Loya yells "You killed my mother, do you hear, killed her" (Barua 120). Furthermore, she blames that her grandfather's world is "So private it could not let a daughter into it?" (Barua 120). Loya's attempt is to resettle her mother to her parents' home.

Loya fulfills her desire to arrange a reunion of her mother with her grandfather; however, she is not there to witness it. It is the most poignant situation of the novel. Loya has gone to market with Biren and suddenly "the sky turned fiery red and then immense black clouds billowed up chocking all light" (Barua 169). The havoc following the explosion drowns Loya and she drifts away and she never returns. However, it is her disappearance that brought Rukmini back to the yellow house which she has left in 1983 on her wedding day. In this way Loya can be seen as a link between Rukmini and her mother Usha. Usha is also a strong willed woman but her ideologies are shaped by patriarchy. However, her progenies namely Rukmini and Loya are women with great determination and they achieve what they desire but they are not influenced by patriarchal ideology.

### **Recommendation**

The novel is studied from feminist perspective in the present article. Since the theme of the novel is rich, it can also be analysed from the perspectives of identity issues and quest for home. The novel features three strong willed women against the backdrop of Assam Movement; therefore, the novel can also be examined through New Historicism point of view.

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