

Articulating Multiple Layers of Dispossession in Jahnvi Barua's *Undertow***Dr. Himakshi Kalita**Assistant Professor, Department of English
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Nagaon, Assam**Dr. Arindam Sarma**Assistant Professor, Department of English
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Identity and belonging are fundamental aspects of human existence and are intricately intertwined with one's sense of self and connection to others. Dispossession creeps in whenever one feels alienated from his or her 'roots.' Jahnvi Barua's novel *Undertow* (2020) captures the fluidity and evolution of human existence. The novel offers a medley of characters grappling with conflicting values, internal struggles, and the challenges of reconciling their true selves with societal expectations. The present paper attempts to analyze the multiple layers of dispossession of individuals by locating the intricate process of identity formation, internal conflicts and social pressures and the need to navigate the sense of self in a complex world. Various aspects of dispossession are analyzed at both public and personal levels of different individuals. The issues of dispossession discussed in the present paper represent universal human struggle of self-discovery and self-acceptance.

Key words: Identity, Belongingness, Dispossession, Crisis, Alienation

Dispossession can have a significant impact on both individuals and communities that can aggravate feelings of loss and alienation from one's history. Dispossession can be physical as well as mental or emotional. Jahnvi Barua's novel *Undertow* (2020) is a tale of dispossession which speaks of human suffering, loss and reconnection. The novel contains many layers of dispossession at private and public levels which entails a strong sense of loss and displacement. The present paper attempts to investigate how the experiences of individuals help to examine the issue of dispossession at multiple levels. The psychological effects of relocation and dispossession are also discussed in the paper as the characters struggle with their loss of identity, feeling of belonging, and ties to their homes. In this novel, the character of Rukmini is emblematic of being dispossessed. Rukmini's journey in the novel sheds emphasis on the emotional costs associated with uprooting oneself and the challenges of beginning anew in a different location as she tries to build a new life for herself. Rukmini's experiences highlight the emotional and psychological costs of dispossession in starting over a new life leaving behind the past life.

Rukmini is forced to leave her home and land, which deprives her of her feeling of place and belonging. On her wedding day, Rukmini's feeling is described as being forlorn: "Was falling in love a fault? To the wrong man, it certainly was...A man who was not of her religion, let alone her caste, nor of her race, not from any region remotely near hers, and a man whose skin was dark, to make matters worse" (Barua, 5). Since her very childhood, Rukmini is deprived of her mother's affection. The novel portrays a strained relationship between

Rukmini and her mother Usha, “They had never been friends, Rukmini and Usha...There had never been any of that soft mother-daughter business between them. Rukmini would not have been averse to any maternal overture; she had seen her friends with their mothers and had envied them, but Usha made no such gesture towards her...She hardly saw Usha as a parent” (Barua, 11-12). This absence of motherly love and affection in Rukmini’s life creates a psychological lacuna in her mind which can be interpreted as a kind of dispossession on emotional grounds. This emotional loss causes a psychological repercussion in Rukmini which makes her unable to form a bond of warmth and passion even with her husband and daughter. Relocation and dispossession are experiences that are not only physically unpleasant but also emotionally and psychologically taxing. To be displaced is to be cut off from the physical, emotional and cultural landmarks that orient one in the world. Rukmini chose Alex as her life-partner, a Malayali from Kerala and left for Bangalore to live with him. Rukmini was forsaken by her family for choosing a non-Assamese as her husband and on the occasion of her marriage she felt like being exiled instead of that usual feeling of warmth and joy of a bride: “But this morning she looked at it with a pressing sense of loss....she was not going into exile after all, but as hard as she tried Rukmini could not shake off an unreasonable worry....” (Barua, 7). Rukmini undergoes that acute feeling of dispossession which is typical of “to be thrown into a state of insecurity and precarity that can be profoundly disorienting” (Laing, 14).

Undertow narrates the intricate nature of dispossession and its effects on the lives of individuals. The novel recounts the belief that “we carry the weight of our traumas with us, every day, everywhere we go” (Habila, 179). The experience of dispossession is often characterized by human suffering which can manifest in various ways. The emotional and psychological toll of displacement can have a long-lasting effect. The dispossessed people often face challenges in adapting to a new culture, language and social norms, which can further exacerbate their sense of dislocation and isolation. Dispossession entails “more than the loss of land, property, and possessions; it also involves the loss of identity, belonging, and social relationships” (Kothari, 245). Usha’s domineering nature made Rukmini feel intimidated which resulted in the latter’s low self-assertion. Rukmini felt deep unquestioning love for Alex in her heart but she was not vocal enough in her expressions of love towards him. When her husband Alex fell in love with another woman named Sugandhi, she did not protest much and accepted to live in the flat with her daughter arranged by Alex. Later her daughter describes her as “Ma was so afraid of people she would not meet anyone unless she had to. Only the ones at work. Whether festivals or holidays, birthdays or anniversaries” (Barua, 136). Rukmini feels devoid of her sense of self and connection to others. Belonging relates to the human longing for acceptance, affiliation, and connection with others and the world. It involves finding a sense of place, community, and shared experiences that validate one’s identity and provide a feeling of inclusion and security. Rukmini is denied all these throughout the novel. Rukmini’s love for Alex came as a hope to enter a world where she would feel loved and wanted. But her dream was shattered as she could not make a place for herself in Alex’s family too. Loya defines her mother as doubly dispossessed, “Shut out of here and shut out of there. Here, Usha angry and banishing Ma from home. There, Ammachi hating Ma, and so shut out of everything there too” (Barua, 124). In case of Rukmini, dispossession is an embodiment of displacement that “uproots people from their homes, communities, and support networks, often leaving them vulnerable to abuse and exploitation” (UNHCR). In Alex’s place she was made to feel as an outsider by Alex’s family members: “Alex’s family made it plain she was alien. An outsider, where their beloved son and brother should have brought one of their own into the family home” (Barua, 179). The constant

feeling of being dispossessed led to isolation, low self-esteem, and a lack of agency in Rukmini's life.

In *Undertow*, issue of dispossession moves in both public and private spheres that brings the insider-outsider dichotomy along with it. The opening pages of the novel speak about the personal tragedy of Rukmini but the novel also links the tragedy to the greater phenomenon of the city that is affecting the public lives. The very opening line of the novel, "As if things were not bad enough, the morning of her wedding the All Assam Students' Union declared a bandh" (Barua, 3) establishes the simultaneity of the public and the private. The novel often highlights the issue of Bangladeshi immigrants. The novelist mentions that ever since "the students of the AASU had decided to fight the government on the issue of Bangladeshis being allowed to not just stay but also vote, the state had been thrown into chaos" (Barua, 16-17). In the context of the novel we can refer to Nandana Dutta's remark that "existing interpretations of migration and nation did not and could not do justice to the location" (xx). The novel directly addresses the issue of ULFA (United Liberation Front of Assam). Since its inception in 1979, the insurgent organization emphasised on the national liberation of Assam. They maintained that "the question of secession is a mistaken one since historically, Assam has never been a part of the Indian nation and its location within the political map of India has to be explained simply as a fact of colonial occupation" (Kar, 57). Rukmini feels marginalized on her wedding day as she feels cut off from her loved ones. This feeling of marginalization extends towards the public space when Rukmini feels herself like a traitor for choosing a Malayali from Kerala over an Assamese boy. The college students' union called her a *desodrohi* (Barua, 19) when they learn about the love affair of Rukmini and Alex for the first time. In her mother Usha's eyes, "Rukmini remained a traitor who had betrayed state and race and family" (Barua, 19). Rukmini's private feelings of dispossession and desolation were aggravated by the public declaration of bandh on her wedding day: "The city was to be shut down. Normal life was to be suspended: no one would leave home, no offices or schools or shops would open, no vehicles would be allowed on the streets and those that chose to defy the bandh would do so at their own risk" (Barua, 6).

The grandson of Robin koka names Baba is fascinated by the revolution against illegal migrants and joins ULFA. Baba joined as a terrorist or an insurgent as "notions of rescuing the motherland entered his head" (Barua, 134). Baba's parentd named Mamoni and Jitu, his grandfather Robin koka did not even know whether he was alive or not and continued with a thin hope of his return in their hearts. Baba's case typifies the condition of numerous youths of the times that unfolds countless stories of dispossession, exile and homelessness. Belonging encompasses the complex and nuanced explorations of an individual's need for connection, acceptance and a sense of place within a particular community. It delves into the fundamental human longing to belong, to be understood and to establish authentic relationships and bonds with others. Whenever there is a shortage of such things, the acute sense of dispossession creeps in. Loya, Rukmini's daughter feels uprooted and dispossessed in this sense. The character of Loya reveals the emotional and psychological impact of feeling disconnected. Loya's journey to her mother's childhood home is a journey of self-discovery. The confrontation between Loya and her grandfather, Torun shows how the characters in the novel grapple with conflicting values, internal struggles and the challenges of reconciling their true selves with societal expectations. Torun oscillates between love and affection towards his daughter and single-minded devotion towards his wife. Torun struggles with reconciling his true passions to his wife, Usha, and her expectations from him and his sense of duty of a father to his daughter, Rukmini. This sense of guilt on his part makes him cold and reserved in front of his granddaughter, Loya. In the novel we find a glimpse of

Torun's inner mind in the words of his best friend Robin, "That would mean admission of guilt. Of course, he is guilty. When Usha threw out Rukmini, Torun did not object. That makes him responsible too. But, he thinks he had no choice and that Usha made him do it" (Barua, 125-26). After Usha's death, Torun's feelings can be understood in terms of an astute sense of loss and discontent which is increased by the appearance of his granddaughter, Loya.

Loya carries numerous layers of dispossession and discontentment within her heart. We find her embarking on a journey to Assam searching for her mother's roots in Yellow House. This journey of Loya can be considered as a journey of self-discovery, self-acceptance and self-definition. This is a journey of seeking acceptance, searching for a sense of home, and forging connection with others. It involves the exploration of the emotional, social and psychological aspects of belonging and the impact it has not only on Loya but also on those individuals around her. Loya is "half Assamese, half Malayali" (Barua, 147). Loya strives to fit into a particular group of people and longs for a hometown or a specific environment that evokes a sense of rootedness and belonging. Loya's character navigates the complexities of identity, relationships, and the yearning for connection. She wondered "what it felt like to be rooted in one place, to belong so fully" (Barua, 150). Loya took keen interest on the origin of the Ahoms. Loya questions the idea of a 'foreigner.' When her grandfather tells her about the Ahom dynasty, she insists that they are migrants, to which her grandfather remarks, "Isn't everyone in the beginning?" (Barua, 148) on which Loya smiled.

Loya feels dispossessed to the core. She did not get the love and affection of her parents as her father married another woman and her mother was too confined to herself. Loya mentions "Glenburn, her father's house" (Barua, 101) without any attachment. Her grandmother Ammachi was not child-friendly. Ammachi was hostile to her mother and her mother spent most of the time in her own room in Glenburn, "Ma and I were banished to her room; life went on around us in Ammachi's house" (Barua, 124). In Bangalore, Loya was not of there or here. She felt like a "half insider" (Barua, 150) which made her to look into "happy families, happy relationships" (Barua, 150) with a feeling of loss in her heart. Loya had no illusions about her desirability. At one point of the novel, she remarks, "Rukmini barely touched her. Of course, she must have when Loya had been a baby—babies needed to be fed and cleaned and cuddled—but as far as she remembered, Rukmini had never held her" (Barua, 115). The lack of communication increased the feeling of dispossession in Loya's heart. Loya did not like the flat named *Ashraya* which her father provided for them after his second marriage with a woman named Sugandhi. Loya "had been dismayed by the prospect of living in the tall grey building that poked coldly into the blue Bangalore sky. *Ashraya*, the building was called, shelter, but it hardly felt like one to Loya" (Barua, 102).

Home is a "physical or nonphysical place or situation with which one identifies and where one is and feels unconditionally accepted" (Etoroma, 103). One is at home when one inhabits a cognitive environment in which one can undertake the routines of daily life and through which one finds one's identity best mediated and homeless when such a cognitive environment is eschewed. Loya can be considered as 'homeless' from this point of view. This dispossessed state makes Loya to come to Guwahati, her mother's hometown in search of 'roots' and a sense of belongingness.

Loya gets nostalgic about her mother's past in Yellow House. Loya exhibits the "nostalgic desires to obliterate history and turn it into private or collective mythology, to revisit time like space, refusing to surrender to the irreversibility of time that plagues the human condition" (Boym, xv). In her mother's home, Loya attempted to relocate the past by searching old photographs, "The photograph was a little out of focus...but there was

something overpoweringly familiar about it...Loya's ears grew hot as she examined more pictures. Occasionally, she came across a photograph of Rukmini, young and earnest" (Barua, 119). In her search for her mother's belongings in Yellow House, Loya found the English records once possessed by her mother. Loya pulled out the English records, very gently, one by one, and laid them on top of the other on the floor and felt glad that all her mother's possessions were not thrown away from Yellow House. This search fulfilled Loya's deep desire for genuine connections. In the course of the novel, we find that Loya and Torun are reconciled and a great bond is formed between granddaughter and grandfather. Loya starts to address Torun as *Koka*. Both Torun and Loya experience a deepened sense of fulfilment and contentment through this bond.

The novel is also a commentary on cultural hegemony. Loya, daughter of an exile and an outsider, straddling her multiple identities, finds a home in Guwahati. Loya in the novel achieved cultural amalgamation and this culturally amalgamated state lessened her dispossessed state of mind. Loya's decision to journey to her mother's native place results in bridging the old grudges securing that long desired feeling of belongingness in her heart. Loya began to consider Yellow House as her home. When Rukmini showed reluctance to amend the past, Loya retorted to her mother in a hard voice, "When are you going to begin to live, Ma?" (Barua, 180). Towards the end of the novel, a deepened sense of fulfilment, contentment and self-acceptance can be seen in Loya. She gains a support system, a sense of security and the validation of her identity in Yellow House. However, Loya's journey of self-discovery remains unfulfilled as she is drowned in the river Brahmaputra during a blast. Loya stands for both outsider and insider in the novel and her sad disappearance during the blast suggests that "both the insider and the outsider became victims, where symbolically violence consumes all" (Pradhani, 1-9). However, Loya's sudden disappearance brings Rukmini to her home forgetting all the bitterness of the past. The novel ends with Rukmini holding her father's outstretched hands consoling him with the words "Everything will be okay" (Barua, 181). The novel is a standing testimony to how past trauma and old grudges have a way of embedding themselves in human hearts. The novel captures the nuances and complexities of human condition and explores the struggles, conflicts and triumphs that arise from the quest for self-discovery and the desire to belong. The novel enriches our understanding of human relationships by shedding light on multiple layers of dispossession that lurk inside human hearts.

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