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Kaberi, the Modern Indian Female Self: A Study of Jahnavi Barua's *Rebirth*

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Abstract

North-East India, considered as one of the culturally distinguishable part of the world, is inhabited by more than two hundred fascinating tribes. Jahnavi Barua covers a lady from this region who suddenly had to experience living with her husband in Bangalore. The writer has emerged as one of the strongest voices from this region and therefore it is only natural for the North-East to serve as her favorite literary setting. North-East has never lacked in providing platform for female figures, whether politically, socially or in literary fields.

Rebirth is a refreshing reconnaissance of the turbulent topic revolving around female liberation. The change takes place in the inner self of the protagonist. This paper is an attempt to show how Kaberi, the protagonist, learns about her individuality and accepts it in a courageous manner taking along her yet to be born baby and surpassing her indifferent husband to gradually have a status of her own. The paper will also try to highlight the writer's experience of her land and its influence in her writing.

Keywords: North-East, Women, Voice, Liberation, Individuality

Introduction

Life for a woman has transitory roles beginning from her birth, especially after her marriage, when she has to start her life all over again in a new place, adapting to the circumstances without any complaints. The states in the North-East of India have been subject to multiple protracted conflicts. In cases where the gendered nature of these conflicts is considered, stereotypes of women as passive victims or natural peacemakers tend to be reproduced. Geographically, men and women share the same space, but everywhere in the world, women are accorded a lower status than men. But times have changed as Altekar says, "...changes have been taken in the position of Hindu women as far as proprietary rights, marital relations

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and public life are concerned.”(*The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization*,x). There is a perception that the status of women is higher in the North Eastern region of the country in comparison with the status of women in the entire India. This paper tries to show how a woman learns to accept her misfortune rather than mourning over it and also portrays how a woman has got the capacity to handle situations that always turns against her. This paper also tries to reveal that a woman can think for herself rather than playing the role of a compromiser and always laying herself down for sacrifice and also will depict the many strands that make up the modern Indian female self. An attempt will also be made to highlight the author’s own perceptions of being a woman and attaining a respectable place in the society. This article adopts various methods including the descriptive as well as the analytical methods. It is largely based on secondary sources.

Analysis :

Woman’s writing in North-East begun after the advent of the British and with the coming of the American Baptist Missionaries. It points to the fact the social system in North-East India was not conducive for women’s contribution to literature from within. The earliest Assamese women writers to contribute to Assamese literature were either from affluent families or were Christian converts. Nedhi Levi Farell stands to be the first Assamese Christian convert, and a regular contributor to Orunodoi; on the other hand, women writers like Tarini Devi and Bishnupriya Devi was lucky enough to be born in liberal families. It was but obvious that they got the suitable environment to give shape to their creativity. Educated women from such background not only contributed to literature but also participated in social movements and the national struggle for independence.

Jahnavi Barua, a woman writer from North-East, opts to write about a woman of her region which takes the readers through different dimensions of all the relationships a woman has: with her parents, with her friends, with her in-laws, with her family-like-neighbors, and most importantly with her yet to be born baby, and herself. The protagonist, Kaberi, lives in Guwahati but suddenly has to shift to Bangalore after her marriage. The author has shared the pain and prowess shown by a woman in the most bizarre but utterly possible situations. The inner conflicts and confusions within the protagonist, when she tried to balance the promises of motherhood and betrayal of her love, has been shown meticulously.

Lacan’s Psychoanalytic theory has attempted to provide the means to form an understanding of the complexities of the human mind, supplying answers to questions surrounding identity and agency in the world. *Rebirth* uses the narrative technique of interior monologue and henceforth, Kaberi, the protagonist’s, inner and outer world is brought to forefront as she negotiates between them in turbulent waters of human relationships. Her narrative to her unborn child and her self-realization forms the core of the novel. In the end she is in love with her newly emerged self.

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Text analysis

Is it true that the North-East is defined only by its insurgency, while its culture, art, tradition and history are all condemned to the seldom-visited annals of human memory? Are we defined by where we grow up or the company we keep? Jahnavi Barua, through the combination of influences does not isolate the human experience from culture or politics but she writes about life instead. She tries to show her readers that no matter how different people may be on the surface, there is universality to human emotion that only art can truly put in perspective. Probably this stands to be the reason behind being able to connect with her story *Rebirth*.

Kaberi, a young woman married to Ranjit, has to shift from Guwahati, Assam, to Bangalore. Belonging to the tea gardens of Assam, she was bound to move into the concrete space in Richmond Road of Bangalore. She assimilates into a corporate culture that her husband is part of. Kaberi, the narrator, interests the readers as a woman who has, throughout her life, suppressed her individuality and had let others make decisions for her. She has been a patient and obedient daughter and a wife. Her passivity comes across as a sharp contrast to the women usually portrayed in the writings of North-East women writers. Barua’s heroine is set apart from the conventionalism, therefore the name of the book tallies with the story. It is definitely a rebirth.

There is a feeling of loss in the very beginning. Kaberi’s marriage with Ron does not work out as he leaves her for another woman just as their long-cherished child is conceived. She realizes that she keeps on feeling the absence of Ron and speaks this out in front of her yet to be born baby: “I could not bear to look at the dining table where we had sat together talking about all the small things...” (Barua 3). She could find no one more suitable than her unborn child to express and share her longings. Kaberi wished not to reveal the news of her pregnancy to anyone, not even her husband because she did not want pregnancy to be the reason for her husband’s return. She did not want to seek solace in sympathy. When they were together, Kaberi was reluctant to socialize especially with the friend circle of Ron as she found it difficult to communicate and match up to the strata of the people there. She remarks: “may be it was because of the small town I came from...” (Barua14)

Apart from doing household chores, the women of North-East have shared the work on the fields and helped in generating income along with their male counterparts; the women here are also free from the evil practices like dowry, sati, female feticide, honor killing, child marriages, etc,. A number of daughters of this region has achieved great feats in diverse fields. However, unfortunately, in spite of the social and economic equality with the men, the women folk have been marginalized from the decision making bodies. Kaberi and Joya are two different women characters portrayed in the story with opposite attitudes towards life. Kaberi realizes knows this well and therefore remarks “Joya was my friend... we were created of different flesh” (Barua 23). Joya at least had the guts to opt for what she

desired whereas Kaberi's decisions were mostly taken by the ones attached to her. Moreover, Joya is shown to have a loving and caring husband, who laments her death after so many years of her absence. Ron, on the other hand, leaves Kaberi for a different woman. As Kavita Kane writes, "...as they say, the wife is the last to know." (*Menaka's Choice*, 143). Kaberi's husband makes a sudden selfish return on knowing about her pregnancy, while openly flaunting his extra-marital affair.

Barua's style of narration is unhurried and yet the speed of storytelling never seems to drop. The little details of the variety of trees, flowers and birds that show up in her stories create a unique flavor of writing that is very enjoyable. Barua, even, does not fail to describe the scenic beauty of Assam. The positivity that lies in the story cannot be ignored. Barua chooses to stay an exception saying, "I don't want to pick up on any trend. I write about the human condition and I remain focused on that. If any social cause is essential to the character's story or the plot, I would write about it, not the other way around..." Apart from these we could experience words like expectations as Kaberi speaks about "is an unfashionable word in the world". (Barua 18) She talks about dreams that can be "dreamt in color" (Barua 31); a drive to Mysore with Preetha; positivism in relationships. The tone of the story is not monotonous as there is always a change in situations, places and events.

There is the maturity of expression in the works of Barua. There are several aspects to this. "The obvious one is her command over English. The second one is her choice of titles for the stories. They are not descriptive. They serve as a metaphor or encapsulate the theme of a story. The third, the subtle aspect is how she has been able to infuse the rhythms of the Assamese tongues into a foreign language" writes Murli Melwani, a reviewer. The usage of words like *Ma*, *Mahi*, *Jethai* give the essence of the presence of an Assamese lady both within and outside the story.

Preetha comments "Who needs men anyway?" (Barua 44) after Kaberi shared her life's incidences of both Ron leaving and herself being pregnant. But Kaberi could not be free from her husband's memories. Ron emerges out as a caring husband after the news of her pregnancy falls on his years. There is a certain similarity between this story and Kunzeng Choden's *The Circle of Karma*. The story there portrays the undying capacity of a woman even after her immense suffering. The protagonist Tsomo deals with the hardships, created mainly because of the presence of all the male figures right from her father to her husband and male co-workers. But Tsomo ultimately finds out, all on her own strength, the shelter of her solace. Similarly, Kaberi too dares to decide her fate.

Barua also portrays the rift in family and the lack of love which in the long run makes Kaberi a passive woman. Kaberi is shown to have a difficult relationship with her parents, one devoid of communication. Her father rarely did demonstrate his love and the rift between her parents has its toll on her as well. This lack of love that she has felt all throughout her life has probably changed her attitude towards her yet to be born child. She assures her child

saying: "I am going to tell every day, as long as I live, and even after I die, from that great darkness-or maybe it is light—that I love you my child. You can never love too much. Or say it enough." (Barua 169) Kaberi realizes the importance of love and familial bonding in her journey towards becoming a strong woman.

Her contact with her family back home after her father's death makes her realize the strong bond that she has with her people. Her silent mother and her aunt and uncle reach out to her at a time when she really needs them. In fact, Kaberi's revelation about Ron's behavior towards her and the unhappy truths of her marriage no doubt shocks her family, but they do not give up on her or distance themselves from her. Rather they enfold her in their midst and make her realize that "there is always a home" (Barua 195) for her wherever her family stays. This unconditional love gives immense strength to Kaberi at a point of time when she was completely lonely and even though her mother's memories make her feel like turning "around and go home" (Barua 195), she dared to realize that her refuge has shifted to somewhere else. Family bonding, love and trust on others as well as her own self finally help Kaberi emerge as a new person.

Conclusion

Even though Ron confesses of moving out of the house and probably out of the life of the other woman, Barua does not end her book with a possible reconciliation between the couple. Rather she leaves it open-ended with a strong suggestion that Kaberi may not be able to accept Ron anymore as she discloses her awareness of not stepping back to the dark again. Kaberi transforms from a vulnerable wife to an independent woman, a woman who refuses to succumb to her husband's self-centered demands. Barua's story, even though based in Bangalore, keeps up the spirit of the North-East in the representation of the beautiful scenery, the political situation, traditions and customs, but most importantly, in the portrayal of a woman who is caught up in the age-old custom of being submissive, but finally emerges as confident and courageous.

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