

Memory, Motherhood and Identity: A Study of Jahnvi Barua's *Rebirth*

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Abstract

The advent of feminist literature and its subsequent ramifications have facilitated a nuanced representation of women's experiences. Many contemporary narratives offer a profusion of depictions of various arenas of women's lives. This article attempts to bring forth the complex portraiture of memory, motherhood and identity in Jahnvi Barua's *Rebirth* (2010). One of the primary roles a woman is expected to embrace is that of motherhood. A mother is supposed to be nurturing, self-sacrificing, and duty-bound. The ambivalences, expectations and complex cultural realities of motherhood alter women's identities. In Barua's work, mothers function both as emancipators and agents of patriarchy. The relationship between the mother and her child facilitates an exchange of cultural memory. These memories alter and reshape the lives of various female characters in the novel. The female voices take precedence and foreground the dexterous implications of agency and individuality.

Keywords: Motherhood, Memory, Identity, Agency, Women

In the contemporary scenario, migrating from one's place of birth to a metropolitan city in search of better education or employment opportunities is rather commonplace. Our relationship with our parents and the experiences of the region we grow up in shape our consciousness and map our boundaries. The question that needs introspection is how we cope with the loss of familiar spaces and try to recreate a familiar ambience in a foreign location. It is not just human beings who travel from one place to another; their prior experiences- personal as well as social, culinary habits and cultural memory travel along with them. Such displacement means different things for different people.

The space occupied by women in any location is often determined by patriarchal standards of society. Women need to live their lives within a cycle that is pre-determined for them. From being someone's daughter, they become someone's wife and then someone's mother. Any disturbance in this cycle results in stringent criticism from the androcentric patriarchal system. Contemporary articulations of women's lives in literature attempt to break this cycle. The multifaceted dimensions of human lives are put under scrutiny from the perspective of women. Such articulations provide a space for women's identities, with all of their subtleties and contradictions, to be represented.

Rebirth deals with the space occupied by women and its implications for their identity. The representation of the inner life of the protagonist in Barua's novel presents an innately women-centric perspective. It offers a space wherein a nuanced introspection of women's concerns can be put forth. The present study is a critical analysis of Jahnvi Barua's novel *Rebirth*. It highlights the multidimensional experiences of motherhood and how these experiences alter the identity of women. The paper also examines the role of memory in altering the experiences of the protagonist, as the memory of Guwahati permeates the consciousness of Kaberi.

Rebirth recounts the story of a young woman who attempts to grapple with both physical and emotional changes. Kaberi's life has altered since her husband left her for another woman, and she finds out that she is pregnant. The narrative is an intimate portrait of a mother talking to her unborn child and narrating not just the everyday happenings around her but also her past and her vexatious present.

Women are affected by the presence as well as the absence of motherhood. Kaberi's late descent into pregnancy made her married life strenuous. In the linear progression of a family, having children is considered the natural next step. If this supposed natural order of things is disturbed, the family is deemed incomplete in the eyes of society. Kaberi's late pregnancy, therefore, leads to disastrous consequences for her marriage. Initially, she keeps the news of her pregnancy from her husband, although, he later discovers it as her hospital bills were deflected to him. He attempts to swiftly return to her life upon receiving the information about her pregnancy. Although Kaberi is living in Bengaluru, her thoughts constantly oscillate between the Guwahati of her childhood and youth and her present abode. While reminiscing about the Nabagraha temple, Kaberi speculates that her mother must have prayed in the temple for her barren womb. Adrienne Rich distinguishes between motherhood and mothering. According to Rich, motherhood is a patriarchal institution, and mothering is a woman-centred experience. The mother serves the interests of patriarchy: she exemplifies in one person religion, social conscience, and nationalism. Institutional motherhood revives and renews all other institutions (45). Rich's distinction between the oppressive institution of motherhood that reinforces patriarchal standards and mothering as an experience is crucial. She argues:

"I try to distinguish between two meanings of motherhood, one superimposed on the other: the potential relationship of a woman to her powers of reproduction and children; and the institution, which aims at ensuring that that potential – and all women- shall remain under male control." (13)

The patriarchal institution of motherhood makes sure that mothers forfeit their individuality and function as carriers of patriarchal ideals.

The women around Kaberi, her friend and her housemaid have a troublesome relationship with their children. Kaberi's friend Preetha is a constant source of support for her during these tumultuous times. Her son, Tarun, is born with Down syndrome. Preetha takes care of her son all the time, yet she is cautious in giving suggestions to a fellow woman as her child doesn't fit in the mould of a healthy child.

Preetha is full of advice, yet even as she gives it I can see her holding back. Tarun, her six-year-old son, had been born with Down's syndrome and although nothing she had done had contributed to his being born with that she has never stopped blaming herself. (Barua 44)

The institution of motherhood deems the mother fully responsible for the child. It becomes all the more difficult for women with differently-abled children to fit in the mould of ideal mothers. The case of Kaberi's housemaid Mary is entirely different. Mary's son developed hebephrenic schizophrenia as a young man. He makes a nuisance at home by refusing to take medicines and hitting people around him. Mary feels the situation is her fault. The institution of motherhood compels women to find faults in themselves whenever their children go through something that is not considered acceptable according to social norms.

'It is that son of mine again, madam,' she replies, continuing to cook. 'How I wish he had died in my womb!' she adds with uncharacteristic bitterness. (Barua 81)

Although both mothers can't control the disability of their children, and they take care of them in every possible manner, they feel guilty for everything that has happened.

Jan Assman, while talking about cultural memory contends:

According to Nietzsche, while in the world of animals, genetic programs guarantee the survival of the species, humans must find a means by which to maintain their nature consistently through generations. The solution to this problem is offered by cultural memory, a collective concept for all knowledge that directs behaviour and experience in the interactive framework of a society and one that obtains through generations in repeated societal practice and initiation. (126)

Kaberi narrates the quaint customs and culture of Assam to her child. She tells her unborn child about the jaron ceremony; an ancient custom of paying the bride price in north-eastern India, the importance of afternoon siesta in Assam, the grasslands and the marshes of Kaziranga, the inauspiciousness of black colour on special occasions, Bihu, and the subtleties of the language of the region.

Kaberi's monologue to her foetus makes numerous revelations about her past. Her upbringing, her friendship with Joya, her marriage, and her life in Bengaluru and Guwahati lay bare before the readers. She moves swiftly between her memories and her present surroundings. Every incident that happens around her triggers a memory of her past.

Kaberi and Ron have carefully curated their life in Bengaluru. Although both Kaberi and Ron had different requirements in terms of finding a new home, their broker found an apartment that encompasses the requirements of both individuals. Kaberi had to teach her housemaid Mary to whom these methods seem alien, the kind of food they like, the spices, and the method of cooking. Upon a visit to Mysore, Kaberi sights a granite rock that stimulates a memory of Assam.

Stone was a treasure in my part of the world; very few in Assam could afford stone. We made do with bamboo; it was used for everything- for fences, walls, furniture and almost everything else. Stone felt so much more permanent. (Barua 49)

Guwahati comes alive in the novel. Kaberi's visit to the Kabini River with Preetha reminds her of Kaziranga. Her thoughts move back and forth in a haphazard manner. One incident in the present connects her with something that happened in her past. Kaberi talks about the Guwahati of her childhood, which upon visiting, after her father's death, she finds that the place she longs for has changed. The rural landscape has transformed. She ascertains that the place she knew exists only in her memories.

Our field, full of clover and touch-me-nots, is gone and the river has vanished too, behind rows of concrete houses that grow like cancer all over the once bare hillside. (Barua 191-192)

Joya forms another key part of Kaberi's memory. The cause of Joya's death was her active involvement in the Assam Agitation. The people of Assam, under the leadership of the Assam Student's Union, were protesting against their government. What provoked this unusual mass protest was the government's treacherous policy of aiding the influx of illegal migrants from a neighbouring country so that they could vote for them (Barua 88). Kaberi and her father remained in the outlines of the movement, but her mother and Joya participated actively. Very soon, violence overshadowed the cause of the agitation, and Joya was killed in a bomb blast.

There was no body, you know, the blast had shred everything in that bus to pieces. I could not even look upon Joya's face for the last time. (Barua 22)

By narrating the past and present to her unborn child, Kaberi is attempting to deconstruct the patriarchal institution of motherhood. Through her monologues, she is transmitting the cultural memory of an Assam she knows, a place her child would never be able to visit. Simultaneously, she is trying to confront the ghosts of her past - the disconnection with her mother and father, the estrangement with her husband, and the loss of friends and home. She is not acting as a mother, who is supposed to prepare her child to align their choices with society's expectations. She is preparing herself for an experience; that her mother didn't know was possible.

I am going to tell you 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)

While gliding through her repositories of memory, the protagonist attempts to come to terms with the estranged relationships she shares with people and the place around her. Kaberi's monologues are facilitated by her pregnancy and rely on her memory. Her recounting of the past completely alters her perspective. She becomes a more confident woman who is capable of making her own decisions and can move beyond the shadow of her husband. Her confrontation with her parent's disturbing relationship reminds her of the fact that she, just like her mother is living in the shadow of violence. She divulges the truth of her relationship with Ron to her mother before leaving for Bengaluru.

Rebirth effectively portrays the experience of a new mother who is trying to free herself from the shackles of the patriarchal institution of motherhood. Kaberi's memories offer her a refuge amidst the acute uncertainties of her marriage. Even the most mundane objects and incidents happening around her trigger a memory of her past, when she was among familiar people in a place she longs for now. Her attempt to forge a distinct relationship with her unborn child comes from her lack of a similar experience. For Kaberi, being a mother presents an avenue that changes her relationship not just with the people around her but with herself. She becomes more aware of herself than she ever was. For others, the birth of her child is a natural outcome of her pregnancy; but for Kaberi, this moment also celebrates her journey from self-doubt to self-affirmation, a rebirth of self.

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