

Silence as Agency in Jahnavi Barua's *Rebirth***Awnisha Verma**

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This paper offers a feminist reading of Jahnavi Barua's *Rebirth* by examining silence as a contextually shaped form of agency rather than a marker of passivity or failure. Centering on the protagonist Kaberi's response to marital infidelity and emotional estrangement, the study challenges feminist paradigms that equate empowerment with speech, confrontation, or exit. Instead, it argues that *Rebirth* foregrounds agency as an ethically complex negotiation enacted within conditions of constraint. Drawing on Uma Narayan's critique of universalist feminist frameworks, the paper situates Kaberi's silence within the material, emotional, and relational realities that shape what choices are viable. Kaberi's refusal to confront her husband or immediately leave the marriage is read not as acceptance, but as a deliberate withdrawal from emotional labour and confessional demands. This withdrawal preserves dignity while simultaneously revealing the power asymmetries embedded in intimate relationships. The maternal interior monologue addressed to the unborn child emerges as a central narrative strategy through which Kaberi reclaims speech without submitting to justification or reconciliation. Motherhood, in this context, does not function as redemptive closure but as an ethical reorientation toward care, temporality, and inward self authorship. By attending to everyday endurance rather than spectacular resistance, *Rebirth* expands feminist understandings of agency to include silence, restraint, and ethical waiting as meaningful practices.

Keywords: Silence, Agency, Rebirth, Jahnvi Barua, Kaberi

Introduction

Silence, rather than confrontation or rebellion, structures the emotional and narrative core of Jahnavi Barua's *Rebirth* (2010), a novel that maps a woman's transformation through interior reflection and maternal consciousness. Barua herself has remarked that the idea for *Rebirth* "slipped insidiously into my mind as I looked at women around me, at their struggles, dreams and aspirations," indicating that the novel emerged from an engagement with women's lived emotional realities rather than from a desire to construct an overtly political narrative (Barua, "10 Minutes with Indian Writer"). This authorial insight foregrounds the novel's emphasis on inwardness and

restraint, qualities that are central to its narrative method. Barua has further explained that her choice of second person narration was deliberate, as it allowed her to create an intimacy essential to the text while simultaneously highlighting the protagonist's profound loneliness (Barua, "JCB Prize Longlisted Author"). Unlike overtly confrontational feminist narratives that privilege vocal resistance and visible rupture, *Rebirth* unfolds through silence, interiority and reflective distance. The novel is narrated by Kaberi, an Assamese woman living in Bangalore, who addresses her unborn child in a sustained interior monologue during the final months of her pregnancy (Barua, *Rebirth*). Through this intimate narrative structure, Barua presents a woman's life shaped by emotional neglect, marital betrayal and patriarchal expectations, yet without resorting to dramatic rebellion or explicit protest. The quiet tone of the novel, however, should not be mistaken for passivity. Instead, it gestures towards a subtler process of transformation that unfolds internally, ethically and deliberately. Kaberi's life, as revealed through her narration, is marked by displacement, geographical, emotional and relational. Married to Ron, a corporate professional, she relocates from Guwahati to Bangalore, where she experiences increasing isolation and emotional erasure. Ron's infidelity and emotional manipulation intensify Kaberi's sense of loneliness, yet the novel resists sensationalising her suffering (Barua, *Rebirth*). Rather than framing betrayal as a catalyst for dramatic confrontation, Barua situates Kaberi's experience within the rhythms of memory, pregnancy and introspection. Kaberi does not articulate her resistance through direct speech to her husband or society. Instead, she speaks inwardly, addressing her unborn child and through that address reconstructing her sense of self.

Existing critical responses to *Rebirth* have largely interpreted the novel as a narrative of female self realisation, emphasising Kaberi's journey from emotional suppression to personal awakening. Much of this scholarship foregrounds themes of patriarchal marriage, emotional abuse and eventual empowerment, often reading silence as a preliminary stage of victimhood that must be overcome. Such readings tend to rely on feminist paradigms that equate agency with vocal resistance, decisive rupture or public assertion. As a result, the ethical and political significance of Kaberi's silence remains underexplored. Responding to this critical gap, the present study approaches *Rebirth* through the lens of maternal silence and interior voice, arguing that Kaberi's silence functions not as absence or submission but as a conscious form of feminist agency. By closely analysing the novel's sustained interior monologue, particularly its maternal address, the paper examines how silence becomes an ethical mode of self assertion that enables Kaberi to reclaim authorship over her experiences without submitting them to patriarchal validation or confrontation. At the same time, the study foregrounds motherhood as a critical site through which interior narration facilitates quiet transformation, allowing agency to emerge inwardly rather than through overt resistance. In doing so, the paper seeks to reframe feminist understandings of agency by demonstrating how *Rebirth* privileges restraint, care and reflective interiority as meaningful modes of empowerment.

Reading Silence as Agency:

At first glance, Kaberi's decision in *Rebirth* to neither confront her husband's infidelity nor leave the marriage appears to sit uneasily with feminist expectations of agency. From a conventional feminist standpoint, silence and continued presence within a toxic marriage risk being read as acquiescence or internalised patriarchy. Jahnavi Barua's narrative deliberately invites this discomfort. Rather than resolving it through redemptive speech or decisive exit, the novel insists on a prolonged dwelling within ambiguity. Any reading that seeks to stabilise Kaberi's silence as either resistance or submission therefore risks flattening the ethical complexity that *Rebirth* carefully sustains. The task of feminist criticism, then, is not to justify Kaberi's choice uncritically, but to examine how agency operates under conditions where all available options are ethically compromised. Uma Narayan's critique of universalist feminist frameworks provides a crucial entry point here. Narayan cautions against evaluating women's actions through abstract ideals of liberation that presume equal access to choice and mobility. Such frameworks fail to attend to the social, emotional, and cultural constraints that shape what actions are thinkable, viable, or survivable. Read through this lens, Kaberi's silence cannot be reduced to passivity, but neither can it be celebrated as unproblematic resistance. It must instead be understood as agency under pressure, shaped by pregnancy, emotional isolation, displacement, and the absence of supportive networks. These conditions do not eliminate choice, but they radically narrow its ethical field.

Kaberi's recognition that certain questions should not be asked is therefore deeply ambivalent. When she reflects that "there were things you could never ask, questions that would only humiliate you by their asking" (Barua, *Rebirth*), the novel exposes how speech itself can function as a site of violence. To speak is not always to empower oneself. Within unequal relationships, speech may demand self exposure without any guarantee of recognition. Narayan's observation that feminist theory often assumes voice to be inherently liberatory becomes critical here. Kaberi's silence resists a confessional economy in which women are required to narrate their suffering for it to be acknowledged. Yet this silence also reveals the limits of her position. That certain questions cannot be asked signals not only ethical restraint, but also the asymmetry of power that renders speech costly. This tension becomes more pronounced when Kaberi remains within the marriage. Feminist readings that equate empowerment with exit often treat leaving as a moral or political imperative. Narayan warns against precisely this kind of evaluative shortcut, noting that feminist judgments frequently overlook the material and emotional costs attached to departure. In *Rebirth*, staying is not equivalent to acceptance. Kaberi does not reconcile herself to Ron's betrayal, nor does she reinvest emotionally in the marriage. Instead, she remains physically present while withdrawing affective participation. This withdrawal constitutes a form of refusal, but it is also marked by endurance. The novel refuses to romanticise this endurance. Kaberi's silence protects her dignity, but it does not dissolve her vulnerability. Here, *Rebirth* complicates Narayan's emphasis on everyday agency by foregrounding its ambivalence. Kaberi's refusal to engage emotionally disrupts patriarchal expectations of female accommodation, yet it also leaves her suspended within an institution that continues to constrain her. Agency, in this sense, is partial and incomplete. It offers survival rather than liberation. This distinction strengthens rather than weakens the feminist reading of the novel. Barua does not present silence as a solution, but as a strategy for living within damage.

Motherhood further intensifies this ethical complexity. The maternal interior monologue addressed to the unborn child creates a space where Kaberi can speak without interruption or judgement. When she observes, “You listen without judgment. You do not interrupt. You do not ask me to explain myself” (Barua, *Rebirth*), the child becomes a figure through whom speech is reclaimed without risk. Narayan’s critique of compulsory disclosure helps illuminate this moment. Kaberi’s maternal address resists the demand to translate pain into publicly legible narratives. However, motherhood also reorients Kaberi’s agency toward care and futurity, potentially postponing confrontation indefinitely. The novel thus raises an uncomfortable question. Does maternal responsibility enable ethical self preservation, or does it risk legitimising continued silence. Rather than resolving this tension, *Rebirth* sustains it. Kaberi’s maternal silence is neither purely emancipatory nor purely restrictive. It enables reflection, ethical recalibration, and self authorship, yet it also defers structural change. Narayan’s insistence that agency must be read within constraint allows us to recognise this ambivalence without collapsing into judgment. Kaberi’s silence becomes meaningful not because it overcomes patriarchy, but because it reveals how women inhabit and negotiate it unevenly.

Nature imagery reinforces this temporal and ethical deferral. Kaberi’s identification with the jacaranda tree, which blooms only in its own season, underscores the novel’s resistance to narratives of immediate empowerment. Her recognition that “nothing blooms when it is forced” (Barua, *Rebirth*) rejects feminist impatience with endurance. Yet this metaphor also risks aestheticising waiting. Barua’s narrative carefully avoids celebratory closure, leaving the reader with transformation that is inward but not yet social. Ultimately, *Rebirth* does not argue that silence is inherently feminist. Instead, it insists that silence must be read relationally, temporally, and ethically. Kaberi’s silence is a mode of survival that carries both agency and cost. Read alongside Uma Narayan’s critique of feminist universalism, the novel exposes the limitations of feminist frameworks that demand clarity, rupture, or resolution. Kaberi’s agency lies not in transcending constraint, but in negotiating it with dignity, restraint, and care. By refusing to offer a triumphant feminist arc, *Rebirth* contributes a more unsettling insight to feminist thought. Agency under patriarchy is often fragile, incomplete, and ethically compromised. Maternal silence in the novel is not a celebration of endurance, but a quiet indictment of the conditions that make endurance necessary. In attending to this ambiguity rather than resolving it, Barua’s narrative expands feminist understanding of agency beyond empowerment as exit, insisting instead on a feminism attentive to survival, temporality, and lived contradiction.

Conclusion:

This paper has examined *Rebirth* as a narrative that deliberately unsettles dominant feminist expectations surrounding agency, speech, and resistance. By focusing on Kaberi’s silence within marriage and her turn toward interior maternal address, the study has argued that Jahnavi Barua does not present silence as either failure or triumph. Instead, the novel stages silence as a situated response to conditions in which all available choices carry ethical and emotional cost. Kaberi’s decision not to confront her husband’s infidelity or immediately leave the marriage is not framed as moral weakness, but neither is it celebrated as radical resistance. Rather, it is shown

as an act shaped by constraint, care, and temporal uncertainty. Read alongside Uma Narayan's critique of universalist feminist frameworks, *Rebirth* exposes the limitations of feminist paradigms that equate empowerment with visibility, confrontation, or exit. Kaberi's silence resists the assumption that voice is inherently liberatory and that speech necessarily produces justice. Within the uneven terrain of intimate relationships, speech can demand self exposure without offering recognition or redress. Silence, in this context, emerges as a means of preserving dignity and refusing emotional labour, even as it reveals the asymmetries of power that make such refusal necessary. The novel thus invites a more cautious and context sensitive feminist vocabulary, one that recognises agency as relational, partial, and often ethically compromised. The maternal interior monologue at the heart of *Rebirth* further complicates the relationship between silence and agency. Addressing the unborn child allows Kaberi to speak without entering a confessional economy that demands explanation or justification. This mode of speech does not seek resolution or closure. Instead, it enables ethical reflection and self authorship within a protected space. At the same time, motherhood reorients Kaberi's choices toward care and futurity, raising difficult questions about postponement, endurance, and responsibility. The novel refuses to resolve whether maternal silence ultimately enables transformation or sustains deferral. In doing so, it resists feminist narratives that demand clarity, immediacy, or redemption.

By foregrounding everyday negotiation rather than spectacular resistance, *Rebirth* contributes to a feminist understanding of agency that is attentive to survival as well as struggle. Kaberi's silence does not dismantle patriarchal structures, but it disrupts their emotional demands. It marks a refusal to participate fully in systems that rely on women's expressive labour and moral accommodation. Such refusal, while limited, remains ethically significant. In conclusion, *Rebirth* challenges readers and critics alike to reconsider how feminist agency is recognised and evaluated. It urges a shift away from prescriptive models of empowerment toward a feminism that can hold ambiguity, endurance, and inward transformation without reducing them to either complicity or resistance. Maternal silence in the novel is not a celebration of patience or suffering. It is a quiet but insistent reminder of the conditions that constrain women's choices and the fragile forms of agency that emerge within those conditions. By attending to these complexities, this paper has argued for a more nuanced feminist reading of silence, one that remains critically alert to both its possibilities and its limits.

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