

Memory and Space in Jahnvi Barua's *Rebirth* (2010)**Dr. Shiva Prasad Sharma**

Assistant Professor

Department of English

Pandit Deendayal Upadhyaya Adarsha Mahavidyalaya

Eraligool, Assam

Abstract

Human experiences are translatable into spatial terms. Various aspects of space have meaning embedded in them which are intelligible to the members of a particular group. For members of a particular group a landscape holds the memories of friends, adversaries and also memories of some scope changing socio-political events. Therefore even after being uprooted because of circumstances from one's space of belonging and provided with nothing in the not so familiar conditions to call home, an individual survives by letting himself/herself loose in the intricate web of memories of the space that he/she has left behind. As an example to bring home this observation we can take the case of the Tibetans residing in India since 1962 after being displaced from their homeland by the People's Liberation Army of China. These Tibetans in exile have in their memory snatched away a part of their homeland from the Chinese. Young Tibetans living in exile have retained an affinity towards their homeland. Therefore their space of belonging is inextricably related to the memories of their homeland. Similarly in Jahnvi Barua's debut novel *Rebirth* (2010), the protagonist Kaberi have retained memories of her space in Assam. The space called Assam becomes meaningful only when memories are inscribed into it. This particular paper will endeavour to delve into relationship between memory and space and argue that memory is meaningful only when it is rooted in a particular space.

Keywords: Space, Memory, Nationalism, Feminine Identity, Violence

Rebirth (2010) very poignantly depicts the journey of Kaberi, a young woman who comes to grip with her uncertain marriage. Narrating her predicament to her yet to be born child Kaberi revisits the memories of her space in Assam. And what emerges in the process is her new found strength to negotiate through the treacherous waters of betrayal that she has faced at the hands of her husband. Her new identity as an individual who is able to liberate herself from a relationship based on subjugation to that of self assertion has as its base the memories of her space in Assam. Images and various spatial symbols of her life lived in Assam are conjured up to assert her individuality as well as contest the catastrophic waves of uncertainty surrounding her predicament in a city miles away from her home. The physical space called Assam therefore by virtue of being inscribed with memories play an important role in her transformation. Assam for Kaberi becomes what the famous urban theorists Tuan and Altman has proposed about space. According to Yi-Fu Tuan Space is a realm “enriched with human experience and understanding: an organized world of meaning” (Tuan 1976). For Altman and Low it is a “setting to which individuals are emotionally and culturally attached.” (Altman and Low 1992). In consonance with the definition of stalwarts like Yi-Fu Tuan the space of emotional belonging and attachment for Kaberi is Assam. Assam with all its diverse spatial aspects ranging from the physical to the socio-cultural and political is ardently alive in the consciousness of Kaberi. Her memories unfold within the spatial framework of Assam. There are numerous attempts made by Kaberi conjure and correlate her current predicament in Bangalore with that of her life lived in Assam. Assam for Kaberi is an enduring presence, her present which is shaped by her past is preserved by the aspects of the space that she inhabits. It is to this space that she seeks a continual access and

returns for her present to appear meaningful. For instance the very sound of the gurgling of the dove at her apartment in Bangalore takes her back to the memories of her life in Assam. Kaberi reminisces;

“The consoling gurgling of the bird takes me back home, to my childhood home.

The mornings were always filled with the cooing of mating doves. Ma and I would sit by the windows in the front room, mostly in silence for Ma and I never had much to say to each other, and listen to them as we did our little bits of work. Mostly, I did embroidery- delicate shadow work on the gauzy organza or the regimented cross stitch on matty cloth- while Ma knitted, her needle flashing in the morning sun. Thick, delicious sweaters she turned out in days, in readiness for cold winters. I will ask her to knit you a bundle, don't worry you will never be cold” (Barua 2010,p 5).

This mechanism of reverting back to the memory employed by Kaberi is an attempt to come to terms with the uncertainty that life had thrown at her. Trapped amidst the darkness surrounding her marriage with Ron and the anticipation of the unborn child, Kaberi strives to structure and organize the memories of her lived life in Assam in order to identify patterns and consistencies which will induce in her a sense of self assurance. For Kaberi the past is omnipresent. The uncertainties surrounding her marriage with Ron, her impending motherhood, the death of her bosom friend Joya, the socio-political tumults surrounding her homeland constantly shape her predicament. The only audience of the recollection of her memories is her unborn child who is evidently a part of her present predicament. Yet, the unborn child is as much a product of the

past as it is of her present. Her newfound motherhood is shaped by her constant revisiting of her the memories inscribed in the space called Assam. Speaking about the ability of human beings to cipher memories in order to assimilate the past into the present Birgit Neumann in an essay entitled “The Literary Representation of memory” opines:

Memory and the processes of remembering have always been an important, indeed a dominant topic in literature. Numerous texts portray how individuals and groups remember their past and how they construct identities on the basis of the recollected memories. They are concerned with the mnemonic presence of the past in the present, and they illuminate the manifold functions that memories fulfill for the constitution of identity. Such texts highlight that our memories are highly selective, and that the rendering of memories potentially tells us more about the actual events.(Neuman 2010)

Furthermore, the novel’s weaving together of Kaberi’s inner and outer world uses the thread of memory rooted in Assam. Her space in Bangalore is a superficial one. Bangalore is a non space which gains meaning only in conjunction with the emotional space that the narrator inhabits. For instance her sense of disorientation with the landscape becomes evident in the road trip that she had taken with Ron to Mysore:

“Six years ago, Ron and I had driven to Mysore to spend a weekend away from Bangalore and I had been astonished at the landscape that met my eyes. It was all gently undulating land, very dry. I remember for that had been in February covered by pockets of scrub mixed with a few big trees. There were rocks too, small ones, big ones and some very large outcrops. Granite, Ron had said they

were, they were granite stones. 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 fence , walls, furniture and almost everything else” (Barua 2010, p 49)

Similarly, the Kaziranga national park as a spatial symbol plays a very important role in the memory of Kaberi. It is a repository of the memories that Kaberi had spent with her parents, Bina Moha and Mahi, Joya and also the relationship that she shared with Ganesh- an elephant used for jungle safari in Kaziranga. Kaziranga as a spatial form is of paramount importance because it permeates the consciousness of Kaberi and also moderates and governs the evolution of Kaberi in face of the uncertainties that life has thrown at her. The Kaziranga National Park while being a link with the natural environment of her new surrounding is also a soothing presence in the life of Kaberi. It has got the capability of initiating pristine emotions in the minds of the narrator. At this juncture it will be pertinent to emphasize that the life stories, with all their spatial aspects that Kaberi narrates to her unborn child have a very important role to play in the novel. These stories narrated to the unborn child by the protagonist, is a sort of reassurance that she tries to provide to her child. Abandoned by her husband who very selfishly seeks to return after knowing that Kaberi is pregnant, the narrator reassures her unborn child that it will not be alone in the world in which it would turn up. The strong sense of place, a strong sense of tradition will help the child survive in this uncertain world by giving the child a sense of identity.

The road trip to the Kabini jungle resort that Kaberi undertakes along with Preetha takes her back to the memories of the Kaziranga national park in Assam. So, strong is the presence of

Kaziranga in the mind of the narrator that even writes a book about Kaziranga. Relating the trip to forest surrounding the Kabini river in Karnataka to the trip that she had undertaken with joya to Kaziranga in Assam Kaberi narrates:

“This was the one trip we made without fail every winter. My family and Joya’s. We would all pile into Bipul moha’s black ambassador , the men in front, the women and children at the back, and drive away, usually on a cold winter morning”(Barua 2010, pp 47-57).

Kaziranga , for Kaberi is a repository of the memories of her lived experiences in Assam. The way Kaberi, remembers the intricate details of the trip to the forest testifies the role played by the forest in the construction of her identity. We further realize that the book that Kaberi had written about the forest in her homeland features Ganesh – a domesticated elephant used by the forest department. Talking about the story that she had written about her sojourns in Kaziranga, Kaberi reveals the all pervading influence of the area upon her consciousness ;

“Ganesh is the hero of my story. When I began to write a year ago I wrote about him first- a story for children set in the grasslands and woodland and marshes of Kaziranga. And although it was only a story every blade of grass in it seemed to me real; I felt I was telling a lie when I called my writing a story. How could I be sure it had not all happened a long time ago?”(Barua 2010, p 40).

For Kaberi the memory of Ganesh helps her construct a safe refuge out of an emotional residue. She exclaims: “That morning as I rode on Ganesh’s back, I was invincible. Nothing could ever frighten me again” (Barua 2010: 40). The transmission of the memories of Kaziranga onto a similar environment in Karnataka also brings her close to the memories of people who have shaped her very existence. Lying down in her bed at the Kabini River Resort surrounded by the gashing sound of an unfamiliar river and the forest she had never seen before Kaberi finds her old life right beside her:

“Moonlight spills into the room and in that silver light a ghostly procession shuffles slowly across it, disappearing through the glass door into the river: my father first, his long hair falling across his wide forehead into his empty eyes- he looks at me but does not see me; my mother, diminutive but fierce, her white sador wrapped tightly around her shoulder, looks at me warningly, the lines between her eyebrows etched into a mark of Vishnu; she follows my father closely. Bina mahi, her round face luminous in the light, smiles at me and Bipul maha stops to wave; hand in hand, Joya and Bidyut walk lightly across and then- then your father appears. He stands by my bed, face inscrutable but still my heart leaps up, swollen with love.

I want him to hold me in his arms, the way he had that first night in kaziranga” (Barua 2010, p 62).

The memories of Kaberi are initiated by her connection with the spatial form called Kaziranga. Yet the connection of the narrator’s memory is interrelated with the spatial form. Therefore both the space and the act of remembering occupy a position which is inter-changeable. To be in a

particular space is already to remember. Place appears only in that particular form as is taken up by the memory. As eminent theorist Jeff Malpas once famously remarked; “Only on the basis of memory are we oriented, and only as we are oriented are we placed.”(Malpas:2013). Therefore Kaziranga for Kaberi cannot be approached independently of her memories of the people who have influenced her life. Kaziranga, therefore for the narrator apart from its lush green grasslands and the one horned Rhino is also about the people. A symbol which stands as a testimony to the initiation of Kaberi from a child into her marital life. Kaziranga exists in the consciousness of the narrator because the memories associated with it exist. As Jeff Malpas explains; “It is as remembered that place first appears, and even the experience of place is always suffused with memory, shaped by memory, directed by memory. There is thus no place without memory; no memory without place.” (Malpas 2013, p 55).

Similarly, memory is also nostalgic in nature and this nostalgia is inextricably related to the dynamic nature of space. Memory always involves a sense of something which is not present, that is a steep sense of loss. The act of remembering involves an attention to what is past, what is no longer present in the same context as it once was. To attend to, what is remembered is to attend to the dynamically unfolding nature of space. It also, involves an inevitable loss of the sense of place. Space therefore emerges as a supportive construct engaged with the gradual evolution of our identity both as a melancholic individual as well as a social being.(Malpas 2012, p 54).

Episodes from the novel can be brought up to bring home the sense of personal as well as social evolution of the character of Kaberi. The nostalgia and the sense of melancholy in the character of Kaberi can be attributed to the death of her bosom friend Joya. Joya has an

overwhelming presence in the life of Kaberi. Joya is a sort of emotive refuge to which Kaberi can return at times of distress. Acquainting the readers of Joya, Kaberi brings out “Joya was my friend. No, that is not adequate at all; she was much more. I would like to say she was my sister but then we were created of different flesh so let me call her my alter ego, for it was difficult sometimes to distinguish where Joya ended and I began, where we flowed into one another, a pair of underground streams” (Barua 2010, p 25).

The fearlessness that Joya embodied had provided courage for Kaberi to face life in all its manifestations and on the other hand Kaberi’s calm and composed nature also induced Joya to be a little bit more patient and watchful. There is a steep sense of loss associated with the recollection of the time Kaberi had spent with Joya. In face of the clouds of foreboding surrounding the life of Kaberi, Joya is the only person that she misses the most. Yet, this sense of loss has also induced Kaberi with the strength to clash head on with her current struggle. It is as if the sense of loss that Kaberi experienced on the death of Joya endowed her with the strength to face any other loss which would definitely be far less strong as compared to her death. For instance Kaberi is not emotionally shattered on the death of her father. The death of her father provides her with an opportunity to analysis the relationship between her father and her mother which she realizes was not in a equilibrium in terms of emotional attachment. Their relationship as husband and wife, like the marital relationship of a host of other characters in the novel was as sort of compromise shaped more by the dictates of the society than emotion.

Memory is not the prerogative of a single individual, but is a part of the larger public domain that is memory is a collective as well as a cultural entity. The narrator’s constant urge to bring forward the traits and events of her homeland is a attempt to preserve and transmit symbolic

heritage of Assam, to protect the past against the corrosive action of time and so that the coming generations have a sort of safe refuge under which to construct their coherent identities. The memories of the Assam agitation which raged like a wild fire through the courtyards of the state and the betrayal faced by the common masses at the hands of the new government have also important part to play in the construction of the individuality of Kaberi. The agitation runs like a leitmotif throughout the novel. The betrayal faced by the indigenous inhabitants of Assam because of the failure to implement the provisions of the Assam accord like the policy of providing constitutional safeguard to the rights of the indigenous have all an important role to play in the development of the identity of Kaberi as someone belonging to the region. Individual memory mixes with the cultural memory to create a mirror image between the predicament of Kaberi and her motherland. Kaberi's association with the agitation is linked to the memories of Joya. It was Joya who along with her would be husband Bidyut urged Kaberi to join the agitation. Her personal strife becomes symbolic of the strife that the people in Assam had to confront during the agitation. Speaking of the link between the two Kaberi remarks:

“The last time I had to deal with sustained strife I had not fared better than this while Joya, as expected, had flourished. Those had been the years of the Assam Agitation, when ordinary citizen led by young student leaders, still in college and school, had risen in a peaceful protest against their own 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 2010, p 88).

The ‘individual being’ and the ‘social being’ co-exist in the consciousness of Kaberi. The attempts initiated by Kaberi to come to terms with her marital relationship, in a city miles away

from her homeland represents her private universe. Her social being corresponds to the internalized ideas, habits, values and norms that have originated by dint of her association with the Assamese society. There is a juxtaposition of both the individual being and the social being in the psyche of Kaberi. Her calm and composed nature, her melancholic disposition, her ceaseless endeavour to understand her personal predicament by connecting it to the predicament of the individuals of the members of the social group to which she belongs all point out to the co-existence of the individual and the social self.

Reminiscing the memory of Joya, and the agitation, kaberi further reveals:

“ Andolan!Andolan. Revolution. It was Joya who first said the word to me; she had heard her parents discussing it. It was an andolan that was brewing a struggle of the people” (Barua 2010, p 88).

The memories of the agitation also point towards a new aspect of the concept of memory. It brings out the fact that no memory is completely private. Since memory is placed, it has some dimensions which is also shared. Memory therefore is differently related to different modes of human identity and narrative- to identity and narrative as personal as well as collective. Memory is also given in public rituals and events. We see this in events of collective celebration as well as agitation. As the eminent postmodern humanist geographer Ed Soja in his influential work *Postmodern Geographies: The reassertion of space in the critical social theory* articulates:

“We must be insistently aware of how space can be made to hide consequences from us. How relationships of power and discipline are inscribed into the apparently innocent spatiality of social life, how human geographies become filled with politics and ideology” (Soja 1989, p 10).

The narration about the agitation involves an attempt on the part of the narrator, Kaberi, to transmit the cultural memory that she has inherited by dint of her taking part in the agitation to her unborn child. She wants her child to acquaint herself/himself, with the events that have shaped the destiny of her homeland. The narrator's constant urge to bring forward the traits and events of her homeland is an attempt to preserve and transmit symbolic heritage of Assam, to protect the past against the corrosive action of time and so that the coming generations have a sort of safe refuge under which to construct their coherent identities. In the novel such attempts to transmit the collective as well as cultural aspect of the narrator's memory to her unborn child can be easily deciphered. The episode of her participation in the andolan is transmitted to her unborn child:

“The turbulent times are often forgotten now. But there is one incident that has stayed with me; it refuses to go away and it does not seem to lose its rawness as I travel in time away from it.

A hot suffocating afternoon in late August, the sky is heavy with clouds that threaten rain, a demonstration has been planned; a procession is to march to Dispur to protest yet another student death in Dispur. A column of people have gathered in Judges field, wending their way past the High Court and judges field(...) From the head of the column a cry sounds, *Joi ai Asom! Long live Assam!* The call is taken up by others and soon the people rally around it. I imagine I can hear Joya's voice shouting out in front, and then Bidyut's I cannot see them but once again I feel the electricity in the air.

‘Run!’ they cried. ‘CRP lathicharge!’

A woman in a cotton mekhela sador darts across the road pursued by a man in khaki. As I watch, mesmerized, I see his baton rise and fall on the head of the frantic woman. There is a crack like that of a coconut shattering and the slight woman crumples to the ground,

Someone grabs at my arm and I scream and then I see it is Bidyut but I still scream (...) he presses me hard obscuring my body with his own and as I listen to the sounds of men in heavy boots running along the lane looking for us.

And then my darling, you know what I do? I close my eyes and then throw up, right there, on his white cotton shirt” (Barua 2010, p 93).

Similarly referring to the bard of Assam, Dr. Bhupen Hazarika to her unborn child Kaberi explains; “I slip in Bhupen Hazarika first. Listen. Hear about love and longing and betrayal; listen to the Brahmaputra flowing and the wind whistling above”(Barua 2010: 139). Furthermore she tries to acquaint her unborn child with Bihu- the lifeline of the Assam: “Can you hear the beats like the drumming of the heart? This is the Bihu, my love, and all around are the songs of the birds and the whisper of the hills.

There is so much to learn my love, we will take it one at a time.” (Barua 2010, p140).

The desire to lead her unborn child to the socio-cultural trajectories of her region is intense. “There is so much to learn my love” (Barua 2010: 140) brings out a strong desire on the part of the narrator to associate her child to its roots. Moreover the novel is also an earnest endeavour to establish the region in all its socio-cultural glory for the outside world to experience. The reference to the mighty Brahmaputra- the Burha luit as it is known as in the local language, the ancient temples of Kamakhya, Nabagraha, are all conjured up to impart the binding strength of the socio-cultural trajectories of the region. It is as if the collective strength of the rich cultural diversity of the region is adequate enough for the yet to be born child to create a safe refuge in the absence of fatherly support.

The impact of the social on the personal also emerges in Kaberi’s narration of the reign of terror that has been let loose since decades in the North-East. Living in the shadows of terror, memories of armed agitation also pervades the courtyards of the consciousness of Kaberi. Along-

with intense nationalism embodied by characters like Joya, Bidyut as well as the narrator's mother, the dark days of insurgency also is portrayed in a vivid manner. The fact that the narrator's best friend Joya is killed in a bomb blast along with her fellow doctors while travelling to an area where insurgency prevailed, strongly point out that violence propagated by the revolutionaries do not make distinction between the indigenous and the alien, violence is a tactic adopted by the revolutionaries to keep themselves alive in the minds of the public. The dark side of terrorism emerges once again when the narrator refers to the Bomb Blast that rocked the city of Guwahati on the 30th of October 2008. The fact that the narrator is constantly referring to the terror lore to her unborn child is because of the fact that violence has been an integral part in the lives of the common masses of the region. As Sanchet Barua, in his article, entitled "*North East: does the agony of the people matter?*", published in the Meghalaya Guardian, 30th August 2007, states: "The state capitals and important towns have the crackle of gunfire and fierce cries which disturbs the night...bullets sprayed from guns at point blank range, passing through one or two of several dead bodies, the slash of steel on soft flesh, the dull thuds of blows, the crack of broken bones-all that picturesquely is the North East" (Barua 2007). The stories of survival amidst the shadows of the gun and the cankerous smokes of the grenade have also a strong part to play in the rebirth of Kaberi. The physical as well as the emotional torture that she faces at the hands of her double-faced husband Ron, parallels the tumult hidden behind blue hills and green valleys of the region. The politically charged environment adds a sort of courage to the psyche of Kaberi to face her husband. Throughout the novel, Kaberi returns to the shadows of her long dead friend Joya, she constantly emphasizes Joya's nationalist desires. The reference to the nights of Blackouts during the agitation, all provides a new courage for Kaberi to respond to the atrocities committed by Ron. Therefore towards the end of the novel when Ron returns back to Kaberi, she refuses to accept him. She repeatedly questions him:

"Did you love me, Ron?"... In the beginning, then later...ever... did you love me, Ron?. He looks me in the eye, "there are more important things than love, Kaberi."

No, Ron. There is a lump in my throat. There are few things more important than love" (Barua 2010, pp 173-174).

Kaberi, refuses to budge from her decision to walk away from the marriage, she decides to face her life with all its joys and uncertainties along with her unborn child. Unlike, her own mother and her friend Preetha in Bangalore, who were subjugated by their husband, kaberi decides to live her life on her own terms. As she exclaims: “Everything had changed. All fixed points on the map of my world have shifted now” (Barua 2010, p 174).

On the basis of the above analysis we can now, understand that the so called rebirth of Kaberi occurs because of her return to the memories inscribed in the space called Assam. It seems like Kaberi, Assam must also carve new pathways of existence by liberating itself from the fetters of terror and the strategies of belittling its rich socio-cultural heritage at the hands of the neo-colonial government. And this liberation like liberation of Kaberi must take place through affirming vehemently the golden era of the past. Assam like Kaberi must learn to return to the stories of the past. Only then the healing of its soul can take place. As the eminent Naga novelist Easterine Kire emphasizing the need to return to the stories of the past asserts:

“Every man is a story. Every nation is a bristling galaxy of stories. To be able to share one’s story- shouldn’t that be basic right? Where there is a denial of the freedom to tell our stories, invisible prisons are created. Invisible prisons are more poisonous, more effective than visible prisons. The denial of the right to tell our stories violates our humanity. I believe that every story has its space in history. The telling of some of our stories has been completed while some stories are waiting in the wings to be told at the right time. But when that opportunity is denied a terrible wrong is committed. Every nation must be given the right to tell its stories, in their own patterns and by the proper storyteller i.e, its own storytellers. The telling of a story is not only an artistic action, it is a spiritual exercise that is an integral part of the healing of a people’s psychological wound. The imprisoning of stories can prevent the healing of a nation’s soul. No one has the right to do this” (Kire 2004).

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