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Abstract :

The novel *Rebirth* offers a profound and nuanced exploration of the complex and contentious issue of women's freedom within a contemporary context. The narrative is centered on the protagonist, Kaberi, whose internal transformation is skillfully depicted throughout the storyline. This paper aims to elucidate how Kaberi embarks on a journey of self-discovery and bravely embraces her identity, all while navigating the multifaceted challenges presented by her indifferent husband and the impending arrival of her child. Furthermore, it will examine the extent to which the author's deep comprehension of her cultural and geographical landscape informs her literary work.

In Jhanavi Barua's *Rebirth*, the protagonist's evolution is striking, reflecting a remarkable shift from a reserved and timid disposition to one characterized by resilience and strength. This study will delve into the significant role that the natural environment plays in Kaberi's transformation, highlighting the intricate connections between her personal development, the natural world, and her interactions with various supporting characters.

The author critically examines the systemic challenges that Indian women confront within patriarchal frameworks, revealing the social and cultural constraints that limit their autonomy. She critiques the anthropocentric approaches that prioritize development at the expense of both women's rights and the broader ecological context, ultimately underscoring the need for a more equitable and sustainable paradigm.

In their insightful research paper, Sharada and Jyothi (2023) delve into the profound connection between the main character, Kaberi, and the natural world in Jhanavi Barua's novel *Rebirth*. They illustrate how Kaberi's evolving relationship with nature mirrors her mental growth and parallel her interactions with other characters throughout the narrative (p. 418). The authors shed light on the intricate experiences of Indian women who grapple with oppression, emphasizing the detrimental impacts of anthropocentric actions during societal development—both on the women themselves and the environment that surrounds them. This analysis delves into the intricate challenges that women encounter as represented in Jhanavi Barua's *Rebirth*. It thoughtfully explores the myriad societal and personal conflicts that define the experiences of female characters, illuminating the profound complexity of their struggles.

Through a rigorous examination, the narrative uncovers the critical interplay between external societal pressures and the internal emotional battles that women must confront in their pursuit of identity and autonomy. Barua's poignant portrayal compels us to engage with the systemic issues that shape women's lives while highlighting the remarkable resilience they exhibit in overcoming adversity. This examination invites a deeper appreciation of both the obstacles faced by women and their unwavering strength in navigating a world fraught with challenges. Anjana (2018) presents a compelling analysis of Kaberi's transformative journey within the novel *Rebirth*, chronicling her evolution from a submissive figure with low self-esteem to an empowered individual who recognizes and embraces her self-worth. This paper intricately outlines the significant changes Kaberi undergoes, highlighting the critical roles that nature and her relationships with others play in her path to self-discovery. Employing a creative storytelling approach, Anjana captures the essence of a narrative that might otherwise be overwhelming in its complexity, providing readers with a more engaging and accessible exploration of Kaberi's journey (p. 411).

Keywords: Gender, stereotypes, conflict, Individuality, Voice, Marriage, Nature,

The states of Northeast India have faced enduring conflicts that have shaped societal perceptions, often reinforcing narrow stereotypes depicting women as passive victims or inherent peacekeepers. The journey of a woman in these regions evolves significantly throughout her life, particularly after marriage, as she embarks on a new chapter in an unfamiliar environment, often suppressing any dissatisfaction or frustration she may feel.

Within the same geographical landscape, the value placed on women frequently pales in comparison to that of men. There exists a common belief that women in Northeast India enjoy a more favourable status than their counterparts in the northern regions of the country. However, this perception often overshadows the reality that many women endure hardship gracefully, accepting challenges as an integral part of life rather than fixating on their tribulations.

This paper delves into the resilience and strength that women embody in the face of adversity, advocating the notion that a woman need not always strive for compromise or be primed for self-sacrifice. Furthermore, it examines the nuances of contemporary Indian womanhood, alongside the author's insights on the pursuit of respect and dignity within society, illuminating the complexities of women's experiences in this culturally rich region.

Nivedita Menon in her work *Seeing Like a Feminist* articulates the perspective that societal upbringing systems intricately structure and compartmentalize the gender roles assigned to men and women from childhood onward. This analysis emphasizes how these systems not only delineate expectations and behaviours for each gender but also reinforce stereotypes that influence personal identity and societal interactions. Menon's examination highlights the pervasive impact of early socialization in shaping perceptions of gender, ultimately arguing for a critical reassessment of these entrenched norms to foster greater gender equality. In *Seeing Like a Feminist*, Nivedita Menon posits that societal upbringing systems systematically compartmentalize the gender roles of men and women from an early age.

In North-East India, women began writing primarily after the arrival of British and American Baptist missionaries, which highlights the challenges they faced in contributing to literature. The first Assamese women writers typically came from affluent backgrounds or converted to Christianity. Nidhi Levi Farrell may have been the first Assamese Christian and contributed to the newspaper *Orunodoi*. Other notable writers, like Tarini Devi and Bishnu Priya Devi, came from progressive families that nurtured their talents, enabling them to impact literature and political movements during the fight for national independence.

Jahnavi Barua, a distinguished writer hailing from North-East India, intricately weaves women's experiences into the fabric of her narratives. She asserts, "The women writers of the region did not lag in their contributions to writing from North-East India. Recently, there has been an increase in novels, poems, and short stories" (Begum 5). Barua's works delve deeply into the multifaceted nature of women's relationships, capturing the richness and complexity of their lives within the socio-cultural context of the region.

In a similar vein, Anitha Nair's novel *Ladies Coupe* shines a light on the pervasive themes of patriarchy and familial inequity, painting a vivid portrait of the struggles faced by diverse female characters. Nair presents an array of women's stories, each reflecting distinct perspectives and experiences, intricately exploring how societal norms shape their lives and identities (Shobana 323). Together, these authors contribute to a growing body of literature that amplifies women's voices from the Northeast, enriching the literary landscape with their unique insights and experiences.

Kaberi, the main character in the novel *Rebirth*, moves from Guwahati to Bangalore after her marriage. The author portrays her emotional struggles as she reconciles motherhood with feelings of betrayal. The author intricately explores the depth of pain and resilience exhibited by a woman as she confronts bizarre yet profoundly relatable situations. The protagonist's tumultuous internal conflicts and emotional turmoil are meticulously illustrated as she struggles to reconcile the promise of motherhood with the profound sense of betrayal from her love. This duality creates a rich tapestry of emotions, revealing the complexities of her journey.

Drawing from Lacan's Psychoanalytic theory, the narrative offers a compelling framework for understanding the intricacies of the human mind, illuminating the profound questions surrounding identity, agency, and the quest for

self-awareness in a chaotic world. The novel *"Rebirth"* skillfully employs the narrative technique of interior monologue, allowing readers to delve deeply into Kaberi's psyche. This technique brings her inner thoughts and feelings to the forefront, highlighting her nuanced negotiation between her inner self and external realities as she navigates the turbulent waters of her relationships.

At the core of the narrative lies Kaberi's poignant reflections on her unborn child, which catalyze her profound journey of self-discovery. This interplay between motherhood and personal identity shapes her understanding of herself and her place in the world. Ultimately, as she confronts and embraces the complexities of her experiences, Kaberi emerges with a newfound love for her transformed self, illustrating a powerful narrative of rebirth and empowerment.

Kaberi is obedient, mild-mannered, and quiet. Originally from Assam, she moves to Bangalore with her husband, Ranjit (Ron). The story unfolds from Kaberi's perspective as she addresses her future child, focusing on the theme of marriage. Following her parents' wishes, she marries Ron, who comes from a wealthy family. Despite this, her marriage is troubled; she learns of Ron's affair and his threats to leave her.

Kartik and Shruti's article, "The Legal Implications of Adultery," highlights the emotional impact of infidelity: "Adultery is a devastating betrayal that can cause immense emotional pain to the betrayed partner, leading to feelings of anger, sadness, and confusion" (p.4). Kaberi reflects, "Is he ever sad about the bed? It goes without saying that he doesn't miss me, although he checks in weekly to see if I need anything" (Barua 2010, p.6). She couldn't have anticipated Ron's betrayal and becomes increasingly aware of her cultural conditioning to endure such treatment. When Kaberi discovers she is pregnant, she briefly considers telling Ron but ultimately decides against it, thinking, "After all, I still loved him" (Barua 2010, p.110). Once Ron learns of the pregnancy, he expresses a desire to be with her but refuses to leave his mistress.

As a mother, Kaberi gains the courage to confront Ron, stating boldly, "That won't do," and no longer succumbing to fear (Barua 2010, p.85). Her character evolves from shy and dependent to brave and determined. She also grapples with her parent's troubled marriage, discovering her father's desire to marry someone else, which her mother had to refuse due to religious constraints (Barua 2010, p.163)

Barua adeptly explores the theme of marriage, addressing various dimensions including tradition, abuse, and transformation. In her narrative *Undertow*, she centers on the experiences of Rukmini and Alex, whose cultural backgrounds diverge significantly, with Rukmini originating from Assam and Alex from Kerala. Their romantic relationship culminates in a decision to marry, despite the considerable challenges posed by their contrasting familial backgrounds. Rukmini's mother vehemently disapproves of the union, criticizing Alex for his darker complexion and their differing religious and caste affiliations. She explicitly articulates her opposition, stating, "You are going to marry him even if I die" (Barua, 2020, p. 5). In defiance of her mother's objections, Rukmini and Alex proceeded with their marriage and relocated to Bangalore. However, their marital union is short-lived, resulting in a separation following the birth of their daughter, Loya. In the aftermath of this separation, Rukmini advances her career as a physician and finds fulfillment in her role as a mother. Her professional identity as a doctor endows her with the resilience required to navigate the adversities of life.

Another significant theme in Barua's work is self-redemption, as seen through the character of Kaberi, who narrates her own story. Initially, Kaberi is portrayed as a conventional young woman who marries Ron to please her parents. After the wedding, she relocates to Bangalore with him. Throughout her childhood, she is depicted as calm, shy, and obedient. Kaberi embodies traditional values, cherishing her cultural attire and striving to maintain good relationships with both her friends and in-laws. She fondly recalls one of her favourite mekhla sadors, saying, "One of my best mekhla sadors is black cotton on me, and I feel surprisingly well" (Barua, 2010, p. 98).

However, Kaberi's life takes a dark turn when she discovers that Ron is seeing another woman. Despite knowing about his infidelity, she refrains from confiding in her parents or in-laws. Instead, she tries to cope with the emotional and physical abuse Ron inflicts upon her, holding onto the hope that things will improve. As Ron begins living with his new partner, Kaberi finds herself increasingly isolated, seeking joy in Bangalore's lush, natural surroundings.

Kaberi experienced profound happiness when reflecting on her home state of Assam and the time spent with her best friend, Joya. She harbored a strong desire to return to Kaziranga and frequently shared enchanting stories about it with her future child. She expressed, "I cannot stop wanting to get away from everything that has grown too familiar. When individuals visit Kaziranga, they invariably experience a sense of renewed vitality" (Barua 2010, 46).

Kaberi was enthusiastic about her pursuit of motherhood, viewing it as a transformative journey toward becoming a courageous and self-fulfilled woman. This experience signified the commencement of a new chapter in her life, grounded in the joys of parenting. Near the conclusion of the narrative, Barua presented Kaberi's mother as a figure who had subverted societal norms. During her visit to Guwahati for her father's funeral, Kaberi confided in her mother about her tumultuous relationship with her husband, Ron, only to find that her mother did not endorse the idea of ending that relationship.

A significant theme in the novel *Rebirth* is ecological awareness. Jahnvi Barua adeptly illustrates the intricacies of nature and scenery within the narrative. The story unfolds in two primary locales: Bangalore, where Kaberi establishes her residence post-marriage, and Assam, her birthplace, where she was immersed in a natural environment. The author skillfully captures the essence of both settings. This aspect aligns with Ecocriticism, which investigates the interconnectedness of women and the environment, a domain referred to as ecofeminism. Ecofeminism scrutinizes the parallel mistreatment of women and nature.

Ecofeminism serves as a foundational theme in the novel *Rebirth*, intricately weaving together ecological concerns with feminist ideology. This critical framework articulates the parallels between the oppression of women and the exploitation of the natural world, asserting that both phenomena stem from deeply entrenched patriarchal structures. The earth is often symbolically portrayed as feminine, embodying life-sustaining and nurturing qualities that echo the traditional roles assigned to women within households and communities. In contrast, the dominion over both land and women has frequently been claimed by men, highlighting the systemic exclusion and marginalization of both.

The emergence of ecofeminism can be traced back to the social movements of the 1970s and 1980s when activists and theorists began to critically analyze the interconnections between gender oppression and environmental destruction. This movement gained momentum as it examined how the degradation of the environment disproportionately affects women, particularly in areas severely impacted by ecological disasters. The term "ecofeminism" was first coined by French feminist Françoise d'Eaubonne in 1974, marking a significant moment in feminist discourse. It resonated within broader social movements that advocated for ecological justice, linking the exploitation of women to the domination of nature and underscoring the necessity for an intersectional approach to both feminist theory and environmental activism. In this context, the land is more than just a resource; it is a living entity imbued with femininity, characterized by its fertility and ability to sustain life. This metaphorical association reinforces the idea that just as women have historically been viewed through a lens of nurturing and reproduction, the earth is also revered for its life-giving capabilities. Yet, the inherited narrative of ownership remains gendered, with men traditionally occupying the role of authoritative landowners, further entrenching the link between environmental exploitation and gender inequity. Ecofeminism, therefore, seeks not only to amplify women's voices within the environmental conversation but also to challenge the broader systems of power that govern both ecological and gendered domains.

Ecofeminism critically interrogates the connections between male dominance over both women and the environment. Kaberi felt immense happiness when she thought about her home state of Assam and the time she shared with her best friend, Joya. She longed to return to Kaziranga, often telling her future child beautiful stories about it. "I can't stop wanting to get away from everything that has grown too familiar. When people visit Kaziranga, they always feel alive again" (Barua 2010, 46).

Kaberi was excited about her journey toward becoming a mother. She saw this experience as a path to becoming a brave, self-redeemed woman, marking the beginning of a new life through the joys of motherhood. Near the end of the story, Barua portrays Kaberi's mother as a woman who has defied societal expectations. Kaberi shared her troubled relationship with her husband, Ron, with her mother during her visit to Guwahati for her father's funeral. Her mother did not support her decisions regarding their relationship.

An important theme in *Rebirth* is ecological awareness. Jahnvi Barua beautifully illustrates nature and scenery throughout the story. It unfolds in two main locations: Bangalore, where Kaberi settles after marriage, and Assam, her home state where she grew up surrounded by nature. The author effectively depicts the landscapes of both places. This aspect of ecocriticism explores the connection between women and the environment, a field known as ecofeminism. It examines how the mistreatment of women is linked to the exploitation of nature.

Ecofeminism plays a vital role in the novel *Rebirth*. It is a branch of ecocriticism that illuminates the relationship between ecology and feminism, demonstrating how the oppression of nature correlates with the oppression of women. The earth is often associated with femininity, as it nurtures life much like a woman cares for her family, yet ultimately, ownership rests with men. Ecofeminism brings environmental issues to the forefront of feminist discussions (Devi 35).

The land is frequently viewed through a feminine lens because it is fertile and sustains life, similar to a woman's role in nurturing her family. Historically, men have claimed ownership over the land. Ecofeminism emerged in the 1970s and 1980s, examining the connections between the exploitation of women and the domination of nature. The term "ecofeminism" was first introduced by a French feminist in 1974 but gained popularity during various social movements and protests against environmental degradation, which were often triggered by recurring ecological disasters affecting women (Miles 13). Ecofeminists challenge the connections between male dominance over women and nature.

The narrative presents a stark contrast between the urban landscape of Bangalore and the abundant greenery and majesty of the Brahmaputra River. The flow of the story is seamless, allowing the protagonist to find solace on the open porch of her apartment, despite its location in the heart of the city. Observing the surrounding plants and trees from her balcony instills in her a sense of trust and security that is notably absent in her interactions with those around her. Through a gradual appreciation of the strengths inherent in her lifeless environment, she begins to recognize her power. The sensory experiences associated with the sights, sounds, smells, and memories of her vibrant homeland provide her with a sense of comfort and tranquility. Barua effectively establishes the mood by articulating:

"Sometimes—not very often—when I craved the open skies of my childhood, I would carefully lock the door behind me, step out of the apartment, and run up the stairs to the terrace, where the sky was all around me. As I leaned against the low wall, I felt sick to my stomach because it had never been that blue before." (Barua 2010, p. 1).

The narrative progresses to depict a boat ride shared by the protagonist, her friend, and her friend's autistic son on the Kabini River. Additionally, she reflects on her visit to Kaziranga National Park. During moments of solitude in her cold, isolating Bangalore flat, she frequently recalls the jacaranda tree, a symbol of her evolving self-assurance. She elucidates that although the jacaranda currently lacks its lush foliage and appears unappealing, it will soon flourish and transform as warmer temperatures arrive.

Throughout her reflections on her experiences in Assam, she consistently mentions the crystalline waters of the Brahmaputra, which profoundly impact her psyche. She recalls the "powerful view of the Brahmaputra as it curved slowly from east to west" (109). In another passage, she describes a driving experience along the riverbank, where nature's visual, auditory, and olfactory elements serve as motifs illustrating her transformation.

As her pregnancy progresses, Kaberi prepares not only for the birth of her child but also for her rebirth. The story intricately weaves together various subplots, highlighting important characters, objects, flora, and fauna that facilitate her journey from a sensitive spouse to an empowered individual. These elements illuminate her path forward, allowing her to abandon her past. The author artfully intertwines concerns pertinent to women and environmental preservation, emphasizing individual responsibility towards nature and the empowerment of women.

Barua vividly describes Assam as a region rich in biodiversity, encompassing the mighty Brahmaputra, picturesque hills, and a variety of wildlife. Kaberi's deep longing for her homeland fuels her quest for tranquility and fulfillment in nature. She observes numerous plant species and wildlife, including the natural splendour of Kaziranga, with its diverse avian and terrestrial life. As Kaberi approaches the time to give birth, she embarks on

a journey of self-discovery, drawing strength and confidence from her encounters with nature, thereby enhancing her well-being. Upon her return to Bangalore, she emerges more resilient and increasingly independent.

As the story approaches its poignant conclusion, the final segment of the novel is imbued with intricate subtleties and profound themes that suggest a hopeful and rejuvenating future. A woman finds a second chance at life through the love and promise embodied in her future child, symbolizing renewal and hope. Through careful restraint and earnest prose, Barua adeptly illuminates the myriad unsettling challenges faced by individuals living in contemporary urban environments, such as isolation, environmental degradation, and the quest for belonging. Simultaneously, he emphasizes the transformative and healing power of genuine friendship and a deep connection to nature, suggesting that amidst the chaos of city life, solace, and renewal can be found through meaningful relationships and the natural world around us.

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