

The Long Path to Selfhood in Jahnvi Barua's *Rebirth*

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Abstract: This paper intends to make a study of the trajectory of transformation of the protagonist in Jahnvi Barua's *Rebirth* from a submissive, unassuming person to a someone who knows her worth. The paper reviews the process of this transformation and how the nature and persons assisted her to reach her selfhood. The writer brilliantly employs a new narrative strategy to portray an otherwise over written storyline.

The inextricable link between human beings and natural environment has been of perpetual interest for writers down ages. Theoretical deliberations on this relation between natural environment and human beings have started to gain momentum only in the last decades of the 20th century. If ecocriticism deals with relationship between literature and nature, ecofeminism establishes a direct link between natural environment and female sensibility, both advocates the importance of inter-relationship between human beings and the natural world. It stands at the crossing point of literary criticism and ecological studies. Ecofeminists advocate a deep reverence for all life forms both human and non human with the natural world. Some ecofeminists point to the linguistic links between oppression of women and land, such as the term "rape the land", referring to women as "wild" and "untamed" etc. Ecofeminists consider the domination of both nature and women by men (androcentrism) as the root cause of environmental problems. A synthesis of the concerns of both feminism and ecology is palpable in this concept. Ecofeminists claim to be a part of a definite movement. Janis Birkeland in *Ecofeminism: Linking Theory and Practice* defines ecofeminism as "a value system, a social movement and a practice, but it also offers a political analysis that explores the links between androcentricism and the environmental destruction (19)".

According to Bill Ashcroft, the western rationality identified binaries as the structural basis of life, such as: man versus woman, nature versus man, man versus civilization. The binary of man versus both woman and nature is interrogated in Ecofeminism. It also traces the similarities between nature and woman in relation to man much like feminism promotes a gynocentric perspective, a concept critiquing an androcentric dualism. Mario Mies traces the development of this consciousness in the book *Ecofeminism* co-authored by Vandana Shiva:

An ecofeminist perspective propounds the necessity for a replacement cosmology and a replacement anthropology which recognizes that life in nature (which includes human beings) is maintained by means of co-operation, and mutual care and love. Only in this way can we be enabled to respect and preserve the diversity of all life forms, including their cultural expressions, as true sources of our well-being and happiness.(6)

The present study interrogates how nature becomes a perennial presence for the transformation of the protagonist from a meek, docile girl to a bold lady who knows to take things on her stride in Jahnvi Barua's novel *Rebirth*. Barua is an Assamese born Indian writer who carved a place for herself in the Indian writing in English. *Rebirth* was shortlisted for Man Asian Literary Prize in 2011 and the Commonwealth Book Orize in 2012. This book has a stereotypical, over written story line, but what makes its unique is the treatment she gives to that clichéd thematic strand. The protagonist Kaberi is an Assamese girl who is replanted to the metropolitan city of Bangalore after her marriage with a IT professional. And when the story opens it has been seven years since she is there at Bangalore. Kaberi never had a decision of hers, she always let others make decisions for

her. She never questioned them and remained placid, and patient and obedient to the desires of others. She had suppressed her individuality or hardly recognized her own wishes and creativity. She is a very quiet docile lady with an unfaithful as well as abusive husband. Towards the end of the book a tremendous transformation happens within herself. She emerges as a person as well as an individual who knows the strength within herself.

The author adopts an unusual narrative premise for the hackneyed theme. When the story opens we find Kaberi as pregnant women of 7 months. The entire story unfolds in a monologue that this mother to be is having with her unborn child. Hence it has to be contained within the time span of a few months. The tone employed by the author is very subdued, calm, and composed. The movement of the plot is very slow and is devoid of any violent action. The language she uses too is very delicate as that is the only way a mom to be can speak to her unborn child.

As the novel opens we can find the protagonist Kaberi as an introvert delineated by herself through her words to unborn infant. Through her intermittent nostalgic musings, the author weaves up the entire life of Kaberi before marriage in the lush green terrain of Assam. We get to know of other characters through this narration. She had an alter ego in Joya who was her closest friend from childhood. Her death in a bombblast had left an indelible scar on the psyche of Kaberi. Barua weaves the political history of Assam in patches and glimpses through her narration. Finally Kaberi emerges out of the dark night to behold a day that promises to illumine her road ahead without the need for her to look back, even for once.

In contrast to her violent marriage, there is a sense of calmness and serenity in Kaberi's world view. Even when agitated she does not use any aggressive language. She hardly gets angry or agitated. The tone and language adopted by the author is so significant that the protagonist is talking to her unborn baby and not to the readers. None can yell or scream at a baby in the womb. The brilliant way of first person narration makes *Rebirth* a deeply introspective novel. There are no melodramatic outrage or excessive reaction over the traumatic incidents in her life. The interior landscape of the protagonist is laid bare before the readers through this snippets of monologue that she has with her unborn child. *Rebirth* is a woman's journey into personhood.

Through skillfully employing the interior monologue, Barua captures the deep bond between the unborn baby and its mother. Through these private conversations, Kaberi unravels her dreams, aspirations and even her own character. This unraveling of the inner psyche helps the protagonist to transform herself from a docile, passive person to a confident and empowered one. There are significant subplots, characters, things, flora and fauna which contributes to this transformation of Kaberi from a vulnerable wife to someone who knows her own individuality.

There is a perfect juxtaposition of the urban landscape of the Bangalore to the lush green vegetation and scenic beauty of the Brahmaputra. The movement is seamless and smooth. Even in the hustle and bustle of the city, an open verandah attached to the flat gives the protagonist a place to rejuvenate. The sight of the trees and bushes from the balcony instills in her a kind of confidence and security she hardly got from the humans around her. The slow realization of her empowerment is garnered through harnessing the synergies of various inanimate objects around her. The sight, sound, smell even the memory of the lush green homeland gives her a whiff of solace and succor. At the very outset itself, Barua sets the tone by writing:

Sometimes-not very often-when I missed the open skies of my childhood, I would step out of the flat, locking it carefully behind me, and run up the stairs to the terrace where I was surrounded by the sky. Still, it was never as blue as I remembered and I was left with an ache in my stomach as I leaned against the low wall. (1)

As the story progresses she and her friend along with her friend's autistic son goes for a boat ride in the Kabani River. Here also she recalls her visit to the Kaziranga wild life sanctuary. While on the boat they suddenly spot a tiger far away. She describes the moment :

...the boat is silent. No one talks; we are imprisoned in our own thoughts. A tiger always seems to have this effect on people, robs one of all speech. It cuts us down to size, in a way, reminding us of our largely insignificant place on the immense stage of nature. (58)

Again in her lonely days in the more lonely cold flat in Bangalore, she tells us about the jacaranda plant outside their flat. These lines foreshadow her emergence into a confident and self assured individual. She draws a parallel with the jacaranda in an emphatic and empathetic manner:

The jacaranda is bare now, no feathery leaves to clothe its nakedness. Without its green cover it looks ugly; it does not possess a particularly appealing shape. But soon, as soon as the temperature begins to rise, it will grow resplendent, confident, a different being entirely. (81)

While recalling her days in Assam she invariably refers to the sparkling waters of Brahmaputra. The river had a tremendous impact on her psyche. She recalls the “majestic view of the Brahmaputra as it looped in a lazy curve from east to west (109)”. In another occasion she describes a car journey along the river bank. The sight, sounds, smells of nature work as tropes triggering the transformation of the protagonist.

As her pregnancy progresses, Kaberi gets ready for the birth of her child as well as her own rebirth. Her journey to Assam instills in her a confidence and courage. The flora, fauna, the rivers all accelerate the process of her becoming. She begins to see things in a different perspective which helps in the improvement of her health and confidence. She comes back as a stronger person to Bangalore who is no longer dependent on her husband. The concluding part of the novel is replete with lots of subtleties and suggestions promising a better and brighter future. A mother ‘reborn’ through her ‘unborn’ child. Through overriding restraint and disarming honesty, Barua lays bare the disquieting predicaments of contemporary urban life and reveals the timeless and redemptive power of friendship and nature.

Works Cited

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