Mothering a Text: Rewriting Identity in Jahnavi Barua's *Rebirth*

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Abstract:

In contemporary North East Indian writing there is no dearth of female self-representation with assertive authorial voices who write powerful woman-centred novels. Jahnavi Baruah's is one such emerging voice that demands to be heard. This paper aims at reading Baruah's novel *Rebirth* as a text which gives voice to the feminine perspective while relegating the male voices to the background. It explores the psychological evolution of the protagonist Kaberi as she journeys towards "motherhood" – something which in itself is fraught with multiple layers of meaning in the context of the novel. The act of giving birth runs parallel with refashioning of the self and rewriting one's identity as a woman. On another level, the paper seeks to establish that this is a text which is self conscious about the act of writing itself, the process of bringing forth a text.

Key Words: Mothering, Identity, Rewriting, Reconstruction, Self-representation

The representation of women in literature has a lopsided history, with the literary canon being almost exclusively thronged by male writers. In a bid to write the female side of the story into history and rectify misrepresentations, women writers produce texts that aim at self-definition, reconstructing their feminine selves and recreating the feminine experience. In contemporary North East Indian writing there is no dearth of female self-representation with assertive authorial voices who write powerful woman-centred novels. Jahnavi Barua's is one such emerging voice that demands to be heard. This paper aims at reading Barua's novel *Rebirth* as a text which gives voice to the feminine perspective while relegating the male voices to the background. It explores the psychological evolution of the protagonist Kaberi as she journeys towards "motherhood" – something which in itself is fraught with multiple layers of meaning in the context of the novel. The act of giving birth runs parallel with refashioning of the self and rewriting one's identity as a woman. On another level, the paper

seeks to establish that this is a text which is self conscious about the act of writing itself, the process of bringing forth a text.

The narrative technique employed in the novel, where a pregnant woman is talking to her unborn child revealing her mind to the baby in her womb, appears to be novel and fascinating on first glance because it is unusual, but not sensible or feasible in a practical situation. The first question that comes to the mind is why she chose the baby as her audience. This can be answered saying that Kaberi was so lonely she had no one else to talk to. Barua's choice of second person narrative technique is not the first of its kind in fiction (although it is an innovation in the fiction produced in our part of the world), but what sets it apart from other such second person narratives is the intended listener of the story, the "you" of the text, which is the unborn child, not the reader. The reader gets a feeling that she is intruding upon the private space of the mother and child, that she is overhearing a conversation which itself is carried out at an intrapersonal level, because the child is not yet born. It is as if the reader is allowed the privilege to eavesdrop.

Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter* employs the second person narrative where Ramatoulaye addresses Aissatou, but it is written in the form of a letter, and hence seems feasible. *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* is another such example, but here the narrative directly addresses the reader, and hence she does not feel left out. The narrative technique almost deconstructs the opposition between the private and the public. Externalizing her thoughts through her account Kaberi manages to traverse a liminal space between interpersonal and intrapersonal conversation.

Several other questions can be raised. Is the foetus sentient enough to understand? In the Mahabharata we have the tale of Abhimanyu who, while still in his mother's womb, learns about the Chakravehu from stories that Arjuna told, but only partially since his mother fell asleep halfway. Even in our times it is believed that the health of the foetus does get affected by what the mother goes through, her mental state, and that it experiences the same things as the mother and absorbes them in the process. The first question, therefore, is answered. The foetus does listen, and does partially understand. This brings us to the next lot of questions. Does the child, at this prenatal stage, truly need to know what Kaberi tells it? Or is it a need of the mother to retell those experiences which she is going through even as she is pregnant, along with those which she remembers from her past, and thus heal herself in the process through the act of storytelling itself? We might ask ourselves, why the necessity to overburden the foetus with her problems? There is enough evidence that Kaberi's mood swings and tensed state of mind affects the normal growth of the foetus. The baby at one point suffers from intrauterine growth retraction(IUGR).

On a symbolic level, the foetus can be seen as an unborn text, a text in the making. Everything that writing eccompasses – thinking, feeling, introspecting, retrospecting, questioning, remembering, repeating – goes into the making of a text. The creative process

is a lonesome activity, both for male and female writers, but for the female writer it is more full of struggles, of resistance, of the need to trespass.

The narrator confronts her own experiences a second time in the process of retelling them. She needs a sympathetic ear, her baby cannot but listen to her musings. "Confiding in others allays pain."(Ba 20) The entire book is written in Kaberi's voice, and although the novel takes place during the months of her pregnancy until the time she is in labour, narratives from the past, not only her own but also of those around her, are squeezed into this narrative space, thus imbuing it with a strange temporal elasticity.

On a few occasions, nonetheless, the narrative seems unconvincing, when Kaberi makes some awkwardly uncomfortable revelations – those about sex, for instance. At such times we can find what can be called the shadow of the author's intervention trying to give credibility to the entire narratorial process. It is almost as an afterthought, and as a justification of her saying such things to the child that Kaberi adds, "I would not want you to ever be as ignorant as I had been so I will allow you to listen to a few things, but when I ask you to shut your ears, you must."(64) In the course of the rest of the novel though, Kaberi never asks the foetus to shut his ears.

It is a book where one does not find much action but reflection. But the little that happens, along with Kaberi's musings, is enough for the repair and reconstruction of her self. At the end of the journey, she not only gives birth to a baby but is herself reborn in the process. This constant going back to the past and reiterating hurtful things to the baby which it itself must have been experiencing along with the mother, helped her weigh things better, made her make newer perspectives on old matters and people, and gave her authority over herself by the end of the book.

Something which is somewhat peripheral in the book, but which I have sought to bring into the centre in my paper, is the fact that Kaberi is also working on a book. As it appears, the book is conceived around the same time as the baby, and grows with it. There are passages where Kaberi is found talking about the development of her book just after she talks of the growth of the foetus, and it is not plainly incidental but intentional.

Kaberi's first sighting of the baby happens the first time she undergoes an ultrasound. As her eyes are eagerly fixed on the monitor, her doctor guides them to the "spine" of the foetus.

'There.' Dr. Joseph sounds satisfied. 'Can you see the spine there?'

I strain to see and when she runs a finger in a curve over a line of lightness and denseness I begin to see… your backbone…(Barua 29)

One can hardly ignore the resonances of the word "spine" here. The spine is what holds a book together as well. And only a few pages later, Kaberi reveals to us that she is writing a book for children. A couple of months later, Kaberi tells her unborn child, "They say you are ten inches long now; that you are beginning to grow hair on your head and have

eyebrows." Just one paragraph later she intimates the child about an email that she has received from her editor telling her that the editing of the book will start shortly.

Kaberi is mothering not only a child but also a text, both in the absence of and without the knowledge of her husband, Ron. In both cases Ron discovers the news from other sources, Kaberi does not choose to tell him, and Ron is taken by surprise on both occasions. She deliberately keeps Ron outside of the creative process when the book and the baby are in their embryonic stage. While both Kaberi's and Preetha's mothers compromised with their respective husbands because of the fear of society, and their belief that "Children need a father"(200), Kaberi's baby and her book see the light of day almost hand in hand, both almost orphaned at birth as Kaberi chooses to bring them forth into a fatherless existence.

While at times the narrative device fails to convince us, it does not fail us when seen as symbolic of the female writer's engagement with writing itself, its foetal state which is the pre-production stage when the ideas form and develop and finally realize into book form, the various stages of its development and the post-production state as well, when it travels from the inner private space to the outer public domain. There are many instances where the text's self-reflexivity about woman's writing comes to the fore. It is engaged with the act of writing itself, the female writer's preoccupations with an unborn text, and related concerns. At some point quite early in the novel, Kaberi regrets the fact that her childhood and Joya's passed without leaving any evidence of its existence. "We grew up without fuss, the two of us – took our first steps,…spoke our first words – and no one bothered to document or even remember when it was that we did, unlike today when every move a baby makes is recorded in a book, a compact disc or on film." (24). I feel this again is an authorial indication, however oblique, towards the lack of proper documentation when it comes to women's achievements, particularly women's texts that have been lost in history.

Just as Kaberi through her meandering narration to the foetus chooses what is called 'the talking cure' (Freud) for herself, Jahnavi Barua's text shows its self-consciousness about the 'writing cure' available to woman writers. It shows that writing itself is a liberating process, and though the journey can be painful, there is relief and freedom on the other end.

> "What is writing if not the act of giving birth, painful yet liberating, and it works like a therapeutic cathartic tool, where the very act of writing symbolizes transgression and anticipates change. While Kaberi's child will finally bring love to her desolate life, her book will bring her an independent identity as a writer and also the much needed financial independence."(Das 221)

Whereas "birth" is a primary, originatory event, in this novel, as the title itself would testify, it is the "rebirth" or the "second coming" which is of primal importance, because "being born is one thing, claiming ownership of one's birth is another." (Rimmon-Kennan 113). Towards the end Kaberi mothers a baby, a book, and a new self as well, thus claiming

ownership of all the above. The novel which appears to be Kaberi's long interior monologue(since she speaks to an unborn foetus there is hardly any scope for dialogue) allows space for her verbalization of her thoughts. In the novel narration plays a crucial role in the retrieval and reconstitution of self. In a sustained effort to piece together varied experiences spread across different times and spaces and arrive at a wholesome understanding, Kaberi gains a sense of mastery over her life in the end.

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