

Reevaluating Gender Roles in Jahnvi Barua's *Rebirth: A Novel*

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Abstract

Many critics posit that gender is a preconceived concept and the patriarchal hegemonic gender identification is reified through a series of patriarchal institutions passing it down from generation to generation institutionalising its beliefs and values. Judith Butler says that gender pre-exists the body and through a series of performances it produces the classification of biological sex. Simone de Beauvoir states that women are relegated to a secondary role through manifold agents and women become the other because of the nurture. Through glorification and naturalisation of cultural hegemony, they are insisted to receive the gender stereotypes as their unavoidable identity and accept their subordination willingly or unwillingly. Women writers negate such misrepresentation of women in their writings unearthing the hidden strategies of gender identification. Jahnvi Barua recounts the patriarchal traditions that marginalise women in a patriarchal society in her novel *Rebirth: A Novel*. Barua underscores reification of women's subjugation in the patriarchal society through the enactment of gender roles in this novel. The paper analyses the process of gender identification in a patriarchal society reevaluating its validity and veracity in Jahnvi Barua's *Rebirth: A Novel*.

Key Words: Patriarchy, Gender, Stereotypes, Hegemony, Evaluation, Liberation.

Introduction

World witnesses an unequivocal voice against the conceptualisation of gender on the pretext of having biological differences between the sexes. Feminist thinkers worldwide posit that gender is a social construct and sex is biological. The corporeal disparities should not be treated as the basis for gender classification. The concept of masculinity and femininity categorizes human race developing binary opposites of abled/disabled, absolute/other, sufficient/lack, active/passive, etc., thus miseducating the receivers of the narratives to naturalise the lopsidedness of the system. Women writers throughout the globe seek to relocate women's position in society unveiling the magnus operandi of gender identification. Jahnvi Barua, a Northeast writer in India, who is also known for her treatment of social issues of Assam in *Next Door: Stories* (2008) underscores women's issues in *Rebirth: A Novel* (2010) calling for women's liberation from gender stereotypes and patriarchal hegemony.

Literature Review

Nevedita Menon in *Seeing Like a Feminist* manifests that the categorical upbringing systems compartmentalise the gender roles of man and woman since childhood (2012). Judith Butler observes that through a series of performances the classification of biological sex is produced by the concept of gender (1988). Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* too stresses on manifold strata of patriarchal hierarchy through which gendering is enacted. Her statement "One is not born but rather becomes a woman" (1997, p. 293) aptly points out the reason for women's otherness. In *Women in Patriarchy* Jasbir Jain comments that patriarchal system reifies the subjugated and marginalised positioning of women through many agents (2017). Joan Wallach Scott defines gender in "Gender as a Useful Category of Historical Analysis" as "a way of denoting 'cultural constructions' – the entirely social creation of ideas about appropriate roles for women and men. It is a way of referring to the exclusively social origins of the subjective identities of men and women. Gender is, in this definition, a social category imposed on a sexed body" (2007, p. 63). He continues, "gender is a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes, and gender is a primary way of signifying relationships of power" (2007, p.71) confirming the role of social prejudices in enactment of gender stereotypes. Thus, gender is a preconception and needed to be redefined. This perception is analysed in Barua's *Rebirth: A Novel* which is a representation of feminine perspective narrating psychological evolution of Kaberi, the protagonist of the novel (Dar, n.d.).

documenting realities in her fictional world (Sharma, 2016) manoeuvres ways to dismantle the fixed compartmentalisation of gendering and gender stereotypes. Narrating her journey to motherhood, the novel delineates rebirth of Kaberi (Chaturvedi, 2011) subverting gender stereotypes through assertion of selfhood. Dealing with themes of marriage, oppression and transformation and self-redemption (Begum, 2022) and other Barua adroitly manifests women's marginalisation in cultural and traditional domains in a patriarchal society. She calls for denial of submission to such discrimination (Chowdhury, 2012) and urges to fight for their rights (Haque, 2021).

Objectives

It studies Barua's representation of women's gendering role compartmentalising the sexes in the fixities of patriarchal society. It aims at analysing cultural conditioning of women in Assamese society positioning them in the margins. It manifests the author's voice for liberation of women from the circumscription of patriarchal society asserting their selfhood through subversion of the cultural hegemony.

Methodology

Thorough study of the content of the text is done. Comparative approach is applied in the study. The discussion is based on Feminist theories. Different critical essays are also incorporated.

Result

The novel which is set in Assam and Bangalore unfolds its narrative through a monologue from Kaberi, the protagonist to her unborn baby. The soft tone of the narration enhances the serene scenic beauties and charismatic natural aura of Assam. The book which underlines Assam Agitation launched by students' bodies against the illegal immigrants draws the theme of women's liberation from gender stereotypes in parallel to the violent hit Assamese lives. Through the compassionate words of a mother to her baby with no tinge of treachery and insincerity the novelist lays bare the throes of emotions of Kaberi who reels under the tyranny of patriarchal systems. Kaberi marries Ron (Ranjit) through an arranged marriage. The couple has no affinities in their choices and worldview. Differences of urban Bangalore lifestyle and rural or rustic

Assamese way of living depicted in the novel can be seen as the metaphorical representation of the disparities between the duo too. From choosing the colour of clothes, craft designs of teak furniture, tiled or untiled floors of the rooms, to deciding the types of the flat or house both of them manifest their differences. In analysing the characters in the novel too Ron is portrayed as dominative, rude and adamant while Kaberi as submissive, shy and down-to-earth. Her true nature is revealed in her own words to her baby in her womb – “Even when Joya (Kaberi’s friend) would work herself into a lather over my submissiveness I never gave in – I did not see conflict as obligatory in every situation. Things could be worked around. Or could they? I don’t know these days. I am not sure of my convictions any more. All I know is that things are never what they seem to be, that nothing is permanent in the way I knew it” (p. 28-29).

Contrary to Kaberi’s opinion of safeguarding a relationship through compromises Ron authoritatively exercises his dominance over her even in household chores – “I was careful to lay out his clothes on the bed just as he liked to have them: clean underwear, vest and socks; then crisp shirt and matching trousers; finally the belt. He was so particular about his clothes that I hand-washed them in Genteel myself and hung them, inside out, to dry on the clothes stand in the veranda that ran along the front of our flat” (p. 2). Kaberi submits to Ron’s demands and wishes to merge herself to Ron’s world – “Your father and I had very separate spaces too, only I did not want mine. I wanted always to give it up and immerse myself in the other” (p. 60). Even if she realises her marginal positioning, she does not feel it necessary to raise a voice against her marginalisation. Her submissiveness is conveyed in the following words too – “Your father and I had no reason to develop a rift. I never gave him a reason. And yet. Maybe I should have been a different person; maybe I should have been more assertive, more argumentative, less willing to acquiesce, but that has never been my way” (p. 28).

One is surprised to find Kaberi’s eagerness for Ron’s return to her life when the latter openly asks her for divorce for the sake of his extramarital affairs. In fact, he affirms his stance for his mistress by living separately from Kaberi in his mistress’s apartment. But Kaberi clings on her hopes that he will return for her one day and her life will be flourished again. She says:

Four months now since your father moved out and although I have tried to be patient, tried to be brave and all those things that Joya always went on about. I want your father to make up his mind now and come back. There is worrisome thought at the edge of my mind; that somehow as time ticks by something will change, that we will both lose some

opportunity which will never come back again. I will try to hang in here, this is an unchangeable fact, but somehow, I don't know how, things could slip out of control (p. 73-74).

She even calls this separation as “a hiccup” or “the seven-year itch” in Preetha's words. In short, it can be said that she is ready to accept him ignoring his infidelity and unfaithfulness if he wishes to do so.

Even though she wants Ron in her life back, Kaberi does not reveal her pregnancy to Ron. She is aware of the fact that once Ron comes to know about it, he will return to their world. After all he waits for this blessed moment for long seven years. But Kaberi does not want to ruin the relationship by bonding in a master-slave relationship. She wants to bridge their gaps with love and understanding. So, she becomes realistic and does not allow herself to be swayed with emotions. Thus, she deprives Ron from his right to stand by her and their baby while taking first sonography of the foetus – “Your father should be standing here now; this is a moment I am stealing from him that I can never give back. He makes me do these things, he makes me, I tell you. I would love to have him here beside me but he has to come back – he should have come back” (p. 29). Even if she feels an intense guilt of divesting Ron of his privileges, she determines to be harsh.

With the advancement of her pregnancy there is a gradual change in Kaberi too regarding her efforts to redefine her selfhood. When Ron finds out her pregnancy, he decides to come back home but without ending up his affairs. Kaberi unequivocally denies his decision – “I mean exactly that. You are welcome to stay here, but not if you are still with her” (p. 85). But Ron is authoritative and affirms his dominance over her – “Who are you to tell me what to do? And what will you do, what can you do. If I don't leave her?” (p. 85). Kaberi gives him one month to think and take a concrete decision. Here it can be observed that Kaberi is portrayed as a round character showing her dynamism in her activities and process of self-assertion. Even if she wants Ron in her life back, she does not want to entertain the uncertainty and humiliation by stooping down to that much level of self-demeaning. Therefore, when Ron decides to end his extra marital affair and return home, Kaberi asks him to give her time to think whether to accept him or not. When she redhandedly catches Ron of his infidelity, she is disillusioned from her illusion about Ron's love for her. “I should have forced Ron to talk. Maybe, then, I would have had a chance to know him. Really know him instead of this apparition I had conjured up out of my own

imaginings. Yes, I think I know him a little now; but I am not prepared, at all, for what I see” (p. 175). Ron declares that he does not love her at all. He confesses his love for her only at night when it is dark. He never expresses his love for her at broad day light. He also confirms that his coming back is not for love but for responsibility of fatherhood by stating – “There are more important things than love, Kaberi” (p.174). His action is an example of what Beauvoir says: “Man knows that to satisfy his desires, to perpetuate his race, woman is indispensable; he must give her an integral place in society: to the degree in which she accepts the order established by the males, she is freed from her original taint” (p.112). Ron’s condescending attitude regarding the existence and objectification of Kaberi clearly reflects the otherness of women and their dependency on man.

Signalling to venture on her journey of selfhood Kaberi starts questioning herself after the disillusionment: “Everything had changed. All the fixed points on the map of my world have shifted now. Was it love that I had felt for your father all these years or did I love him merely because I had been expected to?” (p. 174) After coming out from her delusions Kaberi becomes assertive and affirmative and so cannot accept Ron to her life back. When she expresses her intentions to her well-wishers, she receives opposite responses. Her mother’s reply surprises her – “No, no, not with the child on its way, it needs a father, his name to carry” (p.183). Her mother is an epitome of typical Indian wife who toils in her sufferings unwaveringly. Kaberi encounters many days when her mother is beaten up by her father. But her mother does not reveal these atrocities to none and bears it silently because she thinks that family matters cannot be shared with others. Moreover, she confides to Kaberi that her husband never loves her. But she has no complaint for “What is love, Kaberi? He looked after me, in a way, and gave me respect in public” (p.163). Kaberi’s mother ignores her discrimination and neutralizes her subordination and dependency as an essence of her existence. Even if she is a victim of her husband’s tyranny, she never legs behind in showing her responsibilities of a wife and it is discernible through the opinion of Kaberi: “Ma had lived in the shadow of violence all her life, yet today she was offering prayers for the soul of the same individual who had kept her in that darkness” (p.165).

It is not only her mother but her friend Preetha, who is often praised for her acts of self-assertion, advises her to accept her subordination – “When you cannot change something, Kaberi, you have to learn to accept it” (p. 87). Her statement replicates what Manu documents regarding the traits of a wife: “a woman assumes through legitimate marriage the very qualities of her

husband, like a river that loses itself in the ocean, and she is admitted after death to the same celestial paradise” (qtd. in Beauvoir, 1997, p.112). Even if the patriarchal imposition in the name of family is consolidated through many instances, Kaberi is firm to discard Ron from her world. The author at the end of the novel hints that Kaberi chooses another man in her life by making her final call to Bidyut in her way to hospital which symbolically presents that with the birth of the baby she is reborn enjoying a complete meaning of a familial life.

Her relationship with Bidyut is another aspect of discussion regarding her conduct, but it cannot raise questions to her unwavering fidelity to her husband. Bidyut is her deceased friend Joya’s husband and her friend too. She shares her emotional attachment with him before her marriage also. Bidyut also shows his feelings for her before his marriage with Joya. When Joya passes away, the relationship becomes closer even to the extent that she shares her pregnancy cravings with Bidyut who later on fulfils her cravings, which is an indication of Bidyut’s performing the roles of father for the unborn baby. Kaberi’s well-wishers suggest her to maintain the privileges and pleasures of the child by submitting herself to Ron’s dictatorship so that the baby is blessed with fatherly care and love. Kaberi, however, does not want to continue her adherence to Ron’s supremacy rather it is hinted that she prefers Bidyut in sharing her emotions with through many instances. For example, the final call to Bidyut seemingly indicates that she decides to provide her baby that fatherly love through Bidyut by choosing him over Ron.

The author suggests another way of ending the novel where Kaberi redefines herself which is that her mother gives nod to her to come back abandoning her caged life and live independently resisting the nonchalant and flagrant attitudes of male bourgeoisie. What one can conclude here is that Barua mainly focuses on the individual spirit of Kaberi and highlights her emancipation from male chauvinism even if two possibilities of the ending are hinted. Kaberi’s relation to Bidyut cannot be seen as a tarnish to her character but the birth of a relation foregrounded on mutual understanding and respect which are the essence of an ideal relationship. “When Bidyut makes a physical approach to Kaberi, the moment is captured for its tinge of love, respect and emotional need. Leaving no scope for judgement, Barua has portrayed this relationship as very natural and even much needed” (Chaturvedi, 2011, n.p.). In fact, her choice of Bidyut over Ron despite the latter’s declaration of his coming back in her life can be seen as a change in power structure. Kaberi here acts as a subject and decides to discontinue her role of being an object in the relationship and thus deconstructs the hierarchy. So, Barua through

evolution of Kaberi advocates the freedom of women from their containment in patriarchal systems and cherishes the familial values based on equality. Considering the other possibility, it can be observed that if Kaberi brings up her baby alone, she embodies the independent mother shattering all the shackles of patriarchy. So, it can be concluded that despite this dualism the novelist makes it clear that the avenue for independence of Kaberi is open thus subverting the power dynamics and gender roles.

Discussion

Jahnavi Barua in *Rebirth: A Novel* portrays gender stereotypes which segregate man and women in the tight compartments. She documents the existential struggle of Kaberi in the biased patriarchal society. Her marriage to Ron is an entrapment where she is commoditised as an object having no meaning of selfhood. Her objectification is evident from Ron's imposition on her to give him divorce before he knows about her pregnancy. Then, his declination to divorce her when he comes to know about her pregnancy despite Kaberi's demand for divorce is another evidence for her marginalisation. Here, it will be worthy to quote Beauvoir:

Through marriage woman is now no longer lent from one clan to another: she is torn up by the roots from the group into which she was born, and annexed by her husband's group; he buys her as one buys a farm animal or a slave; he imposes his domestic divinities upon her; and the children born to her belong to the husband's family. If she were an inheritor, she would to an excessive degree transmit the wealth of her father's family to that of her husband; so she is carefully excluded from the succession. But inversely, because she owns nothing, woman does not enjoy the dignity of being a person; she herself forms a part of the patrimony of a man: first of her father, then of her husband. (1997, p.113-114).

Thus, Kaberi follows his dictates in order to save her marriage as through marriage she is forced to endorse this belief living in an oblivious state:

It is this ambivalence of the Other, of Woman, that will be reflected in the rest of her history; she will be subjected to man's will up to our own times. But this will is ambiguous: by complete possession and control woman would be abased to the rank of a thing; but man aspires to clothe in his own dignity whatever he conquers and possesses; the Other retains, it seems to him, a little of her primitive magic. How to make of the wife

at once a servant and a companion is one of the problems he will seek to solve; his attitude will evolve through the centuries, and that will entail an evolution also in the destiny of woman. (Beauvoir, 1997, p.112-113)

Kaberi submits herself to the prescribed norms “Since the oppression of woman has its cause in the will to perpetuate the family and to keep the patrimony intact, woman escapes complete dependency to the degree in which she escapes from the family; if a society that forbids private property also rejects the family, the lot of woman in it is bound to be considerably ameliorated” (Beauvoir, 1997, p.120). So, she has to abide by the rules in order to survive and her submissiveness is necessitated in order to consolidate male hegemony. She, for being a woman is compelled to submit to her husband. Butler says that “To be a female, ... a facticity which has no meaning, but to be a woman is to have become a woman, to compel the body to conform to an historical idea of ‘woman,’ to induce the body to become a cultural sign, to materialize oneself in obedience to an historically delimited possibility, and to do this as a sustained and repeated corporeal project” (1988, p. 522). Kaberi as a part of that project is expected to internalise her subordinate positioning. But as she progresses towards her journey of self-identification, she deconstructs this dominance through resistance and subversion. Kaberi reclaims her own identity and with the birth of the baby she is reborn (J, 2018). The novel records “the complex interior landscape of the protagonist’s mind towards self-realization and her eventual liberation from the patriarchy” (Haque, 2021, p. 12) and explores the possibilities for women to deconstruct biased gender roles.

Conclusion

Barua divulges into cultural intricacies and complications of patriarchal society relegating women to marginalised state in this novel. She elucidates the gender roles that segregate the sexes in the tight compartments of the societal norms. She throws light to the biased traditions that result in the lopsidedness of social strata. She contends for the dismissal of the condescending male attitude and authoritarian regime by unearthing the possible domains for exploring individualism by women. Through the manifestation of the journey of Kaberi to motherhood with a unique narrative pattern Barua disseminates rebirth of her protagonist celebrating individualism and growing up her self-confidence. By dealing with the verisimilitude of women’s life through her fictional world she manifests the agonising state of women and calls women to come out from this dominance in the novel.

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Declaration of interest statement

There is no competition of interest in the ideas shared through this research paper.

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