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Self-realization in Jahnvi Baruah's "*Rebirth*"

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Abstract: Though mainstream feminism has been dwelt in length in Indian Writing in English but North East feminism has remained marginal to a large extent. North East feminism heavily depends upon the western feminism and Indian feminism frameworks. These frameworks are diversely distinct from the North East feminism depending upon different factors. Some scholars and critics opine that North East women comparatively have better status than the mainstream women in rest part of the India. But different surveys point out that the ground reality is not different from the mainstream feminism except in the part of Meghalaya. It is unanimously assumed that universal problems of women issues are the same in the North East feminism. Women writers from North East especially from Assam have also focused extensively on the issues concerning the status of women in the society and accordingly have given equal attention to such query. Jahnvi Baruah with her debut novel *Rebirth* (2010) has created a new sensation and has impressed the reader and critics with her treatment of issues pertaining to the status of women in the country. *Rebirth* is a tale of Kaberi and her psychological developmental journey. This

story opens the complex interior landscape of the protagonist's mind towards self-realization and her eventual liberation from the patriarchy.

Key Words: feminism, marginal, self-realization, patriarchy

If we study the different anthropological studies and archaeological findings carried out in different times, we find that status of women were much more high in ancient India and women enjoyed equality with men and even they engaged themselves in hunting and farming. The creation of life, rebirth of nature after the death of winter, hope of resurrection and a sense of humans as integrally connected with nature, were associated with women. The earth goddess cult with its belief in the earth as woman strong and sustaining began in agricultural societies where the Earth Mother or the Mother- Goddess cult was more powerful. Maleness was not a matter of glorification over femaleness. However,

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women gradually lost this equal status by the dominating physical strength of men with their anticipation to ensure that their property was transferred to their deserving heirs.

In ancient Indian literature, a woman is projected in relationship to man. The husband-wife relationship bears more importance than the daughter, father, sister, and brother and mother relationship. Conventionally a good woman is always identified with a good wife and a good wife must show her fidelity and trust to her husband like mythical characters Sita and Savitri. In religious scriptures and myths, a woman has been shown either as a goddess or a sub-human creature, never a full perfect human being. On the one hand, woman has been depicted as the object of respect and worship, on the other hand she is considered as man's personal property.

Apart from the religious cultural factors, the historical and political events also appear to have their impact on the status of women in ancient India. Women lost the honour and respect, commanded in the early Vedic society. Sons were preferred more than the daughters as they participated in wars because civilizations were constantly exposed to such dangers. Later because of the impact of Islamic culture, the purdah system came into being which further lowered the status of women in the society. Some evil practices such as

Sati system, child marriage, and ban on widow marriage during different ages further lowered the status of women in Indian society. There is a great difference between the idealized concept of women in Indian scriptures and myths and the ground reality of women in life. Outwardly women enjoy high status but inwardly women are suppressed, subdued and tortured in different ways in the society. Female infanticide, rape, wife battering, family violence and dowry related death are some prevalent forms of suppression on women. Total submission on the part of a woman is regarded as the highest virtue. Traditionally her destiny is marriage and as a married woman she must worship her husband like a god because serving him only a woman can reach heaven. Man always thinks that he is in the right while a woman is in the wrong; all the negative qualities are associated to her.

The position of women is changing slowly and they are striving to take part in world affairs but it is still a world that belongs to man. The subjugation of women still continues. She has been treated as a beast of luxury. Man either sees her as a source of transcendence or projection of his own guilt, on her. Though a great deal of awareness is created among the general masses by various ways such as print and electronic media, N.G.O. and seminars on women empowerment but the ground reality is not satisfactory.

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Feminist writer Nayantara Sahgal believes that women should be afforded the same opportunity as one afforded to the so-called superior sex. The personal sufferings and treasures besides intolerable humiliation find a place in many of her novels. Her novels *Storm in Chandigarh* and *A Situation in New Delhi* are feminist novels where she tries to find real woman. Her heroines do not succumb like the heroines of Anita Desai but rather they rebel. In one of her articles she says that women continue to be burnt for sati, dowry and their lives are sniffed out at the foetus stage. In rural India it is the destiny of girl child to eat less, clothe less or die prematurely. She is of the opinion that marriage is like a lifelong damage if the other partner is not sensitive enough. Rashmi in *This Time of Morning* after she breaks her marriage gets comfort from a stranger Neil Berensen. Woman is often marginalized, repressed or silenced in literary works. Feminist writer like Shoba De, Kamala Das, Ismat Chughtai, Prabha Khetan have voiced their anguish over the marginalization of women in their works with a lot of intensity and passion.

But with the rise of feminism, the struggle for women's rights has got its momentum. An increasing awareness of injustice done to them slowly made women raise their voice against inequality and oppression and in the twentieth century this female consciousness against male

domination led to the birth of Women's Liberation Movement which is a serious reform movement aiming at an upliftment of women in society.

The term feminism is one of the most contested term in the literature. Though mainstream feminism has been dwelt in length in Indian Writing in English but North East feminism has remained marginal to a large extent. North East feminism heavily depends upon the western feminism and Indian feminism frameworks. These frameworks are diversely distinct from the North East feminism depending upon different factors. Some scholars and critics opine that North East women comparatively have better status than the mainstream women in rest part of the India. But different surveys point out that the ground reality is not different from the mainstream feminism except in the part of Meghalaya. It is unanimously assumed that universal problems of women issues are the same in the North East feminism.

North East India is geographically surrounded by foreign territories. This part of the country seems to be isolated and more importantly remains misunderstood even till today. This region is socially and culturally rich and diversified. "This heterogeneity presents a colourful cultural kaleidoscope that the nation should be proud of" (Swami 221).

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Women writers from North East especially from Assam have also focused extensively on the issues concerning the status of women in the society and accordingly have given equal attention to such query. May it be the fiery and courageous writings of Indira Goswami or Arupa Patangia Kalita or recent writers writing in English like Mitra Phukan. They are wonderfully divergent in their portrayal of memorable women protagonists such as Saudamini (*The Blue Nacked God*, 2013), Giribala (*The Moth Eaten Howdah of a Tusker*, 2004), Rukmini (*The Collector's Wife*, 2005) and Felanee (*Felanee*, 2011). In this galaxy of female writers writing about women, Jahnavi Baruah's arrival in this domain is a recent entry. Jahnavi Baruah with her debut novel *Rebirth* (2010) has created a new sensation and has impressed the readers and critics with her treatment of issues pertaining to the status of women in the country.

Rebirth is a tale of Kaberi and her psychological developmental journey. This story opens the complex interior landscape of the protagonist's mind towards self-realization and her eventual liberation from the patriarchy. The readers can resonate with the story and can feel the lingering effect even after the readers close the book. In an interview in *The Hindu*, Sharanya Manivannan observes:

....there are books that wander in without bells on,

as quiet as the comfort that fills the heart while watching the day's first or last light from one's own window alone but for the succour of a cup of tea. Perhaps that is the analogy that comes closest to expressing the peace that Jahnavi Baruah's *Rebirth* brings. (Manivannan 2011)

The most striking feature of *Rebirth* is that it looks a real story without any melodramatic passages and it creates a world truly faced by women. The story starts at the point of time when the protagonist expects her child to be born. Jahnavi Baruah explains in clear terms Kaberi's rebellion surprisingly in an interview with 'The Hindu':

Traditionally, Assamese society has placed great emphasis on-among other things- moderation, restraint and resilience in all spheres of life. In keeping with this, expressing any emotion too loudly is not something that is encouraged. While things are changing rapidly, politics and globalisation have played their part in impacting traditional behaviour; I do believe that

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coming from that region has partly resulted in my writing being the way it is. (Baruah 2011)

The impression that the author holds is not only true for the Assamese society but the amount of expectations of the assigned rules of women have always portrayed them as submissive and subdued. Women are to pay heavy price for being women. It seems that many stories, grievances and suffering of women go unheard as a part of deal. The novel exposes the artificial veil of the hypocritical society that prescribes separate sets of rules for male and female. If we see the narrative of the novel; it is not only a cry for a wronged or displaced woman but it addresses those silences where the voice of the women should have been given due attention. As a matter of fact, Kaberi's notion of love, respect and mutual understanding poses a serious question when her husband Ron begins to show indifference after having come to know about her pregnancy. In initial part, the trajectory of the novel shows that Kaberi is ready to accept her infidel and tormented husband for the sake of reconciliation. In the end, she questions herself whether she is living a worthy life or it is a complete lie. It is heart touching when she asks Ron if he ever loves her:

There are more important things than love, Kaberi. To which she replies, No, Ron.....There are few things more important than love (174).

The question of self-realisation and self reflection will remain incomplete if we do not mention the character of Joya who is Kaberi's best friend. She plays an important part in Kaberi's life whenever Kaberi faces a dilemma in her life. Sometimes Kaberi thinks what Joya would have done had she put Joya in her place. Priyanka Kakoti in her thought provoking article "The Avatar in Jahnavi Baruah's *Rebirth*" has elaborately explained the functioning of Joya:

In *Rebirth*, Joya is Kaberi's (sic) avatar. Just like the computerized graphical avatar, Joya is not Kaberi's reflection but she is everything which Kaberi is not. She represents Kaberi's alter ego, someone from whom she is both alienated and identical at the same time. (Kakoti 484)

Right from the beginning, the novel tries to give emphasis on individual's space and identity both in terms of physical and psychological context. Identity is concerned with the self-image of an individual. Who

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are women? What positions do they have in the society? Selfhood of women is not exclusively formed as they are not to suffer identity. In spite of this, they lose their identity. According to Heilbrun, wifehood renders women loss of selfhood. Identity and the sense of belonging to home goes side by side. In the context of India, women's issue of home and identity is conditioned to change; what was once home turns strange after marriage and likewise strange turns into home. It is perceived that there is always a lingering sense of alienation. In some degree search for some sort of anchor to life is very pertinent in forming the ideas of the self.

The novel is predominantly occupied with Kaberi's struggle with these ideas. Kaberi's long struggle to save her marital life is a kind of battle of choosing between identity independent of her marital status; should she go to the position of being an obedient and submissive wife or finally emerge as an assertive and emancipated woman.

The protagonist, Kaberi gives the novel a new lease of life. In patriarchal society, a woman's self consciousness is often trampled by male— may it be a father, brother or a husband. The novel *Rebirth* subverts the age old traditions through which a woman's self realization can be reconstructed from different and independent point of view. It can be

concluded that the story of *Rebirth* is the tale of transgression and self-realization where a woman is more than what she is perceived.

The novelist not only reveals the trauma of a depressed and wronged woman but also makes it known to all that women are now determined to fight for their rights. The woman novelist in her own individual feminist voice clearly proclaims and asserts that they are women of substance, not merely sex objects or sacrificing persons in the family. Above all, she has established and declared in her voice that women too are human beings. So this writer contributes significantly in restructuring fiction from male orientation towards female orientation by highlighting travails of female characters and by taking the readers inside the consciousness of their female characters.

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