



Research Paper

Understanding Women's Mental Wellness Through Gendered Space: A Reading of Jahnabi Barua's Rebirth

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Abstract: Women's lives are characterized by certain modes and conducts within the gendered space that are disproportionately set by the society. The life of a woman undergoes multiple disadvantages because of the conditioned gendered space which involves pre-defined roles as wives, mothers and others. Amidst these disproportionately, socially conditioned space, one dimension of women's wellness is the concern of the mental health of women. This paper attempts to understand the nuanced representation of women's mental wellness in Jahnabi Barua's *Rebirth*, which captures the story of Kaberi and her confrontations to the difficult situations in her life.

Keywords: gender inequalities, gendered space, mental wellness, pregnancy, women etc.

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Women in the course of their lives undergoes diverse experiences, shaped by culture, society, family, class, context and situations. While each woman has their own struggles to recount, yet there are some common threads that confluences with the experiences of woman globally, particularly in context of their existence within the patriarchal societies. The expectations, roles, inequalities, resilience and so on; thrust by the notion of gender on women essentially shapes their lives, often limiting the opportunities, freedom and well-being. As Kumari states, the space women occupy in any part of the world is often determined by the standards set by the patriarchal society. Women need to act and live their entire lives within certain norms that are pre-determined for them by men, for instance, from being someone's daughter to becoming someone's wife and then someone's mother. Any disruption against these norms leads to stringent criticism from the androcentric patriarchal system. (Kumari 257) Women are confined within the gendered space conditioned by the society. The society identifies certain modes of conducts and actions within the social relation as the gendered space. Women are confined within this gendered space which involves predefined roles as mothers, wives, widows and in general, as 'women'. This conditioning significantly affects not only the physical health but also the mental well-being of women. Despite being overlooked, psychological vulnerability and emotional resilience are everyday realities, deeply embedded into the lives of women. Through this paper, an attempt is made to understand the nuanced representation of the mental wellness of women as portrayed by Jahnabi Barua in her much-acclaimed book, *Rebirth*. Jahnabi Barua is a contemporary North east Indian writer who has established herself as a significant feminist enthusiast with her sensitive and introspective narratives. Her works largely deals with complex thematic concerns like feminist consciousness, silences and oppression of women, women's emotional lives and the internal conflict, gendered violence, the gender biases and discrimination that exists in patriarchal societies in India. Most of her works portray unique female characters who undertakes a journey to selfhood and eventually realizes their potential beyond the gendered spaces; at the same time, learns to assert their human rights of receiving equal treatments in the society. Barua through the female characters in her *Rebirth*, highlights the limitations set upon women due to the disproportionately set gendered spaces in the society.

A reading of Barua's *Rebirth* reveals how women's health issues are often related to larger social, cultural and political context. The novel presents the story of Kaberi's who is seven months pregnant and has to take immense care of her health due to her nutritional deficits. She was married to Ranjit and was childless for several years of their marriage. Her marriage with Ranjit is at the brink of separation as Ranjit openly engages in extra marital affairs. Barua acutely portrays the tendency of men to betray their wives in the pretext of being childless and the mental trauma such women has to withstand within failed marriages. Through the story of Kaberi, Barua explores the themes of gender disparities, emotional trauma, identity, isolation and healing. The paper aims to understand how the gendered space exerts pressure on women and alongside, understand the space occupied by women in Indian society both in their house as well as in the society. Through the lens of gender,

the study investigates the internal psychological world of Kaberi who undergoes emotional trauma because of the turn of events in her life. The methodologies used are analysing the discourse with a qualitative enquiry of Kaberi's life in the light of her struggles as a woman, which is followed by an attempt to explore the deeper insights of the real-world problems of women like her. Kaberi's maternal anxiety and emotional resilience amidst the patriarchal silence on gender inequalities are radically portrayed in the novel.

Traditionally, in the mainstream Indian literature, the emotional and psychological experiences of women are often disregarded and as such, the mental wellness of women has always been a neglected issue. Barua in *Rebirth* presents an introspective deliberation on the interior life of Kaberi throughout the novel. Kaberi's mental wellness is being interrupted because of her failing marriage which she tries to revive through her journey to motherhood. What makes the novel unique is the narrative strategy used by Barua as Kaberi narrates the account of her own life, in the form of an interior monologue, addressing her unborn child. Initially, Kaberi's entire life revolved around her husband but as he abandons Kaberi due to his own infidelity, she has had a scope to explore her own self. However, Kaberi's husband Ranjit returns to her only when he learns about her pregnancy. The situation of Kaberi presents an intense picture of the reality of the expectations on women as reproducers and how women are made to feel if she is unable to give birth to a child. According to Saikia, the novel explores the complex emotions of the protagonist, Kaberi who goes through multiple ruptures in her life while living with the sheer pressure of being infertile. The patriarchal standards of the society had made her believe that her inability to have a child has stopped her from becoming a woman and hence an undesirable wife. She suffers from guilt and inadequacy because of the pressure from society to have a child. She begins to feel like a failure and isolates herself from the rest of the world. (Saikia 4) This gendered expectations alters the mental health of women, navigating her to trauma and emotional complexities about her own self. As Kaberi writes to her unborn child, "You certainly took your time to show up. Year after year, we waited, your father and I, nerves jangling every time my period was late; but every time, like a leaky tap, I bled and wept but never gave up. I never gave up on you, I want you to know that. In the last year I sensed that your father had given up and I tried to tell him not to but he was already drifting away from me and nothing I said seemed to make a difference anymore. It had all been too much for him, I think. The hospital trips, the endless tests, the injections, all those nights of tense couplings; in the end he just gave up. I went on planning though and even ventured out to a furniture factory on Sarjapur Road, as recently as in June, to look for a cot for you." (Barua 4)

The normative silence around women's mental wellness in patriarchal societies has accentuated disproportionate living conditions of women as presented through Kaberi. Kaberi was never given space to evolve as a complete self with a distinct identity of herself. They are always expected to comply to the wishes of her husband and children. Women's choice are always neglected behind the choices of their husband as Kaberi recounts about her preferences of the décor in the house. While she prefers minimal embellishment, her husband likes fancy stuffs. She tells her unborn child that there is no room for her choices in their house and she doesn't revolt because the patriarchal standards have always taught her that compromising is what a woman is supposed to do. Throughout the years of their marriage, Ranjit never recognized her uniqueness and personality. For him, she was just a wife, equivalent to the furniture of the house. Her efforts are neither validated nor acknowledged by Ron. As such, the marriage results into a bad reality full of emptiness, ineptness, loneliness and most importantly, lack of communication. As Simone de Beauvoir states that a bad marriage might reduce a man to but it always destroys a woman. (Beauvoir 46).

Jahnvi Barua's *Rebirth* presents a psychological journey of a woman who undergoes several crises such as her broken marriage, her unfaithful husband, her distress and loneliness, the death of her father, loss of her childhood friend, Joya, domestic violence among her parents, the silences of her mother and so on. The novel begins with Kaberi, the protagonist who is seven months pregnant. "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." (J 411-412) The novel is a narrative account by the protagonist herself to her unborn child about the various events in her life. The novel fluctuates in time and space with various intertwining incidents in Kaberi's life. Barua through the narrative frame brings out the connection between a woman and her unborn child through the character sketch of Kaberi. Kaberi being the central character of the novel who narrates the account of her own life that suppressed her individuality until the point where she discovers her path to selfhood. Kaberi is an Assamese girl born and brought up amidst the hills and river that she repeatedly mentions in her narration. She longingly looks back to her childhood and reminisces her carefree self. But after her marriage to Ranjit, (abbreviated as Ron), her life has changed. Much to her discontent, she moved to the metropolitan city of Bengaluru after her marriage with Ranjit, who too hails from Assam. Kaberi's quest

for her own self began with her experiences of motherhood. She is a well-educated young woman who has lost herself after getting married into a rich family. She therefore represents women who have been victims of marriage as well as male supremacy that affects her mental health. Through the journey of Kaberi's discovery of identity, Baruah gives a realistic portrayal of feminine behaviour and outlook in middle Indian households. "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." (J 412) Baruah presents two generations of women in the novel. One generation is the submissive and patient, abiding by the gender biases and living according to the gendered spaces. While the other generation represents the contemporary, focused, pursuing a career and challenging. The second category of the female characters thrives to find their unique positions in the society despite the gender inequalities that exist in the society. However, amidst their struggles to challenge the gendered spaces, women sustain acute mental trauma and sufferings. Baruah presents the solitary journey of a wife who is pregnant but chooses not to reveal about her pregnancy to her husband. Through Kaberi's journey of discovering her individuality, the physical and psychological hardship of a woman inside a failing marriage is presented. The character sketch of Kaberi and her life allows the readers to delve into the deeper intricacies of the struggles faced by women amidst the gender biases. Kumari writes that the novel *Rebirth* deals with the space occupied by women and its implications for their identity. Through the representation of the inner life of the female subject, Barua tries to offer an innately women-centric perspective. (Kumari 258) The novel largely focuses on the theme of marriage and the treatment of women within the confinement of marriages, especially the treatment of the wives by their husbands behind closed doors. This is evident when Kaberi asks her mother about domestic abuse after the death of her father, but Kaberi's mother declines and defends her husband. Her mother defends her father by saying that Kaberi's father always wanted to marry someone else but couldn't because the girl was of another religion and the family would never give the consent. Instead, the family coerced him to marry her mother instead. Kaberi radically asks her mother if her father ever loved her and her mother gave a diplomatic answer. Kaberi wanted to know if her father used to hit her mother and asked about the noises behind the closed doors. Kaberi's mother retorted with anger that he never hit her although he used to break the things around him. Kaberi's mother defends her husband despite of the trauma she had undergone within her marriage. Through the depiction of the unfair treatment of the wives by their husbands, Barua has also highlighted a picture of how women's dreams are shattered on the wake of extra-marital affairs of their husbands. The various mental and physical oppression faced by women in the Indian society. Kaberi's alienation and her struggle underscores how women have been subjugated and overshadowed within the confinement of marriage. There are female characters in the novel who are bonded by marital bonds for their entire lives. Women are bound to marriages beyond their will and are treated as secondary members of the family which has enhanced their mental trauma. However, this mental trauma of women is neither acknowledged nor discussed by men and women alike. A woman is expected to behave like a subordinate self to the husband which creates unequal boundaries for men and women. A woman's life remains confined to the whims of their husband and their own mental and physical health remains neglected throughout their lives. In this novel, Barua presents women characters whose mental as well as physical health deteriorates in the wake of psychological as well as physical violence inflicted upon them. According to the standards set by the gendered spaces in the society, women are expected to bind their lives in household chores and in giving birth to children. Kaberi narrates how her husband was his demonic self in the morning while she is expected to meet his demands and cater to his needs. "In the early mornings he was a demon, your father was, impatient and full of vitriol when anything went wrong. I was careful to lay out his clothes on the bed just as he liked to have them: clean underwear, vest and socks; then a 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." (Barua 2) Amidst this societal pressure, women often lose themselves and undermine their own existence. They allow the society to treat them unequally and patiently tolerate the biases and indiscriminations directed towards her. Women are preached to suppress their expectations from men and the society in the larger context, but at the same time are taught to live by the expectations that the society imposes upon them. "Expectations. This is an unfashionable word in the world I live in here. It is a point of pride, a badge, women especially, like to flaunt, this lack of expectations. If you expect the slightest thing from anyone you are made to feel as if you are a parasite, a person so demanding it is impossible to have a relationship with you. So I learnt to throw most of my expectations out of the window." (Barua 18) These gender biases generate mental health challenges that are specific to women only. Kaberi is a woman who is detached and trapped within the marriage which resulted in her isolation. Issues of depression and mental health are reflected by Barua in this novel. Kaberi's husband returned to her only after he learned about her pregnancy. However, the return of her husband was not a solace to Kaberi as she felt like an outsider in her own home. She felt suffocated and her husband was completely aloof of her emotions.

The fight against the patriarchal bias begins right from the early age and the practise of femininity within the ambit of gendered spaces are experiences that are intrinsic to being a woman. These female experiences cause psychological anguishes in women which is a major concern of mental wellness. Preetha was full of advice, yet she was never her fuller self. Her six-year-old son, Tarun was born with Down's syndrome and she blames herself for her son's condition. As such, it is important to recognize the female sensibility within the concern of feminine mind. The desires and frustrations of women which are often neglected also impacts the mental health of the same. They survive by undermining themselves and neglecting the harsh realities surrounding them. While portraying the challenges faced by women in the face of gender discrimination, Barua through the female characters have provided different feminine responses in the novel. The response to the gender biases and the response to the challenging situation vary according to time and space. The notion of supremacy of men in the society and the image of woman as a home keeper are presented by two different generations of women. Some of the female characters like Kaberi, Preetha, Sonia, Joya etc. bears the image of new women who experiences the social biases but at the same time chooses to liberate themselves from such confinement. These new women do not allow themselves to be dictated by the patriarchal norms and chooses to live their lives on equal terms with men. These new women decide to react and revolt unlike their mothers who believed in passive endurance. After Ranjit leaves Kaberi for another woman, Kaberi had the courage to live her life without him. She decided to discontinue the traumatic experiences inflicted by an unhappy marriage and struggles hard to come out of the previous toxic life with her husband. She became conscious about her subjugated life and she then decides the route to find the meaning of her life by means of writing. She decides to revive her writing prowess and as the narrative advances, her journey to selfhood also progresses. There is a shift from submissive inclination to an assertive one in these characters. However, to the contrary of these female characters stands Kaberi's mother who has perpetuated her suffering through her silences until the death of her husband. She belongs to that generation of women who accepts male dominance and follow the standards set by the patriarchal society. She had accepted the gendered space allotted to women. For instance, a woman is expected to serve, nurture, sacrifice, submit and peacefully tolerate all the biases and violence against her. Throughout her life, Kaberi's mother has prioritized the well-being of her family more than her own self. She rarely found recognition and validation for all the efforts and sacrifice and lives an oppressive life. Despite being aware of the oppression within her marriage, Kaberi's mother had chosen to bear them silently and never opposed or attempted to break herself free from those traumatic circumstances.

Kaberi's mental health is also affected by the relationship of her parents. It is interesting to see how Kaberi tries to create a bond with her child even before her child is born while she herself lacks a strong emotional bond with her parents. Here, the strong emotional bond between a mother and a daughter is negated in the story of Kaberi. Through Kaberi, Barua has presented the internal struggle of a woman whose identity conflict arises within her own self after she learns to cope with her parents' detachment from each other, her husband's infidelity and her pregnancy. Throughout the novel, Barua portrayed female characters who struggles to adapt to new situations by combining traditional and contemporary values. Barua's depiction of the female characters within the current social framework demonstrates how the gendered spaces confine woman into a marginalized position and strips them off their individual self. Another setback to Kaberi's mental health is the loss of her childhood friend Joya with whom she grew up. Kaberi still carried the pain of losing her best friend and recounts the impact of Joya's carefree self on herself. "She had an alter ego in Joya who was her closest friend from childhood. Her death in a bomblast had left an indelible scar on the psyche of Kaberi" (J 412) At the end of the novel, Kaberi breaks all restraints and transcends the social boundaries. Through Kaberi, Barua has aspired to bring forth the ideology for women to live for their own selves rather than the society and to create an identity of herself. Further, the character of Kaberi represents all women who can achieve goals in their lives, can lead an independent life without needing a man for their survival and also paves the path for single motherhood. She transcends the psychological barriers imposed by the gendered space and recognizes the wellbeing of her mental health by choosing a life that is free from negativity. Interestingly, her bond with her unborn child alleviates her loneliness as she finds a new reason to eat and survive. Her new book also symbolically stands as a metaphor for her unborn child as she engages herself with both these engagements. She negates the patriarchal boundaries and marches toward a dignified existence. 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. Thus, the responsibility of physical and mental wellness of women are inevitably dependent on their own self by setting themselves free from the toxicity of the gender biased society. Women must encourage themselves to concentrate on their own emotional and mental wellness rather than catering for the reactions of others. Women must learn to acknowledge their emotional and mental wellbeing by prioritizing peace over societal validation as Kaberi does who emerges out of her failing marriage and heads towards the journey of self-fulfilment.

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