From Alienation to Empowerment: A study of Kaberi's Internal Journey in Jahnavi Baruah's *Rebirth*

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North-East women's writings have considerably focused on the different challenges for the women in the forms of patriarchal oppression and the ever present tussle between several militant groups and the Indian government. Nevertheless, these writings highlight the strength and public presence of women of the region functioning under tremendous pressure and yet gaining grounds time and again. North-East women writers like Temsula Ao, Mamang Dai, Easterine Iralu, Uddipana Goswami and others have time and again portrayed strong and determined women who make a mark for themselves in the family, community and the larger society. Sriram Ananthanarayan in his essay "Strength and Public Presence of Women in North East India" similarly gives a picture of "….the wonderfully open presence of women in almost every facet of life" and the "considerable lesser levels of patriarchy and male oppression." This dominant picture of strong women of the North-East finds its way in Jahnavi Baruah's first novel *Rebirth* in the portrayal of Kaberi, the protagonist, who fights an internal battle of coming out of her passive existence by not being succumbed to male domination. Baruah, a Bangalore-based author, uses the city that she lives in as her primary locale, but a major part of the story is set in Assam, where Kaberi is born and brought up and later on discovers much of her true self.

Kaberi, the narrator and the chief protagonist of Baruah's novel, interests the readers as a woman who has, all throughout her life, suppressed her individuality and had let others make decisions for her. She has been a patient and obedient daughter and a wife. Kaberi's passivity comes across as a sharp contrast to the women usually portrayed in the writings of North-East women. Right from her childhood, she has barely recognized her wishes, and the same trend follows after her marriage. Her passive and inward-looking character is laid bare in the opening paragraph of the book: Before her husband left her for another woman, she "had been partial to the large soft sofa in front of the television, from where I had a good view of the screen, but from where I also looked inwards, into the heart of the house. I did not see much of the sky or the buildings clustered around our own, but all that, anyway, did not cross my mind very often, so focused was I on your father and myself and the home we had fashioned together." (*Rebirth* 1) Writers like Temsula Ao and Mamang Dai, on the other hand, have given very different pictures of North-East women who take the course of life in their own hands. Baruah's heroine is set apart from these women, probably intentionally by the author, so as to be shown ripe for the much-needed 'rebirth', breaking the shackles of all her past inhibitions.

Baruah portrays the discordant marital life of Kaberi and Ranjit (Ron), their differences in their social status and aspirations and the separation just as the long-cherished child is conceived. The couple had been living a hopeless married life, waiting and hoping for a child. Kaberi adjusts herself to the corporate culture that her husband is a part of, hopelessly waiting for her indifferent husband to care for her. Ron beats her and also believes that he has all the rights to take decisions regarding her as well as their future. As Ron leaves Kaberi for another woman, she discovers that she has conceived at last, but decides not to disclose the news to any one, not even to her husband. For Kaberi, Ron's return should be based on his real love towards her, and not the child and she clearly states her mind to her unborn child: "I wanted

him back, more urgently than I admitted even to myself, yet at the same time, I wanted him to come back to me, *for me*….I want to be assured of his old love for me before he comes back, that same love I have grown accustomed to these seven years." (*Rebirth* 8) Ron, however, quite contrary to Kaberi's expectations, makes a selfish return on knowing about her pregnancy, but openly flaunts his extra-marital affair. Baruah lays bare the psyche of selfish men in the society, such as Ron, who on the pretext of the wife's infertility leaves her, but comes back without any sense of repentance. Ron's return to Kaberi is equally without any remorse; in fact, he does not hesitate to blame her for not letting him know about her pregnancy earlier. His lack of regard for her is highlighted in his matter-of-fact discussions about their course of future life, at the same time, bluntly asking her to accept his relationship with the other woman. Even after the return, we are astonished at his erratic behaviour with his wife – showing love and care one day and physically abusing her some other time. He is equally demanding and feels that it is his inherent right to boss over her and make her do things his way. Kaberi is left with little choice and usually acquiesces with slight protests. Ron's indifference towards his wife has its roots probably in the arranged marriage between two completely different individuals, and as he puts it later on, Kaberi was more of his mother's choice than his. His complete disregard for Kaberi even during her pregnancy leads to deterioration of her health and complexities that even her doctor is not able to fathom. The fluctuation in Ron's attitude towards her for a short period of time during which he cooks her favourite dishes and pampers her, boosts Kaberi's mental and physical health and she is able to "sleep well at night", "eat better" (*Rebirth* 113) and come back to normal life. But much to Kaberi's shock, she finds Ron still cheating on her and discovers him with the other woman during the New Year eve party. Kaberi's transformation, at a later point of time, from being submissive to a confident woman, owes a lot to her marital relationship and the hardships that she had gone through.

Baruah's novel revolves around marriage and the betrayal and insensitivity imposed on women by the men around them, specifically their husbands. Even though the focus of the book is entirely on Kaberi and Ron, the author introduces significant sub-plots – successful as well as unsuccessful marriages – which contribute to the transformation that Kaberi undergoes. Kaberi, on her visit to Assam, gets to know the real picture of the marital life of her parents. Her mother, a silent woman, discloses for the first time how her father wanted to marry some other woman from a different religious background, and showed his frustration on her as his family did not allow him to follow his mind. He took to drinking regularly and "would throw things, break things….shout and yell" (*Rebirth* 163) and died a morose and sad man. Kaberi is much astonished at this revelation, but it does help her to understand the reality better and also to disclose her much similar situation to her mother. She is at last able to have a woman-to-woman talk with her mother and reveal how Ron has been physically torturing her and has now left her for another woman. If Baruah's story dominates with marriages that have gone wrong and instances of male domination, she also gives scope to possible marital relationships based on trust and mutual understanding. Kaberi's childhood friend, Joya, for instance is shown to have a loving and caring husband, who laments her death even after so many years of her absence. Bidyut is immersed in his own grief and draws strength from her memories and keeps them alive even though he disconnects with the family probably to escape the pity and sympathy. Rather, Joya's memories give him inspiration to settle down in life and become a successful businessman. Kaberi's narrative hints on the marital life of two other couples – her friend, Preetha and her husband, Sundar, and Ron's friends, Rahul and Sonia. Whereas Preetha and Sundar "have clearly defined spaces" (*Rebirth* 60), Rahul and Sonia portray an amiable relationship even if they have mutually decided not to have children. The observations and revelations about the different marriages make Kaberi look at her own situation with more maturity and she gradually learns to accept life as it is,

instead of running away from the bitter truths of life. Baruah fills her novel with various anecdotes about marital relationships that educate Kaberi and ultimately transform her from a submissive woman to a more determined one. One such incident is portrayed by Baruah towards the end of the novel where Preetha in her urge to make Kaberi understand that every "child deserves to have a father" (*Rebirth* 200), reveals how her mother "found out accidentally" (*Rebirth* 200) of her father's second wife and children. But instead of separating from him, the woman decided to stay on as she did not want her children to be deprived of their father. Kaberi's narrative reveals many such lessons on motherhood and a wife's duties from which she is able to see her marriage in a different perspective. Her mother's traditional wisdom of keeping the secrets of her marriage to herself and many more truths that she gets to know from her friends finally result in her transformation as a strong woman.

Baruah portrays the rift in family and the lack of love which in the long run make Kaberi a passive woman. Kaberi is shown to have a difficult relationship with her parents, one devoid of communication. Her father rarely demonstrated his love and the rift between her parents had its toll on her as well. This lack of love that she had felt all throughout her life had probably bothered her so much that she takes a vow never to do the same with her child: "I am going to tell you every day, as long as I live, and even after I die, from that great darkness – or maybe it is light – that I love you, my child. You can never love too much. Or say it enough." (*Rebirth* 169) Kaberi realizes the importance of love and familial bonding in her journey towards becoming a strong woman. Her contact with her family back home after her father's death makes her realize the strong bond that she has with her people. Her silent mother and her aunt and uncle reach out to her at a time when she really needs them. In fact, Kaberi's revelation about Ron's behaviour towards her and the unhappy truths of her marriage no doubt shocks her family, but they do not give up on her or distance themselves from her. Rather, they enfold her in their midst and make her realize that "there is always a home" (*Rebirth* 195) for her wherever her family stays. This unconditional love gives immense strength to Kaberi at a point of time when she was completely lonely and even though her mother's memories make her feel like turning "around and go home" (*Rebirth* 195), she draws courage and realizes that "this time I have found shade elsewhere." (*Rebirth* 195) Family bonding, love and trust finally help Kaberi emerge as a new person.

If Baruah has portrayed discordant marital lives and lack of family bonding which make Kaberi aware of many sad truths of life, she also shows great bonding between women which result in Kaberi's mental strength. This woman-to-woman contact is portrayed by the author in the relationships that Kaberi makes out of her own choice. The greatest influence in Kaberi's life had always been her childhood friend, Joya, who dominates Kaberi's consciousness all throughout the novel. As Kaberi recalls, Joya had not merely been a friend to her, "she was so much more. I would like to say she was my sister but then we were created of different flesh so let me call her my alter ego, for it was difficult sometimes to distinguish where Joya ended and I began, where we flowed into one another, a pair of underground streams." (*Rebirth* 23) It was Joya's unfortunate death at the wake of political turmoil in Assam that left an everlasting mark in Kaberi's mind. Joya's character had always been just the opposite of Kaberi. Whereas Kaberi was silent, passive, and lacked courage, Joya demonstrated strong will and free opinion. She had her own way of getting her things done and even amidst lots of protests from her family, marries the man she had been in love with. Kaberi could never gather the courage and determination that her friend showed in being a part of the revolutionary marches against the police authorities, organizing black outs and taking the lead in many such 'andolans'. Joya's demise had been a terrible loss to Kaberi and in her reminiscences of the past, we are made aware of the great influence that her friend had on her. Kaberi's memories of the shared past with Joya gives her much courage at a time when she feels lonely and lost. This woman-to-woman contact which provides much solace

to Kaberi is shown in her friendship with two other women, Preetha and Sonia, whom she gets to know in Bangalore. It is to Preetha that Kaberi confides her news of pregnancy and split with Ron, even before she reveals it to anyone else. Preetha is portrayed as another strong and determined woman, managing a career and a child with Down's syndrome. Quite contrary to Kaberi, Preetha is one who is very daring and has a free will and strong determination much alike Joya. She is not one to sympathize with Kaberi about Ron's behaviour; rather her matter-of-fact response: "Who needs men anyway?" (*Rebirth* 44) is what Kaberi needs at that moment. She offers the same unconditional friendship and love to Kaberi as Joya used to and in her own subtle way, helps in the transformation of Kaberi to stand and face the world. Quite different is Kaberi's relation to Sonia, the wife of Ron's friend and boss. Kaberi is reluctant to keep in touch with Sonia and barely keeps up the show of friendship to please Ron who insisted on her maintaining a good relationship with the wife of his boss. However, once Ron leaves, she neither bothers to give Sonia the news of her pregnancy or about Ron leaving her, nor answers her calls. The relationship, however, takes a new turn as Kaberi gets to know Sonia better. In due time, Sonia bonds with her and offers Kaberi real friendship. The 'rebirth' of Baruah's protagonist owes a lot to these relationships which transform her to a strong woman. A great deal of focus has been given to Kaberi's contact with the other women – her friends, mother, mother-in-law, aunt, and maid - who give her loads of wisdom and the courage to carry forward in life.

The transformation of Kaberi which occurs as a result of her understanding the reality of her married life and the acceptance of that reality; her bonding with family and friends who make her realize the importance of love, is the central focus of Baruah's novel. Kaberi's matured perspective of life is reflected in her narrative voice. Baruah chooses quite an unusual narrative device, but of course one which is extremely authentic and suits the context. Kaberi, the loner, who always found it difficult to voice her own feelings, speaks to the child in her womb, in an "almost timeless narrative" (Datta) moving between past and present as she pours out her heart to her unborn child. At a point of time when her husband leaves her, she is only left with her unborn child to whom she feels comfortable to confide in. The bonding that a mother feels right from the moment that she knows of the child's existence is portrayed in Kaberi's overflowing love towards the child in her womb. In a conversational mode, Baruah presents her protagonist's fears, hopes and dreams as she reveals them to her child. However, Kaberi's growing maturity is exposed to the readers through the change in the narrative voice that is "tender but matter of fact….tentative but also confident." (Shadow Man Asian) As befitting a mother's conversation with her child, the narrator never becomes too sentimental or gives graphic details of domestic violence and betrayals. The matured narrator neither indulges in self-pity nor bemoans her fate. The focus of the narrative is always on Kaberi, her sense of isolation and her gradual realization of empowerment. Kaberi's final decision to take the course of her life in her own hands is the ultimate transformation that the readers wait for all throughout the protagonist's journey to establish an identity of her own. She is no longer ready to forgive, forget, and adjust to her husband's way of life. Even though Ron confesses of moving out of the house and probably the life of the other woman, Baruah does not end her book with a possible reconciliation between the couple. Rather she leaves it open-ended with a strong suggestion that Kaberi may not be able to accept Ron anymore as she discloses her awareness of "crossing a line I cannot step back across." (*Rebirth* 202) Kaberi's self-awareness and determination is final as she finishes writing her book, plans the child's arrival, and heads towards the hospital on her own as the labour pain starts. By this time, she has ultimately learnt whom she can rely on, the first and foremost being herself.

Kaberi's journey in the process of her 'rebirth' is linked to the 'birth' of her child. In her search for her true 'self', Baruah's protagonist realizes her own worth and emerges as a

strong and determined woman. Baruah's story, even though based in Bangalore, keeps up the spirit of the North-East in the representation of the beautiful scenery, the political situation, traditions and customs, but most importantly, in the portrayal of a woman who is caught up in the age-old custom of being submissive, but finally emerges as a confident and courageous one. Kaberi's journey towards establishing her own identity "does not meet sudden peaks but progresses gradually to a climax" as she is finally able to come 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." (Mitra)

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