

## **Voicing from the Margin: Feminist Reading of Jahnvi Barua's *Rebirth***



### **A DISSERTATION**

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## DECLARATION

With due concern, I Haina Ramchiary, bearing Roll No- PGENG408A22017, and Registration No- 013629/2022-23 hereby sincerely declare that the submitted Research work on the title, “Voicing from the Margin: Feminist Reading of Jahnavi Barua’s *Rebirth*”, is to fulfill the curricular demand of PG (M.A. 4<sup>th</sup> Semester). I also declare that this dissertation does not contain any other part of any other work that has been submitted for any other degree either by this university or any other university.

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Signature of the candidate

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## ABSTRACT

The aim of this dissertation is to study Jahnvi Barua's *Rebirth* through a feminist lens, focusing on the character of Kaberi to highlight the voices of marginalized individuals. Barua's narrative sheds light on the challenges faced by women in a patriarchal society. Through Kaberi's personal experiences and challenges, the novel explores themes such as identity, agency, and empowerment, revealing the influence of male dominance and societal norms on her story. She has been depicted as a gentle, calm and meek woman. It emphasizes her struggles with the uncertainties of her marriage. Despite facing physical and emotional abuse, she chose to remain passive. Kaberi's passive demeanor illustrates the social conditioning that often encourages women to conform to submissive roles and expectations. This paper seeks to examine Kaberi's journey from submission to self-awareness within the framework of feminist theory. By highlighting Kaberi's voices and her life experiences, the research draws attention to broader issues surrounding gender bias.

**Keywords:** Feminism, Patriarchy, Marriage, Self-identity, Emancipation, Motherhood.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

There is a noticeable contrast between men and women, even in the present day, with women often facing marginalization or disadvantage in various aspects of society. Women seemed to have enjoyed higher status in ancient times. They were respected and had more rights and opportunities. They were not treated as inferior to men, and in some cases, they even enjoyed equality with men. Women in ancient India were not limited to traditional roles like homemaking and childcare. They were also involved in activities like hunting, which was typically seen as a masculine pursuit in many other cultures. This suggests that women had a broader range of roles and responsibilities in ancient times, and they were not confined to strict gender roles. This higher status of women in ancient India can be seen in various aspects of society, including mythology, literature and historical accounts. For example, in Hindu mythology, there are many powerful goddesses who are revered and worshipped alongside male gods. This suggests a level of respect and importance given to women in ancient Indian religious beliefs. Historical texts and inscriptions also provide evidence of women holding positions of power and authority, such as queens and rulers. This indicates that women had the ability to wield political influence and make significant contributions to society.

During the medieval period in India, women faced more limitations on their rights and freedoms. This happened as society changed, with patriarchal norms becoming stronger. Influences like the spread of Islam, caste-based social structures and shifts in political power played a role. Under Islamic rule, women often had fewer rights and were expected to follow strict rules about behavior and dress. In Hindu society, women's roles were more confined to the home and practices like child marriage and seclusion became more common. So the medieval period in India saw a decline in women's rights and opportunities compared to earlier

times. As a result, feminist movement started to make things better. Women realized they needed to work together to challenge the unfair systems that kept them down.

In India, the feminist movement gained steam in the 1800s and 1900s, inspired by global movements for women's rights. Indian women looked to both Western ideas and their own traditions of standing up against injustice. One of the earliest Indian feminists was Raja Ram Mohan Roy, who was a social reformer and lived in 19<sup>th</sup> century. He advocated for women's rights, including the right to education and the abolition of Sati system. With the rise of figures like Sarojini Naidu and Annie Besant in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Indian feminist movement gained strength. These women fought for social reform, education, and women's suffrage. Additionally, they made efforts to better the status of women in areas like health care and employment. The feminists movement in India has included women from various backgrounds such as different religion, and castes, who joined together to promote gender equality. But it has also met resistance from conservative groups that want to keep things the way they have always been, with men and women having set roles and positions in society.

The Hindu Code Bill's passing in 1955-1956 was one of the Indian feminist movement's greatest victories. Women's advocates like Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru supported this legislation, which aimed to change Hindu personal law and grant women more rights in areas like marriage, divorce, and inheritance. In the years after India gained independence, women's rights activists kept working hard to make thing better. They wanted new law to stop dowry, violence at home, and sexual harassment. They also fought for more women to be in politics, business, and other important parts of society.

A new generation of activists has been driving the Indian feminist movement in recent years. They are mobilizing support for gender equality and creating awareness using social media and other digital channels. For Indian feminists, topics including job discrimination, reproductive

rights, and gender-based violence have taken the stage. The movement has also been affected by global movements like #MeToo, which encouraged people to speak up about sexual harassment and pushed for change in how it's handled. Despite the progress that has been made, Indian feminists continue to face many challenges. Gender inequality is still pervasive and women continue to experience violence and discrimination in their everyday lives. There are still barriers that prevent women from fully participating and thriving in society. Many women still experience marginalization, as they are treated as less important or are given fewer opportunities compared to men. This can happen in various ways, which will be discussed in detail in the second chapter of this dissertation work.

Literature has always been a powerful tool to make society better, and women authors have used their voices to challenge unfair rules and support equality between genders. They have illuminated topics that have been overlooked or marginalized by sharing their experiences and viewpoints through poetry, fiction, essays, and memoirs. Literature let people share their experiences. When women talk about how they have been treated unfairly or faced tough times because of their gender, they challenge wrong ideas and give a voice to people who have not been heard. This helps others understand what is really going on and why it's important to make things better for everyone. So, literature is not just about telling stories; it is also about making sure everyone's voices are heard and understood.

Indian writers like Anita Desi, Shashi Deshpande, frequently how women battling societal constraints, patriarchy, and gender injustice in their works. Their characters are seen negotiating the conventional roles and expectations that their families, communities, and cultures have placed on them. Similarly, literature from Northeast India offers a distinctive viewpoint on women's challenges within the particular cultural and sociopolitical setting of the region. Women's experiences in the context of ethnic conflicts, insurgent movements, and



modernization issues are well recorded by writers hailing from states like as Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, and Nagaland.

Jahnavi Barua is a prominent figure in the literary world, hailed as one of the most exciting contemporary Indian writers. Born and raised in Assam, she is known for her distinctive voice and portrayal of the region's social and cultural complexities in her works. Barua's novel and short stories offer a unique insight into the lives of Northeast Women, capturing their struggles, aspirations, and resilience. As a Northeast women writer, Barua has been instrumental in building the gap between mainstream Indian literature and the largely unexplored narratives of Northeast India. Barua's storytelling is powerful and poignant, bringing to light the experiences of women that have been ignored or overlooked. Her portrayal of women in various roles and stages of life demonstrates a deep feminist consciousness, highlighting the struggles and triumphs of women navigating tradition, modernity, and personal growth. By centering women's women voices and experiences in her works, Barua contributes to the broader conversation on gender equality and women's agency in contemporary society. One key aspect of feminist consciousness in Barua's work is the exploration of women's inner lives and their journey towards self-discovery and empowerment. In Jahnavi Barua's works, her characters start off seeming like they just go along with what society expects of them, especially as women in India. But as the

story goes on, they change. They begin to see how valuable they are and realize they have the power to make their own choices. Through their ups and downs, they learn to stand up against the old-fashioned rules and ideas that hold them back. This change does not happen suddenly, it happens gradually, with moments where they really think about who they are and what they want. By the end, they become strong and confident, no longer limited by what others think

they should be. Barua shows how women characters grow and become more independent, inspiring readers to believe in themselves and their own journey to feeling empowered.

In the novel *Rebirth*, Barua examines the journey of woman named Kaberi, and showcases the struggles faced by women in asserting their independence and highlights the importance of self-empowerment. Her works has received critical acclaim and has contributed significantly to the representation of women in literature. The novel *Rebirth* according to *DNA* is, “A poignant coming- of-age tale that weaves together the many strands that make up the modern Indian female self” (Rebirth 2010). Kaberi encounters several difficulties in her life that deeply affects her mental state, but over time, she grows stronger and comes to understand her own value. In the third chapter of this dissertation work, we will discuss the difficulties that Kaberi faced and about her transformation.

## **Literature Review**

Literature has the capacity to reshape and redefine the roles of women, presenting them in diverse and transformative ways that challenge conventional perspectives. Through literature, women’s roles can be recreated and redefined which offers fresh insights into their capabilities and contributions. This research will observe the marginalized condition of woman and how she dealt with it.

Charles Fourier, a French philosopher, coined the term “feminism”. He used it to describe a belief in the social, political, and economic equality of the sexes. Fourier held the belief that women ought to enjoy equal rights and opportunities to men, encompassing the right to vote, engage in employment, and participate actively in society. He saw feminism as a movement to achieve these goals and to challenge the traditional gender roles that limited women’s freedom and agency. So, basically, feminism is about making sure women have the same chances and choices as men in everything.

Many academics have addressed the term “feminism” with different interpretations and justifications; some have connected it to past political movements in the United States and Europe. Zara Huda Faris in her article *Do Women Need Feminism* writes “women need feminism because there are women who suffer injustice” (Faris, p.1, 2013) she also refers to the Feminists idea that “women have traditionally been dehumanized by a male and dominated society, which they call the patriarchy”(Faris, p.1, 2013). The word ‘feminism’ has a lengthy and complex background. It represents the struggles and difficulties women have faced, and their hope for real fairness in societies where men usually have more power. This means they want to have a say in things, be independent, follow their dreams, and change how society sees women.

In her book *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Mary Wollstonecraft argues that women ought to enjoy the same chances as men. It asserts that women are not naturally less smart or capable than men, but society treats them unfairly. The book argues that women should have the right to education, jobs, and, being involved in society just like men. It is an important book on feminism as it started conversations about treating women equally.

In her novel *Fasting, Feasting*, Anita Desai depicts the gender inequality between sexes. She depicted the challenges faced by women like Uma in a traditional Indian society. Uma’s story

reflects the limitations imposed on women by societal expectations, such as the pressure to marry and fulfill domestic roles. Through her work, Desai highlights the struggle for gender equality and the importance of challenging traditional gender norms.

Simone de Beauvoir in her seminal work *The Second Sex* talks about how society treats women as different or 'other'. She says women are often seen as less important or powerful than men. Feminism according to her is about fighting against this unfair treatment and making sure women are treated equally. By exposing and critiquing the societal perception of women as 'other', she lays the foundation for feminist thought and activism, urging for the recognition of women as full and equal members of society.

Ajita Bhattacharya in her article *Three Generations Having the Same Treatment: Feministic Study of The God of Small Things* says that women's oppression and inequality persists across generations, impacting individuals, families, and cultural norms. Through the characters like Ammu, Baby Kochamma, Mammachi, and Rahel, she highlights the many problems women face like being pushed down and treated unfairly in societies where men hold most of the power, regardless of their age difference. So, she discussed about how women are mistreated simply because of their gender, which is a key concern of feminism.

Madhabi Lata Devi in her article *Perspectives of Women of the Northeast and Gender Discrimination* discusses how Jahnvi Barua explores gender discrimination and societal expectations through character's journey, depicting challenges like abandonment due to infertility. It offers insight into patriarchal dynamics and women's resilience.

Ratnasree Borthakur in her article on *Kaberi, the Modern Female Self: A Study of Jahnvi Barua's Rebirth* discusses Barua's narrative in *Rebirth*, addressing themes of identity, cultural assimilation, and personal growth. It contrasts Kaberi's passive nature with the resilience

depicted in other Northeastern women's stories, highlighting the universality of human emotions transcending regional boundaries.

Unmana Datta wrote "*Rebirth* is a haunting story of one woman's relationship with her unborn child, through the journey of her pregnancy".

### **1.3. Aims and objective**

The universal aim and objective of feminist study include highlighting patriarchal structures, critiquing gender roles, and advocating for equality and justice. This research work aims to discover the inequality and consequences of patriarchy in women's lives through Jahnvi Barua's novel *Rebirth*. To explore the feminist themes and ideologies present in the novel, including issues of gender inequality, patriarchy, and agency. To investigate how patriarchal structures and social expectation impact the protagonist Kaberi's choices and experiences. To explore how she deals with her hardships and her journey on finding autonomy and self fulfillment.

## 1.4. Research methodology

The researcher utilized qualitative research methodology, drawing from both primary and secondary sources. A feminist perspective is used to study the selected area. By employing a qualitative approach, researcher analyzed the text through a feminist lens, without relying on statistical analysis or numerical data. Primary source is the original book by Jahnavi Barua. As a secondary source it consists of close reading of some literary journals, thesis, renowned texts and articles from authentic internet sites and library reading. In this research, the focus is on exploring the characters, their dialogues, and the narrative progression in Jahnavi Barua's *Rebirth*. The aim is to uncover underlying themes and deeper meanings, particularly regarding marginalized voices, especially that of woman character. Methods such as thematic analysis and content analysis are employed to delve into the portrayal of gender and to challenge prevailing assumptions. Through this qualitative approach, the study aims to contribute meaningful insights to discussions surrounding gender equality and social justice.

## CHAPTER 2:

### Marginalization of Women

According to *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, marginalization is “the process or result of making somebody feel as if they are not important and cannot influence decisions or events; the fact of putting somebody in a position in which they have no power” (“marginalization”).

Marginalization refers to the exclusion or under-representation of certain voices, perspectives etc. Factors like gender, class, and sexuality can lead to marginalization. Individuals who are marginalized lack full autonomy over their lives. They do not have access to the social facilities that other's do. In the context of feminist study the term marginalization means: “Marginalized people might be socially, economically, politically and legally ignored, excluded or neglected, and are therefore vulnerable to livelihood change.” (Gurung and Kollmair, 2007, p, 9).

This study focuses on understanding the complex nature of women's suppression and marginalization. The marginalization of women, which means putting them in less important or powerful position compared to men, is a widespread problem that has been going on for a long time. In actuality, women make up half of the world's population, despite the fact that their journey is somewhat difficult in a hierarchal, patriarchal and male-oriented culture where women are marginalized based only on their gender. Not giving the same opportunities and rights as men affects women's lives in many ways. Women are always treated as other or second class citizen.

Women have historically been more marginalized in societies where men are the majority. Men are considered superior to women, and women have less rights. Since ancient times women's

primary roles are taking care of the children, cleaning the house, and doing household chores which indicates that women are working more as compared to males. They still don't receive enough recognition for their efforts. Even in the twenty first century where discussions about gender equality are common, women still face marginalization and discrimination in various forms. They are often treated as property of their fathers or husbands. Men are always given preference, whether it be at business, at home, or elsewhere. Women have a difficult time succeeding because of gender biases. Since their birth, women have been perceived as inferior or secondary. There is this constant comparing of boy and girl children. Parents appear to be quite glad when a boy is born since he will continue the family line, but they believe it is awful when girl is born. Indian culture holds that men, not women, are better suited to care for their parents. It is said that girls have higher survival rates at birth but according to the reports "India is the only large country where more girls die than boys".

In India initiatives like the Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao (Save the Girl Child, Educate the Girl Child) campaign aim to address issues such as female infanticide, child marriage, and lack of access to education for girls. Despite these advancements, several challenges remain for women in Indian society. Gender norms and stereotypes often dictate women's roles and limit their freedom and opportunities. Women always gets excluded from the decision making process. Their opinion does not matter that much to anyone. They are always expected to be docile and obedient. Women are viewed as embarrassing and a shame to the family if they attempt to behave inappropriately or in ways that conform to what society expects of them. Women are not allowed to cultivate their own identities in the male dominated society. They still are the victim of various forms of discrimination, violence, and inequality in society.



In terms of gender parity, India came in at position 127 out of 146 countries according to the Global Gender Index 2023. It demonstrates how far India has to go to achieve full gender equality.

## **2.1 Patriarchy:**

One of the reasons why women are marginalized is because of the system where men hold power and authority, known as patriarchy. Patriarchy is a social system that values masculinity over femininity and privileges men over women in various aspects of life. This system has been around for a long time, and it affects many parts of our lives. “In this system, women and girls have historically, and overwhelmingly, been exploited, oppressed or otherwise disadvantaged” (Santos 2019). Because of patriarchy, women often face barriers and challenges that can make it harder for them to succeed or to be treated fairly.

As every society in India is influenced by the patriarchal system, women often face unfair treatment and are pushed to the sidelines. For example, in many families, boys are given more attention and opportunities for education and jobs, while girls are expected to take care of the home. This creates a cycle where women have fewer chances to succeed and be independent. Women are still undervalued and perceived as weak. Patriarchy also affects how women are treated in their homes. Sometimes they are not allowed to make decisions or have a say in important matters. They have to follow everything blindly without daring to raise any question. From their early age girls are taught to behave in a constrained feminine manner and to be obedient and subservient. Women those who live entirely to adore their husbands are the epitome of perfection in Indian society. It is taught and made to believe that their husbands are next to God. A woman is expected to prioritize her husband’s well- being and happiness above her. Women have to be

obedient and have to agree to whatever their husband says because men are considered more learned and intelligent. If their husbands are aggressive, deformed, crippled, irresponsible, drunkard, women are always expected to love and care their husbands. If they fail to do so they are labeled as a disgrace. It is assumed that women can only survive by being obedient to all men for their lifetimes, such as their father in childhood and husband after the marriage.

Women are consistently marginalized in societies where men have a dominant position. Men achieve higher positions in many political, economic, legal, military, domestic, and religious institutions. It goes without saying that men naturally occupy a higher portion of income and wealth. As a result, they influenced cultural design to suit their own objectives and interests. They are also capable of holding leadership roles in media like television, movies, and happenings that portray women as inferior beings. Thus, women are undervalued in a society where males predominate. These are all signs of how one gender is considered superior to other. Hence women are employed as resources within capitalist systems. Patriarchy and capitalism are interlinked with each other in case of women status. Patriarchy is like a big, invisible set of rules that have been around for a long time. These rules say that men should be in charge and have more power and control in society. On the other hand, capitalism is all about making money and owning things. Now, even today, in many places, men often have more opportunities to make money and own businesses compared to women. This means they usually end up having more power and control over important things like who gets hired, who gets paid well, and who gets to make decisions. But where does this leave women?

Well, historically, women have faced barriers that have kept them from having the same opportunities as men. They have been told that their main job is to take care of the home and family, and they often have not been paid for this important work. Because men have traditionally

had more chances to make money and own things, they have ended up having even more power over women. These old-fashioned ideas about gender roles have actually helped capitalism too. For example, if women are expected to stay at home and take care of the family, it's easier for businesses to pay them less or not give them the same chances as men in the workforce. Thus patriarchy and capitalism grant men extensive authority, where women again get marginalized.

Patriarchal system shapes women as submissive and timid. Although women make up almost half of the world's population, they still face many challenges in their paths as women. The patriarchal system marginalizes women by reinforcing gender roles and expectations, limiting their freedom and agency in society. Kamala Das, a renowned confessional poetess in her poems like *Introduction* and *Old Playhouse* vividly portrays the oppressive nature of patriarchy through personal experiences and societal observations.

In *Introduction*, Das reflects on the complexities of her identity and expression. She writes, "I am sinner, I am saint. I am beloved and the betrayed" (Das). Here, Das captures the conflicting roles imposed on women by society. Women are expected to conform to rigid ideals of purity and virtue, yet are often betrayed and oppressed by the same system that demands their adherence. Similarly in *Old Playhouse*, Das delves into the theme of female subjugation within marriage. She writes, "You planned to tame a swallow, to hold her/ In the long cage of your body" (Das). This metaphorical portrayal of marriage as a cage symbolizes the confinement and control imposed on women within patriarchal structures. Women are expected to fulfill the desires and expectations of their husbands, sacrificing their autonomy and individuality in the process. Through these examples from Kamala Das' poetry, we see how the patriarchal system marginalizes women by constraining their identities, confining them to predefined roles, and limiting their agency and freedom.

## **2.2. Gender Bias:**

Gender bias is a complex problem that affects individuals of all genders, often resulting in discrimination or prejudice. It operates on both conscious and unconscious levels, shaping attitudes and opportunities within societies worldwide. Gender bias against women, both historically and in contemporary times, has been a prevalent issue. Historically, gender bias has been deeply entrenched in patriarchal systems, where men have held positions of privilege and power, while women and non-binary individuals have been marginalized and subjugated. In many places, laws and policies now promote gender equality.

Although progress has been made in many parts of the world towards gender equality, gender bias against women still exists in various forms-

### **2.2.1 Education:**

Education holds utmost significance in the lives of all individuals. But there exists bias in determining who will have access to it. Despite advancements in various sectors, gender inequality persists in education. This means that girls still face unequal opportunities and treatment in our society. “Despite education being recognized as a crucial element for human resource development and economic growth many developing and underdeveloped countries still grapple with gender disparities”. (Nair and Kotian 6 June, 2023) In some cultures, there is still a belief that boys should be prioritized in education because they are seen as the one who will carry on the family name or support the family financially in the future. On the other hand, girls are often viewed as weak, inadequate, and incompetent. In the past, boys were often given more

opportunities for education than girls. Even though things have improved in many places, there is still lingering effects of the historical bias. It's like saying, "Boys should study because they will do big things, but girls don't need to study because they will just get married and take care of the family".

We can see gender disparity in schooling through certain literary works, which demonstrates how women are marginalized. For example, the play *Tara* by Mahesh Dattani and *Fasting Feasting* by Anita Desai shows how boys are often granted more educational opportunities compared to girls. In the play *Tara* the character Tara faces discrimination because she is a girl. She is treated unfairly and left out of opportunities just because she is female. The unfair treatment between a female and a male is clearly depicted in the play, where her brother is constantly encouraged in pursuing higher studies and Tara is ignored. Similarly, in *Fasting Feasting* the character Uma finds herself confined to traditional gender roles, expected to prioritize domestic duties over educational pursuits. This is contrasted with her brother Arun, who is afforded the opportunity to study abroad in America. Uma is asked by her parents to discontinue her school so to look after her new born brother and to get familiar with household activities. Uma's mother said "We are not sending you back to school, Uma. You are staying at home to help with Arun" (Desai, 18). Her circumstances highlight the disparity in educational opportunities between genders, where boys are often prioritized for higher education and career advancement. Thus, in both these novels we witness the pervasive bias that favors boys over girls in education. These narratives serve as a powerful reminder of the continuous struggle for gender equality and the necessity of removing structural obstacles to education for all.

### 2.2.2 Politics:

Gender bias in Indian politics has a long history. In the past, politics in India was predominantly male dominated, with women facing numerous barriers to entry and advancement. Women were frequently assigned secondary positions or were sidelined together. The emergence of notable women in politics such as Indira Gandhi, Sonia Gandhi etc, challenged traditional gender norms and stereotype in politics.

However, the status of women in politics still requires some improvement. It is still difficult for women to fully and equally participate in positions of political leadership, despite notable advancements in recent years. There are not many women in top political positions. Gender prejudice and patriarchal views are still prevalent in political parties and society at large, which presents a difficulty. The credibility and aptitude of women as leaders are sometimes undermined by preconceptions and biases. In contrast to their male colleagues, they are often thought to be less capable or appropriate for leadership positions, which limit their chances of moving up the political party ladder. Traditional ideas about what women should do also holds them back. In many places, women are expected to focus on family instead of having a career in politics. This makes it tough for them to even think about getting involved in politics. Dr. Pankaj Kumar in his article, *Gender Issues in Indian Politics* states that gender discrimination in Indian politics happens because of different reasons like religious beliefs, social norms, economic dependence, political dynamics and cultural attitudes. These things make it harder for women to join politics and go ahead. Even though the law says men and women should be treated equally, women still face many challenges in politics, which keeps gender inequality alive in society (Kumar, 2020).

Women also struggle with harassment, sexism, and unequal resources compared to their male counterparts. The old-fashioned idea that men should be in charge often stops women from reaching their political goals completely. There has been a rising focus on achieving gender parity in politics. Social movements like #MeToo have highlighted the widespread issue of sexual harassment and misconduct in the political sphere, leading to demands for increased responsibility and fundamental changes.

*The World Economic Forum* estimates “it will take 145.5 years to attain gender equality in politics”. This prediction highlights the magnitude of the challenge ahead in achieving true equality. However, it also serves as a call to action.

### **2.2.3 Employment:**

Despite efforts to promote equality, gender prejudice in workplace still exists. Throughout history, women have faced obstacles in accessing employment opportunities and achieving parity with men in workforce due to traditional gender roles and societal expectations. Women were frequently confined to household responsibilities and had limited opportunities to pursue careers outside the home. Unfortunately, this bias continues to manifest in various forms today. For example, even when women are equally competent for a position, some employers may choose to recruit males for it. This can happen due to stereotypes or beliefs about what men and women are capable of. Another example is the prevalent practice of asking women about their marital status or family plans during their job interviews, which can influence hiring decisions based on outdated assumptions about their commitment to work. Ninda Lal Kidwai former CEO of HSBC India said,

“It is a tragedy that women still have to prove that they are better than men” (Kidwai). She also says, women are overlooked for leadership positions and “Women in India face a variety of barriers to career progression, such as cultural biases, family obligations, and lack of mentorship” (Kidwai).

Similarly, the issue of unequal pay continues, women often receive lower compensation compared to men for performing the same tasks. Several female actresses in Bollywood film industry have spoken out about disparities in pay. Actress Aditi Rao Hydari questioned the disparity in pay between female and male actors, stating in an interview with PTI, “I don’t really understand why we are paid less than the male actors because we put equal efforts” (Hydari). Also, in an interview with NDTV, Kangna Ranaut asserted her belief that she deserves equal pay to male actors stating, “My male counterparts are paid thrice the amount. No one can guarantee the success of a film so why such discrimination?” (Ranaut). This disparity in pay not only reflects systemic gender biases within the industry but also perpetuates inequalities and reinforces traditional gender norms.

### **CHAPTER 3: Feminist Reading of Jahnvi Barua’s *Rebirth***

This chapter will discuss about the experiences and struggles of the protagonist in Jahnvi Barua’s *Rebirth* through a feminist lens. It will discuss about the various aspects of



marginalization and how the female character in the novel although facing lot of hurdles develops agency and speaks up for herself.

The primary goal of female writers over the years has been to stop the inequality between sexes. There has always been gender inequality in human history. Feminist authors came to understand their marginalized status in society. They quickly started to focus on women's issues in their work and developed themes accordingly. Mary Wollstonecraft in her feminist essay *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) spoke up to call for women's independence and to get equal rights as that of men. Wollstonecraft advocated for women's right and independence, arguing that women rather than being subordinate to men, they should be empowered to make their own choices and decisions. She also talks about the importance of women having autonomy and control over their own lives, rather than seeking power men. She writes, "I do not wish them to have power over men but over themselves" (*Vindication*, p.154). From its three wave feminist theory developed. The primary goals of the first wave of feminism were women's suffrage and legal equality. The second wave focused on topics like gender equality in the workplace, reproductive rights and cultural perceptions of women. The third wave is a reaction to second wave feminism and is still ongoing. In order for society to view them in a different light, feminists thus took the initiative to raise awareness of their issues and came forth to convey their feelings. Many writers and critics like Virginia Woolf, Elaine Showalter, and others in the twentieth century did not stop their efforts to fight for women's rights.

North East women writers have also made a distinctive contribution to women's liberation and advancement. Jahnavi Barua in her works always depicts the struggles and experiences of women in a society. She consistently gives women a voice and depicts their marginalized status. The novel portrays a society where men hold dominant power and women are always the victims of

oppression. In the beginning of the novel *Rebirth* we see a lonely young woman talking to her unborn child. The protagonist Kaberi born and raised in Assam is shown as calm, tolerant and obedient. She later settles in Bangalore after her marriage with a man named Ron, which her parents had chosen for her. . In “The Second Sex” Simone de Beauvoir writes “The destiny that society traditionally offers women is marriage” (page-502). Women often face marginalization in Indian society especially within the institution of marriage. As Indian society is largely patriarchal the decision of the marriage of a woman gets decided by the family members or the head of the family. Women have limited say in important decisions making even if it’s about their own lives. “While Bidyut’s mother, with moist eyes, anointed Joya with a sacred sendur, her best friend, Jeuti Bora, noticed me in the circle of young girls around Joya and instantly chose me as her son’s bride” (Barua, p, 69). This shows how the consent of the bride does not matter, if her family agrees to the proposal. Kaberi describes the situation where she for the first time met her husband:

I suppose any young girl prodded into a marriage arranged by her parents would be apprehensive. In this case, I was paralysed with anxiety. You see a wide and deep chasm stretched between your father’s family and mine. While my family was solidly middle middle-class, my father a poorly paid schoolteacher, your father’s family was a prosperous one. (Barua, p, 69-70)

Most parents want their daughters to marry someone who has a higher status than them because they believe it could bring better opportunities and a more comfortable life for their child. But it is uncertain whether the husband will genuinely love their daughter, as marriage involves more than just a status. Same happens with Kaberi, despite the expectations placed upon Kaberi to find happiness in her arranged marriage, she struggles to find fulfillment and love within the relationship. As her husband’s higher status does not guarantee a loving and supportive

partnership. Instead, Kaberi grapples with feelings of loneliness and a sense of disconnect from her husband gradually. Ron and Kaberi do not have a friendly or warm relationship throughout their marriage. After their marriage women are expected to fulfill social expectations like making her husband and in-laws happy and most importantly giving birth. Kaberi always tried to be obedient to her husband as she was with her parents. Since, the beginning of the novel readers can somewhat find out that Ron is aggressive when Kaberi says, “In the early morning he was a demon, your father was, impatient and full of vitriol when anything went wrong” (Barua, p, 2).

As the story advances, readers discover that the couple has been married for seven years and has longed to have a child. The novel dives into Kaberi’s struggles and emotions, as she wrestles with the truth of her inability to conceive. She is troubled by the notion that her incapacity to become pregnant has taken away her sense of being a woman and her role as a wife. The societal pressure to start a family worsens her sense of guilt and inadequacy, leading her to feel like a disappointment. She becomes increasingly isolated and lonely as she grapples with her circumstances. Jahnvi Barua’s writing skillfully shows Kaberi’s feelings and emotions. She shows Kaberi’s inner challenges with understanding, drawing readers into her difficult experiences. The novel also addresses the stigma around infertility and its impact on women. Often, society unfairly blames women for infertility, which can be really tough on them emotionally. It looks at how Kaberi’s inability to have children affects her connections with her closest ones. Her husband Ron undergoes a change in his behavior. Kaberi says, “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” (Barua, p, 4). Kaberi’s difficulty in getting pregnant creates tension in her marriage, leading her husband Ron to seek companionship with another woman, adding more complexity in their relationship. Ron not only

leaves her for other woman but he also abuses her physically and verbally. Kaberi was very lonely when her husband left, she craved for nothing but only love, “I demand love” (Barua, p, 41). Ron after finding out that Kaberi is pregnant decides to move back with her, and when Kaberi disagree he ridicules her reliance on him for financial support. Through the exchange of words in the following line exposes her vulnerability:

‘Are you going to leave her?’...

‘No,’ Ron says, ‘I will not. I will move back here, but I will come and go’.

‘That won’t do,’ I say, my voice stiff.

‘What do you mean, won’t do?’ Ron raises an eyebrow but his sarcasm rolls easily over me.

‘Who are you to tell me what to do?’

‘And what will you do, what can you do, if I don’t leave her?’ Ron is mocking now.

‘I will divorce you then,’ I say calmly.

Ron is incredulous. ‘Divorce! Divorce! And how will you survive? Haven’t you grown accustomed to all this?’ (Barua, p, 85)

Beauvoir writes, “In marrying, the woman receives a piece of the world as property; legal guaranties protect her from man’s caprices; but she becomes his vassal” (Beauvoir, p, 506). Because of the economic dependence of women on their husbands, they are not always treated very well. It’s like saying, “You are living off my money, so I get to make every decision”. The idea of equal right between men and women is only an illusion according to Beauvoir. She says,

“...But as long as the man has economic responsibility for the couple, it is just an illusion” (Beauvoir, p, 589). The way in which Ron speaks and behaves with Kaberi even if it is his fault , reflects his superiority complex due to his economic control over her.

Ron always discourages her and makes her feel less confident. This can be seen, where Kaberi decides not to disclose to Ron that she is writing a book. She is always careful to work only when her husband leaves and wrap up her work before he comes ( Barua 111). She keeps it a secret because it may not fit within traditional expectations. In some cultures, women are expected to prioritize household responsibilities over their individual interests. Kaberi knows that her husband would find it difficult to approve or may not understand her desire, so she choose not to tell him to avoid any further conflict. This secrecy reflects the stress women may experience to adhere to traditional gender norms and the difficulties they face when pursuing their personal interests beyond these expectations.

Kaberi also faces both emotional and physical mistreatment, subtly hinted at when Ron confronts her about her pregnancy. He not only flaunts his extra-marital affair without any empathy but also blames Kaberi for not letting him know about her pregnancy. Instead of showing some love and guilt, he begins to grow more aggressive. Barua depicts the self-centered mindset of a man like Ron, who lacks understanding of how to actually treat a woman, particularly during pregnancy, as demonstrated in the following lines:

...He hustles me in into the bedroom and I know what is coming next as he tenses his arm.

I try to free my arm. ‘No, Ron,’ my voice is steady. ‘Not now, with Baby.’

Ron clenches his fingers; I can feel the bruise forming already, the small capillaries popping and flooding the tissue with blood. It will blaze forth in rich colours tomorrow, but it is almost winter and I will be wearing long-sleeved jumpers (Barua, p, 79).

Kaberi's ability to anticipate his actions suggests that she has experienced similar situation before. She had grown used to Ron's behavior, but she always struggles to stand up for herself even when Ron emotionally abuses her by making passive-aggressive comments about her body and mocking her small town background. He always wants to control Kaberi by any means. Throughout, their married life, if Kaberi decides to do anything against Ron's wish, he would always lose his temper and shout at her. She, similar to other traditional wives, endures everything quietly and attempts to adapt herself to the situation. He neglects to offer her emotional support and instead consistently seeks to discourage her, showing no regard for her feelings through his verbal and physical mistreatment. Ron used to discourage her and made her less confident. This can be seen, where Kaberi decides not to disclose to Ron that she is writing a book. She is always careful to work only when her husband leaves and wrap up her work before Ron comes ( Barua 111). In societies where patriarchy is dominant, there is prevailing notion that women must rely on men for validation and assistance.

So, as the story unfolds, we see a pattern of oppression. Kaberi feels trapped because she learned from her mother to endure abuse without standing up for herself. Ron mistreats her, leaving her for another woman but returning when she finds out she is pregnant. He came to her not because of the love for Kaberi, but for their child. Ron says he never loved her, "It was Mama who had fallen in love with you" (Barua, p, 132). This cycle of unequal and unhappy relationships mirrors what Kaberi's parents went through. In the novel, Barua delves into the intricate bond between mothers and daughters, suggesting that Kaberi's passivity may stem from her relationship with her

mother. This exploration highlights the significant impact a mother-daughter relationship can have, often repeating the same struggles. Kaberi's relationship with her mother shows how Kaberi ends up experiencing similar hardships in her own marriage. Even though there are signs of abuse, Kaberi's mother refuses to acknowledge it and when Kaberi asks if her father genuinely loved her, her mother replies, "What is love, Kaberi? He looked after me, in a way, and gave me respect in public" (Barua, p, 163). This echoes Kaberi's observations about her husband's behavior in public. Kaberi's mother even though was hurt by her husband defended him all the time. She says to Kaberi, "He did not drink for fun, you know, he drank because he had problems"(Barua, p, 162). Kaberi's mom confesses that she stayed in the marriage because she blamed herself for her husband's problems and relied on him financially. This show, how both the mother and daughter are oppressed by their husbands. Kaberi, eventually tells her mother that Ron hits her, "He hits me, Ron hits me" (Barua, p, 182). Her mother scolds her for not telling them before, but Kaberi answers her back saying that her mother did not either mention her own experience, to which her mother scolds her for being disrespectful. Many women like the ones depicted in the novel do not feel empowered to share their negative encounters. Instead, they manage to suffer it. Because they are taught to believe that since men are the head of family, they can do whatever they feel like doing. They are taught to respect and treat their husbands like god. Kaberi's mother, despite knowing that Ron is violent, pressures Kaberi to stay in the marriage because of the baby on the way, believing the child needs a father figure. This demonstrates how deeply ingrained patriarchy is, as Kaberi's mother expects her to adhere to traditional expectations, even though she is enduring hardship. Without meaning to, Kaberi's mother teaches her to accept oppression, just as she had to, reflecting a pattern often observed across generations of women, because they were taught it's

just how things are, and they have not always had strong role models to show them they can fight back.

The transformation of Kaberi can be seen as the novel progresses. She has always been controlled by others in various ways and did not try to break free. But everything changes when she realizes her worth. With the baby inside her womb, she finally begins to raise her voice on everything, which she failed to do earlier. She finds strength in becoming mother. This idea is really important in the story. Barua shows that while being pregnant makes women vulnerable, it also gives them power because they realize they are carrying a new life. Kaberi gets braver and faces things she used to avoid. Her body changing makes her realize she is stronger than she thought. Kaberi decides she won't let her husband mistreat her anymore. She stands up for herself instead of being passive. This can be seen when she caught her husband cheating on her for the second time she finds courage to question him everything that she intended to. Kaberi always wanted her husband to love her and hoped that he will leave other woman for her. But Kaberi, as a transformed woman says, "You can decide whatever it is you decide away from here and let me know later" (Barua 132). She no longer fears to confront her husband. She stands up for herself when her husband again tries to hit her. "I find more courage now", she says (Barua 86). Kaberi who has previously lost her identity gains it again. By embracing her impending motherhood and finding strength in it, Kaberi asserts her voice and agency in a society that have previously marginalized her. She also no longer hides the book she has written from him, "I make no attempt to conceal the book from him this time..." (Barua ,201). This shows that she can be independent. Writing helps Kaberi feel stronger and more in control. It also shows how strong and determined Kaberi is now to stand up for herself.



In the journey of Kaberi's transformation, there are other women character like Sonia, Preetha, Joya, and the maid, who continuously supported her. Female relationships in the novel serve as crucial sources of emotional support and validation. Kaberi's close friend from childhood, Joya, remains a significant presence in her mind, shaping her thoughts and actions. Even though her friend met a tragic end due to her activism in Assam, Kaberi finds courage and motivation from her memory. Preetha, consistently provided support and stood by Kaberi's side when Ron abandoned her. She continuously encouraged Kaberi, and her confidence was evident when she remarked to Kaberi, "Who needs men anyway" (44). This statement reflects Preetha's boldness and her belief in female strength and independence. Barua mainly focuses on Kaberi's feeling of loneliness and her journey towards empowerment. Kaberi's biggest change happens when she decides to take charge of her life, refusing to continue accommodating her husband's behavior. Kaberi's empowerment is evident in her refusal to accept Ron's apologies blindly and in her acknowledgment of her own boundaries. Kaberi shows a newly discovered understanding of herself and strong determination. When Ron admits that he will leave the house and also end his extra marital affair, Kaberi's reply is not very clear. Barua leaves it to the reader to interpret the ending for themselves, but with a hint that Kaberi may not be able to forgive her husband. Kaberi's reluctance to have her husband with her in her most difficult time suggests that she no longer desires his presence in her life. She also makes no attempt to call him when she was on the way to hospital alone to deliver her baby. This shows that she has come to realize who she can count on the most, and that is no one but herself. So, in *Rebirth*, Kaberi undergoes a transformation, as implied by the title. We witness her transformation from being passive and oppressed to someone who recognizes her own value and worth.

## CHAPTER 4: CONCLUSION

This dissertation illustrates the domination of women in society and how female authors use their narratives to empower women. Through Kaberi's journey, Jahnvi Barua brings attention to the struggles women face within patriarchal systems and promotes empowerment. Kaberi's story shows the challenges women face when trying to take control of their lives and break away from oppressive norms of the society.

Seen through a feminist perspective, Jahnvi Barua's novel *Rebirth* shows different kinds of struggles and challenges women face in a male-dominated world. The story, told through the experiences of Kaberi, the main character, showcases the strength and potential for empowerment that women have, even while facing different kinds of marginalization and oppression.

An important issue in *Rebirth* is identity and how society expectations affect how each person views themselves. While navigating the complexities of her relationships and her experiences, Barua's protagonist sets out on a voyage of self-discovery and wrestles with issues of identity and belonging. By centering Kaberi's story and experience, Barua not only validates the struggles of marginalized individuals but also invites readers to empathize with their plight and advocate for change. Barua invites readers to reevaluate their preconceptions about femininity and masculinity.

From the start, Kaberi faces a lot of pressure from society, especially when it comes to getting married. She doesn't get to choose her own partner, and she's expected to act in certain ways

because she's a woman. This shows how much influence patriarchy has on her life. Kaberi's difficulty in having children also shows how society looks down on women who can't have children and puts a lot of pressure on them ,even their own partner. It is unfortunate that women are often solely held responsible.

As the story goes on, Kaberi starts to feel stronger and more in control, but it happens gradually and changes her a lot. Finally, being able to conceive and becoming a mother gives her courage and makes her realize how valuable she is. She stands up to her husband Ron and tells him what she want and resist his actions. It shows her transformation of taking charge of her life and making her own decisions.

Kaberi's transformation is not a solitary endeavor; it is facilitated by the support and solidarity of other women in her life. From her childhood friend Joya to her confidante Preetha, female relationships serve as sources of emotional support and validation for Kaberi. These relationships underscore the importance of female solidarity in navigating patriarchal structures and overcoming societal oppression.

Rebirth shares important ideas about feminism and how women experience life in a society where men usually have more power. Through Kaberi's story, the novel shows how unfair it can be for women because of their gender. But it also shows how strong women can be when they face tough situations. Overall, Rebirth is a strong reminder of the ongoing fight for fairness between genders and the power of women to overcome obstacles. The novel also highlights Jahnvi Barua's deep concern for women, and her feminine perspective allows her to address the challenges women face.

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