Echoes of Assam: Reflection and Cultural Identity in *Rebirth*

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ABSTRACT

This research paper focuses on Assamese culture, identity and female subjectivity through the theme of displacement and emotional construction in Jahnavi Barua's novel *Rebirth*. It analyses the protagonist Kaberi, an Assamese woman who experiences trauma due to her marital betrayal and displacement from her hometown. The novel exhibits the psychological and emotional journey of Kaberi which reconnects her with cultural roots and reveals symbolic process of rebirth. Also this study provides

enough evidence of how Barua integrates attachment to land, ecological sensitivity, family structure and traditional values not merely as a background but as a transformation of Kaberi's identity and resilience. The purpose of this study is to analyse the cultural representation of Assam including rivers, hills, names of rural people and their domestic traditions which are explored through Kaberi. Barua portrays the inner strength of Assamese woman by emphasizing cultural political consciousness as a source of empowerment by representing Kaberi. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of psychological resilience, cultural differences and selfhood.

Keywords: Alienation, Assamese Culture, Displacement, Identity and Selfhood.

Regional literature refers to works written by writers who focus mainly about indigenous people's lives, their culture, language, customs, traditions, and landscape. Its main characteristics are use of local dialects and languages, portrayal of local landscape, identity and cultural life of regions such as R. k Narayan's *Malgudi Days*, Premchand's *Godaan*, Thomas Hardy's *The return of the Native*.

Culture and Domestic Traditions in *Rebirth*

Jahnavi Barua in her novel *Rebirth* depicts Assamese cultural through domestic details, local practices and customs. In Chapter 1, the protagonist Kaberi recalls, "Mostly I did embroidery delicate Shadow work on gauzy organza or the regimented cross stitch on matty cloth while Ma knitted sweaters" (Barua 5). This narrative between Kaberi and her mother portrays the domestic life of women in Assam. Hand embroidery and knitting are more popular among Assamese women than teaching. This tradition being passed from one generation to another (mother to daughter) is considered a mandatory feminine tradition. Similarly, material object symbolizes cultural continuity such as Kaberi remembering the wedding

furniture given by her father. They use solid teak wood furniture, not veneers like wenge and ebony foreign woods. This contrast between solid teak and imported veneers represent indigenous root and modern global influence.

On auspicious occasions Kaberi wears Silk Mekhela. The mention of traditional Assamese attire such as silk mekhela & Muga Mekhela reinforces Assamese textile heritage. It is not just mere clothing. It represents cultural identity, womanhood and regional pride. Through such references Barua sketches Kaberi as an authentic Assamese. Even casual reference to household items like cuticura talcum powder reflects generational memory, middle class life in a particular era.

In Chapter 5, the novel highlights communal rituals in indigenous life. For morol ceremony decorations such as 'four young banana saplings and strings of mango leaves' show the connection of agrarian culture. Banana saplings and mango leaves are associated with fertility, prosperity and auspicious beginning in Assamese tradition. This echoes the theme of regeneration which is the central motif of *Rebirth*.

In Chapter 3, Barua reflects Tea Culture which plays another vital marker of Assamese identity. It appears when Kaberi reflects that tea-making is taught early to girls in Assam. (Barua 35). Tea is more than a beverage in Assam; it is an everyday ritual symbolizing hospitality and domestic responsibility. Teaching girls tea-making at an early age reflects gendered cultural expectations and community bonding.

The indigenous architecture style is reflected in Chapter 2, in the description of "An ordinary teashop, three walls of bamboo, front mostly open, closed at night by hinged bamboo flap and roof of corrugated tin" (Barua 25).

In Chapter 9, Traditional seating such as the murha (a woven bamboo stool) further reinforces indigenous material culture. In India bamboo plays a major economic and cultural role, especially in northern region. Assam is the largest bamboo producing state in India with over 50% of the country's bamboo species found there. In Assam, bamboo is widely used for housing, handicrafts, furniture, and other daily needs, making it an essential part of indigenous life and cultural identity. Nature is not separate from culture; rather, it becomes the foundation upon which identity and community are constructed.

Socio and Political Consciousness

Through the protagonist's memories Barua discloses the political crisis in Assam, breakouts of protest marches, lathi charges and public agitation. The author blends the socio political turbulence of the late twentieth century. She also clearly points out the Assam movement, a mass protest led primarily by students for the demand of detection and deportation of illegal immigrants. This movement led to the signing of the Assam Accord in Delhi.

Kaberi recalls the atmosphere of protest in chapter six, with the mention of the slogan Joi Ai Assam which means victory to mother Assam. Assam is compared to mother, which strengthens the bond between the Assamese people and land.

The descriptions of CRP presence, lathi charges, and student agitation reflect the tension between state authority and regional identity. Images of khaki uniforms, police force deployment give rise to fear and uncertainty among the public. The mention of student deaths in Upper Assam emphasizes the tragic cost of political struggle. These memories become collective trauma for Kaberi which is expressed in her narrative structure of the novel.

The political crisis shapes Kaberi's formative years and contributes to her emotional consciousness. The atmosphere of agitation, slogans, and resistance becomes part of her cultural memory. The political movement therefore functions as a formative experience that strengthens regional solidarity and cultural identity.

In the end of the Assam Accord, the novel symbolizes both resolution and compromise. While the government's concession marked a political milestone, the emotional scars of agitation remain stamped in collective memory. Through these references, Barua added Assamese identity not only by domestic traditions and landscape but also by the involvement of political resistance and historical struggle.

Names as Cultural Identity through Displacement

In the novel *Rebirth*, the names of the characters play a vital role not only as a person's identity but also represent cultural identity. Most of the names in the novel are rooted in Assamese roots such as Kaberi, Joya, Bipul, Bina, Mahi, Bidyut, Joymati and Golapi Bai. The Assamese name of the protagonist Kaberi represents displacement. The novel uses different naming pattern. When the author portrays the characters in Bangalore, she intentionally changes the names to modernity just to reflect the cosmopolitan identity of the people living there.

Kaberi lives with her husband Ranjit who is called Ron among his colleagues. She notices differences in names from her native names such as Mary (her maid), Preetha (her friend), Rahul and Sonia (her husband's friends), Dr. Joseph (her doctor), and Tara (her editor). These names are pan India and not regional specific.

The contrast between these two sets of names is culturally significant. Assamese names such as Kaberi or Joymati are deeply rooted in cultural and historical memory, which preserve regional identity. This

evokes belongings. In contrast names such as Rahul, Sonia, Mary, Tara and Joseph represent urban and cosmopolitan modernity. This shows detachment from regional ethnic identity. It evokes modernity rather than emotionally rooted connections. Kaberi faces cultural displacement through names when she starts living in Bangalore. Cultural displacement does not always require crossing international borders. *Rebirth* is set in India.

Landscape of Assam: Rivers, Gardens, and Ecological Memory

The description of landscape in *Rebirth* functions as a Symbol of Belonging. Through the protagonist Kaberi's memories, readers can capture the vivid picture of Assamese landscape, rivers, landmarks and locality. She recalls 'Kothali chompa' bush in the corner of her front garden. Indian household often have some plants that represent holiness. Examples are Tulsi and trees such as Peepal representing divinity. In Assamese, Kothali chompa plant is found in almost all house gardens.

Kaberi often dreams of "Joya and Kaziranga Park," which connects with Kaziranga's ecological richness. She has beautiful childhood memories in the park. Those dream imagery strengthen her longing for her hometown due to displacement. Such landscapes symbolize places of longing. Similarly, the mention of Jokholabondha and Burapahar (the old hill) reflects the familiarity indigenous people have with their terrain. Hills, rivers, and forests are not distant tourist locations but lived landscapes shaping identity. Rivers have special symbolic importance. Example is the description of The Brahmaputra River which is a recurring, significant feature in the narrative.

The description of the Kolong River at Nowgong represents her childhood memory and regional attachment. In contrast, the Kabini River near Nagarhole National Park appears in a different geographical

context, emphasizing displacement. This shows that displacement happens not only to immigrants but also to people who migrate from one state to another.

Final Observation

This research provides enough supporting evidence that *Rebirth* is not merely a psychological narrative but an in-depth analysis of Assamese indigenous life. Through domestic traditions, ecological landscapes, socio political memory, and culturally rooted names, Jahnavi Barua constructs a narrative deeply connected in Assamese identity. Culture emerges as a sustaining force, enabling emotional resilience and displacement.

The novel contains the touch of community bonding, ecological sensitivity, ritual symbolism and historical memories. The protagonist's native place functions as an emotional refuge, while names preserve collective memory and shows cultural displacement through names. Longing for her native land is expressed through her memories. Together, these elements reaffirm the strength of indigenous culture.

With these valuable findings *Rebirth* exhibits the fact that identity is inseparable from land, language and community. It foregrounds Assamese indigenous life. Barua not only narrates a personal journey but also preserves and celebrates a regional cultural consciousness and psychological dimension of women's displacement due to marital life.

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