

## Trauma Caused Through Gender Specific Functional Stratification In Jahnvi Barua's 'Rebirth'

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**Abstract:** Women torment through the gender specific stratified roles in the contemporary patriarchal social and familial setup, that loads her with immense obligations, however with a denial of dignity and recognition. Therefore, she is wretched at the crossroad between career and family. The women, who aspire to transcend their life, seeking existential individuality, are forced into the realm of perennial negation of arbitrary positions that destabilizes them with a denial and misrecognition for having debunked the set arrangement of the existing phallogocentric structures. The men, being kernel of existing patriarchal structure, discern a threat to their socially perpetuated domination, when women plan to widen their existential horizon beyond their traditional mantle. Such an insecurity towards men's prestige, position and control ahead of their female counterpart perpetuate them into a stance that alarms them of losing their subordinate partner, who they feel are inferior, and suit for the labor and tasks which men perceive mean and inferior to their gender. The men resist women's new aspiration beyond the existing stratified duties and the identity. The phallogocentric structure within which women are supposed to exist hinders their every attempt to seek and fit the new roles and pursuits of independent recognition, contrary such structure even punishes them for the insurgence against the set social plexus. Jahnvi Barua's narrative *Rebirth: A Novel* provide an adequate analogy, a replica of real-life shared experience of women in their gender specific functional stratification. The paper aims at exposing the patriarchal structure sustained for the benefit of male gender.

**Keyword:** Trauma, Gender Stratification, Functional Fit stratification, Janhavi Barua

The long battle for the women's natural and equal share, traceably found, fought and advocated since the publication of Mary Wollstonecraft's treatise 'A Vindication of the Rights of Women' (1792) that implores the rights of women in confidence with men as their natural partners. She underlines the objectification of women and seeks more humane treatment of equality. Further, Olive Schreiner's 'Women and Labour' (1911), has highlighted the nuances of conventional stereotypical representation and life of women mere as domestic gender. This articulation for women found sublimity into gender studies as the gender discourse with publication of Virginia Woolf's 'A Room of One's Own' (1929) that can be claimed to have further development, as a call to reassert the views of Wollstonecraft and Schreiner, in which Woolf eludes about the lack of women emancipation and argued for the feminine gender to aspire to seek identity and education beyond the shackle of patriarchy. Woolf's views then were considered unconventional. Meanwhile Judith Butler states sex is natural but criticises the social imposition of gender and roles discriminatorily to the one being male and female which eventually undermines the naturalness of sex. Further, Simone Beauvoir precisely maintains that it is not the birth that determines woman but the society that creates her. And Wendy Bottero in her book, 'Stratification: Social Division and Inequality', explicitly highlights the elements of stratification based on her observation on the stratified lifestyle in the social paradigms:

"Social division and inequality is about who gets what, and how. It is concerned with the patterning of inequality and its enduring consequences for the lives of those who experience it. It offers a fresh perspective on the stratification debate, looking at how our most personal choices (of sexual partners, friends, consumption items and lifestyle) are influenced by hierarchy and pressures towards social similarity." (Bottero)

Despite the history of such debate, attempt, liberation movements and advocacy of the rights of women for the women and their claims over identity, recognition, and coexistence as natural and equal, Barua's protagonist is still a subject of gender stratification in the contemporary educated society that claims to have evolved the human. Barua's text highlights the notion that "the universal presence of stratification is precisely the requirement faced by any society of placing and motivating individuals in the social structure" (Moore 242).

Jahnvi Barua's narrative *Rebirth: A Novel*, is taken to depute as an example that mirrors the existing arrangement that prevails even in urban modern society. The study relates the prevailing gender specific stratification of women through the life of the protagonist of the novel at scrutiny. Kaberi finds her existence stuck in the constructed cannons of contemporary Indian patriarchal society. She suffers an extreme trauma caused through an imposed stratification as an inevitable and required under the affiliation of love and family. Irrespective of gender, every subject involved in certain functioning seeks an opportunity to excel for better identity and existence. However, in the male dominated society, the opportunities do exist in the gender paradigm, structured around men at the center to claim maximum opportunities and keep tasks that have more

prestige, social acceptance, and monetary value. On the contrary, the phallogocentric distributions deny women equal share, prestige, and opportunities from becoming financially independent, so that they would continue to be enslaved easily and forced to be stuck with menial chores and remain permanently dependent on men equal to the volunteered labor with no prestige. Men ensure that their power position is sustained, and their dominance is kept up over their female counterpart, to stringent their hold on the male centered structure so that they can force women rely upon them existing at the periphery. However, everyone is tempted to get his or her chance at their own future, which is always for the hope of stability. The nuances of stability differ due to the functional stratification for men and women based on their appraisal, which is highly influenced by patriarchy and cultural norms. The distribution of the existing functional tasks lacks gender parity. Gender stratification is much endorsed by patriarchy as a requirement for the social well-being of the family. Jahnavi Barua's narrative *Rebirth: A Novel*, prompts a story of a woman protagonist Kaberi, whose present is obstructed in rooted conservative dogmatic tenets still prevailing even in the urban educated contemporary locales. The existing patriarchy is not only sustained but consolidated through an imposed stratification which society finds prerequisite and reasons out to advocate it as inevitable and required to the family and social necessity. Kaberi, the protagonist of the novel, resists her role in family and society to be presumed and stratified as normalized, consequently she undergoes isolation and suffers traumatic experiences, at the level of family and society, which inflict her emotional pangs, for having debunked the familial hierarchy and fitted roles.

Kaberi is a type-cast who struggles in her every functional role and relationship, in the pursuit of personal and economic independence. She, being a modern woman, is aware of her credible personal attributes, therefore, she resists fitting into the stratified functions, which she is expected to fulfill as her natural obligation. However, Kaberi prefers to negotiate for her career, and conflict against the double binaries at the other fronts - her chaotic family failed-ambience- with unfaithful husband, and a strong patriarchy at her parent's home. Her denial, thus, to fit into the stratified roles against the phallogocentric and discriminative yet normalized family structure, enforces upon her an isolation that punishes her into an intense trauma.

The novel *Rebirth* unfolds a series of experiences underscoring the harsh reality of terrible human relationships perpetuated through gender stratification. Kaberi is a married and pregnant woman, who lives alone, and is jilted and cheated by her husband. She is cast embossing her writing career to seek independence. Barua's portrayal of Kaberi's character pushes the new age reader to the fresh take on the duality of present educated Indian social milieu. The contemporariness, that Barua resonates is still rooted in the age-old gender biasness that adequately represents the concretely constructed gender specific stratifications, which aggravatedly has proven timeless and still impede women from realizing their full potential in the pursuit of existence and survival as equal human, irrespective of what gender they naturally propagate. There is an intrigue surrounding the position of female gender at the institutions and experiences like of family, marriage, parenthood, couple relationship, notions of love, women, types of marriage and obligation. No wonder, that the term gender, in relation to the women is widely discussed with regards to the issues of women. Whatsoever, Robert Connell aptly defines *gender* as, "... a social practice that is organized in relation to the material realities of the human body. Masculinity and femininity are gender projects whereby individuals negotiate their understanding of one in relation to the other. While biological differences exist between men and women, only through the social process of defining masculinity and femininity do these biological differences become stratified." (O'Brien 542)

The biological difference, thus, are consolidated to dominates over the female gender as other to the men and the gender roles continue to be stratified with the women identity as naturally subordinate. The protagonist Kaberi is trammelled with the predicament of marriage and relational coexistence in her family. Her psyche has been prepared to carry out her sole duty as the feminine partner to her man, for years into the marriage, in which the man never loved her, and she has "known all along" as the character of Ranjit asserts "It was Mama who had fallen in love with you." (Barua 132), to validate her strangled existence. After the astute violence that emerges in the frustration of being constantly unsatisfied with each other. The rejection of Kaberi in their marriage, is reduced merely being the choice of Ranjit's parents. Kaberi suffers the delusions of obligations that she admits and has lived for years which she monologues to her unborn child: "Was it love that I had felt for your father all these years, or did I love him merely because I had been expected to?" (Barua 174). Her life adverts around the necessities of her husband she assumed to fulfil. The much-celebrated gender-based subjugation, evident in the contemporary patriarchy, further dominates Kaberi's life and continues to justify it as normal, and thus her traumatize her existence into the stratified and functionally fit family dynamics; equally to the educated and non-educated, if one is a woman. The deviations, that the relationship of Kaberi and Ranjit goes through, are merely lay upon the imbibed gender differences and disparity. Kaberi is chosen by Ranjit's mother like an object to be wed and bedded with Ranjit and therefore they probably have nothing common to relate and share, neither that mattered then; because practically at every discourse of the novel the portrayed character Kaberi is scapegoated in chains of the family being and obliged to forgive without reprisal. The enunciation of Kaberi, staged in the patterns of her life, represents the gender specific social stratification adhered to the social norms that reduces women into a servitude towards her husband or men as the character in the novel explicitly admits:

"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. ... I even did all the ironing myself, meticulously placing a white linen cloth on the trousers so they would not get all shiny and look old before their time... Once he was through with his bath and was dressed in his fresh clothes your father wanted a hot breakfast on the table. That really was no burden for I loved cooking; strangely—I should not be telling you this—but it made me feel desirable in a way I could not really account for." (Barua 2-3)

Thus, Kaberi's limited world was stratified to restrict her existence - to lay out her husband's "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", and not to have a consciousness to exist as prominent beyond; as if she existed in the family and the relationship only for such tasks and therefore, shall claim the controlled identity and existence her husband defines. She is wo(o)-man, therefore shall not exist beyond that! Kaberi lacks her to be dominant conscious being to realise the disparity, which the women gender has constantly survived so far and does not practically require any validation into the prevailing hierarchy. Women seeking desirability within the refused existence by their own family is being normalized to sustain the juncture of a picture-perfect family that suffocates the sacrificing woman in the namesake of love, family, and marriage. The estimates to measure Kaberi's stratified existence are- love, marriage, home, children, and a validation from her husband and parents. She aligns her husband to the masculine traits being considered superior and neutralises her financial dependence on him as natural without realising the denied consideration underneath, as an equal partner.

Kaberi's subjugation is forced with the docile trait that represents the cultural and societal standards in the presumption of having a healthy and good family, however, they are perpetuated upon the phallogocentric structure of inequality and marginalisation for the women. Kaberi's survival of domestic violence is normalized, as it is generally done under any patriarchy, by her mother based on her own marital subjugated experiences that she perceives natural and normal for the female gender at the hand of man one is married to. Her mother ensured to sustain a cold and detached affinity between Kaberi and her father, deeming it as social necessity for a girl, for her survival, growth and identity underscores the unwritten code exercised by every father to control a female child. Even when the control leads to a violence assault that may thrust the female child, as it does to Kabery, into a deep lasting neurotic wound pushing her into traumatic realm. Kabery vainly dissents her suffering against the violence, to her indifferent mother who would as expected would perceive it inevitable for a woman species as she remonstrates, "He hits me, Ron hits me." (Barua 182), was an inadequate rant to divulge forth the cruelty of men towards the women which is normalised and neglected, as her mother would have chosen to keep her stratified. Kaberi seeks an acquiescence and aid approval with a strong consent to guide her through her inability to decide her future course. Kabery presumed her own mother would assist, if not console, her for she has age old life experiences and maturity to take a call upon whether she shall discontinue the marriage: "Should I leave him, Ma?" (Barua 182), to which she bluntly replies as a perpetuator of the patriarchy: "No, no, not with the child on its way, it needs a father, his name to carry." (Barua 182).

However, Kabery's mother shall not be expected, with the experiences she did have under patriarchy, to push her daughter against the deeply rooted masculine structure/s created, endorsed and sustained using muscles for ages, where such attempts of rebel, Kabery dares imagine, would surely have been thrashed then and there deeming it punishable offence by someone who the patriarchy perceives inferior, subordinated and meant to have born and exist for menial work and slavery at the disposal of men, and what more worth is, to remain an object to please his carnal cravings and to contour a mean (body) to beget his offspring to maintain continuity of his clan and lineage. The life of Kaberi and her mother suggest the life of women in periphery that constantly revolved around the four walls of the house with the men at center and dominance. The life of Kaberi elucidates the existing arrangement reflecting lack of parity in distribution of work and opportunities that denies a women of her right to excel in career, therefore, most of the women are forced to choose an easy alternative option of survival for admitting their incapacities lacking muscles and existence of any women centric familial and societal any set up or structure of their own that may make them possible to exist and survive independently against the other, the long preserved, sustained power structure disguised under the stratified social and familial structures that has been positioning and treating men and women differently, unequally, and unjustifiably over the later. Therefore, such confinement as they were to Kabery in the novel, are common to women gender, as Wendy Bottero rightly points,

"The asymmetry of women's and men's relations is a marked feature of almost all social settings and leads to considerable separation in women's and men's lives. This is a general feature of stratification. Men and women typically spend much of their lives in different sorts of work and leisure environments. In settings strongly skewed to one gender or the other and pursue skewed lifestyle tastes and interests. This is a consequence of the

impact of gender stratification on social arrangements, but it also helps to reproduce gender divisions." (Bottero 113)

In the epistemologies dealing with humanities, more specifically, in gender studies and feminism, the movement advocating women's rights have witnessed various disagreements since the inception of family structure over who would forge the domination in the distribution of duties and resources, which still exists. Accustomed to such gender divisions in the prevalent socio-cultural gender biased dynamics, Kaberi, all her life, has lived on motivation to educate herself to be put into an affluent marriage, care for the household, and cast herself into roles to comfort her husband. However, such stereotyped mainstreaming of gender specific task conflicted with her individual needs as human, beyond forming the other gender to male. Her need to have independent existence and to be recognised not as other to someone but a woman of/for herself set her as rebel. She has been conscious of being herself and to belong to own self beyond any. On the contrary she has been forced to be disentangled from the clutches of the complex mesh weaved around her husband. Though she felt to be at comfort to exist limitedly with her submissive comprehension of her existence for the certain stratified roles that were allotted to her. However, being jilted by her husband for his own life choices coerced her into the quest to seek self-existence and recognition beyond the stratified existence, which were at the question. Her role in forming the defining other (her husband) who is about to loosen the knot to who she had been trying her best to become and identified by. Her being all other to her husband has been her only identity. He was important so far, for her, to form her identity.

The functional necessity of gender stratification is the basic paradigm, that determines the woman as the necessity that men individually affiliate. Aligning to such notions, Ranjit walks away from Kaberi in his infidelity and starts living with Lakshmi, his office colleague and girlfriend. It is after the months of living apart, Ranjit apprehends Kaberi's pregnancy through the medical bills prescribed by gynecologist Dr Joseph. Ranjit comes around to claim her with authoritative voice and concern that can be conceived as his comeback to claim his ownership on his woman and the unborn child, which is consensually emphasized by Kaberi as she constantly longs for her husband to 'come back' (Barua 29). He yells at her, referring about the pregnancy asking "And when were you planning to tell me?" (Barua 79). He asserts his claim at his objectives in life that includes persuasion of children and wife. He further drops the plan to divorce her, "Don't you know why? Because of the child, of course" (Barua 84). The consequence of having children makes Kaberi an amenable target as her husband decides to predate on her esteem and breaks the barriers of mutual reconciliation as he initially dictated mocking Kaberi that he would not leave Laxmi and would continue his affiliation with both "...will come and go". (Barua 85). He ridicules Kaberi for her dependency on him, which is an outcome of ages old stratifications perceived them fit to menial functions at home, and underestimates her for having grown financially dependent on him during their marriage. Kaberi's apprehensiveness about such informed infidelity and objectification is met with the threats of custody battle for her kid, wherein she succumbs the legal battle and gives into his demand and accepts him consensually redeeming her household duties again. This is not a paradox to what Kabery has been aspiring to for so long, however it is a harsh social reality that underscores the deeply rooted phallogocentric social stereotypes which would not easily be dismantled nor could easily be altered by the elk of Kabery. Kaberi has been hosting Ranjit's friends and into a similar socialisation at a friend's place she watches Ranjit kiss Lakshmi, "transfixed as the dark profile of the man bends down to the woman and meets it in a kiss...It is Ron." (Barua 131)

The character of Ranjit is a contemporary picture-perfect impression of the accustomed duality of the social standards that have formed the modern ensembles of equality that has been refusing women equal choices. Ranjit assaults Kaberi constantly as an easy substitute to release his office frustration and everyday exasperations, meanwhile also holds the demeanor of liberal ideals, wherein he enjoys mingling around people in his office space and further socialisations. Contrary he erects bars that subjugate Kaberi to the household chores and typical homely decorations that can be grossly considered as inflicted puppetry, enslavement into homely ideals, and objectification. His behavior around the time of naming the child suggests his licentiousness in the imbibed patriarchy, which validates his dominance. Amy Kroska in her article 'Investigating Gender Differences in the Meaning of Household Chores and Child Care' invites a serious consideration on such social gender biased heterogeneity,

"Women and men view about one third of family chores differently, but paid and unpaid works mediate, suppress, and moderate the relationship between gender and several task meanings. Specifically, when work patterns are controlled, women's less positive impression of several domestic tasks becomes evident. Also, as women's share of their family's non-masculine and paid work increases, their impression of several non-masculine tasks become less positive and/or less potent. This suggests that because women are more likely than men to do domestic work out of obligation, rather than by choice, the women who do the majority of their family's domestic work are more likely than men with a similar workload to find domestic chores unpleasant and disempowering." (Kroska)



The trauma of violence in the life of Kaberi has been inflicted in her since her childhood. She has lived all her life experiencing assaults by her drunkard father, seeing things hurled around within the closed doors, and beating her mother. This endurance in the family acclimatised Kaberi to the inflictions of marital violence and to be stratified to the ways of men that her upbringing normalised. She scaffolds these ways in her life, normalising Ranjit's violence under marriage obligations, and consciously letting it off for her unborn child even when Ranjit assaults her for her rebels. She caresses her swollen belly and justifies to herself and her unborn child that it is his own father, that the child will learn to accept as he grows along, "Ron lets me go with a jerk and I lose my balance and sit down heavily on the bed. Hush, hush little one, it is only your father. You will grow accustomed to him in time." (79)

Kaberi suffers her husband's attitude to deny due respect as equal partner, rather he treats her as a lesser important part. Disillusioned through misrecognition in her marriage, Kaberi is pushed into the realm of identity crises that to makes her perceive her efforts and contributions in the marital life failed and recognized. Expectedly, such a circumstance rebated her further to another world - the pursuit of identity, existence, and happiness. The subdued senses, once sharpened through education induces her into a realization to feel her essence. Furthermore, the same character i.e., Kaberi, having a freedom to conscript writing career and manage to embark on her individual choices, is seen powerful, more mature with new independence without a man; therefore, she could efficiently rebuff the advances and attempt of Ranjit to reconcile with his wife Kaberi, leaving his illicit partner, that the narration thus elucidates through Kaberi's discussion with her friend Preetha, "He has offered to leave her and come back."

'So where is the problem?'

'I have to think things through- decide what I want for baby and me.'" (Barua 200)

Kaberi is sorted to exist and contrive upon about herself and the baby and avails no space to any possibility to allow her husband to exist. She is indifferent of any such a feeling except for only the baby she is concerned of. Even when she senses the possibility to reconsider her marriage, she sidelines the thought confidently, with self-belief to exist without a man, that makes her asserts, "I am also aware of crossing a line I cannot step back across." (Barua 202) Kaberi's successful survival and revival- a *Rebirth*, as a woman validates the possibility that Kingsley Davis and Wilbert E. Moore's 'Some Principles of Stratification' propagate,

"... to instil in the proper individuals, the desire to fill certain positions, and, once in these positions, the desire to perform the duties attached to them. Even though the social order may be relatively static in form, there is a continuous process of metabolism as new individuals are born into it, shift with age, and die off. Their absorption into the positional system must somehow be arranged and motivated. This is true whether the system is competitive or non-competitive" (Moore 242).

Kaberi's concern has been the sense of marginalisation that paved through her pregnancy in her seven years of marriage that only objectified her at the hand of her husband Ranjit. Ranjit, being a man doesn't feel obliged or answerable to his relationship with his wife Kaberi and keeps himself open and free for extra marital affair. He felt dissatisfied in her company, in his monotonous marriage, and therefore is seen perpetuating his frustration on Kaberi. His economic and financial dominance forces Kaberi into isolation, as he constantly forces Kaberi to stay aloof and lonely in her confined social circle. Ranjit's friend Rahul is aware of his affair with an office colleague, though he pretends to be unaware in the pretext of not hurting anyone. This presupposition of Rahul with a blunt excuse vocalizes the sexist ideologies and sexism in the contemporary culture. However, Kaberi realizes her dwindling and fickle position in the relation and family, where she has been investing unconditionally, after witnessing Ranjit's intimate proximities towards his illicit partner at Rahul and Sonia's house. She senses implicit approval from Rahul as well to this illegitimacy as normal to men, when she hears Rahul's wife Sonia console her saying: "Rahul knew, of course, he had always known. And not said a word to me" (Barua 135). Thus, stratification seems normal to both genders. However, it engenders unceasing issues to women only, when perceived discriminatory in gender-based stratification.

Kaberi constantly suffers objectification at the threshold of marriage. Her dependency on Ranjit emerges as the main cause of her subjugation that she seeks to pacify becoming mother. She becomes desperate with an obsession having a child, which does not reciprocate well by Ranjit. He refrains from emotional involvements and perceives her only as an object for his desire under the license of marriage, though for Kaberi, on the contrary, has been a means of lifetime survival. Therefore, she largely depends on him for survival needs though which means Kaberi's limited existence and identity, like of most of Indian women under the perpetuated patriarchy. He caters to her financial needs that he beguiles as the care.

Thus, the functional fit stratification only fits women into certain obligations and sets men liberal and unaccountable. The complexities of relation Jahnvi Barua's *Rebirth* elucidate through the story of Kaberi sensitises the reader towards the functional fit stratifications that incites traumatic lifelong endurance shackling women's upsurge as equal human.

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