



The Avatar In Jahnvi Barua's Rebirth

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Abstract:

Rebirth, by Jahnvi Barua is the story of Kaberi, a young woman who is married to Ranjit and resides in Bangalore. Prolonged years of childlessness makes their relationship estranged and the book opens at a point when Kaberi is pregnant but their marital relationship is on the verge of a breakage. Through the narrative technique of interior monologue is brought to forefront Kaberi's inner and outer world as she negotiates between them in turbulent waters of human relationships. Her narrative to her unborn child and her self realization through her avatar, alter ego Joya forms the core of the novel. In the end she like her avatar emerges as an empowered woman.

Key words: avatar, empowerment, Lacan, mirror stage, self

1.Introduction

In computing, an avatar is the graphical representation of the user or the user's alter ego or character. Neither permanently within the margins of the human self, nor totally devoid of humanity in the cold dominions of binary data, the precise position of the avatar seems opaque. The alter ego, on the other hand, is a second self which is believed to be distinct from the person's original or normal personality. In such an analysis, the avatar is close akin to the alter ego. In many ways virtual worlds emulate the real, with the fundamental rules of gravity, linear time, topographical space and distance, and crucially, the representation of living creatures to inhabit the virtual space and time. The typical avatar is visually similar to the physical human body, and there is evidence to suggest that avatars display humanistic behaviour and conform to the social rules of the real world.

Before proceeding further, a clear conception of the self is also essential. According to Jung, the self is one of the various archetypes. It signifies the coherent whole, unifying both the consciousness and unconscious mind of a person. The Self, according to Jung, is realized as the product of individuation, which is defined as the process of integrating one's personality. The ego is the center of conscious identity, whereas the Self is the center of the total personality—including consciousness, the unconscious, and the ego. The Self is both the whole and the center. While the ego is a self-contained little circle off the center contained within the whole, the Self can be understood as the greater circle. Psychoanalytic theory has attempted to provide the means to form an understanding of the complexities of the human mind, supplying answers to questions surrounding identity and agency in the world.

2.Objective Of The Paper

Using the framework of Lacan's mirror stage as a means to describe the origins and persistence of the human subject, an attempt has been made in the paper to explore the protagonist's self in Jahnavi Barua's novel *Rebirth* not only through the persona of the protagonist but also through the avatars or the alter egos of the self represented through the character of Joya. An attempt at the exploration of the self is also made through the narratives or more specifically through the monologue of the protagonist Kaveri.

3.Lacan's Mirror Stage And Its Relationship With The Avatar

Lacan locates the mirror stage to the development of a child between the ages of 6 and 18 months. Such a child can recognize as such his own image in the mirror. In the case of intelligent animals such as monkeys, this act of recognition is self-exhausting and its implications extend no further. In the case of the child, however, this recognition has a profound and enduring impact: in his mirrored gestures and in his reflected play, the child experiences the relation between the movements assumed in the image and the reflected environment and between this virtual complex and the reality it reduplicates the child's own body and the persons and things around him. In other words, whereas the monkey sees in the mirror simply another monkey, the child sees reflected himself and his relationship with the environment. Lacan stresses that we must understand the mirror stage as an identification which results in a transformation in the subject: though the child is somewhat helpless, unable to walk or even stand up, he exhibits a jubilant assumption of his spectacular image. The mirror stage occurs prior to the child's actual acquisition of a sense of self, a sense of itself as the subject in distinction from the objects of the world: the child experiences, as projected in its mirror image, itself and its surroundings as an integrated whole. Lacan's mirror stage, we find it to contain fundamental concepts which we might more readily associate with avatar use. The mirror stage concerns a perception of selfhood, beyond the mere specular image. Lacan's child perceives the image in the mirror, not simply as a reflection of the self, but as a foreign and estranged entity. The reflected image is understood by the child as a separate entity, external from the self, contained body and moreover an image which contradicts the fragmented self by producing a totality. Paradoxically, both alienation and identification become central to the mirror image. This is what we see paralleled in the relationship with the avatar.

4.The Novel

Rebirth is the story of Kaberi, a young woman married to Ranjit and resides with her husband in Bangalore. Belonging to the hills, valleys and tea gardens of Assam, moves into the concrete and mortar space in Richmond Road of Bangalore city after her marriage to Ranjit (Ron). She assimilates (or tries to) into a corporate culture her husband is part of. From picking the right wooden furniture, furnishing the bathroom with branded towels to arranging the living area in the most sophisticated combination of colours, fabrics and flowers on every tabletop, Kaberi finds her days spent under the

amlakhi trees, admiring the mighty Brahmaputra River, the smell of the paddy fields and the morning sun atop the Kamakhya temple turning lifeless shadows. Darkness thickens in the form of another bitter truth in the face of Kaberi when her husband walks out on the marriage for another woman. Speaking to her unborn child she laments,

"You certainly took your time to show up...your father had given up and was drifting away from me..."

It is quite amazing to discern how little respect a man has for his wife. Once Ranjit assures himself of his wife's inability to reproduce a child, he abandons her only to make a selfish return on learning about her pregnancy later. She transforms from a vulnerable wife to an independent woman, a woman who refuses to succumb to her husband's self centered demands. She wants to win over her husband but not through the news of her pregnancy and therefore she does not reveal the news of her pregnancy to her husband.

Other than this we have the subplot of the Assam Andolon at the backdrop. There is the presence of Joya, Kaberi's childhood friend who dominates the story and Kaberi's life throughout.

5. Alienation And Identification

The mirror image is the site where the subject becomes alienated from the self. The vision of an estranged body in many ways parallels the initial experience of virtual worlds. In such spaces, one eventually comes to face the image of their avatar, and, as with the child's first sight of the alien specular image, the digital body appears to be a foreign, extrinsic entity.

In Rebirth, Joya is Kaveri's avatar. Just like the computerized graphical avatar, Joya is not Kaberi's reflection but she is everything which Kaberi is not. She represents Kaberi's alter ego, someone from whom she is both alienated and identical at the same time. Joya is a medical student who believes in free speech, free love and free everything. Unthinkingly she marries Bidyut who is one of the boys who hang around the tea shop. Joya retaliates against her family to marry Bidyut whom her family members think to be undeserving of her. Kaberi, on the other hand is not explicit in her expressions like Joya. She is soft spoken, reserved and marries according to the choice of her parents. In this sense, she is alienated from her avatar. She has been a patient and obedient daughter and a wife. Kaberi's passivity comes across as a sharp contrast to the women usually portrayed in the writings of North-East women. Right from her childhood, she has barely recognized her wishes, and the same trend follows after her marriage. Her passive and

inward-looking character is laid bare in the opening paragraph of the book: Before her husband left her for another woman, she “had been partial to the large soft sofa in front of the television, from where I had a good view of the screen, but from where I also looked inwards, into the heart of the house. I did not see much of the sky or the buildings clustered around our own, but all that, anyway, did not cross my mind very often, so focused was I on your father and myself and the home we had fashioned together.”

Kaberi’s alienation with her avatar is also highlighted in the fact that compared to Ron, Bidyut is a loving and a caring husband who who laments her death even after so many years of her absence. Bidyut is immersed in his own grief and draws strength from her memories and keeps them alive even though he disconnects with the family probably to escape the pity and sympathy. Rather, Joya’s memories give him inspiration to settle down in life and become a successful businessman.

Simultaneous to the sense of alienation with the unified body, Lacan's infant goes through a process of identification with the image of itself in the mirror stage. 'We are only to understand the mirror stage as an identification. The infant identifies with the unified body perceived in the reflection, where the image of wholeness is assumed to be the self, and adopted as such. Evans describes this process as 'to recognise one's self in the image and to appropriate the image as oneself'. The avatar does not visibly represent our physical body with the immediacy of a reflective device, however, through the ability to alter and change appearance, the avatar comes to be representative of the self through modification.

Kaberi talks to her unborn child, detailing her life and its trials as they happen, but also reflecting upon the past : her friendships, especially with Joya who“ was my friend. No, that is not adequate at all; she was so much more. I would like to say she was my sister but when we were created of different flesh so let me call her alter ego, for it was difficult sometimes to distinguish where Joya ended and I began, where we flowed into one another, a pair of underground streams.”

It has been three years since Joya was killed when the bus in which she was travelling with other doctors was ambushed, but Joya's absence still haunts Kaberi.

During her childhood Joya is the one with whom she spends most of her time and Joya is the one with whom she shares her emotions and thoughts. Both of them become allies in adolescent quests about sex and the human body. It is during Joya’s ‘juron’ that Jeuti Bora selects Kaberi as her prospective daughter-in-law. The vibrant Joya finds her way out through Kaberi for the first time when Kaberi warns Ron that if he doesnot terminate

his illicit affair , she would divorce him. Joya's character had always been just the opposite of Kaberi. Whereas Kaberi was silent, passive, and lacked courage, Joya demonstrated strong will and free opinion. She had her own way of getting her things done and even amidst lots of protests from her family, marries the man she had been in love with Kaberi could never gather the courage and determination that her friend showed in being a part of the revolutionary marches against the police authorities, organizing black outs and taking the lead in many such 'andolans'. Joya's demise had been a terrible loss to Kaberi and in her reminiscences of the past, we are made aware of the great influence that her friend had on her. Kaberi's memories of the shared past with Joya gives her much courage at a time when she is lonely. Like Joya , she emerges as an empowered woman at the end of the novel.

When Kaberi goes home after her father's death, she wishes to meet Bidyut inspite of the fact that Ron doesnot like him because Bidyut is her only point of contact with Joya. The distinction between the self and the avatar blurs when Bidyut showers his affections on Kaberi, as to him Kaberi becomes a replica of his wife Joya.

6.Conclusion

Even though Ron confesses of moving out of the house and probably the life of the other woman, Barua does not end her book with a possible reconciliation between the couple. Rather she leaves it open-ended with a strong suggestion that Kaberi may not be able to accept Ron anymore as she discloses her awareness of "crossing a line I cannot step back across." Kaberi's self-awareness and determination is final as she finishes writing her book, plans the child's arrival, and heads towards the hospital on her own as the labour pain starts. By this time, she has ultimately learnt whom she can rely on, the first and foremost being herself. Thus we see that it is through the avatar that Kaberi realizes her true self. According to Payel D Chowdhury Kaberi's journey towards establishing her own identity "does not meet sudden peaks but progresses gradually to a climax" as she is finally able to come out of "the dark night to behold a day that promises to illumine her road ahead without the need for her to look back, even for once."

7.Reference

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