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**DOMESTIC SPACE AS A SITE OF FEMALE AGENCY IN HASAN
AZIZULHAQUE'S AGUNPAKHI**

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Abstract:

Hasan Azizul Haque's Agunpakhi remains one of the most seminal works of Partition Literature. The novel's historical context and structure helps us to unravel multi layered concerns embedded under the political phenomenon of 'Partition', which permanently changed the discourse of history in the Indian subcontinent. Agunpakhi through its unnamed female narrator portrays the minute of daily life of a middle class housewife and how she deals with the mammoth socio political event of 'Partition'. Agunpakhi illustrates vividly contemporary responses regarding Partition, with the spectre of being a 'refugee' looming large. The text can be read as a register of evolution of the marginalized female coming to terms with the male centric discourse of 'Partition' and 'Independence'. This essay ventures to explore how the domestic space becomes an important focal point as the narrator tries to wrest agency. 'Home' becomes a form of episteme where the domestic entanglements characterise themselves gradually, the domestic space becomes a microcosm, where the unnamed narrator is waging an existential war where her own identity and her relationship with the family becomes increasingly tenuous. The narrator tries to assert her identity as it is besieged by historical forces. This essay illustrates how the entire novel becomes a 'register of the female experience' by investigating the 'domestic sphere'; a decidedly 'female sphere', and how the unnamed narrator subverts conventions to gain political agency.

Keywords: Resistance, Domestic Space, Agency, Feminist, Identity, Othering, Female Agency, etc..

Introduction:

Partition novels are characterised by constantly fluctuating perspectives of the political phenomenon which results into constantly shifting narrative point of views. Partition, being a result of male centric political discourse, multifarious viewpoints regarding this political event tend to be patriarchal in nature, where women are constantly 'othered', and in this marginalized plane of 'othering' is where Hasan AzizulHaque's *Agunpakhi* locates itself. It is the 'becoming' and 'unbecoming' of an unnamed Muslim housewife. Countering the male gaze of Partition, here we find a feminine space in a constantly imploding world. This female gaze has a historical context, and it is in that context the author seeks to portray the impact and ramifications of Partition. The unnamed narrator is a housewife of an affluent middle class Muslim family in a village of Bengal, through her journey we get a portrayal of the



marginalized and localized reality of Partition. The novel is the narrative of the 'othered', thus we find spaces the 'othered' female inhabits; the kitchen, the bedroom, but never the courtyard, the open space of the courtyard is freely accessed by her politically ambitious husband who uses it as his own stage to preside over matters plaguing the village. The concept of 'Home' is contested, it becomes a geometrical space surgically defined by patriarchal conventions. It is only when the patriarchal norms come crashing down and threatens the society it itself has constructed we find the unnamed narrator weaving an identity of her own, it is exactly when the conventional symbols are abandoned, she finds an individual way to fuse these symbols to synthesize a historiography of her own.

Domestic Space: As a Site of Agency:

The symbolic image of the Indian woman, historically, has been closely tied to the domestic sphere; the construction of the myth of the 'Indian woman' is directly related to her role in daily household activities. The norms the Indian women are subjected to defining their boundaries are patriarchal in nature. During the time of political upheaval when Partition loomed large, this myth of the 'Indian woman' found new annals to channelize itself, this mythmaking of the woman was at the heart of the nature of communal divide. The middle class households were one of the most fertile epicenters of this myth creation, where the idea of 'woman' was equated with an idealized form of motherhood which later extended to envisage the whole country as the 'motherland'. The unnamed housewife of this affluent Muslim family has always been defined by such conventions, “ডাইনেবলেডায়ে বায়েবলেবায়েশু দুইহুকুমতামিলকক্যাকনমনেহয় জবনেরকুনোকাজনিজেনিজেকরিনিজেরইচ্ছাকেমনকরেখাটাতেহয়কুনোদিনজানিনাইমিকিমানুষামানুষেরছেঁয়াতা-ওকিআমারনিজেরছেঁয়া (Haque, 29).

‘If I was told to turn right, I turned right, if I was told to turn left I turned left. Obeying orders was my sole duty. Now that I ponder over my life it becomes all the more clear to me I never took any decision out of my own volition, I never knew how to be heard. Am I a human, or just a shadow? Is that shadow even mine?’ Hasan AzizulHaque right from the outset, lends a specific tone while creating the ‘world of the narrator’, before she got married at an early age she had a telling encounter with feminine reality when she witnessed the death of her widowed aunt. The silent, oblivious ignorance of the world in that sleepy village shaped her adolescence. After her marriage she arrives at a village which is not removed from the political upheavals shaping the time, it is only after her marriage that she becomes ‘aware’ about the time she is living in, she gradually starts to formulate her own relationship with the world. Her husband pesters her to ‘read’, impresses upon her the advantages of being ‘literate’, but, for a woman merely being ‘literate’ did not guarantee accessibility towards political agency. Her husband wanted her to become literate as long as it served the mythmaking narrative of the woman in a middle class household. The domestic space, thus, assumes an overarching presence in the life of a woman. It becomes an ‘episteme’ through which a woman’s identity is crafted.

To understand the place of a woman in a contemporary Muslim household we may take a look at Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain’s ‘Griha’ অতঃপরজমিলাকেখনআমাদেরবাসায়যাইতেআমু রোধকরলাম,তখনতিনিবললেনতাহারাকোনকালেবাড়িরবাহিরহ,কিন্তুইতাহাদেরবংশগৌরবকখন



‘ঘোড়ারগাড়ি বা অন্য কোন যানবাহনে আরোহণ করেন না আমি সবিস্ময়ে বলিলাম’ তবে আপনারা বিবাহ করিয়া শ্বশুর বাড়ি যান কি না? আপনার ভ্রাতৃবধূ আসিলেন কি করিয়া জমি লাউত্তর দিলেন? ইনি আমা-
দের আত্মীয়কন্যা এপাড়ায় কেবল আমাদেরই গোষ্ঠীর বাড়ি পাশাপাশি দেখিবে “এই বলিয়া তিনি আমাকে
অন্য একটাল ইয়াগিয়া বলিলেন এই আমার কন্যার বাড়ি এখন আমার বাড়ি চল তিনি আমাকে একটি অপ্র-
শস্ত গলির ভিতর দিয়া ঘুরাইয়া ফিরাইয়া লইয়া গেলে হারসকল গুলিকক্ষ দেখাইলে কক্ষগুলি “অসূর্য-
ম্পশ্য” বলিয়া বোধ হইল। অতঃপর একটি দ্বার খুলিলে দেখিলাম অপরদিকে পুত্রবধূ আচ্ছিন্ন মিলাবলিলে
ন,” দেখিলে এই দ্বারের ওপারে আমার ভাইয়ের বাড়ি পার্শ্ব আমার বাড়ি ও কক্ষবধূ থাকেন বলিয়া এ দ্বা-
রটি বন্ধ রাখি। আমাদের সওয়ারির দরকার হয় না কেন? অহা এখন বুঝিলে একপেস কল বাড়িই প্রদক্ষিণক
রাযায়।’

‘When I requested Jamila to visit our house sometime, she replied with pride that women of her family never set foot outside their own households, they never got inside any form of transports. Amazed, I asked “Sohow did you come to your in law’s house after marriage?” Jamila replied, “Every woman living in our block is related to our family some way or the other, in this block you will only see households of our relatives”. After saying this, she took me to another room and said “this is my daughter’s house, now come to mine.” She took me through a narrow lane which was dotted with rooms one after the other, some of the rooms were as impenetrable as a gynaceum. As we went on I saw Hasina’s daughter in law looking at us through one such room. Jamila said, “Look, there is my brother’s house, opposite to that here is mine. Daughter in law lives in that adjoining room, so I keep this door shut. Now can you see why we don’t need any transports?”. One can encircle the entirety of the house this way.’

Here we can see how the geographical contours of domesticity are constructed; the house is designed like a panoptic on where every movement of woman is subjected to surveillance.’ The woman lives in a constant state of surveillance, the unnamed narrator gets a taste of this at the aftermath of death of her son, the ritualistic tone and the vivid detailing of the congregation lays bare the space of the narrator in this ‘location’. This is the first instance where the narrator fully realised her ‘marginalized’ stature, she becomes aware of ‘othering’

দাফন করে সবার ফিরে আসতে আসতে দোপার গড়িয়ে গেলে পরখাওয়া দাওয়া শেষ হতে হতে দিনই ফেরায় ফুরিয়ে এল সবাই এসে বাড়ির ভিতরে উত্তরের ঘরের উসারায় বসে আত্মীয়কুটুম এসে ছোটুনমাতার ছেলেম
য়েসবাইকে এনে ঘর বাড়ি থেকে আমার ছোট ভাই মুরাখালা রাসবাই এয়েছে গুতার ওষিখানো যা
তো আত্মীয়গুটি ছিল কেউ বাদ যায় নি সবাই হাজির আর এয়েছে আমার বাপজি (Haque, 103).

‘It was during afternoon when everyone came back after the burial, the day was almost over when everyone was done eating. Seating arrangements were made at the northern side of the house; everyone including relatives came and sat there. Everyone came, my brother, my uncles, stepmother with her sons and daughters, relatives of my husband’s side of the family, everyone came. At last came my father.’

In grief, patriarchal conventions force her to be silent, she has no outlet, she is forced into linguistic loneliness, and this is where we find the key towards the inward nature of the text. Language becomes an important tool for the narrator. The novel becomes a linguistic register of the feminine self, we can see the dynamics of the family through her ‘gaze’ the



language becomes voice of the ‘othered’ ‘সোংসারেরকয়েদখানায়সারাজেবনেরমেয়াদেকয়েদখাটচিকুনদ্যাশেষুদুহচে কেযুদুধকরছে কতো লোকমরছেকতলোকখোঁড়াহচে কতদ্যাশ, কতঘরসংসারছারেখারেযেচোআরআমিকিজানক্যামিয্যাকনচোদবছরেরমেয়েআমারবিয়েরসো মায়েয্যাকনএমনিসারাদুনিয়ায়যুদুধয়েছিইকিছুইতোবুঝতেপারিনাইরঁধেছিবেড়েছিখয়েছিছে লেপুলেমানুষকরেছিধুনিযেকোনদিনভাবিনাইতাআবারঅ্যাকনসারাদুনিয়ায়যুদুধশুরুহয়েছেরতাহ হলোইবা,নিজেরাতোকিছুট্যারপাবনাতরচেয়েজটিমাসেগাঁয়েযিআগুনলাগাটাইদুপাড়াটোপুড়ে গেলসিধাক্কাজানেযেয়েলেগেছেতোমাদেরএইযুদুধরচেয়েঅ্যানেকবেশি (Haque, 130).

‘I am a prisoner serving life sentence in this world-how can I know and what do I care about war, countries and death, how can I know how people and families are perishing due to war? When I was fourteen even then people screamed ‘There is a war! There is a war!’ so what, it didn’t affect me, I cooked, I ate, took care of my children as they grew up, I never felt the need to think about war. People say the world is at war, the only thing that comes to mind is the blazing inferno which swept through the Hindu area last year, the pain I felt that day was much more than your World War.’

This language also traces the psychological plane of the narrator, how she constantly assesses her position in the domestic sphere, that the novel is about the process of ‘becoming’ makes itself clear. At this stage, the narrator is looking at the conventions that ‘define’ her, in this phase she is trying to find her voice through successful adjustments with conventions, but she becomes aware about the space she inhabits, this space will gradually shrink, and threaten the narrator’s notion of self identity. Md. Shamim Mondol in his research paper on *Agunpakhi* uses the example of Michel Foucault’s notions of Heterotopias.

Michel Foucault in his ‘Other Spaces’ outlines the notion of ‘Heterotopias,’ ‘There are also, probably in every culture, in every civilization, real places-places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society. Which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all spaces, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. Because these places are absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about, I shall call them, by way of contrast to utopias, heterotopias.’

Heterotopias then, are a kind of liminal space where the polyphonic nature of society reflects its multi layered form; it is opposed to the homogenic form of ‘utopias’. Heterotopias are a kind of space where historical context and an individual’s yearning to be free of any historical quantifiers are always at tension, the individual through constant negotiations with heterotopias carves out a space for herself. *Agunpakhi*’s narrative yields interesting results when seen in this context. As the narrator gradually learns to read and write her need for self expression grows, her ‘heterotopia’ that is, the domestic space slowly implodes, everything progressively worsens. Hasan AzizulHaque uses this process of implosion to skillful effect, the patriarchal structure of society gradually breaks down, and it’s withering has a psychological effect on the narrator, the crisis gradually reaches the household, the author brilliantly portrays this in a scene where stacks of paddy gets thinner by the day. Here we might look at the relationship between the individual and history. The individual’s yearning for self expression is one of utopian a historicity, but she can approach there only through



constant negotiations with the historical process. A historicity is an illusion; every lane an individual encounters is brimming with historical context. This crisis forces the narrator to think about the multifarious repercussions of the term 'identity' her marginalized position renders her helpless, she is swimming against the tide of history. Here, it should be remembered the domestic sphere is undergoing a radical change, social disintegration is mirrored through changing family dynamics, there are uncomfortable silences, bickering and this is the position from where the narrator's participation becomes an active one, she subverts the implications of patriarchal conventions, that is, the conventions that marginalized her so far, is in constant threat of break down due to Partition, and this is the space the narrator enters to wrest agency, she is not passive anymore, now she wants to be a facilitator of events themselves, thus a chasm starts to grow between her and rest of the family, she decides to use her 'literacy' combatively, ironically, she finds her husband in constant opposition to her space, she uses the conventions and symbolisms of pre Partition days to her advantage, she starts to construct her own historiography. The narrator's will to self expression becomes her historical context, and it is in this context that she carves out the idea of 'home', but partition renders the notion of a 'home' fanciful, the narrator stands for heterogeneity in a society engulfed in the inferno of homogeneous identity politics, 'এইবাড়িতেইহয়েআসারপরকুনো দিনগাঁয়েররাস্তায়বেকুইনাইপায়েহেঁটে.....পাড়ারভেতরদিয়েইবাড়িউবাড়িরপাশকাটিক্রোড়েগনে ওরএগনেরওপরদিয়েচলেযাই.....মাথারচুলপাতলাহয়েগেছেকছেওদুএকটা...। মনেকরলক্ষণ কএআরশুদুবক্ষ্যানেবেরিয়েছেলমশুনলেরাগকরবেননাআমিজাহা (Haque, 217). 'I never set foot outside the house ever since I came to this house as a wife.....I went by lanes, courtyards.....my hair is becoming thinner, greyer, it's been so long.....no need to tell my husband, I thought, even if he comes to know somehow, I think he will understand.'

Here, the narrator takes the bold step of going out of the house after she hears one of her Hindu neighbour's son has been killed in the riots. This very act of getting out of the house becomes a rebellion; here she is transgressing established patriarchal norms. We may recall the geography of the panoptic on like house in Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's 'Griha'. The narrator crosses this 'border', that too, to console a woman of the 'other' community. This is how she constructs her own historiography, giving conventions personalized meanings. She becomes a 'symbol' but not a mute, patriarchal one, a symbol steeped in history which constantly reminds a phase of socio political reality which will soon be the past, she becomes a register of pre Partition reality, but, crucially she 'becomes' this through her own terms, and significantly, she becomes someone who chooses to focus on 'lived reality', the glasses which sees her as a symbol are the biased glasses of partition, and invariably we come to the symbol of the 'mother', in the next portion of this essay we shall see how the narrator uses the conventional myth of 'motherhood', individualized it to overcome the siege of contemporary socio political discourse. The image of the 'mother' while discussing female identity has always been a defining feature of our socio political engagements, the spectre of partition exacerbated this notion as illustrated by Urvashi Butalia, "The country, whether referred to as Bharat, or Hindustan, was imaged in feminine terms, as the mother, and Partition was seen as a violation of its body" (Butalia, 186).



This othering of the female by the symbolism of ‘mother’ is subverted by the narrator in *Agunpakhi*. Here, the narrator becomes a repository of history, as the novel reaches its culmination the narrator finds her axis, and it is this axis which becomes focal point of her agency while, in her journey to carve out self identity she is confronted with one of the most harshest truth of her life, when she is disillusioned by her husband. She confronts him, ‘পিথিমিতেমতজোরতোমারনিজেরপরিবারেরওস্বামীরএকটিমাসুখমিপাওনাইজোরখাটাবারলেগে তাইবারআমিবলছিড়খোকায্যাতোইবলুক, আরতুমিয্যাতোজোঁঝাটাও, আমিযাবনাচারাগাছএক জায়গাথেকেআরজায়গায়লাগাইলেহুঁহুদ্যাশথেকেআরদ্যাশেলাগাইলেওবোধায়হুঁহুস্তুকগাছবুড়ি য়েগেলেআরকিছুতেইভিনমাটিতেবাঁচেনাকত্তাঅবাকহয়েবললেতুমিআবারএতকথাকবেশিখলোগ আমাঙ্কহলো, বললমএতকালযাশিখিয়েছতাইশিখেছিবিবলিয়েছতাইবলেছিআকনএকটিদুটিকথাআম িবোধায়নিজেনিজেসিখেছি’ (Haque, 244-245). ‘All you have done in your life is force your decision upon the family, you have no one other than us to where you can brandish your authority, but enough is enough, no matter how much pressure you and your son put on me, I am not going anywhere. You can take a sapling from one country to another country and it might grow, but you cannot do the same to an old tree.

My husband surprised by my resistance, asked, ‘Where did you learn to speak like this?’ ‘Far too long I have sung to your tunes, but now I have learned a thing or two by myself’ I retorted.’

Overcoming the moral authority of her husband is where the narrator’s growth as a character reaches its flash point. The narrator’s relationship with her husband is also symptomatic of contemporary ‘educated’ middle class household where the ‘liberal’ husband of the house encourages wife’s educational endeavours until it serves his version of ‘liberalism’, here we have patriarchal conventions in a different form altogether. The husband of the narrator with an active social and political life with access to power had ample time to prepare himself for the notion of the new country called ‘Pakistan’, in this rapidly changing socio political reality he had taken his wife’s assent as granted, but the narrator has found her voice, she asserts identity by placing herself directly in contradiction to her husband’s space. She is signed by memories, she remembers the obsolete way of life, which was not obsolete even a few days ago, she finds no reason why she is forced to abandon her life’s worth of identity with immediate effect, ‘আমায়কেউবোঝাতেপারলনএইদেশেছেড়েআমিকেনমাবEverybody failed to convince me as to why I should leave my country.’

The narrator’s resistance becomes a reckoning of history as her standpoint in every step implicates the political notion of ‘independence’, this is where the narrator uses every ounce of her mental reservoir to give self expression of her ‘individuality’, so she becomes not only the preserver of history, but also an active agent of defiance when she decides to live alone. This ‘aloneness’ is how history marginalized and defines people. The narrator’s loneliness is the loneliness of history. Partition was defined by the jarring suddenness of severance, and this severance is reflected through the narrator. She becomes the agent of abandoned history, the location she inhabits after her decision also merits some exploration. The space we have been talking about for so long is finally ‘defined’ by her, but at a dear cost, the feminine agency is possible through the danger of being abandoned by history, this is a delicate touch which the author brings out so well. The narrator chooses to live in her own world, a world which is



historically is in a limbo, the geography around her changes, but she defiantly carries on living her own life, the marginalized individual's struggle with history reaches a crescendo here. The domestic site has become an 'episteme' through which the narrator weaves symbols, images, roles and landscapes to defiantly lead her own life all the while swimming against the tide of history. Through her epistemic loneliness she finds key towards a female linguistic register to dispel patriarchal monochromatic history .

Conclusion:

As we can see by the investigations conducted in this essay, how Hasan AzizulHaque employs multifarious tissues of history to contextualise an individual's resistance amidst the chaos of geo political turmoil. In this endeavour, the home or the domestic space assumes an overarching significance, its multi layered epistemic space counters theocratic one dimensional definitions of historical construct. During the period of Partition the discourse surrounding the question of 'woman' had been an important one, narratives were defined by patriarchal norms and biases, in this novel the female narrator finds her 'voice' ,thus, she can make her case and play an important role. The multi layered form of female history as opposed to the male construct of history is one of the most important aspects of the novel, the narrator becomes an integral part of Post Partition feminist discourse, she is a facilitator of feminine historiography. The domestic space in changing socio political dynamics becomes a hot bed for political discourses; the narrator puts herself in historical context, thereby, paving the way for a dynamic feminist discourse. The narrator is a stellar example of an individual's continuous lives reality of political defiance, as she traverses through protean points of history.

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