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Home as a Site of Resistance: A Study on *Agunpakhi* by Hasan Azizul Huq

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Abstract:

This paper is an attempt to investigate Hasan Azizul Huq's much awaited novel *Agunpakhi* to explore the potencies and potentials of home as an empowering site of resistance. The novel commonly studied as a counter narrative on the Partition of India has multilayered implications embedded in it. One such dimension is the exploration of home place by contesting the common ideas to redefine its scopes. Home is normally studied as a sequestered space of deprivation and gendered marginalization. The inhabitants inhibited there by the social apparatuses are simply seized mentally. The consequent ideas built around home as a site showcase its impotence, and imposing character with no productive aspects. But the lived experiences of the inhabitants and their resultant practices if studied out of the box exhibit the excellences of home as a nurturing ground for raising resistances against the oppressors. To concentrate on these empowering aspects of the space, I will draw on bell hooks for her insights on home as a site of resistance. The research will advance the argument that home is a place of care and nurturance in the face of harsh realities facilitating the emergence of voices and subjectivity leading to emancipation from exigencies of marginalization.

Key Words:

Agunpakhi, Home, Site, Voice, Resistance.

1. Introduction

Hasan Azizul Huq who was born in 1939 has a long literary career with successes showered on him for his ceaseless efforts to accelerate in creative works, his understanding of the realities of life, its faithful portrayal in fictions and non-fictions, and his transformation over time to tell new stories avoiding repetitions and adding new dimensions. Mondol observes, “Hasan Azizul Huq in his long writing career spanning over fifty years have exquisitely woven his lived experiences of a life enriched by multi spatial and temporal dimensions into short stories and novels of highest acclaim at home and abroad.” (129).

Agunpakhi (The Firebird) is a novel by Hasan Azizul Huq, the prominent short story writer of Bangladesh. He started his career with some minor novels. But later, he concentrated entirely on short stories. When he was above sixty, he felt to write serious novels. And *Agunpakhi* is the first serious attempt with huge preparation and immediate success. When it was published in 2006, it created a ripple among the critics and scholars. The book cemented his position as a major novelist of Bangladesh. It was awarded Prothom Alo Book of the year prize in 2007 and Ananda Purashkar in 2008.

In the novel, the writer aims at capturing the major issues of the first half of 20th century under the British rule with special attention on the question of the Partition of India portrayed from his own vantage point. Before giving the book a desired shape, he was searching for a fitting character through which he could hold the spirit and portray the time. He couldn't get any alternative to his mother and manifestly confesses, "It is my mother". (Huq, Interview with Faruk Ahmed and Mahbub Morshed, 2011, p. 310) The story is narrated by an unnamed female protagonist. Anwar assesses her thus, “Her physical movement is very limited but the expanse of her thoughts, understanding and analysis of circumstances are extraordinary.”

It is a linear story told by a female protagonist. The narrative can be termed as her life story. And the book records the first half of the twentieth century under British rule. The story ends just after the Partition of India. To portray a faithful realistic picture of that time from a marginal area, the story comes to capture the socio-economic-cultural and political scenario of the society. But the spark of the story lies in the climax where the narrator refuses to migrate to the newly established country. And that she does as a result of her ultimate realization of the self she has. This way the writer has reconceptualized the ideas of the terms home place advancing the argument of “the primacy of domesticity as a site for subversion and resistance.” (hooks, 1990, p. 48) The writer has used his own experience of migration, his mother's image, his father's social position and personality and history to shape his work. And the book comes to be commonly considered as a saga on Partition, a major Bangla novel on the subject. According

to Noman, “This novel is an artistic narrative of the society, history, politics and the partition.” The writer’s basic purpose of writing the novel was to catch the great disaster of migration after 1947 and through the protagonist, he reaffirms his belief that it is impossible for those to even imagine who didn’t experience this agonizing event of migration. “The novel was penned to capture that to some extent.” (Huq, Interview with Jafar Ahmed Rashed, 2011, p. 91).

But to me, it is about the power of resistance that arises from home place. And this is showcased by the female narrator who is multiply marginalized. Still she comes out to be a voice that can defy the established narratives and discourses. I will draw insights from bell hooks, the American cultural critics, feminist, and social activist. Among many of her intellectual gems, I will avail her thoughts from the essay, “Homeplace: A Site of Resistance” for analyzing the text. The aim of the paper is to contest the long-standing discourse, which consider home as a sequestered site, a site of suppression and deprivation. I would advance the argument that home is an empowering site, a site of resistance.

2. Homeplace and Resistance: A Theoretical Exploration

“Homeplace: A Site of Resistance” by bell hooks explores the potentials of home and comes out with insights for the space from perspectives which contest the long-standing narratives of the place as the site of repression and deprivation. From her lived experiences, she finds homeplace as the site where everything that matters in life takes place, and that instils in the inhabitants the sense of “dignity, integrity of being”. (hooks, 1990, p. 41) Reflecting on the marginalized life, she affirms the extreme hardships in life under the oppressors, and reiterates that after works, home is the place to get back for relief and make life happen, and thus it proves to be “spaces of care and nurturance in the face of the brutal harsh reality” and nourishes a belief in them that advances them for the construction of a homeplace which has inevitably “a radical political dimension”. (hooks, 1990, p. 42) Against the brutal reality, and domination, the homeplace turns to be the site to “freely confront the issue of humanization” with the power of resistance and the efforts “to be subjects, not objects”, and thus the self-affirmation emerges despite “poverty, hardship, and depravation” in the site where “dignity denied” in the public sphere can be restored, and “many of the wounds inflicted” can be healed. (hooks, 1990, p. 42) This site gives the women the opportunity to grow and nourish their spirits leading to a community of resistance.

hooks advances the value of the act of remembrance which turns to be a gesture to honor the struggles, and the efforts to uphold the self which “continues to be a radically subversive political gesture”. She believes that the dominant oppressive figures and practices benefit most

when the dominated and oppressed find nothing to give to themselves, they find nothing left with them, no homeplace where they “can recover ourselves”. She finds respect for the struggling women as “they continue to struggle in the midst of suffering, because they continue to resist.” (hooks, 1990, p. 43) With these explorations, hooks categorically comes to a position to declare the potential of home for resistance and liberation.

hooks admires the resistance work initiated by the female at home despite their assigned role by sexism. She extols them for extending the conventional role “to include caring for one another, for children” that elevates their spirits and keeps them away from despair and teaches some of them “to be revolutionaries able to struggle for freedom.” (hooks, 1990, p. 44) She emphasizes remembrance of the past as forgetfulness undermines their solidarity. So the women must understand “intellectually and intuitively the meaning of homeplace in the midst of an oppressive and dominating social reality, of homeplace as site of resistance and liberation struggle.” (hooks, 1990, p. 45) She points the work place of the women as adverse one stripping them “of dignity and personal power” proving that for them the “space of Otherness” and insists on the importance of a home place formed for love for one another and necessary resistance learnt from “critical consciousness” from lived experiences with the awareness that the space is “not without contradictions”. (hooks, 1990, p. 46) But a conscious consideration shows home as the space to renew spirits of both male and female, and its absence, there will be a consequent failure to have a community of resistance. In the process, the “subversive value of homeplace” must be recognized as “domestic space has been a crucial site for organizing, for forming political solidarity.” (hooks, 1990, p. 47)

In this connection, Radford-Hill asserts the essentiality of the power of the marginalized “to influence the purpose” and the power influencing own culture from within, otherwise immobility ensues, failure in integrating self and rolling identities occurs and inability to resist the dominant culture pervades which destroys the dominated “from within.” (quoted in hooks, 1990, p. 47-48) So reconceptualization of the home place is essential for arguing that it can be a site both of subversion and resistance. This, however, requires “sharing insights and awareness”. (hooks, 1990, p. 49) hooks reaffirms that once this foundation is constructed, the dominated “can regain lost perspective, give life new meaning” and the home place can turn into the space for “renewal and self-recovery” to heal the wounds and “become whole.” (hooks, 1990, p. 48)

3. Home as a Site of Resistance in *Agunpakhi*

Huq has located the unnamed female protagonist born around 1900 in a gender sequestered marginalized space where at the beginning of the story, she was eight or nine years old already orphaned at the death of her mother and consequently burdened with a small brother of one year or two years. The small brother is strapped to her as she says, “Wherever I go, he is always in my lap.” (Huq, 2029, p. 9) This burden bearing fate continues to be a metaphor for the rest of her life as she is thoroughly burdened with the duties and responsibilities of her husband's family throughout her life without any active participation or voice in the decision making. Only at the final stage, she comes out with ultimate realization to counter with confidence any opposition and stand her point stressing “the importance of homeplace as a site of resistance and liberation struggle.” (hooks, 1990, p. 43)

The narrator is multiplying marginalized both at her parental house and in-law's house. In a patriarchal society, she is the victim of the gender sequestered marginalization. Her father was educated and had the financial capability, still she was denied access to education and was pushed in the periphery. The bilingual father had his education from far off places, but never thought of sending the daughter to school. Rather he countered the idea of educating the daughter saying, “What will the girls do after learning in school? She will be a bit obstinate. She will retort on the face-isn't that all?” (Huq, 2029, p. 21) Thus, the expansion she could cover was narrowed down and the space she could enjoy was denied reducing her to be powerless and voiceless within and beyond. When she was married off at fourteen or fifteen years of age to a man double of her age, she remained as something to be transacted in accordance with the imposed repressive space maintained by the dominant groups and practices. Nobody informed her of the proceedings, nor she was asked for her opinion. She didn't have any choice at all as “whatever the guardian will do will be done.” (Huq, 2029, p. 21) Her marginalization thus stripped her of the right to live her own life. But the space is not a linear site, rather it exerts multiple influences as Foucault (1986) writes, “The space in which we live, which draws us out of ourselves, in which the erosion of our lives, our time and our history occurs, the space that claws and gnaws at us, is also, in itself, a heterogeneous space.” (p. 23) So the same space offered her some opportunities to have ultimate realization of life. And she turned the domestic space into a ground for breeding her intellectual height and understanding the world affairs. When the youngest sister of her husband died, it was a great disaster as she was apple of eyes for all, especially to her husband. To her great surprise, she saw that despite the disaster, everything came to a normal shape, and she realized, “Time tends to tolerate everything. Can the responsibility of world affairs be over?” (Huq, 2029, p. 66-67) Her space continued

expanding. The same woman started reading a newspaper, and she could come out of the cocoon. She was able to point out the reality inside politics because she understood that the politicians were not working for feeding the people or solving the problems. Rather it was almost a type of luxury for them. She realized the dealings in the national level, weighed the weight of the leaders and made unfailing pithy assessments on their roles, “Those who don't have any anxiety for them, don't have any anxiety for their food and clothes, can think big of the poor sitting at home.” (Huq, 2029, p. 190)

The sequestered saga of the protagonist continues after her marriage to a family of far better financial standing, and she could sense that from the very first day as she expressed her feelings, “Me, a new bride, came from a puddle to a big pond.” (Huq, 2029, p. 27) In the joint family of five brothers and four sisters with the widowed mother of her husband, she didn't get time to get familiarized to the circumstances and had to get to work as if she were the beast of burden. Her mother-in-law, a strong lady, had her domination in such a height that she could not even express her emotion charged sorrow for her ailing son, and had to carry out her order to do some chores. She was not even in position to decide on conceiving and so she had to conceive on regular basis with no assertion of her personality or desire. Later she reminisces, “I started pulling the grinding tree that time and never could stop pulling that in the whole of my life.” (Huq, 2029, p. 28)

The geographical locations of both the houses she partakes are far from the burgeoning centers, the town areas, and this spatial location places her along with all those localities in the peripheral position. The position itself imposes on them the deprivation resulting from inaccessibility to the basic rights available in and confined to the town areas. Then again even after more than thirty years of her marriage, she has never crossed the road across the village. Thus, her domestic space remains confined without any expansion all the years of limited shuttling between the parental house and the husband's one. She routes her memory lanes and finds that after coming to the house, “I have never come out to the village road on foot.” (Huq, 2029, p. 193/194) Despite occupying the socially imposed cloistered space, she gradually dissociates herself and reverses the center of decision making. Lefebvre's observation on the social production of space is pertinent here and to him, humans as social beings “produce their own life, their own consciousness, their own world” (1991, p. 68).

Despite these limitations imposed on her, she in the squeezed space of home occasionally got stirred and started questioning. She reflected on herself, “Am I human being or the shadow of human being?” (Huq, 2029, p. 28) She is right in her sorry assessment about herself that the impositions have reduced her to a shadow with no choice or control over it. She got a good

amount of ornaments from her father as well as from the landlord's mother. And those were for her the most valuable possession, as she says, "What has a woman got but for her ornaments! Even if the husband passes away, the ornaments will be there." (Huq, 2029, p. 38) Those invaluable possessions were taken by her husband to buy landed property. She initially objected feebly, but finally gave in without any claim on it. And her husband didn't even think it important to inform her of the purchase in exchange for her ornaments. This same maimed lady will later retort on his face pointing to his grave mistakes, "You have not done everything right, but still you did what you wanted." (Huq, 2029, p. 217) Even before that, she showed the mettle in her in times of serious need. The elder son was in Calcutta, and he was reported to be involved in politics. She had not got news for long and the mother in her rose and she placed the request to inquire of the son to him in a commanding tone, "I haven't got news of the son for long. Go tomorrow and have his news." (Huq, 2029, p. 72) The same self with stronger hold would also come out in another crisis. After two years of complete failure in crops for drought and heavy rain, the family fell short of rice. A day came when there was no rice at all. But nobody in the house cared or took responsibility. She took the responsibility and placed her request to manage rice before her husband in the toughest possible manner with a question mark on his authoritarian position, "The children of the family have gone to sleep without eating anything. The whole night they will fidget for hunger. What type of master you are that you are sitting in the dark room? Who has brought them into this world? Tell me, you must tell me that." (Huq, 2029, p. 175).

However, the home space that squeezed her thus voiceless also earns her the clues to significance of her existence. The acknowledgement she got from her mother-in-law for the sacrifice of the ornaments was one of the first mental boosts she happened to receive, "I know everything. You gave away all your ornaments. Allah will bless you. I pray for you. Have an eye on your brother-in-law, sister-in-law. They all will respect you, obey you all their lives, I know." (Huq, 2029, p. 43) Still she was not in the position or mind to assert herself. Her position got exposed when her brother needed money for getting admitted in college and her father didn't have the capability to manage. He came to the sister's house, and she knew it was possible for husband to manage. Still she knew her position which did not allow her to manage any amount for her brothers. She feared, "Be he my brother. Still he is a relative from my father's side. Why should I be guilty to the in-law's house by asking for him anything?" (Huq, 2029, p. 58).

Despite all these imposing aspects of home place, it is not without potencies. Rather the site makes occasional offers, and the inmates who are to stay in to transform it as a site of resistance. In course of the narrative, home is portrayed as the space where "women and men can renew

their spirits and recover themselves” (hooks, 1990, p. 46-47), and in absence of it, there comes consequent failure to “build a meaningful community of resistance.”(hooks, 1990, p. 47) The protagonist got the first jerk in her stale life when her husband at one night suddenly told her to start reading. She was confounded as she didn't find any meaning of reading at that stage, but the husband clarified, “As there is difference between light and darkness, so is the difference between a literate person and an illiterate one.” (Huq, 2029, p. 34) In two-month time, with the joint efforts of herself and the husband, she learnt to read and started reading a newspaper called *Bangabasi*. Her growth started slowly and silently only to be firm like stone by the end. Alam rightly points out, “As the narrator grew older, she started becoming more assertive, more independent in thinking.” She was married during the First World War. It was over and the Non-cooperation Movement started in India. She was informed of it by her husband who told her more about Queen Victoria, her death twenty years ago, the reign of her son as well as the latest development of the political scenario. Thus, her political consciousness grew, and she grew up in her a personality which would mold her to revolt finally in the final stage. By then, she would be able to trace herself, locate her position and take decision against the grain. And before that as a part of her confidence building and consciousness raising process, she kept on developing and could feel the spaces at national level from within the domestic space. So, she could not be convinced that basing on religion of Islam and Hinduism, a country can be divided. She could instantly connect it to lives and society she had access to and narrowed down the irrationality of the Partition of India saying, “Hasn't there any difference between Muslim and Muslim? In the same family, there are many differences among the members.” (Huq, 2029, p. 71) Thus, the lady on the surface completely incapable of questioning the authority of the authoritarian husband and mother-in-law confidently and convincingly questions the nationally hailed leaders and their decisions. Her understanding also touched philosophical dimensions and gave her exposure to the realities of life that nothing is permanent. She applies this realization in case of the British thinking thus, “The British are now here, they have not been here from time immemorial, and they won't be here forever.” (Huq, 2029, p. 71) The philosopher in her peeped on other occasions too and all came from within the domestic space. In her in-law's house, she saw the gradual economic progress of the family under her husband's leadership. After the death of her mother-in-law, she also saw certain degradation after the Second World War and the famine. This brought disaster to the family and everything fell apart. From the sudden change of the family members, she tried to understand human life and the harsh reality. She concluded, “We get angry to see the fight between dogs and cats. But in what

respect human beings are better than the dogs and cats. All are equal if they find themselves lacking in one fundamental thing. That fundamental thing is the stomach.” (Huq, 2029, p. 170). She did not entirely depend on her fate to cement her position and deepen her understanding, rather she tiled it by extending services and cooperation to anyone of the family in times of need. She rendered the best services and proved to be the best support to her carrying sister-in-law, “I would not allow her to do many of the chores. I myself would do them.” (Huq, 2029, p. 51) She did the same when her mother-in-law was completely bedridden. She took the responsibility, and till the last day of the old lady, she continued services even in washing away her urine and stool, and she didn’t let any other do that. This way she expanded the impounded domestic space from her birth by extending her humanitarian hands without shying away from responsibilities with eyes and mind open to the wider spaces and for chances to come.

The only crossing of boundary for her was the shuttling between the husband’s house and the parental one by an oxen cart. The journey was through a wide expanse of open fields, and as usual she availed the chance and exposed herself to the open space by ordering to remove the cloth covering the two openings of the cart, “I told them to move the saree from both the openings” (Huq, 2029, p. 55) and she found her freedom and let her imagination flourish for alternatives which hooks in “Preface” to Feminist Theory points out as “the willingness to explore all possibilities” (hooks, 1984, p. x).

It was the turbulent time of movement against the British. It was also blustery time for the Hindus and the Muslims as they got entangled into bitterness leading to killing one another in the riots cooked up by the British. The result was the loss of life on both the sides. The killing of the young boys and girls came to her as loss of a mother. She instantly could connect with the British mother who lost her child in India. Again when she came to know about Pritilata Waddedar, the Bangali revolutionary nationalist, taking part in the revolutionary 1932-armed attack on the Pahartali European Club and her suicide consuming cyanide, she could also assess the fighter’s worth and could easily say with her nationalistic feelings and motherly affection, “She is not anyone's daughter. She is the daughter of all the people of this country-she is the daughter of the whole world.” (Huq, 2029, p. 76) Thus, she emerged as the universal mother, the mother of any child at any corner of the world.

By the final stage, she is no longer the girl to be convinced by any dominant position, or discourse, rather she poses questions about the division of the country based on religion. She asks her husband implying feebleness of the argument on the Partition of India, “Can anyone be outside the division?” (Huq, 2029, p. 191) It is simply impossibility to separate the people exclusively and reform the countries, and so there is no relevant answer to the question. She

emphasizes the variations in the country within different regions saying that within it, “so many countries are there.” (Huq, 2029, p. 191) This thought startles the authoritarian husband. Then again, she seriously thinks about the riot, the bloodshed and poses the question analogous to that of Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice* implying to the dead bodies lying on the street and the drains, the dripping blood and the resemblance, “The blood of the Muslim, the blood of the Hindus, not different, the same blood. In the drain, the dead bodies are dumped, Hindus and Muslims are the same there.” (Huq, 2029, p. 205).

What she retorted till this stage of the narrative is just the rehearsal of a personality which is manifested in the final days. By that time, her sons were settled in the East Pakistan, and the daughter was married off and settled there. She brought her younger brother with her far away from her mother to take care of his education.

Finally, everything is settled. The home place proves to be an energizing site as hooks points out, “Homeplace has been a site of resistance.” (hooks, 1990, p. 47) The husband tries to convince her to migrate to the new country by exchanging properties. The daughter beseeches her to accompany them to East Pakistan. But she is adamant in her understanding. Now she wants to understand first and then accept. Otherwise, she is determined not to budge an inch. She poses the solid question, “Why should I go to Pakistan? Why should I leave my country?” (Huq, 2029, p. 210) People are streaming on both sides. The Hindus are coming from East Pakistan to India, and the Muslims are streaming to East Pakistan from India. But she is not convinced about the rationality of this migration because she has come to know from her son's letter that the new country Pakistan has turned into a country of both the Hindus and the Muslims. She even gets reaffirmed of her position and instantly comes to see the hollowness of the political decision upon which the country has been divided.

When the husband insists saying that he did whatever he wanted all his life, she resists his authority questioning his previous decisions of supporting the creation of Pakistan and the division of the family. She gives a final decision, passes her judgement saying in response to whatever the husband and the son say, “I won't go... I'll live in this house.” (Huq, 2029, p. 217-219) The very assertion is assessed by Rahman (2008) thus, “The voice Hasan Azizul Huq has created in *Agunpakhi* is also extraordinary.”

She is left alone. Everybody departs for Pakistan. She is alone in the house and she sits to evaluate her position and decision if she has done right or not. She cannot take the argument that, because she is a Muslim, Pakistan is her own country, and India is not. She cannot take it as both the communities are still living in both the countries. She is again not convinced of the argument that she has to go to the new country because her husband and children have gone

there, because she comes to the realization, she and her husband are not the same person, rather they are different though they are very dear to each other. Regarding her decision and strict stand, she comes to the realization, “Finally it has come to my mind, I have done everything only to get myself. I have not been obstinate. I did not disregard anyone. I have only wanted to understand everything myself.” (Huq, 2029, p. 224) Thus, she comes out a rebel from the home space reminding the rebel of Kazi Nazrul Islam (2018),

I’ve discovered myself all of a sudden, I’ve burst through all bonds.

...

I’m the ever-rebellious hero--

Soaring over the world, all alone, head forever held high!

(Translation by Fakrul Alam)

4. Conclusion

The study brings out the fact that the narrative of the novel unsettles the dominant subject position by situating a subaltern at the center turning the domestic space from its peripheral position to the center. The marginalized homeplace is explored to reverse the subject position and reinstate voice to the voiceless. Thus, the protagonist despite occupying a sequestered space can finally come out of the cocoon and exert her free agency with voices and position of her own. The same domestic space which is commonly used to suppress the voices is constructed here as a space to reclaim their voices which emphasizes the volatile nature of the boundary of spaces and its interchangeability. The study pointedly shows the homeplace as the site that can empower the inhabitants and advance a community of resistance. The protagonist in the novel studied here occupies the homeplace and gradually comes out as a comet, a rebel to counter the common discourse on homeplace.

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