

# Re-telling the Story of Partition: A Study of Hasan Azizul Haque's Novel *Agunpakhi*

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## Abstract:

*Agunpakhi (The Bird of Fire)*, a novel by Hasan Azizul Haque, re-tells the story of the partition of India and the creation of a new country—Pakistan, but with a twist. Here, the narrator is an ordinary Muslim housewife from a remote village. She sees things through the eyes of her husband who has some access to the greater world. But the gaze presented here is certainly that of a woman for whom the partition of her family is no less heart-wrenching than that of the country. Her family is of utmost importance to her. The novelist very beautifully weaves another story of partition with that of the great historical one—the partition of the well-to-do rural joint family that the protagonist belongs to. In this paper I have tried to show what differences does it make to the novelist to present the whole story from the perspective of a woman. This paper further tries to find out the parallels that the novelist has very cleverly woven between the backdrops of both the partitions. The more tragic fact is that the dark shadow of partition gradually encroaches within her family resulting in scattering her children along with her husband. She is hurt. One by one all her children go to East Pakistan in search of a better future from where they never return. And the final and the most painful/heartbreaking blow comes from her husband when he decides to sell all his belongings in India and settle in East Pakistan, to live the rest of his life surrounded by his offspring and their families. But here lies the turning point of the novel. The till now docile, soft-natured ordinary housewife of a village for the first time expresses her disagreement with her husband's decision. Even when her husband is obstinate on leaving the country without paying any heed to her opinion, she protests with all her strength. She won't leave until one could explain her why she should. Finally she ends up in staying alone in her house, with the deepest realization that any woman has ever felt, "Me and my husband are not one human, rather two different

personalities—in spite of being the dearest and the nearest ones, we have two different identities” (252, translation mine). This is the ultimate recognition of the voice of a feminist. This paper is a humble attempt to find out the source of such power that converts an otherwise illiterate, submissive, dutiful common rural woman into such an iron-willed lady.

Keywords: Partition, feminism, identity crisis, patriarchy, trauma

Hasan Azizul Haque’s novel, *Agunpakhi*, or *The Bird of Fire*, has been written in the backdrop of the partition of India and Pakistan, along with the devastating experiences of communal riots during the period. The reference to communal riots breaks through into the novel with the killing of Satya, the eldest son of the Roy family. And the reaction of our protagonist to this incident is striking, “At first I couldn’t make out any sense of the news. ‘Has been cut down’—what does it mean at all? People get run over by buses, get beheaded by the train, but how can people be cut by other people? Human are not like vegetable that anybody can cut them into pieces with the *bonti*!” (209). Riot between Hindus and Muslims sounds strange to her and to the people of the whole village. They have never heard anything like that. Especially, Satya was such a gentleman that no one could believe that he could have harmed anybody. So, there was no question of him taking active part in any kind of dispute. News spread that he was killed by the Muslims. The protagonist reflects: “This is what happens. If there is Hindu-Muslim riot, it is implied that Hindus will be killed by Muslims and the vice-versa. Nothing else will ever be even thought of” (210). And as a Hindu was killed by a few Muslim men, now it is automatically implied that all the Muslims of the world have turned into enemies of all the Hindus. The ordinary Muslim woman now starts feeling insecure in a village dominated by Hindus. Being terrorized she tries to gather knowledge about the political scenario behind the sudden outbreak of the communal riots. And thus, the readers are enriched with the picture of freedom and partition through the eyes of a common, illiterate housewife of a remote village—a rare gaze indeed in Bengali literature. With the help of her husband, she learns to read letters. And then by reading *Bangabasi* she came to know about the demand of the Muslim League for a separate country for the Muslims. In the meantime, the Great War took place, followed by the famine, heavily affecting the lives of the common people. People were struggling with their daily livelihood in the post-famine phase. The illiterate common woman that the protagonist is, she thought that the issue of partition didn’t bother the struggling people any more. She was wrong. There were some such people who were not that much affected by the war and famine (they were the lucky ones to have some wealth). They now began to worry about the future of poor Muslim people on their behalf, with the pre-determined

solution like the need of a separate country for their well-being. And the issue revived again, once the effects of the famine were somehow managed by the commoners.

Satya was killed. That was just the beginning. Rumours spread about communal attacks here and there in the surroundings. Excitement prevailed all over the area. One after another village stirred up. People started gathering weapons. Those who were over-excited at the situation, were in a kind of hypnotic state. Their senses were numbed. Gradually the situation became unbearable and also uncontrollable. She now looks back into the past (which is not so rear) to see the pictures of love and fellow-feeling between the people of the two communities. She remembers *Kattama* welcoming her (the protagonist) with huge amount of ornaments, Mr Bhattacharya consoling *Kattamashai* with a huge warm hug at the time of the death of his son and so on. Were these only show-offs? It's true that there are some people among both the communities who cherish strong hatred for each other. They always are there. But now suddenly they began to matter. They excite the other people. Her husband observes, "Gandhiji has somehow stopped riots in Calcutta, maybe he would be successful in Bihar and Noakhali too. But what the British wanted has already happened. Hindus and Muslims, the two communities have turned into enemies forever" (231) ().

The narrator, with great care, is weaving another story of partition in the novel—the story of the partition in the family. The head of the family, rather head of *Andarmahal* who is the mother-in-law of the narrator dies during the famine. At that time the family along with the whole country was undergoing great scarcity of the essential commodities like clothes and fuel. The first time when the differences in the family became visible was regarding the distribution of the substandard sarees among the women of the house managed from the controlled shop. And this was just the beginning. The narrator reflects: "Does damnation begin like this? A hairline crack was there somewhere, almost invisible. When saw it for the first time, I wonder how did I not notice it earlier. Next day there was another beside the first one, and gradually many more—before understanding fully, the whole thing broke down and scattered" (185) (). And the wise *Kattamoshai* determines to divide the family.

The novel is unique in many ways. First, it is one of those rare narrations of partition presented from the viewpoint of a woman. Second, here the narrator is an illiterate, common housewife from a rural Muslim family. Naturally, she doesn't have any knowledge of the contemporary political scenario. Whatever she comes to know about such things are from her husband's interpretation of the newspaper *Bangabasi*. She never had the exposure to realize such complex battle of ideologies. She is least bothered by them until they come to affect her small world. So, her gaze is the one that of the most common people of the country. Third, the

whole novel is narrated in a particular dialect of Bengali language, which is indeed very difficult to maintain throughout the novel. But the most interesting part of the novel is none of these. It lies within the amazing intertwining of those two parallel stories of partition –one of the nation and the other of the joint family. And that is possible only because for the narrator who is a woman, the family is no less important than the nation. And the way the twining of these two apparently non-related issues is done is simply superb. We have already mentioned the first occasion on which the difference within the family became visible. Each was unhappy with her own share. Each was jealous of what the others got. Now, isn't it the psychology behind the discrepancies between the two major communities during the Partition? Did both of them not think that the other is enjoying more economic and political facilities?

In this respect what the narrator's husband says at the time of dividing the family is very significant. He concluded his long speech by saying, "Everybody likes to manage his own family according to his own will, and it doesn't sound good to have one head of the family above all. When the family becomes too large, there are chances of mismanagement. It causes injustices to the younger ones too" (205). Now consider this argument in the backdrop of the political scenario of the period. According to a part of the historians, this is the root cause behind the demand for the partition of the country. It was the question of the urge to govern the country according to the ideologies of our honourable leaders that caused the difference of opinion, resulting in the division of the country and having separate portions for our leaders to practice their ideologies respectively.

Coming back to the uniqueness of the narrative, it represents an innocent, unaware housewife in the backdrop of the most critical time that ever our country had to undergo. Being illiterate, whatever knowledge she could gather about the political scenario, was what her husband related to her. Gradually she learns about the devastating power of the World War from her husband. By that time the war has started influencing their daily livelihood. Scarcity of essential commodities, presence of army, numbers of fighter planes flying in the sky and such other things has now become very common. For our protagonist, family is her priority, which is very natural for a woman. That is why the separation of her family grieves her more than the political upheavals of the country. So, the differences within the family ultimately leading to breaking up of it gets equal space with that of the division of the country within the novel, though the novel is primarily known as one of the masterpieces of partition literature.

It is true that she didn't like the idea of the partition of India from the very beginning. She could never understand the need for a separate country for a particular community. She tried hard to comprehend the reason behind such a devastating decision from the newspapers. But no reason forwarded by our politicians could satisfy her. Along with the division of the country, her family for which she made countless sacrifices too separated. And that too after much bitterness being created among the members of the family. Even her children went away from her one by one. The novel becomes a masterpiece through the final decision she takes. The protagonist, anonymous, illiterate woman of a remote village, denies to leave the country she has been known to be her own throughout her whole life at the end of the novel, though all her children, even her husband sets out for the new opportunities in the newly-found country. The firmness she shows to follow her inner voice makes her different from other women, yielding to the situations created by patriarchal society.