

AGENTIAL MARGIN AND POWER OF SILENCE IN HASAN AZIZUL HAQUE'S "ATMOJA O EKTI KOROBİ GACH"

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Abstract

In "Prosongo Katha" ("Talk on the Context") of his definitive collection of short stories on the Partition titled *Desh Bhager Golpo* (Stories on the Partition), Hasan Azizul Haque shares his experience thus, "Just like the heart being sawed in a sawmill, each and every story has been written in such extreme pain" (p. 7). "Atmoja O Ekti Korobi Gach" ("Own Daughter and an Oleander Tree") is commonly considered his best story which brings forth his lived experience of the post-partition period, and it "has been engraved in our collective memory" (Kamal, "Hasan Azizul Huq", p. 8). While capturing the collective pangs and pains of the migrated people, the author also hints at the emergence of agency in unconventional forms through the eyes of the marginalized people, particularly a teen aged girl named Ruku who is silent and absent, but remains agential in every contour of the narrative. Drawing on insights from Schlant's reconceptualization of silence and bell hooks' exploration of the creative dimensions of margin, I venture to broach a dialogue on an extremely marginalized and silent character and unhinge her unheard and untold potentials and power, and thus hope to advocate for a critical tool and literary lens through which literary studies can advance more.

Keywords: experience, migrated, marginalized, dialogue, silent, lens

Introduction

Hasan Azizul Haque in "Atmoja O Ekti Korobi Gach" has initiated what Grosvener (2007) calls "step forward from the shadows" while studying the marginalized childhoods and the possibilities of their voice and agency (p. 427). A writer with a missionary perspective to promote and give voice to the unacknowledged agents and unheard voices from the stacked or buried history has always the self-assigned tasks to represent those who cannot represent themselves. This is not easy as Mishra posits that making a subaltern voice heard is a challenging task, and the ways to make them heard is to acknowledge that such voice exists, and then set for an arduous undertaking to search "the voices, both archival and anthropological; their retrieval, transcription, translation, documentation, editorial labour, dissemination, critical reevaluation and fight for admission into the 'canon' (90). The short narrative under this study with a nuclear family in the canvas reimagines and enacts the political partition with/out the involvement of the people in the margin and the consequent human massacre unprecedented in human history. This paper

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endeavours to map the debacle resultant from the migration and aims to counter and overcome the grand narrative of the partition and construct the discourse of the potentials of the marginalized and silent.

Theoretical Perspectives

Silence can voice a lot and can make the absence strongly felt by those present or are perceived to be present. In *The Language of Silence*, Schlant focuses on the Grunewald Monument in Berlin built in memory of those detainees who were deported from that station to die at Auschwitz. While explaining the monument with the outline of human figures on the walls, she stresses, "The figures themselves are nonexistent; it is the surrounding cement that makes their absence visible" (1999, p. 1). Schlant reverses the feminist writers who suggest silence as restrictive, and emphasizes that an absence can become a presence. She denies the conceived void in silence and adamantly puts, 'silence is not a semantic void' (p. 7). She advances the argument saying "Literature uses words to strategize silences, to contour avoidances, to reveal unstated assumptions, to disclose what it wants to hide or deny (p. 9). The silence by Ruku is strategic, and it aims to disclose what has overtly been kept hidden and away, and "every strategy, conscious or unconscious, employed in the service of this denial is also an acknowledgment" (p. 9). Adopting her argument and affirmation that silence is a language and it can voice a lot if it is read and heard, this paper progresses along with other insights of bell hooks on the margin. In "Preface" to *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, hooks advances the argument that to be in the margin facilitates one a particular way of looking at reality "both from the outside in and from the inside out" (p. ix). Those in the margin have to shuttle between the margin and the center, and can develop "an oppositional worldview - a mode of seeing unknown" (p. ix) to the oppressors. This very view aids them in the struggle "to transcend poverty and despair", and strengthens their sense of self and solidarity (p. ix). hooks advances her argument further in "Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness" and adopts a radical approach, and identifies in the margin "the formation of counter hegemonic cultural practice" to "begin the process of revision" (p. 145). This revisionary process "requires pushing against oppressive boundaries set by race, sex and class domination" acknowledging "a defiant political gesture" (p. 145). This strengthens the argument that living in the place called home is "to move beyond boundaries" (p. 147), and this instils into the marginalized the agency turning the margin into a "radical creative space which affirms and sustains our subjectivity, which gives us a new location from which to articulate our sense of the world" (153). In this paper, Ruku, a silent and physically absent character strategically posits herself against the boundaries set through structures, discourses and practices and transcends them by defiantly denying them.

Discussion and Analysis

Silence is a form of language just like any other, and it is relevant to the suppressed narratives as the authors often tend to suppress or shy away from portraying and articulating them explicitly. By rewriting the suppressed or sidelined narratives, Haque has been both restrictive and liberating in this short story. Strategically, the author has silenced or adopted silence capturing the contours of the minor girl and the sexual abuse she faces and offers herself to face in utter adversaries. Despite some critics' adamant position to consider silence as restrictive, Schlant adamantly emphasizes, "silence is not a semantic void" (p.7), rather it can be loud and clear in alternative ways. Ruku as a silent character is instrumental in voicing all the vices and viles through bringing to the fore the suppressed or bypassed tales of the non-existent in the official political history which is stuffed with the bargains and braggartism of the politicians. Ruku herself is non-existent and silent metaphorically and practically, but the talks of other characters, inmates' sufferings of the house, and the transactions make her visible. She even strides forward to be the breadwinner, and her bread winning subject position is constructed, represented and mobilized through occasional references by the outsiders who are unexpectedly welcome to the house which houses the vulnerability, helplessness and agony of the migrated people.

The family shifted themselves from a location which according to the old man, "We are people from dry land, got it? All are of other types, life is different there" (p. 178). This look back to the past is, Rushdie says, "sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back" (1991, p.10). The locational position of the migrated family is in the extreme margin far away from the human habitation, and is set apart in a desolate place dissociated from all others of the society and its common activities and surveillance. In exchange, they got a piece of land and managed to settle in the location which is far away from the village boundary and away even from the minority habitants in a desolate place where people hardly go. So, the old man craves for home but finds none as Brah observes, "'home' is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination. In this sense it is a place of no return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of 'origin' (p. 188). In consequence, they continue "to negotiate the meaning of their pasts and the effort to heal its wounds" (Rogobete and Marino, p.3) in the space of liminality through redefinition of the notion of home in that marginalized geographical position. The locational marginalization of the family is further stressed by their migrated position which instead being a boon to be accepted and acknowledged by the locals became a burdensome tag to them and the permanent habitants who after the initial euphoria came to consider them as an extra addition and a pressure on the society. This pushes them in the liminality where tales of sufferings physically and mentally

continue to germinate. Baldwin pathetically marks, "There will never be enough novels to tell the tales of those who died—5 million people" (qtd. in "Introduction", *The Partition of India: Beyond Improbable Lines* 1). This story through Ruku and other characters reflects deep sufferings, rooted in the historical juncture of the partition.

The historical reality of the story stresses its authenticity to attest to the human debacle and disaster after the partition which displaced millions from their ancestral home ground and misplaced them in the newly founded national space which was conceived ideal and was propagated so, but remained perceptually and practically a mistake beyond correction. The division of the political borders creating two independent countries with focus on religious identity hardly took into consideration the majority people who inhabited the margin. The dream of ideal states could hardly bring all people under connivance and confidence neither it was practically a possibility, and consequently, millions of the people remained in their ancestral land falsifying the political calculation and testifying their position as correct through those who took the political rhetoric of partition and migrated. The disaster can be inferred from Urvashi Butalia's study (2002) which shows, "the dead vary from 200,000 (the contemporary British figure) to two million (a later Indian estimate) but that somewhere around a million people died is now widely accepted. ... about 75,000 women are thought to have been abducted and raped ... Thousands of families were divided, homes destroyed, crops left to rot, villages abandoned", and despite warnings, the new governments could not anticipate "that the fear and uncertainty created by the drawing of borders based on headcounts of religious identity ... would force people to flee to what they considered 'safer' places, where they would be surrounded by their own kind" (p. 3). These realities require narratives in fictional form as "Fiction also spawns competing versions of truth and multiple points of view and thus facilitates a richer, and a more nuanced, understanding of events and people" (Asauddin 2010, p. 96). The old man's family was one of those kinds, and fled from their birth places in search of a safe heaven, but they have to be disillusioned after being migrated and settled in the Muslim land. Soon the migrated people could realize, "they are merely poor players trapped in civil, political and religious nightmares enacted to satisfy the egotism of some and the powerful ambitions of others" (Bhalla p. 6). The marginalisation of the family is stressed by the economic condition which is worsened to the extent where the three surviving members cannot support even a day with whatever they have. Moreover, the members' age and their working capability also push them in the extreme margin, as the supposed master of the house is an old man suffering from breathing problems with a failing health and devastated mind as a result of the partition and migration. The other elder member is the mother herself whose presence with a shrill voice to protest an unethical practice within the family structure and the

following eraser of her voice by the master also shows her infirmity as a member and incapability as a working force to support and earn livelihood. The marginalised position is further deepened by the fact that the migrated people occupy a piece of land supposedly in exchange are not integrated within the established society, and so the people who could have been of any help to them hardly visit them or pay any attention to them. The consequence is dire, and the whole family with nobody to earn by physical labour faces a debacle where only death can be an honourable solution, and so the old man refers to the planting of an oleander tree. He also narrates the purpose and it is to get the seeds which gives the best type of poison, "When I came here - I planted an oleander tree first ... Not for flowers, for seeds, understand, for the seeds of oleander flowers. The seeds from oleander flowers produce pure poison" (p. 179). In this extreme marginalized position and dehumanized condition within a conservative society, the adolescent girl supersedes all the conceived, and perceived lines and denies the embargos set on them from societal and religious considerations, and offers herself to be a space to yield livelihood which can be termed as "enterprising spirit" of the refugee women who stand up to rescue the family from complete disaster (Batra p. 16).

Ruku's space is in flux, and she silently continues negotiating herself with the elements for dominance. By age, she is yet to attain youth, and the occasional and eventual references to her physical structure invalidate her position to support herself let alone the family in the conservative social practices. But in adversaries, the adolescent girl comes to be a rescuer and bread winner in times of national disaster and historical humanitarian massacre. Ruku transforms herself with exceptional adaptability to fit the emergency, and so keeps silent even when she gets her support within the family space from the mother. The wage-earning activity she takes up is not in line with the family tradition nor in the social practice among the conservatives. A girl born and brought up within the Muslim conservative family structure transcends the boundary of being imbecile, and emerges as someone physically challenging, mentally irresistible, practically advanced and emotionally mature. So far religious position is concerned, she questions the very essence of the nationalist politics in connection to the partition which considered religion as the prime factor. By physically offering herself as a ground to earn livelihood, she defies all the desires and expectations by the state politics and the politicians, and then comes out to be a rebel who can falsify the whole narrative and discourse and creates discourse of her own. Her defiance and transcendence can be regarded in bigger spaces. The physical sacrifice of the adolescent girl levels her with the freedom fighters who fight and sacrifice for the country at the best of their capacity in times of need. On their way to the destination, Feku, Suhas and Inam come across a fox holding in its mouth a dying hen, and heading towards a safe site to devour it. The imagery of the fox is aligned with the youths, and Ruku in our perception turns

into the sacrificial being for the survival in the resultant struggle. But Ruku subverts the conceived space, and instead of being a victimized self without any position of her own like the hen, she brings a reversal of the position, remains the centre of action and survival strategy, proves the centre of gravity to attract the prospective clients and silently sacrifices as a breadwinner. She carves her place against the political rhetoric, socio-religious embargo and extreme marginalization. Thus, in the diasporic space, "multiple subject positions are juxtaposed, contested, proclaimed or disavowed; where the permitted and the prohibited perpetually interrogate" (Brah, 208). Moreover, the body space of the adolescent can be altered with the land space of the country which natures the inhabitants and citizens, but is somehow always being exploited, misused and misappropriated the land. Thus, she by sacrificing herself under unbearable situation comes to be a metaphor for the motherland herself, and brings forth the extreme necessity of correcting our visions and views.

The stray boys head towards the newly built house of the refugee, but their destination and desire are all directed towards the physical space of the adolescent girl. Thus, she elevates herself not as a polluted self to be ignored and underestimated, rather she is a site to be adored and adopted at convenience. Moreover, the stray boys who do not care about the society and the structured life are contained, controlled, attracted and tamed by her. The boys have nuanced understanding of the education system which fails to accommodate all hailing from their backgrounds, and are thrown out of the amenities and ambits in the process. So, they can easily question the whole system by equating it with the object on which one feels like peeing, a gesture of a rebel. In addition, they are physically capable of taking tortures meted out to them by the traditional system while got caught in stealing. These boys whom the traditional perspective consider to be incorrigible are within the control and view of this girl. Despite the fact that the writer initially carefully depicts an image of a hen being caught by a jackal, and is being taken to the fields crossing the road by distancing itself from human habitation. Ruku initially seems to be the hen which faces the end through the hungry animal. But she even transmits that vision of the writer who denies to fall back and fail, rather she creates repeating value attracting the boys who on the surface are simply the derailed people, but in the process comes out to be the stronger members of the community where the grown up and the established do not go or like to enter, they regularly visit and, despite being rapists turn out to be the rescuer as the old man articulates, "If you had not come what will happen to us we will die of hunger'. It is not a welcome position for the old man but an obligatory condition where the alternatives despite being bitter are invited, accepted and practiced, and all are channelized through Ruku but for whom the narrative loses its essence.

Ruku keeps herself inside, and this confinement is ascribed to and imposed on the female body by the socio-religious practices to ensure the purity of the society which itself is unmindful to and incapable of safeguarding them from the exposure which is subversive of the impositions. The adolescent thus makes a mockery of the conservatism for its being impractical as well as inhuman. Her age and physical condition are not supportive of the burden of physical abuse, but she silently allows her body space to be mis/used as a survival strategy. The father's own incapability is compensated by his bargaining position and strategic approach to endorse as well as retrain and restrict the perpetrators-cum-saviours whom he considers rescuers, "But for you, we would have died in this jungle" (p. 178). This survival strategy is entirely based on the physical value of Ruku, and she restores in the old father the utility with which he can serve the family. Two of the three youth Feku and Suhas get the pass to enter the forbidden world, but Inam is suspended of the eligibility and is kept outside along with the alienated old man who has his stories and willingness to share them. The listening partner is Inam who is also managed there by the silent, absent Ruku for whom all the three have come there. His inability to manage two taka and consequent waiting collectively earn him the leisure to observe the old man, listen to his story of planting the oleander tree for its seeds to produce high quality poison and feel the heart-broken weeping of the repentant, failed and incapable father. An impatient young man denied access to consumption transforms into a sympathiser to the previously intolerable boring old man and comes with utterances with solace for a man who himself finds no worth on earth except gasping for breath to live, "You are crying now? You are crying now? Crying, you now?" (p. 179). The only emotional engagement results from Inam's inability and the old man's strategically strict position, and this has been facilitated by the marginalized and silent Ruku with proven subjectivity and subversive agency. This final utterance equates the partition with the seeds of the oleander tree, perpetual crying of the old man and subversion through submission of Ruku.

Ruku's silence is louder than all the voices and articulation in the story. She challenges the essentialist claim of superiority by the patriarch. She remains instrumental in exposing, alternating and subverting the inscribed, imposed, established and practised discourses and structures. The margin she inhabits is in flux and creatively open for facilitating and nurturing the emergence of agency and voice as Ruku does.

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