



New

ISSN:2582-7375

LITERARIA

An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities

Volume 5 Issue 2

Aug - Sept, 2024

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Affect, Subjectivity and Everyday Resistance in Hasan Azizul Haque's *The Bird of Fire*

Srestha Bhattacharya

Abstract

This paper intends to explore Affect as a potential source of both personal and political subjectivity, with special reference to Bangladeshi author Hasan Azizul Haque's historical novel *Agun Pakhi (The Bird of Fire)*. Published in 2008, *The Bird of Fire* chronicles a highly eventful time in the history of the Indian subcontinent. The novel begins around twenty years before the partition of Bengal and goes on to document a number of socio-political upheavals of the time, including, for example, the Second World War, the Bengal famine of 1943, the partition of Bengal, and the ensuing unrest between the Hindus and Muslims. In *The Bird of Fire*, however, these events are documented not as external, 'outside' activities, and are instead mediated by and presented through the everyday domestic experiences of the novel's unnamed female protagonist. As a consequence, the 'mundane' in Haque's novel acquires political salience. In Haque's novel, qualities like tenderness and affection, which are usually taken to be signs of 'passive' femininity, come to play a crucial role in the protagonist's attempts to subjectivize her. This 'feminine' expression, in turn, is largely driven by Affective dimensions. By the virtue of her emotional response-ability, the protagonist succeeds in forging a new mode of resistance that challenges both political violence and patriarchy. By studying the form and content of Haque's novel, this paper explores how the notion of resistance in *The Bird of Fire* recalibrates itself in terms of the 'ordinariness' of the protagonist.

Keywords: Affect, Everyday, Subjectivity, Political Violence, Resistance.

Introduction

Jurgen Habermas (1991) sees the public sphere as "made up of private people gathered together as a public and articulating the needs of society with the state" (175-676). In this definition, Habermas implies that public sphere in its ideal form can serve as a site of potential transformation. It is through the critiques exercised and debates generated in the public sphere, Habermas contends, that important social and political changes are potentially facilitated. However, at its core, Habermas's conception of the public sphere remains an idealistic vision. As critics like Joan B. Landes (1988, p. 21), Geoff Eley (1990, p. 310) and Swati Chattopadhyay (2005, p. 19) have pointed out, the notion of a single, monolithic 'public' leaves a significant part of the general population, including women, out of its scope. Throughout the course of history, men have been primarily associated with the 'external', while women have been largely seen as inhabiting a rather constricted 'private' world. As Susan Hanson (2010) puts it,

[M]obility/immobility stand at the core of traditional gender ideologies, which are infused with notions of space, place and mobility. These ideologies echo the familiar dualism that on one side equates women and femininity with the home, the private, with domestic spaces and restricted movement (which translates into interactions that are routine, quotidian, familiar), and on the other, equates men and masculinity with the not-home, the public, with urban spaces and expansive movement (which translates into interactions that bring excitement, challenges, new experiences, encounters with the unknown). (9)

Such gendered notions of space and mobility have inevitably contributed towards the exclusion of women from questions of socio-political agency. To address this issue, several feminist critics have suggested ways in which women can partake in and enact movements of resistance and emancipation. Fraser (1990), for example, argues for the existence of “subaltern counterpublics” (67). Conceiving publics as plural entities, Fraser maintains that marginalized groups of different kinds have managed to form a multitude of parallel public spheres that destabilize the bourgeois, male-centric singular public sphere. Suffragette activist Frances Willard, on the other hand, has advocated in favour of increased physical mobility for women in order to enable their liberation (Willard, 1991, p. 17). In their observations, both Fraser and Willard seem to foreground the importance of interacting with the 'outside' world when it comes to female subjectivity.

However, when one considers the specific case of South Asian women, particularly the ones belonging to the lower and lower middle classes, getting involved in any form of public activity for them is a particularly difficult task. Given the lack of financial independence and the rigid, patriarchal joint family structure, a large number of South Asian women remain confined to their households. As Partha Chatterjee notes in the context of colonial India, “[...] unlike the women's movement in nineteenth and twentieth century Europe and America, the battle for the new idea of womanhood in the era of nationalism was waged at home” (Chatterjee, 1993, p. 133). In the light of Chatterjee's remark, it becomes imperative to look beyond the conventional ideas of resistance that privilege ‘publicness’ in one way or the other. Bangladeshi writer Hasan Azizul Haque’s historical novel *Agun Pakhi* (The Bird of Fire), referring to the Phoenix, provides one such literary instance where such a development becomes possible.

Published in 2008, *The Bird of Fire* chronicles a highly eventful time in the history of the Indian subcontinent. The novel begins around twenty years before the partition of Bengal and goes on to document a number of socio-political upheavals of the time, including, for example, the Second World War, the Bengal famine of 1943, the partition of Bengal, and the ensuing unrest between the Hindus and Muslims. In *The Bird of Fire*, however, these events are documented not as external, ‘outside’ activities, and are instead mediated by and presented through the everyday domestic experiences of the novel's unnamed female protagonist. As a consequence, the mundane in Haque’s novel goes on to acquire a political salience. As it appears, instead of getting absorbed within the folds of the normative rational order, the discourse of resistance in *The Bird of Fire* is enacted in terms of what Mary Holmes (2008) has termed “the everydayness of gender” (p. 4). Consequently, something like emotion, which has “long been associated with the personal, the body [and] the feminine” (Åhäll, 2018, p. 37), comes to play a crucial role in the protagonist’s attempts to subjectivize herself. By the virtue of her emotional response-ability, the protagonist succeeds in forging a new mode of resistance that challenges both political violence and patriarchy. By studying the form and content of Haque’s novel, this paper explores how the notion of resistance in *The Bird of Fire* recalibrates itself in terms of the ‘ordinary’ existence of the protagonist.

Contextualizing The Bird of Fire

Set in pre-independence, undivided Bengal, *The Bird of Fire* follows the life and struggles of its female protagonist— a timid, unlettered Muslim woman who is forced to confront the harsh realities of her time. Right from the beginning of the novel, the author focuses on the narrow, restricted scope of the protagonist's existence. As she grows up in a strictly patriarchal society, the narrator is denied a coherent sense of self; this is perhaps the reason why she remains unnamed throughout the course of the narrative and is chiefly defined through her relationships with the people around her. Since her lack of formal education prevents her from accessing the public sphere, the social circle of the protagonist remains limited only to the people with whom she happens to share a physical proximity. Narrated in the first person, the novel traces her journey right from her childhood, where she is portrayed as being meek and submissive in the presence of a detached father, to her youth, when she is married off in a well-to-do family in a distant village. Even after marriage, her life follows a similar trajectory; while her husband cares for her, he fails to connect with her on a personal level. The overbearing presence of both her husband and her mother-in-law, and her daily duties as the daughter-in-law of a big family, keep her confined to a rather mute existence until the very end of the novel, when she finally assumes a more assertive character.

In Haque's novel, however, the build up to the climax is foreshadowed right from the beginning. The title of the very first chapter of *The Bird of Fire* explicitly invokes a 'feminine', 'bodily' symbol, namely that of the female lap— "My Brother Turns into a Cocoon in my Lap"¹ (Haque, 2008, p. 7). This evocation of the imagery of lap is particularly significant. In her essay "The Laugh of the Medusa", the French feminist critic Helene Cixous (1976) calls for a radical change in a way in which language in literature communicates itself. Contending that language is male-centric, Cixous posits the need to develop a new idiom which challenges this phallic bias, this privileging of rationality and structure that is, according to her, inherent in most literature. She terms this form of language as *écriture féminine*, which literally translates to "women's writing". Cixous goes on to say that *écriture féminine* marks a:

[...] return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her [the Woman], which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display - the ailing or dead figure, which so often turns out to be the nasty companion, the cause and location of inhibitions. Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time. (Cixous, 1976, p. 880)

It thus follows that the body, according to Cixous, occupies a key position in the undoing of phallogocentrism; the body in all its corporeality challenges and disrupts the normative idea of the 'rational' male mind that is prevalent in literary language. In practices of *écriture féminine*, then, 'bodily' imagery is heavily deployed. In this 'feminine language', references to organs like the heart, viscera and womb, which serve as the 'Other' to the thinking mind in the Cartesian binary, become integral in communicating authentic, felt emotions. Cixous maintains that despite the explicit invocation of 'femininity', not every woman author practices *écriture féminine*, and nor is it only limited to women's writing. Haque's novel is a case in point— throughout the novel, the authorial persona entirely disappears into that of its female protagonist, making the writing essentially 'feminine'.

Through his use of language, the author underscores how the female existence of the protagonist in *The Bird of Fire* is intimately connected to her identity as a mother. The quality of motherhood, in turn, becomes a metaphor of the protagonist's identity as a caregiver and demonstrates how the personality of Haque's protagonist develops chiefly through her private, interpersonal relationships and not her engagement with any form of

public discourse. The death of the protagonist's mother, with which the novel begins, serves to be the turning point of both her and her brother's life. Left with no one except their brooding, emotionally withdrawn father (and his ailing aunt, who soon dies), the siblings find no source of support and affection.

While the second marriage of their father brings some amount of stability in the protagonist's life, her brother continues to suffer from loneliness and anxiety. Feeling alone and helpless, he clings desperately to his sister as a source of protective maternal care that shelters him not only from the aloof and intimidating presence of their father, but also the harsh realities of the outside world, as he turns himself into a 'cocoon' in her lap. The lap of the protagonist, here, serves as a metaphor for the womb, the site on which her motherhood is enacted. As one observes, the lap/ womb goes on to become a safe space for her brother, and despite her intentions, the role of motherhood is inadvertently thrust upon the narrator from a very young age.

The Idea of Home

Rosemary Marangoly George (1996) characterizes home as a site of ambiguity and ambivalence. Although its purpose is to make its members feel included, the inclusion is selective. The memberships, George further argues, are "maintained by bonds of love, fear, power, desire and control" (George, 1996, p. 9). *The Bird of Fire* captures this paradoxical nature of 'home'. While Haque's protagonist refuses to romanticize her domestic life, her sense of "belonging" is nevertheless derived from her "emotional attachment" to her immediate surroundings— and, by extension— to the homeland she was born and brought up in.

For instance, when the protagonist's eldest son gets beaten up for his participation in the anticolonial resistance, it is his home, his mother's lap, that shelters and nourishes him. The protagonist, again, becomes involved in an anticolonial struggle, albeit in an indirect, 'passive' way. Unlike her son, who actively participates in the anti-colonial movement, she does not resort to picketing shops or hitting the roads in protest. However, as she takes care of her son who does all of that, her very motherhood becomes her way of resisting, the colonial rule. While the protagonist's involvement in the nationalist movement is unintentional at best, through her character, Haque's narrative nevertheless acknowledges the contribution to the Indian struggle for independence by several unknown people, especially women, whose names and identities have been consigned to oblivion by mainstream narratives of history. It, however, needs to be noted that the domestic space in itself is not the safe place that some readings of the novel have identified it with. In fact, right after her marriage, the protagonist immediately starts viewing it as a site of oppression:

Once I joined the drudgery, there was to be no end to it. If they said right, I had to go right. If they said left, I had to go left. It seems now that I never did anything on my own, I never knew how to follow my own wishes. Am I a person or a person's shadow? And even then, is that my own shadow? (p. 14)

The home in itself does not offer any comfort; rather, it is the motherly component, the recurring symbol of the lap and the womb that turns the home into a site of strength, courage and safety. Besides the people around her, the protagonist herself derives satisfaction and inspiration from her motherhood. When her husband asks for her jewellery for his new business venture, the protagonist admits that she felt shattered. However, no sooner than her husband accuses her of loving her jewellery more than her children (a trait he ascribes to the whole of womankind), the narrator becomes ready to part with her jewellery without any second thoughts whatsoever. This insult to her motherhood not only gives her the strength to

part with her prized material possessions but also turns her into the martyr figure among her in-laws'. Perhaps even more importantly, it demonstrates how the author avoids attributing essential qualities to womanhood and womanliness and instead presents his protagonist as a product of her immediate social and geographical context. Even if the role she plays in most of these developments is passive in nature, these incidents, mostly related to her status as a mother, are crucial to the development of the protagonist's character.

Affective Resistance in *The Bird of Fire*

While there has hardly been a consensus on the subject of affect, it is usually understood in terms of agency or intentionality, or the lack thereof. For instance, Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, in *The Affect Theory Reader* (2010) suggest that "affect" arises in the "in-between-ness" of capacities to act and be acted upon (Seigworth, p.1). Patricia Clough, on the other hand, defines affect as "the augmentation or diminution of a body's capacity to act, to engage, and to connect" (Clough, p. 2). Thinkers like Brian Massumi have described affect as a "prepersonal intensity", a theorization that can apply to anything from mental or emotional states to bodily sensations. In the context of feminist politics, however, the state of being 'affected' has been primarily linked to felt emotions. For instance, in *Living a Feminist Life*, Sara Ahmed (2017) suggests that "a gut feeling has its own intelligence. A feminist gut might sense something is amiss. You have to get closer to the feeling" (27). Making a similar argument, Clare Hemmings (2012) contends that the "question of affect—misery, rage, passion, pleasure—that gives feminism its life" (Hemmings, p. 150). The protagonist in *The Bird of Fire* exemplifies this idea of affective feminism. A stereotypically passive, 'feminine woman', she is seemingly devoid of assertiveness and relies primarily on her emotions to make sense of her surroundings. Influenced and motivated by her everyday interactions and interpersonal relationships, Haque's protagonist eventually develops a personal value system that is always "intended toward the other" (Spivak, 2003, p. 73).

The protagonist's isolated existence and rich interiority makes emotions the driving force of her life. Susceptibility to feelings— a traditionally 'feminine' character trait which manifests both in the protagonist's speech patterns and thought process, serves as one of the key factors that aid her transformation. However, this, too, has more to do with her sheltered upbringing than her 'given' womanhood. Owing to her lack of formal literacy, Haque's protagonist stays outside the purview of a globalized, modern systems of communication. Unable to read newspapers, she also remains unaware of the important global events that her husband keenly follows. Throughout the novel, the author portrays his narrator as someone who resists rational thoughts that are a by-product of institutional education. When her husband tries to initiate her into formal education, the protagonist- a woman who has made peace with her illiteracy- resists immediately even as her husband constantly berates her for being "uneducated" (Haque, p. 34) and "stupid" (p. 36).

At one level, the narrator's reluctance to yield to a new, more globalized idiom of 'knowing' merely seems to be a practical issue, since all her duties as a housewife leave her with little energy to devote to other activities like studying, as she herself admits. However, this refusal also means that for the narrator — who had until then received little exposure to letters — feelings remain the dominant mode of perception. Consequently, for her, truth consists not of logical propositions that can be found in books, but is derived from the reality of actual lived experience. Even after she learns to read, the narrator processes information around her through the means of her emotions. Besides perception, the narrator's emotions also influence the way she expresses herself. In contrast to the chaste Bengali spoken by both her father and her husband, the narrator speaks in her local *rarhi* dialect, which has more emotions and a certain poetic cadence than the Bengali spoken in the city. External factors, whether social, political or geographical, are therefore seen to exercise a formative influence

on the consciousness of the protagonist. Tirthankar Das Purkayastha (2014-15), noting the novel's resistance to translation, remarks that "[t]he narrator's dialect is textured with images of hard and poor living, simple, homely words, intensely evocative of a life lived with least amenities." (Das and Purkayastha, p. 160). As such, there remains no inconsistency between her thoughts and expressions. As the following instances make it clear, throughout the novel, the narrator understands and expresses profound truths in a manner that is both simple and thought-provoking. For example, when the entire village community fearfully anticipates the devastating consequences of the Second World War, the narrator wonders if such tremendous violence makes any sense, because all soldiers, after all, must have been born of a mother, and therefore should not engage in acts which involve snatching a child away from their mother. Her idea of maternal love, then, becomes a profound, if somewhat utopian, expression of what the world should ideally be like, as motherhood and the female body become a vernacular through which universal truths are articulated.

This becomes clearer in the vastly different ways in which she and her husband perceive Hindu-Muslim relations. While her husband analyses the Hindu-Muslim relations in colonial India largely through historical and political developments like the Khilafat Movement, and cynically concludes that Hindus and Muslims are not meant to be together, the narrator, cut off from all outside events, forms her ideas chiefly through her real-life encounters and interactions with the people from a different religious community than that of her own. On pondering on the Hindu-Muslim unrest, she comes to the conclusion that such debates are pointless, because she herself has witnessed the cordial relationship that her in-laws shared with the local influential Hindu family, and fondly recalls the warm welcome she received at their place. For her, actual human relations take precedence over theoretical concepts and ideas. Consequently, her version of the Hindu-Muslim equation is much more humane than that of her husband:

Whatever be the case, what is there in Hindu-Muslim differences to be so bothered about? Aren't there differences between Christians and Hindus? Aren't there differences between Christians and Muslims? There are so many differences among Hindus themselves! Don't Muslims differ amongst themselves? Even members of the same family don't always agree with one another. Is there even a point in thinking about such differences? (Haque, 2008, p. 213)

This intensely felt emotion, connected deeply with her status as a mother and a caregiver, remains a quiet, assured presence throughout the narrative. Even when the traditional structure, ordered by rational logic collapses, the narrator manages to survive. Indeed, it is precisely the narrator's emotional dependence on others that ultimately enables her to stand up against her family in the novel's climax. Noting the change in the tone of the novel, Mahmud observes:

At first she [the protagonist] mostly speaks of life within the family. Births, deaths, marriages. Their fortunes improve as they become the largest landowner in the area. But as World War II breaks out, they get hit by cholera, shortages, crop failure, and finally the trauma of Hindu-Muslim division. With these big events, the story breaks out of its domestic confines. (Rahman, 2008)

This structure of the narrative, in a way, parallels the narrator's character development. Slowly but surely, the narrator develops her own personal value system that manifests explicitly for the first time in the climax of the novel. Her husband's extended joint family has split up by now and relocated from India to the newly formed state of Pakistan in search of a better life; as have her children. The narrator, however, in her own way, questions this

'outside' violence and cruelty, which again takes the form of an apparently 'sentimental', 'irrational' outburst: "You have achieved Pakistan with your *lorke lenge* ('we will fight to get [Pakistan]'). Do you even know what that country is like? Won't you now go to that country you won through all your fights and bloodshed?" (235).

Resistance, Subjectivity and the Everyday

The narrator stands by this position till the very end. Finally, the narrator's husband, too, decides to leave the land of Hindus (West Bengal) and migrate to East Pakistan with his entire family. Even though migrating to Pakistan with her husband to be together with her children would have been the most 'practical' decision, the narrator decides against it, solely because her emotional self is repulsed by this act of unmitigated violence. Assent to emotions becomes the mode through which the narrator challenges the normative order of so-called rationality. As her husband charges her with ignorance — "since when did you know so much?" (Haque, p. 245) he asks her angrily — the narrator stands her ground. She makes it amply clear that her decision is motivated by emotion, but not indiscretion:

No one could explain to me that this wasn't my country just because I am a Muslim. No one could explain to me that I must migrate to Pakistan, just because my children stay there now. What can I do if my husband leaves? Him and I are two distinct individuals. He is the love of my life, but he is a different person. (p. 252)

In the words of Rosemary Marangoly, "[i]magine a home is as political an act as is imagining a nation" (George, 1996, p. 6). In defining her own idea of what she considers to be her 'home', the narrator's personal choice becomes an assertion of political identity. What transforms the erstwhile timid girl into a fiery, assertive woman is, as she herself proclaims, not 'education' or literacy but the 'love' that she carries in her "bosom" (252). Standing against the "masculinized memory [and] masculinized hope" of her husband's nationalistic fervour, the exercising of her female identity becomes a radical act of resilience and subversion in itself (Enloe, 2014, p. 106). She is thus the titular *Agun Pakhi*, the Phoenix who does not breathe fire, but rather endures it and subsequently rises from the ashes instead. Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1995) observes how the western gaze has categorically constructed the Third World Woman as a homogeneous entity. In her own words, a significant portion of western feminist writings:

[...] discursively colonizes the material and historical heterogeneities of the lives of women in the third world, thereby producing/re-presenting a composite, singular "third world woman" [,] an image which appears arbitrarily constructed, but nevertheless carries with it the authorizing signature of Western humanist discourse. (Mohanty, p. 260)

The protagonist of *The Bird of Fire* initially appears to be in conformity with a rather western notion of the marginalized South Asian woman that Mohanty seeks to dismantle- she is uneducated, docile and seems to be devoid of any sense of individuality. However, as the narrative progresses, it becomes apparent that the author deftly defies and subverts the prevalent stereotypes surrounding the Third World South Asian Woman precisely by appearing to adhere to them. This not only enables the author to directly confront the Western gaze towards the Third World Woman but also allows him to creatively map an 'internal' history of monumental socio-political events.

Conclusion

In the highly stratified society of South Asia, the expression of subjectivity has to take into account the distinct gender identities. As Meenakshi Thapan argues, "the gendered subject is

not a biological or even psychological but primarily a social being who experiences her femininity in inter-subjective relationships with several others in a complex interplay of class, caste, regional and socio-economic factors” (Thapan, 1995, p. 32). For a female character belonging to the same socioeconomic status as Haque’s protagonist, it is a given that she would forge her resistance in a manner that is in tune with her place and time. Haque himself hints at this in one of his interviews, stating that his protagonist in *The Bird of Fire* is based on a “real person”, that is, his “mother” (Haque, 2020 as cited in Mondol, 2020, p. 270). It is, however, important to note that despite its real-life inspiration, the protagonist remains unnamed throughout Haque's narrative. This anonymity not only foregrounds her initial identity crisis in a patriarchal society, but also allows her to transcend her immediate spatiotemporal context and become a model of everyday resilience who gains agency not in spite, but rather because of her female identity, even as she keeps her distinct individuality intact.

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Bio-note

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