

# Partition and Identity Formation: The Case of *Agunpakhi* and *Rajkahini*

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## Abstract

In both *Agunpakhi* by Hasan Azizul Haque and *Rajkahini* by Srijit Mukherji, the female characters follow the rules of the patriarchy, and more or less are satisfied with their prescribed roles. However, Partition of the country provides them an opportunity to think about their inner strength and distinctiveness and so, the female characters rise above and subvert their previous dominated identities to become new women. Unlike the remarkable Partition narrative, in both *Agunpakhi* and *Rajkahini*, we feel the pains of Partition from the experiences of the female characters. However, they are not only the passive victims of partition, they prove their worth by rejecting traditional gender roles and fighting for the country. The aim of this paper to unmask the repressive and fundamentally flawed patriarchal society that restrain the female characters to form their identities, and at the same time to focus on the opportunities that Partition gives them to fabricate their sense of identity. In this paper, Feminist theory will be used.

**Keywords:** Identity, motherland, new woman, patriarchy, partition

## Introduction:

*Agunpakhi* by Hasan Azizul Haque and *Rajkahini* by Srijit Mukherji unleash the poignant story of Partition (1947) of the Indian Subcontinent and the protest of a group of female characters against it- the protest that enables them to form their identities. In both *Agunpakhi* and *Rajkahini*, the women change immensely and dramatically through the events of the Partition. In the pre-partition era, the women in both *Agunpakhi* and *Rajkahini* are oppressed as well as governed largely by a patriarchal society and hence, do not get an opportunity to form and flourish as independent individuals. *Agunpakhi* chronicles the story of a nameless rural woman ruled by her father in childhood, husband in her conjugal life until the Partition occurs. By not giving a name to the protagonist-the narrator, the author intentionally focuses on the identity crisis that women undergo under the torturous events of the Partition. Again, *Rajkahini* unfolds the distressing story of a group of women, headed by Begum Jaan, who sell their bodies and men misuse them in the name of education, political shelter, and protection. Hence women are subjugated and dominated physically as well as mentally by patriarchy. However, when the leaders of Partition threaten to tear the country apart, the women, being aware of their rights and internal power, show firmness of decision, fight against authority and power, and finally sacrifice their family members (in case of *Agunpakhi*) or sacrifice their lives (in case of *Rajkahini*) for their country. These actions represent the rejection of the stereotypical

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concept of womanhood, redefinition of gender roles, and the defeat of masculine supremacy.

It is noticeable that Begum Jaan's brothel is the Utopian world for the prostitutes-the most ignored ones of the society who irrespective of religion, caste, or creed live on their territory-the the brothel of Begum Jaan. When the pressures of the external world force them to vacate their own kingdom-their country, they protest against Partition, calling it into question, drawing attention to what others never think of. Again, in *Agunpakhi*, the woman develops a new identity abandoning her family members and thus challenges the male-dominated family structure by living in her own land-her country. Therefore, one can say that, though Partition makes their lives awful, it gives occasions for new voices to rise, concentrating on the relevance and strength of their newly attained distinctiveness. It opens up new windows through which women can be imagined and portrayed from a different angle.

### **Gender Stereotype and Identity Formation:**

The term *gender* "refers to our cultural programming as feminine or masculine" (Tyson 86). No one is born as feminine or masculine rather society categorizes gender. Traditional gender roles depict women as submissive, sensitive, emotional, servile, weak, and nurturing while men as shown as dominant, strong, rational, protective, and confident. "These gender roles have been used successfully to justify inequalities, which still occur today, such as excluding women from equal access to leadership and decision-making positions" (85). Patriarchy propagates the idea that women, being biologically weaker, are inherently inferior to men and "continuously exerts forces that undermine women's confidence and assertiveness, then points to the absence of . . . qualities as proof that women are naturally, and therefore correctly, self-effacing and submissive" (87). Hence women internalize patriarchal programming of feminine attributes, manners, and roles that make them *other* within the patriarchal domain. Simone de Beauvoir (1949) asserts:

One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society: it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine. Only the intervention of someone else can establish an individual as an Other. (267)

Patriarchal programming offers only two identities for a woman. "If she accepts her traditional gender role and obeys the patriarchal rules, she's a 'good girl'; if she doesn't, she's a 'bad girl'" (Tyson 89). To relate to the patriarchal order, women ignore their perspectives, emotions, and opinions to fabricate or form an identity mask which is quite inappropriate for them and so, suffer from a sense of loss of identity.

Identity indicates the conscious process of rethinking, of revising one's behaviors and feelings about others who may or may not have the same habits or manners. It describes how an individual deals with complexity and uncertainty. "Our personal identity, too, is to a considerable degree moulded by the people we interact with, who tell us what we are or should be, whom we admire or despise" (Coulmas 10). It indicates "our place in the universe, the meaning of life and death, and our purpose for being here" (Chickering and

Reisser 207). Erikson (1968) identified some components of identity which are: (1) a sense of personal continuity over time and across situations; (2) a sense of inner agency; (3) a commitment to certain self-representations as self-defining; (4) a commitment to certain roles as self-defining; (5) an acknowledgment of one's role commitments and views of self by significant others; (6) a commitment to a set of core values and ideal self-standards, and (7) a commitment to a worldview that gives life meaning.

The components indicate that though identity is formed concerning other identities or to culture and society, "a vital part of every identity—of a person, a group, a corporation—is that it is different from other identities" (Coulmas 95). Usually, a woman fails to form a distinct identity apart from the identity given by society as she feels insecure and does not know where she belongs and often is uncertain who she is. For this, feminists talk about female identity construction focusing on two distinct positions:

1. Women behave like women because they have been oppressed for generations (and therefore should change their behavior and that of men).
2. Women behave like women because they are fundamentally different from men (and therefore should fight for recognition of difference). (Coulmas 43).

### **Partition and Women:**

War is gendered and it further paves ways for "symbolic violence" (Morgan and Thapar Bjorkert 441) against women. In any war, women are the worst victims as sexual violence is considered a basic of heroism and masculinity. During the war, rape often symbolizes the defeat of a particular territory. Women are held to represent the motherland and they are easy to defeat and so, their humiliation signifies the loss of honour of any nation. Sexual purity of women is thought of as a pre-requisite for national purity. Therefore, "women's bodies are constructed as both territories to be conquered and vehicles through which the nation/group can be reproduced" (Kelly 50). However, the adversities that women experience physically and psychologically are no less significant than those of men. It may offer a new opportunity that is, instead of being passive victims of war, women can prove their worth by defying traditional roles and attitudes.

Like other wars, during Partition, extreme systematic violence against women was noticed. Partition was a mechanism of the British government, that divided British India into different states along religious boundaries—India and Pakistan. It was done so hastily that there was little scope to understand what its consequences would be—the enormous scale of riots, massive killings, migration, and excessive viciousness against women. Menon and Bhasin (1998) in *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition* claimed that the official number of abducted women stood at 50,000 for Muslim women kidnapped by Hindu and Sikh men on their way to Pakistan, while 33,000 Hindu and Sikh women were abducted as they attempted to migrate to India (70). Still, in the vast Partition literature, there is only focus on male political figures. There is no acknowledgment of women's involvement. "If women are included, the discussions are usually framed in the context of women as a victim of sexual violence" (Sidwha 18). Contrary to this dominant Partition narrative, in both *Agunpakhi* and *Rajkahini*, we see Partition from the eyes of women, perceive its effects from the experiences of women.

Though men want to conquer them by inflicting gender violence, they (the women) are not defeated. They radically uproot masculine authority and declare their individuality in such a way that they achieve veneration from the men. Kamini Roy (b. 1864) said:

As women we may mothers be  
Also wives we may  
But as women we claim our place  
As women to have our say.

#### Characterizations and Plots of *Agunpakhi* and *Rajkahini*:

Characters and plot are widely considered as essential elements of any literary work. The logical arrangement of events is called plot and the process of creating and developing characters is called characterization. According to Jones (1968) "characterization is the depicting of clear images of a person (84)." However, the way of developing characters is different in novels and movies. In the case of the novel, there are two ways of showing characters in a plot. Jones (1968) says:

There are two methods of characterization: The Dramatic and the Analytic. In the dramatic, we form our opinion of the characters from what they do and say, from their environment and from what other characters think of them. In the analytic method, the author comments upon the characters explaining their motives, their appearances, and their thoughts. (84)

Analytically, the author outlines the attributes of the characters directly, while dramatically, for character analysis other issues are needed to be considered. In *Agunpakhi* the author deploys dramatic method for developing the protagonist- the unnamed rural woman. This woman, with her strong sense of observation, keenly observes her surroundings and comments on the personality of other characters. Through her narration, she chronicles births, marriages, deaths, political situation of rural Rarh area. At an early age, she is married to a person who always expects her to fulfill the demands of the family. The woman gradually perceives her worth and feels that she is different from her husband, from any other individual- she is a different identity. Hence, she rejects stereotypical roles and starts leading a life of her own choice.

There are some different steps of analyzing characters in a movie. Little (1966) categorizes some ways of character analysis in a movie. They are:

- 1) Basic Characteristics
  - a. Physical (age, physical oddities, etc)
  - b. Social relationship (personal relationship in the other character in the works; wider social relationship such as social class occupation)
  - c. Mental qualities (typical ways of thinking, feeling and acting)
- 2) Appearance from various points of view
  - a. How the character sees himself
  - b. How various other characters see him (83)

Through the performance and characteristics of the characters of Srijit Mukherjee's *Rajkahini*, we can analyze, how they look like, how old they are, what are their

intentions, whether they are responsible or not, what kind of relationship they have with society, etc. The movie is a sensitive portrayal of India- Pakistan partition and its plot revolves around a house (brothel), located between Debiganj and Haldibari districts, with eleven inmates headed by authoritative Begum Jaan. In a world where the prostitutes are not more than objects of pleasure, Begum Jaan (Rituparna Sen) holds power. She, with her curly hair and appearance, is able to point towards the dark sides of life- injustice, oppression, exploitation; each of them is associated with a male-dominated world. Though the other girls in the film do not get ample screen time to shine, Rubina (Jaya Ahsan) shines in an intimate, tender, and emotional scene with Sujan (Rudranil). Shabnam (Ridhima) gleams as a reaped girl suffering from deep mental and physical trauma. The other remarkable characters are Saleem Mirza (Nigel Akkara), Mr. Profullo Sen (Saswata Chatterjee), Mr. Ilias (Kaushik Sen), Nawab of Ranjpur (Rajatava Dutta), Master (Abir Chatterjee), Police officer (Kanchan Mallick) and Kabir (Jisshu Sengupta).

The government which never thought of the inhabitants of the brothel now decides the fate of them and asks Begum Jaan to evacuate her territory. Mr. Profullo Sen (Saswata Chatterjee), a member of Congress, and Mr. Ilias (Kaushik Sen), a member of the Muslim League, are given the task of uprooting them while relocating the people of the two districts. When they fail to vacate the place, they hire a goon Kabir and his gang who commit all sorts of heinous crimes. Kabir (Jisshu Sengupta) with his disgusting appearance and ruthless behavior steals the limelight. He and his gang butcher Sujan and set fire to Begum Jaan's tiny heaven. All women bravely fight back instead of surrendering to the lust of vicious Kabir's gang. Most of them died and the remaining women including Begum Jaan enter their own home and embrace their death in their own land. The radiance on Begum Jaan's face when she shuts the door of the brothel symbolizes her pride in defeating the menfolk. When the house and the inhabitants are burning, in the background *Bharata Bhagya Bidhata* plays. Like, true patriots, to secure their land, broadly for India they accept death willingly and happily.

### ***Agunpakhi and Sense of Identity:***

*Agunpakhi* refers to a mythical bird—Phoenix—which regenerates from its ashes. The novel describes the story of a rural Rarh woman who transcends the constraints of an ordinary identity rejecting her family, relationship, as well as her so-called responsibility as a housewife to attain her identity as a human being. It is as if she burnt everything to be revived again with a new shape/ new distinctiveness.

The novel chronicles thousands of years of culture of the then Rarh region: births, deaths, marriages, values, beliefs through the narration of a rural housewife who does not even have a name. At the very beginning of the story, she is only eight or nine years old and does not know the reason for her mother's death. Her father with his ample property and enough knowledge is quite unwilling to educate his children, let alone the daughter, and marries the second time a woman who is at best six or seven years older than the narrator. After her mother's death, she has to take care of her brother and family. Then she starts wearing a sari without knowing when she has become an adult. She said, "এই করতে করতে একদিন আমি হঠাৎ কেমন করে যি বড়ো হলোম, তা নিজেই জানতে পারি নাই" (18)|(Doing all these suddenly I have grown up, I was not aware of that).

During her marriage, nobody thinks of taking her consent. Even though she is married to a wealthy person, it does not change her lot. From one domestic confinement, she just goes to another world of confinement where she remains as a new bride even after becoming the mother of three children. No one cares for her. She works from morning till night for the family. She only gets honour and respect from others when she becomes pregnant. In this way, she passes her life being more or less satisfied with the role recommended by the society and thus represents ideal feminine values, while neglecting her individuality. Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) notes; “The feminine mystique permits, even encourage, women to ignore the question of their identity. The mystique says they can answer the question 'Who am I?' by saying 'Tom's wife... Mary's mother.' – an American woman no longer has a private image to tell her who she is, or can be, or wants to be,” and therefore “the core of the problem for women today is not sexual but a problem of identity” (71). *Agunpakhi* is not simply the story of that particular woman, rather it is the perpetual tale of all women who have to value social constructs overlooking themselves, to become the angels of their homes. Throughout history, women have been serving men through inculcating the qualities of gentleness, benevolence, and compassion, which in turn uphold the patriarchy.

However, in *Agunpakhi*, the woman's comprehension of her self changes step by step as she achieves maturity experiencing war, riot, killing, and migration. Liberating her psyche of the limitations of the domestic world, she strongly observes herself and the people who are around her and thinks distinctly and separately. She questions the validity of the Hindu-Muslim division and she feels that the girls who are being raped are her daughters, the boys who are being killed are her sons. She refuses to go to a new country that has been built on the blood of her children. When her family members urge her to leave for Pakistan, she immediately rejects this proposal, by informing them of her decision to stay behind, alone and by herself. Her profound sense of identity teaches her: “আমি আর আমার সোয়ামি তো একটি মানুষ লয়, আলেদা মানুষ” (224)| (I and my husband are not one entity, we are different.). She accomplishes a distinct identity when she frees herself from all the forces that strangled her individuality. Ultimately, she realizes; “আমি কিসের লেগে কি ছাড়লাম? অনেক ভাবলাম। শ্যামে একটি কথা মনে হলো, আমি আমাকে পাবার লেগেই এত কিছু ছেড়েছি” (224)| (Why did I leave everything? I thought. At last I understood I left everything to welcome myself).

### ***Rajkahini* and Assertion of Identity**

*Rajkahini* (The Tale of Kings) is the saga of eleven prostitutes who achieve the status of kings overthrowing societal prescribed roles. The story revolves around a brothel situated on the border between India and Pakistan where the women fight to the death to defeat tyrannical powers that try to snatch their abode—their country and hence, become the champions of feminism. In this movie, the tumultuous consequences of Partition and poignant stories of women are entwined to show the exploitation of women and at the same time how this exploitation gives birth to volatile personalities who can challenge patriarchy.

The opening scene shows a father searching for his missing daughter in a refugee camp. When he finally finds her, he finds that she has been brutally raped by a group of men. Fatima who has been tortured physically and mentally has completely lost her consciousness and does not respond to her father's plea. She only remembers the word 'open' and reacts when the doctor of the camp in a harsh tone utters "khule de" (open). She immediately opens the strings of her pant and mechanically opens her body which horrifies the men in the room. As the daughter has lost her virginity, the father sells her to Begum Jaan's brothel. His attitude towards the innocent girl is as harsh as the rapists. This event shows that oppression of women is perpetual and they are always seen as objects of pleasure. This also confirms how the harsh behavior meted out to them does not change even when their family members are concerned. Whatever be the situation, women suffer the brunt of patriarchal norms and values.

Partition brought a lot of suffering for women. Both men and women died in large numbers, but the deaths of women were horrifying as they were severely raped and then burnt alive by gangs of rioters. In *Rajkahini* Ilias, one of the government employees lost his wife who was raped and killed by a group of rioters. Again, the sisters of Prophullo, another government employee, somehow escaped gang rape. But these two men, despite the commonality of their sufferings, are very determined to give birth to two countries through the partition. Ilias says; "I am the King, I am the Bishop, I am History." The division of land had more effect on women than on men. Mother earth suffered as her body was divided into parts and the women also suffered a lot as their bodies became the objects of comfort for the rioters, as exhausted by their violent acts of killing, setting the fire and so on, they sought comfort in women. In *Rajkahini* this victimization of women is deconstructed by the resistance of the strong and determined female characters. It is an "epic saga of defiance" where "the fallen will rise" to terminate the powerful.

Begum Jaan's brothel is the Utopian world for the inmates who irrespective of religion, race or caste live happily, no one is subaltern, everyone has her dignity. Begum Jaan, an authoritative, fierce and mother-like figure, takes care of the welfare of all. This utopian world is a dream world for the women who had experienced the dark sides of life and here, they enjoy freedom from any kind of subjugation. This world is everything for the women as well as for Begum Jaan. Among them, Begum Jaan is the queen of that kingdom and she does not allow any man to control her. Even while dealing with the Nawab of Rangpur, she does not give up her authority. She coyly serves the Nawab because she is dependent on him for the safety and security of her place. She makes him leave her palace when she realizes that even the Nawab is unable to render their security. She asserts; "I do not need any men to protect me." The firmness of her character reflects the notion of the empowerment of women. It is this firmness and strength of character that enables her to refuse the temptation of the Master, who asks her to elope with him to start a new life.

In this tiny kingdom, the other women also become radical, as we can see when the vengeful police officer and government officers come to uproot them by saying; "India-Pakistan border will pass through this land." They arm themselves with guns to protect their living place. Instead of surrendering to the injustice and lust of a male-dominated world, they fight back to declare their honour and pride, and die for the house. Here, their

house symbolically represents India and like true patriots, they sacrifice their blood for the sake of the country. Begum Jaan strongly states; “[i]f anyone tries to evict us, the only ‘Partition’ that will happen will be that of their limbs from their bodies.”

Partition imparts these women new identity, new voice to claim their rights. Each of them becomes a *New Woman* able to defy all impediments. From the old grandma to young Bunchki, all of them show their resistance in their own ways. Their decision to die together in their house implies the victory of women. A bunch of victorious women enters into the house. Begum Jaan shuts the door of the brothel with a sense of pride. Their self-immolation equates each of them to the status of Padmini, the Rajput queen. Asserting their identities, protecting them, and their house from shame and humiliation, they achieve respect from their enemies even from vicious Kabir.

### Conclusion

In both *Agunpakhi* and *Rajkahini* the female characters subvert gender stereotypes to claim their identities as human beings rather than as angels of homes or objects of pleasure. In the case of *Agunpakhi*, the woman defies the norms of family, society, and culture from the moment she realizes her distinctiveness. She strongly resists her husband's decision to leave the country to be settled in another country. She with her enormous inner strength determines to stay in her own land where she was born, got married, and became mature. In *Rajkahini* the bunch of females also resist oppressors to protect their honour, pride, and their land. In both cases, the women fight back to protect their motherland and sacrifice their family members or their lives. Their new way of perception of the world offers them opportunities to welcome their selves, to declare their distinct identities, to rise again like mythical Phoenix, or to accomplish the dignity of Padmavati.

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