

Emergence of Female Agency Within and Beyond: A Study on *A Doll's House* and *Agunpakhi*

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Abstract

This paper interrogates the perception of female freedom in terms of locational position, and stresses that female freedom can be achieved irrespective of locations if space is kept and considered open and creative. The study analyses two female protagonists, one is Nora from *Doll's House* by Henrik Ibsen, and another is the eponymous protagonist from *Agunpakhi* by Hassan Azizul Huq with concentrations on their locations that correlate their final decisions of defying the dormant structures and discourses, and selecting own courses of life in the riskspace. With a close textual analysis through the lens of spatiality and agency, the paper stresses that while Nora comes out as a subject articulating her agency by leaving behind the patriarchal domestic space in a rebellious manner by banging close the door, *Agunpakhi* chooses to stay back home defying the patriarchal dominance and national discourses on the Partition. In both cases, the female protagonists choose risks, voice their presence, and orchestrate their subject position with agency. With insights from the theories on space, agency and riskspace, the researcher aims to expand the frontiers of women's freedom which can be attained irrespective of locational position.

Keywords: Female Freedom, Locational Position, Riskspace, Spatiality, Agency

Introduction

Henrik Ibsen's Nora and Hassan Azizul Huq's *Agunpakhi* are two significant characters set in two different spatial and temporal settings. *Agunpakhi*, is "a memento of our fiction" (Saha, "Agunpakhi in Translation" 2015), and *A Doll's House* is a "storm of outraged controversy" (McFarlane 2008) that went beyond the theatre to the world of newspapers and society. Both the texts narrate the domestic space of the female sections in a patriarchal society where the male figures define the roles of the opposite sex, and determine their domains and engagements. Walby (1989) considers patriarchy in an extended manner and finds it as manifestations of mechanisms that privilege male dominance socially over the females causing exploitation or oppression (pp. 223-234). In that system, the female section is often confined within some boundaries imposed. But the authors refuse to comply with the socially ascribed representation of space as "the dead, the fixed, the undialectical, the immobile" (Foucault, 1980, p. 70), rather they explore the potentials that

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every space has which is hardly recognized. So, they facilitate the gradual progression of the female protagonists. Despite being brought up under the patriarchal fathers, and married at an early age, the protagonists expand themselves while living in the domestic space. With growth and realisation, they choose to claim centrality by reversing the dominant position and asserting agency. But they adopt different strategies to break free from the exigencies. While Huq's protagonist chooses to stay back at home asserting her agency, Ibsen's heroine opts for banging close the door of the homespace and step ahead to make her own space. A Doll's House written in the last half of nineteenth century raises question regarding the traditional roles of men and women in 19th-century marriage (Fisher 2003, pp. 99-101), and Griffith (1995) stresses that Shaw finds in Ibsen a willingness to examine society without prejudice, and he marks it as exhilarating (pp. 164-165). Woolf (1929) too testifies this position, "Men have treated women as inferiors for many years. It is the men who define everything in the society" (p. 28). Such circumstances existing in Europe were the backdrops for this play. In this part of Asia too, patriarchy is dominant as Kabeer (1988) observes that Bangladesh belongs to what has been described as the belt of classic patriarchy characterized by extremely restrictive codes of behaviour for women, including purdah or seclusion of women (p.101). Uddin (2021) also finds that until the second half of the 20th century, the third world women were treated as victims of patriarchy (pp. 141-162). The protagonist of Huq has been placed in these circumstances. But none of the female protagonists of Ibsen and Huq agrees to comply with the codes imposed, rather they go for transgression. Their assertions of individuality expand the frontiers of the emancipation of female freedom. These assertions and expansions can be analysed in relation to thoughts and insights advanced by the theories on space as a creative location, riskspace as a source of thrill and freedom, and agency as the action of an individual or group in the lived space to decide upon the course of life.

Theoretical Perspectives

This study responds to Michel Foucault's emphasis on space, "The present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space" (1986, p. 22), and adopts Henri Lefebvre's proposition, "(Social) space is a (social) product" (1991, p. 26). I consider hooks' "Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness" for "the formation of counter hegemonic cultural practice to identify the spaces where we begin the process of revision" which "requires pushing against oppressive boundaries set by race sex and class domination" with "a defiant political gesture" (1990, p. 145) "to move beyond boundaries" (1990, p. 147). The marginal position is not impotent, rather it is 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"

(1990, p. 153). The protagonists under this study succeed in exploring the potentials of the margin through transgressing into the riskspace.

Again riskspace is another area of this study. Risks are seen as “potential dangers” (Arnoldi, 2009, p. 1), and as a concept, it cannot be dissociated from its socio-institutional engagements. Heise (2008) emphasises that the perception about risk “cannot be analysed in isolation from the social and institutional structures that situate individuals, and through which dangers are communicated and administered” (p. 127). However, risk space is not without positive potential and promises. Rather risk taking can add much to the empowerment as there can be found ““specific cultural practices of risk taking that promise ‘pleasure’, ‘thrill’, and ‘freedom’ to their practitioners”” (Mayer “Ecoglobalism”, 2016, p. 496). To emphasise the associated issues of risks, it is, therefore, important to consider “imagination, suspicion, fiction, fear” (Beck “Living”, 2006, p. 335), and Mayer observes in Beck increasing “attention to the role of the imagination and of narrative” (“Ecoglobalism” 501). Going through the risk spaces, Nora and Agunpakhi endeavour for agency. According to Cole, agency refers to any thought and/or action of an individual or group that articulates individual power. It empowers one to think individually and “act in ways that shape their experiences and life trajectories”. In case of the individual, agency reproduces or challenges the socio-cultural norms and relation dynamics. In that case, there occurs rejection, denial, protest and transgression. Agency implies one’s ability or power to act in accordance with a set of rules set forth by the person himself or herself (Kant 1949 cited in Kitayamma and Uchida 2005). As a concept, agency relates to the subject position of an individual with the ability to decide the course of life. This emergence of individual self and articulation of voice are linked to the entanglements with the surroundings and achievements through multi-directional engagements. Emirbayer and Mische conceptualise agency “as a temporally embedded process of social engagement” which is “informed by the past” as a habitual aspect, “oriented toward the future” as the capacity to devise “alternative possibilities” and oriented toward the present as the capacity to connect the past and the future “within the contingencies of the moment” (962). However, the concept of agency is linked to lived experience. Drawing on Dewey (1934) and Dilthey (1976), Bruner argues that lived experience is concerned with our relationships with others including the emotions, sensuousness and values that are part of these relationships (cited in Sullivan 2004, 191). Therefore, the assertion of agency can differ markedly. Agreeing with Sampson (1989), Kitayamma and Uchida (2005) argue, “although agency is based on personal judgements, decisions, and intentions, the meanings recruited to these judgements, decisions and intentions are quite diverse and variable” (p. 138). This multidimensional articulation of agency and space-making can be empowering in this study about the female protagonists of Huq and Ibsen as “Sisterhood is powerful” (hooks, 2014, p. 18).

Following these theoretical underpinnings, this paper advances the frontiers of emancipatory space-making of the female section by endorsing and advocating both ways of staying within and going beyond. This approach can be more inclusive especially when it comes to the question of conservative patriarchal practices especially in the Asian region.

Discussion

Patriarchy as a concept, accordingly to Meagher (2011), explains male dominance as a social, rather than biological, phenomenon. In both the texts, the female protagonists are placed within the exploitative patriarchal society where the females are by birth stereotyped, and they are assigned some rules without any voice or participation of their own. Placed within multiple workings of the dominantly imposing patriarchal mechanisms, the two protagonists head towards explaining the socially imposed system differently, and choose different strategies to make space for themselves. They both have been under the patriarch father who brought them up traditionally with strict supervisions and restricting norms. They are placed in the marginalising process, and are pushed to the margin in multiple ways. Coincidentally, both of them lost their mothers at an early age. The nurse Anna in *A Doll's House* says, "My poor little Nora had no mother but me" (Act II) while Agunpakhi herself shares that when she was eight or nine and her brother around two, "my mother closed her eyes setting us adrift in uncertainty" (p. 9). Consequently, they find themselves protected by the patriarchal surveillance system executed in and through the figures of father, brother, husband and bosses etc. at various stages in different locations. So, Nora says, "I mean I passed from father's hands to yours" (Act III), and Agunpakhi finds her marriage just a transition, "Me, a new bride, came from a puddle to a big pond" (p. 27). Within that protected cocooned, they generally clutch at the traditional roles, form the habit of being satiated within the definition given by the surveillance agency, and pass a life directed, guided, shaped and imposed by those dominant agencies. Agunpakhi says, "I started pulling the grinding tree that time and never could stop pulling that in the whole of my life" (p. 28). Patriarchy ensures the sustenance of suppressive activities, and so Helmer can accuse Nora of having the faults of her father, "all your father's want of principle has come out in you" (Act III). They are, however, made to face limitations by the authors, and cross that limit through actualization, "the desire to become more and more what one is, to become everything that one is capable of becoming" (Maslow 1945).

The female protagonist of *Huq* is set in the patriarchal structures of the South Asian region within the conservative frame. She has been born and brought up within the structures and practices where she along with all the female sections

has no participation, voice or agency. Initially she is introduced as a sister burdened with a little brother in her lap, a metaphor for her lifelong burden imposed on her by the society which she continues to shoulder in her father's house, and then in the patriarchal domestic space of the in-laws. She is suspended from her choice of any associate of her life. The father denies her education as she shares, "My father didn't allow me to go. 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?" (p. 21). Even the marriage has been solemnised with no participation of her at any stage. In the in-law's house, she faces the same restrictions. The social structure is so constraining and restricting that she finds it normal not to go beyond the family space for decades. Ibsen's Nora too is placed in a European patriarchal structure where "women's position was clear, she was always physically and intellectually inferior to the man" (Rubenstein, 1987, p. 7). In her paternal house, she has been shaped after her father's desire. So Nora recalls, "When I was at home with father, he told me his opinion about everything, and so I had the same opinions" and "He called me his doll's child, and he played with me just as I used to play with my dolls" (Act III). She is then married off to the banker, and there she too faces the same limiting conditions. She comes to realise, "I have been your doll's wife, just as at home I was father's doll child" and the marriage turns her into a doll without agency (Act III).

The patriarchal process itself suspends their expansion as an entity, delimits their perception about the reality, and leads them to relent to what they come by automatically through the established norms and practices. Nora sadly expresses to her friend Linde, "You all think I'm fit for nothing really serious" (Act I). Likewise, Agunpakhi was not allowed any intervention while she was bound to give her ornaments, and was bound to say, "Take all my ornaments" (p. 39). As they are framed by the normalised dominance of patriarchal figures and society, they fit themselves into the existing norms, and act to be happy or satisfied. Both the protagonists are placed in that type of patriarchal dominance, exploitative structures, normalised discriminatory systems, and gendered practices of two different geographical locations, Europe and South Asia. So Nora can say, "I'll do everything to please you Torvald" (Act I). They, however, show the glimpses of their existence and agency whenever they come by any chance which paves the way for their final decision of denying others' interference in their life, and deciding their future course of life through realisation and active participation in the course of actions.

Both the characters grow and go through the traditional responsibilities and roles, but often extend themselves to step forward beyond being an objectified entity and muted object. They violate the closed logic of the binary approach set and settled by the patriarchal system, and the authors too deny the closeness in space as space is "a contested, fluid, generative and political constituent of society

and social experience" (Tabur, 2017, p. 1). In times of crisis, they come to shoulder responsibility which the patriarchs are supposed to do, claim the driving seat, and ensure their emergence as occasional saviours. Agnpakhi passes her life in the in-laws' house under the patriotic dominating husband along with the dominating mother in law. But she shows her agency when the mother in law is bedridden, and she takes the responsibility of cleaning, feeding and washing alone without any instruction from others. This engagement of serving the most important figure strengthens her position, and earns her blessings. This space making on her part continues throughout the novel occasionally. When there is drought and the family suddenly faces a food crisis of not having food grain to feed even the smaller members, all the other family members keep themselves away from this critical moment, and choose to keep silent, maimed, shocked or safely aloof. But she steps forward and insists on managing foodgrain with such a powerful voice that the dominating husband becomes compelled to go out to manage foodgrain for the family members. The domestic space as a location of the interplay of multifarious activities, actions and interactions comes to be a nursing ground for her critical thought and emerging personality. This can be traced in her comment on Prithilata Waddedar whom she, despite being within the domestic space, can consider as the daughter of the whole country sacrificing for the freedom of the country from the colonial domination and rule. Even when there comes the necessity of selling her ornament for buying land property for the joint family, she reluctantly offers her ornaments which is to the women "more important even than the husband" (p. 40). This sacrifice propels her up beyond other members who are not there or are not approached for. Besides, when her son gets caught up in Calcutta for political turmoil, and she is uninformed of his latest location and condition, her motherly instinct assumes the shape of a guiding and dominating agency to instruct the husband to go there and find the son. All these engagements, performances and executions pave the way for her final decision of staying back in her house denying the proposition of migrating to the new country with all the family members and others around. She comes to realise her position, denies others' imposition, and takes decisions from her own location. This kind of transformation is also noticeable in Nora's character. From out of her 'squirrel', a bird-like figure supposedly happy to be caged and controlled by the master, she creates a space of her own. Earlier the patriarch family space gets settled for her without any sign of expansion or transformation. She sadly recalls her interaction with the husband, "we have never sat down in earnest together to try and get at the bottom of anything" (Act III). When Helmer falls ill without financial ability to have proper treatment and weather change, Nora comes to take the whole issue in her hand, devises plans, transgresses her boundary set by the patriarchal practices, manoeuvre ways to develop unholy pact with Krogstad, and manages the amount by counterfeiting her father's signature. Despite having no record of dishonesty or cheating previously for herself except some playful lies, she goes to

the extent of dishonesty to ensure better treatment of her love, to cure her husband from his prolonged illness. She states, "I will show you that I too have something to be proud and glad of. It was I who saved Torvald's life" (Act I). This is not the only manipulation she goes through. She manipulates her husband in the case of her friend Mrs. Linde while she comes as a helpless lady needing a job immediately. She takes it her responsibility to pursue her husband beyond the ethically permissible limit, and manage for her a job in the bank. In both cases, she falls for her emotional engagement at the price of violating ethical norms and values. Her humanitarian move and welfare for others in both the cases are noteworthy. As a traditional female figure, she rather could easily shrug off the responsibilities by confining herself to the domestic chores and a traditional wife's position. But she shows the emergence of agency in the emergency situation within herself, and applies her voice to establish her thoughts and wishes for the betterment of others. These are not the only occasions when she shows her articulation of self by engaging in decision making and attempting directly to execute the works, she also shows her negotiating ability in case of the family friend Dr. Rank whom she facilitates some comfort, but he advances which she strategically avoids, and manages the peculiarly unexpected situation in a cool headed manner without making a fuss. Even more than that, she silently and stealthily continues to work to earn money to pay for the debt she incurred from her husband's treatment without taking him to confidence in this regard. So, these assertions of self and articulation of agency of Nora paves the way for her deciding moment in the last part. The domestic space which she occupies not only confines but also facilitates her expansion beyond being cocooned to find her real self. The entity of a rebel emerges who can deny all the traditional rules imposed, and violate the rules of decency defined and imposed by patriarchy. The result is her emancipation by stepping forward in a riskspace which requires struggle, invites risks, poses the threats of failures, but expands the limit imposed from birth for her gender position. So Nora in response to Helmer's query about what she is going to do replies, "To take off my doll's dress", and she decides to carry "my duties towards myself" (Act III). Agunpakhi says, "Finally it has come to my mind, I have done everything only to get myself ... I have only wanted to understand everything myself" (p. 224). And thus individualism emerges for her in the riskspace, "Me and my husband are not the same people, we are different" (p. 224).

The final assertions of agency of both the characters push them to the riskspace where uncertainty deepens, but does not contain them, rather push them to the threats of challenges and promises of creative space. To advance their causes of creating space for the female section, Ibsen and Huq comply with Beck's opinion of the importance of fictions in the risk space, "to knowledge, therefore, drawn from experience and science, there now also has to be added imagination, suspicion, fiction, fear" (2006, p. 335). So, both the characters are fictionally made to transgress

and define their own boundary with creative openness. They come out as subjects by denying their objectified existence shaped and guided by patriarchy, and limited by traditional roles. But the way they execute their tasks, and emerge as subjects are different. While Nora chooses to go beyond her domestic space into a risk space with an unbound uncertainty ahead and assured but delimiting space behind with her agential assertion, "In any case I set you free from all your obligations (Act III). Agunpakhi makes her space and asserts her agency by deciding to stay back within the domestic space inviting identified and unbound risks as a Muslim minority in the new political scenario after the Partition of 1947, and keeps her space open for the future. The result is a shock and shudder for the patriarchal dominance, and in that unsettled situation, there emerges a subject with agency having voice against the national discourses. In fact, both the protagonists stand against the established patriarchal discourses and normalised traditional roles imposed, and negate the unquestioned and taken for granted impositions, and come out as rebels stepping on the risk space.

The restrictions and impositions on the female protagonists fail to deter them from pushing their boundary forward, and thus they come out agential through their engagements and assertions with the wilful choice of riskspace. Through the texts composed quite apart temporally by more than hundred years, the authors choose to build the female protagonists who are born and brought up in patriarchal dominance. They, however, grow to grasp the mechanisms of the imposed structure, and come out of the cocooned placement. In the final stage, they resist any closure in their space, protest the taken for granted practices, deny being docile and yielding as victimised entities, and violate the assigned and imposed roles, and take decisions from their own locations using their own agency through active participation in the decision making. Their final activities are unsettling for the settled structures, and pointedly strike the patriarch, shake the very foundation of the exploitative practice, and they emerge as the rebels having voice and subject position. They place themselves among the people with agency as Gibson (2002) observes, "the most agentic people are those who readily exploit imperfect options". In that process, they come to a final realisation of their individual self through assessing the socio-cultural realities, and searching their locations within the spaces. They succeed in realising their individual self, and they thus come to consider themselves as a separate entity from the patriarchs. Nora in reply to Helmer's offer for help in future marks him as a stranger and says, "I can receive nothing from a stranger" (Act III). Agunpakhi too comes to sense the same self, "Me and my husband are not the same people, we are different" (p. 224). In this search, they come to recognise their past which has been shaped and guided by the social and institutional structures and practices in which they were born and brought up. This rebellious assertion, however, pushes them to the risk space which entails danger

and creative excitement at the same time. In taking the risks, Nora leaves everything belonging to the patriarchal husband, "I have put the keys here" (Act III) while Agunpakhi stays back in the homespace with the manifest determination, "I won't go ... I'll live in this house" (p. 217-219).

Conclusion

The agency of the protagonists emerges in different locational positions. While Nora chooses to transgress by crossing the domestic patriarchal boundary, Agunpakhi opts for staying back at the homespace with agency. Thus both of them make their own space by stepping into the creative riskspace and coming out as agencies. These choices of locational positions expand the frontiers of female freedom which is hardly linked to locational position. Rather space making and gaining can be possible within and beyond.

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