

Female Resistance and Reclamation of Space in the Historical Backdrop of Fall of Dhaka in Raihana A Hasan's *Sips from a Broken Teacup*

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ABSTRACT: *This qualitative research identifies with the Hélène Cixous and Virginia's Woolf's concerns regarding silencing of women in history and reclamation of their right to keep writing. This study can be placed under the larger context of Feminism. It traces active female consciousness in portraying the role of women: their quest for survival, contribution towards the society and their fighting spirit during the troubled times of partition of Pakistan in 1971. It is an attempt of retrieving the history on which there is a patriarchal control. Raihana A. Hasan is a Pakistani author who has resisted against the phallogentric control on knowledge where history is mostly documented by male members of the society. Thereby, this paper aims at exploring how Hasan has reclaimed her position in writing by documenting history and narrating her-story [perspective based on female experience] in the form of a memoir. She has proved that with acute female consciousness, a woman becomes a huge source of knowledge and recorder of socio-cultural and political histories. The objective of the study is to explore how Hasan has raised her voice against injustices towards women in the socio-cultural setup of tea plantations in the Eastern Wing of Pakistan in the 1960s. This article also depicts how multilayered and significant women writings are and why there is need for women to write. Hence, the gender inequality and resistance of women in *Sips from a Broken Teacup* is traced for this purpose in the article. There are works in which history of 1971 is recorded but there is shortage of first-hand narratives of survivors of the time. Hence, Hasan's memoir fills the gap of the research. Moreover, this article will aid in inculcating the notion that women can use writing as a tool to retrieve their lost socio-cultural and political identities from the past and raise their voice against the subjugation in current times and in future as well.*

Keywords: Female consciousness, gender inequalities, ideological, phallogentric control, resistance

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Introduction:

This article elucidates how a female narrative can provide a stronger and a gender inclusive view when women own their space in the field of writing by analyzing *Raihana Hasan's Sips from a Broken Tea cup*. It is a narrative with the backdrop of the Fall of Dhaka which demonstrates that including her-story [a perspective from woman's lens] in history provide different look of the same event and present a wider and vivid picture of reality. With the help of alternative genre of memoir, Hasan has painted landscape as a mindscape during the political and ideological turmoil of fall of Dhaka in 1971.

In the past, women writings have been ignored for centuries under the pretext that they lack depth or simply don't match up to the standard of male writings: this notion has been elaborated in the later part of this research. By exploring how Hasan has created a prolific piece of writing which covers the personal, political and cultural view of a historical event of Fall of Dhaka, this article aims to negotiate that women writings such as *Sips from a Broken Teacup* must be given their due status and acknowledgement in the literary canon. By writing *Sips from a Broken Teacup*, Hasan has owned her space in the field of writing; she not only breaks the stereotype that women writings are not a match for male writings but also she has shown how women should be given proper representation in the writings.

This article reflects that Hasan has fought a battle against silencing of women both as a character of the memoir as well as a writer to provide women their lost space as a social, political and cultural entity in a society. It establishes that Hasan's style of narration is multifaceted which enables her to doubly resist the injustice towards women. Hasan is writing herstory. Herstory is a concept which is presented by re-interpreting word history; "It is a neologism coined in the late 1960s as part of a feminist critique of conventional historiography with the word "history" reinterpreted, using a false etymology, as "his story" ("Herstory"). The purpose of using the term 'herstory' is to present the notion that the women narratives hold equal importance as those of male narratives. Thus, 'herstory' is used in the article to emphasize on the importance of historical fiction documented from a female perspective by exploring Hasan's narration in a politically triggered environment of Fall of Dhaka.

Discussion and Analysis:

Sips from a Broken Teacup opens a window into the past and allows the reader to look into the world where Hasan has demonstrated personal, collective and historical experiences of life in Sylhet tea estates of East Pakistan and upheaval of 1971. This reveals personal and political trauma and quest to pass through the difficult times of 1971 partition. This particular text creates a space for women in historical, socio-cultural and political context of 1971. It is an example of women's writings against phallogentric control over knowledge and caters bigger issues like question of nationality.

Phallogentricism was first coined by Ernest Jones, a British psychoanalyst, in reference to the primacy of the phallus in Sigmund Freud's theories (Rine 1). It justifies the male dominance and gender difference on the basis of male anatomy which is having a phallus. Where this male centric approach created hegemonic masculinity in the society, language is not exempted. Phallogentricism made language a gendered phenomenon leading to rejection of publications of many female writes. Feminist critics like Hélène Cixous has used the term "phallogentricism" to accentuate the issue of how women writings were ignored for centuries under the pretext of lacking the characteristics of male language. In her essay, "The Laugh of Medusa", she argues that history of writing has been one of "phallogentric tradition" (Cixous 879) and women have yet to be given their turn and due status in literary canon. Cixous urges women to fight back against this phallogentric control and write a new type of text that liberate them from this gender discrimination. This article illustrates that the context, style of writing and storytelling in Hasan's *Sips from a Broken Teacup* makes it an example of retaliation against the phallogentric control on knowledge as Hasan has portrayed active female consciousness in this memoir.

Hasan has woven the plot around her experience as a newly-wed bride migrating to Allynagar Tea Plantation district in 1961 [-1971]. The details of life in tea plantations of Sylhet and Hasan's social critique and commentary on it, is a proof of active female consciousness. Hasan emerges as a storyteller. She has used the local tradition of folklore and story-telling technique like that of Tony Morrison and Maya Angelo to convey the knowledge about life and people in tea plantations and history of Fall of Dhaka. Just like Hasan, Morrison and Angelo have also presented their writings as the cultural documents through the genre of

memoir and novels. For instance, the knowledge of the cultural practices is interlocked with the personal and communal trauma of the black people in *Beloved* by Toni Morrison. In her writing, she enunciates how the black community especially their women have been subjugated for years.

Hasan's account is a message of tolerance while she passes down the history to current generation and the generations to come. In author's note Hasan gives the rationale of the memoir by conveying that this memoir serves as a lesson to be learnt from the past and a warning to save Balochistan where alarm bells are ringing. History must not repeat itself is the urgent message given in *Sips from a Broken Teacup*. While conveying this message women are not only given space in history but also are encouraged to be prepared for their roles in future in case of any catastrophes.

Through her female consciousness, Hasan has not only depicted the discursive practices through which women are repressed but also has resisted against them by raising voice against injustice. She has revealed how women in tea plantations were modified into objects under the system of patriarchy with a subsystem called the *Bandobust* [arrangement] where local pimp arrange garden girls to appease the voracious sexual appetite of tea planters (Hasan 138). People like Harry King had hired three mistresses at a time for this purpose without considering the consequences of exploitation of female body. Grace is an example of a woman who is a victim of this brutality. She is a bastard child of tea planter and is forced to live a life of *ayah* [caretaker] because she is left abandoned by her father. Hasan expresses annoyance on Bilal's indulgence with one such woman. He was a colleague of Hasan's husband and was sharing the government allotted house with them. Hasan is registering a protest in the form of memoir by depicting the marginalized and Otherized treatment of women at the hands men who justify it by giving it name of a *dastur* [norm](Hasan 15). This is illustrative of the notion that, "in woman, personal history blends together with the history of all women, as well as national and world history" (Cixous 82). Thus, Hasan has recorded subjugation of women in the form of commodification in *Sips from a Broken Teacup* as reflected through Grace's example.

Hasan provides the list of unjust practices carried out in name of *dastur* [norm](15) in the memoir. Women workers at tea plantations contributed

equally or perhaps more than men but were paid less. She has resisted against such norm which she believes are only there to satisfy false male ego. Such norms have deprived women of their agency and rights for ages, “what a stupid *dastur*?” (Hasan 52) This practice of labor exploitation and domination of men in the name of custom echoes Virginia Woolf’s “Women and Fiction” where she criticizes the laws and customs which subjugate women and snatch their rights of education and writing. Therefore, she emphasizes on having a strong economic background for women, so that they can attain their rights.

Hasan exposes the strategies through which labor is manipulated and women are exploited by those in power. Nadeem, a tea planter had two sculptures of females in front of his house which he had named as his “private deities” to instill fear and reverence in laborers’ minds (Hasan 92). Woman’s disempowerment in the name of beauty is thus facilitated here by Nadeem’s propaganda.

Hasan has not only just narrated the tales of subjugated females but also has included strong women in the memoir who are exercising their agency and are resisting against social and patriarchal stigmas. Women who were wives of tea planters can be seen educating the children by opening a school in a cottage even in the chaotic times of political and social upheaval which led to the Fall of Dhaka. Wives of Patrakhola planters did this duty. The wife of one of the Bengali assistants used to come and teach Bengali language to children. This depicts that language issue which was one of major conflict and reason of partition was not ignored by females. This farsightedness is prior to the incident when threats in the form of leaflets were sent to non-Bengalis tea planters. These leaflets contained the message: “YOU WANT TO LIVE IN THIS COUNTRY. IT IS HIGH TIME YOU LEARNT THE LANGUAGE” (Hasan 185). This demonstrates how women took initiative of owning and accepting Bengali as one of the pertinent languages of Pakistan and believed that country should not split on language issue.

Resistance is embedded in the text. One form of resistance is resistance of a mother fighting for her life in operation theatre. Hasan had a miscarriage and was in critical condition but she decided to fight for her two sons, “Right, I say to myself, I can’t die” (Hasan 195). Here historical loss of physical land has been encapsulated in the mishap that makes a woman lose her child. There are several tales of courage and bravery of women who resisted the pressures of the times. Ayah Ma who was servant

in Hasan's house, at crucial time helped Hasan's family when Bengalis were threatening and killing Non-Bengalis in Sylhet. Ayah ma rose above the conflict of Bengali or Punjabi and took care of Hasan's children. She even offered that in case of attack she would take the children to a safe place and would keep them safe at any cost – "don't worry I will cherish them like my own" (Hasan 272). Thus, Ayah Ma did not accept the cultural rivalry and stood against her own community to provide shelter to Hasan's innocent children. Here, Hasan's and ayah ma's examples are accentuating Foucault's notion; "where there is power there is resistance" (*History of Sexuality*,95). Hasan and her characters have not yielded against ideological or any other form of power and have surged up as courageous figures whose resistance is exemplary.

Iram's story represents the heroism of many females in the history who are often muted by historians. This accentuates Elaine Showalter and Virginia's Woolf's protest about silencing of women in history. Woolf in "Women and Fiction" and Showalter in "Towards Feminist Poetics" are of the view that male writers have failed to do justice with the role of females in their writings by portraying either their stereotypical roles or simply by excluding their true accomplishments as members of the society. Iram, despite her Bengali identity saved non-Bengali colleagues at the time when a furious crowd ["some labor leaders and some strangers probably Indians"] was ready to burn the house in case of disobedience. She held the Holy book on Saeed's head and dared them to attack. What Akraam – Iram's husband could not do at that time, she did with her retaliating nature which is to save a life. Iram also saved Hasan's family when *Sangram Parishad* [Bengali political group] people came to take Ashad. She showed affiliation, "this is my sister and this is my brother who is sheltering me" (Hasan 315) with Hasan's family despite the major risk and threat on her own life. Iram's courage and resistances provides a true image of Cixous's roar, "we're stormy" (Laugh of Medusa 878). Thus, by voicing Iram's courageous story, Hasan has given tribute and has resurrected many such unsung heroines which are often ignored in histories despite their sacrifices.

Hasan has also resisted the interpellation of enforced social and ideological identity. According to Althusser, "All ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects" (173). Individuals in any society are recruited as 'subjects' and in Pakistan, 1971 was the time when people had to choose loyalties. People were forced to be

subjects and choose their ethnicity and pick the identity of either a Bengali or a Punjabi in East Pakistan. At that time Hasan rose above the conflict of “son [daughter] of the soil” and West Pakistani woman (Hasan 330). In the operation theatre a nurse asked her whose side she is at; she resisted the pressure and chose identity of her own – “I am a Pakistani” (Hasan 198). This is how she retaliated and owned an identity by her own free will.

Hasan also took risk of saving Mukhtar Raja- a colleague of Ashhad from Mukti Bahini by arranging a secret mission of “Operation M.M” to provide shelter and food for him. The resistance and contribution of females in taking care of the children, supporting men of the family, providing valuable pieces of advice and fighting the crucial times no matter what their communal status or ethnicity was [ayah, Punjabi or Bengali] underpins the vigilance, courage and companionship of females during this turmoil. They learnt to operate guns to defend themselves and others, took turns for vigilance at bungalow and served on various levels as mothers, caretakers, wives, sisters, individuals and as Pakistanis. Hasan has captured active participation and contribution of women towards family and society by providing the details. By tracing struggle, suffering and heroism of females, Hasan has broken the norm of muted identity and silencing of women in history. She is reclaiming their space by showing that without their support and fighting spirit, much damage and fatalities would have occurred. Those who have survived like Hasan, Semma and many like them and those who sacrificed their lives need to be acknowledged in the narratives which include history. All the female martyrs, victims and survivors are unsung heroes who need to be remembered and given space in memories of new generations as courageous and heroic figures.

Hasan has recorded the cause and effects and reasons of a partition almost like a historian therefore, this memoir is multifunctional. She has revealed how different agencies played role in the downfall. She has written about how media and press created a certain image of Pakistan. They mis-conveyed and camouflaged the news to the dismay of citizens of the country. While travelling with Indian citizens in India in 1971, Hasan came to know that media has only portrayed the bloodshed of Bengalis at the hands of West Pakistanis. This news was conveyed under proper propaganda, “foreign media ... paints a gruesome picture of Holocaust inflicted by an army of barbarians” (Hasan 261). By this memoir she is clearing the accusations put on Pakistanis in the case of Fall of Dhaka.

There are multiple voices in the forms of quoted verses and views of non-Bengalis and Bengali colleagues from tea plantations which makes this portrayal of history impartial. She further authenticates her account by giving references from retrieved letters which she wrote to her mother during her stay in East Pakistan. She has also added news clips from radio programs to portray the true picture of the time. There is information in the form of news from several media sources in boxes present in the text. Here Hasan alienates herself from text and inform readers how chaos enveloped the country date by date with graphic and detailed narration of riots, smuggling of weapons, executions, moves of political leaders, student organizations, massacres and brutality. She has also painted how negative forces, external agencies like Mukti Bahini, surveillance system, masked troops, miscalculated judgments and policies like curfews in East Pakistan led to disaster.

By acknowledging how Bengali colleagues like Aziz, Iram, Tariq and servants like Basanto, Gopi and Ayah Ma helped West Pakistanis, Hasan has offered self-reflection and demonstrated how circumstances turned people against each other. For instance, Iram pleaded Hasan, "Don't hate us, I beg You... we weren't always like this" (Hasan 320). Hasan also provides answer to this query that what turned them into hostile beings other than obvious Indian and Mukti Bahini's influence. Lack of proper infrastructure even after two massive floods in 1965 in East Pakistan and finally deaths of "300,000 to a million" people in Bhola Cyclone of 1970 (Hasan 181), prejudiced behavior toward Bengalis, their language and culture and lack of attention towards progress of East Pakistan from Government of Pakistan and political power dynamics played role in breaking the teacup [Pakistan].

Rather than playing a blame game, disfiguring history and supporting only one side, Hassan has acknowledged the struggle and pain of both sides. Profound sadness over the split and collective trauma traced in the memoir shows how women are more receptive and open minded towards breaking of the Nation. She has included rather than excluded the perspective of both sides. She has also owned negligence on the part of West Pakistan rather than denying it, and has demanded tolerance and compassion rather than hostility for the second party. She brings home the idea that the cup has broken [Pakistan] and ultimate loss is of Pakistan which has lost its part as the tea has spilt [Nation has divided into two]. She has not only presented what happened but also has put forward the

questions like who were the stake holders of this loss and how to stop history from repeating itself? By choosing a plot with a historical event of 1971, Hasan is exercising her agency and voicing trauma of several those who were affected by this catastrophe.

The issue of refugees, forced dislocation, false media representations, role of language and Indian interference in fanning the conflict are all crafted in *Sips from a Broken teacup*. The dislocation of Hasan's family and Mukhtar despite the struggle of their colleagues to provide them safety is an example of how Pakistanis became homeless in their own homeland. Bilal who was one of the colleagues of Ashhad burst in to tears while telling him that he cannot protect him anymore- "I have been threatened by the Mukti...they came to see me and others as well. They accused me of being disloyal because we've been protecting you" (Hasan 344).

It is a multi-layered text containing socio, political, historical, personal trauma and collective memory. Therefore, not only "personal is political" from feminist movement is accentuated but also richness of the memoir incorporates the flexibility and fluidity which are characteristics of women writings. The inclusion of women, servants, laborers and members of tea plantations in generally remote area of Sylhet in this account illustrates that Hasan is concerned in showing how ordinary people and all people without distinction should be given proper space in history and other writings.

Women's space in history, their positioning as peripheral identities in writings, their muted, invisible and stereotypical portrayal in literature are some major concerns in feminist writings which are also highlighted in this article. It is on record that women writers have faced many difficulties in publishing their works for decades. They have been forced to use Pseudo names for publications and making their space in literary circle as elaborated in Showalter's article "Towards a Feminist Poetics". Moreover, male writers have not given women their rightful space in the writings. Women can better voice their issues and document their contribution in the society if they own their place in writing. Hasan's account of events in *Sips from a Broken Teacup* serves as one fine example of this.

Sips from a Broken Teacup even fulfills the criteria of female literary tradition. Female culture or Gyno-criticism is Elaine Showalter's concept through which she encourages females to develop new models based on their experiences as females for the analysis of women literature. Hasan

has developed a female subculture in the form of this memoir where one can observe the female quest for identity and resistance against the gendered constructed ideals dominated by patriarchal stereotyping. She has not only narrated her experience during and prior few years of Fall of Dhaka but also, she has penned down the details of socio-cultural practices of other women during these troubled times. Hence, she has given a model of writing in which women are not marginalized but given voice. *Sips from a Broken Teacup* is in the form of a memoir which itself is an alternative space of writing for many female writers.

Conclusion:

Summing up, by highlighting the role of women in history, their spirit of sisterhood and active female consciousness in *Sips from a Broken Teacup*, Hasan has exercised her female agency and has negotiated proper space for women in history and literature. This memoir serves as an encouragement for female writers to write and voice their opinions. Hasan has written her-story which echoes the ideals of feminist critics like Cixous who urged women to break silence in literary field and own their space, "Woman must write herself: must write about woman and bring other women to writing... woman must put herself into the text- as into the world and into history by her own movement" (Cixous 875). By giving proper representation to women in *Sips from a Broken Teacup*, Hasan has broken the absence presence of women in the field of writing and owned her place as a female writer in literary field.

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