



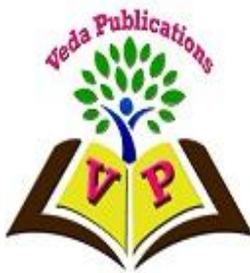
PORTRAYING THE PLIGHT OF A NATION THROUGH A SKETCH: HUMAYUN AHMED'S CONCERNS IN *HIMUR ACHE JOL*

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ABSTRACT



Humayun Ahmed has shown his consummate artist self in many of his novels and short stories. *Himur Ache Jol* (Himu In Possession Of Water) is one such novel in Himu series where he has initiated to envision Bangladesh in a launch journey at a night. Himu is the protagonist of the novel and, as usual, a keen observer and noncommittal narrator of and dispassionate commentator on the people and affairs of the country. Usually Himu presents himself as an ordinary person who gradually asserts himself through interactions and finally wins over all around him with an intention or implication of corrections. In *Himur Ache Jol*, he is a commentator on the multifarious affairs of the country with a view to making others visualize a canvas being staged everyday around without being properly seen. Humayun Ahmed here has shouldered the task of telling about the malignant growth of power and wealth, the unrestrained hold of a class over the hapless and the degradations occurring at every sector. The target of the visionary writer is to make those corrupt people face a type of trial orchestrated unexpectedly by some stray people and touch their conscience. This paper is an attempt to look into the greater canvas of this commonly considered popular novel to see how the writer has successfully portrayed a brief picture of the country with representations from different classes of people along with special focus on the major trends. Thus this research aims to point to seriousness and depth of the writer to be explored yet.

Keywords: *Humayun, Himu, Popular, Visionary, Explore, Representations, Country.*



INTRODUCTION

Humayun Ahmed as a super prolific, unprecedentedly creative and extremely popular writer has been highly successful in writing fictions in a language of his own, creating several characters ever most popular in Bangla literature, expanding Bangladeshi readership and extending the dreams of the youth in a literary career of about forty years. Murshid (2012) observes, Humayun Ahmed "is the most widely read writer in Bangla literature." (95). He was born in 1948. He started writing poems in his school days. But he emerged as a major writer in Bangladeshi writer with his debut novel *Nondito Noroke* (In Blissful Hell) published in 1972 which earned him critical acclaim from the leading scholars of the country and popularity among the youth. He, however, wrote *Shankhonil Karagar* (Blue Conch Prison) first in 1969. Both these novels were written when he was an honors level student of the University of Dhaka. He was awarded the highest literary award of Bangladesh Bangla Academy Literary Award in 1981 with only four novels to his name and the highest state honor the *Ekushey Padak* in 1994 for his contributions to literature. He never looked back and continued writing till the last days of his treatment for colon cancer in the USA. He penned over two hundred novels and about hundred short stories along with travelogue, memoirs, autobiography, columns and poems with unprecedented popularity. "His popularity surpassed even that of Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay to many folds." (Naser, 2012, 32)

Among his novels, Himu series based on an apparently vagabond character, Himu constitute a significant chunk. The series started with a novel titled *Moyurakkhi* in 1990. It includes total twenty five books with the last one published in 2011. In the very first book, the writer introduces us to his bringing up and personal traits. At his childhood, he was under the strict supervision of his psychopathic father who wanted to make him a great man through training. To do so, he was trained never to be bound by love, affection or illusion of practical life. He was named Himu or Himalaya so that his heart "becomes as large as the Himlayan" (*Moyurakkhi*, 30) and still can be touched. To deprive him of motherly affection, she was killed when he was born. He was

gifted a bird at his tender age and that was killed only to make him harder. His father left the riches of almost a land lord father and the family and died when Himu was nine. He made sure at his death bed in a clinic that Himu would be brought under the guidance of the maternal uncles who "are evil spirited and he will learn much in their company." (*Moyurakkhi*, 32) His intermediate passed father who had interest in oceanology, astrology left him several advices to follow. He grows to be a man without any bonding and back pull. He wears yellow punjabi without any pocket and lives a vagabond life. He walks endlessly barefooted and with no profession. Often many people respect him as a spiritual person, a great man. He declares without reservation, "I am not a great man. I tell lies consistently. The sufferings of the helpless don't affect me." (*Moyurakkhi*, 27) He feels that a great man is the person whom no dirt can even touch. He doubts, "Has such a person ever born on earth?" (*Moyurakkhi*, 29) He remembers Tolstoy who raped a girl of thirteen years and confessed it. He has read the life of the great men which could not attract him. He, however, acts like a great men sometimes and feels that he does well in that role. But the character grows into the keenest observer of the disparities and discrepancies of the society. With Himu as the protagonist, *Himur Ache Jol* was published in 2011. The novel focuses on a broader perspective of Bangladesh and the writer in that small canvas showcases the current affairs and probable consequences. With his consistent presence in all the books and imagination of the youth of Bangladesh, "Himu is the most popular of all characters by Humayun Ahmed." (Choudhury, 2012, 360)

LITERATURE REVIEW

Often the studies about Humayun Ahmed and his writings focus on his overall achievements. The critics are more interested to talk about the strength of the writer and his contributions in general. And almost all the leading critics and litterateurs of Bangladesh have their observations about him. Almost all of them feel that Humayun Ahmed's greatness as a writer lies in the fact that he located himself in his time and could understand the vive of it and transform them artistically. Anisuzzaman (2012) evaluates thus, "We don't have



an iota of doubt that Humayun Ahmed will stand the test of time. The reason is he has successfully stirred his time. He has mainly talked about the contemporary life... He could discover the extraordinary in the ordinary people." (5) All his writings have always advanced positivity, but often the readers missed those attempts of the writers. Syed Shamsul Haq (2012) puts, "I can see three lights in the depth of Humayun Ahmed's writings: truth, purity and beauty. These three lights have enlightened his stories, novels, travelogues, memoirs, even the light hearted writings. But it is true that his readers remain busy with discovering entertainment through simplicity instead of that light." (382) He, however, knew his responsibility to the society clearly and so he had to pay attention to it and he did it to the best of his capacity. Anisul Hoque (2012) thinks, "In this luckless country, a writer can't go as he wishes, he has to shoulder the responsibility of the society and the country. It was his destiny." (31) With that responsibility, the writer has portrayed the character of Himu and developed him in the books for years in such a manner that "He has grown into a spokesman for unveiling the inconsistencies and obscurities of the social realities through fun and sarcasm." (Choudhury, 2012, 361) Through the character, the writer has showed his commitment to the society and in doing so, he showed rare courage too. Anisuzzaman in his essay "You Will Remain Silently" observes, "The courage he showed in writing *Himur Ache Jol* (Yellow Himu, Black RAB) is rare and dangerous too-without commitment to the society, this type of book can't be written." (24) This study is an attempt to look into the strength of the writer to dive depth into the society and the people with an intention of corrections with reference to *Himur Ache Jol*.

ENVISIONING BANGLADESH IN *HIMUR ACHE JOL*

In *Himur Ache Jol*, Humayun Ahmed presents a mini Bangladesh with representations from the major classes of the society who apparently are the players in different capacities at different levels. Through those characters, he has explored Bangladesh inside out, exposed the lurking ills and evils unreservedly and has very realistically left the readers in an uncertainty only with little implications

of brighter possibility and prospects lying in the unity, and that is possible through leaving behind the rotten past, utter degradations and deplorable divisions. The writer as a conscious citizen of the country with a sensitive mind has responded to the stark reality and embarked on a brave task of making deepest possible observations and terse commentaries. And the intention is traced thus by Rahman (2012), "His thought was dedicated to the welfare of the countrymen." (168)

Humayun Ahmed is generally recognized as unrivaled popular but often shelved as cheap and recreational of writer. But he has lot of gems yet to be explored with the implications. The novel in study is presented in a small canvas, but the writer has successfully portrayed Bangladesh with an intention to expose the ills and show urgency to address them in a concerted manner. *Himur Ache Jol* is thus one significant work of Himu series but one among the least discussed novel often bypassed by the critics and readers. But Humayun in this novel in his own reticent and terse style has endeavored to depict whole Bangladesh and the major trends and practices in the country at a night. The story is set in one launch from Saderghat, Dhaka to Barishal. By assembling the passengers from different strata of the society, he has presented Bangladesh with remarkable representations.

The story is woven together thread by thread as a part of journey from one part of the launch to another while Himu meets or sees different people representing different generations along with their tendencies. To unfold the story, the writer has Himu, a passive and occasionally active traveller on the launch who has chosen for himself a vagabond's life though he surely has the zeal and personality of a great man caring none and nothing for his own interest, fearing no situation, however, may be the gravity and delving nowhere whatever may be the temptation. A boundless bird life he lives but has chiseled a great human life for himself furnished with illusion free personality enriched with boundless knowledge gathered from extensive study of books on science, religion, health, psychology, astrology, biography, armored with humility, tolerance and sympathy and blessed with very high and rare ESP. Being a solid human, he is never prone to show and



assert his worth, rather he plays with haughty assertion and hollow high sounding people to see their length and they always end up in mess with Himu who turns to be the solver, rescuer, setter of standard both physical and moral. Consequently all around inarguably preserves for him the most special and highest space. This Himu on the launch is the fittest traveller in the mini-Bangladesh. At first, he is introduced in sleeping condition in open space shivering in cold earning sympathy from a beggar. The beggar tells him, "You were suffering in cold, that's why I have draped your body with my chador. New chador, my son-in-law bought it for me." (262) Thus the writer preserves the space for humanitarian salt in the heart of the marginal.

Himu is to go around the launch and he himself introduces, "Let me see the launch around. Geo-tourist Ramanath. Launch tourist Himu." (266) This wandering around the launch is like going around the lanes of the country to face people from different classes and positions. He moves to different parts and meets different people. The story keeps rolling and unfolding Bangladesh in the Humayunian way of humor and humility. And Himu in his every step touches the core and unveil what should be revealed. Hasan Azizul Huq, a renowned writer of Bangladesh thinks, "Any literary work almost like cobweb remains entangled with everything of politics, culture and society of that time." (Interview with Anupam Hasan 11) Humayun Ahmed also goes with this understanding as he has tried to showcase his time and the society with its different dimensions. In lieu of showing gratitude, Himu demands two taka for taking tea. The old beggar gets confused and wants his chador back. Himu says, "Now it's digital Bangladesh. Nothing is returned if it gets out of hand." (263) The obvious criticism of the corruption of the people having power and the practices in the name of digitalization is clear here. Himu threatens him, snatches five taka note and strides forward. In reply, the man says nothing, rather, "The old man with wide open eyes continues looking at me or the chador. I saw from distance, his lips are quivering. Perhaps he is reciting dua." (263) Himu thus points to the power practice of the country where the more privileged often strip the deprived of the least amenities they afford.

The launch is of three stored. In the second story lies the tea stall with food items. The items are written with chalk in a black board but the price list is not there which facilitates the seller demanding more depending on the situations which shows the moral bankruptcy of the businessman from lower level to the higher. Two young boys are having tea and one has a mobile phone at hand and, "The mobile has got some nasty video clipping. Both are watching with interest and they are suppressing their laughter when in the verge of laughing like a fox. They are looking back and forth" (264) and one says, "We are watching private thing." (265) The porn addiction of the young generation is shown with one stroke. They confess that the video is of a girl named Sultana of class nine from their locality and she strips her clothes playfully in front of the camera. The sexual perversion taking silently in the society is again been portrayed with care in the text. While taking tea, Himu asks them if they get the scent of camphor in tea and they reply in the affirmative. He explains the reasons to them that dead bodies are preserved with tealeaves mixed with camphor. "For the herbal quality of tealeaves, dead body doesn't get rotten. Those tealeaves are then sold at a very cheap rate. Tea made from tealeaves used in preserving dead body gets the scent of camphor." (265) Thus he shows the extent of malpractices even in the food items by the businessmen. The two boys get angry and prepare to beat the man. One says, "I f I don't break this bastard's nose, my name is not Shakur. My name is Kukur (Dog)." (265) This Shakur is a criminal who was caught and handed over to the police by the local parliament member. He handed the OC twenty thousand taka and got free. This divulges the extent of corruption of the administration and helpless of the people. However, the double standard and hollowness of the youth and their hypocrisy are explicitly portrayed here. They are forgetful of their own but interested in other's morality. Humayun has set out to portray a society where rottenness has grabbed from the upper state to the lowest.

He goes to the backside of the launch and introduces himself as a journalist of Kaler Chitkar (The Shouts of The Times). He finds there a man named Pir Habib Kutubi who is being taken from Dhaka Central Jail to Barishal Central Jail to be



hanged for the killing of his two wives and sister-in-law surrounded by police. He says, "My pet Jwin Kafil did." (268). He has over thousand disciple and followers among whom "there are judge, advocate, and parliament member. There is one state minister." (267) He is not anxious, recites verses from the holy Quran and gives others teachings. This is how religious faith has been exploited by the criminals. The criminals are often keen observers and can assess situations. He entertains Himu to the irritation of the police. While Himu leaves, Kutubi says, "Wherever there is hue and cry, there are the journalists. Where there are killings, there is the police, where there the names of Allah, there is Pir Murshid (Mentor). Where there is wine and women, there are the mediators." (270) This is one Humayun's technique of making harsh but factual statements by those whom others generally neglect. Himu moves hearing a hue and cry. A young man of seventeen /eighteen has snatched two lac and forty six thousand taka from a betel leave businessman. The whole amount has already got passed to the Ansar members who "are contriving to eat up." (270) Others along with the OC, Shakur are not sitting idle. So the owner may get back, but a little amount. The writer was never shy of his responsibilities towards the society. He in his life was not a detached man from the social crises, rather he was present with his commentary and writings in addition to this delineation in the books. He even participated in hunger strike in Shahjalal University when his bungalow in Nuhashpolli was burnt by the miscreants. Naser (2012) records the incident thus, "The whole bungalow was burnt to ashes with a huge collection of books and expensive furniture." (33) Here also he dares to expose the two major political parties. Himu asks Shakur if he will take a small amount. He replies, "Why should I take another person's taka? It would make sense if I were involved in Chatra League or Chatra Dal. They have their right in anyone's amount." (271) A simple statement by a man who himself is involved in extortion underpins the facts in student politics of the major parties in Bangladesh. The courage the writer has shown here by mentioning two parties is rare and exemplary. The scenario here also clarifies the vicious circle of crimes in the country.

A grave situation emerges as the launch gets stopped. The situation aggravates as "the helm of the launch had broken and the engine has gone out of order." (273) The serang is suffering from severe fever and nobody is there to take the launch ahead. Hablu Mia is the supporting hand who is taking care of the serang. This is clearly the indication to the country where the country itself is groping in the darkness in absence of capable leaders and concrete directions. The generator too gets off as its capacity is not much. The sky gets covered with dark clouds and storm may ensue at time. In the launch, there is the launch owner's youngest son who is expected come forward. "He is involved in antisocial activity. In addition he is drunk. There is a girl in his cabin." (274) It looks like Bangladesh which is despite having potentials is groping in no definite direction. Even in that situation with lurking danger, people are on their usual way. Himu gets back to face a decent, educated and beautiful girl named Trisha who is doing her PhD in University of Washington in Physics and is on her way to Borguna, her maternal uncle's house. Being frightened, she invites Himu to her cabin. He introduces him as a cleaning staff. Still as she asks of his identity, he says, "Man is searching his identity after he has got sense, still he is to attain it. The day he will attain it, that day all knowledge will come to an end." (277) She even proposes to her in that danger. She informs Himu of a couple in the adjacent cabin who are making peculiar sound. Himu tells her the fact, "They are not husband wife at all. They have rented a cabin for antisocial activity. They will pass the whole night enjoying." (278) At Barisal, they will not get down and next night they will get back to Dhaka. And this kind of arrangement is common in launch which shows the ills of a society from the core. Later Ator Mia kicks open that cabin to find an old man with withered body named Rashid Khan. He is a garment businessman and is found with a naked girl. He threatens to kill Ator, tries to contact his goons, but stops after getting Ator's real identity. He also informs her of Dr. Zillur Khan, a professor in a private university of Dhaka who has rented a cabin for a girl student named Sima. But she has been snatched away by the launch owner's son. He mistreats Himu and uses nasty language. Ator Mia rescued Sima. He also manages a pistol from the



owner's son and gets empowered. The writer comments that in Dhaka "universities have crept in everywhere. In any lane of Dhanmondi, there are three/four universities. Universities have been established renting a medium size building. The garage of the house turns into the office of the Vice Chancellor." (290) Thus the writer shows the miserable condition of education, moral standing of the educated and wealthy in two short anecdotes. Zaman observes about Humayun Ahmed's mission, "It is not that he has not lashed out at the hollowness of the upper class. He rather attacked them severely and boldly." (197)

Himu then comes out as the journalist of Kaler Chitkar to see and collect information. He tells us of the Answar members, three of them fled and one is caught by the people and tied to a pole. Rustom, the treasurer of Barisal Truck Drivers Association, has emerged as the leader and is instigating the people and making them chant slogan 'Allahuakbar' to arrange a public court to throw the caught one to the river. The writer here shows how leaders are created from nowhere and they execute their will using public's name and subtly use religious sentiment. The snatcher is also caught and tied tightly with rope. Often they are beaten to death and some of them live crippled and among the "beggar class, the crippled husband has extra value." (279) The tea stall owner also gets caught, but he is sure that his mentor Ator Mia will surely rescue him and take the control of the whole launch. Thus one triumphs on another but crimes perpetuate. The Pir exhorts Himu about the benefit of watery death in religion, he himself is planning to escape by jumping into the river. Thus he also shows common duality among us. Even in that situation, Shakur and his friend are watching that video presenting themselves as "The sample of middle class mentality. Keeping away from troubles and passing time in personal enjoyment." (282)

Then only Himu comes across Ator Mia who is fleeing from Dhaka to escape from RAB to Sundarbans. He has already planned to take control of the launch, caught the Answar battalion members and took the money and gave the OC his share of fifty thousand taka to keep him mum.

Himu in his night walk one day saved Ator Mia from being killed thus turning him his disciple who said, "Himu vai, you are not human being, something different. From now onward, I am your slave." Ator has a shop in front of Baitul Mukarram named The New Medina Ator House, but he makes transaction of small weapons in cartoons. He kills man but he says, "I have never killed any human being. Man is not always human being. Many hyenas also roam in the look of human beings. If they are over with, the world will get benefited." (285)

The novel draws a dismal picture where most of the people are ethically bankrupt, mentally unsound, socially double faced and at the core hypocrite. By dealing heavily with the negative or rotten at heart characters unreservedly, he has attempted to divulge the hollowness of our country, ills and wounds embedded inside. The people commonly held high are stripped naked. Pir Kutubi is a convict of murder, the police members are openly involved in bribery, the Answar members are involved in snatching, businessmen are immoral and always after money, teachers are depraved, politicians are extreme exploiters and youth are without any sign of prospects. Sympathy, pity, kindness and other human qualities have driven back at the heart of the paupers, beggars and even the terrorist. So we see that the writer concentrates more on the people in the driving seat of the country, the terrorists, businessmen, religious persons and security personnel. This goes well with Haider Hussain's popular patriotic song, "What we were supposed to see/And we are to see/what we were supposed to think/ what we are thinking /even after twenty years, I'm searching my liberty." The country has ranked topper in the corruption ranking of the world. Democracy and judiciary have almost collapsed. Thuggish practices are rampant resulting in domination of those people. Corruption and degradation have come to such a point that there is no prospect in near future as the victory of the common people is thin and bleak. Sirajul Islam Chowdhury, the preminent thinker said about the impending election, "No matter who wins the election, people will lose." However, the writer in the end has arranged for tauba, a type confession. Azan is being called. People are engrossed in reciting from



the holy Quran with pure heart. All get united in the crisis to overcome it. In an uncertain bleak situation, this is the only ray of hope. The writer is an optimistic person, and Mahadev Saha assesses him thus, "He has quenched the thirst of the people who have so much cruelty around want a bit of smile and pleasure." (177)

CONCLUSION

Himur Ache Jol is by Humayun Ahmed, the consummate artist. Here he has successfully showcased Bangladesh with the major players, practices and polarities. Himu is an observer and commentator on the circus being staged everyday around without being properly seen and understood. Humayun Ahmed here has shouldered the task of telling about the malignant growth gaining unrestrained hold both at urban and rural areas. The target of the visionary is to make them face a type of trial to touch their conscience. In the end, people are though not purified, different from what they were initially. Ator Ali utilizes his experience steers to take all to a possibly right direction. The beggar gets his due back. The people on board at least have supper to satisfy themselves. All come forward with whatever they have to get out of dangers. The last scenario shows as if the whole humanity were facing danger on the Noah' arch. Thus the novel has expanded its canvas even to take whole humanity under consideration which needs concerted efforts with pure intention and firm determination to overcome. That can enliven a ray of hope, but no sure future beacon. That is what Bangladesh is envisioned and portrayed by Humayun Ahmed in Himur Ache Jol.

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