

## A tribute to Humayun Ahmed (1948-2012)

# The storytelling magician

JUNAIDUL HAQUE

A cultural legend breathed his last on Thursday last week. He was our best known writer. He was a phenomenon. He was only sixty three.

Sunil Ganguly called him more popular than Saratchandra Chatterjee. Shirshendu Mukherjee put him ahead of both Sunil and himself. Syed Manzoorul Islam, our guru and favourite writer, informs us that Humayun Ahmed will live as long as the Bangla language will be there. Yours truly feels that only Kazi Nazrul Islam and Saratchandra Chatterjee can rival him as popular literary figures. He appeared almost from nowhere to keep our youngsters spell-bound for four decades with his stories, like the Pied Piper of Hamelin.

After a ten-month fight with cancer, the master storyteller breathed his last in a New York hospital. He was recovering well when a post-operation viral infection spread through his body and snatched him away. He was born in Kutubpur, a village of Kendua in Netrakona on November 13, 1948. His mother survives him. His two brothers, Mohammad Zafar Iqbal and Ahsan Habib, are talented personalities. The former is a gifted writer, academician and IT specialist, the latter a cartoonist and writer. Fayzur Rahman Ahmed, his father, was a 1971 martyr. No wonder the magical storyteller never forgot 1971. He also sang the glory of greater Mymensingh, the region which gave birth to him and nursed him. He loved its landscape and the people, the bauls and the beels, the rivers and the haors, the green and golden paddy fields and the folk songs. That he was a master interpreter of middle class emotions is a universal truth now.

His fiction was so popular that at every Ekushey Boimela his books sold the most copies. Our youngsters loved to read him. The characters of his fiction were loved by them. They wished to be Himu and imitated him, wearing yellow punjabis and behaving freely, maybe a little crazily. They loved Himu's free-spirited nature. Himu symbolizes the unconscious desire in us to be free of conventions and norms. They loved Misir Ali. They loved Shubhra. Girls wanted to be like his heroines.

Did he write fiction only? He was our most popular TV dramatist since the eighties. Even yours truly was addicted to his TV plays. We loved his young magician, the kind bhabhi and the half-crazy Asaduzzaman Noor in *Ei Shob Dinratri*, the half-crazy (or Pogo-like, if you prefer) Mama, portrayed by Aly Zaker, in his *Bohubrihi*, Baker Bhai, the goon hero of *Kothao Keu Nei*, Mirza Shaheb, the fading aristocrat, and his two wives of *Ayomoy* and many more.

There were processions protesting the hanging of Baker Bhai in the last episode of *Kothao Keu Nei*. The streets were empty when his TV plays were being shown. He made us weep and laugh at will. He entered our hearts effortlessly. His movies were well-made and decent and completely different from the run-of-the-mill Bangla movies. *Aguner Parashmoni*, *Shyamal Chaya*, *Amar Achhey Jol*, *Shrabon Megher Din* and the other movies got him the national



award on many occasions. For his brilliance as a writer, he was awarded the Bangla Academy prize in 1981. He bagged the Ekushey Padak in 1994.

Was he our most popular writer only? Whenever I read his *1971* and *Jalil Shaheber Petition*, my eyes get wet. I haven't read many stories finer than these. The stories are based on our great war of liberation. His *Chokh*, based on the social malaise of gouging out the eyes of a criminal, makes us speechless in wonder. What a powerful writer! Syed Shamsul Huq always praised this story in superlative terms. His first two novels, *Nandita Narakey* and *Shankhaneel Karagar*, took our literary world by storm in the early seventies. Nobody has written in a more sensitive manner on our struggling middle class existence before. Two decades ago I saw his *Ajatra*, a TV play on a poor, retired primary school teacher, trying in vain to collect his pension by overcoming bureaucratic hurdles. He created touching moments, beautiful moments of love and affection in this play of a struggling, old teacher almost at will. Young Humayun Faridi, another gifted Humayun, acted brilliantly in the old teacher's role. I never liked a play more. I quietly said, 'Hats off!' to both Humayuns. I wanted to see the play again. I realized that Humayun Ahmed could always come up with sublime art if he wanted to.

Humayun Ahmed was a meritorious student with excellent results in all major examinations. He was almost at the top of the merit list in his SSC and HSC examinations. He even secured record marks in his BSc Honours and MSc exams of Dhaka University's chemistry department. He did his Ph D in polymer chemistry from North Dakota State University. He was extremely well-read. He was the first writer of science fiction in East Bengal.

*Fiha Samikaran*, *Tomader Janya Bhalobasha* and *Omega Point* are excellent books of science fiction. On his return from the US, he turned into the Humayun Ahmed we know now the popular writer of fiction, dramatist and filmmaker. In the 1970s, he did not write for popularity. He was a serious writer then. The American cultural scene taught him a lot and changed him.

Humayun Ahmed is famous for his simplicity. He says the most in the least words. His economy of expression is exemplary. He depends on witty dialogue more than narration. Science taught him to be logical. His rational, logical and clear approach made our youngsters love him. He never bored his readers. He taught them to love nature, to be romantic and smart and also to love science and logic. He understood both west and east and mingled technical know-how with eastern emotion and wisdom. No wonder his books were always bestsellers. Readers almost always read his books in a single sitting. Big novels like *Jyotsna O Jananir Galpa* and *Madhyanha* are perhaps exceptions. In spite of a few weaknesses, *Jyotsna O Jananir Galpa* is a major work on 1971. *Gouripur Junction* and *Badshah Namdar* (on Moghul Emperor Humayun) are good novels. His Himu and Misir Ali novels have surpassed all selling records. *Darjar Opashe*, *Moyurakshi*, *Ami-i Misir Ali* and *Nishithini* are good examples. He wrote more than two hundred novels. He also wrote for children. Who can forget his *Botal Bhut*, *Shurjer Din* and *Putul*?

May the gifted son of Mymensingh, of Bangladesh, of the Bangla speaking world live long in our hearts!

JUNAIDUL HAQUE WRITES FICTION AND ESSAYS.

# Sofa's inspiration ...

REAZ AHMAD

Eleven years ago, one of the literary luminaries of Bangladesh, Ahmed Sofa, died a rather premature death at the age of 58. As we recall him today, one particular characteristic of Sofa instantly creeps into the mind: his contribution to promoting budding talents, mixing with the younger generation and his ability to exhibit a natural affinity with people much younger than he.

Sofa was an accomplished writer, poet, essayist, critic, translator and a leading intellectual of his time. He wrote novels, poetry and non-fiction essays. He also translated the writings of others, most prominently, Goethe's *Faust*. Ahmed Sofa was renowned for his intellectual righteousness as well as his holistic approach to the understanding of social dynamics and international politics.

But, above all, many of his disciples and admirers revere Sofa for the patronising role he always played for the benefit of new talents.

Only the other day Bangladesh lost one of its finest storytellers and most popular novelist and playwright Humayun Ahmed at the age of 64 only. Humayun had been under treatment in a New York hospital after suffering from colon cancer for long.

Ahmad Sofa was, indeed, instrumental in publishing the very first book of Humayun Ahmed. In a just liberated country, back in the early 1970s when things were not in place in many respects in society, not to mention patronisation and nurturing of literature, young Humayun literally shot into fame through his literary debut *Nondito Noroke*, published at Sofa's initiative.

A good organizer and a lifelong bachelor, Sofa played an important role in mobilizing writers along with Ahmed Sharif to establish the Bangladesh Lekhak Shibir (a writers' movement) in the 1970s. He always wanted the young to rise to the occasion. He was against opportunism and was a champion of idealism and progressive culture. Sofa always endeavored to inspire people in participating in progressive humanitarian causes.

Ahmad Sofa was very affectionate towards the younger generation who gathered around him. He was never seen seeking fame in a trivial sense. He was a secular thinker.

He was also a major driving force in establishing and popularizing a true artist like S. M. Sultan in post-independence Bangladesh. Sofa made endeavors to introduce Sultan's artworks to the civic art connoisseurs.

Born in Gachhbaria, Chittagong district in 1943, Sofa's career as a writer began in the '60s. On 28 July 2001, Ahmed Sofa died in a hospital in Dhaka. He was buried in Martyred Intellectuals' Graveyard.

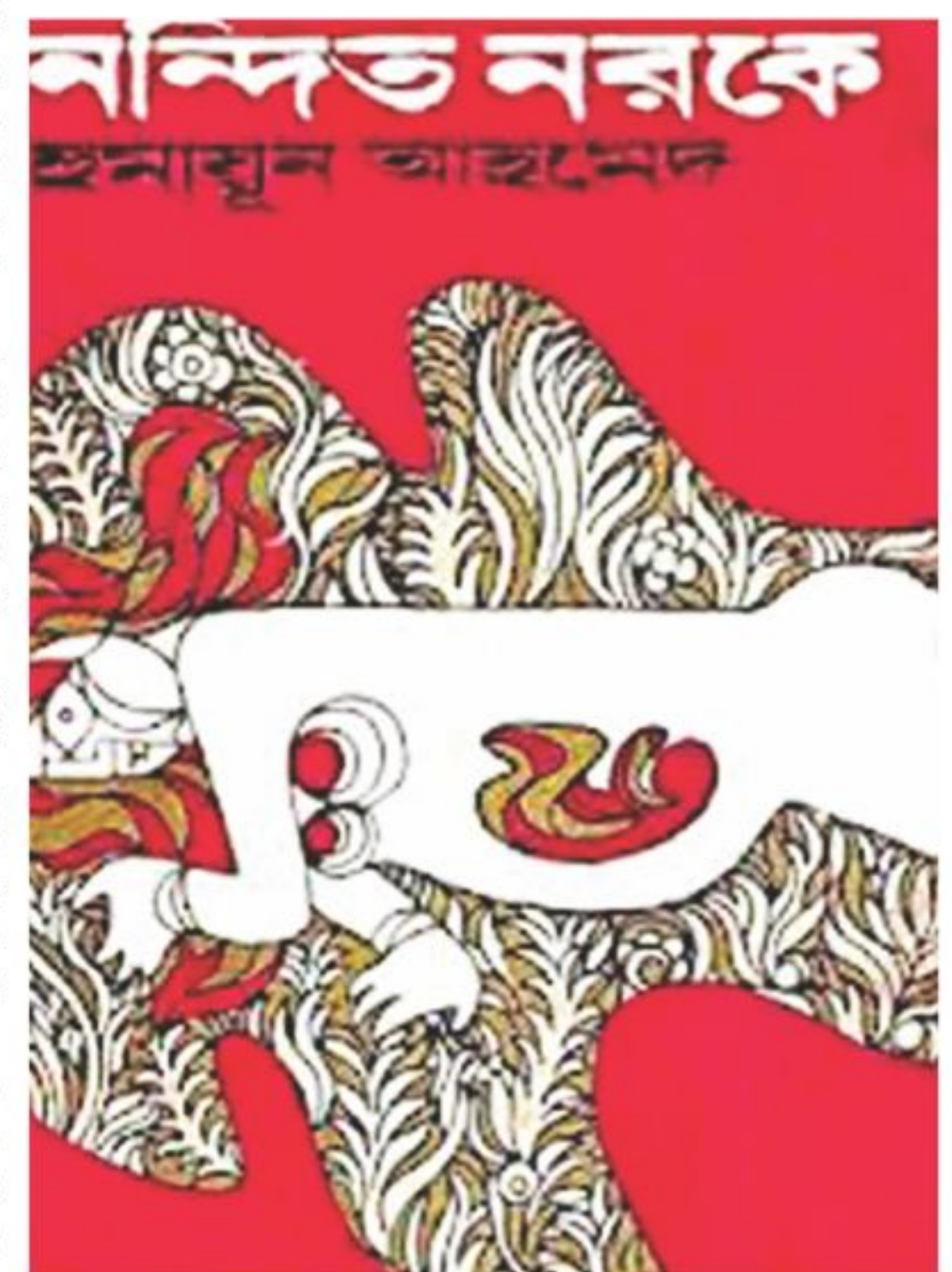
Ahmed Sofa's outspoken personality and bold self-expression brought him into the limelight. Sofa's fiction was often based on his personal experience. He protested against social injustice and tried to portray the hopes and dreams of common people through his writing.

While reading Sofa's *Ardhek Nari Ardhek Ishwari* (Half Woman, Half Goddess), I was wondering why he only introduced his readers to certain real-life female characters he had come across during his youth.

Poetry and fiction apart, Sofa was admired for many of his thought-provoking non-fictional write-ups. Sofa had interest in a lot of diverse issues ranging from studying Muslim minds to the history of the sepy movement, from letters of Ahmed Sharif to Prof Abdur Razzak, whom he revered as his Guru.

Along with eight novels, Sofa authored hundreds of lyrics, poems, short stories, essays, and columns. But in contemporary Bengali literature Sofa's role and contributions have not been widely discussed and analyzed yet. Particularly his role in inspiring the younger generation and imbuing them with the confidence to get published needs to be recognized.

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# The night of eternal stars is yours ...

TOWHEED FEROZE

Talented people do not die like ordinary ones: they mostly die at the height of glory and that has been the case with Humayun, the writer of the people. He could have given us more books, could have made some more films. But would we have liked him to give us one hundred percent and then wither away into old age? That would have been unfortunate. No, he left us unfulfilled and therein lies the charm, the allure. They say, too much of a good thing spoils the magic, and so, believing in that, let's accept one thing: leaving a little early, he fell short of utilising his full potential and possibly an eventual burnout. This present feeling of non-fulfillment has managed to maintain his mystique. Needless to say, without that, a writer is brought down to banality.

Enigma is crucial for a writer because once he becomes an open book, he ceases to amaze and wonder. That intrigue should not dwindle but end abruptly so that people are puzzled, confused and left in a sea of hopelessness. Today, as we mourn his death, we must take inspiration from his works that carved a new path for Bangla literature post-independence.

No, he won't write anymore but instead of pining for his writings, let's now look at his works a huge pile indeed, and ensure that they create a future path for new authors. A void has been created, there is no doubt. But the empty space has to be taken by new writers. Of course, there will never be another Humayun and we all know that. Every writer is unique and no other can be like the other, but the



influence of a writer is indestructible.

Humayun Ahmed was the first person to dabble in psychological thrillers in Bangladesh and that is where he remains unique. Although people will recall him more for his social dramas, it's the character Misir Ali which is his unique contribution to contemporary Bangla fiction. Humayun was the first writer who explored the nuances of human sexuality and the darker sides of human psychology in his Misir Ali novels and in his complex plots he brought hermaphrodites, people with bi-polar disorder and a host of Bohemian characters that lived on the

fringes of society. Even in creating Himu he tried to glamorise the life of the eccentric and readers soon discovered that affluence did not always guarantee an eventful existence. Himu, the Bohemian, lives in all men. Most suppress it while others let it flourish and take over. That is exactly why in real life we often see top notch public service examination graduates opting to take up journalism rather than be confined within the four walls of sedentary and stifling work. In society's definition, the latter is the perfect being, following all rules and living by the template. But they have no colourful experi-

ences to share and no 'charm' to give to the world. Of course, many of these people make money but then there is the saying: the happiness of a rich man is not higher than the contentment of a middle income person who gets the basic items to lead a comfortable life. Humayun Ahmed, in one of his interviews, said: 'I am happy with basic comforts nature, simple but properly cooked food, good company and clean place to sleep.' He got more than that. But the writer never strove to be extravagant. He drove a Toyota though he could have managed a BMW or a Merc. The writer could have lived in opulence but chose solitude instead among the trees, stars and animals. There is Himu for you maybe the yellow panjabi was missing but at heart he was every bit the maverick. Once upon a time, Humayun Ahmed used to live in Elephant Road, just behind the house where this writer lives. The writer used to be seen spending his evening hours sipping tea at roadside stalls. Often he sat there, looking at the variety of humanity go by the life of the ordinary person who became extraordinary by the touch of his pen. Ahmed's greatest achievement is that he made the ideology of leading a fairly honest life a trend. That is exactly why, despite all this corruption, we still have a generation of people driven by ideals and morals and not merely by avarice. But again, no man is perfect and Ahmed wasn't one either. His personal life erupted in controversy when he divorced his first wife and chose what many deem a path which radically disregarded social norms. Subsequently, his image was tainted to a large extent. Of course a

man's personal life should not be used to judge his creative works. But no matter what we say, a writer cannot expect his readers to judge him by his works only. Be that as it may, accepting that no man is faultless, we take a lenient look at Humayun Ahmed.

Interestingly, just before he left for the US for the second operation, Ahmed gave a lot of interviews to different papers; and though he spoke of hope and the future, maybe in his heart he knew that he had very little time left. The once atheist Humayun became softer, becoming somewhat philosophical about death and after-life. No, he was not a defeated man but perhaps near the end he had an epiphany about a lot of things. But everything said and done, Humayun was a writer of the masses, a social chronicler who kept petty politics aside to bring out the many other aspects of social living. By focusing on life and not politics he took literature to a humane level and this is why people of all strata of life thronged at his funeral. Now there is talk that his sanctuary Nuhash Palli will be converted to a Shantiniketan-type institution and that wouldn't be a bad idea. At least students, surrounded by nature, will learn to be creative and Humayun's spirit can be in the wind, in the moonlight, the stars and the trees looking after them. He always longed for nature. Now he is part of it. So let's have no regrets. The writer has his wish fulfilled!

TOWHEED FEROZE, WITH HIS BACKGROUND IN JOURNALISM, WRITES ON A VARIETY OF SUBJECTS.