

TRIBUTE

Humayun Ahmad: Man and writer

NIAZ ZAMAN

My meeting with Humayun Ahmed this year, when he came for a few weeks to Bangladesh before returning to the United States to resume cancer treatment, was the first and last time I met him. Apart from his short hair in public he had taken to wearing a hat, but did not have it on at home there was nothing to suggest that all was not well with him. In fact, he looked so unbelievably well that I was sure that, after completing his course of treatment, he would return to his former self and productive life. Sadly, that was not to be.

I had heard about his love for food and his gracious hospitality, and I experienced it at first hand. After answering most of the questions that I had noted down I am in the process of translating his novel *Maddhyana* and had some queries on that for him he offered me tea and snacks. There was a plate of *monda* a sweet I am particularly fond of but, for whatever reason, I politely declined. He asked me if there were health reasons why I couldn't take sweets. When I said no, he urged me to try it. It was good, he said. I took it and, yes, it was good.

There were a lot of people in the room and I realized that I should leave to allow others to speak to him. As I got up to leave, he gave me *Bhoy*, a collection of three stories focusing on Misir Ali. You might like it, he said.

That was the first and the last time that I met Humayun Ahmed.

Of course, like most Bangladeshis I knew about him. Had seen his television serials and had read a few of his short stories. Had in fact, written to him on a number of occasions for permission to translate a short story or to include a translated short story in an anthology. Always he had given permission. There were also a number of book launches of these anthologies, but he could not attend any.

I am not sure whether I became acquainted with him through his television plays or his fiction first. Perhaps it was simultaneous. But while I enjoyed the television plays, his short stories drew me to his writing. I must confess that my interest in his short stories developed indirectly rather than directly. A sister-in-law (nanad) of mine used to be an avid reader and was fond of sharing what she had read with me. She suggested that I would enjoy Humayun Ahmed's short stories. I got a copy of *Shrestha Galpa* and discovered that



Humayun Ahmad was indeed a master of the craft of the short story. As Rabindranath Tagore has said, short stories are about seemingly small incidents, about small joys and sorrows, but which leave an impression on the mind. Humayun Ahmed's best short stories exemplify Tagore's description:

*Chhoto praan chhoto kotha
Chhoto chhoto dukhho byatha
Nitanto-i shohoj shorol
Nahi boronar chhota
Ghotonar ghomoghot
Nahi totto nahi upodesh
Ontore otripti robey
Shango kori mone hobe
Shesh hoye hoilo na shesh.*

(Little souls little tales
Little pains and pangs
Merely simple in the telling
No elaborate description
Only a narrative of events
No theory no advice
The thirst remains unquenched
Once done the feeling rises
It ended and yet did not end.)

(Translated Syed Badrul Ahsan)
The first story of Humayun Ahmed's that I read and translated because I could not get the scene of the eater out of my mind was "Khadak." It is the story of a man who

eats so that his audience might derive pleasure from seeing him defeat his rivals. Told through a narrator, who is not the protagonist but a witness as in several of Humayun Ahmed's short stories (perhaps the influence of Somerset Maugham, who used this device in his fiction) the story ends with the eater continuing to eat while his hungry children look on. Will there be a happy ending? The narrator asks. Will the eater stop eating and give the food to his children? But no, he continues to eat. There is a moral to the story, a social critique, woven subtly into it. The English translation was published in an issue of the *Bangla Academy Journal* and picked up by the compilers of *Voices*, a literary magazine published by expatriate Bangladeshis in the US.

Other stories which I read and translated myself or requested others to translate for anthologies included "Ayomoy," "1971," "Jalil Saheber Petition," "Aparanha." "Ayomoy" which has nothing in common with the television serial of the same name is about the relationship between a rich zamindar and an ailing man. It is the month of Ramzan and the zamindar is busy with other matters. He does not want to bother about the poor, sick man to whom he is a reluctant host. He is told that if the man is made to do "taoba," he will die quickly. The

imam of the mosque is sent to carry out this ritual and he does so. But the man does not die. It seems that the man does not want to die and therefore only pretended to do "taoba." Finally, the zamindar's attitude to the man changes. If the man is so determined to live, he deserves to be saved. He therefore decides to take him to town for proper medical treatment and care. In the space of a few pages, the short story deals with class differences, religious rituals, superstitions, human relations, and above all, with human resilience.

Both "1971" and "Jalil Saheber Petition" are about the Bangladesh Liberation War: the former taking place while the war is still raging, the latter several years after it is over. Both are classics: "1971" in showing the indomitable courage of an unarmed Bengali civilian faced with the might of the Pakistan military and "Jalil Saheber Petition" in showing the plight of a father who has lost both his sons in 1971. All Jalil Saheb wants is that people recognize the sacrifices of his sons and others like them in 1971. He goes around with a file under his arm. At the beginning the narrator finds him somewhat of an eccentric nuisance as perhaps readers do. The narrator goes abroad. He returns to find the man is dead. He thinks that he will take up Jalil Saheb's work. But he never does, involved he becomes with other activities. Thus Humayun Ahmad indicts all of us who have benefited from the sacrifices of the freedom fighters and their families but remain silent or indifferent.

Another thought-provoking story is "Aparanha," about the death of a rickshawallah. For the last few years, rickshaws have been banned from several streets in Dhaka, but a few years ago rickshaws were a common mode of transport. Humayun Ahmad's short story about the rickshawallah was so true for all of us who have ridden or still occasionally ride rickshaws. The way we haggle with rickshawallahs, trying to bring the fare down, as well as our complete indifference to the individual who is pedalling the rickshaw is brilliantly touched upon by the author. It is a sad story the rickshawallah dies but there is also humour in it as the narrator asks another rickshawallah before he hires him what his name is, whether he is well, etc. He doesn't want this rickshawallah to die on him again.

For a number of years, whenever I com-

piled an anthology, I would include Humayun Ahmad's short stories. Then, for whatever reason I stopped. Then last year, I was approached with the request to translate *Maddhyana*. I hesitated. I had translated short stories, but had never taken up a novel. Did I have the time to translate four hundred pages? But I could not say no. After all, Humayun Ahmad had always readily given me permission to translate his stories and include them in anthologies. So I agreed, but with the stipulation that I could not do the whole work myself but would collaborate with another translator.

Yes, the first draft of the translation of *Maddhyana* is finished. That is why, when I met Humayun Ahmad, I was able to discuss it with him. Some of my questions had to do with style, some with content. Bangla fiction, for example, uses the present tense for narrative, English the past tense. Which would he prefer we use? The present tense, he said. What about quotation marks? Bangla fiction does not use quotation marks, English does. Use quotation marks, he said. As I revise what my co-translator and I have done, I am putting in these changes. But there are other questions that remain unanswered because he wanted to think about them.

I am sorry that he isn't around, sorry that I couldn't give him the finished translation, sorry that the questions he was going to ponder over before responding will remain unanswered, sorry that we never did get to talk about the title. But I want to thank you, Humayun Ahmad, for your short stories, for your plays, for your movies and for obliging me to read this historical novel about Bengal during the third and fourth decades of the twentieth century.

I would like to end this tribute by quoting from the American poet Walt Whitman: "The proof of a poet is that his country absorbs him as affectionately as he has absorbed it." If there is any need to evaluate how Bangladesh has absorbed Humayun Ahmad, we need only to remember the scenes at the Shaheed Minar where multitudes thronged to pay their last respects to the writer who had entertained them for forty years and who had inspired a whole generation to read Bangladeshi books.

(Humayun Ahmed's birthday was observed on 13 November)

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SHORT STORY

... Nazneen....

ABDULLAH SHIBLI

(CONTINUED FROM LAST WEEK)

While Akram was in Chittagong, I had my first child. I named him Farhan and was glad to have a companion to fill up my days. Akram came every month to see us, particularly to spend time with his parents. It was during these months that I noticed some change in his attitude towards me. Before, when we were alone in our bedroom, he would try to touch me, and draw me closer towards him. During the pregnancy, he stopped this and we almost never made love during this period. While this change took me by surprise and worried me, I did not bring it up with him. But I could sense that something was amiss when I found out that he was talking frequently on the cell phone on the roof. As soon as I went to the roof to join him, he would hang up. I was not sure if I should ask him about these calls but soon I heard from my cousin who lived in Chittagong that he had seen "dulabhai" with another woman.

I was puzzled and sad to know about Akram's interest in this other woman, and I started to wonder if this was the first instance or he had been cheating on me all along. Akram's work days were long while he was working in Dhaka and he often went out after work with his friends. I assumed he just needed to unwind or hang out with friends as was the common practice among his friends circle. I never asked him much about his friends, or who else was there in his evening *adda*, or even if they went out. I knew that I could always reach him on his cell phone if I needed to, but I never called him even though sometimes I was lonely at home in the evening.

As Farhan was growing up, I kept busy with him and attended to his studies but thought it would be fun to go out to the movies with Akram, just the two of us. Once when I brought it up, he did not show any interest, and it seemed from his facial expressions and body language that he considered going out for an evening with your wife and leave the parents at home was impractical.

I often talked to Amma about my feelings of emptiness and melancholia brought about by Akram's behavior and his infidelity and she, after a while, began to side with me. She offered her sympathies and tried to distract me with words such as *sabar* and *kortobyo*, and always advised me to have patience. I cannot remember on how many occasions I heard from her the traditional Bengali saw "soburey mewa foley" and "dhoerje dhoro", and have been amazed her unflinching faith in the old adage "innallah ma's saaberin". It was during these conversations that I often lost my patience with her. However, of late I also noticed that she was very cautious about offering me any advice. I am not sure if that might have been because she realized that the traditional "suffer in silence" approach was not in my best interest or because she wanted me to find the appropriate course of action. I once heard from her that many years ago, when she was unhappy in her own married life, her only brother had once told her that his doors are always open if my mother ever decides to walk out on my father. But she never did make any moves in that direction, and suffered in silence for her entire life.

She confided in me that there was a very painful time when my father was posted in Rangpur. He would take out his frustrations at work or with financial problems by cutting her off or abusing her.

My mother's less than perfect conjugal life helped me in many ways to cope with my own partnership with my husband. From the stories I heard from her, I learned well about men and how some of them are wired. She told me how she faced the full brunt of my father's wrath whenever she spoke to him about Dadi, my grandmother. Once, when we were visiting my Dadi's house in Kushtia, my mother wanted to visit Shelaiddah, and see Tagore's *kuthi-bari*. My Dadi did not like the idea and expressed her strong displeasure to my father about *bohu*. She apparently had told my father that my mother was a little "forward", and my father had then proceeded to abuse her verbally and physically in my Dadi's house. My mother was not sure what triggered his anger and the resulting abuse, but she said very casually to me, "may be to please his mother, he was so *matri bhokto*". Since then, she had tried to steer away from any acts or decisions that might displease my Dadi.

Amma was my steady friend during this period, and always my friend in times of need. After three years in Chittagong, Akram was transferred back to Dhaka, and I never heard from him or my cousin about his secret affair. Amma offered to take care of Farhan when Akram had a chance to go to Kolkata for a few days, and I convinced him to take me along with him. I often chatted with her during

the evenings when Akram was out with his friends or at official functions. Even though my brothers and sister kept her busy, she would call me almost every night. After his retirement, Abba was preoccupied with his prayers and was spending more and more time at the mosque in the neighborhood. Amma discussed with me cooking tips, her daily worries, and about the two helping hands who worked in my parents' house. She would always complain about them to me but every time I'd ask her to get rid of them she'd calmly respond: "But where are they going to go? They stay with me because I am their only *asroy*!" I couldn't help but laugh after I would hang up with her at my mother's ways and this love-hate relationship. She can't stand the two *buas*, but also can't get rid of them.

When Farhan was ten years old, Kanika, who was teaching at a school in Kalabagan, informed me one day that there was an opening for a second grade teacher in her school, and she wanted to know if I would be interested. I gathered all my courage and said yes, even before I had a chance to talk to Akram. I was not sure if he would have any objections to my working outside the house, but I had been feeling for a few years, particularly after Farhan started going to school, that I should start to work outside the house. Since I never held an outside job previously, I was not sure if I would be able to find one as I suspected that my professional skills, particularly in spoken English, had become a little rusty. Kanika called back the next day and informed me that the principal

wanted to interview me right away. I got the job partly because it turned out that I still had a decent command of English and my knowledge of math and world history was pretty good thanks to the practice I had while helping my son with his school work. Akram did not voice any reservations but I assured him, just to be on the safe side, that I would be back home after work even before Farhan's school ended, and be there to attend to my in-laws during dinner time. I did not think much of that since I have always been taking care of them since my marriage.

A few months ago, one evening as I was explaining a short story by Maupassant to Farhan after he finished his school work, Amma called me to let me know that she was not feeling too well. I asked her if she had seen a doctor and she told me that the doctor had given her a prescription which she was taking. I wanted to go and see her as soon as I could get away but I did not have a car. Akram was at the Officer's Club and when I called him I found out that his cell phone was off. I could not make up my mind; I could have called a cab but did not want to leave my in-laws home since I knew that might upset Akram. When I called my brother Sajid he told me that Amma had fallen asleep after taking the medication and it would be alright for me to come in the morning. After Akram got back, I asked the driver to come early the following morning. Just as I was getting ready to go next morning, Naushin called me and gave me the news that Amma had passed away in her sleep. I held the phone in my hand for I don't know how long as I

struggled to take in the news. My entire life flashed in front of my eyes as I stood there and tried to make sense of my mother's short and lonely life, my own loss and sorrow, and sort through our intertwined sad lives together.

I spent the next few hours at my parents, in an attempt to ensure that everything was running in order in my mother's absence, and to follow the clues on how she managed her affairs. I found her set of keys and opened the *almirahs* and the box room where Amma kept her small possessions and mementos. The pain of losing my mother was soon overtaken by a sense of urgency as I found myself in her shoes, in the midst of her world. I started to organize her room, her clothes, and everything that I found in her room. I helped to wash her body and with every ritual as it was being readied for the *janaza* and burial. I don't remember I cried much as I was scurrying around asking my brothers to contact the *moulvi shahab*, tasking the *buas* to clean the bathrooms and the living room for the mourners, and everything else that Amma would have done if she were in charge. After all the men came back that evening from the burial yard, I told Akram that I wanted to stay in this house until the *dua* on the fortieth day of my mother's passing. He looked surprised, but when he saw that I was not seeking his approval nor showing any sign that I wanted to discuss my decision with him, he did not argue. I called Kanika and requested her to take care of my in-laws while I was away.

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