

THE ETERNAL SUNSHINE

of Humayun Ahmed



Humayun's world

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

Literature has immortalised Humayun Ahmed. Or Humayun Ahmed has enriched literature through giving it fresh new shots in the arm. The result has been a fantastic combination of creativity and established tradition. In his novels, in his plays, it is the characters who assume shape and significance, leap out of the stories as it were, to remind us that we are those characters or those characters are us. That is literature working at its most concentrated level. If cultural heritage tells us that

literature does not happen but could happen in our lives, that indeed the life we live is literature itself, Humayun Ahmed leads us by the hand to the widening spaces of existence --- to enlighten us on the truth that literature does happen in life or life is but another name we give to literary experience.

In the tales spun by Humayun Ahmed, it is the good cheer and deepening depression and rampant ambitions and abject failures of individuals that assail us as we read the books or watch the plays. And these individuals are not part of

fantasy. They serve as the underpinning of middle class reality as we spot it in Bangladesh. There are larger than life egos at work in the characters. And then come the petty desires and ambitions in those who do not go beyond daydreaming. The neighbourhood young man, so much a terror to so many others, remains a darling of the locality he inhabits. Think of Baker Bhai. Think of narrow streets or large drawing rooms. Think of pesky uncles and cheeky man-servants. Imagine the sounds of rain or the glow of fireflies on quiet pastoral nights. Humayun

Ahmed only rekindles in you thoughts of things you knew once, or kept dormant.

The question of whether Humayun Ahmed was a great writer or merely one who responded to the contemporary need for light entertainment through his fiction is irrelevant here. What does matter, though, is that he speaks for us through informing us that sometimes our self-obsession can get in the way of our enlightenment. Humayun Ahmed consistently crushes pretensions. A Syed can steal, of course. That is easy. But his sense of respectability will not

allow him to pedal a rickshaw. As Humayun Ahmed sees it, there is in all of us, or perhaps most of us, a Misir Ali. Shades of the Eliotesque J. Alfred Prufrock? Maybe.

Humayun Ahmed was the first, the very first, among our writers to have achieved stardom status. He was a word-magician who happened to be a celebrity or he was a celebrity because of the powerful evocations of human nature he caused to rise through his writing. His diction is ours, the kind we speak at home. His characters are people we meet at the local tea stall or in the kitchen market in our quo-

tidian struggle to come to terms with the demands life makes on us.

A year after Humayun Ahmed's passing, our world of literature and aesthetics remains as vacuous as it was when news blew in of mortality catching up with him in New York. A world is destroyed in the death of a writer. In Humayun Ahmed's end, it was a world which exploded along with all its dreams.

We are still trying to pick up the pieces. We need to have that world back, for reasons we do not need to reason about.

(Humayun Ahmed died on 19 July 2012.)

Mesmerising the young

ROBIN GAZI

It was as dreary a July Friday afternoon as it could be for a boy in his early teens. It had been pouring in the morning and it was still drizzling. The playground near my home in the small town had been flooded and so had been the streets. No point thinking about getting the bike out. Cricket was out of the question.

I thought to myself, "If I was to be stuck at home I might as well read." The only stuff lying around were "Thakurmar Jhuli" and "Gopal Bhar Hashir Golpo". It had been years since I grew out of them.

Money for a teenager was hard to come by and I had to rely on others for my reading needs. One of them was the big brother living downstairs, Sujan.

Unable to go out with my bike or play cricket, I went down to his flat to go through his shelf and get some "Tin Goyenda" to read.

"Read it, read it, read it" ... the two words went on and on in my head as I almost turned his shelf inside out. It was of no use and the dreary afternoon would continue, or so it seemed.

Then Sujan handed me this book and said, "Have a go at this ... you will like it."

It was a book with a hard cover. Not the paperbacks I was used to. It felt like something a thirty year old would read. I was sceptical. I returned home with the book rather disappointed.

It took me less than an hour to finish the book but more than an hour to come to terms with what I had just read. It took me into a world I had never been in before.

I loved this Himu person with his yellow punjabi and the fact that he had the courage to shave his head, including the eyebrows. I hated the maternal uncle he had, largely for his drinking habit and for treating Himu the way he did which I felt Himu did not deserve.

I loved Badhon, Himu's cousin and blind follower.

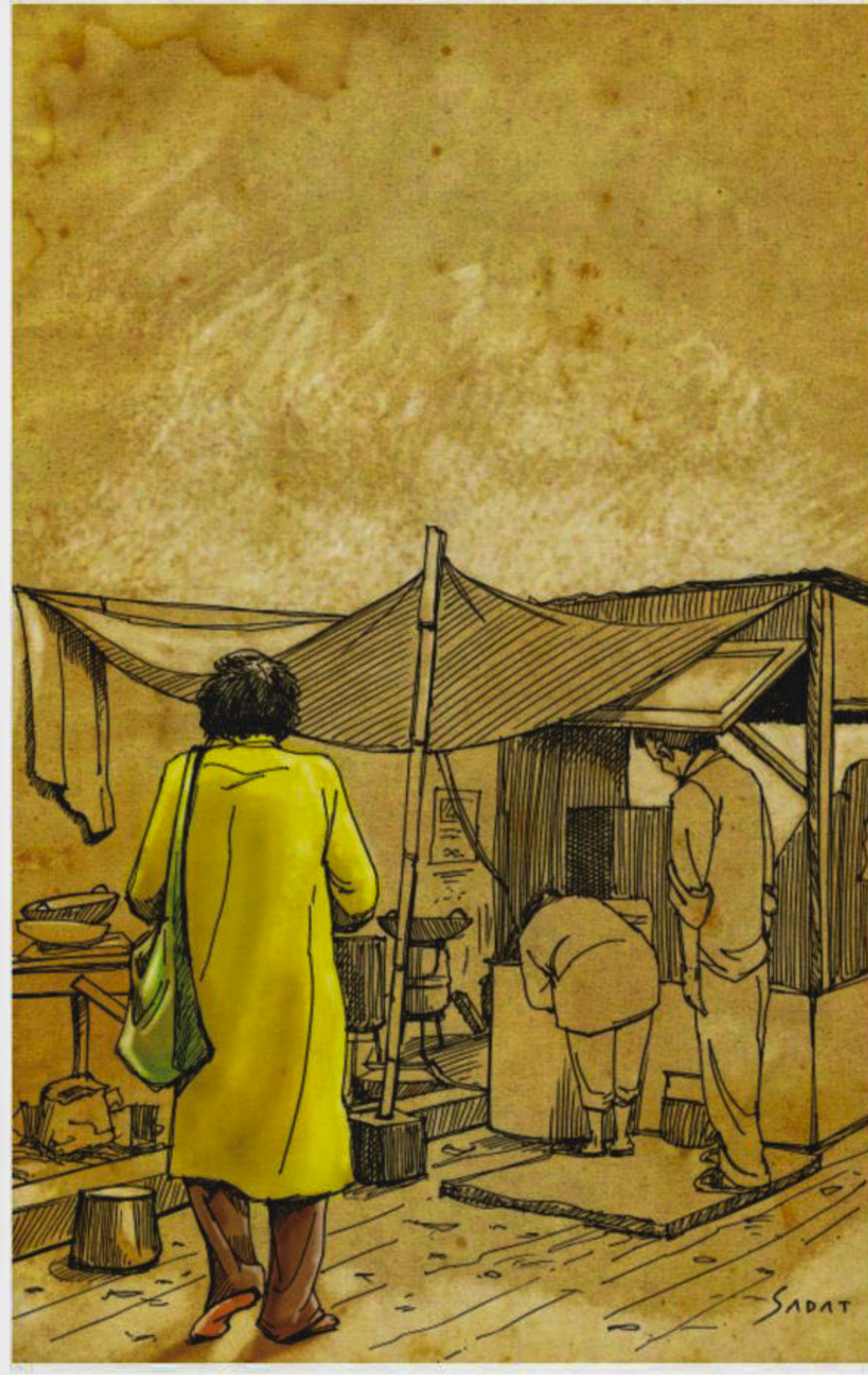
The book, and I don't even remember the name, was probably the most significant book I had ever read. In the next few months I read nothing but Humayun Ahmed's books.

After reading around a hundred, I guess, of Humayun Ahmed's books, I was catapulted into the world of literature. Names like Sunil, Shirshendu, Sarat, Dickens and Jane Austen followed.

A few years later, I was running around the country trying to get into a university. My parents thought I was trying to get into a good business school or in an engineering university.

Little did they know that I only sat for admission tests for the literature department.

My story is in no way an exception. Thousands have been touched by Humayun Ahmed. It is now pretty safe to say that he would still be mesmerising young minds years from now. Like Sarat still does today.



The Shakespeare of Bangladesh

Humayun Ahmed, who earned a PhD in chemistry from North Dakota State University, and who was a scientist, writer, and a filmmaker, died aged 64 in the US, after a nearly year-long battle against colon cancer. Every Bangalee heart has grown heavier and heavier since his death.

Humayun was a custodian of the Bangladeshi literary culture whose contribution single-handedly shifted the capital of Bangla literature from Kolkata to Dhaka without any war or revolution.

One of the remarkable things about Humayun's distinguished literary career is his influence. His writing is so influential that people



On the set of "Kothao Keu Nei".

not only get psychological pleasure from reading his books, but usually end up becoming fans of his fictional characters, such as Himu and Misir Ali.

However, in death, Humayun's celebrity status seems likely to exceed his

popularity, even at the height of his fame.

Humayun reached the peak of his fame with the publication of Nondito Noroke (In Blissful Hell) in 1972, which remains one of his most famous work. He wrote over 200 fiction and

non-fiction books-all of which were bestsellers in Bangladesh. This is something unheard of.

Furthermore, Humayun made a huge contribution to the field of fine arts, especially in film. He is hailed as one of the most influential architects of television drama of all time, authoring landmark sitcoms, such as Ei Shob Din Ratri, Bohubrihi, Ayomoy, and Kothao Keu Nei, which featured a fictional character named Baker Bhai, who was wrongly convicted and executed. Baker Bhai became such a popular character that before the last episode was aired, thousands of people across the country urged Humayun to change

the script just to save his life, the life of a fictional character. This made Humayun a household name.

It is true that Bangla literature would have remained piteously incomplete, and even imperfect, without the works of Humayun. However, it is also quite apparent that without the works of Tagore or Nazrul, Bangla literature would have broken up into mutually unintelligible dialects. Hence, it is fair to place Humayun after Tagore and Nazrul. However, Humayun never compared himself to Shakespeare, and not even to Tagore and Nazrul. He did not regard himself as a great writer. (Abridged. The article by Rashidul Bari was published in The Times of India on Aug 16, 2012.)

The petition

SHAHTUB SIDDIQUE ANIK

"I am a father of two martyred freedom fighters. My two sons died in 1971," said the man, aged 60, smiling. He lost two sons in the war but still he could laugh. "My name is Abdul Jalil."

We meet Jalil Saheb at a time when the country is under HM Ershad's dictatorship. It is 1988. Jalil Saheber Petition is a story by none other than Humayun Ahmed and came out in a book titled, Sheet O Onyanno Golpo (Winter and Other Stories).

Jalil Saheb's petition! What kind of petition was that? His petition said something that many were not willing to say at the time. It said: more than a million Jews were killed during World War II. Everyone guilty of this heinous crime was prosecuted. But why were those responsible for the killing over three million people in Bangladesh never brought to justice? Mr Jalil asked the government to take action in this regard.

Remember it was a time when hardly anybody used to mention the need for a war crimes trial. We had to wait till 1992 for the Gono Adalat, a symbolic court to try Ghulam Azam, to be formed under the leadership of Jahanara Imam, mother of martyred guerrilla Rumi.

The word "razakar" was almost absent from the media as if nobody had ever collaborated with the Pakistan occupation army in 1971. Our politicians were in "forgive and forget" mode. (It was again Humayun Ahmed who coined the phrase "tui razakar" through a parrot in his famous tv serial Bahubrihi in 1988-89. And around the same time the band group Nova released a song in which they demanded a list of collaborators.)

So, Jalil Saheb -- like Humayun Ahmed, who himself is the son of a Liberation War martyr, Jahanara Imam and Nova -- were doing what many others should have been doing. Why?

"I am not doing this because I lost two sons. My boys were killed in the war. I seek no retribution for their death. I demand justice for those who were dragged out of their homes and killed." It was nothing personal.

Jalil Saheb was bound by oath. So was Shaheed Janani Jahanara Imam. "I was there, at the dawn of the movement. Our oath was not to leave the streets until the goal was achieved," reads her last letter.

Jahanara Imam, the one to initiate the movement for the trial of war criminals, had written the open letter, to the people of Bangladesh, on her deathbed. She died of cancer on June 26, 1994, at the age of 65. Already, the government had sued her on the charge of sedition.

And what did Jalil Saheb say? "Do you think I will give up? Never. Two of my sons went down fighting. I will fight, too, until I die. If necessary, I will collect the signatures of each and every one in Bangladesh. Three million people lost their lives. How is it possible to remain silent? Are we human beings, or what?"

"...I will put each and every swine in the dock." However, as the story says, Jalil Saheb did not see the start of the war crimes trial in his lifetime.

Neither did Jahanara Imam. But she wanted us, the people, to continue the battle.

(Acknowledgement: Hasan Ferdous for his English translation of Jalil Saheber Petition)

