

A skilled storyteller in his own right, Humayun Ahmed's narrative prowess was eminent in his films. During the 90s when rampant commercialisation resulted in over-glammed, action-packed, blockbuster-style cinema led by testosterone-fuelled heroes, Ahmed's films exhibited a knack for well-rounded and socially relevant narratives. Starting from his first movie to his last, Ahmed threaded together tales of love, political self-determination, and heroism—all of which have a complex relation with gender and masculinity. He explored these concepts through his memorable characters, who still remain favourites with Bengali film audiences from the 90s onward. What is remarkable about Ahmed's films is that his idea of people was not static—his characters became more fluid and complex as time went by. Looking at three of Humayun Ahmed's films from three different stages of his career, it becomes more and more evident that the writer's attempt at understanding the male character beyond its traditional roles evolved with time.

Initially, Ahmed displayed a classic understanding of male characters. In his first movie, *Aguner Poroshmoni* (1995), he explored masculinity in a traditional framework—in which men who exhibit



The main character in *Ghetuputra Komola* exhibits perceived gender-fluidity.

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THE MEN OF HUMAYUN AHMED'S FILMS

SARAH NAFISA SHAHID

physical strength, bravery, aggression, and emotional toughness towards violence are on top of the gender hierarchy. These attributes are idealised for male characters who are shown to dominate others. In that way, masculinity of this film unfolds in two cases: first as the conditions of war itself, and second, as the heroic freedom fighter protagonist.

The film tells the story of a middle-class family stuck in Dhaka during the Liberation War of 1971. Ahmed depicts war almost solely as a project of exploitation of men by men. Apart from domestic roles, women are not involved in war, and strikingly, neither are they portrayed as victims. Scenes of war-struck Dhaka are constructed as homosocial spaces, be it the military, the guerrilla resistance, the tea-stall, or the office. War only has space for men who emit leadership and extroversion akin to the male protagonist, Bodi, played by Asaduzzaman Noor. And those who exhibit "weak" attributes such as fumbling, pleading, fear, are either victims of intimidation or are killed in the film.

The family gives temporary refuge to freedom fighter Bodi, who is constructed as the ideal *man*—righteous and courageous. He is desirable in all senses, he is kind to animals, he is respectful to women, he doesn't discriminate along class lines, he takes care of his mother

and sister, and also fights for his country. Bodi exhibits hegemonic masculinity—personality traits that are rewarded by social institutions; other men who do not exhibit such alpha-male behaviour are measured as inferior in relation to characters like Bodi.

These roles become further defined when the character is contrasted with that of Ratri's, the female protagonist, played by Bipasha Hayat, who becomes infatuated with Noor's character. Their developing romance dally around gendered behaviour. Ratri embodies the soft-imagination of the war while Bodi is the hard-imagination—he has a material impact in changing the conditions of war but Ratri's scope within the war is limited to keeping up the spirit of liberation through songs and poetry. Ratri feels helpless in the conditions of war while Bodi feels purposeful. Her character is constructed as fragile, unable to confront loss, experiencing frequent nightmares, and breaking into fits. This construction implies that men's lives are meaningful and women's purpose is to ensure that these men never lose sight of that meaning.

However, Ahmed's understanding of masculinity was more nuanced in his mid-career film, *Shyamol Chhaya* (2005), where he created the stereotypical hero in Humayun Faridi and the not-so-stereotypical-hero in Shaon. Faridi plays a freedom fighter akin to *Aguner Poroshmoni*'s Bodi, with similar high-spirited patriotism and nonchalant chivalry. Shaon's character, Asha, on the other hand, is a playful newly married



The main character in *Aguner Poroshmoni* is constructed as an ideal man.



The female protagonist in *Aguner Poroshmoni* feels helpless in the conditions of war.

woman who is unable to romance her husband because of her evil mother-in-law.

While Faridi does play the obvious war hero, Asha is also seen interacting with conditions of war in her own naïve

ways. Her first brush with war is when a Razakar attempts to capture her but she actively resists. When other passengers in the boat capture the Razakar and keep him hostage, Asha visits him in private

Continued to page 13

THE MEN OF HUMAYUN AHMED'S FILMS

After page 12 and threatens him with a razor blade, "Dei gola ta kaitta (Shall I slit your throat)?" The whole film is laced with Asha's protests, be it refusing to remove her *shankha* when the Muslim boat-owner orders her to, or sitting close to her husband when her mother-in-law asks her not to, or singing when her husband tells her not to.

Asha's final protest was joining the troupe of freedom fighters led by Faridi's character. However, Faridi's character, the freedom fighter leader, who exhibits hegemonic masculinity in this story, falls short in winning the audience's sympathy. A battle ensues at the end of the film and though the obvious outcome would have been a heroic act by

mother who dislikes Gourango's wife, Asha. The Bengali-German engineer, played by Shimul, is struggling with the loss of his family and refuses to take part in battle. These characters' wars are not in the physical battle field but in the social realms, a realm which is not separate from war-struck consequentiality.

Maulauna's fight is in remaining true to God in a war that is between Islamicised Pakistan and secular Bangladesh. Yet, it is Maulauna who convinces the boat owner to allow Hindu passengers to remain on the boat. By the end of the film, we see him coming to terms with the liberation struggle and opine that "Pakistan Military are oppressors". Gourango, too, overcomes his dependency on his mother, and chooses to join his wife in battle.

Shimul's character resolves his internal conflict by becoming more



PHOTO: COURTESY

Komola's gender-fluidity makes him vulnerable to gendered violence.

All members of the zamindar house and even Komola's troupe and family, remain silent when he cries for help. Even if someone raises a complaint, like the zamindar's wife did at the very beginning, they are silenced immediately by the zamindar who has the potential to cause physical and societal harm to people under him. While Komola continues being sexually exploited throughout the film, only one voice, that of the zamindar's daughter, reminds us that this is indeed gendered injustice. She keeps asking, "Komola ki chele naki meye (Is Komola a girl or a boy)?"

Komola's perceived gender fluidity is also depicted as threatening to existing conventions. The zamindar's servants feel repulsion towards him which manifests through bodily resistance. The head servant washes her hand every time she comes in contact with him in order to purify herself. The zamindar's wife prohibits Komola from touching her make-up box. She also orders her daughter not to play with the boy in fear of getting "corrupted". Zahir, too, internalises his "abnormality" and asks the zamindar's court artist, "Apni ki amake ghreena koren (Are you disgusted of me)?" Zahir's question quietly reminds the audience that he is but a kid suffering violence due to social prejudices. In classic Humayun Ahmed-style, the volatile perception of gender is realised through the intricate layers of Zahir/Komola's pathos.

From his first movie to his last, Humayun Ahmed displayed a gradual progression in his understating of human conditions, especially relating to masculinity. With time, his characters became more complex, teaching his audience that men do not function in one certain way. The same cannot be said about his female characters, but that is for another day. For now, it is worth appreciating the characters who have transcended the burden of masculinity. Characters that subtly or boldly challenge their existing circumstances and inspire many more young men to shed the burden of being the hero-types.

Sarah Nafisa Shahid studied Art-History at McGill University, Canada and is a columnist of Star Weekend.



Humayun Ahmed brings a bit more complexity to stereotypical roles in *Shyamol Chhaya*.



Humayun Ahmed's understanding of masculinity was more nuanced in *Shyamol Chhaya*.

one of the male characters, it is Asha who is hit by a bullet while distracting the Pakistani Army. With this ending, Ahmed decides to bring a bit more complexity to stereotypical roles of women during wartime.

Moreover, he writes other male characters that do not fit the macho mask. The dedicated Maulana played by Riaz, obsessively cares for his pregnant wife, bringing her fruits, making sure she's not sick, at a time of war. The Hindu man, Gourango, played by Swadhin, is controlled by his toxic

compassionate. He quotes Shakespeare's Caesar, "cowards die many times before their death" and decides to join the Muktibahini. But Faridi's character advises, "shobai ki shob kichu pare? Apni e toh bolsen. (Everything is not for everyone, as you said so)," indicating that to be a *man*, one does not have to throw grenades at the enemy—Shimul's job as an engineer is equally important. His emotional torment at the loss of his family does not make his life less purposeful. These avenues as a whole redefine what it must mean to be a man

during a time of crisis, and thankfully, Ahmed's *Shyamol Chhaya* provides more than one option.

In his last film, *Ghetuputra Komola* (Pleasure Boy Komola) (2012), Ahmed pushes the lid with masculinity by providing us a character in Zahir/Komola, who is perceived as gender fluid and because of such fluidity, is vulnerable to gendered violence. The film opens with an explanation of ghetu tradition—a form of folk performance art where a young boy dresses as a girl to sing and dance. Set in colonial Bengal, Komola, Zahir's ghetu avatar, is hired by a zamindar, played by Tareque Anam, for the duration of the flood season. His perceived gender fluidity makes him a victim of the zamindar's sexual aggression. *Ghetuputra Komola* blurs the dichotomy that what is male is absolutely not female. It turns the binary on its head—Zahir is perceived as weak in his female avatar, similar to how women are perceived as vulnerable by the dictates of patriarchy.

Through this film, Ahmed appears as a staunch critique of the power structures that enable gendered violence. The homosexual relation between the zamindar and Komola is readily accepted due to his perceived femininity.