

TRIBUTE

# Humayun Azad and the courage to dissent

RUFAYIA ZIA NUHA

Does our society support free thinking or blindly imitate patriarchy, prejudices, and silence? Humayun Azad was one of the most controversial writers, professors, and researchers in Bangladesh. He explored various branches of Bangla literature. Through his novels, short stories, poems, and essays, he revealed the harsh realities and hypocrisies of Bengali society. This multidimensional writer often described himself as a nonconformist. For his rejection of traditional social and religious norms, he was heavily criticised by reactionaries. At the same time, he became an eyesore to many for fearlessly pointing out the cruel flaws of society. Yet, as a writer and thinker, he only sought to break down unjust customs, patriarchal restrictions imposed on women, and blind religious dogma, and also wanted to spread the spirit of progressivism. For this out of the box thinking and boldness in wielding a pen, he became a unique voice not only among his



ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

**To depict the suffering and difficult situations of women who have been raped, Humayun Azad wrote 10,000 Ebong Aro Iti Dhorshon (2003). In the story, Mayna's tragic journey highlights the societal stigma, victim blaming, and injustice faced by rape survivors.**

contemporaries but also among many other writers of Bangla literature.

"Man has called woman a goddess, eternal, benevolent, the household Lakshmi, half imagined; but has desired her as an eternal servant." The quotation is excerpted from his magnum opus *Nari* (1995). This quote exactly aligns with Mary Wollstonecraft's view in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). She said, "They are formed into creatures who appear to men as ornaments rather than companions, as if their business were to amuse, not to be useful; to please, not to reason; to be passive, not active; to be obedient, not to govern." In his book he also states: "A woman must remember that she is a person, not a woman; 'woman' is only her sexual identity; she must remember that she differs from man only by one

chromosome, for this one chromosome cannot become one master and another maid." *Nari* highlights how religion, society, and politics have discriminated against women since ancient times.

To depict the suffering and difficult situations of women who have been raped, Humayun Azad wrote *10,000 Ebong Aro Iti Dhorshon* (2003). In the story, Mayna's tragic journey highlights the societal stigma, victim blaming, and injustice faced by rape survivors. Moreover, the book highlights how some religious leaders demean women, labeling them as negligible and sinful, attempting to corner and oppress them. In both his books, *Pak Sar Jamin Sad Bad* (2004) and *10,000 Ebong Aro Iti Dhorshon*, Azad illustrates how minority women are perceived as mere objects, facing oppression and sexual violence, which dehumanises them. Domestic violence is significantly discussed in his books, which is rarely found in most other prominent writers' works.

He exclaims in *Narake Ananta Ritu* (1992), "Bengalis are extremely authoritarian, seemingly mild, yet everyone is a Genghis. If we consider each family as a small state, the father is its absolute ruler [...] Even a small child understands whether the father is powerful or uncontrollable and whether the mother is powerless. The

mother, like them, is oppressed." This book challenges the long-standing imbalance within family structures, the struggles over equal rights, power, and authority between men and women in the family, and the weaknesses in parenting that arise from them. Even today, such issues are often considered less important to discuss, and thus, they rarely receive serious attention. However, Azad confronted them directly in his works.

Azad further said in "Manusher Shongo Chara" (2004), "I prefer not to comment on people. /I just wonder how these beasts became so ugly. How do their mouths get filled with trash/ How did they become so ill-natured? There is hatred in everyone's eyes /desire to enjoy the delightful taste of life." In this poem, he expresses his grief and condemns societal injustices. In most of his writings, he has exhibited intense resentment against social hypocrisy and moral corruption.

As an example of Bengali double standards, Azad's remark on Bangladesh's national poet Kazi Nazrul Islam is particularly relevant. He said in *Prabachanguchchho* (1992), "While alive, Kazi Nazrul Islam was labeled a 'heretic-atheist-apostate' by contemporary mullahs and clerics, but after being half-dead, Bangladesh granted him citizenship and named

him the national poet. Bengalis destroy living talent but light incense over the graves of the dead." Indeed, recurring circumstances have repeated throughout history, with the likes of Socrates and Galileo, and the same goes for Azad—all of whom became revered figures after their deaths.

In the context of religion, Humayun Azad stated: "Secularism means that religion exists in society, and anyone can choose to practice it or not; yet the state will not support any particular religion nor persecute those who do not follow one." However, over time, across the world, authoritarians have often tried to impose religion, and religious minorities around the world have faced persecution. Even today, building a conflict-free society requires the establishment of a truly secular state, as Azad emphasised. Azad fearlessly criticised social structures, governments, and authorities, challenging entrenched norms that he considered unjust or unnecessary.

Humayun Azad is a true devotee of beauty. In "Kafane Mora Ashrubindu" (1998), he notes: "I'll probably die for something small/ For a single drop of beauty." He finds beauty in the petals of flowers, in the songs of birds, in the sparkling sunlight, and even in human generosity and simplicity. In his memoirs, *Phuler Gandhe Ghum Ashe*

(1985) and *Buk Pokete Jonakipoka* (1993), he depicts the simple, honest people of his village magnificently. Even amidst the struggles of the oppressed, he perceives this beauty. In his poem, "The Beauty of the Poor" (1993) the first and last lines convey that, "The poor are not usually beautiful; only when they protest, their beauty shines."

During his lifetime, this writer faced widespread criticism. In 1995, his book *Nari* was banned by the government for its writings against conventional religious beliefs and regulations. Though, in 2000, the ban was lifted. In objection to his works, religious extremists erupted into protest, even demanding exemplary punishment on charges of blasphemy. On February 27, 2004, while returning from the Ekushey Boi Mela, he was brutally attacked by extremists with machetes, leaving him severely wounded. After receiving treatment first in Dhaka and later in Thailand, he eventually recovered.

Even today, many continue to hold agonistic views about him, which are often expressed on social media. Some slanderers misinterpret his words, intentionally or unintentionally, to discourage readers from reading him. Humayun Azad never bothered about the criticism. He stated in *Prabachanguchchho*, "Most great men of the world are still controversial; there is no debate about any donkey anywhere on Earth. From Plato and Aristotle to Marx and Rabindranath, they remain subjects of controversy."

In today's world, gender inequality, persecution of minorities, and religious conflicts persist. Moreover, people are often attacked for expressing opinions contrary to the mainstream. The speed and intensity with which hatred spreads on social media, targeting followers of other religions or communities and the despicable comments, slut-shaming, and misogyny directed at women is truly alarming. Throughout his life, this writer expressed intense hatred for and protest against all forms of such conflicts through his writings, which established him as a humanist writer. Yet, discussion about him remains limited, but he is still relevant. May he not be lost to oblivion but live in the hearts of readers.

Rufaiya Zia Nuha is an undergraduate student at the Department of World Religions and Culture, University of Dhaka. She can be reached at [rufaiyazia-2021014361@wrc.du.ac.bd](mailto:rufaiyazia-2021014361@wrc.du.ac.bd).

INTERVIEW

## Writing what silence carries: Mohua Chinappa on memory, pain, and inheritance

NAMRATA

*Thorns in My Quilt* (Rupa Publications India, 2024) unfolds through address rather than disclosure. Written as a series of letters to her father, Mohua Chinappa's memoir traces memory not as a sequence of events, but as an emotional inheritance shaped by silence, expectation, and the subtle negotiations that govern family life. The book lingers over what is absorbed rather than spoken, attending to forms of hurt that leave no visible trace yet quietly shape a life.

Moving from poetry and short fiction into the epistolary memoir form, Chinappa adopts a voice of restraint and attentiveness. The letters neither accuse nor seek resolution; instead, they allow complexity to remain intact. Parenting, care, ego, and endurance emerge as lived experiences rather than arguments.

In this conversation, Chinappa reflects on writing memory as something felt rather than retrieved, on finding language for invisible harm, and on the kind of hope that does not arrive as consolation but as a steady, hard-won presence.

**Choosing the epistolary form—letters addressed to your father—creates both intimacy and distance. What does the letter allow you to hold that a conventional memoir might flatten or over-explain?**

I began writing the book immediately after my father's death. It was a way to process the



ILLUSTRATION: MAHMUDA EMDAD

pain, the final ending, a sublimation on my part to write this book. Letters helped me pen my thoughts unhindered, without the fear of judgment, as letters are extremely personal. I wanted to bleed without the fear of the outcome.

**Memory in *Thorns in My Quilt* feels less archival and more emotional—shaped by silence, omission, and repetition. How did you approach memory not as fact to be verified, but as something lived and carried?**

Our memories sometimes fail in their accuracy, but the feelings of certain events remain truthful in their essence. Also, memories have a range of emotions. Some

are more profound than others. They enable us to delve into a deep state of reckoning and reflection on the stories our heart carries. Some details may be fractured, yet they are an amalgamation of all the darkness and light in their entirety in each of my entries.

**Much of the book attends to forms of hurt that leave no visible mark—expectations, control, emotional withdrawal, unspoken hierarchies. As a writer, how did you find a language for harm that is systemic yet quiet, and therefore often dismissed?**

As a female writer, words are our saviours in expressing harm that is systemic yet hidden in the folds of propriety that society deems right or wrong. Therefore, there can be no

specific language to express emotion, except from the deepest recesses of my heart that I knew needed to be acknowledged—for all the dismissals, the denials, and dehumanising feelings. They needed to be written by me.

**Parenting in the book appears as a site of deep love, but also of inherited pressure. Were you interested in examining how care and control sometimes coexist, especially in family structures that value obedience and endurance?**

I don't think I was aware at that juncture of my life of what I was enduring, till my father passed away and my marriage of 24 years fell apart. I was forced to look at myself in my rawest state of vulnerability and muster the courage to pick up each piece as I went along.

**The image of the quilt suggests warmth and continuity, while the 'thorns' complicate that comfort. How do you see this metaphor working across the book—as inheritance, memory, and survival stitched together?**

Our families are supposed to be a safe haven for all of us. We return to the comfort and familiarity of our lineage and bloodline after fighting the external world that can be brutal, demanding, and bruise us. But safety is often a negotiation of where you stand in the pecking order. It is far from ideal in dysfunctional families.

**There is a strong sense in the memoir**

**of women carrying invisible labour—emotional regulation, accommodation, endurance—without naming it as such. Was it important for you to let this burden reveal itself through narrative rather than argument?**

Yes, it was extremely important to lend my art and voice to more women across the globe who are silenced and burdened with tremendous guilt for feeling resentment towards duties they are sometimes emotionally and physically incapable of handling without a mental breakdown. I wanted them to know that I see them and hear their pleas too; their voices are loud to me in their silence.

**Throughout *Thorns in My Quilt*, there is a quiet movement from hurt toward a tempered, hard-earned hope—not resolution, but steadiness. As a writer, what does it mean to arrive at that kind of hope on the page, one that does not erase pain but learns to live alongside it?**

My sublimation came from my betrayals, grief, and pain. Not a single day do I wish away the gift of pain that bestowed me with the steadiness these experiences have helped me evolve into as a human being.

I also hope I can write more on unspoken emotions for my sacred sisterhood.

Namrata is a writer, a digital marketing professional, and an editor at *Kitab literary magazine*.