

New Historicism and Humayun Ahmed's *Jochhona o Jononir Golpo*

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the coexistence of literary and historical values, giving equal weight to both. In this connection, Humayun Ahmed's Jochhona o Jononir Golpo is examined from the perspective of new historicism. New Historicism is a method which puts equal importance on the reading of literary and non-literary texts, usually of the same historical period. In this approach, literary and non-literary texts are studied parallel, given equal weight and constantly inform or interrogate each other. It takes combined interest in the textuality of history, and the historicity of a literary or other text. In Jochhona o Jononir Golpo, the facts by which the plot of the novel is knit states the real pieces of information from history, thereby, the storyline containing real life incidents, characters and happenings of 1971. These incidents are represented through various techniques like flashback, dreams, interview, letters and diaries. As a result, the historical events mentioned in the novel, become inseparable from the literary text. This parallel study of history and literature is the focus of our research which we believe will give a new dimension to the study of fictional work.

Keywords: Literary text, Liberation War of 1971, New Historicism, Fiction/non-Fiction.

Introduction

There are many texts in literature that are based on historical facts but only few of them represent the true history. In focusing too much on the fiction, the history could be avoided or even misrepresented. Usually historical facts are taken as context to the literary value. The focus is of course the literary text which is the object of value and the historical context just goes merely as a background to the text. This unequal weight given to literature and history imparts biased knowledge to the true knowledge seekers. The novel *Jochhona o Jononir Golpo* by Humayun Ahmed crosses the above mentioned limitation and goes close to the facts of the liberation war of Bangladesh. He examines the historical documents and relates them to the incidents in the text. Here the author mentioned specific dates, places and events that can be considered to conform to the true history of 1971 war and its impact on the lives of the Bangladeshis. At the same time, the fine literary value of this text is also inevitable. New Historicism demands this kind of equal weighting to both literature and history in a single text. It takes combined interest in “the textuality of history, and the historicity of text” (Montrose, 1989: 15). This parallel study of history and literature is the focus of our research which we believe will give a new dimension to the study of fictional work.

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New Historicism and Old Historicism

The term “New Historicism” was first coined in the early 1980’s by an American critic, Stephen Greenblatt. Though Greenblatt himself went on to question the term, yet New Historicism was launched as it acknowledges an older form of historicism for its enunciation of something new. A simple definition of New Historicism could be a method giving equal weight to the reading of literary and non-literary texts, usually of the same historical period. In this method, literary and non-literary texts are studied parallel, given equal weight and they constantly inform or interrogate each other.

The method of New Historicism opposes the earlier approach that made a hierarchical separation between the literary text and the historical background. The earlier approach which is known as Old Historicism valued the literary text as the object of attention and the historical background was considered merely as the setting and of lesser worth. In the early twentieth century when “New Criticism” evolved, the Russian Formalists looked forward to isolate literature from history and other disciplines of knowledge. In regard to the historical background and historical context, the language of traditional historicism considers the literary work in the foreground and history in the background. Now it becomes the task of the critic to connect the two. If the literary work refers to any historical context, the critic must research the history which it refers to. As a result, the critic must have some knowledge of some disciplines of history that the text makes use of. He or she needs to read a good deal of non-literary work or there could be many possibilities as there are schools of historical study like biographical, social, cultural, political. But the general reader without having such background information is sure to be misguided by the text. This is how the Formalists accused mixing of literature and history because they were interested in distinguishing and clarifying the uniquely literary nature of their enterprise. So they wanted to send the historians, sociologists, and biographers of literary study off to their separate fields of study. But history could not be separated from literary study and it returned more strongly than before. Literature study today is persistently historical.

New Historicism distinguished itself from its previous circumstances of Old Historicism largely because of the way in which the concept of history it assumed had passed through a Post-Structuralist critic, Michel Foucault. What Foucault makes explicit is the textuality of history, the way in which history is only available as a collection of discourses. He found problem with the traditional method of the historians who addressed historical truth which lie beneath war, famine, etc. This way they overthrow certain strata (levels) of history by marginalizing them. There is a tendency in the historians to avoid sudden and violent events and imply a vague and secret cause instead. According to Foucault, we should go for the event which was marginalized instead of the so called origin. Moreover, Foucault draws attention to another tendency in the historians, to take actual statements and fabricate a document which can always be questioned. So, he suggests that we should go for the actual event as and when it occurs. Being influenced by Foucault’s concept of event and statement, the New Historians started to see the historical as textual. As a result there happens to be a new relationship between the historical and the literary texts. Since both are representations, neither one is closer to the truth of history. History is not some unmediated

reality. Some stable background that the literary text refers to is not a context. Rather it is like a co-text. Such a view might seem to deny the privilege of the literary text or of history, but this makes it possible to study relations between texts both literary and historical and discover how they trace certain patterns and negotiate various kinds of meanings.

Louis Montrose as cited in Peter Barry's *Beginning Theory*, states that these kinds of writings have:

[...] dramatic openings that often cite date and place and have all the force of the documentary, eyewitness account, strongly evoking the quality of lived experience rather than history. Since these historical documents are not subordinated as context, but are analyzed in their own right, we should perhaps call them co-texts rather than contexts. The text and the co-text will be seen as expressions of the same historical moment and interpreted accordingly. (Barry, 2002:173)

Introducing *Jochhona o Jononir Golpo*

Jochhona O Jononir Golpo is a novel by Humayun Ahmed set in 1971 in Bangladesh. The novel depicts death, murder and rape that took place at the time of the war. The story mentions the fact that numerous women of Bangladesh lost their husbands and young sons. Several women and their daughters were inhumanly tortured by the Pakistani military. The houses were burnt and their lives were threatened every now and then. At the same time, the writer with his expert touch switches in time from present to the past and thus designs the stories in an interesting fashion that adds to the flavor of the novel. The stories told through various characters give a through view of what the Bangladeshis went through in the time of war. When the country was in war, the Bangladeshis were united. Even the most unknown person behaved like the closest family member. They felt deeply for each other and the country lost thousands of such devoted innocent citizens.

Jochhona O Jononir Golpo covers a diverse range of characters. The characters represent the religious state of the country, the moral conditions of the general people, the psychological swing of the uncertainties and hopes, the loss and the ultimate craving for liberation. At the same time, the novel through its characterization and plot mentions the Rajakars and the traitors who for their evil intentions and individual interests caused the sufferings and pain for several Bangladeshis. The contemporary young generation participates directly or indirectly in the war. They fight with or without arms, training and ammunitions. The critical time of the Liberation War drives the country into uncertainty and brings the crude reality on the surface. The rickshaw pullers, representing the lower class, the businessmen, the service holders and all the other sections of the population were excited with the hopes and dreams of a piece of independent land.

The novel gains its authenticity from the segments that had been collected from various valid published documents. The alarming number of people were killed, there were stories of inhuman and monstrous attacks on women. The detail of the murders, the loots and the rapes present how bloody the war was. The military operations murderous ceremony on the villages one after another. The Biharis slaughtered the Bangladeshis even when they were at sleep. At the same

time, the sufferings of the numerous families that pervade the text and make it a vivid art, draw the attention of the humanity.

The political instability of 1971 is visible in all the incidents in the novel. The familial relations are affected, plans and dreams are broken and the revolution turns into a destructive wave of building a new nation. The arms and ammunitions, the tanks, the gun-boats and fighter-planes used by the Pakistani Army in the city present frightening scenes of destruction. The Pakistani military fired thousands of Bangladeshis. They also attacked and killed the Hindu Bangladeshis because of religious difference. The national and international political complications pervade through the text and knit the plot into a complete whole.

Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the spirited leader and powerful patriot emerges as a character in the text which basically enhances the intensity of history into the poetic truth in the fiction. The leader's declaration of the war, the mysterious and haunting truth and the glorious sacrifice of the Bangladeshis are clearly stated in the book.

Humayun Ahmed amplifies the scope of reality and portrays the documents and facts into a fine masterpiece of art and an authentic document of the most horrible and nerve taking yet the most vital movement that finally gives birth to a brand new state, Bangladesh.

History and Literature as Co-texts: The Case of *Jochhona o Jononir Golpo*

What this paper tends to establish is like the New Historicist investigation, history does not appear as a context to literature in *Jochhona o Jononir Golpo* rather it appears as a co-text. At the same time, literature is not sidelined because of the mention of historical facts of 1971 rather they seem to be inseparable from each other. The writer sketches the historical events tactfully through the use of various letters among the literary characters of the text and through the interviews of the historical figures. He also makes use of the documents collected from the Ministry of Information, The People's Republic of Bangladesh. The mention of events from personal diaries contributes to the contextual depth of the plot. Even the contemporary newspapers are also referred to as a means of authentic source for the intensity of the facts that took place very frequently during the war. The announcements through the radio that provides a ground of truth are also mentioned by the author in this novel. He also gives specific dates and details to connect the story and the facts. Historical figures appear as living characters in the plot of the story. The other literary characters like rising poet, rickshaw puller, house-wife, politician, young freedom fighters, the rajakars and the businessmen represent the historical situation of that time.

Now let us examine the various components mentioned above in order to justify the textuality of history and the historicity of text as found in *Jochhona o Jononir Golpo* by Humayun Ahmed.

The author visualized the spirit of the common Bangladeshis about the war and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman when he showed Shahed, one of the important characters in the novel, moving towards the Race Course of Dhaka to attend the procession. People from different spheres of life enthusiastically gathered to get the signal from the historical speech of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. They could have listened to it on radio at home but the excitement led them to the spot. The description provided by the author does not only present history but also has gained literary value. The people were marching with booming slogans that the Bangalees need to take their weapons and fight for their freedom. It also suggests that they should kick on the mouth of Bhutto in order

to free Bangladesh. Padma, Meghna, Jamuna - Home for all Bangalees – must be protected from the enemies of Pakistan.

When these slogans are mounting to the sky, Shahed's attention is suddenly drawn towards a little girl who is sitting on her father's shoulders and crying. She is also beckoning the red ribbons tied on her plates. This might have come as a metaphorical meaning for the enslavement of the Bangalees but this girl also reminds Shahed of his own daughter. This urge for freedom and the sense of loss for his daughter, i.e. Shahed, weaves history and literature together.

The Pakistan army sentiment has been vividly expressed by General Tikka's speech:

[The Pakistan Army is one of the bests in the world. The way this Army will carry on its solemn duties will be written in the history of this nation. We will teach the stupid East Pakistanis. They have no idea how tough the process might be. We are in a war situation. In war, we need to engrave our human qualities - kindness, benevolence and pity- deep in the ground. [...] Humane treatments are for human beings. It is not for the East Pakistanis who are opportunists, sister-fuckers, ass-lickers of the Hindus.] (203)

After this short speech, the author states that General Tikka felt very relaxed and thought that Dhaka city has begun to look normal and this news has to be broadcast through radio and television and published through papers and magazines. Foreign journalists will be invited and they will watch a clean city. In the critical war-like condition of the state, General Tikka provokes the military force against the East Pakistanis once again upholding the cruel sentiment of the Pakistanis.

Humayun Ahmed brings the historical fact of "Operation Search Light" into his fiction that includes some fictitious characters. Brigadier Abrar, Captain Major General Formaan Ali, Major General Khadem were engaged to punish the people of Dhaka city and the rest of the country. The author metaphorically mentions General Tikka Khan's orders given at 9 pm on the 25th of March. Tikka ordered :

[We have to create such a massacre in Dhaka city that even the milk in mother's breast would turn into curd. Bangladesh is a tiny wicked animal. Dhaka is the head of the body and we shall only crash the head. We don't have to do anything else. I will withdraw the curfew at dawn on 27 March. Inshallah on 27 March the country will be alright.] (140)

Humayun Ahmed maintains this historical event of "Operation Search Light" by quoting Simon Dring, a reporter of *The Daily Telegraph* of London, who first sent the eye-witness report directly from Dhaka:

City lies silent

Shortly before dawn most firing had stopped, and as the sun came up an eerie silence settled over the city, deserted and completely dead except for the noise of the crows and occasional convoy of troops or two or three tanks rumbling by mopping up.

At noon again without warning, columns of troops poured into the old section of the city where more than one million lived in a sprawling maze of narrow, winding streets. For the next eleven hours they devastated the 'old town' as it is called.

The lead unit was followed by soldiers carrying cans of gasoline. Those who tried to escape was shot. Those who stayed were burned alive. (141)

Humayun Ahmed makes use of private diaries in many places in his novel to illustrate the tensed situation among the characters involved. For example, he mentions about a day (30th July, 1971) from Begum Sufiya Kamal's diary which relates the event of Sheikh Hasina's imprisonment in the hospital:

[...I went to see Hasina's son in the hospital. How rude the military officers were to us! Yesterday, Hasina's mother could see them for ten minutes only. From today the rule has got tougher, nobody can visit them anymore. What an inhuman behavior! Even a prisoner gets the opportunity to meet his people. What more has Allah in store for us!](366)

Here the emotional intensity to see the dear one is of universal literary appeal. At the same time the authenticity of the fact is also made evident from the specific date mentioned.

Mrs. Mujib's special interview published in *Bangladesher Shadhinota Juddho Dolil Potro*, part VIII, which depicts a historical situation as well as her personal anxiety for her family members has also been used in this novel.

[At the end of November, I started to feel that something was going to happen in December. There was no scope to get news from outside in my imprisoned life but I had the transistor set. We heard that when India would approve Bangladesh the very day Bangobondhu would be killed. So our wait was of different kind for the historic public meeting on the 3rd instant. Indiraji finished her speech. I was really excited. I don't know why I could not move away from the transistor. The night grew, the news of Akash Bani ended. Suddenly the breaking news of a special announcement came. We were tired after the whole day's work. Still all the family members sat around the transistor. The time was running but there was no sign of any announcement. The children went to bed one after the other. I don't know when I also felt asleep keeping the transistor on. I was awake by the horrible sound of the anti aircraft missile. I immediately understood that the war had begun.

On the 6th of December, India recognized Bangladesh as an independent nation. That was a terrific feeling. The news of free Bangladesh moved my whole being. Children were crying for their father. I tried to stop them but the recognition of freedom and the fear of dear ones' death numbed my soul.] (375-376)

Conclusion

From the above discussion, it could be understandable that in *Jochhona o Jononir Golpo* the incidents of the novel are the real pieces of information from history, therefore, the storyline contains real life happenings, characters and events of 1971. These facts are represented in the novel through flashback, dreams, interview, letters and diaries. In other words, history is moulded into a story. Even the fictitious characters share the feeling of the contemporary time. As

a result, the historical events mentioned in the novel, becomes inseparable from the literary text. The author himself mentions in the preface of the novel:

[It is not a book of history, it is a novel. Even then I tried to remain close to history.... I have made use of some important persons of the time as characters in the novel.... Almost all the incidents mentioned in the novel are true. Some are written from my own experience, some are borrowed from others.] (8-9)

When the author himself has referred to the historicity of his text and also the textuality of the history of 1971 Bangladesh, it becomes obvious for the history and the text to coexist. We believe Bangladeshi readers need more books of such category that will help them to feel the pride of the Liberation War of 1971 and thus, will possibly promote more literary pieces of that kind.

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