

# Humayun Ahmed's *Gouripur Junction*: A Saga of Unforgiving Realities and Perpetual Uncertainties of the Marginalized People

Md. Shamim Mondol

Assistant Professor

Department of English, Green University of Bangladesh

## Abstract

Humayun Ahmed in his novel *Gouripur Junction* attempts to portray the picture of a train station along with the lives of the people depending on it. His sincere efforts are directed mainly towards the marginal people who are fated to be there, somehow eke out a living there and are bound to face the uncertainties and complexities in the struggle for living an unstable life. While the writer has made a comprehensive delineation of their lives along with relationships of different types, love and hatred, strengths and shortcomings, the basic aspect of their life is uncertainty, sufferings and struggle. Humayun Ahmed though commonly considered as a writer having good understanding of and compassion for the middle class, he has another strong but less attended area and that is his unflinching endeavor to portray the marginal people in a comprehensive way. In this novel, his manifest intention is to portray life in totality by a balance attention on the realities as well as the psychosocial aspects of those people and make the readers empathetic towards them. This paper aims at studying this strong but less attended dimension of Humayun Ahmed's fictional works with special attention on his short novel *Gouripur Junction*. To make the study, the researcher will avail the works of the writer as primary source and major prevailing works on him as the secondary source and hopefully open up a new dimension.

**Keywords:** station, struggle, uncertainty, marginal, dimensions

## 1. Introduction

Humayun Ahmed "is the most widely read writer in Bangla literature." (Murshid, 2012, 95). He penned over three hundred novels and about hundred short stories along with travelogue, memoirs, autobiography, columns and poems in his career spanning over forty years. He has also been a cult in drama and cinema which Momin Rahman (2012) considers as "the extension of his stories and novels." (258) He also finds artistic presentation of moonlight, rain, death, Liberation War, love, class discrimination, the position of the female, natural beauty, folk music, novelty in all his films as common features. Both as a writer and director, he gained equal popularity and won awards at national levels. With his debut novel *Nondito Noroke (In Blissful Hell)* in 1970, he emerged as a widely acclaimed writer both by the readers and the critics. What Rabindarnath Tagore in his famous short stories did by entwining nature and human in same canvas for a perfect portrayal of life, "Humayun Ahmed did the same in his *Nondito Noroke (In Blissful Hell)* written at age of twenty or twenty two." (Hoque, 2012, 30) He never looked back since then. He as a prolific writer has uninterruptedly wrote books to create a readership of Bangladesh. He has mastered a language of his own and chosen diction comprehensible to all. His story telling makes the leading scholars like Ahmed Sharif, Professor Abdur Razzaque spell-bound. He has created some characters like Misir Ali, a retired professor working with abnormal psychology, Himu, a young man of the height of a great man indifferent to worldly bonds and achievements, Shuvro, a pure hearted simple young man who among others have occupied a powerful space in the imagination of the people which has turned them more powerful than even the real characters. Himu has influenced many young people to emulate his dress, life style and philosophy. His popularity has been assessed by one contemporary popular writer Imdadul Haque Milon saying that The Ekushey Book Fair, the biggest in Bangladesh, tilts towards Humayun Ahmed if he comes.

There have been some common perceptions and assessments of Humayun Ahmed in vogue. His writings are often compartmentalized and considered derogatorily as popular and cheap. His writings are termed as mere depiction of the middle class and emotion charged story without much essence. These are summarized by Mahub Aziz thus,

He is shallow. His writings have a little mark of deep thought. He has turned literature into recreation and the same characters come to his writings again and again. He has written dialogues in lieu of descriptions. He has transformed literature into the scripts of TV-cinema! He has shown the middleclass a type of fantasy or imaginative dream! Different intellectuals –litterateurs have termed his writings as 'reading for the adolescent'" (Aziz, 2012,188)

Some critics and writers, however, consider some of his writings valuable. This results in miserable failure and deplorable lack in scholarly and objective assessment and evaluation of his works. For this reason, many of the gems of this genius are yet to be evaluated properly in terms of the focus, themes, characterization etc.

Humayun Ahmed's novel *Gouripur Junction* is such a novel of small length about a junction in the Mymensingh area of Bangladesh. Though the novel is of short length covering mainly one day, the writer has with compassion portrayed the floating people as well as all station based people specially the marginalized. His portrayal goes well with what Mulk Raj Anand (1978) thinks about realism in novels,

The novel should interpret the truth of life from felt experience, and not from books. And one should adventure through new areas of life and always try to see, in the intricate web of circumstances of human existence, the inner core of reality, or at least attempt to probe the depths of human consciousness. (5)

In his attempt, he has chosen a physically invalid coolie as the protagonist and collected the other characters to make his world complete one. In his voice as well as the writer's narration, the story of the novel has become a tale of the perpetual struggle for living of the marginalized people who with their lot and labor, dedication and deficiency, humanitarian attitude and hypocrisy, gratitude and jealousy drag a life full of uncertainty. Humayun's consciousness manifested in the novel is well captured by Syed Akram Hossain (2012) when he says,

"Social consciousness in a divided society is, in an important way, also class consciousness, for our political and religious thoughts, our artistic and literary ideologies, our moral and ethical life and our ideas of individual and collective well-being are all defined by the position each of us occupied in the social hierarchy." (98)

Dreams and happiness are there without being materialized in full circle. Peace and glory are fleeting here with evasive attire for them. To portray the marginalized in a complete form, the writer has focused both on the strengths and weaknesses of the characters thus making them quite realistic. The attempt of the writer is to present a comprehensive picture of the marginalized with glimpses of different dimensions of their life.

## 2. Literature Review

The studies and discussions on Humayun Ahmed's writings have been generalized over the years. The scholars and critics are seen commenting on his language, theme, and characters in general. The genre based discussions also see the same trend like overall assessment of his short stories and novels with careless focus on few pieces of writings. Again another area of discussion concentrates on his contribution in creating readership, bringing back the readers dependence on the writings of West Bengal, creating some cult characters etc. Often those discussions are followed by some kind of fore telling about his future. Prominent Bangladeshi academic Anisuzzaman (2012) finds him excellent in telling about the familiar stories furnished in his own style and engage the readers in no time. He says, "He has presented the urban middle class just as he has seen them." (13) Some writers and critics really feel that Humayun Ahmed is far more serious than he is generally thought to be. Rezaul Karim Rony is such a writer who thinks that Humayun has not only created a vast readership among the Bangladeshi people, he has also shifted literary practices and parameters that were dominant so far. So his historical value is immense, "Historically, Humayun's path is so different that all the traditional parameters for evaluating literature become questionable to Humayun." (Rony, 2015)

Critics, however, have often been generous and full of praise regarding his language. Tuhin Wadud comments, "The distinctive power of Humayun Ahmed is his prose style. He has crafted his artistic world with neat and clean prose and unsurpassed diction." (Wadud, 2017)

Bangladeshi litterateur Abdus Shakur (2012) agrees with Muhammad Yunus, the Nobel laureate Bangladeshi social entrepreneur who said, "Humayun Ahmed in a mysterious way makes room in the heart of the people." (41) Ghulam Murshid (2012), another eminent critic, observes, "If we look at his novels, we find that the story advances towards a maturity. In the story, there are such characters which holds the reader, attract them." (93) Binayak Sen (2012) is interested in considering him in the light of history and places him very high in order of his contribution. He feels in case of his novel *Madhanyo* (The Noon) that, "I feel he has started this project on history very consciously." (151)

## 3. Realities in *Gouripur Junction*: The Tales of Uncertainties of the Marginalized

The life of the marginal people is immersed in uncertainty pervading in all aspects of life. This uncertain state of life makes them suffer, takes them close to one another either positively or negatively, keeps them going on and on and never lets them away from its clutches. The writer knows it quite well and so, he has taken care to portray this basic aspect of the life of the marginal people from the very beginning to the end of the novel.

Joynal, the central character of the novel, is seen lying on a sack of cloths stacked in one side of the station which might be transported away at any day. While he is lying there with a blanket draped over his body to shy away cold, he passes time in apprehension that, "Anyone may pull away the blanket he is lying with draping over the body. It is the unbound mercy of Allah that none has taken it yet." (9)

Another character Bazlu, a boy of eight or nine, lost father. His mother got married dumping him behind. His uncle is unwilling to bear the burden and so he leaves him in the station. He has no warm cloth, not even a chador, follows and wanders around those who have warm clothes from evening. But he fails to earn sympathy.

He, in the hope of a shelter by Joynal, lies near his feet. Whistling sound comes from his mouth for severe cold, and so he hopes to have some sympathy. But he rather earns threat from Joynal and leaves the spot without any word and throws himself in indefinite uncertainties to come. People like them without ground under their feet live no less like the base animals in their lifestyle, desire and manners as a part of necessity of life. Bazlu being utterly helpless depends on other's pity and, so he waits with hungry eyes wide open while other people eat. Joynal observes, "The bastard has got the nature of a dog." (11) The social structure and psychological workings of the class are quite different. So the word bastard never means anything serious to them. Joynal terms him bastard, drives him away but feels the qualm of conscience thinking, "whether he has got a space for lying" (11) because a man like Joynal who has been passing a life in the station through the harshest reality realizes best, "This world is very tough. Nobody spares even a smallest space for anyone. There is nothing called love or affection." (11)

This reminds us of the famous quote by Karl Marx, "Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people." They get solace through religious explanations by supporting the injustices and disparities perpetuating on earth. Joynal takes solace thinking, "Qiyamat, the last day, is nearing. The nearer Qiyamat is, the more love and affection get sailed away. Allah takes away love and pity. Man becomes guilty. In fact helpless man has no guilt." (11) He thus gets rationale behind people's cruelty, the reason for which Bazlu was dumped at the station by his uncle whom he considers rather intelligent for leaving the boy in station, a public property where nobody starves. Something gets managed somehow.

But the writer knows it quite well that they are not always without power, rather power is pervasive in the Foucauldian sense and it has bottom up as well as top down flow with instable nature of shifting tendency. So the obviously powerless people also have their power over those considered powerful in Marxist and Weberian criterion which align power with property and ownership of production respectively. Joynal sometimes feels like slapping the gentleman to see how they behave or react. He knows that the gentlemen behave ludicrously if they fall in danger. He feels pleasure to see them in danger. He feels like taking revenge on the gentleman for addressing them in a humiliating way, bargaining for price and unloading everything even a handbag on the coolie. This very assessment of the gentlemen shows the fragility of their personality as well as incapability of good behavior.

Joynal shares with us some of his past experiences when he was a capable man. One day a gentle man made him bear a baggage of about two mounds and after crossing the over bridge, gave him three taka saying that two taka was for his service and one taka was tip. Joynal felt hurt and retorted, "You needn't pay. Free for you...What's the value of money? Money is just nothing." (12) This instantly pushed the man down and made him cornered, compelled him to change his initial evaluation. But Joynal triumphed as he walked away without paying a little ear or care.

Joynal in his position harassed the gentle man and taught him a lesson by reversing the role which reminds us of one protest song by the great Bangalee composer Salil Choudhury, "Oh Justice, those common people who will set you in trial have woke up."

The writer has pointed the ups and downs of the marginal people as a common but extreme phenomenon. Joynal who would once bear on back a sack of three mounds quite easily now "can do nothing. His condition is now like a dog with broken waist." Thus the imagery of a stray dog is availed by the writer to make us feel the worthlessness of life.

Joynal once had his heyday working regularly, eating himself and feeding a wife and also dreaming more. But life gave him a tragic twist. A sack of three mounds fell on his back and he turned invalid. "One leg is getting withered reducing like a rope. He can't touch ground with the leg. The whole body gets shaken in pain." (13) Though the sack fell on his back, one of his legs got invalid. Life thus comes with surprises for them, but that adds reduction only.

Again it is life of the marginal which gets no care in times of need, silently gets deprived and bear the burden of that sharply contrasted body for the rest of life. Joynal doesn't afford medical treatment. So he has to resort to traditional practices. He comes to the conclusion that the way he feels pain is a type of gout. The proof he gets in the full moon. That time he feels more pain. To him, petrol is the elixir for gout. He feels it would help a lot if he can massage twice a day in the morning and in the evening. But he doesn't afford to buy petrol. He even thinks of kerosene which is cheaper and less effective. But he fails to manage that too. However he is having less pain for last two days as he believes, he has tied a thread from Madargonj Pir, a Muslim saint, who has spirit under him, and the pir make do impossible possible. He even thinks of his recent insomnia which can also be cured by another thread if can be collected from the pir.

The marginal people though often show cruelty, they know that they are also the resort for themselves. So when Bazlu comes back finding no other alternative anywhere showcasing the helplessness of their class and resilience in humiliation and threat, Joynal takes pity, and allows him saying, "From now onward, you will sleep with me, no problem." (14)

Life is a perpetual process of compromise for the marginal with the unwelcoming aspects, but for which their story of deprivation only deepens further with graver consequence. Malbabu is such a character in the station, an officer who despite being a man of gentle family is habituated to hurl foul, nasty words at the floating people which baffle the marginalized. If in bad temper, he addresses them as son of servant, son of pig, thief-born-in-thief's-house, and slave from the womb of a slave and exercises power. But still he is taken with good grace as he also helps them in time of need and forgives them their faults. That, however, depends if he is in good mood which, in turn, depends on his extra illegal weighing the booked goods. He gives Joynal a blanket that saves him from severe cold, forgives him though he one day disappeared with ten taka when Malbabu sent him to bring tea. The compromise in life makes the marginalized alive and so they welcome the intervention of compromise in negotiating the uncouth situations. For Malbabu, Joynal cooks up rationale saying,

"Those who are foul tongued have a good mind. Whatever foul is comes out through mouth. Nothing gets deposited. The gentlemen utter no foul words. All get deposited. Their clothes are clean, words are clean, manners are clean, and mind is dirty. Dirty to such extent that even soda can't wash them clean."  
(16)

So there is a constant negotiation of identity in the society where reality and disguise matter and once the guise is removed, differentiation becomes blurred.

Those marginalized people are not as foolish as we generally think to be. Rather they have interesting and comprehensive observations. Joynal shares his observation that when a gentleman faces danger, he feels unstable, utters few English words, and he wriggles out of it by shifting their responsibility on others specially the marginal.

The best witness of the public place as well as the society comes from the marginal people. They often can observe from a very close quarter and make unfailing commentary. Joynal relates one incident of dacoity by Iyad Ali in an unprecedented style of a relative of IG of police. So drastic action was taken in no time, all the floating people were arrested and tortured. Joynal comments on the exercise of power, "Who commits crime and who gets punished!" (18)

However, a public place and the life of the floating people are no less complex. They have their intrigues, revenge, jealousy. In interrogation cell, Joynal refers to Mobarak, the chief the coolies who controls the station, its deserted wagon by letting them in and sharing the amount with the station master and others, run a small prostitution in a wagon, has two wives along with a recent beautiful Bihari girl. Thus the writer shows the instability in society where once a marginal is not always so. Rather time, asset and power affect one's class and bring change. Everybody is bound to respect him and all the floating people are afraid of him. The police arrest him and torture him. He finally gets killed in power politics among them. And his disciple Hashem is the killer who takes control and marries his young wife.

They are deprived of necessary nutrition and basic need especially in times of danger what Joynal faces after being crippled. He is not yet forty, but his hair has turned grey and he looks old. So passengers address him, "Hey old man, hey." (22)

Dishonesty is commonly practiced among them for necessity and as a part of habit. So Joynal when given a flux for bringing hot water and drinking water to feed milk to a baby, he assures the lady but instead goes straight to a market, sells them and starts enjoying. He feels for the baby but in no time succeeds in establishing a rationale that the baby will be taken care of by the angels. Besides, the baby will cry loudly and that will help to clear the lungs. This is common viewpoint of Humayn Ahmed about human beings whom he thinks as a combination of good and bad in differing degrees.

The people of this class have indifference to life as life has towards them. Here money matters most in life, but money doesn't have the power to enslave them. Once money is at their hand, they are for life, life of Ulysses in their capacity ready to "Drink life to the lees." When Joynal goes to Porimol's shop for tea, he misbehaves with him. Joynal's mind is fresh, he doesn't feel like quarreling, as "He doesn't feel like quarreling with so much money in his pocket. He feels like looking at all banality and insignificance of a man." (24) Money also empowers them and they don't fail to assert that power as Joynal tells Porimol, "Customer will order you, you'll give him that thing and take money. You are a slave to order." (24) He even tells Porimol to keep one taka more as tip to hit him back.

With money in pocket, Joynal delves in some philosophical question like, all animals have tails, why then human beings don't have. Then they would also avail their tails often. Thus Joynal makes the thinking people of our society a part of the idle brains.

He has his own type of humanitarian attitudes and approaches. He feels bad when Porimol, the owner of the tea stall in the station, misbehaves with his brother-in-law, a boy of nine years for losing one cup while selling tea in the train. Joynal saves him by compensating the cup's price. He even offers tea to the newly introduced canvasser in the station.

But nothing can give them stability or consistent peace. The station has some hidden rules, like informing Hashem of any stealing first. Joynal has not informed him. So he feels worried in Hashem's presence.

Joynal's wife left him when he got invalid as he could not feed her. Still he loves the lady named Onufa who has taken to prostitute. With money in his pocket, he goes to visit her after along gap with much preparation and reaches there before noon. She is no more there. Another girl named Fuli welcomes him with the gesture of a prostitute. He comes to know, Onufa left for Dhaka six months back as earning was not satisfactory. He gives everything to Fuli and even one hundred taka he has planned to give to Onufa. He gets back with a deep sigh that all know about her going to Dhaka, only he doesn't. He would be happy if Onufa at least could inform him, he would entertain her with tea, say good bye at the station and wave hand what he has seen throughout his life in the station. But the people like Joynal can't have their dream fulfilled, not a single one. They can dream, try, and get a touch of it, but incompleteness and imperfection are what life offers them.

Belayet is another character who begs with his small daughter. Joynal gives five taka, tells him to buy a dress for her so that she does not catch cold. Belayet tells him the fact that she has her dress but "Less dress begets more alms." (43)

He comes back to the station to see police investigating the incident of lost ten sacks of sugar in another station. He is called and interrogated. He, however, gets released after short interrogation. Coming to Bazlu, he comes to know that Hashem is looking for him. He understands and knows, "Staying at the station is an affliction." (46)

Hashem has been leader since the death of Mobarak. Joynal encounters him while coming back from Ramjan, a petty employee in the station who tells him that Hashem looted the wagon and killed the man in the incident. Hashem did it as a continuation of previous killing. Hashem tells Joynal of his selling pots of the lady at two hundred which was worthy thousand taka. He wants to know what Ramjan has told him. Joynal is indebted to Ramjan for his help in his adversary and evades the query. But Hashem knows that Ramjan has told him about his involvement. He says, Joynal is clever but cleverness doesn't serve any purpose, one needs power which Joynal lacks. Joynal is clearly threatened by Hashem and it is life threat.

"What will Joynal do? Will he gather people crying? Or he will lie going to the station? Allah administers the world as He wishes-should we debar that wish by doing anything? What will he do? Will he go to the station and tell the SP-sir, I want to tell you one thing. A secret. Will the SP listen to him? Who is he? He is nobody. He is a crippled man living in the station." (50)

This thought of the writer and the character speak a lot of the life and its worth of the marginalized people. They are nothing.

The novel ends leaving Joynal the sea of uncertainties. He shivers and remembers, "The day his father died left him to the guardianship of the station... The Gouripur Junction is so near, still it seems far away. He feels he might never reach there in life." (51) The day seems different, perhaps a doomsday for him. Hashem, the new leader, tries to get information from him and fails. So he tells Joynal, "Go to the station and sleep peacefully. You need sleep." (50) He weeps, gets reminded of his father, lost sister Shaheda and left wife Anufa.

The novel ends with the implied killing of Joynal as we see, "A swarm of insect flies round Joynal." (51) The fact that the floating people in the places like station can never be sure of the proceeding of life. Rather they are to live in the present, and go through whatever comes their way with uncertain consequence of survival or death. This plight of the floating and marginal people has been portrayed by Nirmolendu Goon (2000) in an excellent way in his poem "Nekabborer Mohaproyan" (The Great Demise of Nekabbor) with the conclusion,

Nekabbor is seen lying in his life's last station. Around his rotten, decayed corpse

Standing a group of journalists. Someone says of his death for hunger, some says of malnutrition  
some says, it's for his old age, -Nekabbor says nothing. (126)

The writer's observation comes to a circle when he finds the marginal fighting for survival and getting entangled in perpetual conflict that makes life intolerable but that can never be avoided. In the conflict mainly of power of some corners, the marginal people like Joynal have to sacrifice their lives. This is what happened, is happening and will happen. The people like Joynal will lead a life without having a human life at all. Still they will have their efforts for betterment in their own fashion, their dream of a better life, a desire to wield power and inevitably be in the clutch of power to be sacrificed. In between people like Joynal also have their love, carnal desires, sympathy and kindness, deception and dishonesty. With all these desires and deficiency, the life of the marginal goes on and on.

#### 4. Conclusion

Humayun Ahmed's earnestly efforts in the novel *Gouripur Junction* are to portray life in totality without being biased idealistically to present angels or demon in the characters. He rather goes for great human life with highs and lows at different phases, but he ever strips it of the divergence that life inevitably goes through. Hence life portrayed in *Gouripur Junction* teems in tough tussles and sufferings, but still it has its beauty, riches, fun and even power of its own nature. But above everything, uncertainty surpasses all other situations and aspects of this life. Humayun Ahmed has deftly portrayed all these aspects with sympathy and compassion. He has also delved deep into the psychological workings and domain of the characters and successfully presented a comprehensive picture.



**Works Cited:**

1. Ahmed, H. (2014), *Gouripur Junction*, Dhaka: Kakoli Prokashoni.
2. Hoque, A. (2012), “The Maker of Our Dreams”, Humayn Ahmed: Souvenir, *Dhaka: Anyaprokash*.
3. Anisuzzaman (2012), “You’ll Remain Silently”, Humayn Ahmed: Souvenir, *Dhaka: Anyaprokash*.
4. Aziz, M. (2012), “Life and Death, The Struggle of Humayun Ahmed for Living”, Humayn Ahmed: Souvenir, *Dhaka: Anyaprokash*.
5. Goon, N. (2000). *Nirbachita*, Dhaka: Kakoli Prokashoni.
6. Hossain, S. A.(1996), *The Novel in Bangladesh: A Consideration of Form*, *Contemporary Bengali Writing*, Khan Sarwar Murshid. Dhaka: University Press Limited.
7. Interview with Anupam Hasan (2011), *Unmochito Hasan. (Hasan Revealed)* Hayat Mamud edn. Dhaka: Ittadi Grantha Prokash.
8. K.K. Sharma (ed.), (1978), *Perspectives on Mulk Raj Anand*. Ghaziabad: Vimal Prakashan.
9. Rahman, M. (2012), “Humayun Ahmed: The Themes and Subject Matters of his Films” Humayn Ahmed: Souvenir, *Dhaka: Anyaprokash*.
10. Murshid, G. (2012), “Humayun Ahmed”, Humayn Ahmed: Souvenir, *Dhaka: Anyaprokash*.
11. Rony, R. K. (2015), “Humayun Ahmed and the Danger of Colonized Literature”, *Paraspor*, November 17, 2015, Retrieved from:  
<https://www.porospor.com/%E0%A6%97%E0%A6%A6%E0%A7%8D%E0%A6%AF/%E0%A6%B9%E0%A7%81%E0%A6%AE%E0%A6%BE%E0%A7%9F%E0%A7%82%E0%A6%A8-%E0%A6%86%E0%A6%B9%E0%A6%AE%E0%A7%87%E0%A6%A6-%E0%A6%93-%E0%A6%89%E0%A6%AA%E0%A6%A8%E0%A6%BF%E0%A6%AC%E0%A7%87%E0%A6%B6%E0%A7%80/>
12. Sen, B. (2012), “The Society at Noon” Humayn Ahmed: Souvenir, *Dhaka: Anyaprokash*.
13. Shakur, A. (2012), “Story Teller Humayn Ahmed”, Humayn Ahmed: Souvenir, *Dhaka: Anyaprokash*.
14. Wadud, T. (2017), “Humayn Ahmed: the Glosser of a Neat Prose Style”, November 10, 2017, *Kaler Kantha*. Retrieved from: <http://www.kalerkantho.com/print-edition/silalipi/2017/11/10/563476>