

Performing Authorship in *Shrabon Megher Din*

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Abstract

Humayun Ahmed has been enjoying an overwhelming popularity with his creative works even after his death, and his audience and readership are still massive. But the common trend still tends to bracket him as a popular writer with less serious engagements. Although his creative works continually engage with the socio-cultural and historical junctures of the country, involve us in dialogues, raise serious questions about existing unjust practices and have been suggestive of many solutions, his works have not yet been critically studied extensively. Especially his films which have been invariably adapted from his fictions have much to tell, teach and talk. But the common tags remain in this case too. This study is an attempt to enquire into his *Shrabon Megher Din* to show his suggestive attempts to raise awareness, have revisionist approach to history through his authorship, and offer solutions to some serious problems. Through close analysis of the contents, dialogues and scenes, this paper offers insights from socio-historical perspectives applying auteur theory.

Keywords: Ahmed, Authorship, Revisionist, Solution, Auteur theory

1. Introduction

Shrabon Megher Din, made from Humayun Ahmed's eponymous novel published in 1994, was released in 1999. The film has been written and directed by Ahmed, and presented by his own production house Nuhash Films. This national award-winning film in several categories captures several crucial issues, and orchestrates the director's presence decidedly with his manifested missions of critique, corrections and suggestions. With the technicalities, motives and implied meanings and missions, the director comes to the fore as an 'auteur' who writes himself with his planning, preparation, arrangements and presentations. Ahmed comes up as more than simply a director with manifest control and distinction over the whole film. The story revolves round a love story with several twists and turns, and the love relations remain unrealised, and end in the tragic demise of one protagonist, Kusum. The protagonist Moti, a bard, struggles with his career despite his excellent creative capability and singing performance. The eccentric village girl Kusum who is also adept in singing loves him madly and implies her affection with little response from Moti as he espouses the philosophy that the devoted bard must not be knotted, otherwise it will delimit and destroy his creativity though he feels for her. However, the appearance of the granddaughter of the landed gentry, Shahana adds much to the story and the relation. Being a doctor, she breaks herself free

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from the self-imposed estrangement of the familial tradition of the landed gentry. Instead of being confined within the grandly arranged tour around the village, she chooses to roam around freely, interact with the villagers, understand their health issues and backwardness and develop a sense of attachment with them. Through better understanding of their life, problems and complexities, she grows a sense of duty towards them which pushes her to come to the decision to permanently settle in the remote rural area in future to serve them. Being a lover of music, she grows liking for the bard Moti, which is, however, misunderstood by Kusum. Through her presence and dynamic personality, Shahana brings about radical changes in the social dynamics in the village by setting herself away from her grandfather's ideal of maintaining ancestral pride. She rather loves to serve the common people with nothing of the pride which her grandfather has been nurturing throughout his life. The impact is immeasurable as she succeeds in burying the relation of fear and distance, and levelling them with the common villagers in the same line from humanitarian ground throwing away the feudalist practices sustained forcefully by conservative mentality. But the film maker's most important point through all these plots and subplots is the social and political dynamics of the Post-liberation War rural society in particular and the country as a whole which is still broiling under the pro and anti-liberation positions. This paper focuses on this particular aspect of the film in addition to several other issues.

I draw on auteur theory to show how the director advances his mission through the film. Andrew Sarris coins the term 'auteur' in an article titled, "Notes on the Auteur Theory" in 1962 which arose from the ideas of Andr  Bazin and Alexandre Astruc. He summarises the premises of the theory in three concentric circles: the outer circle as technique; the middle circle as the personal style and the inner circle as the interior meaning (1979, p. 663). The first premise presupposes the technical competence of a director which qualifies him/her as an auteur while the lack disqualifies the position (1979, p. 663). The second premise claims the director's leitmotif, style and characteristics which set him apart and are constantly seen in his or her works. The third premise refers to the interior meaning along with the "shot" frame technique, and this is the basic of production which is also the distinguishable characteristics of the director. Keeping these basic premises in mind, I also draw insights from the later development of the theory by other theoreticians to elaborate the papers. In this case, the filmmaker creates his own version with marked control over the whole project with a recognizable style, theme and stylistic attributes. This study concentrates on *Shrabon Megher Din* to examine how the director Humayun Ahmed advances some crucial questions and suggests solutions with some marked traits that make his films apart. Keeping in mind Andrew Sarris's 1968 writing that "Comprehension becomes a function of comprehensiveness" (p. 19), and leaving a

comprehensive study to the future researchers, the present study avoids focuses on the technicalities as Ahmed as a director has transcended his “technical problems with a personal vision of the world” (Sarris, 1968, p. 39), and concentrates on the socio-cultural and historical issues and the director’s intention to settle a crucial problem.

The film has been enjoying popularity among the audience for long, and many film critics and academicians have their observations on it. After making a quick assessment of Humayun Ahmed’s achievements as a filmmaker, Matin Rahman finds the film a visualization of “the country, time and thoughts on the rural society in film language” while Shanta Maria studies the film for its socio-cultural impacts on the audience when there was vulgarity rampantly presented in Bangladeshi films. She opines, “The healthy trend of entertainment gets revived through this film. It brings back the middle-class people”. Pavel Rahman also finds the film an impactful one, and opines that for the film, “the middle class thronged in the cinema hall”. Tazrin Rika focuses on the long-lasting popularity of the film, and thinks, “*Shrabon Megher Din* is an excellent love story. Simplicity of rural people, various folk cultures have come out in it”. Shyamal Kanti Dhar finds in the film Ahmed’s favourite issues of love, rain, moonlight, along with “the crisis of the people of haor area as well as the day-today life of the poor people”. Md. Anwarul Islam, however, considers it a classical film made following Bresson’s Law of the Technique of Poetry making it a lyrical presentation. To him, Humayun Ahmed has always concerned with the issue of the Liberation War, and this concern has been strengthened by his familial sacrifice as his father lost life during the war. He thinks, Ahmed has made “the anti-liberation forces bow their heads before the common people by making the Zamindar seek forgiveness”. But none of the discussion develops much to have a comprehensive study on the film regarding its concentration on the issue of the Razakars in the postliberation war period.

2. Discussion

Shrabon Megher Din, perhaps the most popular of all Humayun Ahmed’s films, is a love story ending in the tragic death of the female protagonist, and settling the long-standing problem of the Razakar narrative through the zamindar Irtaz Uddin in the historical entanglement of the Liberation War with glimpses to solution through his highly talented and educated granddaughter Shahana. The film, however, ends with optimism for better days by settling the long-standing crucial problems which mark all his films and fictions. In portraying the story, Ahmed has used techniques skilfully to leave his marks as a director distinctive from others. This missionary common target attests to Ahmed’s authorship as the auteur theorists over time extend their consideration to believe that a director is to

be considered to be an auteur if there is stylistic and thematic personality in his/her works (Hayward, 1998; Sarris, 1968; Sarris, 1976; Stam, 2000).

Initially, the film captures a station in a rural area and engages the station master, supposedly an advanced man, in conversation with two newcomer girls without male company to put forward patriarchal dominance, conservative mentality, and the prevalence of the influence of the zamindars on the marginal people. This is further stressed by Moti's feelings towards the zamindar while rowing the boat when he says, "the tigers in the forest are nothing to them". Then again to showcase the backwardness of the rural people and their multiple marginalization, he routes us to the village road where the small kids get curious to see the town girls, the zamindar's granddaughters, the would-be mother knows no of hygiene and nutrition, and the old blind woman feels happy to touch the face of the zamindar's granddaughter. Ahmed also locates the protagonist bard Moti away from the village and arranges a shed under a big tree as his living place. But he also has his romantic entanglement with life in this periphery, and he makes Kusum fall in love with him while makes Shahana, the doctor, to like him like a dream partner. The shots have been taken throughout the film properly to present whatever the director has wished to make prominent or otherwise. But the major focus lies in the fact of the Liberation War and Ahmed has come up with his proposal. As we know, the Razakars were trained by the Pakistan Army (Iqbal, 2015, p. 38), and their main task was to arrest and detain nationalist Bengali suspects, and they tortured them during custody and killed them (Khan 2015). But this is just one side of the story as many of them claimed to have rescued the country people from the Pakistani armed forces including the maternal grandfather of the director himself. So, the director avoids portraying Irtaz Uddin as altogether negative character as the more political and intellectual critics of auteur theory considers "authorship as an unconscious process" in which the auteur's "presence could subvert the surface meanings of a given filmic text" (Wexman, 2003, p.6). Ahmed knows the Razakars are from our society, and remain headache for many. So, he comes up with solution to settle the issue permanently. So far its class discourse is concerned, the film engages as a whole two classes. One is the landed gentry who lives in the past pride and lost hey days, but still imposes and enjoys what emanated from their self and position during the British period and the Pakistani period. On the other side, there remain all those who are poor, and still are interpellated beings sustained by the practices of the long-lost-but-still-alive masters as interpellation is "this uncritical consumption" which interpellate "us into a certain set of assumptions" and leads us "to tacitly accept a particular approach to the world" (Gauntlett, 2002, p. 27). The result is a bleak picture of the society which even long thirty years after the independence has been permeating under the same conditions and conditionality that existed and dominated the common people in the margin in the previous periods. The film has

serious engagement with these deplorable conditions of the common people who were supposed to be liberated and specially blessed with due rights after the independence. The filmmaker has come up with this slavery sustained by the feudal structures which is “a specific form of socio-economic organization of production in which the producer was neither an independent economic being nor was he completely separated from the means of production, and so was made economically dependent on the sale of his labour to lord to supplement their income for sustenance” (Mukhia, 1999), and has suggested strongly the need for immediate change and improvement of the existing situations. Even as a revisionist of the oppressive and suppressive structures, he fictionally wants to allocate them their share, and suggests development and welfare for them within the existing amenities. The result is the settlement which he brings by the end of the film that the landed gentry Irtaz Uddin finally comes to the realistic understanding of life, and reaches the actualization that the oppressive life-style must not sustain. Rather the time has come for atonement for what has been done to the common people for ages. So, he spontaneously comes to the decisions to allocate the palace-like house he was proud of as a hospital which has been inspired and instigated by his granddaughter who, as a doctor, comes to know about the deplorable condition of the villages, their health issues, especially their childbirth.

The dominant idea propagated through this film has been developed gradually and placed finally as an eyeopener as the “dominant idea[s] made concrete through its representation by the characters, action, and imagery of the film” (Rabiger, 1997, p. 517). In this film, the most important aspect is Irtaz Uddin’s transformation from the position he nurtured throughout his life even during and after the Liberation War. The perspective advocated in the film suggests the engagement of the landed gentry, mainly the Muslim leaguers in antiliberation activities, and their insolence in maintaining that position even after the liberation. This has sustained a stagnancy that also stifles the socio-cultural interactions of the people, and strains the combined efforts and united initiatives for the actual emancipation of the country. The result is the long-standing separation of the feudal father and the son who has not felt a qualm of conscience to maintain any relation with the Razakar father. Even the later development and changed prospects have not been communicated. The narrative advances the ways to solve this pervading problem in the country through those who are more comprehensive and humanitarian, and can come up with revisions regarding the freedom fighters and Razakar relation. It is to be noted that both the parties are related closely and cannot sever relation forever which claims a settlement. So, the visitor granddaughter Shahana, before leaving the village, suggests three conditions to the feudal grandfather to bring about a permanent solution. But these conditions come to the fore only when she makes him feel proud for her personality, and academic and social achievements. She places

before him three conditions: “one- you will come to Dhaka and reside with us, ... two- you will settle the issue with my father, ... three- you will seek forgiveness for the wrong you did during the Liberation War”. But these conditions have not been placed whimsically, rather Irtaz Uddin being satisfied with her personality and performance asks her to express her wish to be fulfilled by him. Thus, the suggestions promote the necessity of truly higher education aiming at serving humanity to understand socio cultural and historical perspective and solve the problem. The important aspect of the suggestion is, however, the engagement of psychological issues. In his attempt to bring about a solution, the filmmaker has avoided any imposition, rather performance has been stressed above everything to raise awareness about the obsolete one.

The film renders the feudal system, an “exploitative relationship between land owner and the subordinate peasants” (Hilton, 1978), obsolete and unfit though the practices are still prominent in the generation decadently sticking to the ideals. So Irtaz Uddin’s character has been consciously built to show his ignorance of and apathy towards the newly emerging social structures, and love for maintaining the old and obsolete one, “the hegemony of a small-scale individual production” (Guy Bois, 1994). He is mentally placed in the past, which is long gone-by, and which can no longer provide safeguard to the obsolete structure. He has placed himself away from the day today life of the common people. This is a metaphoric distance implying to former Pakistan which was geographically placed in two distant locations linked by some ideals and beliefs which failed to ensure unity in practicality, and the results is the emergence of the newly independent country. This imaginary of geographical implications has been extended in this film, and the emancipation of the fettered people has been made imminent. The people’s rights have been acknowledged, and arrangements have been made to advance their position. The basic target of the film remains in making the so called unquestionable questionable through emerging voices.

Ahmed has prepared a platform to accommodate the emergence of some small voices from the margin, which are commonly denied or not taken into account or deliberately suppressed. The questions have not been raised hastily, rather it has been delayed to prepare the ground or realise the essence of the question and the demands. Initially, Ahmed facilitates some intrusions into the inaccessible house previously unimaginable. The neglected poor bard Moti is invited to have dinner in the house by Shahana though he is denied the honour inside the house in her absence by Irtaz Uddin who, however, cannot stifle the progress, rather reluctantly espouses the invitation outside as he feels proud of her mental strength, personality and argumentative approach. Ahmed knows well that facilitating the intrusion of a poor man can never be realistic, and can never ensure the establishment of their

access. The consequence is the denial to concede him access inside the house but compulsion to entertain Moti with the same food items which have been prepared for his granddaughters. Most importantly, this invitation extended to the marginalised and ever suppressed bard unsettles the zamindar, and has been instrumental in assessing the newly emerging tendencies and his necessity to understand it for reconsidering his position. This finally makes him lower his status, go with head down, and allocate the palace for serving them as hospital which is again not as a magnanimous gift, rather as an atonement for what he has done to them in the past. Shahana's revisionist approach gives him irrecoverable shocks and irreducible pain, gives rise to conscience to consider the reality and the world from humanitarian ground. Ahmed thus links Irtaz Uddin's transformation not only materially rather from humanitarian ground, and reconsiders and rewrites what has been commonly taken for granted. But he has assigned the task of transformation and materialisation to the truly educated young people who can go to any length with their works, and can materialise what is desired and dreamt in the independence country. But this requires pointing out the follies and pitfalls of the existing society and suggest solution.

It is shown that the sustenance of the feudal system has been connected to the sustenance of the marginalised position of the common people through discriminatory practices. Seeing his granddaughter Nitu enjoying outside holding the hand of the family support Pushpa, the zamindar sacks her and sends her back home for this courage to transgression. Even religious gaining is done through compulsion. Irtaz Uddin shares his pride with his faithful servant Mobarok, proudly tells him of his granddaughter Shahana's academic achievement and forthcoming scholarship, he cannot understand clearly and expresses his usual consent to which the zamindar gets angry and compels him to say, MaShaAllah. The film thus questions the system which ensures the marginalization of the common people and sustenance of the vested-interest. The feudal practices can never sustain unless and until the villagers are kept in the margin deprived of education, and set in the dark about their life itself. The film is thus a sociological study on the oppressive and suppressive social system and anthropological study on the life of the people.

To Ahmed, "The cinema is both a window and a mirror. The window looks out on the real world ... The mirror reflects what the director (or other dominant artist) feels about the spectacle" (Sarris, 1968, p. 31). So, he continues to unveil his mission. And showcases that things can be inverted even with a humanitarian touch of the people in the centre or their little intimacy with those in the margin. This can raise hope and boost courage. So, Moti dares to accept the invitation which others of his standing cannot even imagine. He is insulted in that invitation, but he finds the access denied for ages. He will not stop there and raise voice. Before

making him voice his position, Ahmed makes a display of some masculinity of the marginalized specially through the song before the boat race, which implies to the power ignored by the dominant, "O my sister, rowing boat is the task of a strong young man" (my translation). With this masculinity, Moti rushes to the palace, stresses his right on the doctor Shahana, intimates the emergency service for a multiply marginalized Hindu woman in her complex childbirth, and demands the service from the granddaughter in front of Irtaz Uddin, an articulation formed from the access.

Humayun Ahmed as a conscious and advanced citizen of the country knows that the enmity and discourses regarding the positions of those who opposed the Liberation War can never be solved exclusively as the things done can never be undone, and the social dynamics also makes it impossible for the reason of kinship among both the parties as we can see that the father and the son have. The filmmaker also makes it clear that the old generation remains with the old ideals and dreams of the Pakistan nationalism while the new generation can understand the necessity of the new country and independence. So, Ahmed serves exactly what Syed Shamsul Haq has done in his celebrated drama *Payer Awaz Pawa Jaye*. Huq suggests the congregations of both the parties by the end of Liberation War, and makes arrangement for the participation in the janaza prayer of Razakar matbar in the settlement and essential unity among all so that the future can be built unitedly without questioning what happened to some people during the war. But the solution cannot be imposed if it is to sustain for long. So, in the film, the ground has been made prepared, efforts continue with almost no effort initially which shows the gravity of the problem and complexity in changing the standing dynamics in the socio-political arena. Ahmed realises that things must change from within, and if solution is imposed forcefully, that will hardly be nurtured, and that will hardly benefit the society for long in future. So, he ensures the realisation from within, and makes the hard-hearted man immersed in remorse, and rush towards the bank of the river in the last moment to accompany his granddaughter in the journey to transformation with inspiration from the new thought, understanding, education and personality. So, he comes to the river bank where the people come in huge number to express their love, respect and feelings for Shahana which Irtaz Uddin has never seen or never thought possible or necessary. Thus, the power exercise shifts from physical to service and love. His realisation comes to a final circle. So, he from the bottom of his heart accepts the conditions proposed by the granddaughter, and finally breaks his cocoon he natured throughout his life. The filmmaker thus writes his mission subtly and settles the crucial issues at least fictionally to do justice to auteur theory "that a theory that honored the personality of a director would endorse a cinema in which a director's personality was unquestionable supreme" (Sarris, 1968, p. 31).

3. Conclusion

The film with its story thus incites serious questions, opens our eyes to the improper and unjust practices and institutions, makes us aware of the necessity for humanitarian services, builds platform within the available amenities to ensure the common people's right through the female protagonist's proposed conditions to come to a settlement. The result is a suggestion which is not yet commonly accepted, but has been strongly advocated and advanced in the film. Had this been realised, the country can be advancing in the best possible manner. Humayun Ahmed thus ensures his authorship by maintaining his signature characteristics and mission.

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