Everyday Lives, Epochal Histories: Humayun Ahmed's *Moddhannya* Through New Historicism

Tahera Zobaida Maliha
Department of English, Bangladesh Army University of Science and Technology (BAUST), Saidpur Cantonment, Saidpur, 5310, Bangladesh
Email: tzmaliha@baust.edu.bd

Abstract This study examines *Moddhannya [মধ্যাহ্ন , The Noon]*, a two-part historical novel by Humayun Ahmed, often considered the most popular Bengali writer of his time, through the lens of New Historicism. Rather than foregrounding monumental events or nationalist figures, Ahmed centers the everyday lives of maids, mendicants, musicians, and marginalized communities amid the upheavals between the 1905 Partition of Bengal and the 1947 Partition of India. Drawing on Stephen Greenblatt's and Louis Montrose's concepts of the historicity of texts and the textuality of history, the paper explores how the novel negotiates cultural memory, ideological discourse, and the circulation of power. The study offers a qualitative, interpretive reading that traces recurring motifs across both volumes and relates them to relevant historical and biographical contexts. *Moddhannya* resists linear historiography, embedding historical transformation in rituals, relationships, and shifting norms of gender, class, and belief. Ahmed's narrative, while deceptively simple in tone, enacts a complex historiographical intervention that both reflects and reimagines early twentieth-century Bengal. This reading not only positions *Moddhannya* as a significant contribution to Bangla literature but also argues for the inclusion of vernacular popular and historical fiction within broader conversations about literary historiography, postcolonial memory, translation politics, and subaltern voices in world literature.

Keywords Vernacular Historical Fiction; Circulation of Power; Postcolonial Historiography; Gender and Communal Identity in Bengal.

Author **Tahera Zobaida Maliha** is Lecturer in the Department of English at Bangladesh Army University of Science and Technology (BAUST), Saidpur. She received her MA in Applied Linguistics and English Language Teaching from Independent University, Bangladesh, where she was a High Achiever's Award

recipient, and her BA in English Literature from the same institution with summa cum laude honors. Her research interests include South Asian literature, literary historiography, language policy, and postcolonial studies. She also mentors the BAUST English Language Club and has published both creative and scholarly work in local journals and edited volumes.

Introduction

Among contemporary South Asian writers, few matched the narrative authority and popular reach of Humayun Ahmed (1955-2012), a writer, dramatist, screenwriter, filmmaker, songwriter, and university professor. Author of more than 200 works spanning genres from romance and suspense to historical fiction and science fantasy, Ahmed has long been regarded as the most widely read and influential literary figure in post-independence Bangladesh (*Dhaka Tribune*). His literary emergence in 1970 with *Nondito Noroke* [*In Blissful Hell*] marked the arrival of a voice capable of transforming everyday life into mythic storytelling. As Imdadul Haq Milon observes, "What Rabindranath Tagore in his famous short stories did by entwining nature and humans in the same canvas for a perfect portrayal of life, Humayun Ahmed did the same in his *Nondito Noroke*, written at the age of twenty or twenty-two" (Milon). From that point forward, Ahmed's literary output reflected not just creative virtuosity but an acute attunement to the cultural rhythms of Bengali society. Md. Shamim Mondol notes that "He has mastered a language of his own and chosen diction comprehensible to all" (Mondol 80), a formulation that encapsulates Ahmed's ability to merge colloquial ease with lyrical resonance.

Ahmed's legacy has not gone unnoticed by literary giants and intellectuals across the Bengali-speaking world. Sunil Gangopadhyay, a canonical figure in Indian Bengali letters, noted that "Ahmed was even more popular than Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay" (*The Independent*). Nobel Laureate Muhammad Yunus went further, claiming that "Humayun's works are the most profound and most fruitful that literature has experienced since the time of Tagore and Nazrul" (Bari). Shirshendu Mukhopadhyay offered the striking admission: "Humayun Ahmed was one of the best writers in the Indian subcontinent. He was a much better writer than us" (Haque). Despite this regional acclaim, Ahmed remains conspicuously underrepresented in global literary scholarship. Only a handful of his works have been translated, *Gouripur Junction* being the most widely circulated, and academic engagement with his texts outside Bangladesh remains minimal.

This discrepancy between regional ubiquity and global invisibility raises

significant questions about the construction of literary canons, the cultural politics of translation, and the criteria by which historical fiction is judged as "serious literature." While critics such as Syed Shamsul Haq have illuminated the philosophical depth of Ahmed's writing, suggesting that "I can see three lights in the depth of Humayun Ahmed's writings: truth, purity, and beauty… But it is true that his readers remain busy with discovering entertainment through simplicity instead of that light" (Haq 382), such insights have yet to be fully pursued in sustained critical discourse. As Mondol et al. have argued, the existing studies on Ahmed "focus on his overall achievements […] and almost all the leading critics and litterateurs of Bangladesh have their observations about him, but very few venture into close thematic, ideological, or historiographical analysis" (Mondol 116).

This paper attempts to fill that lacuna by focusing on *Moddhannya*[1], Ahmed's two-part historical novel published in 2007 and 2008. Set against the backdrop of the 1905 Partition of Bengal and culminating with the 1947 Partition of India, *Moddhannya* offers a densely layered narrative that foregrounds rural life, minoritized voices, and communal transformations. In the preface to the novel, Ahmed makes a characteristically self-effacing comment:

> I write for my own pleasure. Whether topics like society, politics, time, or grand ideas (!) have appeared in my writing or not, I've never bothered […] Whatever I try to write, I feel compelled to capture the time period. That's what happened in *Moddhannya* as well. I began the story in 1905 and tried to carry it through. But readers, please note—I'm not writing a history book. I'm simply telling a story as a storyteller. And yet... [2]

This disclaimer, while charming (Ahmed, *Moddhannya*), belies the sophistication of *Moddhannya* as a historical narrative. Scholar Binayak Sen offers a contrasting assessment, stating, "I feel he has started this project on history very consciously"

---

1 *Moddhannya* is the transliterated form of the original Bengali title মধ্যাহ্ন, which translates to *The Noon* in English. The transliteration is retained throughout this paper to preserve cultural authenticity and maintain clarity for an international readership.

2 This quote, originally written in Bangla, was translated by the researcher:

আমি লিখি নিজের খুশিতে। আমার লেখায় সমাজ, রাজনীতি, কাল, মহান বোধ (!) এইসব অতি প্রয়োজনীয় (?) বিষয়গুলি এসেছে কি আসে নি তা নিয়ে কখনো মাথা ঘামাইনি। [...] যে-কোনো লেখায় হাত দিলেই মনে হয়—চেষ্টা করে দেখি সময়টাকে ধরা যায় কিনা। মধ্যাহ্নেও এটাই হয়েছে। ১৯০৫ সাল থেকে কাহিনি শুরু করে আগানোর চেষ্টা করেছি। পাঠকেরা চমকে উঠবেন না। আমি ইতিহাসের বই লিখছি না। গল্পকার হিসেবে গল্পই বলছি। তারপরেও..."

(Sen 151). The novel's depiction of shifting communal identities, gendered rituals, and local cosmologies signals an awareness of history not merely as backdrop, but as active substance—negotiated, remembered, and imagined. To engage with this duality, the simplicity of tone and complexity of vision—this study adopts a New Historicist framework. Drawing on Stephen Greenblatt's and Louis Montrose's formulations, this paper treats *Moddhannya* not merely as a narrative of past events but as a cultural artifact embedded in the ideological and epistemic structures of its time. Greenblatt's model, introduced in his seminal work *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (1980), emphasizes the reciprocal shaping of text and context, effectively dismantling the rigid boundary between literature and history and allowing fiction to be read as a form of historical discourse (Greenblatt; Barry 167). Montrose, expanding on this approach in his influential essay "Professing the Renaissance: The Poetics and Politics of Culture," articulates New Historicism through the dual concepts of the "historicity of texts" and the "textuality of history." The former emphasizes that literary texts are products of their historical and cultural milieus, while the latter underscores the constructed, narrative nature of historical knowledge itself (Montrose 18). As Nasrullah Mambrol further explains, history, like language is shaped by "the vested interests of dominant societal groups or institutions," making it less a neutral record of facts than a contested and ideologically infused discourse (Mambrol). Thus, New Historicism invites a reading of *Moddhannya* as both shaped by and shaping the socio-political forces it evokes. The thematic scope of this study is organized around several critical vectors: the narrative structure and progression of *Moddhannya*; the ideological configurations of its characters; the degree to which the novel aligns with or reimagines historical records; and the portrayal of power—particularly in relation to gender, class, and communal identity. To examine these, the study engages in comparative textual analysis, placing *Moddhannya* in dialogue with archival documents, secondary histories, and existing literary accounts of the same period. While the novel is fictional, its imaginative reconstruction of events, persons, and social shifts reflects a historical consciousness that merits scholarly attention.

Methodologically, this research is a qualitative, interpretive study that draws on thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), identifying recurrent motifs and ideological threads in the novel. In this study, thematic analysis is employed in a literary-critical, interpretive sense, and it operates alongside a qualitative New Historicist reading attentive to the circulation of power, discourse, and cultural memory. The corpus for this analysis consists of the two volumes of *Moddhannya*, supported by historical, archival, and biographical materials,

including Willem van Schendel's *A History of Bangladesh* (2009), which offers a comprehensive synthesis of Bengal's political and social transformations and provides essential comparative grounding for the novel's reconstructed world. The themes are then situated within the larger frame of New Historicism to reveal how Ahmed's storytelling mediates historical discourse. While traditional historicism treats history as a sequence of objectively verifiable events, New Historicism regards historical knowledge as partial, constructed, and inflected by power relations. As Lois Tyson explains, "From this perspective, there is no such thing as a presentation of facts; there is only interpretation… reliable interpretations are, for a number of reasons, difficult to produce" (Tyson 283). *Moddhannya*, in this light, does not offer an authoritative account of early twentieth-century Bengal; rather, it stages a cultural memory which is partial, plural, and deeply local.

While New Historicism provides a productive interpretive lens for this paper, critics such as Aijaz Ahmad and several Marxist historians have argued that the approach can drift toward textualism or culturalism, underemphasizing material structures such as economy and labor. This study negotiates that limitation by attending not only to discourse and ideology but also to the novel's representations of famine, land relations, class mobility, and material exchanges, ensuring that the analysis remains grounded in both cultural and socioeconomic histories. This methodological positioning aligns with the novel's own narrative strategy, which highlights the material and experiential textures of everyday life rather than monumental historical accounts. Indeed, the strength of Ahmed's novel lies precisely in its resistance to monumental history. Rather than centering nationalist heroes or official narratives, *Moddhannya* foregrounds the lives of maids, mendicants, women, religious minorities, and everyday rural people. These are not simply narrative ornaments but active agents in a historically volatile period. As Gao notes, understanding historical fiction requires an awareness of the author's psychological, social, and ideological positioning: "historical events are interpreted by writers with their personal experiences and opinions… It is necessary to examine writers' psychological background, the social sphere, and the books and theories that may have influenced them" (Gao 1765). To this end, this study also considers Ahmed's biographical context—his upbringing, education, and post-Liberation War worldview—as formative to his vision of history.

In centering *Moddhannya* as a case study in vernacular historiography, this paper aligns itself with broader scholarly efforts to revalue South Asian popular fiction as a site of cultural memory and intellectual labor. As Tyson reminds us, even "popular" texts—those written in accessible language, with emotional clarity

and wide readership—can function as complex engagements with history, ideology, and identity (Tyson 298). Ahmed's *Moddhannya* deserves recognition not only as a literary achievement but as a methodological intervention: a reminder that fiction, too, can be a form of historical thinking.

The Historicity of the Text: Ahmed and His Magnum Opus

In *Moddhannya*, the novel's intricately interwoven characters and plots do not exist in isolation but rather serve as conduits for understanding the lived realities of early twentieth-century Bengal. The villagers of Bandhobpur, though fictional, embody the historical consciousness of a society in flux. Their lives reflect a historically plausible experience, filtered through Ahmed's own understanding of the past and his surroundings. Ahmed's intimate connection to the geographical and cultural setting of his novel further strengthens the text's historicity. Born on 13 November 1948, just a year after the end of the timeline depicted in *Moddhannya*, Ahmed grew up in Kutubpur village, located in the Mymensingh region, strikingly similar to the fictional Bandhobpur. This setting lends authenticity and texture to the novel's landscape. A particularly illustrative moment appears when the narrative references Kendua[1]:

> That year, our Julekha was relocated to the infamous red-light district of Kendua, locally known as 'Rongila Notibari' [The Colorful Courtesan's House].
>
> In an old edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Kendua was mentioned. It was written there: 'Kendua, a place for dancing girls.' A joyous gathering of delightful performers.[2] (Ahmed, *Moddhannya* 76)

Here, Ahmed interweaves regional lore with textual citation, referencing an old edition of *Encyclopedia Britannica* to anchor the fictional world in archival memory. The use of English within the Bangla text, "Kendua a place for dancing girls"—underscores the permeability between official historiography and local

1 Kendua is the administrative sub-district under which Kutubpur, the birthplace of Humayun Ahmed, falls. This geographical proximity further grounds the fictional Bandhobpur in Ahmed's personal landscape.

2 This quote, originally written in Bangla, was translated by the researcher.
আমাদের জুলেখার সেই বৎসর স্থান হলো কেন্দুয়ার বিখ্যাত নিষিদ্ধ পল্লীতে। স্থানীয় ভাষায় যার নাম 'রঙ্গিলা নটিবাড়ি'।

Encyclopedia Britannica'র প্রাচীন সংস্করণে কেন্দুয়ার উল্লেখ ছিল। সেখানে লেখা ছিল 'Kendua a place for dancing girls'। আনন্দদায়িনী নর্তকীদের মিলনমেলা।

storytelling. This moment typifies New Historicist attention to the circulation of cultural discourses across genres, languages, and institutions. In another instance, Ahmed drew from his maternal lineage to craft the character of Thakur Ambika Bhattacharya, a figure he identifies as a distant kin of his mother, Ayesha Foyez (née Khatun). The character's narrative—particularly his conversion to Islam following the accidental consumption of beef—reflects Ahmed's deep-rooted connection with family lore.

> One branch of Humayun Ahmed's maternal lineage traces back to Thakur Ambika Bhattacharya. Although the current generation has abandoned Hindu customs, they have retained the Thakur title. One of novelist Humayun Ahmed's maternal grandfathers was named Anisur Rahman Thakur. He was a devoutly religious man whose nights were spent in prayer and worship.[1] (Ahmed, *Moddhannya* 115).

These moments exemplify a deliberate act of narrative intrusion**,** wherein the author steps into the fictional frame through a sudden shift to the first person. Such metaleptic gestures not only blur the boundary between author and narrator but also draw attention to the narrative's constructedness. In doing so, Ahmed aligns his storytelling with New Historicist concerns by embedding his personal memory within the fictional fabric, thereby illuminating the dynamic interplay between individual experience and cultural discourse. This transmutation of inherited narrative into literary motif exemplifies what Stephen Greenblatt might call the "circulation of social energy" through the text.

Moreover, Ahmed's family history also undergirds much of the emotional and ideological architecture of the novel. His father, Foyzur Rahman Ahmed, was a sub-divisional police officer who was killed during the 1971 Liberation War. This traumatic loss at a formative age endowed Ahmed with a profound awareness of political violence and familial grief, both of which echo throughout *Moddhannya*. His writing frequently meditates on the costs of war, the complications of faith, and the fragility of communal harmony, all themes that converge in the novel's depiction of events such as the Swadeshi movement and the Quit India movement. Ahmed's appeal, as noted by Anisuzzaman, lies in his capacity to render the ordinary

1 This quote was translated by the researchers. The original statement is হুমায়ুন আহমেদের মাতুল বংশের একটা শাখার পূর্বপুরুষ ঠাকুর অম্বিকা ভট্টাচার্য। বর্তমান পুরুষেরা হিন্দুয়ানির সব ছেড়েছেন, ঠাকুর পদবি ছাড়েন নি। উপন্যাসিক হুমায়ুন আহমেদের এক নানার নাম আনিসুর রহমান ঠাকুর। তিনি কঠিন ধার্মিক মানুষ ছিলেন। তাঁর রাত কাটতো এবাদত বন্দেগি করে।

extraordinary. "Ahmed mirrors the urban middle class just as he's observed them" (Ahmed, *Moddhannya* 13). His depiction of the rhythms, rituals, and emotional cadences of middle-class life—punctuated by the trauma of losing his father and the burdens his mother bore—formed the emotional substratum of many of his works. Characters such as Horichoron Shaha in *Moddhannya*, whose kindness toward a Muslim child leads to ostracization, reflect this dynamic. Ahmed, too, was estranged from segments of society during his later life, owing to his second marriage to Meher Afroz Shaon. Though the particulars differ, the emotional texture of exclusion and quiet endurance recurs.

Music and food, two seemingly peripheral motifs, become significant in understanding Ahmed's sensorial aesthetics. While his literary and cinematic accomplishments often dominate public discourse, his passions for music and culinary detail infuse his work with a deep sensory appeal. Rayhan and *The Independent* both note his love for Tagore's songs and folk music, especially that of Lalon. In *Moddhannya*, characters like Julekha embody this devotion: drawn to melodies from a young age, she evolves into a renowned singer. The novel revives forms like *Maljora Gan* (a question-answer lyrical genre), and portrays real-life singer Ukil Munshi with affectionate nuance. Music here becomes not just an aesthetic but an ethical force—bridging religious and cultural divides. Food, likewise, operates as a cultural and emotional register. Imdadul Haque Milon describes Ahmed as someone who "was not a heavy eater, but delighted in the presence of diverse dishes." The novel reflects this affection through its richly detailed culinary scenes, where characters' preferences mirror Ahmed's own fondness for dishes like fresh *Rita* (Ahmed, *Moddhannya* 100) fish. These gastronomic interludes provide not just local color but embodied links to cultural identity and sensory memory.

Ahmed also draws freely from the supernatural, another recurrent obsession of his. His literary corpus often resists empirical realism in favor of what might be called Bengali magical realism. The line from *Hamlet*, "There are more things in heaven and earth"—recurs in his rhetoric and fiction, signaling a metaphysical openness. In *Moddhannya*, this manifests in characters like Horichoron, a healer whose powers attract villagers from afar, and Labus (Jahir), whose prophecies include accurate forecasts of monumental events. Labus's death in the Hiroshima bombing—despite being nowhere near Japan—functions not as a historical absurdity but as a metaphor for the universal reach of suffering and violence. Similarly, the ghost of Shiuly, Horichoron's daughter, adds a spectral layer to the story, reinforcing the porous boundaries between past and present, living and

dead. What is compelling is that Ahmed's inclusion of these elements does not feel incongruous. Instead, they beautifully harmonize with the cultural tapestry of Bengal, which has, for centuries, intertwined the everyday with tales of the supernatural. And, in a touch of life imitating art, Ahmed's own haven, Nuhash Polli[1], is enveloped in legends of its own, with many whispering tales of hauntings and otherworldly occurrences. By integrating the ethereal with the earthly, Humayun Ahmed does not merely tell a story; he beckons readers to contemplate the infinite possibilities of existence, reminding them that the universe is much grander and more mysterious than it might first appear. The coexistence of folklore, mysticism, and historical realism reflects what Louis Montrose calls "the textuality of history"—its susceptibility to myth, memory, and ideology.

Ahmed's literary inspirations span a wide spectrum, from Rabindranath Tagore and Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay to Kazi Nazrul Islam and Tarasankar Bandyopadhyay. His narratives often reference these figures affectionately, integrating them as cultural presences rather than central actors. *Moddhannya* thus functions as both historical fiction and homage to the Bengali literary tradition. His relationship with Sunil Gangopadhyay was particularly formative. Gangopadhyay's praise of *Nondito Noroke* in 1972 marked the beginning of a lifelong literary dialogue. Within the broader tradition of Bangla historical fiction, *Moddhannya* can be read alongside works such as Gangopadhyay's *Sei Somoy* [*Those Days*], *Prothom Alo* [*First Light*], and *Purbo Poshchim* [*East-West*], as well as the historical-romantic novels of Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay. However, unlike Gangopadhyay's *Sei Somoy* (*Those Days*) or other historical texts, which center the monumental figures of the Bengal Renaissance within the urban matrix, Ahmed's Moddhannya deliberately displaces the narrative locus to the rural periphery of Netrakona. Where Gangopadhyay memorializes the intellectual struggles of the bhadralok [bourgeoisie] elite, Ahmed privileges the 'everyday' consciousness of the village subaltern—figures like Harichoron and Dhonu Sheikh—who experience history not as a set of ideological debates, but as a series of material and communal disruptions. This shift marks a distinct departure from the 'Great Man' theory of historical fiction that has long dominated the Bengali canon. His fiction shifts attention toward the anonymous multitudes: cooks, clerks, priests, widows, mendicants, small traders, and domestic workers become the primary agents through whom history is imagined and felt. This focus on the everyday subverts conventional historiography and aligns with New Historicist efforts to

1 Nuhas polli is a charming & beautiful place situated in Gazipur which is created by famous writer Humayan Ahmed.

recuperate subaltern voices. *Moddhannya*, in particular, demonstrates how fiction can reconstruct history without being didactic. Written during the mid-2000s, a time marked by religious extremism, political unrest, and socioeconomic disparity in Bangladesh, the novel refracts contemporary anxieties through the lens of the past. By embedding modern concerns within a historical setting, Ahmed creates a temporal palimpsest where struggles for justice, dignity, and meaning transcend any one era.

Ahmed's stated disinterest in writing "a historical book" aligns paradoxically with New Historicist theory. As Tyson clarifies, traditional historicism treats history as an empirical sequence—event A causes event B, which causes event C—whereas New Historicism posits that history is discursively constructed and ideologically fraught (283). Ahmed's refusal to offer a linear, factual account of history corresponds to Greenblatt's call to view literature as a cultural product implicated in the negotiation of power, memory, and truth. By focusing on villagers, maids, musicians, and ghosts, Ahmed stages what Gao calls "the historicity of texts"—their embeddedness in ideological and psychological contexts (Gao 1765). In turn, the novel's creative anachronisms, mystical elements, and subjective perspectives illustrate "the textuality of history"—the idea that historical knowledge is itself a kind of storytelling.

In this sense, *Moddhannya* is neither a chronicle nor a fantasy, but something more intricate: a vernacular historiography that amplifies the lives history tends to forget. Ahmed's achievement lies in reminding us that history is not merely what happened—it is also what is remembered, imagined, mourned, and re-enchanted.

The Textuality of History

In Humayun Ahmed's *Moddhannya*, the notion of history as a fixed sequence of events is actively challenged. Instead, the novel presents history as an unfolding process embedded in daily life, social exchanges, and competing ideologies. While the previous chapter explored the historicity of the text—its rootedness in Ahmed's own life and cultural memory—this section engages with the textuality of history. Drawing on Michel Foucault's concept of power and discourse (Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*) as well as key insights from New Historicism, it argues that *Moddhannya* maps a complex circulation of power within the rural Bengal society it portrays. The novel resists linear, event-based historicism and instead stages multiple narratives and shifting ideological centers, revealing how history itself is produced, contested, and inhabited.

Michel Foucault's theory that power is not a centralized force but one that

circulates through social exchanges informs the reading of Bandhobpur's village life. Power is shown to be exchanged through material goods, people, and ideas (Tyson 285)—three axes that shape the narrative trajectory of *Moddhannya*.

The first axis—the exchange of material goods—is exemplified with particular clarity in Dhonu Sheikh's trajectory in *Moddhannya*. Initially, Dhonu occupies a low position in Bandhobpur's social hierarchy, working as a ticket seller at the Launch Ghat. His outspoken sympathy for Horichoron Shaha, who had been socially ostracized, leads to his dismissal. As a financially vulnerable Muslim in a Hindu-majority village, Dhonu finds himself stripped of livelihood and security. A decisive turning point occurs when Horichoron, the wealthy merchant he once defended, provides him money to purchase a launch. This transaction, seemingly an act of charity, becomes the catalyst for Dhonu's rise to power. With new economic leverage, he establishes himself as a figure of influence, using material resources to shape religious alliances and incite communal tensions. His attempts to convert Hindus and manipulate local politics show how wealth can become an instrument of ideological power. After Horichoron's death, Dhonu further exploits material advantage by trying to seize the inheritance clearly designated for Labus (Jahir), demonstrating how patronage and opportunism can blur ethical boundaries. The novel underscores this cyclical transformation: the once-impoverished Dhonu replicates the same elite dominance he originally contested. A similar shift is seen in the case of the zamindars. Shoshangko Pall, the hereditary landlord of Bandhobpur, falls into destitution due to moral failings and economic mismanagement. Horichoron, once socially ostracized, acquires the Zamindari rights from Shoshangko. In a telling moment, Shoshangko attempts to sell his silver plates to Horichoron.

> He is Shoshanko Pal, the former zamindar of this region. Now he is destitute. The Kashmiri shawl on his body is the only valuable item left. Beneath it, two silver plates of value. He has come to Harichoron to sell those two plates in exchange for some money. Not much—just fifty silver coins. Harichoron didn't keep the plates, but he gave him the money. *(Ahmed, Moddhannya* 94*)*[1]

These exchanges of wealth are not merely economic but symbolic—they mark shifts in influence, status, and agency.

---

1 Original Text: তাঁর নাম শশাঙ্ক পাল। এই অঞ্চলর প্রাক্তন জমিদার। আজ তাঁর হতদরিদ্র দশা। গায়ের কাশ্মীরি শালটা অবশিষ্ট দামি। শালের নিচে রূপার থালা দু'টো দামি। তিনি এসেছেন থালা দু'টা হরিচরণকে দিয়ে কিছু টাকা নিতে। খুব বেশি না, পঞ্চাশটা রূপার টাকা। হরিচরণ থালা রাখেন নি, তবে পঞ্চাশ টাকা দিয়েছেন।

The second axis—the exchange of people—illustrates how marriage, divorce, and sexual exploitation function as mechanisms of social control and transformation. The lives of Julekha, Sharifa, and Jamuna illuminate the gendered dynamics of power in early twentieth-century Bengal. Julekha is initially abandoned by her husband, Sulaiman, and eventually finds herself married to the ailing Maolana Idris, only to end up in the brothel Rongila Notibari. Paradoxically, the brothel becomes a space of empowerment, where Julekha reclaims her identity as a celebrated singer. "Being part of Rongila Notibari feels like a divine plan." (Ahmed, *Moddhannya* 160)[1] Likewise, another character Sharifa is passed between husbands as a pawn in male-driven decisions, ultimately raped and forced into prostitution. Yet, even she returns to her first husband Imam Karim with renewed self-possession. Ironically, it's in the brothel, a place many might view as a space of exploitation, where Sharifa and Julekha discover their agency and voice. Another notable character Jamuna, after a traumatic sexual assault, is relocated to Calcutta by her lover Suren and is reinvented as a modern, urban woman. These narratives embody Foucault's assertion that power is always relational and contingent—the same institutions that oppress can also serve as sites of agency and reinvention.

The third axis—the notion of exchanging ideas, as Michel Foucault reminds us, lies in the intersections of discourses that emerge from and shape specific historical, cultural, and social contexts. Lois Tyson similarly observes that discourse is "a social language created by particular cultural conditions at a particular time and place," a medium through which interpretations of human experience are both reflected and enforced (Tyson 285). The early twentieth century—especially the years around the Partition of Bengal in 1905—was marked by precisely such discursive ferment. As Willem van Schendel details, the British division of Bengal into "Bengal" and "Eastern Bengal and Assam" not only provoked elite anxieties over commerce, law, and media, but also galvanized a broader nationalist movement that experimented with new forms of protest. Moderate tools such as petitions and conferences gave way to the Swadeshi movement of boycott and self-reliance, and eventually to revolutionary violence, celebrated in figures such as Khudiram Bose and Surya Sen (Schendel 79-84). Yet the partition also exposed fissures within anti-colonial solidarity: "After 1905 'Muslims' and 'Hindus' became clear-cut political categories, and these categories have figured very prominently in Bengal political life ever since" (Schendel 80). It is within this milieu that Humayun Ahmed situates *Moddhannya*. Although the village of Bandhobpur is distant from Calcutta's political centers, it is not immune to the circulation of new ideas. The arrival

1 আমার মনে হয় আমার অনেক ভাগ্য যে রঙ্গিলা বাড়িতে আমার স্থান হয়েছে।

of Shashi Bhattacharya (alias Kiron Ghoswami) and later Mofiz (alias Jibonlal Chatterjee) exemplifies how the Swadeshi ethos reached rural Bengal. Ordinary young men become radicalized into revolutionaries through the ideological currents of the time, illustrating Foucault's insight that discourse not only "transmits and produces power" but also "undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart" (Foucault 100-01).

Yet Ahmed also foregrounds the contradictions embedded in these discourses. Comrade Mozaffar Ahmed, in his memoir *Āmār Jīban o Bhāratīya Communist Party*, noted that Bankimchandra's *Ānandamaṭh* and the hymn *"Vande Mātaram"* inspired revolutionaries but alienated Muslims by sacralizing the motherland as a Hindu goddess. As translated by Sri Aurobindo Ghosh, the hymn proclaims:

> *"Thine the strength that nerves the arm, / Thine the beauty, thine the charm. / Every image made divine / In our temples is but thine."*[1] For Comrade, such verses demonstrated how nationalist discourse privileged Hindu devotional imagery, rendering it inaccessible to Muslims committed to *tawḥīd*. He concludes: "How would the monotheistic Muslims pronounce such chants? No Hindu Congress leader ever understood that" (Ahmed*, Moddhannya* 47).

As Schendel observes, while this religious flavor strengthened the nationalist movement among Hindus, it simultaneously antagonized non-Hindus (Schendel 82).

The dynamics of *Moddhannya* reveal how power, as discourse, circulated unevenly across communities. Just as revolutionary ideology inspired Jibonlal, communal tensions gave rise to alternative alignments. Dhonu Sheikh, for instance, betrays Jibonlal to the British in return for the promise of a Khan Bahadur title (Ahmed, *Moddhannya* 171). Ahmed does not portray him as a villain but as an ordinary man navigating competing discourses of loyalty, communal interest, and personal gain. This ambivalence underscores Tyson's reminder that no discourse is monolithic or permanent; discourses "are always in a state of flux, overlapping and competing with one another … stimulating opposition to that power" (Tyson 285).

This polyphony extends to Ahmed's treatment of marginalized voices. In contrast to conventional historical fiction that centers elites, *Moddhannya* offers

---

1 Original Text:
বাহুতে তুমি মা শক্তি
হৃদয়ে তুমি মা ভক্তি
তোমারই প্রতিমা গড়ি মন্দিরে মন্দিরে।
ত্বংহি দুর্গা দশপ্রহরণ ধরিণী [...]

a plurality of perspectives. There are no singular protagonists or antagonists. Harichoron, the benevolent merchant; Maolana Idris, the devout yet conflicted cleric; Julekha, the fallen and risen woman; Imam Karim, the pious man turned vengeful; Labus, the mystic child; and Dhonu Sheikh, the power-hungry opportunist—each represents a facet of Bandhobpur's social fabric. Moreover, characters like Naresh, Lakshmi, and Ekkori Shaha foreground the structural violence of famine and class. Lakshmi's longing for rice during the 1943 Bengal famine—a man-made crisis exacerbated by hoarding and war profiteering—contrasts starkly with Ekkori Shaha's strategic stockpiling of grain for economic gain (Schendel 74). Ahmed even integrates historical figures like Zainul Abedin, whose famine sketches preserved the visual memory of that catastrophe (Schendel 76). By incorporating these disparate voices, Ahmed resists the master narrative and instead constructs a historical collage. Tyson notes that "a plurality of voices [...] helps ensure that a master narrative [...] will no longer control our historical understanding" (Tyson 287).

Finally, the novel interrogates the very notion of normalcy. As Foucault argues, definitions of insanity, crime, or sexual deviance are social constructs used by dominant groups to maintain power (Tyson 286). Ahmed reproduces this critique by depicting normalized patriarchy and sexual exploitation. For instance, the practice of slave wives and the differential inheritance rights of their children is presented as a common feature of Muslim society in the novel's timeline—"Easy-peasy" (Ahmed, *Moddhannya* 2 83). Women had no say in divorce, remarriage, or education, echoing historical conditions described by Quayum regarding the early 20th century (Quayum 152). Perhaps the most provocative instance is the portrayal of 'Ghetu Putro'—young boys dressed as girls to dance for elite patrons, often used for sexual gratification. The discomfort with such practices is not moralized in the text but presented as culturally normalized in the historical setting. Ahmed juxtaposes this with Komla's shocked inquiry, not about the boy's abuse but about the possibility of a man marrying a man—a reflection on shifting taboos and normalized deviance across eras. As New Historicists argue, understanding a culture's normative framework is crucial for understanding its literature and ideology.

Moddhannya is not merely a historical novel. It is a historical intervention. Through its layered narrative, multiplicity of voices, and depiction of power as fluid and ubiquitous, Ahmed offers a radical rethinking of both history and fiction. He does not ask us to admire heroes or condemn villains. He invites us instead to witness the ordinary people who carry the burdens of extraordinary times and to see in their struggles, our own histories, reimagined.

This intervention, however, is not only significant within the fictional world it constructs but also within the broader field of literary circulation. Stepping back from the close reading of *Moddhannya*, it is also important to consider how Ahmed's novel is positioned within broader circuits of world literature. The relative absence of his work from Anglophone scholarship is not merely an accidental gap but a symptom of structural biases in translation, publishing, and academic canon formation, which tend to privilege metropolitan, formally experimental, or already globalized South Asian writing in English (often equated with difficult, experimental, or explicitly political texts such as Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*) over vernacular popular and historical fiction. South Asian authors who write in English frequently attain international visibility, prize recognition, and curricular presence, while Bangla-language writers such as Ahmed remain largely confined to regional readerships despite comparable cultural influence at home. In this context, *Moddhannya* complicates dominant expectations of what "serious" historical fiction should look like: written in an accessible register, centered on rural, subaltern lives, and interweaving humor, the supernatural, and domestic detail, it nonetheless sustains a complex engagement with historiography, power, and cultural memory. Recognizing the historiographical labor performed by such texts requires a rethinking of the criteria through which South Asian literature is canonized and a more sustained attention to the ways in which translation economies and institutional selections shape what counts as world literature.

Conclusion

As Lois Tyson reminds us, for the New Historicist, literature is not a passive reflection of history but an active participant in the discursive formations of its time: "the literary text shaped and was shaped by the discourses circulating in the culture in which it was produced" (Tyson 295). This study has examined *Moddhannya* as a literary intervention that both absorbs and reconfigures the historical energies of early twentieth-century Bengal. Through the lens of New Historicism, Humayun Ahmed's novel emerges not merely as a narrative about the past but as a site where competing ideologies—religious, national, gendered, and class-based—are enacted, contested, and transformed.

At the heart of this inquiry is an acknowledgment that neither history nor literature exists in isolation. Ahmed's novel, like all cultural texts, is the product of a particular moment, shaped by personal memory, ideological perspective, and the sociopolitical tensions of both its setting and its time of writing. By foregrounding rural voices, domestic rituals, and everyday negotiations of power, *Moddhannya*

complicates the conventional boundaries between the historical and the fictional, offering instead a textured map of the past seen through the eyes of the marginalized and the ordinary. This research, too, is embedded within its own historical and intellectual contexts. Its interpretive choices are shaped by current critical concerns, linguistic translation, and the limitations of disciplinary focus. While the present study has concentrated on *Moddhannya*, Ahmed's broader corpus of historical fiction—such as *Josna o Jononir Golpo* [*Story of Moonlight and Mother*], *Badshah Namdar* [*The Titled King*], and *Deyal* [*The Wall*]—offers fertile ground for future inquiry. Each of these texts engages with distinct historical periods and political configurations, inviting further readings that trace the dialogic interplay between fiction and historiography.

Finally, the continued relevance of Ahmed's work, and of Bangla literature more broadly, depends upon its sustained engagement across languages, disciplines, and borders. Translators, scholars, and educators play a crucial role in bringing these narratives into global circulation. Through critical translation and scholarly recontextualization, works like *Moddhannya* can enter new conversations, challenging dominant historical paradigms and enriching our collective understanding of how literature remembers, revises, and reimagines the past. In doing so, Ahmed's voice—rooted in the vernacular yet resonant with universal questions—continues to shape and be shaped by the ever-evolving discourses of culture and history.

Works Cited

Ahmad, Aijaz. *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures*. London: Verso, 1992.

Ahmed, Humayun. *Moddhannya*. [in Bangla]. 1st ed., Dhaka: Anyaprokash, 2007.

Ahmed, Humayun. *Moddhannya 2*. [in Bangla]. 1st ed., Dhaka: Anyaprokash, 2008.

Askari, Rashid. "The Genius of Humayun Ahmed." *The Daily Star*, 9 June 2012. Available at: <https://www.thedailystar.net/news-detail-237497> (accessed January 6, 2021).

Bari, Rashidul. "Tears for Humayun Ahmed: The Shakespeare of Bangladesh." *The Times of India*, 16 Aug. 2012. Available at: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/nri/citizen-journalists/citizen-journalists-reports/rashidul-bari/tears-for-humayun-ahmed-the-shakespeare-of-bangladesh/articleshow/15515838.cms> (accessed January 6, 2024).

Barry, Peter. Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory. 3rd ed. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2009.

Braun, Virginia, and Victoria Clarke. "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology." *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2006, pp. 77-101.

"End of a New Era in Bengali Literature." *The Independent*, 22 July 2012. Available at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20120825092915/http://www.theindependentbd.com/

paperedition/frontpage/129-frontpage/122280-end-of-a-new-era-in-bengali-literature.html> (accessed January 6, 2021).

Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality: Vol. 1: The Will to Knowledge*. London: Penguin UK, 2019.

Gangopadhyay, Sunil. *Sei Somoy* [in Bangla]. Kolkata: Ananda Publishers, 1984.

Gao, Yang. "A New Historical Approach to *Midnight's Children*." *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research*, vol. 119, 2016, pp. 1765-1770. Available at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/318803045_A_New_Historical_Approach_to_Midnight's_Children> (accessed January 6, 2024).

Greenblatt, Stephen. *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1980.

Haq, Syed Shamsul. "Humayun Ahmed, His Departure." *Humayun Ahmed: Souvenir*. Dhaka: Anyaprokash, 2012.

Haque, Junaidul. "The Story Telling Magician." The Daily Star, 28 July 2012. Available at: <https://www.thedailystar.net/news-detail-243793> (accessed January 6, 2024).

Kabir, Ekram. "Humayun the Great." *Dhaka Tribune*, 17 Nov. 2017. Available at: <https://www.dhakatribune.com/opinion/op-ed/130837/humayun-the-great> (accessed January 6, 2021).

Mambrol, Nasrullah. "The Textuality of History and the Historicity of Texts." *Literary Theory and Criticism*, 17 Oct. 2016. Available at: <https://literariness.org/2016/10/17/the-textuality-of-history-and-the-historicity-of-texts> (accessed January 6, 2021).

Milon, Imdadul Haque. "How Was Humayun Ahmed" [in Bangla]. *Kaler Kantho*, 18 July 2020. Available at: <https://www.kalerkantho.com/feature/love-for-humayun/2020/07/18/936407> (accessed January 6, 2021).

Mondol, Md. Shamim. "Humayun Ahmed's *Gouripur Junction*: A Saga of Unforgiving Realities and Perpetual Uncertainties of the Marginalized People." *Journal of Literature, Languages and Linguistics*, vol. 51, 2018, pp. 80-85.

Mondol, Md. Shamim, et al. "Portraying the Plight of a Nation through a Sketch: Humayun Ahmed's Concerns in *Himur Ache Jol*." *Veda's Journal of English Language and Literature (JOELL)*, vol. 5, no. 4, 2018, pp. 115-121.

Montrose, Louis A. "Professing the Renaissance: The Poetics and Politics of Culture." *The New Historicism*, edited by H. Aram Veeser, New York: Routledge, 1989, pp. 15-36.

Quayum, Mohammad A. "Gender and Education: The Vision and Activism of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain*." Journal of Human Values*, vol. 22, no. 2, 2016, pp. 139-150.

Rayhan, Abu Naser. "The Musical Soul of Humayun Ahmed." *Dhaka Tribune*, 13 Nov. 2017. Available at: <https://www.dhakatribune.com/showtime/130534/the-musical-soul-of-humayun-ahmed> (accessed January 6, 2021).

Rushdie, Salman. *Midnight's Children*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1981.

Schendel, Willem van. *A History of Bangladesh*. Cambridge UP, 2009.

Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*. Edited by Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine, Folger Shakespeare Library, Simon & Schuster, 2003.

Sen, Binayak. "The Society at Noon." *Humayun Ahmed: Souvenir*, Dhaka: Anyaprokash, 2012.

"Thirteen Unknown Facts about Humayun Ahmed." *Dhaka Tribune*, 15 Nov. 2016. Available at: <https://www.dhakatribune.com/9785> (accessed January 6, 2024).

Tyson, Lois. *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide*. 2nd ed., London: Routledge, 2006.

Uddin, Mohammad Jashim. "Nondito Naroke and Immortal Humayun Ahmed." *Academia.edu*, 13 Nov. 2012. Available at: <https://www.academia.edu/34379665/Nondito_Naroke_and_Immortal_Humayun_Ahmed> (accessed January 6, 2021).