

A Feminist Interpretation of Humayun Ahmed's *Kothao Keu Nei*

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Abstract

The renowned Bangladeshi novelist Humayun Ahmed is well-known for his engaging stories, easy narratives, satiric tone, and humorous characters. Despite being a popular writer, he has gained less critical acclaim than comparable novelists from other countries. One of his best works *Kothao Keu Nei* (There Is No One Anywhere) was a huge success both as a novel and as a television adaptation. The novel essentially centres on the leading female character Muna's struggle in a male-dominated society. It also focuses on the lives of some other women who are subjected to patriarchal tyranny. The novel, however, became popular because of the major male character Baker's comical antics and his tragic death at the end of the story. As a result, the book's central issue of female representation remained unappreciated and unexplored. Therefore, this paper looks at Humayun Ahmed's representation of Bengali women, especially those from the middle class, through a feminist lens.

Keywords

Humayun Ahmed, middleclass Bengali women, patriarchal oppression, power struggle, *Kothao Keu Nei*

Introduction

In early literary works, women have been portrayed as Cinderella or the stepmother and portrayed as attractive, delicate, and docile, or malicious, jealous, and cruel. Traditionally, women are considered good at housework, stuck in a problem, and rescued by a Prince Charming. Md. Mahmudul Hasan argues that "neither gender stereotypes of women as evil nor fulsome praise of them as domestic queens elevate their status or promote their rights in society unless the patriarchal underpinnings of gender relations are challenged" (Hasan, "Intimate Revelations" 2). However, over time, both male and female authors have started to emphasise realistic female characters, as well as real women's emotions, experiences, and survival challenges.

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Humayun Ahmed² (1948-2012) has created a number of iconic female characters such as Muna in *Kothao Ken Nei*, Rabeya in *Shonkhanil Karagar*, Rupa in *Himu*, Ranu in *Debi*, Rumali in *Rumali* and many others who have significant impact on readers. One of the reasons for Humayun's enduring success is that readers can effortlessly relate their emotions, experiences, and realities to his writings. He prudently depicts a human being's strengths and limitations, chiefly those of a woman. He presents every female figure in his writings with great care, taking into account all of her psychological, socio-political, and cultural circumstances. From a naive adolescent girl to a mature middle-aged lady, from an illiterate village peasant to an educated working woman, from a poor woman to a middle-class, upper-middle-class, and upper-class woman, every character in his narrative is extraordinarily vivid. As Cherly Lange believes that "[g]ender roles are hard to dispel, but some male authors have attempted to see life from a woman's perspective" (1). Humayun can be regarded as such a male writer. However, despite making a significant contribution to the representation of women, his female characters are rarely discussed, and he has not been identified as a feminist author.

It is worthwhile to investigate Humayun's portrayal of women and his literary impact on female readers. Emphasising the significance of his female characters, Mohammad Azam writes:

The influence of Humayun in the psychology of rural and urban middle-class women is undeniable. [Such] proof can be found in his effortless presentation of female psychology. The adoption of the author's ideas and viewpoints on women by middle-class readers demonstrates their belief in it. Hence, it is perhaps logical to conclude that his writings are important to comprehend and analyse the sentiments of at least Bangladeshi middle-class women.³ (230)

Therefore, given the popularity and significance of Humayun's works in Bangla literature along with his contributions to the realistic portrayal of Bengali women, this paper analyses his depiction of female characters and explores his methods of narrating female stories in one of his 1993 most famous novels *Kothao Ken Nei* (There is No One Anywhere). The novel is regarded as a milestone in Humayunian literature and is also hailed as a classic for its adaptation in Bangla television dramas. Because of the picaresque hero Baker (popularly known as Baker Bhai or Brother Baker) and the novel's bold heroine Muna, the adaptation of *Kothao Ken Nei* has remained extremely popular.

One example of the novel's incredible popularity is that people protested on the streets during the airing of the drama's final episode, and some even threatened the author with death to force him to change the ending of the story.

²Henceforth I will use his first name – following the Bengali convention – in the body of this essay, and his last name in reference entries.

³All translations from Bangla source texts are mine unless otherwise stated.

Because, in the end, Baker is found guilty in a contrived case and sentenced to death. However, despite being mostly based on a middle-class working woman's struggle against patriarchal standards, Muna's resilience in the face of adversity, and her mental confrontation with society's traditions, the novel has not been received as a feminist text. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to evaluate the novel through a feminist lens in order to discuss Humayun's feminist narrative tactics and approaches, as well as his portrayal of female characters in the novel.

An overview of the novel

Kothao Keu Nei is primarily a story about some Bengali middle-class women in the 1990s. Muna and Baker are the major characters in this story, the latter being a local gangster. Despite his rugged exterior, he is a helpful and kind-hearted person. He loves Muna and is always willing to assist her. Muna, on the other hand, is an educated, smart, and independent working woman who likes Baker but is not in love with him. Mamun, a college lecturer, is the love of her life. Muna's parents died when she was young, leaving her to struggle for the rest of her life. Shawkat, her maternal uncle, and his wife Latifa are her primary caregivers. They have two children named Bakul and Babu. Muna's life revolves around this family.

Bakul embodies the innocence and naivety of an adolescent girl. She eventually falls in love and marries Jahir, a family doctor. Her marriage throws her life into disarray. Bakul has a good friendship with her neighbour Tina. Bakul, Muna, and Tina are presented as diametrically opposed characters, yet they share one trait: they are all victims of male-dominated society.

The novel, however, has many interesting twists and turns. The characters and happenings keep the readers guessing until the very end. In the middle of the story, Muna's uncle Shawkat is jailed because of a financial theft case involving his office, putting the entire family in jeopardy. His wife Latifa dies after suffering from respiratory difficulties for a long time. Shawkat also passes away a few days after Latifa. Baker assists Muna during this tough period, providing an opportunity for her to know him. Muna gradually realises that Mamun is a selfish and wilful man and Baker, a selfless one. At one point in the narrative, Mamun assaults her. Shawkat's and Latifa's death, Bakul's marriage, and Mamun's betrayal have left Muna entirely alone and distraught. Baker is arrested in the meantime in a framed murder case. Muna tries in vain to set him free. Baker receives the death penalty in the end, and Muna becomes even more lonely and abandoned, making the novel's title evocative – *Kothao Keu Nei*.

Documenting women's socio-economic condition

Kothao Keu Nei opens with Muna's return home from work. Humayun carefully establishes the novel's setting as well as women's social condition in its first scene where Muna's entry is noteworthy:

Muna tried to check the time when she reached the front door of her home. Her wristwatch's dial is so small that she cannot see anything... She checked the time as soon as she got out of the rickshaw, and it was 7:30 pm. The journey from the alley to the entryway of her home took no more than four minutes. By now, it should be 7:35 pm. It is still not too late. Muna is still ashamed. She was late yesterday also. For this, Shawkat sahib (Mr. Shawkat), her uncle, avoided speaking with her. Muna carefully opened the gate and stepped inside. The ground is really muddy.... Her new Jamdani saree will be ruined if she slips in the muck of the courtyard. She was dressed in this saree for the first time. It will be impossible to remove the stain if it gets soiled. Muna cautiously stepped forward.⁴ (9)

In the novel's opening scene, the existing glass ceiling against women and the boundaries set by patriarchal society for them are evident. Muna's first act in this novel is to check the time. Before entering the house, she had to confirm that she had not exceeded the stipulated time limit for being outside, emphasising the limited space and scope that women have in the outside world. Furthermore, as she enters, Muna finds the courtyard moist and slippery, illustrating the hardships a woman faces outside. Walking towards the home was exceedingly difficult for her. The setting of the courtyard symbolises the difficult societal conditions that women overcome in order to accomplish their goals. Muna's dread of staining if she falls inadvertently is a symbol of a woman's fear of societal judgment directed at her. Despite the obstacles, Humayun's Muna moves forward, anxious but cautious and resolute. After giving us a glimpse of the outside world of Bangladeshi women in the 1990s, Humayun immediately takes us inside the house. Instead of receiving a welcoming smile upon entering the house, Muna was met with disappointment and disgust for her audacity in defying patriarchal standards. The narrator then shows Muna's room, which is extremely cramped and confining:

Muna's room is cramped to the point of suffocation. The huge eastward window lets in enough light and air. But Shawkat permanently shuttered the window. Local thugs, he believes, may hurl acid through the window.

Even in the sweltering summer, it is now impossible to open it. (10)

Here, through the image of Muna's room, Humayun illustrates the plight of Bengali women in the 1990s who were not safe and free even at home. In order to keep the female family members protected and safe, the worried guardians restrict them at home, barring them from all the possible opportunities available outside.

To overcome social barriers, women endure unimaginable hardships and

⁴I use the 2012 edition of Humayun Ahmed's novel *Kothao Keu Nei*. Subsequent references to the text are cited parenthetically by page numbers.

frustration throughout their lives. In one scene of the novel, Mamun goes to their local Agriculture Bank in a remote rural area for a loan. The bank officer informs Mamun that Jahanara, the bank's new second officer, will help him obtain the loan he has sought. Mamun inquires with surprise, "Women officers are being sent this far?" The bank officer's response reflected a more heightened surprise. He replies, "Girls boost the office's decoration. They come to the office all dressed and decked up. It feels good to gaze at the dolled-up girls. Hahaha" (153). For a long time, the numerous domestic activities that women perform at home have been ignored. Through this scene, Humayun demonstrates how males continue to disparage and undermine women even if they have been working outside and demonstrating their skills and knowledge. Moreover, to counteract female autonomy, patriarchy erects barriers in their way of life, denying them all of the chances to which males are entitled. Humayun depicts how the 'male gaze' objectifies and undervalues women's ability.

The bank manager disrespectfully comments on female "looked-at-ness" (Mulvey 11), referring to her as a sexual object while ignoring all her efforts and intelligence. Sexual harassment and workplace violence against women are common societal occurrences. A courageous lady like Muna is even uncomfortable in front of her boss. There are rumours that he summons the female employees to his room and under the guise of admiration touches their backs and shoulders (29). Most of the workplaces are unsafe, uncomfortable, and unwelcoming to women. Men oppose women's emancipation and mobility in order to protect patriarchal interests. Early-career sexual harassment has long-term repercussions on depressive symptoms, which can affect one's quality of life, relationships, and professional success (Houle et al. 3). Within the personal, working, and social arenas of life, patriarchy systematically dominates women in many ways. As a result, women are subjected to contempt, humiliation, control, suppression, harassment, violence, and segregation.

Humayun painstakingly portrays the various degrees of suppression and denial that women experience throughout their lives. Patriarchy disregards a woman's potential when she rises to a higher rank through her own abilities and efforts. In one scene, Humayun brings up the subject of Bangladesh's then-military ruler in a conversation with a local tea seller, who tells Baker,

It is impossible to keep the country running without the military. Mr. Ershad is a military person. He persecuted the two female politicians so strongly.... Women are expected to have children. They aren't meant for politics and other manly jobs. (165)

Hussain Muhammad Ershad (1930-2019) declared martial law in the early 1980s. To reclaim democracy from Ershad's dictatorship, Khaleda Zia of the Bangladesh National Party (BNP) and Sheikh Hasina of the Bangladesh Awami League (BAL) organised movements and relentless protests against the dictatorial administration. Despite the fact that the two parties were ultimately successful in

overthrowing the military government, they were brutally persecuted and many of their affiliates killed. Here, Humayun depicts a tea seller who relishes violence towards women, sets their boundaries, and even takes pleasure in the violence meted out to women. As Abeda Sultana points out, “This control over and the exploitation of areas of women’s lives mean that men benefit materially from patriarchy, they derive concrete economic gains from the subordination of women” (9). It is evident that when men fail to compete with women’s intellect, confidence, and courage, they utilise harassment, molestation, rape, physical assault, verbal and emotional abuse to tame women and remove them from the power structure. In the same vein, a woman is not safe even with her husband who is supposed to be her most loved person. At one point in the novel, Mamun proposes a hasty marriage to Muna. It is the time of her aunt’s death, her uncle’s imprisonment, and her cousins’ inability to deal with the circumstance. Muna decides not to marry in this situation because of family concerns. As a result, Mamun becomes enraged as soon as she declines his proposition. He rapes her on the spur of the moment at the flat they planned to reside in after their marriage. Humayun narrates:

Mamun stood up and slammed the door behind him.

Muna inquired, “What are you up to?”

Nothing really!

Mamun switched off the light and embraced Muna as if nothing had happened. Muna’s initial thought was to scream aloud. But she was unable to do so. She was taken aback. Is this truly going on in her life? (99)

Humayun shows how men use rape as a weapon to control, dominate, and domesticate women. Muna’s refusal to marry him is viewed as audacious, for which Mamun rapes her to satisfy his male ego and chastise her disobedience. For him, this horrible act (rape) is “nothing really.” A man demonstrates his authority by breaching a woman’s chastity and aggressively taking ownership of her body. A higher number of men are generally accused of sexual violence against a female intimate partner, such as a girlfriend, and current or former wife. According to 2013 United Nations survey on “Men and Violence in Asia and the Pacific,” 54.9% women in Bangladesh experience one or more acts of physical or sexual violence at any point in their lives (Fulu et al. 29). Thus, Humayun underscores how men use rape as a means of sexual pleasure and also as an instrument of male domination. In such cases, woman never receives the respect she deserves as a human being from her lover, husband, or brother, let alone from the rest of the world. In *Kothao Ken Nei*, Humayun lays bare the untold sufferings of women and the flawed socio-political patriarchal structure.

The dominant masculinist attitude to women

Men’s and women’s relationships have a long history of female servitude and

male dominance. Gender roles and limits for women are strictly established in patriarchal culture. Women are taught to be feminine, submissive, modest, and patient, while men are taught to be strong, masculine, and muscular. These defined rules, which have been passed down from generation to generation, enable patriarchy to govern and control women. Through the representation of male psychology and attitudes towards women, in *Kothao Keu Nei*, Humayun impartially brings forth some of these vital realities to readers. He demonstrates how someone who is helpful and friendly may not be liberal or egalitarian. For example, while Baker is helpful to others, especially women, he has low regard for women. "Women's job is to talk incessantly and to talk nonsense," Baker says, "Who would pay attention to such gibberish" (81)? Baker also shows his displeasure with Muna's stern manner multiple times in the story. Muna's firmness irritates him even though he is in love with her. "What a hardness surrounding her," Baker thinks about Muna, "Toughness does not suit girls" (168).

Where femininity and submissiveness are associated with women, men are referred to as muscular and fearless. Any sign of weakness in a man is considered womanish and causes him to be disgraced. When Baker was in jail, he spotted one of the inmates crying at the moment of his release. "Can you tell me why you are crying so much?" Baker inquires sarcastically: "Are you a woman" (180)? While attributes such as emotion and vulnerability are considered feminine, courage and autonomy in women are seen as inappropriate. In order to sustain patriarchy, society has established gendered notions. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar maintain that "assertiveness, aggressiveness – all characteristics of a male life of 'significant action' – are 'monstrous' in women precisely because 'unfeminine' and therefore unsuited to a gentle life of 'contemplative purity'" (600). Thus, Humayun demonstrates how patriarchy uses prejudice against women to engender and perpetuate their subordination.

Humayun also demonstrates men's fickle and hypocritical face. He shows how the lover, who can do or at least pretends to do everything for the beloved, can transform in a short period of time. The lover assumes authority over her right away, as if he has acquired a possession of his own to use or mistreat. Dr. Jahir in the novel, for example, proposes to Bakul that she should have studied science instead of humanities. "You could be a doctor then," he says, "Doctors, particularly female doctors, are desperately needed" (29). Bakul is smitten by this lovely man. Jahir's positive perspective of women's education, conversely, proved to be hollow in practice. Bakul's misery begins after her marriage, when her inconsiderate husband ruins all of her romantic dreams. In front of others the man demands Bakul scratch his back. He talks loudly, sweats profusely, and is violent in bed. "Does the life of a married female entail one tedious long night after another" (170), Bakul asks, disillusioned by the unpleasant faces of marriage. There are hundreds of thousands of Bakuls in some form of distress. Latifa,

Bakul's mother, likewise had a difficult marriage. When Latifa died with all her unfulfilled dreams and desires, Bakul's father regrets, "I have done enormous wrongs to your Aunt, Muna" (89). Sensing the momentary guilt Muna responds,

For a few days, you'll be miserable, but then everything will be alright. Mama [maternal uncle], humans are odd creatures. If you get married again after a while, you will adore that girl for the first few days, and then you will resume your old unjust behaviours.... Won't you? (89)

The picture of ceaseless male domination over women is obvious here. Humayun's awareness of women's plight, as well as his unbiased representation of man, can be seen in these images.

Female characters of diverse propensities

Despite their biological similarities, neither all men nor all women are alike. Though both gender groups have some similar attributes, they differ in terms of socio-cultural, political, religious, and environmental characteristics. Feminist scholars today are having trouble defining women as a whole. Feminism increasingly focuses on women's differences in order to better define them. It is important to discuss the differences of women as they "too are socially constructed beings, products of the discourse and representations of their culture" (Lenox 94). In the narrative, Humayun includes a number of female characters and presented them in varied situations where they all battle for their own destiny. Muna, Bakul, Tina, Latifa, and Jahanara are the five prominent female characters in the novel. Humayun demonstrates how these five women are diverse in nature and live separate lives, yet there is one thing they all have in common. Muna and Jahanara are the two working ladies whereas the other women are housewives. Humayun portrays the three housewives Bakul, Tina, and Latifa, along with the independent working lady Jahanara, as being representative of Bengali women who suffer under patriarchal restrictions. They never question the system, preferring to accept it as their fate. Muna, on the other hand, is the sole woman who is constantly fighting against patriarchal exploitation and gender stereotypes. Therefore, female characters in the novel can be divided into three categories.

There is one type of women who are beautiful, feminine, husband-loving, obedient, and tolerant – their world revolves around their family and domestic life. Latifa and her daughter Bakul fit in to this category. They are taught that "[m]an must be pleased; but him to please/ is woman's pleasure" (Patmore 1-2). A Bengali girl is taught from an early age that marriage is the ultimate objective of her life. Her husband is her defender and commander in life, and it is her moral obligation to satisfy him. In one scene, sick Latifa regrettably tells her daughter about her husband, "Your father appears to be very sick. There is no one to look after him. Who knows when he eats or how he manages his life" (62)? The irony

of the situation is that the ill Latifa is more concerned about her husband than herself. In *Mad Woman in the Attic*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar write:

From the eighteenth century on, conduct books for ladies had proliferated, enjoining young girls to submissiveness, modesty, selflessness reminding all women that they should be angelic... and they were told that this good Grace was a woman's duty to her husband because "if Woman owes her Being to the Comfort and Profit of man, 'tis highly reasonable that she should be careful and diligent to content and please him." (600)

Latifa instils in her daughter the same selfless devotion to her husband. This is demonstrated in a scene where Bakul experiences the same emotions for Jahir when he encounters difficulties with his property. She wants to please her husband anyhow. The author narrates:

Bakul planned to gossip with Jahir till late at night in order to make him happy. Men have other desires besides gossiping, and she will zealously satisfy all of them.... Oh, her man had been through so much on his own. She will not let him suffer alone any longer. (244)

Bakul aspires to carry out the traditional wife's responsibilities that she learned from her mother and society. In countries like Bangladesh "the male-breadwinner-female-homemaker family model kept women confined to a submissive role in the private sphere" (Hasan, "Early Defenders" 766). Many a time Humayun has been chastised for depicting women in a subjugated state as though he wants to see women in this state. Many people misjudge and misunderstand him on this point. But here, it appears that his goal is to depict genuine social condition in order to highlight the predicament of women, who are denied their rights and forced into subordination in a male-dominated culture.

There is another set of women who, despite being conscious of patriarchal oppression, continue to tolerate it. They frequently discuss the patriarchal oppression, yet they never show any sign of protest. Despite their dissatisfaction with the system, they cling to it, and thus the patriarchal agenda is passed down the generations. Humayun presents the physically and mentally imprisoned state of women. Tina, Bakul's neighbour, falls into this category. Tina is a housewife who married young. She, unlike Latifa, laments women's struggles but cannot help accepting societal norms. She confides in Bakul that she endured traumatic sexual abuse as a child. Tina, like many other women, was afraid of societal censure and persecution, so she remained silent about the assault for a long time. She tells Bakul, "Being born as a girl is really challenging" (50). Muna was also a victim of child sexual abuse. While Tina takes it hopelessly as her fate, Muna, who was also scared to speak up, develops hatred towards patriarchal oppression. Muna expresses her resentment and grief to her uncle, "The same incident happened in my childhood when I was only thirteen. I didn't tell any of you. My mind has become dead, Mama. I am disgusted by everything" (186).

The third group of women strive to make society and the world a better place for both men and women to live. Some female characters in Humayun's work always strive to escape the patriarchal dungeon and liberate their souls from social taboos. The protagonist of the story belongs to this group. Muna, the novel's lone wolf, has her own set of ideals and principles, and is indifferent to patriarchal constraints. In a scene, Baker comes across her in a newsstand, flipping through magazine pages. As he has never seen a woman in a newsstand skimming through magazine pages, he is taken aback. He approaches Muna and inquires:

“What are you doing, Muna?”

“You can see what I'm doing. I am reading magazines.”

“You mean you're reading magazines standing here?”

“There's no way to sit here. There is no table or chair, as you can see.”

As Baker wonders over her confidence, she does not give it a second thought to respond as though the response was already prepared. (129)

Muna wants the other ladies to be honest, confident, and fearless like her. When she senses Bakul's stern demeanour, Muna thinks to herself, “It's a positive indication. Girls shouldn't be unnecessarily mushy” (23). While Muna appreciates Bakul's confidence, Tina does not like Muna's. Tina asks Bakul, “Where did you get such an inspector-like sister? I can't stand her at all. She is quite manly” (48). Tina's gender ideologies are influenced by patriarchal schooling which taught her that adjectives like confident, strong, and powerful are only appropriate for men and not for women. Tina's perspective on life is shaped and impacted by society. Similarly, Jahanara, though a financially independent woman, could not go beyond the conventional roles of a woman. She also adheres to the patriarchal system.

These women, no matter how different their viewpoints and ways of life are, are all victims of patriarchal oppression at one point or another. These portrayals are frequently assumed to be Humayun's personal opinions. As a result, he is labelled as a conformist or, more precisely, an anti-feminist. As argued before, Humayun, on the other hand, seeks to provide the genuine picture of women's servitude in society through his narration, while simultaneously depicting women like Muna who overcome obstacles and serve as role models for many other women.

Psychological impacts of patriarchal oppression

Patriarchal oppression, societal norms, and traditional expectations often stifle a woman's natural development, leading to mental breakdown. The evocative Bertha Mason of the Thornfield Attic in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) is worth mentioning here. Her “vocal, social, cognitive or psychiatric impairment is exacerbated by mistreatment and neglect” (Bolt et al. 1). Bertha is a victim of patriarchal dominance. Likewise, in the story, Humayun's female characters also

suffer from mental breakdowns. Humayun has profound knowledge of women's psyche. He scrupulously portrays the effects of patriarchal injustices on women's psychological and physical health.

In the narrative, Humayun shows how Bakul's marriage affects her life and shatters all of her aspirations. She feels lonely and alienated after her marriage, far away from her home, parents, and siblings in her husband's large gothic village mansion, where she is compelled to reside until her mother-in-law's death. Her husband's obnoxious sexual expectations and authoritativeness make her sick of the relationship. Bakul verges a severe psychiatric breakdown when her claustrophobic relationship with her husband falls short of all of her romantic expectations of marriage. She develops paranoia and fears her husband as her potential murderer. Her suspicion was not unfounded. It was the outcome of Jahir's repressive treatment of her. He does not literally kill her, but he does murder her soul.

In her nightmares, Bakul receives warning from her deceased father who forewarns that her husband will murder her in her sleep (214). The father figure, not the mother, is used by Humayun to warn the daughter. The warning from her late father puts her life at stake, and she becomes hysterical. The father perhaps represents the menacing patriarchy that instils terror in the daughters and puts their lives in jeopardy.

Even Humayun's hard-hitting Muna is equally unable to escape patriarchal oppression and eventually collapses. She had been raped twice in life and remained traumatised. She was raped for the first time at the age of thirteen, and this has a lasting impact on her psychology. In one scene, Muna finds Bakul smiling in her sleep. She must be dreaming about something lovely, Muna thinks. Her dreams, on the other hand, are not like Bakul's. Humayun narrates:

Muna used to have nightmares when she was of Bakul's age. One of which was a snake's nightmare. That nightmare was so clear that it seemed real. She goes to take a bath in a pond. As soon as her feet touch the water, a snake emerges from the depth to attack her. She takes off fast. The snake continues to pursue her. She dashes from one path to the next, but the snake continues to pursue her. Every time she turns back, she sees two red eyeballs and a forked tongue. What a dreadful nightmare!
(108)

According to Sigmund Freud, dreams are manifestations of our subconscious thoughts. The snake, says Freud, is a phallic symbol – a gigantic penis. He argues that the snake indicates either suppressed sexual desire or internal sexual conflict. It is also frequently associated with sexual repulsion and terror (Lohff 198). The snake can also allude to the one in the Garden of Eden. Snakes have long been seen as devilish, deadly, and dangerous creatures. Muna's dream of a chasing serpent represents her fear of the phallus as well as the trauma of sexual abuse. The snake is described as repulsive and hideous, indicating her aversion to it. Her

anxiety stifled her natural development and tormented her entire life. When Muna is raped for the second time by her supposed lover, her mental state deteriorates even further. She is torn apart by disgrace and disbelief. She begins behaving erratically as a result of her inability to cope with the painful reality, for example, walking aimlessly for hours on end and spending all of her savings on frivolous purchases (119). One day Baker notices tears in her eyes and is taken aback because “he has never before seen her crying” (108). Babu and Bakul are also dumbfounded by Muna’s transformation. One day

[w]hen Bakul comes with a cup of tea for Muna, she senses something peculiar. Muna is crying uncontrollably. She is trembling and choking back tears time and again. By tucking a piece of her saree into her mouth, she is desperately trying to stifle her sobs. Bakul was astounded as she approached the door. (128)

Muna utterly loses her way and can sense her mental state that she is acting strangely. She says to Bakul, “If I go mad for any reason, kill me with poison. There is no need for treatment” (147). Muna’s relentless inspiration to overcome life’s challenges wanes at this point in her life.

Bakul and Muna are eventually able to overcome their mental depression; yet, what will happen if they fail? Humayun hints it all at the beginning of the novel. He adopts an intriguing storytelling technique in which he reverses the mental preparation of the story. Before Bakul’s and Muna’s mental breakdown, Humayun briefly introduces Mamun’s sister Farida, a neurotic patient. Towards the beginning of the novel, Mamun receives a telegram message about Farida’s critical condition. In front of Mamun, she dies, groaning in pain like an animal, from an unknown disease. He says of Farida’s death to a boarder of his Dhaka residence,

Her death is a sort of relief to us. She was in a lot of pain.... During my visits to my village home, I couldn’t sleep. She used to scream all night long. Her agony was unbearable. She had a neurotic ailment that was unknown and incurable. (36)

Farida’s death is mentioned only briefly in the narrative, and she then vanishes from the story as well as from readers’ minds. This character, however, is crucial to the plot. The causes of Farida’s mental illness are never properly stated. Through the two other neurotic women, Muna and Bakul, Humayun encodes the secret of Farida’s breakdown. When Farida is in the terminal stages of her mental collapse, Muna and Bakul are in the early or middle stages, symbolising two other possible Faridas. Farida serves as Humayun’s metaphor for the final stage of a woman’s mental state, when she is unable to cope with reality and finds patriarchal repression to be intolerably painful. Bakul’s and Muna’s mental states may eventually converge to resemble Farida’s or vice versa. Her experience might have been similar to theirs. She is the mirror image of Muna and Bakul. With these three neurotic ladies, Humayun demonstrates how male dominance and

suppression of women may lead to mental collapse and so generate instability in their life.

Conclusion

Feminist scholarship has gone through several phases and experiments. Humayun's *Kothao Keu Nei* is a valuable addition to feminist literature. In this novel, Humayun seeks to portray untold miseries of Bengali women in a patriarchal society. He hopes to raise awareness among men and women so that they can "deconstruct masculine privilege and challenge institutionalized patriarchy" (Aragon 6) through his writing. Humayun is a writer who focuses on the middle class. In his writings, he gives voice to the lives and hardships of middle-class families, particularly middle-class women. In the name of tradition, culture, and religion, Bengali middle-class and lower-middle-class women are subjected to endless patriarchal oppression. For the sake of family and tradition, they sacrifice their entire lives. Humayun has chronicled in his writing the oppression and injustice that has been perpetrated on women for centuries and demonstrated how masculine dominance shatters women's unfulfilled goals and wishes. Humayun uses his writing to bring women's suffering to the attention of readers.

Humayun is skilled at narrating manifold emotions that women experience. Describing the other sex's intimate experiences and hidden emotions is a difficult undertaking. As William Makepeace Thackeray says in his novel *Vanity Fair* (1846): "What do men know about women's martyrdom?". Thackeray adds: "We should go mad had we to endure the hundredth part of those daily pains which are meekly borne by many women" (511). Humayun takes up the difficult challenge of conveying women's struggles and emotions. His popularity among female readers can be traced back to his accomplishment of this endeavour.

It is evident that understanding and appreciating Humayun's feminism necessitates an understanding of his idiosyncratic storytelling approach which I have called the "Humayunian" style in the paper. Humayun's literary brilliance and feminist fervour will be undercut by doubts about his deepest comprehension and sympathetic representation of women's position and being. His compassionate portrayal of women's struggle and skilful narration of their stories, through which he readily connects with his readers. In *Kothao Keu Nei*, Humayun demonstrates how women are equally capable as men, but not receiving their fair share of recognition. Additionally, he shows how women become accustomed to patriarchal conventions and are deprived of what they are entitled to. Therefore, this study analyses the novel to uncover major functional female storytelling approaches used by Humayun in order to establish his feminist aspirations. Given the popularity and scope of Humayun's writing, this study is likely to aid in developing a new critical reading and a deeper appreciation of his works.

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