

## History, Myth, and Trauma in Anisul Hoque's *The Ballad of Ayesha*: An Analysis

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### ABSTRACT

In *The Ballad of Ayesha* (2018), Anisul Hoque portrays a young woman named Ayesha and her sufferings in life after a sudden disappearance of her husband, an officer in Bangladesh Air Force, on a fated day in 1977. Ayesha determinedly fights off the woes of life and waits, with a secret hope, for her beloved husband's return. This tale, also, throws light on a period of extensive instability and bloodshed in the history of a newly independent Bangladesh, when a great mutiny in the armed forces was brutally suppressed by then military ruler General Ziaur Rahman in the aftermath of his ascent to power after the assassination of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in the hands of a group of military officers in 1975. The novel presents this history in the background of Ayesha's traumatic experiences which are presented in parallel to Behula's sufferings, a legend found in the popular Bengali folk-epic *Manashamangal Kavya*, in the wake of her husband Lakhinder's death by snake-bite on their bridal chamber because of goddess Manasha's wrath. The fiction, hence, intertwines the personal trauma of an ordinary village woman with the popular myth of Behula in the context of a dark historical chapter of Bangladesh. This paper, thus, investigates the representation of history and myth in this historical novel and argues that the narrative, while presenting individual traumas of Ayesha and Behula, ultimately foregrounds a period of national trauma in the political history of Bangladesh. Analyzing from a historicist perspective, the study opines that *The Ballad* also challenges some propagandist political narratives which intend to demean Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's contribution as the leader of Bangladesh and tries to uplift the military rulers as saviours of the nation. The paper thus points towards the novelist's intention to dig out some long buried truths of Bangladesh's political history in the early years of independence and present it to the modern readership through fiction.

### INTRODUCTION

*The Ballad of Ayesha* like a historical novel, "which reconstructs and recreates history imaginatively" and where both "historical and fictional characters may appear" (Cud-don et al., p. 333), opens the door of a dark chapter, less represented in the mainstream literature, in the history of independent Bangladesh for its readers. A history of coup, counter-coup and military dictatorship in the context of Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's assassination has been portrayed through a unique way of storytelling in this novel by Anisul Hoque. The current text is an English translation by Enam Ahmed from the original Bengali novel *Ayeshamangal* (2010). *The Ballad of Ayesha* exceeds the original novel in significance as the translated one introduces some less known history of Bangladesh along with the folk myth of Behula, popular in Bengali local culture, to the world readership, and thus, opens up Bangladesh's history and a popular mythological tale to the world. So, the novel interweaves history and myth to usher a way of storytelling quite unique to modern-day Bangla literature. However, what is more interesting in this novel is its

portrayal of trauma- the protagonist Ayesha's trauma of losing her beloved husband Joynal and a parallel comparative presentation of Behula's traumatic experience of losing her husband Lakhinder. Thus, the individual Ayesha has been connected to the mythical Behula. The author's intention is clear in this regard, as he says:

I have given the title in the fashion of *Manashamangal*, an epic Bengali folklore. In fact, I have narrated the story of *Manashamangal* off and on in the book. There is a parallel between the story of the folklore and my own story and often their undercurrents mingle in the narrative. (Hoque, 2018, p. 167).

Here, the author points out that the titles of the original Bengali novel *Ayeshamangal* and its translation have been chosen intentionally to create a parallel with the Bengali folk epic *Manashamangal*.

However, this invocation of Manasha-myth in this novel has its objective which can be understood in the common traumatic experiences of Ayesha and Behula. *The Ballad of Ayesha* tells a woman, Ayesha's story. The novel starts in the present when Ayesha finally has got a clue to know

the truth behind his husband's disappearance and death. The omniscient narrator then narrates Ayesha's past as a meritorious, young school-going girl, her getting married to an air force officer Joynal Abedin, love for her husband, getting two children and the shocking disappearance of Joynal and the news of his death through a sentence of martial court. Ayesha becomes helpless in the patriarchal world with her two little children when her father passes away a few years later. Her struggle to survive through that tumultuous sea of patriarchal injustice has been portrayed vividly. The novel ends in tragedy when Ayesha despite her secret hope of finding Joynal alive, learns the tragic truth of her husband's cruel death in an unjustified administrative suspicion of being involved in an attempted coup against then military ruler General Ziaur Rahman.

The legend of Behula is derived from a medieval folk-epic in Bengali literature, *Manashamangal Kavya*. Behula loses her beloved husband Lakhinder of snake-bite on the very day of their marriage in a highly secured bridal chamber made by Chand Sadagor (Lakhinder's father) to save his last son from being killed by Manasha- the snake goddess who vowed to kill Lakhinder on his wedding night as a revenge on Chand as Chand refused to worship Manasha, whose being accepted as a goddess on earth depended on Chand's acceptance and worshipping of Manasha as a goddess. Eventually, Lakhinder is snake-bitten on the very night of his marriage and dies. Behula, however, refuses to accept the death of her beloved husband and begins her journey to heaven for justice with Lakhinder's dead-body. In the end, she, overcoming all the predicaments, wins back the life of her husband as a gift from god Indra. The trauma she goes through is severe and her resilience to overcome all the troubles is remarkable and legendary.

Trauma is, defines Cambridge dictionary, a "severe emotional shock and pain caused by an extremely upsetting experience." (dictionary.cambridge.org). However, in literature, "We think of trauma as a pathological mental and emotional condition, an injury to the psyche caused by catastrophic events, or by the threat of such events, which overwhelm an individual's normal response mechanisms." (Kurtz, 2018, p. 2). Now, Trauma Studies "explores the impact of trauma in literature and society by analyzing its psychological, rhetorical, and cultural significance." (literariness.org). Both Ayesha and Behula's experiences of acute sufferings are obviously traumatic. Despite the apparent differences in the final outcome of Ayesha and Behula's struggle, they are similar in their experience of trauma and struggle against all the odds in the society. As Hoque (2018) says, "I could feel that this lady was carrying the memories of her husband just as Behula carried her husband". (p. 169). The individual and the mythical have been, thus, represented in a historical context, as Hoque (2018) asserts, "We must understand the context of the story" (p. 168), which takes us back to 1977 when "there was a mysterious coup in Bangladesh in the aftermath of which many soldiers and officers of the Air Force were hanged." (p. 168). Thus, Hoque intertwines history, myth and trauma in his novel and presents a narrative to the readers who ponder over the underlying significance

of this presentation of history and myth. So, the objectives of the paper is to find out the significance of the use of myth in the text, to probe the use of history of a particular period of Bangladesh in the novel, and to investigate how does Ayesha's trauma connect to this presentation of history and myth.

The study uses a qualitative method to examine the primary and secondary resources and reach its objectives. Trauma theory in literature and historicism are two major theoretical perspectives used in this study. To analyze the presentation of history, historical criticism is a useful form of literary criticism that "in the light of historical evidence or based on the context in which a work was written, including facts about the author's life and the historical and social circumstances of the time." (britannica.com). Historical issues portrayed in the novel will be investigated in the light of this perspective. Further, the paper argues that Ayesha and Behula's sufferings are their traumatic experiences because of their personal losses and resulting acute mental sufferings. Thus, to understand the operation of trauma in *The Ballad of Ayesha*, this paper applies contemporary perspectives of trauma theory. So, this research claims Ayesha and Behula's sufferings and struggles as traumatic experiences, and depicts that *The Ballad of Ayesha* presents them in an intertwined style in a historically turbulent political context in a newly independent Bangladesh. It further asserts that Ayesha's trauma symbolically represents a period of national trauma in the history of Bangladesh.

#### PARALLEL PRESENTATION OF AYESHA AND BEHULA

The fiction illustrates individual traumas in a parallel presentation of Ayesha and Behula, and thus composing a ballad of suffering and struggle. Ayesha's moment of trauma in her life starts from the very moment of her husband's disappearance on that fated day of 2 October 1977. Joynal, a Bangladesh Airforce officer, left home early in the morning and never returned. "The night dragged on and yet, Joynal did not return. Ayesha's mind was filled with a sense of foreboding.... Her pregnant body made every step feel like moving a ton of bricks." (Hoque, 2018, p. 64). The acute disturbing experience becomes heavier when nobody could inform that alone and helpless pregnant woman in a friendless and unknown Dhaka city the whereabouts of her beloved husband. And, when, in the next morning, a stranger (someone from the air force) comes and informs that "Joynal has been arrested" (Hoque, 2018, p. 66), Ayesha's mental agony multiplies. The parallel to Behula's loss of Lakhinder and Ayesha's loss is evident in this illustration- "Ayesha's head started spinning. A thousand memories flashed through her mind.... Behula- Lakhinder. Lakhinder's body blue with venom. Goddess Manasha's curse." (Hoque, 2018, p. 66). However, Ayesha's trauma rises into its peak when a month later "THE LETTER ARRIVED in a long yeloo envelope". (Hoque, 2018, p. 1). And it announced that the martial law tribunal has "sentenced Corporal Joynal Abedin (Badge No. KA 44061) to death for an attempted coup in the defence

forces on 2 October 1977". (Hoque, 2018, p. 2). The novel describes her moment of that acute mental distress-

She let out a shrill cry, 'O Allah!'... Her cry had been unrelenting. It had the noxious effect of a snakebite and drowned out all other sounds around- ... And Ayesha was lying on the floor, lifeless. (Hoque, 2018, p. 4-5).

This news just does not end, rather begins a new phase of Ayesha's trauma and lonely struggle in life with her two little children. "The letter had not explained much. Not a word about whether Joynal was dead or alive, or buried, in case he was dead. Nothing of that sort." (Hoque, 2018, p. 5). This creates a sense of hope for Ayesha that she cherished in the deep of her heart for twenty years that may be Joynal is alive after all, and is in jail serving long terms, and would come out one day, despite others telling her that Joynal must be dead. The severe mental stress of Ayesha is not helped by what happens in her life later in a cruel patriarchal world. She, together with her two infants, gets shelter at her father's house, but soon after Azizul Hoque's death, her brothers do not show great empathy for her. In her father-in-laws house she is not a welcome figure; all are blaming her directly or indirectly for the fate of their son, Joynal. Again, when she tries to stand on her own feet by offering private tuition, she is given blame as a woman of bad character. However, Ayesha's determination is not diminished at all. In the end, despite carrying that deep scar of mental agony with her for twenty years, she has fulfilled the dream that Joynal dreamt of, bringing up their children well educated. The novel ends when Ayesha after twenty years of pain, finally, learns about the ultimate truth of her husband's execution in 1977 from a newspaper journalist who got access to those earlier secret, classified files. The novel ends there, but surely Ayesha's secret hope of meeting her beloved again is destroyed.

Silence is often regarded as an expression of deep trauma. Maria Ritter (2014) in her article "Silence as the Voice of Trauma" says, "Silence is a key to the unspoken world of the patient. Rather than interpreting silence as a defensive maneuver, the analyst may understand this disruption as a royal road to the patient's traumatic experiences." ("abstract"). Fakhru, Ayesha's son, fearfully finds this silence in her mother- "Fakhru was speechless. His legs were trembling.... His mother was still showing no emotion. Her face could have been set in stone." (Hoque, 2018, p. 156). So, the trauma which befell on her twenty years ago does not come to an end; rather she has to carry it with her to the grave.

Behula went through such trauma for her beloved husband, Lakhinder, in the story of a popular folk-myth in Bengal. The story is found in *Manashamangal Kavya* by Ketakadas Kshemananda who composed this tale of the snake-goddess Manasha, a non-aryan goddess, who forced a Shiva worshipper named Chand (or Cand, or even Cando), to worship her as a goddess and thus established herself as a goddess on earth. (wikipedia.org). Regarding the influence of Manasha in Bengal Pranabananda Jash (1986) depicts, "In fact, the worship of Manasa is prevalent all over Bengal, especially the rural Bengal and neighbouring regions among the people of the lower stratum of the society like the Dom,

Bauri, Keot, Mal, Bagdi, etc., mostly hinduised aboriginals." (p. 170). However, in *The Ballad of Ayesha*, Manasha, as per the tale in *Manashamangal Kavyo*, has been described as a demonic power which causes sufferings and trauma. Metaphorically, she represents someone who in lust of position and power destroys innocent lives. Lakhinder had been the last son of Chand who became the latest victim of Manasha's rage and was killed of snake-bite as Chand refused to accept Manasha as a goddess and worship her. The rebellion of rich merchant Chand destroyed his all- his seven sons were killed and he lost his ships too. Edward C. Dimock, Jr. & A. K. Ramanujan (1964) in their article "The Goddess of Snakes in Medieval Bengali Literature. Part II" depicts this tale of Behula- Lakhinder and Lakhinder's death, used in Hoque's tale. I would summarize the part of Lakhinder's death from their article: Cando summoned Visvakarma, the architect of the gods, and prevailed upon him to build on a high mountain a house all of iron so that Manasha cannot fulfill her oath of killing Lakhinder on his day of marriage. Manasha got news of this and threatened Visvakarma with consequences of her wrath unless he left a chink in the iron. Visvakarma got terrified and complied. The wedding took place and immediately Cando took the couple to the iron house. Manasha sent her deadly snakes one after another, but Behula was awake and caught all of them and put them in a basket. Finally, at the end of the night, Manasha sent the deadly snake called Kalini. Behula, exhausted, was dozing beside her husband, and Kalini unintentionally bit Lakhinder. Behula, cut off the end of the tail part of Kalini while Kalini was fleeing but Lakhinder was dead. (Dimock & Ramanujan, p. 314-315).

Behula's trauma just begins here- she is cursed by Sanaka, her mother-in-law and blamed by many. Behula; however, shows exemplary courage, determination and faithfulness to her husband Lakhinder that places her in a legendary position as Dimock & Ramanujan (1964) says, "Behula's faithfulness is proverbial in Bengal; she rivals Sita and Savitri as a model of Indian womanhood" (p. 315). In the legend, Behula goes through extreme physical and mental stress and sufferings on her quest to restore the life of Lakhinder. "Behula, the body of Lakhinder in her lap, drifted on the river. She was beset by many dangers: men who wanted to seduce her, animals which wanted to eat the corpse." (Dimock & Ramanujan, 1964, p. 316). In the mythological tale, the mythical Behula, in the end, succeeded to revive Lakhinder by pleasing the gods through her penance. Behula succeeds but she has to go through a traumatic experience that was thrown upon her by a deity full of lust for position and power of a goddess.

Despite the different ending of their stories, both Ayesha and Behula stand out in a similar way. They are victims of someone else's hunger- hunger for consolidation of power and position. For Behula it was Manasha who wanted to be revered as a goddess on earth where she had not been accepted as one till then. The innocent woman Behula had to go through acute mental distress and physical penance for Manasha's lust. On the other hand, Ayesha becomes a victim of relentless desires of military Generals to grab and consolidate power of a newly independent nation. Anisul Hoque (2018) asserts that both Behula and Ayesha's stories are sim-

ilar- Behula's story "is the story of a Bengali woman who journeyed with her husband's corpse in a raft to resurrect him. In my story, another Bengali woman, just like Behula, carries her husband's memory year after year,..." (p. 168). Thus, in parallel to Behula, Ayesha's tale resonates the same sense of tragedy that readers feel for Behula. This creates a new ballad- a tale of Ayesha's tragedy.

## HISTORY REVISITED

*The Ballad of Ayesha* revisits the initial years of post-independence Bangladesh with specific objectives. Firstly, the novel tries to discard the negative criticism of Bangabandhu's measures of rebuilding a new nation, destroyed by the Pakistani military, by indicating the famine he had to face, and the socio-political anarchy created by JSD. Then, the in-fights, coups and counter-coups, and the rise of General Ziaur Rahman as the first military-ruler of Bangladesh have been viewed through very common eyes. After that, Ziaur Rahman's tenure as the President of Bangladesh has been sketched with little praise and a lot of sarcasm. This research will offer a historical reading of the period from 1972 to 1977 to understand the presentation of those historical moments appropriated in the current novel. The novel substantiates a historical narrative widely discussed in recent decades and which have been suppressed for decades by the military regimes in the post 1975 political context of Bangladesh. Generally, the term Historicism "is understood simply to imply a historical approach that sets a text or texts in an appropriate past historical context" (Brooker, 2002, p. 123). Again, historicism refers to "a theory, doctrine, or style that emphasizes the importance of history: such as: a theory in which history is seen as a standard of value or as a determinant of events." (merriam-webster.com). *The Ballad of Ayesha*, a historical novel, thus, will be analyzed and understood in the historical context of Bangladesh from 1972 to 1977, and the major political events will also be explored in this study.

After the independence of Bangladesh from Pakistan, the government of Bangladesh had been led by Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman from 1972 to 15 August 1975. He took a plethora of initiatives to rebuild the war-ravaged nation. However, he had to face numerous challenges- both internal and external. He had to tackle a famine in 1974. Moreover, political insurgency in the country led by the armed radicals had been creating major instability in the newly born nation:

The new nation faced many other seemingly insurmountable problems inhibiting its reconstruction. One of the most glaring was the breakdown of law and order. In the wake of the war of independence, numerous bands of guerrillas still roamed the countryside, fully armed and outside the control of the government. (globealsecurity.org)

Bangabandhu has been working hard to establish stability through a democratic system of governance in the country, but problems of insurgency, economic crisis and shortage of food in 1974 made things worse. Tinker & Husain (2021) in Encyclopedia Britannica describes the situation as follows:

Elections held in 1973 gave Mujib a landslide majority, but the euphoria soon evaporated. Following a policy of economic socialism, the state had absorbed industries and businesses abandoned by Pakistanis, but economic troubles persisted. Prices escalated, and in 1974 scarcities were exacerbated by a great famine with a massive death toll. (Bangladesh).

The above mentioned internal and external problems led him to rethink the political system of Bangladesh and he, subsequently, adopted a new system that many harsh critics of Bangabandhu and Awami League calls dictatorship. However, Bangabandhu, along with his family, was then brutally assassinated:

On August 15, 1975, Mujib was assassinated along with most of his family. Right-wing pro-Pakistan army officers were behind the killing; some politicians also were involved in the conspiracy, and there were allegations of outside support. (Tinker & Husain, 2021, Bangladesh).

History of this political instability and fear among general people has found its voice in Hoque's novel which recreates these moments of pathos from the perspectives of apolitical people. The rise of communist insurgency (widely known as Nakshal movement) has been portrayed in a rural context:

It was 1974. A great famine was spreading its tentacles across Bangladesh. The farmlands had no work. They started streaming towards the towns in search of jobs. Desperation turned people into robbers. Every night, there were reports of robbery from one place or another. There were rumors that the leftists were involved. 'Arre sir, JSD, the radical leftist party, is behind all this chaos,' said an all-knowing teacher to Ayesha's father. (Hoque, 2018, p. 13)

The mayhem created by the radical left parties created havoc not only for the common people, but also for the Bangabandhu government. A proof of the fear they created is presented in the text by Hoque through the incident of Ayesha's early marriage when a young man named Alam, self-proclaimed Nakshal, threatens to bring those radicals after being refused by Ayesha in his proposal of love: "Okay, I am leaving. But I will bring the Naxals. The JSD. They will know how to treat you best". (Hoque, 2018, p. 16). Ayesha's father marries his talented daughter off hurriedly only out of fear of these Nakshals.

The brutal assassination of Bangabandhu and the anxiety it created among common people are traced in the novel through the voice of Ayesha and her father, Azizul Hoque:

'I feel depressed.... Why did they kill Bongobodhu Mujib? Azizul Master started crying aloud again. His cry could be heard from afar. Tanks were rolling down the streets of Dhaka. Their chains left deep marks on the chip seal roads. Azizul Master's wailing drowned the roar of the machines. (Hoque, 2018, p. 44).

His cry represents the deep sorrow felt by the ordinary people many of whom were even scared to cry aloud, as Ayesha was afraid that spies may hear- "Please. Don't cry again, Baba. Do you want all of us to get in trouble? Please be quiet. There are military men all around. Calm down." (Hoque, 2018, p. 45).

The initial post-Mujib years proved to be bloodier, conflict-ridden and undemocratic for the nation. Maniruzzaman

(1976) writes, "... at the end of 1975 Bangladesh entered into a period of greater uncertainty than was the case under the Mujib regime. With the removal of the charismatic leadership of Sheikh Mujib, conflicting political forces are taking definite shape." (p. 129). Coup and counter-coup followed later on. Khandakar Mushtaq, often termed as the traitor who betrayed Sheikh Mujib, ran the government as a puppet led by the military officers who killed Bangabandhu. A coup on 3 November 1972 brought Major Khaled Mosharraf to power, who was then terminated in a counter coup on 7 November by Colonel Taher- a Marxist revolutionary officer and friend of General Zia, brought Zia to the helm of power. Syed Serajul Islam (1984) says-

The fall of Mujib in August and the "sepoy mutiny" of November 7, from which General Ziaur Rahman (Zia) emerged as the de facto military ruler, profoundly altered the state system in Bangladesh. A "new state" emerged, which seemed to follow a pattern that had been set in prelibation Bangladesh; a marriage of convenience between civil and military bureaucrats, similar to that existing in Pakistan before it collapsed in 1971, evolved in Bangladesh after the 1971 coup. (p. 556).

The novel, then, hints at the crackdown on JSD, which Bangabandhu did not do, by General Ziaur Rahman. The hanging of Colonel Taher, has been described with a tone of sympathy in the text, as he is quoted dreaming of revolution till his hanging, "There is nothing greater than a brave heart. I call upon my countrymen to be brave in their purpose. My death does not signify the end of a revolution. It is only the prelude to a greater struggle." (Hoque, 2018, p. 51).

## MYTH, HISTORY AND A NATIONAL TRAUMA

*The Ballad of Ayesha* uses myth as a metaphor to represent a historical period of national trauma in independent Bangladesh. The initial post-independent years from 15 August 1975 have been nothing short of traumatic experiences for Bangladeshi people who cherished and fought for the independence of the nation. The assassination of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman has been the beginning point of a few years of great political unrest when coup after coup followed; and like a game of Russian roulette one after another military officers rose and fell. Finally, General Ziaur Rahman came out victorious though he was also killed by a group of military officers in 1981 and, thus another military commander, General Ershad climbed up to power. This uncertainty in the politics of Bangladesh did not end till 1990 when General Ershad had to step down as president of Bangladesh after a great pro-democratic uprising of people of Bangladesh.

Talukder Maniruzzaman (1976) describes the event of Bangabandhu's killing:

The details of the bloody coup staged in the early hours of August 15 are well-known in the political circles of Dacca. Three dismissed officers of the army in collaboration with 20 to 30 majors and captains ... of the armoured corps of the Bangladesh army<sup>5</sup>, supported by about 1400 soldiers, made simultaneous attacks on the residences of Sheikh Mujib, Sheikh Moni and Abdur Rab Sarniabad." (p. 122).

Thus, twenty persons of the Sheikh Mujib family including Bangabandhu himself were brutally assassinated. Later, on 3 November, "several senior officers led by Brigadier Khaled Musharraf staged a second coup." (Maniruzzaman, 1976, p. 124), and thus, toppling the betrayer of Bangabandhu and the puppet of Bangabandhu's killers, Khandakar Mushtaq. Then, on 7 November another coup staged by Colonel Taher killed Khaled Musharraf and brought General Zia as the de facto ruler of Bangladesh- "Khaled Musharraf was killed while trying to flee from the Cantonment. The *jawans* then freed Ziaur Rahman who had been kept under house arrest." (Maniruzzaman, 1976, p. 125).

This novel does not go into details; still it portrays these moments of pain and uncertainty in the aftermath of Bangabandhu's assassination. How voices and cries of people were suppressed through fear is portrayed by Azizur Rahman's cry after hearing of Bangabandhu's assassination and Ayesha's expression of fear that some spies must hear him lamenting which might bring danger for them. (Hoque, 2018, p. 45). The aftermath confusion and uncertainty of the massacre is pointed out too:

Things were not the same after the coup on 15 August. Trouble brewed within the armed forces. It was difficult to decide which faction of the forces was in control. Military officers were confused about which side to take. The most confusing days were between 3 November and 7 November. (Hoque, 2018, p. 49).

The novel, then, sketches the strong arm tactics that Zia applied to consolidate his power. "Colonel Taher was soon arrested and sent to the military tribunal. Zia himself signed the death sentence for Taher, the man who freed him through a coup." (Hoque, 2018, p. 51). Later, Ziaur Rahman "removed Justice Sayem from the presidency and declared himself the President and chief martial law administrator." (Hoque, 2018, p. 52). The fiction, now, throws light some shadowed history of Bangladesh when General Zia brutally subdued rebellions inside the armed forces and hanged a lot of officers. The story of Corporal Joynal Abedin of Bangladesh Air Force is a sample of hundreds of such stories. In October 1977, Zia became worried of a growing dissent in the armed forces "when some sections of the army and the bulk of the air force attempted a coup." (Franda, 1981, p. 365). Franda (1981) describes-

Eleven senior air force officers, 10 army officers and estimated 200 other soldiers were killed in that abortive coup, while hundreds of others were said to have been killed during an earlier coup attempt at Bogra on September 30, 1977. Zia himself announced that 460 people were tried for participation in October coup, of whom only 63 were acquitted. (p. 365).

The assassination of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and his family in 1975, and the aftermath chaos and killings through coups and counter-coups, together with this massacre of hundreds of officers of armed forces in 1977 are nothing sort of moments of a collective sufferings and agony for a newly independent nation like Bangladesh. This is nothing but a second spell of national trauma for the people of Bengal after the genocide by Pakistani military in 1971.

Plotkin-Amrami & Brunner (2015) in their article "Making up 'national trauma' in Israel: From collective identity to collective vulnerability" discusses the idea of national trauma:

Over the past two decades, the term 'national trauma' has become common in the academic literature on psychological reactions of an entire country to large-scale violence. The term is usually used in a cultural sense to describe collective experiences of violent events, ones that undermines the ethos of a society.... (p. 526).

The violent events that unfolded in Bangladesh and its politics in August 1975 and its aftermath, the brutal killings of armed forces officers on accusations of mutiny are violent experiences that shook the whole nation. Thus, these moments of national trauma has found a voice in *The Ballad of Ayesha*.

This novel uses metaphors to portray the moments of national trauma. Ayesha and Behula's individual traumas metaphorically represent the collective trauma that people of Bangladesh faced from 15 August 1975 to 1977. The tragedy of the two women of Bengal are ballads of the own, while the tragedy for the people of Bangladesh, who lost the Father of the Nation, his family, and the brave sons of Bengal in this period, composes a ballad of bloodbath which has been portrayed in a compact way in Anisul Hoque's fiction, *The Ballad of Ayesha*. All three, Behula, Ayesha and Bangladesh were victims of power struggles. The legendary Behula was a victim of tension between Chand and Manasha, while Ayesha becomes the perfect metaphor for mother-Bangladesh who becomes an innocent victim of power-hungry Generals. Thus, the novel puts history and myth in a synchronized way to lament moments of national trauma.

## CHALLENGING NARRATIVES

Hoque's fiction, while presenting a national trauma, challenges some politically motivated historical propaganda narratives. Firstly, the fiction refutes the narrative, presented by some ideologues of anti-Mujib political forces, that says people of Bangladesh became extremely antagonist to Bangabandhu and his regime, while in the novel, Azizul Haque, the school teacher, is found crying and lamenting the loss, Ayesha and her family keeping *roja* (fasting) to pray for their great leader's soul. The voices of common people like Azizul Haque, Ayesha, Joynal are only suppressed out of fear of their own lives as the ruthless killers of Bangabandhu were not less brutal than the Pakistani military. This narrative challenges and proves the so-called "mayhem and relief" narrative that "Sheikh Mujib gave up the façade of parliamentary government and resorted to device of a one-party dictatorship and totalitarian control" (Maniruzzaman, 1976, p. 119) and his demise relieved people of Bangladesh as promoted by his political rivals in the post 1975 era accusing Bangabandhu's tenure a failure, a mere falsehood as found in some politically affiliated intellectuals in later decades. Professor Dr. Shawkat Ara (2003), writes in her book, *Bangladeshi Jatiyotabad: Rajnitir Bikash o Jonopriyota*:

*Sedin jatir chorom opomaner din- hotashar din, khover din. Je Sheikh Mujib somogro jatir nikot ekjon deshpre-*

*mik neta, bir chilen, dhire dhire sob gunaboli kothay hariye gelo. Tar modhye fascism ese gelo. Manush 1971- er moto punoray bhito, sontrasto, khubdho hoye gelo.* (That was a day of great insult for the nation- a day of frustration and rage. That Sheikh Mujib, who was a patriotic leader, a hero to the entire nation, where all those virtues had gone! Fascism engulfed him.... People again became afraid and angry as in 1971. (p. 21).

Such representation of Bangabandhu has been countered and refuted in the novel through the reaction of Azizul Hoque Master, a representative of both the ordinary and patriotic people of Bangladesh.

Again, the tenure of General Ziaur Rahman has been often portrayed as a period of calm, development and democracy which have been challenged and lampooned in this text. The presidential election of 30 May 1977 has been sarcastically portrayed as a highly rigged one. In the novel, "Azizul Master was tired of waiting for voters" (Hoque, 2018, p. 55) as only some selected few were allowed to vote. In the end, even the few "NO" votes were turned into "YES" votes:

The assistant presiding officer, Shamsul Huda, said, 'What's the need to count? Just watch what I do. Don't make a fuss.' He opened both the 'Yes' and 'No' ballot boxes and stashed the 'No' ballot papers into the 'Yes' box.... Shamsul then took the thick wad of unused ballot papers, tore them up and stuffed them into the 'Yes' box.... Barely fifteen or twenty votes had been cast out of a total of 1400. So now he made it seem that 1390 votes had been cast. Of them, 1388 went to the 'Yes' box and only two to 'No' vote box. (Hoque, 2018, p. 56).

*The Ballad of Ayesha*, thus, challenges the credibility of the narrative of a free and fair democratic process under the Zia regime. Again, the myth of political stability in General Zia's time has been challenged by the portrayal of the attempted coup in the armed forces in 1977 and the description of his assassination in 1981 "in an army coup Chittagong." (Hoque, 2018, p. 126). Thus, the novel refutes many propagandist political narratives regarding Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and the tenure of General Ziaur Rahman.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, *The Ballad of Ayesha* is a novel that goes beyond its overt subject matter of a personal tragedy; rather it uplifts a national one that still haunts the politics of Bangladesh. In the end, Ayesha's personal loss of a loving husband is exceeded by a nation's loss of its father-figure and also the loss of its brave sons who died in coups and counter-coups in a period that is a dark blot on the history of an independent Bangladesh. The popular myth of Behula and her personal tragedy amplifies the significance of Ayesha's sufferings, and together it sets the tone of a ballad- a song of tragic loss. The mythical story of Manasha's lust for the position and recognition as a goddess among the mortals and throwing vengeful venom when she is refused and resisted goes beyond a tale and becomes a historical metaphor to understand a similar lust for power and position among the armed forces of independent Bangladesh, when a group of

revengeful military officers threw their venom on not only Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and his family but also on the nation of Bangladesh. Later struggle for power among military commanders and the resulting bloodbath, imposition of martial law and the killings of hundreds of armed forces officers on accusation of coup-attempt are not less cruel than Manasha's venomous bite that took away Behula's happiness and thrown her into the darkness of trauma. The traumatic experiences Ayesha goes through represent the collective trauma of people of Bangladesh who went through immense agony in the aftermath of 15 August 1975. The novel, again, questions and refutes many propagandist narratives regarding Bangabandhu and his tenure, and the political development later years.

However, the study could not minutely discuss all the political events represented in this novel. The role of JSD in creating a chaotic situation in the tenure of Bangabandhu has been hinted in this text, and their role in his tragedy should be subject of separate studies. The crackdown on JSD by Ziaur Rahman and its implication to the later coup-attempt in the armed forces call for further study. Above all, the struggle of Ayesha as a single-mother in a patriarchal and conservative Bangladeshi social context summons more analysis.

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