Chapter- 5

HUMAYUN KABIR
CHAPTER – V

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INTRODUCTION:

The contribution of the pre-independence period political leader-writers to the field of Indian writing in English is immense. Some of the leader-writers are multidimensional and multilingual personalities. Sometimes even it is difficult to draw an exact line of demarcation in their commitments. For instance, in the first phase of Indo-Anglian literary history, writers like Sarojini Naidu, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, M. K. Gandhi and B. R. Ambedkar are great writers as well as great socio-political and socio-cultural activists. Similarly, in the second phase of Indian literary history, Muslim writers like K. A. Abbas, Ahmed Ali and Humayun Kabir had their own political charms. This is more true in the case of Humayun Kabir. Though he lived for just sixty-three years, his contribution in both English and Urdu is enormous. He started his career as a writer at the age of twenty by publishing a collection of poems and he continued his creative writing till the end of his life. His last book is on Maulana Abdul Kalam Azad published in
1959. It is translated into several European Languages. Really he is as
great as any of the pre-independence Indian English writers.

HUMAYUN KABIR’S LIFE AND WORKS:

Humayun Kabir, a writer and politician, hails from West Bengal.
He was the son of a Civil Service Officer, Kabir Uddin Ahmed. He was
born in Faridpur on 22nd February 1906. He learnt Bengali, Urdu and
English. Even during the days of his education he worked, and he
obtained an M.A. from the University of Calcutta and he got one more
M.A. from the University of Oxford.

Humayun Kabir’s educational career was marked with brilliance.
As a student he bagged a number of gold medals, prizes and
scholarships. The period from 1926 to 1928 is an unforgettable time of
success in his life. He won a state scholar award in 1927, Exeter College
Foundation Prize in 1931 and a number of other prizes. His life is full of
colourful incidents and professional changes. He was a journalist,
lecturer, politician and a leader of students’ and peasants’ movements
and trade unions.

Soon after completing his post-graduation, Humayun Kabir
joined Andhra University and taught there for two years in 1932-33.
Then he joined Calcutta University and worked for eight years. Later he
was appointed as a special lecturer in Tagore Studies and served in both Oxford and London Universities.

Most of the writers of the 1940s and 1950s were men of multidimensional abilities. For instance, K. A. Abbas was a novelist, journalist, filmmaker, organizer and orator and Prof. Ahmed Ali was a novelist, professor, businessman and ambassador. Similarly Humayun Kabir was a versatile genius. During the days of his higher education, he worked as an editor for Presycoll Magazine. Later he launched his own paper Bharat in 1929. He worked for another leading magazine of Calcutta Chaturanga in 1934. Even he wrote columns for Bara Mashi.

Dipankar Datta, in the Preface to his work *Humayun Kabir: A Political Biography*, writes,

Humayun Kabir has perhaps many firsts to his credit than any contemporary Indian. After a resplendent career in India, he went to Oxford to become the first Asian to achieve office in the union and a first in a final honour school. He was the first Indian, possibly the first Asian, to translate one of Emmanuel Kant’s unpublished texts from German into English. His application of sociological analysis to the interpretation of Indian culture was the first of its kind. They are Jawaharlal Nehru’s *Discovery of India* and Sardar Panikkar’s *Survey of Indian History*. He presided
over the only conference of the Indian philosophical congress held outside India, was president of the first All India Literary Convention and chairman of the presidium of the first Asian Literary Conference. He was Co-Chairman at Canberra of the first international Round Table on the philosophy of the East and the West. He was the first Indian to be invited to inaugurate the American National Education Conference at San Francisco in the USA. He presided over the first Asian History Congress and is the only student of humanities to become the president of Indian Science Congress. He was the first Indian to preside over the International Congress Orientalism and his record of being simultaneously the president of Indian Philosophical Congress, the Indian Science Congress and the International Congress of Orientals is not likely to be repeated soon. He was the first Asian to deliver the Herbert Spencer’s lecture at Oxford where the earlier lecturers were men like Einstein and Bertrand Russell.1

Prof. Kabir’s interest in politics began from his student days. He was actively involved in politics until his death on August 18, 1969.
Dipankar Dutta thinks that his great asset whether in India or abroad, is that he had no rival.

Humayun Kabir involved in the politics of his time. He was a dynamic activist. He was a member of Bengal Legislative Council from 1937 to 1945. As he achieved popularity he got re-elected for a second term. He represented Krishik Praja Party and Nikhil Bengal Krishik Praja Sameethi. Humayun Kabir was a humanitarian and he identified himself with the common people. His purpose behind his political involvement was for the re-organization of farmer's community. He was a member of the Rajya Sabha and Loka Sabha, and a Union Minister for Civil Aviation Ministry for Scientific Research and Cultural Affairs and a Minister for Petroleum and Chemicals. Besides, he had associated himself with various organizations. He was the president for Federation of Port Trust Workers. He was a great disciple of Maulana Abdul Kalam Azad and acted as his secretary during the Shimla Conference. He was a leader for Indian Education Mission to the erstwhile U.S.S.R. He was a joint additional adviser for University Grants Commission. Humayun Kabir was a leader for Indian delegation to the third General Conference of the UNESCO.

Humayun Kabir's short life covers such a long list of achievements that no other contemporary writer could boast of. He was one of the active, brilliant and wonderful personalities of Indian socio-
HUMAYUN KABIR'S NOVELS:

Humayun Kabir has written varieties of books. His world of creativity includes poetry, essays, criticism, travelogue, translation, autobiography and fiction. He wrote in Urdu, Bengali and English. Of course, he was a very prolific writer in Bengali. Still his contribution to the development of Indian writing in English is respected and considered seriously. His *Mahatma and Other Poems* (poetry), *Men and Rivers* (a novel), *Our Heritage* (a history), *Cabbage and Kings* (a collection of speeches) and *Green and Gold* (a translation from Bengali into English) are examples of his involvement in the literary history of 1940s and 1950s. Some of his works are translated into European languages.

As it is already mentioned, Humayun Kabir's novel *Men and Rivers* was published in 1945. Besides, he has written a collection of short stories called *Three Stories* (1947) and a collection of speeches, *Cabbages and Kings* (1948). Humayun Kabir was basically a political leader and organizer, who widely travelled attending national and international seminars. Some of them reflect his concept of co-existence. In spite of his busy political career, he spent a good deal of time in literary activities. His creative writing is a combination of both social
and philosophical observations. His *Men and Rivers* reads like a story of the river Ganga. It is his only novel but of great importance. Uma Parameswaran is of the opinion that,

*Men and Rivers* is an interesting novel where the author has invested a simple story with a deep significance of human values. The story is based on the ancient legends of East Bengal where River Padma is looked on as a merciful mother as well as mother Kali, the destroyer.²

In fact, now East-Bengal is not a part of India as with Partition it went to Pakistan. However, it did not remain with Pakistan too as it declared its independence in 1967 becoming a separate country called Bangladesh. Still *Men and Rivers* is an exclusive story of Bangladesh as Humayun Kabir wrote it when Bangladesh was a part of India. As politics was Humayun Kabir's forte, propaganda was inseparable from his writing. Of course, he writes with a purpose. Social change, women’s emancipation, progress of Muslim community and communal harmony are the major purposes behind his writing. Humayun Kabir has tried to achieve this goal in *Men and Rivers*. Though he is a Muslim writer, his novel transcends religious limitations and it is identified as a work of mainstream Indian writing in English.

A village called Dhaldi on the river Padma is a locale of the novel. Another village Byanchar is on the other side of the river. There are two
families in these villages, symbolically representing India and Pakistan. We know that they are not the cities but ordinary villages in East Bengal. Nazumia and Asgar are two of the farmers of these villages. The hitch lies in the fact that both love a girl called Amina. Humayun Kabir has sketched Amina as the central character of a love-triangle. Later the two farmers try to possess the belle and the same leads to a ruthless enmity between them.

Nazumia and Asgarmia originally hail from a place called Katihar. When they leave their village with Rahim Baksh they are just sixteen years old. They find a good riverside. Therein the land is fertile. This makes them dream many things. Nazumia’s love for the river Padma is admirable. The author says,

He loved her with almost physical passion as he remembered the days that he had passed with her. His life was wedded to hers when Rahim Baksh brought him to her banks and selected a plot of land for him. It looked at first sight an unpromising plot. It was a marshy land by the riverside in which grew wild grass and reeds; but Rahim Baksh called him aside and said, ‘don’t be despondent, my lad, the soil is like gold. You can grow paddy here and get crops that are beyond your wildest dreams. In winter you
can grow mustard and garlic and other crops... surely Allah will make you prosperous.\(^3\)

Not to speak of the two brethren start a fresh life. They prosper too. But their ambitions make them greedy. Their high expectations make them callous. The old enmity continues. The novelist observes,

They were neighbours as in the days of old, but between them burnt enmity, bitterness and evil memories. Allah was merciful but why should his mercy extend equally to all? In his own fields a happy harvest smiled, but the pleasure at the thought was almost spoiled when he remembered the bumper crop expected by his rival and enemy.\(^4\)

The novel reads like a romantic film, which was popular in the author's days. When the difference between the two families reach a finale, Amina marries Nazumia of Dhaldi. But their marriage does not go a long way. Soon they separate from each other because of their personal differences. But Amina has already given birth to a male child, Malik. Nazumia too passes away in a few years. The incidents move fast as though in a film. Amina has already married Nazumia's enemy Asgarmia and she has given birth to a female child, Nuru. What is more interesting is these two children Malik and Nuru grow together later. Besides, they do not know the background of their families. But Malik,
as an orphan boy, is not as fortunate as Nuru. Still they live together and fall in love with each other. It is astonishing that they are portrayed as though unaware of their parental background. Indeed, there is much mystery.

However, one day Asgarmia comes to know the two youngsters' love-affair. He is enraged. Shortly he tells them the riddle of their past. This, in fact, shocks the lovers. The repercussions are serious. Malik runs away for escaping the emotional blow.

This is how Humayun Kabir presents a romantic story related to two generations. The novel, in addition to that, depicts the plight of farmers on the bank of river Padma. But critics say Humayun Kabir's portrayal of rural India is not so authentic. Yet his characters like Nazumia, Asgarmia and Ayesha are well depicted. For example, Ayesha the female character is Nazumia's mother and she is a great matron of the village. Ayesha is known for her courage and frankness. She is braver than her son. As we see she wants her grandson Malik get married at the earliest. That is too when he is just ten years old. When Nazumia opposes the idea, she asks, "How old was your father, when he married me. Do you want Malik grow into an old man of eighty before you will think a bride for him." Ayesha wants to see a grandson before she dies. Ayesha is a God-fearing woman of certain moral codes and social conduct. While her son Nazumia is not a man of patience. He
is rough and short-tempered. Often there are clashes between Nazumia and Asgarmia. Sometimes, Ayesha scolds her son for his disobedience to the Panchayat.

The novel, besides being a love story, is a picturesque and authentic study in Indian tradition. It is a saga about Indian customs, beliefs, urban-rural polarity and the simple life of peasants and fisherfolk of East Bengal. For instance, Faqeer-episode represents Indians' innocence and ignorance. This is how Humayun Kabir tries to show generation gap. For example, Ayesha represents the old generation while Nazumia represents the young. Even Ramzan, Nazumia's friend is in favour of the old generation when Ramzan tries to convince Nazumia that Faqeers could predict future. Nazumia says,

Have I kept you to go about nosing for charlatans and cheats? He regards. Faqeer indeed! As if a real Faqeer has no other business but to cater to idiots and rogues like you! Ramzan persisted. Don't abuse a holy man Panchayat. They know even your unuttered thoughts. They can hear you even if they are not here. Nazumia uttered a mighty oath and said - Allah has given you a buffalo's frame and a buffalo's wits. Will your Faqeer secure me? If he can, well, I will pay him in silver. If he can't, what good is he to anybody?
Not to speak of when Nazumia rejects certain of Ramzan's request, the Faqeer gets angry and he abuses Nazumia. However irrational the Faqeer seems to be, it appears, he predicts Nazumia's future. This emerges as a climax in the novel. For instance, the Faqeer bursts,

Get back, get back, you fool, for on you is a great calamity, and yet you are fighting among yourselves. The river shall rise and land and water shall be one. For Nazumia, I see a stormy evening when the clouds gather and the waters boil. Your best friend will be your worst enemy and your worst enemy will be your best friend. Beware, beware when the wind is from the northeast and the cloudy eagle rises in the sky. Asgar and Nazu; Nazu and Asgar - what a strange pattern of love, hatred and suffering, Allah weaves with you.\footnote{7}

Modern science is powerless before certain Indian saints. However the Indian sub-continent undergoes rapid changes, characters like the Faqeer get a wide popularity in rural society. When Nazumia's mother Ammajan listens to Nazumia's quarrel with the Faqeer, she feels that something unnatural is going to befall upon him. What is more? Nazumia, the protagonist himself believes that fate is unavoidable. So the novel *Men and Rivers* is full of popular beliefs, exposing Indian psychology. The concepts like modernism, science and technology do
not find a place of pride in the novel. Most of the characters emerge from peasantry and they are lay people.

The second chapter of the novel is a discussion on religious practices, especially about the Quran and its importance. Humayun Kabir presents the level of peasants' literacy and the like. For example, the discussion between Nazumia and a young man runs like this:

What are you reading? He asked the young man. "Don't you know the Quran? He replied 'I am an unlettered man my brother,' replied Nazumia, 'and I rarely have the good fortune of listening to the holy writ. Will you please tell me what you are reading? 'But you are listening to what we are reading,' returned the young man. 'Yes; I can hear what you are reading, but I cannot understand a word. Will you please tell me the meaning of the verse you are reading?' said Nazumia. The young man looked with astonishment at the meaning of the verses? 'But we don't know the meaning. Aren't they the words of Allah? That is enough for us; we are committing the verses to memory.' Nazumia was about to answer when the inner door opened again.

The novel is full of funny scenes.

Humayun Kabir presents a beautiful picture of the river Padma.

The river is full of hopes for Asgarmia and Nazumia, while it is a mine
of new life for Chacha. It is a life-force for the Bengalees as much as it is a valley of death for people like Nazumia and Ammajan. In one of the situations Nazumia tries to convince his mother that the river Padma has lost her fury. In return Ammajan says, “One can never trust Padma. She is a witch, a witch that has swallowed hundreds of villages and men. She puts on an appearance of calm only to lure unwary boats.”

The river Padma is not just an imaginary creation. It is a reality flowing near Faridpur, which is Humayun Kabir’s birthplace. Humayun Kabir has spent much of his life in Padma’s atmosphere. She has influenced him in many ways. Her ever-changing shape and upheavals have influenced his poetry in *Monads and Society* and *Mahatma and Other Poems*. Similarly *Men and Rivers* grows amidst her presence. In fact, the river Padma reminds us the river Ganga. It is personified that way.

Here it is a character rather. Humayun Kabir observes,

The Padma lay still in the haze of light. She had lost her autumnal splendor and looked emaciated and hungry. Sandbanks showed here and there. The banks in the distance gleamed in the sunlight. The brilliance on the river was dazzling. A steel sky looked down upon the steel surface of the water. Padma is always hungry and Padma in the rains is angry, and Padma in the autumn is treacherous—must men keep indoors all the year? Have
men stopped sailing on the Padma for such childish fears?

It is a clear day, and it is yet quite early. Even if the wind rises, storms never start before the evening. We shall be safely across the river before then. It shouldn’t take us more than a couple of hours to row across, if we go with the current.10

Ammajana Ayesha is characterized as a typical old Indian Muslim woman. She believes in religion and loves her grandson Malik more than anything else in the world. She respects Faqees and Maulwees and expects her grandson follow her. Once when Nazumia calls a Faqeer, a pretender, Ayesha gets angry and retorts, “Can’t you show proper respect where it is due? You may not have regard for the Faqeer but I have. You should have at least a respect for your mother.”11

Ayesha, due to her frankness and genuine concern as a mother, sometimes outshadows even the male characters in the novel. What else? She is a perfect cook and a great ritualist. In fact, much of the novel is about her. According to S. A. Altekar, “The character of Ayesha lives through one third of the novel, but the impact it makes on the lives of other characters is tremendous.”12 Finally, Ayesha dies by drowning into the river Padma as her son Nazumia did it long ago.

CONCLUSION:
Humayun Kabir wrote only one novel which is considered an embodiment of Indian ethos. Many Indian characters are treated here symbolically. The river Padma stands for the Ganga and the two villages for Pakistan and India. The Faqeer represents the great Indian tradition of saints and Ammajan plays the role of an Indian matron. Chacha stands for hope and aspiration, while Asgar and Nazumia for enmity. Especially the end of the novel is symbolic and meaningful. Malik leaves his village as Muslims left for Pakistan. So the novel reads like an allegory.

Basically Humayun Kabir is a poet. His career as a novelist is secondary. Maybe this is the reason why his prose is poetic. As far as Humayun Kabir’s writings are concerned, the poetic style and the rich imagery drawn from nature and rural characters play a vital role. This is why Humayun Kabir’s literary career is unique in the history of Indian writing in English.
REFERENCES:


4. Ibid., p. 8.

5. Ibid., p. 40.


7. Ibid., p. 34.

8. Ibid., p. 42.


10. Ibid., p. 52.

11. Ibid., p. 38.