
RESEARCH ARTICLE

A Comparative Analysis of Mental Health in Humayun Ahmed's *Nondito Noroke* and *Debi*

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ABSTRACT

Humayun Ahmed is a prominent author from Bangladesh, widely read for his ability to blend surrealism within the boundaries of middle-class families in Asian households. *Nondito Noroke* (In Blissful Hell), was the first-ever work of the author published in the 1970s. The plot revolves around a lower-middle-class family struggling to make ends meet. Rabia, the twenty-two-year-old, female character is the eldest daughter of the family. She suffers from an unexplained mental disability that restrains her duties and allows her to lead a carefree life. Her carelessness ultimately pushes her to death while her family suffers from a deep personal loss that claims three lives. On the other hand, *Debi* (Goddess) portrays the psychic powers of Ranu, the seventeen-year-old protagonist suffering from Hysteria Schizophrenia. Her extraordinary sensory perceptions of hearing a voice without an external stimulus raise her to the position of a medium for "Debi" to communicate with the human world. This paper attempts to conduct a comparative analysis between Rabia and Ranu through the lens of feminist psychoanalysis and trauma theory, where the former is an oppressed and rejected individual who is constantly pulled apart by the expectation of the conventional society on the norms of gender roles. At the same time, the latter is idolised as a Goddess for her ability to foretell the future. The significance of this research lies in understanding the pattern of mental health in the context of women's development from a South-Asian perspective.

KEYWORDS

Humayun Ahmed, Gender Roles, feminist psychoanalysis, trauma theory, Mental Health

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1. Introduction

Widely known as the "Shakespeare of Bangladesh", Humayun Ahmed has contributed immensely to the field of modern Bengali literature during the post-colonial period. His artistic pieces are designed with flowy language, creative expressions, and realism, which has made readers from all spheres of life easily connect with the storyline. Having won the title of a top seller, Ahmed has set the stage for narratives of Bengal to be an engaging plot with a satirical tone underlining the bickering of the Asian household. His blend of surrealism to portray women in the context of Asia picturing their mental and social state gained the attention of female readers, particularly in Bengali literature. He efficiently depicts the strengths and weaknesses of the female protagonists and places them in the centre of the plot with great care (Jahan 2022). This paper will briefly analyse two of the most prominent works by Ahmed namely *Nondito Noroke* and *Debi* focusing on the portrayal of the characters Rabia and Ranu through the idea of feminist psychoanalysis trauma theory reflecting on the identity formation that is shaped by the societal expectations and past traumas on how their mental states affect their lack of agency within their families and society. Published in 1972, *Nondito Noroke* (In Blissful Hell) marks the beginning of Ahmed's literary career. The plot revolves around a middle-class family struggling with financial incapacities. Rabia, a 22-year-old woman is placed in the heart of the plot. She suffers from an unspecified mental condition which leads her to a care-free life without any social responsibilities. Unfortunately, freedom comes with a cost, Rabia's reckless behaviour brings tragic consequences to herself and her family. On the other hand, *Debi-Goddess* (1985) narrates the life of Ranu, a 17-year-old protagonist who suffers from a traumatic past. Ranu is diagnosed with hysteria and schizophrenia by a haggard-looking man called Misir Ali. Unlike Rabia, Ranu has an extraordinary psychic ability that allows her to communicate with a figure that transcends the natural world. She hears a voice and acts as a human medium of the goddess who wants to serve the

human world. This unusual gift brings positive psychology to the plot elevating her character from a troubled young girl to a strong societal figure. Ahmed's tactful skill of incorporating surrealism into realism has formed a ground to explore how society perceives mental health in women and how the distinction between madness and illness is drawn through individual experiences. This paper will examine the contrasting portrayals of Rabia and Ranu to explore the nature of societal norms surrounding mental health and how these conditions can lead to the oppression of female agency in society.

2. Literature Review

Discussing the prominent work of Humayun Ahmed, literary critiques have identified him to be a soulful writer who sheds light on the development and drawbacks of contemporary society. Haq (2012) states the process of enlightenment that is evident in Ahmed's work in the form of elements such as truth, beauty, and purity. His awareness of social responsibilities and guidance has been greatly celebrated in his pieces of literature by ignition of unveiling the social realities in all circumstances. The creation of Ahmed in the background of a lack of democracy, unemployment, oppression, poverty, etc. has succeeded in providing the readers with a taste of life (Zaman 2012). Known for his straightforward and lucid prose, which makes his work accessible to readers, Ahmed is famous for his critical commentary on the societal norms and inequalities that are deeply embedded in Bangladeshi society. Often grounded against the political and historical context of contemporary society, Ahmed's prose also deals with subjects such as identity formation, nostalgia, and family dynamics. In this research, Mofidul Hoque (2012) Ahmed is a revolutionary writer who transcends the traditional structure of dealing with the socio-political and cultural issues of Bangladesh.

Considering the social background of Bangladesh in 1972 and 1985, these backgrounds denote significant contributions to the development of *Nondito Noroke* and *Debi*. Resulting of one of the most historically brutal and traumatic events of 1971, Bangladesh emerged as a successful nation out of internal colonialism. Many doubted the stability of the newly-emerged land, as Bangladesh was an over-crowded land stricken with poverty which was ruined by the Pakistani military in their ninth-month rule. Following the first year of the liberation war, in 1972, the socio-economic conditions of Bangladesh slowly recovered with more population being inclined towards gaining proper education (Jahan 1973). The Liberation War of 1971 ignited a strong sense of national identity among the population following the quest for self-determination. Despite the constitutional guarantees, the role of women was profoundly shaped by traditional roles and socio-economic constraints. However, the period's troubled economy contributed to larger societal troubles in the form of unrest and infrequent violence (Bertocci 1986). The education system and health sectors faced major challenges with women often facing exclusion from the opportunities.

In the context of Bangladeshi society, mental health among women remains highly unaddressed and it is influenced by the traditional roles embedded in society to build disparities among men and women. Bangladeshi women often bear the primary responsibilities of the household which raising children, meeting the demands of their husbands, taking care of the elderly, etc. Despite the traditional female participation in the household, there was an increase in the participation of women in the workforce. However, very little attention is paid to the declining health of the women. Mental health problems including trauma and depression became a global phenomenon among women who face the consequences of social disadvantages. Moreover, limited access to and the cost of mental health services are major critical issues for low-income families (Akhter, et al. 2017). Studies further revealed that women in developing countries do not share their problems with family members and often avoid medical treatment.

3. Methodology

This paper employs a comparative analysis between Rabia from *Nondito Noroke* and Ranu from *Debi* to explore Humayun Ahmed's portrayal of mental health and societal expectations in Bangladeshi society. This analysis is grounded in the combination of feminist psychoanalysis and trauma theory, which provides a critical framework for examining how gender, mental health, and societal norms intersect in the character's experiences. Feminist psychoanalysis will provide insight into the identity formation of Rabia and Ranu and how gendered expectations not only shape their interaction with their family and society but also shift the power dynamics towards a patriarchal setting. Drawn from the concepts of Freudian psychoanalysis, this theory offers tools to understand the internal worlds and the symbolic representation of the behaviour and mental health of the characters. Trauma theory will further offer a nuanced understanding of character development by exploring whether past traumas have influenced the character's current mental state. The comparative analysis method will examine specific aspects of the characters including societal perceptions and treatment, family dynamics and relationships and personal agency. Close reading techniques will be adopted to understand the narrative structure and imagery in the portrayal of these characters. By applying the theoretical and methodological approach, the study will explore how Ahmed used these contrasting characters to critique societal norms and explore the complex interplay of gender, mental health and social expectations in Bangladesh. Although the study offers insight into the intersection of gender and mental health, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. This paper will support the qualitative data analysis based on the translations of the original Bangla texts; therefore, it may fail to capture the expressions of Ahmed's language in the original texts.

4. Analysis of Rabia in *Nondito Noroke* (In Blissful Hell)

The title which translates to "In Blissful Hell" portrays the nature of Rabia's existence in the household, who is free from societal expectations and yet is a captive to a world that fails to understand her. In contrast, Rabia lacks agency and is entitled to an unspoken freedom. Rabia belongs to a lower-middle-class family with financial constraints where her mother struggles to raise a child with special needs. Although Rabia's condition remains unspecified due to the lack of medical attention, she is treated with extra care such as a glass of milk given to her before going to bed. To them, affording milk is a luxury. Rabia is a 22-year-old woman with a carefree nature that is symbolic of an innocent child. She is exempted from the responsibilities towards society granting her a certain extent of freedom. However, her character is established as a village fool in the community due to her condition. Born in a household with a lack of understanding of her condition, Rabia is often stigmatised by her parents who find it difficult to grapple with the challenges of raising her. Her siblings and parents are also affected by her presence which influences their choice of living. Under one such unfortunate event, with no exposure to sex education, Rabia falls prey to extreme exploitation that costs her life in the climax of the plot. She is raped and impregnated by her father's friend which comes into light much later when her body begins to undergo development. To protect her family's reputation, Rabia is socially suppressed. She is locked up in the house and is forced into marriage. Although Rabia is a beautiful woman, she is non-verbally ostracised from the community due to her mental illness and potential grooms silently reject her. *Nondito Noroke* is a work of fiction that carefully explores various aspects of human emotions such as love, sadness, hatred, etc. Therefore, this is an obvious reason why Ahmed plants motherly love through Rabia after her pregnancy. Unaware of the developing foetus, Rabia begins to care for and love her unborn child which becomes evident from the forced abortion that her family carries out. As a mother, she senses the death of her child and eventually, she falls into the lap of death as well. Thus, the trauma theory that is established in the plot has helped in the process of re-traumatisation of Rabia's internal transformation. As a response to the traumatic experience of a painful abortion and shackled lifestyle, Rabia emerged as a mature mother figure before her death. In *Nondito Noroke*, Ahmed tactfully incorporated mental health as a social evil to highlight the idea of social suppression and sexual exploitation that is prevalent in society. The social perception of mental health problems in a middle-class household has been beautifully captured through the easy flow of language and imagery in the text. Rabia's mother's reference to taking her to the holy *pir* (a religious figure) to cure her through superstition is a form of belief that still exists in society. This example draws an idea about the lack of knowledge surrounding mental health services in the social background of Bangladesh in 1972. The intersection of gender and health and its complex repercussions in society leads a mentally challenged individual to maintain a secluded life in the dynamics of family and community. In the text, Rabia is looked upon as a naïve and harmless person who becomes a subject of social pity, however, as the characteristics of a female body come to light, she is draped in a fully covered saree and is confined to the space of her home. Thus, the sensitivity of mental health remains to be extremely taboo when linked with the subject of gender.

5. Analysis of Ranu in *Debi* (Goddess)

Debi represents a different portrayal of mental health through the experiences of Ranu, a 17-year-old protagonist who suffers from hysteria and schizophrenia. Ranu's mental health has been designed with an extraordinary psychic capacity that allows her to communicate with a transcendental character of a parallel universe. The text is characterised by the blend of a vivid scenario of a Bangladeshi middle-class family and supernatural elements. At the beginning of the narrative, readers are introduced to an eerie atmosphere as Ranu encounters a dark figure in her house. This marks the initial stage of her association with persistent hallucination that develops throughout the plot. In the case of Ranu, her mental health comes into consideration after her marital union with Anis, an elderly man in his 40s. As the title suggests, *Debi* explores the psychic supernatural powers of Ranu, an ordinary housewife in Dhaka. Although mixed with the overwhelming emotions of a horrific midnight story of someone lurking around the house, *Debi* is the goddess that associates herself with Ranu to protect her from the evil forces against women in the context of violence and assault in particular. In *Debi*, Ahmed curated the plot of the text in a reverse manner in the form of unveiling a mystery. The use of dark imagery, language and suspense added a horror-like genre to the plot which later on reveals the helplessness and protection of the goddess. Ranu is hesitant to share her past traumas with her family until she meets Misir Ali, a professor who teaches clinical psychology at the University of Dhaka. The symptoms of mental illness in Ranu began when she was attempted rape by a man in her village as she was playing in an abandoned temple. To rescue her from this incident, the soul of the goddess from the idol that is established in the temple rushes towards her and takes shelter in the human world by using Ranu's body as a medium. As a result, Ranu develops into a goddess-like beauty with a mysterious personality. Through this, Ahmed created a magical setting where a woman fights back to protect herself from the exploitation of the patriarchal system by developing a complex personality within her physical existence. Therefore, past trauma in this plot works as a moving point where a woman shifts from a helpless state to empowerment. To ignite the interest of the readers, Ahmed developed the plot with a dual setting of mystery and an internal world of Ranu where her subconscious self works in the background to protect the vulnerability of Ranu. However, Ranu further moves into a state of hallucination and hysteria as she fails to cope with the change in her personality. Unlike Rabia in *Nondito Noroke*, Anis takes up the responsibility to cure his wife of her illness, however, Ahmed draws a saddening end by marking the death of Ranu, almost stating through the narration that, the destructive force of the goddess cannot sustain in a human world among powerless human beings.

6. Discussion & Conclusion

Humayun Ahmed's portrayal of mental health in *Nondito Noroke* and *Debi* explores the societal perceptions of how gender and mental illness intersect in Bangladeshi society. The contrasting depiction of Rabia and Ranu offers the lens to examine mental health from two different settings. In *Nondito Noroke*, Rabia's mental illness remains unspecific due to the lack of access and poverty in the context of 1972. As a result, she becomes socially vulnerable with a family that faces challenges to cope with her needs. Conversely, *Debi* offers an empowering narrative through Ranu's character. Her mental illness in the form of a supernatural gift elevates her beauty and mystery. This can be interpreted as Ahmed's commentary on the mystification of mental health issues in Bangladeshi culture. Both narratives underscore the vulnerability of women with mental health conditions, sexual exploitations, and changing relationships that address real-world concerns due to the intersection of gender. The tragic end of Rabia and Ranu calls for a greater awareness surrounding mental health issues, particularly in women. Thus, this comparative analysis serves as a powerful tool for examining complex social issues that can be transformed to build an inclusive setting for supporting individuals regardless of their mental health status.

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