

Humanizing 1971: Representation of the Liberation War, Islam, and Culture in Humayun Ahmed's Films

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Abstract

This independent research examines the representation of the Liberation War of Bangladesh in Humayun Ahmed's cinema, focusing on Aguner Poroshmoni (1994) and Shyamol Chhaya (2004). Unlike films that emphasize battlefield heroism or revolutionary leadership, Ahmed's vision highlights the struggles of ordinary people who lived through fear, compassion, moral dilemmas, and faith during 1971. Using qualitative content analysis and thematic interpretation, the study explores the intersections of family life, Islamic ethics, cultural practices, and national memory in these films. The analysis demonstrates how domestic spaces, rituals, and collective survival become sites of resistance, while religious symbols and cultural artifacts such as Rabindra Sangeet and folk songs embody resilience. Findings suggest that Ahmed presents the Liberation War as an inclusive and humanist struggle that integrates nationalism, religion, and culture into a collective memory of dignity.

Keywords: Liberation War, Humayun Ahmed, Bangladeshi Cinema, Islam, Culture, Memory

1. Introduction

The Liberation War of 1971 remains the cornerstone of Bangladesh's national consciousness. State-sponsored narratives have often highlighted military sacrifice and political leadership, focusing on battlefield heroism and grand strategy. While these aspects are crucial, they sometimes overshadow the lived experiences of civilians and the moral, emotional, and spiritual dilemmas that shaped ordinary lives under occupation.

Novelist Humayun Ahmed emerges in this context as a cinematic voice for the silenced majority. His films tell the story of the war not through spectacle or propaganda but through intimate portrayals of everyday resilience. This paper examines *Aguner Poroshmoni* (1994) and *Shyamol Chhaya* (2004), two of his most significant works on the Liberation War. The central aim is to explore how Ahmed humanizes 1971 by portraying historical, familial, religious, and cultural dimensions of the struggle.

The study also situates Ahmed's films within their historical production contexts. *Aguner Poroshmoni* was released in 1994, during a Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) government, and *Shyamol Chhaya* in 2004, also under BNP rule. Despite these political contexts, both films honor the leadership of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and celebrate the ideals of 1971.

This independence of vision reflects Ahmed's role in safeguarding national memory beyond partisan politics.

1.1. Research Rationale

The Liberation War of 1971 is a defining moment in Bangladesh's history, yet most cinematic and scholarly representations emphasize battlefield heroism, political leadership, or revolutionary narratives. The experiences of ordinary civilians, their moral and emotional struggles, and the interplay of faith, culture, and family life have often been overlooked.

Humayun Ahmed's films, *Aguner Poroshmoni* (1994) and *Shyamol Chhaya* (2004), offer a unique perspective that foregrounds these human, ethical, and spiritual dimensions. This study seeks to explore how Ahmed's cinematic vision humanizes the Liberation War and constructs an inclusive national memory that integrates secular, cultural, and religious elements. By examining these films, the research addresses a critical gap in Bangladeshi film scholarship and contributes to a deeper understanding of how cinema mediates historical memory, ethical reflection, and cultural identity.

• **The Guiding Research Questions are:**

1. How do Humayun Ahmed's films represent the Liberation War through everyday life, family spaces, and moral choices of ordinary people?
2. In what ways does Ahmed portray Islam as an ethical and spiritual force, and how does he contrast it with the misuse of religion by occupying forces and collaborators?
3. How do cultural practices such as music, rituals, and storytelling function in Ahmed's films as strategies of resistance and as carriers of collective memory?

1.2. Literature Review

Cinematic depictions of the Liberation War have often focused on armed struggle and nationalist fervor. Films such as Zahir Raihan's *Jibon Theke Neya* and Chashi Nazrul Islam's *Ora Egaro Jon* are celebrated for their revolutionary tone and emphasis on sacrifice (Hayat, 2012; Chowdhury, 2014). These works fit into the broader trend of early post-independence cinema, which constructed a heroic and patriotic visual language of the war.

Humayun Ahmed's contributions, despite their widespread popularity, have not received equal scholarly attention. Zaman (1999) and Azim (2012) highlight his distinctive narrative style, which emphasizes micro-histories and emotional intimacy. Ahmed's films give visibility to the experiences of women, children, and religious figures, who are often neglected in dominant political or military-centered analyses.

Religion in war cinema has been relatively underexplored. When represented, Islam often appears politicized or marginalized. Ahmed offers an alternative, portraying Islamic rituals and moral codes as personal, ethical, and aligned with human dignity. This opens new avenues for understanding the intersection of faith, culture, and resistance in national memory.

1.3. Theoretical Framework

This research applies two theoretical approaches to analyze Humayun Ahmed's films: Collective Memory Theory and Cultural Studies Theory.

Collective Memory Theory (Maurice Halbwachs, Pierre Nora). This theory explains how memories of the past are socially constructed, preserved, and transmitted within a community. Ahmed's films serve as cultural texts that help shape how Bangladesh remembers 1971. They preserve intimate details of family life, faith, and cultural practice, making war memory

collective and human rather than limited to state narratives of heroism. Domestic spaces, music, and rituals become "sites of memory" (lieux de mémoire) that keep the Liberation War alive in everyday consciousness.

Cultural Studies Theory (Stuart Hall). Cultural Studies emphasizes representation, identity, and power in media. It shows how meaning is produced through film, language, and symbols. Ahmed represents Islam, Bengali culture, and nationalism as lived experiences rather than rigid ideologies. By portraying prayers, Rabindra Sangeet, folk songs, and small acts of compassion, he challenges dominant political narratives. His films give voice to ordinary people, showing how culture and religion function as tools of resistance and unity.

Together, these theories explain how Ahmed humanizes 1971. Collective Memory Theory highlights how the films preserve shared national memory, while Cultural Studies Theory shows how cinema reshapes identity by representing culture, ethics, and religion in inclusive ways.

1.4. Research Paradigm

This research is rooted in the interpretivist paradigm, which views reality as socially constructed and best understood through subjective experiences, narratives, and symbolic practices. Rather than seeking quantifiable measurements, this study emphasizes meaning-making, cultural expression, and emotional resonance.

1.5. Objectives

1. To examine the representation of the Liberation War in Humayun Ahmed's selected films.
2. To analyze the role of Islamic elements and spiritual dilemmas in his narratives.
3. To identify cinematic strategies that humanize collective war memory.
4. To explore how family, religion, and culture operate as thematic anchors of resistance.

2. Methodology

A qualitative approach was adopted.

Sampling: Purposive sampling was used to select *Aguner Poroshmoni* (1994) and *Shyamol Chhaya* (2004), both of which directly address the Liberation War and are directed by Ahmed.

Data Collection: Each film was watched repeatedly, and detailed annotations were made on dialogue, mise-en-scène, sound design, and symbolism. Supplementary sources such as interviews, essays, and audience reviews were consulted for triangulation.

Data Analysis: Content analysis was used to identify representations of war, family, religion, and cultural practices. Thematic analysis was then applied to highlight recurring motifs such as sacrifice, compassion, trauma, and resilience. Quotations from the films were coded to support interpretation.

2.1. Film Analysis

2.1.1. *Aguner Poroshmoni* (1994)

Set in Dhaka during the early days of the war, *Aguner Poroshmoni* follows a middle-class family that shelters a freedom fighter, Bodi. The domestic space becomes a metaphor for the nation under siege. Private life turns into a site of political and moral resistance.

The characters serve symbolic roles. Bodi represents youthful idealism and sacrifice. Matin Saheb, his wife Surma, and their daughters embody compassion, quiet defiance, and cultural resilience. Even minor figures such as a tea shopkeeper, a beggar, or the family's domestic helper symbolize broader societal struggles. Their detest for the occupation, with its barbaric tortures and mass killings, enables the audience to connect empathetically with the suffering of 1971.

Several scenes demonstrate Ahmed's focus on humanity. Matin Saheb's act of giving bananas to a wounded rickshaw-puller epitomizes compassion amid cruelty. Bodi's uncle sacrifices his life by refusing to betray him under interrogation, showing moral courage. Rashidul Karim's refusal to disclose information despite torture illustrates ethical steadfastness. Even after losing his fingers, he does not bow down.

Islamic representation in the film is subtle yet significant. Quranic recitation, Azan, and private prayers appear throughout, positioning faith as personal and ethical rather than politicized.

Surma's prayers for Bodi and Matin Saheb's symbolic act of kissing the Quran before leaving home reflect a blending of faith, culture and norms. In contrast, the Pakistani forces and their collaborators are shown using Islam only to serve their worldly goals and interests. They organize processions of „Shanti Bahini“ in the name of religion to keep Pakistan united, while at the same time supporting heinous acts of killing, rape, and torture against Bengalis. Such actions clearly do not reflect the true teachings of Islam.

Cultural artifacts also play an essential role. Rabindra Sangeet is used as a form of cultural resistance, symbolizing the persistence of Bengali identity. Daily rituals such as taking snacks, storytelling, and music humanize war's chaos. The mise-en-scène of the family home, with close-ups of anxious faces and careful use of lighting, creates intimacy while highlighting fear under curfew.

The film concludes ambiguously, leaving viewers to question whether Bodi survives. This unresolved ending reflects the uncertainty of 1971 while preserving hope. Ratri's love for Bodi symbolizes continuity of human affection amid destruction.

2.1.2. *Shyamol Chhaya* (2004)

Shyamol Chhaya tells the story of seventeen passengers escaping by boat through occupied territory. The boat becomes an allegory of the nation, carrying a fragile yet diverse community bound together in the struggle for survival.

The character of the Maulana is metaphorically significant. At first, he sympathizes with Pakistan, reflecting the dilemma of many religious figures in 1971. As he witnesses atrocities, he condemns the army as *jalim* (oppressors). He declares, “A true Muslim cannot sit idle without resisting oppression,” and eventually joins armed resistance. His transformation symbolizes Islam as a moral force aligned with justice.

The film highlights civilian courage, particularly through Ashalata, who participates in a Mukti Bahini operation. Shot during battle, she becomes a symbol of women's bravery and civilian involvement in liberation. Her wound, treated by fellow passengers, illustrates communal solidarity. Religious harmony is a recurring theme. The Maulana insists on protecting Hindu passengers and prays for all on board, rejecting sectarianism. Muslims and Hindus share food, grief, and survival.

Jamunar Jol Dekhte Kalo is a Bhatiyali folk song. Bhatiyali songs are sung by boatmen on rivers like the Padma, Jamuna, and Meghna. They show longing, separation, and the flow of life. They connect nature with human feeling. During the war, disguised freedom fighters sang the song. This surprised and disturbed the characters. Ahmed created this scene to bring all these feelings together. Another folk song „Kon Ba Pothe Nitai Ganj Jai“ shows uncertainty and wandering. It reflects the characters' confusion and displacement. Ahmed's cinematic techniques reinforce these themes. Wide shots of the river and mist symbolize uncertainty and transition. Silent shots of bodies floating along the river avoid sensationalism, instead creating a mournful rhythm. Camera pans across the passengers highlight diversity and tension. The boat's journey mirrors the nation's moral journey. Suffering, betrayal, courage and hope were the feelings of the people. The film closes with the boat continuing downstream under the flag of independence, suggesting that, despite trauma, hope and unity endure. The collective singing of Muktir Mandir Sopan Tole appears as a non-diegetic background score. This artistic choice blends patriotic fervor with spiritual depth, uplifting the closing sequence beyond the immediate narrative.

3. Discussion

Both *Aguner Poroshmoni* and *Shyamol Chhaya* reposition the Liberation War as an ethical, cultural, and human struggle. They do not glorify war spectacle or military strategy. Instead, they emphasize the resilience of ordinary people, the strength of families, and the integration of faith and culture in the pursuit of freedom.

Through the lens of Collective Memory Theory, Ahmed's use of domestic space, music, and rituals becomes a way to preserve memory. The Matin family's home in *Aguner Poroshmoni* transforms into a site of resistance, while the boat in *Shyamol Chhaya* becomes an allegory for the nation. These spaces hold memories of sacrifice, love, prayer, and solidarity. They carry forward the moral weight of 1971 into the collective memory of Bangladesh.

Secular and inclusive nationalism emerges as a central theme. In *Shyamol Chhaya*, the Maulana insists on sheltering Hindu passengers, while in *Aguner Poroshmoni*, Matin Saheb's family risks their lives to protect Bodi. These acts show unity beyond religion or social class. They reflect an inclusive vision of nationalism that Ahmed ties to Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's leadership. Mujib's March 7 speech echoes in these films not as propaganda but as cultural memory. Ordinary people draw courage from his call, turning homes and boats into fortresses of resistance.

Religion in Ahmed's films is not rigid or politicized. Instead, it works as an ethical and moral language. Surma's prayers, Matin Saheb's symbolic act of kissing the Quran, and the Maulana's declaration that a true Muslim must resist oppression illustrate Islam as a source of justice, compassion, and human dignity. Through Cultural Studies Theory, these portrayals can be seen as counter-narratives that resist the misuse of Islam by Pakistani rulers, collaborators, and looters. Ahmed criticizes hypocrisy and false piety while presenting faith as humane, everyday practice. Simple expressions like "Assalamu Alaikum" or "Mashallah" are represented with sincerity, showing religion as lived reality.

Culture itself becomes a form of resistance. Rabindra Sangeet, Hason Raja's songs, folk Bhatiyali, and patriotic anthems all reaffirm Bengali identity. In *Aguner Poroshmoni*, music and storytelling keep the family united. In *Shyamol Chhaya*, folk songs reflect longing, uncertainty, and survival. The final scene of background score "Mukhtir Mandir Sopan Tole" elevates the narrative beyond trauma into a shared cultural and spiritual triumph. Through Cultural Studies, these cultural artifacts are understood as signs of identity and resistance that challenge colonial and oppressive power.

Ahmed's films also reveal historical consciousness. He avoids statistics and battlefield spectacle, instead focusing on human faces, silences, and prayers. This choice preserves the dignity of memory and avoids sensationalism. Characters such as the Bengali-German Engineer in *Shyamol Chhaya* show moral dilemmas, representing those who lacked courage to fight but could not escape the ethical weight of 1971.

The political timing of the films adds further meaning. *Aguner Poroshmoni* was made with state support under the BNP government and the then Prime Minister Khaleda Zia (F. Elahi, 2020). and *Shyamol Chhaya* was released during the BNP-Jamaat alliance rule. Despite political risks, Ahmed honored Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and highlighted secularism, religious harmony, and cultural dignity. He represented the role of religion in a subtle, critical, and at times humorous way.

This demonstrates that the memory of 1971 transcends party politics and belongs to the nation. While critics like Robert Koehler found *Shyamol Chhaya* too symbolic, Ahmed's aim was not spectacle but cultural memory. His films serve as bridges between personal stories and national identity. In sum, through Collective Memory Theory, we see Ahmed's films as repositories of national

remembrance, and through Cultural Studies Theory, we understand them as sites of negotiation between faith, culture, and identity. Ahmed humanizes the Liberation War by blending family life, ethical Islam, the use of Islam as political means by the Pakistani and Collaborators, and, Bengali culture into a collective memory of dignity and unity.

4. Research Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, it focuses exclusively on two films by Humayun Ahmed, *Aguner Poroshmoni* (1994) and *Shyamol Chhaya* (2004), which, while significant, may not fully represent the broader spectrum of Bangladeshi Liberation War cinema. Second, the interpretive and qualitative nature of the analysis relies on subjective readings of narrative, visual, and auditory elements. This approach could introduce researcher bias despite careful annotation and triangulation. Third, the study does not incorporate audience reception data or interviews with filmmakers, which could provide additional insight into the films' cultural impact. Finally, historical contextualization is based primarily on secondary sources, limiting the direct verification of certain archival or production details. These constraints suggest that the findings reflect a particular analytical lens and scope.

5. Recommendations

Future research should expand the scope to include a larger selection of films and directors who depict the Liberation War. Scholars may also incorporate audience reception studies to better understand how different communities interpret these films and how cinema contributes to collective memory. Additionally, interdisciplinary approaches that combine film studies, history, cultural studies, and religious studies could provide deeper insights into how cinematic representations influence national identity, ethical reflection, and cultural continuity.

6. Conclusion

Humayun Ahmed's *Aguner Poroshmoni* and *Shyamol Chhaya* portray the Liberation War as a deeply human, ethical, and cultural journey. The struggle for independence was not only military but also about dignity, compassion, and solidarity. Through intimate domestic spaces, collective journeys, and small acts of defiance, Ahmed humanizes 1971 for contemporary audiences. Themes of secularism, nationalism, and socialism (meaning social harmony and relationships, not economic socialism) are mixed with religious harmony and cultural resilience. By acknowledging Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's leadership, portraying faith as justice, and celebrating Bengali cultural artifacts, Ahmed constructs an inclusive vision of liberation. His films remind us that the Liberation War was not only a fight for land but also a struggle for human values, memory, and unity.

Author's Note

The author affirms that this research was carried out independently, without financial support, and without direct academic supervision.

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Appendix

Coding Sheets

Coding Sheet for *Aguner Poroshmoni*

Scene Description	Characters Involved	Theme(s)	Notes/Description
Bodi plans guerrilla attack	Bodi, Matin Shaheb	Nationalism	Shows active participation in liberation, strategic resistance
Family shelters Bodi at home	Matin Shaheb, Surma, Ratri, Apala	Secularism, Socialism	Collective support across family roles; unity under threat
Rashid's interrogation by Pak military	Rashid	Nationalism, Moral Conscience	Highlights courage, ethical steadfastness under torture
Matin Shaheb gives bananas to injured rickshawpuller	Matin Shaheb	Compassion, Culture of compassion, hospitality and helping the helpless	Ethical action and humanitarian behavior during war
Bodi wounded during operation	Bodi, Fellow fighters	Nationalism, Sacrifice	Demonstrates direct risk and personal cost for freedom
Family reacts to news of massacres and trauma of Ratri and Apala after being captured	Matin Shaheb, Surma, Daughters	Bengali culture	Family grief shows collective trauma and cultural identity
Bodi's uncle sacrifices life to protect him	Sharif Shaheb	Sacrifice, Moral Conscience	Ethical courage, protecting freedom fighter at personal cost
Tragic death of armless civilians and fighters in combat	Mass people, Bodi, Fellow fighters	Nationalism, Sacrifice	Shows human cost of independence
Radio broadcast of Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra, Voice of America, BBC	Matin Shaheb and his daughters	Nationalism, Bangladeshi culture	Connects characters to liberation news and national sentiment
Discussion of the hope for liberty and the public abhorrence to the Pak military	Family members, Tea shop owner, beggar	Hope for independence, Socialism, Culture of standing in favor of truth	Collective decision-making, ethical resource distribution
Ratri cares for Bodi	Ratri	Love, Compassion	Highlights moral duty transcending gender expectations
Surma's prayer for Bodi	Surma	Bangladeshi culture, Moral Conscience and Islam	Emotional resilience and cultural continuity
Speech of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman at Radio	Sheikh Mujibur Rahman as the inspiration of the war	Nationalism	Ahmed's depiction of the contribution of Mujib

Funeral or prayer rituals for fallen fighters and Mass Graveyard	Community	Islam as a moral code and Bengali culture of humanity	Maintains cultural respect even during wartime
Rabindra sangeet and other songs including Hason Raja's song	Ratri, family, Bodi	Bengali culture, art and aesthetics and Moral Conscience	Philosophical reflection on ethics of resistance, Culture through Rabindra Sangeet (<i>Aguner Poroshmoni, Esho Nipobone, Chander Hashi Badh Bhengeche</i>), songs of Hason Raja (Nisha Lagilore).

Coding Sheet for *Shyamol Chaya*

Scene Description	Characters Involved	Theme(s)	Notes/Description
Boat scene with seventeen passengers of different races, religions	Passengers, Boat crew	Secularism, Socialism	Microcosm of society, diverse passengers cooperating for survival
Ashalata dancing during Muktibahini operation	Ashalata	Nationalism, Courage, Women participation in battlefield	Civilian bravery, direct participation in liberation struggle
Maulana supports sheltering Hindu passengers	Maulana, Hindu passengers	Religious Harmony, Islam as moral fact	Moral guidance and interfaith solidarity
Speech of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman on Radio	Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Passengers, mass people	Contribution of Mujib, Nationalism, Human cost	Horror of war, collective grief, and reflection on violence and contribution of Mujib
Maulana become captured by the Pak Military and somehow recued, but, joins battlefield with weapon	Maulana, Muktibahini	Nationalism, Islam as moral code	Spiritual and ethical courage integrated with active resistance. Moulana says, „Pak Military soldiers are oppressors (Jalim)“ and „A true Muslim cannot sit idle without resisting the oppression“
Song <i>Muktir Mandir Sopan Tole and other folk songs (Jamunar Jol Dekhte kalo, Kon ba pothe Nitaiganj Jai)</i> during battle	All the characters, Freedom Fighters	Bangladeshi folk culture, Nationalism	Cultural and patriotic reinforcement of liberation
Boat passes through dangerous territory, while ensuring social cohesion and taking care one another	Passengers, Boat crew	Courage, Socialism, Religious harmony, Secularism	Collective navigation and survival as community effort
Collective trauma and mass killing by the Pak military and Dead bodies along riverbank	Passengers	Collective trauma	Reality of the history
Sharing of limited food among passengers	All passengers	Socialism	Cooperation and egalitarian behavior in crisis
Discussion about protecting women and children, Wives love and respect for their husbands and vice versa	Passengers	Secularism, Religious Harmony, Family bonding and culture	Collective moral responsibility across faiths and cultures
Old man and old woman assisted on boat	Elderly	Bangladeshi culture, Moral Conscience	Respect for elders, cultural values during war
Maulana stands against the looters and Rajakars and protecting woman	Maulana, Rajakars, Pak Military soldiers	Ahmed presents Islam as a moral and ethical guide through Maulana. At the same time, some characters, like the Rajakars and looters, exploit religion for politics and selfish interests, showing a false version of Islam.	Faith provides ethical guidance and spiritual resilience, when, the Rajakars and the looters used Islam to fulfill their personal desires, actually, they had no love or belief in Islam and its moral indications. Though, Maulana cherished the love for Pakistan or keeping Pakistan undivided first, practical experiences and oppressions and barbaric incidents made him anti Pakistan and compel his conscience to go to war against Pakistani occupation.

Ashalata's wound treated by passengers	Passengers, Ashalata	Courage, Compassion, cultural norms	Community support for injured civilian
Boat continues downstream after battle and the flag of independence	All passengers	Nationalism, Hope	End of film, unresolved fate, resilience emphasized, new flag indicates the hope for liberty
Ethical dilemma of Bengali-German Engineer and cowardness	Bengali-German Engineer with radio on his hand	Ahmed uses some characters as a metaphor for those who lack the courage and strength to join the battlefield, showing their constant moral and emotional dilemma	The character called the war a „Bipod“ (danger), but the commander objected, asking whether it is right to call the war of independence a danger.

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