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**Research Article**



## Representation of Deaths due to Misrule during the Famine of 1974 in Neamat Imam's *The Black Coat*

**Rukunuddin Shaikh**

Ph.D. Research Scholar,

Department of English

Jadavpur University, Kolkata, West Bengal, India

**Email Id:** [rukunuddinshaikh6@gmail.com](mailto:rukunuddinshaikh6@gmail.com)

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6564-1181>

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### Abstract

Death is the irreversible cessation of organismic functioning and human death is the irreversible loss of personhood. Death occurs at different situations and moments and has important significance in various circumstances. The phenomenon of death is present from the beginning of the world and it has been represented differently in literature and culture. If we

relate death only in relation to physical loss, the significance of death is narrowed to a specific space. But death has a wider spectrum than that of physical loss. Though most deaths are forgotten, some incidents of deaths are important because of various social, philosophical and historical circumstances. An important phenomenon relating to death is that sometimes mass deaths are caused by state administered misrule. As for example during famine the failure of government to take necessary steps results in loss of numerous lives. Such is the case with millions of deaths during the 1974 famine in Bangladesh under the regime of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Faulty economic policies, mismanagement, black market, corruption and power hunger of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman made havoc on the poverty-stricken people who were forced to die of starvation. Almost 1.5 million people died, but Mujibur Rahman acknowledged only 27000 deaths from starvation. Not only that, those who raised their voices against the misrule of the government are put to death by the state administered mechanism. This terrible situation of Bangladesh during the famine of 1974 is nicely portrayed in Neamat Imam's famous novel *The Black Coat*. In this novel Imam very deftly upholds the autocratic rule of Sheikh Mujib which caused so many deaths from starvation. The violent death of Nur Hussain by Khaleque Biswas represents not only the death of an individual but also the violent suppression of conscious voice that has the guts to hold the government responsible for the misery of the people of Bangladesh. The present research article presents the pathetic condition of the people of Bangladesh during the famine of 1974 which made havoc on their lives due to the tyrannical government of that time.

**Keywords:** Death, Famine, Tyrannical Government, Suppression, Starvation, Loss, Misrule, Repression, Dystopia, Corruption, Malnutrition, Healthcare

Death in physical sense means the cessation of all the bodily activities of any living creature. It is always accompanied by a feeling of sadness. But philosophically death does not mean only the physical loss, but it denotes specific significance relating to the situation in which death occurs. Some deaths are forgotten within days, but some are remembered for a long period of time because of the social, economic, political significance associated with deaths. Death sometimes opens the eyes of the people to the gross injustices done to them. As for example during the famine deaths occur as an inevitable outcome of it. But the socio- economic-political circumstances also influence the number of deaths during famine. The victim classes i.e. poor people are the main suffers of famine. But these deaths affect conscious entity of human soul which help them to rise against their standard and demand justice from those who are responsible for their misfortunes and sufferings. This is what forces them to rebel against the powerful people who control the state and as a repressive measure the powerful people leaves no stone unturned to suppress those who oppose them. Death becomes significant in this specific situation because it tries to put an end the voices of the subaltern. In this context Neamat Imam's *The Black Coat* is very significant because of its portrayal of 1974 famine in

Bangladesh and the repressive measure of the government to suppress any voice against them. In this I will show how the irresponsibility and tyrannical attitude of the government make havoc on the poor people of Bangladesh and how they try to stop the voices of people to keep hold on power. Shaikh Mujibur Rahman who is generally considered the father of the nation in Bangladesh is described as a blood hungry monster. In this novel political history and fictional narratives are intertwined. Therefore, while presenting the misfortunes of Bangladesh just immediately after independence which caused so many deaths because of chaotic governance, it is important to throw light on the historical facts of the then Bangladesh. But before coming to the main point of discussion it is necessary to know the story of the novel in brief.

The two main characters of the novel are Khaleque Biswas and Nur Hussain. Khaleque Biswas is journalist by profession who writes for the *Freedom Fighter*. During the 1971 war and immediately after independence he writes only the glorious achievements of Bangladesh, particularly the heroism shown by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and others against the Pakistani oppressors. But when he finds out the deplorable conditions of the poor people of Bangladesh after the war, he becomes cynical and decides to write strong editorial where he will disclose the shabby condition of the country. As ill luck would have it, he gets fired from his job for depicting the grim reality of Bangladesh. All his principles, values and sense of judgement are washed away along with it. Losing his profession, he suddenly becomes unemployed and, in his idleness, he starts playing the recorded lecture of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's famous 7<sup>th</sup> March speech. At this time Nur Hussain, a very simple unemployed youth from village comes to him in Dhaka to get any kind of job. To his surprise Khaleque Biswas finds that Nur Hussain has no talent except the wonderful gift of mimicry of Sheikh Mujib's 7<sup>th</sup> March speech. One day after getting a little money from the street people where Nur delivers the 7<sup>th</sup> March speech just to pass time, Khaleque Biswas hatches a plan to get money by using Nur's wonderful talent of mimicry. But their activity of delivering speech and collecting money come to the view of Moina Mia, the local Awami League MP who makes a deal with Khaleque Biswas to use Nur's talent so that they can get public sympathy at a time when country is running through the toughest period because of the famine in 1974 and when people's patience at the capacity of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman to rescue the country from perilous circumstances loosening. These politicians take full advantage of Hussain's talent to subdue the growing displeasure among the masses. Khaleque's upright character undergoes a drastic change from righteous to evil character with the inflow of money but Nur Hussain who comes from the grassroots level of rural Bangladesh where people's sufferings are extreme becomes disillusionment with taste of so called 'independence' or 'freedom'. He metamorphoses from being a mere puppet of Khaleque Biswas to being a vocal critique of Sheikh Mujib from the experiences he accumulates while roaming across the country to deliver the famous 7<sup>th</sup> march speech. He witnesses poverty, starvation, corruption, misrule, black market, deplorable condition of the slums, countless deaths on the one side and the prosperity of corrupted political leaders on the other under the administration of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. He, therefore, holds Sheikh Mujib responsible for

country's miserable conditions as he is the Prime Minister of Bangladesh and criticizes him by comparing him to a blood hungry monster. Khaleque Biswas who by now a blind supporter of Mujib can no longer tolerate this sudden outburst of rebellion of Nur Hussain and warns him not to speak anything against the Prime Minister. When Nur Hussain refuses to follow his instruction and continually criticizes Sheikh Mujib from then, he is killed by Khaleque Biswas in the most grotesque manner. This is the story of the novel in a nutshell.

From the content of the novel, it is clear that Neamat Imam is keen to depict a picture of a different Bangladesh after the independence. Instead of glorifying the leaders of the Liberation War, particularly Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, he makes him accountable for the miserable condition of the country. This is a completely different novel from the mainstream genre of Liberation War literature. While most of the novels of Liberation War depict a picture of Pakistan's brutality and the heroism of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, this novel depicts the very grim reality of the political leaders of Bangladesh. And the charming appeal of the novel lies here. In this novel Imam shows the dark sides of the political leaders of Bangladesh under Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. The Liberation War was fought to liberate East Pakistan from the clutches of West Pakistan and to make Bangladesh a democratic country. Equality would be primal force of Bangladesh. It would be a corruption free country. But in reality, the contrary happens. From the dream of corruption-free utopian Bangladesh, it becomes a series of disastrous political turmoil due to the misrule prevalent in Bangladesh. As a result, the popularity Mujibur Rahman enjoyed during pre-independent Bangladesh suffered a drastic change and he becomes too much unpopular. The difference between reality and expectations becomes more and more clear in coming years. What is important is the distortion of facts by Mujibur Rahman during famine of 1974 which caused millions of deaths from starvation. But in an interview Sheikh Mujib acknowledged only 27000 deaths from starvation. This distortion of truth from public by the government strikes the conscience of Neamat Imam who goes to depict this unknown side of the history of Bangladesh in his debut novel *The Black Coat*.

The setting of the novel is post-independent Bangladesh. Sheikh Mujib was the Prime Minister of Bangladesh. Power, greed, money and struggle for existence are the main themes of the novel. It is set at a time when Bangladesh was undergoing one of the toughest period of its history – when the devastating famine sweeps the country. The inflow of refugees throughout the country towards the main cities, particularly Dhaka makes the situation even worse. An inevitable outcome of famine is the breakdown of laws and order in a country because disciplined behavior from hungry people is unexpected. Robbery, daily thieves, burglary etc. show the desperate conditions of the people during famine. They are ready to do any detestable work to get food or money. In *The Black Coat* a teenage boy agrees to bury a dead body just for a few takas although he has no prior experience of burying dead bodies. In another incident the landlady of a house agrees to take the dead body of the pregnant woman who committed suicide when a little money is offered to her. All these shows the desperate conditions of the people.

Sheikh Mujibur Rahman failed to fulfill the dreams of a healthy wealthy Bangladesh after independence. Bangladesh did not prosper as it was expected to be because of corruption and political upheaval. In addition to that lack of employment and scarcity of food and money force the people to migrate to the cities for better livelihood. Khaleque Biswas, the narrator and journalist speak out the shabby condition of the country while evaluating the condition of the people after independence- "I saw hunger, dissatisfaction, rampant poverty, looting. It was only eighteen months into Bangladesh's independence and the country was falling into deep pit of darkness" (Imam, *The Black Coat*, p.23). This revelation of the true condition of Bangladesh after independence is indicative of the wide gap between expectation and reality. Moreover, just after independence the country was hit by a devastating famine due to primarily two reasons- (i) the natural calamity and (ii) faulty administration by Mujibur Rahman. When people realize, the Prime Minister cannot improve their lot, they become his stern critic. Therefore, Sheikh Mujib suffers a popularity loss just two years after independence which reaches its peak during the devastating famine. But instead of taking bold or necessary steps to improve the condition of the country, he only tries to maintain his public image by employing a number of innate supporters who only propagate his gorgeous benevolent character and by enforcing the belief that Bangladeshi people are in a very comfortable position during the famine. It is obvious from Moina Mia's plan to use Nur Hussain to draw public sympathy by recreating the famous 7<sup>th</sup> March speech which once roused the people in 1971 against Pakistan. The politicians leave no stone unturned to manipulate a significant number of intellectuals such as Khaleque Biswas to use to intellect to pacify public anger against government. This irresponsible attitude of the government is symptomatic of a dystopian country. As it happens in dystopia, Bangladesh also heads towards chaos due to irresponsible government. In this context a quotation from George Orwell's *Animal Farm* is apt mentioning:

No one believes more firmly than comrade Napoleon that all animals are equal. He would be only too happy to let you make your decisions for yourselves. But sometimes you make wrong decisions, comrades, and then where should we be? (Orwell, 55)

People's sufferings during the 1974 famine are beyond description. The famine forces them to go on starvation for a long period of time. But no significant actions are taken to provide them with the minimum assistance, although it is propagated that the government under Sheikh Mujib is making every effort to improve the condition of the country. But as the novel shows the government in fact failed to curb the rampant corruption, black marketing etc. existing in the country. This inefficiency of the government is indicative of the misrule and mockery of democracy. In this context Tahmima Anam's *A Golden Age* is relevant. In response to Mrs Sengupta's claim that Nature is responsible for the starvation of the people during the Pakistani regime in East Pakistan, Sohail retorts, "Starvation is not caused by God. It is caused by irresponsible governments" (Anam, *A Golden Age*, p.29). The sufferings and desperate situation of the people is evident from an incident in this novel. In chapter 12 titled "The Screw Eater" of book 2 of this novel a man who is among country's starving masses is arrested after

stealing a bag of screws from a construction site and for eating them. When asked for explanation the man says “I needed something heavy in my stomach, heavier than regular rice and egg and potato and milk” (Imam,159). The man also adds “I did not want to go to bed only to wake up a hungry man in the morning” (Imam,159) Bangladesh under Sheikh Mujibur Rahman becomes East Pakistan under general Ayub khan. In topsy-turvy world of Imam’s writings, this novel makes a bizarre kind of sense.

How long can anyone endure such devastating scenes? How much anyone’s ability to tolerate such devastation survive? Man has a limit of tolerance and when the limit is crossed, he becomes rebellious. This is exactly happened with Nur Hussain. His wonderful art of mimicry opens the opportunity for him and Khaleque to roam across the country to deliver Sheikh Mujib’s speech at various gatherings. Drawing public sympathy for Sheikh Mujib and the government is the primary aim of such gatherings. But while traveling they witness the inhuman deplorable conditions of the poor people. Khaleque Biswas in his greed for money closes his eyes to the people’s distress. But it opens up the eyes of Nur Hussain. He gradually becomes disillusioned. The sufferings and deaths across the country that he witnesses during his traveling deeply disturbs his consciousness. As he comes from a village, he feels affinity with those poor people who could not get enough food to fulfill their stomach during the famine. Nur comes to believe that Sheikh Mujib is responsible for the suffering of the people. The Prime Minister himself enjoys a lofty standard of living while the poor people pines away for the shortage of foods. His concern for the safety of the people and his deep regret for their sufferings seem to be crocodile’s tears. If he is really concerned for the suffering of his citizens he would come out of his palace and make necessary arrangements to ensure that not a single people die due to starvation. But what happened is contrary to the expectation. In fact, corruption within government, black market, oppression, etc. just increase during his regime. In his book *Bangladesh: A Legacy of Blood* Anthony Mascarenhas notes:

By summer of 1972 everything was going wrong for Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. By June 1972 the price of paddy was well above the crisis level of Bangladesh.... Other essentials such as puffin, cooking oil, salt and soap were also difficult to come by because of the outrageous market manipulation. The country was in the grip of a severe money famine since unemployment.... showed... no signs of declining.... And adding to the overall distress there was a pervasive lawlessness and violence. (Mascarenhas, 1986, p. 22)

Seeing such conditions of devastation Nur Hussain cannot keep silence. He gradually loses his faith in Sheikh Mujib and likens him to a monster in his memorable speech:

‘My brothers’, he said, in the most memorable tone of the 7<sup>th</sup> March speech, ‘I have stood here many times before. But I have not felt what I am feeling today. Today I can tell you that there is no hope in the words I have spoken for so long, that they were words unconnected to our lives, to our dreams, our future. Look around you and tell me truthfully: where are all your brothers, your sisters, parents, children and neighbors; where are they, why aren’t they here with you now? They were not as lucky as you are



because of the famine? No. We have own our luck in the victory in 1971. We have written our claim on hope forever by winning freedom. This is the mistake of one person and one person alone. I have struggled with myself hard but today I can tell you the truth: Sheikh Mujib has become a monster, and as I speak of my emptiness here, he is coming for you. (Imam, 177)

This speech against Sheikh Mujibur Rahman proves fatal for him and he is warned by Khaleque Biswas not to repeat such speech again. But he goes against his instruction. Khaleque, on the hand is pressed by Moina Mia, the representative of Sheikh Mujib to put an end to Hussain's life. Therefore, Khaleque locked Nur cunningly in a room. But this sudden captivity fails to subdue the indomitable spirit of Nur Hussain. From his locked room he compares Khaleque to Mujib in the most taunting manner:

Looked at that little Sheikh Mujib,' he said, whisperingly. 'Victory to you little, rejuvenated Sheikh Mujib. Long live, little, rejuvenated, indomitable Sheikh Mujib. May you be happy, little, rejuvenated, indomitable, indefatigable Sheikh Mujib. (Imam, p.225)

Khaleque Biswas cannot take it anymore and he murders Nur Hussain in a grotesque manner. The act of murder carries many symbolic significances. Nur Hussain here is the representative of the voices of the downtrodden people. Khaleque Biswas here represents the oppressive mechanism of the government. This murder of Nur Hussain by Khaleque Biswas reinforces the fact that the subaltern cannot speak. Whenever they try to raise their voice against the injustices done to them, they are silenced by the oppressive mechanism of government. On a broader sense this murder represents death of people's consciousness by the exploitative tools of authoritative force. It is obvious that Bangladesh after Liberation did not become the utopia or a relatively corruption free state, rather it has become a dystopia due to the autocratic administration of Sheikh Mujib. Distortion of truth is one of the chief features of an autocratic state. According to Mohiuddin Ahmed the actions taken by the government to battle against famine are not adequate. Ben Crow in his article 'Warning of Famine in Bangladesh' in the *Economic and Political Weekly* observes, "Late, inadequate and sometimes inappropriate government responses made the 1974 Famine mortality higher than it need to have been". All of these shows the grim reality of the 1974 famine.

The novel depicts Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in negative light and it creates a spark of criticism in Bangladesh. But for Imam, who successfully draws the scenes of famine, the never-ending flow of refugees and above all the destruction of a Bangladeshi dream that was dreamt in 1971, the reaction could have been more and more outrageous. Imam here presents the realistic and pragmatic scenes of starvation and not the imaginative one. Through the interplay between Khaleque and Nur, Imam shows that the belief in Sheikh Mujib as the saviour of the country is gradually losing its ground. And the silencing of Nur's voice shows the autocratic nature of the government.

In the end it is obvious that Neamat Imam in his novel *The Black Coat* sheds light on much neglected history of a very known event – the deaths of countless people during famine of 1974 due to the misrule of the administration. No other novelist has shown enough courage to point to the failures of Sheikh Mujib, who is hailed in numerous writings for successfully snatching independence from Pakistan. Mujibur Rahman of 1971 war of Independence is different from the Mujibur Rahman who was the Prime Minister of Bangladesh. He loses his overwhelming popularity in just two years after independence. But he cannot think of anything than to retain power. When the criticism against him reaches its peak, he banned all the political parties except Awami League and this reflects the autocratic nature of his governance. Similarly, during 1974 famine he did not fulfill people's expectations in him. The lesser number of deaths in his government officials show how desperately he is trying to hide the reality from the people though he claimed that he is not hiding anything. In this context Anthony Mascarenhas' comment is appropriate:

The food supply had progressively deteriorated due to smuggling, market manipulation and corruption at all stages of the import and distribution.... people in the countryside began to die like flies.... Sheikh Mujib himself publicly admitted that 27000 people died of starvation. In the circumstances this was a very conservative estimate.... Since at least 3000000 people were living below the starvation line, by that reckoning the death toll as a result of famine was well into six figures. (Mascarenhas, *Bangladesh: A Legacy of Blood*)

This novel shows the corrupting influence of power and a courage to put questions against the prevalent system. The miserable condition of the people and all-pervading suppressive force to dominate the voice of the downtrodden people speak of the ill management of the then Bangladeshi government. The deaths that occurred during that famine are so horrible that they cannot be described in words. The scenes of people dying because they are deprived of having enough food or they pine away due to malnutrition are so pathetic that even the imagination of those horrible sights brings tears to the eyes. But the irony is that while the poor people perished during this period, the rich and corrupted politicians flourished. People like Khaleque Biswas or Moina Mia or even Sheikh Mujibur Rahman does see the rampant poverty and scarcity of food across the country but they are not affected by it because they already increased their wealth in just two years after independence. Therefore, the deaths of so many people during the famine are very shocking for Nur Hussain or the people like him who represents the grassroots level of Bangladeshi poor people, but those in power are not ready enough to make necessary arrangements to lessen the sufferings of the people. This novel very dexterously and with subtle irony exposed this other side of history of the downtrodden people.

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