

Walking as Space Making by Humayun Ahmed's Himu

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Abstract

A city space beyond its structural execution by the planners and administrators is consistently acted out by those who perform daily practices in those spaces. A walker as a regular practitioner appropriates the space, invents and inscribes stories there causing transgression in the imposition by the dominant structures and cultures. Humayun Ahmed, a well-known writer in Bangladeshi literature, has created the popular juvenile fictional character Himu, as a walker in the streets of Dhaka with no confinement encountering others and rewriting stories and histories unacknowledged in dominant discourses. This paper studies Himu, the quintessential walker, as a space-producing agency that problematizes many of the taken-for-granted practices in the streets. He routes through the streets of Dhaka and orchestrates before us multiple stories. With insights from de Certeau's "Walking in the City" from *The Practice of Everyday Life*, this paper focuses on walker Himu and shows his space-creating activities as digressive as well as transgressive in creative ways to dismantle the dominant culture which are commonly acted out by the common practitioner in the streets.

Keywords: City space, Walker, Practitioners, Transgression, Rewriting stories

Introduction

Humayun Ahmed "the most widely read writer in Bangla literature" (Murshid, 2012, p. 95) has been prolific throughout his career. He has shown his calibre by concentrating on local issues and thus has carried out his responsibilities towards nation. Anisul Hoque (2012) states, "In this luckless country, a writer can't go as he wishes, he has to shoulder the responsibility of the society and the country. It was his destiny" (p. 31). With that destiny of shouldering responsibility and showcasing novelty through creativity, he has created Himu, an apparently vagabond character with innumerable dimensions that need to be explored. He started the series in 1990 with the novel *Moyurakkhi* and continued till 2011 producing twenty-five books charting Himu's childhood to youth making his rout the streets of Dhaka and unveiling and ascribing stories in the city space. With his consistent presence in all the books and imagination of the youth of Bangladesh, "Himu is the most popular of all characters by Humayun Ahmed" (Choudhury, 2012,

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p. 360). To understand the barefooted walk of Himu, de Certeau's understanding of walking as a space making endeavour is relevant.

De Certeau offers a "highly poetic theoretical framework" (Collie 2013) for understanding how urban spaces are produced, experienced and written through the city dwellers' everyday practices. To de Certeau, space is a "practiced place" and the structures built are "transformed into a space by walkers" who perform "an act of reading ... of a particular place: a written text" (1984, p. 117). Thus, space is engendered by "the ensemble of movements deployed within it" (p. 117). de Certeau contrasts between two views of the city: one seeing the city with the celestial eye of a god standing on the summit and seeing through those who live down below. The first view presents a gigantic mass where there is no barrier to impede progress and which obscure nothing but also obscure everything. This top down observation reduces the city into just a view, an object created and appreciated by the architects and administrators. Life is controlled, imposed with constant surveillance. de Certeau puts, "When one goes up there, he leaves behind the mass that carries off and mixes up in itself any identity of authors or spectators" (p. 91). While this view hides the living space of the city, the walker's view is the reversal, an "Icarian fall", as de Certeau puts it. In this view, the city is comprised of the walkers, the true practitioners in their everyday experience and it is fixed yet transitory with the living force emanating from the spatial stories setting it against the rigidity set in the perception of the administrators. Taking the planners structures of the city as background for living stories acted out in everyday practice by grasping the live presence of its sights, sounds and smells through the streets. The space making is not one sided rather it is interactive as the city imprints itself on the walkers moving across the streets while the walkers' "endless supply of new and old stories fill its sidewalks, subways, and buses" as "Walking is a process of halting, dodging, and crossing to avoid an unending mass of bodies" (Walking in the City, 2018).

The act of walking generates a city text and this act produces an urban embodied subject whom we know as pedestrian who as an everyday user of place-producing-space reads and writes the actual city. The pedestrian's act of reading and writing is framed by what de Certeau calls a form of bricolage as well as enunciation. The acts of reading and writing is manipulative by nature and involves appropriation and rewriting of contemporary cultural products. They do so by inserting his/her world, pleasure, body and history into the designers and administrators executed place or written text. The pedestrians thus appropriate "the streets they fill with the forests of their desires and goals" (p. xxi).

Discussion

Humayun Ahmed has created a quintessential walker in Himu who continues to be in the same age and stage to explore the city space with enthusiasm. This ever-youth of Himu has been affirmed by the writer himself who declares, "Himu is alright, Himu's world is alright. He is not getting older. He is not changing" (2014, p. 7). He thus has been a walker in the city making his own space by being unusually powerful and manipulative without being serious levelling him once again with the common walkers' capability unexplored in the dominant discourse.

The representation of Himu is often, however, seen as a hyper-real iconic creation that has become highly popular in the cultural and literary context of Bangladesh. Himu, as a character, not only represents a resistance against the typical materialistic philosophy of life dominated by the capitalist society, but also creates certain urban spaces through his apparently peculiar activities which challenge the conventional interpretations of the spatial arrangements of the city (Mazumder 2018). No young man in the city likes to walk under the scorching sun at midday, but for Himu, it is an action to his extreme liking. When Himu becomes the icon, his likings or habits also become exemplary to the same young star-like roaming barefooted around the streets wearing the unpopular yellow Panjabi at midday. So, simultaneously rules in and rules out both the day and night of a city space and gives alternative meaning to them.

The day-night shift of a city space is distinctively different for both the city planners-executors viewing from the top as well as for the general pedestrians moving on the ground. In general, the city space at day time becomes alive through the human traffic for going to work or coming back home. The same place becomes alive at night with electric lights set on the streets, buildings and along with the moving lights of the vehicles. But, the pedestrian like Himu, writes the night of Dhaka city in other way round. Rather than characterizing the city by objects like neon-sign or traffic lights, he produces various subjects on the streets mostly at night. Firstly, his appearance with unusual gesture-posture contradicts the city planner-rulers' induced norms or perception of the pedestrian at night. Secondly, his encounter with the controlling or the surveillance bodies represents a reversal of the subjugation effort on behalf of pedestrian community at night in general. For Himu, the city night is the space of liberty and discovery. It allows him to interact with street dogs, with the marginalised people who somehow fail to manage space for themselves in daylight. The night also lets him be amused with urban moon-light and the scenic beauty with the shadows as an effect of the moon-lights on the city streets. He also finds the street night-guard as a member of the pedestrian community by looking into the deeper aspect of his life. Himu's city-night roam

ing gives words to say the untold stories of the criminals in a humanistic way that breaks the stereotypes of the daylight walkers. Thus, Himu himself is an author of the text of a common man with some uncommon practices.

Holud Himu Kalo RAB is arguably the most engaging novel where the writer makes Himu explore the law enforcing agency and their space more closely and inscribe stories beyond common perception. While getting back to his mess walking at night, he is caught on suspicion by RAB, and the unbelievable space making and story inventing continuous throughout the narrative. Himu has a book with him on the life of Genghis Khan, and in reply to their query, he humorously tells them that the book is about the life of an extremist, a historical fact unknown to the RAB members who connect the term to the current day usage. The book is seized by the RAB members and checked with care without the ability to perceive what the book means, a revealing event granting superiority to Himu. He is, however, arrested, an action emblematic of the educational qualification, intellectual bankruptcy and ruthlessness of the RAB members which problematizes the very practice of arresting people on baseless ground. He in no time asks with enthusiasm "Sir, will there be crossfire?" (2006, p. 17), a question divulging an unlawful culture of killing people. A street in Dhaka thus turns out to be a creative place of the stories which are being produced and inscribed by the law enforcing agencies.

He is being interrogated in the office by sitting him on a chair with hands tied behind. He takes it humorously as he normally does with everything and articulates the cruellest truth about RAB culture in that interrogation cell saying, "The All nourisher is above us and here we have RAB" (p. 22), a statement expressive of the unquestionable position of RAB and their indiscriminate exercise of power. Himu makes that statement in the office in protest to what has been practiced by them as is rightly put by Mondol and Kabir that Ahmed often informs us of the social working by "telling about the malignant growth of power and wealth, the unrestrained hold of a class over the hapless and the degradations occurring at every sector" (2018, p. 115). The truth remains truth but the offenders often fail to have the strength to tolerate it. Consequently, one officer loses temper and control over himself and jumps up to slap hard Himu, but falls down for having a stroke, a habitual outlet to their power position and unexpected turn in the story. After some consecutive events, he is released thinking that he is a man of supper power, again a critic of the superstitious mindset of those who are to deal with crimes and serious issues practically. In the meantime, his walk inside the RAB office relates more stories. He is kept in a room where another man has also been kept. He is Murgi Sadek, one of the top terrors who is counting his days as he is convened that he would be killed soon. Before that he has been beaten brutally and so "there is blood clot in the forehead, chin and the whole body" (p. 23).

Before coming to the Thana, he explores Suhrawardy Udyan, a city space where stories are being created and recreated everyday by the walkers. He as an agent encounters stories and makes more too. He comes across his uncle, a man from upper class with trouble-torn conjugal life, passes time there and searches stability and peace in the company of a prostitute pseudonymously named Flower from a slum in Karwanbazar. This story channelizes the commonly known interactions of the floating prostitutes to those from the upper class of the society.

Moyurakkhi is about the making of his personality by his father who names him Himu or Himalaya so that his heart "becomes as large as the Himlayan" (2012, p. 30). He grows to be a man without any bonding and back pull. He wears yellow Punjabi without any pocket and lives a vagabond life. He walks endlessly barefooted and with no profession. Though he is often taken as a spiritual person, a great man, he clarifies without reservation, "I am not a great man. I tell lies consistently. The sufferings of the helpless don't affect me" (2012, p. 27). He, however, grows into the keenest observer of the disparities and discrepancies of the society. When he walks, he utilizes this faculty.

Thana is a frequent space for him to explore and there he continues inventing and inscribing stories. In *Mayurakkhi*, a car comes by and a lady peeps through the window calling him Tutul, her acquaintance and she stresses her point, an act of imposition by the dominant classes even in case of identity. He humorously accepts and enters the car and sits in the front seat. Somehow the mother with the daughter succeeds in identifying him to be a different man unknown to them and orders him to get down. He, however, rejects and makes them take him to different places. The family in the car happens to be of a judge, and he is taken into a Thana and is handed over to the police. The police start addressing him as *tui*, a derogatory address often used for those lower in status in many occasions. This very address is the beginning of the exploration of the Thana space which turns out to be a punitive space for both the criminals and the innocent people. The police like the judge family treat him like a criminal without even knowing a bit of him. Himu thus exposes the approach and ability of the police and the Thana space, a space which is supposed to be rewarding for the innocent while punitive for the criminals. The space making individual on his part continues as he humorously tells the police that he was kidnapping the judge's wife and the daughter in their own car thus frying a fish in its own oil. The police cannot stand this light-hearted expression and take it as an offence turning the Thana space as a location devoid of common human behaviour and features. In *Dorojar Opashe*, he is arrested for being accused of feigning a great man, he is released with a call from his friend's father, a powerful minister. This gesture implies to the exercise of power and the nature of the application of law which have selective performances. After being released, he chooses not to get back to Dhaka, but to spend the night on

the top in any one launch in the terminal with a shawl draped over to make the staff think him one among them as he affirms, "A launch terminal is a good place for spending nights" (2012, p. 133). This unfailing agency is resulted from his walk. In *Himu Remande*, he is taken to the Thana and is interrogated as a criminal Ayna Mozid. He, however, manages to escape from the custody and unusually reaches the police officer's house as disguised brother-in-law and gets entertained by his wife. There he comes to know of the criminal's escape and the suspension of the officer. He then calls the officer from his house and says over phone, "Can't you recognize me? I'm Ayna Mozid" (p. 26). Then he formally takes leave of the house and hides himself. Himu thus proves the penny pound foolish law enforcing system of the country where miscalculation makes sense for many. Beyond this law enforcing location, Himu goes for observing Bangladesh as a whole in *Himur Ache Jol* in which the novelist manages to assemble all section of the people specially the upper class facing the lower class to expose their role and inner working. Consequently, the launch by the end reaches on the verge of drowning, an emblematic of the what is happening in the country, "Roars of frightening people are heard in the lower floor. May be the launch is drowning" (p. 331).

This space-making journey of Himu continues in all the books and he never fails to surprise us by exploring in an unconventional manner the inner working of Dhaka city and inventing and ascribing stories. In his words, "I walk the whole day. My path remains without any end. He who walks on the way without destination is not supposed have any end to his walk" (Mayurakkhi, 2012, p. 98). His walk is thus an assertion of agency that inscribes on the text already written by the dominant, a subversive act to transgress what is imposed on the common practitioners of the city.

Conclusion

Himu as a walking agent actively participates in daily practices as a pedestrian and produces spaces for him often reversing the imposed meaning by the dominant structures, planners, and administrators. He charts Dhaka city, encounters story and recreates meanings in the street, and continues his walk without any break. Thus, he represents the walkers and pedestrians in general who walk the streets, and invent stories and ascribe meanings to the spaces through their practices. Walkers are thus transgressive by nature and space creating agency that dismantles the imposed rules and regulations and expose new stories. Thus, they write the text of the city already written by the planners and dominant classes. This paper is an empowering attempt for the pedestrians and workers who are side-lined in the dominant discourse, but in reality, create spaces, make stories and continue reversing the imposed structures of the dominant through daily practices.

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