



Identity Crisis in Shahidul Zahir’s Story ‘Indur-Bilai Khela’: A Critical Representation of the Conception of Power and Liberty through Metaphor and Coercion

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Abstract

Dolu Nodir Hawa O Onyanya Golpo (2004) is an acclaimed work by Shahidul Zahir (1953- 2008). It is a short story collection and contains seven stories. Among these stories, Indur-Bilai Khela (2002) is a story that depicts human imagery of modern Dhaka, concurrent political reality, and identity crisis of citizens through connecting incidents from liberation war of Bangladesh with the political incidents that are taking place in twenty first century, in a given context. Zahir interwoven peoples of two different realities firstly, those were victim of liberation war and secondly, peoples living in same locality in current time and by doing this, he describes the crisis of identity in different occasions. The name of this story is a metaphor that shows some kind of crucial game between hunters and victims. This metaphorical name of the story gives a new meaning to its reader by using typical imagery of cat and rat. We use Paul Ricoeur to understand metaphor and meaning making in Shahidul Zahir’s story. He was a modern writer and connected his idea of identity with the idea of oppression and liberty. To understand him, Isaiah Berlin’s ideas on negative liberty are very crucial, and in this paper we used Berlin too along with Ricoeur to understand Zahir. Shahidul Zahir created metaphors in his story through the medium of language. There are two sides of the power he shows in his writing. His metaphor is built on the interrelation of these two sides of the power that by defaults illustrates identity and related crisis of citizens of “Bhuter Gali” (A typical street of Dhaka). To create the metaphor Zahir adopted a structure of the story that is interconnected yet split in its narrative.

Dolu Nodir Hawa O Onyanya Golpo (2004) or *The wind of Dolu River and Other Stories*¹ is an acclaimed work by Shahidul Zahir (1953- 2008). It is a short story collection and contains seven stories. Among these stories, *Indur-Bilai Khela* (2002) or *Rat and Cat Play*² is a story that depicts human imagery of modern Dhaka and concurrent political reality. The name of this story is a metaphor that shows some kind of crucial game between hunters and victims. This metaphorical name of the story gives a new meaning to its reader by using typical imagery of cat and rat. In this paper, we will discuss two unrelated but important themes to understand what Zahir wants to illustrate for his reader. He interwoven several stories of different times to elucidate his metaphor and an underneath force of his story is that, it connected all that sub-stories that can illuminate its readers in a way. In this piece of writing firstly, we will see the metaphorical use of Zahir and how he makes meaning through his narrative, and will use Paul Ricoeur's theory of interpretation or hermeneutics regarding this. Secondly, we will discuss the inherent power practice and related identity crisis or existentialist crisis in a given context and we will use Isaiah Berlin's theory on negative and positive liberty to understand this crisis.

Choosing a text or selecting any writing, e.g., the story *Indur-Bilai Khela*, as a text opens up several ways to interpret it, and interpretation always demands a holistic approach. But, if we choose a metaphor that is most probably a single word or parts of a sentence, in a given sentence that seemingly approach to interpret a specific moment. But, according to Ricoeur, when a writer or even a speaker uses metaphor to illustrate his message, it is used in a certain context, irrespective of a listener or a reader. A metaphor always ignites new sense for its reader or listener through language. Otherwise, there is no meaning of speaking and writing, if it does not ignites new senses that are emergent.³ Paul Ricoeur also proved that, in a text metaphor creates meaning or interpret in a way that it connects all the texts in a specific way and therefore creates an emergent sense. Ricoeur said in his essay "Metaphor and the Main Problem of Hermeneutics",

Allow me to conclude in a way which would be consistent with a theory of interpretation which lays the stress on "opening up a world." Our conclusion should also "open up" some new vistas. On what? Maybe on the old problem of imagination, which I cautiously put aside. We are

¹ It is translated by the author of this paper to make it understandable and there is no such translated story in this name.

² ibid

³ This conception was used by Raymond Williams in his essay *Dominant, Residual and Emergent*

prepared to inquire into the power of imagination, no longer as the faculty of deriving “images” from sensory experiences, but as the capacity to let new worlds build our self-understanding. This power would not be conveyed by emerging images but by emerg-ing meanings in our language. Imagination, then, should be treated as a dimension of language. In that way, a new link would appear between imagination and metaphor. (Ricoeur 17)

Now, if we look upon the story we will understand that, it ignites readers mind in senses that showcases coercion between different entities, e.g., coercion between the children gang of Babul Mia and children of the 32 and 33 number houses; coercion between the Razakars and people lived in Bhuter Gali in 1971; coercion between the armed gang of Ibrahim Khan and citizens of Bhuter Gali in a relatively current time; and, coercion between Purnalakshi’s family and local political leaders from two different faction, one of them are relatively more secular than other, but also an aggressor when they gain power. Regarding all of that coercion, the most striking and important part of these is that, all sub-stories followed a common trend to make a meaning of subjection of some people while another small faction appeared as oppressor. Moreover, he chooses a trivial rat and cat metaphor to connect all other metaphorical sub-stories to create one important grand sense of coercion condition in that arena. It seems Shahidul Zahir used picture after picture to interconnect his stories. His narrations are very in detail, but ignore facts that are not related to his story. Paul Ricoeur explains this dichotomy of image and meaning by saying,

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In his writing, Shahidul Zahir used words, like but; maybe; nor; rather; etc. frequently to create fuzziness and uncertainty, so that, the reader does not get a clear picture of his motifs or about the story he wants to tell until it reaches at the end. And, this fuzziness and uncertainty of his writings are like Guernica of Picasso that is divided into parts but in a whole a great work of art. He talked about this comparison with Ahmed Mostafa

Kamal in an interview.⁴ Shahidul Zahir's writing style is very uncertain, and it is always toned in a high pitch. He started speaking with his reader in a dramatic way, but did not ever forget the triviality of everyday life. Though he used everyday life, its characters, incidents, and materials, but he always maintained the high pitch tone of his as a generic marker for his writing. This obscurity of his plots and writings creates several meanings for his reader and ignites the imagination. To understand how Shahidul Zahir created this fictional world for his readers, one must first consider the storyline of his story.

In *Indur-Bilai Khela* one can easily find two parallel stories but occurred at different times. Shahidul Zahir first illustrates the rules of cat and rat games to its reader and he also describes characters respectively representing cat and rat. Later, he expands the horizon of expectation for its reader and if we want to interpret this expanded horizon of expectation we need to connect our understanding with his metaphorical use of political terms, that was very popular in Old Dhaka's public life.⁵ Ricoeur in his essay shows us that, if a complete sense was not built up by the use of metaphorical language in a certain context then it would become meaningless. In a dictionary the words gain a lexical meaning if only they are used in a sentence otherwise meaning-making will become futile. Ricoeur wrote,

The connection between metaphor and discourse requires a specific justification, precisely because the definition of metaphor as a transposition occurring to names, or to words, seems to put it in a category of entities smaller than the sentence. But the semantics of the word demonstrates very clearly that words have actual meanings only in a sentence and that lexical entities – words in the dictionary – have only potential meanings and for the sake of their potential uses in sentences. As concerns the metaphor itself, semantics demonstrates with the same strength that the metaphorical meaning of a word is nothing, which may be found in a dictionary (in that sense we may continue to oppose the metaphorical sense to the literal sense, if we call literal sense whatever sense may occur among the partial meanings enumerated in the dictionary, and not a so-called original, or fundamental, or primitive, or proper meaning). If the metaphorical sense is more than the actualization of one

⁴ In a talk on Shahidul Zahir's contemporariness and characteristics of his writing, Mozaffer Hossain used an interview of Ahmed Mostafa Kamal with Shahidul Zahir, that later published in *Banglatribune*.

⁵ Horizon of expectation is a term that is used by Hans Robert Jauss to interpret reception theory of a reader.

of the potential meanings of a polysemic word (and all our words in common discourse are polysemic), it is necessary that this metaphorical use is only contextual; by that I mean a sense which emerges as the result of a certain contextual action. (Ricoeur 6)

Previously, we showed that through coercion and through metaphorical world Shahidul Zahir elucidate critical connection between his characters, and this process obviously creates a discourse among different factions as well as between readers and writers. His story creates that horizon of expectation for its reader that can enable them to create a completely new sense, which is gain through interpretation of the story, by using its metaphors. In a story lesson, the author's imagery and language are connected to the reader by constantly making meaning. We use image and language separately because an image can be accessed through language but language cannot create meaning without referents. Shahidul Zahir created metaphors in his story through the medium of language. There are two sides to the power he shows in his writing. His metaphor is built on the inter-relation of these two sides of the power.

The game first started with Abdul Gani, a Rajakar (An armed group comprised of Bengali people, that helped Pakistan army during liberation war) who questioning Abdul Karim, a resident of Bhuter Gali about Muktibahini (Guerilla fighter). Later, Abdul Gani brought Pakistan army's lieutenant Sharif along with his soldier to start a crackdown in those areas and they set fire on some of the houses of that lane. Khatija was a widow and she was in her room to get her radio, at that moment, while, all other members of that lane abandoned their home to save their life. Lieutenant Sharif saw and raped her. Khatija saved her house but did not able to save her. They came back again and again, and each time they came they burnt down some building and by the end of November, they burnt every house of Bhuter Gali and left Khatija with anguish. It was Abdul Gani, who also takes advantage of the situation and raped Khatija. At the beginning of December, Muktibahini came back after rescuing most of the areas of Bangladesh. At that time, Khatija burnt their house because their house was intact and looks ugly inside so many burnt houses. She thought her days of sorrow ends, but Shamsul Alam Khan, a guerilla fighter again raped her because she admitted feeding Abdul Gani. Some other guerilla fighter saved her and Shamsul Alam Khan's father made a proposal to make her bride of his son, but, she refused. At that moment, guerrilla fighters killed Abdul Gani.

The second part of the story or we can say that another parallel sub-story began in the context of the last two decades of the twentieth century. Humayun Kabir alias Humu

and Jahangir Hussain alias Jahu of Bhuter Gali creates terror and killed a low-class civil servant officer Altaf Ali. They are the right hand of young leader Ibrahim Khan who was a son of Shamsul Alam Khan. Khatija later protested against them and they created anarchy in the whole area, but, Shamsul Alam Khan was refrained them to do further havoc. Shahidul Zahir also wants to tell the reader another short but important sub-story within his story *Indur-Bilai Khela*. Purnalakshi the daughter of Chandrakanta and Satyalakshi was a common partner in playing games for both boys and girls in Bhuter Gali. At the time of the election, everyone wants vote from her father and mother. In a very short analysis, Shahidul Zahir illustrates two genres of power politics, the fundamental one and the secular one. But, in his story, he shows that both this political power created a condition that is not suitable for Purnalakshi's family. Girls and boys of Bhuter Gali want her to play with them, but it was the situation that refrain her to do that. In this course of incidents, though she was present, Purnalakshi lost her existence from the context. Boys and girls of Bhuter Gali forgot that, once, she was a common part of their game. An artist like Shahidul Zahir can create this powerful metaphor that sometimes may represent the imagery and creates meaning through the language. Lieutenant Sharif, Abdul Gani or Later Ibrahim Khan and his gang are like cat and Khatija, Altaf Ali, Purnalakshi and residents of Bhuter Gali are like rats, in his story. By this metaphor, he represents the whole story of oppression in different periods in a nutshell, like colonial oppression of Pakistani force and later oppression was made by them who brings liberation, creates a kind of political paradox and surely ferments the mind of readers. Also, his style made it possible to understand different stories within the story through parallelism. Ricoeur writes in his essay,

...it is the word that has a “metaphorical use,” or of a nonliteral meaning, or a novel, “èmergent meaning” in specific contexts. In that sense the definition of metaphor by Aristotle- as a transposition of an alien name (or word)—is not cancelled by a theory which lays the stress on the contextual action which creates the shift of meaning in the word. (Ricoeur 3)

Now we will move our direction to understand another version of the story, and it remains under the arena of political philosophy therefore, demonstrates power practice and the conception of liberty in Shahidul Zahir's story. If we look at the story we can find two types of conception, firstly, oppression that is common in one stratum of story and secondly, negative liberty in other stratum of story, though I used “negative” to expound

and detach some character . Anne E. Cudd in her essay “How to explain oppression criteria of adequacy for normative explanatory theories” writes,

Oppression names an objective social phenomenon which is characterized by

1. *the harm condition*: Individuals are harmed by institutional practices (e.g., rules, laws, expectations, stereotypes, rituals, behavioral norms);
2. *the group condition*: individuals suffer harm in (1) because of their membership (or perceived membership) in a social group;
3. *the privilege condition*: there is another social group that benefits from the institutional practice in (1);
4. *the coercion condition*: there is unjustified coercion or force that brings about the harm. (Cudd 5)

In *Indur-Bilai Khela* we can find three types of oppression. At that time, the people who lived in Bhuter Gali were representing the Bengali ethnic community and Pakistani force deployed their colonial force to suppress them. So, it was a condition of coercing unethically and they suppress people’s democratic rights through deploying army on innocent people. Abdul Gani and his corresponding Rajakars are a privileged social group from Bengali ethnicity, who gained their power by betrayal their community and they cause much more destruction than Pakistani army because they know everything of this community. Shahidul Zahir, in a very general way, describes the atrocities on Bengali ethnic community. His description has raised issues such as burning houses, repeated assaults, killing and rape. All these narrations illustrate the atrocities on a certain ethnic community. In the plot of this story, we can try to explain the manifestation of another form of power through the Berlin’s doctrine on negative liberty, but basically it derives from the thinking of John Stuart Mill. Berlin wrote in his essay on “Four Essays on Liberty”,

I am normally said to be free to the degree to which no man or body of men interferes with my activity. Political liberty in this sense is simply the area within which a man can act unobstructed by others. If I am prevented by others from doing what I could otherwise do, I am to that degree unfree; and if this area is contracted by other men beyond a certain minimum, I can be described as being coerced, or, it may be, enslaved. (Berlin 3)

From this point of view, some western thinkers suggested a relation between power and individual that ensure limited freedom for its citizens. But, again Berlin wrote,

Liberty is not the only goal of men. I can like the Russian critic Belinsky, say that if others are to be deprived of it—if my brothers are to remain in poverty, squalor, and chains—then, I do not want it for myself. I reject it with both hands and infinitely prefer to share their fate. But nothing is gained by a confusion of terms. To avoid glaring inequality or widespread misery I am ready to sacrifice some, or all, of my freedom: I may do so willingly and freely: but it is freedom that I am giving up for the sake of justice or equality or the love of my fellow men. (Berlin 5)

This implies an important and relatively critical conscience of Berlin to interpret liberty. He does not want to give a definition of it rather wants to elaborate the horizon. In a given context if a person or a group of persons exercise illegitimate power over others, no one can say it liberty for those, who are practicing illegitimate power. Berlin define this as negative liberty, while he interpret positive liberty as,

For the ‘positive’ sense of liberty comes to light if we try to answer the question, not ‘What am I free to do or be?’, but ‘By whom am I ruled?’ or ‘Who is to say what I am, and what I am not, to be or do?’ The connexion between democracy and individual liberty is a good deal more tenuous than it seemed to many advocates of both. The desire to be governed by myself; or at any rate to participate in the process by which my life is to be controlled, may be as deep a wish as that of a free area for action, and perhaps historically older. (Berlin 8)

Now if we again gaze upon second part of the story of Shahidul Zahir, we see that state power is gradually exerting control over the lives of the citizens. During this time, Ibrahim Khan made his debut as a youth leader and Humu and Jahu tried to take control of the Bhuter Gali residents, for him. Their control, however, is not absolute. They allow the inhabitants of the Bhuter Gali the freedom and the right to criticize, as long as their power remains intact and the people obey their authority. This controlled concept of subjectivity is what Berlin calls the ‘negative liberty’ and this is for those, who are exerting power and not for subjects, there situation can be defined as coerced. A part of the society is relegated to the role of rats during this period, and cats continue to chase down residents of that region. In this way, Shahidul Zahir presents the unchanging position of the inhabitants of Bhuter Gali in the context of two different periods. Berlin

believes that, positive freedom depends upon social bondage and those who want it always stay in a hoard. Berlin neither accepts positive freedom nor he denies it, and the same is true for negative freedom too. He said,

The freedom which consists in being one's own master, and the freedom which consists in not being prevented from choosing as I do by other men, may, on the face of it, seem concepts at no great logical distance from each other--no more than negative and positive ways of saying much the same thing. Yet the 'positive' and 'negative' notions of freedom historically developed in divergent directions not always by logically reputable steps, until, in the end, they came into direct conflict with each other. (Berlin 8)

However the narration, how another subgroup associated with power objectified the residents of that area through oppression in the absence of an outside colonial enemy is crucial. The characters of Bhuter Gali gradually becomes blurred in the context of the rise of nationalistic power, the appearance of this oppression continues to clear. And, as we can see, the inhabitants are holding their nerves in a commotion as if it were breaking down. We need to remember that Ibrahim, the young youth leader, is the son of Shamsul Alam Khan, who was a freedom fighter at the time of liberation. As a result, we do not find in the story of Shahidul Zahir the message of liberation or the collective identity of the people, the idea of 'positive liberty' that Berlin wanted to give. Rather, we see the rise of an oppressive nationalist force. Berlin wrote,

No one saw the conflict between the two types of liberty better, or expressed it more clearly, than Benjamin Constant. He pointed out that the transference by a successful rising of the un limited authority, commonly called sovereignty, from one set of hands to another does not increase liberty, but merely shifts the burden of slavery. He reasonably asked why a man should deeply care whether he is crushed by a popular government or by a monarch, or even by a set of oppressive laws. (Berlin 26)

As Shahidul Zaheer wrote this story, ideas of oppression and negative and positive liberty came into existence automatically. As a result to create the metaphor he adopted a structure of the story that is interconnected yet split in its narrative. Through this narrative, a writer can create a world outside of the story. Of course, this concept is the primary feature of all authors in the world. The author says more than what he says, which he doesn't say. But, it is an author's words that make a difference in the reader's mind. In this world of conceptions, Shahidul Zahir's words created extra conceptuality

that helps the reader to understand oppression and negative liberty simultaneously.⁶ And, as a result, the reader can understand the reality of a certain time with comparison to other time. Thus, extra conceptuality of a literary work can sometimes be an indicator of reality that is more real than the actual one. Through Zahir's creation we used several literary instrument and theory, like horizon of expectation; dominant, residual, and emergent feelings in texts; and extra conceptuality in reception theory, to interpret metaphor, coercion, and liberty in both of its sense. Finally we can conclude that, through all of his characters that are characterized by different and distinguished features; he creates a world for readers to explain the features of oppression. In another way we can say this, he explains how peoples of Bangladesh, and to be specific in a certain area of Dhaka region will lose their existence or identity in a different context. He also gave Purnalakshi's family small space in his story and he always keeps them busy with dealing nationalistic forces that arises after independence and has certain type of characteristics, no matter about their cultural identity, like secular or conservative. For Purnalakshi, he provides less space in the story with ultimate coercive condition is a representation of a certain period of the society, and we can identify it as Zahir's mastery.

⁶ Extra conceptuality is an idea of Syeed A Syed. He elaborately speaks on it in his essay "Being seen Through Literature". It means any literary text ignites the conceptual framework of a reader in a way that he always gets something more than he expected.

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