

Predictions and Realities in Ameena Hussein's short story "Now and Then: The natural progression of things" from *Zillij*

^aShashikant Mhalunkar, ^bDimple Prajapati

^aP. G. Department of English, B.N.N. College, Bhiwandi, Dist. Thane- 421302, Maharashtra, India

^bDepartment of English, B.N.N.College, Bhiwandi, Dist. Thane, Maharashtra, India

Abstract

Ameena Hussein is one of the celebrated female writers from Sri Lanka who was longlisted for the prestigious Man Asian Literary Prize in 2007 narrates human life very minutely through her fiction. Her collection of short stories *Zillij* exhibits the snippets of human lives like an album. In her "Now and Then: The natural progression of things" Ameena presents the dichotomies of present and past—Now and Then by comparing the predictions made by the great sage Adishanya in the year 500AD with the present situation. The Great sage Adishanya had a series of visions that he inscribed on fifty Ola leaves. The visions foretell the future of the hard times in Sri Lanka. Similarly, these also predict peace and prosperity being restored in Sri Lanka. Ameena Hussein compares these predictions and cross checks them with the present scenario. She reasserts that the predictions in the Ola leaves are absolutely correct as the present is chaotic and stuffed violence, bloodshed, insecurities and death. The present paper attempts to examine Ameena Hussein's short story "Now and Then: The natural progression of things" that presents the dichotomies of past and present; comparing them with the predictions made by the sage Adishanya and the chaotic present.

KEYWORDS: Past, present, Ola, predictions, violence

Introduction: Ameena Hussein, a well-known Sri Lankan novelist and short story writer who projects a variety of Sri Lankan lives through her collection of short stories, *Zillij*. Every short story is different and unique. In her "Now and Then: The natural progression of things" Ameena presents the dichotomies of present and past by comparing the predictions made by the great sage Adishanya in the year 500 AD with the present situation. The Great sage Adishanya had a series of visions that he inscribed on fifty Ola leaves. The visions foretell the future of the hard times in the island, Sri Lanka. However, only thirty-two Ola leaves have been found. "Now and Then: The natural progression of things" amplifies the agonies, unrest, chaos and violence in the present as predicted by the sage in the year 500 AD. The present paper attempts to bring to light the insights of Hussein in comparing the predictions of the sage with the present situation in Sri Lanka. These Ola leaves are short poems by the sage that foretell the progression of time and the forthcoming lives of the people in future which the writer quotes as touchstone to prove the predictions.

The civil war in Sri Lanka between the Liberation of Tigers of Tamil Eelam and the government of Sri Lanka become the triggering elements for the long prevailing chaos, bloodshed and violence in the country. The nation faces crunch in economy and human relationships. Everything goes for a toss as nothing remains certain. Everything becomes unpredictable. As a result, the author goes back to verify any certainties about future and hope. She finds the Ola leaves written by the great sage Adishanya in 500 AD. The last quarter of the 20th century rips apart the nation. The

civil war continues for years, making the Sri Lankan identity as a permanently fractured one. Jong, Mulhern, and Ford in their article captioned “Psychological trauma of the civil war in Sri Lanka” rightly pinpoint the causes and effects of the national trauma in Sri Lanka:

Sri Lanka’s ceasefire brokered by the Norwegian government 3 months ago has essentially held, bringing hope for the end of the country’s brutal 19-year civil-war. The war between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, who have been fighting for an independent state in the north and east of the island, and the Sri Lankan government has more than 64000 deaths and shattered the economy...thousands of displaced people have been settled in government-run camps known as welfare centers. These centers were established 10 years ago as temporary facilities for people displaced by conflict and wishing to resettle elsewhere in Sri Lanka.(Web 2002)

Illustration: Human beings are always curious about their future; in fact, it is a fundamental tendency to know about future. Therefore, the predictions made by seers become an area of interest. It is observed that prophecies made by the foreseers, fortune tellers and prophets always trigger curiosity in the minds of the prevailing generations. Right from Tiresias, Nostradamus, Ibrahim, Ismail, Moses, David, Jesus and Muhammad to the preachings in *The Bhagwadgita* and the Indian sages, predictions about future have been centre of attraction for every era. Similarly, Ameena Hussein in her short story “Now and Then: The natural progression of things” foregrounds her story with prophecies of the great sage of 500 AD. The writer begins the story with Ola leaf Number 15 that prophesizes violence in future that will be entirely smeared with blood. The entire nation will witness blood everywhere and every member in the family will suffer a great loss. True to this, the entire island undergoes a greater unrest due to war. Pain, suffering and chaos envelop the nation as predicted by the great sage Adishanya. The story opens with Ola leaf Number 15 stating the present day scenario of Sri Lanka as a wound. The predictions of the great sage Adishanya begins:

There will come time
when blood will flow.
The country will be split
and Red will be the only
colour.
For many years people will
suffer. (Hussein 145)

The writer swings the narration in prose bringing it into present as she says “The ambulance wails down the road... - a faint moan – that crescendos into a high screams outside my house and then a diminuendo towards the General Hospital.” (Hussein 145) The writer is in her bed lying straight listening to the ambulance siren over and over continuously throughout the night. It is the war time and several aeroplanes land with wounded soldiers carrying them for hospitalization. The ambulances continuously rush from airport to hospital.

Basically, the story chronicles the harsh realities of the present day Sri Lanka wherein the nation always suffers from one or the other attack. War, violence, chaos and sabotage become the common character of Sri Lanka. The last quarter of 20th century was marked with bloodshed and massacre. Thomas, Navodita in their resourceful article “Revisited: Wounds of Sri Lanka’s civil war remain impossible to heal” amplify the agonies and chaos of Sri Lanka:

In 1977, clashes broke out between Tamil youth and the police. Anti-Tamil riots also erupted across the country, causing several hundred deaths. Little by little, the youngsters became radicalized. They later began to take aim at the Sri Lankan army. In 1983, 13 soldiers were killed in an ambush. In retaliation, organized massacres against the Tamil population killed several thousand people, the start of what would become a civil war. The conflict lasted until all the Tamil Tiger guerrillas has been killed. At least 100,000 people lost their lives, tens of thousands went missing and hundreds of thousands were displaced, with most of the civilian victims Tamils. (Thomas, Navodita 2022)

Further, the author represents modern mundane generation who is not interested in the warfare. She prefers to shrug off the negative thoughts of war and blood. She wears her shoes and plays on the techno music and prefers to dance on the tune of English DJ. In jumping and dancing she forgets the tragedy. Rather, this act projects how the young generation has coped up with everyday tragedy. Further, the writer goes to a restaurant along with her husband to eat her food and ice cream. The waiter boy spills *falooda* on Ravi, who is already drunk. They drive in their Mercedes along with their friends Suresh and Anjali. Ravi does not have an ID. A traffic constable makes them to stand out of the car. All the four young people stand arrogantly and carelessly. The writer provides a significant parallel to the situation in Ola Leaf number 27 as predicted by the sage:

Who is the ruining man?

The one of anger and
wealth

The one of hate and
division

The one of greed and
jealousy

Such is the ruining man. (Hussein 148)

This projects how humanity will be ruined. Anger, wealth, hate, division, greed and jealousy will ruin the modern generation. The author, Ravi, Suresh and Anjali carry all the canons of modern, angry and hungry generation. The young generation does not have any answers for the questions or problems they face. They waste time and waste lives, “We lapse into silence till we reach home. We crawl into bed and then the sun rises. Another day wasted. More lives lost.” (Hussein 148) In other words, agony, despair and death are the common visitors.

Gradually, Hussein presents Ola leaf number 19 comparing the predictions with the present day violence that prevails in Sri Lanka every day. The predictions vocalize

how violence becomes the routine part of human life. Chaos, violence and bloodshed become common. Ola leaf number 19 states:

The city will explode.
Not once. Not twice. But
many times over.
There will be darkness that
descends on our children.
As if the sky will fall on top
of them.
The blood will travel from
North to South;
from East to West. (Hussein 149)

Ameena Hussein states that violence originates from North and it percolates towards South. Similarly, it originates in East and enters West. The writer upholds how violence hovers over the young generation. The future for the young generation is in dark. Similarly, the writer vocalizes the ever increasing modernization and industrialization that results into the increase in traffic jam. It is not the usual traffic jam, but the unusual traffic congestion that is caused by the wartime chaos. The chaos pushes humans on the roads in their vehicles in a rat race where they cannot move. She says:

Traffic was thick, a different kind of traffic. It was not the usual before-school, after-school, lunchtime, before-work, after-work kind of jam. This was a panic-ridden, wretched and hopeless kind of traffic jam. This was a sitting-and-waiting-in-your-car, not-moving-for-minutes, not-knowing-what-was-going-on kind of jam. This was a watching-many-people-rushing-around and yet-not-moving kind of jam. This was a bomb jam! (Hussein 149)

Ameena Hussein touches upon the resultant trauma of war wherein people are bleeding casually. A father is bleeding who has lost his daughter in the war and chaos of the war. He is not aware of the blood and the injury but he is more worried about his lost daughter. The author does not vocalize the entire terror of the lost daughter of the father but she only symbolizes on the loss of a daughter in the war where she might be suffering beyond any explanations. Hussein writes, "A line of blood leaked out from under his bandaged head and made the slow journey down to his chin. He sat down and cried. "My daughter", he wept. "Where is my daughter"?" (Hussein 149)

Gradually, the author compares war with the elements of nature-especially water. Water heals but it also kills. War is like a waterfall that disrupts everything. It swipes away everything that comes in its way. The modern times experience the coercive power of water. It is evident through tsunamis that the world has experienced recently. Floods and tsunamis kill mercilessly. These predictions were made by the sage. The Ola leaf 33 by the great sage Adishanya in the year 500 AD vocalizes the destruction that will be caused by the war will be like the strong water fall. Hussein cites Adishanya:

Ola leaf number 33

This war is waged like

water

In no constant form

It flows in accordance with

the ground

And kills with the merciless

thunder

Of a waterfall (Hussein 150)

Further, the writer anticipates the trauma of war on children. The psychopathology of the children is so devastated that they never forget the chaos of the war. War and the terror of the war fills up their senses. "For many months afterwards, no lullaby lulled them to sleep, no song soothed their sorrow, no whispered speech touched their minds. All they heard was that roar." (Hussein 150) Thus, chaos becomes the ever prevailing scenario and a permanent marker of the lives of children. The young generation, the future of the nation grows in and with trauma. The writer projects the suffering of the entire nation in the war and post-war turmoil. Sri Lanka as a nation suffers from war, bloodshed, violence, and the chaos of the island where the nation suffers chronic conflict. In such emergency the basic health facilities are not available. The same has been predicted by the great sage, Adishanya in 500AD which comes to reality after 1500 years. The seer was absolute in predicting the future. Jong rightly comments on the pathetic condition of Sri Lanka as a suffering place:

The survey findings provide an indication of the general level of suffering of the population in a country where chronic conflict has taken a dramatic toll and the health system is unable to cope. Health units, health professionals, and medical supplies have all suffered as a consequence of the long-term conflict, resulting in lower access, availability, and quality of health care. (Jong 2002)

Gradually, the author vocalizes the restlessness of the modern generation where the atmosphere triggers heat and humidity. The humid atmosphere makes everyone to sweat profusely. For a woman sweating causes restlessness and uneasiness. Often times, such sweat makes the author difficult to move in public. The darkness symbolizes the darker side of life. She feels as if she is in dark. She is hopeful for the dawn- a hope of a better day where she will get some relief. The author narrates,:

The sweat creeps down my back. It inches its way to my buttocks. It clings and moves and gathers both momentum and mass. It leaves a spreading stain of misery on my clothes. I try not to move. Every shift in position makes it worse. I lie there staring out at the darkness waiting for the relief of dawn." (Hussein 150)

The increased heat in the atmosphere does not give relief to the people. For instance, the author desires to take a shower, but the water fails to sooth her. She finds sweat is inseparable and unstoppable even by water and showers. This also hints at the increased heat and humidity that prevails in atmosphere. The writer comments, "A new day must begin. I have begun sweating while having a shower. The sweat gushes

out just as fast as the water.” (Hussein 151) In addition to this, it also signals that even atmosphere is like a bleeding fresh wound. Further, Hussein criticizes the condition of Sri Lanka as a country without rain and relief. It will always be in darkness-the darkness of terror, war and chaos. The entire nation will be stolen and raped by every worthless leader. The country’s wealth will be stolen away. The attacks by the extremist groups dismiss the peace of Sri Lanka. Chan Cheong in his scholarly research paper “Bloodshed in Sri Lanka displays influence of IS amid crisis” highlights the violence and chaos in Sri Lanka:

The attacks that shook the capital Colombo and the adjacent city of Negombo as well as Batticaloa in the east left at least 250 deaths and hundred more injured. There was a period of immense grief as attacks came at a time when most Sri Lankans thought that they had left behind their violent past following the defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), also known as the “Tamil Tigers” in 2009. The government on the other hand was scrambling to find the culprit only to learn that it was perpetrated by a little-known extremist group, backed by the notorious Islamic State (IS) based in the Middle East. (Cheong 2019)

This is the situation in the present day Sri Lanka. But, surprisingly, it was predicted by the great sage in 500AD. Hussein entails Ola leaf number 35 that chronicles the foretelling of the sage that comes exactly true in the present scenario. The island is recklessly disturbed by the terrorists. The ecology, nature, people and property are spoiled by the attackers. Even the gods become helpless. The darkness of chaos, violence and death hover over Sri Lanka as predicted by Adishanya:

Ola leaf number 35

The rains will fail and
darkness will be imposed.

A Godless country raped
and plundered;

those who lead will not be
worthy.

And the country’s wealth
will flood away from her.

She will be paralyzed with
Apathy (Hussein 151)

The chaos and war steals the harmony of living in the island. All the good days disappear. Even in night the sense of insecurity is so high that the author feels the forced darkness engulfing the city. Ominous shadows silently wait in houses for sorrow and death. She finds relief in the thought that her parents are dead. The earlier generation had always thought of the better life for the future generations. But, the time showcases war, turmoil and sorrow. The author experiences the loss of harmony, peace and hope as she narrates:

Life creeps along, the country is stilled. The vibrant hum of life, the neon lights, the blaring *kademusic* cannot be found. At night, candles flicker ominous shadows in houses that stand silent and tragically in a city that has been forced into darkness. I snort in disbelief and think thank God my parents are dead, for they thought life would get better for us! (Hussein 151)

Ola leaf number 37 projects how Earth is covered by Heaven, same like the shroud covers the dead body inside the coffin. The writer showcases extreme greed for wealth and the degrading social values in the postmodern era. The Ola leaf number 37 by great sage Adishanya vocalizes the destruction and decaying of Earth. Author compares humans with oysters which are thrown after removing the pearl from it. In the postmodern period the spirit is lost. Humans move on like shadows where they seem hollow from within. The entire humanity has lost the soul as the Earth has turned into a huge coffin. Lifeless and spiritless people pull on with their lives like silhouette.

Ola leaf number 37

A shroud of Heaven and a

Coffin of Earth

A pearl-less oyster sleeps

on the ocean bed

Discarded and thrown

It tempts only the

scavenger

Who rips it apart with

avarice (Hussein 151)

The author represents the situation of bloodshed, war, chaos and violence in Sri Lanka where the innocent suffer for survival and they are killed by the political leaders for power. The war forces the people to harm others to fulfill their own needs or to clear their barrier for living. Gradually, Hussein presents Ola leaf number 43 comparing the predictions of the great sage Adishanya which come true after 1500 years, with the present day. Violence prevails in Sri Lanka. The predictions vocalize how men kill other men. Trust, honour, and peace mean nothing for them. Ola leaf number 43 states:

Ola leaf number 43

The innocent will be killed.

Death comes in the form of

other men. (Hussein 152)

Further, the author touches upon objectification of females by the socially ill elements. She refers to an unknown man who suspiciously moves into the society. A stranger comments upon the author, "Hello," he said, "sexy disco!" (Hussein 152) This remark indicates the decline of moral values and the degrading social system in

the postmodern era. There is neither the fear of society nor the personal conscience. Women are teased casually. Even women dress so fashionably that they are teased easily by men. The stranger in this context is a non-descript who does not have an identity. He is suspicious about everything in society. For him a woman is an easy target to taunt to satisfy his machoism.

Conclusion: Ameena Hussein's "Now And Then: The natural progression of things" draws a parallelism between the past and the present with the help of the prophecies by great sage Adishnayain 500 AD with present scenario in Sri Lanka. The author compares the prophecies inscribed on Ola leaves with the present scenario of war and turmoil in the island. The story develops an exact projection of the decaying of humanity, spirit, loss of peace in the war time in Sri Lanka. The story indicates that the nation is suffering from war in which people have lost their families and are unable to find them. Bloodshed, psychological trauma, violence, chaos are the common tenets in Sri Lanka. It was a serene island once, but it has lost its peace and serenity. Now the entire nation is in the turmoil of war and chaos. Humans move on like shadows.

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