

TLC Showcase

HARUN RASHID

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Introduction to *The River Flows Upstream*

The *River Flows Upstream* is an historical novel that focuses on the life of a six-year-old boy, Wadud, as he lives through the riots between the Hindus and Muslims in 1946, just before the division of colonial India. The book follows his life growing up through Partition. It was originally planned as a comprehensive novel set in the background of what is present day Bangladesh encompassing a timeframe from 1946 to 2006. However, the novel had become so vast that I had to tell a lot of stories instead of showing them which my reader Tom at TLC rightfully assessed as full of missed opportunities to dramatize because of the summarization of them. I have then broken the story into three separate books, the first one is *The River Flows Upstream*, which covers from 1946 to 1971, from colonial India's division into India and Pakistan to the birth of Bangladesh as an independent nation. In my planned trilogy, Islamic extremism would be studied from a compassionate perspective, aiming at solving this malady, rather than inciting the Muslims of the world. Although fundamentalism is one of the principal subjects of my writing, I would like to avoid criticising the religion, examine subtly the root causes, and find out possible solution within the purview of Islam to this unprecedented global crisis. Moreover, I wanted to tell a story, not to fall into the popular terrain of propaganda. I am familiar with the subject I have been trying to formulate as fiction.

I first made contact with TLC in September 2013 and received a cordial answer to my query from Aki Schilz. Since then, I have been in touch with TLC, sending a manuscript now and then, and getting useful feedback. I have learned a lot about the craft of writing the novel from the TLC readers – I especially recall Tom Bromley here – and have been able to improve what has always been my greatest weakness: the issue of 'Show Don't Tell'.

Although I am still a struggling writer as far as the publication of my works is concerned, there is no doubt that I have received plenty of support from TLC, without which it would have been more difficult to stick to my own resolution to become a writer. I appreciate not only the TLC readers who assess manuscripts written by authors of varied background and experiences, but also the staff of TLC, who are prompt, cooperative, and understanding. In the course of my communications with TLC, I have realized, through mutual understanding, from the TLC readers that

the contexts of my writing – the Indian subcontinent, or particularly my country, Bangladesh – are relatively unknown to the market of the novels of the English language, through which I have decided to express my creativity, despite the fact that English is my second language.

At the onset of my last round of communications with TLC, one of my former readers advised the Editorial Services Officer Joe Sedgwick to send my latest MS, *The River Flows Upstream*, to Kavita Bhanot. Kavita, who, by virtue of her Indian background, appreciated the potential of my writing and the relevance of its context to the contemporary world and wrote an encouraging report while assessing my MS. Upon reading Kavita's report I have revised the novel according to her feedback. Because of Kavita's patience, hard work, and inspiration, I have been able to bring *The River Flows Upstream* to a certain level of publishability by virtue of which TLC has offered me to be a showcase author. This is so far the greatest honor in my writing career and I am eagerly waiting to see myself on TLC website. I have been wandering in the world of unpublished authors for so many years that it has often occurred to me that there is nobody to listen to my voice. Under such circumstances, the importance of TLC's contribution to my writing endeavors cannot be overemphasized. I feel obliged to tell the customers of TLC that it is the greatest organization of its kind in the world. I can assure you that I have known quite a few to form such an opinion.

The River Flows Upstream, by Harun Rashid

September, 1946.

Wadud's story was entangled in the story of his nation, bookended by the two most important and bloody events in its history, its first birth at the time of independence from the British and the partition of East and West Bengal, and its second birth twenty-three years later, another independence and another partition: the Birth of Bangladesh. But in 1946, before either storm had fully erupted, Wadud was just a little boy, living with his family; adored by his two half-sisters, both old enough to be his mother, loved by his caring but often withdrawn mother, and most comfortable with his father who, being the most respectable Muslim leader – though not a politician – in the area, was hardly ever available to Wadud. Mr. Mahmud, as Wadud's father was called by the villagers, was not the oldest man Wadud knew, but he was old enough to be the father of all the other members of his family – Wadud himself, his two half-sisters, and his mother.

Wadud's house was constantly visited by the villagers, Hindus and Muslims alike, mostly to solve their problems, which ranged from dispute over land and properties to domestic violence. Since the house was the center where everything was discussed, little Wadud, hearing everything, learning about the world around him, was not like other boys his age.

Among the men who came to the parlor, Wadud loved the village doctor, Big Uncle, and Uncle Mobassher the most. Uncle Mobassher, who was not Wadud's real uncle, was everywhere; handing out alms to the beggars, taking sick people to hospital, mediating between rowdy farmers when they were about to punch one another over some disagreement, rescuing a child caught inside the fire in a burning house, jumping into the pond to salvage a toddler who had fallen into the water while chasing after a frog or lizard. Uncle Mobassher had once even rescued Mr. Noni, a prominent Hindu from the village, from drowning into the sea when several of them had gone to the seaside for a picnic. Uncle Mobassher was called a Communist. Little Wadud did not know what was meant by that exotic word, but it was obvious that Uncle Mobassher had a problem with religion, in fact with God, but nobody would take Mobassher's views about religion seriously, because he compensated for them

with his generous charity to the needy and to the local Deobandi madrasa from his prosperous inheritance.

One eerie morning, waiting for the village doctor to arrive at home to see his sick sister, Jobi, Wadud sat with Uncle Mobassher beside his family pond. While Uncle Mobassher angled, Wadud shared his stories, and occasionally Uncle Mobassher smiled or nodded. The autumn morning was neither gloomy nor shiny and the marble staircase into the pond was an inviting place. The trees in Wadud's family forest had thickened, with the last tender twigs nourished by the monsoon rain. The guava and pomegranate trees in the orchard on the other side of the house had lush yields although Wadud did not like those fruits as much as he did mangoes and jackfruits which ripened in early summer and were now out of season. In autumn the sky, with all the white clouds floating in it, looked more crowded than in winter or summer, or even than during the rainy season, when the clouds uniformly stuck to it like a second layer. Wadud could not resist sharing his ideas about the construction of the sky with his Mobassher Uncle.

"Uncle," he said. "I told them the sky is a dome-like roof made of polished blue marble. Four pillars hold it up, each one is so far away from us that we don't see them."

Uncle Mobassher was toying with the butt of the fishing rod. He glanced at Wadud and smiled, his dark, smooth brows stretched a little. "You're already a scientist Babu," he said.

"I think so," Wadud said. Heart swelling, he thought he had invented the truth about the cosmos. "Yesterday when I was telling the children about the sky, even Nurul and Shorif listened to me attentively. Shorif asked me if the pillars are also blue. I could not answer him immediately. But then I said, no, the pillars are white, like the marble of this staircase."

Uncle Mobassher laughed. The float, which was a strip of peeled jute stalk, swayed in the small ripples made by the early breeze in the clean water. Uncle Mobassher had longer hair than any man Wadud knew, except of course, the Brigand Mofij, who wore his red hair in a funny ponytail.

Wadud was wearing a pair of shorts over the soft cotton underwear his oldest sister, Mari, had sewn for him before his circumcision. He felt a little scratch in his recuperated circumcision rim and stood up to place his little organ in a comfortable

position. Uncle Mobassher was dressed immaculately as he always was, in a pair of black pants and a white ironed shirt. Standing, Wadud could see the clean, white skin of Uncle Mobassher's head, along the parting which was narrowing by the blowing breeze.

"Did I tell them right... about the sky, Uncle?"

"You have a great imagination for a boy of six."

"But I won't be able to be a scientist."

"Why?"

"Shorif said we all will die soon. In many places people have started killing one another."

Mobassher frowned. His eyes stayed fixed on the float bobbing in the water. "It won't happen here."

"Nurul said even if there is no killing in our area, it doesn't matter, we'll die anyway. Because doomsday will follow soon."

"You must not talk with the servants about the killing, Babu."

"Hujur Jafor also says doomsday may come any time," Wadud said.

The breeze attacked Uncle Mobassher's mustache in which each hair was much thinner than that of Wadud's father's. Wadud could tell how old or young a man was by the thickness of the hair of his mustache. Wadud gazed at Mobassher's round face, which was fair, with a straight nose, set in a fine way above his lips, the like of which Wadud had seen in the photograph of Rabindranath Thakur, the greatest poet in the world – so was written there – in his glossy Bengali book. Mobassher's soft eyes scrutinized Wadud.

"Our country is going through a bad time Babu," Uncle Mobassher said. "But the children should not be scared when it is not necessary. You must not talk with the servants about politics."

"But I must listen to Hujur Jafor."

"Yes, you can listen to him. He is your tutor."

Wadud watched the float. He saw the fishes hovering, floating, gobbling water, or diving, creating little whirlpools. But Uncle Mobassher seldom caught a fish.

"Uncle, why don't you stick the bait to the hook? With bait, Abba catches a fish as soon as he throws the hook into the pond."

Mobassher squeezed his lips. "It's no fun if you catch a fish with bait. Never try to catch anything with bait."

"Why, Uncle?"

"To use bait is immoral, like cheating."

"Maybe," Wadud said absentmindedly.

Looking back, he saw his oldest sister, Mari, coming to them, with her usual heavy gait, her bare feet covered in dust, the edges of her sari fluttering about her. The breeze blew her hair over her fair, round face. Coming down, standing three stairs behind them, Mari said, "Mr. Uncle, the doctor has arrived."

Uncle Mobassher shot a sideways glance at Mari and his shoulders somewhat tightened and rose. The doctor had said that Jobi, Wadud's second sister, could have died of her sickness, which the doctor called pneumonia. But after three weeks of suffering, Jobi was now almost recovered. The villagers believed Uncle Surendra, a Hindu, was the best doctor that had ever lived in the country, with some miraculous power to cure any lethal sickness that had no cure anywhere else in the world. Everybody in the village respected Uncle Surendra as they did Wadud's father.

Wadud gazed at his sister.

Edgily, Mari smiled at him, saying, "Sweetie."

"Mari," Wadud said. "Why do you call Uncle Mobassher Mr. Uncle?"

Mari frowned, then pushed away her dark hair from her face, which had colored a little. The tossing of the hair exposed her pink neck to the air. The little polished bell-like gold rings hanging from her earlobes gave her the look of the Hindu goddess Saraswati.

"Ask your Uncle Mobassher," Mari said. "I am leaving. Come quickly. Or you will have to sit on the floor. The parlor is already packed."

Wadud turned to see his sister leave, somewhat faster than she had come. The breeze blew her *sari*, showing the form of her right hip and the shape of her thighs. Among the three women in Wadud's house, Mari was the healthiest. She was not fat, only a little plump, but to Wadud, she was as sweet as his other sister, Jobi.

"Uncle," Wadud said when Mari went out of sight. "Why does she call you Mr. Uncle?"

"To tease me," Uncle Mobassher said. "I am not old enough to be an uncle to her. Besides, I'm not anybody from your family."

"But," Wadud said, "Abba always says you are a member of our family."

"Does he?"

"Always."

Uncle Mobassher had already reeled back the line. When the hook was put in place at the head of the rod, Uncle Mobassher threw the bait – which was a mixture of water, oil-cake, and dead rubber worms – into the water. He had come to the house very early. Now the sun had stripped of its redness and the rays coming through the foliage were brightening furiously, evaporating the clouds, promising a splendid day.

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When Wadud and Mobassher entered the parlor, Wadud's mother was combing Jobi's hair, Jobi sitting against a pillow on the couch. Her little mouth had been shrunken by her sickness, and her large, dark eyes seemed larger in it. Mari, her feet clean now, brought an *odna* and put it around Jobi's shoulders. Seated opposite them, in a line, were the doctor and Wadud's three uncles. Wadud's father sat in an armchair.

The doctor was the most respected Hindu in the villages. Apart from Uncle Mobassher, Uncle Surendra, the doctor, was the most important guests in Wadud's family, sometimes even more important than Wadud's own uncles. The doctor was Wadud's father's friend as the doctor's son Babul was Wadud's.

Wadud had not seen Babul since his circumcision. When they were together, usually in the afternoons, either in Babul's house or Wadud's, Babul would make himself

and Wadud stand against a wall side-by-side to mark how fast Wadud was growing to catch up with Babul's height. Even Babul, who was a few years older than Wadud, knew that Wadud had not grown a bit in his second year of life because that year Wadud's mother had been pregnant with Wadud's brother who had died the same day he had been born and Wadud had had a very inadequate amount of his mother's milk during her pregnancy.

This morning Wadud had woken up dreaming about Babul. In the dream, Wadud and Babul had been flying a yellow kite. Since having woken up, Wadud had wished to see Babul and he had already told Mari so. Wadud gazed at the doctor and remembered how he would carry him on his shoulder whenever Wadud went to the doctor's house as a younger child.

"I've got to go to see Jafor," the doctor said. He went up to the couch and Wadud's mother stood up to make room for the doctor. She was the tallest of the three women Wadud lived with. The doctor sat on the couch, turned his shoulders to Jobi, grabbed her wrist, and held it for some time.

"Her pulse is normal," he said. "She has no temperature."

The doctor beckoned and Mobassher picked the doctor's black satchel from the foot of the sofa and took it to him. The doctor brought out a white bottle with liquid in it from his satchel. "Niece," he said, jiggling the bottle, "rinse the insides of your nose with this saline water three times a day." Sniffing with his nose and shaking his head, the doctor showed her how she should use the water. "You will be breathing freely again in three days, and then you'll be running along the causeways."

"I've stopped going to the causeway, Uncle," Jobi said.

Wadud saw Mari stiffen. A solemn expression came over Mobassher's face. Wadud's mother, tall as was she, squirmed standing, and now looked somewhat shorter. Uncle Bashar coughed.

"You see Mahtab," the doctor said. "Even Jobi is afraid to go out alone."

Mahtab was Wadud and his sisters' Big Uncle, his father's maternal cousin, and his mother's older brother. Big Uncle, in his olive-colored safari suit, shrugged.

"Nothing will happen in our three villages."

"How do you know Mahtab?" the doctor said.

"Nobody would dare touch a Hindu around here," Big Uncle said.

The doctor shook his head, the small bald patch gleamed in the middle of his dark head. "I'm sure, Doctor Da," Big Uncle said, "or I'd warn you straight away."

"Yesterday, they burned down four Hindu houses in Chhagalnaiya," the doctor said. "They took away three women and a boy who managed to escape the fire. The rest of them were burned alive."

Wadud strained his ear, his heart thudding. Men, women, children burning and shouting. Roofs falling into flames. Were they big compounds that had been burned? Wadud would usually keenly listen to the children and the servants talking about killing and destruction. Now he felt cold sweat under his arms.

"I won't allow it in my area!" Abba, Wadud's father, shouted, standing up. "The Hindus are our own people. You are my brother, doctor, aren't you? Your children are like nieces and nephews to me, just as mine are to you. Tell me if I am wrong."

Wadud had climbed up the couch and sat on the other side of Jobi. Now he pushed himself into her. Trembling, Abba forgot to sit.

"Calm down, Mahmud, will you?" the doctor said. "New riots are breaking out every day. I don't think you will be able to prevent it here."

"This is not Chhagalnaiya," Abba blurted out.

"No," the doctor said. "But that scares the local Hindus even the more. Chhagalnaiya is near to the border with Tripura. After the last arson, all the Hindus there have already fled to India."

"Mahmud," Big Uncle admonished Abba.

Abba calmed down and became silent.

Wadud heard three weak knocks on the door.

"I'll see who it is." Abba moved off.

Wadud jumped out of the couch to follow his father, who swung open the parlor

door. Standing outside was a small woman clad in a black burka, her face was covered with her burka-veil.

"Mrs. Surendra said the doctor is here," the woman said in a weak, reedy voice.

"Who are you woman?" Abba said.

"I am Hujur Jafor's wife Sir."

"Come in, Madam."

Wadud moved aside so that Jafor's wife, whom he had never seen before, could enter the house. Jafor, Wadud's house tutor cleric, had not come to the *kachari* since Wadud's circumcision.

"Thank you Sir," the woman at the door said. "I need the doctor."

"Has the cleric's jaundice worsened?" Abba said.

"He vomited several times this morning," whimpered the woman.

The doctor too came to the door. He would usually move only in his loincloth. Today he was wearing a white shirt over his white loincloth.

"Daughter," he said. "I was about to go to see your husband."

Wadud gazed up at Jobi. If only Ma had allowed him to go with the doctor, he could have seen his tutor and then played with Babul and then returned home with Mari who went to chatter with Rekha, Babul's sister, almost every afternoon.

"Why are you taking so long Sir Doctor?" the woman said.

"Mahmud," the doctor said. "Will you go with me?"

Abba stared at the doctor, whose thick whisker twitched. A sheen of sweat covered the doctor's broad, square face. Wadud thought Abba was going to embrace the doctor, but he did not.

"I'll go with you, Doctor Da," Abba said.

"I'll go, too," said Uncle Mobassher, who was standing behind the older men. "Today, tomorrow, and the next day."

"You see, Dada," said Big Uncle, resting his hands on the doctor's shoulders. "When we have young men like Mobassher, we have little to worry about."

"How many boys are like Mobassher?" said the doctor as Big Uncle took his hands off him.

All of them were standing now, looking at the woman at the door. Wadud turned and saw Jobi was standing behind him. He receded nearer to her and nudged her thigh, making her look at his face. Jobi's eyes shone into his.

"Abba," Jobi said. "Wadud also wants to go with you."

"It's too hot outside," Abba said.

"He wants to see Babul," Mari said.

"Take him Mahmud," the doctor said. "My boy has been asking me when he can play with your son again."

Ma grabbed Wadud's wrist. Wadud faced her and then let himself loose, dragging Ma to stooping.

"It's okay," Abba said. "He can go with us."

"Why do you pamper him all the time?" Ma said.

"I want to show my boy everything," Abba said.

"You want to prove to him that he is a man," snapped Ma. "You don't care that he is a mere child."

"I'll carry Babu," said Mobassher.

"Fetch some umbrellas, Mariam," Abba said.

It was Jobi who ran to the hallway. She returned with two umbrellas, gave one to the doctor and one to Abba, who slipped his into Mobassher's hand.

The burka-clad woman at the door was weeping.

"Go home daughter," the doctor said. "We are coming."

"I don't know what I would do without you Sir Doctor," said the woman before she turned. "May Allah grant you a hundred years of life." The little woman walked away across the courtyard which was covered here and there by a tuft of grass.

"May God listen to her," the doctor said, winking at Mobassher. "Another forty-eight years to live would be grand."

Mobassher forced out a smile, stretching his red lips. "You are very fit, Doctor Da," he said.

"Do you think, Mahmud, I'll survive the coming anarchy?" the doctor said as he stepped into the courtyard, clicking open his umbrella. "Will my Ishwar listen to Jafor's wife's prayer?"

"Allah will listen to the poor woman," Abba said.

Wadud heard a sigh.

Halting, Abba turned his head to the doctor. "Before anybody touches you, Dada." Abba's face twisted. "He'd have to step over my dead body."

The tonic of politics tasted bitter in Wadud's mouth. "Uncle." he looked up at Mobassher. "Can't they stop talking about it?"

Mobassher tightened his grip around Wadud's wrist.

About the Writer

Harun Rashid is a Bangladeshi diplomat, and has been working in the field over sixteen years. He has worked at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Dhaka, and the Bangladesh Embassies in Rome, Cairo, Mexico City, and Madrid, which is his present station of work. Although he enjoys his job, he has never been able to quell his desire to become a writer. He has been actively writing for nearly two decades and is not discouraged by the difficulty of publication, rather, he believes in going on and trying.



Harun was born in a Bangladeshi village, in April, 1973, in a clerical family, and was raised in a religious environment. Politics, religion, and love have become the subjects of his novels because of his congenial background. Currently he is revising his first novel, *Journey Through My Obsessions*, to send to TLC for a critical report. He was inspired by *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel Garcia Marquez to write *Journey Through My Obsessions*, which recounts the story of an unrequited love.

His main inspirations are Marquez, Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Flaubert, Hemingway, and Milan Kundera.