

**INVESTIGATING CHARISMA THROUGH HISTORICAL FICTION: WORKING OF  
MANIPULATIVE CHARISMA IN THE *THE BLACK COAT***Urooj Waheed<sup>1</sup>, Iftikhar Khan<sup>2</sup>, Rana Kashif Shakeel<sup>3</sup> (Corresponding author)**Original Article**

1. PhD Scholar, Department of English, Air University, Islamabad, Pakistan.  
Email: arooj.rehman@gmail.com
2. PhD Scholar, Department of English, Air University, Islamabad, Pakistan.  
Email: khaniftikhar111@ymail.com
3. Lecturer in English, Department of Humanities & Linguistics, University of Agriculture, Faisalabad, Pakistan. Email: kashif.gcuf@gmail.com

**Abstract**

*This article focuses on the play of political power through manipulative charisma in the novel The Black Coat by Neamat Imam. The author has tried to maintain that Sheikh Mujib has used his charismatic image to control people's will by exaggerating the negligence of west Pakistan towards the plight of Bengalis and through the propagation of half - truth about the economical condition of newly liberated Bangladesh. The article has made use of Tucker's concept of charismatic leadership -which itself is indebted to Weber's theory of Charisma- to study the importance of socio-political condition in the construction of charismatic image of the given leader. Wrong's concept of manipulation has been used as a guiding principle to study the episode of Mujib's life where charisma used manipulation for the sustenance of political power. The research has found out that in the selected novel Sheikh Mujib and his party first exploit people's desire for a divine rescuer in the moment of stress and then use their blind belief to pursue the party's agenda.*

**Keywords:** Power, Charisma, Manipulation, Political Fiction, Leadership

**Introduction**

The concepts like *Power* and *Charisma* are related as both concepts owe a great deal to the amount of influence exercised on the given group of people and often later guarantees the continuity of the former. Charisma seems to be at work in situations (political, religious and social ones) where overt display of power is superseded by display of obedience by targeted groups which emerge as followers. History is full of such episodes where socio-political conditions paved the way for the leaders to use their charisma to win mass following. This article tries to investigate one such episode of history

through a close reading of its fictional version conceived by Neamat Imam in his novel *The Black Coat*.

The article tries to substantiate the stance that in the selected work the character of Sheikh Mujeeb appears as a charismatic leader and his charisma gains strength from turmoil of the given stressed historical moment, and once his charismatic image is established, it is used to manipulate Bangali people.

By briefly highlighting the concept of charisma by Weber, the article would move on to relate Tucker's investigation of charismatic leadership in its relation to charismatic movement and social condition which

facilitates the maneuvering of leaders. Any discussion which focuses on charismatic leaders and movements would be incomplete if the response of enchanted followers are not discussed who ordained a leader as a charismatic one. Wrong's concept of *Manipulation* as a form of power has been consulted with which helps in the understanding the response of manipulated Banaglis. Banaglies' reception of Mujib's political revolutionary rhetoric is studied to check manipulative elements and submission of followers to the influence of manipulative leaders.

The article develops a theoretical framework by using the relevant strands of *Tucker's Theory of Charismatic Leadership*, to study Mujib's character as charismatic leader and to study 1971 as the moment of distress that gives way to the initiation of charismatic movement. The concept of manipulation discussed by Dennis Hume Wrong (2009) would guide the part of study where it directly deals with the manipulative power of charismatic influence of leaders and is used to study the exploitation of the masses under the manipulative influence of pseudo-charismatic leaders.

The researchers (Shamir, Arthur & House, 1994; Ellwanger, 2013; Heracleous, 2014 & Aswad, 2016) have studied the working of charismatic leadership through rhetorical charisma. The aforementioned studies discuss the real social and political incidents for the investigation of charismatic leadership, and no work has discussed the charismatic leadership in a fictional setting let alone in historical fiction. Studies have talked on the negative side of charisma (Sankar, 2003) and the relationship between manipulative power and democracy (Ware, 2014), and they do so by focusing on factual social settings and incidents. No such research work could be found which focus on fictional works to entertain different possible situations where charisma can be

manipulative. Manipulative contemporary global economy is the topic of Michael K. Walonen's research (2016) which focuses on fictional work to study manipulation as the abusive form of power by highlighting the tactics of neoliberalism and exploitative economy. Rose McDermott's article (2018) discusses emotional manipulation of political identity by charismatic leaders and it is found that McDermott finds emotional manipulation a just tool for a larger political purpose. The research done so far has either ignored the fictional works or the aspect of charisma. The current article brings together historical fiction, charisma and manipulation and maintains that these three are interrelated.

This three dimensional study of the selected work is guided by three goals: to study the character of Sheikh Mujeeb as charismatic leader, to study the political episode of 1971 as a charismatic movement, and to study the manipulative force of charisma.

This study provides a detailed overview of the working of charisma in a life alike socio-political moment and the selection of historical novel is based on this very rationale that historical settings are life alike and any sort of fictional enhancement appears as a reflective note by authors which might stand for the conscience of the whole society the author belongs to. The Black Coat is a historical novel in a sense that it's fictional plot is deeply rooted in real historical moments of Bangladesh's history. In spite of borrowing real historical facts to craft his historical fiction, Neamat Imam's fictional version of history is more like a challenge to widely held opinions about Sheikh Mujib. The main conflict of the novel lies in the blind following of Sheikh Mujeeb despite his corrupt tactics. Nur bears a striking resemblance with Sheikh Mujeeb and is trained by Khalique to use this resemblance to steal money from people. The inability of people to see reality tells a great deal about the way a charismatic leader might

exploit his charisma first for seeking pure obedience and then for manipulation. In this novel, the historical moment of 1971 is also discussed at great length and provides an ample material to study the situations which give birth to a charismatic leader.

Any study of Charisma is considered incomplete without the mention of Max Weber. Weber's concept of charisma and power has been applied on the dictatorial and democratic rules and scope of term of charisma includes any kind of human genius and creative activity (Sechweitzer, 2014). Though Weber was not the first who shed light on the topic of charisma, he is probably the first who studies the function of charisma in the political field. According to Max Weber "the term charisma will be applied to a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is considered extraordinary and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities (Weber, 1968, p. 48). The inclusion of exceptional powers and qualities makes Weber's understanding of charisma relevant for the contemporary political environment where political leaders either genuinely have exceptional qualities or make others believe so. Another relevant comment of Weber regarding charisma is the one where he diverts his lense from charismatic leaders to the makers of his followers: "What is alone important is how the individual is actually regarded by those subject to charismatic authority by his "followers or "disciples." (1968, p. 48). By giving sole importance to the reception of charismatic leaders by his followers, the Weber has (may be unknowingly) presents Charisma not as a result of an innate set of qualities but as a matter of followers' perception of the given leader. Though Weber does not talk about this perception/reception phenomenon, Tucker (1968) has pointed out art of argument as an essential tool to influence followers' perception. Here art of

argument can be seen as one of various other exceptional qualities of charismatic leadership by highlighting the persuasiveness. According to Tucker "Immense persuasiveness in argument may, in other words, be one of the extraordinary qualities by virtue of which a leader acquires charisma in his followers' eyes" (1968, p. 736). Though Tucker does not try to look at any sinister intention lurking behind this persuasiveness, yet he accepts one thing that perception of the followers are at disposal of leaders' persuasive power. So the article would take help from the work of Wrong who first explains how persuasion transforms into manipulation and then discusses manipulation as a forearm of power. Tucker's work would remain equally valuable, though, as it highlights the characteristic of the situation which facilitates a leader to appear as a charismatic one. Historical novels dealing with turbulent parts of history cannot help talking about such revolutionary figures. In spite of the critical treatment of such revolutionary personas, literary works nevertheless treat them as revolutionary and also reflect upon the situation that nourishes such revolutionaries, and one of the aforementioned aims of this article is to study the situation which facilitates Sheikh Mujeeb's charismatic projection.

The upcoming sections deal with Tucker's insight regarding characteristics of charismatic leaders leading a charismatic movement and his understanding of Weber in this regard. An overview of the work of Wrong is also provided to explain manipulation as a form of power. Moreover, a detailed discussion of textual inferences is conducted under the light of selected theoretical principles to substantiate the stance made about the interplay of charisma and manipulation.

### Charismatic Leaders and Historical Moments: Mujeeb's Charisma in 1971

In his article "The Theory of Charismatic Leadership", Robert C. Tucker revisits Weber's concept of charisma along with other scholarly opinions to understand the historical situations which facilitates the following of a charismatic leader. Tucker's discussion somehow finds the locus of charisma not only in the innate characteristics of the charismatic leader but also in the outer situation where leaders manage to win trust of their followers. This realistic understanding of charisma within the backdrop of tangible historical situations makes it possible to merge Weber's concept of pure charisma with material reality and maintains that charismatic image can be achieved like other political goals. Weber has been criticised by Carl Fridrich (1961) for taking the concept of charisma out of religious domain and applying it to the political world, and by R.J.Ratnam (1964) for not providing "any clear statement of catalogue of personal qualities in charismatic leaders which gives rise to special bond with their followers" (Tucker, 1968, p.732). Tucker finds Weber useful in spite of this criticism for he finds religious and political domains of life intertwined as neither religious figures can be considered working without any pursuance of power nor can it be claimed that political organizations are only working for the gain of power as there can be some unavoidable psychological motives on the part of leadership (1968, p. 733).

Tucker accepts the criticism regarding the vagueness on the part of Weber while defining charismatic leadership and to remedy this deficiency he takes help from the historical situation like Russian Movement and German Nationalist movement that facilitates the charismatic image of a political leader like Stalin and Hitler. Tucker tries to formulate *Theory of Charismatic Leadership* and finds that Weber's notion of charisma proved a highly useful tool of "analysis of the

remarkable personal authority that Lenin exercised over the Bolsheviks from the inception of the movement at the turn of the century to his death" (1968, p. 734). The findings of Tucker's insight into Russian movement and Lenin's leadership can be generalized to other similar situations of history and in this very article the selected historical moment is Bangladesh's movement for independence under the charismatic leadership of Mujib. Tucker's theory of charismatic leadership does sound suitable for two reasons; it helps to understand Mujib as a charismatic leader and also highlights the role that the historical moment of 1971 plays in the play of his charisma.

While extending the concept of charisma to political culture, Weber replaces absolute obedience with the domination that a leader exercises on followers because of having certain extraordinary qualities. Weber's extraordinary charismatic leader appears like a demigod like figure despite his involvement in secular matters. The scholars Grabo, Spisak and Vugt (2017) based the notion of Charisma on the ability to motivate people in dire situations so they define a charismatic leader "as an individual who signals their ability and willingness to swiftly mobilize group action in the face of an urgent coordination challenge" (p. 24). During his first meeting with Mujeeb, Khaleque finds Mujeeb a larger than life character who has the ability to behave like a prophet in a moment of chaos:

He was tall; I guess taller than ninety-nine percent of Bangladeshis. I felt if lightning struck right now he would receive it first and deflect it from us. He would create a second Noah's Ark, to protect us from flood, and would bear our guilt and accept our punishment on his shoulder. It was not accidental that Pakistanis feared him so much and incarcerated him so many

times. They knew what a mortal threat he was. I also felt he was the most gracious man I had ever met (Imam, p. 104, 2013).

It is worth noticing that the writer makes his charisma tangible by making his extraordinary appearance a factor contributing to it, and the importance of physical appearance has been discussed by Balcer along with his fellows who find that tall people have advantage on short ones in terms of leadership (Blaker et al., 2013).

Other than the appearance of Mujeeb, his extraordinary rhetorical skills seem to dominate his people's psychology who find obedience as the only suitable response to Mujeeb's call to revolt. One of the commanders of the liberation movement tells Khaliq about the level of obedience they have for Mujib: He said he also heard Mujib's voice several times during the war: "You may not believe me either, 'he said, 'but you may believe in God. At this moment I can only tell that if you believe in God you must believe in Sheikh Mujib" (Imam, p. 10). Tucker finds in his study of Lenin's leadership that because of his persuasive skills he manages to build a charismatic authority relation and, similarly, in *The Black Coat*, it's Mujeeb's persuasiveness enacted time and again through his political address that builds a charismatic authority relation between him and his people and in a later manipulative phase of his political life he even decides to use Nur to continue his game of manipulation as he resembles Mujeeb and has also learned to deliver speeches like him.

Tucker is in agreement with Weber's claims about features of charismatic leadership, yet he adds that Weber fails to fully acknowledge the role of social movement which is either a result of charismatic calling or a situation which facilitates such calling.

The importance of historical situation has been acknowledged by Givant and Bebnson as well: "Treating charisma as a universal, and thus abstracting it from its particular historical, social, and economic context, diverts attention from the use of charisma as a screen for specific ideological or material interests by relevant interest groups (1975, p. 612).

Tucker situates charisma in specific historical moments by looking into its play in connection with a given movement which is both an effect and a cause of charismatic leadership. For Tucker "to speak of charismatic leadership is to speak of charismatic movements, the two phenomena are inseparable" (1968, p. 738). This leads us to study the situation that the novel talks about as a charismatic movement in the light of Tucker's Russian movement and his discussion about blind following of Hitler after the first world war which he finds suitable contemporary examples of charismatic movement. Here Tucker again revisits Weber who says that charismatic leaders naturally emerge in the time of economic, ethical and social distress; moreover, he finds that devotion of followers is born out of distress. Tucker talks in detail about the interplay of charismatic leadership and the moment of stress and explains this relation in detail by recalling three types of stress pointed out by Erik H. Erikson:

"There are certain historical conditions, such as the waning of religion, in which people in large numbers become charisma hungry. Pursuing the point further, he distinguished three forms of distress to which a charismatic leader may minister: Fear, as in the fear of the medieval European Jews for their lives or the obscure, subliminal fear of nuclear destruction in contemporary Western man; anxiety, especially experienced by a person in an identity vacuum or the condition of not

knowing what they are existential dread of the distress that people experience under conditions in which rituals of their existence have broken down. Correspondingly, a charismatic leader is one who offers people salvation in the form of safety, or identity, or rituals" (Tucker, p. 745).

The selected text shows that the time Mujeeb is winning the hearts of followers is the time of stress as the Bengalis are feeling neglected and deserted by West Pakistan: "There were the stressed, the psychologically traumatized and the homeless, who needed a moment of calm. But above all, and despite all this, we needed to celebrate the heroism of our people" (Imam, p. 9). Mujeeb entertained this opportunity by presenting himself as a path seeker to the herd of wayward people: "They all believed in the leadership of sheikh Mujib. All of them believed that if the country were not free now, under his direction, it would never be free" (Imam, p. 9). The people of west Pakistan need to believe someone in the moment of stress and they believe Mujeeb.

#### **Props of Manipulative Charisma; Analysis of Mujib's Speech and Political Tactics**

Wrong (1982) and after him Wartenberg (1997) talks at great length about the forms of power. Wrong finds manipulation as a separate form of power that comes under the category of influence but he finds its mechanism different from that of persuasion. The difference between persuasion and manipulation is very subtle as both aim to influence others' will without any physical use of power, so Wrong finds this difference in the amount of information shared with power subjects. "If in persuading or commanding a power subject, the power holder fails to make explicit certain actions he induces the power subject to perform, even though he has made explicit other performed actions, he has manipulated the power subject in addition to exercising other forms of power over him"

(Wrong, 1982, p. 28). While in persuasion, the persuasive agent does not hide his intent to influence, the manipulative one not only conceals his desire to influence but also the goal he wants to achieve by influencing others. After establishing a difference between persuasion and manipulation, Wrong pronounced it as a "sinister form of power that cannot be openly resisted by the power subject, since he is unaware of the power holder's intent or even sometimes of his existence" (Wrong, p.30).

The narrative of Mujib's party presents Pakistan in such a manner that Mujib's party appears as the only option left for the salvation of Bangali people, Wrong (1982) would call it symbolic control on the will of the power subject where "the power holder may exercise concealed control over the power subject through symbolic communications designed to make veiled suggestions, to limit or determine selectively the power subject's information supply, or to inculcate without appearing to do so certain positive or negative attitudes" (p. 28).

In the selected text, Mujib's manipulation first aims at exploiting banagalties' desire for better life through false promises and the propagation of exaggerated information, and in the later phase of his political career, he conceals the reality about his country's economic condition from the direct victims of food scarcity. Throughout this process of manipulation, Mujib's Charisma facilitates calculated transformation of information which is readily accepted as truth.

During a confused moment of bitter realization, Khalique justifies Mujib's indifference to poverty and at the same time unveils his tactic of withholding the truth: Sheikh Mujib was right turn a blind eye to these people who insulted the human spirit ...He was right to block the images of death from the media" (p. 164).

Narratives of Muktibahini (an armed militant group made by leaders of the student awami league) and content of Mujib's speeches are based on either sort of information: false, accurate and partially correct but regardless of authenticity of information, party narrative manages to manipulate people because of its persuasive vigour and because of people's belief in Mujib's charisma that make people listen to his speeches and become prey of his political agenda. The manipulation flourishes among false information Khaleuqe - bangladeshi journalist and the central character of the novel admits the propagation of wrong information which is easily accepted by enchanted Bengalis: "In all my articles, I attacked and insulted the Pakistani rulers...invented stories about, mislabeled their names and destinations to make seem eccentric and trivial" (Imam, p. 6).

Mujib's manipulation includes making false promises and withholding of true information: "He was one leader who ardently stated he did not want to be prime minister of Pakistan, and insteads wanted to see Bangladesh free" (Imam, 2013, p. 7). Whatever happens in the later part of the novel shows that Mujib was telling a white lie regarding his lack of desire for prime ministership. Banaglies believed him and continued to do so even after the indifference of Mujib's government towards the plight of the newly liberated country. The affectees of these manipulative promises reach Dhaka after the flood: "They did not want to be shadows of lives without enjoying the promises of the new country" (p. 89).

The charismatic image of Mujib proves to be a backbone for the manipulative play of Mujib's party. Blinded by Mujib charm, they did not try to investigate the political claims of Mujib regarding Pakistan's government, and they continue to do so once Mujib appears as the sole authoritative figure with all the necessary power to make just decisions for

his people. Despite living in sheer poverty in the post 1971 war years and, instead of questioning the shallowness of the promises made before war, Bengalis seem interested in listening to Mujib's charismatic speech from Nur. The interest in listening to the same old and rather forgotten promises shows that they are unaware of the manipulative role that their charismatic leader has played by replacing their will with the policies of the parties and snubbing almost all the possibilities of individual thinking. The response of the poor woman to Nur's enactment of Mujib's speech shows that how deep are the roots of Mujib's charisma that even poverty cannot lift the spell cast by his magical words. The woman insists on listening from Nur a reiteration of promises once made by Mujib: "Tell us something about the liberation struggle...Tell us something about our future' Though he did not speak, she opened the knot of her sari and threw a coin at his feet, as a token of her respect for him.'Take this money... protect our motherland" (p. 32). Here Tucker's claim regarding the need of stressful moment for the birth of charismatic seems valid again as mostly the people under the stress of poverty get attracted to Nur deliverance of Mujib's famous speech .Their response is overwhelmingly emotional and they "sometimes got tearful; they wanted to touch Nur Hussain's hands to receive his blessings" (Imam, p. 54).

The game of manipulation reaches its apex when the news of Nur's fame reaches Mujib and he decides to spend people money on the maintenance of his dying charisma he decides to use Nur's passionate youth to attract people towards awami league. It is quite clear that so far the charismatic influence paves the way for Mujib to manipulate people into giving up their will. But this subtle but political and socially ubiquitous play of power mainly rests on a carefully established charismatic image and blind belief of people in that image. Amid famine and sheer poverty ,

once enchanted people start getting disenchanted about which C. Stephen Jaeger (2012) has correctly stated that charisma is always seen as benevolent and life-affirming, at least until disenchantment sets in (p. 9). This disenchantment starts showing itself when the people of slum areas about to hit Nur who were once mesmerized by his speech: "Though he was in his rags, some refugees recognized him. I could clearly hear one of them loudly asking the man sitting next to him if Nur Hussain was the person who used to deliver Sheikh Mujib's speech... I sensed some desperate ferociousness in their attitude. They were plotting something. These hungry people could be really nasty" (p. 171). Later on Nur internalizes this disillusionment and decides to speak the truth:

"My brothers...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 that I have spoken so long...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" (p. 177)

But well before this display of rebelliousness, Awami League senses that Mujib's charisma is losing its vigour and starts scheming for the popularity of Sheikh Mujib. Pappas (2016) alludes to Weber while studying the relationship between populism and political charisma and finds that that charisma can only exist as long as it is recognized by followers and it needs to be constantly sustained. Once the divine image of Mujib of a revolutionary leader transforms into an image of a political leader liable to human errors, his party starts striving for the sustenance of his charismatic image. The campaign of Moina Mia aims at careful continuation of Mujib's failing charisma: "We have arranged twelve hundred exhibitions and forty-two thousand discussion programmes...

we have printed a mass of three hundred and fifty million leaflets...We do not want to see a single mind in the country to go against Sheikh Mujib and the Awami League" (p. 121). The manipulative politics reaches its apex when the Party decides to use Nur - a symbol of prevailing unemployment - for speaking on the behalf of Mujib's services for the country. A banagli youth is sold for the tactful concealment of the reality. Khalique thinks to himself: "Thus I sold Nur Hussein once again. First I sold him to the people on the street for their coins...Now I sold him to Sheikh Mujib through Moina Mia" (p. 123). But Nur refuses to sell his conscience and receives his punishment in the form of death. Khalique has to kill him as he is now a dangerous man for the existence of Awami League. Mujib does not require his charismatic image as now he has decided to impose his power not through manipulation but rather through coercion: Sheikh Mujib declared himself president for life with extraordinary power...Sheikh Mujib has banned all political parties in the Awami League" (p. 229). Once Mujib's greed for power sheds its manipulative garb, it gets easy for opposing forces to confront him and he is killed in 1975. But the manipulative charisma of the dead leader sneaks into history books: I taught history to schoolchildren. I was glad that the textbook said nothing about the 1974 famine... It was history edited, a history lavishly distorted; but I enjoyed the fact that I did not have to speak about the famine. I could teach history without...explaining actually why Sheikh Mujib was killed so brutally" (p. 233-234). Now, through telling a half truth, the school syllabus manages to keep Mujib's memory alive as a father of the nation and keeps serving nationalist agenda of Awami League.

**Conclusion:**

The detailed analysis of the selected historical fiction *The Black Coat* shows that charisma in contemporary age is not restricted to divinely bestowed leadership which rests on purity of heart and selflessness of conduct. Tucker's working with the concept of charismatic leadership finds the source of charisma outwardly rather than locating it solely in the personality of the charismatic leader. Using the example of Lenin and Hitler, Tucker justified that stressed socio-political condition allows a person with a persuasive personality and with ability to purgate desired emotions to earn followership and to maintain it with continued display of charismatic leadership. Sheikh Mujib has been found using different political props from indigenized costume to emotional speeches with an empathic slogan of "Joy Bangla" to build his charisma among the people who are living with a fear that they soon be robbed of their right to live. Sheikh Mujib first enhances this fear and then offers himself as a sole remedy by manipulating people's fear for West Pakistan's government into obeying Awami League. The power is exercised through manipulative charisma and gradually develops into coercion which reaches its apex with the death Of Nur Hussien who is the symbol of the disencharnted banagli people ready enough to question Awami-league's claims regarding the charismatic leadership of Mujib.

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