

SHORT STORY

The Bakery

AKMAL LOHANI

Damn, Harish Kingrani came home thinking, *my friendly neighborhood baker just tried to pick me up*. He took off his leather jacket and slung it on the battered hat rack he had retrieved for a song from a Salvation Army store: *Only in America...*

According to its blue-and-white sign, the bakery has been in this Washington D.C. neighborhood since 1939. A neighborhood that is the Hispanic rim to the largely white, professional, pet-owning community veering crookedly through Rock Creek Park to the rise overlooking Connecticut Avenue. The road on which the bakery sits has Latino immigrants lounging in front of brightly-bannered *cantinas*, where on Sunday mornings young moms in mournful black skirts trailed stiffly-starched children up church steps. During evenings spanish guitar chords and an air of half-hearted flamenco lingered in the dying light. It reminded Harish of marshy fields behind the nurses hostels in the small Sindhi town of Thatta, where once he and a friend had roared to on motorcycles while ‘bunking’ from his college classes in Karachi.

The bakery is fronted by a large plate glass window where children cup their hands around their eyes to make out the shapes in the cool gloom of the interior. Inside the large rectangular room, the counter runs the length of one wall before making a right-angled turn to block off tables laden with boxes, string, tapes and other flimsy paraphernalia of the baker’s trade. Beyond the tables swing doors lead to the actual bakery. A line of stained barstools is stationed by the window. Beneath the

countertop, beneath the green bulbshades swooning in the faint yeast-and-cinnamon smell, is the usual American glut to Harish’s still-Pakistani eye: an assortment of pies, bagels, cakes, doughnuts, turnovers and pastries. On shelves behind the counter are stacked loaves of bread that Harish, despite his years in America, still can’t name.

Even though he has been in the neighborhood for a few years, he has never been inside the bakery, preferring instead to shop over in the more properly ‘white’ shops of Connecticut Avenue. Then, one morning a couple of months back, Harish had impulsively stepped inside for a cup of coffee – small, plain white Styrofoam cup (miracle of miracles in ad-saturated America, a logoless cup!!!), 70 cents. Picking up a copy of the free *City Paper* from the stack on the way out, Harish knew that he was hooked—he would be getting his morning shot of caffeine here. Slowly, he came to know the bakery crew by sight. They were, he said while on the phone to his sister in Toronto, the “older Hispanic woman”, the “toothy Hispanic woman” with bangs on her forehead, the “very pregnant Hispanic woman”, and the “plump Hispanic woman” with the startling eye makeup.

“Are you kidding me?” Nandita, his younger, college-going sister had responded, “just call them all *Senoritas*.” “You mean *Senorita Eye Makeup*, *Senorita Plump*?” “No,” she had laughed, “just *senorita*.” She was seven years younger than him, had come to the United States at a much earlier age than he had. Unlike him, she hadn’t heard their mother’s stories about the 1947 Partition, when his father, loath to sell the cloth business that

had been in the family for generations, had refused to leave Karachi for Bombay. The rest of their extended Sindhi Hindu family had done so, and were today settled in Mumbai amid the prosperous and professional community of ex-Pakistani Sindhis. It was only after their father died that his mother had moved to Mumbai, selling the business, selling the old, yellow-brick house with the high ceilings in Bunder Road where Harish had been born to a Parsi doctor. She was now in the midst of an ever- widening circle of Kingranis, occasionally complaining about the fish “too much pomfret here...” Harish had never been to Mumbai, he had come to America straight from Karachi. His sister, however, was an ex-‘Mumbaiya’. “It’s just not them,” he had told Nandita. “It’s the bread too. I just point and say ‘I want that.’” “Why don’t you just ask which is which?”

“Well, English isn’t exactly their strong point.” “Oh, okay! But hey, since when did you get so big on bread anyway?” “I’m not.” “Then what’s all this about bread anyway?” “Ummm...” “Wait, is there a chick in the storyline, or what?” “No.”

But Harish had been dissembling—yes, there was a ‘chick in the storyline’. A redhead with gray-brown eyes. And she hadn’t been behind the counter.

Harish had first seen her a month back. Or rather had seen the dog first—nobody could miss it— a massive Alsatian, its back broad enough for a four-year-old to ride it, the head leonine, its fur sleek and glossy. She was holding the leash, chattering



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familiarly with the plump *senorita*. In Spanish. After that Harish would see her occasionally, sitting at one of the tables or barstools, tall but delicate-seeming beside the dog panting at her feet. One evening a week later on the way back from work, Harish ducked in the bakery to see that the afternoon shift was all-white. A woman and a man. *Aaah, English speakers. Time to ask*. Harish, pointing with a forefinger, asked the woman behind the counter: “What’s that?” “This? Rye.” “And that?”

“Whole wheat. This one’s pumpkin. Those over there are sourdough.” Harish is aware that the man, standing behind one of the back tables, is looking at him. “And the square one on top?” “Brioche.” “What’s brioche?” “It’s a slightly sweet white bread.”

“I’ll take it.” “You want it sliced?” she asks, holding the bread over a saw-toothed machine. “Yes, please.”

The brioche is good. It is good

with the *sai bhaji* and the *methi gosht* that Ratna Gurshahani has taught him how to cook in her big airy suburban kitchen in Virginia. It topped up the curry gravy just right as he sat watching videotapes of cricket matches rented from luridly posterd Indian shops in the suburbs. On evenings Harish makes sure to bring home a loaf.

“That’ll be two ten.” “Thank you,” Harish would take it, pay and be gone. Oftentimes he would notice the man helping out the regular Hispanic crew, which was now missing its very pregnant member. Early thirties, with long hair and oddly (odd because of the setting) patrician features, with perhaps a too delicate a way of picking out the brioche from the bunch.

Then for about two weeks, Harish doesn’t go in the evenings. Doesn’t need bread. It’s bagels and coffee in the morning and rice otherwise.

Then, one gray rainy day, home off from work on Martin Luther King Day, Harish suddenly wanted bread. He pulled on his

jacket, walked up the block from his house, and jaywalked across the debris-strewn street with rain sizzling hamburgers on the rooftop. Inside, the candle-powered day has dimmed the white of the fleur-de-les tiles. The Hispanic woman with the eye makeup is there. Harish pointed to the rye and at the same time said, “Coffee, small, please.” The man is at the other end, ringing out change to a raincoated woman in high heels. “Hi,” he said.

“Hello.” As Harish took the cup from her, he sauntered over to stand beside the woman behind the counter. He gave Harish’s black leather jacket a quick appraising look. The raincoated woman clicked out of the store. The three of them were the only ones now.

“Haven’t seen you lately,” “Oh,” Harish responded. “I do come in. Only in the mornings, though, for coffee.”

“Well, you should come in the afternoons to see *me*.” Harish raised startled eyes to his. *Did I hear that right?* The other man’s gaze is steady, absolutely level, but the message in the look, now with one arched eyebrow underlining it, is unmistakable. *What the hell is going on here?* Harish momentarily turned his eyes to the Hispanic woman, and saw that her eyes too had widened, the mascara now narrowed to a thin line. She had somehow picked up on the exchange and stiffened slightly, one hand absentmindedly twisting the plastic wrap of the bread, telepathing him in some automatic brown skin solidarity, “Watch out, white man *maricon*.”

Harish looked back at him. The guy was still looking at him, holding his gaze a second time, but there was nothing furtive there, not a trace of back alley

snigger. Harish relaxed, *perhaps an honest mistake*, almost put a hand on his shoulder, *sorry, but I am straight, can’t help it*, and laughed instead, a medium-gauge, neutral laugh, which did nothing to reassure her. He took the bread, paid, and walked out into the rain. A Washington D.C. rain, streaming down steadily on buses and cabs, falling down in long slanting lines from grey skies. Through the bar windows Harish could see Latino men sitting moodily inside, dreaming of homelands a whole continent away.

A little shock renewed in him outside on the street: *a pass, at me?* It has been a long road—different culture, other times—from the merciless hazing in the boys’ school Harish had attended in Karachi of the one girlish classmate who took ten minutes to tie his shoelaces in a perfect bow and pored over makeup ads in movie magazines to this American world of gays and gay rights, of live and let live, to the immigrant’s topsy-turvy American world of left is right, up is down, to the slow realization that *they too are outsiders, like me, looking in from the fringes, like me, not fitting in, like me*.

The next morning when Harish went in for his morning coffee he saw the dog sprawled beneath the window, leash tied to a barstool. *She* was now behind the counter with the Hispanic crew, the V-necked weave of the white Fruit-of-the-Loom T-shirt taut against her breasts. He waited in line till his turn came. “Hi, may I help you?” “Hello,” and then he decided to chance it, wanting to test the other side in this place, “new here?” “Nope,” she smiled, “I’m just filling in for somebody.” Short, tight sleeves high up on

freckled arms, a sooty look in gray-brown eyes set beneath the careless, russet line of her hair—

(*Immoderate hue oh, I do, I do red-tipped you gray and...*)

Harish snapped back as she repeated, fingertips lightly pressed on countertop, “May I help you?”

“Coffee, small, please.” Still smiling her gray-eyed smile, she began to turn to the coffee machine behind her, then thought of something, and turned back to him. Her lips parted. Words came out of the open, inviting mouth. Rapid fire. Harish shook his head. She had spoken in Spanish. She said it again, even more rapidly.

“I’m sorry,” Harish replied. “I don’t speak Spanish.” She stopped smiling, her lips primly shut. The eyes went blank. Whatever had been there was now quickly replaced by a professional politeness. “Sorry,” she mumbled, briskly poured out the coffee and handed it to him.

“Next please.” The door to her had swung shut.

Out on the soulless pavement, hung out to dry, Harish looked at the steam rising from the coffee cup, the plain Styrofoam cup, and it came to him, the perfect logo for his neighborhood bakery: a gingerbread dragon chasing, round and round the ever-receding curve of the cup, its own gaily waving tail, forever trapped in that circle of fickle desire.

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Letter from

KARACHI

MUNEeza SHAMSIE

March has been a dramatic month. Amid protests over the Chief Justice’s dismissal, the police raided the offices of the television channel Geo to prevent its live coverage. But Geo kept filming. The raid was relayed live onto our screens. The President apologized. An enquiry was instituted. Attempts at state censorship have dogged us at regular intervals throughout our history. However another, form of censorship has been endemic across South Asia for centuries: gender-based censorship, silent, insidious, deep-rooted and sanctioned by social structures.

In February, I attended “The Power of the Word: South Asian Women Writers Colloquium” in Delhi, organized by Women’s WORLD, an international organization which concerns itself with gender-based censorship. The Indian chapter is headed by the feminist publisher and writer Ritu Menon of Kali/Women Unlimited. She was the moving spirit behind the conference, which included a public address by Gloria Steinem, that icon of the feminist revolution.

A tall, elegant woman with a quiet, impressive presence, Steinem is a natural communicator with her measured voice, her wit and her incisive comments. She asserted that “changing consciousness was the first step to activism” and described different forms of censorship that women face due to the pressures of society. She expressed concern that today, discourse on gender-based crimes such as sex trafficking and rape, presents women as victims, but does not include men as perpetrators. She spoke of the different ways that literary output is controlled. She was critical of the dearth of poetry and fiction in US women’s magazine because advertisers want publications to support products and will refuse those which feature “depressing” subjects. Also she urged the preservation oral traditions and literature and the need for good translators to enable talent from languages to reach a wider audiences.

The Indian delegates included English language poet, Rukmini Bhaiya Nayar, Hindi poet Gagan Gill, Urdu novelist Jeelani Bano, Tamil playwright A. Mangal, Bengali poet, novelist, essayist. Nabaneeta Dev Sen, as well as writers of Kannada, Maharati, Malayalam, Telegu. In the opening session Tasleema Nasreen spoke about the difficulties of exile, the

loss of homeland. The Pakistani novelist and filmmaker, Feryal Ali Gauhar described her search for an identity as a woman writer cutting across Pakistan’s geographical borders. There was a particularly well-presented speech by Manjushree Thapa, the Nepalese English novelist and erstwhile exile. She spoke of the complexities of writing during political flux, as Nepal finds its way from monarchy and autocracy to democracy.

Several writers represented minority groups such as Mamang Dai from Arunchal Pradesh, Tamsula Ao from Nagaland, Esther David the Jewish novelist from Gujrat, Bama a Dalit writer all had to battle to make themselves Ameena Hussein from Sri Lanka described the marginalization of Muslims in her country and their subsequent retreat into orthodoxy. She founds her opinions as a woman were not popular among the Muslim community, yet she was afraid of having them manipulated by the community’s critics to reinforce prejudice.

Self-censorship was a recurring theme at the conference and was addressed, among others, by myself, as well as Neeman Sobhan and Shabnam Nadiya from Bangladesh. As women we are so conditioned by society, that as writers we are often beset by the worry “What will people say? What will my family think?” Some revealed that they had two writing lives: one which was public, published and known, the other, a secret world, of unpublished work which they were too afraid to share for fear it was too radical, would offend or be considered a betrayal.

Nabaneeta Dev Sen criticized the literary domination of English, the pressures of international publishing and marketing which promoted diaspora Indian English writers as India’s authentic voice while vernacular literatures languished in comparative obscurity. Kamila Shamsie paid rich tributes to Mai Ghoussoub the Lebanese-born founder of Saqi books who had passed away suddenly in London. Kamila described Mai as a woman who had decided “to publish books that weren’t being published” in Britain, found a niche and made Saqi financially viable too. Saqi’s publications have included short story collections by women from Iran, Pakistan and Bangladesh.

Dr. Niaz Zaman spoke of Mai with great warmth too and of her readiness to have ‘Galpa: Short

Stories by Women from Bangladesh’ edited by her and Firdous Azeem reprinted in Dhaka because Saqi’s British price was unaffordable in Bangladesh. Niaz lamented that few Bangladeshi writers are known internationally, despite their high quality work because their writing does not conform to the demands of the western market.

Some women writers have broken through the taboos of society but brave constant censure. Anoma Rajakaruna, the Sinhala poet had faced a barrage of criticism since childhood because she wrote on subjects considered improper. Fahmida Riaz spoke about misunderstandings surrounding her feminist Urdu poetry which was erroneously confused with her personal life, because she employed the female gender in poetry forms which had traditionally been written in the male. She also described her research into Baluchistan’s oral traditions and folk poetry such as lullabies and wedding songs in Baluchistan to establish the intellectual capacity of women across the ages.

Back in Karachi, International Women’s Day was celebrated across the city with speeches, dance, drama and music. To many the one woman who symbolized the struggle and resilience of women in Pakistan, was Mukhtar Mai. Women journalists urged that she should be given life membership of the Karachi Press Club. Her courage has led to awards in US, Europe and by Pakistani NGOs. Her book ‘In The Name of Honour: A Memoir’, dictated to Marie-Therese Cuny, has been received with widespread acclaim. Her struggle for legal justice is central to her narrative. Mukhtar was gang-raped according to a jirga’s decree in the village of Meerwala, to avenge the honour of the upper caste Mastoi clan. They claimed her brother, aged 12, had had ‘illicit relations’ with a Mastoi girl. The incident drew national and international outrage. In a series of legal twists, the perpetrators were jailed, freed, jailed. The case drags on. Mukhtar, conscious of her own illiteracy and its disadvantages, has set up a primary school in her village for girls and later, boys, with donations received. She now has 700 pupils.

Muneeza Shamsie has edited three anthologies of Pakistani English writing. She is a regular contributor to Dawn newspaper, Newsline and She, The Journal of Commonwealth Literature.

Book Review

A mixed bag

AZFAR AZIZ

**Swadhinata: Prothom Khando** edited by Major (ret) Kamrul Hasan Bhuiyan; Dhaka: Centre for Bangladesh Liberation War Studies (CBLWS); February 2007; 144 pp; Tk. 135

The volume under review is the first of a series of books containing firsthand accounts of freedom fighters the CBLWS plans to bring out. Twelve Liberation War heroes have contributed to this first issue. In 10 of the write-ups they describe numerous guerrilla and conventional military operations and encounters they either led or took part in, besides their day-to-day activities, relationships with various socio-political and military quarters during the war for independence.

Of the remaining two entries, ‘26 March *Chhilo Juddhe Namar Din*’ (26 March Was the Day to go to War) by retired Col Mohammad Abdus Salam Bir Pratik, then a student leader in Dhaka, is a description of how the March-25 Pakistani crackdown on Bangalis prompted Salam and his associates, then in Sylhet, to mobilise a force on their own. They confronted a contingent of the Pakistani occupation forces the next morning. After a number of the resistance fighters were injured in the skirmish, the rest escaped, realising the futility of such unplanned fights. Salam and three others then headed for Telipara to join the mainstream freedom fighters. Here ends the write-up, making it very much uni-focal and narrow in scope.

The other entry, ‘From Operation Blitz to Operation Searchlight’ contributed by the editor, is the last but one entry in the book, although it would have been better placed at the beginning, since in it Major Bhuiyan gives a very detailed socio-political and military background of the war. It covers the major events following the fall of the Ayub regime, from the 1970 general elections to the launching of the murderous Operation Searchlight. Bhuiyan also

provides historically significant statistics on the various troops and war equipment of West Pakistan as well as Bangali military, paramilitary and police personnel when the war broke out. However, placing the article at the end of the book to an extent constitutes a failure of the editorial role.

Major Bhuiyan however compensates for this shortcoming by beginning the volume with the best-written piece, *Titto’s Swadhinata*, (Titto’s liberation) by Nasiruddin Yusuf, who was then commander of guerrilla forces in the Dhaka North zone. He fought in Sector 2, under Major Khaled Mosharraf. While describing military operations, Yusuf also gradually introduces an adolescent boy named Tito to readers. Mosharraf brings him to Yusuf’s camp one night after the guerrillas have been hit hard by Pakistani soldiers. The boy’s eyes sparkle with fervour, when next morning, to arouse the spirit of the soldiers, Mosharraf tells them, ‘Remember - the people of a liberated country don’t love live freedom fighters. The people of a liberated land want dead, not live, guerrillas.’ Tito is always insisting on joining the fight, even though he is too young to be inducted. Frustrated, Tito once shouts back, “Why should I live on? My brother has been killed. And I have come to fight. I, too, must die.” Fate grants him his wish; he does die one day during a guerrilla ambush in Savar on retreating Pakistani forces. The last words he says are, “I want to see liberation. Liberation, liberation, liberation...” His remains lie in a grave near the entrance to Savar Dairy Farm.

The rest of the contributors to the book are retired Major Hafizuddin Ahmad Bir Bikram, Mahub Alam, retired Maj Gen Amin Ahmed Chowdhury Bir Bikram, Mahub Elahi Ranju Bir Pratik, retired Colonel Mohammad Safiq Ullah Bir Pratik, Nizamuddin Laskar, Haider Anwar Khan Juno, Dr Ziauddin Ahmad, and Akhtaruzzaman Mandal.

Hafiz, then a captain in Jessore Cantonment, rebelled along with 200 other Bangali soldiers against

the Pakistani army command and left it on March 30. He soon became a part of the Z Force, and took part in the famous attack on the Kamalpur border outpost (BOP), a Pakistani stronghold, as well as in battles in the Sylhet area. His descriptions of various battles, raids and guerrilla operations end with the surrender of Pakistani forces in Sylhet on December 15.

‘*Ei Bangla, Banglar Mukh*’ by Mahub Alam is another account of the war that is as good in literary quality as the piece written by Yusuf. He fought in the north-west, in Sector 6. Generally, the write-ups contributed by Yusuf, Alam, Col Safiqullah (a teacher field-commissioned in 1971), Laskar and other civilians-turned-freedom fighters demonstrate more humane, non-technical, and literary merits than those written by military academy-trained commissioned officers like Maj Ahmad and Maj Gen Chowdhury. The latter’s accounts of the war often focus only on war strategy, planning and operational details as well as their prose tends to be jargon-heavy. On the other hand, the war account of Amin Ahmed Chowdhury, particularly the detailed descriptions of the Bangladesh army’s attacks on Kamalpur BOP, Bahadurabad Ghat, and Nakshi BOP, is really rich and of much historical importance.

The initiative taken by CBLWS to publish first-hand accounts of the Liberation War is a praiseworthy one, although the selection of write-ups in this volume does not indicate any definite plan or criterion, like presenting a complete overview of the war in one or more specific sectors. Hopefully the coming volumes will be organised considering such aspects, with compilations on forces or services such as medical, signal, intelligence, logistics, liaison with Indian troops and Mujibnagar government, etc, which will help readers acquire clearer pictures and insight about the multi-dimensional aspects of our glorious war of independence.

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Flute player on the rustic paths

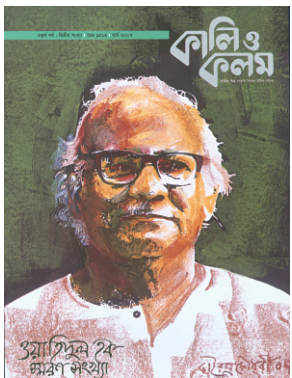
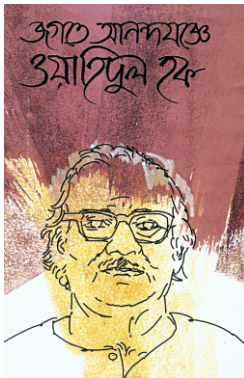
SYED BADRUL AHSAN

*Jogote Anondo* jogge Waheedul Haque: Waheedul Haque *Shorone Shonkolan*; Dhaka: Chhayanaaut

Only weeks into his death, Waheedul Haque continues to cast a lengthening light on the land of which he was once such an integral part. The tributes being paid to him is proof of the powerful hold he has on our collective aesthetic imagination. Those who knew him in life, had cause to associate with him, knew all along of the expansive nature of his knowledge. He was one who seemed at ease with nearly every facet of life --- from music to trees to physics and almost everything else.

*Jogote Anondo* jogge is not a reassessment of Waheedul Haque. It is a reassertion of all the ideals he lived and, one might add, died for. As Zillur Rahman Siddiqui remarks in his tribute, Haque’s patriotism was the underpinning of all that he stood for. There were the times when he disappeared into the hamlets and villages of Bangladesh, in search of young people ready and willing to uphold Rabindranath Tagore. It was Tagore that energized Waheedul Haque. And yet there was a varied side to his character. Kamruzzaman brings out that side in his discourse on the young cricketer that Haque was in the early 1950s. Waheedul Haque, like all good proponents of theory, turned out to be a middling practitioner of it in the field, whether cricket or football.

The essays in the anthology cover, basically, the years 2003, when Waheedul Haque reached his seventieth year, and 2007, when he succumbed to mortality. Shamsur Rahman, however, is one of the few whose reflections on Haque predate the two years in question. *Bandhob Tomar Jonno* is a moving tribute to



the genius in Waheedul Haque. And moving too is KG Mustafa’s poignant *Tomar Joi Hok Ustad*. The sheer variety of interests he pursued comes through as mind-boggling in this collection. Mita Haque’s tribute to the man who was her relative and mentor is brief but touches the heart. Ifat Ara Dewan travels back in time to relate the story of her forays into Rabindrasangeet along a trail set by Waheedul Haque. He was her Waheed Bhai, indeed everyone’s Waheed Bhai. For many, he was the one who played the flute and led mesmerised listeners of his melody to the banks of the primordial river. Nazim Mahmud calls him the pied piper of Hamelin. Syed Shamsul Haq spots the monsoon in him even as Baishakh goes by. Mustafa Nurul Islam’s prayer on the *sangeet guri*’s seventieth birthday centres on a wish for more years for Haque to journey through his world. Islam had no way of knowing that four years down the road the object of his tribute would walk those rustic

paths of poetry no more.

In this collage of images, a composite of Waheedul Haque emerges through the essays. Mahboob ul Alam Chowdhury’s amazement at the quick achievement of mastery the founder of Chhayanaaut registered in classical music is as great as ours. It is little wonder, therefore, that Waheedul Haque would, with Sanjida Khatun, in time undertake the gigantic enterprise that Chhayanaaut was destined to be. Nurul Quader, in his 1996 tribute to Waheedul Haque, *Shongteangone Balyobondhu Waheedul*, lets the lamp shine on a teenager whose craving for music surpasses anything one may have known in life. The tribute leaves painful scratches on the soul.

And then there is more pain in store for the Waheedul Haque admirer. The commemorative issue of *Kali O Kolom* on the baul, for that is what Waheedul Haque essentially was, is once again a panorama of recollections on the contributions he made to culture in Bangladesh. Many of the essays in the collection could well mesh in with those in the Chhayanaaut work and yet they throw some new light on Haque’s chequered existence. Every inch a troubadour in search of beauty and poetry, he is here celebrated by what is truly a galaxy of Bangladesh’s eminent men and women of letters.

There are the reminiscences and then there are the reflections on aesthetics as Waheedul Haque shaped it, or added newer dimensions to. *Kali O Kolom* is an eloquent exposition of the tragedy that was the death of the man.

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