

SHORT STORY

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-banded *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 Plum*?"

"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-'Mumbaiana'. "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 Aisatian, 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



artwork by apurba

familiarly with the plump señorita. 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. Aah, 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 sopped up the curry gravy just right as he sat

watching videotapes of cricket matches rented from luridly posterized 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 broche 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 roadtop. 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

"Nope," she smiled, "I'm just filling in for somebody."

Short, tight sleeves high up on

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 girl 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 carefree, russet line of her hair -

*(Immoderate hue
oh, I do, I do
red-lipped 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

Women Writers Colloquium

Book Review Review A mixed bag

AZAFAR 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 Teliapara 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, *Tito's Swadhinata*, (Tito'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 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..." 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, Mahbub Alam, retired Maj Gen Amin Ahmed Chowdhury Bir Bikram, Mahbub Elahi Ranju Bir Pratik, retired Colonel Mohammad Saqif 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 Mahbub 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 tend 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 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 Anondojogge Waheedul Haque: Waheedul Haque Shorone Shonkolan; Dhaka: Chhayanaut

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 are proof of the powerful hold he has on our collective aesthetic imagination. Those who knew him in life, had cause to associate him 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 Anondojogge is not a reassessment of Waheedul Haque. It is a reassessment 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. *Bandobor Tomer Jonno* is a moving tribute to

Haque. And moving too is KG Mustafa's poignant *Tomar Jai Hik Ustad*. The sheer variety of interests he pursued comes through as mind-boggling in this collection