# Discovering a Cold Climate Bengal

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Confident concrete pillar, gleaming glass, reflection, angle and contemplative curve: seemingly simple, skyscrapers are, at their best, towers of thought. Modern design conceals little, so it seems –neither shy to be straightforward nor backward in coming forward.

How the light will play, the engineering dimensions and even the impact of shadow through the day will have been considered. Simplicity is not simplicity in the end.

Poet Ahsan Akbar in his first collection, "The Devil's Thumbprint" published by Bengal Lights Books in 2013 has likewise pursued architecture of the modern kind. The collection was criticised on first submission, with one potential Bangladeshi publisher claiming Akbar's work was "too permissive and explicit." It's true that some of the poems concerning the themes of attraction are not for the prudish.



Ahsan Akbar's *The Devil's Thumbprint.*

But Akbar took the criticism as encouragement. He refused to consider the suggested edits and withdrew the manuscript. True to what he wanted – honesty and candour – his manuscript found its way...

It's not surprising it wasn't readily recognised. The deltaic tradition is substantially different. Whether it is the intricate beauty of Tagore, the labyrinth layers of Das or the zeal of the rebel poet – Akbar's work does not seem to draw from the same well. But the expectation of decorative adornment familiar to the renaissance building is unlikely to be fulfilled by a modern high rise. There's a need to look for something else.

In what is perhaps his most interesting poem, "Tree Without Roots", which documents an impression of Dhaka by an outsider who really should be an insider, there is the confession that "Your soul was empty / Of the rustic Bauls..." and "Nazrul could not invoke / A blood rush..." There is an element of regret, of the Dhaka that "frightened", of the love for the west that "asphyxiated." There's a Bengali tradition looming that is somehow difficult for the subject of the poem to access.

And yet the book purports to be the debut collection of a young Bangladeshi poet. If so, it's pushing the envelope since in style, subject matter, language and perspective there is a lot of the contemporary U.K. in it, where Akbar arrived at age 16 and still lives. But of course traditions are not stagnant and the duality of culture in Akbar's life is hardly uncommon nowadays. Perhaps it is Bangladeshi poetry of an emerging kind.

Of himself Akbar says when in Britain he feels very Bengali but while in Bangladesh he feels like a fish out of water. As is not unusual for emigrants he fits everywhere and nowhere.

What is certain is that his poetic beginnings do belong to Bangladesh, stemming from his childhood in Dhaka. Akbar describes growing up in the 1980s as an experience with drawbacks. "There were few leisure activities," he says, "no bowling, nothing much on TV." The diversions largely absent, "things happened elsewhere" – his imagination took over.

The very first "poem" he recalls creating was at age seven. It was three Bangla lines: "*Aasher mash / Goru khai ghash / Bhag khai hash.*" "In Aasha month / Cows eat grass / Tigers eat ducks."

During his school days, Akbar was especially popular with friends at times of special occasions. He was known for his verse-writing skills, in particular for Valentine's cards. Many a young woman was impressed by his ghost writing efforts – some married their schoolyard sweethearts only to meet