

A Sleeping Bag for Two

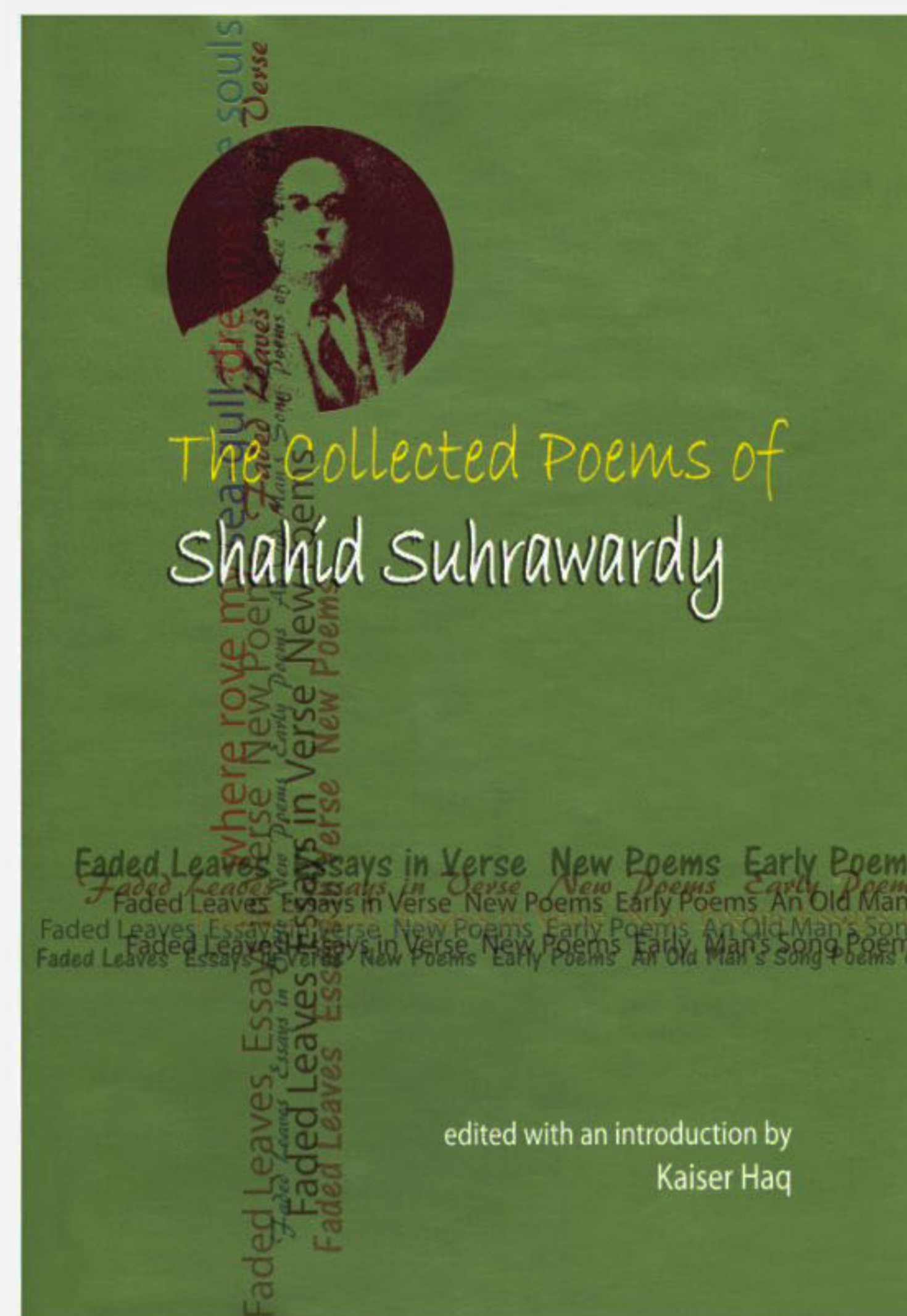
AHMEDE HUSSAIN

A certain sense of apprehension prevailed in the air when Oxford Majlis decided to invite Rabindranath Tagore immediately after he had won the Nobel in 1913. The Majlis, which took over the Oxford Indian Club a year ago, earned some notoriety for, as (Hasan) Shahid Suhrawardy writes, "...it was a loved game of ours to get hold of a well-known Indian political leader, cajole and flatter him, lavish hospitality upon him, invite him to the Majlis meeting and then skin him alive, proving him that he was a worthless worm, who, in spite of his nationalistic pretensions, had done nothing else all his life but lick the boots of British Imperialism."

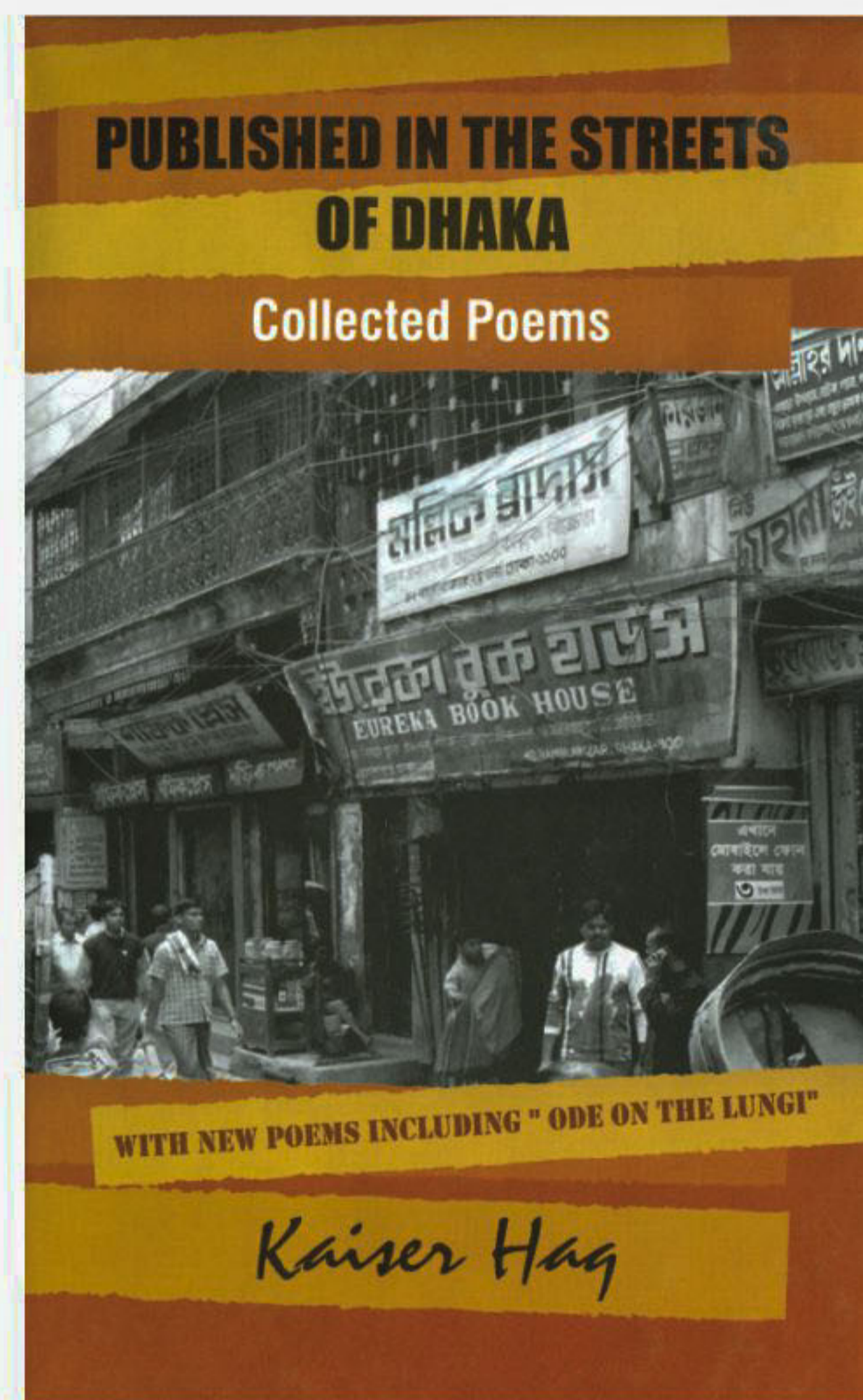
Shahid Suhrawardy and his brother Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy, a fellow Oxonian, were members of the Majlis, and the bard's encounter with the group went on rather smoothly except for the fact that the flower bouquet with which the poet was greeted was a funeral wreath.

Tagore and Suhrawardy met twice in London. We cannot tell what they both talked about. Not only Tagore, as poet, translator and essayist Kaiser Haq points out from Suhrawardy's published letters that he was friends with some of the luminaries of English literature such as DH Lawrence and Aldous Huxley.

Much neglect at his time and even after his death, Suhrawardy is now recognised as one of the first to write poems in the English Language in the Southasian subcontinent. In fact what is significant about 'The Collected Poems of Shahid Suhrawardy' is Kaiser Haq's introduction. Haq, a leading poet of the world literature, introduces modern readers to Suhrawardy's oeuvre with some remarkable brilliance. He rightly thinks that Suhrawardy's presence in the literary world has three strands and each is entwined with its other selves. While explain-



The Collected Poems of Shahid Suhrawardy
 Edited with an introduction by Kaiser Haq
 The University Press Limited; Dhaka
 pp 190; Tk 1000



Published in the Streets of Dhaka
 (With new poems including 'Ode on the Lungi')
 Kaiser Haq
 The University Press Limited; Dhaka
 pp 231; Tk 490

ing his premise Haq does not leave any room for confusion. From Sarojini Naidu to Nissim Ezekiel, Haq critically examines Suhrawardy's works and their relationship with that of his peers. Haq's introduction stands on its own merit, and a critical history of Indian writing in English is expected of him.

Suhrawardy's poems are romantic and yet they are duly coated with his demonic sense of humour:

Death is not far.
 Even as you are;
 Prevent him, Dear,
 He's near, too near.
 Come now!

In fact, he's more romantic in 'Faded Leaves', an earlier collection:

When your cheeks on pillows pressed,
 With your fire-breast heaving,
 Then my prows were, Amber-tressed,
 Through the waters cleaving.

There is no denying that Suhrawardy (1890-1965) was heavily influenced by the time he was born, yet his works go beyond the pseudo-emotional vagaries that some of his peers were plagued with. While some of them remained in existentialist quagmire, Suhrawardy wrote:

Who knows if in a last obstreperous mood
 You might be consummating in a ditch
 Your agonising orgies with a
 bitch?

Like Ezra Pound, Suhrawardy was an ardent admirer of Chinese poetry. In collaboration with Liu Yih-Ling, he translated from the Chinese a collection of poems by Lee Hou-Chu (born 937 AD), who was also the king of South T'ang. Again, the poems are mostly romantic in nature and the world and love's enduring presence in it play an important role in the poems:

Her eyes stealthily enchant,
 Like autumn waves before
 they break.

Or:
 I fear short meetings with
 her--
 Short as dreams.

Suhrawardy's poetic talent has remained unknown and neglected even long after his death in Karachi in 1965. His recently published collected poems will certainly canonise Suhrawardy, which his works certainly deserve.

A new edition of Kaiser Haq's 'Published in the Streets of Dhaka' has recently come out which has one of his celebrated poems-- Ode on the Lungi. Unlike its Keatesian counterparts, the Ode is caked with a wicked sense of humour which is essentially Post-Modern in nature. Written to poet-humanist Walt Whitman as an extended letter, Ode is at its poetic best when intertextuality colleague with satire rightfully claims its place in the history of English poetry:

And how hypocritical!
 'All clothes have equal rights'--
 This nobody will deny
 and yet, some obviously
 are more equal than others.

The choice of Whitman, who wrote the poem *A Passage to India*, is indeed a clever choice. Whitman is the father of free verse and his poem is used by EM Foster in naming his much celebrated novel. And the allusion refuses to stop here, Haq makes lungi, which is worn by the masses across Asia and some parts of Africa, a symbol of resistance, which is where lungi refuses to remain mere lungi, takes a dramatic shift:



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Hasan Shahid Suhrawardy; Philip Arnold Heseltine (Peter Warlock); D.H. Lawrence by Lady Ottoline Morrell; vintage snapshot print, 29 November 1915 3 7/8 in. x 2 1/4 in. (100 mm x 57 mm) image size

In short the lungi is a complete wardrobe for anyone interested; an embalm of egalitarianism, symbol of global left-outs.

Philosophy With Raina, another poem, is wise and profound. Here the poet tells his daughter, still a toddler, to think and ask questions, especially when she'll be 'alone with her thoughts between life's cartoons and scary ghost stories'. The book starts with the child asking his father what happens when all the numbers in the world are put together:

'Infinity.'
 'How do you write it?'
 'Like this...'
 'Looks like an 8
 put to sleep.'

'Pilgrims' on the other hand, is a rather staid affair. It is a translation of Tagore's 'Tirthajatri', which is itself a translation of Eliot's 'Journey of the Magi'.

The tone of Haq's new poems is varied in nature; in them float humour in a bucketful of melancholy. 'Senior Citizen' is a case in point:

I'll just take things easy
 let eyes wander where they will
 forget to zip up after a pee
 wear red underwear on Valentine's Day.

Haq's fifteen new poems reassert his place as one of the leading poets in the subcontinent. The book is a must read for anyone who wants to fly away on the viewless wings of poesy, tender might be the night and 'when romance strikes, the lungi will also remain a sleeping bag for two.'