

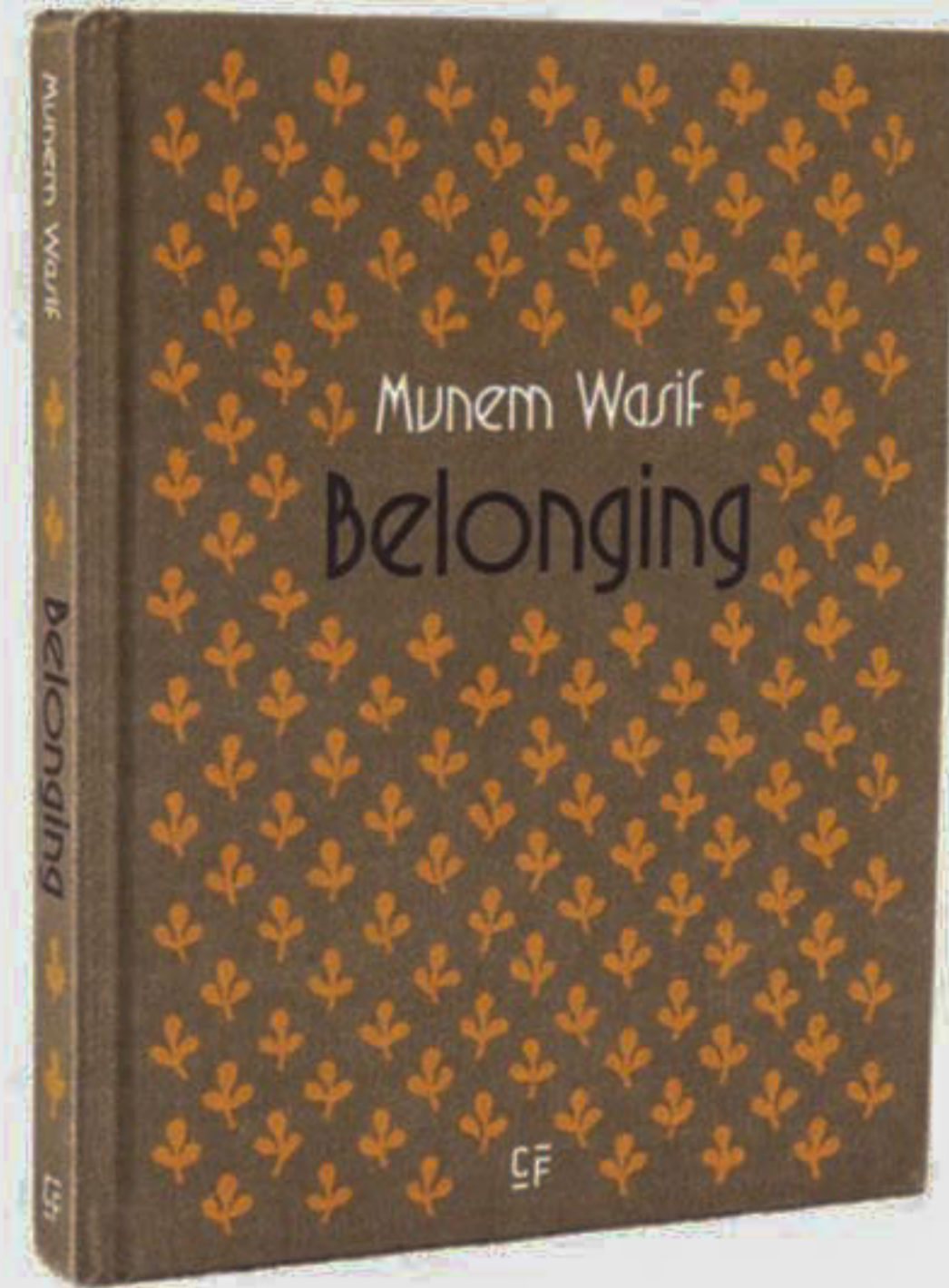
When we say Puran Dhaka or Old Dhaka, it signifies and brings so many things to our memory. Firstly, it paints the clichéd picture of narrow roads with huge traffic, followed by a picture of an intimate encounter of people living in cramped quarters. Then you imagine old, dilapidated architecture that once signified our heritage, and finally you get the vivid picture of a part of the city rich in culture and history. People gossiping happily amidst traffic, drinking steaming cups of tea, reading newspapers, children flying kites on the roof - in other words, Puran Dhaka presents the picture of an area where the concept of actual neighbourhood still survives.



Munem Wasif



Munem Wasif, in his recent book "Belonging" published by Clémentine de la Féronnière, tells the story of a ten-year long journey of a magical storyteller living in the old part of Dhaka. His lens tells stories of nostalgia, human relations and people. And he captures the pictures in black and white - the classical form of photography - to depict his imagination and its connection with reality. 'Belonging' is



A Magical Tale of Belonging

This week *the Star* discusses 'Belonging', the latest book written by noted photographer Munem Wasif

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thus more rooted in humanistic angels and the invisible pleasures and tribulation of daily life.

Wasif grew up in Comilla, a small town, rich in its historical lineage and distinct culture, customs and traditional lifestyle. Dhaka, thus, was a bit of a shock to him. The bustling, hectic city and individualistic attitude of people diluted his taste for city life. However, he found the older part of the city more attractive and interesting, and moved there. "I would walk freely on the roads, stopping for a cup of tea or a quick chat with neighbours. This gave me a kind of joy and reminded me of the small city that I had left behind. I still love visiting Old Dhaka to talk to people and am even more interested in divulging the collective life of people living there."

Photograph as a medium has its limitations. The subject cannot be a passive actor in a good picture; it has a role to play not only in rigid frames but also in



Photos are from *Belonging*.

real life. So a life which is larger than the boundaries of photography is not easy to capture. The storyteller's job is to convert the daily activity of human beings - where someone is passionate, caring, sensitive, cruel or unfeeling. A photographer tries to translate these feelings through his lens. These characteristics are the key of a narrator to begin his story. "Stories are not a means to present facts but evoke emotions, give a sense of feeling and connect with the action of an actor and time," says Wasif. And that's exactly what he tried to portray with his picture.

We do not read or look at things that do not affect us in any way. The busy and collective life of Old Town mesmerizes him, attracting the attention of his camera to study the unseen life of its residents. When you look at *Beauty Boarding* and a monkey perched with few crows on the room, you can't help but be awed by this unique coexistence. Similarly, no festival is as wildly celebrated as Holi in Old Dhaka thus making for some fascinating pictures; his photograph depicts an extended family sharing the joy of festival.

Most people become self-conscious in front of the camera. They either get too stiff or behave strangely. Interestingly, in Wasif's pictures, it feels as if the lens is absent; people in his pictures have genuine expressions, they go about their daily lives in the most natural manner possible. Wasif has beautifully captured the details of the close-knit neighbourhood feeling of Old Dhaka.

What is remarkable is that an artist has transformed the limitations of the camera to present a magical image to us. His pictures are more like meta-



phors of myths. Wasif is highly influenced by noted literary figures Akhtaruzzaman Elias and Shahidul Jahir, "These two storytellers write a lot about the old part of Dhaka. I do not follow their characters but their words etched magical images in my mind and that influenced my work in Old Dhaka."

His photographs give us a sense of belonging, togetherness and collective life, where the camera becomes obsolete and the actors are their natural selves. He takes us to a place where life meets every day in a small alleyway and the smoke emitted from tea pots tangle with people who have so many stories to tell and so much to share. His photographs capture more than the present situation and weave luminous threads of imaginary stories, which will remain in the viewers' mind, as they create a space between myth and reality. ■