

SMART STORIES

ELEN TURNER

Kafka in Ayodhya by Zafar Anjum Kitaab, Singapore

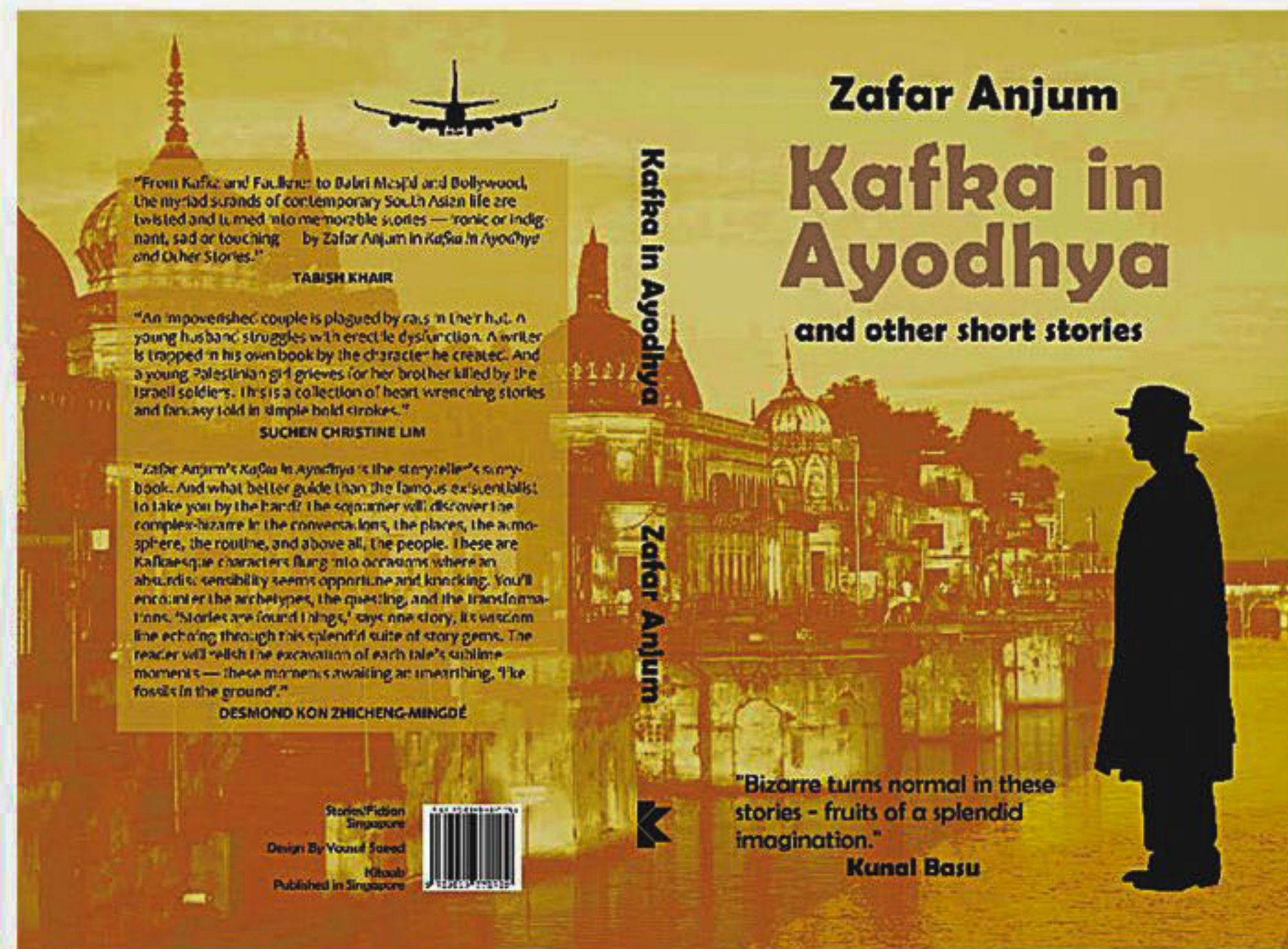
The title and the epigraph of Zafar Anjum's *Kafka in Ayodhya* give a good indication of the central concerns of the short story collection: for the wounded 'idea of India'. The stories within the short collection are dark as well as humorous, international and grounded in India, and mix surrealism with realism.

As well as the titular story, *Kafka in Ayodhya*, there are Kafkaesque touches through the stories. Farce, dark humour, metamorphoses of people into things, and things coming to life. For example, the story 'The Rats' ends, creepily:

'The thought of this made him scurry. He did not even notice the dappled shadow that ran along with him through the maze of the streets.'

In using this surrealist mode to make social commentary, I was reminded of Gujarati Jewish author Esther David's *The Man with Enormous Wings*. In this novella, Gandhi returns to earth as an angel and watches, horrified, as Gujarat succumbed to carnage in 2002. The same sense of witnessing the crumbling of society is interspersed throughout *Kafka in Ayodhya*; an author asking, through his characters, 'how did we come to this?'

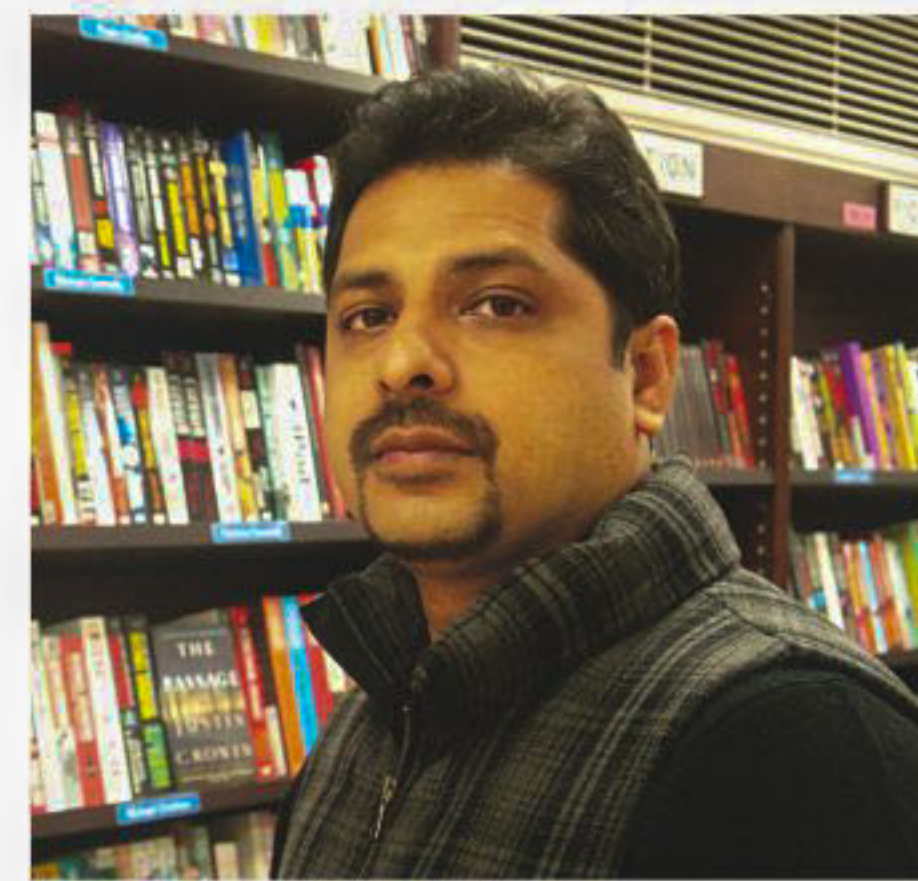
There is also a preoccupation with the act of writing and publishing, a deconstruction of the division between writer, character and reader. For example, in 'The Lone Fighter', the narrator (who is



a writer) encounters a fellow writer in a bookstore who emphatically declares that all other books are rubbish; only his are any good. He has, perhaps, taken too far the modern-day importance of self-promotion. In a later story, 'The Revolt', a character who believes he has been misrepresented by his creator takes revenge, and physically traps the author within the pages of his own book. 'Don't

turn the page,' the author begs of us, the reader, because when we do, he will be stuck there forever!

A nice story that does not seem to fit the collection is 'The Thousand Yard Stare'. Set in a Palestinian refugee camp in Gaza, it tells of a young girl who sorely misses her brother. It is a well-crafted story that echoes the despair of some of the other stories in the collection, but it bears no



hint of black humour, and it is entirely realist. In a short story collection, variety of subject, tone and style is welcome, but this lone example of a story unrelated to India and written in a different style stands out as not quite belonging here.

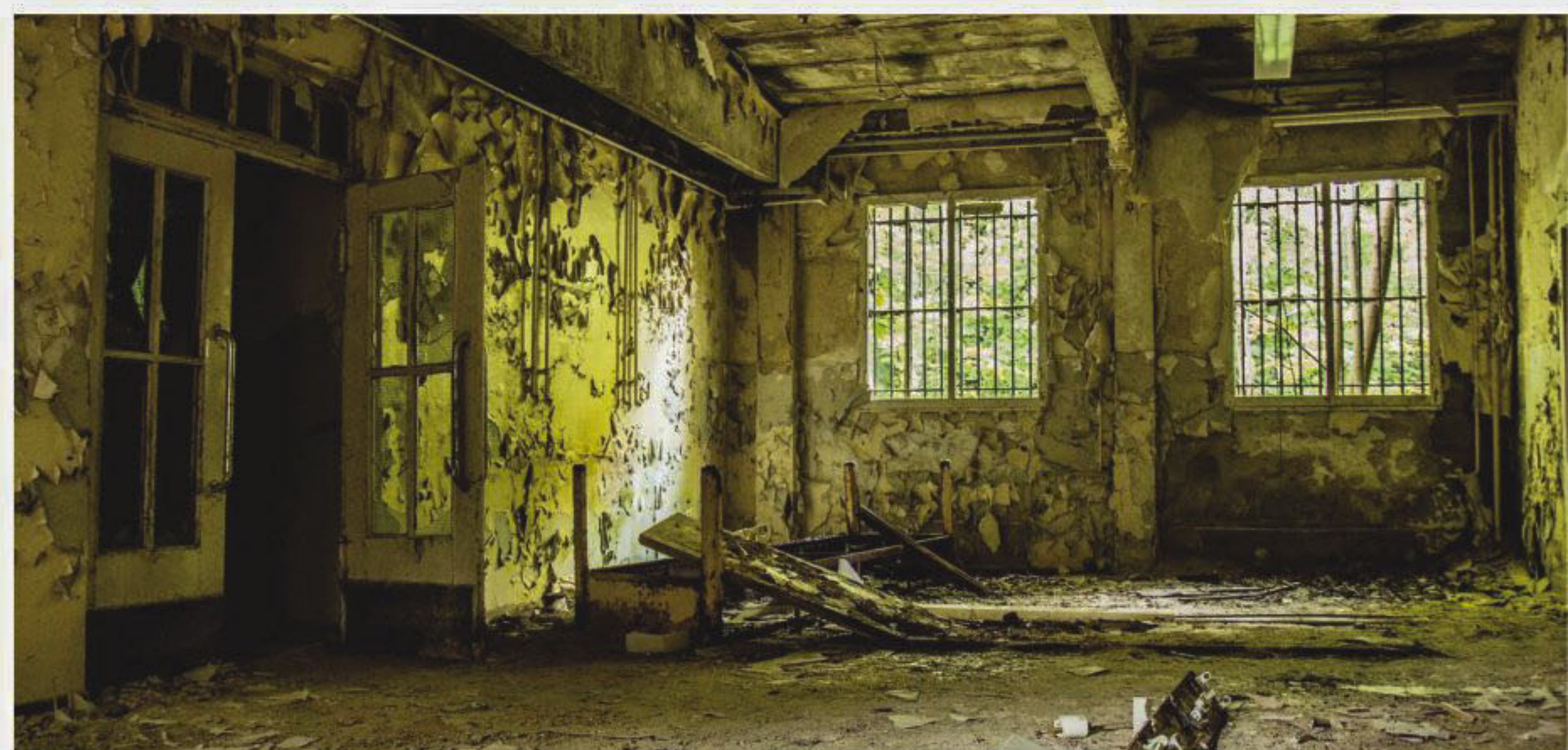
I would like to have known more about the genesis of the story 'Waiting for the Angels'. The post-script reads: 'Inspired by a Spanish short story'. Does this mean that Zafar Anjum read an untranslated Spanish story and thought it would present well in English? Or does this refer to an oral story? I read this statement and wanted to know much more. Overall, *Kafka in Ayodhya* is a fresh collection of smart stories that work well individually, and some of which work well together.

BEFORE
THE
CITY IS
DESTROYED

RAFIQ AZAD

Translated from the Bengali: SM SHAHRUKH

If the city is razed to the ground, the last clock stopped ticking
One can envy the gaities of the savage and the departed.
We scream for salvation in the deluge
But no vessels will ply this sewer water all around.
The sea is far far away, nowhere near the city:
Dark shallow marshy waters surround from all sides.
Our loving and living are a mixture of pus filled blood;
The desire for vigour is full of hopelessness.
Where you hold firm- clinging to your valuables;
Calm will forever remain unreachable there.
Life's essential locomotion will go on soundlessly –
'Cause no one will sound an alarm before obliteration.
My talent is stolid like a well-grounded tree –
Had the ambition to rise tall like a giraffe before I perished.

Mor
Bhabonere
Ki Haowa

RABINDRANATH TAGORE

Translated from the Bengali: FAKRUL ALAM

What wind is it liting my thoughts so amazingly?
Its caress swings, swings my mind unaccountably.
In my heart's horizon moist dense new clouds swarm,
Stirring a shower of emotions.
I don't see her—don't see her at all
Only occasionally in my mind I recall
Almost indiscernible footsteps sounding
And ankle bells tinkling, oh so tunelessly!
A secret dreamscape spreads
Across the wet wind-swept sky—
A new and ethereal azure shawl!
Shadowy unfurled tresses fly,
Filling me with such intense disquiet
On this far-off ketoki- perfumed wet night.

The
Enigma
of
Articles

AINON N

Language mold me
Its structure and form bind me

Can I contain
The mind, mine
Not a mind
in a narration without
A, AN, and THE
How unsettling will my thoughts become
without the definite article

Am I to be
stamped, sealed, and packaged
just as the element of words...

“ব্যঙ্গ-সৃষ্টিতে অসাধারণ প্রতিভার প্রয়োজন। ... বন্ধু আবুল মনসুরের হাত-সাফাই দেখে বিস্মিত হলাম। ভাষার কান মলে রস সৃষ্টির ক্ষমতা আবুল মনসুরের অসাধারণ। এ যেন পাকা ওস্তাদী হাত।”

-কাজী নজরুল ইসলাম

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কাটাঘন: প্রকৃতি (০১৭২৭৩২৮৭২৩), বেইলি রোড: সাগর পাবলিশার্স (৯৩৫৮৯৪৪)
বিমান বন্দর: বুক ওয়ার্ম (৯১২০৩৮৭)। নরসিংদী: বই পুস্তক (০১৮১৮৫৩৪৮৯৩)
কুষ্টিয়া: বইমেলা (০১৭১১ ৫৭৫৬০৬)।

চট্টগ্রাম: বাতিঘর (০১৭১৩০৪৪৪), প্রথমা (০১৭১১৬৪৯৪২২)