

# Writing Dhaka

SHAMSAD MORTUZA  
THE BOOK OF DHAKA EDITED BY ARUNAVA SINHA & PUSHPITA ALAM  
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Translated from Bengali by Pushpita Alam, Arunava Sinha, Masrufa Ayesha Nusrat, Arifa Ghani Rahman, Mohammad Shafiqul Islam, Marzia Rahman, Mohammad Mahmudul Haque, and Ahmed Ahsanuzzaman.

The Book of Dhaka: A City in Short Fiction, Edited by: Arunava Sinha and Pushpita Alam, BLB, 2016, ISBN 13: 9781905583805

You can judge a book by its cover, banal stereotypes notwithstanding. The red lines on the slightly green graph paper, featuring on *The Book of Dhaka: A City in Short Fiction*, give an inkling of various city structures: the mausoleum of three leaders located at *Doyel Chattar*, Lalbagh Fort, Shahid Minar, Dhakeswari Temple, a rickshaw, and even a bailey bridge at Hatirjheel. The architectural grid on the cover has captured the essential Dhaka that one expects to find on the pecking order of the Tripadvisors site. However, the collection of short stories about Dhaka, the capital of the green country that had its first red dawn purchased in blood, aims to arrest a different crowd—an Anglophone audience who has little resources to learn about the aesthetic life of contemporary Dhaka that exists outside the close circuit of few literary doyens who have been sporadically translated. Most of the stories included in the collection were published in different literary supplements of Bengali dailies. Their authors have hardly ever made any significant noise to reach the ears of an international audience. Thanks to the “Reading the City” project of Comma Press, Manchester, this collection of ten short stories from Bangladesh in superb translation can now represent Bangladesh well.

The red and green cover illustration sets the tone for the first story that renders a fitting tribute to the liberation war that led to the emergence of the country. Akhteruzzaman Elias’s “The Raincoat” was first published in 1995 and was recently made into a film titled *Meghmallas*. It is about a simple man caught in the grand scheme of things during the turbulent days of 1971. A college professor Nurul, wearing the raincoat of his freedom fighter brother, was captured by the Pakistani army for his alleged link with ‘miscreants’. The water repellent was far from a protective gear in a metaphorical rain in which the local boys mused over having home advantages over the Pakistani invaders in a guerrilla war. “The bastards don’t know the rains of Bengal.

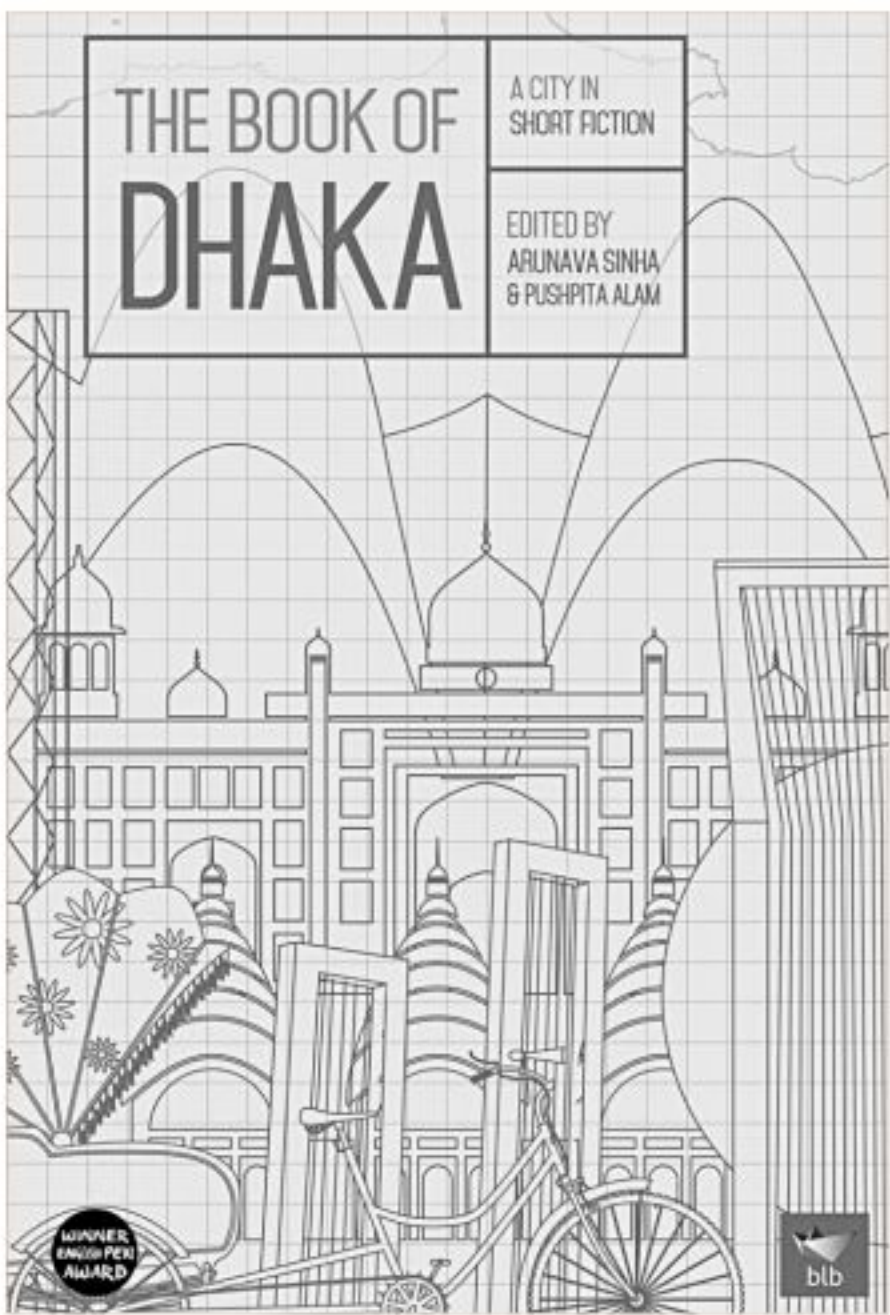
Russia had General Winter, we have General Monsoon” (17). The narrator became privy to such insidious comments made by some workers fixing a cabinet in his office, and was later captured and tortured in custody for information about an explosion that took place near his college. Like rain showers, the whip lashed out on Nurul’s body stripped of the raincoat. However, instead of suffering pain, the story ends with Nurul focusing on the excited possibility of collaborating with working class laborers who were putting up the resistance.

One could wonder, however, what this highly symbolic story of class and social struggles has to do in a book that is supposedly about Dhaka. The answer lies in the existential crisis that subsumes our socio-political identity not only as city dwellers but also as citizens of an emerging nation trying to find its cultural basis. I am sure the people behind the book are deeply cognizant of such urgent seeking. Focusing on Elias’s style will help us frame the issue further. By employing the free indirect style, Elias allows reader access to the consciousness of the central character without suppressing the individuality of the character’s voice. The result is a strange matrix of relationships between author, character and reader that can be interpreted in terms of the ‘sense of place’ of each. Our relationship with Elias, and by extension with Nurul, defines our national, political and cultural identity. After all, the perspective of the narrative viewpoint in relation to place can tell us much about the social and aesthetic values of the author as well as of the values of characters in fiction in general.

However, it is not possible to reduce Dhaka to a site of singular identity that has its originary moment in 1971. The ten stories of this collection, the earliest one being Mainul Ahsan Saber’s “Britto” (The Circle, 1978) and the latest one Pervez Hossain’s “Shiddhanto” (The Decision, 2009), make sure that we come across more nuanced identities of Dhakaites.

In Syed Manzoorul Islam’s story “Ostro” (The Weapon, 1997), Dhaka is recognizably

Dhaka, but recognizably many other places too. The rise (and fall) of Ponir, a slum boy named after cottage cheese, is detectable in any Third World locality where the reality of survival itself is fantastically magical. A boy struggling to stick to the ‘unchangeable nature of truth’ ultimately has to resort to violence fracturing the very foundation of humanism and enlightenment dicta. The grand narrative, symbolized by Ponir’s all-time companion *Memorable Sayings of Venerable People*, finds itself fractured as the protagonist decides to



pick up his gun to encounter his nemesis.

The third story of the collection, Pervez Hossain’s “The Decision,” locates violence in the domestic sphere as an estranged couple broods over their failed marriage at the famous Book Fair for which Dhaka is known. Rashida Sultana’s “Mother” humanizes a drug peddler in a slum. The cry of a son whose mother has been arrested with heroin in his possession converges with the city shower. Moinul Ahsan Saber’s “The Circle” offers a glimpse of a typical middle class urban family

who plans to go out of the city and its mundane routine just for one day. Yet the family’s only ride, the husband’s motorcycle refuses to get out of the city despite his repeated attempts. Alam cries out to his wife: “I am trying, Feroza. I am trying”(72).

There is no escape from the ‘Camusesque’ Dhaka. The masseur in Shaheen Akhtar’s “Astaan” (Home, 2005), Bindu, darts from one spot to another to provide body massages to clients whom she calls ‘Madams.’ As her name suggests, she is the centre that reassesses different city perimeters. Her phone gives ‘missed calls’ to announce her availability as she shores up in different houses to become a witness to different stories that make up contemporary Dhaka. She comes from the line of a family that has lost its way while migrating from India. Now she assures her sister who is afraid of Dhaka: “I won’t go to Dhaka, Bindu. I’ll lose my way.” “What rubbish, Didi. I know Dhaka like the back of my hand. I know every road, every backstreet. I’ll show you everything”(84). And indeed, the clients are there at the back of her hand. Centering on Bindu’s narrative we walk through the gallery of portraits that Dhaka has in store for its viewers.

Bipradash Barua’s story “The Princess and the Father” recounts the story of its teenage protagonist Bokul who goes skating to impress some ‘dream princesses’ but ends up attending an injured freedom fighter who reminds him of his own dead father. His good deed is rewarded by a surprise visit by one of the ‘princesses’ who wants to partner with him for a forthcoming skating competition in the upscale north western part of the town.

The yearning of the obsessive lover Helal can be translated as the hidden desires of the city in Anwara Syed Haq’s “Helal was on his way to meet Reshma.” The story that follows, Salma Bani’s “The Path of Poribibi”, has a similar theme in which a love-struck Salim identifies a nightly woman Munni with the legendary daughter of Subedar Shaista Khan, Pori Bibi. History here is his story; it is a story of disappearance as he pursues the dark tunnel to accompany his mysterious lover

mistaken as Pori/fairy. The mysterious aura of Bani’s story reminds us that Dhaka is not only a physical location but also a state of mind. Both Haq and Bani transport the readers to a Dhaka that is the locus of memory that expresses the condensed, if not exhausted, capital of collective memory. The last story titled “The Widening Gyre” (Chakrabridhii, 1998) captures the action/reaction, justice/revenge diatribe of political protest. The death of a protester adds to the compound interest of policing on which dictatorial system banks on. The chronology of the selected stories points at an editorial choice of framing Dhaka between two landmark events: the first Dhaka is the one that broke free from the military regime of Pakistan to emerge as the Capital of Bangladesh in 1971, and the last one presents Dhaka as the heated site of political agitation that paved the way for democracy in the early 1990s, bringing to an end to homegrown military dictatorship.

The book, as the Director of Dhaka Translation Center Professor Kaiser Haq tells us in his foreword, is an outcome of a workshop conducted by the editor/translator Arunava Sinha. Both the book and the workshop were sponsored by Bengal Lights Books. The great thing about this collection is its bold attempt of bringing together, if I may suborn, mainstream and non-mainstream writers. Thanks to the rich introduction provided by Kazi Anis Ahmed, the book becomes what he calls a ‘creative entrepreneurship’—a true representative of Dhaka in fiction.

Full credit goes to the translators for making these stories available in lucid prose. The added footnotes make sure that cultural roadblocks are traversed without any major bump. Nothing is lost in translation, but gained. This is a highly recommended volume for anyone who is interested in South Asian literature.

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## Excerpts from *The Book of Dhaka*

“There is no sound inside the bus now. The thumping in the passengers’ chests gets louder in the quiet and the sound throbs inside his head. Beneath the rimmed cap, the sounds rub against each other to ignite a fire whose flames emerge from his eyes. But the banging inside his head and chest comes back under control as he shifts in his seat and, ignoring all that, looks directly at the military man’s face.

The man’s eyes narrow and the pupils of those narrowed eyes pierce his face like darts. He, too, calms his blunt but heated gaze and casts it lightly over the military man’s sharp nose and needle-like eyes, the reddish skin around and under those eyes, that nose and that moustache. It works. The military man’s pointed gaze moves away from his face, falls to his raincoat. It seems as if the man is counting the drops of water on the raincoat. Do the drops seem a little reddish from the heat inside him? They came to kill people in the land of water, so what is it in these water drops that has stunned the military man so? Does he see signs of blood in them? The man abruptly finishes counting the drops and says, ‘Move on.’”

**THE RAINCOAT**  
by Akhteruzzaman Elias  
(Translated by Pushpita Alam)

It was now a quarter past ten. After leaving the actress’s house, Bindubala gave Shathi Madam a ‘missed call.’ It would be 11 by the time she got there, first by rickshaw, then on foot to the bus stop to get a bus. Madam was not calling back. Perhaps she had already gone in to bathe. There was no use rushing all that way now. She would only waste her fare. Bindu waved her hand to stop a bus to Gulistan and got on. Where would she go now—should she go to Paltan? But could she expect to do an 8 o’clock assignment at 11? Still, she clutched her ticket to Paltan tightly and settled regally into a double seat. But the pleasure did not last. Was her body a honey-trap? With so many empty seats, why did the thug have to sidle up to her? What could she say,

he had paid for his own ticket, after all. Bindu moved away till she almost melded into the metal frame of the bus. But the man was adamant. ‘Do you want a job? Good salary. Ten thousand cash per month. Other perks too...’ He whispered at first, but gradually his voice rose. *Why don’t you do it yourself? You wouldn’t have to ride this ramshackle bus if you earned ten thousand a month.* Bindu’s thoughts remained in her head. She didn’t say a word. Instead, she got off the bus before reaching her destination for fear of creating a scene.

**HOME**  
by Shaheen Akhtar  
(Translated by Arifa Ghani Rahman)

There was so much magic in the world! The moment the thought occurred to Helal, his rickshaw began lurching from side to side. It seemed on the verge of taking off in the fierce wind, complete with its star- and moon-studded hood. The young rickshaw-wallah stretched his arms out in sheer delight. A few seconds more and they would have lift-off. Helal laughed in delight. Slapping the rickshaw’s torn red seat, he called out: ‘Faster, boss, faster!’ And in the excitement, he swore he could see a strange light emanating from the rickshaw-wallah’s steely body. Helal was mesmerised. What energy the boy has! What effortless pedalling, it’s like he could haul a green whale out of the sea. To Helal, it felt like a revolution—a revolution of green labour. The businessman looked down, smiling. There were five rose buds in his right hand; a little out of place, perhaps, in his large, rough fingers. The number pleased him though—not seven, not ten, but five. Five was what he needed. Thrusting the five red buds into Reshma’s hand, he would say: ‘This is my patience, this is my courage, this is my strength, this is my promise.’ Then, holding out the biggest one: ‘And this one is my love.’ The thought of the word made his heart hum; imagining the smell of fresh grass, he began to melt. How easily he strolled around the steps of the Parliament House, holding this woman’s hand. From the steps to the terrace and back again.

His feet no longer touched the ground; it was as if he were flying.

**HELAL WAS ON HIS WAY TO MEET RESHMA**

by Anwara Syed Haq  
(Translated by Marzia Rahman)

Someone on the back of the truck suddenly blew into the microphone. He was not merely checking it, there was anger in his breath as it hit the crowd’s ears. Then a new voice could be heard speaking into it: fast, nervous, untrained. This new voice was barely decipherable. The little they could gather from the announcement was as follows: three men, including two political figures, had been killed, and seventeen injured, nine critically, following an armed encounter between non-violent labourers and government party goons at the Adamjee jute mills, two hours earlier. Now a different person took the microphone. His voice was strong and incisive, much better suited to the job. His fierce, pointed

words moved from one subject to the next, calling on all fellow comrades to join the fight. Suddenly Modhu could no longer see what was happening on the other side of the shaded, almost dark road. Protester after protester, head after head blocked his view. The heads became so many they no longer seemed to be connected to necks and shoulders. An impossible number of heads without shoulders or necks rolled into view, in his mind, and began tormenting him. He was thrown into darkness as the heads piled up and started to form a wall so thick that no light passed through it. The darkness in his mind began to hurt. On 7th August, when he had lifted Swapan’s lifeless body from a footpath near Doyel Square, he had not felt anything except that darkness. Now, this feverish wall of disembodied heads was compelling him to thrust his own head against it with all his strength. But how could he budge this wall on his own?

**THE WIDENING GYRE**  
by Wasi Ahmed (Translated by Ahmed Ahsanuzzaman)

*Standing on the pavement near the Shankar bus stand at the peak of the morning rush hour, Ahmad Patwary was lost in a deep philosophical contemplation. The street in front of him was spilling over with traffic and pedestrians. As each bus screeched to a halt, people waiting impatiently made a beeline for it, jostling for even a 'standing room only' space. The noise and babble were deafening—buses honked, people shouted and cursed, street vendors clamored and howled, the lone traffic policeman blew his whistle at the top of his lungs. Ahmad, because his left leg was a bit shorter than the right one, or the right leg a bit longer... all the same, anyway—couldn't even reach the footboard of a bus before it departed, no matter how hard he tried. It was not a new experience for him though, because every morning, for nearly an hour, he had to go through the same ordeal, which took a toll on his energy and patience.*

**THE LIVING DEAD**  
by Syed Manzoorul Islam

### THUMBNAIL REVIEW



## Adventure, Nostalgia and Puran Dhaka

TS MARIN

Kishor Galpa Shamagra, Shahriar Kabir, Charulipi Prokashon, ISBN 984-598-065-1, 2004.

Shahriar Kabir, one of the first and finest children’s and “Young Adult” authors of Bangladesh, hails from Old Dhaka. Most fictional works of this prolific writer bear whiffs of Old Dhaka and juvenile adventure, and by extension--nostalgia. His *Kishor Galpa Shamagra* is no exception. Many of the stories in it borrow delightfully from the author’s memories as a Gregorian and Old Dhakaite. Kabir grew up in a rented *Zaminderbari*--full of history, mystery, and “ghosts,” and studied in one of the finest and oldest missionary schools of Old Dhaka. All these made him the lauded juvenile author that he is. In this collection of short stories, all the stories anthologized date from the 60s to the present. Apart from a few charming and petit translations of Chinese ghost stories, most stories are set in Old Dhaka. This anthology is nothing short of a magic carpet--transporting us new Dhakaites to a city of narrow alleys, vintage dilapidated houses, *Khaas Dhakaiya*-speaking grannies and grandpas, and hair-raising adventures! Rafiqun Nabi’s quirky and whimsical cover and illustrations are simply cherry on top. 5 stars!

TS Marin is a lecturer of English at Primeasia University, and an ardent lover of children’s literature and juvenilia.