

Metaphors of Writing and How We Actually Write

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What is a metaphor? How does it help people learn to write? What good is it to even to ask such questions? Though Bangladeshi culture values literature greatly and so recognizes its value in poetry we do not think much about metaphors beyond aesthetics. People overlook the power of the metaphor to conceptualize and get things done. That is, we have failed to realize that metaphors are not just rhetorical or literary techniques but the very stuff of thought.

Advertisers and businessmen have always known the power of metaphors; they are the basis for marketing campaigns. Neuroscientists and cognitive scientists have also chimed in recently and shown that metaphors are fundamental to how we understand the world. Yet, people who should be directly concerned with metaphors and language, such as scholars in English or language studies, rarely talk about it seriously. This is a shame because people who do not understand how they grasp things by the ways they speak and think about them – and that there are always multiple ways of speaking and thinking about things – deprive themselves of powerful tools. The humanities are tasked with teaching people to think, and metaphors play a big part in this. Conceptual Metaphors and Morality To see the power of metaphor we can consider how they are fundamental to understanding morality. It is impossible to think about morality without what cognitive linguists call conceptual metaphors. Even when moral behavior is stated in a prescriptive, concrete to-do list such as the five pillars of Islam, it still comes in a metaphorical package, an image or symbol. The five pillars metaphor makes people think about a

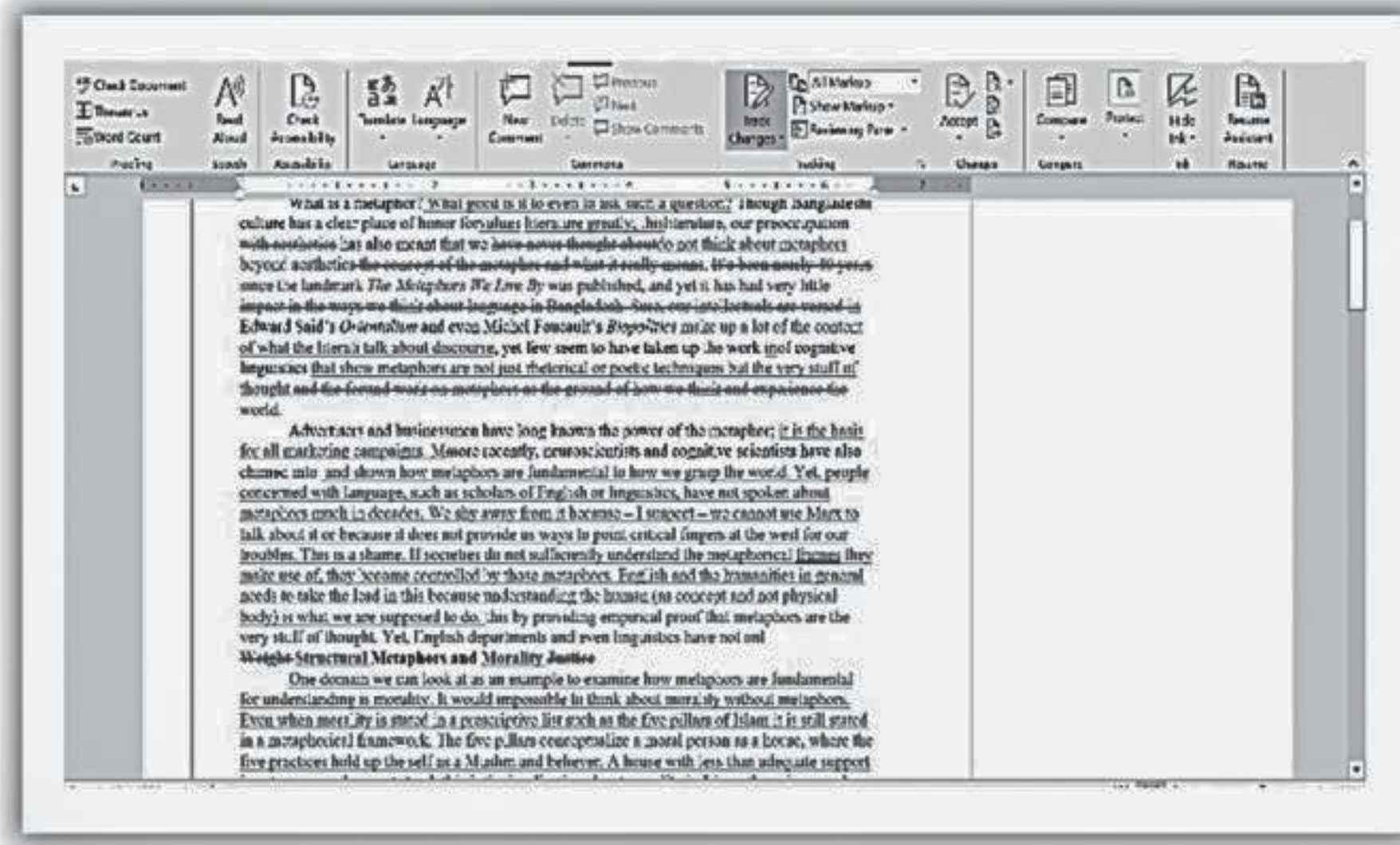
moral person as a house, and the five practices are about holding up the moral self. Morality is structure, in other words. A house with less than adequate support is not strong and cannot stand; when we do not observe our namaz or give zakat, in other words, we become weaker (moral) persons and we risk collapse.

Compare this to the image of the yin-yang symbol, or Taiichi symbol, of Taoism (seen on the side). It is a widely used and misused symbol of popular culture: a white and black tear-drop-like shape folding into each other; and each has a little bit of the other inside it, with a dot of white in the black and a



Yin-Yang symbol: A Taoist symbol of Existence as Made up of opposing forces, Complementary, Interconnected and Interdependent.

dot of black in the white. The image or sense it evokes is that of amovement between two essentially opposing forces: yin and yang energy, destruction and creation, fire and water, good and evil, etc. Morality, in this image, is thought of as balance. Harmony is what matters rather than structure. To be a moral person in this idea is to “go with the flow” and move along with different forces.



To stand rigid in the midst of such movement would lead to collapse. The Writer-as-Genius Metaphor and Writing

Once this idea of conceptual metaphor is grasped, we can see it operating in various areas of society. It shapes our reactions as individuals and as groups; it enables or disables our actions and thoughts. One disabling instance of this phenomenon I face daily working at a university is what writing researcher-call the “writer-as-genius” metaphor. It is an image that comes from the Romantics – Lord Byron being the emblematic figure. It is the image that the writer is a tormented genius, an individual dogged by the whispered songs of the muse; someone up at all hours of the night, driven half mad by an inspiration to write. Writing happens inexplicably and writers simply write what they wanted to write.

But this image and metaphor is wrong, and it does incredible harm to writers or those who might be interested

in writing. Genius and inspiration are not how writing happens or how good writers are able to write. Writing is a craft. It is, put straight forwardly, dull work and dull labor. Shakespeare, a luminous figure of English literature, wrote as a part of his job with a theatre troupe (he also had to likely direct, act, manage etc.); after making enough money, he hung up his quill. He never wrote – the best we can tell – anything after *The Tempest*. The Bard wrote well, I would argue, because he saw it as a job. Once he got what he wanted from it, he left and raised a family in Stratford on Avon.

To think that writing comes from genius or inspiration is to misrepresent writing and do a disservice to writing and dissuade writers from writing. I see the way that the “writer-as-genius” metaphor stops students at university from putting in the time and effort needed to accomplish writing. The sense that when it comes to writing, or being good at school, “you either got it or you don’t” runs deep. They think writing should

simply flow, that they will be inspired and then write their essays from the beginning to the end. When they get frustrated, consequently, they stop and give-up. The affordances of computers make such views and approaches to writing absurd. For example, take this essay. I did not write it from beginning to end. I wrote “The Writer-as-Genius Metaphor” section first because it was the most concrete. Then I thought about how best to lead into it, how to write the introduction and what would be an effective illustrative example of conceptual metaphors appropriate to the readership. I thought about talking about the conceptual metaphor of the country-as-a mother, but then finally settled on comparing the five pillars of Islam to the yin-yang symbol.

After that, I kept writing and rewriting, and editing out as much as I could. I tend to overwrite and that makes my writing bad essay writing. It had to be shorter and use fewer adjectives. This meant that the clean essay seen here was anything but. Technology let me play around and cut and copy-paste, delete, move around sentences, etc. The more accurate picture of this essay is seen in the screen shot of this word file with track changes showing.

Writing researchers call this – an actual way people write – the writing process. Illustrating this image of writing and comparing it to the image of the writer-as-genius idea demystifies how people write successfully and provides writers an enabling metaphor. It clears up to people that writing is messy and continuous revising. It is, to end with another metaphor, a tool, used by laborious doing and redoing.

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REVIEWS

It's All Relative: Relative Truths

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REVIEWED BY MAYEESHA AZHAR

However trite it may seem at first glance to call a book “It’s All Relative,” more layers are revealed on further examination of this collection of stories published by Bengal Publications. The title is perhaps an allusion to how stories bounce off each other, morphing into something different with each changed perspective. As each badminton player needs to move in space with each encounter with the shuttlecock, so too do stories discombobulate around each other in the universe.

In Farah Chuznavi’s “Mistaken Identities” we get the sense that it is the author’s intention to portray the first-person narrator as a bit conceited. His disdain for Bengali rice pudding is telling, but also a preference that this reviewer shares. The story finds a uniquely apt metaphor for navigating dual diasporic identities that capture the unease, the discomfort, the conundrum of opposing influences. The father’s own memories of his childhood in Calcutta colour his reaction when his college-age son announces that he would like to actively reconnect with his South Asian deshi roots.

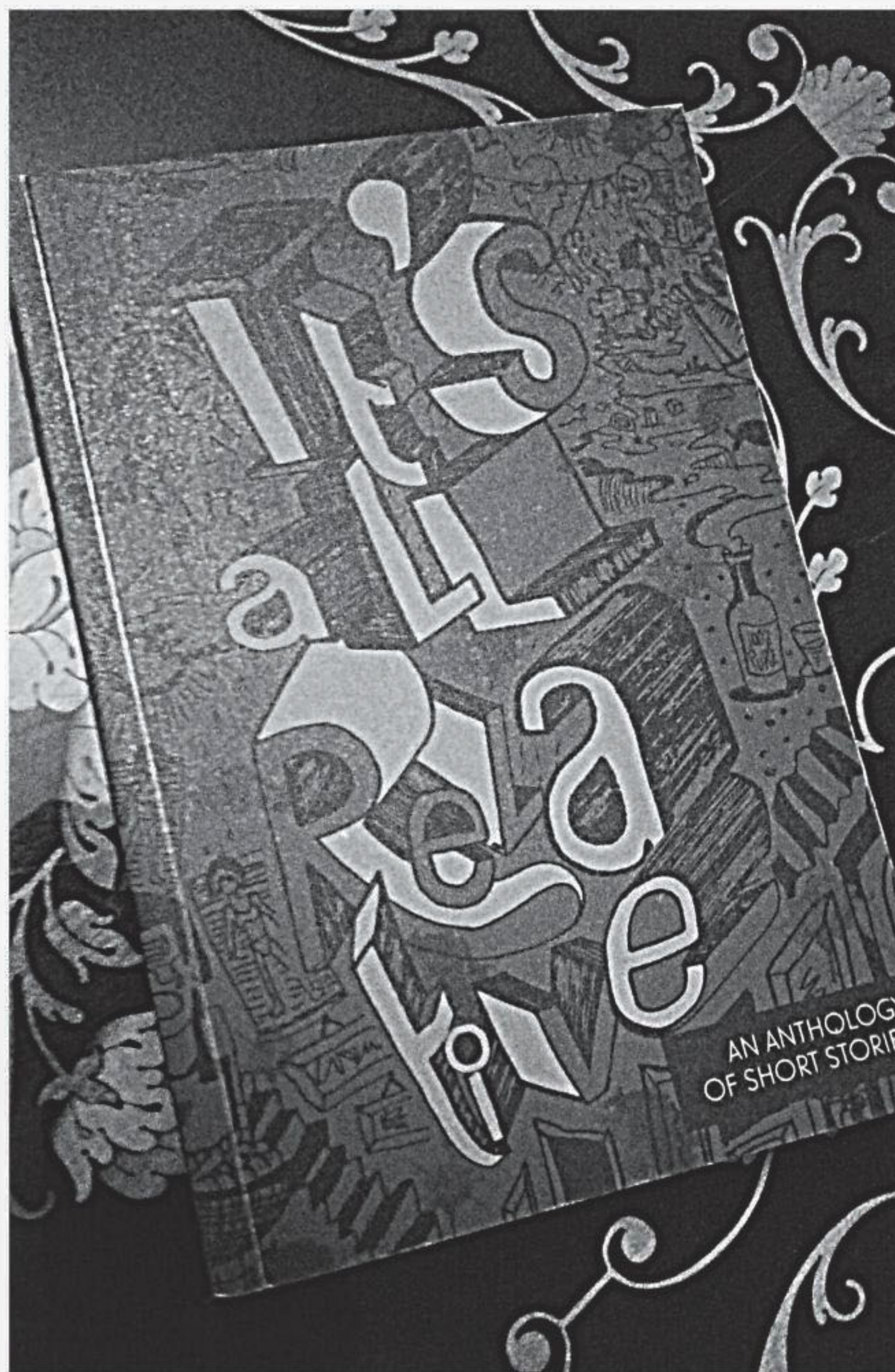
The subtle humor in the father’s sense of foreboding is delicious. It throws into relief the absurdity that can sometimes emerge when those we consider our very own get caught up in the performance of a culture that we have always taken for granted. The writer’s voice observes, narrates and describes without judgement—it remains appropriately indiscernible how the author feels about all this. As the immigrant experience is turned on its head, we empathize with the father’s ordeal as he explains that he never imposed the influences of his own heritage on the boy.

“Sessions with a Telepath” betrays the comic book nerd its author identifies as. The narration is fluid and, like the best work in that genre, the ending leaves the reader with a satisfied chill. His guilty subconscious drives the protagonist to seek justice himself. Adding to the chill factor, “Mr. Magic” by Khadija Rouf is this anthology’s nod to magical realism - or more simplis-

tically put, a ghost story. Not only is the middle-aged conjurer losing his glamour and his lover, but returning specters from the past compel him to make further amends. “In the End Is My Beginning” shows the altered reality of a schizophrenic, without shying away from the full scope of its horror.

Sohana Manzoor introduces the dusky and spirited protagonist Ratri. The story that follows is poignant in portraying the all too human regret that comes from neglecting an elderly loved one in the process of navigating a difficult life. Seeing the possibility of the hurtful lessons from that time materialize into another young woman’s painful reality. Learning that all too often, when we try to escape the pain in our past, we sacrifice the only people who made it possible to survive. Nabina Das chronicles the faceoff between the dung collector Chitro, at the bottom end of the social food chain and the temple priest, who embodies the authority of the deity himself. Yet for an exhilarating moment, Chitro has the upper hand in this chase, demanding justice for herself. She is this close to a proper reckoning with him. The status quo of power seems poised to be overturned for one glorious moment in the sun.

Like this one, at least two other stories speak of those who do not have the privilege to shield themselves from the worst, this time in what is allegedly the second most unlivable city in the world. That of Fatema, a 10-year-old household help who suffers abuse is all too common. As is how easily she is forgotten, and how little her dreams count for. The grief of two young children losing their mother in the Korail slum—she slips and falls when getting water for them from the communal tap, and of course the ambulance they cannot afford arrives only too late—is piquant. The mother poured her first round of savings into a mobile phone so she could call home, only to find that her husband has started another family. “Beyond the Blinds” portrays in only three odd pages the alienation on Dhaka streets, too rough for any vul-



nerability, be it a kitten or childhood innocence. Her closing paragraph, is perhaps the most insightful and revealing of the cosmopolitan selfie generation “enjoying the beauty that lies in being able to filter in the happy things.”

Readers looking for women stepping into their strength will not be disappointed. With quiet dignity, a classical

musician leaves the man who for years has not done right by her. Trapped in an uninspiring marriage, it is only when her hand is forced that a young mother leaves behind the values of her upbringing that are holding her back. Bilquis in Rashid Askari’s “Co-wife” is the picture-perfect Bengali village wife. Trouble brews in her paradise when

the couple is unable to have a child and the husband inevitably remarries. Bilquis, however, launches a secret ploy to prove that it is not she but her husband who is infertile. She chooses to bestow her favors on her husband’s distant cousin, who brings her betel leaves to chew any time she requests. The moment when she makes this ruminating decision is a tantalizing one. While this trope is not uncommon in Bangla literature, Askari’s storytelling brings a smile to the face at the thought that anglophone readers too can now savor it.

Shehtaz Huq’s story is hauntingly beautiful, capturing all the nostalgia enclosed in a jar of pickles, and cravings intense like an expecting mother’s, that almost makes the skin crawl. As the narrator takes a taste of the sweet, salty and sour mélange we can almost catch a waft the oil and vinegar odor. The concocting process is laid out oozing with lost love. It is as if the pieces of the mother’s life are embalmed in the tantalizing morsels.

This collection also includes two stories in translation. The more contemporary one by Syed Manzoorul Islam is another nod to magical realism. The mother is terrified that her child will be a girl, butis filled with pride when the foetus begins to fight her battles for her, taking a stand against her in-laws.

This brief anthology pulls together a diversity of imaginations, coming mostly out of Bangladesh. If the simplest yardstick for a book is whether it brings delight to ordinary readers, then this one clears it with ease. It will introduce the country in unexpected ways to readers unfamiliar with it, and the fact that it is chock full of familiar pieces from their lives will be an additional thrill for South Asians, especially Bangladeshi readers.

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