

## CREATIVE NONFICTION

# Of glitter pens, prestige, and Eids in Dhaka

**You walked for what felt like hours, chubby feet maneuvering past the squeeze of the Taraweeh crowd, huffing and panting to match your father's big strides. You stepped over the same blocks of bricks as he did to transport yourself to the other side of a pool of mud, adrenaline pumping all your blood to your cheeks and ears as you felt them heat up.**

TASHFIA AHMED

Being a Dhakaite, your Eids in childhood were spent in mournful longings for something to happen. They felt like that one uncle from bidesh who over-promised and under-delivered. You blamed it on your lack of a "graamer bari"—this mystical place your classmates would talk about when they returned from Eid vacation, happy tans framing their smiles several shades brighter than you last saw them.

For you, Eid was curtain-drawn rooms and freshly spread sheets you were not allowed to climb onto. For you, Eid was Jagjit Singh and Lata Mangeshkar's crooning conspiracy of lulling you to sleep, even as you sat straight-backed on the sofa, its grating fabric chafing the back of your thighs. Evidently, the Social Studies book had lied. Eid wasn't fun. You didn't get to play with anyone. Instead, you were handed the chore of keeping your new Eid clothes neat and stain-free.

As such, the only sliver of fun you got to have was pre-Eid when the pavements before the flat block you lived in would decorate themselves with stalls selling Eid greeting cards.

These were makeshift, temporary dokan—practically glorified blanket forts propped up with poles of bamboo—but oh how glorious they were in their assortments of glitter-coated roses, Tom and Jerry wearing the white salat topi, elaborate cut-outs and pop-ups, all wishing you a very joyous Eid, five takas each (two, if you took your mother there and she haggled it down to even include freebies). It was a flex to receive the most number of cards and to give the best looking ones, so of course, you waited to see what the rest were getting to make a calculated purchase. You had recently learned how to count on your fingers and you did that to ascertain how many cards were needed for all your classmates. At home, you sat down with them splayed on the cold mosaic floor and picked each card in regard to your friends' and the rest of your classmates' personalities and tastes. The boys got the Shrek card but for your coolest boy friend you saved the Hot Wheels card. The girls were getting glitter. And for each of them, you wrote a personalised message with glitter gel pens.

One Eid, inflation affected the cards. Prices of glitter had gone up or something so the cards were ten takas each, with the disclaimer "nile nai na nile nai". You lamented the days of cheaper buys and found a simple solution: You had to DIY them with chart papers, scissors, and glitter pens. In each class period, you rushed to finish the classwork, and scrambled over to the teacher's desk to hand the exercise copy over so you could use the rest of the class time to make those



ILLUSTRATION: AMREETA LETHE

cards. After several painstaking days of worsened handwriting, lowered marks, and a parent-teacher meeting addressing your crafting problem, you had about 10 cards ready. But what about the rest of your classmates?

At an iftar dawat on the weekend before school closed for the Eid holidays, you brought it up with your father: *Papa, greeting cards. My friends. It's a matter of prestige. Please.*

So, just after iftar you held his thick pinky and walked down the stairs from the eighth floor because the lift was observing its scheduled rest. But this was a matter of prestige.

You walked for what felt like hours, chubby feet maneuvering past the squeeze of the Taraweeh crowd, huffing and panting to match your father's big strides. You stepped over the same blocks of bricks as he did to transport yourself to the other side of a pool of mud, adrenaline pumping all your blood to your cheeks and ears as you felt them heat up. More air, more air, breathe. This is a matter of prestige.

But at the turn of the corner: There it was. Your destination. Paltan's stationery hub. Real dokan, not the temporary kind, lined the expanse of this market, sprawling all the way out to the main road where the rickshaws

stood custodian to its vibrance. Bright white lights boasted strings hanging greeting cards of a variety so extensive they threatened to spill out onto the streets.

The storekeepers started showing you all their cards, but very quickly you realised they were not the flashy glitterfest nor the familiar cartoon faces that you had expected. These cards were mostly monochromatic, either

a single shade of blue or brown, and featured solemn images of masjids or the tessellation patterns that decorate the domes of the most majestic of those masjids. These cards were not the kitschy phantasmagoria of Barbie dancing with Bugs Bunny that you had hoped to find. These were too elegant and demure—not good enough for your tacky childish taste for sparkles and vibrant shocks of colours.

Just as you were about to wrestle with your expectations and settle for reality, one of the storekeepers brought out the showstopper: A whole array of white popcorn-textured cards with images that popped up, quite literally, into neon-coloured foam-like squishy blobs. You can't quite explain what these blobs really looked or felt like without drawing comparison with your father's shaving foam or those clay slimes that

your nephews and nieces play with, but oh were they just the sensory nirvana you needed to set yourself apart from the rest of your classmates!

You gave your father the signal and he haggled the prices down. You don't quite remember how much he paid for each card but so long as you got to be the giver of the coolest cards this Eid, you could not bother to care for much else.

On the last day of school, you waited till everyone had distributed their cards and then you rose, envelopes in hand, carrying the aura of grandness you felt to each seat as you handed out the cards you had selected for each of your classmates. As soon as the first wow hit your ears, you knew you had accomplished just what you had wanted.

The boys played with the squishy blobs by digging their fingers into them, but very quickly, they got bored. The girls, however, cooed and crooned to get you to spill where you had gotten these cards from. Some even wondered how these blobs were made or what they were called. You remembered a storekeeper saying "ambush" and so you told them that. But now, you know that "ambush" was most likely a mispronunciation of "emboss" and

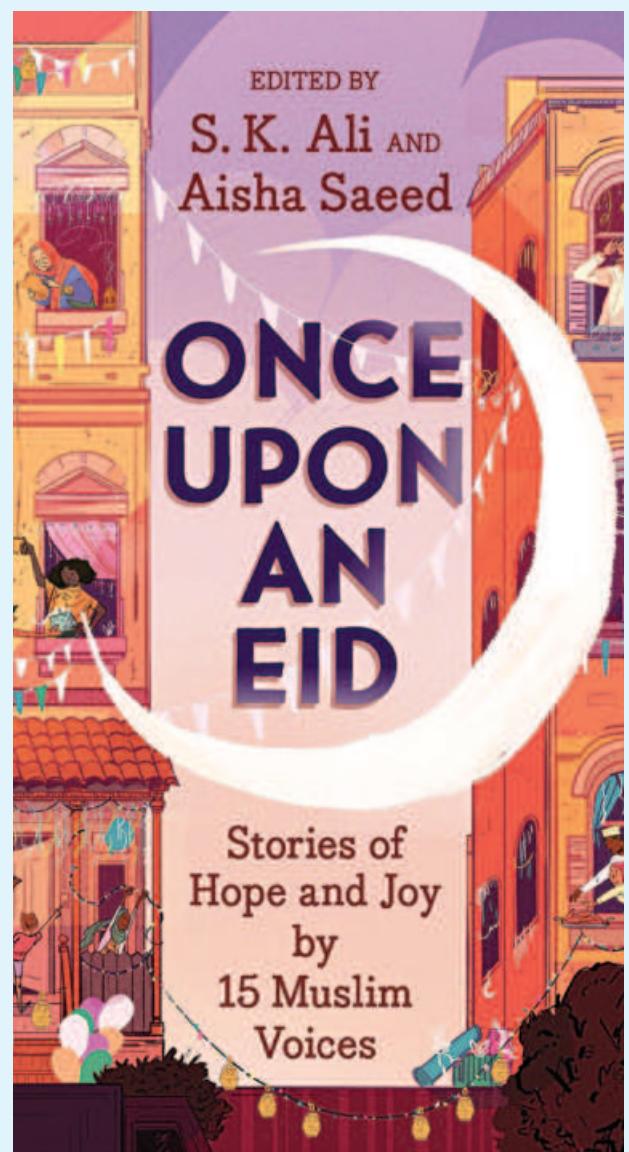
that's a very different thing. So to this day, you do not know what those blobs would have been called. But when you recall this memory, you fondly remember how cool you felt that one particular Eid.

As a Dhakaite, your Eids never quite captured the communal joy promised by your Social Studies book as all your cousins were busy celebrating their Eids with the patrilineal sides of their extended family and the neighbourhood kids were away at the coveted graamer bari. The little joys you could find were from the consumerist culture of Eid peddled by the TV channels and ads: Buying Eid greeting cards, applying Lijon mehedi while trying to replicate the designs on their free pamphlets, watching the Eid special episode of Ityadi, getting your parents to buy you a pair of Jump keds and following the programme schedule of Eid special telefilms that you had cut out from *The Daily Star*'s entertainment page.

You find joy in what you can.

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## WHAT WE'RE READING THIS WEEK

*Once Upon an Eid*S.K. Ali and Aisha Saeed (eds.)  
Amulet Books, 2020

For those who have ever wondered what Eid feels like in different countries, *Once Upon an Eid* is the perfect anthology to explore. This delightful collection of middle-grade short stories celebrates the diversity of traditions observed by Muslims around the world on this joyous occasion that unites them all. It portrays that although religion might be deeply personal, stories of hope and joy like this shows that celebration and kindness transcends diversity. The book begins with introducing the ever-confident and eccentric Hawa. Along with her, we embark on a journey of discovering different customs and traditions celebrated by her South African cousins on Eid and relate to the heartbreak of not being able to wear your perfect dress on Eid. Beyond the celebration of Eid, wonderful descriptions of food and decoration, this book also explores the themes of love, loss and grief of spending a special occasion without a loved one. However, the best thing about this anthology is that not all Muslim characters are portrayed as unrealistically good or perfect, making them feel authentic and relatable.



PHOTO: COLLECTED

## POETRY

## What does a tomb look like?

TIASHA IDRAK

Let us talk about death.  
Let us talk about funerals.  
About tombs and dignity.  
About mementos and memories.  
Let us talk about funeral rites,  
About ablutions,  
Washing the body, enveloping it in white shroud,  
Whispering prayers before sending your beloved to their maker,  
Ensconced in mother Earth,  
A dignity in death.  
Let us talk about the luxury to grieve,  
To not have the ground trembling under your feet,  
To not have hellfire rain down upon you,  
To not die without breaking a fast,  
To not shed tears for the child who didn't survive till the next suhoor.  
They say people are equal in death,  
That eternal slumber is fair to all,  
And yet, in the land of olives,  
I see no fairness,  
Where tombs take the shape of vines of torn limbs and flesh,  
Hanging on the wall,  
Tiny tiny pieces of hope,  
Little fingers, tuft of hair, remains collected in plastic bags,  
"10 kg for a 6 year old."  
Sophisticated missiles to slay sleeping children  
Crates devour tents,  
Dates turned black on ashening trees,  
Soil gray from gunpowder,  
Skin peeled off the chin, hanging like paint,  
Sisters, mothers burned to crisp,  
Heads and limbs scattered amidst debris,  
A puzzle for us hapless spectators—  
Wasn't the fire supposed to cease?  
Trembling hands, lovingly stuffing a cloth  
Inside a head hollowed,  
A father's fingers tenderly grasping the end of a pigtail,  
His darling child cradled in his arm,  
Face tilted towards the sky  
Unseeing eyes posing a question—  
Was Satan not shackled in this Holy Month?  
The wind carries the cries of the dead,  
The anguish of those still living,  
Children under the rubble,  
Half eaten bread in hand,  
A torn slipper,  
A chipped glass,  
Coffee spilled, never to be sipped again.  
Where homes are replaced by tents and tents replaced by nothingness,  
Abandoned bookshelves in childhood homes,  
Prayers buried in mass graves,  
Funerals delayed,  
Here in Gaza,  
I see no fairness,  
Here in Gaza,  
They're not allowed dignity in death.

**Tiasha Idra** is submerging in her own ocean of thoughts. She reads, writes, doodles, and daydreams most of the time.