

THE OVERTAKERS: STORIES TO MULL OVER

[http://www.the.dailystar.net/book/reviews/news/the Over Takers](http://www.the.dailystar.net/book/reviews/news/the%20Over%20Takers)

Wasi Ahmed. ISBN: 9789842005817. Adorn Publications, 2018.



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I was scratching my head as I completed reading the first story in Wasi Ahmed's anthology of short stories entitled *The Overtakers*. I was scratching my head when I had finished the eleventh tale, also the last in the engrossing volume. In between the bookends of the stories, I kept scratching my head as I went through the remaining nine. The tale of my fingers literally and figuratively running through my hair will soon become apparent. Suffice to say, these are stories the kind of which I do not recall encountering in Bangladeshi writers. Wasi Ahmed is a Bangladeshi fiction writer who had written these stories in Bangla and which had appeared in various magazines and journals. They have been translated into English by the author, Afsan Chowdhury, Rani

Ray, Debjani Sengupta, and Hugh Ferrer (who must have been the one who “didn't know a word of Bangla” in the author's Acknowledgements), and presented in *The Over Takers*.

Not a few readers might be tempted to declare that they had gone through some strange stories that they had found problematic in deciphering. And their conclusion could not be dismissed peremptorily. There are accounts that, at first glance, might appear strange and divorced from reality. However, a closer look would reveal subliminal meanings behind the apparently surreal accounts and depictions of odd situations that both ordinary citizens and social misfits find themselves in. The stories are pretty much about ordinary people living ordinary lives, but who constitute a part of the vast fabric called human existence.

The second story, which has been selected as the book's title, “*The Over Takers*,” is both strange and allegorical. Atiq, the protagonist, was a “chemical engineer turned gardener,” one who, instead of making use of his academic degree/training to land himself the expected (from Bangladeshi society) comfortable middle class job and existence, decided to grow bonsai plants. The author indulges in allegorical depictions and profound philosophical thoughts like Atiq pondering over the question, “Why should he tend plants to teach anyone a lesson!” The opening story, on the other hand, “The Dogs of Dolphin Lane” is mainly about dogcatchers of the City Corporation trapping stray dogs, killing them swiftly with poison injected from syringes, and carting them off from the area. While a number of grown-up residents of the area applauded the action, others termed it “stupid eyewash” by the authority to paper over its failure in order to successfully tackle “traffic jam, flies, mosquitoes, garbage, water logging, robberies, murders and so on.” The author, in the course of telling this tale, paints an interesting picture of a common phenomenon where “colorful fishes called dreams danced and swirled with their resplendent fins and tails!”

Dolphin Lane returns in the last story, “The Hole.” On the surface, it deals with the dastardly deeds of “a dishonest milkman who in the early morning had stood knee deep in the waters of Dhanmandi Lake filling his milk filled plastic bucket with lake water. He had been unmoved by the dawn light or early risers as he had gone about his task of mixing dirty water with the milk.” And thereby hangs a tale beyond the story of the adulterating maestro. An absurd scenario was created when his punishment was being debated by the people, enabling the writer to depict the peculiar idiosyncrasies of politics. “Youth belonging to the government party protested but because it was the best venue possible, they had to accept the location. The opposition leader's supporters were thrilled by this development. It seemed politically potential to them.”

The next one called “A Passage to America” again has subliminal meanings beyond that of the Bangladeshis (and other nationalities) trying to emigrate into the land of milk and honey. Along the way Wasi Ahmed does not hold back on throwing some trenchant remarks: “What greater security was there in life than a US passport?” And, “The US is not Bangladesh, here laws apply....” Finally, in a deliberate or incidental reference to fake news, he mentions “Dhaka's perennially misrepresenting newspapers.” “Full Circle”

is another existential tale told in a strange setting with unusual people engaged in unusual activities, where life's occasional absurdities are highlighted. So is, briefly, “the immense glow of greenness”, and, on a sub-textual level, “mental castration.”

“Kalashnikov's Rose” is of much interest, which begins with the capture in Dhaka of a terrorist carrying a disassembled Kalashnikov rifle, more familiarly known as AK-47, the most famous gun in the world. A brief account is provided by Ahmed on how the gun was invented by the Russian Michael Kalashnikov in 1947. (K in AK refers to the inventor's name, 47 to 1947; A to Avtokat or Automatic). Kalashnikov equated his gun to poetry with this subtle explanation: “Poetry doesn't care for meanings. One has to understand, just as one has to understand my gun.” If this is an accurate reproduction of his statement, then the contextual implication should jump out at the reader. “Reverie at Midday” is about a woman working in a clerical position in an unassuming courier service. Her mechanical life is portrayed in a space with a broken air-conditioner that the owner, who mostly spends time at another of his establishments, does not bother to have repaired even when it becomes boiling hot.

“Skyward” is a story of both symbolism and straightforward observation. The reader will get doses of both in the story as this small sample will show: “...the entire city had become a dump yard for garbage and that there were countless sources — habitats — of bad smell all over the city. These habitats had come up everywhere, in all the places — roads and alleys, parks, kindergartens, playgrounds, parliament house, office buildings, chests and cabinets, newspaper offices, teleprinters, TV channels.” “Six Meters Distance”, among other things, draws attention to the Press Club (of Dhaka) and the “cracking speeches in human-chain programs under the generous shade of Korui trees in front” of it. “The Monument or Eleman's Tail” ostensibly talks about a man with an appendage at his back, and adds a supernatural element, but it is also a commentary on the society. “The Cage's Strange Bird” exposes the dirty not-so-hush-hush secrets of the government institutions, in this case a rehabilitation center, told through a disabled freedom fighter's ordeal. The center's two-faced character is an indictment on issues of neglect, corruption, chicanery, and inhumanity in different kinds of institutions. As the author relates through the protagonist's travails, “One-legged, one-handed Suleman knows the reason well enough.”

All in all, *The Overtakers* should make the reader think about ordinary people muddling through their lives in stories that are woven in an unusual style that adds to their quality.

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