

# Wasi Ahmed and the enigma of history – Afsan Chowdhury

Nov 26, 2021 | [Insight](#) | [0 comments](#)

Reading Time: 22 min ( Word Count: 4352 )



*Wasi Ahmed is an acclaimed short story writer and novelist from Bangladesh. He has published nine collections of short stories and six novels. Formerly a civil servant, he is currently associated with the Bangladesh English daily The Financial Express. He is a fellow of the Iowa University, USA where he attended the International Writers' Residency Program in 2016. His stories have been translated in English, French, German and Arabic. He has received several literary awards including the Bangla Academy Literary Award.*

Wasi Ahmed is not easy to peg into traditional categories, literary or historical. He has been recognized as a major writer for decades but not always as the writer who matters most for serious minds. Though his status is now beyond any debate, his work remains in its own space without mingling with other literary genres common in the literary world he lives in.

Of course, he has crosses to bear. It's not easy to be an outsider in a literary world dominated by an agreed cultural history of the elite, almost religious in its assumptions. It's a bit ironic because Ahmed works almost entirely on history and its enigmatic consequences. But it's his own history, deeply political, deeply influenced by the 1971 war and its consequences as well. So who is he?

## **A culture of history**

The aspiration for an “undivided” Bengali tradition based on language is often the prime test of literary legitimacy in his land. The argument lies in the primacy of language rather than history as the producer of culture. Many if not most writers succumb to this equation without questioning.

Wasi Ahmed doesn't and is part of a handful of those who have written to mark his historical rather than linguistic cultural identity through his work. With him it happens without polemics.

His history is very different as his consciousness took off from a different hill than those of his seniors and many peers. This historical sense makes him nearly independent of the Bengali literary past that most others embrace.

Ahmed grew up in a tumultuous world that defines him and his literature. He joined college in 1969 and by then his world was already in revolt. His academically elite college was full of intellectual achievers who were not beholden to the traditions that identify many if not most contemporary writers of his land.

He was close to a literary circle at the Dhaka College where brash young lads were already planning to join the freedom war. Their rebellious spirit was reflected in their literary work as well. Bengali literary canons were not their prime dominant force, and some were openly disdainful of both the Western and Eastern traditions. While much of it was typical undergrad swag, it is also true that they had no pre-set loyalties. It gave them the intellectual space to grow unshackled by “Bengali” literary traditions as they moved towards Bangladesh.

A set of rebellious minds met in a rebellious society, about to become a state. It was a bleeding, furious and enigmatic war that touched everyone in different ways. It's this process, midwived by a new cultural tradition organic to history not the colonial past, that dominated a new state. This process of birth also produced the writer as we know him today.

His mind consumed that history, and his literature keeps holding up juxtaposed mirrors of the same. The world before 1971, scarily innocent, the ravenous raging war and life afterwards as people move on is what his literary world is largely made up of. It is inevitably without the traditions that sustain much of Bengali literature today.

### **In a world dominated by language**

Most Bangla fiction writers draw their genealogy from the colonial tree and its expiring dated fruits. However, Wasi Ahmed is not trying to recover and discover his ‘reality’ from the imagined past. This past is decorated with aspirations of a newly grown underclass under the shelter of colonial wings. Nor does he, unlike many, subscribe to the mythical village as the sylvan ultimate, a deified space in a peasant graduated society. In this push and pull, many Bengali writers from Bangladesh may seem oddly schizoid. They hold two realities in their hands, one is cultural loyalty and the other is historical reality and not many are sure to which one belongs. The battle is between what Bengal was and what Bangladesh[i] is, very crudely put. To many both are inclusive and to some never so.

The historical state reality is a fact to reckon with, but the cultural reality continues to dominate the literati, as language is seen as sacrosanct. It's a trait rooted in religion whereby all liturgy is sacred and understanding of liturgy is not needed to gain piety.

Bengali to the literary class is more than a vehicle of communication but an object of religious adoration as well.

This has been strengthened by the role of Bengali language as part of the Bangladesh state movement. The exclusion of Bengali as one of the two state languages of Pakistan of that time was essentially an economic exclusionary policy of the Urdu speaking elite, mostly from UP(India) who had migrated to Pakistan in 1947. They wanted to limit entry of competitors from Bengalis of East Pakistan<sup>[ii]</sup> into the civil service primarily. This met with immediate resistance from the educated middle class of East Pakistan from 1947 onwards. In 1952, students and others from civic society were shot at and killed. This became the great “iconic” event bordering on the sacred that many see as the political “source” of Bangladesh, though it is an ahistorical assumption. It also transformed from the “State language” movement – a fact-to the “Mother language” movement – a myth-in the collective imagination particularly of middle-class minds. Thus, middle class consciousness is considerably located in language-based loyalty. When language and content both become sacred in religious text, the status of the meaning and how it is expressed are influenced. Buddhism changed after the adoption of Sanskrit as the language of liturgy. Loyalty to the masters of Sanskrit language became as important as the liturgy, even particularly when few understood the language. Ultimately, Buddhism’s decline coincided with the resurgence of Sanskrit as well.

This emphasis on language as the Dominant also brought it closer to its master source, the literary tradition located in colonial Kolkata. When Pakistan attacked Tagore and banned him in one of its most racist-silly moods, reality and imagination, language and content, became one. In many cases it remains till today.

That series of events that threatened the language of the middle-class liturgy also influenced the status of an ‘independent’ Bangladeshi literature. To many, it occupies a junior space in the overall Bengali literary world. To some, it has over time become a bit of a derivative literary hoard. It is still looking for affirmation from its literary “motherland” while trying to construct self-portraits sitting elsewhere in history.

### **The colors of the Self**

Wasi Ahmed is free from the pre-Bangladesh trends, whether the traditional Tagorean stream or its cousin, the Babu-Left populism<sup>[iii]</sup>. The latter, though weakened now, was once very robust, and gave birth to several genuine icons and helped sustain political ideology as a literary form.

Instead of shedding political tears, Wasi Ahmed observes and describes how people interact with politics and society through history. This is very deep in some of his novels – where the writer deals with the complex task of demystifying history without damaging the literary goblet that holds its shivering waters.

One of his earliest novels is on the overlapping theme of life before, during and after Bangladesh’s war of independence in his perennial search for continuity. He focuses on life before the 1971 war and what it looked like, how the war affects people and how the living and the dead experience it in imagined and unimagined ways after the war is over. The dilemma and enigma of love and war, the real and the imagined, the collective and the individual become puzzles greater than the conventional broader frame that tries to grasp them all. The idea is not about how the war was but the semiotics that are reflected

in each layer of a never-ending war. (*Roudro O Chayar Naksha: A Mosaic of Sun and Shadows*. Aitirjo Publications 2001)

The novel is about utterly ordinary people made “special” by the war, mostly in terms of suffering. The crutches of the disabled warrior, who is also the lover but never spoke out, becomes a motif pushing the story forward. It’s not a polemical or even an angry novel. Nothing dramatic really happens except that the crutches collapse to the floor and break into pieces. The warrior/lover lines up his bedroom walls with crutches gifted to him to help him walk, while dragging his war-wounded limb along.

The female protagonist, also in love, also unspoken but widowed by the war, dreams of crutches all lined up against the wall just as they are in the room of the male protagonist. She has never been in the room before. She also dreams of a pair of crutches that crash down to the floor and break into pieces. It happens in her dreams, but it ultimately also happens in reality.

The narrative begins before the war as the young girl is about to get married and continues afterwards as she is widowed by the war and people try to pick up broken pieces of their lives. If the male bears the burden of his war injury, the female bears the burden of being a martyr’s wife, constantly in public focus, a man she barely knew, whose identity overwhelms that of her own.

Wasi deals with the opportunity cost of dreams and aspirations and the consequences of what happens when the individual becomes part of the collective in a state-making war. This “war” novel makes no concessions to populism and is one of the most serious literary explorations of the semiotics of 1971 written in Bangladesh. In this genre, Wasi Ahmed has few peers.

### **The Long-distance war after 1971**

Wasi Ahmed was a young adult, about to take his University entrance exams in 1971 when the war broke out. At college, he was a quiet kid, a good student like his peers and part of a small group which produced critical thinkers and litterateurs. Several of his close friends published a “little” magazine – *Purbopatra* – which was known for producing quality literary criticism beyond the writers’ years but also considered arrogant by many.

Coming as it did just before 1971, it was a showcase of the visible distancing between the “extension” Bangla literature of East Pakistan/East Bengal and the new literature of about-to- emerge Bangladesh. In many ways, it showcased the chasm between the generations also.

The psychology of literary separatism influenced his generation deeply just as did politics. It began in the late 60s and continues. It’s this indigenous identity of Bangladeshi literature that Wasi Ahmed bears.

Very few in Bangladesh know that Ahmed began as a poet, at least his first published book is a collection of poems. Interestingly, many of his close literary friends also wrote poetry but almost all turned their back on this form, preferring essays and fiction. In the early 70s, Dhaka University was flooded with poets but Wasi Ahmed was noticed. His book drew praise, but he drifted away from poetry too, like his peers. As his livelihood life began, his shift was completed. He has since tried to comprehend history and humans through fiction, giving himself more structural space to explore his themes.

Violence is an understated but ever-present motif in his work, but he grew up in a violent world apart from the large-scale political takeovers and coup related killings. A particular incident that struck him deeply was the killing of several students by their political rivals in the University dorms which Ahmed shared. Another was the violent death of his own roommate – a young Leftist radical who was killed by a random police bullet while he was in a protest gathering.

Post liberation world was not an easy one and the violence of the war continued to echo in small explosions all around as Wasi Ahmed crossed over to the adult world of life and writing.

When he passed out of college, took the civil service exams, got a post and moved on, the outwardly gentle, friendly person, liked by all, had morphed inside into a very introspective soul. He saw much and internalized it all. He probably didn't become the typical "progressive-liberal-Leftist" framework writer because he hardly was into prescribing solutions. He wrote on what seemed the enigmatic puzzles of history rather than offer quick fire solutions off the political shelf through literature. He was not even seriously bothered about publishing. Why?

"I was bored, I was living in a city – Chittagong – in which I neither grew up nor was familiar with. So, I began to write and that's what happened." Boring civil service postings do have their good sides, it's obvious.

It's during one of those days that Wasi Ahmed had an old friend visit him. It was Hasan Ferdous, the editor of *Purbopatra*, the magazine published by his friends, which he had contributed to during his Dhaka College days. And one night Hasan read a few of the stories Wasi had written. When Ferdous returned to Dhaka, he carried some of them with him. Very soon they were published in the top periodicals of the country and very soon Wasi Ahmed had begun to swim in the serious mainstream of Bangladesh's literary river. He had already taken that traditional cultural cloak down to put on the historical gown of Bangladesh.

### **The Great Novel of 1971 and the missing 'truth'**

The collective angst regularly heard is that "nobody has yet written the true novel of 1971". But nobody knows what it looks like or what they want to see in it. When "history" becomes a political product of various groups and factions at play, most look for affirmation of answers already given by one side or another.

Everyone has different notions of 1971 borrowed from memory of one's own or that of others or those transferred through the generations. What may be missing is not the literature of 1971 but perhaps a consensus on what 1971 was. That *great novel* can thus never be written.

Wasi Ahmed deals with this puzzle in his austere and most complete novel on the theme "*Borofkol*"- (The Ice machine. *Kothaprokash* 2021). The novel deals with the victims of 1971 war, particularly rape victims and how they encountered the world of post war and memory.

It's one of the most mature novels on the topic of 1971 and memorializing. Wasi Ahmed develops the story around the politics of suffering and survival, individual and collective. The novel doesn't spell out what people went through but shows how they experienced history and the enigma that such interactions produce, during war and afterwards. To

that extent, it's an almost "abstract" novel that contemplates the topic of war rather than the war itself, masked as a narrative of concrete facts.

It's this interplay between "facts and truth" that propels the writer to search for both even though he has no plans to say it aloud or says it's possible to find one.

Wasi Ahmed remains located in Bangladesh 1971 but introduces the complexity of the multiple responses to the same question of location, arriving through the windows of national and international politics, social structures and ultimately the examination of the self in war.

It's this refusal to simplify the complex that makes his novel perhaps the most fully realized product on the topic. His novel doesn't end with the arrogance of having understood the message but with the pilgrims' prayer that one day he will. The last line of the last page ends this way. "I don't know whether I shall find Shefali this time around. If I do, I shall rather wait to hear what she has to say...if she says something to me, out of kindness..." The writer waits... In the unstated may lay everything else.

As he wrote in a note to a friend in the novel, "hope you find some "truth" in it..."

\*\*\*

After more than four decades of storytelling, Ahmed is still trying to find the meaning of "truth" in enigmatic scenarios. One can't be sure he has a definitive answer or thinks it can be found at all, but few would want to journey from certainty to enigma as he does. His literature is a record of that process.

If his novels have dealt more with the larger issues of state and society, his short stories are much more intimate in nature, doing the same. Although readers and critics often search for the fullness of the writer in their larger works, it's possible these miniatures reflect the microcosms of the meta.

The short story collection titled, "Overtakers" (A collection of stories in English translation, Adorn publications. 2018) is one such example. A selection of stories, it holds much of the veiling and unveiling of that outwardly simple world that springs on the reader to surprise and shock.

One of the briefest stories in the collection, "The Dogs of Dolphin Lane," is at one level about the stray dogs running amuck in an urban middle-class residential area. The noisy dogs bark excessively at night and the residents hope for some respite from this canine torture to sleep in peace. One day, as all had hoped, a dog culling drive ends the noise—the dead dogs are carried away in municipal trucks and the people left "in peace" to enjoy their sleep.

For the first few days they cherish the pure-bred silence that comes with the pleasure of quiet nights but the dead mongrels slowly return through their absence and silence to haunt them. They realize they can't sleep at night without the howling of the dogs. In the end people feel that the dogs had left but had taken with them the enigmatic sense of completeness that their all-night barking had given, that filled the vacuum of their minds. To them the departed dogs become a loss and what they aspired for is what they miss the most in reality. In a manifestly personal and collective sense, it felt as if some of their body parts—limbs and appendages were carted away with the dead dogs in the corpse carrying trucks.

The story is told with the dead pan humor of a mortician as the most ordinary incidents

unfold one after another to the inconclusive ending. “What then do you desire?” is the question that haunts without being stated once.

If “Dolphin Lane” is about an undefinable enigma, in another story, dreaming makes life unbearably enigmatic. “Dream that Lokman Hakim Dreamed” is about Lokman Hakim who becomes terrified when his pregnant wife starts to have fantastic dreams.

It is often the same dream, of a baby born with resplendent wings that visits her, making the wife feel happy, filled with longing for life. For Lokman Hakim, the dreams seem too absurd for his simple-soul wife to have, or so he tells himself.

He even seeks the help of a psychiatrist, but his wife does not stop having the dreams, terrifying him beyond measure because dreams make human minds strange and out of the ordinary, briefly lifting life out of everyday banality. And that is scary for those whose life remains cordoned by the very things which dreams challenge – predictability and acceptance. In the end, when the protagonist begs his wife to share her dreams, the story climaxes.

It is fantastic and simple at the same time, a description of absurdity when limited human imagination interacts disastrously with the unlimitedness of dreams. That normal life can be upset so abnormally by human dreams makes it a unique story, but it shows the minefields of human lives and minds. Both are real, both are part of life, but both find co-survival difficult. It is a contradiction which the author doesn’t resolve. He lets it be.

In another story, hilarious and simple yet heart-breaking, a man of extreme ordinariness is often seized with strange and inexplicable desires, mostly violent, which he carries out almost against his will. He stones a fancy car and manages to escape. He pushes a man peeing on the street into a ditch and ignites a blaze in his office.

Yet he has no fight with the car, the man on the street was a stranger and he does not necessarily hate his office. He is the most uncomplicated person that one could imagine and yet he sees these compulsions as powerful signals of something he doesn’t really understand. One day overpowered by the same impulse, he goes to the roof of his house and quickly grabs the dangling trunk of an elephant flying past in the sky.

Is it a death wish he had been grappling with all along or is it freedom transcending the banality of death in a starry night’s sky strapped securely by a flying elephant’s trunk? The idea of freedom, not merely of the yearning chained within but one that is hidden in the ripples of surface reality and deemed lost, is a subject Wasi Ahmed often explores. And as he progresses, he discovers and reconstructs the wonders that make life itself a puzzle.

Just as Lokman Hakim, tormented by his wife’s dreams, finally begs for dreams “so he could see them just for this once”, the protagonist in the story “Over Takers” is struck by a sense of disbelief when he realizes that what he considered an unredeemable defeat is actually a magical achievement—freedom in a reconstructed space of imagination or perhaps reality of another kind.

In another story, “Farming the Stunted Beauties” – bonsai trees – is a man who sees his own life as a failure and the tiny trees as a metaphor of his own stunted life. But his bonsai flourishes unlike his life. The trees wish to be released from the imprisoned state, which is extremely disconcerting for him. He believes that the trees strain at night to surge high and reach for the sky in a defiant gesture of leaving their bodies behind.

It is a nightmare that he cannot get rid of even as he connects and disconnects with the real world. And in one magnificent and terrifying night he sees the bonsais ripping

through the sky, leaving the roof garden behind, free and fabulous. It's a defeat for him but not without a mysterious and unbelieving ecstasy of release.

"The Cage's Strange Bird", is a story both disturbing and evocative. With a thin storyline blurred by continuous flashbacks to depict the confusion of linear time, it is woven with a sense of chaos, the essence of what the story is about. It stretches out through daydreams, slumber, interior monologues and agonizing states of waking and revelation.

It deals with an emotionally challenging topic, the suffering of a freedom fighter disabled in the Bangladesh 1971 war. The story is built around the rebellious life of a disabled war veteran called Suleman who continues to battle the post-war world with his words and defiance. It is not about just one fighter but of a war in which the warrior(s) are destined to fight even on a wheelchair and maybe after death with only a leftover leg and arm.

Suleman's story is told through a series of ramblings of a man puzzled by the going-ons in the decrepit rehabilitation center where he resides. He spends his days awaiting the visitors who stop by to inquire about him and the war that was. Finally, one day he is awakened by the silence of the visitors who are not able to speak to him or move about in hushed circles of respect.

It was strange but liberating for Suleman to realize that he is dead and it is his funeral day, his last moment in the cage! The story is powered by the narrative structure and the central idea of a liberation war which cages its warriors.

The story titled "The Hole" is perhaps one of his most accessible, where a poor milkman is suspected of adding lake water to the product he supplies to homes. He is tied up and then tortured by an entire neighborhood filled with people of many kinds. It's almost as if they are becoming the beasts who line up before the mirror which the author holds up in his story to show themselves. At one point the suffering man begins to die. Wasi Ahmed ends the story this way:

"Slowly an anxiety began to creep upon the people. Since twilight didn't stay long, people began to worry about the dark rumors about a dead Abdul Karim. The impending death of a simple guy suddenly turned into sympathy occupying the soft spaces of their minds.

But the point is Abdul Karim was alive. Still, it was not smart to leave him like this. The way the situation was, his death seemed imminent. The people then thought of shifting his body to another lane and shove it down a manhole, but his eczema scarred body was too big for that.

They kept moving from one lane to another, from one manhole to another. It just was not possible to shove him down. Instead of going down a manhole, he remained on their shoulders. Those who carried him felt his body weighing heavier and heavier. What could be done? There was nothing one could do about it. He had to be on their shoulders until their search would find a right enough hole."

Ahmed sums up contemporary Bangladesh, describes the past that constructs it and the future that beckons with the enigma which only his own history can offer. He lives there.

Notes:

[1] Beginning in March 1971, the *Bangladesh* War of *Independence* led to East Pakistan becoming a new nation state, Bangladesh



[ii] East Pakistan was a Pakistani province established in 1955, renaming the province as such from East Bengal. After 1971's war of independence, East Pakistan became Bangladesh.

[iii] Refers to writers from educated class influenced by communism



**Afsan Chowdhury**, a veteran journalist, author, Liberation War historian and recipient of Bangla Academy Award, is a development and media professional, researcher and social activist with over 40 years of experience in the development sector at national and international levels. He has worked as Sr. Advisor (Advocacy and Communication) at BRAC from 2012-16. His other areas of work are health communication, diversity analysis, community mobilization, Child rights, disaster management, safe migration and extremism issues. He has authored and co-authored over 15 books.

antonymmag.com © 2020