Wasi Ahmed's stories in translation: The incandescent enigma of the mundane and surface reality

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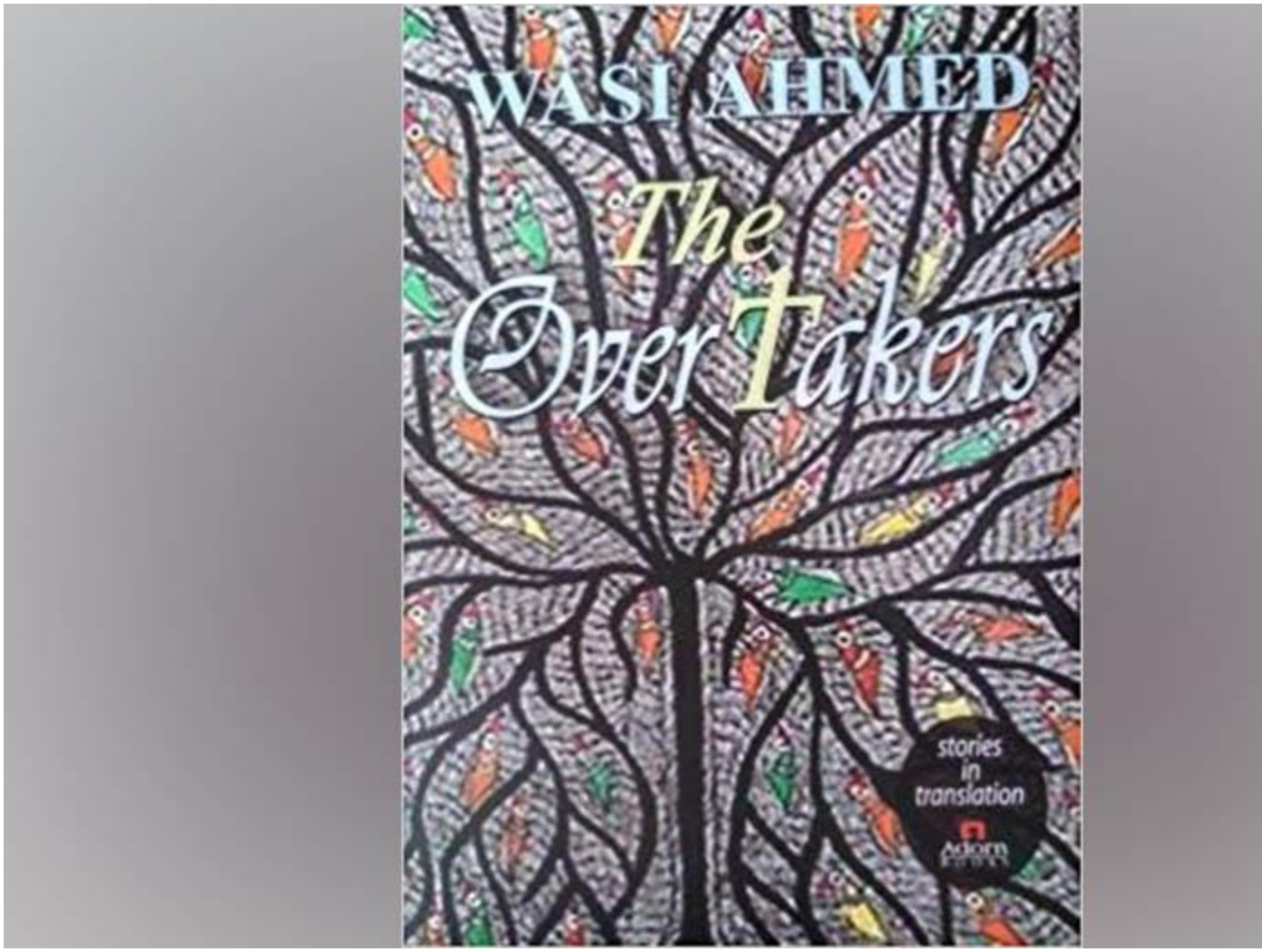

Book review

Wasi Ahmed deals with enigmas and deception of everyday living with a sense of supreme irony combined with unique application of his literary craft. In his own fashion he is able to paint his private vision of the unexpected and the impossible in the most plausible of situations. The banal and the extraordinary both mingle with a sense of reality pointing to the distortions and wonders that construct our time and days.

More than three decades of storytelling have presented Ahmed, leading fiction writer of our time, with a search for meaning (or the lack of it) underlying the ordinariness of physical reality—in which one lives. This is a shadowy area and challenging if one has to constantly look beyond the veneer of surface appearances. Surface reality, as Ahmed tells his readers, is almost always deceptive, even unreal.

Eleven translated stories in the book, *The Overtakers,* published last year, stand out as markers of how fictional stories are told. One of the briefest, "The Dogs of Dolphin Lane," is at one level about the stray dogs in an urban middle-class residential area. The noisy dogs bark generously 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 dogs carried away in trucks and the people left "in peace" to enjoy their sleep.

For the first few days they devoured the pure-bred silence that came with the majesty of quiet nights but the dead mongrels slowly returned with their absence and silence to haunt them. In the end people felt that the dogs had left but taken with them the enigmatic sense of completeness that their all-night barking had offered them, filling the vacuum of their minds. To them it looked like a loss, in a manifestly personal and collective sense, of some of their body parts—limbs and appendages maybe—that they suspected carted away with the dead dogs in those trucks. The story is told with the dead pan humor of a mortician as the most ordinary incidents unfold one after another to a momentous inconclusiveness of endings.

If the "Dolphin Lane" story is about an indefinable enigma, there is another where an apparent enigma leads to wonders that make living possible, perhaps with a bit of dreaming. "Dream that Lokman Hakim Dreamed" is a story about one Lokman Hakim who is terrified when his pregnant wife starts to have fantastic dreams. It is often the same dream, of a baby born with resplendent wings that visit her, making her look happy with a renewed lease of life.

For Lokman Hakim, the dreams are too absurd for his simple-soul-wife to have or so he thinks and for his "normal" mind to bear. He even seeks the help of a psychiatrist but his wife cannot stop having the dreams, terrifying him beyond measure because dream lifts human minds only briefly out of banality and ordinariness, and it can be frightening for those for whom predictability is far more valuable than uncertain cravings of happiness. 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 incomprehensible absurdity meeting its nemesis in the form of limited human imagination in a marvelous piece of fiction.

There is a hushed note so characteristic of the stories that in their oblique style they evoke a multilayered reality. Underneath the ordinariness and apparent unreality, it is the interpretation of a given situation with a zealous insight into the human psyche that makes the stories distinctly different.

“A Passage to America” could be a case in point. Here the author constructs an intimate portrait of strangers who live together as a family. The family waits to migrate to the States to escape its genteel poverty living in the shabby squalor of lower middle-class people. Wasi Ahmed is almost relentless in describing the lifestyle of the anonymous and the vulnerable social segment as he traces their every frustration, shallowness, small-time ambitions along with self-effacing courageous sacrifices and guile, too.

This would-be immigrant family finds emotional proximity with the Cuban refugees that are landing on the Florida shores which they watch on the CNN. In this process of accommodating disgust, empathy, anxiety and self-shame, through the courtesy of TV pictures beamed on a flickering TV, the author turns the images into a metaphor. And yet the story, supremely crafted with each character sketched with an almost obsessive attention to details, triumphs as a social commentary on the crisis of migration. It demystifies the family and all its hallowed symbols. Ahmed shows that carnivorous instincts and instinctual empathies are never separable; he again achieves in establishing the triumph of the mundane, the supremacy of the banal and also, an artist's right to stories as an excuse to play with style and craft.

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 somehow manages to escape; he pushes a man peeing on the street into a ditch and reignites a blaze in his office that came under control. Yet he has no fight with the car, and 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. So 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 with an 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 often deemed lost is a subject Wasi Ahmed loves to explore. And as he progresses, he discovers and reconstructs the wonders that make all the differences in our life. Just as Lokman Hakim, tormented by his wife's dreams, finally begs for dreams “so he could see them just for this one time only”, the protagonist in the remarkable “Overtakers” is struck by a sense of disbelief when he realizes that what he considered an unredeemable defeat is but a magical achievement—freedom in a reconstructed space of imagination or perhaps reality. Farming the stunted beauties 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 bonsais flourish 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. A defeat for him but not without a mysterious and unbelieving ecstasy of release.

“The Cage's Strange Bird”, one of the longest stories, is at the same time disturbing and highly evocative. With a thin storyline blurred at times by continuous flashbacks and a sense of timelessness, this is a story within a story webbed with a sense of chaos, the unmistakable essence of what the story is actually about. The story stretches out through day-dreams, slumber, interior monologues and astonishing states of waking and revelation. It deals with an emotionally challenging topic, the suffering of a disabled freedom fighter in the Bangladesh liberation war.

The story is built around the rebellious life of the crippled FF Suleman who continues to battle the post-war world with his words and defiance. It is not about just one fighter but about the spirit of a warrior who is destined to fight even on a wheelchair and maybe after his death with only a left-over leg and an arm. Ahmed tells the story of the main character Suleman who, passing through rambling states of slumber and waking, is puzzled by the goings-on in the decrepit rehabilitation center where he resides awaiting the visitors who stop by to inquire about him and the war that was. Finally, one day he is all awake by the silence of the visitors who are not able to speak to him, move about in hushed circles around him. A strange but a liberating revelation for Suleman: it was his funeral day, his last moment in the cage! It is a deeply moving tale crafted by extraordinary power of the narrative and the central idea that pervades it.

Playing with metaphors reinforces the oblique signals Wasi Ahmed so often wants his readers to hear and see. Nevertheless, it is essentially his way of telling the stories that one finds crucial. “Skyward” is gripping as the search for the foul smell continues untiringly in Milli’s household. Unguarded against the unseen enemy, she is vulnerable and seeks recourse to a bottle of au de cologne,holding it close to her nose while going to bed. The smell with a physical torment is something a bit more complex, because when the city municipality launches its cleansing drive, it targets not only the common and usual “habitats” of smell but also the unthought-of domains such as the parliament building, television channels, chests and drawers of offices etc.

Wasi Ahmed has shied away from pontification style, common to writers in the region. The stories are explorations in a fashion that seem to say that both silence and words are overpowered by signals, stated or hinted.

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