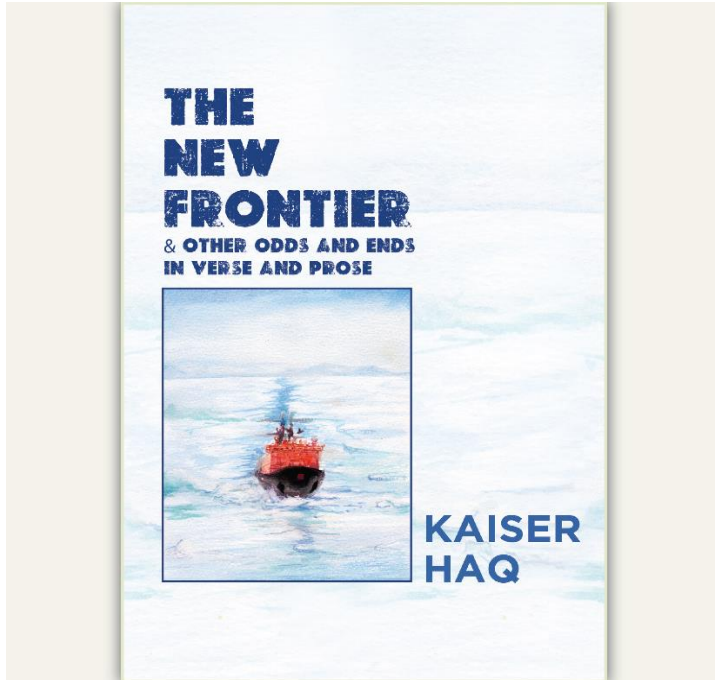


Kaiser Haq. 2024. *The New Frontier & Other Odds and Ends in Verse and Prose*. Dhaka: ULAB Press, 80 pp. ISBN: 978 984 95816 8 0



Kaiser Haq is a poet – I’m really tempted to say, a scholar-poet – who has been producing verse, translating and editing works of poetry and prose for well over forty years. Haq may not need any introduction to Bangladeshi readers. He has been a prominent figure on the literary scene in Dhaka for many years, and his translation of *The Triumph of the Snake Goddess* (with an introduction by Wendy Doniger) has also disseminated his name through the portal of Harvard University Press to a much wider audience.

When one looks through Kaiser Haq’s non-fiction writings over the decades – his various reviews, stories, memoir snippets, and short essays – a tremendous, subterranean store of erudition becomes evident. It lies there, lurking, beneath an array of sometimes acidic comments and cynical half-turns, forever reminding the unwary reader of exactly who they are dealing with. He writes with ease not just about Rabindranath Tagore and Kazi Nazrul Islam – which is to be expected – but also about Levi Strauss, Gunther Grass, Allen Ginsberg, and Greek classicism as well as Berlin. The erudition in his work is what erudition should always be in poets – palimpsestic, never interfering

ostentatiously with the poem at hand, but tacitly supporting, deepening, illuminating the written line with a promise of profundity, an echo of something unmentioned, throwing an ‘optional,’ invisible shadow over a verse for the Reader Who Knows.

In many ways, Haq’s best poetry offers a masterclass in how scholarship can augment a poet instead of stultifying them. In *The New Frontier*, for example, “Belated Mirror Stage” (14-16) begins in childhood memory – on the scarcity of mirrors in his home, on his indifference towards them as a youth – and ends, lugubriously, on his reliance on them in old age as a means of checking he’s still alive. It works if you don’t know Lacan, but for the reader who does, the idea of a primordial moment in the becoming-subject of childhood only fully taking place at the age of seventy supplies a wonderful, cynical twist, augmented of course (as so many of Haq’s poems are) by their postcolonial re-setting: if you’re European, you get your mirror stage at two or three – in South Asia, you have to wait until you’re seventy, and even then, it’s only to check you’re not dead.

This cynicism is important, as it forms an important ingredient in the poems of Kaiser Haq; I’m not sure I completely understand how, or indeed whether it is always to his work’s benefit, but cynicism is what I found myself thinking about constantly as I read his latest collection, *The New Frontier*. Sometimes the cynicism is a kind of coping strategy, a way of dealing with a government’s inability to improve society, or human beings’ inability within that society to form a government to do so. In “Elegy Written in a Redbrick House,” he writes of the stars in the sky above Dhaka “too shy to twinkle in polluted air,” certainly not the only time Haq successfully weaves the environmental negatives of his native Dhaka (overcrowding, air pollution, water quality, and other issues) into something cheekily sublime. There is enough cynicism here to remind the reader the poet has remained in contact with visceral, quotidian reality – but at the same time, not so much as to overwhelm the possibility of (in this case, literally) looking at the stars.

The title of the collection stems from a guiding interest in the “Emerging Arctic” which receding ice caps are beginning to unveil – and the depressing variety of neo-colonial strategies the world’s leading powers are employing to appropriate them. “O what a piece of shit is man – or woman for that matter” says Haq’s Hamlet (51), as a kind of race on a bar chart between levels of cynicism and optimism runs on throughout the book. On the whole, Haq feels the dollar will have the last say: “...soon ice-free summers will draw/Billions in investment – O how I love these statistics” (48), a conviction of humankind’s irreversible moral decay probably more capitalist than Calvinist but no less irremediable for that. Solutions are not really offered in this small collection – not the poet’s job,

Haq would argue with good cause – and if any politics is on display at all, it is more than anything an anti-politics, a constant, pressing observation on the finitude of human vision, but with no real alternatives (Islamist, leftist, environmentalist) to offer a corrective. As I write the last sentences, my hands pause on the keyboard, as there is – in the closing pages of *The New Frontier* – a superlative translation of Kazi Nazrul Islam’s “Bidrohi”/ “The Rebel”. The energy and force and sheer willpower of Nazrul Islam’s pen blows away the cobwebs of pessimism, it might be argued, that hang around the book, and retrospectively reconfigure the earlier moments of cynicism as stages, leading the reader down one path before spectacularly providing another.

One subject cynicism does not intrude upon too much in Haq’s poetics, however, is the memory of loss: there are a couple of moving moments in *The New Frontier* where the poet approaches the memory of his first wife (sadly taken by cancer). In “Ode on the Sari,” he writes: “now I can’t think of you/without thinking of a sari/ I can’t think of a sari/ without thinking of you” (23). For English readers, it’s Thomas Hardy one thinks most immediately of, and what Haq has in common with Hardy is the masterly control of feeling and pathos – communicating melancholy and loss, but without lapsing into the stickiness of sentimentality. It is perhaps a fitting presence in a collection of poems dedicated to the gradual, G8-organised demise of our planet – personal loss and a looming public catastrophe are not as disparate as themes as we might imagine.

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