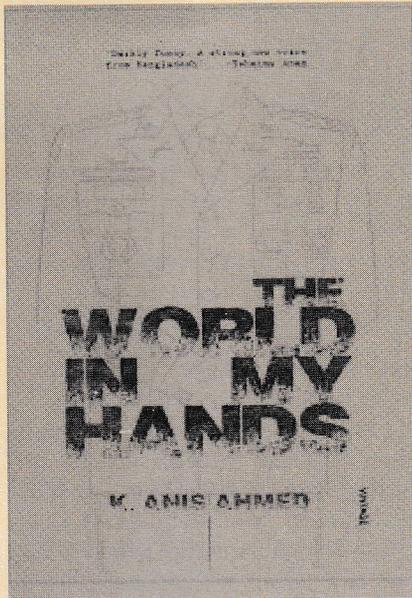


## Pandua Indeed!

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K. Anis Ahmed,  
*The World in My Hands*  
Random House India, 2013  
Rs. 299, pp. 376.

K. Anis Ahmed's *The World in My Hands* is indeed a powerful novel containing satire, humor laced with bitterness, and characters that are no strangers to readers living in Bangladesh. In the world outside, Ahmed's maiden novel projects a chunk of life from urban Bangladesh where people, like many other places in the world, have ambition, are in love, aspire to reach the top, and can even conspire to earn the favor of a military junta trying to get rid of politicians posthaste.

To those who know Bangladesh only as an impoverished and benighted country of millions, the novel introduces a land where people can think and act in order to succeed in life, and at the same time, connive and conspire. Like the author, urbane and suave, his first novel realistically depicts urban Bangladesh of the early twenty-first century when the military has ingeniously set up a hand-picked civilian government intending to exile the country's two political matriarchs who have ruled the country, in turns, over the past seventeen years. In the process, the military has picked up business tycoons, arrested politicians, en masse; and blindfolded and physically tortured university professors. These repressive measures were hitherto not experienced in independent Bangladesh although the military had staged a coup-d'état only three years after the country's birth in which the nation's founding father, along with his family members, was brutally murdered.

Ahmed's novel is set in Pandua, readily recognized as Bangladesh by anyone aware of the topography of this South Asian country. Pandua is not a fictional land, such as R. K. Narayan's Malgudi or Gabriel Garcia Marquez's Macando; and the characters in the novel are the realistic men and women, whose hard work, success, and desires have evolved the society since the country earned its independence following a bloody war of liberation in 1971. Ahmed's description of the country is absolutely true when he says the land has been constantly shifting because of the mighty rivers that go on swallowing human habitat at regular intervals. This cruel reality of the rivers' fury is a metaphor for the periodic changes occurring in the country's political scenario. Democracy is practiced, and when politicians alienate themselves from the people, experiments of cleansing the society overnight are carried out by soldiers constitutionally authorized to protect the country's sovereignty from external aggression. The military experiment also ends in failure when people start resisting, which they have done ever since the partition of India in 1947, ultimately leading to the country's freedom.

It may become quite difficult for a novelist to depict a very recent happening in their own country because, unlike a historian or a journalist, the novelist cannot solely depend on factual events. For the creative writer, imagination and speculation are of supreme importance, and a novelist has to take liberties that the professional historian would rather shun. Although Ahmed's characters, Hissam, Kaiser, Natasha, Duniya, and even the Intelligence boss Brigadier Bakhtiar, are familiar people, the author makes them come alive imaginatively in a story of love, ambition, torture, endurance, and death. Kaiser's aspiration to reject a typical lower middle-class state of mind represented by his father, a clerk who recites Keats and is good at English, propels him to leave behind his small town and enroll at the University of Pandua. After earning a first class Honors degree, he drops out of university and starts a business for he intends to go up in a big way. He works hard and remains honest as much as he can in a society where old colonial laws and a snail-paced bureaucracy continually construct deterrents.

The novel's strength of portraying contemporary familiar characters in the context of potentially volatile political events transport the reader to a known world where they can readily identify with the characters as much as with the flow of events during the two-year military rule with a civilian face. Ahmed's satire can at times transform into rage, for example, when early in the novel Hissam Habeeb, Deputy Editor of *The Daily Pandua*, who is much too eager to become editor of the newspaper and keeps close contact with the military intelligence, mulls over the self-importance of men in uniform who, he thinks, leap-frog at least by two ranks: majors behave like colonels, colonels think they are generals who pretend to be gods during an emergency when clauses guaranteeing individual liberties in the constitution are rescinded. Ahmed's novel is not simply an exposé of the military's unsuccessful attempt to turn around the course of history between 2007 and 2010 in Bangladesh; it is also a powerful satire that removes the masks of those who constitute the civil society. Their selfishness, hyper-ambition, and sly maneuvers are treated with a sense of uncaring loathing by the author. Brigadier Bakhtiar wants Hissam Habeeb to bring together members of the civil forum in a new political party that would replace the PPP which had ruled in the immediate past, and the Soc Dems who were their predecessors in state power. There is a problem, however, as some of the old guards will not accept Sabine, who has done most of the spadework to head the new conglomerate. Ahmed's understanding of his society is spot-on as he has the Brigadier make it known that Sabine will not agree to be anyone's deputy, which the military man interprets as a manifestation of the typical Panduan ego.

Apart from the blending of reportage and imagination, Ahmed's ability to develop powerful characters such as Kaiser, his wife Natasha, and Brigadier Bakhtiar bear ample proof of his skilled craftsmanship. Natasha's early love for Hissam, her later decision of marrying the richer Kaiser, and

Hissam's lifelong affectionate involvement with Kaiser's family lends a tender touch to the narrative, evoking a softer feeling in contrast to the harsher realities of life that Ahmed narrates in a language uniquely his own. Ahmed's gripping narrative moves forward in twists and turns but always remains firm and in complete control of the author.

The novel, however, is not only about serious matters relating to purges and torture or the demolition of Kaiser's 30-storied commercial building: a symbol of his hard work and commitment. Ahmed provides relief to the readers when they follow the interesting and humorous philandering of Hissam with Duniya. The love-starved Hissam makes love to Duniya and wants to continue with the affair as long as he can although she knows what suits her best. Duniya, meaning the world, cannot be possessed by any individual like the world that cannot rest in one's own hands. The world belongs to all, and for any individual or intuitions to regard it as their own is a mistake.

After Kaiser is released from captivity that involved beastly physical torture which the man in no way deserved, his world soon comes to an end as he kills himself with an overdose of anti-depressants and sleeping pills. A shocked Hissam is overwhelmed by this twin loss of Duniya and Kaiser. He realizes a suicide could never be an act of taking revenge against the self, but is also a slap on the face of others. The military's world also shrinks as they decide to give up by changing their strategy of grabbing the world as they pleased.

K. Anis Ahmed emerges, in my opinion, as the most powerful novelist writing in English in Bangladesh because of his deft knack of creating fiction out of a nation's two-year history of a military government's aborted attempt to sanitize the society. Ahmed's mature understanding of this world around him, narrated in a robust language, keeps the reader consistently glued to the 375-page novel.

After reading *The World in My Hands*, I wondered why the author changes the name of Bangladesh to Pandua and Dhaka to Palitpur. For any Bangladeshi reader the description of the city in its present and past would be much too obvious. The novel is not a frontal attack on the military; it only tells the tale of an entire society gone corrupt that the military wanted to cleanse in its own typical manner. Therefore, even if the author had retained the name of Bangladesh and its capital, there would be no reason for any particular institution, be it political parties or the military, to take offence.