

## Tahmima Anam, *The Good Muslim* (Harper Collins, 2011)

Tahmima Anam's second novel *The Good Muslim* is regarded by many as a continuation of her accomplished prize-winning first novel, *The Golden Age*. Like the first novel, *The Good Muslim*, too, has the three protagonists: Maya, her brother Sohail, and their mother Rehana. The reader is reminded of the key characters in *The Golden Age*, but soon he realises that they are not the same people. This second novel is not a sequel to the first. It can be appreciated even without the earlier work.

After a successful and acclaimed first novel, expectations are high from the second. Readers as well as critics cannot help comparing the two and drawing parallels between them, more so when they are set in the same background. It is because of the first novel that the second gets its first batch of readers, but the novelist does not disappoint her readers. Instead, *The Good Muslim*, with its effortless narrative, is much more confident than her debut. It is safe to say that it establishes Tahmima Anam as a novelist, apart from the acclaim that her first novel received.

It is a story about faith and family shadowed by a war. The family that has taken active part in the war of independence has now to face the challenges of peace, within and outside. Maya returns home after almost a decade of absence and finds her beloved brother Sohail completely transformed. She still has the same revolutionary zeal, but Sohail has resorted to religiosity in its puritanical form. The ideological difference between him and his sister creates a deep seated schism in their minds. This difference is the central conflict in *The Good Muslim*. They have charted their own ways, opposite to each other's, of moving forward in the shadow of the tortuous history. Maya is a liberal-minded 'village doctor' who helps women victims of war. She performs abortions so that the women who had conceived as a result of rape do not have to carry the stigma. Thus she witnesses misery all the time, everywhere. Sohail's way of being a good Muslim is altogether different from his sister's. He has embraced an extreme version of Islam as defined by the Tablighi Jamaat, which shuns the joyful life filled with music, friends and liberal values. Sohail wants to send his son to a madrasa and, as a result, a conflict ensues between them and comes to a devastating climax.

The novel gives human face to a nation's tumultuous history. The theme, the legacy of war and how individual lives are affected, opens a window to human psychology and behaviour in different and contrasting hues. The war with Pakistan, then West Pakistan, that led to the formation of Bangladesh as a sovereign nation, was a traumatic experience that played havoc with the lives of many in the newly-formed country. During the last days of the war Sohail found, in an abandoned house, a woman whose story still haunts him and, perhaps, has a vital role in his transformation.

The novel, triggered off by the cataclysmic events during the struggle and the way these events transformed individual minds afterwards, is important in many ways. The novel has been written not by someone who was a witness to what happened. Anam herself says in an interview, 'I did lots of research for my first book which carried over to the second. I prefer to ask people who were there about their experiences.'<sup>1</sup> Secondly, it has been written four decades after the monumental year, 1971; that is, after considerable time has elapsed and

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<sup>1</sup> Terry Hong, 'An Interview with Tahmima Anam', *Bookslut*, July 2011 (online) ([http://www.bookslut.com/features/2011\\_07\\_017958.php](http://www.bookslut.com/features/2011_07_017958.php))

the pain and trauma has subsided to a great extent, though the nation is still haunted by religious fundamentalism. This lends a sense of detachment to the depiction of truth.

The homecoming of Sohail from fighting in 1972 has been paralleled with the return of Maya in 1984 from her 'crusade' against the misery that has befallen women. Their approaches towards life and duty run along lines that do not seem to converge. Maya cannot digest Sohail's 'conversion' to ritualistic Islam. Maya herself does not believe in religion and she resents that fact that Islam is 'knotted among all the other things' (119). She was not ready to submit her will and 'become one of those people who buckle under the force of a great event and allow it to change the metre of who they are' (126). She hits out at the religiosity that regards rituals and duties defined and dictated by it as more important than compassion and emotional attachment. On the contrary, Sohail needs refuge in the certitude of a faith in order to seek redemption for the savagery he has been a witness to as well as the savagery he, too, has perpetrated. Maya realises, at last, that his 'conversion' to religious fundamentalism has been effected by the guilt of war, and it is his means to survive the psychological after-effects. His faith enables him to cope with the turmoil in his psyche.

Anam has successfully handled a grim theme with consummate skill. The novel is full of strong emotional undercurrents and intense passions. At times, it is too real and looks like a memoir rather than work of fiction. However, it will find a pride of place in any discussion on how individuals' reactions to war and violence may differ in an attempt to find solace and reconcile with the self. It also offers a case study of one who has turned into a fundamentalist, or allegedly so, which is significant especially at a time when the world has been witnessing a rise in fundamentalism of various hues in many countries doomed to be war zones. A must read.

### **Mohammad Saleem**