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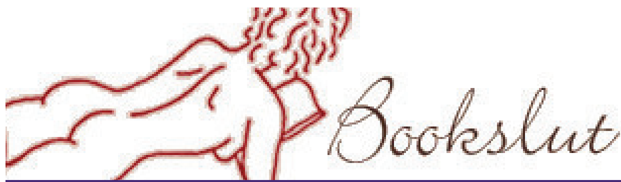

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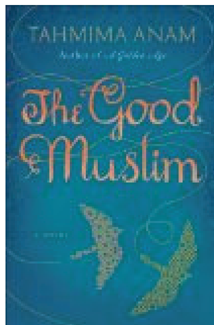
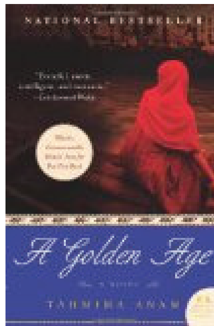
features

An Interview with Tahmima Anam





In spite of the fierce, wrenching content of her books, Tahmima Anam in real life is a gentle, warm, incredibly youthful presence. We met in livetime a few years ago in Washington, DC, as her debut novel, *A Golden Age*, was winning major international awards, including the 2008 Commonwealth Writers Prize for Best First Book. Recognizing the literary stardom to come, Anam was the earliest invitee to the Smithsonian Institution's 2008 South Asian Literary and Theater Arts Festival [SALTAF], an annual public program of the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Program (my then-day job that came with serendipitous literary perks for sure). By the time Anam landed in DC from London almost eleven months after that initial invite, she had earned some well-deserved, hefty accolades.

Tahmima Anam's impressive debut, *A Golden Age*, is the first of a trilogy set in Bangladesh, before, during, and after the War of Independence that ended in 1971 with the birth of Bangladesh as a new nation separate from Pakistan. Anam's first protagonist is Rehana Haque, who while still mourning the sudden loss of her too-young husband, loses custody of her young son and daughter to a scheming brother-in-law. Separated for a year with her children faraway in Lahore while she remains in Dhaka, Rehana -- in spite of what seems to be the impossible trap of young widowhood without a clear means of support -- manages to reunite with her children out of sheer will, determined she will never lose them again. In 1971 when the people of Bangladesh declare independence from Pakistan, Rehana is no longer certain how she can protect her children during a horrific time marked by betrayal and terror. But neither will she remain a silent bystander while civil war threatens to destroy her family, friends, and adopted country.

From Rehana, Anam shifts her focus to the Haque children in *The Good Muslim*, the second book of her Bengal Trilogy which debuts this month. For the first time since the war, Rehana, her son Sohail, and daughter Maya are under the same roof… and yet their physical reunion is overshadowed by emotional disconnection. Sohail's wife has just passed away when Maya returns home, leaving behind shocking violence in the small village where she was a doctor for several years. She is tired and spent, having witnessed the too-often subjugation of women just for being women. She can't comprehend Sohail's new religious fervor since his return from the war, his reinvention as a revered Muslim leader, nor his unbending rules and expectations in the name of a god that Maya can't accept as absolute. Sohail's devotion to his faith leaves him blind to his utterly neglected son -- a frail young boy, unwashed, clothed in tatters, thieving, lying, and yet the only request he voices regularly is to be able to go to school. Bypassing her brother's objections, Maya tries to at least provide her nephew with a basic literacy, but her attempts at enlightenment have tragic consequences.

Born in Dhaka, Bangladesh in 1975, currently domiciled in London, Anam's writerly strength is driven by a sharply observant imagination that allows her to recreate a time before she was born, before she had access to her memory. Surely her international upbringing in Paris, New York City, and Bangkok -- thanks to her father's peripatetic UN career -- instilled in her a broad understanding of humanity in diverse situations. Her privileged education -- undergrad at Mount Holyoke, PhD in social anthropology at Harvard (yes, that's Dr. Anam!) -- made sure that xenophobia was never even a glimmering possibility in her questioning mind.

Catching up this time via phone lines strung under the Pond from DC to London, Anam was as soft-spoken as ever. That she spoke about war, corruption, imprisonment, and even rape, rarely changed her firm but even tone. She was also sure to balance the tragedy with joyful moments of family, love, and even someday-children. As expected, her ability to explicate and engage made an hour-plus pass all too quickly...

This year, Bangladesh is celebrating its 40th birthday. You were born four years later, and have now lived through much of your country's tumultuous history, the vast changes, improvements, and challenges. What are some of your immediate thoughts about your birth country during this celebratory time?

I feel it's a mixed bag. The good news is the incredible progress that has been made in major areas: we've been a functioning democracy for the last 20 years after a tumultuous period of martial law and army rule. The world of micro-credit founded by Muhammad Yunus and his Grameen Bank has changed so many people's lives, especially among the very poor. The fact that 95% of the borrowers are women means many improvements for women especially. Through microcredit and state investment in girls' education, women are becoming economically powerful. They're sending their daughters to school, they're managing their homes, and taking jobs. Bangladesh has a strong feminist movement; women are advocating for legal changes to the constitution for more equitable rights.
In addition to the progress, I'm aware of a lot of problems, especially the threat of climate change. In spite of being a democracy, our government has a top-down political power structure. The people suffer because of corruption.

We need more democracy, less corruption.

How important do you think Muhammad Yunus, his Grameen Bank, his 2006 Nobel Prize were in raising Bangladesh's international prominence?

Winning the Nobel Prize brought him international fame. And the success of Grameen Bank has been Bangladesh's big media story -- the fact that such a groundbreaking system could come out of such an impoverished context. Muhammad Yunus is a real hero of mine; he's a hero for so many Bangladeshis. He's done a great service for the whole country, especially the nine million borrowers!

Yunus's ouster in March of this year was a shock to both Yunus and, I would say, to much of the world. The

decision came from the Bangladesh government, and seems to be quite a misstep. What are your thoughts on Yunus and Grameen's future?

I don't know what will happen to Grameen as an organization. The way that Yunus was treated by the government was shameful; this is a really dark chapter in our history. I think a political vendetta was launched against him. He is definitely suffering because he was ousted, but the whole country is suffering more because of our loss of him. Bangladesh had been enjoying relatively favorable media up to now because this current regime keeps the religious right marginalized, but the way they have treated Yunus has definitely taken the shine off. They made a big mistake. All I can say is, I'm ashamed of my government.

Just as Yunus has become an international symbol of Bangladesh, your literary stardom has also made you a prominent voice of Bangladesh. Do you feel pressure about being a country representative? Are you comfortable with this role?

I think it's important as a writer -- especially if you're from a country like Bangladesh -- to be able to speak knowledgeably about your country. I'm perfectly fine with talking about Bangladesh. Even though I don't live in Bangladesh right now, a major part of my focus remains with my country, its future, its people.

In my writing, though, I want to make sure to portray intimate human moments that aren't political, that are just about individuals. I keep the two sides of my work separate -- the intimacy of my writing versus talking about politics, religion, and other big ideas that relate to Bangladesh. While I try to leave the particular political engagements out of my novels, if my character happens to be political, I embrace that. At the same time, I don't want my characters to be merely mouthpieces, or vehicles for me to make a political point -- I want them to be real, to be three-dimensional, to have their own lives and families and interests that don't intersect at all with mine.

You are truly a global citizen, having been raised in both the east and west, educated in the US, and now living in London for seven years. Your parents, and much of your extended family, are based in Bangladesh. Is Bangladesh still "home"? What might make you return there to live?

My parents, my sister, my grandmother -- everyone still lives there. I'm the only one living out! I do think of Bangladesh as home, even though I love being in London, and I loved the years I lived in Cambridge [MA]. Yet my major preoccupation is always with Bangladesh. It's like a long-distance relationship: I don't experience Bangladesh on a daily basis, which lets me have a more romantic view of my country. It's a hope of mine to live there someday. Although I recently married an American -- so living in London is a half way compromise for us for now. I want to live in all three countries someday, somehow.

So the very last thing the reader reads in the acknowledgements of *Good Muslim* is your love-filled dedication: "As I finished writing this book, I became engaged to the most wonderful man…" Now we can all celebrate with you virtually!

Yes, we were married last September. He's from New Hampshire. We met at Harvard. He's an inventor -- he built a new kind of electronic piano.

And your children when you have them… with your tri-country longing, where will you raise them?

They will be biracial, our children, so I want them to have a sense of the larger world. I image we will be traveling a lot with them, with at least a few months in Bangladesh every year. What I worry about is how they will learn the language. If they don't live there, language is going to be a tricky one.

How do you prepare for your stories? You weren't alive when the events of *A Golden Age* take place. You

were a toddler and a tween when the events of *The Good Muslim* happen… and you've lived most of your life outside Bangladesh. And yet, your stories are so real… obviously your imagination is the spark, but how do you yourself recreate the scenery, the dialogue, the atmosphere of a place and time you didn't experience yourself?

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; I don't like to use books, unless they're memoirs or testimonials. I ask people the little details, about what they wore, what brand of cigarettes they smoked, what music they listened to, maybe the car they drove. And then I try and forget the research, so the reader doesn't ever feel like I've just given a history lesson. I want the research to be in there, to be accurate, but not felt in a palpable way. I think the only time you notice research is when the illusion of the past gets broken, and I'm trying to avoid that. I want readers to feel that the characters are living in a time and place that is not ours, but they can still relate to them. With all the personal interviews I've done, I've gained quite the reputation for being rather inquisitive.

For *Good Muslim*, I had particular things I was looking for… and one person would tell me about another person to talk to, who would tell me about another, and so on. I do a lot of atmospheric research -- I spend three or four months every year in Bangladesh, hanging out with people, eating lunch with them, reminiscing about the past. That's all easy to do, people love to talk about past, about their youths. I just listen and take notes; notes are important otherwise I might forget the details. I always ask permission first. I don't use a tape recorder because that can make the conversation too formal. People know I'm a writer, so they don't seem to mind if I whip out my notebook occasionally.

Here's a funny story. One of the things I had to research was religion -- I'm not a religious person. I went to one of my aunts who wears a burqa. I noticed the front had several pockets so I asked about them. And she said that those pockets were there so she didn't need to carry a bag -- she had one pocket for a cell phone, one for an herbal stick for her teeth, another for loose change. Then she said to me, "You're going to write this down, aren't you?" And, of course, I had to. My relatives know about my reputation and tell each other to be careful what they tell me, because it might end up in a book someday!

In addition to moments of quiet joy, both books are filled with horrific, tragic events… how did you live with that during the writing process? How did you keep the sadness from coloring your non-writing life?

I don't know… It's important for me to go to those dark places when I'm writing. I can be very emotional, but I limited those moments in the book itself. I could definitely have described Joy's imprisonment, or the rape camp in much greater detail. But I think the more lasting emotional impact comes with imagining the horror for yourself, when not everything is spelled out for you.

Knowing what people lived through, to engage emotionally with those experiences does require going to a dark place -- I would find myself in a weird space for several weeks at a time. For me, it helps to have a routine, and when the writing is over for the day, to have something else to do. I have what you call a "normal" life, and that helps. I live with someone, we talk about his day, I talk about my day… we climb out of our work-brains together to meet each other at end of each day.

How much of these novels contain your own family's stories? I noticed in the acknowledgements at book's end that you thank your grandmother, Musleha Islam, who shares the same last name as one of your characters.

Some of the episodes in both of my novels are from my family history. But the novel's characters are very different from any individuals in my family. They obviously have shared historical moments. My grandmother, for example, was the inspiration for Rehana, but Rehana and my grandmother are very very different. Everyone in the family gets to read my novel before it comes out. No one has ever said, "oh don't put that in, that's me." My characters are different enough

that my relatives realize the novels are not a family chronicle in any way.

The family unit, however, is at the center of what I'm trying to do -- the family is a microcosm of the world. In all my novels -- the two that are out and what I imagine will be future titles -- it's hard for me not to write about family, those that I'm closest to. But I'm careful to create those lines and boundaries between what happened in real life and what happens in my books.

When I read your titles, I feel the women are always the true heroes. Have women always been the heroes in your own life?

No, I wouldn't say that. But I am definitely interested in women as heroes, in the unexpected ways that women are heroic. Rehana is an unintentional hero. The war is going on, but she's just in it to protect her children. That's just what women do, all over the world: they do what it takes to protect their children. That's the kind of heroism I'm interested in.

My mother is a feminist leader in Bangladesh. So I've grown up with all those ideas about strong, able women. I find that women make more interesting heroines -- their lives are always complicated by different kinds of stakes. Their choices are not always clear-cut.

In *Good Muslim*, Sohail is ideologically driven; he has an idea of himself as a revolutionary, and then adopts an idea of himself as charismatic leader. He's so mired in his own ideas that he can't see his own son suffering. His mother's and his sister's lives are more complicated. And they can see that much more because of that. I like writing women characters who are strong, ambivalent, ambiguous, challenging.

As we are all aware, women face gender inequity throughout the world, although more so in so-called "traditional" societies. Education -- especially for girls, but also for boys as they must help break the cycle of inequality -- is obviously the answer to lasting change. Maya's desperate attempts to educate her nephew Zaid are heartbreaking. What are some of your thoughts on how to make education accessible where it's needed most?

In Bangladesh, we have a tradition of non-formal primary schools in villages. The idea was originally established by BRAC [an international development organization originally founded in Bangladesh and dedicated to alleviating poverty] to create small schools outside of the state system that could be adjusted to local schedules, so kids could help their parents and still go to school. Each family has a stake in the school, with no required uniforms or expensive books. That idea showed that education can be adapted to the particular needs of the very poor, and that model has really worked throughout the country. That program has also been responsible for bringing girls into the education system. In the last 20 years, the government has invested heavily in girls' education. The rising indicators of change are proof: infant mortality rate is lower, maternal mortality is down, early marriage is down -- these are all indicators directly related to girls going to school. I feel Bangladesh is moving in the right direction.

In today's overlapping, border-changing, unpredictable world of instant information access do writers today have a moral obligation to educate and inform?

I believe reading is a moral act. Reading offers a small glimpse into the lives and experiences of another person, maybe a kind of person the reader may otherwise never meet, but through reading, the reader has an empathetic channel of understanding open up. It's not so much a moral responsibility for the writer, but that's just what writers do -- open up other worlds to their readers. I wouldn't put that sort of responsibility, though, on all writers; some writers are already deeply subversive, some are more comfortable with political objectives and motivation, and some aren't, and that's okay, too.

Do you think a writer today can be apolitical? Given the post-9/11 reductive mentality of "you're either with us, or against us," writing seems to require taking some sort of "side." The very act of putting words to the page can have polarizing effects, more so than ever before. Agree? Disagree? What are your thoughts on being a political writer?

Just like reading, I think writing is also inherently a moral act. I was at an event with Hisham Matar [*In the Country of Men*, *Anatomy of a Disappearance*], a Libyan writer, who said, "there's a reason why dictators hate writers. The power of writing is why the Bahraini police arrested the poet [Ayat al-Qurmozi, just released July 13, 2011] during a recent protest. Governments and dictators are afraid of writers for good reasons, because writers help us to look at the world in different ways, to shift our views on society, to change how we choose to participate in our world.

I'm not saying that it's impossible to be apolitical as a writer. But writers need to decide if they are going to come out as political writer or not. Many are uncomfortable with that sort of declaration. But just writing can be an act of protest in and of itself.

I remember when we spoke in Washington, DC a few years ago about *A Golden Age*, you mentioned that you might explore the father's story in your next book… and take the family journey back to Calcutta? Is his story still forthcoming?

I decided not to do that, mainly because the thought of writing about Partition [the 1947 end of British rule, marked by the separation of India, Pakistan, and what was then East Pakistan, which became Bangladesh in 1971] would mean I would have to go back into the archives. I like to talk to people for my research, not go through endless papers. I also realized that I really wanted to push [Rehana's] family story forward.

With *A Golden Age* and *The Good Muslim*, you've now finished two-thirds of your Bengal Trilogy. Could you share a peek at the final third?

The third book is set in the present. It's going to involve climate change -- which is the big thing around the corner for Bangladesh. The setting will be on a beach in southern Bangladesh. And Maya's daughter Zubaida will be the main character.

Have you thought about what you might write next after the trilogy?

I want to write a book on migration, although I'm not yet sure if it will be fiction or nonfiction. That will depend on where I am in my life after I finish this third book. I'm interested in people leaving their homes and seeking work in other parts of world. Labor migration is huge in Bangladesh, with so many Bangladeshis working outside the country and sending money home; many especially are working in the Middle East. I'm especially struck by all the women who go to other countries to raise other people's children, while their own children are raised back home by extended family.

The world is constantly changing and immigration and temporary migrations today are very different from what they were historically. In the past, immigrants created new homes and remained living outside their country of origin; today, temporary migrants provide cheap labor for a few years but often return home. That's a different sociological shift -- there are stories there I'd like to explore...

Terry Hong writes BookDragon, a book review blog for the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Program