

O nce, while jostling my way through a crowd, a bicycle stand fell on my leg, cutting my shin. Later the pain subsided, and the blood dried up. It's been three years, but now and then, the scab will itch. Usually I let the feeling alone, but there are times when I have to scratch.

Nations too have scabs like that—and their writers feel compelled to pick at them. Jews revisit the Holocaust. Russians return to the Great Patriotic War. And across the Indian subcontinent, we excavate stories from Partition. For Bangladesh, there's also the *Muktijuddho*, the 1971 War of Liberation. In poetry and memoir, stories and novels, nearly every writer from this country has journeyed back to that pivotal year. The War slammed us like an earthquake, and the aftershocks still reverberate. That year saw bloodletting and refugee marches on such a scale that the numbers dissolve into a blur. It is our writers who bring into focus how individual lives were shaken up by that crisis.

Even in the midst of war, some put pen to paper. The novelist Shawkat Osman wrote *Jahannam hoyte bidai* (Farewell from hell). Anwar Pasha left behind *Rifle, roti, aorat* (Rifles, bread, and women) before being led away to his death on the eve of victory.

The decade afterwards, when Bangladesh saw the hopes of wartime drowned in yet more blood—the Naxalites the first to go, then the core nationalist leadership, followed by freedom fighters within the military—there was an explosion of fiction centred on both the war and the society it shaped.

Many writers visited the War, again and again. The prose stylist Mahmudul Haque poured out the novels *Jibon amar bon* (Life is my sister), *Khelaghar* (Dollhouse), and *Oshoriri* (Out of body), looking at the period with the eyes of characters staying aloof from the struggle. In the mid-'80s, Akhtaruzzaman Ilyas published *Chile kothar shipahi* (The soldier in the attic) set during the 1968-69 upsurge that set the stage for the Liberation War. This novel moves from student marches to the Naxalite-inspired peasants in North Bengal, whirls around the debates between nationalists and Leftists, and circulates among the crowded flats of old Dhaka and the *bosteas* of rickshawwallahs and maids. No other novel has tried to capture the political and social complexities of those years.

Around the same time, a wave of memoir literature emerged. Jahanara Imam, who lost her son, published her wartime diary, *Ektattorer Dingulo* (Days of 71). She went on to inspire a movement protesting the rehabilitation of local war criminals. Its call to remember brought forth more memoir writing. Nearly every writer has composed short stories about 1971. The publishers still bring out anthologies, a recent one containing 64 stories. The variety of character, theme, and plot is staggering.

Even those who were children during the War have felt the urge. In 2004, Shaheen Akhtar published *Talaash* (The search). The novel centres on a young woman who is held as a sex slave by the Pakistani army. It follows her through the next 30 years as she refuses the fates chosen by many of her peers: suicide, prostitution, evanescence.

The wounds of war

A Golden Age: A Novel

By Tahmima Anam

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The literature includes testimonies of horror and tales glorifying bravery and self-sacrifice. There are also efforts to uncover stories outside the dominant narratives. Writers examine guilt, shame and collaboration. They probe the enemy psyche. They look for the specks of later disappointment within the wartime canvas itself.

The bulk of the writing is in Bangla.

Maya, now in their late teens and at university; her tenants the Senguptas; her neighbour Mrs. Choudhury and her daughter Silvi; and two other women from the gin-rummy circle she once frequented.

At the party Mrs Choudhury lobs a surprise. She has found a husband for her daughter: Sabeer, a Bengali lieutenant. Sohail, in love with Silvi from

Nations too have scabs—and their writers feel compelled to pick at them. For Bangladesh, there's the *Muktijuddho*, the 1971 War of Liberation. In poetry and memoir, stories and novels, nearly every writer from this country has journeyed back to that pivotal year. Tahmima Anam's *A Golden Age*, the first novel about 1971 in English, is loosely based on her grandmother's story during the war. It follows an often-mined theme of 1971-related fiction: the arc of a character moving from detachment to engagement.

Within that theme, Anam embraces a unique challenge: to imagine an Urdu-speaking mother's story during a time of ascendant Bengali nationalism

A few memoirs and fiction anthologies have appeared in English translation. Those who write in English have written short stories or considered 1971 within novels dominated by other themes. The reader who cannot read Bangla is cut off from the diversity and richness of *Muktijuddho* literature.

This year saw the publication of Tahmima Anam's *A Golden Age*, the first novel about 1971 in English. Born four years after Independence, Anam loosely based the book on her grandmother's story during the war. It follows an often-mined theme of 1971-related fiction: the arc of a character moving from detachment to engagement. Within that theme, Anam embraces a unique challenge: to imagine an Urdu-speaking mother's story during a time of ascendant Bengali nationalism.

A Golden Age opens with a moving prologue set in 1959. Rehana visits her dead husband's grave to inform him that she has lost custody of their children to his brother and sister-in-law in Lahore. While there are hints of political rumblings in the background, the prologue grounds the reader with the promise that this will be a novel about a single mother's fight for her children.

The main novel begins on 1 March 1971. Ten years earlier Rehana retrieved her children after renting out a house she had built. Every year she holds an anniversary party. The gathering brings together her everyday world: her son Sohail and daughter

childhood, is heartbroken. On the evening of March 25th, the engagement party is thrown into chaos when the Pakistani army launches Operation Searchlight spraying the city with bullets. Mrs. Choudhury hurriedly marries her daughter to Sabeer.

In the scenes that unfold, the Senguptas flee Dhaka, Sohail joins the liberation fighters, Maya is visited by personal tragedy, Silvi retreats into religion, and Rehana is drawn out of purely family concerns to support the war effort. Rehana sheds her naïveté, and tries to balance the pull of nationalism from her children and her fierce desire to protect them. And when she has to take care of a wounded freedom fighter, Rehana opens up to love.

Tahmima Anam chose to write a novel of character—a family drama—set within a novel of powerful event, the War. In interviews she has indicated that she wanted to both tell the story of Rehana and dramatise the Liberation War. It seems that in trying to do adequate justice to both goals, neither is fully realized. Rehana and the children come off as sketchy—sacrificed, I believe, to the pull of depicting too much event. Meanwhile the War is not drawn in the sort of detail that reflects the complexity or feeling of that time.

There was potential here, with her choice of protagonist, an Urdu-speaking mother raising children attracted to Bengali nationalism. This was a time when Bengalis cursed Urdu as the language of the oppressors and derided Urdu-speakers as '*mauras*'; yet aside

from a few fragments, the book does not explore the confusion and pain such a time would bring to a mother who not only speaks Urdu but also loves the language.

Meanwhile Sohail is a pacifist who becomes a guerrilla. I was curious to see how Sohail would reconcile his beliefs with the realities of the War. There is one compelling moment when he cries out, "How can it be the greatest and the very worst thing we have ever done?" It left me wanting more. Maya is depicted as a communist, shouting both Victory to Bengal and Victory to the Proletariat at the same time; but in reality those two positions were hotly contested before, during, and after the time. Near the end there's not much sign of her communist beliefs, with the reader getting little sense of how they disappeared. And yet this was a time when people in Bangladesh took their ideologies seriously.

There are chapters in the middle where Anam does not sacrifice character to event. When Rehana cares for the injured Major, the writer spends time with the two, and we see Rehana's deeply buried need for intimacy breaking through. In the next chapter, after Sohail begs her to save Silvi's husband, the narrative slowly takes Rehana through the harrowing details of that venture. I found these the strongest chapters of the book. Anam lingers on the scenes, develops conversations instead of rushing through them in staccato fashion, allowing Rehana to come alive in her words, motions, and thoughts.

I read the book twice. The first time I was irritated by the many factual errors. This is the burden of a reader who lived through the events of that time. When I read a Russian writer describing the Eastern Front during World War II, how would I know if he'd slipped up with a fact or two? But in *A Golden Age*, when there's a slip-up every few pages, the sloppiness is hard to ignore. Such errors would not matter if this were a novel playing around with time and geography. But this is a book written in strict realist mode. Many of the mistakes could be regarded as minor—after all this is fiction not history—but at least one suggests a lapse in imagining the fear in occupied Dhaka.

In the book, one April day, soon after the War breaks out, Rehana goes to search for her daughter. She finds Maya at the university in a line of girls, marching with wooden sticks, "pretending to load, aim, fire, reload."

In reality, that month the military was everywhere. The blood had barely dried on the campus grounds. To travel through Dhaka, one had to go past the watchful gaze of soldiers at checkpoints. I recall draining my mind into silence because I was afraid that the troops would sense my unspoken thoughts, see something treasonous in my body or face. Students did indeed march around with wooden sticks, but that was before the crackdown, at a time of rage, bravado, and what felt like limitless freedom. Not after, not during the long night.

A Golden Age is Tahmima Anam's debut novel. Trying to complete a first novel myself, I appreciate how formidable the task can be. In an interview published in the *Telegraph* in London, she said she had raced through the first draft, then spent three months reworking the book. I wish she had spent a bit more time. ■