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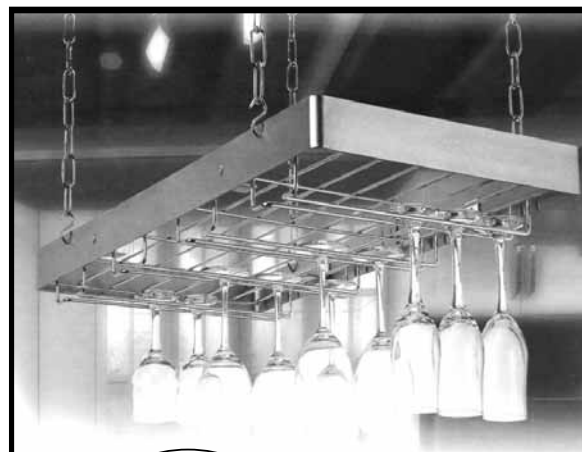


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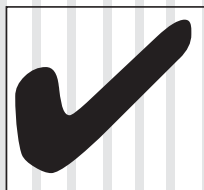
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A Devastating Debut...

by Cary Knapp



This review would probably have been more timely a few weeks ago because Mother love is at the heart of *A Golden Age* (Harper Collins, \$25.00), one of the first novels written in English about the 1971 civil war that eventually created the country of Bangladesh. This is a powerful debut by Tahmima Anam who was born in Bangladesh, grew up in New York City, received her doctorate in anthropology at Harvard, and now lives in London. Her book rose out of research she conducted in her native country, when she interviewed people who had been involved in the war, including student activists, guerilla fighters, mothers and politicians. Initially, she had thought of attempting an epic with sweeping battle scenes, but ended up writing an intimate story about a young widow, Rehana Haque, who is caught up in the chaos of the war and strives to protect her children. Anam incorporated some of her research, but the main character of Rehana is based on her own grandmother, who is now in her early 80s.

Between 1948 and 1971, Bangladesh was actually known as East Pakistan. The British attached the halves during the partition of India because they both had Muslim majorities. "What sense did it make, to have a country in two halves, poised on either side of India like a pair of horns?" The heroine wonders at one point. Unfortunately, the two sides didn't share a common geography, language, or culture.

Rehana actually embodies the divided nature of Pakistan--An Urdu-speaking woman from the wealthier west, she's made the Bengali east her home. In 1959--years before the rest of her country--she suffers an invasion from western Pakistan and Rehana becomes a widow. Because she is poor and refuses to remarry, her young children, Maya and Sohail, are taken from her, when her brother-in-law from Lahore has her declared an unfit mother in court. It takes Rehana more than a year to raise enough money to bribe the judge and bring her children home, but the forced separation will defined her life.

More than a decade later, her children are university students, and Rehana is still racked by guilt. It's during the war she finds an opportunity for redemption. On the night of a neighbor's engagement party in March 1971, Pakistan invades after Bangladesh declares independence. While Rehana and her children eat lamb and try to navigate the horrible awkwardness arising from the fact that her son has been in love with the engaged young woman since both were children, soldiers target the university and the Hindi sections of Dhaka, the capital. "Oblivious, they devoured the roast lamb, smacking their lips and sucking on the bones. Later they would remark upon the crudeness of their hunger."

Outraged by the invasion, both Sohail and Maya want to join the rebels. Rehana is torn between admiration for her children's bravery and terror for their safety. "There was a part of her that

wanted to allow her children anything--any whimsy, any zeal, any excess," while "another part of her wanted them to have nothing to do with it all, to keep them safe at home." But, just as a decade earlier, they leave her behind. Maya becomes a press writer for the nationalists in Calcutta, while Sohail, originally a pacifist, joins the Bengali guerrillas. This time Rehana learns how to let them go. As her friends hide in their homes and pretend the war doesn't exist, Rehana finds herself becoming an involuntary revolutionary. She starts by sewing blankets made from her silk saris. Then she lets Sohail's rebel friends set up a base in her rental property--vacant since her Hindu tenants fled the persecution by the Pakistani army--and bury guns under her rosebushes.

At first, Rehana is motivated less by nationalist fervor and more by a desire to make her son happy. As his requests become more and more dangerous, Rehana is oddly delighted: "It was the most distasteful, gruesome task," she thinks when Sohail begs for another favor. But it was also an opportunity. Her son was giving her another chance to atone. The years of slavish devotion, the mothering...she had always known they would not be enough. She could not help welcoming the prospect of some new sacrifice."

The novel's physical landscape looms almost as large as any character. Anam folds in scenes of meditative beauty that both educate the reader on the markets and gardens of Dhaka and the expanse of the Bangladeshi delta as well as punctuate the domestic and political drama. "Every year the land will turn to sea as it disappears under the spell of water, and then prevail again, as if by magic, and this refrain, this looping repetition, is the archive of its long, flood-turned history," she writes.

A Golden Age, the first of a planned trilogy covering the birth of Bangladesh, is a riveting tale and a lament for the atrocities the people suffered during Pakistan's invasion. But the novel is also full of beauty, with the author celebrating the poetry and food of her homeland. A longing for samosas and biryani is guaranteed to hit a reader by the third chapter. However, I'd recommend eating before continuing, because the horrors that left an estimated 3 million dead and turned 10 million more into refugees is sure to turn your stomach. **U**



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