

SHORT STORY

JULIE REZA

I am a thief.
Oh, I know -- you look into my innocent-looking eyes, (baby-brown and fringed by dark, curling lashes) and you doubt my word. You think I'm jesting. You smile to yourself as you imagine that I'm pulling your leg. But believe me, I'm not.

I AM a thief. It's TRUE!

But, no I'm not a thief in the sense of the word that you're thinking of. I've never broken into someone's home, I've never stolen someone's car, or taken someone's money without permission.

You're puzzled now, aren't you? So you begin to wonder about me, about my lifestyle. You look at my pristine, elegant outfit. You look at my exquisite jewellery, you know I have a wonderful job in banking, and so you assume I must be referring to some white-collar crime -- some sort of fraud or deception. But I'm afraid you'd be wrong there too.

Are you curious? Well then, let me tell you about my crime. I assure you that you won't be shocked. In fact you'll laugh at me, I know. You'll think I'm a little crazy. But let me tell you that today, it dawned on me that the guilty conscience that I've borne for so many years was totally justified.

The crime was committed over forty years ago. I was a cheeky six-year-old little girl that loved wearing pink and blue, with pretty lace and flowers. I was an only child, no siblings, and I believed that the entire world revolved around me. I was bright but bored, so had all sorts of hobbies to keep me busy. I liked making things -- everything from doll's dresses to my own play-jewellery. I drew and designed. I was going

to be a fashion designer when I grew up. I collected things -- stamps, coins, soft toys, dolls in national costume, ribbons and badges.

But my favourite collection was my bead collection. It was very precious to me. In little bottles and boxes, some wrapped in soft tissue, others in cotton wool, I had beads of every colour -- red, green, orange and blue. I had hundreds of some of my beads, but others were lone members of my little collection. There were beads of different shapes -- round, oval, conical. They were made of all sorts of material, plastic, metal, papier mache and glass. I had beads that were so tiny that you couldn't thread normal thread through them. Other beads were as big as marbles. Some of the beads were beautiful, but others were so ordinary that you -- the non-bead lover -- wouldn't have even noticed them. Yet they were all equally important, equally precious to me.

One fine, sunny day I was playing with my friend at her house. We were busy running indoors and out, jumping about and skipping with ropes. Dressed in bright colours we danced around the garden like humming birds or butterflies -- pausing every now and again to look at some pretty flower, or lean over to take in its beautiful fragrance. My friend was wearing a new necklace, yet it was the pretty white ribbons with flecks of silver which tied back her hair that made me look at her enviously. As she leant over reach out for some blackberries, her ribbon got tangled in a twig. She struggled to free herself but somehow, in doing so she snapped the string of her necklace. All of a sudden the beads trickled down onto the ground.

I helped her to collect them all together. And as I did so it suddenly occurred to me

how pretty the beads were. All the time that they had been part of a necklace I had barely noticed them, but now that I held the individual beads in my little fingers, I saw them in an entirely new light. Each bead, made of metal, was beautifully crafted. Each was aqua blue-green, and caught the light with a shimmering silvery-gold hue when held up to the sky. Spots of red enamel, like tiny flowers, added a little bit of texture to the bead's surface, and finally, zigged-zagged over each bead was a thin, raised line of gold enamel.

While I gazed lovingly at each and every bead that I found, my friend just bundled them together into her skirt and took them indoors. I followed her and saw that she carelessly dropped them into her drawer -- to be lost among scraps of paper and fabric, dried out pens, broken crayons, and damaged dolls arms and legs. She didn't give the beads a second glance.

But for the rest of that afternoon my own eyes didn't wander from the drawer. I'd been tantalised, and now temptation was taking control of me. I wanted to see those beads again, and was desperate for an opportunity to open that drawer. So, when my friend called me from the other room and asked me to bring some crayons out from her drawer, I was overjoyed. I opened the drawer and immediately searched for the beads that had become scattered among the tropy-turvy contents. I only found one -- but it was enough to satisfy my hungry eyes. I handled it tenderly between my finger and thumb. I felt the exactly the same way that a jeweller does when he handles a pure, clear, pear-shaped cut diamond. And then, on impulse, just as my friend called me again, I slipped the bead into my lace-trimmed pocket.

Like a true criminal, I justified my crime. The bead was unloved, uncared for. My

friend had hundreds of others, and would replace this bead easily, without a moment's hesitation. I knew, absolutely, that what I was doing was wrong, but in that moment my need to possess the bead was greater than my friend's. I felt I deserved the bead; I'd been given the opportunity to take it, and so surely it was meant to be mine?

And so that afternoon the bead entered my collection. I wrapped it in a piece of pink tissue paper that I had found a few days earlier. Every now and again I looked at it adoringly. It has to be said that these were furtive looks, tinged with immense guilt. For years I never showed the bead to anyone else, lest they realized it was stolen and I was punished in some way.

So you see, I told you I was a thief. You doubted me. Yet I see you now -- you laugh at me for feeling guilty over something so trivial done when so young. But, despite the crime being small, it was still a crime, and I'd committed it in full awareness that I was doing wrong. What I had done was every bit as bad as if I had stolen a cut diamond.

Years passed and, although my guilt didn't decrease when I consciously remembered what I had done, I no longer



worried about the dastardly deed or felt apprehensive about being caught. Who'd remember a tiny little bead, I reasoned?
My 21st birthday came, and my parent's bought me a beautiful gold charm bracelet as a gift. Little charms -- gold keys, cats, figures, jewels and beads dangled down from the chain. When one

charm fell off one day, it seemed natural for me (with my well-honed jewel-making skills) to replace the charm with my own little stolen piece of treasure. The yellow gold set off the aqua bead, and the bead increased the charm of the bracelet; together they became one of my most precious possessions.

Even more years passed by, and we came to the present day. This morning I went out shopping wearing my charm bracelet. Normally I wouldn't wear real gold to go to the shops -- but the bracelet went so well with my outfit and earrings, how could I not select it?

The weather was fine, and the market busy. I browsed from stall to stall, looking at the items laid out in display. I bought many items -- pointing at this and that with my bejewelled hand.

I turned a corner and was surprised to find myself in a quiet area. All of a sudden it was as if I didn't exist -- people seemed to be looking in every single direction other than mine...except for one person -- a thin young man in a white T-shirt and blue jeans. He looked straight into my eyes with his big, heavily lashed eyes -- not unlike my own brown eyes. But there was something different. There was a glint of silver in them...and there was also a glint of silver in his pocket. And then I realised it wasn't a glint of silver that I could see in his eyes, but a glint of menace; and the silver in his pocket was nothing other than the cold steel of a knife. He reached out and grabbed at my bracelet. I was so stunned I couldn't do or say anything. He gave the bracelet a hard tug and the bracelet's fastening came undone, tearing at my skin as it did so. And with that swift movement he ran away, vanishing from view by the time that I had regained my composure. I looked down at my hand, small droplets of blood dripping from the wound that he'd left. Although not a large wound, the skin had torn away leaving a nasty, jagged edge. And as I looked at the gash it struck me that I would be left with a permanent scar to remind me of what had just taken place.

People were turning to look at me now -- to gasp, and some, grasping the situation at a glance, shouting out 'stop, thief'. People that I didn't know gathered around me to offer help and sympathy, and to ask what had happened. I slowly looked up at them with my (not-so) innocent eyes, wanly smiled, and whispered... 'Divine Justice'.

And with that comment I breathed a sigh of relief for finally, after all these years of guilt, I had been punished for my crime.

Julie Reza is a doctor in the UK.

Book Review

The definitive 1971 novel

KHADEMUL ISLAM

A Golden Age by Tahmima Anam; London: John Murray; 2007; 276 pp (hbk).

It has been a mystery why the great novel of 1971 has never been written. 1971 (or as Bangladeshis simply say, "71", without there being any need to elaborate things further) has inspired innumerable non-fictional narratives and short stories; it admittedly has also provided material for novel-length fictional works, but for 36 years there has been nothing we could point to and unhesitatingly claim was the definitive novel of 1971, the fictional equivalent of say, either, Jahanara Imam's *Ektattur Deengulo* or Mayedul Islam's *Muldhara*.

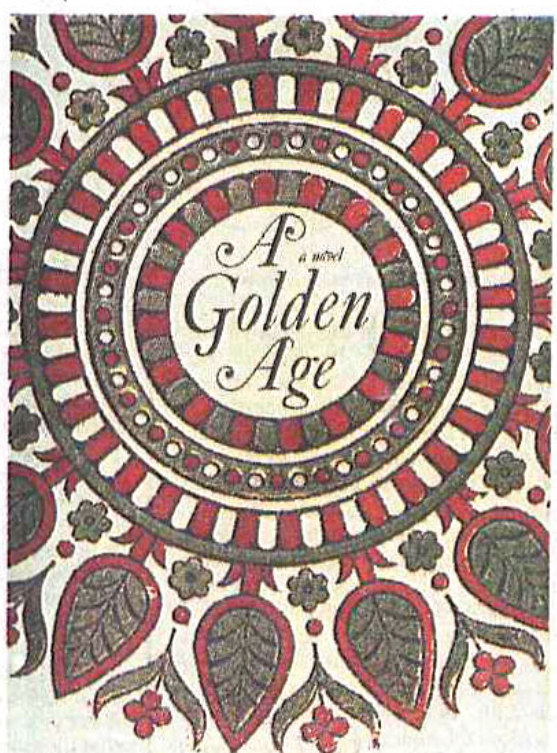
Until now, that is. For with the publication last month of Tahmima Anam's accomplished debut novel, *A Golden Age*, that gap has been filled. Until something else comes along the defining Bangladeshi novel of 1971 has been written. And in English, too.

There is a second point to be noted about the book. The very subject matter of her novel sets Tahmima Anam apart from other English-language writers of Bangladeshi origin such as Adib Khan or Monica Ali. While the latter's works tend to be about the Bangladeshi diaspora (to use that ungainly term) and its attendant immigrant life and/or sensibilities, Tahmima's novel, in contrast, by being set in Dhaka, and to some extent in Calcutta, peopled entirely with a local set of characters, by closely spanning the war-torn months of 1971, with each chapter corresponding to a month or several months of that year in the lives of its characters, lays claim to be fully a Bangladeshi novel, to be about life here. It is a book which tells the story of Bangladesh, its people and the terrible year of its birth from the inside. That, combined with the high quality of its writing, makes the novel a milestone in the field of English-language fiction by Bangladeshis. The novel has been favourably reviewed in British newspapers, which have hailed the author as a 'voice of real eloquence' and 'major new talent.'

A Golden Age, appropriately enough, begins with lines from Shamsur Rahman's *Shadhinota Tumi*, (translation by Kaiser Haq):
Freedom, you are
An arbours in the garden, the koel's song.
Glistening leaves on banyan trees,
My notebook of poetry, to scribble as I please.

The book begins with loss, begins with the fateful month of March in 1959. Rehana Haque, suddenly widowed and insolvent, "with nothing to recommend her, no family near by," is forced by a court to surrender custody of her two children to her brother-in-law Faiz and his wife in Lahore. The novel then jumps to March 1971, with the children Maya and Sohail now seventeen and nineteen years old and back again with their mother at Road No. 5 in Dhanmondi. Maya is the intense, serious type, who has joined the student wing of the Communist Party. Sohail is popular and handsome, disdains parties and politics, is imbued with a "love for all things Bengali: the swimming mud of the delta; the translucent, bony river fish; the shocking green palette of the paddy and the open, aching blue of the sky over flat land." It is however, Rehana, born into an aristocratic family in Kolkata that has witnessed a precipitous decline in its fortunes and who is subsequently married off to Abid, who holds center stage in the book. It is her story -- a woman and a mother, fittingly enough, since it is a nation's bloody birth that is being narrated -- that the book tells, as she, her children, her neighbours, the city they live in, the country they are inhabitants of, experience

and absorb the horrific shock of genocide and army occupation. It is an agonizing experience, and parallel to the story of the tortured road to national independence runs the equally painful tale of Rehana's own liberation from her previous small, constricted life. The novel admittedly starts slowly, but once these two histories start to weave together a couple of chapters into the book, it is hard to put it down. 1971 is here wholly in the book: the rhetoric, the politics and privations, fear, death, the Pakistani Army, Mukti Bahini, refugee camps in West Bengal, wartime Dhaka and Calcutta, and since life must go on even in the most extreme of conditions it is also about humid dampness, fleeting love, eating, falling sick, tending flowers, visiting neighbours.



TAHMIMA ANAM

A Golden Age is superb in its depiction of the land, its rivers and rains, in evoking its sounds and colours, which moodily, forgettably, unsurpassably anchors the novel's action in Bengal's timespace:

"The Padma spread out before them like the sea, its banks so far apart they were visible only as grey lines on the horizon, and in hints offered by the distant shore--a clutch of seagulls, the dotted wave of a fisherman."

Or: "The land was divided into rectangular plots of rice, framed by a raised mud bank the width of a footprint. Different stages of growth were segregated in the plots: there were the pale, tiny shoots the colour of limes, which would be pulled and replanted when they grew waist high; and then the established shoots, denser and slightly darker; and finally the milk-toned paddy, ready to be harvested. The plots were miniature islands, each in its own flooded pool; together they were a chequered palette of green and gold."

But surprisingly, and admirably, in a first novel, the effects are used sparingly. Love, for example, its half-suppressed tremors, is rendered simply, and effectively, in a very Bengali way: "How very close it is to illness. The loose, restless limbs. The feverish cheeks. The burning salt of the heart. The prickle of sweat."

The novel's gaze is detailed, unflinching, capable of establishing character in a single paragraph:

"...the building was a rainbow of decay: the outside walls were streaked with bright green moss where the rainwater had collected...the verandahs were covered in wet laundry, lungis and blouses and soggy pyjama bottoms...(she) saw a grey pair of men's underwear, next to which was an equally tired brassiere, and beside that a small child's nightie. She felt an old swell of longing for the unit, the family: man, woman, child. This was the formula for happiness, the proper order of things. All other equations suffered in its shadow."

Though the novel is about a Bengali Muslim woman and her household, the novel's vision is inclusive, generously acknowledging historical debts. Here Rehana is in Calcutta as part of the refugee exodus, buying groceries from a Calcutta shopkeeper:

"Where are you from--are you Joy Bangla?"
"Sorry?"
'Are you from Dhaka? Bangladesh? Joy Bangla?'
No, actually, she thought, I'm from Calcutta. But she said, 'Yes, I'm Joy Bangla.'

'Ten per cent discount,' he said, smiling. 'Ten per cent refugee discount.'...And then he looked at her with such fatherly tenderness. 'You come back here when you need anything. Anything at all.'

Suddenly the man was a blur. He waved his hand at her. 'Please, don't cry! You want a choc bar? Milon, get my daughter here a choc bar. Don't cry, Ma, don't cry.'

The book, of course, is not without its hiccup. For example, Rehana, living in her house on one bigha of land in the prime real estate of Dhanmondi, is described as 'poor' (sudden widowhood and financial insolvency), yet, in the context of Bangladesh that may be stretching the definition of poverty to impossible lengths. Again, she seems to have no household help -- no ancient family retainer, no maid, not even a boy servant -- a dubious proposition in Dhaka. But these things aside, if there is one overarching critique of the book, paradoxically enough, it may be that the very beauty of the writing can serve to at times distance the terrors of that year, to hold it at bay. There are descriptions of suffering, of great and terrible pain, in the novel, but it is never quite the thousand-pound gorilla sitting on one's neck taking huge bites of flesh that was 1971, the absolutely unreal pitch of fear that is so evident in the first person narrations, recollections, diaries and memoirs of that period. There are a couple of instances in the book -- in, say, Rehana's conversations with her brother-in-law, a wartime collaborator, or during her visit to a police thana -- when a tangible menace hovers in the hollow spaces between words, and the reader's neck hairs rise listening to the "orange saliva laugh" of a police official in a windowless room, but they are exceptions to the general rule.

The above points, however, are negligible in the face of Tahmima Anam's achievement. She has not only written the first true novel of 1971 but also decisively altered the landscape of Bangladeshi English-language writing. With *A Golden Age*, it has come of age. Tahmima Anam has raised the bar, and from now on the Bangladeshi English-language novel will be counted as an equal in the greater republic of South Asian letters. For this we should be proud of her.

Khademul Islam is literary editor, The Daily Star. *A Golden Age* will be available in Dhaka bookstores soon.

TRAVEL WRITING

Cricket in Trinidad

S. I. AHMED

We drag socks on dry ankles, strap on walking boots, tug laces into place, stand for another final time, pick the hats and other fan-phenilia, and slowly walk out into the Caribbean sun, 28C and 87% humidity. Does she swing or not, not the foxy lady but the red ICC ball, is the question for now.

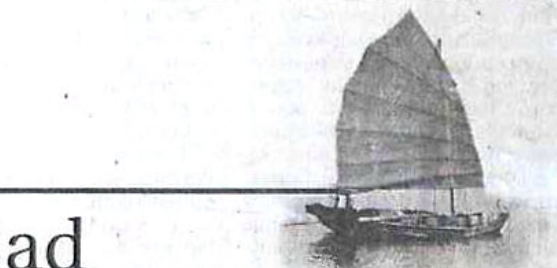
Legend has it, as legends go in this windswept part of the world, that in approximately 1498 Christopher Columbus landed on Trinidad, on his third attempt, the first two attempts having been subverted while dodging inaccurate but numerous arrows from the mighty Caribs and native Arawak tribes.

Columbus, Catholicism's commercial captain, was so swept by a wave of relief after his safe landing at Port of Spain that wild eyed and exhausted, he looked at the three hills ringing the town, muttered the Holy Trinity of 'Ghost, father...etc', thus branding another unspoilt part of the world with a Western label (Trinidad), leading it into a permanent state of economic imbalance and energy exploitation that continues to this day. There are many islands in the Caribbean, from the diminutive 5-square-mile Saba to the 19,000 square miles of the Dominican Republic, stretching over a part of the Atlantic Ocean; most are independent nations, most blighted by tourism and some boosted by oil. Between the 16th and early 19th century, waves of Dutch, Danes, Swedes, English, French, Irish and Spanish fought for this tropical retreat, wiping out the locals and fusing a hot peri-peri of cultures. Needless to say, after Napoleon's defeat, the English had the islands ceded to them under the Treaty of Paris, ending 300 years of Spanish rule. Post treaty, the new masters annihilated the Caribs (thought to be originally from Brazil and Venezuela) and the Arawaks, who today exist only as official archaeological remains and one tiny, remote community. Asians were imported as slaves, but with the official abolition of slavery in mid-19th century, Indians were brought as 'indentured labour' the English had got around their laws through change of sourcing and terminology.

It is just past morning and the steel refurbished stadium is sleeping, the world turns, and as the tide rolls in, downtown Port of Spain, foster home to the Tigers of Bangladesh for the past eleven days, begins to shake to an early calypso beat. 'Island time' moves on its own pace, and means 'I'll go when the spirit moves me', chased only by the trade winds that fuelled the early European schooners arriving in this Bay.

I stand alone, Shiraz in hand, gazing across the layers of aquamarine, feeling well-defined grains of sand beneath the toes, the sun beating down and imagine the thirty varieties of shark that swim ahead and beneath of me in the sea and remember that Hemingway called them 'moving appetites' in the penultimate passages of his *The Old Man and the Sea*. Are we going to be fighting a different kettle of fish today, as the tigers take on the sharks in blue? Isn't the tiger, the strongest cat, with piercing night sight, a strong swimmer, powerful climber, isn't it the striped leader of Bengal's forest? But how will it fare against the epitome of evolution's peak - the shark, restless assassin of the deep, capable of smelling human blood from 10 miles in salty waters. It would take a strong nerve to bet for the Tigers...but we do, which is why we are here.

It is toss time on the pitch and our motley crew is assembled in the Posse Terrain stands. Old friends, living in England and USA, making a pilgrimage that almost never happened -- but then the rented villa came through, the tickets were courtesy of a friend



of a friend, the office leave and flights fell into place and after 14 hours we landed at Port of Spain. On board it is amusing to note that the West Indian islands are separated by more than the waves they have less loyalty to the national team than to their own island's representatives. A Trinidadian (Trinni for short) would mutter about Chanderpaul's lack of form, while in Barbados they speak about Brian Lara's lack of captaincy, words that would have the Trinni put hemlock in your rum-and-Coke if you were foolish enough to say them at Port of Spain. A beautiful hill overlooks Savannah Park; on the cusp is Lara's mansion, gift of a grateful government to him for crossing the highest one day score single-handedly. I take the obligatory photographs outside it.

The best dish in Trinidad is the 'roti' - not the Indian version of 'roti', nor our 'rooti', but naan packed with chicken and rice curry, an East Indian legacy that spread northwards through the island and stopped at its shore, a delightful blend of Indian and Bangladeshi cuisine. It drips green here, layered upon itself, a sweaty humid green--noxious and numbing it drags us to back to the game. The ex-colonies live, the old colonies die in this game of leather and willow in front of 20,000 spectators.

The Oval is hallowed ground, and we meet strong Indian contingents on the way, posing for photographs with scantily clad samba dancers--'what rhythm mon'. We also find fellow Bangladeshi expatriates, ("New York?" "no, Canada," "Yes, we are from London" and so on), quick photographs, laughter and confidence boosting boasts. I mention our flag has not arrived and the Bangla legion lends us a spare one, here's the weapon, use it...Inside it is search and seek for the stands. Each ticket has ten free drinks from whiskey to Carib and lunch thrown in. We Bangladeshis have less bodies and less beauty compared to the Bollywood brigade, but surprise, we have the full support of the Trinni contingent! Again the islands' ethnic faultlines surface: there's 45% Indians and 45% Trininnies over here, and though nobody acknowledges divisions, the political voting is along ethnic lines with the Trinni party currently in power, and they fully support us for standing up to the Indian onslaught. They also like the cheek of the Tigers "younger brothers, mon". They dance and laugh with us, the rum flows a lot, the runs flow a little. Every boundary and change of overs gets the music going, and every Bangladeshi effort is praised. The wise and sagacious share very accurate opinions, "Look at your passion, you will win" "The little guy, what's his name...Khan?" "you say, "No Tamim" "Aaah great class, he will go far..." Wrinkled eyes, looking far beyond the game, speak of the 60's, the 70's, of dark warriors who played a more difficult game for much less.

Tigers are in control, this is the overwhelming impression through out the day, the sharks take a bite or two, but they are more endangered then threatening. There is never a ball dropped, or a return away from the tigers and except for one overthrow, the last-wicket stand in blue that takes 31 runs more to split, we are through.

The lights glint on the hills surrounding the port, we feed on Carib fish and visit the local bar, where the deafening music is within easy reach of Negro (yes, that's what he says his name is) our instant friend who says, "you win, we love you, but if you lose you walk alone".

Tonight we walk with many.

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