

# THE BONES OF GRACE

UNEVEN BEAUTY, HEART-WRENCHING  
SADNESS AND RARE POWER

*Tahmima Anam concludes her Bengal trilogy with a novel that, in recounting the story of a love across continents and ethnic lines, subtly addresses the deepest concerns of our age*

*The Bones of Grace*  
by Tahmima Anam  
Text Publishing/Canongate Books

Nothing about *The Bones of Grace*, the third in Tahmima Anam's loose trilogy of novels about her native Bangladesh, plays out in predictable or humdrum ways.

A novel of unusual, uneven beauty, heart-wrenching sadness and rare imaginative power, it is a timely reminder of why this Dhaka-born novelist and anthropologist is a judge of this year's Man Booker International Prize, and also why *Granta* included her on its 2013 list of the 20 best young writers.

Anam first won international acclaim with her 2009 debut novel, *The Golden Age*, the first in this trilogy, in which she set out to chronicle three generations of the Haque family from the Bangladesh war of independence to the present day. It won her a devoted global readership as well as the 2009 Commonwealth Writers Prize for Best First Book, and its sequel, *The Good Muslim*, was long-listed for the 2011 Man Asian Literary Prize. But *The Bones of Grace* can be enjoyed regardless of whether you've read the prequels in what is often referred to as the Bengal trilogy.

It opens in contemporary Cambridge, Massachusetts, with a five-word declaration by its narrator, Zubaida Haque: "I saw you today, Elijah." The "voice" of this 28-year-old graduate palaeontologist tumbles onto the page with an immediacy and honesty that ensnares the reader from the outset.

This mysterious narrative, addressed to her former lover Elijah Strong, takes the form of a kind of reckoning; an account in words of not just this man who bears such an improbable name and is the great love of her life, but "of the whole thing". She adds: "Also of Anwar, the man who led me to my mother, and of Grace, the ship that was ground to dust before our eyes. There is also a whale, a woman who gave up her child, a piano, and a man who searched so long and hard for his beloved that he found me."

One of the minor miracles of this novel is that its tone of immediacy and intimacy rarely falters as it winds its way between the subcontinent and the US, between the past and the present. In the blink of a paragraph or two, we are swept up inside the complex workings of Zubaida's twin desires: her desire to unravel the mystery of the walking whale, and her hope that this will lead her back to Elijah.

Even as she writes this narrative of reckoning she is inside a lab in Cambridge, clutching an ankle bone of *Ambulocetus natans*, the 49-million-year-old fossilised skeleton of the mammal she calls Diana, the so-called walking whale, a precursor to the modern whale. How she and these fossilised bones came to be here is revealed in tantalising snippets as the narrative hurtles backwards and forwards in time and place. Zubaida thinks of Diana's bones as "a spirit of comings and goings, a beacon that leads me across continents and through time".

The bones remain the touchstone of this narrative. Zubaida reveals that even before she met Elijah three years before, she'd already been awarded a coveted place on an archaeological dig



Tahmima Anam

in Pakistan to retrieve Diana's bones from the sediments of the ancient Tethys Sea. But her first words to Elijah are not about her imminent departure for the dig, but of how, at age nine, her parents, former revolutionaries in Bangladesh's war of independence, had revealed that she was adopted and never spoke of it again.

Elijah's parents are both Harvard professors and Zubaida is fascinated by the contrast between his all-American family and her own. They spend her few remaining days in Cambridge together in a whirl of shared confidences and experiences, and vow to engage in some sort of emotionally coded communication when she leaves by texting each other the lyrics of Nina Simone songs.

Yet it is only when she is in the red desert sands of Dera Bugti, in Pakistan, "searching for the bones that will rewrite everything we have known about our history", that Zubaida realises she is in love with Elijah. This revelation dawns on her together with some of the harsher realities of this part of Balochistan province, riven by war and age-old rivalries. She soon witnesses one of her colleagues, Zamzam, being brutalised and kidnapped, never to be seen again, while she and the others are forced to abandon the dig and leave the country without the coveted whale skeleton.

Her dream of creating palaeontological history in tatters, Zubaida returns to her parents in Dhaka where, despite longing for Elijah, she caves into pressure and marries her childhood sweetheart, Rashid. One day into the marriage, she realises the magnitude of her mistake.

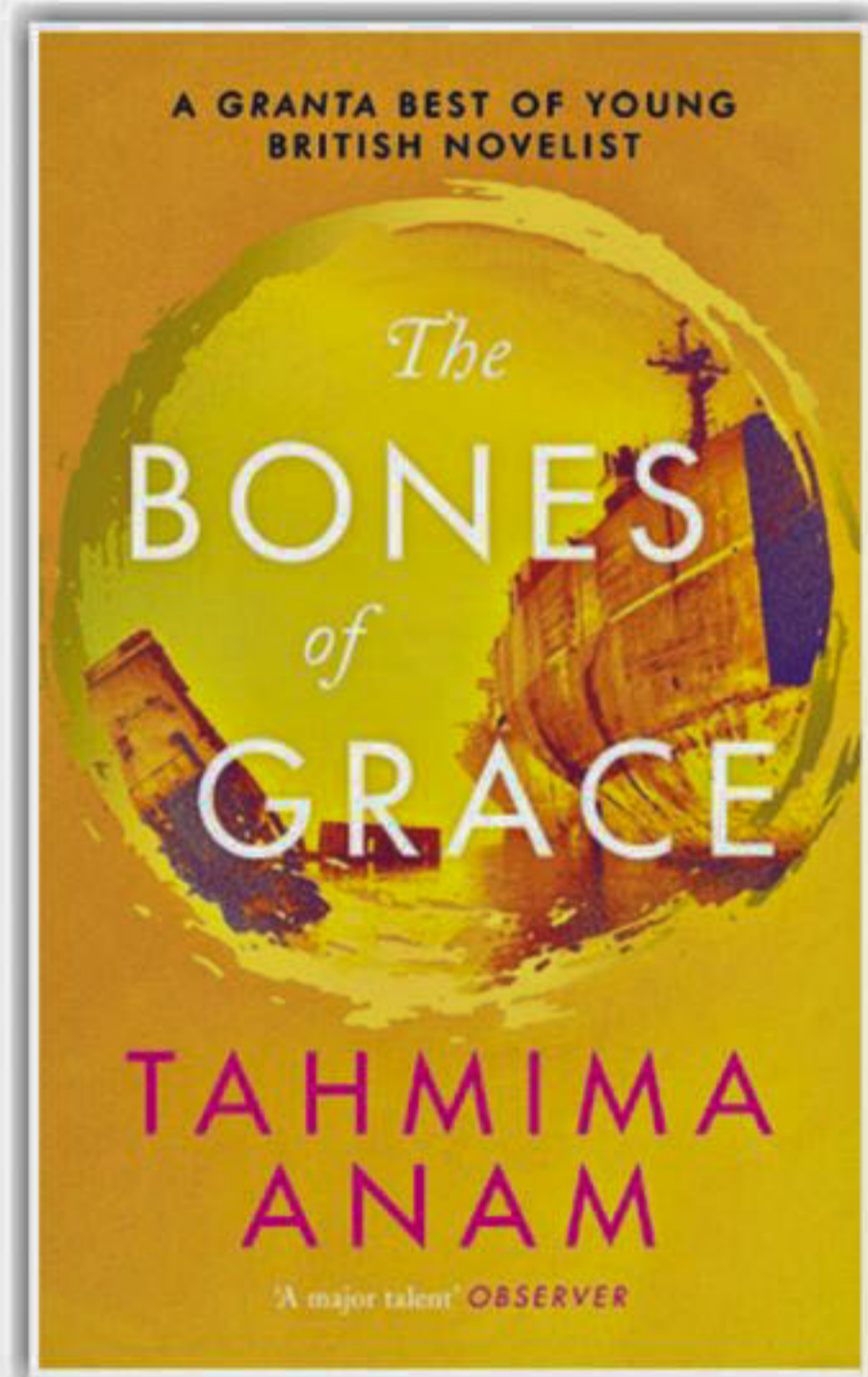
As Zubaida reveals here, in her "reckoning" to him, the sense of despair, failure and guilt that led her to betray Elijah, she takes us deeper into the story of her family, who are, 40 years later, still shadowed by the effects of the war of independence. She also outlines how in the shadow of her

own dwindling self confidence, "I became again, an obedient orphan".

Her narrative veers between a brutal honesty and a grating self-absorption, but that appears to be Anam's point. She deftly gives shape and form to Zubaida's misery and well-to-do life of privilege and opportunity within the context of those three generations of women, her family, whose individual struggles each personify an aspect of Bangladesh's evolution.

What seems like a modern, somewhat indulgent tale of love, longing and identity in an age of seemingly infinite possibilities becomes something else when, midway through the novel, Anam picks up the strands of a darker, more disturbing tale of migration, dislocation and human suffering. This sudden shift of narrative gear occurs when, soon after a miscarriage, Zubaida accepts a job offer from a friend of her mother's to help a British filmmaker, Gabriela, make a documentary about ship-breakers in the port of Chittagong. Tasked with interviewing the labourers who dismantle the ships, she takes up temporary residence with Gabriela in a nearby beach shack. Her obsession with her origins and confusions of the heart reach crisis point soon after she invites Elijah to visit her.

The disparate elements of the tale are brought together very cleverly by Anam and readers will get



deep into the novel before they realise just how broad, deep, and utterly contemporary and apposite its concerns are. From the way it addresses the plight of labourers entrapped in servitude in Dubai or in the hazardous work of ship-breaking in Bangladesh, to the pangs of individual and national identity, this is a novel that speaks so potently, so lyrically to our times and to the mystery of origins. It possesses a grace all its own.

*This review was first published in the South China Morning Post.*

## NEW IN NAGALAND

RAANA HAIDER

(PART I)

*'Come my friends,  
Tis not too late to seek a newer world.'*

*Alfred, Lord Tennyson 'Ulysses', 1929*

Once upon a time, there were head-hunters. Only presence we found in April 2016 were two skulls perched on bamboo shafts on display at the National Ethnographical Museum in Dimapur, the commercial capital of Nagaland. The exhibits highlight the dresses, crafts and lifestyle of the sixteen tribes that inhabit the state in the north-east of India – a rich cultural mosaic of the rich heritage of the Nagas. They are by race of Mongoloid stock and speak a Tibeto-Burman group of languages. A fifty minute flight from Kolkata, the Dimapur airport is located amidst the small plains of Nagaland; while most of the state's territory consists of the Naga Hills – part of the Eastern Himalaya. In a mark of serendipity, we were told that the BBC in May 2016 screened an interview with one of the last surviving head-hunters in Nagaland. It remains on my bucket list of things to view.

Prolific bamboo resources have provided the impetus to establish the Nagaland Bamboo Development Agency in Dimapur. Much of the economy is dependent on natural resources – agriculture, forests, water. Within the sprawling complex, lie artisans creating bamboo furniture for the domestic and international markets; a factory producing charcoal briquettes for barbecue, a museum featuring varieties of objects made from the bamboo plant (flutes, baskets, flooring, hats and even paintings), a bamboo boutique for shoppers and a bamboo roofed and pillared restaurant 'Bambusa.' Bamboo shoots were had in a chicken curry. Stir-fried beef was chosen without Naga chili (the dynamite variety) that has been described as 'Nagaland's fabulous chili which would give the Mexicans a run for their money' and filling fried rice. A measure of contemporary fusion is to be observed in the grass-root material-built pavilion that has on it plastered 'Wi-Fi Available'. An effort to see the Kachari medieval ruins was uneventful since it was closed on the day. Dimapur was the ancient capital of the thirteenth century Kachar kingdom. Apparently, rock monoliths, temples, embankments and baths are to be seen.

In a spirit of discovery, we ventured up a winding stepped path to AZ Phizo's birth place atop a hill. We were in Khonoma. AZ Phizo was the father of the Naga Nationalist Movement and is widely respected in the state. There amidst the alluring and pristine high hills, we knew we were in one of many of 'God's Own Land.' We discovered the music of silence. There was hardly anyone around the terraced living areas. All was clean and green – Nagaland's first eco-village. An Alpine-like Naga cottage complete with pots of radiant purple and pink geraniums provided picture-perfect postcard serenity. This was one of those 'live the moment' experiences. As we climbed higher and higher, the eye took in distant churches nestled amongst verdant hills. While at lower altitudes, summer has left its parched imprint. Smatterings of rhododendron trees grace the path as do marijuana. Although, we did not have a chance to see it, some fifteen kilometres to the south of Kohima, lies Japfu Peak, the second highest peak in Nagaland at 3048 metres above sea level. Here one can find the tallest rhododendron tree in the world. Over 109 feet tall and the base measures more than 11 feet. It has the honour of being mentioned in the Guinness Book of World Records.

The idyllic sylvan setting was punctured when we were told that within these hills, fierce battles raged between the British and the Naga people. A fort had been built by the British during the first Anglo-Khonoma battle. The last stand against the British intrusion occurred in 1879. Bamboo shafts and spears were no match for gunfire. Valleys of tears lay around us. A small memorial on our hilltop commemorates the battle. Mentioned are the names of three British officers and one Indian. It is maintained by the Archaeological Survey of India.

As we drove through twisting and turning curves into the Naga Hills, us car occupants were rocking and rolling through rough roads. Sign-boards spotted were: 'Visa Stationeries,' 'Bright Corner Paan Shop,' 'Capital Air-Gun Shop,' 'Hotel Ozzy' (Aussie!), 'Rice Hotel,' 'Nagaland Wrestling Association,' 'Cider Center,' 'Symphony of Rock Music,' 'Zonal Taxis' and 'Crossword Book Shop.' English is widely spoken and well spoken. Baptist missionary schools were established early on and both Christianity and Education flourished. We were en route to Kohima. Like the surrounding rolling hills, Naga names roll musically off one's tongue.

A drive up a hill has us halt before a well-maintained bungalow decked in a profusion of floral beds - pansies and roses creating an artist's canvas. We were in the grounds of the former British District Commissioner's Bungalow, on Officer's Hill in Kohima. Today, it has been restored into a four bedroom hotel 'The Heritage.' Maps, portraits, oil paintings of the surrounding landscape and wooden plaques listing the names of its occupants adorn walls. While book shelves line walls, sink-in sofas invite sitters around the fireplace. Had we known of this hidden jewel, we would have embedded ourselves here. Elsewhere, Kohima offers homestays with Nagaland families – homes in the hills.

Privileged to enjoy the warm hospitality of Naga friends; an open-air casual Naga dinner under a star-filled sky and cool temperature in Dimapur was characteristic of their well-known openness of home and heart. A second treat came our way in Kohima as we nibbled our way through Naga appetizers only to be accompanied by our guitar-playing host who serenaded us with Bob Dylan, Harry Belafonte and country-western numbers. Here we were comfortably seated in a bungalow in a corner of North-east India singing along - surely a serendipitous moment.

'Window to Nagaland' Kisama village provides a telescopic purview of the traditional housing of the sixteen tribes of Nagaland. From the Angami, Chankhesang, Garo, Rengma, Sumi to Zeliang; each one of the ethnic groups have their distinctive village home in open air display. All housing material is sourced from the land – bamboo, straw and wood. The high-point of the year is the festival of all Nagaland festivals, the Hornbill Festival held annually early December. In what has morphed into a major North-eastern and beyond musical and cultural event, the yellow and black beaked Hornbill bird flies the flag. This is a happening event with cutting-edge music combined with traditionally outfitted dancers celebrating Nagaland's rich heritage.

*(To be concluded in the next issue.)*

*Raana Haider is a writer and a travel enthusiast.*

## Long To Belong

SAMINA A SHAHRUKH

She walks the walk of her steps  
And stops in front of the old man  
Who sits calm and collected.  
What is it child? He asks.  
Do you need an ear or a shoulder?  
I have come to learn, She says.  
But I know nothing, he says.  
What can I teach you?  
Can you teach me the skills to wait?  
He replies,  
I have gone about my life;  
Listened to the wind, flowed with the sea  
And when I got what I wanted  
I knew that I had waited.  
With the years I have found that  
It is in the not waiting that one waits.  
It is in the not wanting that one wants.

How do I stop to float? She asks.  
You do not, my child, for it is our nature to float.  
It is for the rock, the tree, the river, the cloud  
To hold us tight and wrap us with sheerest  
magic

So that we become an essential part  
And we then feel that we belong.

Oh, how I wish I understood! She laments  
He smiles at her and says,  
It is in the not wishing that one actually wishes.  
It is in the not understanding that one truly  
understands.

