

The Bones of Grace or the Coming-of-Age of a Writer

The Bones of Grace by Tahmima Anam, Daily Star Books; ISBN: 978-984-92966-3-8, 2017

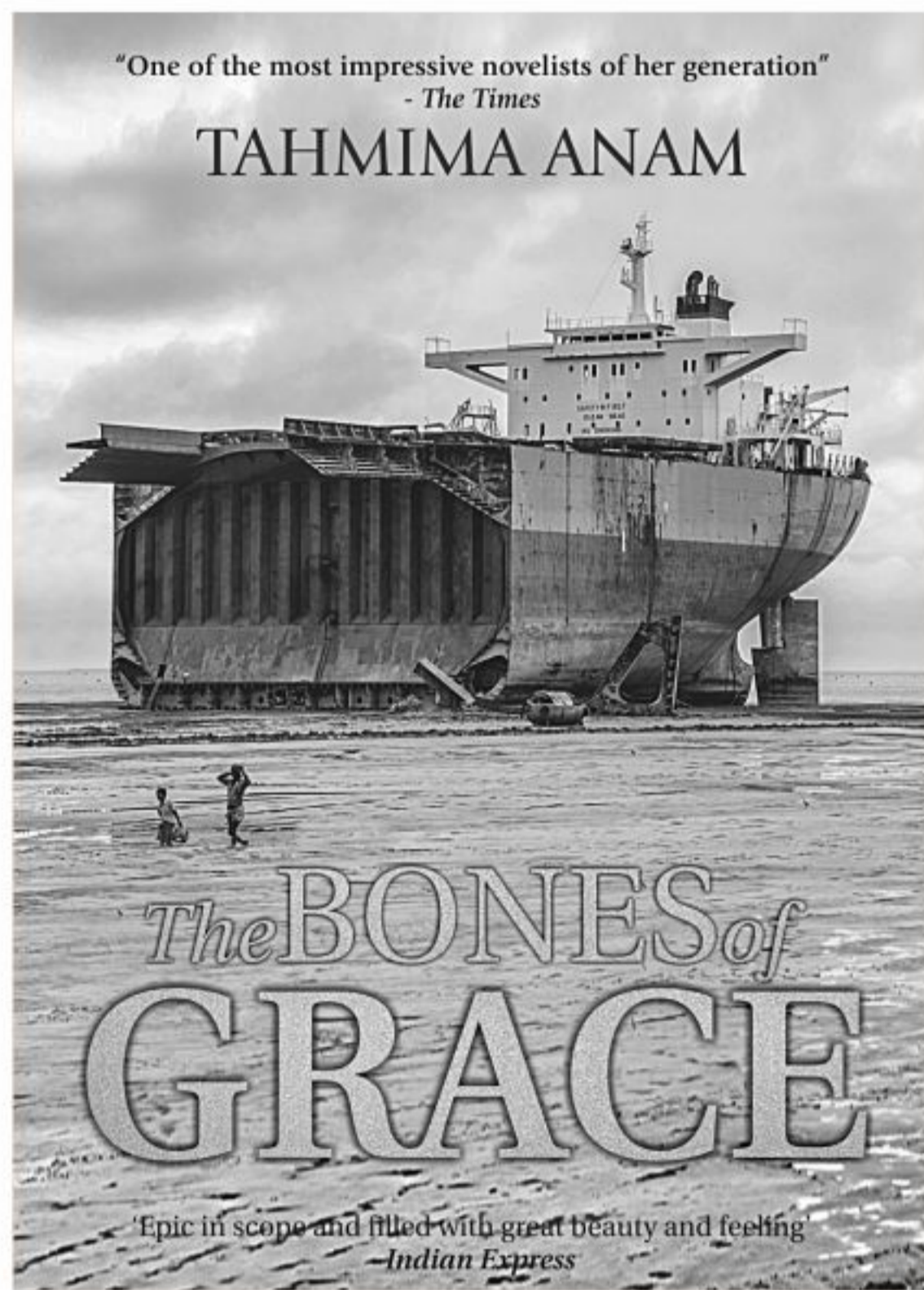
REVIEWED BY FIRDOUS AZIM

Tahmima Anam's *The Bones of Grace* is the last in the trilogy that began with *A Golden Age* and was followed up by *The Good Muslim*. Despite the recurrence of characters from the previous novels, *The Bones of Grace* marks a new beginning, as the narrative takes off from the stories of the 1971 Liberation War and its aftermath, to trace the lives of contemporary Bangladeshis. The novel weaves many strands of contemporary life, following its protagonist Zubaida Bashir, and through the ramifications of fate and chance, meshing in the story of Anwar, perhaps the male counter to the life/lives that are being recounted.

This multi-layered novel spans continents, as it traces through the journeys of these two characters the many countries and locales where Bangladeshis tread. Zubaida is a young girl from a privileged background, a graduate student at Harvard University, where she is pursuing a Ph.D. in evolutionary biology. The descriptions of Cambridge and its environs are detailed and evocative of student life in that great university, tracing friendships, chance meetings, academic jealousies and opportunities. It is in the course of her research that Zubaida has to travel to Pakistan in search of a whale, and the dig brings out the first bones of grace as this prehistoric creature is dug from under the soil. Our other ancillary protagonist travels to Dubai to work in construction, and the vagaries of migrant workers as the city's skyscrapers go up gives us the other aspect of transnational Bangladeshi life. The juxtaposition of the two stories of travel and migration shows the political and economic reality of Bangladesh, and how Bangladeshi lives have not and cannot be lived within the borders that had been fought for so passionately.

The juxtaposition of these two stories has a very happy effect. Zubaida's story – of the life, loves and adventures of a young woman from a privileged South Asian family – can easily be read and related to the stock-in-trade of South Asian English writing, and could be compared to many novels. What remains a criticism, and perhaps even a limitation of this genre of writing, is its class provenance. The question has been asked whether writing in English can overcome the class barriers that reading and writing in that language necessarily entails, and every major writer has tried to bring in stories of the poor, of hardship and suffering. Salman Rushdie, for example, sent Saleem Sinai to the slums of Delhi and Bombay, but the magic realism technique of the novel, relieved him of the onus of realist description. Anam takes on the challenge directly, and not only through Anwar, but through the many 'subaltern' characters in the novel – Pahari, Mo and the Shumon gang – disparate social classes are integrated into Zubaida's story. This is indeed a difficult task, as the narrative could easily sink into pathos, or become guilty of 'othering' the poor and the needy. I think this effort is praiseworthy, and the narrative does try to bring in all these facets not only through careful and detailed description, but also through the vagaries of the plot.

The Bones of Grace is primarily a woman's novel, related in the female first-person voice, interjected by Anwar's testimony. It is written as a long letter to a man. It can be read as a love letter, and as a love letter from a woman, it expresses desire, longing and a search for fulfillment. This is what struck me the most on my first reading of the novel: the boldness and the honesty with which this desire is expressed. This requires courage, and the novel is not only courageous but honest in its depiction of female desire. The letter is addressed to Elijah, whom the heroine is in love with, though they had met only briefly and accidentally before her departure from Cambridge for the



archaeological digs. The epistolary style gives the novel immediacy and intimacy, giving the reader a feeling that they are closely following Zubaida through the vagaries of her life. But as we know there is also a limitation to this: the reader gets only one point of view. This is exactly why the novel is so interesting, as we are listening to a young girl recount the story of love, marriage and sexuality.

There is a portrait of a marriage within the pages of the novel – of two marriages really. One is that of Zubaida's, who with her young husband, a childhood sweetheart, son of her parents' closest friends, tries to find happiness within the privileged gilded Gulshan crowd among whom they move. But Zubaida has travelled far and wide, has flown away really, and as she tries to reconcile her flight with the reality of her

marriage, can only bring hurt and suffering to all who come within her sphere. This results in immense guilt "weighing me down like stones around my ankles." Anwar's marriage, on the other hand, brings him back to his original love, and just as Zubaida spends her whole time writing to – talking to – her beloved, so does Anwar, through his sojourn in Dubai, and his inability to love his wife – spends his time searching for his original love. It is this search that draws the two together in ways that transcend class divides. It is difficult to discern which the 'real' transgression in the novel is, but I tend to think that Zubaida's struggle with marriage and love – with an unexplained and inexplicable desire – remains the most striking element in the novel. That women's desire is complex and the voicing of such desire is transgressive, has been witnessed time and again in literature. Whether it be the nineteenth-century women writers like Charlotte and Emily Brontë, or even a writer who is a social worker such as Maitreyee Devi, or the fate suffered by Taslima Nasreen, the expression of female sexual desire has been met with disapproval and even opprobrium. This "relentlessly, brutally truthful" recounting is thus all the more appreciated. And in its relentless honesty, it doesn't spell out a site of fulfillment, thus not falling into the hazardous trope of "white men saving brown women from brown men" as Gayatri Spivak would have it.

Tahmima Anam has been experimenting with both themes – of class and sexuality – recently. Her short story "Garments" has been both admired and reviled for the recounting of women's sexual lives and desires, and as readers we can only await to see what her future writings will be concerned with.

Finally, I feel as though English writing from Bangladesh is finding its own distinctive voice. It has taken flight from its South Asian locales, to transnational locations, flitting from the US to Bangladesh, to the Emirates and Pakistan. India seems to take a back seat here, and even in its geographical purview, Bangladeshi writers are mapping out another South Asia. It reminds one of Zia Haider Rahman's *In the Light Of What We Know*, in its skipping over the great landmass of India to bring together Bangladesh, Pakistan and Afghanistan. The novels also share a great interest in science, and in bringing science – this time as evolution – into the pages of the novel, span divided intellectual territory.

As we are talking about voice, the novel is written in easy, expressive and flowing English. The cadences of the Dhaka elite are audible, as are, obviously in translation (and the epistolary style really comes in handy here), the accents of interaction between various classes of people.

With this new novel, published beautifully by Daily Star books, as its Bangladeshi edition, we hope that the Bangladeshi novel is English is ready to take flight and we await a host of new writing from Tahmima Anam and a new crop of Bangladeshi writers.

Firdous Azim is the Chairperson, Department of English and Humanities, BRAC University.

POETRY

Fairy Tales

SABRINA BINTE MASUD

"and mother... Why tell me the story of a tiger, the one black on golden stripe, that chewed its own arms and legs in silent rage at night? Also, what about the dragon, who ate apples and fire, lived inside impractical caves tucking in wings of lost desire? waiting, day after day, breath held back for fear unseen. Will the knight meant to free his soul be fearless and keen? The spear flung and true, caught its jaded breast; in the end my dragon was a forgotten winter mist... So I ask oh mother, why sing such a song? The tiger of those years lives undefeated, strong. Why fear the dragon too? They both are poised ready I hide my eyes struggle on my knees bare needy bathed in lies, neck exposed veins pulsing heat, I know my tiger waits in hunger, that dragon gnashing emerald teeth ...you shrink away in pain, mother so have I too, and in vain. Me, myself and I, were not to be a tale with happy end.."

Fallen

In a winter morning's tranquil despair, the last shiuli hung on a branch gone bare. The bough heavy and burdened sunk towards the ground, a single petal poised on its neck, forced it to the earth. Pulled the planet's core, a promise of rebirth. It was the last dew from a dawn withdrawn, that sat at the tip, swollen to the brim - the crystal womb, a forgotten hope. Did it witness a wish slip off the edge? Did the arm reach out, at the slightest sign? Did it hold on to the fragile light of life, tasting eternity in an atom of air? Did it travel to the end of hell and back, in that fractured tilt of uncertainty? Yet, poised at the brink of the truth that kind of gravity will win eventually.

The last dew of that morning held inside, all of the earth and all of the sky.

Sabrina Binte Masud writes creatively in a number of genres and has won international awards for her plays.

A 21st Century Novel: Tahmima Anam's The Bones of Grace

AHRAR AHMAD

It is awkward to write about a novel when one is not a literary critic. The task is all the more daunting, given that unlike Tahmima Anam's first two books, which were easy for us to identify with (the first was really "our" story of the liberation war, the second dealt with issues, characters, and a milieu that are very familiar to all of us), the third is quite different in setting and tone.

Indeed, *Bones of Grace* is Anam's most complex project, her most ambitious and most autonomous work till date. Here she is no longer tethered to a historical phenomenon we have experienced collectively, or a social/cultural space we had once inhabited together. True, in this book her ties to that past provide both continuity and context. But these shadows are fleeting and fraught, functioning more as props for the story rather than as drivers of the text.

Bones of Grace is also an archeology of the past, but here the quest is neither political nor social, but deeply, fiercely, single-mindedly personal. As an adopted child Zubaida, the protagonist of the story, is searching for herself, her own origins and identity. In the process of that discovery she realizes that she has become a composite of the music of Nina Simone, which she enjoys with Elijah Strong, a young American with whom she falls in love; the carcass of Grace, a ship being torn apart in Chittagong; the bones of Diane, the extinct whale she is hoping to piece together; and the genes of Meghna, her clue to her family history, all rolled into one.

The epistolary method used in writing the novel brings it both intimacy and immediacy. It can also be a bit messy at times, for there are periods of drift and mild confusion because the author has to speak for many people, tie many loose

ends, and clarify much. But on the whole *Bones of Grace* holds together well. The fact that it does so is testimony to Anam's skill and resourcefulness as a story-teller since the episodes of the novel are located in such disparate worlds.

First, there is the rarefied world of Cambridge, where nerdy and driven Harvard kids sip lattes, go to Shostakovich concerts, and chatter knowingly about "stuff", and where families, like that of Elijah, are part of the Boston Brahmin landscape, and where their members live comfortable, enlightened lives with a high tolerance for individualism and, even, quirkiness.

The second is the world of upper crusty Dhaka, defined by privilege, conspicuous consumption and refined tastes, where the women wear brocades and silks, the men play golf, the China on the table is fine and delicate, and where there is an army of (mostly invisible) domestic workers who cater to their needs and whims.

The third is the grim and grimy world of ship breakers in Chittagong—lonely, desperate, hardene men (and an occasional child worker), living in dingy, suffocating environments, whose chief concern is to preserve their body parts so that they can return the next day to the dangerous and grisly chore of taking apart a ship till it disappears into nothingness.

And finally, there is the world of Anwar, who had returned to his village, married, acquired some respect (thanks to some hush-money he had received after a co-worker's death in Dubai), appeared to have "made it", but is tormented by his own inner demons to find the woman that he had so cruelly abandoned in the past.

All these worlds collide, collude, and

collapse into the quest for uncovering the secret of Zubaida's identity. She does find some answers regarding her birth origins. But one of the appealing aspects of the book is that it is not framed as a detective story where the answer itself is the resolution. There is a closure of sorts, but it does not necessarily free her from her present, nor carve out new directions for her future. Identity is, obviously, more complicated than knowing your daddy's name!

There are other appealing aspects of *Bones of Grace*. First, it is the result of extensive research. Far too often we see writers taking "poetic license" in terms of their indifference to factual accuracy. While novels are inherently creative exercises they are, for the most part, situated within lived realities. If we have to take Zubaida seriously, we have to believe that she is a real paleontologist who speaks and acts like one, and when she goes to Chittagong, we must know that what she is describing is correct and realistic and recognizable. One does not have to be obsessive about "getting it right" (like James Joyce), but a good writer must be knowledgeable in order to be credible. In this regard, in spite of a few geographic lapses, *Bones of Grace* is impressive.

Second, the characters seem authentic. Anam gives them presence, voice, complexity. They do not fall into simplistic hero/villain or saint/slut binaries. Anwar is not necessarily very virtuous because he is searching to reclaim the lost love of his life and wants to make amends. Rashid, Zubaida's husband, is shallow and emotionally clueless but tries hard to understand her internal churning. Elijah is charming, seductive and talented but maddeningly irresolute, and sometimes irresponsible.

And even Zubaida herself, brave and beautiful and gifted can, at times, be passive-aggressive, self-absorbed and manipulative. The multi-dimensionality of the book's characters gives them fullness and authority.

But the final reason for *Bones of Grace*'s success is the writerly abilities and the craftsmanship of the author, which often results in prose that is rich and vivid. She displays what T.S. Eliot called, "an auditory imagination," instinctively knowing not only how the text will read, or what it will convey, but also how it will sound - its tone, its pitch, its timbre. For all of us who care about the beauty of language, about an apt word, a finely turned phrase, an elegant sentence, this book offers an embarrassment of riches.

At one level *Bones of Grace* is a deeply personal story of a woman torn between traditional norms and modern yearnings, between the guilt of infidelity and the bliss of romance, between gratitude for the pampered and caring life she has received and her frustration at not knowing her own incomplete history. It is also a story of people suffering capitalist exploitation, and the alienation and cruelties inherent in the process, but also of human compassion and resilience. Finally, it indicates how multiple markers – of geography, class, language, ethnicity, faith and so on – may define our uniqueness, but also how they intersect and overlap to create new hybrid realities, destinies and identities. This is a 21st century novel and bears the imprint of both its contradictions and its possibilities.

Ahrar Ahmad recently retired as a professor of political science. Currently, he is the director of Gyantapas Abdur Razzaq Bidiyaepeth.



Poetry

RUBAB ABDULLAH

From dawn's early luster to unfulfilled dusk hours A graceful furor in the mind leads to creation, In the blush of love's light the poet's verses are born The splendor of poetry connects the works of Poets who bejewel words and souls who read poems.

No doubt some are born poets and not everyone But whose heart doesn't melt when poems are recited? Poems are magical incantations that enliven lives And while rhymes serenade children to sleep peacefully Great poems meld living minds fully and live eternally.

Rubab Abdullah lives in the US and writes poetry.