A Daughter of India vs. a Son of England

JOHN DREW

John Drew finds a crucial moment in modern Bengali history thrown into relief by an unexpected cricketing dimension.

"Would not the immolation of a daughter of India and a son of England awaken India to its continued state of subjugation and England to the iniquities of its proceedings?" - Bina Das (1932).

When I recently read the story of Sir Stanley Jackson, the Governor of Bengal, side-stepping the five shots Bina Das took at him during the Convocation at Calcutta University in 1932, I wondered rather inconsequentially whether this notable cricketer would have survived if his assailant had been allowed to complete her over.

This is a reprehensibly trivial way, no doubt, of regarding a grave historical moment. Bina Das, famously, was an offspring of the Easter Rising in Chittagong in 1930, a revolt against the British Empire as significant perhaps as its predecessor in Dublin in 1916, catalyst for the freedom of Ireland, albeit partial.

If a true parallel with Dublin is to be observed, Chittagong probably has to share its historical moment with Jallianwallabagh, a massacre that might have led to the immediate freedom of India had not Gandhi in 1922 called off the mass protest movement of non-violent non-co-operation that followed.

The summary executions of the leaders of the Irish Uprising that were intended to reaffirm British imperial rule had the exact opposite effect of making it untenable. So was the massacre of the crowd of Punjabi fair-goers, trapped in a square in Amritsar three years later. Chittagong was an expression of utter exasperation at the frustrating delay to India's Independence.

It is curious to reflect now that, a century ago, Home Rule had been a possibility for Ireland and then increasingly, via Annie Besant, for India and was only stymied perhaps by the strange death of Liberal England. Gilbert and Sullivan had earlier informed their operatic public that in England every child born alive was Liberal or Conservative. Had there been more Liberal children we might even have had a British Commonwealth of Nations at the end of the First World War - the

Lucknow Pact, incidentally, then pertaining.

In the event, the Conservative children remained dominant. Sir Stanley Jackson, GCSI, GCIE, KStJ, was a prominent figure in the Conservative Party, its Chairman and a minister in Government. As a school prefect at Harrow, his fag or servant had been a certain Winston Churchill. Appointed Governor of Bengal he had fostered the Co-operative movement, inaugurating the (still extant) Malda & District Co-op Bank. As Bina Das deposed, she had nothing against him personally, only as a figure of authority in a despotic regime.

Bina Das was a brave young woman from an educated family who took the fate of India upon herself. Influenced by the example of her Brahmo schoolmaster father and social worker mother, she was moved to action by the way she saw friends and neighbours in her own Chittagong and surrounding districts, suffering and being crushed by the arbitrary detentions and punishments that followed upon the imposition of martial law after the Armoury Raids. She was particularly indignant that her own sister had been rigorously imprisoned on charges that could not be sustained.

At the heavily-guarded Convocation at the University of Calcutta, Sir Stanley was actually delivering a speech on the need to deal with the growing menace of "terrorism" in the educational system. Bina got up once to approach him but sat down before making a second, more determined effort.

The image of Sir Stanley using his skills as a batsman side-stepping, body-line bowling probably applies, though accounts vary only to the first two shots. By then Lt. Col. (and thereafter Sir) Hassan Suhrawardy, the (first Muslim) Vice-Chancellor, with the help of another, had grappled with Bina and wrestled her into a chair as she discharged two more shots, one grazing an old professor. Her final shot whistled harmlessly into the air before she was disarmed and led away.

Sir Stanley - noblesse oblige -

coolly resumed his speech after this dramatic illustration of the subject of it, perhaps impervious to the notion that one person's terrorist could be another's freedom fighter. Jackson was coming to the end of his term in Bengal and, as we now know, so was the British Empire: rather symbolically, he died in 1947.

Until recently, I was unaware of Stanley Jackson, let alone this Bengali dimension to his life. Unbeknown to me, he had been with me for many years. As a boy, I found an old print of a cricketer in a bookshop off the Charing Cross Road and gave it to my father, a keen village cricketer. The print of a stooping batsman, part of the famous Vanity Fair series of portraits by Spy, is captioned: The Flannelled Fighter. This anonymous flannelled fighter had spent decades taking up his stance on one wall or another of our family's homes.

Only of late, for the sake of my grandson, did I try to find out who had been the original of this portrait. It was Stanley Jackson, member of five of the unassailable Yorkshire sides that won eight County Championships at the turn of the century. More than that. Not only was he captain of the England side that easily retained the Ashes in 1905 but, surely uniquely, topped the batting and the bowling averages of both teams combined.

There is an earlier Indian twist to Jackson's cricketing story. When he moved on effortlessly from Harrow to become captain of the Cambridge University cricket team, he was confronted by an Indian student whose developing brilliance as a cricketer he initially failed to spot, perhaps as much on account of his unorthodox stroke-play as of the appalling racial prejudice then prevalent. The student was Ranjitsinhji and, to Jackson's credit, he changed his mind and awarded the young Indian his Blue. Ranji went on to join him in playing for England.

Sir Stanley's impeccable credentials were such that he had a Yorkshire bishop to preside at his funeral. The Bishop of Knaresborough was moved to recall that as he gazed down on the rapt faces of the congregation he could see they revered the dead man as though he were the Almighty, adding in portly jest more justly applicable to Ranji, "though infinitely stronger on the leg side."

Bina Das, ever poised between Bose and Gandhi, after serving two prison sentences and while a Member of the Bengal Assembly, joined Gandhi in Noakhali in 1946-7 to help provide basic social training for poor peasant women of whom she had hitherto known little or nothing. Forty years later, she died less ceremoniously than Jackson: alone and unknown by a roadside in Rishikesh.

John Drew is an occasional contributor to the Literature pages of The Daily Star.

POETRY

The Other Half

AINON N.

The inkwell is trembling
There is the smooth rise and fall of memories
The hesitant fingers wrap the quill
The words come alive on paper
Is the scheme of life completeness of whole?
Thoughts cast back
Let us sit in dusk to remember
It says
Like others
There will never be this moment again
The shades of memories are deep and complex
Like transience of life
They pass without the permission of your mind
All you can do is steal half a story
Weave characters
Give them the truths
The other half is a littérateur's calligraphy
On life's scroll

I know
My pen is rough-edged
My thoughts rusty
Each conversation a far-off sound
Every presence a blurred vision
Yet my words are attentive
To the imperfections of time
The motif of a composer
To conquer the impermanence
That indistinct existence
Of the whole
I lived there
In that distant unknown

The truth is, thoughts asserted
In life's oeuvre
The arrangements
May be segmented
But in all
You were never incomplete

And yet, I was
I am

Ainon N. is a poet, writer, and critic. She writes from Chicago, USA.

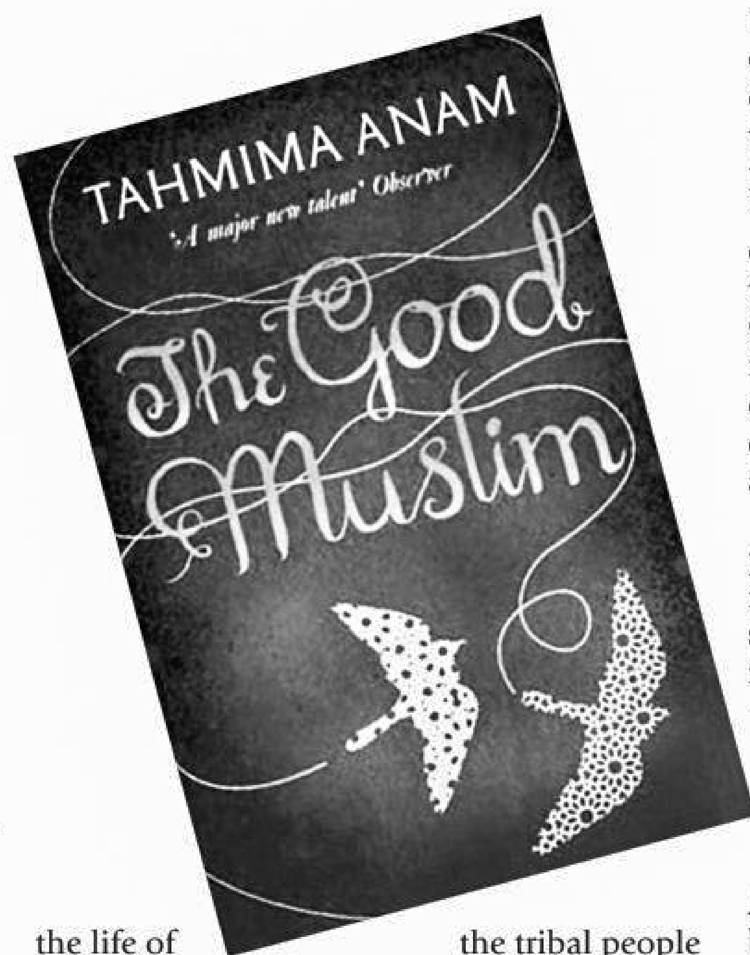
The Good Muslim: A Post-Liberation War Bangladesh

REVIEWED BY MD. ABU YUSUF

Tahmima Anam, ISBN: 9781921758287, Harper Collins, 2011

"A novel asserts nothing; it provides a framework for thinking about things," said Martin Amis, a British writer, in an interview with Rachel Cooke published in *The Observer* of 1 October 2006. Shortlisted for the 2013 DSC Prize for South Asian Literature and long listed for the 2011 Man Asian Prize, the Bangladeshi-British writer Tahmima Anam's *The Good Muslim* (2011) provides the framework that Amis articulates in order to muse on the national narratives of post-liberation war Bangladesh, interweaving the personal and family chronicle with the national. In that, the novel brings to fore the appeal of Islam in the political life of Bangladesh and in the formation of national identity. It unearths some less discussed and often neglected issues like the true meaning of freedom, rehabilitation of women raped and abused during war, trial of war criminals, war babies and marginalization of Hill tribes. It further focuses on how women face cultural restrictions of a diverse nature and how some of them openly and radically contest and sometimes rise above the age-old generalizations about the rights and struggles of women in Bangladesh.

Moving between 1970s and 1980s, *The Good Muslim* showcases how post-war Bangladesh has deviated from its pre-war ideals – equity, justice and freedom for all the people irrespective of class, race, gender, ethnicity and religion. In doing so, the novel unveils atrocities that are still taking place in



the life of the tribal people who were "there before anyone else, before maps and Pakistan and the war" (254). It critiques defilement of Hill tribes and forests: "We raze their villages and let the army rape their women. We take their forests and smoke them out of their villages. This is no kind of freedom" (156). Here, the political agenda and indirect attempt to rewrite history get revealed by unnaming city streets, turning 'Paltan Maidan' – the historically sacred site of Bangladesh – into an amusement park. The question of the possibility of islamization of the country has been reflected through the presence of an unnamed Dictator who says "Allah between every other word" (119) and endeavors "to change the name of the country to the Islamic Republic of Bangladesh" (42). On the anniversary of the Independence Day in 1984, he says nothing about the massacre of the liberation war. Rather, he expresses his eagerness "to befriend the old enemy" (42) and praises the significance of regional unity.

Sohail's becoming a charismatic leader of a puritanical and proselytizing branch of reformist Islam, Tablighi Jamat and his succeeding link with international religious fundamentalists justified through frequent visits from Muslims from France, South Africa, Italy and Cuba embody the rise of religious radicalism in the country. In an interview with Zia Us Salam published in *The Hindu Sunday Magazine* of 8 May 2011, Anam declares Sohail as representative of a big resurgence of religion in the political life of Bangladesh. The clash between secularism and fundamentalism becomes intensified when the progressive social activist Maya who writes for opposition newspapers and participates in the larger political movement for the prosecution of war criminals is arrested not because she tries to kidnap her nephew Zaid but because "the Dictator has been trying to cosy up to them [the mullahs], so he's taken against" (285) her.

Haunted by memories of human tragedy in the war, his failure to help one of its female victims and having killed an innocent old man, Sohail shuns his pre-war secular ideals and his early anger "at a religion that could be so easily turned to cruelty" (158). His close-mindedness makes him believe that religion is the only way he can redeem the past and salvage himself. He is so immersed in his ideals that he becomes indifferent to his ailing mother and to the suffering of his six-year-old son, Zaid. On the contrary, Maya who equates Islam with backwardness, anti-politics and close-mindedness responds differently to the "disappointing ordinariness of freedom" (174). She becomes a doctor to help women and counter patriarchal superstitions and customs revolving around pregnancy and childbirth. Departing home in frustration, she works as an itinerant doctor in a village in Rajshahi where she experiences how her friend Nazia is accused of adultery by her frustrated husband for procreating a baby with Down's syndrome. Not knowing it as a biological defect, the villagers decree a Fatwa of one hundred and one lashes for Nazia. At the Rehabilitation Centre when Maya performs abortions on some of thousands of female rape victims, she is caught up in a complex feeling of guilt. She reassures the victimized women that "their lives would soon return to normal, that they would go home and their families would embrace them as heroes of the war. She said this to their faces every day knowing it was a lie, and they listened silently, staring into their laps, willing it to be true" (69). She finds that women remain wrapped in the shroud of shame and get persecuted even after committing no crimes. Besides, stories of raped and abused women are either marginalized or erased in search for a clean, linear history. She reasons that the attempt to deal with the rape victims erases what really happened to them and effaces the trauma they underwent.

Unlike other rape victims, Piya rises out of victimology refusing to get rid of the enemy seed. She denies remaining as a passive victim. Her decision to retain the child born out of many rapes challenges women's vulnerability and patriarchal restrictions that confine her to the standing of a criminal albeit having no fault of her own. The novel, thus, offers a complex portrayal of women. On the one hand, some of them like Nazia reinforce the stereotypical victimhood of women in an overarching religious patriarchy, while on the other, women like Maya and Piya speak up and boldly face their culturally backward society indicating that Bangladeshi women are learning to assert themselves and to transcend the patriarchal binarist paradigm.

The reviewer is Lecturer in the Department of English, Varendra University, Rajshahi.