DESIGN: **KAZI AKIB BIN ASAD**

FRESH OFF THE PRESS: FICTION
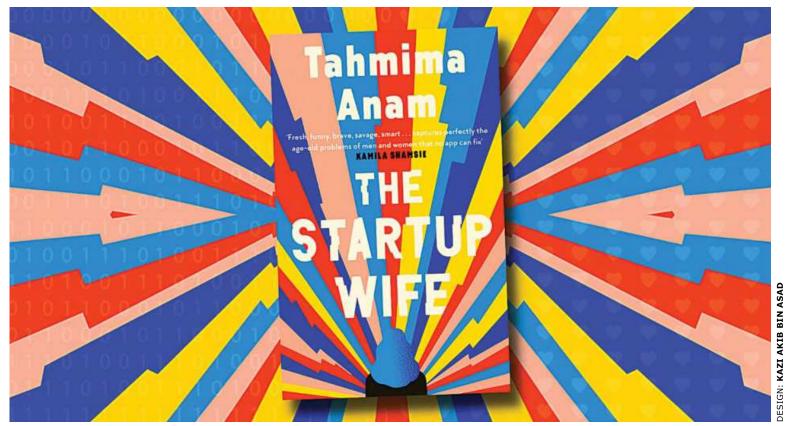
Love and feminism in the world of tech

SARAH ANJUM BARI

Earlier this week, in a break from work-related correspondence, I sent author Tahmima Anam a personal email. I told her I was writing to her "as a reader" this time, because after months of scarfing down books for the sole purpose of writing reviews, *The Startup Wife* (Penguin India, 2021) made me forget that I was reading it for work. From the moment I laid eyes on its cheerful cover art and right through to the end—experiencing, along the way, affections and disappointments for its various characters and plot points—I came away with more smiles and tugs on the heart strings than I did notes. Is there anything better to say about a book?

Anam's protagonist in her fourth novel is Asha Ray, born to Bangladeshi immigrant parents in the United States. Early on in the story, Asha skips cheerfully through her childhood in Jackson Heights and her intellectual blossoming—what she calls "step[ping] into my brain like I was putting on a really great pair of sneakers"— in college. She is seen pursuing her PhD by developing an algorithm to inject empathy in robots. When a chance encounter with her high school crush Cyrus brings love, marriage, and inspiration knocking on the door, Asha bundles up her ideas and leaps from academia to the world of entrepreneurship.

Here Asha and Cyrus will make a marriage out of their intellectual pursuits as much as of their personal lives. Cyrus used to personalise rituals for a living. Their social media platform, WAI (We Are Infinite), will draw from Asha's algorithm and Cyrus' ideas to electronically generate rituals for users, based on their unique interests and beliefs. And their partner, Cyrus' longtime best friend Jules, will handle the business end of the operations.

It is this vision that takes the trio to Utopia, a tech incubator where their business will launch and flourish, and where they will plow through episode after nail-biting episode of pitching to investors, correcting bugs, and connecting with hundreds of thousands of users. By the novel's climax, WAI has become a way of life and Cyrus has become something of a cult leader. Asha,

DESIGN: **MEHRUL BARI**

retaining with quiet clarity the vision that started it all, has become increasingly sidelined in the firm's success and decision making. Some of it has to do with Cyrus's magnetic personality. A lot of it has to do with the way women are perceived and treated in the tech and startup world.

And so, while the central story is about Asha's slackening grip on her brainchild and her marriage, as an anthropologist Tahmima Anam is interested in how rituals and relationships add meaning to life, and the limits beyond which they can turn destructive. In her debut novel, *A Golden Age* (Daily Star Books, 2008), this meaning-making happens through the process of war, the slogans, music and personality cults from which war draws energy. In *The Good Muslim* (2011) this is succeeded by religious fundamentalism.

In *The Startup Wife*, which is set in the most immediate now, Anam is interested in ideas—how they proliferate our consumerist lives, swelling beyond tangible proportions—and the role played by identities (of gender, race, and past experiences). At Utopia, Asha meets Li Ann, whose app, Spoken, filters out triggering language in emails. Destiny's app Consentify seeks to "unlearn the meaning of seduction" by contractually identifying the body parts users agree to having touched. Marco's platform Obit. ly handles the social media activity of the dead.

The implications of these ideas add weight to an otherwise breezy, cheerful novel whose interior feels like the world of Nancy Meyers's *The Intern* (2015) and Freeform's TV series, *The Bold Type* (2017-2021). It is this blend of the light and the powerful that makes the novel such a pleasure to read. While Asha does defer to Cyrus too often, it is an impulse born, among other things, of faith in a loving relationship. She is, otherwise, a witty and confident coder who *knows* how smart she is. Her sister, Mira, is funnier and stronger still in her newfound motherhood. And her mother, in a rare moment of privacy, offers the advice that, "Marriage is an epic poem. But you are young, and smart, and God gave you some very unique gifts. So I don't think that kind of compromise should be assumed." The presence of such strong women causes the men in the novel to pale in comparison—be it Jules's goof-ball charm, Asha's all but silent father, or even superstar Cyrus, whose magnetism feels more implied than demonstrated.

Years ago, when I first read *A Golden Age*, Tahmima Anam's writing seemed to be growing stronger with each consecutive sentence in the book, while its follow up novels arrived as more definitively polished end products. *The Startup Wife* feels polished almost to the point of squeaking—its characters briefly drawn up but memorable, with their flaws and attachments sometimes painfully relatable, and their world a soothing and entertaining refuge from the summer heat.

Tahmima Anam's *The Startup Wife* (Penguin India, 2021) is available at Baatighar Dhaka, Chattogram, and Sylhet.

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BOOK REVIEW: NON-FICTION

Su'ad Abdul Khabeer on what it means to be Muslim and cool

LABIB MAHMUD

Su'ad Abdul Khabeer is an Afro Latina Muslim, a hip-hop head, and the originator of the term "Muslim Cool". Through her book, *Muslim Cool: Race, Religion, and Hip Hop in the United States* (NYU Press, 2016), she attempts to reconcile Blackness with Muslim communities in America, which are dominated by South Asian Americans and Arab Americans, and are emblematic to the systemic racial inequality deeply rooted in the social structure of America. This work of ethnographic research explores the idea of appropriation with awareness as a tool of resistance, and urges the inclusion of Black Muslims in the construction of American Muslim identities. It ultimately helps the reader realise what it means to be Muslim in the 21st century.

To situate oneself at the crossroads at which Islam meets hip hop, it is absolutely necessary to look back at Malcolm X, one of the most influential figures during the civil rights movement. Malcom X advocated for Black empowerment as a spokesperson for the Nation of Islam (NOI) but later, after completing Hajj, embraced Sunni

fabric is left hanging in order to cover the nape. This style of wearing the hijab embodies Blackness, and when appropriated across races as a fashion statement, becomes synonymous to "coolness". Contemporary modest fashion is indebted to American Muslim women, and as Khabeer strongly states, this, in point of fact, is appropriation, as Black Muslims are fenced within the hierarchies of Muslim communities in America.

Khabeer also introduces us to

DESIGN: **ZAREEN TASNIM BUSHRA**

> Hip hop naturally lends itself to political-consciousness and insurgency, and is thus celebrated by countless marginalised groups, locally and globally.

Islam and continued his pursuit of racial justice through Muslim Mosque, Inc (MMI). Malcolm's influence on jazz was extensive, and Islam was central to his activism for Black equality. Islam has influenced hip hop, and in a purposeful response, hip hop has invited American youths residing in Black urban communities to Islam. The American rapper, Mos Def (aka Yaslin Bey), whispers "Bismillah-ir-Rahman-ir-Rahim" in the opening of his debut album *Black on Both Sides* (1999). Of the more contemporary times, Khabeer mentions, among others, Grammy-nominated singer and rapper Maimouna Youseef (aka Mumu Fresh), and her tracks being replete with homages to her Muslim-American heritage, and how the culture has shaped contemporary hip hop.

Hip hop naturally lends itself to political-consciousness and insurgency, and is thus celebrated by countless marginalised groups, locally and globally. Accordingly, it is critical and fundamental to celebrate it with utmost awareness of historical knowledge, and to avoid appropriation. In her later chapters, Khabeer talks about "Hoodjab", which is essential in the discourse of appropriation. Hijab is an act of modesty and an important part of the female Muslim identity. When you mix it with 'the hood', it is a head scarf tied in a bun and the extra

"Muslim Dandies", and this in contrast faces the challenges of assimilation and mimicry. Dandy is a white man who dresses a certain way with bespoke suits, shiny shoes, and pocket squares that match the tie. Immigrant Black men in the US assimilated with this way of suiting and, with the awareness of historical struggle, this mimicry evolved into a tool of resistance. Similar to the intersection of Islam and hip hop, Muslim dandies portray the union of Islam and Blackness, fundamentally becoming a form of religious and racial resistance. This again faces hurdles within the American Muslim community, as the style of a pious Muslim man is dominated by South Asian Americans and Arab Americans.

Muslim Cool comes at a time when comprehending the Muslim self in a globalised platform has become perplexing and complex. Coolness is anything that is in contrary to what is conditioned to be "normal", and "Muslim Cool" engages with Blackness to counter US imperialism, and with Islam towards the inclusivity of Blackness. The integration of Islam and hip hop, "hoodjab", and "Muslim dandies", individually and in union, sketch a trajectory towards the interrogation of hegemonic ethno-religious structures, and resistance against white supremacy, as a means to conceptualise, and better understand the Muslim self. This book, in my opinion, is for Muslims who are interested in arts, music, fashion, activism, and in realising the self in the contemporary world.

Labib Mahmud *is a freelance writer and designer. His interests lie in subversive literature and discourse. Reach him at labib.mahmud848@gmail.com or @labib.mahmudd on Instagram.*

BOOK REVIEW: NON-FICTION

An essential read on knowledge management

DR MOHAMMAD TARIKUL ISLAM

The book, *Knowledge Management, Governance and Sustainable Development: Lessons and Insights from Developing Countries* (Routledge, 2020), edited by M Aslam Alam, Fakrul Alam, and Dilara Begum, is indeed a timely endeavour. In the 21st century, civilisation is steadily building towards a society where knowledge will be the main thrust for improvement. This book, examining the importance of governance in knowledge management, considers the impact on human capital and sustainability in the implementation of this relatively recent academic discipline.

'Knowledge management' refers to the creation and utilisation of knowledge as it pertains to an organisation. Knowledge, of course, leads to invention, innovation, modernisation, entrepreneurship, dynamism, and sustainability of the economy. The flourishing of the general public, likewise, to a great extent relies upon good governance, in which knowledge management assumes an imperative part at all levels of public

administration. Again, in achieving sustainable development, which is to say finding better ways of doing things both for the present and the future, knowledge management and good governance are mandatory. This book brings these three burning issues under one umbrella, divided into two broad and logical headings.

In the first part, 13 chapters highlight the importance of "Information and Knowledge Management". Duly conversed here are: knowledge-based economies, knowledge management in libraries, transformational leadership, behaviour styles of professionals, knowledge sharing, and information literacy. In the second part, governance nexus sustainable development comes into exploration and discussion. A good number of issues are broadly discoursed—covering, among others, the relationship between growth, poverty, and inequality to comprehend Sustainable Development Goals, digital health information management, capacity building initiatives for the

young civil servants in meeting SDGs, and Bangladesh's progress towards attainment of SDGs.

This edited volume by and large reviews the contemporary development of knowledge management and sustainability, as well as the implications of ensuring good governance in public institutions. The effect of leadership on human capital and sustainability is analysed at the macro-level, while issues with both transformational leadership and strategic leadership are reviewed at the micro-level.

The relationship between knowledge management and innovation, and the relationship between innovation and sustainability, are adequately deliberated in this book. These three components, which are firmly interrelated, require inventive exercises (research and innovation) through advanced educational establishments in a joint effort with the private area. Innovation in technology enhances the development of knowledge management system capabilities for

organisations of various sizes, while sustainability is turning into a sharp drive for development under the plan of the SDGs being supported by different governments. Such meaningful development activities can be operationalised by the higher education institutions that facilitate knowledge transfer in collaboration with various business organisations and other stakeholders around the world.

I applaud Dr M Aslam Alam, Professor Dr Fakrul Alam, and Dr Dilara Begum for their commendable academic work. It is thought-provoking, insightful, and an essential read for students of library science, political science, public policy, governance, sociology, anthropology, environmental science, and international relations.

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KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT, GOVERNANCE AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

LESSONS AND INSIGHTS FROM DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

Edited by
M Aslam Alam, Fakrul Alam and Dilara Begum