



COLLAGE: SARAH ANJUM BARI

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

# In which Muslims are not “radicals”

The novel follows the story of one Palestinian-American Afaf, who is the head of Nurideen School for girls in Chicago. One fateful day, a white supremacist shooter attacks the school and has a chance encounter with her.

SHAH TAZRIAN ASHRAFI

Too often, the representation of Muslims in arts and culture has been tainted by the shadow of “extremism”. If a young man or a woman in a book decides to convert to Islam, we eventually see them trekking across Syria to join ISIS. A Swedish Netflix series, *Caliphate*, and Fatima Bhutto's novel, *The Runaways* (Viking, 2019), are glaring examples. Another, less severe, example is Tahmima Anam's novel, *The Good Muslim* (Harper, 2011), where Sohail's devotion to Islam is viewed through a negative lens to such an extent that I felt like it was designed to pander to a Western audience.

Sahar Mustafah's novel, *The Beauty of Your Face* (WW Norton & Company, 2020), shatters this longstanding image that many tend to associate Islam with. It was the first time I read such a narrative, with an authentic representation of Islam and Muslims, and it felt like a breath of fresh air.

The novel follows the story of one Palestinian-American Afaf, who is the head of Nurideen School for girls in Chicago. One fateful day, a white supremacist shooter attacks the school and has a chance encounter with her. The novel is concentrated mostly on the trajectory of Afaf's life up until that point; we discover

who her parents are and how their relationships strain with their children in the face of dire circumstances, such as the disappearance of Afaf's sister, Nada. We get to see how these people attempt to fit into the social fabric of an American life that always spits them out.

Afaf's father has a long stint with alcohol following Nada's disappearance. When he stumbles across Islam as his sanctuary, he ropes Afaf into this new journey. Comfort and healing descend on them, while it does not have the same effect on her apathetic brother and bitter mother. In hindsight, I can easily see how Afaf and her father's journey into Islam could come off as treading on radicalism. While the author makes it a point to show reluctance to embrace religion so wholeheartedly, her approach is still balanced and nuanced. In that her primary focus is to portray how religion can be an unshakeable refuge.

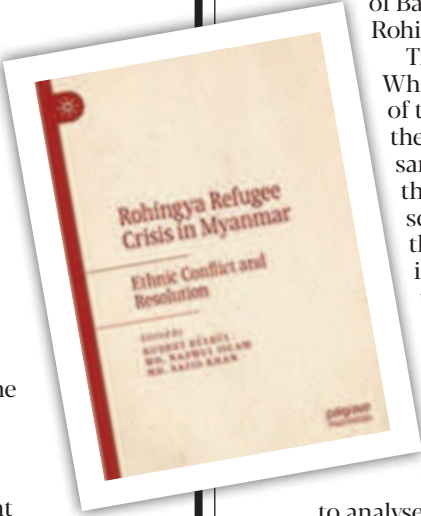
One will find solace from how accurate the representation of religious practises is in this novel: from accepting the decrees of God, to perseverance in facing life's challenges, to the daily mandatory prayers, to performing Hajj, and other essential Islamic rules and rituals. Although there are parts that a faction of practising Muslims might find debatable—such as Muslims

celebrating Thanksgiving and Christmas, and receiving piano lessons in an Islamic school—the novel succeeds in turning internalised Islamophobia on its head.

Yet, another strong point of the novel is Mustafa's decision to give the shooter a brief backstory. Through the subplot, readers get a glimpse at why anti-Islamic sentiments run rampant in the US, and the plotpoint can also be interpreted as the writer's attempt to unveil America's hypocrisy in its intervention into the Middle Eastern foreign policy—how it unleashed long spells of violence and disasters in the name of human rights, and at the same time bred supremacists like the shooter represented in the book.

*The Beauty of Your Face* is a lesson not only in writing about a healing Islamic experience but also in approaching a clever structure for storytelling. The novel swings back and forth from Afaf and her family's past to scenes of the shooting in Nurideen School for Girls. This lends the story a sustained layer of suspense, one that keeps readers glued until the end.

Shah Tazrian Ashrafi is a contributor.



BOOK REVIEW: NONFICTION

# The Rohingya conflict: A critical look from a global and regional lens

MD NIAMOT ALI

Edited by Kudret Bulbul, a professor of Political Science and Public Administration at Ankara Yildirim Beyazit University, Turkey, Md Nazmul Islam, a Bangladeshi who teaches at the Ankara Yildirim Beyazit University, and Md Sajid Khan, a research scholar in the Department of Social Work at Hacettepe University, Ankara—Rohingya Refugee Crisis in Myanmar: Ethnic Conflict and Resolution (Palgrave Macmillan, 2022) observes critical aspects of the crisis that has seen over 1.3 million Rohingyas seeking shelter from Rakhine in Bangladesh.

In the introduction and also its first chapter, Abdur Rahman Fuad and Ali Dadan dive deep into the origin of Rohingyas and the glorious past of the Muslim Kingdom in Arakan. The second chapter touches upon genocide, forced migration, and forced labour from a global perspective with regards to international law. In contrast, the third chapter narrows down in its discussion of forced migration and human trafficking in context of the Rohingya refugees in South Asia.

The work in its entirety discusses the current as well as a hypothetical future for Rohingyas. The authors propose practical approaches to resolving an ethnic conflict of this magnitude. They have tried to consider the crisis as an international issue played out by two Asian giants, namely India and China, and a number of chapters deal with the Indian policy and realpolitik for the world's most persecuted refugees and interest in the Rakhine state of Myanmar. Asif Bin Ali critically develops the Myanmar government's policies and politics against the Rohingyas. And Sariful Islam analyzes the interest of the present Government of Bangladesh in terms of hosting Rohingyas as a humanitarian response.

The book has some flaws, however. While it does cover a wide range of topics, a significant number of the essays have been written by the same writers, including the editors themselves. Therefore, the discourse seems to create a bubble of ideas that could have been avoided by including more authors. Second, the organisation of the book has not been well planned out. And while some of the chapters have solid theoretical and empirical basis, the rest merely gather information that lacks any solid analytical support.

Conversely, the authors seek to analyse the grave issue under the theme of media representation in Bangladesh and India. In addition, the role of western countries, particularly in providing foreign aid through INGOs and NGOs, has been presented in the last two chapters of the book, along with accounts from the perspective of Rohingyas.

In its consideration of the nationalistic policies of the Myanmar government, the authors have shown how Bangladesh has become one of the primary victims of the crisis; in various capacities, they propose, Bangladesh has even made political profit out of the situation. Because of its various tools for analysing the problem, this book can be referred to for history, politics, sociology, international relations, and media studies.

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REVIEW: SHORT STORY OF THE MONTH

# “Mother’s Milk” by Tahmima Anam: Anatomy of a mother’s pain

In this monthly series, we review short stories that deserve to be rediscovered and appreciated.

SARAH ANJUM BARI

In “Mother's Milk”, a short story by Tahmima Anam which appears in *Our Many Longings: Contemporary Short Fiction from Bangladesh* (Dhuali Books, 2021), an unnamed narrator gives us brief snatches of her life as she attempts to endure...something. One can't really call it an incident; it is, seemingly, more a state of being that requires her to keep joy at bay. Consciously, deliberately.

As her “friend” in this project of endurance, the narrator seeks refuge in the newspaper, in the stories of refugees, dead babies, floods, hunger, and poverty that it brings to her everyday. They allow her to flit from flashes of pleasure and peace back to misery, even as her husband, mother, and in-laws attempt to shift her from home to (her husband's) workplace, from her own life to that of her brother's, where things look cheerier. All of these things—and more—are told to us in very brief scraps. Bearing them into one flowing, narrative

whole is the narrator's breast milk, which flows and flows, dampens her blouse during a board meeting, smears her green salwar kameez on a trip to Mymensingh, a flow that seemingly nourishes no one.

Like this outpour of milk (and maternal instincts, and the solace to be found in newspapers), many things in this short story are left open and lopsided and inexplicable, which makes reading it a distinctly different experience from those associated with the *Golden Age* trilogy, or the more recent, *The Startup Wife* (2021). Those stories came with plots, with characters who communicated their personalities and desires to the reader with clarity. Here, the metaphors aren't what you think they're about; the parallels to be drawn between characters and motifs don't quite add up in neat little boxes; grief, as in real life, looks and feels different on each new day.



Each sentence carries its own little grievance bitterly, tightly retold. Each paragraph, sowing these sentences together, tells the story of a different experience in the narrator's daily life. And Tahmima Anam shuffles these paragraphs around so deftly that the contrast, the juxtaposition of incidents, bares to the

reader a particularly raw, pink layer of the narrator's pain. It has just stopped stinging, but it will again, in a matter of seconds.

Through this hopping from pain to pain, we learn mid-way through the story that the woman has recently lost her newborn child. The incident reveals many things. How “decent” a man her husband is for not leaving her. How motherhood feels for a fleeting second. How grief is a darkness with agency: you could be “listening to music or browsing through old photographs. You haven't engaged in risky behaviour by daring to read a book”; but it can visit you unannounced and balloon your personal pain into the pain of every suffering individual on the planet, so that you find solidarity not with another struggling mother, but with a bull that has been failing to ejaculate semen for the narrator's husband's business.

This encounter with the bull—the

way his ability to breed is labelled as “productivity” (or lack thereof)—allows the narrator to take one fragment of a step towards reconciling with her pain. At the same time, it lands her on the cusp of reflecting on the mechanical, capitalist lens through which society looks at those who procreate.

In the first sentence of “Mother's Milk”, the narrator specifies that the newspapers that so helped her, do so “in black and white”. Later in the story, in a fit of rage mentioned almost-too-casually in passing, she bites a newspaper into shreds with her teeth. Underneath the calm that narrates this tale of trauma, there appears to be a clawing need to rip through the absolute blacks and whites of a human's, a woman's, and a mother's experiences, and let the shades of red burst forth.

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