

The Language of the Enemy

A Golden Age

By Tahmima Anam

New York: Harper, 2008, 288 pp., \$24.95, hardcover

Reviewed by Mandira Sen

Tahmima Anam's novel takes place mainly during the nine-month civil war between West and East Pakistan—the War of Liberation as it is now referred to—which resulted in the creation of the independent country of Bangladesh. The eastern wing of Pakistan, separated from the West by a vast expanse of India, had been simmering for decades with discontent against its distant rulers. Then, West Pakistan refused to accept the verdict of the 1971 general election, in which Sheikh Mujibur Rahman of East Pakistan won a resounding victory, making him prime minister, and his party the one that would form the country's government. Overnight, Mujibur Rahman was arrested and spirited away to West Pakistan. The Pakistani Army was called out to subdue the rebellious easterners.

The civil war was one of the world's most brutal, and the Pakistani army, which specifically targeted women, raping, mutilating, and murdering them, is often accused of genocide. So one wonders what "golden age" Tahmima Anam's title could possibly refer to. The onset of freedom? The gratitude of those who lived to tell the tale? The house named *Shona* (gold) that becomes a symbol of the rebels' heroism after guerillas take it over? Anam leaves it to her readers to decide.

Although the book starts as the story of Rehana Haque, a 38-year-old mother and widow, it later gathers together the details of many everyday lives and becomes a war novel. The book's tone matches Rehana's personality: gentle but firm, reserved, outwardly conventional, and as the war unfolds, astonishingly courageous, even heroic—though Rehana would not identify herself thus. Most of the other characters are ordinary middle-class people—the privileged in a poor country. Rehana's son, Sohail, and daughter, Maya, are both students at the University of Dhaka, a center of resistance. Rehana's small circle of woman friends includes Mrs. Chowdhury and her daughter, Silvi; Mrs. Akram; and Mrs. Rahman. In a country that was created for Muslims, it's significant that two other characters, Rehana's tenants, the Senguptas, are Hindus who had not joined the flight of their coreligionists to India. The poor characters who appear are marked with dignity—among them the butcher who may be from the "other side" (although, ironically, he never actually made it to West Pakistan) and the rickshaw-puller, Bokul. On a small canvas, Anam paints a remarkable portrait of the affirmation of humanity in the midst of a hideous war.

At the heart of the novel is the question of identity, surely a baneful preoccupation of our times. Rehana is a native speaker of Urdu, the language of Pakistan and of the Muslims of north India. She grew up in Calcutta, India, in a wealthy Muslim family who lost their money suddenly when she was three. Her two sisters left for Karachi, in West Pakistan, after they were married. Rehana's marriage, the last to be arranged, is with Iqbal Haque, an Urdu speaker like her, who lives and works in East Pakistan. She moves there with him and builds a happy new life with her adoring husband among the Bengali-speaking Muslims. Yet to her sisters, she is living among "Bungalis," as they pronounce the word, indicating their contempt for these fellow Muslims and giving us a hint of the growing alienation between the two wings of the country even before the conflict erupts. When Iqbal dies in 1957, Rehana's sisters urge her to leave for West Pakistan, yet she remains where she has settled.

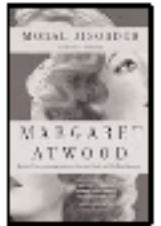
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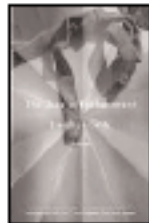


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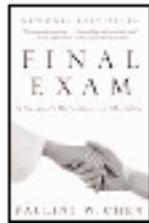
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Once the war breaks out Rehana becomes conscious of her ambivalent feelings about her adopted country:

She spoke, with fluency, the Urdu of the enemy. She was unable to pretend, as she saw so many others doing, that she could replace her mixed tongue with a pure Bengali one, so that the Muslim salutation, *As-Salaam Alaikum*, was replaced by the neutral *Adaab* or even *Nomoskar*, the Hindu greeting ... she could not give up her love of Urdu, its lyrical lilts, its double meanings, its furrowed beat.

As the war progresses, Rehana's image of herself changes. Her sisters think of her as a traitor, and the language she had loved so much seems to have changed its character. "How strange the language suddenly sounded, aggressive, insinuating. She saw that it was now the language of her enemy; hers and Sohail's."

Rehana maintains relationships with both the living and the dead. She has a curious custom of visiting her husband's grave and telling him what is happening in her life. She first does this when, after his death, she is forced to give up their children to her husband's elder brother, Faiz, and his wife, Parveen, in Lahore, West Pakistan. The couple had sought custody because they were childless, and they convinced the judge that a poor widow who had poor judgment as well (she had taken the children to see the presumably immoral film *Cleopatra*) was not suitable as a guardian. Throughout the war, she keeps Iqbal informed,

explaining to him why she could not stop the children from joining the war: "[I]t is too great a thing." In the end, she tells him of her attraction to and love for a badly wounded army major who had left the Pakistani army to join the guerrillas, whom she helped to nurse.

Alone, without Iqbal to consult, she worries over the difficulties she has with Maya, who has become cold and silent since the gang rape and murder of her dear friend Sharmeen. Rehana doesn't know how to reach her. Is it because she has always been closer to Sohail?

She had a blunt, tired love for her daughter. It was full of effort. Sohail was her first-born, and so tender, and Maya was so hard, all sympathy worked out of her by the throaty chants of the street march, the pitch of the slogan ... The ideas were like an affliction; they had taken her over so completely.


Sohail leaves with the guerrillas, and later Maya goes to India, where she works with refugees in the camps and with the government-in-exile. Before Maya leaves, she tells her mother to be careful, that she has always worried about her. Rehana feels unaccountably comforted:

Here it was, the thing that she had been looking for, a small window into her daughter's locked heart. It was not that she was diffident but ... burdened by the beloved, the disappeared. By her own widowed mother."


Anam writes of the unspeakable tortures inflicted by the army with great delicacy, which paradoxically increases the impact of these passages. Rehana agrees to try to free her neighbor Silvi's husband, Sabeer, a soldier who joined the guerrillas and was captured. She persuades her brother-in-law Faiz, now an important official whose role is to help suppress the rebellion, to sign a release order, and she makes her way to the prison. (Later, after the Pakistani army surrenders and Rehana has the upper hand, Faiz will turn to her for help.) Sabeer or, more accurately, what remains of him, is freed. Outside the prison he shies away from her: "Rehana heard a sound like a siren coming from his bent head ... she pulled at his shoulder. The wailing grew louder; it was high-pitched and alien, a cry with no mouth." With the help of Bokul, the rickshaw-puller, she manages to get him onto the rickshaw. It is hard going: "Sabeer kept screaming and twisting away from her. ... finally Rehana released him, and he sank to his knees and began to sob." She thinks that he is now, with his brutally mangled hands, "a red-fingered bird." When Sabeer dies, Rehana and Maya try to comfort Silvi. Reluctant to talk of him as a hero, she simply says, "It's God's will," adding "[t]hat was his business. Nothing to do with me." She believes the fighting is a pointless waste of human life, and that Pakistan should stay together: "That's why it was conceived. To keep the *Ummah* [faithful] united. To separate the wings is a sin against your religion."

Later, when visiting Calcutta to see Maya, Rehana accompanies her daughter to a refugee camp, where she meets her former tenant Supriya Sengupta, who fled, like ten million other East Pakistanis, to India. She does not speak anymore. Rehana washes her and keeps talking, persevering because it was "not unlike sitting at Iqbal's grave. There was never any answer, but she imagined somehow Mrs. Sengupta could hear her." One day she brings a notebook and a pencil: "Mrs. Sengupta held up the notebook: 'I went into the reeds, ... in the pond ... I left him and ran into the pond.'" Rehana doesn't know if Mrs. Sengupta is writing of her husband, her son, or her captor.

Anam writes with insight about how the victims of violence sometimes share the motivations of its perpetrators. Rehana often acts with compassion, but she is also cruel when she believes it is necessary, ruthlessly sacrificing someone else to save Sohail, for example. In her conversations with Iqbal, she weighs what she has gained and lost.

Written with marvelous control and understatement, this first novel impressed me with its maturity. There are some minor flaws, flowers blooming in the wrong season, talk of planting bokul flowers at Iqbal's grave when the bokul is a tall tree, albeit a favorite flowering one in the region. These hardly detract from the book. The author chose to write in English rather than Bengali, perhaps to reach a wider audience, perhaps to acquaint people in other parts of the world with some history that they may well have forgotten: indeed, it is hard for translations from South Asia to get published in the West. It is heartening to hear that the novel, first published in the UK, is now available in a US edition. 

Mandira Sen is a publisher with two imprints, Stree, on gender studies, and Samya, on cultural studies. She lives in Calcutta.



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