Tahmima Anam, *The Good Muslim* (Text, 2011)

Reviewed by Gillian Dooley for Writers Radio, Radio Adelaide, recorded 24 September 2011.

*The Good Muslim* is Tahmima Anam’s second novel, a sequel to her first, *The Golden Age*. In it she continues the story of the Haque family, following the Bangladeshi war of independence in 1971.

There are two threads in the story, both initiated by a homecoming. In the first, Sohail Haque returns from the war to his widowed mother and his sister, with secrets weighing heavily on him. A young woman arrives looking for him, and his sister, Maya, a medical student, begins to suspect she is pregnant and that her pregnancy is the result of rape by Pakistani soldiers. When the young woman, Piya, leaves suddenly, Sohail completes a transformation from the liberated, western-educated, sceptic he was before the war, to a devout and puritanical Muslim. He marries Silvi, the widow from across the road, and they set up some kind of religious centre in the upstairs part of the house where Maya and her mother still live.

Maya is furious at her brother, who seems to be betraying everything that he was, everything that they held dear. The last straw is when he burns all his books. She departs to work in the country, becoming a doctor’s assistant, delivering babies and making basic improvements in a remote village. Eventually, though, after seven years away, she hears that her sister-in-law has died and, since the men of the village have recently turned against her, she feels that it’s time to return to Dhakar and her mother and brother. This return, in 1984, begins the second thread of the novel.

She discovers that her mother is lonely, and her brother has become remote even when she sees him, though he is away preaching much of the time. Among the community of women upstairs she notices a small, ragged, underfed boy, and is shocked to find that this is her nephew, Zaid. With his gamin ways, Zaid worms his way into this prickly woman’s heart and she tries to convince her brother to send him to school. To her horror, he decides on a distant madrasa rather than the local boys’ school.

*The Good Muslim* is a third person narrative, but it is infused with the anger and prejudice Maya carries with her. ‘She believes – oh, how foolish she is, how arrogant – she believes ... she can do something to prevent’ Sohail turning to religion (126). Sohail, in turn, ‘longs for her to know, to know something of what it was like, longs for her to have a heart as heavy as his, a heart that needs to wrap itself around a certainty, a path’ (128).

It’s sometimes difficult to disentangle changes in point of view from a character’s interior monologue projecting into another character’s mind, and the point of view bounces round – sometimes confusingly – between the characters. With Maya’s cynical and pessimistic personality dominating, the early part of the novel can be heavy going. Momentum picks up later as the two threads of the plot begin to come together and Maya starts to realise that despite her fierce intelligence there are things she hasn’t known, and that her stubbornness might have been partly responsible for the events she so deplores. This is a powerful novel, deeply serious and devoid of any sentimentality, tackling large questions about the nexus between the violence of war and the certitudes of religion.