

Anyone attempting to understand 21st-century America via its literary fiction might believe that neither religion nor politics plays a significant role in shaping the lives of its inhabitants. Politics with a lowercase p is often at work, but with a capital P almost never; and religion, one might say, is largely the preserve of Marilynne Robinson. It was clear the Trump years would place a new set of demands on the novel, though readers will not immediately recognize Nawaaz Ahmed's debut, "Radiant Fugitives" — about an Indian American woman volunteering on Kamala Harris's attorney general campaign in 2010 — as responding to these demands.

The story begins in a San Francisco hospital room, where a newborn, Ishraaq, is narrating the death of his mother, Seema, in childbirth. Seema's ex-husband, Bill, is pacing outside along with her mother, Nafeesa; while her sister, Tahera, is running through the hospital corridors toward them. From there the novel moves back to Ishraaq's conception, and explains the arrival of Nafeesa and Tahera in California days before the birth. We learn that Seema has been estranged from her Indian family for years, ever since she came out to them as a lesbian back in Chennai. Knowing that neither Bill nor her new lover, Leigh, can be the support she needs with a baby, a pregnant Seema turns to Nafeesa, who has little time left to live and wants above all to set things right between her two daughters. The sisters' differences have only widened since Tahera, now living in Texas, sought sanctuary in an **austere** form of Islam.

Ishraaq's narration, sometimes addressed to Nafeesa, is mostly a distraction. There is little to distinguish his voice from any third-person **omniscient** narrative, and you quickly learn not to pay much attention, for instance, as he refers to Seema primarily by name and occasionally as "my mother." For a while this appears to be a fairly **conventional** story of a family confronting old rifts and even older loves, its boldest act to give us a deeply religious Muslim character.

That is, until the novel jumps back even further, to 2003, when Seema meets Bill at an Iraq war protest. Ishraaq's tone becomes more energized, but its intimacy falls away as he follows Seema through a series of political campaigns that **culminate** in her disillusionment with Obama. Ahmed doesn't quite manage to tie this disillusionment to Seema's abandonment by her father, and it's a relief when the novel returns to just the trio of women. It is in this final section that Ahmed's ambitions become clear. Throughout the novel the reader might wonder: Why am I listening to an imam's sermon or a lecture on Keats? Why are Leigh and Bill introduced as primary characters, and then allowed to **recede** into the background? Why so much attention to Tahera's faith and Seema's politics?

"Aren't our lives **circumscribed**," the narrator asks in the end, "by powers over which we have little control?" Ahmed here sharpens the point that has been building all along: We are not in charge of our own lives; we are not just nuclear families formed by our relations to one another — or, if we are, then only partly. We are to a greater extent **enmeshed** in a very large world with **myriad** forces acting upon us in ways large and small. Isn't it time for American writers to face up to the challenge of reflecting that? The flaws of "Radiant Fugitives" aside, we can still stand back and applaud Ahmed, a writer of vast ambition, who wants nothing less than to reshape the American novel.