



Shards of grief

The Association of Small Bombs: A Novel

By Karan Mahajan

Fourth Estate/HarperCollins Publishers India, 2016, 288 pp.,

Rs 499 (HB)

ISBN 978-93-5177-787-8

SWATI DAFTUAR

Karan Mahajan's *The Association of Small Bombs* begins with a nod to its name — an explosion that rips through its very first pages. For the rest of the book, we reel under its aftershock; watching as a kind of slow and steady implosion, like dry rot, eat its way through the story and its people. The explosion has been caused by what is known as a "small" bomb — its reach is limited to a crowded market and a few news reports, destined to be buried under bigger, more horrific statistics. In *The Association...*, this diminutive description becomes twisted, a cruel joke that mocks its own foundation and inadequacy. As Mahajan zooms closer, setting the very first page of his story right at the centre of the blast — "Back in the (Lajpat Nagar) market, people collapsed, then got up, their hands pressed to their wounds, as if they had smashed eggs against their bodies in hypnotic agreement and were unsure about what to do with the runny, bloody yolk." — he begins to pull at the most integral thread of his book. Can there be "small" bombs and "small" tragedies? Is there anything like "a bomb of small consequences"?

Mahajan's story does start "small". In the May of 1996, two brothers, Nakul and Tushar Khurana, aged 11 and 13, and their 12-year-old friend Mansoor Ahmed, are running a simple errand in Delhi's chaotic Lajpat Nagar market. The brothers are there to "pick up the Khuranas' old Onida color TV", and they've convinced their cosseted, protected friend to come along. It is, really, a regular day, until a Maruti 800 parked in the market explodes, firing shards of shrapnel from the crude handmade bomb that has been left in it. Later, the terrorists would discuss the numbers with an air of disgusted dismissal — the casualty has been too low, the damage too little. So the blast that kills the "sum total" of Deepa and Vikas Khurana's family isn't even deemed satisfactory enough by its perpetrators.

The Association... is a difficult book, germinating from a seed that is sown entirely in destruction. The very existence of the story it tells is determined by a past stained in spilled blood, and the echoes of "the bombing...a flat, percussive event..." stalks every development in the book, both creating and shaping them. Some are expected, like Mansoor's inescapable shame and rage, borne of survivor's guilt. The Ahmeds, already overprotective of their only child, are now almost paranoid about his safety. At one point, finding his daily rides on the school bus replaced by chauffeured cars, Mansoor wonders at how the bomb that killed his friends "had improved his life".

And then there are those insidious developments, with their links to the past, tenuous but undeniable. In exploring them, Mahajan really proves his ability to trace the contours of grief and listen to its beating heart. He understands its power to consume a life, burrowing into the most innocuous, everyday activities. Soon after the death of his sons, Vikas Khurana marvels at the relentlessness of his pain. "He'd experienced nothing like this— had never known a pain that could slip into every fold of the body." Mahajan's book is a testimony and tribute to grief, an ode to its power.

Perhaps this is why he divides the story into sections, each a capsule

so many different forms and shapes of grief: Mansoor's wrist, still throbbing and aching eight years after the bombing pierced it with shrapnel, the Ahmeds' financial decline, the Association of Terror Victims the Khuranas establish, and the daughter they have.

Working with only a handful of characters, Mahajan stays with them as they change — the process is laborious and slow, and perhaps because it lingers over details, highly effective. In some ways, considering how the book begins, we expect this course that the novel takes; expect to watch the Ahmeds and Khuranas unravel. After all, *The Association...* is a book on terror, and

Can there be "small" bombs and "small" tragedies? Is there anything like "a bomb of small consequences"? Mahajan's exploration really proves his ability to trace the contours of grief and listen to its beating heart. He understands its power to consume a life, burrowing into the most innocuous, everyday activities. His book is a testimony and tribute to grief, an ode to its power. We watch as each life affected by the blast moves forward while also staying still; creating a surreal, layered effect. Their future doesn't seem to include all those possibilities we are used to reading about — redemption and forgiveness, even closure

of "responses" and reactions by the different players in the story. He follows a linear timeline only intermittently, often discarding it in favour of a more intuitive trajectory. We watch as each life affected by the blast moves forward while also staying still; creating a surreal, layered effect. Their future doesn't seem to include all those possibilities we are used to reading about — redemption and forgiveness, even closure. In this book, the blast isn't a punctuation, a long pause that gives way to the rest of the story. It is, for its victims, the point at which their story takes off. Mahajan gives words to this idea once again through Vikas Khurana, who wonders at his reality after the explosion: "He'd become a man whose kids had died. This was his chief distinction. It occurred to him now that people are defined much more by their association with death than by what they do in life." And it isn't just the Khuranas who suffer, as their marriage, born in the most tentative and tender of ways, transforms into something sick and broken; Mahajan touches upon

terror needs victims; innocents knocked down like those "half a dozen massive trees" whose "green gums" the Lajpat Nagar bomb loosened. Watching their complicated, consistent misery is painful and tragic, but hardly out of place.

So when Mahajan invites Shockie into the story, the effect is surreal, abrupt, and above all, bold. Shockie is the leading bomb maker for the terrorist group that carries out the Lajpat Nagar bombing — the Jammu and Kashmir Islamic Force, operating "out of exile in Nepal". He's an avuncular looking 26-year-old man with "cat like green eyes" who loves Delhi and has an ill mother he constantly considers returning home to. He's also someone who takes "a certain sensual, even feminine, pleasure in shopping for materials for a bomb; he might have been a man out to buy wedding fixtures for his beloved sister"; who has "killed dozens of Indians in revenge for the military oppression in Kashmir". In bringing us so close to him, Mahajan is taking a risk. After all, do we want to know? Do we want a direct line into the very human

mind of someone we'd rather believe to be a monster? Mahajan's account of Shockie's inner life is disorienting. It doesn't demand judgement or sympathy, both of which would be easier. Instead, he simply paints for us a life, complete with its pain and joy and ideas — a complex, contradictory life that is impossible to reduce to a single facet. In Shockie, he gives us the cold, calculating terrorist, disappointed with the scale of damage his bomb has caused: "Nothing happened, yaar. A few buildings fell. A few people were burning...My personal philosophy is, if we are fighting a war, we should try to kill people, not just injure them." How do we reconcile this man to the one who falls asleep hugging his friend and listening to birds above? At one point, the only one in the book, there's a hint of sympathy, perhaps guilt: "he [Shockie] could see the faces of framing shop owner and the owner of Shingar Dupatte, how they would react when the bomb went off; and he felt sad, the way one did when one knew the victims even a little". But the page turns, and the moment passes, only to be replaced with a clinical, practical one: "But mostly Shockie felt there was no innovation when it came to bombs". This duality would be jarring if Mahajan didn't lay it out so beautifully, the nuances coming together to form the portrait of a very real character—one you may not fully understand, but do believe.

In Shockie, Mahajan also broaches the topic of religion. Contrary to what we'd expect, the terrorists in this book do not practice radical Islam. In fact, Shockie calls religion "that crutch of the weak". The bomb didn't explode in the name of god, but was borne of political motivations, of revenge and justice— twisted reasons, and even logic. When Deepa Khurana seeks to meet the incarcerated man who is suspected of playing a role in the blast that killed her sons, she is warned by a relative of its futility: "The meetings were never satisfactory. They always found that the militants were reasonable men, which was even more difficult than finding out the opposite."

Mahajan writes with brutal honesty, chasing his characters with an unforgiving relentlessness and laying them bare before us in all their tragic, pathetic reality. In Mansoor, this is perhaps most effectively portrayed, as he loses his future to a possibly psychosomatic, but crippling and debilitating cancer tunnel syndrome, courtesy the bomb blast. And then there is Ayub, whom Mansoor befriends — a young man of strong opinions who works with an NGO working for peace. Ayub's "response to terror" is perhaps the most severe, and as his life careens off course, slipping into the quicksand of everything he earlier fought against, it basically precipitates the end of the story.

It is, in a way, an unsatisfactory end. Even as it carries the echoes of its beginning — the book's conclusion hardly comes a full circle. Instead, it fizzles, like a "small burp of fire" from the bombs that go "phut". We do not find redemption in the end; neither do we find justice. But the book has never really been about those things. It is the deliberate excavation of the human mind and its motivations; the charting of pain and its manifestations. It follows lives that live in a suspended moment of profound grief. By taking away the idea of moving on, and crafting an end that is both fatalistic and thin, Mahajan makes the conclusion of his book all the more believable. It seems inevitable that this book and its story, which began with a bang, should go out with a whimper. ■