

**Contribution of Women in the Formation of Bangladesh: A Critical Appraisal on Tahmima Anam's novels *A Golden Age* and *The Good Muslim***

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Abstract

The 1971 Bangladeshi Liberation war is one of the most significant and phenomenal event in the history of twentieth century Indian subcontinent. This bloodstained historical event constantly lingers in the minds of Bangladeshi people while constructing the Bangladeshi sense of nationalism. Till today, the Liberation war has been in the centre of attention in both national and international media. It has been depicted in various mediums both in home and abroad. And in the traditional history of war and in the formation of any nation, women have always been depicted as passively exploited figures, merely a victim of war and doing nothing so actively to be recognized. Such traditional representation of the contribution of women in history has been reconstructed by Bangladeshi diasporic novelist, Tahmima Anam in her debut novel *A Golden Age* (2007) and in its sequel, *The Good Muslim* (2011). Anam has relocated the traditional presentation of women as exploited, tortured, raped, submissive and passive in the war history. Unlike the conventional passive victims, her heroines are active, liberal, brave and courageous women who not only defy the men controlled situations to live in it, but also shows the way for her contemporary women how to cope with the double colonization faced by every woman in their home and the society and thus contribute in the formation of nation and its identity. This proposed research seeks to explore the role of women in the formation of Bangladesh as a nation with the references to Tahmima Anam's fictions *A Golden Age* and *The Good Muslim*.

**Key Words:** partition, 1971 Bangladeshi Liberation war, partition and gender, feminism, trans-nationalism





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*A Golden Age* and *The Good Muslim*, both are the part of Anam's trilogy, written on the historical journey of Bangladesh from a state to a nation. To be more specific, *A Golden Age* is a fictional retelling of the 1971 Bangladeshi Muktiyudha which led the creation of the new nation of Bangladesh from erstwhile East Pakistan. The novel with great clarity depicts the struggles and miseries of the people of Bangladesh during the Liberation War. And *The Good Muslim* presents another story employing the characters of *A Golden Age*, though of advanced years, evokes the disillusionment and disappointment of Independence. It shows how the post-independent Bangladeshi society has been smitten by a number of serious problems like-ignorance, superstitions, acute poverty, immorality, political violence, and above all religious fanaticism. Both the novels, therefore, articulate a distinctly "Bangladeshi" narrative and identity, constructing a national narrative of Bangladesh from its creation to its later travails. And this total historical journey of Bangladesh as a nation has been communicated beautifully through the prism of a family, Haque family. Kamila Shamsie noted in her review of *A Golden Age*: "Throughout the novel, Anam deftly balances the story of nation against that of a family" (2007). Here the family serves as a metaphor for both the nation that becomes a trauma as well as fragmentation that the nation undergoes in the wake of the divisive nationalist events like partition. And this research paper makes an attempt to explore the contribution of women in the formation of the nation, Bangladesh, specifically with the references to the women characters, projected in the novels *A Golden Age* and *The Good Muslim*.

Before going to explore the contribution of women in the formation of Bangladeshi identity, it is relevant to talk something about its historical framework. Within the short span of 25 years, Bangladesh had undergone two different national movements - the first taking place in 1947 which led to the creation of Pakistan, and the second in 1971 which resulted in the creation of Bangladesh and its secession from Pakistan. These two moments of violent rupture both impacted upon the fashioning of identities, but each in different ways. After 1947 there was the confusing situation of the old being dead, and the new not yet being born. During this interregnum, the national political space in East Bengal was occupied by various combinations of secularism, socialism, democracy and linguistic nationalism. Later, after 1971, came the military

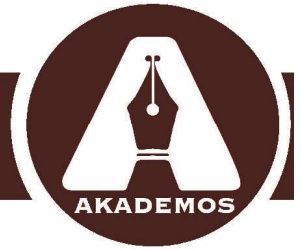




dictatorships and the rise of a more strident Islamic hegemony. During this period new heroes were made and old ones replaced, symbols and myths were created and then torn apart, and history was continually written and re-written in the search to imagine a nation in ways that overcame the underlying deep-rooted contradictions. While the idea of secular Bengali nationalism was important in events leading up to the Liberation struggle of 1971, identities have since moved on. In particular, an erosion of secular trends began soon after the birth of Bangladesh, and subsequently both military and democratic regimes have attempted to reshape religious identities. This paper is an attempt to find out how women play an important role in the struggling journey of Bangladesh.

This paper quests to know the sacrifices of women in the liberation war of Bangladesh in 1971 and their contribution in the formation of Bangladesh, specifically with the reference to Tahmima Anam's *A Golden Age* and *The Good Muslim*. A great part of Bangladeshi woman participated in the Muktiyudha. But whenever we conceive the participation of women in the liberation war we only envision the women who were censured and raped. But women also participated in the war as fighters, helping hands, cooks, messengers, Diplomats, Inspiration, medical assistants and also as mothers. Most of the woman in Bangladesh participated in the war sometimes directly and sometimes indirectly. Some of the women also joined in the front war, among them two women had been awarded as "Bir Pratik". It is a well-known fact that Liberation war was not an abrupt matter, so the participation of women in liberation war was also not an astonishing thing. If one considers the mounting of liberation war, one can see that women had participated all the movements as like- Language movement in 1952, The Education Movement in 1962, The six points movement in 1966, The Mass Upsurge in 1969, The Pakistani General Election in 1970, 7<sup>th</sup> March speech in 1971 at the Race Course Ground. So it was a general matter for women to participate the liberation war. But they had not been recognized according to their sacrifices. They are only recognized as a ravished woman. The women who forsaken their lives and were raped by the Pakistani Army and their collaborators, we could never recognize them what they deserve. This paper has endeavoured to present the active participation, as well as the sacrifices and devotion of women in the liberation war of Bangladesh especially with the reference to Anam's fictions *A Golden Age* and *The Good Muslim*.

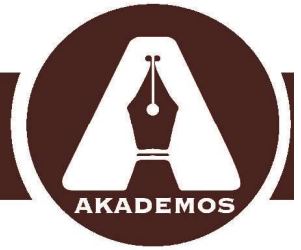
In *A Golden Age* and *The Good Muslim* Tahmima Anam has brilliantly depicted the passionate story of a mother during the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971 and in the post-war Bangladesh. With her protagonist, Mrs Rehana Haque, a middle aged widow, and some other remarkable characters such as Maya, the daughter of Mrs Rehena, Sultana, Nazia and



Piya Anam has relocated the traditional role of women as only exploited, tortured, raped, submissive and passive in the war history. Unlike the war victims, they are active, liberal, brave and courageous women who not only defy the men controlled society to live in it, but also show the way for their contemporary women how to cope with the double colonization faced by every woman in their home and the society. Mrs Rehena loses her husband in a very earlier stage of her life. Then she also loses her babies to their uncle, Faiz. But she does not lose her hope. Finally she manages to get back the custody of her son and daughter. And her role in getting back her children from the custody of their uncle and aunt as well as inspiring them to liberate Bangladesh is truly inspiring and unconventional. Even while she is being displaced from her abode, she always cherishes the hope to get a country of their own irrespective of their multiple culture, religion and even language.

Rehana is the character for whom there can be no greater religion than humanism. She is religious from her mind, prays Namaz and teaches her children Islamic codes and conducts. But she always tries to impose humanity in her loving children and hence she had not taught them the proper lessons about Jannat and the afterlife. Religion does never kill her logical sensibility and the sense of humanity. During the troublesome period of Bangladesh Liberation War, she keeps Hindu tenants Mr. and Mrs. Sengupta in her home, Shona. She is habituated with the public gathering with Muslims as well as Hindus without any discrimination. She enjoys an unrestricted life when it comes as a matter of socialisation. She drinks whisky, loves gathering, goes to watch Cleopatra in theatre and Cricket match in the stadium with her children and Hindu tenants. Mrs Rehena constantly promotes secularism and humanism and thus contributes in the formation of national identity of Bangladesh.

Rehana again proves herself as a true lover of her country when Sohail and Maya express their wishes to actively participate into the Bangladesh Liberation War. Sohail participates in the freedom movement directly and Maya goes to West Bengal to help the refugee camps where almost 1 million Bangladeshi refugees take shelter. Rehana does not prevent them and offers a full support to her children as the fate of Bangladesh seems to her the fate of her own children. During the war time Rehana symbolically emerges as a motherly figure to the whole nation. Like a true war heroin she sacrifices a lot to form Bangladesh as a nation and Bengal as a national language against Urdu, though it is her own mother tongue. It is not that she only indirectly contributes to the war; she helps directly utilizing her skill of Urdu to privilege the Bengali freedom fighters against the Urdu speaking West Pakistani armies. She allows Sohail and his friends to use her house and garden to lead their



movement. It could destroy her family. But she never worries about her own self, never thinks that she may be tortured and raped; her only motto is to support her sons to form a nation where they will have their own definite identity. Now she is not only the mother of Sohail, but also the mother of every freedom fighter. She plays tricks on Pakistani armies to free Sabir, the husband of his son's beloved. The liberation of the country seems to her a sacred duty beyond the personal relationship and personal revenge. She even moves to Calcutta to help her daughter in the refugee camps sheltered by millions of Bangladeshi people. When Bangladesh becomes independent after a bloody episode and lots of sacrifices of lives, chastity, personal bonding, love and memory, Rehana shows how the selfless love conquers all even during the period of great crisis- "Today I have come here to tell you how we survive... I know what I have done. This war takes away so many boys only my son survives. This time so many girls burn only my girl left." (Anam 273-274).

Maya, the daughter of Mrs Rehana is another strong woman character who represents the active participation of women in the formation of the nation, Bangladesh. She is educated, free-willed, and liberal in her thoughts and actions. She believes in making the world a better place by each one contributing towards it. Maya dreams of a free Bangladesh. She is devastated when her friend Sharmeen is reported missing. The political upheavals and instability finally enter the microcosm of Rehana's family and thus enter into the life of Maya also. However, being a strong woman, Maya turns this loss into motivation. When the guerrilla activities begin from 'Shona', Maya starts helping the revolutionaries writing press releases. Eventually, when Maya finds out that Sharmeen was brutally raped, became pregnant, and lost her life at the cantonment hospital, she becomes furious. She decides to leave Dhaka and go to Calcutta to join a magazine writing press statements. She wants to tell the world about the brutal politics of West Pakistan and the genocide of Bengali people. She also visits the relief camps at Salt Lake to help people in distress. When the situation worsens in Dhaka, Rehana comes to visit her in Calcutta. Together, they help many distressed women in relief camps before returning to Bangladesh.

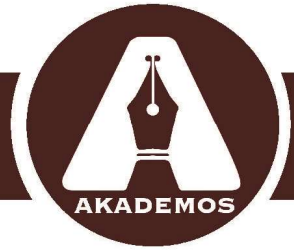
During the Liberation War, Pakistani soldiers rape and kill thousands of women. During this time, many women got pregnant and even lost their lives. Once Bangladesh got its independence, there was a huge population of rape survivors in the country. "Six days after the end of the war, the new Bangladeshi government publicly designated any woman raped in the war a birangona (a brave or courageous woman; the Bangladeshi state uses the term to mean 'war-heroine') as an attempt to reduce their social ostracism" ("History and the Birangona"). But people from their own society refused to accept them. Their own families



did not offer them space in their homes. The women survivors feel, “despite the ‘double violence’ they experienced arrest and torture for fighting for freedom and rape because of their gender—there are no commemorative symbols to remind the nation of women’s sacrifices and contributions on behalf of national freedom” (Saikia 105). Anam depicts the plight of women who were warriors of war and turned into victims of sexual violence through the characters like Sharmeen and Piya. Many of these women were punished for fighting against the Pakistani army and their ruthless laws. Despite having paid an unbearable price for loyalty to their country, their own male partners refused to accept them and they never got their respect back. While men survivors were called heroes of the war and revered for their brave participation, women did not get their deserving position.

In *The Good Muslim*, the larger ruptures within the Bangladeshi national identity in the years of disillusionment after the euphoria of Independence, when the country witnessed political dictatorship and overall degeneration of the values they had fought for, are evident in the disruption of the Haque family in the post war Bangladesh. This is especially revealed in the fragmentation and the distance between the siblings, Sohail and Maya. While Sohail had taken up the path of religion by joining the Islamist Movement of the Tablighijamaat, it was Maya who remained loyal to the secular, Marxist inflected nationalism that provided a sense of solidarity during the war years. The woman figures like Maya try to keep the secular identity of Bangladesh. Maya’s character as a freedom fighter evolves in the second novel *The Good Muslim*. Maya learned as a village doctor that the revolution had not changed rural Bangladesh. It is marked by ignorance, superstitions, poverty, patriarchal domination, immorality, above all political violence and religious fanaticism, where Nazia is punished by her husband, as the child she gave birth suffered from Down’s syndrome and the child looked different. The ignorant husband punished the innocent wife and felt that he was “protecting the village and the name of the village.” (Anam, *Good Muslim* 13).

It is significantly shown through Maya’s experiences that the process of nation making is done in terms of the land and women owned or lost. “Women’s bodies mark the vulnerability of borders and in other sense, women embody the borders.” (12) This image finds clarity when Tikka Khan’s soldiers of the enemy nation try to control Bangladesh by looting homes and conducting mass rapes. So, here we find that. “the enemy male wants to invade the national space” by abducting the women, stealing the identity and diluting the national culture by installing their own culture; and the easiest way they presume to do this is by raping the women and leaving their culture to grow in their wombs and subsequently they expect the native culture

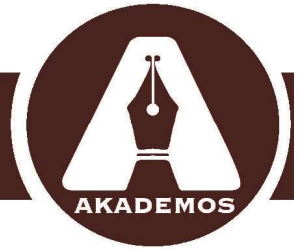


to fade away and their own culture to flourish in a new land. Consecutively, the new born nation sees its national honour to be held in the bodies of women. Women's purity comes in the foreground. On the one hand, the women who had lost their son in the war were given the title of "Shaheed Janani, Mother of Martyrs" and were accepted in the newly formed nation; on the other hand, the raped women were not even accepted by their families. Though they were given the hollow title of "Birangonas, war heroines" but they only could be merged in the national property by making them pure after the washing away of the enemy culture engulfed in their wombs.

The national leader of the new born nation, Mujibar Rahaman also "promised to take care of the woman" as such, rehabilitation camps were built for women; but, "he had said he didn't want the children of war" and so, mass abortions were performed in those camps. Ritu Menon in her essay "Do Women Have a Country" while speaking of the aftermath of partition of India, and says that the rehabilitation of women "was a crucial aspect of the state's perception of itself as benign and paternalistic, and in its definition of itself as socialist, democratic, welfarist – and secular." (46) In *The Good Muslim* too, we find that the national identity of benignity is created through the rehabilitation camps where Maya as a doctor was "tasked with telling the women that their families would embrace them as heroes of the war" (Anam, *Good Muslim* 28) although she knew that it was a complete lie. Thus, in the nation making process the national identity is formed by the patriarchal government and it decides what to be accepted and what not.

In every nation making, a national story of the struggle for independence is written and in this story only the grand narratives of the patriarchal nationalists' struggle is portrayed but the suppressed narratives of the women are nowhere written, as if women are nothing to do in such a struggle. Towards the end of the novel, Anam presents Maya as the voice of the nationalist, who speaks and writes about the struggle of the women in the nationalist movement. She through her persuasive articles of the true stories of the plight of women, makes possible the truth commission to be established where the voice of the 'Biranganas' like Piya is heard. In these two novels Anam has brilliantly depicted the active contribution of women figures in the formation of the identity of Bangladesh.

Thus, women though are social members of a nation, but in every nation building process, their role in political subjects is always ignored or suppressed; whereas men are glorified as "the people who would make their victory into a country, who would write the constitution and give them passports and anthems." (Anam, *Good Muslim* 21) But Anam



suggests that women can also raise their silenced voices by writing, as writing is an effective means of subversion, and consequently, it challenges the patriarchal hierarchy in the discourse of nation building. Finally, the epilogue of the novel generates the hope for a democratic alternative to the grand narratives where the hidden histories of the women are opened to the multiplicity for recognition.

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