

Exploring the Bangladesh Liberation War: A Study of Tahmima Anam's Select Novels.

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Abstract

Tahmima Anam is a Bangladeshi-born novelist, who writes about her homeland highlighting the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971 in her works. This paper attempts to enunciate the Liberation War of Bangladesh, its history, and the occurrence of the events that led to the War as present Bangladesh is essentially the outcome of the sacrifice, loss, and bloodshed of millions of people involved in the war of 1971. It marked the creation of two nations separating East Pakistan from West Pakistan and forming a new nation called Bangladesh on 16th December 1971. The East Pakistanis wanted to preserve their culture, ethnicity, and identity as Bengali Muslims which was not possible in United Pakistan and this led to the Liberation War of Bangladesh. The 1971 war has a great impact on the creation of an independent identity for the Bangladeshi people. The stance for an independent national identity created the zeal to fight for their rights and self-recognition. The effects of war have always been engraved on the minds of the survivors as it is engulfed with human suffering, emotions, and violence. The paper will explore the Liberation War of Bangladesh, the struggle, pain, and hardship portrayed through the characters in Tahmima Anam's select novels namely *A Golden Age* and *The Good Muslim*.

Keywords: Bangladesh, History, Nation, Identity, Violence.

Tahmima Anam is a Bangladeshi-born novelist, her debut novel *A Golden Age* (2007), is a trilogy followed by *The Good Muslim* (2011) and *The Bones of Grace* (2016) which are fictionalized history of the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971. For this paper, only her first two works - *A Golden Age* and *The Good Muslim* are analysed. In *A Golden Age*, the novel starts with Rehana Haque's fight for the custody of her children after the death of her husband and how she has struggled to earn a good living for the sake of her children, Sohail and Maya. It also focuses on the Liberation War and how Rehana and her children got involved in the independence movement. The second novel, *The Good Muslim*, opens as an independent Bangladesh, a struggling young nation trying to find its foothold, still ravaged by wartime violence. Anam has shifted the focus of her story from the mother Rehana to her children Maya and Sohail who were both former revolutionaries and how the Liberation war has affected and changed their lives completely. When Maya has returned to Dhaka to nurse her ailing mother and is devastated by the changes that her household has gone through. She had been away for more than a decade, during which period she was working as a village doctor, giving up her dream of becoming a surgeon. She had left home basically because she was unable to bear her brother's transformation from a freedom fighter to a devout Muslim. In both, the works Liberation War is represented alongside the story of love, compassion, and the survival of the Haque family. It is about the survival of Rehana and her children Sohail and Maya during the Liberation War and how it has affected them individually.

The Partition of India was a forerunner that led to the Bangladesh Liberation War and the formation of Bangladesh. The yearning for a separate Muslim homeland became a political movement that led to the formation of Pakistan. Ironically, the formation of Pakistan was based on religion, but religion was not able to hold West Pakistan and East Pakistan together, creating a new nation called Bangladesh. Nationalism is an ideology that places the nation at the center of its concerns and seeks to promote its well-being. Anthony Smith observes nationalism in his book *Nationalism: Theory, Ideology, History* as “An ideological movement for attaining and maintaining the autonomy, unity, and identity for a population which some of its members deem to constitute an actual or potential “nation” ” [9]. Nations are not perennial; they can be formed, and human will and effort play an important part in the process. Willem Van Schendel argues in *A History of Bangladesh* that “The liberation war of 1971 was the delta’s third big shock of the twentieth century. After the devastating famine of 1943/4 and the Partition of 1947, it was now the armed conflict that engulfed the delta” [161] which held the integrity of Pakistan at stake. Anam also states in her novel *A Golden Age* “National integrity, religious integrity, this is what we are fighting for” [187] as they stand united to revolt for independence. The Bangladesh Liberation War involved unparalleled human struggles, brutal genocide during the war, and their ultimate urge for freedom which led Maya to pen down the struggle and reality in an article that was never accepted to publish entitled ““The World Looks on as Bangladesh Bleeds: A Cry for Help’ by Miss Sheherezade Maya Haque” [85] (Anam, 2011). To comprehend the history of the Liberation War it is necessary to explore the events surrounding the 1971 Liberation War that turned Bangladesh into an independent sovereign state.

The West Pakistan and the East Pakistan were miles apart which also caused communication barriers, the government headquarters were established in the Western Wing, and the ultimate powers lay in the West. The political representations of the different ethnic groups were not equal and the elite groups of West Pakistan dominated the Government. In 1952, to protest against the imposition of Urdu as the sole official language of United Pakistan, the language movement erupted which can be seen as the first movement of self-determination by East Pakistan. The language movement can be seen as the precursor to the national movement- the nationwide struggle against the exploitation faced by the East Pakistanis. However, throughout the reign of military General Ayub Khan, the Eastern Wing suffered immense losses. Khan’s government concentrated and favoured the Western Wing exclusively and the political parties of the Eastern Wing were prevented from propagating and participating in the elections. The discontentment of the Eastern Wing against the government heightened when security measures were neglected to defend the Eastern Wing during the war between India and Pakistan in 1965. This led to feelings of insecurity, betrayal, and anger which ultimately intensified the desire for autonomy. In 1966, a Six-Point Programme demanding autonomy for the Eastern wing was adopted which spearheaded the national liberation movement led by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, leader of the Awami League. Though the Six Point Demands gathered widespread support from the Eastern Wing no support was received from the Western Wing and as a result, the Six-Point Programme was rejected.

After Ayub Khan was forced to step down in March 1969, General Yahya Khan, Commander-in-Chief attained dominance over united Pakistan. Yahya chose a different path from Ayub, promising to hold the first general elections for the National Assembly, and eventually fulfilled his pledge in 1970. Their hope to restore mutual peace and cooperation between the two wings was soon shattered after the declaration of the election results as Awami League, a dominant political party of the Eastern wing stood victorious against the Western wing’s political parties. Willem Van Schendel claims “This huge success gave the Awami League an absolute majority in Pakistan’s 300-seat National Assembly, something that hardly

anybody had foreseen. The second largest party in the assembly (with eighty-one seats) was the Pakistan People's Party, headed by Bhutto" [125]. Hence, for the first time in history, a political party known as Awami League from the Eastern Wing was able to access power in Pakistan. Following the victory of the Awami League, the demands for the development of East Pakistan could no longer be ignored, but soon a conspiracy was devised as it did not meet the interest of the elite political parties in the Western Wing. Dominant political leaders of the political parties in the Western Wing including Zulfikar Ali Bhutto of Pakistan People's Party and other army officials convinced Yahya Khan to cancel the session of the National Assembly. This act of postponing in honouring the verdict of the 1970 general elections led the Awami League headed by Mujibur Rahman, to push forward the liberation struggle for the attainment of complete freedom.

Thus, civil unrest spread over East Pakistan along with protests and calls for independence. Anthony Mascarenhas in his book *The Rape of Bangladesh* explains how the leader of the Awami League, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, who was also known as "Bangabandhu" cried out at the top of his voice to uplift the spirit of the Bangladeshi people by declaring "Our struggle this time is a struggle for freedom. Our struggle this time is a struggle for independence. Joi Bangla!" [101] which eventually ignited the struggle for the Liberation of Bangladesh. In Anam's *A Golden Age*, the participation of Rehana and her children, Sohail and Maya conform to that spirit of revolution- which led to the Liberation of Bangladesh. After a long and continuous struggle for independence, the dark spell finally broke on 25 March 1971 when Rehana and her children heard the declaration of independence by Major Zia on the radio "*I, Major Zia, Provisional Commander-in-Chief of the Bangladesh Liberation Army, hereby proclaim, on behalf of our great national leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the independence of Bangladesh. I also declare we have already formed a sovereign, legal government under Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. I appealed to all nations to mobilize public opinion in their respective countries against the brutal genocide in Bangladesh*" [67, 68]. The fight for ultimate independence broke out and Rehana along with her children, Sohail and Maya participated in the freedom movement. The occurrence of the event was led by the negligence and discrimination of the West Pakistanis against the East Pakistanis. West Pakistan dominated politically, socially, and economically over East Pakistan which led to the Liberation War of Bangladesh.

Postcolonial life is often a bitter contest between further fragmentation into a multitude of real or imagined ethnic communities and the consolidation of a vague consensus about real or imagined national identity. Identity is a description or, in other words, the definition of existence and belongingness. Belonging to a country has a great influence on adopting and reinforcing national identity. Kwame Anthony Appiah in his book *The Lies That Bind: Rethinking Identity* writes "Each person's sense of self is bound to be shaped by his or her own background, beginning with family but spreading out in many directions- to nationality, which binds us to places; to gender, which connects each of us with roughly half the species; and to such categories as class, sexuality, race and religion, which transcend our local affiliations" [xii, xiii]. Rehana suffers from an identity crisis at different levels, being born in Calcutta during undivided India and later moving to Dhaka after her marriage to Iqbal which became her home. She was seldom questioned by her daughter Maya to prove her nationality as a Bangladeshi to which she answers "This is my home. Your father's home" [91] and that she belongs to this place i.e., Dhaka. However, she felt the need to do something more for her country as both her children were active participants as freedom fighters. So, she along with her friends, Mrs. Rahman and Mrs. Akram started sewing blankets for the refugees which they named rooftop projects. When Mrs. Akram asked her about the urgency and need of sewing the blankets for the refugees she stated "Why not? Everyone has to make sacrifices, why not me? It's my country too"

[95]. Hence, Rehana also contributed to the revolutionist movement by sewing blankets with her companions whereas, Sohail and Maya, joined the Resistance and communist party respectively. Rehana's contribution does not end there as she also gives shelter to the Mukti Bahini freedom fighters in her house (Shona) because Sohail has asked permission to use it as a hiding place for guerrillas and weapons, to which she willingly agreed. The newly built house, Shona is not only helpful in bringing back the children from Lahore and re-uniting the Haque family; it also serves as a refuge to the guerrillas of the Mukti Bahini. It was all her love and massive support for her children that she was willing to give shelter in 'Shona' to the underground intelligence.

However, Sohail's participation in the Liberation War of Bangladesh as a freedom fighter transformed him beyond recognition. In *The Good Muslim*, Anam states "The change in Sohail began as soon as he returned from the war" [66]. Sohail's going into silence and not revealing the picture of the war days to Maya form a drift in their relationship as she was eager to know the stories of war so "She devoured the story, begged him for more. How greedy she is. He wants her to be quiet so she can hear the roar in his head, thinking that if she could hear the roar, the roar of uncertainty and the roar of death, she might understand" [124]. Before the outbreak of war, there was a strong bond between brother and sister, they were best friends who shared their dreams and secrets. They had been revolutionaries and had shared the pains of war but now they seemed torn apart after the war. While Maya remains the same, carrying the struggle and victory along, her brother is alienated and detached from all the worldly amenities. He became silent and refused to join the celebration of freedom, his drowning in silence and change in attitude disturbed Rehana, as she was unable to bear the sudden changes in her son. So, it was his mother who gave the Holy Book, the Quran to Sohail since "The book has helped her through so many difficult times, times she could not imagine surviving" [92]. He was vigorously traumatised by the experiences of war but by reading the Quran, he found peace and solitude which led to his transformation from a revolutionist to a conservative Muslim. His newly found identity as a 'good' Muslim helped him to battle the traumatic war memories. The etymological meaning of the word 'trauma' which is of Greek origin is wound. But, in psychology, it does not refer to any physical wound. According to Caruth, it refers to the wound of the mind that breaches the mind's experiences of time, self, and the world. The trauma of war leads to post-war transformations, as Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience* explains "trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way it's very unassimilated nature - the way it was precisely not known in the first instance - returns to haunt the survivor later on" [4]. The involvement in the gruesome war has traumatised and affected Sohail unconditionally, as the past keeps lingering in his mind and cannot be easily forgotten.

Wars have always had an impact on the survivors. Rehana, Maya, and Sohail's lives have changed drastically after their involvement in the freedom movement. The colonising spirit which was carried by the West Pakistanis against the East Pakistanis has been portrayed through the dominance of power and how it uplifted the zeal to fight for complete independence. A Golden Age ends with an optimistic note of the formation of the new nation 'Bangladesh'. After nine months of complete struggle for independence that led to violence, bloodshed, and sacrifices of lives, love, personal bonding, and chastity, Bangladesh became an independent nation. Rehana's selfless love is triumphant and defeats the war as she exclaims "I know what I have done. This war that has taken so many sons has spared mine. This age that has burned so many daughters has not burned mine. I have not let it" [287]. The aftermath of the War eventually leaves the characters looking for an identity that they had dreamt about. In *The Good Muslim*, Sohail, questions his identity as a post-war hero, rejecting the title of a freedom fighter is caught in the conflict of

recognising himself due to his conversion as a staunch follower of Allah. The depiction of physical, psychological, and spiritual changes of the characters during the pre-war, war and post-war period of Bangladesh has been explored in Anam's works.

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