



## Representation of Religion and Nationalism in the Select Novels of Tahmima Anam.

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### ABSTRACT

This paper explores how the conflicts between nationalism and religion during and after the Bangladesh Liberation War (1971) play a dominant role among the people of Bangladesh and how they navigate their ways of life after civil war. War always brings countless harms, deaths and destruction, even in nation-building. Accordingly, Bangladeshi women to a large extent became victims of subjugation, repression and rape because of their ethnic, lingual and cultural background. The 1971 Liberation war was fought under the banner of Bengali nationalism that outlined Bengali ethnicity, language and culture. East Pakistan claimed to be a new secular country but after the war being influenced by the political tricks a large number of Bangladeshi people took shelter to extreme dogmatism which led to a catastrophe of a country or nation.

**Key Words:** Religion, War, Nationalism, Independence, Identity.

After 9/11 there is an increasing flood of xenophobia in the form of Islamophobia propagating around the world considering Muslims as either liberal or radical. It is mostly since then that the category of good Muslims and bad Muslims came into existence. As a young novelist Tahmima Anam had tried to explore the rise of Islamic radicalism in lieu of liberal secularism through the intimate lens of Haque family at the backdrop of war of independence from Pakistan in 1971 maintaining her diasporic identity crisis. While *A Golden Age* (2007) narrates the war from the experiences of the widowed matriarch Rehana, *The Good Muslim*

(2011) focusses on the aftermath of Bangladeshi war of independence. In *The Golden Age*, Rehana Haque struggles through the Bangladesh Liberation War because both of her children were deeply involved with the war efforts being titillated by the spunk of nationalism. Bangladeshi War of Independence broke out under the leadership of Mujeeb-ur-Rehman against West Pakistan despite of being a Muslim country which indicates that this was not a war of religion or against religion but unfortunately after the war some people responded towards extreme fundamentalism. The Bangladeshi War of Independence was basically about ethnic minority fighting against the majority. It was basically Bengali nationalism as Bengali were oppressed in terms of not being permitted to speak in Bengali, to wear as they wish and they had no freedom in their expression of culture and identity. In such a situation, Rehana struggles to keep her children safe but she has to witness a heart-rending dilemma. The novel shows her unprecedented courage, determination, love and duty towards her children Maya and Sohail.

Because of increasing influence of Tablighi Jamat, an Islamic movement across the country Sohail's involvement in the *MuktiBahini* (the East Pakistan guerrilla) is wiped off and he profoundly turns to religious extremism as disclosed in the second novel of Bengal trilogy while Maya who also took part in *MuktiBahini* remains unchanged. So here women remain unchanged while male counterpart stoops to extreme dogmatism but unfortunately enough, women were treated badly during and after the War. Even, *sari*, a form of female everyday clothing worn by Bengali women was considered morally and religiously improper and Pakistani women were advised against wearing it. This prejudice paves a way towards erasure of Bengali identity in the new Pakistani Consciousness. During the war, Bengali women were rape-victims who were either raped by enemy soldiers or gang-raped by soldiers in the camp where they were kept as captive for many days. These rape-victim women were living a miserable life with no future and no place to go as they were abandoned by their families. Maya consoled those women and had performed many abortions while Sohail who is now a devout Muslim is not concerned with the rape-victims of Bengal. But sexual violation is regarded as serious sexual crime in Islam.

An incident during the time of the Islamic prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon him) would form the basis of later jurisprudence of rape. When a woman went out for prayer at dawn, a man attacked her on the way and raped her. She shouted but the rapist escaped. When another man came by, she complained: "That man did such and such to me." And when a company of the Emigrants came by, she said:

"That man did such and such to me. They went and seized the man whom they thought had raped her and

brought him to her. She said: "Yes, this is the man." Then they brought him to the Messenger of God. When he (the Prophet) was about to pass sentence, the man who (actually) had raped her stood up and said: "Messenger of God I am the man who did it to her." He (the Prophet) said to her: "Go away, for God has forgiven you." But he told the man some good words [Abū Dāwūd said: meaning the man who was seized], and of the man who had had intercourse with her, he said: "Stone him to death."

So it's total hypocrisy in the name of a religion as shown in the character of Sohail. Infact, it's because of Sohail who is outwardly religious and because of not having concern towards his six years old son, Zaid he becomes totally wild, loitering here and there, even stealing people's money. Sohail did not care neither about his wife Silvi, whom he loved so much in his youth nor for his ailing mother, Rehana. It indicates that Sohail is definitely far from the shadow of nationalism but he is also definitely not able to reach the luminous halo of Islam. Indeed, he was fallen deeply in the quagmire of religious extremism, fanaticism and extreme political fundamentalism. It was not religion, but politics in the name of religion where Sohail was trapped profoundly. Admittedly we must say that the novels also shed light on how Muslims around the world who are serving humanity, are judged on the basis of merely race, religion and ethnicity, the result of which is the Muslim community after 9/11 has to face arising tide of identity crisis in the form of Islamophobia.

Tahmima Anam's select novels namely *A Golden Age* (2007) and *The Good Muslim* (2011) are primarily set at the backdrop of Bangladesh Liberation War. In order to understand the novels historically let us go through the history of Bangladesh during civil war, setting of the novels. In the partition of 1947, the British India was divided into two independent dominion states, India and Pakistan. Pakistan was formed with the religion of Islam as the core cause of its foundation, while India was established with the majority of Hindus. Pakistan had two parts- East and West, which were separated by about 1200 miles. Due to physical remoteness, political and cultural polarity and discrimination in economy and powers, East Pakistani started protesting against West Pakistan which eventually caused the eruption of the civil war in the year 1971. Both East and West Pakistan remained united merely because of their religious identity. Indeed, religious sentiment has always been present, otherwise what was East Pakistan could have merged with Hindu Indian state of West Bengal, where the same language is spoken. So, it was not for the cause of only Bengali nationalism but it was in the name of religion. But ultimately the cause of religion became hazy and the cause of politics and power spoke predominantly. This eventually made the people of East Pakistan infuriated and rebellious. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the leader of Awami League in East Pakistan explicitly demanded more economic and political powers. It was definitely

politics of Awami League who used the sentiment of nationalism, the righteous status of Bengali language in Bangladeshi soil. Incidentally a horrible cyclone hit East Pakistan in 1970. It was called Bhola Cyclone. It killed about 500,000 people and many more people became homeless. At this crucial juncture, the government was not concerned to alleviate the extreme miserable conditions wrought by the cyclone which resulted in the ignition of a civil war.

*A Golden Age* was published in 2007 in the United Kingdom by Canongate Books as the first novel of the trilogy. It tells the condition of Bangladesh during Bangladesh Liberation War through the eyes of one family. The novel was awarded the prize for Best First Book in the Commonwealth Writers' Prize 2008. It was shortlisted for the 2007 Guardian First Book Award. In this novel, the major character Rehana Haque along with her son Sohail and daughter Maya witness the turbulent time of uncertainty and terror and how the (west) Pakistani administration carried out its brutality on the Bengali speaking people in Bangladesh. It was at this crucial condition, Bangladeshi war of independence under the leadership of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman broke out. In such a situation, Rehana struggles to keep her children safe and she faces a heart-breaking dilemma. It is pathetic for a widow mother to leave her children for the sake of a nation. Anam finely reveals the status of women during Bangladesh Liberation War in a male dominated society and their struggle against various misogynistic norms as portrayed through the central character Rehana Haque.

In the novel, after the death of her husband Iqbal, Rehana was compelled to witness a hiatus from her children as the court-order came in favour of their uncle Faiz considering the children would grow up flawlessly with their uncle and aunt who were still living in Lahore, West Pakistan. After some years, Rehana regains custody of the children, now adult teens. It is the year of 1971 in Dhaka, Rehana Haque was troubled by the then condition of East Pakistan when most turbulent times are looming large in the horizon. She was tormented by the political turmoil prevailing in the country. Dark clouds were fast gathering in the sky and she was anguished apprehending that her children will soon be in perils. Sohail and Maya are now students of Dhaka University, proudly join the *Mukti Bahini* in the war. They are loyal to the secular Bengali nationalism and resolutely fight for the independence of East Pakistan from the clutches of West Pakistan. Even the Haque family harboured a dominant national sentiment to achieve independence, as evident by Sohail's proposal of a flag of their envisioned Bangladesh and he presents it to his mother, Rehana. In such a situation Rehana is unable to keep her children safe, thereby her duty for her children and the bond of love among family members turn into a bond of duty to the nation. Rehana Haque, who at the initial position was not sure of her position on

the brink of war, now is pursued by her children to go to the meeting at Racecourse Ground in Dhaka on 7<sup>th</sup> March, 1971, where Sheikh Mujibur Rahman had given a fiery speech regarding the civil war. Now Rehana's life is about to change. During the course of the novel Maya secretly joins women's league to work as a journalist to report on the advancement of the liberation fighters while Sohail starts making a training camp to secretly host a party of guerrillas. Accordingly, Sohail along with his friend Joy and others, conducts an operation of a bomb blast at Dhaka intercontinental hotel. Though the operation was successful but the major, one of the members of the team got injured, who took shelter at *Shona* and nursed to health by the care of Rehana herself.

During the course of the novel *A Golden Age*, Silvi, Sohail's childhood-love gets married with Lieutenant Sabeer Mustafa and Sohail accepts the loss of his love thinking that it is not the right time for lamenting this loss. He is more concerned about the fate of the nation, not about his private affair. In the meanwhile, on the brink of the war, Silvi's husband is captured by the West Pakistani soldiers and is detained. Silvi's mother pleads Rehana to get Sabeer out. While Rehana decides to try, Sohail also appeals on behalf of his love, Silvi. Therefore, with the help of her brother-in-law, Faiz, an officer in West Pakistani army Rehana is able to get Sabeer out. The action now shifts from Dhaka to Calcutta while Rehana travels to Calcutta and works at refugee camp where Bangladeshi born people took shelter in Calcutta in order to secure themselves from the verge of war. Rehana and her daughter Maya witness the sufferings and helplessness of the homeless people and their struggle for identity being emigrated to a new nation crossing the border. Therefore, they return to Dhaka at the height of the crisis when Sohail prepares to participate in another operation. Now all the three major characters— Rehana, Sohail and Maya are politically conscious and are not ready to bow down before the oppressive West Pakistani regime. Rehana herself serves the movement by nursing an injured Major and sewing rags for the refugees sheltered in Calcutta. Notably, Rehana Haque is not totally flawless and innocuous character. She is a woman of blood and flesh with natural frailties and vulnerabilities. While the major is getting well from injuries and. Rehana reveals to him her long buried secret of how she tried to get a financial support to gain her children in her lap. She was compelled to bribe the judge to reverse the verdict and she was in want of money for the round-trip plane tickets to Lahore to take back the children and to build another building in her plot so that she could rent that out for a steady income. She has also uncovered to him that when she went to a banker in the hope of getting a loan, she was sexually harassed by the banker. In such a crucial situation even she agreed to marry a blind wealthy widower named T. Ali. At a time when she was invited by T. Ali in his

house to show his deceased wife's bedroom. Rehana accidentally broke the mirror of a dressing table. This incident infuriated T. Ali so much that he shouted at her and told her to get out immediately. Thus, the final rays of hope to get a support of guardianship for her children became a total fiasco.

*The Good Muslim* is the second novel of the trilogy, released four years later than the first one, in 2011, by the publisher Canongate. While *A Golden Age* is set before and during the liberation war of Bangladesh, *The Good Muslim* is set a decade after the war. In *The Good Muslim* Anam uncovered the plot on a further level focusing on the aftermath of the Bangladeshi war of independence. After the independence of Bangladesh the lives of two of the main characters, namely Sohail and Maya have changed and they respond differently towards the new political milieu of the country. In 1984, Maya returns home after long seven years upon receiving the sad news of her sister-in-law Silvi's death. Upon arriving she becomes annoyed and disheartened finding her brother completely transformed. Maya and Sohail, the two siblings of Rehana Haque were fond of each other. They had almost same way of thinking and ideology but after the war, an ideological hiatus is made in between them. Maya remains loyal to secular, Marxist infected nationalism but Sohail joins the Tablighi Jamat, a proselytising Islamic movement. Sohail transform from a freedom fighter to a radical Muslim. It was not possible for Maya to tolerate that how a freedom fighter transforms himself to an extreme dogmatism, thereby Maya, a practical and calculative citizen of Bangladesh is forced to leave her home to serve people in the countryside. Witnessing the ferocious, bloody and intolerable condition during the civil war in Bangladesh, Sohail endeavours to find solace in religion. Accordingly, he tries to become a good Muslim and his influence increases day by day in his locality. Henceforth, he engages himself in religious movement and is not concerned about his family affairs. For him family affairs are more worldly things. He does not permit his son named Zaid allowing him to go to school because Sohail thinks it to be modern education which he does not like. While Sohail preaches people to be good, his son, Zaid is loitering, stealing and lying in the locality. At this crucial juncture, Rehana Haque remains passive knowing well the hostility between Sohail and Maya. It indicates that Rehana is not opposing Sohail in his attempt to bowing down against religious fundamentalism.

There is no denying the fact that Islam never promotes a man to be unconcerned about his family affairs and never preaches not to let your son inflict towards education, rather Islam emphasizes on education and civilizes a citizen having deep-rooted nationalism in his heart. Sohail is taking the guise of pseudo-Islamic ideology, not the ideologies as preached by the prophet Mohammed fourteenth hundred years ago. Here,

Tahmima Anam, who herself is inclined towards Marxist ideology, has keenly made sarcasm on religion providing the title of the novel *The Good Muslim*. Was Sohail, the representative of Muslim in Bangladesh after the independence, good as Muslim? — He was definitely a Muslim in appearance but in reality he was a fundamentalist and extremist too. He was divorcing himself from the luminous halo of secular nationalism and took a shelter under the veil of radicalism. So, the golden age is, therefore transformed into an era of golden radicalism, from national identity to religious identity, from secularism to political conspiracy, from liberalism to fanaticism and the like.

The 1947 partition saw the two countries India and Pakistan projecting religious identification but the birth of the new nation Bangladesh was regarded as a secular liberal country. But unfortunately, Bangladesh turned drastically into a violent country. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the man behind liberating the nation from the colonizer—Urdu-speaking West Pakistan, was assassinated in 1975. The golden age of Bangladesh, therefore was placed by a new brand of nationalism—the re-emergence of religious identity under the leadership of Zia Ul-Haq and General Ershad. Hence, the people of Bangladesh were again colonised under the hegemony of conservativeness. *The Good Muslim*, thus explores the ambiguous milieu of a nation and the hard times to reconcile the ambivalence of national identity. This is how, Tahmima Anam unrolls the social contradictions in the new nation Bangladesh and the struggle to alleviate the societal polarities.

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