

# Nation, Memory, Voice: A Study of Gendered Narrative in Tahmima Anam's *A Golden Age*

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After achieving its independence in 1971, Bangladesh underwent the transformative effects of civil war in terms of postcolonial national identity, ethnicity, class, caste and religion. The historical circumstances produced significant “material and ideological changes that affected women,”<sup>1</sup> whose integration into the national struggles was different from that of the men. In this context, *A Golden Age* as a literary text sheds light on the “invisible” history and experiences of third world women in Bangladesh.

Since this study looks at gendered narratives and gender roles mediated by nationalism in the public and private spheres, concepts of femininity (motherhood and widowhood) and masculinity (in the national struggle), and the effects of migration and generational dynamics on national identity are of key importance. Concepts of collective memory and national identity remain significant to this analysis.

## ***A GOLDEN AGE: PARTITION, MOTHERHOOD AND NATIONAL IDENTITY***

This study reads Tahmima Anam's *A Golden Age* (2007) as a gendered narrative of collective memory, arguing that gendered positioning in public and private domains, as well as the concepts of femininity and masculinity in Bangladesh, played an essential and formative role in the construction of national identities.

Published over three decades after the foundation of Bangladesh in 1971, *A Golden Age* represents a woman's narrative of collective memory, which brings with it pertinent questions about the reproduction of national identity through events associated with the partition, women's ever changing roles in both public and private realms, motherhood, widowhood and sexuality during the struggle for independence. Based on the true story of Anam's grandmother, who experienced the war between West and East Pakistan, this novel provides a feminised perspective on national identity and domestic loss with historical and spatial distance. In the narrative, Rehana is described as a young Urdu-speaking Calcutta born widow who lives in the Bengali East in 1971.

### East and West Pakistan in 1971



The novel starts with the startlingly blunt words of a widow: “Dear Husband, I lost our children today,”<sup>2</sup> and presents her desperation as she resigns to her fate “My children are no longer my children.”<sup>3</sup> Young Rehana faces the tragedy of the death of her husband and her fight to keep her children, when her dead husband’s brother and his childless wife claim they could take better care of them. The first chapter begins with that day in 1959 when the court gives custody to her brother-in-law and his wife, who live in Lahore, (West Pakistan) while Rehana is in Dhaka (East Pakistan). The novel then jumps forward and is set in 1971, in Dhaka, the year of its war of independence, when East separated from West Pakistan and became Bangladesh. Rehana’s children, Maya and Sohail are now university students and living with their mother after she manages to get hold of some money without having to resort to remarriage for acquiring financial stability.

Despite her best efforts to protect her children, Rehana is unable to stop them from becoming involved in the events of the revolution. Representing the educated younger generation, Sohail and Maya actively contribute to the cause of independence of the Bengal East, and it is difficult to keep these matters hidden for long: “He’s too busy with his politics—he’ll never make a good husband . . .”<sup>4</sup> she hears Mrs Chowdhury say about Sohail. The comment stings because it is probably true. Her son Sohail joins a guerrilla group of freedom fighters and her daughter Maya goes to Calcutta to work in nearby refugee camps and write press releases.

Lately the children had little time for anything but the struggle. It had started when Sohail entered the university. Ever since ’48, the Pakistani authorities had ruled the eastern wing of the country like a colony. First they tried to force everyone to speak Urdu instead of Bengali. They took the jute money from Bengal and spent it on factories in Karachi and Islamabad.<sup>5</sup>

Rehana initially treats their political involvement with suspicion: “The Dhaka university students had been involved in the protests . . . Even Rehana could see the logic: what sense did it make to have a country in two halves, posed on either side of India like a pair of horns?”<sup>6</sup>

Although reluctant to support them first, Rehana soon finds herself enmeshed in the conflict—as a mother trying to protect her children. The shift in her thought process as well as her changing role as a woman who contributes to the war of independence is in sharp contrast to the idea of a masculinised collective identity and point toward the importance of private domestic space in the creation and reproduction of national identity.

Rather than be fearful of losing her children again, she supports them and their cause, finding herself on the opposite side of the conflict to her disapproving family who live in West Pakistan.

Rehana wondered what her sisters would make of her at this very moment. Guerillas at Shona. Sewing kathas on the rooftop. Her daughter at rifle practice. The thought of their shocked faces made her want to laugh. She imagined the letter she would write. Dear sisters, she would say. Our countries are at war; yours and mine. We are on different sides now. I am making pickles for the war effort. You see how much I belong here and not to you.<sup>7</sup>

The conflict of national identity that Rehana experiences becomes clearer during the civil war between the two wings of Pakistan after the partition of India. In the novel, the simile of “a pair of horns”<sup>8</sup> on either side of India explicates the difficulty of separation, as well as the construction of a Bengali national identity. Rehana’s national identity is shaped solely by her socio-cultural and gendered location within the national contexts of East and West Pakistan. She is a middle-class Muslim woman from Calcutta, and with her unconfirmed status as a Bengali woman speaking fluent Urdu—now the language of the

enemy—in East Pakistan, she holds an ambiguous status as far as traditional expectation in a divided nation is concerned. Throughout the narrative, one witnesses that concepts of femininity, such as widowhood and motherhood, are stressed upon, for they have a decisive impact upon Rehana's life as well as her role in the national resistance. As a widowed housewife, she had lost the custody of her children only to regain it after many years, and that too only when she is financially stable again.

In her struggle to find money, she even considers remarrying and faces risks of exposure to sexual harassment, something that she forcefully avoids. The patriarchal social structure and traditional gender roles, in this sense, are perpetuated through the family institution and restrict women's capacity to be active agents in society.<sup>9</sup> For Rehana, motherhood precedes all the other roles that she plays in her life, and this has a decisive role in her involuntary participation in the freedom movement. With her children's active participation in the movement, she becomes more interested in the political confusion and the destructive effects of war on her nation and family. Finally she gives in to her children's request to shelter refugees at Shona (their house), providing food and even going to the extent of hiding guerrillas there.

Thus, it becomes obvious how a private domestic space (Rehana's home, in this case) serves as a shelter for national resistance and leads to the creation of the national Bengali identity. Rehana's courage and support upgrades her position to that of a female "hero" who strives to protect her community against the outrage and take her place in the gendered narratives of collective memory. Developing the concept of collective memory, Maurice Halbwachs argued that individual memories are only understood within the context of a group, unifying the nation or community through time and space.<sup>10</sup> The individual memory (IM) comprises remembrances supported by individuals and reconstructed due to their interaction and determination with certain group(s). The remembrances would be constituted by experiences

lived by the individual himself, and the collective memory (CM), which comprises remembrances supported in a collectivity, is mostly the result of common IM.

The differential integration of women and men into the nationalist struggle of Bangladesh is also disclosed through men taking more active part in organising and joining the resistance than women: they are the warriors, while women are expected to do their bit in preserving national identity, to increase national awareness through media and communication, to assist men by working in refugee camps, and tending to the victims of the war or sheltering guerrillas in their houses. Kamila Shamsie observes: "One of the novel's great strengths is its decision to show war from the perspective of the women who cannot join the armed resistance and must instead find a way to live in the limbo world of a city in curfew."<sup>11</sup> On occasions, they even end up becoming victims of war because of their positioning as regards their gender and national identity. Sexual violence, or the fear of it, leads to the need for male protection. Maya's best friend, Sharmeen, dies in hospital after a sexual assault by enemy soldiers. On the night of the army occupation, Rehana's neighbour, Mrs. Chowdhury enforces an immediate marriage ceremony between her daughter Silvi and her fiancé Sabeer to save her daughter's "honor." Parveen, her brother-in-law's wife, on the other hand, (mis)uses her husband's position and political power to oppress Rehana and other women.

Anam balances the private history of a family against the public history of their nation. Never once does one lose sight of the upheaval of Dhaka in 1971, as she effortlessly weaves these stories into the personal lives of her characters. If one looks within the postcolonial and nationalist construct, women like Rehana have usually been identified as biological, symbolic and cultural "reproducers" of the nation, and these roles have substantially shaped women's obligations, rights and duties. In *Gender and Nation*, NiraYuval-Davis opines that constructions of nationhood usually involve specific notions

of womanhood and manhood and masculinity and femininity as a way of determining gender-roles.<sup>12</sup> Talking about the nationalist or masculinist bias in gendering the nation, where women and their roles are pushed to the periphery, she says that it is “women who reproduce nations biologically, culturally and symbolically.”<sup>13</sup> Butler argues that gender is “a stylized repetition of acts” and is real only to the extent that it is performed. The fact is that one is not essentially one but one becomes one through his or her acts. Butler in this context gives the reference to the “drags” who by their everyday gender rituals and, through this repetition of gendered actions reveal that gender is a performance; “a constructed identity”, “a performative accomplishment.”<sup>14</sup> Gender, according to West and Zimmerman, is not a personal trait; it is “an emergent feature of social situations: both as an outcome of and a rationale for various social arrangements, and as a means of legitimating one of the most fundamental divisions of society.”<sup>15</sup> As social construct, gender is considered an achieved status by feminist theory, typically (and not exclusively) one which is achieved very early in childhood (West and Zimmerman).

Thus, one sees that both gender and nation are constructs, and while gender is a social construct, nation, as Benedict Anderson famously argues, is an imagined political community. Homi K. Bhabha like many other thinkers, perhaps takes Benedict Anderson's book *Imagined Communities* (1991) as a starting point to think about nations. For him, nation is an idea; a discursive and cultural construct. It “is a system of cultural signification... the representation of social life rather than the discipline of social polity.”<sup>16</sup> These nations are “historically a male-constructed space”<sup>17</sup> and they commonly perpetuate a masculinised collective memory. The novel, however, radically represents “the differential integration of women and men into the national project.”<sup>18</sup> It establishes the fact that the construction of national identity is essentially rooted in the family setting or private domestic space, which is often seen as having minimal impact on the public sphere, through which masculine interpretations of

nationalism define themselves.

In nationalist movements, the roles of women are frequently restricted to being only “contributive” in the public sphere, while men are considered “the main movers of history” because they “organize and set parameters for nationalist movements”.<sup>19</sup> In this regard, *A Golden Age* draws attention to third world women’s critical status and changing roles in public and private spheres through a family’s experiences of nationalist struggle and controversial issues in Bangladesh (like those related to social, religious, linguistic and political matters). In the words of Anam:

After having interviewed more than a hundred survivors of the Bangladesh War for Independence, I realised it was the very small details that always stayed in my mind—the guerilla fighters who exchanged shirts before they went into battle, the women who sewed their best silk saris into blankets for the refugees. I realised I wanted to write a novel about how ordinary people are transformed by war, and once I discovered this, I turned to the story of my maternal grandmother, Musleha Islam, and how she became a revolutionary.<sup>20</sup>

In *Feminism Without Borders*, Chandra Talpade Mohanty suggests that third world women do not share totally the same history with women from other areas of the world due to their “particular inheritance of post-fifteenth-century-Euro-American-hegemony, the inheritance of slavery, enforced migration . . . colonialism, imperial conquest and genocide.”<sup>21</sup> However, they are unified by their experience of oppression, their opposition to war and war like situations, and shared goals. Their political struggle is usually concerned with their participation in organised movements. Women in these states are linked to the nation in various roles: “as biological reproducer members of ethnic collectivities . . . the transmitters of culture, as signifiers of ethnic/national groups, and participants in

national, economic, political and military struggles.”<sup>22</sup>

Although women appear to be the carriers of cultural values and traditions, and thus national identity, it would be wrong to assume that they can use these assigned roles on their own behalf. Freedom movement/ National struggle partially frees women from traditional restraints and allows them to take part in public and political spheres with men that were “disallowed under normal conditions”; yet, it also threatens their role as reproducers through religious, “communal, class and caste” hostilities like rape, forced pregnancy and torture.<sup>23</sup> Gendered parameters also style men as the “author and subject of the nation”, whilst women represent the nation itself and are expected to maintain its “purity.”<sup>24</sup>

The diasporic narrative of Anam investigates the issues of “the production of self and collective consciousness” by documenting “third world women’s life histories.”<sup>25</sup> Documenting such stories immensely helps communities sharing a particular history by preventing their collective consciousness from being lost. This also promises the “very possibilities of political consciousness and action” for females through telling their stories.<sup>26</sup> Rehana’s story highlights the often forgotten experience of women in war and the price that they are willing to pay for their collective cause. Rehana must bear wounds in the deepest part of her soul to save her children. She does not flinch while giving up the man she has grown to love, to save her son and herself. This story goes on to show that while a women’s role in war is different than that of a man’s, women hardly come out untouched.

## CONCLUSION

As a gendered narrative of national identity and collective memory, *A Golden Age* represents the transforming gender roles and understanding of femininity and masculinity in Bangladesh. The novel demonstrates that national struggles, political conflicts, generational dynamics

and migrant experiences have contributed to the improvement of women's status and roles on the public, private and national levels. Despite being challenged by set gender roles which were patriarchal, stifling and oppressive, women were actively involved in national movements and constituted a critical part of the collective memory of national independence.

As bearers of national identity and culture, women play a determining role in the reconstruction of national identity; however, very often, their involvement gets shaped or controlled by a masculinised nation-state and its traditions. Their transformation, therefore, triggers socio-cultural change and is detrimental in the preservation of the national identity. Anam says in her interview with Terry Hong that she is interested in women as heroes, in the unexpected ways that women are heroic.

*A Golden Age* thus promises hope of the transformation of the roles of third world women and draws attention to the significance of women's narratives of nation in preserving collective/national identity.

## NOTES

- 1 Lois A. West, *Feminist Nationalism* (Oxon: Routledge, 2013), 13.
- 2 Tahmima Anam, *A Golden Age* (London: John Murray, 2007), 3.
- 3 Anam, *A Golden*, 5.
- 4 Anam, *A Golden*, 32.
- 5 Anam, *A Golden*, 33.
- 6 Anam, *A Golden*, 33.
- 7 Anam, *A Golden*, 104.
- 8 See note 6 above.
- 9 Karyn Stapleton and John Wilson, "Gender, Nationality and Identity: A Discursive Study," *European Journal of Women's Studies* 11, no.1 (2004): 45.
- 10 Lewis A. Coser, ed and trans. *Maurice Halbwachson Collective Memory*, (University of Chicago Press. 1992), 2.
- 11 Kamila Shamsie, "Windows on a Mother's War," *The Guardian*. (March 2007), [www.theguardian.com/books/2007/mar/17/featuresreviews.guardianreview21](http://www.theguardian.com/books/2007/mar/17/featuresreviews.guardianreview21)
- 12 Nira Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation*. (London: Sage. 1997), 1.

- 13 Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation*, (London: Sage. 1997), 2.
- 14 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 179.
- 15 Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman, "Doing Gender." *Gender and Society* 1, No. 2, (1987), 126.
- 16 Homi K. Bhabha. *Nation and Narration* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 1-2.
- 17 Elleke Boehmer. *Stories of Women: Gender and Narrative in the Postcolonial Nation* (New York: Manchester University Press, 2005), 22.
- 18 West, *Feminist*, 11.
- 19 West, *Feminist*, 13.
- 20 Tahmima Anam. "I have a complicated relationship with Bangladesh," interview by Claire Armistead, *The Guardian*, May 2016.  
[www.theguardian.com/books/2016/may/13/tahmima-anam-i-have-complicated-relationship-with-bangladesh-interview](http://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/may/13/tahmima-anam-i-have-complicated-relationship-with-bangladesh-interview)
- 21 Chandra Talpade Mohanty. *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*, (London: Duke University Press, 2003), 52.
- 22 Jyoti Puri. *Women, Body and Desire in Postcolonial India* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 12.
- 23 Neloufer De Mel. *Women and the nation's narrative: Gender and nationalism in twentieth century Sri Lanka*. (USA: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2001), 13.
- 24 Mohanty, *Feminism Without Borders*, 3.
- 25 Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Ann Russo, and Lourdes Torres, eds, *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 33.
- 26 Mohanty et al., eds. *Third World Women*, 35.

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