

Of Erasure and Resistance: Negotiating History and Identity in Tahmima Anam's *The Good Muslim*

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Abstract

The 1971 liberation war of Bangladesh led to the birth of a country which considered linguistic commonality as the single most potential marker which could appropriate the nation-state within a homogeneous identity. It is interesting to note that the porosity of language as a token of unification became evident during the nine month long liberation war itself. Voices of discontent were raised revealing the fissures belying the linguistic commonality which demanded the integrity of Pakistan apparently for the sake of Islam. Setting aside its Islamic identity as a nation-state Bangladesh tried to emerge as a democratic and secular country. However, this tension between the linguistic and religious identity began to gain prominence in the post-independent Bangladesh. Within a decade its socio-political fabric discerned a paradigm shift which attempted to transform the nation into a dictatorial Islamic state. This shift was evident in the subversion of the shared history of the liberation war and also in the erasure of the traumatized past. The regressive forces of religious fundamentalism tried to curb the progressive forces of modernity. The dissemination of the madrasa education bears testimony to this fact. Pitted against the dictatorial regime of 1982 Tahmima Anam's second novel *The Good Muslim* captures how within a decade a paradigm shift takes place in the socio-political fabric of the nation turning it in an Islamic fundamentalist state from a secular one. It shows how the nexus between politics and religion tries to impose an Islamic identity erasing the traumatic past, and thus hindering the process of healing from the scars of trauma and how individual acts of resistance function to challenge such acts of imposition and erasure. This paper will discuss how in the matrix of the novel the conflict between the linguistic and religious identity gets articulation in the microcosm of the family and how individual resistance to the erasure of the past helps the nation to take its first step towards a process of healing.

Keywords: Nation-state, Language, Religion, Identity, Islam, Erasure, Resistance

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The 1947 partition of India culminated in the emergence of Pakistan etching out masses of lands from the eastern and western wings of the nation-state. Religious identity became the most significant marker in the formation of Pakistan. Nation-state is formed on the basis of a collective identity harping on the ideas like history, religion, ethnicity, language. It often imposes a sense of homogeneity appropriating the heterogeneous elements embedded in its structure and thus puts its integrity into crisis. The token of unification fails to address the pockets of differences. This is evident in the case of Pakistan where, by and far religion being the only source of sustenance fell short as an apparatus of unification because linguistic and cultural differences surfaced more prominently reflecting the topographically fragmented nature of the eastern and western part of Pakistan. As a result, West Pakistan took recourse to coercive measures in order to uphold the integrity of the nation which resulted into the forcible linguistic and cultural appropriation. Imposition of Urdu as the state language by West Pakistan challenged the linguistic identity of the Bengali speaking Muslims of East Pakistan which eventually took the shape of a mass revolt called *Bhasha Andolon*. The tragic outcome of the revolution due to military intervention and martyrdom gave the eastern wing of Pakistan a sense of solidarity on the basis of linguistic identity. The resonance of *Bhasha Andolon* reverberated in the gradual development of the conception of a nation to be formed on the basis of linguistic homogeneity. The cultural inferiority of the East Pakistan in the eyes of West Pakistan was rooted in the burden of shared linguistic and cultural history of the Bengali Muslims with that of their Hindu counterparts in West Bengal. The imperial nature of economic exploitation of the subsequent military regimes of Pakistan, the discrimination in employment generation fuelled the demand for a separate nation. The inhuman treatment of West Pakistan towards the cyclone ravaged East Pakistan evidently highlighted how the imperialist economic policies functioned as a form of domination. Political negotiations failed to dissolve the differences between the eastern and western wings of Pakistan. And finally the coercive measures taken by the West Pakistan to curb the demand for a parliamentary democratic government on the part of East Pakistan gave rise to the cessationist movement which resulted in the creation of Bangladesh.

The 1971 liberation war of Bangladesh led to the birth of a country which considered linguistic commonality as the single most potential marker which could appropriate the nation-state within a homogeneous identity. However, the undercurrent of a counteractive force which tried to curb the war from within reveals the fissures belying the linguistic commonality. The question of language has been an enigma for the Bengali Muslims across the globe. This is evident in the following words of Anisuzzaman as reflected in the book *A South Asian Nationalism Reader*,

As a consequence of identifying himself with the Muslim world that transcended his political and geographical borders the Bengali Muslim was

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confronted with language problem. Arabic was for him the language of religion; Persian he considered a language of his culture; Urdu a lingua franca in India; English was the official language; and he was born into Bengali. (372)

It is interesting to note that the porosity of language as a token of unification became evident during the nine month long liberation war. Voices of discontent were raised revealing the fissures belying the linguistic commonality which demanded the integrity of Pakistan apparently for the sake of Islam. The Urdu speaking Bihari Muslims and a section of the Bengali Muslims better known as *razakars* collaborated with the West Pakistani army to curb the cessationist movement. Overpowering its religious undertones East Pakistan emerged as Bangladesh upholding its linguistic identity. However, this tension between the linguistic and religious identity began to gain prominence in the post-independent Bangladesh. Setting aside its secular and democratic identity Bangladesh started to emerge as a dictatorial Islamic state. Tahmima Anam's *The Good Muslim* articulates this tension between language and religion embedded in the self fashioning of the nationalist identity of Bangladesh and also how the interplay between erasure and resistance negotiate in the construction of its identity.

Pitted against the dictatorial regime of 1982, Anam's second novel *The Good Muslim* captures how within a decade a paradigm shift takes place in the socio-political fabric of the nation turning it into an Islamic fundamentalist state from a secular one. M. A. Hakim and A. S. Huque rightly point out that there is a shift from the 'existing ethnic identity' to a 'territorial identity' which can also be viewed "... as an attempt to draw a line of distinction between the people of Bangladesh and the ethnic Bengalees of West Bengal and to project the image of Bangladesh as a distinctive Muslim nation."¹ It is evident in the dictatorial regime's attempt to change the name of the country to 'Islamic Republic of Bangladesh'. (Anam 42) Sohail's abrupt transformation from a *muktijoddha* to a *maulana* and his strict adherence to the fundamentalist orthodoxy reflect the nation in transition. The regressive forces embedded in the fundamentalism run counter to modernism. Zaid, Sohail's son becomes the victim of such forces. Sohail deprives him of modern education whose strong belief lies with the madrasa education. Maya's earnest attempt rescue Zaid turns out to be fatal. Acting as a foil to Sohail, Maya represents the progressive forces of modernism. Being a doctor she takes sides with science instead of religion. She realises the futility of freedom and her protest against the social malice brings her imprisonment under charges of sedition. However, the novel concludes with the note of a new beginning welcoming the *Birangana* and the children of war and hanging the *razakar*. According to Ania Loomba the postcolonial state often, "...consolidate its own power while making enormous concession to multinational interests. And then it is not merely the state but other social and political configurations that lay claim to the rhetoric of the nation." (173) This paper will discuss how Bangladesh

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negotiates with its past while forging its identity on the basis of religion and also how politics of forgetting and repression of the selective memories of the past function in the self-fashioning of its nationalist identity.

The exclusionary politics embedded in the formation of identity was evident in the emergence of Bangladesh as a nation. The Bangladeshi nationalist self harped on the linguistic identity 'othering' the religious one that was the predominant founding principal of Pakistan. The conflict between the linguistic and religious identity not only rips apart the nation but also cuts across the Haq family as revealed in the matrix of *The Good Muslim*. In the novel the microcosm of the Haq family captures the macrocosm of the nation. Maya was long estranged from her mother Rehena and her brother Sohail. It was largely propelled by her refusal to face Silvi, Sohail's wife who according to her was the sole architect in the conversion of Sohail from a *muktijoddha* to a maulana. Maya thought that Silvi's death would help to form a truce between the long estranged siblings. Here, Silvi seems to function as a 'transcendental signified'² where her absent presence opens a space for two contesting identities to negotiate. Maya is emblematic of secularist consciousness whereas Sohail's mind becomes the battle ground where the conflict between linguistic and religious identity is fought. Sohail burnt his books as a gesture of erasing his past and signalling a shift towards a life where his identity as a *Muktijoddha* hardly matters. Sohail's act enraged Maya because basking under the glory of the past she could not accept the vulnerability of the secularist project which gave birth to the nation. Bangladesh was never a secular country. In *Nationbuilding, Gender and War Crimes in South Asia* Bina D'costa rightly argues that the formation of Bangladeshi identity has been '...affected by a problematic politicization and extreme polarization of religious identities and the supposedly secular Bengali identity'. (80) The politically motivated secularist ideology which foregrounded language as the binding principal was discursively produced. Religion was an extension of everyday culture which was not limited only to the institutionalised practices as performed by Sohail and Silvi in the form of *Tablighi Jamaat*, 'The Congregation of Islam'. Rather, it crept into the discourse of the public domain so vehemently that the Dictator's attempt to change the name of the country to the Islamic Republic of Bangladesh seemed to be the result of a collective wish. Maya was appalled to see how religiosity had captured all and sundry. She could not comprehend why for the vegetable man *Allah Hafez* had become a more religious term than *Khoda Hafiz*. Her friend Saima's *Alhamdulillah* bothered her as well because "...once up on a time they would have laughed at people referring to God between every other sentence". (Anam 54) Like Maya the secularist discourse could not accommodate religious elements and repressed them to the margins in the collective unconscious of the nation. So, if the fragile discourse of secularist identity functioned at the level of 'ego'³ and 'superego'⁴ in the psyche of the nation then that of the religious identity functioned at the level of 'Id'⁵. Consequently

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the resurgence of religious identity in the regime of the Dictator can be deciphered as the 'return of the repressed'⁶. During the emergence of Bangladesh the dominant ideology of the nationalism foregrounded secularism as the common marker negating the existence of the Islamic forces which vehemently sought the integrity of Pakistan. In the initial phases of the post independence Bangladesh these Islamic forces lost their credibility for supporting West Pakistan in the nine month long carnage. However, after the assassination of Mujibur Rahaman a paradigm shift was visible in the religio-political fabric of the nation. Islamism started to gain prominence in the wake of the consecutive military governments led by Zianur Rahaman and General Ershad respectively. In *Bangladesh and Pakistan: Flirting with Failure in South Asia* William B.Milam(2010) rightly points out that, "In scenarios reminiscent of Pakistan, the Islamists parties in Bangladesh were saved politically by military governments. Both Zianur Rahaman and Ershad reached out to Islamic forces to help secure their legitimacy...." (237)

Erasure of the memories of the past becomes an important trope in the nationalist self fashioning of Bangladesh in order to foreground the Islamic identity instead of the ethnic Bengali one. The celebration of the Independence Day in the regime of the Dictator evidently becomes an occasion to negate the memories of violence in which the birth of a secular nation was inscribed. The performative act of paying homage at the altar of the martyrs denotes the celebration of the integrity of the nation and commemoration of the sacrifices that led to the birth of a nation. However, the Dictator chose this day for extending camaraderie to Pakistan, their old enemy. Maya is disgusted to find that he has not spoken a word about the killing perpetrated by the Pakistani soldiers. The memory of killing is emblematic of the past that gave priority to the secularist identity instead of the religious one. Such markers are disruptive for a nation which wants to reframe its identity on the basis of religion. That is why the places have been renumbered stripping them off of their past associations. Contrary to these indicators of the secularist identity, Pakistan stands for the nurturer of the religious identity. Comradeship with Pakistan and the Dictator's call for the consolidation of the Muslim brotherhood reveal how religion can function as a large cultural sphere contesting the identity that brought a nation in to being. However, Maya finds that forgetting is not merely imposed by the political discourse rather a collective amnesia is at work. People are no longer interested in "... grasping at the retreating feeling of having once, many years ago, done something of significance." (Anam 43) According to Pierre Nora, "The less memory is experienced collectively, the more it will require to undertake to become themselves memory-individuals..." (16) In the fabric of the novel Maya resists, being the memory-individual, remembering the past against the tide of forgetting. Maya is trapped in the glories of the past because of a sense of unbelonging to a nation-state which has stopped to strive for ideals like democracy and secularism.

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The sense of unbelonging is even more brutal for those women whose deglorification is implanted in the glory of the liberation war. In “Gendered Embodiments: Mapping the Body-politic of the Raped Women and the Nation in Bangladesh” Nayanika Mookherjee writes, “...the gendered preformativity of rape during collective violence ensures that the gendering of women’s bodies as female constitute them as political signs, territories on which the political programmes that also affect the nation, community and family get inscribed.” (40) The body of the women became the site of war during the liberation struggle. Thousands of Bangladeshi women were raped and seeded with children by the Pakistani soldiers with the rationale of ethnic cleansing. The newly formed nation-state embraced them as *Biranganas* or the war heroines but refused to accept their children and thus mass abortion was conducted to get rid of the children of war. However, even abortion could not ensure their rehabilitation. Being ostracized by the society and family many of them left their homeland for Pakistan with prisoners of war who were released as a token of generosity. They were ashamed of being called as the war heroines and wanted to leave their shame behind and start anew. They wanted to create new identities in which ‘suffering was hidden at a time when resistance and survival was central’. (D’costa 115) The nation-state wanted them to, “Forgive and forget. Absolve and misremember” the way it once wanted them, “to send their brothers into fighting, to melt their pots and surrender their jewellery.” (Anam 70) Like the nation-state, Sohail wanted Piya to forget her past and start afresh. He rescued her from a military barrack where she was raped and impregnated by the Pakistani soldiers. However, her victimization did not stop with the war. Snubbed by her family she came to the Haq family for refuge. They accepted her with dignity but she was incessantly haunted by her past. The irremediable scars of her past resurfaced in the form of a guilt consciousness. Maya wanted her to remember and talk about her past. However, trapped in the limbo of remembrance and forgetting she could not unearth the ripples of thought that was tormenting her. Piya’s silence is metaphoric of the erasure of their history from the consciousness of the nation.

Education can become a source of salvation for a nation which has become oblivious of its past. Maya feels that modern education can inculcate liberal sensibilities which can help the future generation to revoke glories of the past. That is why she wants Sohail’s son Zaid to get modern education. However, Sohail’s insistence on the madrasa education shows how education can function as the machinery for the dissemination of the dominant ideology. The proliferation of madrasa education becomes an imperative for Bangladesh which is incumbent to form a religious identity. In “*Islamic Politics and Education*” Ali Riaz argues that, “The religious educational institutions namely madrassahs, were kept to appease the religio-political forces who were consigned to oblivion through the ban imposed on all religious parties in 1972.”⁷ (Riaz and Fair 120,121) Sohail’s penchant for the madrasa education not only reflects his religious affiliation but also the proliferation of madrasa as a

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token of Islamization in the regime of General Ershad. The conflict between Sohail and Maya is that of between Islamism and modernity. This is evident in Maya's resentment towards madrasa education and Sohail's inclination towards it. She finds it to be inadequate for the future generation because it will not emancipate them from the forces of religious fundamentalism. Sohail's treatment of his son exemplifies how regressively religious fundamentalism can act. He wants Zaid to act in strict adherence to the laws of religion depriving him of anything that is modern. Having failed to convince Sohail Maya decided to rescue Zaid from the regressive forces. Unfortunately, her attempt ended up in a tragedy when the boy drowned in the river. Zaid became the victim of a society which was torn between the forces of religion and secularism. Zaid's predicament underlines the precarious condition of the future generation of Bangladesh. Their ethereal existence is fixed in the ignorance of their past and the uncertainty of their future. Before she could recover from the trauma of Zaid's death she found herself imprisoned under the charges of treason. She apprehended that she might have been imprisoned for kidnapping Zaid from the madrasa. However, at her astonishment she found that she was rather behind the bars for writing an article asking for the trial of the war criminals. Her imprisonment was actually fabricated by the Dictator to assuage the infuriated mullahs who ganged up against her because she had transgressed by rescuing Zaid from the madrasa. This incident maps the transition of post-war Bangladesh and shows how the nexus between organized religion and authoritarian rule can curb the democratic rights of the citizens in order to intimidate them to yield.

The conversion of Sohail from a revolutionary to a holy man is emblematic of the transformation of the nation itself. Maya could not clearly comprehend the reason behind his conversion. She assumed the reason to be his wife Silvi who delved herself deep in to the religious practices during the time of war. On the other hand, Sohail's mother Rehena felt that the reason behind his conversion might be The Holy Book which she gave him to purge his soul that was loaded with the brutality of the war. Sohail's anxiety was rooted in the loss of his father. Maya, at last, learns about the traumatic event that initiated his conversion. While returning from war Sohail mistakenly killed an old man in the frenzy of vengeance assuming him to be a Pakistani soldier or a Bihari. However, he quickly realized that he had not killed an enemy but a man who had 'the face of a father'. (Anam 284) The nation has also killed a father under whose guidance and leadership it emerged as Bangladesh. Bangladesh saw the brutal assassination of Shiekh Mujib, the first President of Bangladesh who was like a father to the nation. Sohail realised that he had not killed an enemy but an ordinary man who looked like a father and as penance he turned towards religion. Sohail's journey towards religion alludes to the journey of Bangladesh from secularism to Islam which started to take shape after the assassination of Mujib, the father of the nation. Sohail can not revoke his past which has been erased for he has turned towards religion. Maya's words, "He would remain a

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hallucination to her, the ghost of a man she used to love” reveal the fact that reconciliation between the siblings is not possible. (289) It alludes to the impossibility of the reconciliation of the contesting ideas that has split the nation in to two. Erasure of the past becomes an imperative to the nation for forging the identity on the basis of religion.

Maya’s incessant struggle for the revocation of the past, Piya’s attempt to reconcile with her past being a single mother and the hope of a fragmented nation for justice bring the text to the closure with a sense of anticipation. The end of the Dictator’s regime paves the way for the nation to dream for a better future. Victims of the war come together to share the ‘words they have uttered only to themselves all these years’. (291) A shared sense of loss binds the nation together. The absence of Sohail haunts Maya but she ‘recognises the wound in his history, the irreparable wound, because she has one too’. (293) Even in his absence, Maya finds a sense of reconciliation with Sohail because their wounds bind them in to one. The nation acknowledges the *Biranganas* or the war heroines, accepts the children of war. Through acknowledgement, recognition and acceptance the nation takes the first step towards healing.

¹ As quoted in *Bangladesh and Pakistan: Flirting with Failure in South Asia* by William B. Milam.

² See “Structure Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences” by Jacques Derrida.

³ See “The Ego and the Id” by Sigmund Freud

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Ibid

⁶ See “Unpleasure –Pleasure-Repression” in *The Freud Reader* edited by Peter Gay.

⁷ See *Political Islam and Governance in Bangladesh* edited by Ali Riaz and C Christine Fair. In the sixth chapter, titled “Islamic Politics and Education” of the book Ali Riaz discusses the effect of Islamization in education.

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