



Hidden Histories, Silenced Selves: Reading Women, War, and Silence in Tahmima Anam's *The Good Muslim*

Saundarya

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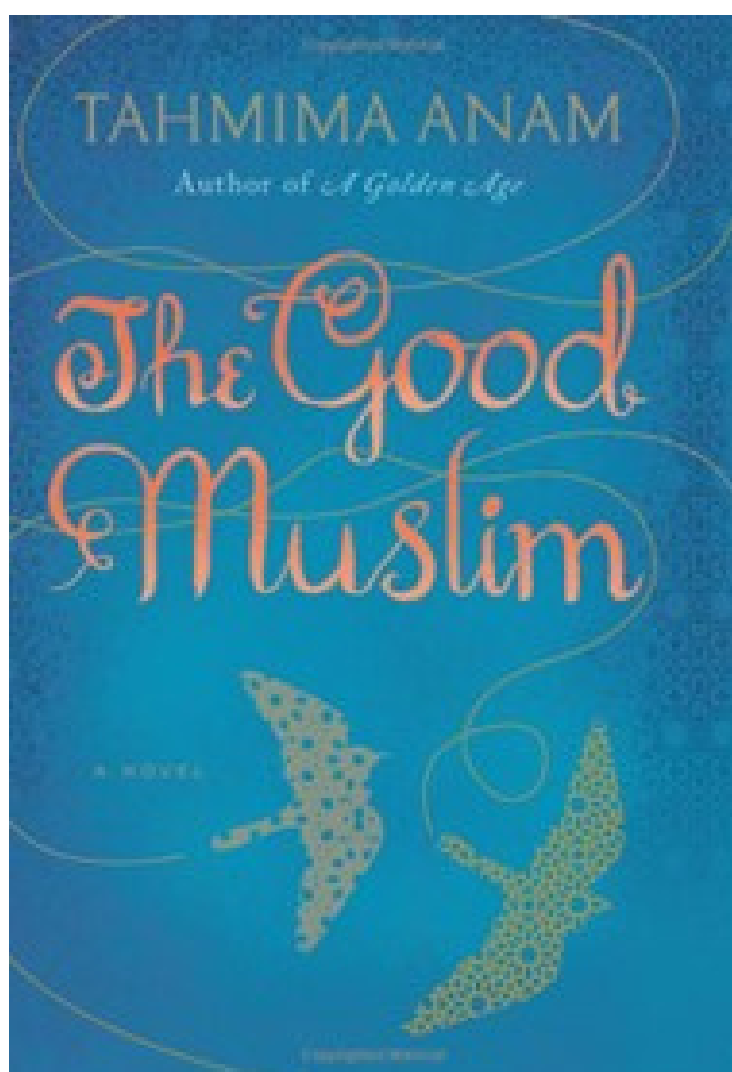
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How do you remember that which does not exist, or whose existence is not even acknowledged. How do you force memory?

- Urvashi Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence*

The 1947 partition, chalked out a distinct boundary, leading to the formation of two nation states. However, a subsequent delineation manifested itself in the year 1971, giving rise to a distinct geopolitical entity. Bangladesh (formerly East Pakistan) was embroiled in a tumultuous period of armed conflicts in 1971. While the most prominent and recorded one was a civil war between East and West Pakistan based on linguistic and cultural differences and another an international war between India and Pakistan, an atrocious “gender war also broke out against vulnerable women within East Pakistan” (Saikia 3). While the liberation war brought freedom to East Pakistan and led to the formation of a new nation called Bangladesh, it did not, however, liberate the women from the shackles of patriarchal violence. It is the voices of these women that have not been heard, the women in war, who have been systemically silenced by the forces of patriarchy working together in the process of nation building. Yasmin Saikia, in her book *Women, War and the Making of Bangladesh*, points out how the story of the liberation war would have become totally inaccessible, “a holy grail”, had the Bangladeshi women not reported on it (225). The stories recounting the losses suffered by women and children was deliberately erased from the public sphere, so as to avoid the gendered shame forced by the war from tarnishing the nation’s image. This intentional silencing of women, sanctioned by the state, in the aftermath of the war is captured in its subtleties in Tahmima Anam’s *The Good Muslim*, published in 2011, which is the second book of her ‘Bangladesh trilogy’.



The trilogy comprising *A Golden Age*, *The Good Muslim*, and *The Bones of Grace*, builds a story narrated by three generations of women of the Haque family. While the first novel explores Rehana Haque’s motherhood juxtaposed with the idea of nationhood in the looming atmosphere of the 1971 liberation war, it is the second novel that traces the fragments of the self, the body, the identity, and the loud silences engulfing the nation in the aftermath of the war through the lens of Rehana’s daughter Maya. The novel is placed before and after the killing of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, popularly known as *Bangabandhu*. *The Good Muslim* is divided into three parts, each part starting with a reference to the verses of Quran, ‘The Book’, that is mentioned uncountable times in the novel and which also plays a vital role in the relationship between the siblings Maya and Sohail. The text is also divided temporally, one immediately following the years after the liberation (from 1972) and the other thirteen years after the liberation (from 1984), with the time frames juxtaposing each other. The book moves back and forth in these time frames, stitching together the fragments to make a whole. This division provides the readers with a past to excavate the remains from, and ultimately make sense of the developments that occur thirteen years after the war, in the lives of both Sohail and Maya, and of the nation as a whole.

A major part of the novel is set in a backdrop of the post-war state going through a political turmoil with the killing of its two presidents and the government’s inability of putting the war criminals on trial. What Bina D’Costa observes in her work regarding the “growing frustration and resentment among its [Bangladesh’s] citizens about the fabrication of history through textbooks and government sponsored media to serve the need of authoritarian regimes in the post-1975 period” (187), is reflected in Maya’s reaction to the erasure of history that the country undergoes. Historical documentation leaves out the details that does not work in accordance with those who document history. So, in an age of what Kerwin Lee Klein calls a “historiographic crisis”, memory tends to appear as a “therapeutic alternative to historical discourse” (145).

Saikia explores an inner history of the war that remains hidden from the public view. These histories and memories “belong to women who were terrorised, brutally sexualised, and marginalised in the war” (Saikia 4). Many women also played an active role in the war by participating as active soldiers. Maya’s character itself is a depiction of such women who challenge the traditional notion of women as mere victims in war. Saikia suggests the other side of Bangladeshi women, as the ones who desired to kill and be killed for the nation. [1] They have a detailed memory of the places and people during the war. Through these detailed remembrances, they try to cope up with the disruptive changes that came after the war. They try to comprehend the remnants of the war, much akin to Maya and Ammo’s act of eating the leftover cake with “the flourish now gone from the edges, the frosting matted and smudged” after relinquishing their hopes of bringing Sohail back (Anam 166).



The perception of women's bodies as territories is not a novel phenomenon within the patriarchal paradigm of society. Women's bodies are consistently viewed as objects to be conquered and possessed. This subjugation of the body manifests itself in a very brutal and literal manner during times of war. A woman's body becomes the site of ceaseless exploitation, existing not merely as an object of sexual desire at the hands of the perpetrators, but is also perceived as a site of the exploiter's assertion of power. It becomes 'the territory on which men inscribe their political programs' (Mookherji, *Spectral Wound* 3). The notion that the honour of the nation is intertwined with the honour of its women, is accentuated ten folds during times of war. This is also the reason why rape is seen as an "explicitly political act, a ritual of victory, the defilement of honour and territory of the enemy community" (qtd. in Mookherjee, "Gendered Embodiments" 40).

In the fourth chapter titled '1973 March' of Book Two, Sohail receives an invitation from Sheikh Mujib. Here, through the character of Ammo, the novel puts forth a question often brushed aside, a memory pushed to the private spaces and a history hidden. As Ammo questions Maya about the nature of work carried out at the Rehabilitation centre, the novel draws our attention to the other vexing issue of the war violence—the mass rape of women in 1971 and the forceful abortion of the Birangonas carried out in its aftermath. An excerpt from this chapter brings to light the covert abortion drive that was carried out in the aftermath of the war: "Bangabandhu had promised to take care of the women; he had even given them a name – Birangona, heroines — and asked their husbands and fathers to welcome them home, as they would their sons. But the children, he had said he didn't want the children of war" (Anam 142). Bringing Piya into the discourse, Ammo tells Maya, "They forced her. And she's not the only one. Some of the girls don't want to. But they're ashamed, they're told they're carrying the seed of those soldiers" (Anam 141-142). This shame is visibly present in Piya. In the conversation where Sohail asks Piya to marry him and she replies, "If you want, I will be your wife. But I am not a good woman" (Anam 247).

Being complicit in this act of violence on the Birangonas, Maya tries to justify it by telling Ammo that it is better "to erase all traces of what happened to them" in order for them to forget the trauma. After the liberation war, when the nation is formed and undergoing its own political and social crises, and "the country had to become a country", it slips into the act of forgetting. The war heroines who did not wish to be so, had to "Forgive and forget. Absolve and misremember. Erase and move on" (Anam 70). However, during her stay in Rajshahi and her work as a "crusading doctor", Maya desperately tries to rid herself of the guilt of performing those abortions by delivering as many healthy babies as she could and helping women during the time of their pregnancy. It is also worth noting how Maya, who once propounded the idea of forgetting, laments the erasure of history of resistance which is slowly taking place with the changing of street names and transforming of revolutionary places into amusement parks.

In the later part of the novel, after Maya's return to Dhaka, at a time when a political crisis is ongoing in 1985, Maya decides to write about the Razakars or war criminals and bring to light the injustice done to the women by the sole act of forgetting. In this context, Maya's conversation with Aditi highlights the change in Maya's character and a crucial aspect of the act of forgetting and remembering:

'The raped women.'

'You mean the Birangonas?'

'Yes, the Birangonas. But calling them heroines erases what really happened to them. They didn't charge into the battlefield and ask to be given medals. They were just the damage, the war trophies. They deserve for us to remember.'

'What if they don't want to remember?'

In her years of exile Maya had met many raped women. Some wanted abortions, or came to her to get stitched up, or simply to ask if there was a way for her to wash it out of them. Not one of them wanted anyone to find out. Not one of them wanted to file a police report, or tell her husband or her father. Perhaps it was wrong of her to want them to tell. But she could not get the image of Piya out of her mind. Piya squatting on the verandah, the words bubbling at her lips. She and Sohail had conspired against her that night. They had comforted her and told her it was over, that she was safe – but they had not made it possible for her to speak. It was an act of kindness that had led to the end of everything – Maya knew that now. And there was only one way to make it right. (Anam 223)

From the above conversation, the use of the term Birangona also seems to be a problematic one. As Farzana Akhter observes, "The title birangona, intended to bring them honour and respect and help them reintegrate into their communities, turned out to be a mark of dishonour and disgrace" (97). Sheikh Mujib had termed the women (activists, rape survivors, etc.) in the war as birangona (meaning war heroine). Even though the term was introduced to honour the women, it "branded them [the rape survivors] as 'fallen' women and became a marker of banishment" (D'Costa, *Nationbuilding* 13). The term worked as a double-edged sword by reinstating the memory of rape and the stigma attached to it. The women's rehabilitation programmes which Maya worked for, might seem like a positive step at the surface level, however, when we look deeper, these programmes, which Maya also later realises, with respect to Piya and other birangonas, "was not emancipative, but to reintegrate the women into the traditional gender roles they had previously performed as housewives, mothers or daughters, effectively silencing their experiences during the conflict" (D'Costa, "Birangona" 207). The incorporation of such term and the task of forced abortions under the rehabilitation programmes had their focus not on the individual sufferers of violence and abuse but on the image of the nation. The history of this gruesome violence, as Mohsin writes, "has been trapped within a nationalist paradigm, where the nation is privileged and the woman is valorized in the context of the nation, not in her own right as a woman and human being" (120).



Birangona woman training

Silence, too, has a very heavy presence throughout the novel. It manifests itself in varied ways, in the form of choice, force, revenge, as well as resistance. It plays out in the form of resistance and power in the case of Joy's experience as a captive in the war. Silence, in this context, is loaded with power. Joy's refusal to speak or even to cry despite all the physical and mental torture, frustrates his tormentors. Silence was something which he was compelled to acquire. It had started with a pretence which later became a habit. In front of his captors, Joy "pretended he couldn't make any sounds, and soon it became too difficult to utter words at night and forget them in the day, so he gave up speaking altogether" (Anam 192). They tortured him even more because they were afraid of this silence which for them, "might yield something special". For Sohail, silence serves as a medium to establish a form of communication with Maya, but Maya perceives it as a way of Sohail's disconnect. Sohail is afraid to talk, he wants Maya to be quiet, he wants her to hear "the roar in his head". He is afraid to express that his experience of war is not only rooted in heroism but also the unbearable weight of the guilt of killing an innocent man, "A nothing man. A man who had done nothing. Walking home from the war like everyone else" (Anam 284). Maya then chooses silence as a form of protest against Sohail's silence. With Sohail finding his rescue in religion and Maya failing to understand this drastic change in his personality, the last straw between their relationship is drawn through/because of silence as a choice and as a revenge. The final incident of the book-burning where Maya desperately tries to bring him back to his old self by singing revolutionary songs to which Sohail retaliates by burning all his prized books, draws an unbridgeable gap between the siblings, who were once inseparable.

As discerned from the conversation between Aditi and Maya presented above, it becomes evident that silence is forced on Piya by the siblings who 'had not made it possible for her to speak'. Even though Piya too is not so clear with the choice of speaking her, she is not even provided with that comfortable space to articulate her emotions, let alone speak. Nobody is ready to listen because of the assumptions that they understand Piya's trauma or that her past does not matter. The former flawed notion of empathy rises in Maya which is evident through the line: "Maya knew exactly what had happened to Piya. No explanation was necessary" (70). This viewing of trauma in a homogenised manner narrows down the importance of archiving personal stories, thereby snatching the agency of the subjects and rendering them mute. In this context, Nayanika Mookerjee observes that "identifying raped women only through their suffering not only creates a homogeneous understanding of gendered victimhood but also suggests that wartime rape is experienced in the same way by all victims" (Spectral Wound 6).

Piya's attempts at talking about her trauma are silenced by both Sohail and Maya. For Sohail it is denial, forgetting, and moving on. On the aspect of Sohail's silencing of Piya, Saumya Lal writes, "Sohail's intent to have Piya forget her trauma is, then, also laced with his wish to shut out events that trigger his own trauma" (Lal 11). For Maya views it as a homogenous trauma, believing erroneously that she understands her plight. It is only towards the end that Piya becomes incharge of her agency and incorporates it in narrating her trauma. She also takes charge of her own life by choosing not to abort her child.

The women are expected to forget their trauma by aborting the "seeds of their enemy". But how can the mind forget when the body remembers? The violence that is meted out on the bodies of women, results in their subsequent disembodiment. The intensity of these traces of violence that has seeped to the very core is such that even language is incapable of articulating the pain of the wound inflicted on the body and the psyche. The children (war babies) are perceived as a reminder of the trauma of sexual violence but forced abortion further marks the body and the mind with an incomprehensible ache, leading to a dismemberment of the self. Language breaks when it comes to expressing an inexpressible trauma. No language or vocabulary is capable of containing what women suffer(ed) during wars. However, an intentional suppression of the women's voices is unequivocally unjust. The disappearance of Piya from the text, as Madhurima Sen points out in her study, reflects the purposive "erasure of the birangonas' narrative from the highly selective national memory and public arena" (4). The act of erasure of a traumatic history then becomes a complex terrain to navigate, as the women are constantly subjected to abject shame and humiliation. But forcing someone to forget does not necessarily make them forget it; it only silences them by suppressing their trauma rather than helping them process it, which is much more dangerous. Thus, the erasure actually works at a superficial level, with a suppressed yet constant urge to remember, forever escaping the clutches of this forceful act, desperately looking for an outlet, to surface up and to speak.

Even after all these years, the intricate inquiries of whether liberation has delivered the promise of freedom and equality to women in Bangladesh, as well as whether they are acknowledged as equal architects in the nation building process in post-liberated Bangladesh, remains unanswered. The novel poses a lot of questions in the context of women during and after the war, thereby interrogating the entire act of delineating borders, inflicting wounds, violating bodies, partitioning selves, and silencing the narratives within the framework of nation building. Thus, it becomes imperative to locate the complexities within the narratives of the various wars fought and to move beyond narrow documentations and find the traces in individual and collective memory.

Note:

1. Saikia presents the readers with a first-hand account of Laila Ahmed's lived experiences. She writes, "Laila's testimony makes us curious to know what women were capable of doing during the war. We suddenly find we do not know the Bangladeshi women. Our lens was focused on a 'single vision', thus far. We saw them as victims of sexual violence and care givers. We did not encounter Bangladeshi women as aggressive agents, desiring to kill and be killed on behalf of territory and nation."



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About the Author

Saundarya is a Junior Research Fellow, pursuing M.Phil. in English from the University of Delhi. She researches Dalit literature and culture and explores the politics of marginal literature and its representation. She has an M.A. in English from Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi. In her spare time, she experiments with her brush and paints anything and everything.

Texts in Turmoil: The Role of Literature in Understanding Partition

Anu Jakhar

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Around 77 years ago, the partition took place. It resulted in the relocation of 15 million people and the deaths of 2 million due to religious conflict (Shashkevich). It was a time of great distress that caused immense suffering and trauma for the individuals who were involuntarily affected by it. It is regarded as one of the most tragic incidents in the history of the subcontinent. Since the only method for individuals to harm the sensibilities of other religions was to injure their women, women suffered the worst during the partition. They were tortured, sexually assaulted, and dehumanized in the name of religion.

There has been a lot of work done in terms of documenting and writing about this event, whether it be fiction or non-fiction. It is exceedingly difficult to accurately recall a former experience when doing so. Less emphasis is placed on people and more emphasis is placed on delivering the story through facts and data. As a result, it is challenging to portray the incident accurately because one does not want to become bogged down in the specifics and complexity of human emotions.

It starts to focus more on the incident and less on the victims of its effects. The identity crises that people went through, how it was more than just a religious conflict, how neighbours turned against one another in a single night, or what all the women experienced regardless of their religion are not particularly highlighted in historical narratives of division.

Therefore, there was a demand for narratives that went beyond this and spoke more about the anguish and pain of people from their perspective. Prabir Kumar Sarkar's, A Reflection on Partition Literature of Indian Subcontinent in English makes this point. History is a straightforward account of the partition that has been recorded on paper, but literature is a reflection and a representation of the sufferings, miseries, and challenges that the people of the partition tragedy had to deal with (Sarkar 2). As a result, post-partition writing about partition came into existence known as "partition literature".