
I Change therefore I am: The Construction of Female Identity in the Works of Tahmina Anam

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Introduction

“Who is there when a woman says, “I am”?”¹, more than three decades ago Gardiner posited it as the central question of feminist literary criticism, with the additional claim that “fictional women are worse off than the real one”², thus declaring the difficulties that relies with literary analysis. The reason then, despite the difficulty, the present paper is interested in fictional narrative is because “Fiction flows between life and imagination, and it is one of the most direct links between the two worlds”³ and “Storytelling reveals meaning without committing the error of defining it”⁴. The paper deals with the narratives of three generations of women of the Haque family, who territorially belong to the ‘Third-World’. The West, blinded by its ‘white solipsism’⁵ has long perceived the ‘Third-World women’ as a homogenous category, as the ‘Third-World woman’ suggesting a ‘positionality without a subject’⁶. And if the women in question are Muslim, then it develops into a ‘triple colonization’ “Oriental, woman and Muslim” echoing the Spivakian construction of “poor, black and female”⁷. Thus one of the main concerns of the paper is ‘decolonization of feminism’ and the ‘acknowledgement of differences’ as propagated by Mohanty⁸.

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1. Gardiner, Judith Kegan. "On Female Identity and Writing by Women." *Critical Inquiry* 8, no. 2 (1981): 347-61. doi:10.1086/448158.
 2. Curti, Lidia. "Female Stories, Female Bodies." 1998. doi:10.1007/978-1-349-26207-6.
 3. Ibid.
 4. Bagchi, Barnita. "Hannah Arendt, Education, and Liberation: A Comparative South Asian Feminist Perspective." *Heidelberg Papers in South Asian and Comparative Politics*, January 2007, 2-20. www.sai.uni-heidelberg.de/SAPOL/HPSACP.htm.
 5. Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses." *Gender*, 2000, 51-71. doi:10.1007/978-1-137-07412-6_5.
 6. Spivak qtd in Mansoor, Asma, and Najeeba Arif. "Articulation, Agency and Embodiment in Contemporary Pakistani Urdu Poetry by Women." *Asiatic* 10, no. 1 (June 2016): 128-44.
 7. Hasan, Md. Mahmudul. "The Orientalization of Gender." *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 22, no. 4, 26-56.
 8. Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses." *Gender*, 2000, 51-71. doi:10.1007/978-1-137-07412-6_5.

The title suggests that the paper is concerned with the construction of female identity as the “issue of identity and female consciousness has always been one of the major concerns of feminists”. I do not opt for a rejection of the differences between the sexes but prefer the performative views regarding the female subject over the essentialist ones. Therefore I use Gardiner’s preliminary metaphor “female identity is a process”⁹ while analyzing the Hoque women. That brings about the questions related to ‘being’ and ‘becoming’. Though I do not commence my arguments solely from an existentialist standpoint, the third stage or the *female phase* where the issue of ‘self-discovery’ or ‘a search for identity’ gradually moves into ‘a new stage of self-awareness’¹⁰ in Elaine Showalter’s triadic formulation of the history of women’s literature particularly interests me. I maintain that the three phases ‘feminine, feminist and female’ are not successive and cannot be applied unswervingly to all literary subcultures as Showalter suggests.

Demystifying the formulation of Third-world women’s identity as unitary and monolithic is one of the primary concerns of the present paper. Thus I wish to employ Braidotti’s conception of identity as a “site of difference”, thus speculating that the “subject women is not a monolithic essence, defined once and for all, but rather the site of multiple, complex and potentially contradictory sets of experiences...”¹¹

A Home of One’s Own

In the paper “Hannah Arendt, Education, and Liberation: A Comparative South Asian Feminist Perspective” Barnita Bagchi exhibits “some of the limitations of Arendt’s taxonomies in her ideas about the private, social and public spheres, and about what counts as political and what does not”¹² by comparing Arendt’s ideas with that of Ramabai and Rokeya. Arendt draws on a number of distinctions between “the *oikos* and the *agora*, the private and the public, the social and the political”; the *ghar* and the *baahir*, the home and the world. Interestingly, the work of Rokeya makes the “fluid continuum between the spheres of the private, the social and the political, in which human action manifests its dynamism”¹³ eminent. It is here that I would like to place our first Haque woman, Rehana.

A Golden Age, Tahmima Anam’s first novel of her planned Bengal Trilogy is the epic narrative of the ‘becoming’ of a nation interwoven with that of the ‘becoming’ of a woman. The gradual and violent birth of Bangladesh runs parallel with Rehana Hoque’s developing agency. Rehana is in her

9. 1 Gardiner, Judith Kegan. “On Female Identity and Writing by Women.” *Critical Inquiry* 8, no. 2 (1981): 347-61. doi:10.1086/448158.

10. Showalter, Elaine. *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Bronte to Lessing*

11. Braidotti, Rosi. *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2011.

12. 4 Bagchi, Barnita. “Hannah Arendt, Education, and Liberation: A Comparative South Asian Feminist Perspective.” *Hidelberg Papers in South Asian and Comparative Politics*, January 2007, 2-20. www.sai.uni-heidelberg.de/SAPOL/HPSACP.htm.

13. Ibid.

forties, a widow and a mother of two. Rehana's identity is what I would like to call 'homebound'. According to Porteous home provides "three essential territorial satisfactions" – "identity, security, and stimulation."¹⁴ Rehana's story seems to provide a justification to this claim. Rehana "had married a man she had not expected to love; loved a man she had not expected to lose; lived a life of moderation, a life of few surprises. She had asked her father to find her a husband with little ambition. Someone whose fortunes had nowhere to go."⁽⁷⁾ This signifies how she values security. As the events unfold, Rehana loses her husband to heart attack and is forced to give up the custody of her son and daughter to her in-laws due to her lack of wealth. Since then it becomes her mission to gain enough wealth in order to receive the custody back.

Rehana tries to regain the disrupted psychic and physical security through building her second home 'Shona' all by herself. Later on she confesses to the Major how she stole from an affluent old blind man, her prospective suitor; in order to claim the custody of her own children. "... Rehana looked at the house with pride and a little ache. It was there to remind her of what she had lost, and what she had won."⁽¹⁸⁾ She named the house built with the stolen fortune of the blind old man, "Shona", "For all that she had lost, and all that she wanted never to lose again" (43). Part of her developing agency has been portrayed through her epistolary conversation with her dead husband, implying the power that she receives from her role as a wife. Much of Rehana's agency stems from her role as a protective mother. She exercises direct authority over her children as mother, "I want to protect you. Everything I have done I've done for you and your brother" (102). Thus the novel jolts the idea that home is a place of man's domination and woman's submission.

The novel traces Rehana's "politicization"¹⁵ while keeping her embedded to home. Rehana remains homebound while the concept of her country itself goes through 'the process of migration'¹⁶. Because in the subcontinent "Often it was not women who moved – the boundaries of the nation did, making women "alien" in their own homes"¹⁷. Her "feelings about the country she had adopted" are "ambiguous". Territorially Rehana has been twice colonized, once by the British and later by her own people, the Pakistanis, whose language she spoke and loved dearly. "She spoke with fluency, the Urdu of the enemy. She was unable to pretend, as she saw so many others doing, that she, could replace her mixed tongue with a pure Bengali one. Rehana's tongue was too confused for these changes. She could not give up her love of Urdu, its lyrical lilt, its double meanings, its furrowed beat" (55). The modest territory of her home, becomes the nation and the world, "This is my home".

14. Porteous, J. Douglas. "Home: The Territorial Core." *Geographical Review* 66, no. 4 (1976): 383. doi:10.2307/213649.

15. Ranasinha, Ruvani. "War, Violence and Memory: Gendered National Imaginaries in Tahmima Anam, Sorayya Khan and Contemporary Sri Lankan Women Writers." *Contemporary Diasporic South Asian Womens Fiction*, 2016, 93-127. doi:10.1057/978-1-137-40305-6_3.

16. Hasanat, Fayeza. "Religion, Diaspora and the Politics of a Homing Desire in the Writings of Zia Haider Rahman, Tahmima Anam and Monica Ali." *Asiatic* 11, no. 1 (June 2016).

17. Loomba, Ania, and Ritty A. Lukose, eds. *South Asian Feminisms*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2012.

“Rehana had not read *Sultana’s Dream*” (43). She develops her agency through her roles as a wife and a mother. Her primary role as a mother is to protect her children, “She kept telling herself she was in charge, that nothing would be done without her consent” (49). She becomes the mother figure for all the revolutionaries, “They’ll be happy to get your blessings. Some of them haven’t seen their own mothers in a long tie.” “she felt a flush of pride at being asked.” (121) “She turned into the kitchen and wondered how she would feed all these hungry dreamers.”(55). She participates in the war by feeding the refugees (71), by “sending my son to war with a full stomach” (96). During the war she develops a war sisterhood and creates the group “the sewing sisters” in order to sew blankets for the soldiers (111).

Nationalism too for Rehana is related to home and relationships. She observes that the people “were his charge, his children. They called him father... Mujib... Shouting Joy Bangla” (57). She is told, ‘Don’t be foolish. You’re just a housewife. What on earth could you possibly do?’ But she persists, ‘We should do something. I’m not giving up so easily’(99). “We are at war, and my daughter says I have to do something. To prove I belong here. So I’m doing something.” 106. She performs “marriage rituals” (68) during the war. Leads men in prayer (128). Travels to Calcutta and serves at the Red Cross. Rehana’s “battle-weary body of a woman” (58) has bore the children, the home and the nation (58). She sacrifices her home *Shona* to the Guerrillas (119). She lets the wounded Major hid at *Shona*, violating the Jungian notion of “the sanctity of the threshold”¹⁷. Despite the war she retains the traditional role of a woman, “It felt foolish nowadays to take pride in cooking, but she couldn’t resist taking pleasure in the domed rise of the puris, the perfect vague sweetness of the halwa” (126)

Above everything her motherhood prevailed. “I’m a mother. Above all things, a mother. Not a widow, certainly not a wife. Not a thief. A mother” (162). For her, family is of utmost importance, “She felt an old swell of longing for the unit, the family: man, woman, hild. This was the formula for happiness, the proper order of things. All other eqations suffered in its shadows” (190). Thus she does not hesitate to sacrifice the Major’s life, with whom she briefly fell in love with, for the sake of her son’s life (304). That’s Rehana’s secret. Her protective love for her children. She confesses to her dead husband, “This war that has taken so many sons has spared mine. This age that has burned so may daughters has not burned mine. I have not let it.” (315).

This is how “a story of domestic loss... works itself into the narrative of civil war.”¹⁸ And home, for Rehana becomes a place of empowerment, whereas home for women has been largely portrayed as a place of confinement. The relationship between Rehana’s home and her identity extends in such a way that the house she has built becomes “a symbol of psychic wholeness”.¹⁹

18. Ranasinha, Ruvani. “War, Violence and Memory: Gendered National Imaginaries in Tahmina Anam, Sorayya Khan and Contemporary Sri Lankan Women Writers.” *Contemporary Diasporic South Asian Womens Fiction*, 2016, 93-127. doi:10.1057/978-1-137-40305-6_3.

19. Porteous, J. Douglas. “Home: The Territorial Core.” *Geographical Review*66, no. 4 (1976): 383. doi:10.2307/213649.

She Sings the Nation-state

It has been thought for long that feminism in the Non-Western land is a Western import. Classic works like Kumari Jayawardena's *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World* revealed organic emergence of feminism in many parts of the once-colonized world through anti-imperial struggles²⁰. Rehana's daughter Maya's hero, Begum Rokeya is one such woman. In her works *Gyanphal* (The Fruit of Knowledge) and *Muktiphal* (The Fruit of Freedom), Rokeya combined critiques of colonialism and patriarchy²¹. While Rokeya and her people were colonized by the British, Maya and her people are being colonized by the Eastern part of their land, the Pakistanis. The way Rokeya imagined concealed links between "women's education, women's agency, and political freedom"²², similarly Maya envisioned a feminist engagement with the liberation war eventually leading to the creation of Bangladesh, the nation-state. Her identity is constructed through her nationalistic struggles for the gradual birth of Bangladesh. For Rehana it was *Shona*, her home around which her identity developed and took shape. For her daughter Maya, it is *Shonar Bangla*, Bengal of Gold.

Maya wanted to believe in "something greater than myself" (286), she wanted to "do" something. Nationalism provided her with an itinerary. She had the "proper trappings of a nationalist" (55) "She swallowed like sugar, every idea passed to her by the party elders. Uprising. Revolution. She bandied the words about as though she had discovered a lost, ancient language (39). "This is our flag". "Maya whooped, draped the flag around her shoulders and ran to find a bamboo pole so they could secure it to the rooftop (56). "She wanted to be on the streets, distributing leaflets and singing 'We Shall Overcome' (62). In her pursuit of doing something for the nation, Maya practices gun firing using a wooden gun on university campus. She later becomes a war correspondent and also serves at the "Salt Lake Refugee Camp" (251) Calcutta.

After the war ended Maya performed abortions on some of the thousands of female rape victims named 'Birangonas' (courageous female war heroines) by the Bangladeshi 'father of the nation' Sheik Mujibur Rahaman, although Maya reasons that such an attempt to deal with the patriarchal stigma of rape 'erases what really happened to them'²³. Later she sacrifices her ambition of becoming a surgeon in order to become 'a doctor for women' (11), 'She didn't think of the debt she was repaying, that each of the babies she brought into the world might someday be counted against the babies that had died, by her hand, after the war'²⁴. She again

20. Loomba, Ania, and Ritty A. Lukose, eds. *South Asian Feminisms*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2012.

21. Bagchi, Barnita. "Hannah Arendt, Education, and Liberation: A Comparative South Asian Feminist Perspective." *Hidelberg Papers in South Asian and Comparative Politics*, January 2007, 2-20. www.sai.uni-heidelberg.de/SAPOL/HPSACP.htm.

22. Ibid.

23. Ranasinha, Ruvani. "War, Violence and Memory: Gendered National Imaginaries in Tahmima Anam, Sorayya Khan and Contemporary Sri Lankan Women Writers." *Contemporary Diasporic South Asian Womens Fiction*, 2016, 93-127. doi:10.1057/978-1-137-40305-6_3.

24. Ibid.

takes the role of a writer in order to turn her 'crusading' experience as a country doctor into a 'chronicle'. Through her writings she participates "in the larger political movement calling for Bangladesh's unnamed dictator to prosecute war criminals who live with impunity in neighbouring Pakistan"²⁵.

"The nation is a state of mind... with a political thrust that replaces the "subject" by the "citizen" and "demands that the nation-state be the site of primary loyalty"²⁶. This is what we see in Maya. Even her relationship with her mother and brother becomes secondary. Maya remains loyal to the nation throughout the trilogy. She actively participates and sees through the trial and punishment of the war criminals. Therefore, Maya's agency is developed not through a "equality struggle" but through nationalistic struggles and survival²⁷.

Her Nomadic Existence

"As a woman I have no country, as a woman I want no country, as a woman my country is the whole world."²⁸

This very utterance of Woolf best describes our third and last Hoque woman, Maya's daughter Zubaida. Her identity is not homebound, neither is she inclined towards a national identity as "the realities of our globalized world question the traditional understanding of nation, culture, and identity"²⁹. The character of Zubaida is hinted in the second book of the Bengal Trilogy and is fully developed in the last. *The Bones of Grace*, Anam's last book of her planned Bengal Trilogy recounts the story of a whale, a ship, and an orphan cum paleontologist. It conjoins the bizarre assemblage in an intricate manner. The story is narrated as an elaborate confessional note that Zubaida composes for her lost love. Learning about her orphanhood and adoption at the age of nine, she has been "living in a state of waiting" (3) ever since. Studying as a graduate student in the USA, travelling to Pakistan to dig the fossil of a whale that will make everything fall into place, getting back to her birthplace Bangladesh, only to travel in the depths of the country and then travelling back to the USA again; gives Zubaida the status of an "Amphibian" that "signaled people in between, people who lived with some part of themselves in perpetual elsewhere" (15). I intend to employ Rosi Braidotti's concept of feminist Nomadic subject based on Deleuze's nomadic epistemology³⁰ in order to understand Zubaida's identity formation.

25. Ibid.

26. Vanaik, Achin. "Marxism and Nationalism." (January 2018). versobooks.com/blogs/3578-marxism-and-nationalism

27. Ranasinha, Ruvani. "War, Violence and Memory: Gendered National Imaginaries in Tahmima Anam, Sorayya Khan and Contemporary Sri Lankan Women Writers." *Contemporary Diasporic South Asian Womens Fiction*, 2016, 93-127. doi:10.1057/978-1-137-40305-6_3.

28. Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of Ones Own ; and Three Guineas*. London: Vintage, 2016.

29. "No(N)-Place Like Home: Postnational Narrative in Carlos Fuentes's Gringo Viejo." *INTI75/76* (2012): 64-75.

30. Braidotti, Rosi. "Nomadism with a Difference: Deleuze's Legacy in a Feminist Perspective." *Man and World* 29 (1996): 305-14.

The discussion on Hoque women started with that of the *ghar*, home, the within. Zubaida's nomadic subjectivity functions in baahir, the world, the without; "blurring boundaries, making transitions between categories, states and levels of experience."³¹ The novel begins with Zubaida already displaced, signifying the "unhomely". There is an 'intrepid' self that resides in Zubaida, which came out when she packed and set for Pakistan to begin the fossil hunt, the fossil of *Ambulocetus*, an intermediate species (30). Deleuze's detachment "from the emphasis on stable and foundational identities" and his rejection of "the notion of roots – let alone of a matrix – for the self" seems pertinent to be au fait with Zubaida's identity which can only be grasped "in terms of spaces of becoming, that is to say of constant mutation"³². Zubaida is beyond the boundaries of home and nation. While her adoptive mother thinks of migration as an abandonment of one's own country, Zubaida on the other hand feels perfectly at home in Pakistan, the enemy territory for her parents and many other nationalists. She knows "home too was not going to be my ultimate destination, that other, final place more barren than anywhere I could have imagined?" (54).

Zubaida is our diasporic Antigone, best described through the notion of *Unheimliche*. Despite of being conventionally translated as the "uncanny", *Unheimliche* is actually rooted in the word *Heim*, "home". As Reed propounds, "The range of significations associated with the word *unheimlich* [eerie, strange, disturbing] is shared to a certain extent by the word *heimlich* [secret, furtive, hidden], despite the fact that the latter term looks like the opposite of the former, and in fact originally had the same meaning as *heimisch* [homey, domestic, familiar]- a historical connection that remains visible in the near-identity of the words themselves. The notion of the *Unheimliche* can thus suggest that there is something strange or improper about that which belongs to the home- and at the same time, something familiar or "homely" about that which belongs outside of it"³³.

From the very beginning Zubaida seems to be at odds with her relationship with home, "she is both loyal to and transgressive of its demands"³⁴. In her pursuit of a homing desire, Zubaida meets the American stranger Elijah, who like her shares the "same restless spirit" and wish to be "somewhere else" (256). After meeting him, for the first time "I didn't care where or who I came from. I didn't care if I was an amphibian or a member of an in-between species because I belonged here, in this moment..." (47). Despite her love for Elijah, Zubaida settles to marry her childhood sweetheart Rashid, perhaps because "The implication that I was not at home in my own country irritated me" (93). Soon she finds out about her pregnancy. After the initial rage passes she thinks of "meeting a person who was related to me by blood, something that has never happened to me before" (127). She finally finds a cause to settle in, feels the sense of belonging.

31. Braidotti, Rosi. *Nomadic Theory The Portable Rosi Braidotti*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2012.

32. Braidotti, Rosi. "Nomadism with a Difference: Deleuze's Legacy in a Feminist Perspective." *Man and World* 29 (1996): 305-14.

33. Reed, Valerie. "Bringing Antigone Home?" *Comparative Literature Studies* 45, no. 3 (2008): 316-340

34. Ibid.

As the baby vanishes “as suddenly as it had appeared” (128), Zubaida sets on a lone, unhoming journey to Chittagong, the port city of Bangladesh far from the “people who had known me all my life and not at all” (81). Her “arrival coincided with the purchase and arrival of a new ship called *Grace*” (143). Losing the baby made Zubaida’s homing desire acute (141). She braves to invite Elijah her beacon of home, to Chittagong. Together they create a temporary home by the shores of Chittagong, observing the ship *Grace*, which like Zubaida is an intermediate species, dwindling between the land and the sea. But the sudden arrival of her husband disrupts her temporary home, creating a “disjunction between the physical and the relational aspect” of home. Like Antigone the physical boundaries of the house do not delimit Zubaida’s “proper place”, but rather serves as an obstacle³⁵. The way *Pakicetus* felt at home in the sea, unlike her ancestors (389), similarly Zubaida “assumed an air of being able to float seamlessly from place to place”. “Everything about my life was too easy. I could love whomever I wanted, and marry or not marry them, or change my religion, or get divorced multiple times and have children with three different fathers if I wanted. I came from what you might call a traditional society, but I was not in thrall to that society... (13). She decides on “transgression” and “abandonment” of the familiar (396), “I seek the connection, but resist when the opportunity is offered. My heart is a nomad still, after so many years of being in this country” (84). In Braidotti’s words, “The nomad is a transgressive identity, whose transitory nature is precisely the reason why s/he can make connections at all. Nomadic politics is a matter of bonding, of coalitions, of interconnections.”³⁶

Zubaida lives in flux, in the constant making and unmaking of her identity. Her “de-essentialized” self can only be understood as “becoming”. Thus Zubaida evolves, a diasporic new-woman³⁷, ready to leave “all our ghosts behind” and to stand fearless before “the terrible, dark world” taking strength from the sense of “belonging only to each other” (407), without any “roots” or “nation” to bind. She is the Deleuzian woman, “the sign of fluid boundaries”³⁷.

“Equally problematic for feminists is the fact that “difference” is confined to the past: all differences are flattened out in a shift of perspective that encourages us to move beyond race, gender, and sexuality to construct a future beyond difference. In response, nomadic theory stresses difference as the principle of not-one, so as to remind us that difference is not a concept but a process. It, moreover, is not a simple additive, or something you can join, but rather a permanent fracture, a split form within: not a utopian future world awaiting our engagement, but a people we are missing right here and now.” (Nomadic Braidotti 172)

Can the Muslim Woman Speak?

35. Ibid.

36. Braidotti, Rosi. *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory, Second Edition*. Columbia University Press, 2011.

37. Hasanat, Fayeza. “Religion, Diaspora and the Politics of a Homing Desire in the Writings of Zia Haider Rahman, Tahmina Anam and Monica Ali.” *Asiatic* 11, no. 1 (June 2016).

The discussion of the Hoque women, placed at home, nation and the world; remains incomplete without a discussion of their 'other'. The way in Western feministic discourses the binary opposition between man and woman prevailed, similarly regarding Third-world feminism the binary opposition between the privileged West and the non-privileged non-West reigned. The Hoque women are loosely tied with the thread of nationalism; Rehana forcing herself to become a nationalist out of love towards her children, Maya a dedicated nationalist has nationalism as her identity, and Zubaida questions the very existence of nation-states. But apart from nationalism there are other categories. "Religion and caste are just two of the categories that have catalyzed fundamental rethinking about the problem of "difference" and its relationship to definitions of the feminist subject."³⁸ My contention here relies in the possibility of a religious "I", that requires and interrogation with the author's "secular assumptions"³⁹ Can the Cartesian Cogito be theologically formulated? Is a pietistic "I" possible? Marianne Katappo expresses her identity as, "I am," "I am an Asian," "I am a Christian," "I am a woman"⁴⁰ in a predominantly Islamic society. Is a similar articulation – "I am," "I am a Muslim," "I am a woman" possible for the women in Anam's work in a society that is secularized and overtly nationalistic?

The first woman to embrace a religious identity during the national upheaval in Anam's work is Silvi, Maya and her brother Sohail's childhood friend, who later gets related to the Hoque family through marital ties. 'It would be arrogant to say that God had found me, or that I had found God. Who are we to find Him, that holiest, most exalted of beings? For He is everywhere, in every breath, every heart. One has only to look.'(186) In a time when Maya was looking for freedom in the creation of a nation state and Rehana was developing he agency through her role as a mother, Silvi seems to have found her freedom in her relationship with the divine. All of them "want to believe in something greater than myself" (286). For Rehana it is the family, for Maya it is the nation and for Silvi it is the divine. This implies " 'Freedom' certainly does not mean the same thing to all women in the world."⁴¹ Strikingly, Anam's treatment of Silvi and her fellow Muslim tabligh jamaat sisters is at variance from that of the Hoque women. Here Anam seems less flexible and presents the women with an overtly religious identity "as a composite, monolithic group of powerless women lacking agency"⁴². It can be argued that now the First world Western feminism, playing the role of the self, characterizes Muslim women as the Other. Thus the oriental Muslim women seems to plunge on 'a triple colonization or a triple orientalization'; as Hasan points out, "The Orientalist representation of Muslim women added another fold to the feminist construction of "double colonization," and thus we can talk of a triple colonization or a triple orientalization. In this case, the Orientalists portrayed Muslim women

38. Loomba, Ania, and Ritty A. Lukose, eds. *South Asian Feminisms*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2012.

39. Ibid.

40. Katappo qtd in Kim, Hyun Hui. "Asian Feminist Theology"

41. Crowley, Ethel. *Third World Women and the Inadequacies of Western Feminism*. 2014

42. Hamid, Shadi. "Between Orientalism and Postmodernism: The Changing Nature of Western Feminist Thought Towards the Middle East." *HAWWA*4, no.1 (2006).

according to a three-fold mental image in mind: “Oriental,” woman, and Muslim. This can be compared with Spivak’s construction of “poor, black, and female”⁴³. This threefold construction seems to have triggered Anam’s portrayal of Muslim women in her *The Good Muslim*. She seems to follow the Beauvoirian injunction that “the veiled and sequestered Moslem woman is still today in most social strata a kind of slave”⁴⁴.

Silvi’s “pordah” (hijab) and her time spent in reading “the Holy Book” has been dubbed as “Foolishness” (184). Silvi gradually attains an agency based on her religious inclinations. She accepts the death of her first husband as God’s will. She braves to let Maya know that “Not everyone believes what you believe.... Your problem, ... is that you can’t tolerate a difference of opinion.” Silvi is a pacifist – “I happen to think this war – all this fighting – is a pointless waste of human life.” (285) Silvi’s religious inclinations gain full force in the second book *The Good Muslim*. The initial description that we find of the “burkha-clad” Muslim women makes us visualize the activities of a swarm of insects other than human beings, “The women seemed to have multiplied, taking every inch of space on the carpet. They leaned against each other and held hands.” ‘Maya packed herself tightly against the wall’, as if to save herself from the attack of the swarm (15). Intriguingly, it is among these seemingly backward looking Muslim women a novel kind of “global sisterhood” evolves, out of their religious unity. The sisters from different parts of the world meet and greet each other ‘enthusiastically, touching their faces and fingering the material of their burkhas’ and ‘speaking to them in a mixture of Bengali, Arabic and sign language’ (134).

Through Silvi, Anam sums up the life of a Muslim woman within ‘God, men, morality. Purdah and sex... The raising of children’ (22). After Silvi’s death, Khadija, ‘the fat’, ‘large’ woman (33) takes over her and plays the role perfectly. To add to the portrayal of the gruesome Muslim women, we find the description of Maya’s ‘ustani’, to whom she ‘never did pay any attention’ because, “She never explained anything to me. And she told me to shave between my legs.... But you remember Ammoo, she was always scratching herself there?... I swear, I thought there was a man hiding under that burkha. Or a hive of mosquitoes” (199). We find a ghastly picture of the woman maybe because it is ‘faith’ that she has, not ‘science’ that Maya expects. And for Maya as it seems for Anam as well both the terms are contradictory. Regarding the portrayal of Mayas religious teacher it can be easily concluded that, “when it comes to issues of Islam and Muslim women, feminists more easily discard judicious analysis and reiterate negative stereotypes”⁴⁵. Despite this “universalizing” agenda their remains a vast wealth of speculations offered by feminist scholars regarding “women’s agency, women’s

43. Hasan, Md. M. “The Orientalization of Gender.” *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 22.4 (2005): 26-56. Print.

44. Hamid, Shadi. “Between Orientalism and Postmodernism: The Changing Nature of Western Feminist Thought Towards the Middle East.” *HAWWA*4, no.1 (2006).

45. Shaikh

choices, and concepts of unified “selves”.⁴⁶ In studying the “burha-clad” women Saba Mahmood’s approach seems most befitting, “I have insisted that it is best not to propose a theory of agency but to analyze agency in terms of the different modalities it takes and the grammar of concepts in which its particular affect, meaning, and form resides.”⁴⁷

Conclusion

“I proudly regard myself as a feminist”, says Anam, and finds it “crucial to openly acknowledge feminisim”. Bangladesh is a place of rich, diverse and often conflicting cultural and religious history. Therefore it has come to be a place of many feminisms. Whereas Anam is able to portray the organic secular-national feminism that stemmed from resistance, she falls short while dealing with religious feminism. Pundits tell us that there is a clash of civilizations or cultures in our world. They tell us there is an unbridgeable chasm between the West and the “Rest.” Muslims are presented as a special and threatening culture— the most homogenized and the most troubling of the Rest. Muslim women, in this new commonsense, symbolize just how alien this culture is⁴⁸. And the message that Anam seems to propagate is perhaps to get out of the grip of the alienated ‘rest’ and to embrace the ‘West’. And her portrayal of Muslim women seems, “perpetuates the myth that Muslim women can become assertive and confident only by becoming more westernized and less Muslim”⁴⁹.

As the West has taken the authors of ethnic or religious minority as native informants, and view their portrayal as something authentic, thus a real and true picturaization of the issues regarding women is something that appears to be of utmost importance. As Lazreg puts it, we need to see women’s lives, even under adversity, as ‘meaningful, coherent and understandable, instead of being infused “by us” with doom and sorrow’. It is also important to draw attention to the fact that ‘the other is just as entitled as I am to her/his humanity expressed in his/her cultural mode’⁵⁰. Anam's portrayal fits Visweswaran's comment that it has become commonplace for feminists ‘to rehearse inventories that begin with middle-class and end with Western or Western-educated’⁵¹. The cure perhaps is to have “a simultaneous other focus: not merely who am I? But who is the other woman? How am I naming her? How does she name me?”⁵²

46. Mahmood, Saba. *Politics of Piety*.

47. Chambers, Claire. *British Muslim Fictions: Interviews with Contemporary Writers*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. Print.

48. Abu-Lughod, Lila. *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?*. Cambridge, Massachusetts & London: Harvard UP, 2013. Print.

49. Meddour, Wendy O. “Brick Lane- Book Review.” *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 21.3 (2004): 172-174. Print.

50. Lazreg qtd in Moghissi, Haideh. *Feminism and Islamic Fundamentalism: The Limits of Postmodern Analysis*. London: Zed Books, 1999. Print.

51. Visweswaran

52. Spivak

Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*. Longueuil, Québec: Point Par Point, 2007.

Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of Ones Own ; and Three Guineas*. London: Vintage, 2016.