Chapter 4
Seeking a Golden Age for Muslim Women of Bangladesh: Tahmima Anam’s
*The Good Muslim*

When God, disgusted with man,
Turned towards heaven,
And man, disgusted with God,
Turned towards Eve,
Things looked like falling apart.
But Crow Crow
Crow nailed them together,
Nailing heaven and earth together-
So man cried, but with God's voice.
And God bled, but with man's blood.
Then heaven and earth creaked at the joint
Which became gangrenous and stank-
A horror beyond redemption.
The agony did not diminish.
Man could not be man nor God God.
The agony
Grew.
Crow
Grinned
Crying: "This is my Creation,"
Flying the black flag of himself.

- Ted Hughes (1930-1998)
Introduction

The year 1971 witnessed political unrest settling down with the liberation of “East Pakistan” as the new republic of “Bangladesh” after the hostile war and rage with “West Pakistan”. Many political movements paved ways to freedom; freedom from “disproportionate allocation of resources for West Pakistan”, freedom from “rabid demands of political Islam” and freedom from “political ambition of West Pakistani elite” (Saikia 4). During the years 1947 and 1971, there remained an acute silence about “East Pakistan” (Now Bangladesh) except the alarming details of economic exploitation by West Pakistani business interests. Their situation forced them to question - who were the real colonisers? - The British or West Pakistanis? (Saikia 35) Like partition of India and Pakistan in 1947, Bengali women (irrespective of their being Hindu or Muslim) also had a similar saga of suffering during the war of 1971.

The Liberation War destroyed human lives, affected the living conditions and created an entirely new world for the victims with haunting memories forever. Women and children, as passive participants in wars, suffered the most while their contribution remained unnoticed, undocumented or simply sidelined. Men’s roles, on the other hand, with chivalry and heroism have always been documented in grandeur ways. Women’s told and untold stories of struggle and their contribution in Liberation War “largely ignored by historians in Bangladesh” (Zaman 39). Bengali women’s Abduction, rapes and physical assaults done by Pakistani army which destroyed these women physically as well as psychologically.

During the liberation war, the Pakistani military brutally killed thousands of unarmed civilians and raped close to 30,000 women... A leading feminist and human rights activist documented unprecedented stories of women’s psychological suffering caused by the Pakistani army’s ruthless violence against them. (Zaman 39)

Yasmin Saikia represents the narratives of personal experiences by victims from Rangpur, Dhaka, Dinajpur and Khulna during these dreadful years in *Women, War and the Making of Bangladesh: Remembering 1971* (2011) which shocks the readers to the core. In this book, one of the victims exclaims: “Pakistani military kept me naked... They had tied me to a chair with my hair; my hair was very long... They
cut my arms with blades because I was shouting... I saw two dead girls; they tortured even their dead bodies; they were dead already” (143). Another woman cries: “It was a nightmare for me” (152), yet another says: “Women are treated like cattle” (178), and again a victim is cited saying: “Don’t ask me about those days, my blood begins to boil. ...There was a river of blood and slaughtered heads of people strewn all over. My sons and brothers were killed in front of me.” (185) Furthermore, “the armed Bengali gangsters” not only raped but also abducted women and did “sten-gun weddings” i.e. weddings under gun threats, with Bangladeshi women during the occupation of Bangladesh by the Pakistani army in a state of lawlessness (Kabeer 110). With such traumatic physical assaults, fearful existence in forced marriages and lawlessness around them, these women must have gone through relentless and unspeakable suffering. Their extreme helplessness has not been much articulated in the history of Bangladesh. But this had sowed the seed of feminist consciousness as Kabeer further remarks that “for some groups of middle-class women, this period may have marked the birth of a feminist consciousness in the sense of revealing the common thread of oppression uniting them with poorer women” (110). Hence, the years of national struggle for freedom proved to be crucial for the women in Bangladesh to build up their feminist consciousness. On top of that, according to Roshan Jahan in “Hidden Wounds, Visible Scars: Structures of Patriarchy” in 1988, two significant developments played a vital role in igniting the flame of feminist consciousness amongst women in those initial years: “(a) the growing international concern with the status of women as reflected in the propagation of the 1975 United Nations Decade for Women, and (b) the role of women’s organizations and the media (especially newspapers) in bringing to light the abuse of young married women for non-payment of dowry” (Zaman 39). The invaluable contribution of writers, feminists and social activists from pre-independence to recent times must be accredited for building and sustaining the feminist quest for equal rights, peace and equity in all the spheres of life. Nawab Faizunnesa (1834-1903) who was felicitated with the title “Nawab” in 1889 by Queen Victoria for her endeavours to promote female education falls under the category of earliest feminist writers (Karim np). Begum Rokeya (1880-1932) is an obvious name in the same category who was the real feminist hero of her time. *Sultana’s Dream* (1903) is a milestone feminist utopia in bringing about a change in women of all ages. Hossain, a young Muslim woman from colonial Bengal, had also written other groundbreaking short stories as well as novels. In 1909,
Hossain set up the Sakhawat Memorial Girls’ School – the first ever school for Muslim women in Bengal. She established the Muslim Women’s Society, an organisation that was in the forefront of the fight for women’s education and employment (Subramanian 1). It is interesting to note that Tasleema Nasreen and Tahmima Anam are two of the most significant feminist writers from Bangladesh who used to cite Roquia Sekhawat Hossain as their inspiration. Tahmima Anam, states:

Many of the women of my grandmother’s generation attended the Sakhawat School, becoming the first women in their families to become literate... In 1916, Sakhawat Hossain founded the Muslim Women’s Society, an organisation that was at the forefront of the fight for women’s education and employment... It was the cornerstone of the women’s movement in Bengal, and paved the way for the vibrant and politically progressive feminist movement in contemporary Bangladesh. (Anam “My Hero Rokaya”)

Kamini Roy (1864-1933) with her contribution to Bangla poetry and social activism gave fervour to feminist movements during her lifetime. She was the first female graduate in British India (Sengupta 83). Jahanara Imam (1929-1994), known as ‘Shaheed Janani’ (Mother of Martyrs), is famous among Bangladeshis for her unflinching efforts to bring those accused of committing war crimes in the war to trial. “Unknowingly, Jahanara Imam blazed a path of feminism, soon becoming the editor of the woman’s magazine, ‘Khawateen’” (Rahman 1). Salma Sobhan’s (1937-2003) contribution to laws and human rights helped Bangladesh with her writing Legal Status of Women in Bangladesh in 1975 and other works based on legal rights of women (Hossain “Sobham, Salma”). Iffat Ara (1939) is remembered for her writing and activism in Bangladesh. She didn't blame Islam for Bangladeshi women’s position (Islam “Iffat Ara”). Hena Das (1924-2009) was remembered for her involvement in the war in 1971 as a teacher.

During the Liberation War, she went to Kolkata and formed the ‘Udvastu Shiksak Samiti (Refugee Teachers’ Association). The Samiti opened 50 camps and continued the distribution of relief, the shelter of the refugees, medical treatment and education of refugee children with the foreign financial support... Among her notable books are Ujjwal
Many contemporary activists, writers and feminists paid tribute to their nation Bangladesh to make it a more female-friendly place to live. Hameeda Hossain (1936) a human rights activist and academic personality has attributed in the field of human rights. One of her articles “Bangladesh: Where is the Promised Change for Women” is a harsh manifesto of female rights (Hossain “Bangladesh: Where is the Promised”). Rounaq Jahan (1944) in political science is the one who established the first feminist research centre in Bangladesh in 1973. She earned Ph.D. degree from Harvard and then started working with Columbia University and UN on women and development. Begum Sufia Kamal (1911-1999) for promoting peace between Hindu and Muslim while writing poetry was an influential cultural icon in the Bengali nationalist movement of the 1950s and 60s (Kabir “Kamal Begum ”). Sultana Kamal (1950) is a lawyer, human rights activist and the Executive Director of Ain o Salish Kendra, a civil rights organization (Rahman “Ain O Shalish Kendra”). These human rights activists and feminists have injected fervour in Muslim women in Bangladesh to fight for equal rights and dignity from the beginning to contemporary times. Major political parties like Bangladesh Awami League and Bangladeshi Nationalist Party with their female politicians Sheikh Hasina (Current Prime Minister of Bangladesh) and Khaleda Zia respectively have promoted women liberation and equal rights in their distinct ways with different agendas. A big number of Non-Profit Organisations and women’s groups have been playing a vital role in building up a voice against discrimination against women. Their quest for women’s welfare and well-being is concerned with urban as well as rural areas of Bangladesh. Mainly among them are Mahila Parishad, UBINIG (Unnayan Bikalper Nitinirdharoni Gobeshona – Policy Research for Development Alternative), Bangladesh Women’s Journalists Forum, Proshika, the Institute of Democratic Rights, Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC), Grameen Bank, Nijera Koni, Women for Women: Research and Study Group etc with support from international organisations as well (Zaman 45).

Besides individual efforts and organisational initiatives to bring about change, there was the need to get them supported by government intervention through policy
and law making. Bangladesh legal system is derived from the British Penal Code and Common Law, but Islamic extremism directly affects State policies for social welfare in Bangladesh and thus State intervention is required to integrate gender equity in policymaking. More precisely, Goetz (1995) remarks:

> In [Morocco and] Bangladesh, Islamic discourses conflict with national secular principles, especially in relation to women’s rights.... Bangladesh began a long process of yielding to theocratic interest in the mid-1970s. Lately, its contradictory discourses on women’s role in development have been put to a violent test by Islamic groups, who have directly attacked government projects working with women and girls. (12)

The structural and social institutions must walk hand in hand with the female population to work on the grievances. The patriarchal mindset is directly responsible for the low status of women in society. It is clearly stated that “structural and social institutions”, “lack of explicit policy initiatives”, “patriarchal preoccupied mindset” and “early marriages” are the major reasons for gender inequality in Bangladesh in health, education and employment rates. (Ferdaush, J. & Rahman, K.M. 6-7) Muslim Personal Laws, following the principles of Shariah, along with the general constitution of Bangladesh, govern the lives of people wherein Muslim Personal Laws disseminate gender inequalities through many laws and clauses directly putting women under men’s control i.e. property, marriage, selection of spouse, divorce, custody of children, etc. More than laws, what happens in actual practice is beyond recognition. For example, the Muslim Family Laws Ordinance of 1961, allows men to have four wives, provided all wives are treated equally. But women do not receive that ideal respect and prestige; instead of that, they live more vulnerable, humiliated and miserable lives. More dreadful is the condition of women seeking divorce. Economic dependency and social, religious stringent norms entrap Bangladeshi Muslim women into a vicious circle of helplessness and they have to compromise with physical abuse, mental torture and humiliation in addition to fighting for divorce legally. In the case of raising their voice and standing against the injustice, Bangladeshi women easily get targeted with physical violence in and outside their family and circles. Numerous case studies provide insight into a very sensational and sensitive issue of violence against women in Bangladesh which assert that different
forms of violence like murder, domestic violence, dowry deaths, acid throwing and rapes are commonly less reported crimes in Bangladesh (Zaman 39-44). A report prepared for the British High Commission, Dhaka in August 1994 titled as “Background Report on Gender Issues in Bangladesh” in a straightforward manner nailed down the very core problem behind gender issues prevailing in Bangladesh:

Bangladesh is a highly patriarchal society. Within the household and through local decision-making and legal bodies (e.g. the shamaj and salish), men exercise control over women’s labour, their sexuality, their choice of marriage partner, their access to labour and other markets and their income and assets. Women’s access to social, economic, political and legal institutions is mediated by men. They are dependent on men throughout their lives, from fathers through husbands to sons. State legislation and institutions underpin this gender subordination and dependence, in spite of constitutional affirmations of sex equality. Men’s authority over women is reinforced by pervasive gender-based violence. (Baden, S., Green, C., Goetz, A., & Guhathakurta, M. 5)

Interestingly, after the Taslima Nasreen controversy in 1993 on the global arena, Bangladesh was presented by burqa-clad women in the New York Times which made an impression on the nation as Iranian-style Islamic theocracy (Wright 20-21) which in reality showed a different face of the nation. As a matter of fact, very few women dress so severely in Bangladesh, which was shown in the New York Times in 1993. Shehabuddin provides the details in “Contesting the Illicit: Gender and the Politics of Fatwas in Bangladesh” in Gender, Politics and Islam by quoting the reports form Ain-o-Salish Kendra that “Between January 1993 and December 1996, more than sixty incidents of fatwa-instigated violence, directed mostly against improvised rural women, were reported in Bangladesh” (Saliba 202). Nevertheless, the relentless media hype, international support and Western press misled the whole issue of Nasreen controversy presenting Bangladesh as a “uni-dimensional theocracy” forgetting the “complex history of colonial and post-colonial legacies” without any mention of “rich history of women’s rights and human rights activists” (Zaman 42). Historically, after acquiring independence in 1971, there was no severe physical burqa tradition apparent in Bangladesh though modesty in clothing had been imbibed
there culturally and religiously. A study of Bangladeshi university going girls and women in 2006, in general, explains that they have recently adopted physical burqa which is influenced by modern Islamist movements. The study questioned “burqa” as empowerment or violation of women’s rights? (Rozario 368) What did compel them to adopt strict physical burqa? What are the implications of women’s rights in recent Bangladesh? Why are these women more inclined to acquire religious identity than their cultural identity for which the country fought against current Pakistan?

Rozario points out that by abolishing Bengali Islam (as influenced by Bengali culture) and by adopting purer Islam as an agenda by Islamist movements, the nation establishes an individualistic and religious identity in the context to nullify Western colonial influences. She explains four reasons behind women going for strict gender segregation (burqa) such as “(1) Strategic – Instrumental (2) Personal Identity Issues (3) Collective or National Identity and (4) Status Concerns of Middle Class Women” (Rozario 376-377). This young country has to create and sustain national policies in regard to promoting gender equality as it’s a major issue to address in the wake of Islamic fundamentalism in Bangladesh. The patriarchal society with increasing fundamentalism is fostering gender inequality and politics of fear amongst people. As an output of the programme entitled Enhancing the Responsiveness of the Government to Address Exclusion and Inequality (2011) in Dhaka, Bangladesh, the writers comment:

Traditional attitudes and gender-stereotyped roles of women often prevent society as a whole to recognise women’s equal rights in both private and public spheres. The underline structural factors include not just poverty but also a culture of acceptance, lack of effective community structures, harmful practices, inappropriate and ineffective allocation and utilization of resources in the context of a strongly patriarchal society. Women are subjected to inequalities in the family, in the community and the workplace. Discrimination against girls starts at birth and continue through the lifecycle. (Ferdaush, J. & Rahman, K. M. 17)

Women in Bangladesh face inequalities in almost all the strata of life with different types of subjugation. Patriarchal society doesn’t allow literate and illiterate women
alike to come out in public without ‘burqa’. Their gender is stereotyped with certain set behaviour patterns, clothing and etiquettes which are morally-ethically according to Bangladeshi chauvinist society. Working women and college-university going girls in urban areas use burqa as a “compromise between the need for women to take part in society and the desire to keep them in seclusion”; meanwhile, the security issues for such women seem dicey as “the onus of women’s security is on women again. The state is not taking any responsibility: women have to behave themselves and obey rules. As for those who are not covered (including non-Muslims), if they are assaulted or violated, it is their own fault” (Rozario 378). Looking at the same scenario of more and more Muslim women adopting a purer form of Islam has another perspective too. Inspired by courageous women thinkers and activists from history, this twenty-first-century Muslim women seem to have changed their approach towards the Quran and Islam. Their approach is quite influenced by “feminist terminology and discourse” which “includes significant and rather unfamiliar facets, like assertions that Islam offers protection from violence against women” (Marshall 1). This approach is a clear indicator of the rise of Islamic feminism in Bangladesh. Women folk are compelling to re-visit the roots and reasons for their subjugation which settles down under an umbrella of Islam. The new generation of women make themselves understand that the traditions that have cast them in subservient roles in the name of Allah are not Islamic, “but the product of male-dominated cultures and a misreading of scripture. Instead, women see their Islamic identity as a source of empowerment, and of liberation” (Marshall 1). In Women and Human Development (2000), Martha Nussbaum quotes an example of feminist argument in religion:

A young wife in Bangladesh, told by local mullahs that religion forbade her to work in the fields alongside men, said that if Allah was requiring them to stay hungry, then “Allah has sinned”. She meant, of course, to express scepticism about the mullah’s interpretation. Her view of her religion was that a just and good God presumably, would let her gain her livelihood and ask men to conduct themselves modestly toward her. (196)

This type of argument, directly and indirectly, suggests that this division must be of “human error, which can be remedied while leaving religion itself intact” (Nussbaum 197). The style of argument is very much utilized in the leading Islamic feminists like
that of Fatima Mernissi and Amina Wadud in their arguments suggesting that vulnerable situations of women are not Islamic but patriarchal and men-oriented. According to Katherine Marshall (2011), two paths have been taken by women in Bangladesh recently in this regard.

One is political, acted out through the Muslim-linked political parties. Here, women are playing increasingly active roles. The other path, far more decentralized, is seen at the community and individual level, where women are interpreting religious texts for themselves and drawing their own conclusions on the spiritual lessons. Women preachers are emerging. Groups where women read religious texts and discuss them have mushroomed over the past ten years. (1)

To counter the increasing fundamentalism, such religiously feminist stance by women is the need of the hour in Bangladesh to carry forward Islam as their faith.

Islamic extremism curbing women’s liberation has not only been tried to be thrashed by social activism, government intervention and other non-profit organisations but also by the feminist writers in the Bengali language from the pre-independence era to the twenty-first century. From Rokeya Shekhawat Hossain to Taslima Nasreen and many more recent writers have comfortably expressed their views about their land in the Bengali language. Women feminist writers have produced tremendous fiction in different forms of expression in the Bengali language. To name a few, Taslima Nasreen (1962), Shaheen Akhtar (1962), Anwara Syed Haq (1940), Dilara Hashem (1936) and Nilima Ibrahim (1921-2002) are well-known fiction writers in their mother tongue. Among them, Taslima Nasreen’s novels and poems in Bengali have been translated into thirty different languages.

A recurrent theme in her writing is sexual discrimination and violence prevalent against women in Bangladesh. She uses graphic language to express herself and to depict the situation of women in the country....

Until 1993, Nasreen was largely unknown outside Bangladesh and West Bengal in India. Nasreen attracted international attention in May 1994 when an obscure fundamentalist group issued a fatwa (religious sanction) sentencing Nasreen to death, put a bounty of Taka 50,000 on her head and demanded her trial on charges of blasphemy. (Zaman 44)
Nasreen has lived in exile from 1994 and honoured with many prestigious awards outside Bangladesh. Selina Hossain (1947) is a leading novelist who won the SAARC Literature Award in 2015 for her remarkable contribution to South Asian Literature. (Banglapedia) When it comes to female writers writing in English, Tahmima Anam’s words encrypted during an interview are remarkable: “Partly it’s because Bangladesh hasn’t had a generation of writers in English coming to maturity, as happened 20 to 30 years ago in India, and is happening now in Pakistan. Apart from a few, most authors are writing in Bengali” (Chambers 162-163). But at the same time, it is considerably true that “Bangladesh is not giving a walk –over. A stream of creative work in English is increasingly developing in the present literary arena of Bangladesh” (Askari 2).

Bangladeshi Diaspora writing became famous worldwide through Brick Lane (2003) fame Monica Ali, Bangladeshi-British novelist, who was shortlisted for Man Booker Award and her novel, was adopted for a movie in 2007. Shamim Azad (1952) is a Bangladeshi-British bilingual poet, writer and story-teller. Her novels and poems in Bengali and English are famous for varied themes and ideas especially Bangladeshi and European folklores infused in them. (applesandsnakes.org) Very few female writers writing in English are on the list; most of them are poets and short story writers. Accolade of Novel writing is with fewer from the list. Shazia Omar’s novel Like a Diamond in the Sky in 2009 talked about drug addiction in Bangladesh. Tahmima Anam (1975) stands uniquely among all the contemporary female novelists as an author of Bangladeshi Diaspora in London as well as a Bangladeshi novelist in English.

Tahmima Anam and her Novels

On 8 October 1975, a girl Tahmima was born to an illustrious literary Anam family in Bangladesh. Her father Mahfuz Anam was the editor and publisher of The Daily Star, an English-language newspaper in Bangladesh. Her grandfather Abdul Mansur Ahmed was a satirist and politician whose works in Bengali remain popular to this day. Tahmima Anam was born in Dhaka and grew up in Paris, New York City and Bangkok due to her father’s work for Unicef. (Banglapedia) Her first novel A Golden Age was published by John Murray in 2007. Soon after its publication, she received 2008 Commonwealth Writers’ Prize as Best First Book Winner. In 2013, she was included in the Granta List of 20 Best Young Writers. The second novel The Good Muslim in 2011 is the sequel to A Golden Age. Anam is the recipient of a Writing
Fellowship from the Arts Council of England. She has worked with movie *Matir Moina* (The Clary Bird) crew which reflects the happenings during the Liberation war. As a writer and editor, she has publications in famous magazines and newspapers like *Granta, The Guardian, Financial Times* and *The Independent*.

*A Golden Age* begins with Rehana Haque’s words: ‘Dear Husband, I lost our children today’ (AGA 3) in the prologue titled ‘March 1959’. Before that, Anam quotes Shamsur Rahman’s words from a famous Bengali poem *Shadhinota Tumi*:

Freedom, you are

an arbour in the garden, the koel’s song,

glistening leaves on banyan trees,

my notebook of poetry, to scribble as I please.

Here in the novel, “freedom” has different connotations for Rehana, the protagonist. Her story from March to December during the year 1971 is precisely described with her struggle to get her children back from their uncle, freedom movements and her emotional and psychological struggle after her husband’s death. While the second novel, *The Good Muslim* (2011) is described by Rehana’s daughter Maya Haque which was shortlisted in 2013 for DSC Prize for South Asian Literature (Nair 1) while the third volume is eagerly awaited as it “will be about the devastating impact of climate change on already flood-bound Bangladesh” (Chambers 161). Unlike Rehana, Maya is fierce and a true rebel who speaks her mind with utmost reasoning and confidence. Maya is an epitome of revolution, Marxism and unflinching enthusiasm for service to humanity. *The Good Muslim* has received praise and positive criticism from across the world. It is truly said:

Anam has successfully handled a grim theme with consummate skill. The novel is full of strong emotional undercurrents and intense passions. At times, it is too real and looks like a memoir rather than work of fiction. However, it will find a pride of place in any discussion of how individuals’ reactions to war and violence may differ in an attempt to find solace and reconcile with the self. It also offers a case study of one who has turned into a fundamentalist, or allegedly so,
which is significant especially at a time when the world has been witnessing a rise in fundamentalism of various hues in many countries doomed to be war zones. (Saleem 2)

Why does it seem like “a memoir”? There are distinct reasons for such keen descriptions of war and its aftermath. In Harvard University, for her Ph.D. in Social Anthropology in 2005, Anam conducted interviews in Bangladesh with hundreds of people who were directly or indirectly involved in the war as for the same, she stayed in Bangladesh for two years. She replies during an interview that: “The Ph.D. provided me with the research for the novel, because while writing up all my interviews, I became convinced that stories, forming the narrative are of the work, would lend themselves well to fiction. You can convey certain ideas through fiction in a way that can’t be done through academic books, images that capture something of the spirit of the time” (Chambers 162). The description of 1971 here is not purely fictional or imaginary as Anam has interwoven imagination with real experiences in a well-knit quilt of that time. This novel talks about the impact of history on the characters’ current lives with what may come in their future. How nationalism and national movements affect individual lives and relationships is wonderfully captured in the narrative. That is why Kamila Shamshie, famous Pakistani female fictionist, praises the novel by saying that it is a “book of searing beauty” about “a family searching for ways to navigate through the aftermath of war; in the process she (Tahmima Anam) takes us on an unforgettable journey through a young nation trying to define itself” (The Good Muslim’s Cover Page). The novel is divided into three books with a prologue titled as “1971 December”.

Each book is entitled aptly with its respective storyline, plot and historical connections. Book One is titled as “All that is in the Heavens and on Earth” consists of eight chapters with labels such as “1984 February”, “1972 February”, “1984 March”, “1972 March” etc. 1984 is the year where most of the story takes place with an indirect comparison with the same months in 1972. Second book “Every Soul shall Taste Death” has eleven chapters. Again there is switching on and off between the year 1984 and years 1972, 1973 and 1974. Book Three “God wrongs no one, Not even by the weight of an atom” consists of five chapters where 1985 is a prominent year with a backdrop of the year 1977. Like a pendulum, the time frame shifts from the past to present asynchronously covering a month of 1971, four of 1972, two of
1973, one of 1974 and 1977 while major part – ten months of 1984, three of 1985 and finally ends with an epilogue in 1992. In an interview “Revolution and the Question of ‘The Good Muslim’” on July 31, 2011, in Weekend Edition Sunday for NPR Books, Linda Wertheimer asks Anam the reasons behind her using 1972 and 1984 as important years to set major part of the story, she replies that after the traumatic event of war and independence in 1971, this family emerged in 1972 in an individual nation with a new identity and thus it is important; while 1984 was the year where the dictator was ousted. Anam, furthermore, justifies: “It’s been really interesting for me, witnessing this Arab Spring that’s happened over the last few months in the Middle East, because in Bangladesh we too had a mass uprising against a dictator, and because of that we’ve had 20 years of functioning democracy.” Stories connect and reconnect with flashbacks in the third person singular voice. The novel is a saga of a family’s suffering after the Liberation war. The homecomings of Sohail after the war in December 1971 and Maya after seven years in 1984 are crucial aspects of the novel which establish a total contrast between these two major characters. Maya, the protagonist, remains to be a staunch atheist, rationalist and social activist serving as a Medical doctor while Sohail becomes a staunch Islamist leader, preacher and a chauvinist. Their relationship during wartime had a strong base of patriotism, Marxism, activism and love for freedom.

Which circumstances, political and personal experiences cause such tremendous changes in making of their persona so contrasting to each other? What causes Sohail’s transformation from a rebellious nationalist to a chauvinist fundamentalist? The answers to these questions are the very essence of the novel. Maya and Sohail, both of them grapple with their past and try to assert their realities their future may bring. Tahmima Anam writes a brilliantly incisive and relevant analysis of the hypocrisy permeating society. Besides family experiences with the long shadow of wartime, the novel talks about child abuse, illnesses, women, religion and atheism in a very distinct way. Claire Chambers in British Muslim Fictions: Interviews with Contemporary Writers (2011) exclaims: “In many ways The Good Muslim is a novel of ideas; in addition to religion and atheism, it explores war, its aftermath, and the vulnerable position of women, children and ‘tribal’ people” (161). The story revolves around Maya’s thoughts, flashbacks and present life with her family. The story, in a nutshell, talks about her experiences as a medical doctor in
villages, as a daughter and a sister in her family and a rebellious writer and activist in her independent country create a complex web of individual experiences for her as a woman of free will. She is shocked to her core on discovering Sohail’s fundamental approach towards everything. It was Sohail’s changing character in 1977 which made Maya leave her home and pursue social service using her skills as a doctor in different villages. Maya still stuck to her revolutionary ideals, while her brother shunned his old life. The contrasting details are killing and shocking for her to withstand. When Sohail decides to send his son Zaid to a madrasa, the conflict between the siblings reaches an upsetting climax. Maya is convicted on charges of blasphemy, anti-national writings against the dictator at the end of the novel. While “Epilogue 1992” ends up the novel with optimistic event with “the witness box” remarking a gathering of people including Jahanara Imam, a famous political activist in Bangladesh as a character for remembering and talking “about the war, about the children and comrades they lost” and for uttering “the words they have uttered only to themselves” (TGM 291). When people start praising Sohail and his endeavours to save humanity in the war with all his religious duties, Maya understands that Sohail is the man who turned to religion to make sense of war, cruelty and poverty and in seeking this refugee he became zealous and extreme. The novel concludes by describing Maya’s thought process:

...she closes her eyes and sees the picture of who Sohail has become, knowing that they will never go to the cinema or sit up at the table with Ammo or share a joke or a book (there can be only One, there can be only One), her heart will break. But she recognises the wound in his history, the irreparable wound because she has one too. His wound is her wound. Knowing this, she finds she can no longer wish him different. (TGM 293)

Sohail’s love for religion as well as Rehana’s hatred for religion grow and sustain from a single thread which is war and its aftermath. As a woman, Maya’s experiences vary from that of Sohail’s. While the mother Rehana stands in between them as an agent of peace. The title of the novel is, thus, intriguing. Who is a good Muslim? Sohail – who strictly performs five times Namaaz and obey each and every single word of the Quran? Or Maya – who devotes her life in the service of downtrodden, poor, helpless women and does not tolerate injustice? Or Rehana – the mother who
believes religion is a routine way to lead a meaningful life? The book is asking the readers to question themselves and answer themselves what and who is a good Muslim?

Islamic Fundamentalism in *The Good Muslim*

Unlike urban areas in Bangladesh, rural areas have been severely infected with a germ called Fundamentalism or Extremism in religion. In the narrative, Maya’s seven years in different villages of Bangladesh between 1977 to 1984 highlights the miserable conditions of women in rural areas. One of the most significant among all is the Nazia subplot. Being a surgeon, Maya operates women for delivery and spread awareness among illiterate people in small villages. During one hot noon, her friend cum patient Nazia expressed her desire to dip her legs in the village pond. Maya accompanies her and all villagers come to know about their hangout. Nazia’s suspicious husband and the villagers, after her delivering a kid with Down’s syndrome, accused her of adultery by saying that: “One hundred and one (lashes)... For lying about the child. He is not mine. He looks like a Chink,... did you fuck a Chinese, wife, is that what you did?” (23) Maya tries hard to make them understand the scientific reason for the look and the disease unsuccessfully. To understand the reason behind such harsh punishments, one has to look into the impact of Shariah Law in rural Bangladesh, preached by local Mullahs. Taj Hashmi in *Popular Islam and Misogyny: A Case Study of Bangladesh Part I* (2006) writes:

Despite the persistent attempts by human rights and gender activists and donor-driven NGOs with specific programs to uplift persecuted, poor and powerless women in Bangladesh, there seems to be no decline in the popularity of rustic misogynous mullahs, their writing and speeches at the popular level. Traditional rural courts, known as *Salish* in local parlance, run by village elders under the supervision of village mullahs have punished thousands of rural women for violating the Shariah code. Various reports indicate that about 3,000 women were victims to these rural courts annually during the mid-1990s. In 1993 alone about 6,000 persecuted and humiliated rural women committed suicide in different parts of Bangladesh. (Part I 3)
In this context, this fictional incident of Nazia which is set in around the 1980s is deeply rooted in the real lives of rural Bangladesh almost in all the decades. Hashmi, furthermore asserts that “elaboration of the Shariah with regard to its contradictions with Quranic teachings and principles portrays it as the source of a new theology, ethics and law in parallel to the Quran and in total contravention of Islam” (Part I 9). Thus these small villages seem to have their own ‘new theology’. The only person, Maya, who tries to stop them, miscounting the lashes, bears one sharp lash on her neck. “Instead of a word, she was marked by the whip, her hand rushing to the place on her neck where it had touched her and returning with blood. And was that a smile in the man’s eye? The one who was only following orders, protecting the village, the name of the village” (23). Nazia, the village girl, in extreme pain and wounds, denied for any help from Maya then onwards. Maya was hopeful that once Nazia would stand up, “they would go to the police; they would break up the meetings. But Nazia said no and her black foot said no and Maya realised she would have to leave the wound open, leave the village with her protests still urgent, still angry” (24). Maya has to leave the village in order not to become more harmful for Nazia. This fictional incident can be seen in the light of historical nuances when Goetz in 1995 writes:

Since the mid-1970s Bangladesh has benefited from substantial aid from Islamic countries such as Saudi Arabia and has permitted the spread of Islamic NGOs in rural areas. ... Recently there has been a great intensification of fundamentalist agitation, in which women who are vocal and visible in the public sphere have been singled out for attack. There have also been attacks by rural men with the connivance of local religious leaders on projects associated with women’s emancipation. Women development workers have been assaulted and raped. (49)

The scar on Maya’s neck reminds her of this gruesome incident all the time. In the name of Allah, the adultery is punished with one hundred and one lashes on the bare body of a woman without investigating or considering the facts. This cruelty in the name of religion affects Maya’s psychology permanently. In her dream also, she watches a dozen men in a circle and Masud, Nazia’s husband shouting: “It’s the doctor, she’s the cause of all the trouble” (21). Her haunting memories in villages do not let her sleep peacefully. She writes about the same incident in an article
“Confessions of a Country Doctor” in Rise Bangladesh! – a revolutionary socialist publication in the novel. (116) Not only local Islamic NGOs but also international Muslim delegates from all across the world the French missionaries called Forashi Jamaat, Russian Jamaat visit her brother and his wife, Silvi in their Dhaka city.

Another constant hammering for Maya is the fight between language preferences. Maya’s homecoming surprises her in her hometown too. Her old friends, revolutionaries of time, have changed with their new habits, language and etiquettes. She feels out of the place in a gathering-cum-party. For her, the newly numbered streets and people with newly imposed Urdu are like “half-swallowed pill, stuck in the throat” (52). Her friend, Saima’s frequent Alhamdulillah (Praise be to Allah) after almost all the sentences pinches her; the novel states:

...once upon a time they [Maya and her friends including Saima] would have laughed at people referring to God between every other sentence. But now everyone had caught it; just this morning she [Maya] had been to the vegetable man, and after she had paid him and taken her leave, he said Allah Hafez. ‘What’s wrong with the old greeting?’ she had replied sharply. ‘Khoda Hafez not religious enough for you?’ And the man had scraped the feeling out of his face and returned her money. ‘Please buy your vegetables somewhere else,’ he said quietly. (54)

Imposed Urdu language seems burdensome to a free thinker like Maya who loves Bengali language as a culture instead of Urdu as a religious sign. There are various incidents quoted in the story where clashes are due to Urdu or Bengali language preference. Extremism emerges when one’s belief and preferences are imposed on others. The language issue has been remained persistent among people of Bangladesh.

The novel deals with a variety of incidents marking the hallmark of religion in the lives of major characters. After Maya’s homecoming, the reunion between Maya and Sohail could not take place for almost two months due to Sohail’s overwhelming engagement with religious gatherings, sermons and bayaans (speeches). Maya, in quest of meeting her brother, arranges medical camp for the pilgrims coming to the Ijtema (religious gathering). The Tablighi movement is on its peak wherein Sohail is a relative newcomer. With Sohail’s little son Zaid, Maya
... pushed through the stream of pilgrims and made their way to the river, passing row after row of tents, each one housing tribes of men, their lungis hanging on strings to divide the space between them. They would eat, sleep and pray here for a whole week. The larger tents were set up with speakers and micro-phones and makeshift stages where famous orators from India, imams from Jerusalem or Shanghai or Mozambique, would stand and spread the word. Maya had heard on the news that it was the biggest gathering of Muslims after the pilgrimage to Mecca. Even the dictator would be attending the final recitation, to seek blessings from the spiritual leaders of the jamaat.

(80)

One encouraging aspect of this gathering is the Medical camp wherein thousands of pilgrims suffering from “usual ailments – dysentery, dehydration, broken legs that hadn’t healed properly, wounds that should have been stitched up but never made it to hospital. Jaundice, malaria, typhoid” (77) get benefitted with free medical services. If religion is serving humanity provided no extremist approach, the world can become a far better place. But again a question should be asked that with International orators, their itinerary, tremendous resources for such huge arrangements, etc. – Why would religious leaders promote such squander? Instead of wasting resources and capital on religious gatherings, the expenses must be used for building schools and universities, for the welfare of poor and for better education, especially for female students. Even for Zaid, Sohail denies school education when Maya, hesitantly approaches him. Readers can witness a stark contrast between the propagation of religion versus promotion of education. He straightforwardly denies the possibility of Zaid going to pursue worldly education by saying: “His education is continuing in the hands of Sister Khadija....School is out of the question” (82-83). With her little efforts, Maya taught Zaid English Alphabets and counting but soon after few months, at hospital for their mother Rehana’s surgery, Sohail interrogates Maya and argues:

‘Zaid tells me you’re teaching him the English letters.’
‘Yes. Soon he’ll be reading Middlemarch.’...
‘Sister Khadija told me you taught Zaid to play cards.’
‘Yes,’ she said, ‘he’s a shark.’
‘Sister Khadija is dismayed. Gambling is not allowed.’
Maya stepped back, the shock of his words dipping slowly, painfully into her.

‘But it’s just a game. Ammoo plays too.’

‘You know the difference between Halal and Haram. If you don’t, then perhaps Sister Khadija should take over Zaid’s education.’

(120-121)

The issues related to “Haram” and “Halal” are always very debatable among Muslims in general. The novel grabs the attention of readers by such conflicts of ideas and adherence to an ideology. Maya, on one hand, craves to remain logical and reasonable while her brother, on the other, shows utmost obedience to holy words and its implications. Moreover, it can be easily understood that if the education and simple card playing is denied to superior sex i.e. male child, Zaid, what else can be expected of the female children at the hands of fundamentalist father in Bangladesh in that era. What happens with the efforts of government or NGOs with initiatives for women and girls’ education is described here subtly:

...BRAC informal schools which tend to have a majority of girl students have been burned down and programmes targeting credit to rural women have been denounced as un-Islamic. The damage these attacks are doing to the WID issue in the country is enormous and the government’s tacit connivance with the sentiment behind this process undermines the credibility of its simultaneous commitment to women’s integration in development. (Goetz 49)

Hence, the novel intertwines history, real issues with women and governmental intervention with feelings, relationships and aspirations among individual characters.

At the juncture of deadly climax which leads to Zaid’s death in pursuit of saving him from Madrasa (Islamic religious school) life and brainwashing to become a religious and pious person, Maya faces basic and yet wrenching questions raised by the extremist approach of so-called religious leaders. In search of Sohail, Maya tries to ransack mosques. And each time, her entry is denied by saying: “Women are not allowed” (257). With her urge to fetch his brother and enquire about Zaid’s location, she bangs on the doors of mosques. Maulvi answers: “Begum, I’m very sorry but we have no provisions for women. You must leave immediately” (257). After troubles
reaching the exact place wearing a full burqa and lots of arguments, Maya gets hold of Zaid finally. But the question of women’s entry in the mosques remains debatable from centuries. There are numerous instances quoted in Hadith wherein men and women together with kids perform namaaz in the mosques while no Quranic verse has been found which claims a ban on women’s entry in mosques. On the contrary, Sahih Muslim Volume 1, Chapter 177, Hadith no. 886 cites the Prophet saying “Do not prevent the female servants of Allah from going to the mosque of Allah”. Beside Quranic suggestions, Prophet’s life span is ideal for Muslims to follow and in this respect; his wives, women of his clan and other believing women used the mosque not only for prayers but also for political and social debates and discussions. Mernissi in The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women’s Rights in Islam (1991) throws light on how wives of Prophet along with other women used the mosque as a centre of knowledge, how the Prophet “is the only monotheistic God whose sacred place, the mosque, opens on to the bedroom” (115) and how his wife Aisha used the mosque during the Battle of Camel, and many more instances where women as equal to men participated in general meetings, debates and discussions in mosques. She shares her disappointments about how a radical religion has been turned into a closed world of fundamentalists with patriarchal interpretations over the centuries:

Islam stresses the fact that sex and menstruation are really extraordinary (in the literal meaning of the word) events, but they do not make the woman a negative pole that “annihilates” in some way the presence of the divine and upsets its order. But apparently the Prophet’s message, 15 centuries later, has still not been absorbed into customs throughout the Muslim world, if I judge by the occasions when I was refused admittance at the doors of mosques in Penang, Malaysia, in Baghdad, and in Kairwan. (75)

It is usually believed that keeping in mind the lack of space in mosques, the women busy with households and little kids were advised to perform their prayers at home, and that eventually became a custom so rigid and unchangeable throughout the Muslim world. To revitalize the old traditions, internationally, many countries like Canada, China, Morocco, South Africa, UK, USA and Spain already have their women Imams (one who can lead the Salaat-Namaaz, prayer) too with obvious
controversies worldwide. Since 2003, Canada has supported women lead prayers to mixed gender audience. (Rachel, National Post) Morocco began training women as Islamic guides which was cited by Borrillo Sara in 2010. South Africa, among all the rebellious Islamic feminist movements, stands unique for the presence of Samima Shaikh and Amina Wadud. The Pluralism Project at Harvard University publishes a research project saying that “on March 18, 2005, Dr Amina Wadud made waves when she led Muslim prayers in New York City, a ritual almost always reserved for men.” (Online Research Report) About the first Islamic Feminism conference in Barcelona, Spain, Giles Tremlett on 31st October 2005 writes in The Guardian: “Marching under the banner of a new “Gender Jihad”, Islamic feminists from around the world this weekend launched what they hope will become a global movement to liberate Muslim women.” He cites the words of a Spanish organiser Abdennur Prado that “Gender Jihad is the struggle against male chauvinistic, homophobic or sexist readings of the Islamic sacred text”. But this emerging scenario of women Imams in different countries marks a bang on the dumb ears of Islamists of the world. Though in South Asia, the scenario has not been changed from what is described in the novel. Amina Wadud Calcutta controversy is one of the recent examples of male chauvinism in Islamic India. Various leading newspapers across the world showed the backwardness in India by publishing the controversy. The article “Police force Madras University to cancel Islamic Feminist’s Lecture” in Times of India on 30th July, 2013 by Arun Janardhanan states that her scheduled talk was cancelled by the police forces “considering law and order in the area”. Over and above, the scenario in Indian subcontinents is rigid in the case of women’s entry in mosques. In particular, Bangladesh as described in the novel after independence in 1971, with various political leaders has been targeted by fundamentalists in public as well as in private worlds with fanatic approach towards women in the name of Islamic ideology. It is stated:

Ever since the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rehman, Bangladesh has been experiencing steady growth of fundamentalist parties and groups. The ideology of secularism, which was the benchmark of the liberation struggle, has been replaced by the Islamic ideology, first in the shape of constitutional amendments and then in the day-to-day politics. (Singh 55)
As “Islamic ideology” has its own dimensions to deal with various hindrances such as cultural influences, globalisation, capitalist economy and advanced technical world, the countrymen are neither able to fully gain the secular state of affairs nor the ideal Islamic state of affairs; rather in every front they are confronting conflicts of different ideologies and fanaticism. The characters in the novel are shaped to show different faces of the nation; Sohail – an ideally Islamic young man, Maya – an ideally secular young woman, Rehana – an ideally balanced person dealing with two children with extreme ideologies, and Zaid – a perfectly abused and victimised child from all the fronts.

The kid remains in the centre whenever Maya tries to approach her brother to satiate her desire to talk to him after her homecoming. Maya can see the contrast between Sohail’s teachings of how to raise children and his own treatment of his son, Zaid. She considers him as ignorant and irresponsible father. Zaid starts stealing money, wandering around and learning different languages on his own. His look like a servant boy at the market startled and humiliated Maya in the public. Maya’s little attempts to put him in a good school and then teaching at home go in vain. Finally Sohail puts him under the surveillance of a so called learned scholar in Madrasa, far from their home. A hidden face of madrasa education is shown in the novel through Zaid’s example. The fundamentalist attitude towards Islamic teachings is stricter than one imagines. Pages 180 to 182 describe Zaid’s horrible life at Madrasa. The hungry child is forced to obey the master’s instruction with beating “Wazu (ablution), prayer, then you eat, bodmaish” (180). He is given overcooked and cold rice. He misses Maya here in the dire need of food, compassion and elderly love. The room in the night is full of different noises from “rats, the hum-snoring, the rustle of mosquito nets” and mosquito noise is louder than the Huzoor’s strikes across his palm. He once successfully runs away from Madrasa and sneaks into home at the time of Rehana’s surgery and hence Maya could not attend the child. She seems listless and puzzled at looking at him as the novel reads: “he stank of sweat and God knew what else, and his head was shaved so close she could see the pale veins of his neck as they climbed, creeper-like, over the dome of his head. She had waited all these weeks for him, and here he was, dirty and bald and breaking her heart” (202). After that, again he is sent back to Madrasa by his religious father Sohail who is blind to his suffering.
Sometime after the incident, Maya comes to know the more disheartening fact through Rokeya after she delivers her baby at midnight. She informs Maya that he was physically abused by the Huzoor, tutor at the Madrasa. Rokeya instigates an inquiry: “He said it was because at the madrasa the Huzoor made him lie down. What did he mean by that, Maya Apa? Because I have been thinking about it and thinking about it, and it can mean only one thing, really. Only one thing.” (239) as Zaid is a boy with blue eyes and smart-look like his beautiful mother Silvi. Maya takes a ferry to cross the river Jamuna to reach a madrasa in Chandpur. With great struggle as a woman travelling alone, she is accompanied by a small servant boy on ferry Khoka in pursuit of her nephew Zaid. To spot the boy, Maya tries hard, uses all sorts of weapons; burqa, Khoka, threats, calling herself Huzoor’s pious sister and what not. The whole detailed event shows that as a woman it is very difficult to travel alone. Negotiation with Maulvis at religious places is challenging and tiresome act. “Women are not allowed” is the only verdict she listens again and again without any further dialogue. (271) But without losing her courage, she finally spots that Huzoor and barks, placing her hands on his chest: “I know what you’ve done …I know and God knows and you’ll burn in dosok (hell) for it” (274). She finally saves him from the cruel treatment of the religious guru. She notices that “there is a cut on his cheek. A bruise on the crease of his elbow” (275) and he was so scared at the mention of his father. Zaid is seen as psychologically broken case; mumbling the Arabic alphabets, reciting the words he has been taught, calling his mother again and again, repeating he wants an orange, a bicycle etc. The entire conflict shows how a woman and a kid suffer at the hands of fundamentalism. The kid at the madrasa has to undergo strict punishments and physical abuse.

**Maya and Sohail**

The struggle between the siblings is the struggle between ideologies which is at the core of this novel. Maya, after seven years of her exile in different villages and towns, visits her family on the occasion of Silvi’s death, Sohail’s wife. She is shocked to see that her native place is totally Islamized, and her house has become a hub for Islamic gatherings and preaching of Huzoor, her brother Sohail. Rehana describes what has become of her house, her brother and their circumstances. Maya looks at the things as an outsider now, a pariah to this Muslim society. Anam writes:
They called themselves Tablighi Jamaat. *The Congregation of Islam.* Silvi had held meetings upstairs, preaching to the women about everything there was to know about being a Muslim. God, men, morality. Purdah and sex. The life of the Prophet. His wives, Ayesha and Khadija and Zaynab. The raising of children. How to be one of the faithful. And Sohail had his group of followers at the mosque; many men had been led to the way of deen – the way of submission – under his direction. They brought their friends; their errant sons, and Sohail told them what to believe and how to live. He was considered a holy man. (21-22)

If Muslim women consider Khadija, Ayesha and Zaynab as their ideals, they must not have bound themselves in the shackles of conformity which is actually created by patriarchal interpretations. As Muslims still like to continue the oldest traditions in this globalised world around them, they must remember what Fatima Mernissi in *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam* tries to remind the world that “from the time that he [The Prophet] was visited by Gabriel and received the first revelations, it was naturally toward the Ka’ba that he turned with his wife Khadija to offer for the first time his strange prayer [Namaaz]” (65). The Muslim world in the novel, especially Sohail’s room for religious gatherings is always divided into two with a curtain between men and women followers. The sex segregation is strongly maintained. For example, Maya with Joy whose actual name is Farhan Bashir plan and visit Sohail upstairs “to ask whether he would be welcome in his jeans and short-sleeved shirt, head uncapped, mind still barricaded against religion” (184). Maya is “not sure what the protocol is” but sex segregation is clearly seen when they approach upstairs:

‘I’ve brought a guest. A man.’ Hurriedly Rokeya pulled the nikab over her head. …The curtain parted and a few men left the room, glancing at Maya and quickly averting their eyes. They were soon pooled at the bottom of the stairs, waiting, she assumed, for the signal to return…

The room was smaller than the women’s chamber. (185)

This contrast between the historical realities and the practice among Muslims in the name of religion continues due to patriarchal interpretations. Moreover, Maya marks
topsy-turvy changes in Sohail’s character. The first novel *A Golden Age* describes him as:

Sohail had grown to resemble Rehana. He was pale and had her small nose and her slightly crooked teeth; his hair was fashioned into a wave at the top of his head, the crest threatening to tip over his eyelids. Sometimes, like today, he wore kurta-pyjamas, but usually, he was seen in more fashionable attire: tight, long-collared shirts and even tighter trousers that hung over his shoes and drew tracks in the dust. (AGA, 20)

But after the war and increasing fundamentalism, in *The Good Muslim*, Maya meets Sohail and the description strikes the readers that “Sohail was standing with his back to her, gazing into the water, his hands folded behind him. … His back was broad, his hips. The white that draped his body ended above his ankles, which were black, his thick heels in a pair of cheap rubber sandals… his fragrance of rosewater and attar” (81). She recalls the last day he wore a trouser, after that “a starched, white jellaba, the loose cotton pants underneath, pearl buttons on the collar. And like a hand pressed in benediction, the cap that never left his head” (225). Modesty in clothing is suggested by all the religions, but the strict assertiveness towards the implementation leads to suppression. Sohail’s changed inclination to religious clothing is suggestive and apt for his growing extremist attitude. Sohail was known as “Happy-go-lucky. Happy and lucky, jolly and laughing, bell-bottomed. Rock and rolled. Before he found God” (91). People believed it was Silvi, his first love who became widow and then religious before their marriage, gave and suggested him to read the Book, but Maya knew that it was her mother Rehana who handed over the book to him. (91-93)

While excavating the details of Sohail’s extreme changes, it is imperative to realize that one of the strongest reasons behind the changes is his war experiences. His haunting experiences and memories in war do not leave him after his homecoming.

He had killed an innocent man. The man was not an enemy, not a soldier. Just someone who had let the wrong word come out of his mouth. There is only one way to be good now. The Book has told him he is good, that it is in his nature to be good. The words have been
reclaimed and he swells up with love for the Book. Weeks after piya has disappeared - … he finds himself climbing the ladder up to the roof and sitting cross-legged under the open sun… His mother has given him the Book and he reads the words, refusing to see his friends or celebrate victory. (123-124)

The Book – the Quran gradually becomes the “only One” (176) to him in the world as this book “believes he is good” (125). Later on, he starts talking about differences between other religions and Islam; other ideologies and Islam.

They had their churches, their gospels, their commandments, their strife, their exiles, their miracles. We, he said, have our Prophet, and our Book. The Book was the miracle. It was so simple. That was the power of the message. It turned them into brothers and guardians of one another. It promised equality. It promised freedom. It was perfect…. Every man was equal before God – how foolish of him to believe that Marx had invented this concept, when it was ancient, even deeper than ancient, embedded in the very germ of every being; that is what God had intended, what God had created. He wept from the beauty of it. (166)

His increasing love for religion becomes intolerable to Maya. She, all the time, compares him with his old self. The contrast is intriguingly disheartening to her. Anam describes a crucial month of November 1977 where their lives took a drastic change due to religion. The magic spell of religion had captivated Sohail while Maya was trying to get her brother back into the real world which is driven by government, politics, illnesses, injustices, poverty like real issues; and not by only Allah and prescribed ways in Quran. Sohail being a man of vast knowledge was turning into a fanatic. Nostalgically, Maya applied numerous ways to remind him of his love for music, poetry and books.

She [Maya] thought of all the things he liked to do. Before the war, before Piya and Silvi. Cricket on the shortwave. Mangoes and Ice cream. Dante and Ibsen. Jimi Hendrix and John Lennon. Her voice on the harmonium. Her voice. … Silvi could go to hell. She would sing.
Sohail, angry at Maya’s singing, burns all the books in their garden. Even after her tiresome attempts to make Sohail realise his growing fanaticism, Maya saw the books burning with black orange fire and its colour saying “I am greater than you. My fire has silenced your fire” (252). The incident marks a difference between atheism and faith, rationality and Islam and so much as between Sohail and Maya. The fires within both the characters are equally ignited and equally on high flames. That same night, Maya decided to leave her home, her mother and her brother with his beloved religious wife, Silvi. She disappeared in the morning in search of her individuality without any support from religion or family. The same sort of incident of burning books of “Marx, Lenin, Engels, Gorky, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Jean Paul Sartre, Pavlov, Rabindranath, Manik Bandyopadhyaya, Nehru, Azad, books on sociology, economics, politics and history” (Nasreen 209) is narrated by Taslima Nasreen in her most controversial novel Lajja Shame by the protagonist Suranjan in response to show that his new country Bangladesh has made him communal, the fundamentalists have proved that these revolutionaries are false and fake, what they are doing is right. In his hopelessness from all the sides, he set fire to all his books. In The Good Muslim, Sohail does it in the year 1977; and in Lajja Shame Suranjan does it in 1992. Both the years are significant in the history of Bangladesh. As Shelley Feldman in “Exploring Theories of Patriarchy: A Perspective from Contemporary Bangladesh” (2001) asserts:

The Islamicization process gained legitimacy in 1977 when Martial Law Administrator Zia Rahman (1977-81) proclaimed that the secular constitution would now include the words “absolute trust and faith in Almighty Allah”. This proclamation with Zia’s … support for Islamic banks, mosques, and madrassas, institutionalized Islam politically. (1099)

The same way, to detest fundamentalism and communalism, Lajja was soon written after the demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya in 1992 which lead communal riots in Bangladesh. The male characters in both the novels experience a negative transformation as a reaction to witnessing rapes, violence and pain. In both the cases,
women as mute, silent mules suffered at the hands of fundamentalists and their male
kinfolks witnessed the catharsis helplessly. This comparison may be seen as a mere
coincidence between two writers and their portrayals, but this confirms that fiction,
thus, is not just a by-product of mere imagination among leading women writers in
Bangladesh, but it’s a medium for them to churn the history and its impact on
common people with special focus on women’s subjugation. One is Muslim and the
other Hindu. One in reaction to nationalism and war while the other in reaction to
fundamentalism.

Sohail turns to spirituality instead of becoming holy with blind faith and rituals
in the beginning. He reads and tries to understand that “with it, God guides him who
conforms to his good pleasure to the paths of tranquillity”. And so “He shall lead
them from the fields of darkness to the light” (125). For Maya, his killing innocent
people for Liberation war is not something shameful or barbarous but something of
“heroism”. (124) It implies that the nationalist agendas confirm his ruthless killing as
something heroic rather than inhumane act while Sohail regrets his mistake that he
misunderstood his religion by saying that “just because it was usurped for evil ends
doesn’t make it a bad thing” (128). For Sohail, it becomes clear that using religion for
wars, mass killing or any inhumane barbarous crimes is a sin itself. In that sense,
Maya is an extremist too in context of her inclination to Marxism, atheism and
wrenching nationalism. The intense arguments between Maya and Sohail over
religion and its pros and cons in the day to day life create a strong base for the novel.
Maya solely blames religion for war, injustice and poverty persisting in Bangladesh
when she taunts Sohail: “You remember, don’t you, what they did to us in the name
of God? ... look what your greater being has brought us. War, and a beggar tapping at
our window.” (128-129) Sohail, on the other hand, wants Maya “to be quiet so she
can hear the roar in his head, thinking that if she could hear that roar, the roar of
uncertainty and the roar of death, she might understand” (124). Maya’s arguments and
opposition are also legitimate as what was done to their country was all in the name of
religion. She, instead of being an idealist, remains brutally practical in her approach
towards thinking of religious people and “their strange world, transfixed by rituals”. She
feels disgusted to know that “this was a world in which it didn’t matter that two
of their presidents had been assassinated and that they were not fully in the throes of
irony, with their very own Dictator, their own injustices, their own dirty little south”
Hence, Sohail is also unable to grasp what she had suffered through wartime and after the war as a woman working in Women’s Rehabilitation Centre. Maya aggressively exclaims: “You thought I was enjoying the days after liberation. But they were blood-soaked, Bhaiya, for everyone.” (248) Piya, a war victim who was saved by Sohail reminds Maya what she had gone through. At Women’s Rehabilitation Centre, Maya was given a job of taking care of widows, their pension and property problems; moreover, she was assigned a more difficult task as a doctor – task of performing abortions. Women who were raped and impregnated by army men came to get rid of the babies. Maya had to encourage them for the abortion by saying Maya feels ashamed of the fact that religion caused such physical and psychological deformity in women. She confesses what she had seen by saying that “the women came to get rid of the babies…. But some of them – it was hard, you know, I didn’t think so much about it at the time – they wanted to get rid of them, but when it came time to do it they would cry. And then they would wake up and ask us to put the babies back.” (243) The irony with these women is that Banglabandhu Mujibur Rehman gave them a title – 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.” (142) Anam writes the story in a zigzag way and makes her characters compare and contrast with their details with distinct nostalgia. She writes:

Maya saw women like Piya every day at the Rehabilitation Centre; they had been pouring into the city for weeks. Some had been raped in their villages, in front of their husbands and fathers, others kidnapped and held in the army barracks for the duration of war. Maya was tasked with telling these women that their lives would soon return to normal, that they would go home and their families would embrace them as heroes of the war. She said this to their faces every day knowing it was a lie, and they listened silently, staring into their laps and willing it to be true. (69)

The psychological trauma is unfathomable. These women gradually lose their mental agility, self-esteem and self-confidence. Maya, Rehana and Sohail are shaken to know that Piya’s head was shaven by the army men, she was raped, impregnated, abandoned and misremembered. As a matter of fact in the novel, she refuses abortion
after conscience dilemma and conflict psychologically. In the end, readers can see Piya with her kid in 1992 named after Sohail who saved her during wartime. For these women, it requires tremendous courage to withstand the humiliation for the crime they never had committed. This humiliation forces them to rebel and get devoid of the “Birongana”, “War Heroines” tag. They know their consolations are illusionary as their families don’t want them back. What can Women’s Rehabilitation Board provide them? Can they provide them heir “families” and their “homes” back? (70) One of the war victims ferociously exclaims: “We don’t want to be Heroines. We are ashamed. We want to leave our shame behind, start again.” (70) Their situation is the sowing seed for feminist consciousness. Without fault, without crime, they are sinful, they are unwanted, and they are abandoned. The situation of these women is focused by Anam to a great extent to illustrate the sick social structure and women’s derogatory conditions in context to nationalism and religion.

The issue of aborting a child born of rape is well discussed in *Islamic Ethics in Life: Abortion, War and Euthanasia* (2003) with citations from Quran and Hadith. Rispler-Chaim, in the fourth chapter of the book, explains that most Muslim scholars hold that the child of rape is a legitimate child and as Islam prohibits abortion in general it would be sinful to kill the fetus whereas, in certain circumstances, scholars permit the same. But “the child born of rape, like one born of adultery is a more lowly member of society with regard of the rights he or she is guaranteed and the social status he or she can attain” (88). It is the religious debate amongst Islamic scholars over the bodies of raped women. The issues in 1990s following rapes of Kuwaiti women by Iraqi soldiers and rape of Bosnian women by Serb soldiers were strongly debated. In 1991, the Grand Mufti of Palestine ruled that raped Muslim women by enemies must abort because otherwise these children in future might fight against Muslims. (87-88) In the case of Bangladeshi women, in the novel, many rapists are of the same religion! Now, who is the enemy and who is not? Nationalistic and religious agendas put aside the opinion of women in such cases. While who can decide and what can be decided in the cases of Non-Muslim Bengali women raped by Muslim Pakistani army men? These are questions with no answers. But as Anam writes “it was time, they were told, to forgive. Forgive and forget. Absolve and misremember. Erase and move on.” (70)
These are the experiences Maya had faced and dealt with, and they cannot be erased by her from her memory. For both the siblings, the war left an unerasable wound in their memory and for both, religion played a distinct role to fathom the situations around them. The clashes between these two individualistic characters are genuine but extremist in nature as both had experienced the war from different perspectives. They are not able enough to grasp, accept and reciprocate their individual understanding of war experiences and their endeavours to overcome the past, coping up with after-war activities. For Sohail, Silvi becomes a saviour with the Book and her devotion to Islam. As Maya was “too busy killing those children” (249).

Maya versus Stereotypes

Silvi, Mrs Chowdhury’s daughter who got married to an army man in the first novel A Golden Age, is widowed and becomes a devout Muslim. Sohail always loved this beautiful, childhood friend Silvi but her mother got her married to Lieutenant Sabeer Mustafa. The scene was perfect with Silvi until her husband’s death. She “started covering her head, and now, on the rare occasions when she left the house, she was seen in a black chador that masked everything but her eyes” (174). Maya knew about Sohail’s secret love for Piya, a war victim, his longing for a companion in his recently started preaching practises and someone to help him focus his duties. After a single meeting, Sohail and Silvi decide to marry without any ceremony, an ideal Muslim marriage. Maya had always believed that Silvi is the leading light in Sohail’s life that is gripping him and pushing him into the pits of religiousness. Her Islamist attitude helps Sohail as a saviour from his traumatised experiences. Maya hates Silvi, feels jealous as her brother as well as her mother obey this religious girl Silvi with all their respect. Contradictorily, Maya is seen as an outcaste, unaccepted and undesirable person in religious circles. Maya, on the other way, becomes stauncher in her nature against religion which gradually has snatched her brother and transformed him into someone else. In the beginning, Sohail recited words from “the Torah, the Gita, the Bible… praised the prophets of old, Ram and Odysseus, Jesus and Arjun, the Buddha and Guru Nanak” (166) but now there were no longer “many faces of God. There was only one. One message. One Book. The world narrowed. Curtains between men and women. Lines drawn in the sand. And Silvi, coated in black, reigned in her brother’s heart” (179).
Maya as a non-believer provides an anti-thesis to stereotypes which Silvi, Rokeya and Khadija stand for. Khadija, a pious religious attendant, preaches sermons in women’s chamber after Silvi’s death. Religious women with “rapturous faces” (235), listen and follow her words blindly. Rokeya is another devout follower of Sohail, Silvi and Khadija. At the time of Rokeya’s labour pain, Maya was called by Rokeya’s sister. This girl seems very unfamiliar to Maya and hence she starts interrogating. During midnight, this new girl comes to fetch Maya, introducing her as Rokeya’s sister. She bluntly confesses that Rokeya is a blind follower of Khadija but she “can’t follow someone like a mule” (235). And the head to toe burkha is just a disguise for her to take out of her house to get Maya’s help. Maya is happy to see this archetype in her surroundings. Rokeya, on the other hand, is seen worn out and depressed who becomes a confidante to Maya in Zaid’s case later on. For Rehana, religion is a way to manage day to day routine. Anam, during an interview, justifies Rehana’s approach towards Islam:

…for most people in most Muslim countries - … religion is just a part of everyday life, so it’s both centrally important and taken for granted. For Rehana, it’s critical that she prays five times a day, and that she says Aytul Kursi when she feels she needs to. These practices are totally embedded in her life but, on the other hand, she doesn’t do them because she feels pressurized or is afraid of what others think. (Chambers 165)

Thus, religion becomes what one wants to get out of it. Specifically, an extreme approach as in Silvi, Khadija and Rokeya binds them with a certain way of life, happily restricted while Maya as an anti-thesis to them does not cater to the idea of religion. She is also an extremist in her approach. Furthermore, Anam indicates the consequences of extremism in any sort of belief which in Maya’s case make her alienated. She replies in the interview:

For Maya, Islam signifies backwardness, anti-politics, and closed-mindedness. She’s narrow in how she views religion and becomes alienated from her brother…. She doesn’t realize that this means her being extremely disconnected, not only from her brother, but from the
many people for whom religion is an important and inescapable part of life. (Chambers 165)

Rehana, as a mother and cancer patient, is worried about Maya and her future without her as she is the only well-wisher for her now. Maya fights back invincibly during her mother’s surgery, chemotherapy and critical health. Their bond is unique and gets strengthened day by day. But at the verge of extremely critical health, Rehana gradually advises her to get married, start praying Namaaz, and accept Islam in an alienated society. The novel marks Maya as a person of freewill and which makes her a pariah in her family as well as in the society. Being independent is the way too unacceptable norm for Muslim women. Rehana suggests Maya:

‘You act so independent. You left home, you made your own life. You’re a strong girl. But who will take care of you when I am not here? I wish you had something of your own. Your father would have wanted that.’ Something of her own. What could she have? A marriage, a family, a God? She had prepared herself for none of these.

(201)

For a woman, it is mandatory to have a family and faith in Muslim society. Maya is constantly questioning the stereotyping in this novel. Maya’s character resembles with that of Taslima Nasreen in few particular aspects i.e. her medical profession as a gynaecologist dealing with raped women and women who cry on the birth of girl child, hatred for religion as an agent of misogyny, atheism and close-connection with the homeland, Bangladesh. Unlike, international exiles and controversies world-wide, Maya is limited to rural women issues, family ties and political movements across her nation. Maya is teased as “Maya-bee”, “Stings like a bee” (45) by her friends and comrades.

Farhan Bashir, known as Joy, used to accompany her in her pursuits to know new hometown after seven years. In past, they had worked together in freedom fight, shared happy and struggling days altogether. After seven years, Maya finds the only companion who listens to her experiences and spends intimate time with her. Gradually, they come closer and Joy fell in love with her. Without informing her, he and his mother arrange a meeting with Maya’s mother to discuss marriage prospects.
Yet again, Maya reveals her real character as an archetype. She blurts out her anger at Joy:

‘I’m a hard-hearted woman, that’s why. You shouldn’t want – shouldn’t even dream of marrying me.’ ‘I dream, I can’t help it.’ ‘Well, I can’t help myself either. You can’t marry me. You marry me and turn me into one of those women, with the jewellery and making perfectly round parathas and doing everything my mother-in-law says and only letting nice words out of my mouth.’ (230)

Here, she can be seen as an anti-sentimental and anti-marriage institution. What triggered Maya so badly that she started hating men, marriage and social construction? Why did she oppose the marriage in ferocious ways? She had seen extremely violent cases among married couples in urban and rural areas. Masud and Nazia as a rural couple as well as Chhotu and Saima as an urban couple, at least, were close examples of misogyny in marriages. Taj Hashmi (2006) exposes the ‘popular Islam’ prevalent in Bangladesh, which is propagated by writings of Mullahs. He talks about “Maksudul Momeneen [Objectives of the faithful], a very popular wedding gift for Muslim brides in Bangladesh, which had its 45th edition in 1994 is an epitome of misogyny and vulgarity, full of atni-Quranic and non-Islamic expositions.” (Part II 1)

Few of the thirty five commandments to women extremely misogynist and anti-Islamic are quoted here:

(7) Never let your husband be displeased with you…. If your husband asks you to stand erect, fording your hands whole night by his side, obey him as it would please God and His prophet. ...(18) While he is in a jovial mood be smiling showing your happiness but if he is not in good mood, never ever giggle in front of him. It might be too irritating for him and he might hit you back… (28) Never leave your husband’s company for any duration without his permission. According to a saying of the Prophet if a wife stays away from her husband for a night without his permission, 70,000 angels curse that woman for the whole night. One who stops a wife from staying with her husband, is equally cursed by angels. … (34) You should be thankful to God even if your husband happens to be insane, stupid and illiterate. You should regard
your husband as precious as the moon and spend your life at his feet so that you get eternal bliss. (Part II 3-5)

Hence, it shows that women have no right even to breathe freely. The community of Mullahs in Bangladesh curbs and controls the mobility of women, their choices, and their basic human rights, etc. Muslim women have to obey their husbands and family according to their so-called law and commandments for women. Taslima Nasreen talks about the same self-proclaimed hadiths and writings by local Maulvis as their final words in her book *Aurat Ke Haq Mein* (2008) wherein she shares her experiences with women in Bangladesh. She feels extremely stunned when an eighteen year old girl, Ratan shows her wounds on her body done by her husband. On further inquiry, Ratan explains that as it is written in Hadith, she would not resist her husband’s beating. Nasreen writes that she tried her level best to persuade her that no Hadith orders husbands to do so with little success. But the husband comes up with many books and threatens her by saying that she should not teach anything to any woman against their Hadith. (33-37) Like Ratan, the majority of Muslim women accept their fates, violence on them and humiliation for the sake of their faith in religion. Here, the novel *The Good Muslim* precisely captures the essence of Bangladeshi women’ misery.

In *The Good Muslim*, Maya stands uniquely against stereotyped women. But she also suffers in distinct and different ways. Although Joy is an atheist, he is not as headstrong as Maya. He had seen a life of disgust and adventures in the USA, married to an American lady for Green Card and had also lost his brother, his hopes and his finger (in the physical assault) in wartime. During their casual meetings too, when Joy laughs at her non-feminine talks on farting due to cheese, Maya plainly explains Joy that “I’m a doctor, bodily functions don’t embarrass me” (215). Extreme rationality and practical approach are the key factors of Maya’s character. Compassion, sympathy and service to mankind are supplementary characteristics added with sheer nationalism. She gradually starts thinking of motherhood and her kids with Joy. Towards the end of the novel, Joy helps Maya in her struggle against lawsuits, psychological asylum and remorse for Zaid’s death. In the epilogue, Maya is seen with her daughter, Zubaida, “a name locked in a name” of Zaid. (293)
Voice against Injustice and Dictatorship

The novel raises questions on several issues concerning women. Through Maya’s character, Anam puts forth the idea of ‘Good Muslim’ or ‘True Muslim’ who does not tolerate injustice in any form, who has a voice against inequality and discrimination. She writes about her experiences in villages as a doctor and gets it published in Communist publication *Rise Bangladesh!* With the help of Shafaat. He is humorous, rough, rugged and blunt. He teases Aditi (a leftist volunteer) and Maya by making jokes on men. He surprises Maya by giving her a thumbs-up on knowing that she is unmarried and says: “I have a daughter, and I tell her, marriage only if she meets a prince. Otherwise men are bastards”. Maya tags him as the “first male feminist of Bangladesh” (88). They work underground and publish their revolutionary articles on dictatorship, nationalism, radical feminism and real issues of their nation. Maya writes Nazia’s story, without disclosing her full name, a horrible case in her medical career in the village and Shafaat publishes the same; it gets a greater response from the audience. Anam uses many real people as characters in the novel like Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the first Prime Minister himself when he meets Sohail and his family after the war to praise their efforts; Jahanara Imam, a political activist in different meetings seeking justice for war criminals and many war veterans.

Shafaat seems adamant to publish her article on war criminals, raped women and their suffering, but she does not leave any hope and prepares herself to get it published in another publishing house. But finally writes and signs with her full real name. The article reads:

None of us is completely free of responsibility – not when we live in a country that is a living example of what we fought against – a Dictatorship, led by a man who cares nothing for this country, and a refusal to acknowledge the criminals who live among us. If we stand by and allow the crimes of the past to go unpunished, then we are complicit in those crimes. If the Dictator does not hold a trial for the war criminals, he too is a war criminal. (226)

The act of seeking justice and standing against injustice is an Islamic trait too. The religion of Islam discourages people who remain silent against injustice around them. Verse 135 in Chapter 4 An-Nisa (The Women) in the Quran states to: “be persistently
standing firm in justice…, even if it be against yourselves or parents and relatives. Whether one is rich or poor … So follow not [personal] inclination, lest you not be just” (Sahih International). This trait is strongly seen in Maya’s character throughout the novel and thus indicates a hidden sign of her being ‘a good Muslim’ too. She stands invincibly like a strong individual for raped women, their medical issues, their abortions, their psychological issues and for the injustice done to them.

But she has to pay a price for her raised voice in a heart-breaking way. On the way back from the madrasa after saving Zaid from the custody of Huzoor, the tutor, Maya meets with an accident - a shipwreck. After a tiresome search of Zaid and heated arguments with Huzoor, she grabs hold of Zaid and starts her journey back home in the ferry. Meanwhile, she sleeps wrapping Zaid in her arms like her own kid in the night. Zaid is lost in the water and she is unconscious, waking up abruptly with “WHEREISZAID” screams and again plunges in dark. (277) Finally, she wakes up in the prison cell in a weird situation: “Cold and not a speck of light. In the dark, she fumbles for her face. Nose, broken. Lips like burst fruit. She presses, examines, the pain spreading to her cheeks, her temples” (278). In Dhaka Central Jail, Maya believes that she is a captive for a charge of abduction of Zaid by her brother Sohail. Joy comes and meets Maya, informs her that Zaid is still not found by the Police. Joy’s love for Maya shines out here in the last scenes in Police station and court.

The lawyer comes to meet her in the prison cell and starts talking about the Dictator, the mullahs who have ganged up against her. Maya is confused and clarifies:

‘I thought I was in jail for kidnapping my nephew, Zaid.’ ‘I heard about that, madam, and I’m very sorry. But this is far more serious.’ What could be more serious? ‘They are trying to decide whether to bring a charge of slander or a charge of treason against you… For you and Shafaat.’ Shafaat? It comes to her now. She is in jail because she wrote that article, because she called the Dictator a war criminal… She buries her face in her hands. They had not come for her because of Zaid. No one had cared about that little boy. (285)

The freedom of speech is just on the paper of its constitution. For a woman, it is a greater sin to speak against the injustice publically. The lawyer makes the argument that Maya and her family were directly involved in the war and she cannot be a
traitor, cannot do a crime of sedition. Her article was just a plea to try the war criminals. Maya, thus, was bailed.

Maya is extremely guilty of the attempt to save Zaid from Madrasa as she can’t look into the eyes of Ammoo, Rehana in the prison cell and finally in the court, after the judgement of her release, she asks Sohail whereabouts of Zaid. Sohail lastly informs her that Zaid is dead and found in the water of Jamuna. Others had hidden this truth from her. Now she understands how it feels to carry the burden of killing someone innocent. Maya imagines him charging her:

I hereby charge my sister, Maya, with the following crimes: not believing me when I turned to the Book, for mocking my allegiance to my faith, for attempting to lure me back to an old life, for abandoning me to whatever demons came to haunt me after our war, after we took our fingers out of the sky. For not loving me. For loving my son. For killing him. (288)

She curses herself and begs Sohail’s pardon.

She wanted to throw herself at Sohail’s feet and beg for his mercy, but she didn’t deserve it. She waited for him to hit her. To open that lip again. Without meaning to, she spoke aloud. ‘I was trying to save him.’ ‘He was not yours to save,’ he said simply. He wasn’t hers. He had never been hers. To whom had he belonged, then? This robed father who lived behind a high wall, behind a string of verses? She felt the bitterness rising in her throat. (287)

Sohail seems larger than life in this scene when Sohail makes her understand that she had nothing to do with Zaid’s death; it is “only God (who) can choose the hour of a man’s death” and “God offers forgiveness” (288) to whosoever believe him. Sohail leaves for Saudi Arabia for an uncertain time; Maya is left with her ailing mother Rehana to take care of. Epilogue with the title “1992” is a bang on fundamentalism and political injustice to men and women. With leading activists, and a five years old daughter Zubaida, Maya welcomes the war victims including Piya Islam, a single mother with her son, Sohail. The atmosphere witnesses the chivalry of women in the war. Saga of their sacrifices and suffering are sung.
Misogyny is not an apolitical cultural construct. It is very much a part of a political discourse in power perspective to perpetuate male hegemony or dominance with the consent of women. So there is no reason to single out Islam or the “popular” version of the faith as misogynous. However, thanks to the subjective interpretations of the Quran (almost exclusively by men), the preponderance of the misogynic mullahs and the regressive Shariah Law in most “Muslim” countries, Islam is synonymously known as a promoter of misogyny in its worst form. (Hashmi Part I 1)

Misogyny in Bangladesh has multi-fold dimensions. Religion cannot be blamed for the plight of women in the society, but the interpretations, execution of those patriarchal interpretations and different political propagation work together. What generally is seen in the social spectrum is the reflexion in the literature by intellectual writers. Bangladeshi literature by female writers in common deals with the ideology of motherhood, shame and modesty on the domestic front, while patriarchal customs, traditions and laws of marriage, divorce and property on political front which subordinate Bangladeshi women. It is brilliantly said: “these patriarchal mechanisms have created a subaltern space for women across classes. Although women from within their heterogeneous positions in Bangladeshi society experience moments of dialogue with the dominant power, often times they are silenced” (Khatun 1). In their expressions, they may uphold any of the two ideologies describes by Rivkin and Ryan (1998); one is ‘constructionist’ ideology and on the other hand, ‘essentialist’ ideology, clashes to its basic fundamental approach. ‘Constructionists’ believe and accept that “gender is made by culture in history” i.e. the very construction of man/woman dichotomy, gender roles and inequality between sexes are the result of power politics from the beginning of the human civilization. Deliberately, women were put aside from the landscape of the political, economic, social, educational and policymaking decisions. While, ‘essentialists’ believe that the fundamental differences between two sexes are inevitably made by nature. Biologically as well as psychologically, both are different, and one should accept facts while seeking the betterment for females. Their core argument goes up seeking special rights and considerations for the female gender. (529) In the novel A Good Muslim, Maya, Piya, Rokeya’s sister, Shafaat and
revolutionary old Sohail strongly represent ‘constructivist’ ideology while Rehana, Nazia, Silvi, Khadija and fundamentalist new Sohail exhibit ‘essentialist’ ideology. Moreover, Islamic feminism is clearly seen in Rehana’s approach towards her faith. For her, Islam neither binds her for prayers nor for extremism; while Silvi speaks like that of an Islamist in her approach towards religion after her husband’s death. Extremism in ideology, in what one believes is seen as a trait in both the major characters of Maya and Sohail. However, the backdrop of war plays a significant role in making of these characters in the novel. The nationalism in Maya and Sohail lead them towards self-destruction without their knowledge and construct different persons out of them. It is well put in these words:

A simple truth of humanity was totally forgotten in the violence during the war and no one even took notice. Even if they did, they marched on, ruining everything in their way and in the end a non-human order was put in place and people accepted the logic of inhumanity and called it love for the nation. State, nation, territory took precedence over human beings and man became anonymous, his actions irresponsible. (Saikia 284)

Before the epilogue, the novel ends with Maya’s dreaming of a world “before the Book, before the war” (288). Sohail, Maya, Ammoo and Zaid all are together with mangoes and ice creams. Anam’s style resembles with that of Toni Morrison in Beloved writing in bits and pieces, flashbacks, short incomplete sentences and words in third person singular narrative and sometimes first person singular details to show a complex human mind, emotions and experiences.

I am dreaming of the three of us, the simple beauty of it because Ammoo was told she could never raise me and Sohail on her own, and here we are, with our appetites and politics and the roar of possibility glowing red in our cheeks, and where is he, my Zaid, he is sitting on the side of the Jamuna and dipping his toes into its heavy water. Warm. He is dreaming too, his hopes edge towards another life, on the other side of the river, laughter and bicycles and television all day. School. Love. Choc bars. The igloo man. … She looks like his mother. But she is not his mother. She is taking him home… The water is as bitter as
the blood. … I can hold my breath that long. He tips his body, minus one tooth, and the water folds over him. I can hold my breath that long.

(289-290)

Dreaming of a perfectly balanced world wherein the three – Rehana, Maya and Sohail along with growing Zaid with the complex human experiences intermingled with thoughts, desires and aspirations proves as a hallmark of Anam’s writing. Dreaming with a positive note for a thinker like Maya subordinates the pain for some moments; opens the doors of different opportunities in future and accepts the wounds given by the past. The novel intermingles all the three strands of time profoundly - pain of the past, suffering in the present and optimism and justice for the future.
Works Cited


[Abbreviation used: TGM]


