

## The Conflicts between the Secular and the Religious in Tahmima Anam's *The Good Muslim*

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### ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the relationship between the ideologies of the secular and the religious in the process of nation-building as presented in Tahmima Anam's *The Good Muslim* (2011). It centres around the conflicts between the Haque siblings, Maya and Sohail as they navigate their ways in life after the Bangladeshi Liberation War of 1971. The novel portrays how Sohail's submission to extreme dogmatism which has led him to neglecting his son, Zaid, and Maya's inability to tolerate her brother's transformation, result in their estranged relationship, eventually leading to a devastating family tragedy. Using Talal Asad's (2003) definition of the secular as an ideology that brings together different concepts and practices, and which is neither a break from religion nor a continuity of it, this paper suggests that the skirmish between the siblings is a metaphorical representation of a conflict between the secular and the religious in the efforts towards nation-building. This formulation foregrounds the importance of establishing an intricate balance between the secular and the religious, which also has the social implication of destabilizing the binary that is often drawn to differentiate between a 'good' and a 'bad' Muslim.

**Keywords:** Tahmima Anam; *The Good Muslim*; Talal Asad; the secular; Bangladeshi writing in English

### INTRODUCTION

*The Good Muslim*, written by Bangladeshi-born British writer, Tahmima Anam, is a "novel of ideas" (Chambers, 2015, p. 143), ironies and contradictions. It presents complex family conflicts that are juxtaposed with a difficult period of nation-building in Bangladesh after the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War, and the confrontations between the religious and the secular. First published in 2011, it is a freestanding second novel of a planned Bengal trilogy that centres on the Haque family. While the first book, *A Golden Age*, which first came out in 2007 narrates the war from the experiences of the widowed matriarch, Rehana, *The Good Muslim* moves forward to the years after the war, and the narration is transferred to her children, Maya and Sohail, both now in their thirties. Although it is mainly set in the 1980s, it also uses flashbacks to return to the 1970s, covering a decade of independence for Bangladesh in its storytelling. As a country that is still reeling from the effects of the nine-month war against Pakistan, Anam's use of the different time settings outline the changing trajectories of the nation. From jubilation, euphoria and triumph of liberation, the country is now thrown into a period of political volatility.

The 1971 Liberation War was fought under the banner of Bengali nationalism that outlined Bengali ethnicity, language and culture. East Pakistan, as Bangladesh was then known, aimed to create a new secular country, with a deliberate detachment from religion and

an emphasis on secularism. This was an attempt to separate itself from the religious identity of (West) Pakistan, which used religion as the reason to unite the two warring brothers while at the same time, maintaining prejudice against the majority Bengali population of East Pakistan. Although Bengali nationalist ideology was successful in bringing the country to independence, strong religious influence that remained in the lives of its people however, led to discomfort, unease and violence in the years that followed, leading to a period of both political and ideological uncertainties.

This is represented in Maya and Sohail's complex sibling relationship. Soon after the war, the family's relief at having Sohail home after his voluntary involvement in the *Mukti Bahini* (the East Pakistan guerrilla) is erased as he increasingly turns to religious extremism. Meanwhile, Maya, who also served in the guerrilla and remains loyal to the secular Bengali nationalism, fought against his brother's transformation, resulting in a family feud that drives her away from the family. Now a "crusading doctor" (Anam, 2011, p. 55) who had worked in rural Bangladesh among the peasants and the poor, Maya returns after seven years, wiser and full of remorse, but nevertheless still full of revolutionary spirit. She is increasingly disillusioned with the direction her country is heading, particularly with the rise of religious right wing in the country's administration under the autocratic rule of General Ershad, whom Maya refers to as 'the Dictator'.

Sohail, a charismatic former student leader who proudly joined the *Mukti Bahini* in the war, is now an *imam*, a religious leader and member of the *Tablighi Jamaat*, a proselytizing, apolitical religious movement that is only focused on giving da'wah to fellow Muslims, that is prominent in South Asia (Siddiqi, 2018). His religious principles lean towards the extreme, and in his zealotry in devoting himself to God, he has rejected anything that is deemed 'worldly' and 'modern', as he sees them incompatible with the teachings of Islam. This comes at the expense of his family as he increasingly neglects his personal relations and duties. He looks at the world as a "grand design" (Anam 2011, p. 82), in which even the death of his wife leaves him "no room for self-pity" (p. 82). Sohail's lack of interest leads to the suffering of his young son, six-year-old Zaid, as his physical and emotional well-being and education are disregarded. Maya fights to care for the family – both for their mother, Rehana, who suffers from cancer and for Zaid, as she appeals to Sohail to send him to school. When he suddenly decides to send Zaid to a *madrasa*, a religious school in rural Bangladesh, Maya takes matters into her own hands, inadvertently causing Zaid's death.

This paper examines the conflicts between the siblings using Talal Asad's (2003) criticism of modern conceptualization of the secular that demands for the separation of religion and insists for it to be privatized. Asad argues that this is a form of power play, which in return, has the potential to bring about the rise of extremism. In the novel, I suggest that Anam paints the image of extremism through the characterization of the siblings. Both Maya and Sohail are extremists in their own sense – Maya, in her vehement rejection of Sohail's turn to religion, and Sohail, in his blind and unreasonable devotion to it. From this, Anam draws the interconnection between the supposed side of the divide by highlighting the porous relationship between them. It portrays the fair share of illogicality and reason, extremism and moderation and ethical and unethical behaviours in both the religious and the secular. As Maya and Sohail are unable to find a common ground, even in their connections to Rehana and Zaid, the latter then becomes the victim of their feud. Despite the title, *The Good Muslim* does not seek to characterize any character into a particular set of attributes, or to define what makes a 'good' or a 'bad' Muslim. Instead, it explores the difficulties in doing so, in the sense the categories cannot be fulfilled through common and stereotypical definitions (Chambers, 2015).

## THE 1971 LIBERATION WAR AND ITS IMPACT ON WOMEN

In the Indian Partition of 1947, the Pakistani state was formed with the religion of Islam as the basis of its unification. The country however, was physically divided into two – East Pakistan and West Pakistan, as they had 1200 miles of India in between them. This physical remoteness also foregrounds the cultural and political polarity that brewed in the country, which eventually saw the eruption of the civil war in 1971. The East Pakistanis were homogenous, with the vast majority of the population ethnically Bengali, with their own language and culture, making it the largest ethnic group in the country. West Pakistan meanwhile, was dominated by the Punjabis. As the minority, they sought the support of the Urdu-speaking Bihari minority to contest for power against the Bengalis (Saikia, 2011). Ranjan (2016) suggests that this cultural polarity was initially centred around the issue of language and dress code. This began with the founder of Pakistan, Muhammad Ali Jinnah's declaration of Urdu as the sole national language of Pakistan in 1948 which completely ignored the fact that only a small fraction of the ruling elite used the language (they were often migrants from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh who had chosen to reside in Karachi). This was a major disadvantage for the Bengalis as they had to struggle to learn the language to obtain academic and employment opportunities (Bhardwaj, 2011). Demands for Bengali to be recognized as the national language fell on deaf ears, resulting in the language movement of 1952. Only in 1955 was this demand fulfilled. Meanwhile, *sari*, a form of female everyday clothing worn by Bengali women was considered morally and religiously improper, and Pakistani women were advised against wearing it.

This prejudice highlights a systematic erasure of Bengali identity in the new Pakistani consciousness. To justify these actions, the ruling powers used religion for the ethnic-based authoritarian approaches towards the Bengalis (Bhardwaj, 2011). As the Bengali language and culture derived from Hinduism, they were deemed inappropriate for the Muslim country, ignoring the language and cultural evolution that had taken place for thousands of years. This was however, an attempt at political control and dominance as in the Pakistani awareness, Hinduism was associated with India, the enemy of Pakistan (Mookherjee, 2008). The impact was not only the rejection of Bengali identity, but also political and economic neglect of East Pakistan, where the Western province enjoyed greater wealth, opportunities and power.

This repression stirred nationalistic feelings among the Bengalis that reached its peak when Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (also known as Sheikh Mujib), the Bengali leader of the Awami League (AL), won a landslide victory in the 1970 general election. Sheikh Mujib had hoped to preserve the unity of Pakistan under a federal structure (Ranjan, 2016), but this was thwarted when the ruling power of West Pakistan refused to hand over power to the AL. They snubbed the inaugural session of the National Assembly in Dhaka, scheduled to be held on March 3, 1971, which was meant to discuss the sharing of power between the East and the West. Instead, West Pakistan retaliated by sending in the military on the 25<sup>th</sup> of March 1971. The operation, codenamed 'Operation Searchlight' was the beginning of the end of a united Pakistan. One of the main targets of this operation was Dhaka University, where many civil movements against the Pakistani ruling power were spearheaded. The aftermath of this military aggression at the university is described in Tahmima Anam's (2012), *A Golden Age*, as the protagonist, Rehana sees it:

... there was a low-lying fog clinging to the pavement – no, it was smoke, whispering through the streets, leaving an ashy, sour taste in the mouth. It got thicker... She held the sari to her nose... when she looked down she saw scraps of litter scattered over the street. She thought she saw a prayer cap and a pair of unbroken spectacles... Now there was a thin length of red ribbon on the road...

... The wet ribbon had followed them all the way, and now it poured into a gutter, which was also red, and on the side of the gutter was a pair of hands, the fingers clasped together in prayer or begging, and next to the hands was a face. The mouth was tiny, only a pale pink smudge, like the introduction of a bruise.  
It was a little girl. Her hair swallowed the top half of her face. Beneath the clumped-together strands Rehana could see an eye squeezed shut. (p. 66)

Symbolically, the first victim of the war that Rehana sees in the novel is a young girl, foregrounding the profound effects that Bengali girls and women endured in the nine-month war. Mookherjee (2008; 2015), Saikia (2011) and Harrington (2013) describe the 1971 war as a gendered war. They were often left to fend for themselves when the men in the family leave to join the resistance (as explored in Anam's *A Golden Age* when the widowed Rehana's only son leaves to join the guerrilla). Many, especially those from the middle class, became involved in the war – serving as volunteers in the refugee camps in Calcutta or were actively fighting in the guerrilla. However, their involvement in the war was unrecognized and undocumented (Harrington, 2013). They are instead, mainly remembered as the victims of the war, as the West Pakistani army rampantly used sexual violence against Bengali women.

The lack of representation of women's experience in the Bangladesh Liberation War is also translated in works of fiction. The events of the war are largely memorialized in fictional narratives in the form of short stories, which “traditionally expose the violence committed against women by West Pakistani soldiers and the valour of male freedom fighters” (Harrington, 2013). The war in itself is an exploitation of bodies, but only the men are seen to be the ones sacrificing their bodies to be subjected to torture in the fight for freedom. Women are seen to be the collateral damages of the war, often powerless in their victimization. Varied experiences in women's lives throughout the war were unexplored and underrepresented. This however, changed in the last decade. Although silence surrounding the reality of women during the Liberation War began as early as 1973, artistic productions have continued to present this issue (Mookherjee, 2015). Chowdhury (2015) supports this by suggesting that alongside creative productions, there are also scholars who are keen to break this silence:

In the last decade, key texts across genres have appeared that disturb the loud silence in Bangladesh around women's varied experiences of the 1971 War of Liberation. Tahmima Anam's novels, *A Golden Age* (2007) and *The Good Muslim* (2011), Shaheen Akhtar's novel, *The Search* (2011), Bina D'Costa's *Nationbuilding, Gender and War Crimes in South Asia* (2010), Nayanika Mookherjee's *The Spectral Wound: Sexual Violence, Public Memories and the Bangladesh War of 1971* [2015], Yasmin Saikia's *Women, War, and the Making of Bangladesh: Remembering 1971* (2011), Nasiruddin Yousuff's film *Guerrilla* (2011), and... the film *Meherjaan* [2011], have all contributed to a new genre of cultural production that seeks to illuminate internal and external tensions surrounding the representation of war, gender, memory, and justice for a wider global audience. Although there is a robust tradition of literature, film, theater, and television dramas in Bangladeshi mainstream media on the topic of the War of Liberation, these newer efforts have departed from conventional norms of representation and launched a crucial discussion of war, genocide, and gender justice on a transnational scale.

(p. 761)

Thus, the characterization of a strong-headed Maya, the protagonist of Anam's *The Good Muslim* is a deliberate attempt at challenging the norm on how women are often portrayed in the war. She volunteered and served in the *Mukti Bahini*, and her experiences in the war lead her to be fiercely loyal to the ideology and beliefs of the resistance. Thus, her disillusionment at her country's current positioning as well as her (in)abilities to come to terms with these changes happening in her country is one of the central focus of the novel.

Maya's spirit, loyalty, independence and strength outline the women's role and support that the country needs in the attempts at nation-building.

### CONTESTED NATIONAL IDENTITY: BETWEEN THE RELIGIOUS AND THE SECULAR

The birth of the new nation, Bangladesh, was treated with elation as the first modern liberal state in the South Asian region. While the 1947 Partition saw the two countries India and Pakistan projecting religious identification, Bangladesh emerged as a success against colonial imposition of religion and the systematic erasure of cultural identity (van Schendel, 2001). In the first few years following the war however, the euphoria died as Bangladesh turned into a violent society. In 1975, Sheikh Mujib, the man who, during the war, was deeply revered, was assassinated along with some members of his family. The Bangladeshi constitution, which had recorded secularism as one of the four state principles in its constitution in 1972 (Hasan, 2011), was amended when General Zia ul-Haq took over as President. Riaz (2003) points out that among others, Zia ordered for the phrase 'secularism' to be replaced with "absolute trust and faith in Almighty Allah", while the citizen of the country is now known as Bangladeshi instead of Bengali. This new brand of nationalism "intertwined the ethnic and religious identities with a clear emphasis on the latter" (Hossain & Khan 2006, p. 333). However, in 1988, General Zia ul-Haq suffered the same fate as his predecessor, and General Ershad, who came to power after Zia's murder, elevated the status of Islam as the state religion. The re-focus on religion at state level as carried out both by Zia and Ershad highlighted the national identity crisis within the Bangladeshi society and the re-emergence of religious identity that had taken the backseat in the war (Hossain 2015; Hossain & Khan 2006).

*The Good Muslim* therefore, explores the difficulties to reconcile the ambivalence of national identity. Anam's writing demonstrates the faults in thinking of the secular and the religious as a form of binary. It is a metaphorical representation of the survival of Bangladesh as an independent country. As Hossain (2015) argues, the country faces a challenge in maintaining its freedom if it cannot find an independent Muslim identity that is free from a particular influence. Anam's exploration therefore, goes hand in hand with Talal Asad's (2003) re-definition of the concept of the secular. Anam's book is a critique of the imposed religious identity by the Bangladeshi military ruling regimes, which also addresses the assumed validity of the secular as a universal concept for the formation of the nation's identity. Ultimately, what can be gathered from both Anam's fictional work and Asad's philosophical venture is the dangers of extremism from both the religious and the secular.

Talal Asad (2003) argues that the idea of the secular is often understood as being categorically different from the concept of religion, and therefore is often viewed as the opposite of religion. However, this simplistic definition has proven to be problematic, as it can and has been proven to be repressive. He criticizes the eminent philosopher, Charles Taylor's claim that a secular society "allows people to have different (even mutually exclusive) reasons for subscribing to the independent, secular ethics" (p. 6). Taylor suggests that political disagreements and disputes over core principles can be solved through persuasion and negotiation. However, the laws of the secular nation-state can hardly be negotiated and certainly does not deal with persuasion. Thus, the irony of the liberal society is that it is often subjected to particular necessities of law. Asad explains that:

The difficulty with secularism as a doctrine of war and peace in the world is not that it is European (and therefore alien to the non-West) but that it is closely connected with the rise of a system of capitalist nation-states – mutually suspicious and grossly unequal in power and prosperity, each possessing a collective personality that is differently mediated and therefore differently guaranteed and threatened. (p. 7)



While the secular states claim that religion prescribes and dominates life, the practice of coercion is also very much a part of modern liberal societies. The questions of who gets to decide what is wrong or right or what happens when a particular individual disagrees with a specific mode of practice or being are more often than not, solved and answered by coercion and persuasion, forged using a forced concept of unity. Ironically, this has opened up a space for manipulation, and it is therefore, a form of power and control. As Brittain (2005) points out, for Asad, the problem with such definition of the secular is that it presupposes society to be neutral, when in fact, it is not and it cannot be expected to be as such. Asad suggests that the formation of the secular society therefore, “are connected to the concern for agreement among “reasonable” men and thus, brings about the creation of a margin struggle to which “religion” (and other forms of uncertain belief) properly belong” (as cited in Bangstad, 2009, p. 191). Within the secular context, religion is then pushed into being the conceptual split of the secular. When religion is privatized, Asad (2003) claims that it is a move to consolidate state power, particularly in face of multi-religious societies which has steadily increases. Religion is now re-located to “moods and motivations of the individual believer, rather than on the practices and rituals that discipline and form the subject” (Brittain, 2005, p. 151). Asad’s critique therefore outlines that any specific attention that is paid on only one side of the supposed divide – either the secular or the religious – is a dangerous absolutist ideology, leading towards extremism (Hammer, 2005), the very problem that Tahmima Anam addresses in her novel, *The Good Muslim*.

As a solution, Asad (2003) proposes that the secular therefore, must be considered as “neither continuous with the religious that supposedly preceded it (that is, it is not the latest phase of a sacred origin) nor a simple break from it (that is, it is not the opposite, an essence that excludes the sacred)” (p. 25). The secular is “a concept that brings together certain behaviors, knowledges and sensibilities in modern life” (p. 25). As it is tied to practices, changes in concepts are therefore, a reflection of changes in meaning thus, “the secular’ obviously overlaps with “the religious”... [and] is neither singular in origin nor stable in its historical identity, although it works through a series of particular oppositions” (p. 25).

Theoretically, from Asad’s definitions, the secular and the religious do not have a clear definition on its own, thus cannot stand on its own. This goes back to Asad’s insistence of its interconnection, and the dismantling of the binary of the secular and the religious that liberal societies are bent on doing. Kaufmann (2007) points out that this pushes the concepts into further complexities as it is difficult to disguise secular ideas as religious, thus, “how can you tell when one has replaced or disguised the other?” (p. 610). This points out to the discursivity of the concepts, where the meaning of each concept changes as the context and meaning changes, thus making it necessary to reconstruct the ways one studies both the secular and the religious.

*The Good Muslim*’s setting of the post-Sheikh Mujib era captures the emergence of religious extremism as a response to the secular ideologies of the war. Instead of portraying violent clashes between Islam and what are deemed as ‘Western’ values, Anam addresses the emotional effects of such extremism. Sohail turns to Islam as an effort to move forward, while Maya refuses to let go of the ideals of the liberation. Often, this paints her as unable to come to terms with the current state of the country. Thus, in the characterization of Maya, Anam also explores the fallacy of liberal humanism that brushes aside religious influence within the society, particularly as experienced by her brother, Sohail. In Sohail meanwhile, Anam problematizes the supposedly non-threatening image of Islamism. Ultimately, Zaid’s life and death work as a warning of the impending failure of the state, concurring scholars’ suggestion that the issue of national identity will never be solved if attention is given to only one side of the divide (Hossain, 2015; Hossain & Khan, 2006; Bhardwaj, 2011; van Schendel, 2001).

## ANALYSIS

### THE IDEALISTIC MAYA

The protagonist Maya is a doctor, who gave up her ambitions to become a surgeon to be a 'lady doctor' so that she could help the women in rural Bangladesh in maternity and postpartum care. This paints her as an idealist, befitting of her courageous demeanor as explored in *A Golden Age* when she served as a reporter in the guerilla, leaving Dhaka to work in Calcutta. In the decade following the war, Maya remains full of revolutionary zeal, remaining loyal to the Bengali nationalism, where she:

prided herself on remembering exactly who she had been before the war broke out. She remembered her politics, the promises she had made to herself about the country...

(Anam 2011, p. 96)

This ideal stands in contrast with the religious ideology that has become the political rhetoric of the ruling power post-Sheikh Mujib, where the chant for "regional unity" as "[a]ll Muslims are Brothers" (p. 42). Maya looks at this as an attempt to "befriend the old enemy" (p. 42) that betrays and forgets the sufferings and tragedies of 1971.

As Maya's ideal is set against the national ideal, the novel therefore explores the dichotomy that exists between the Bengali nationalism, an ethnic based ideology of the 1971 war, and the "new" Bangladeshi nationalism where religion takes centre stage. This is reflected early on in the novel through the encounter Maya has with some of her old friends. Invited to a party organized by one of them, she finds herself bothered by the carefree attitude of the people who were once revolutionaries like herself. The people she meets there are overtaken by the religious sentiments they had previously shunned. In the past, they "would have laughed at people referring to God between every other sentence" but now, "everyone had caught it" (Anam, 2011, p. 54). She also sees them as having lost the spirit of love for the nation, where not only are they forgetting the past, they are also no longer interested and vested to build the country they had once fought for. She looks at one of the paintings decorating her friend's house which depicts a rural landscape with peasants working in the paddy field, and thinks that it looks "nothing like the people she had lived among these past years... [where] the men who walked the paddy were more lean than round, the flesh carved out of them by work and hunger" (p. 54). The sight of the food laid out on a long table reminds Maya of a woman she saw in 1972, not long after the war, who "grabbed a fistful of grass and stuffed it quickly into her mouth" (p. 57). The growing divide between the middle class and the poor in the rural areas is increasing, painting an ironic condition of the country. Religious nationalism, subscribed to many in the middle class, is dubbed to be a unifying factor of the nation has actually caused them to be further removed and distant from reality. This is also a regression towards the past and a replication of West Pakistan's attempts at control and power.

Maya's critical outlook of the religious sentiment around her however, outlines a problematic approach towards the idea of religious identity. One of the problems with the secular nationalist ideology is a lack of sensitivity towards and understanding of "the ordinary people of Bangladesh [who] fought the 1971 war against the Pakistani military for mere survival, not to establish a socialist, secular society that diminished the prominence of Islam" (Hossain, 2015, p. 371). Even at the beginning of the novel, Anam has warned of the danger of the disregard for culture and tradition. Readers are briefly introduced to Maya's good friend, a villager named Nazia from a village called Rajshahi, who had been given one hundred lashes – that being the punishment for adultery – by her husband. Having given birth to a child with Down Syndrome which Nazia's husband says, resembles "a Chink... a

Chinese” (Anam, 2011, p. 23), he refused to admit that the child was his. This tragic incident began with Maya’s insistence for Nazia to swim in a lake in the village while she was pregnant, breaking the village’s taboo that frowns upon pregnant women swimming in public because “no one believed in those things anymore” (p. 18). Fairly confident that her attempts to educate the people through lectures on science and superstitions had overruled the centuries of cultural practices embedded in the society, Maya had lacked the emotional empathy that could help her understand the villagers. She is a woman who sees things plainly in black and white. This eventually, becomes the dividing factor for her relationship with her brother, Sohail.

### THE CONFLICTS OF SILENCE

Just as the complexity of nation-building in Bangladesh began with the 1971 war, the conflicts between Maya and Sohail also begin with the war, and Anam uses flashbacks that are interspersed with the current setting of the novel to explain this. The complex two-way feud and resentment between siblings begins when they find the inability to establish similar perspectives on the war. They share blood relations and childhood, but Maya and Sohail each have such different experiences of the war, foreshadowing the different trajectories their lives are about to take. Although Maya was an insurgent, she did not experience the war in its full force. Sohail meanwhile, was in the thick of action. In *A Golden Age* (Anam, 2012), he lost his best friend Aref who was fighting alongside him and who was wearing Sohail’s shirt at the time of his death. Soon after the war ended, he saved Piya, a village girl who survived the sexual atrocities committed on her by the West Pakistani army. Eventually, Sohail found himself falling in love with her, but was unable to help her alleviate her suffering. She was rejected by her family for being pregnant and in return, as an after-effect of the trauma, she rejected Sohail when he asked her to marry him. However, what causes him to ultimately question his morality and eventually his involvement in the war is the murder he committed on his way home soon after the war ended. He had come across an old man who was speaking Urdu and instincts led him to kill the man, only because the old man “had let the wrong word come out of his mouth” (Anam, 2011, pp. 123-124), making him sound like the enemies Sohail was familiar with. This weighs on his consciousness, drawing him into a desperate search for penitence and redemption.

Thus, while Maya expects heroic stories of the war, of how he planted bombs and saved villages to commemorate the melancholic pride of their involvement in the war, he only wishes he could tell her: “I have committed murder. If he were to tell his sister about the war, that is what he would have to tell her” (Anam, 2011, p. 124). Thus, he finds himself unable to tell Maya of the murder he committed:

Most of all he is afraid to talk. Maya is always regarding him hungrily, eager for small scraps of detail... How greedy she is. He wants to her 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. But she refuses to be quiet for long enough” (p. 124)

While she sees his actions of joining the guerilla as an act of valour, he feels burdened by the tragedies of it. Thus, the open space that they initially shared for discussion is met with complete silence and “[t]his is how the war made its way into their house... A silence between siblings...” (p. 123). He calls her greedy and selfish, wanting to experience only the gallant side of the war (p. 125).

I suggest that the silence that exists between siblings is caused by Sohail who views his sister as different, where in his eyes, she increasingly becomes “the other”. On sensing his attitude towards her, Maya becomes defensive. Sohail’s refusal to talk to her causes Maya to



take his actions as a personal attack against her, pushing her into believing that he does not “think women are victims of the war too” (Anam, 2011, p. 125), and that he does not recognize her contributions in the war. Despite her involvement in it, Maya has always felt “left out, stuck somewhere safe and unremarkable – when the fighting broke out and she couldn’t enlist in the army” (p. 143). Maya’s insistence to talk about the war is actually one that looks to engage and to experience the thick of it by bringing forth the issues and complexities of the war. While she is challenging the “long-established authority of historiography that wishes to move toward national and ideological cohesion and away from unsettling memories that destabilize national development” (Harrington, 2013, p. 13), this is also a personal need to prove herself to Sohail.

Consequently, to reciprocate his actions, she in return, “othered” Sohail. Her treatment of his turn to religion signals a rejection of the newfound identity. This can be seen in her words and actions towards Sohail when he begins to speak of religion. The differences of opinions towards the war therefore, is only the beginning of the divisive principles of the self among the siblings. For Maya, Islam reminds her of the atrocities of the war, feeling the need to erase it for her individuality:

Maya had taught herself away from faith. She had unlearned the surahs her mother had recited aloud... had erased from her memory all knowledge of the sacred, returned her body to a time before it had been taught to kneel, to prostrate itself... because [of] all the things she had witnessed, committed in the name of God. (Anam, 2011, p. 206)

Sohail meanwhile, finds solace in the Qur’an, given to him by his mother who is worried about his state of mind. In his guilt, he finds that “[t]he Book has told him he is good, that it is in his nature to be good” (p. 124) and that through the Qur’an, he experiences “the greatest thing that has ever happened to him... [where] [h]e has found something, something that explains everything” (p. 125). If before, the discussion of the war marred the relationship between Maya and Sohail through silence, the argument about religion dismantles it to a new low.

Anam draws on several ironies as she further explores the breakdown of the sibling relationship. First, as Sohail approaches his sister with his newfound ideal, he is met with her claim that he is “ill” (Anam, 2011, p. 125) and that he is spewing “religious mumbo-jumbo” (p. 126), questioning his turn to religion as hypocritical as for her, it is the very source of their suffering in the war. Ironically, in this context, she is the one who is being a hypocrite as it is she who initially begs for Sohail to speak, but the turn of events demonstrate that she only allows this space if the discussion is steered in the direction she favours. This “public space” that is supposedly opened to free speech is therefore an “exclusionary space” that is underlined with “the element of power” and “shaped by several limits” (Asad, 2003, p. 184).

Secondly, in the very same refusal to accept her brother’s transformation by religion, Maya ironically admits that religion “may in fact be what he is claiming it is, an essential human need” (Anam, 2011, p. 126). Thus, Maya’s rejection of the new Sohail may be a form of power play, where she sees the need to control him. This can be seen in her insistent that:

[s]he will not become one of those people who buckle under the force of a great event and allow it to change the metre of who they are.  
And neither will Sohail. She will not let him... She believes her will is greater than the leaf in her heart and the leaf in her brother’s heart. (pp. 125-126)

The war had torn the siblings apart as they took on different roles and experiences, thus, Maya sees that Sohail’s transformation has the potential to further drive them apart. Maya’s refusal to establish an understanding towards her brother is a systematic approach to

delete any influence of religion in their lives, which as Asad (2003) argues, is the fallacy in looking at the secular “as the space which real human life gradually emancipates itself from the controlling power of "religion" and thus achieves the latter's relocation... [which] then allows us to think of religion as "infecting" the secular domain or as replicating within it the structure of theological concepts” (p. 191). In the context of the sibling relationship however, I suggest that Maya’s intolerance against religion is not simply a mark of arrogance and pride, but is also caused by a sense of frailty. As their mother, Rehana, gently rebukes her to not be “frightened of [Sohail’s transformation as] [i]t is only religion” (Anam, 2011, p. 129), Maya remembers how boys were “butchered because they were Hindu, the university teachers shot and piled into graves because they weren’t considered Islamic enough” (p. 158) in the war. She is acutely aware that religion can easily be turned against her, rather than become the savior that Sohail believes it is. For Maya, religion therefore, is a disease that infected the Pakistani nation which butchered its sons and daughters in the war. This is a wound of the nation that Maya carries inside her, which incidentally, as Chambers (2015) points out, becomes the very principle that allows her to see her brother as the weaker other.

Maya’s rejection of Sohail’s new identity pushes him into the periphery and he sees the need to relocate himself. He spends time on the roof of his mother’s house and it is there that he begins to preach his beliefs. This initially starts with the recitations from the Torah, the Gita and the Bible and “praise[s] of the prophets of old [as] [t]hey were all messengers of God” (Anam, 2011, p. 166). It later turns into the message of oneness of God, where “[t]he world narrowed” (p. 179) both for himself and for Maya. His transformation becomes complete in the last argument he has with Maya as she reproaches him for discarding his books by singing nationalist songs by Tagore. Sohail retaliates by burning them “Hitler-style” (p. 216). Their mother tells Maya: “Did you listen? No. You mocked him... You led him here, calling him a mullah [because] [y]ou couldn’t stand for him to be different” (p. 253).

Tahmima Anam uses a deliberate narrative strategy to outline Sohail’s move into the margin. Although the narrative throughout the novel uses a third-person perspective, the 1970s setting is told from both Maya’s and Sohail’s perspectives. However, the narrative in the 1980s setting is told only from Maya’s point-of-view. Thus, Sohail is ‘silent’ after his metamorphosis is complete thus, limiting the understanding towards his actions. While readers are initially able to understand and even be sympathetic of his transformation in the earlier post-war days, the same cannot be said for his actions later. His cool response to his wife’s passing and his indifferent towards his son, Zaid’s well-being are not explicitly explored. For example, in response to Maya’s worry of the boy’s emotional condition, Sohail replies: “The boy misses his mother, I know that. I should give him more time, but... A boy needs to find his way in the world” (Anam, 2011, p. 121). He demonstrates his loyalties towards God “as though there were something natural about the rule he was imposing” (p. 121), which cannot be disturbed by his personal attachments. This therefore, suggests the dangers of being in the margin. The book burning episode is simply just the beginning of Sohail’s model of religiosity. If earlier on, there was still room to hear his side of the story, his silence in the 1980s timeline suggests that this room has officially been closed.

### ATTEMPTS AT RECONCILIATION

As the narration moves to the 1980s, Maya finds herself addressing her own haunting memories of the war that she had initially tried to push aside. In a secret meeting with survivors of the war, Maya controversially says: “I think – I believe – that the first thing we must do is admit our own faults, our own sins. So much happened during the war – we were not just victims” (Anam, 2011, p. 97). She is also haunted by her actions soon after the war when she used her medical skills to help abort babies conceived through the rapes of

approximately 200 000 Bengali women.<sup>1</sup> Maya is reminded of how she coaxed the women to perform abortions simply because “Bangabadhu [Mujib]... had said he didn’t want the children of war” (p. 142). This is despite her mother’s warning of the complexities of the women’s feelings as they were often shamed and forced into aborting the babies, as the easy way for the nation “to erase all traces of what happened to them... [so that] they can start to forget” (p.142). Maya fails to see that while the act of raping in the war itself marks an act of control of the women’s body that disrupts “woman’s essentialized role as a medium of producing progeny for the community and symbol of the honour of the family and community” (Mookherjee, 2008, p. 40), the subsequent act of state encouraged abortions is also another form of control on the women’s body and a reinforcement of patriarchy where the sexual purity of women is considered important for societal development (Hossain, 2018).

As she re-examines her relationship with her brother, Maya sees a chance for redemption in her nephew, Zaid. Born in the midst of the intense family feud that had caused his father and aunt to stand against one another, “Zaid was born, brought into the world by a midwife whose face was covered by a piece of black netting. He opened his eyes to that, an empty space where the welcoming laugh should have been” (Anam, 2011, p. 253). This foreshadows his difficult life and tragic death, caused by an absent father-figure who is lost in the zealotry of religiosity, and the death of his mother. The first time Maya sees him, he is described to be in a sorry state: “[he has] a mouth of misshapen teeth... everything... about him suggested poverty: his too-short pyjamas, and the way he treated his lips, rubbing them roughly with the back of his hand” (p. 34).

Maya misses the earlier years of Zaid’s life, but she quickly develops a sense of affinity to him after they meet. However, parental neglect and a deep sense of loss have turned Zaid into some sort of vagabond. With his mother’s death, he has nowhere to go and no sense of purpose in life. This is a tragic condition for a six-year-old, and thus, he turns to stealing and lying to fill this void. Maya, who has become her nephew’s victim several times, faces a difficult dilemma of disciplining him or letting him get away with these wrongdoings. Eventually, she chooses to keep Zaid’s actions quiet, as she is afraid of Sohail’s possible actions towards his son, and whatever she says or does, “that wouldn’t bring back his mother” (Anam, 2011, p. 65). Maya takes comfort in imagining Zaid having small comforts because “she had looked the other way” (p. 65). In her growing affection of the boy, Maya learns to control her actions and words and to temper her dislike of her brother’s fervent religiosity, even though she still imagines for “[c]racks would appear in his belief”, for his faith to be “shaken” and for him to “see himself reflected through her eyes – see the absurdity of what he had become... see the ugliness of turning his family away, the cruelty of his own fathering” (p. 83). She learns that the hard-lined actions against him when they were younger only worked to push him further away from her. Through Zaid, Maya sees an opportunity to build a bridge between herself and her brother.

As Maya relooks at her relationship with her brother, she finds herself strangely attracted and comforted by the practices of the *Jamaat*. Here, Anam turns to the mystical to describe Maya’s experience. Upon her return to Dhaka, she finds that the makeshift house that Sohail had built above the mother’s house is often filled with burkha-clad women, attending meetings, listening to missionaries preaching “everything there was to know about being a Muslim” (Anam, 2011, p. 22). However, how they go about in their daily lives is often shrouded in secrecy, and Maya sometimes has a hard time telling them apart as they are always in black. It is when Rehana is diagnosed with cancer that Maya finds herself drawn to them. Her mother’s illness brings Maya to question the medical science, in which she describes the treatment as “uncertain science” (p. 131) that cannot make Rehana better. She searches for peace by wandering upstairs and is surprised by the comfort she finds in them. As they offer prayers and read the Qur’an for Rehana, Maya realizes that it is only with them

that “she could believe, really believe, that her mother would live” (p. 150). Maya’s resilience is further tested when Sohail ‘miraculously’ cures Rehana by whispering prayers into their mother’s ears and “tipping the zamzam [holy water] into her mouth” (p. 212), just when her doctor has given up on her recovery.

Habib (2015) argues that the mystification of Islam here works to portray the religion as a misunderstood faith, in which practices of Islam are often viewed as strange and out of place. Although I concur to this point, I suggest that Anam’s portrayal of the mysticism of religion actually has references to the realities of the Bengali society post-1971. Firstly, it draws on syncretism of the teachings of Islam within the society where Islam is tightly intertwined with local cultural practices until it is impossible to categorize which is Islamic belief and which is local practice. Maya witnesses this in her travels:

In her seven years of roaming the countryside, she had witnessed an altogether different form of faith. The mosques were few and far between; the city, proclaiming itself newly pious was even further. In villages the people worshipped saints and the Prophet in equal measure. They worshipped by prayer, yes, and like everyone else they fasted during the month of Ramzaan and kept a section of land aside, if they had it, to sell someday and embark on the trip to Mecca. But in the forest they prayed to Bon-Bibi, the goddess of the trees, and they invited Bauls to their villages – thin, reedy-voiced men who sang the songs of Lalou, turning the words of the Qur’an into song, a tryst between lovers, casting the divine as the beloved, the poet as His supplicant. (Anam, 2011, p. 206)

As she compares the villagers’ form of faith to that of her brother’s, Maya now sees that there are other sides of the divide which she had refused to see. Religion often works not as a form of control but as a method to achieve specific means and potentials (Mahmood, 2011). As seen in the excerpt above, religious actions are intertwined with practical aspects and demands of daily lives and are often modelled to achieve a specific potential – be it physical or emotional – that allow the self to attain “certain kinds of capacities to provide the substance from which the world has acted upon” (p. 27). In other words, religious practices cannot be seen away from daily lives but must be seen as establishing a connection with them. It is only through this established connection that one maintains a control over one’s life. Sohail’s devotion may be baffling to Maya, but for him, religious actions offer a sense of peace and escape as it is a symbol of Sohail giving up his life, “in exchange for that death” (p. 284). He is not only a figure that is “trumped by the tasks that lay ahead – prayer, sermon, [t]he afterlife” (p. 190), but is also the person that can walk away without looking back “as though this was the only way the day could have ended” (p. 207). Here, Maya begins to understand that Sohail’s religiosity is a form of repentance and sacrifice that ends his stifling regret and sorrow.

Secondly, as Bhardwaj (2011) points out and as seen in the excerpt above, Bengali Muslims have woven an intricate balance of practices between their belief in Islam and the influence of Hinduism, making it a unique society on its own. Thus, the sudden appeal of religion for the staunchly atheist Maya portrays the modern version of this syncretism, where there is “a space for the possibility of supernatural occurrences alongside the workings of modern science” (Chambers, 2015, p. 146). Although it may seem that Sohail is able to bring Rehana away from the brink of death, Rehana’s treatment first begins in the hospital, thus her “resurrection” is a symbol of success for both the religious and the secular. This suggests the fluidity of the local interpretation of Islam, which rejects an either-or framework of Islam and highlights the need for balance between intellect and religion as the country moves forward.



### WHO IS “THE GOOD MUSLIM”?

The representation of the different sides of Muslims is how Anam destabilizes the notion of a ‘good’ or a ‘bad’ Muslim. The portrayal of the members of the *Tablighi Jamaat* questions the validity of strict religious observance. Members of the movement are expected to carry out various requirements on a regular basis, and also to carry out various types of da’wah journeys throughout their lives (Siddiqi, 2018). In the novel, their devotion is put in contrast to the lack of attention that they put on in their daily lives, thus in describing the *Jamaat*, particularly in her descriptions of Sohail, Anam is using the category of ‘the good Muslim’ as a tongue-in-cheek. Sohail’s wife, Silvi, for example, died of untreated jaundice – a disease that has an otherwise highly positive prognosis for adults – due to the failure to send her for treatment. In addition he does not see his son as his responsibility, and decides to send him to a *madrasa* because he “need[s] to spend more time at the mosque” thus, cannot “watch over Zaid” (Anam, 2011, p. 170). This lack of care and compassion stands in contrast with that of the devotion he has for the *Jamaat*, thus representing the illogical side of this devoutness. This is where, as Chambers (2015) suggests, the portrayal of the religious extreme works as an emphasis for the need for moderation and the rejection of extremity, which itself is the basis of the teachings of Islam. Sohail therefore, has not understood this. For him, it is never a question of choice – his son’s needs are always secondary to that of his devotion to God.

When Maya finds out that Zaid is possibly facing physical and sexual abuse at the *madrasa*, she races to see Sohail to demand that he takes the boy out of the school. Much to her chagrin, Sohail seems unperturbed by it and his ambivalent response drives Maya to take matters into her own hands. Zaid’s experience at the *madrasa* and his father’s detached response to his predicaments outline the failures of religious extremism. In the treatment of Zaid, it seems that Maya is the one who cares for the boy, problematizing the empty precepts of the divide between the ‘good’ and ‘bad’ Muslim. Maya, a non-practicing Muslim who views Islam as backwards and violent, should be categorically unfit to be described as a ‘good’ Muslim, but her love towards Zaid has put herself on the pedestal above that of her brother – the obedient Muslim man. Thus, Sohail’s failure in his treatment of his son represents the failure of his religiosity.

However, on the other hand, Maya’s efforts to save Zaid, although carried out because of her love for Zaid, is also influenced by her distrust towards Sohail and who he has become ever since his turn towards religion. Thus, when she inadvertently leads Zaid to his death when the boat that she takes him in capsizes and he drowns, she has also failed him. The paper has earlier argued that Zaid is the opportunity for the siblings to build a bridge to reconnect his father and his aunt, thus his death is the result of the refusal and the failure for them to come together for a common cause. There is a characteristic division between the secular and the religious, and in the determination for each divide to remain on the margin, each loses touch with the ways in which reconciliation can offer help and hope for the helpless. If Rehana’s survival against cancer provides hope for this, this tragic ending however, erases this possibility and becomes the emblem of the clash between the two sides of the divide.

The novel begins with two journeys to the Haque family home in Dhaka. The prologue narrates Sohail’s journey home soon after the war in 1971, and the first chapter, sets in 1984, opens with his sister’s journey after a seven-year absence. The same parallel in this sibling relationship is addressed at the end of the novel. As Maya begins to come to terms with the horror that comes with her rash decision to save Zaid, she is finally able to put herself in her brother’s shoes, where she “knew it was what had led him to this place, what he carried with him everywhere, a necklace of guilt around his neck, and that finally there was some sense to it all...” (Anam, 2011, p. 288). Just as “Sohail had killed a man” and is



haunted by this act every day, Maya realizes that “she will do the same” (p. 289), as she will always feel the burden of her actions that leads Zaid to his death. She finally understands his brother, but this understanding has arrived a little too late. The ending of the novel consolidates the distance between siblings as Sohail walks away from the family for one of his pilgrimages, with no mention of his return.

## CONCLUSION

Tahmima Anam’s *The Good Muslim* displays the societal polarities in the new nation Bangladesh and the difficulties in navigating these contradictions. In the family conflicts between the secular Maya and the religious Sohail, Anam draws attention to the struggles to form a solidified national identity. The novel is an attempt to draw the debates surrounding the secular and the religious from the perspective of a family feud. The problem with both Maya and Sohail is their expectations of each other – Maya expects Sohail to remain the same person that he was before the war while Sohail wishes the opposite for Maya as he wants to move away from it all. As they both view each other in the prism of ‘the other’, they are bitterly disappointed at their inability to draw sameness from one another. However, at the same time, as Chambers (2015) points out, “[Maya’s] nostalgia for the ‘golden age’ of nationalism in the early 1970s and her reverence for the written word, is not so dissimilar to Sohail and his congregation’s [devotion to God and the Qur’an]” (p. 152). They may present themselves as different, but as this paper argues, many parallels between them can be drawn in their characterization.

These parallels therefore, relate to Talal Asad’s argument of the interconnectivity of both the secular and the religious and the importance of inclusion in the debates about one or the other. Inclusivity will allow the creation of the hybrid, or in the case of the novel, a space of moderation. This failure marks the ultra-religious’ and the left wing secular’s misunderstanding of the concept of identity boundaries and syncretism. Zaid presents himself as an opportunity to establish this, but ultimately, he ends up being the victims of their extremism. Only in the acceptance of the merge and mutation of identity can a balance be created. However, Anam recognizes these difficulties but insists that the ideal is not lost. As the novel ends with the epilogue set in 1992, the nation’s wound is the very sameness that every citizen share with each other – a sameness that therefore, should become not only the starting point for the nation to move forward, but also the glue that keeps them together.

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<sup>i</sup> The atrocities marked “an effort to dishonour the traditional bloodlines of the Bengali enemy and to reinforce the purity of the Muslim Pakistani race within the Muslim Bengali community in East Pakistan” (Harrington, 2013, p. 61). Thus, after the war, the newly-formed government under Sheikh Mujib was faced with physical and emotional scars of the female survivors of sexual violence. Mookherjee (2015) points out that the Bangladeshi government had first responded by giving support they deemed necessary, such as offering rehabilitation programs, organizing marriages, as well as assisting in positioning them in the labour market to ensure their economic freedom. To combat public negative perception, Sheikh Mujib dubbed the women as ‘war heroines’ or birangona six days after the war (Mookherjee, 2015). Although initially intended to confer the women honorary status, it had instead caused them humiliation and abuse.

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