

# A Dialectical Discourse on Identity and Hopelessness

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***Abstract-***The paper attempts to show how Tahmima Anam's *A Golden Age* subtly takes the readers back to revisit the history of what happened after the colossal partition of British India in 1947 followed by the creation of the states of India and Pakistan, and how the then East Pakistan's Bengali population felt betrayed and dismayed by the mistreatment of the West Pakistani successive regimes. It also aims to establish the post-partition general disillusionment of East Bengali people as the root cause of the political turmoil that ultimately resulted in the creation of Bangladesh as a sovereign independent country in 1971. The article views the valiant activities of the central characters in the narrative as a struggle for national identity under hostile circumstances and critically analyzes their discontents and striving for identity from a post-colonial standpoint. It specifically deals with the identity issue of the female protagonist because of her non-native background. To do this, the paper sheds considerable light on the migration, displacement and refugee crisis during the partition as well as the Bangladesh liberation war times, and tends to relate them to similar contemporary global problems.

***Keywords:*** partition, disillusionment, identity, struggle, independence

## INTRODUCTION

The partition of British India in 1947 and the human predicament attached to it have been the subject matter of a plethora of writings across the Indian subcontinent over the last seven decades. Apart from other genres of art and literature, some of the notable pieces of fiction depicting the human cost of partition and independence include Khuswant Singh's *Train to Pakistan*, Manohar Malgonkar's *A Bend in the Ganges*, Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice-candy Man*, Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* and etc. According to Haimanti Roy, "Partition ... remains an apocalyptic event within the South Asian popular imagination reinforced by family and personal memories of violence, exile, movement and resettlement" (3). William Dalrymple quotes Ayesha Jalal, an American historian of Pakistani

descent, in a magazine article where Jalal expresses her views on partition and considers it as "the central historical event in twentieth century South Asia. ... A defining moment that is neither beginning nor end, partition continues to influence how the peoples and states of postcolonial South Asia envisage their past, present and future." (Dalrymple) It is perhaps true that both the ordinary and creative people of the Indian sub-continent are still immensely influenced and moved by the remembrance of what happened in those days.

Very recently, the Bangladeshi-born British author Tahmima Anam has fictionally chronicled the emergence of the new nation of Bangladesh in her debut novel *A Golden Age*. Though her novel's focal point is the Bangladeshi peoples' political and armed struggle for independence against the West Pakistani regime, it is replete with the allusion of that post-partition times when millions of people crossed the border either to India or to West and East Pakistan. History repeats itself in this novel with the reappearance of mindless violence and the influx of refugees fleeing for their life. But the difference here is that the violence, killing and persecution are perpetrated only against the East Pakistani Bengali people and are sponsored by their own state Pakistan that they once vehemently supported to create. Contrary to what happened during the bloody partition of India in 1947 and in the subsequent times when Muslims trekked to either West or East Pakistan and Hindus to India, the terrified people of East Pakistan alias East Bengal irrespective of their faith mostly crossed the border into the Indian state of West Bengal during the liberation war of Bangladesh in 1971.

### Historical Background

As far as history is concerned, the British India was partitioned in 1947 by the exiting colonial administration under the Mountbatten Plan, which eventually gave birth to the Islamic Republic of Pakistan and the Republic of India. In the same year, as a result of the long history of mistrust, fear and

unpleasant experiences between Muslim and Hindu communities in the undivided Bengal region, the Bengal Legislative Assembly of the then Bengal Presidency took the fateful decision to split Bengal that resulted in the creation of Hindu majority West Bengal to be a part of India and Muslim majority East Bengal to be a part of Pakistan. Pablo Bose regards this partition as "a compromise solution aimed at appeasing both sides and imposing order on a chaotic situation" (61). However, the political transition was not peaceful at all because the whole subcontinent plunged into probably the biggest and the deadliest communal riots in known human history with hundreds of thousands killed and millions displaced from both sides. Nisid Hajari, in his book *Midnight's Furies*, gives harrowing details of the extent of violence that took place during and after the partition. The severity of violence and killing was particularly more in Punjab and other border areas between India and West Pakistan, where an exodus of refugees took place almost immediately after partition. Though the carnage was less widespread in the Bengal region, both the Hindu and Muslim communities could not feel safe in the areas where they were minorities. That is why, millions of minority Hindus from East Bengal gradually migrated to the West where they were the majority and in the same fashion Muslims from West Bengal to the East. In *The Spoils of Partition: Bengal and India, 1947–1967*, Joya Chatterji explains how both Hindus in East Bengal and Muslims in West Bengal felt concerned for their safety and wellbeing for which they had to take a crucial decision whether to leave for an uncertain future in another country or to stay under the domination of a majority community. She also describes how the upper caste Hindus with relatives and good connections in West Bengal could migrate and resettle there at relative ease and how the upper class wealthy Muslims could come to East Bengal and start a new life in similar way.

#### DIVIDE AND RULE

The observation of historian Alex von Tunzelmann on the impact of the British policy of 'divide and rule' is particularly worthwhile when it comes to the steadily grown mutual disharmony between the two dominant faiths in the sub-continent. She points out that in spite of the century-old mutual 'integration and exchange' among religious communities in India, things began to

take a violent turn. She states that when "the British started to define 'communities' based on religious identity and attach political representation to them, many Indians stopped accepting the diversity of their own thoughts and began to ask themselves in which of the boxes they belonged" (230). The scholarly debate over who should be held responsible for the plights of people during partition is still going on and will probably go on in the foreseeable future too. In *The Great Partition: The Making of India and Pakistan*, the Oxford historian Yasmin Khan blames the British for the contemporary violent anarchy and opines that partition "stands testament to the follies of empire, which ruptures community evolution, distorts historical trajectories and forces violent state formation from societies that would otherwise have taken different—and unknowable—paths" (210). But, the 'different and unknowable paths' were not that unknown to Mohammad Ali Jinnah, the then All-India Muslim League Leader, who could probably envision what was going to happen if Panjab and Bengal were to be divided based on Hindu-Muslim religious lines. In their books, Ayesha Jalal and Stanley Wolpert have quoted Jinnah's numerous initial statements protesting against Mountbatten's partition plan and the draft announcement on it. However, he had to concede to that partition plan under the prevailing unavoidable communal political circumstances. He knew the risks of governing the 'truncated or mutilated moth-eaten' two wings of Pakistan spatially separated by more than a thousand miles of Indian territory.

Jinnah's fear proved to be right in the quick succession of the next few years after 1947 because of various growing socio-political, socio-cultural and socio-economic problems. The Bengali-Muslim's joining with West Pakistan in the hope of forging a trouble free prosperous future together as one country soon became a nightmare among East Bengalis. Because the West Pakistanis started to establish their supremacy in all machineries of the state compared to their Bengali counterpart and the real nature of their Islamic brotherhood soon turned into disillusion for the Bengali Muslims as well as people of other faiths. They started to treat East Bengal as their colony first by trying to impose Urdu as its state language in 1952 and then by plundering the resources of the land but allocating very little for the Bengalis. Though West Pakistan should not be considered as an imperial force in the real sense of the term because the Muslim

majority of East Bengal themselves wanted to join with West Pakistan and helped create the state of Pakistan, almost all their actions against and attitudes towards the Bengalis looked like as if the West Pakistanis were their colonial masters. Michael Doyle explains the nature of relationship between an empire and its colonies. In his opinion, "Empire is a relationship, formal or informal, in which one state controls the effective political sovereignty of another political society. It can be achieved by force, by political collaboration, by economic, social, or cultural dependence" (45)

#### HISTORICAL BLUNDER

However, though the political, economic and cultural journey started with mutual collaboration between the West and East Pakistanis, it did not take long for the East Pakistani Bengalis to realize their blunder. Because right from the beginning, West Pakistanis viewed the land of East Pakistan as their bread basket and the ground for extracting its natural resources. They did every possible thing to make sure that the Bengalis stay dependent on them forever and that they can make uninterrupted and unchallenged use of their resources mainly for the development and welfare of West Pakistan. However, Bengalis could not be kept like that for long and so, discontents began to increase among them leading them to take a firm stance against the Pakistani exploitation and deprivation. From the viewpoint of the events that took place since 1947, *A Golden Age* is a historical novel that documents the post-partition disappointments and grievances of Bengali people and their political and military struggle that ends with the birth of independent Bangladesh. However, their struggle this time is not inspired by the aspirations of Islamic or Muslim national identity; theirs is rather a struggle and striving for Bengali identity that was entirely based on secular Bengali nationalism. The novel also deals with the question of the female protagonist Mrs. Rehana Haque's Bengali national identity, because she hails from a different ethnic and lingual background.

#### POST-PARTITION DILEMMA

The contemporary trend of post-partition Muslim migration to the newly created state of Pakistan is indirectly evident in the novel. At the very outset, the

central character of the novel Mrs. Rehana is introduced to the readers. Her previous name was Rehana Ali who was born in Calcutta, West Bengal in an Urdu speaking aristocratic Muslim family in the undivided India. But her father's financial condition declined as he lost an immense amount of his property in a court case. After the partition, she was married to Mohammad Iqbal Haque, an Urdu speaking man from Karachi, West Pakistan. Her father's fading economic status was clear when he wrote to Mrs. Rehana "I'm sorry, this is all I could save." (Anam 41) while sending a teak mirror frame to her as a gift. The instances of Mrs. Rehana having migrated to and settled in Dhaka with her husband and her other three sisters in Karachi imply to the actual mass Muslim migration of that time. Though the author has not extensively stated the circumstance behind their migration, it implicitly prompts the readers to look back to that troubled time. Because most of the well-off Hindu or Muslims families during partition settled mostly in the big cities and towns on both sides of the border. Moreover, if the situation and prospect of Mrs. Rehana's family were good in Hindu dominated India, it may be assumed that they would not immigrate to the Muslim dominated West and East Pakistan. This initial mini-story of Mrs. Rehana's family goes in line with what Bashabi Fraser says about the legacy of partition:

There is the reality of the continuous flow of 'economic migrants' / 'refugees' / 'infiltrators' / 'illegal immigrants' who cross over the border and pan out across the sub-continent, looking for work and a new home, settling in metropolitan centres ... keeping the question of partition alive today. (40)

It has been already mentioned that the novel does not clearly say anything about the reason why Mrs. Rehana and her husband settle in Dhaka after the creation of Pakistan. However, the historical background of partition times may help come to an agreeable conclusive view on the nature of their migration. Partition historians divide post-partition migrants roughly into three categories- ethno-religious migrants, economic migrants and riot or refugee migrants. Mrs. Rehana and her sisters' settling in the Muslim majority East and West Pakistan by virtue of their marriage to Urdu speaking Pakistanis clearly falls under the ethno-religious migrant category. However, Mrs. Rehana's husband Iqbal is a West Pakistani by birth who settles in Dhaka only because of his business

there. He owns a big mansion in the posh Dhanmondi residential area, drives an imported Vauxhall and leads a trendy life. He seems to be an economic migrant who has made a good fortune from his business in Dhaka. Iqbal's brother Faiz who is a barrister, also practices law in Dhaka and maintains good ties with West Pakistani ruling class throughout the narrative. Therefore, it can be argued that Mrs. Rehana's family and close relatives may not be riot migrants but purely ethno-religious and economic ones.

The author has implicitly used Mrs. Rehana's immigrant as well as different ethnic and lingual background as a tool to show the migration and dislocation of people that happened during the partition and continued for many years after the partition from and to West and East Bengal. Ashcroft et al. in *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts* regard dislocation as an 'energizing experience' saying that "The necessity of dislocation does indeed become the mother of invention. Hence the disruptive and 'disorienting' experience of dislocation becomes a primary influence on the regenerative energies in a post-colonial culture" (65) However, the process of resettling is usually a difficult and unpleasant experience for the dislocated people as they had to learn the new language, adapt with the new culture and confront many practical challenges of life. Though it is not clearly evident how much Mrs. Rehana had to overcome the difficulties of displacement, she has definitely adopted the cultures of her newfound land. She is seen to be wearing Sari, an identical Bengali dress for women and becoming well-versed in Bengali language, which are indications of her assimilation with the local culture. Even though there are no direct instances of 'disorienting' experience of dislocation' in Mrs. Rehana's life in Dhaka because of migration, her efforts to integrate to the new society is noteworthy as she is also found to be forming and maintaining very good social relations with her neighbors around.

#### ASSIMILATION AS PROCESS

The assimilation of migrants with the new cultures of their host countries is an important issue in post-colonial diasporic critique. The acceptance of these migrants to the native people of their new home largely depends on their intention and ability to integrate to the local customs and cultures. Mahbubar Rahman and Willem van Schendel in their article on

partition migration shows how many of the 'partition migrants', 'riot refugees' and other 'cross border settlers' from the North Indian states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh and many from the state of West Bengal with different ethnic and lingual backgrounds could successfully integrate to the local society without much problems. Like Joya Chatterji, they have also talked about the relatively easy and convenient elite (bhodrolok) Hindu and upper class Muslim migration into West and East Bengal. Sarah Ansari, in a book chapter, writes on the post-partition movement of Indian Muslims into West Pakistan and discusses the ethnic tensions between the local Sindhis in Pakistan and the Muslim migrants from different parts of India. She elaborately explains the social, political, economic and cultural factors that created serious violent strife between these two different ethnic communities. Her observation is relevant to the Urdu speaking Bihari migrants in East Bengal, most of who did not embrace the Bengali language and its culture, and largely remained separated from the Bengalis. During the time of war in 1971, this community remained loyal and allied to the West Pakistanis and many of them also fought side by side with the Pakistanis against the freedom fighters of Bangladesh. Contrary to them, Mrs. Rehana's social and cultural assimilation at this stage of the story seems convincing and promising. However, dark clouds are fast gathering in the sky of East Pakistan and she will have to manifest her political assimilation through her own later actions.

All that happened in the joint history of West and East Pakistan since 1947 partition till 1971 uprising brings the concepts of 'nation, nationalism and national identity' to the forefront for critical discussion. Benedict Anderson in his *Imagined Communities* defines nation as "an imagined political community ... imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (6). It means that a nation is a socially constructed community, imagined by the people who perceive themselves as part of that group. Therefore, the Islamic State of Pakistan is what Anderson calls a 'nation-state' based on the principle of religious affinity among its people despite huge geographical distance between its two wings. At least at the initial stage of state formation, the faith of Islam acted like a binding force between

these two different people. However, Anderson also argues that language plays a key role in the construction of national identity and nationalism throughout imagined communities. If viewed from this perspective, the very idea of creating Pakistan based only on religious line was doomed to fail. Because religion may represent the commonalities in the spiritual aspects among Muslims irrespective of their geographical locations but it alone cannot entirely bridge the gap between the social, cultural, political and economic constructs of these people. Once Mrs. Rehana went to Karachi, West Pakistan and met her sisters and other family members there. One of her sisters named Marzia was accusing Mrs. Rehana of betraying her family by staying in East Pakistan after the death of her husband. She also called the people of East Pakistan "Bungali", a derogatory term with its wrong spelling and pronunciation and complained: "Your Urdu is not as good as it used to be; must be all that Bengali you're speaking" (Anam 21). This short episode shows the general West Pakistani attitudes towards Bengalis and their mother language. In such a defamatory and slanderous environment, it is easily conceivable that staying together as one nation would be an inevitable impossibility and searching for own Bengali national identity would be an urgent necessity at some point of time.

#### STRAINING RELATIONS

The post-partition relations between West and East Pakistan can also be viewed from the concept of 'self' and 'other', which is the result of a discursive process in which one dominant group – the 'self' constructs a sense of difference from another subservient group – the 'other', and this way maintains its dominant hierarchy over that weak inferior group. This whole hierarchical process slowly but gradually culminates to the negation of identity that results in the creation of avenues for potential bias, inequity and favoritism against the "other". Edward Said in *Orientalism* and Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Mask* talks about this othering phenomenon of the 'Oriental' and the 'Black' by their 'Occidental' and the 'White' counterparts. According to them, the western colonizers with their senses of superiority over the natives in terms of skin, race, language and even geography constructs a binary form of otherness to justify their colonial domination over their colonized

subjects. Gayatri Spivak's *In Other Worlds and Can the Subaltern Speak?* may provide a viable lens to see through the relationship mechanism between West and East Pakistan. By 'subaltern', Spivak broadly refers to the suppressed and oppressed subjects of the colonial empire of India or more generally to the majority of the lowest strata of 'people', or the 'subaltern classes', who are exploited by 'the dominant foreign groups' – the colonizers and 'dominant indigenous elite groups' – the local associates. This so called 'subaltern' or the inferior rank or status of the locals is the reason behind West Pakistani binary opposition towards East Bengali people. Even though British colonialism in the Indian subcontinent officially ended in 1947, the issue of racial superiority and subalternity continued to evolve its repercussions during the post-colonial Pakistan era. Like the white western colonialists, the West Pakistani elite ruling class with its collaboration with the local Bengali elites considered East Bengali general population as an inferior race making them subalterns, who need to be governed with an iron fist if required. This is precisely what had happened to the East Bengali people during the twenty-three-years of staying together. The neo-colonial West Pakistani ruling class always suppressed the East Bengali voice often by violent means and never let the Bengalis to enjoy an equal status in state affairs.

#### ECONOMIC STRUGGLES

Apart from the political and economic struggles of East Bengali people, another noticeable aspect of their collective strife is their cultural resistance to form their own distinct national identity. In post-colonial study, the clash of cultures between the western imperialists and their native subjects has been a hot topic for scholarly discussion. Said in *Culture and Imperialism* gives a critical insight into the colonized natives' cultural resistance against the dominance of the imperial culture. He quotes W. E. B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* in which he asks the question: "Why did God make me an outcast and a stranger in my own house?" (81) Said argues that such a pathetic situation for the colonized natives is bound to give rise to a collective consciousness among themselves and infuse in them "a passion for community that grounds anti-imperial resistance in cultural efforts" (214) Like Anderson, he also emphasizes on the importance of national language and culture, and writes:

The concept of the national language is central, but without the practice of a national culture ... – the language is inert; national culture organizes and sustains communal memory, ... it reinhabits the landscape using restored ways of life, ... it formulates expressions of pride as well as defiance, which in turn form the backbone of the principal national independence parties. (215)

The East Bengali people after partition found themselves in the same situation where they were not only subjugated politically, economically and militarily but also culturally. After Jinnah's failed attempt with Bangla language in 1952, the new Ayub Khan government's cultural aggression had now shifted to Rabindranath Tagore, the most revered poet and author of Bangla literature. Their primary goal was to change the intrinsic fabric of Bengali culture that is deeply rooted in its non-sectarian outlook to life and literature. So, in 1967, the East Pakistani Governor Monem Khan officially banned all works of Tagore in government media. The reason was quite simple – that his creative writings were mainly secular and humanistic in nature unlike those of his West Pakistani fellow poet and author Allama Muhammad Iqbal, whose literary oeuvre is marked by its glorification of Islamic national identity and heritage. Quite ironically, one of Tagore's lyrical poems later became the national anthem of Independent Bangladesh that promotes universal inclusive thoughts instead of just Islamic ones.

#### BENGALI NATIONAL IDENTITY

The fundamental value of Bengali national identity formation is diametrically opposed to that of the State of Pakistan. Herbert Feith (2013), in his convening address to the audience at The Victorian Committee to Support Bangla Desh, talks about the basic difference of cultural traditions of East Bengal from those of the West. He argues that "Islam and Bengaliness have always been rival themes and identifications for the Muslims of East Bengal" (18) and quotes Professor Spate of Australia: "... trying to keep the two halves of that country together has been like trying to plough a field with a camel on the left side and a water buffalo on the right" (18). Such a strong remark probably makes Jinnah right again so far as his fear for the 'truncated or mutilated moth-eaten' wings of Pakistan is culturally concerned. A Golden Age contains these

aspects of a secular Bengali cultural national identity. The central characters in the novel are all Muslims but quite different in their political and cultural outlooks. Maya is a leftist political activist at Dhaka University and her brother Sohail is a liberal poet and activist at the same institution. Apart from them, there are other instances in the novel of how the Bengali writers, singers and other cultural activists composed of both male and female genders campaigned throughout the war time in favor of East Bengal's armed struggle for independence, and how they collected money and other staffs for charitable causes.

The time since 1947 partition till the independence of Bangladesh in 1971 is considered to be the post-partition era among the Bengali people. Because of the British departure and the entire Indian subcontinent's political independence, this period is also known as post-colonial period in this region's political history. The political independence of Pakistan and East Bengal's joining with them has created an avenue for the West Pakistanis to appear as a neo-colonizer. Alyson Buckman, while defining 'imperialism', talks about the power relations between the elites (whites) and non-elite (Native Americans, blacks and Asian immigrants) masses of the United States of America and points out that:

The colonial relationship is one of domination and subordination among groups and is constructed primarily on notions of difference; it is established and maintained in order to serve the interest of the dominant group, fortifying its position and eroding choice for non-elites through force, authority, influence and dominance. (89)

#### COLONIAL DOMINANCE

The West Pakistani regimes literally applied these principles in all spheres of East Bengali life. Bill Ashcroft et al. in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* provide a detailed discussion on the European colonial dominance over the colonized and the 'after-colonial' complexities, which some of these post-colonial countries grapple with. They argue that "All post-colonial societies are still subject in one way or another to overt or subtle forms of neo-colonial domination, and independence has not solved this problem" (1-2) Almost like the power dynamics that

existed between imperial Britain and its colonies, the relationship between East and West Pakistan was never a balanced one. As has been already said that the West Pakistanis and their attitude to Bengali people were that of a neo-colonizer because they never considered them as their equal partners in the state. Bengalis were looked down upon in terms of their skin color, body height, language and even considered to be Muslims of low birth. That is why, hardly any Bengalis were chosen in key government positions. In fact, the nature of relationship between the West and East Pakistani people was similar to what Ashcroft et al. in *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts* talk about the colonial superiority over the colonized natives: "Rules of inclusion and exclusion operate on the assumption of the superiority of the colonizer's culture, history, language, art, political structures, social conventions, and the assertion of the need for the colonized to be 'raised up' through colonial contact." (37)

However, if that 'colonial contact' does not serve the interests and meet the necessities of the local inferior, new necessities arise to make sure their voices are heard and their issues addressed. Moreover, if the colonizer's so called cultural, historical, lingual, political and social superiority keeps undermining and suppressing the indigenous cultures of the colonized, political eruption for self-determination ultimately becomes a necessity. Therefore, 'anticolonial movement', as Ashcroft et al. suggested in *The Key Concepts*, puts its nationalist agenda to construct new 'post-colonial nation-states' based on their ethnic and national identities. The dominant and the superior colonizer's indifference gradually enhances a 'sense of difference' among the subservient and the colonized too to pursue their own destiny. In their respective books, Gyanesh Kudaisya and Tan Tai Yong (2002); and Mahmud Ali (2010) have discussed how the West Pakistan based regime's mishandling of the Bengali language movement in 1952, the intentional disregard to the East Bengali people's economic and political demands, and the sheer negligence to the needs of Bengali distressed people at a time of natural disaster first resented them and then led them to decide for themselves.

#### EXPLOITATIVE PRACTICES

The West Pakistan based government's exploitative nature and its indifference to Bengali people are

clearly evident from the very beginning of the novel. The characters of Sohail and Maya who are the children of Mrs. Rehana, embody the disillusionment, frustration and anger of particularly Bengali young educated segment of society, who know very well how the West Pakistani regime has been draining the resources of East Bengal keeping their eyes shut to the problems of this eastern part of the country. That is why, in a family gathering, while discussing the fading prospect of power hand over to Sheikh Mujibur Rahman after he won a landslide election victory in December, 1970, and due to the delays and feigned negotiation and diplomacy by General Yahya Khan and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, Sohail bursts out his anger and exclaims:

that West Pakistan is bleeding us out. We earn most of the foreign exchange. We grow the rice, we make the jute, and yet we get nothing – no schools, no hospitals, no army. We can't even speak our own bloody language! (Anam 33)

Even his mother Mrs. Rehana, who is not seen to be concerned about the current affairs of the state at the outset of the story, finds it logical why her children are actively involved in protest activities in Dhaka University campus. Therefore, she also says:

Ever since '48, the Pakistani authorities had ruled the eastern wing of the country like a colony. First they tried to force everyone to speak Urdu instead of Bengali. They took the jute money from Bengal and spent it on factories in Karachi and Islamabad. One general after another made promises they had no intention of keeping. (Anam 38)

There are a few investigative research works on the West Pakistani exploitation and discrimination against East Pakistani people in the 1960s. The military was running the entire show for which the situation was worse during their rule since there was hardly any democratic system to respect the economic and political rights of people. Keith Callard's *Pakistan: A Political Study* is one of earliest studies that discussed the ongoing bad governance and the failing state of the state itself. He observed how inefficient and dysfunctional the state machineries were, in which "democracy was reduced to a mere pretence carried on in the interests of a handful of self-seeking political bosses" (186) The irony in the East Bengali people's rift with their western counterparts is that they are the same people who campaigned actively with utmost enthusiasm and vigor in the pre-partition movement

for the creation of Pakistan. But the colonial attitudes of the West Pakistani rulers quickly extinguished their vigor, which over time turned into extreme anger against them.

Just before the 1970 election, a major natural disaster in the form of a cyclone struck the coastline of East Bengal that devastated the entire southern parts of the country and killed hundreds of thousands of people. The West Pakistani response to that calamity was negligible as they did not come in sufficient aid and rescue to the affected people of East Pakistan. Because of the mishandling of the situation, and delays in reaching the affected areas, more people died and countless dead corpses decomposed or perished in the receding tide. In *Bangladesh: A Country Study*, James Heitzman and Robert Worden comes up with great details of Bengal's history from the 1000s down to the 1980s. They argue that the current political uproar and mass frustration were caused by the West Pakistani callousness after that natural calamity. The government's loose rescue initiatives frustrated Sheikh Mujib so much that he angrily said: "We have a large army, but it is left to the British marines to bury our dead." (Heitzman and Worden 29) Though the then president General Yahya Khan visited the disaster zone days later and declared to take every necessary steps to rescue and relieve the victims, the reality on the ground was quite different from what he promised. Feith, in his speech, also gives a complete chronology of Bengali disillusionment and grievances against the West Pakistani successive regimes since the partition for their mistreatment of and indifference to East Bengali people. In it, he mentions the arguments of many other people and the reasons behind Sheikh Mujib's overwhelming election victory. They think: that victory was largely a result of the cyclone disaster of October and November, that the cyclone and the clumsy indifference of the West Pakistani authorities in providing relief to its victims were major factors unifying East Bengali feeling behind the charismatic figure of Mujib. ( 15)

#### DISILLUSIONMENT

The East Bengali people's disillusionment reached its peak after this disaster as it became crystal clear to them that it was foolish to count on anybody else other than themselves in times of their national emergency. Therefore, people of all walks, especially the students

of universities across the country, rushed to the relief efforts for the suffering and starving people with whatever available resources they had. Sohail and Maya are two of the numerous others who could not sit idle and be the passive observers at that time. Seeing the irresponsible callous behavior and attitude of the West Pakistani regime, Sohail now believes that "starvation is not caused by God. It is caused by irresponsible governments." (Anam 33) and so, he starts volunteering various relief works along with his sister and other university friends. The author continues to narrate the extreme dissatisfaction and utter disappointment of Mrs. Rehana's children:

But in 1970, when the cyclone hit, it was as though everything came into focus. Rehana remembered the day Sohail and Maya returned from the rescue operation: the red in their eyes as they told her how they had waited for the food trucks to come and watched as the water rose and the bodies washed up on the shore; how they had realized, with mounting panic, that the food wouldn't come because it had never been sent. (Anam 39)

The East Bengali people had been experiencing imbalance of power in the civil administration as well as the military and witnessing inequitable distribution of national wealth in budget allocation and the economy at large. But the military regime's heartless indifference after the deadly cyclone in 1970 and Yahya Khan's indefinite postponement of national assembly in early March, 1971, in which Awami League has just won a majority in the parliament, created real political turmoil in East Pakistan that was gradually leading to dangerous revolutionary turns. It already became obvious that "there can't be a Bengali running Pakistan" (Anam 49) although behind-the-curtain-negotiations were still going on to come to a peaceful settlement. A Golden Age is packed with the current political upheavals with direct reference to many historical events. Anam vividly narrates how the four-day Pakistan vs England MCC cricket match in Dhaka that had to be finished abruptly on 1 March 1971 due to the start of protests at the stadium after the spectators heard on the radio General Yahya announcing the indefinite postponement of the National Assembly. She also writes about the galvanizing 7 March 1971 speech of the Awami League Leader Sheikh Mujibor Rahman at the Racecourse ground in Dhaka. On both the occasions, Mrs. Rehana and her revolutionary son and daughter

were there, who witnessed how the Bengalis were heading to a political ultimatum and how they were lining behind their national leader. By using these actual historic events, the author has created a space for these central characters who have not only witnessed but in fact participated in the political activities. She has made use of history in telling the annals of a single family of foreign origin and in so doing, would make them an inseparable part of the nation's history making.

#### POLITICAL DISCOURSE

The ongoing state of political affairs was clearly shifting to a dangerous revolution because of Yahia's intention on not to concede to the East Bengali legitimate demands. Feith states how the negotiations on power transfer and the possibility of a peaceful political solution came to a standstill:

For a time it seemed as if a tightrope walking by both Yahia and Mujib might issue in some kind of agreement. But after early March, when Yahia Khan first postponed the inauguration of the elected parliament, the prospect of a settlement dwindled fast. (20)

By delaying the handing over of power to the elected government, General Yahia was actually fanning and electrifying Bengali nationalism. Partha Chatterjee in his *The Nation and Its Fragments* argues that "the story of nationalism begins with the contest of political power" (6) The ongoing political infighting between the West and East Pakistan was a glaring example of that. Because of the growing uncertainty about the political deadlock to end, Sheikh Mujib, in his speech, had given a clear guiding blueprint of what the Bengalis must fight for their freedom. In the meantime, the West Pakistani military regime was secretly planning something else. They were amassing huge number of troops while pretentiously negotiating and discussing with the Awami League leadership for a peaceful solution. Then suddenly at late midnight on 25 March 1971, the Pakistani military started its preemptive attacks with the code name of 'Operation Searchlight' on the unarmed civilians in Dhaka, and indiscriminately massacred thousands of people with a sizable number of students and professors at and around various residential halls and staff quarters in Dhaka university campus, which was the heartland of all political protest activities at that time. This incident

acted like adding fuel to the fire and infuriated the already boiling situation in East Pakistan that ultimately mushroomed into a full scale war of independence. Hardly anyone could remain indifferent to what had been going on especially in Dhaka and other major metropolitan areas across the country for a long time before this "Pearl Harbour-like strike" (Feith 20). With the military's unprovoked but premeditated attack, all options of peaceful resolution had come to an end and the time had finally come for everyone in East Pakistan to take up arms and go for war against West Pakistan. While talking about the Korean nationalism against the Japanese occupation, Feith also describes the nature of East Bengali movement and says:

Indeed it is much more like an anti-colonial movement than any of the other would-be breakaway causes of the Third World. It is an anti-colonial movement in every major sense except in not being directed against a European power. (24-25)

What happened in East Bengal after this attack, Tahmima Anam also shows the same in the novel. She shows how the whole political spectrum begins to take a military turn and how the most turbulent times are looming large in the horizon. On one hand, an impending war is approaching fast that worries Mrs. Rehana about the safety and well-being of her activist son and daughter and on the other, the ongoing turbulent political situation in her new homeland poses a great challenge to the question of her national identity and belonging to that place. Because her adherence to the national struggle of Bangladesh is questioned by her own children on several occasions. They accuse her of lacking any feeling for the country when she tries to dissuade them from joining the war. Therefore, the issues of her ethnic and lingual background, her overall Bengaliness, and her role during the liberation war will serve as the main criteria to determine her belonging and loyalty to her foster country. After her husband Iqbal's untimely death of a heart attack, Mrs. Rehana almost singlehandedly raised her children facing a lot of obstacles along the way. Therefore, her motherly concern for the safety of her children is natural and justified. However, her motherly fear will soon be overpowered by the situation she will find herself in; it will make her feel compelled to get involved in the war activities as new events unfold.

## TUMULTUOUS NATIONAL HISTORY

The author has made use of the blend of tumultuous national history through the personal story of a family, its ups and downs and the sacrifices that each family member makes under the prevailing critical circumstances. She has brought an immigrant woman at the center of the story and showed how a woman of foreign origin immerses herself in the national cause despite her alien background. When Sohail suddenly comes to their house with his injured commander after a botched operation in Dhaka, Mrs. Rehana's life changes completely. From now on, she starts helping the fleeing refugees, hiding weapons and ammunitions in the yard, feeding Sohail's freedom fighter friends, transforming her house as a covert base for guerrilla operations, and nursing and sustaining the injured major, Sohail's commander. Clearly she is now actively contributing to the war efforts. Israt Jahan Nimni and Murshida Khanom, however, is not convinced of her contribution to the Bengali national cause and argues in their article that Mrs. Rehana's "motherhood overshadows her patriotism" (271), and that she involves herself in the war activities "because of her love for the children rather than her love for the country" (272) But the risks she has taken by facilitating the war activities is probably more than just motherhood. One requires a lot of courage to do such things what she has done in the middle of an ongoing war. Her motherly love and affection for her children may be foregrounded, her engagement in the war may not be by choice but by chance, but what she has done in aid of the freedom fighters bears testimony to her commitment to the nation. That is why, Christine Pyle, in her essay defends Mrs. Rehana and says:

She disassembled the saris, converted them into blankets, and sent them to cove revolutionary soldiers. With this gift to the liberation army, Rehana demonstrated a significant transfer of love and authority. Moving out from the shadow of Iqbal's death, the widow was initiating a courtship with her nation. (4)

Mrs. Rehana's valiant activities continues and a lot more is to come in the course of events that will strengthen her belonging to the nation. Throughout the covert activities at her house, she maintains strict secrecy so that the plan and mission of the guerrillas

are not jeopardized. She even takes the risk of releasing a captured Bengali Pak Army lieutenant named Sabeer Mustafa who has abandoned his post, joined the Bengali freedom fighters and become a traitor to the Pakistanis. To secure his release, she approached and takes help from her brother-in-law Barrister Faiz since he has powerful connections with Pak authorities. She takes the extreme risk for this young soldier because of Sohail's persistent requests and also because he is the newly married husband to the daughter of one of her neighbors. In a wartime Dhaka under curfew, she dares to go to the police station where Sabeer has been held captive and takes the man home from there. One more serious incident happens when Mr. Faiz discovers from an explosive newspaper article that the writer of it is his own niece Maya. It becomes clear to Faiz on which side his niece stands. Maya has already crossed the border into West Bengal and ever since been writing as a war news correspondent from Calcutta. With Mr. Faiz's discovery of her daughter's activity, Mrs. Rehana now fears for everything she has been doing over the last few months. She and the other guerrillas have so far been safely discharging their duties until the time when Mr. Faiz comes to know the fact that his niece Maya is now an enemy of the state. This knowledge of Faiz poses a great threat to the secret activities of Mrs. Rehana and others. All their covert activities are now under the threat of being exposed to the military because Mr. Faiz is a Pakistani loyalist who cannot be trusted. The major and Sohail's friend Joy are now worried about the safety of Mrs. Rehana and their mission as they suspect she might have been followed and the house watched by the secret service of the state. It means that time has come for Mrs. Rehana to pack up and leave because of the extreme risks involved if she stays. Harboring the freedom fighters is after all an act of treachery against the state and the backlash must be something brutal. Therefore, she is left with no choice but to leave the place and cross the border to the Indian state of West Bengal.

## FRICION AND DISHARMONY

At this juncture of the story, Mrs. Rehana's service to the nation takes a new turn as she starts volunteering under a physician at the refugee camp in Salt Lake soon after her arrival in Calcutta. She is greeted with complements there as being "an example to all of them

and a 'hero'" (Anam 242) for everything she has done; even Maya who previously doubted her loyalty to Bangladesh now appreciates her mother saying that she is braver than she thought. There she accidentally finds her tenant Mrs. Sengupta who fled Dhaka in the fear of Pakistani Army's retribution against the Hindus. But her fleeing from Dhaka could not save her husband and son as they were brutally killed in front of her own eyes only because they were Hindus. Mrs. Rehana finds her in such poor physical and mental condition that she starts nursing her with utmost care and warmth. Suddenly, Mrs. Rehana falls sick and unconscious and is diagnosed with jaundice. When she regains consciousness, she finds Sohail and Maya beside her – both of them tending to their sick mother. Sohail tells her ailing mother about his next assignment of taking out one of the major power grids in Dhaka. He also informs her of some recent major gains against the Pak Army. Hearing this from Sohail, Mrs. Rehana asks him: "Are we going to win?" (Anam 273) This simple little question bears special significance so far as the question of the sincerity of her loyalty to Bangladesh is concerned. By saying 'we', she has renounced all her past affiliations and completely become one among the millions of Bangladeshis in their struggle for freedom.

The massive flow of migrants, refugees and displaced people that occurred during the partition of India and the liberation war of Bangladesh was the direct by-product of violent communal friction and military conflicts. Mrs. Rehana's brief wartime dislocation from Dhaka and her experience of nursing the patients at the refugee camp field hospital exhibit the unspeakable sufferings of refugees. This reminds us of the grim truth of today's conflict-ridden world where millions of people are being forced out of their homes due to the ongoing wars and other political and armed clashes. Many recent academic research on refugees have focused on the vulnerability of refugees during their arduous journey to a new land, (Browne, 2006; Collyer, 2010; and Koser, 2000) and their traumatic experiences and various health, cultural and other challenges they face during their settlement in the host countries. (Jordan et al., 2009; Lindencrona et al., 2008; and Shishehgar et al., 2017) However, these researches are mainly based on the issues and experiences of refugees in the rich western countries, who have the resources to fulfill the needs of these displaced people. The mass arrival of refugees from

the war-torn Middle East and many parts of Africa towards Europe and other parts of the developed world has become an emergency political issue for them as a result of which they have become proactive more than ever to address this problem.

#### REFUGEE CRISIS

But the refugee crisis in the developing countries in South Asia, Middle East and Latin America has received insufficient attention from the developed world. The persecution and systematic expulsion of Rohingyas in Myanmar followed by their mass migration to Bangladesh, the flooding of Venezuelan refugees in neighboring Colombia due to political and economic instability in their home country and the Israeli expulsion of Palestinians who have been living as refugees in Lebanon, Jordan and other surrounding countries are some of the examples of what conflicts of any types produce. Many recently conducted Rohingya-centered researches (Islam, 2019; Siddiquee, 2019 & Kipgen, 2019) reveal the sad plights of these people and their identity issues both in Myanmar as a minority group and in Bangladesh as refugees. The unhygienic claustrophobic camp life of today's Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh shows us in what conditions the refugees from East Bengal in 1971 had to live in Indian refugee camps. Mrs. Rehana's falling sick, her diagnosis of jaundice, Mrs. Sengupta's deplorable physical conditions along with her insanity due to the psychological trauma are all instances of the inhospitable conditions of refugee life. Luckily there was an end to the misery of Bangladeshi refugees in 1971 with the country's independence after which they could return to their homeland and start afresh. But fortune is not that favorable to the minority refugees such as the Palestinians and Rohingyas as there is no going-back-home in sight for them.

Mrs. Rehana's bravery continues even after returning to Dhaka where she has to face non-stop questioning by the Pakistani Colonel who, along with his contingent, comes to arrest Sohail after they find out that he and his accomplices are behind the attack on a crucially important electricity grid in Dhaka. She now faces the real horrors of war as she witnesses how the sex deprived hungry soldiers stare at her daughter. Though she trembles out of the fear of what may happen to her daughter, she gives steadfast answers to the colonel and denies any wrongdoings. In the middle

of this, the soldiers catch the major while he was trying to escape. He is severely beaten in front of her and finally dragged away to be tortured further. Even though the colonel insists that he knows everything about what has been going on in this house during the last few months, he surprisingly spares Mrs. Rehana and Maya without doing any harm to them. By then, the war was nearing an end but Mrs. Rehana's journey through it was yet to be over as she must know the whereabouts of the captured major.

With this end in view, she goes to the same police station where that she went for the release of the deserter lieutenant. But going there, she realizes that the major is dead due to the horrendous torture he suffered at the hands of his captors. Her going to that place again bears a special significance as this will be a coincidental occasion where she proves her undoubting loyalty to the newly emerged nation of Bangladesh by severing her family relation for good. There she finds her brother-in-law Mr. Faiz locked up by the Muktibahini (freedom fighters) for his collaboration with the military. Mr. Faiz frantically pleads her time and again to help him get out of there. But she does not pay heed to his strangled cries. Because while Mr. Faiz was loudly appealing to Mrs. Rehana for help, all the faces, that have suffered the most because of this war and the atrocities meted out against them, floated before her eyes. Shortly after, she sells the furniture that were still in the apartment of Mrs. Sengupta and sends the money to the refugee camps in Salt Lake. She has not forgotten what an unbearable suffering of the refugees she has witnessed there. Even after the war is over, she still feels the stinging of her sense of duty that she must do whatever she can for the wellbeing of the countless number of refugees who fled their home just to survive the war. In her next visit to the grave of her deceased husband, she tells her husband about the war and the losses it has caused. The novel ends at this point with the reassertion of her belonging to this newly founded land, with the singing of its national anthem, with the clutching of its flag and the remembrance of how she has done what she has done.

#### NARRATIVES ON RECONSTRUCTION

Anam's approach to narrate the story placing a settler woman at the center is of immense importance to adequately appreciate it critically. The major part of

the setting of the novel is the wartime Dhaka and Calcutta but it is not essentially a typical graphic war story as Anam has not provided any gruesome details of the war in it. Hers is an epic voyage of a single mother through war in which she is caught up with the dilemma between keeping her children safe and serving her foster country. Mrs. Rehana's participation in the war is different from the conventional sense of fighting a war. If war by definition means losing or taking lives, her war means saving lives. The author has shown how a helpless naïve single mother raises her orphan children in an unfavorable hostile society, how an immigrant widowed wife and a concerned mother becomes an indispensable part in her adopted nation's war, and in the process how she becomes a mother to the nation itself. By doing what she has done so far, she has got more alloyed with the cause of the nation and come closer to becoming a universal mother. Sanjib Biswas and Priyanka Tripathy writes in this regard:

Rehana fully comes out from the sphere of biological bonding of a woman and sets herself apart from the domestic sphere. She is no more the biological mother of her children; she emerges as the universal mother free from the womanly weakness. Her liberal mind, sense of patriotism and her sense of duty for the doomed nation turn her to be the mother of every child of Muktibahini. (527-528)

Now, question may arise whether it is justifiable to pursue a violent method in place of a peaceful one to drive out the colonizing force. Some may give the example of Mahatma Gandhi for his nonviolent movement against the British colonial rule in India. Though there is some truth in what Gandhi achieved by his peaceful campaign against the British, there are numerous other examples of violent uprisings and mutinies against the imperial regime. Mir Nisar Ali Titumir led an unsuccessful rebellion against the British rule in India in 1831 who, along with his supporters, built a bamboo fort in the south-eastern part of Bengal and fought bravely with just bamboo quarterstaff, sticks and a few swords and spears against a well-equipped British force. A similar unsuccessful but a larger uprising known as Indian Mutiny took place in 1857, when Indian troops came out of their barracks and rebelled against the British troops in India. This rebellion spread across India and lasted for two years before it was finally put down by

the colonial forces. Though violent incidents such as these happened throughout the British colonialism in India, the ultimate Indian political independence from the colonial rule was relatively peaceful except the communal riots surrounding the partition times. Therefore, it may be said that Indian independence movement started with violence but ended in peaceful political settlement at least with the exiting British administration. However, as has already been extensively discussed, the East Bengali movement against West Pakistani neo-colonial regimes started peacefully but ended in a violent and devastating war.

Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth* discusses how the growing national consciousness among the colonized people about their wretched conditions under colonial rule leads to violence in their pursuit of freedom. The East Bengali experience as a whole made its people realize the stark realities of life under West Pakistani discrimination and exploitation that eventually propelled them to do what Fanon says about the colonial subjects in such contexts: "The colonized subject discovers reality and transforms it through his praxis, his deployment of violence and his agenda for liberation" (21) The Bengalis did not want liberation in the beginning of their journey together but were forced to do so because of the West Pakistani neo-colonial approaches towards them. The Bengali nationalism did not grow overnight but develop through a steady process of self-awakening from their history of deprivation and mistreatment by the West Pakistani establishment. East Bengali people literally became 'an outcast and a stranger' in their own country as hardly any of their demands were paid heed to and met. As a result, their political activities gradually culminated to a forceful anti-colonial movement that finally gave them a country of their own. Though Fanon dedicates this entire chapter of the aforementioned book to the trials and tribulations of national consciousness, the first few lines of the first paragraph clearly match with most of the reasons for East Bengali political aspirations. He writes:

History teaches us that anticolonialist struggle is not automatically written from a nationalist perspective. Over a long period of time the colonized have devoted their energy to eliminating iniquities such as forced labor, corporal punishment, unequal wages, and the restriction of political rights. This fight for democracy

against man's oppression gradually emerges from a universalist, neoliberal confusion to arrive, sometimes laboriously, at a demand for nationhood. (97)

## CONCLUSION

Tahmima Anam's has portrayed the eventful national history of Bangladesh through the stories of a simple urban family that travels through various difficult times. Though the story begins in the mid-1960s, it is indirectly abundant in the reminiscence of the troubled times after the partition of India and directly rife with the post-partition East Bengali unpleasant experiences under West Pakistani neo-colonial rule. Like a time-machine, the author has made the readers time travelers to the past to see how life was like for the East Bengali population after they helped create Pakistan and dreamed for a smooth sailing together. Through the character of Mrs. Rehana, the author has also shown the ethno-religious dislocation of partition times and the accompanying issues any newcomer has to face to integrate into the local culture. Moreover, making a migrant woman from an alien culture the protagonist during the times of Bengali national struggle has also added a new dimension to the story. The novel at times shows Mrs. Rehana's as well as the Bengali people's national identity construction through the rebellious events and incidents that take place in it. Her various actions in favor of the Bengali national cause has, in fact, cemented her a permanent national identity despite her immigrant background. The author has made her and her children a symbol of Bengali resistance against the West Pakistani hegemonic dominance over the native communities of today's Bangladesh.

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