

Totalizing Metanarrative of Bangladesh in the Light of Tahmima Anam's *Bengal Trilogy*

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Masters of Arts in English



Sakiba Ahmed

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## Declaration

I hereby declare that this dissertation is completely my original work except for the references and quotations, which have been cited duly. I also declare that I have maintained academic ethics while preparing this research.

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## Abstract

The objective of metanarrative is to retell the stories, experience and norms of the previous generation to create meaningful guidance for the future generation. However, the metanarrative of Bangladesh gradually becomes totalitarian by silencing different coexisting voices and becomes sexist, racist and stereotypical resulting in a meaningless and unrelatable guideline to the future generations. Tahmima Anam's *A Golden Age*, *The Good Muslim* and *The Bones of Grace* include the narratives of women, working-class people, and Urdu-speaking community who are never represented or misrepresented in the metanarrative of the country. The first book represents Rehana as Urdu speaking non Bengali who is misrepresented in the metanarrative of the war by omitting their contribution and popularizing negative stereotypes. The second book presents the sufferings of women from all walks of life. Their contribution to the war is minimized in the metanarrative by misusing religious teaching, superstition and moral policing. The third book focuses on the downtrodden working-class people who are exploited by the powerful class and are never properly represented in the metanarrative. Be it in the pre-war or post-war times, their condition remains the same and gets worse despite the change in government. Social mobility for these marginalized people is limited or near to impossible, forcing them to live in misery. Thus, people of different marginalized groups can rarely speak against the totalitarian metanarrative for their rights, safety and respectable place in the society. This paper aims to prove that Anam intentionally gives voice to the marginalized people that create a scope for a progressive and peaceful future by showcasing the shortcomings of the totalitarian metanarrative of Bangladesh.

## Introduction

Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodernism as incredulity toward metanarratives.

This incredulity is undoubtedly a product of progress in the science: but that progress, in turn, presupposes it. (Lyotard xxiv)

‘Meta’ means beyond and ‘narrative’ means story. Metanarrative stands for a totalizing and comprehensive story about historical events, experiences and socio-cultural phenomena by utilizing some kind of universal values. The function of a metanarrative is to legitimize power, social customs and authority by retelling the stories. Metanarrative refers to a story that tries to incorporate totalizing and comprehensive accounts of various historical events, social and cultural phenomena representing universal values or truth but there is always something yet to be realized in any meta-narrative. Lyotard claims that in the postmodern era, metanarratives are often extremely simplified, which creates disbelief among the people of any society. As a result, the local narratives replace it. Tahmima Anam’s *A Golden Age*, *The Good Muslim* and *The Bones of Grace* together known as Bengal Trilogy is a metanarrative that has the potential to stand against the presupposition of postmodern symptoms given by Lyotard. Anam creates a complicated narrative that encompasses almost forty years of Bangladeshi history through Rehana Haque and her family. The Haque family’s experience, social norms and major historical events of the liberation war are comprehensively portrayed. Along with the well-constructed central characters, she also creates minor characters representing stories of the sufferings of the marginalized women and men that challenge the dominant narrative of Bangladesh. This paper aims to prove that Anam intentionally gives voices to the marginalized people to create a scope for a progressive and peaceful future by showcasing the shortcomings of the totalitarian metanarrative of Bangladesh.



Although Anam focuses on the crisis of the post-war times in *The Good Muslim*, she represents female voice of different social classes that has been subjugated from society, history and the metanarrative. It explores Maya's experience of becoming a village doctor from a student activist. Unlike Sohail, Maya's contribution towards the liberation war is never recognised. Despite being educated and economically independent she faces gender discrimination and is criticised for rebelling against the norms of society. Anam also questions the orthodox patriarchal prejudice towards rape survivors of the war, *bironganas* who are banished by their families. Piya, a *birongana*, is blamed and persuaded to forget about her traumatic experience and abort her child. Anam also gives voice to village women like Nazia who wish to bring change but are silenced by the rigid social structure and superstition.

The author also consciously portrays the localized narratives of Urdu speaking community and the discrimination they face as an ethnic minority in the novel, *A Golden Age*. Rehana Haque is from Calcutta who settled in Dhaka after marrying Iqbal in the 1960s. She struggles to assimilate with the Bengali culture and language and the rising tension between West and East Pakistan makes her feel conflicted. Through the novel, she explores the duality of her identity and discovers her loyalty and love for her adopted homeland Bangladesh. Similar to Rehana, her children Sohail and Maya also face challenges. They are bullied in school for their poor Bengali and their ties to Karachi, but with time they are able to assimilate themselves better than Rehana. When many of the Urdu speakers pledged allegiance to West Pakistan, Sohail and Maya induced themselves with Bangladeshi nationalism. Unfortunately, the whole Urdu-speaking community is discriminated against and labeled as traitors after the war but the pro-Bangladeshi nonnative fighters are either never acknowledged or their ethnicity is never mentioned. The metanarrative of war portrays them as enemy or traitor subjecting them to hate

and suspicion from the Bengali community. The people of the Urdu speaking community live in camps in miserable conditions deprived of all rights that their fellow Bangladeshi citizens are enjoying. Although they speak Urdu and have different cultural practices they associate more with Bangladeshi nationalism and seek respect and acceptance by society.

In *The Bones of Grace*, Anam portrays the contemporary economical, social and political issues in Bangladesh. Through the central protagonist Zubaida's journey to find her origins, Aman represents the poor working-class people who are exploited by the powerful ruling class. The ordinary workers like Anwar, Pahari, Belal are stripped of their humanity and are treated as hands or things to maximize the profit of the elite Business owners. The economically marginalized people are deprived of education, job opportunities, and basic services. These people struggle to beat starvation and are forced to take unethical and illegal means of earning money by fraudulency, human trafficking, or prostitution. Despite living in an independent country the citizens safely and equally do not enjoy their rights and freedom, the lives of the powerless ordinary remained the same if not worsened. By using Marxist lens the book is analyzed to understand the exploitation of poor working class people by the elite rich business class. The metanarrative only represents the urbanization and economic progress that legitimizes the hegemonic power since it disguises the government's failure to improve the lives of economically marginalized people.

Critics have examined Anam's novels from different theoretical frameworks. *A Golden Age* is mostly analyzed with a nationalist approach by Asma Fathima and Abhisarika Prajapati. Sabine Lauret-Taft, Sanjib Kr Biswas and Pryanka Tripathi talk about the impact of war and the role of women from the perspective of female characters of the first novel. Women's role in war and nation-building are not recognized by the history of Bangladesh portrayed in *The Good*

*Muslim* is explored by Farzana Akhter. Also, the conflict between secular and religious beliefs is analyzed by Amrah Abdul Majid and Dinnur Qayyimah Ahmed Jalaludin. Identity crisis and attachment to the past is analyzed by Hafiza Habiba Ikram and Tahmina Mariyam presented in Anam's trilogy. Tazrin Hossain has discussed how a female becomes a woman according to the norms of the patriarchal society. Momena Rahman Keya has worked on the female characters of all three novels who are able to fight patriarchal domination. However, Critics have not applied Lyotard's concept of metanarrative to analyze the issues presented in Anam's novels. Each of the novels gives voice the narratives of different marginalized groups that challenge the monolithic Bengali metanarrative of Bangladesh.

Anam's trilogy has comprehensive accounts of various historical, social and cultural events along with localized narratives that challenge the dominant narrative. The first chapter analyses *The Good Muslim* through a feminist lens to understand the way metanarrative silences women of all social statuses in post war Bangladesh. *A Golden Age* is explored in the second chapter to analyze the identity formation of the Urdu speaking community with the help of Stuart Hall's "Cultural Identity and Diaspora". This chapter also discusses that the Urdu speaking community is represented as an enemy in the metanarrative of Bangladesh that impacts the public perception negatively. In the third chapter, the economic marginalization of poor people by the capitalistic ideology reinforced through the metanarrative is analyzed with Marxist theory in light of *The Bones of Grace*. This paper analyzes the trilogy using three different frameworks to manifest how the metanarrative marginalizes different groups of people by gender, ethnicity and economic criteria and stops them from improving their standard of life.

Anam's novels create a metanarrative that is not oversimplified, rather incorporates different perspectives and experiences that shed light upon many taboo and sensitive issues and

norms of society. Three of the novels separately and together in the form of a trilogy reflect three universal truths. First, women were systematically oppressed by patriarchy throughout history. Second, minorities are always oppressed by the dominant ideology and third, the poor class are deprived of their basic rights and exploited by the capitalist economy. Anam creates the metanarrative that holds the glorious past and the need to break the dominant grand narrative to think about a better future. With a close analytical reading of these texts and Jean-Francois Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition: A report on Knowledge*, this dissertation attempts to prove that Tahmima Anam's Bengal Trilogy successfully represent an alternative metanarrative of human experience that does not create a rigid structure but opens up scope for readers to think about their contribution to the future. Anam explores the past and questions the dominant social, political, and hegemonic forces to create a scope for the readers to think about the silencing of women, Urdu speaking minorities and poor people. The aim of the paper is to prove that Anam believes the marginalized people can improve their lives by raising their voices against the totalitarian metanarrative of Bangladesh.

## Chapter One

Silencing Women in Post Liberation War and the Metanarrative of Bangladesh: *The Good Muslim*

Every nation has its metanarrative regarding its origins, its heroes, its enemies, and the active social systems and customs of the growing nation that gets retold to the next generation. Despite contributing to the war of independence, Bangladeshi women cannot enjoy their rights because the metanarrative reinforces systematic oppression on them. Literate or illiterate; urban or rural; privileged or underprivileged; all-female voices are censored from the public domain. Not just the public domain, the totalitarian metanarrative has taken control over their personal space and freedom of choice. Women have to stand against the patriarchy to improve their socio-economic and political standing. However, the women who try to raise their voices against systematic suppression often become subject to moral policing, punishment, or violence.

Tahmima Anam's second book published in 2011 mirrors the marginalized women through the socio-political change of the growing nation. The novel reflects the challenges of the newfound nation in the 70s and 80s through Rehana Haque's children Sohail and Maya's experience. Maya sticks to her nationalist spirit but Sohail, who once fought for the country, completely devotes himself to religious practices and preaching. For seven years Maya explores different parts of the country and witnesses the miserable condition of women. She meets Nazia who convinces her to open a clinic in Nazia's village. However, she soon becomes the victim of "village shalish" which is a sort of 'village court' run by the village heads (the powerful men of the village who strictly follow superstition and traditions). Piya represents the rape survivors of the war who are burdened by the title "*birangona*" or war heroine. She is abandoned by her family which reflects the regressive mentality of a patriarchal society that blames women for sexual assault. This

chapter analyzes Maya, Piya, and Nazia's narratives and criticizes the totalitarian metanarrative of the country that only reinforces patriarchal ideology by promoting superstitious practices, orthodox gender roles, and religious extremism in the post war time. The objective of this chapter is to prove that Tahmima Anam encourages women to break their silence against the systematic oppression of the totalitarian metanarrative to ensure their rights and improve their condition in society.

The metanarrative of war does not narrate the stories of women's heroism, patriotism, contribution or self-sacrifice for the nation. This issue is visible as Maya never receives validation or encouragement for her humanitarian work and contribution to the liberation war. On the other hand, her brother Sohail is highly praised for his contribution although he later completely withdraws from the nation-building responsibilities. Maya's motivation for joining the protest against the oppression and corruption of the West Pakistani government comes from witnessing the sufferings of the victims of the 1970's cyclone who did not receive any relief from the West Pakistani government (*A Golden Age* 290). She actively participates in student protests and joins the student Communist party protest. She actively takes part in the student protest and marches against the West Pakistani government. She makes posters for the student protest and works every day at the university for the revolution. At the University of Dhaka, when the female students received rifle training, "Maya was in the front row, raising her knees higher than all the others and shouting louder than all the others" (*A Golden Age* 97). Rehana forces Maya to return home with her from the rifle practice. However, Maya resists Rehana's action by saying that just as she could not keep Sohail at home, she will not be able to hold her back from joining the war. Hearing this, Rehana slaps Maya but Maya continues her contribution to war efforts. Maya is unable to enlist in the army but she travels to Calcutta to volunteer at the refugee camp.

Daniz Kandiyoti explains that women participating in nationalist movements are breaking the “narrowly prescribed gender role” prone to justify their actions by “the name of patriotism and self-sacrifice for the nation. He adds that women’s “activities, be they civic, charitable or political, could most easily be legitimized as natural extensions of their womanly nature and as a duty rather than a right” (Kandiyoti 379). A similar scenario is seen in Maya and Sohail’s situation. Sohail is not criticized for refusing to join the student movement rather he is praised for having potential for a ‘powerful leader’. Sohail does not require Rehana’s permission to become a freedom fighter but Maya, being a female, requires permission to volunteer at the refugee camp. Maya’s voluntary work for cyclone victims or participation in student movement can only be legitimized by considering it as the natural extension of her ‘womanly nature’. As the female gender is associated with the role of giver or caretaker, Maya’s contributions are seen as a gesture of generosity of giving back to the country and her camp work is associated with mothers who take care of their ailing children. Responding to the national emergency is a privilege granted to Sohail that he proudly enjoys without any questions but for Maya, it is a duty she has to fulfill. Since the patriarchal society treats female contributions as a natural and not an extraordinary accomplishment, they are not recognized properly.

Moreover, the totalitarian metanarrative of war glorifies the contributions of men but overlooks the contributions of women to a wide range of fields like volunteering in refugee camps, assisting the freedom fighters, or directly on battlefields. Maya volunteers at the Refugee camp in Calcutta and works there every day. She enlists the new refugees, rape victims, and helps the children who are cramped in pipes with food and resources, nurses the injured people by scoping bullets with minimal instruments. She has witnessed people die out of pain because of the inhumane torture of the West Pakistani military. Although Maya does not take part in the

war like Sohail, Maya's voluntary work during and after the war leaves her with trauma and guilt. Maya states, "How could he [Sohail] know - he was just a soldier, he has killed as a matter of principle, but the war babies, the children of rape, had been left to junior doctors, the volunteers in ragged tents on the outskirts of town" (*The Good Muslim* 51). Maya believes that killing innocent unborn children is more heinous than killing the enemies. Sohail fails to understand Maya's situation and thinks she is selfish. Although she was following orders as a trainee doctor in the camp, she has always felt in debt towards the war babies she has aborted and their mothers. Her volunteer work in the camp leaves her with trauma and guilt for the rest of her life. After the war, the father of the nation invites only Sohail because he wants to meet the boys who have served the country. Maya or Rehana who have contributed to the war efforts are not recognized or celebrated; they attend the program as Sohail's family. In the paper, "Negotiating the Politics of Power" Tahmima Anam's *The Good Muslim* and Women's Role in War and Nation-building", Farzana Akhter discusses that the father of the nation did not give proper tribute to female freedom fighters. The author mentions that "Out of a total of 676 gallantry awards that the post-war government had awarded to freedom fighters for their bravery and courage, women received only two" (Akhter 4). Women did not participate in voluntary work only; rather they also took part in combat, like Sohail's freedom fighter friend Kona, but there is no proper list of female freedom fighters. Women are always left alone to suffer their trauma in silence and never receive compassion or homage from others. Thus, the narratives of women contributors are censored by the gender bias metanarrative.

In the aftermath of the war, the orthodox patriarchal gender roles were restored so, women must conform to them. The women who moved out of the private domain to contribute to the war of liberation were sent back to their domestic sphere after the war ended. They must



behave, dress and work according to their role as a daughter, mother, or wife. Although Maya strongly believes that revolutionaries are free from all social conventions, she is always criticized for her views against conventions (*The Good Muslim* 67). As a result, Maya who previously broke the orthodox homebound attribute of women and contributed to the country is required to return to her role as a dutiful daughter, and sister. In the post-war times, she must resort to her old gender roles at home but she relentlessly volunteers to different causes and leads a very simple life. She always dresses in plain cotton white sarees that symbolizes her political consciousness, unlike her friends who like to be prim and proper. Maya must also fulfil her gender roles since, “nationalist movements invite women to participate more fully in collective life by interpellating them as ‘national’ actors: mothers, educators, culturally accepted feminine conduct and exert pressure on women to articulate their gender interests within the terms of reference set by nationalist discourse” (Kandiyoti 380). Maya must contribute as a mother, educator, and conform to the cultural feminine code. Maya’s friends who are already married always try to introduce her to different bachelors for marriage. Rehana shows concern for Maya’s marriage throughout the novel. Sohail also directly asks Joy to marry Maya without asking her opinion about Joy. She must get married and raise children to fulfil her duties as a wife and become the “Angel in the House” personifying the submissive woman (Goldman 79). Maya is afraid that her marriage is going to bind her to domestic life. Hence when Joy proposes to her for marriage she makes it clear that she cannot give up her dreams and become a housewife. Joy persuades Maya for marriage and “Maya, a doctor committed to breaking away from superstition and tradition, at the end conforms to society’s norms” (Akhter 9). Although she gets married Maya does not stop being an activist. Anam’s third book, *The Bones of Grace* portrays the characters of the Haque family forty years after the liberation war. Maya has given up her

medical practices and gathers interviews from war survivors and witnesses for prosecuting the war criminals (*The Bones of Grace* 84). Maya always remembers who she is and always works for the interest of the helpless women. This nature of control over the women's public life projects the totalitarian system prevailing in Bangladesh. Therefore, Bangladeshi metanarrative reinforces the traditional gender roles and confines women to their gender roles, silencing them from the public sphere.

Women's voices are always suppressed throughout the history of the country and in post-war times this condition gets worse amidst the political turmoil. Nonetheless, women Maya have tried time and again to raise their voices against injustice. During the war, she wrote articles against the West Pakistani government. Although her article, written during the war, "The World Looks on as Bangladesh Bleeds: A Cry for Help" never gets approval from the publisher (*The Good Muslim* 85), she does not give up and continues to write about the corruption of the Pakistani Army and the bravery of the Muktibahini in an article, "Chronicles of a Young Woman in Wartime" (*A Golden Age* 199). Back then she used to write articles under her real name but in the post-war times, she stays anonymous. Maya finds it hard to accept that the country they fought for is governed by a dictator in the 80s. Although freedom of speech is a basic right, the newspapers refrain from criticizing the actions of the government. She also realizes the importance of prosecuting war criminals upon meeting Jahanara Imam who is a portrayal of a real-life author and political activist. However, Maya's publisher refuses to publish articles regarding the prosecution of war criminals and the dictatorial government. She writes, "None of us is completely free of responsibility—no when we live in a country that is a living example of what we fought against- a Dictatorship, led by a man who cares nothing for this country, and a refusal to acknowledge the criminals who live among us" (*The Good Muslim* 226). She criticizes

the government that has allowed the war criminals to live freely and asks for their trial. Since she writes the article under her real name, she is taken into judicial custody in a treason case for calling the dictator a war criminal. She is asked to prove her loyalty to Bangladesh. It shows how the state applies the Repressive State Apparatus (RSA) to hinder Maya's right to freedom of speech (Barry 158). The lawyer pleads, "Miss Haques's brother was a freedom fighter. Her mother was a quiet, unsung hero of the revolution. She is following in her family's footsteps. And I am merely trying to appeal to the ideal of justice to which your court is bound" (*The Good Muslim* 286). Maya, despite all her efforts, is accused of treason and requires Sohail's name to justify her legitimacy as a true patriot. A lot of information regarding the war and war criminals is altered later on. As Lyotard says, "knowledge and power are simply two sides of the same question: who decides what knowledge is, and who knows what needs to be decided? In the computer age, the question of knowledge is now more than ever a question of government" (9). Knowledge and power are interrelated and it is controlled by the person in power. The metanarrative only represents the information that the government in power is allowing. During the 80s when Lt. Gen. Hossain Muhammed Ershad was in power, the citizens could not practice their right to freedom of speech. Maya's article projected nationalist views that were against the Dictator resulting in her imprisonment. Her article on Nazia talks about the miserable condition of village women and the violence against ethnic minorities that shows the failure of law and order in Bangladesh.

The novel represents the unfortunate reality of rape victims of the 1971 war who are shamed and disowned by their families after the war ended. A very small number of women like Piya were able to survive the horrific assault but they were not accepted back into their normal lives. Although the government took the initiative to rehabilitate the rape victims the policies and

the practices in the rehabilitation program have put women at disadvantage. Although the father of the nation honored the rape survivors as “*birangona*”, war heroines and asked their families to welcome them home, he did not want the children of war (*The Good Muslim* 141). The rehabilitation and development work barely helped the victims to cope with their traumatic experiences and get assimilated by society. During the war, women were raped in their villages, in front of their families and many were kidnapped and held in the army barracks until they died or committed suicide. Since the rape survivors were not accepted by their families, they turned to the rehabilitation centre in the city to seek shelter. The volunteers and junior doctors like Maya were instructed to lie to these women that, “their lives would soon return to normal, that they would go home and their families would embrace them as heroes of the war. She said this to their faces every day knowing it was a lie, and they listened silently, staring into their laps and willing it to be true” (*The Good Muslim* 69). These promises were just eyewash for the women; they were manipulated by the policies and their practitioners into believing that their lives would be normal once they abort their babies and forget about the past. Lyotard suggests that the institution imposes constraints or filters while interacting (language games) with the individuals and “the constraints function to filter discursive potentials, interrupting possible connections in the communication networks: there are things that should not be said” (17). The rape victims must not say or make their sexual assault public because rape is socially and culturally considered taboo. Women’s bodies are considered sacred and they must be pure to give birth to the new generation. Therefore, the rape committed by the enemies is associated with the dishonor of the nation. The rape survivors must remain silent about their rape which denies their scope to receive justice. Again, the constraints that Lyotard mentions privilege, “certain classes of statements (sometimes only one) whose predominance characterizes the discourse of the

particular institution: there are things that should be said, and there are ways of saying them” (17). The authorities view rape as a shameful truth of the liberation war that must be concealed in order to protect the honor of the country. The institution preaches that forgetting about the trauma and ineffective rehabilitation work is an insignificant thing that women must do. These women received little treatment from inexperienced junior doctors in the centre. Hence, the volunteers of the rehabilitation centre convinced all the pregnant rape victims to abort their children. The women were told to “Forgive and forget. Absolve and misremember. Erase and move on” for the country to recover from the state of emergency and become a country again (*The Good Muslim* 70). They were also required to forget and forgive the criminals, “It was the least they could do” (*The Good Muslim* 70). Society wants to forget that the women were sexually assaulted during the war by the enemies because it is considered shameful and disgraceful. By silencing the women the poor rehabilitation work done by the government is also covered up.

On the other hand, rape survivor, Piya decides not to conform to oppression and decides to make her own decision instead of following the institution. She is blamed for getting tortured and assaulted. After getting disowned by her family she came to Haque residence to seek help from Sohail who rescued her from a military barrack. Although Sohail and Maya say that Piya should not blame herself for the prolonged torture and rape but it seemed nothing more than words of consolation. These words only silenced what Piya wanted to share about the horrific things that happened to her. Although Piya understands the degree of criticism and blame she will face by giving birth to her child she refuses to have an abortion. She raises her son all by herself by not succumbing to institutional conformity. A lot of women initially thought abortion would help them to start over but after the abortion, they were not properly rehabilitated.

Another thing that is overlooked is not all the rape survivors wanted to get an abortion. Like any other mother, they love their child despite the trauma that caused it. It is one of the reasons Piya suddenly leaves the Haque residence without telling anyone. In the rehabilitation centre, Piya is continuously persuaded to abort her child but she refuses it and runs away. Later she gives birth to a son whom she named Sohail. Piya was not the only one who is against abortion, in fact, there were many girls like her who did not want to do it, “[b]ut they’re ashamed, they’re told they’re carrying the seeds of these soldiers”” (*The Good Muslim* 142). The women are made to believe that they are to blame for the rape and by carrying the rape child they are in the wrong. Akhter comments, “Piya’s disappearance from the life of Maya and Sohail symbolises the disappearance of the *birangonas* from society. Their contribution and existence have been obliterated. What they were left with was the tag of *birangona*, which, as mentioned before, instead of dignifying them, led them to lifelong stigmatization” (8). Women must be silent about their assault and abort their babies who are the evidence of the war crimes. The prisoners of war were released respectfully with their uniforms who never apologized or atoned for their crimes; they will live without any shame. The war criminals were not prosecuted immediately after the war and with time history was manipulated into suppressing their crimes by silencing the witness that is the rape victims who can identify them. As mentioned earlier in the era of the dictatorial government, few of the war criminals held powerful political positions making it difficult for women to even seek justice. Jahanara Imam is a fictional recreation of a renowned author and political activist of Bangladesh who worked for the punishment of the war criminals points out in the book that, “what sort of country allows the men who betrayed it, the men who committed murder, to run free, to live as the neighbors of the women they had widowed, the young girls they have had raped?” (*The Good Muslim* 96). The country has let the war criminals free and

punished the women to the life of shame, loneliness, and silence. Yet with the testimony of women like Piya who refused to forget, years later the war criminals are finally facing trial. Piya chose to raise her voice against the war criminals by not conforming to institutional oppression. The rape survivors deserve respect, empathy and validation for their sacrifice and struggle; on the contrary, the word *birangona* became synonyms to rape victims who brought shame to the nation. They are not accepted by their families since the virginity and purity of the body are highly valued in society. They are labelled as '*Birangona*' or war heroines to glorify them but it ended up becoming a burden to these women

One of the prominent methods to suppress women is depriving them of basic education in science. Maya travels to Tangail, Rajshahi, and hill tribes in the south of Bangladesh where she encounters women suffering from a lack of basic knowledge and care during pregnancy and delivery. These women also lack the knowledge required to care for infants which caused high infanticide rates. Seeing the sufferings and needs of women, Maya gives up her dream to be a surgeon and becomes a lady doctor. She taught the village women the preparation of oral rehydration which stopped the babies from dying. Maya had been lecturing them on, "science and superstition and their rights" (*The Good Muslim* 18). However, the village men felt threatened because Maya was educating the village women about their rights. The boys of the village would laugh at her and throw mud at her window at night. Maya kept her window shut at night in fear of the village boys who taunted her. However, the positive change is considered as trouble by the male authority of the village. Women are stuck in the rigid domestic setting that is determined by the patriarchy. As Lyotard discusses that all people have the "right to science" and if anyone is not able to have this knowledge, "it is because that has been forbidden by priests and tyrants" (31). In the poverty-stricken rural areas, the powerful village heads restrict women to

their houses and do not let them avail this basic knowledge because they are afraid to lose their control over the women. In the 1980s which is the main time frame of Anam's book, the problem of 'village shalish' and 'fatwabazi' were commonly practised leaving women completely helpless. The rural women have no scope to come out of the rigid structure and if they dare to come out of the shackles of patriarchy, they have to face "Village shalish" and if volunteers or NGO workers try to stop such preceding, most of the time they also fall victim to harassment (Ghathakurta and Lina 14). Since Maya was trying to make a change in the village by educating women on rights and health care the village boys teased her. The village leaders considered Maya a bad influence since she is motivating the village women to not follow the age-old superstitious practice. Maya tried to stop the man who was lashing Nazia, one of the lashes landed on her neck leaving a scar. In the public domain, these issues of the rural society are hardly represented properly which Maya quickly understands by looking at an oil painting of a rural landscape at her friend, Saima's house, "The painting looked nothing like the people she had lived among these past years" (*The Good Muslim* 54). Maya soon decides to write, "Chronicles of a Country Doctor" to raise awareness about the violent treatment of women in the hand of "village shalish" (*The Good Muslim* 89). That was giving a voice to the sufferings of rural women like Nazia. This is crucial to raise awareness among people regarding the unjust violence committed towards women.

Anam represents the struggle of village women through Nazia's character and indicates the reforms needed to improve the women's condition. Their sufferings and needs are always neglected. Most of them are dependent economically and socially on the male members of the family. If they fail to follow the norms of the village, they have to face moral policing in extremely cruel and unjust ways by the village head. Nazia is a strong woman who understands



the need for healthcare for the women, “They had never had a clinic in the village. Nazia spread the word, describing how Maya had saved her and her baby from certain death, how she had inserted the needle into her arm” (*The Good Muslim* 11). The village women had rules and a code of conduct for women and if they did not abide by it they got punished. The men of the village were offended by Nazia who dipped her feet in the pond. They discussed, “A pregnant woman in the pond? It was too much. They huddled around a cooking fire that night” and convinced Nazia’s husband Masud that he is not the father (*The Good Muslim* 18). The men announced that “The punishment was one hundred and one lashes. Masud came back from the meeting and spat the words at his wife. ‘For lying about the child. He’s not mine” (*The Good Muslim* 23). Sadly the women who need the help do not receive it and they are left alone.. Women like Nazia would not be able to stand against the system because they lack strong willpower. They are deprived of education, healthcare, and rights as a result they are imprisoned by superstitions and norms. They do not have the basic scientific knowledge that can enable them to understand what is good for them. Although Maya shouted that Nazia’s child was not cursed, rather suffered from Down's syndrome, they justify their judgment for protecting the village and the name of the village. In reality they are just trying to perpetuate their control over women.

Lastly, religious extremism in the post-war time caused by political upraise dominated women’s public and private space. Maya’s sister-in-law, Silvi is educated but is very submissive. She never stood up for herself against her mother’s will. Although Silvi loved Sohail, she married Lieutenant Sabeer because her mother wanted it. After Sabeer’s death, Silvi also finds solace in religion. Later she marries Sohail and completely devotes herself to teaching about, “God, men, morality. Purdah and sex. The life of the prophet. His wives, Ayesha and Khadija and Zaynab.

The raising of children. How to be one of the faithful” (*The Good Muslim* 22). She never talks about Prophet Muhammad (PBUH)’s wife who was a businesswoman or what rights Islam gives to women. Her preaching almost seems one-sided that only talks about women being in their homes with the sole purpose to serve men. Islam preaches the necessity to gain knowledge and to spread it but Rokeya who is one of the women from the tabligh has no clue of the world outside. Tahmina Mariyam in her article, “I Change therefore I am: The Construction of Female Identity in the Works of Tahmima Anam”, talks about the different purposes the women of the Haque family discovered during the war. She states that, “For Rehana, it is the family, for Maya, it is the nation and for Silvi, it is the divine” (9). Silvi completely succumbs to the age-old patriarchal norms that silence women. The religious principles that preach about rights of women are rarely mentioned by the preachers.

Despite all the modernization women are still bound to their gender roles within the domestic sphere. Women's narratives, experiences, and struggles are rarely represented in the metanarrative, making them voiceless and powerless against patriarchal notions. In “The Politics of Independence in Bangladesh”, David Ludden elaborates:

Ever since, the question of who declared independence has been trapped in partisan agenda that demand a choice between two date, two declarations, and two authors, each associated with one of two political parties, each of which reverses one of these two men (Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Ziaur Rahman) as its founding father. (1)

The Bangladeshi metanarrative is fully controlled by whichever political party is in power. So, the women who have contributed to war and nation-building stand no chance against the oppression of institutional policies and the patriarchal structure of the society. Maya, Rehana, or

Piya never get the proper respect and support that the male freedom fighters are enjoying. To show honor, they are titled, 'War Heroines' or *Birangona*, which becomes another way for the families to disown them because they believe rape, brings disgrace to the family. Piya who survives the horrors of the war becomes victim to society's constricted patriarchal stigma against rape victims. They are constantly advised to forget the incident as if the past would be undone and the shame they brought to their families and the country would be erased. Lyotard mentions that the stories which are not recorded cannot be remembered and things that are not experienced cannot be recorded. So, by omitting the stories of these women from the metanarrative, they are forgotten. Anam not only raises this issue, but she also represents the sufferings of uneducated rural women like Nazia who are oppressed by the superstitious beliefs of the rural society. People in the aftermath of the war practiced religious extremism which further ostracized women from the metanarrative. The women of modern times like Maya are expected to be an ideal woman who is modern-yet-modest who can't raise her legs too high wearing a sari during rifle practice; she must marry and raise children. With the rise of Islamic rule, the new standard for women is 'Islamic-thus-modest' and she is at a flex between these two standards (Najmabadi 49). Maya's article on the camp life or confessions of a village doctor is an initiative to voice out the sufferings of women. The women's voices that were limited to private space must be made public. Maya's voice becomes the mouthpiece for the village women like Nazia who are tortured by the village shalish or war heroine Piya who is a victim of the inadequate rehabilitation and false hope from the government institutions. *The Good Muslim* shows how Maya's articles are impacting the public who are getting aware of the oppressive system that censors the truth. Helen Cixous encourages, "Women must put herself into the text-as into the world and history-by her own movement" (321). Only by speaking up women can create a strong narrative that is equal

and inclusive to challenge the oppressive metanarrative of Bangladesh. Anam focuses on questioning this totalitarian metanarrative of Bangladesh that marginalizes women; her attempt inspires women to be well aware of their rights and to raise their voices. The first chapter argues that women are silenced by the metanarrative of Bangladesh.

## Chapter Two

### Urdu Speaking Minorities of Bangladesh and the Metanarrative of War: *A Golden Age*

Bangladesh is a country of multiple identities, ethnicity, language and culture but the metanarrative of the war of independence only represents a monolithic Bengali ideology. The Urdu speaking community of Bangladesh is represented in the metanarrative as the ‘other’, ‘the enemy’ that reinforces the age-old conflict between East and West Pakistani. The state speeches, policies and public discourse always view the Urdu speakers as the accomplice of West Pakistan and war criminals. Although the Urdu speaking minority is also the rightful citizens of Bangladesh, in many cases, they are deprived of their basic rights. *A Golden Age* by Tahmima Anam is a 2007 metanarrative about the Haque family against the backdrop of the liberation war of Bangladesh that portrays the challenges the Urdu speaking people face in Bangladesh. The novel set in 1971 includes a number of flashbacks and recollections of the Urdu speaking central protagonist Rehana Haque from 1950 to 1970. Her character showcases the life of a widow who develops a sense of nationalism over the course of time. Her journey discloses prejudices against minorities and non-natives. The metanarrative often overlooks the stories of minorities and eventually, it impacts the nation negatively. According to Jean-Francois Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, when oversimplified, the local narratives are deprived of proper representation which causes tension between the narratives resulting in disbelief among people. Lyotard’s concept is used to analyze the Urdu speaking characters of Anam’s book and compare them with the present condition of the Urdu speaking community in Bangladesh. The comparison shows two negative impacts of the inadequate metanarrative. Firstly, it creates an identity crisis among the marginalized people because they fail to locate their duality in the metanarrative. Secondly, the majority becomes intolerant towards the

marginalized people who are considered ‘the other’ in the context of the metanarrative.

Therefore, this chapter aims to prove that Anam successfully gives voice to the marginalized Urdu speaking people in *A Golden Age*, which challenges the inadequate metanarrative and its negative impact on the future generation.

Anam portrays quite a few Urdu-speaking characters in the book who represent different issues during the Liberation war. Rehana is from an aristocratic family in Kolkata, but when her father loses his fortune, she marries Iqbal and settles in Dhaka. Rehana’s sisters get married in Karachi, Pakistan. Iqbal’s family is from Karachi but he has an insurance business in Dhaka. Although Rehana’s children Maya and Sohail love their ancestral culture and Urdu language, they associate themselves with Bangladeshi nationalism. Rehana, Maya and Sohail contribute to war efforts in their own way. Similarly, Sohail’s friends Aref and Joy whose ancestors are from West Pakistan but they have also fought for Bangladesh. Lyotard claims that the name a child is given at “birth is already positioned as the referent in the story recounted by those around him,” and his engagement in the language game determines his social bonds with others (Lyotard 15). The characters of Anam’s book are already placed under the social roles and bonds that the metanarrative determines considering their diverse origins. However, after the independence of Bangladesh from Pakistan, the metanarrative only portrays the Urdu speaking community as the enemy resulting in hate among the general people against the minority community. The experiences of the Bihari butcher in the New Market from whom Rehana always buys meat represents the ethnic discrimination poor ordinary Biharis face in Bangladesh. While a great number of Biharis and other Urdu speaking people joined the pro-Pakistan forces like Al-sham, Albadar, Razakar etc and carried out different heinous war crimes during 1971, there were also many Urdu speaking people like Sohail, Joy or Araf who joined Muktibahini and fought for

Bangladesh. The localized narratives of these heroes are often left out of the metanarrative. Since “pragmatics of popular narrative” provides immediate legitimation’, the majority who associate with the predominant metanarrative do not doubt it (Lyotard 20). The dominant Bengali culture legitimizes the metanarrative by itself and by retelling and listening to it, which determines the criteria and social bonds its practitioners ought to play. The Urdu speaking community is stereotyped as traitors because of the group of people who joined forces with West Pakistan. It seems very inhuman for the later generations to pay for the crimes of their ancestors. This chapter focuses on identifying the negative impact of the forgotten local narrative of the Urdu speaking community.

Rehana’s character is a homemaker who is solely dedicated to her domestic sphere. She is doubly oppressed as a non-native in Bangladesh, the then East Pakistan and as a widow in a patriarchal society. After her marriage, she comes to Dhaka, a completely different place with different sets of norms and rules. She learns the ways of the society in Dhaka and tries to fit in. She is first expected to be a submissive housewife and she is constantly told that she cannot be a proper mother after her husband’s death. The systematic conditioning makes Rehana doubt herself as a capable mother to raise her children without Iqbal. She blames herself for not standing up for her children in court; she states, “It was me; my fault” (*A Golden Age* 17). She believes Iqbal died because she did not follow the tradition of burning chilies and circling them over his head or slaughtering a goat to get rid of the evil eye. She blames herself for not following the norms and traditions of the society for which her husband died and she has to lose her children. However, it is the norm of society that silences her voice. Lyotard explains, “[t]he narratives allow the society in which they are told, on the one hand, to define its criteria of competence and, on the other, to evaluate according to those criteria what is to be performed or

can be performed within it” (20). He suggests that narratives enable society to determine the criteria of competence or model behavior for their members. It also evaluates what members can or cannot do as members of the society by legitimizing social institutions. Rehana’s brother in Law admires Rehana only once because she manages to remain cheerful even in hardships, “Being a widow –no fate worse for a woman – and yet here you are, two children, almost grown up (*A Golden Age* 188). The narratives surrounding Rehana try to shape her behaviour, thoughts, roles and actions; she is criticized if she fails to abide by the norms set by society. She feels responsible for her ill fate and helpless condition. Her brother-in-law, Faiz considers Rehana a spoiled wife since Iqbal used to take care of his wife more tenderly than what their family or the society is used to seeing. He is financially capable to help Rehana raise the children or take all of them to Lahore but he decides to alienate her and files a case for custody of Maya and Sohail. During the hearing, Faiz assassinates Rehana’s character to prove that she did not give proper religious teachings to her children. He further states that she is a bad influence since she has taken the children to see Cleopatra. The verdict is given in favor of Faiz. Now, Rehana is all alone and everyone advises her to remarry to regain the lost status. When she applies for a loan, her appeal is not approved by the bank because of lack of security. Not only this, one of the bank employees tries to take advantage of her. The condition of minority widows still remains the same. Anam projects it through Rehana who faces discrimination and is almost exploited by the bank officer. Finally, she steals from a blind man and lives with guilt for decades. Rehana experiences this insecurity and discrimination as a minority widow. The widows of the Urdu speaking community are doubly marginalized by the metanarrative.

The difference between language and culture along with the geopolitical conflict between West Pakistani and East Pakistani creates an identity crisis in Rehana. She is confused and



contradicted between her love for her mother tongue and culture and her new adopted home. Although many Urdu speaking people try to replace their mixed tongue with fluent Bengali, Rehana could not pretend like others to use a pure Bengali accent. She has to give up “the Muslim salutation, As-Salam Alaikum” and greet “neutral Adab, or even Nomoshkar, the Hindu greeting.” But “Rehana's tongue was too confused for these changes" (*A Golden Age* 57). As her mother tongue is Urdu, which is considered the language of enemies, it made her feel ambiguous about her adopted homeland, Bangladesh. She is not able to give up her love for Urdu poets and lyrics but the conflict Between Urdu and Bengali on a national level impacts her. The conflict between the languages also reflects the internal conflict of her displaced identity. According to Stuart Hall, “cultural identity is not a fixed essence at all ... It is not once- and- for -all. It is not a fixed origin to which we can make some final and absolute Return” (395). Cultural identity is always in the process of formation and it is not eternally fixed in some essential past or history. Rehana is a non- Bengali and speaks Urdu but her identity is not fixed. Rehana’s loyalty to her adopted homeland overpowers her association with Calcutta or her family in Karachi since identity is not certain but flexible. Rehana may not understand the nationalist approach, and her origin may raise questions about her patriotism but her loyalty always remains with Bangladesh. She is emotional about her adopted motherland which is now her home. Her actions and contributions to the war may seem like acts of love for her children but the way Rehana always gets offended and protective when someone criticizes Bengalis or Bangladeshi shows her true loyalty. In another instance, Rehana states, “‘I’m not sure I’m a nationalist,’ she said. She was thinking of the well-loved volumes of Urdu poetry on her shelf, right next to the Koran” (*A Golden Age* 151). The nationalist metanarrative does not accommodate Rehana’s plurality or contradictions; as a result, she believes she cannot be a proper patriot. Rehana’s identity crisis

continues until she starts supporting Bangladesh and stands against her motherland and her sisters. Her sisters never wrote to her after the war started and Rehana feels that they consider her a “gaddar” or traitor (*A Golden Age* 135). Rehana cannot relate to the Bengali nationalist narratives during the 1970s or 1971 since she has been a housewife with no association with politics or revolution. Mohammad Moniruzzaman Miah in his article discusses that Rehana’s ethnic identity does not stop her from subscribing to the Bengali nationalist movement and takes a firm stance against the collaborators of the West Pakistanis. He states, “she (Rehana) has renounced all her past affiliations and immersed into the newly founded state of Bangladesh and its social, cultural, lingual and political heritage” (81). The duality of her identity makes her question the new changes she has to adopt as an Urdu speaking non-native during the political uprising; nonetheless, she clearly stays loyal to Bangladesh. She truly feels Dhaka as her home rather than Karachi where her sisters live. She is not completely severed from nor connected with her sisters in Karachi as their countries are at war against each other. She belongs more to Bangladesh and not to her family in Pakistan. Throughout the war, she realizes her love for her newly adopted home Bangladesh which is now more important to her than her roots. In the Refugee camps of Calcutta, she claims she is pro Bangladeshi.

Anam reflects on the issue of sidelining the contribution of non-native Urdu speaking people to the liberation war from the dominant war metanarrative. The metanarrative is incomplete and suppressive since it is ignoring the contributions made by Urdu speaking civilians like Rehana because of her ethnicity and language. Rehana lets Sohail and his friends hide arms and ammunition at her house. She does not fear getting murdered or tortured or raped for supporting and sheltering freedom fighters. Although going to the market is risky she always stocks up food to serve the freedom fighters. She also takes care of an Army major who got

injured during a bomb blast mission. She starts the “Project Rooftop” to sew blankets out of her saris for the revolutionary soldiers on top of her roof (*A Golden Age* 97). Lyotard suggests that “[t] The popular stories themselves recount what could be called positive or negative apprenticeships (Bildungen): in other words, the success or failures greeting the hero’s undertakings” (20). The narrative that is popular among the majority decides what is a positive model or a negative model that is used to frame the new generation. The hero’s success or failure to be properly greeted or recounted in the narrative depends on which of the apprenticeships they are pledging to. Since the Urdu language and its speakers are associated with “negative apprenticeships,” they are identified as the enemy party, and the secular ways of Bengali people and their language are seen as “positive apprenticeships”. One cannot be a true nationalist or loyal Bangladeshi if he or she is associated with the “negative apprentices”. In the novel, Rehana reflects her belief in emerging independent Bangladesh as she makes pickles and blankets for the freedom fighters. She provides shelter and food to the Guerrillas. Shanjib Kr Biswas and Priyanka Tripathi in their paper, “Relocating Women's Role in War: Rereading Tahmima Anam’s *A Golden Age*” praises Rehana’s contributions:

She is an unusual war heroine who sacrifices a lot to form Bangladesh as a nation and Bengal as a national language against Urdu which is her mother tongue, the language of the enemy. She utilises her skill of Urdu to privilege the Bengali freedom fighters against the Urdu speaking West Pakistani armies. (7)

The authors discuss how Rehana is fearless and never thinks about getting tortured or raped. All the freedom fighters are now her sons and her only goal is to help them to win the war and have their own identity. For instance, she goes to rescue Sabeer from the custody of the Pakistani military at Sohail’s request but after seeing Sabeer’s condition she prays if she can take his pain

and heal him. Not only helping the freedom fighters she also volunteers at the Refugee camp alongside Maya. She assists Dr Rao in the refugee camp by taking notes on the new patient and writing down their medications and prescriptions. Soon she catches jaundice while caring for the patients. Rehana is not recognized for her contribution to war by the metanarrative rather than discriminated against her ethnicity.

The relationship between East and West Pakistan was rocky from the formation of Pakistan in 1947. After the 1952 Language movement, the relationship between the people of two wings became sour. The Bengalis addressed the Urdu speaking people and non-Bengalis as ‘Bihari’ in a derogatory manner. Maya and Sohail's experience at school reflects this conflict between the Bengali and Urdu speakers. When Maya and Sohail return from Lahore, Rehana decides that her children must learn proper Bengali, “[n]ot the fractured Bengali they picked up at the sweetshop and the playground but proper, school Bengali” (*A Golden Age* 54). Thus, she admits them to a Bengali medium school. On Maya’s first day at school, “[s]he was met with a vibrating silence as the girls shuffled and cocked their ears at her strained, accented Bengali. And then, chased by cries of ‘Bihari! Bihari!’” (*A Golden Age* 54-55). With the rise of political turbulence, the non-native Bengalis faced different difficulties. “The language games” between the participants determines Urdu as the language of the oppressor and the only appreciated and accepted mode of communication is Bengali. Although Maya and Sohail were bullied for their ancestry, they loved their motherland. The narrator says, “Sohail loved Bengal. He may have inherited his mother’s love of Urdu poetry, but it was nothing to the love he had for all things Bengali” (*A Golden Age* 34). Both Maya and Sohail believed in independent Bangladesh and contributed to the war. They took part in student protests from the very beginning. Later Sohail and his friends Aref, and Joy who are also half Pakistani became guerilla fighters conducting

crucial and dangerous missions to sabotage West Pakistani camps. They have taken several missions in Dhaka and other parts of the country as well and in one such mission, Aref became a martyr at only nineteen. Joy was captured by the Pakistani military losing his one hand in the torture in custody. Unfortunately, despite his contribution, he is not recognized as a freedom fighter. Such stories can help broaden the perception of Bihari identity and counter the popular negative image of the Biharis among the majority. Lyotard further adds to the effect of narrative on time, “By way of a simplifying fiction ... It finds the raw material for its social bond not only in the meaning of the narratives it recounts but also in the act of reciting them. The narratives' reference may seem to belong to the past, but in reality, it is always contemporaneous with the act of recitation” (22) The majority who believe and relate to the metanarrative do not need to remember everything that happened in the past. Lyotard believes the elements required for forming social bonds are already created by the retailing of the narratives. Although it may seem like it is a reference to the narrative from the past, in actuality, it reflects the contemporary ideals by reciting itself. In the context of Lyotard, the present metanarrative of the war of 1971 does not need to remember and retell all the elements of history. The social bonds are formed by the dominant narrative that mostly presents Biharis as traitors resulting in a strained relation among the majority and minority community. Arifur Rahaman et al. in their article, *Origin and Socio-cultural Formation of Bihari Identity: A Study on Bihari Community in Bangladesh* mentions the experience of Zilani Sardar who is the president of Bangladesh Bihari Rehabilitation Assembly is a Bihari but he supported Sheikh Mukibur Rahaman and stood against the British ruler of West Pakistan (qtd. in Rahaman et al. 892). Sadly heroes like Sardar or Khan are forgotten by the narrative as a result forgotten by the masses. The metanarrative has reluctantly ignored the Urdu

speaking non-Bengali heroes. It is a partial recount of the Bihari people and their actions during the Liberation war that has impacted the community.

Over the last five decades, the 'Bihari' identity is treated as a synonym of a traitor of Bangladesh or 'Razakar' or, War criminals by the dominant metanarrative of Bangladesh. During the liberation war, many of the people of the Urdu community joined the Peace committee, Al Badar, Al-Shams who committed various war crimes. However, the whole community was not an accomplice of such crimes. In the metanarrative of the war, the contribution of the non-Bengali Urdu speaking people is ignored. The Chapter "Tikka Khan, the Butcher of Bengal" reflects the changing dynamics among the people of different communities due to the fear and trauma, set in May 1971. Sohail warns Rehana to be careful around Butchers who speak Urdu, "Those are army collaborators" (128). The Urdu-speaking Biharis are rumoured to be siding with the army. Rehana finds it unsettling how the city is divided between "sympathizers" and "collaborators" as she can no longer "trust their instincts. Or even their friends" (129). The growing tension impacts both parties as all Biharis are seen as a culprit as they fear being harmed by the group of Biharis who joined forces with the enemy. Lyotard elaborates how popular notions used in the past over time become part of the narrative and shape the mindset of contemporary society. Emphasizing the importance of time, Lyotard elaborates that "splinters of narratives" that is popular sayings and words that are used continuously over a long period have the potential to become part of the narrative that carries the old structures or moulds that continues to be effective in contemporary society to a certain extent (22). The "splinters of narratives" manage to live because the participants are not allowed to forget. The continuous use of the word "Bihari" as a derogatory slur normalizes racism against the Urdu speaking community. At most wartime, the hatred for anyone who looks like a Bihari or speaks

in Urdu was rising among the general population. Sohail kills a man after the war because he thought he was Bihari but he was not. For years he has held himself guilty of killing an innocent man out of suspicion. In *The Good Muslim*, Joy, while explaining why he went to America, says, “I was so angry I went to the street with my gun, ready to kill anyone who looked like a Bihari or a Pakistani” (*The Good Muslim* 281). Not just Bihari, everyone who speaks Urdu are criticised and stereotyped as collaborators of Pakistan. They are oppressed by the narrative that presents them as enemies of Bangladesh and hating and discriminating against them is like an inevitable part of popular culture. During and post-liberation war the whole community is viewed as ‘the stranded Pakistani’, ‘enemy’ or ‘war criminals’ but the later generation has no association with those crimes. Still, they are suffering the deeds of their ancestors as the narratives continuously reimpose the popular labels of the past onto the ideology of the present society.

Moreover, a great number of Bengalis also were pro-Pakistani and considered the war sacrilegious and pointless. In *A Golden Age*, Silvi represents the Bengalis who do not support the war. Silvi blindly believes, “Pakistan should stay together,’ Silvi said, as though reciting from a textbook. ‘That’s why it was conceived. To keep the Ummah united. To separate the wings is a sin against your religion.’... ‘I’m not ignorant, Maya. Sometimes you have to make sacrifices” (*A Golden Age* 258). Silvi does not believe in Bangladesh and considers ethnic cleansing as a necessary action taken by the Pakistani government and military to restore peace and make the place safe again. Although she does not believe in Bangladesh she is never penalized for her pro-Pakistani beliefs. On the contrary, Urdu speaking people are all stereotyped as traitors. The metanarrative does not represent the heroic contribution of these people and retells their stories to future generations. Information or stories of the non-native Bengali freedom fighters, especially those who belong to the Urdu speaking community, is extremely difficult to find.

Sohail, Joy and Aref's all come from Pakistani and non-Bengali lineage who have settled in East Pakistan but they have fought for the liberation of Bangladesh. However, they are never addressed as non-Bengali freedom fighters. Despite the duality of their identity they endorsed themselves with Bangladeshi nationalism and contributed to the war. Maya and Rehana as well become volunteers at the Bangladeshi refugee camp at Salt lake. Similarly, Johir Khan is a real-life Urdu speaking Bihari freedom fighter who bravely fought in the 1971 liberation. He is physically impaired but it did not stop him from taking part in the Liberation war. (Roy). The people of his community who opposed the war declared him "Kawmik Gaddar", meaning "enemy of lineage".

The present day generation of Urdu speaking community is suffering from an identity crisis. The second-generation characters like Sohail, Maya, or, Joy never talked or practiced the culture of their ancestors. They associate themselves as Bangladeshis and do not have any connections with their ancestral language or culture or family members. The characters have completely disregarded their dual identity which is a common trait among the younger generations of Urdu speaking community. Anam also implies how the poor Biharis will be subject to fear and destitution through the character of the Bihari Butcher. They have nowhere else to go and are viewed as a threat by the majority. This ethnic minority are suppressed by the metanarrative which presents them as 'Mujairs' or religious refugees', 'the stranded Pakistani', 'the outsider', 'the war criminal'. In the journal, "Bangladesh: Urdu-Speaking "Biharis" Seek Recognition, Respect and Rights" it is stated that, "In their daily lives, Biharis face social alienation, including mockery, harassment and discrimination because of their ancestry. As a result, many Biharis try to hide their identity by speaking only Bangla in public, but their national identification cards list their camp address." ("Bangladesh: Urdu-Speaking "Biharis"



Seek Recognition” 4). Many are ashamed of the hatred they receive for their identity caused by the popular negative representation that frames the minds of the majority. Most of the people from the Urdu community have assimilated with the Bengali culture and language since they have been living in this country for the past 50 years. The dominant metanarrative does not represent their plurality which raises confusion among the later generation. They do not associate themselves with the ideological home of Pakistan. Especially those who were born in independent Bangladesh completely identify themselves as Bangladeshi by birth and by ideology. In the above-mentioned journal a woman respondent states, “Most Participants unequivocally identified as Bangladeshi. A Saidpur woman, 18, asked, “Why should we be called Bihari? We are not Bihari any longer. By birth, we are Bengali and Bangladeshi” (“Bangladesh: Urdu-Speaking “Biharis” Seek Recognition” 8). They speak Bangla more fluently than Urdu. They are Bangladeshis but they are not accepted in the community. The metanarrative does not allow them the scope to have any role in the Bengali community or scope to break the labels imposed on them. It has created conflicting social bonds with the people of the majority culture and is the subject of discrimination and racism. This creates an identity crisis among the people of the Bihari community in lack of acceptance they fail to solidify their identity. In “Origin and Socio-cultural Formation of Bihari Identity: A Study on Bihari Community in Bangladesh” quotes, “[t] The identity crisis of Biharis emerged because of them being Bangladeshi and Pakistanis simultaneously, along with confusing their identity between refugees or minorities. Therefore, this identity crisis resulted in the deprivation of fundamental rights, abject poverty, and social exclusion” (qtd. in Rahaman et al. 892). After years of struggle, a good number of people were able to have citizenship and voting rights but do not enjoy basic rights. Hardly 5% of them have formal education. Perpetual hate and marginalization of Urdu speaking

minorities is recounted by partial negative representation in the metanarrative. Despite being the citizens the metanarrative does not actualize them as worthy and respected members of the Bangladeshi society because of their ethnicity and language that partially represents them as ‘war criminals’ or ‘stranded Pakistanis’.

In *A Golden Age*, Anam critiques the totalitarian approach of a grand narrative that marginalizes minorities. The narrative created by Tahmima Anam comprehensively represents the localized voice with significant historical, social, and cultural significance that challenges the dominant war narrative of Bangladesh. During the liberation war, Rehana slowly realizes her love for her newfound country. She not only fights with the social norms but also fights against her internal conflict. Rehana leaves her ancestral home and identity and resettles in Dhaka. She learns Bengali and adapts to the new culture. Anam represents her character as an affectionate but tough heroic woman rather than a victim of war crimes. Yet she is prone to the politics of metanarrative that forgets the contribution of women in war. Rehana’s experience is extremely relatable to the people of the Urdu speaking community. They are subject to suspension and discrimination regularly. Several freedom fighters even after 50 years of liberation never got enlisted on the list. Non-native freedom fighters are rarely recognized and appreciated in the public domain especially if they belong to the Bihari community. Another problem with the popular narrative is that all Urdu speaking non-natives are limited to camp life. The UN Refugee Agency in a report mentions that Urdu speakers live in extreme poverty since the basic services are either unavailable in their camps or they do not have proper legal or administrative documentation like lack of a valid address or passport (“Note on the Nationality Status” 4). Although they are citizens of Bangladesh, they hardly avail their civil and human rights. They also face constant degradation and racism for their ancestral identity. However, a huge number of

the community associates with Bangladeshi identity. They seek recognition, respect and rights as the citizens of Bangladesh. 'Bihari' this title itself is often used as a derogatory word. The children of this community face bullying in schools outside the camp like Maya is called out as 'Bihari' on her first day of school. The metanarrative completely overshadows the good contribution the people of this community made during the war and only the negative examples are highlighted. Lyotard explains that the people in the 19th and 20th centuries experienced terror and loss and paid a high price for the totalising politics of narrative. He suggests that by challenging the totality, the narratives of the Urdu speaking people will come to light allowing a better environment to celebrate the differences rather than sticking to the nostalgia of the whole. Since the metanarrative function through retelling, the elements of culture to produce meaningful guidance to the members of any society. By representing the local experiences of the minorities it legitimizes their position in society. It gives them more meaning as an active and accepted member who has more roles than just a refugee or stranded Pakistanis. When they are accepted, it creates scope for a better social bond between the Bengali and Urdu speaking communities. In chapter three, Marxist theory is used to analyze how the hegemonic ideology of the ruling class reflected by the metanarrative marginalizes the poor class.

## Chapter Three

Marginalization of the Poor by the Metanarrative in Contemporary Bangladesh: *The Bones of Grace*

It didn't matter whether they were a part of Pakistan or not; the injustices towards the poor would continue unless they changed the way the economy was organized. (*A Golden Age* 50)

The above statement made by Sohail Haque in regard to the condition of the poverty-stricken people of Bangladesh when she was part of East Pakistan still applies even after fifty years of independence. The contemporary metanarrative preaches about urbanization, economic and social progress since it is controlled and legitimized by the capitalists. Although economic and social progress is impossible without the contribution of the people working at the root level, they live under the curse of starvation, insecurity, and illiteracy. Anam addresses the exploitation of the economically marginalized working-class people who can hardly improve their condition in *The Bones of Grace* (2016). The book is written in the epistolary form where the protagonist Zubaida not only narrates the painful truth behind her adoption to her lover Elijah but also brings to light the horrific nature of the capitalist society. The author also includes the narratives of laborers like Anwar who are mistreated and abused at the workplace and are unable to stand for their rights. Although the metanarrative of war proclaims that the citizens will enjoy their rights and freedom, the economically marginalized people are mostly deprived from them. The upper class retains the economic hegemony by legitimizing their norms and principles through the metanarrative. The financially underprivileged people are exploited in every way possible, preventing them from equal access to basic services, income opportunities and access to education. Anam represents the narratives of the marginalized people to protect their

fundamental rights and live an exploitation free life by criticizing the contemporary metanarrative of Bangladesh that only benefits the capitalist business class. This chapter analyzes the novel from a Marxist lens and criticizes the totalitarian metanarrative of the country that reinforces capitalist ideology marginalizing the poor class.

Although Zubaida received a good education in a liberal family, she is pressured to conform to the standards of the upper-class ideology. She studied Marine Palaeontology at Harvard University. She had a happy childhood but her adoption and her origin always raised an internal conflict which she mentions at the beginning of the novel, “I could love whomever I wanted, and marry or not marry them, or change my religion, or get divorced multiple times and have children with three different fathers if I wanted. I came from what you might call a traditional society, but I was not in thrall to that society. What I was in thrall to was the past” (*The Bones of Grace* 13). Her statement is ironic because she cannot break off her relationship with Rashid since she does not love him. As Rashid asks Zubaida about their marriage she recalls a memory of childhood when she had soiled her pants and Maya made her stand in the car the whole ride and she was afraid that her parents would send her wherever she came from. This incident indicates that she is getting married to satisfy her parents because she always fears that her adoptive parents might abandon her if she was disobedient. The same fear retained even in her married life. Zubaida frequently uses two words like “silent” and “obedient” to express her thoughts regarding her marriage, like most women, Zubaida has to change a lot after marriage to fit in the new family. According to Louis Althusser says that people of a capitalist society make one “feel like free agents (‘You can have any colour you like...’) while actually imposing things upon us (‘... as long as it’s black’)” (Barry 158). The people feel like they have freedom of choice but in reality they are bound. Zubaida thinks she has the power to choose but she is

powerless against the upper class ideology of her in-laws. Zubaida is expected to make choices that match her husband and their in-laws' choices. She feels like a puppet that follows everything that is instructed by her husband. Zubaida hates biriyani but Rashid likes it so, she has to pretend that she likes it as well. Although Zubaida does not want to change her last name, Dolly insists on her. Dolly persistently instructs Zubaida to wear flamboyant dresses and jewellery that flaunt their class even though Zubaida hates it. Zubaida's sister-in-law also looks down upon her for her looks. Although Zubaida tries to resist this domination she eventually loses power to express her opinion and is suppressed by her in-laws. Although Zubaida tries to learn about her past, Dolly has always discouraged her saying, "Treating you like you were my daughter. But you have disappointed me. And I can only assume it's your bad Background" (*The Bones of Grace* 369). Once again she taunts Zubaida in a tone that indicated that she should have been loyal and grateful because it was only for Dolly that she was able to live a luxurious life, a life Zubaida did not deserve or could ever dream of leading since her birth father was dead and her mother was so poor. Dolly makes it clear that the only reason she let Rashid marry Zubaida is that she did not want to break his heart. She hated Zubaida because of her background. Zubaida's decision to take a job at Chittagong at an NGO Shipsafe as a translator allows her to finally win back her voice and opinion against the oppressive upper-class ideology.

The contemporary metanarrative emphasizes on capitalist economic growth that conflict with the aspirations of the liberation war. The main focus of the metanarrative is shifting from building an equal and secured nation for the citizens to boosting economic growth. Zubaida's adoptive mother and father, Maya and Joy were never conscious of building wealth or maintaining a luxurious lifestyle. Maya was a doctor and Joy was a government employee and earned a decent amount. She also worked as an activist for the punishment of war criminals and

volunteered for different causes. However, Joy's friend Bulbul persuades Joy to start a textile factory; he even lends Joy the capital to open a textile factory titled, Freedom Fabrics. Initially, Zubaida's father's factory did not make a profit but "it rose to success when Western clothing importers realized my father's factory was one of the few that paid a decent wage and didn't employ children" (*The Bones of Grace* 87). Their financial condition changed drastically by the time Zubaida finished her college studies. Anam suggests that ethical businesses have more scope to earn profit and great brand value in the long run. Maya and Joy who have contributed to the liberation war always focused on working for social causes rather than building wealth. As a result, they felt conflicted by the two opposite ideologies, one that talks about equality, justice and human dignity and the other focuses on monetary growth only. Despite the profits they were making they never gave up on the spirit of liberation. Zubaida states that "Their one concession was the apartment in Gulshan, and they had only brought that on the urging of Rashid's parents, who had themselves made the move across town years ago" (*The Bones of Grace* 87). Both the families knew one day Rashid and Zubaida would get married. Rashid's parents who knew about Zubaida's background were worried about what people would say. So, they always tried to convince Zubaida's family about building wealth and flaunting their class in every way possible. Dolly and Bulbul influence their hegemonic idea of more wealth, more status and respect upon Joy and Maya. Anu Muhammad in a newspaper article states that the current capitalist growth only benefits the ruling class and the lower class people are sinking into poverty by denying their constitutional rights. He further adds that "This journey to go against constitutional commitments and the spirit of the Liberation War could not be possible only by state force, since it needs social support and ideological hegemony" ("From 'Socialism' to disaster Capitalism" ). Muhammad emphasizes on the hegemonic ideas focuses on profit-building and exploitation of

the poor class which is overshadowing the spirit of the liberation war. In the case of Joy and Maya, Anam emphasizes that the aspirations of liberation war did not yet diminish. Although Joy and Maya are rich they still work as activists for prosecuting war criminals. Business can be done the ethical way by letting the workers enjoy their rights in a safe work environment.

Although the metanarrative of Bangladesh proclaims a society free from exploitation, the powerful business owners set all the rules and often misuse the law that is aimed to protect the powerless workers. Anam portrays Harrison's (Rashid's uncle) Prosperity Shipbreaking' company to question the unethical cruel treatment of the laborers in Bangladesh. The company earns more profits with time without improving the conditions of the workers. The most cost-effective way to maximize profit is to have cheap labor because the aim of the capitalist principle is "optimizing the system's performance" (Lyotard XXIV). The needs of the workers are overlooked, only their ability to work is focused. The workers in the shipbreaking yard work without proper safety gear or machines with low wages, low quality food and dormitories. Often they are victims of accidents at the site or get ill from the fumes of the chemicals in the process of shipbreaking. Again Harison is addressed as the master by the workers which clarify his position at the powerful end of the hegemony and the workers as his loyal subject. Although they are exploited, they are prohibited to speak against it to anyone. That is why when British documentary maker Gabriela tries to uncover the reality of the shipbreaking company, the workers repeated the same stories to Gabriela about the wonderful environment at Prosperity Shipbreaking and the kind owners who always paid them on time. They would boast about their jobs being the best ones out there that enabled them to send their children to school and thank "God for bringing the blessing of the shipyard to their part of the country" (*The Bones of Grace* 160). Ali, the manager of the shipyard would always keep an eye on the workers and never let



them disclose the truth and tried to convince Gabriela that the workers were giving interviews from their hearts and they are genuinely happy to work there. With Zubaida's help, the workers were starting to break their silence. One of the workers, Bilal, strongly believes that even if they speak up about their struggle in the documentary it would make no difference in their lives. Bilal said that "It's a cruel industry. For years we've been working slowly, partially with the owners. Suddenly she comes and tells us how terrible things are" (*The Bones of Grace* 137). These workers have internalized the mistreatment as the reality. Lyotard states that the face of capitalism is changing but, "The ruling class is and will continue to be the class of decision-makers. Even now it is no longer composed of the traditional political class but of a composite layer of corporate leaders, high-level administrators, and the heads of the major professional, labor, political, and religious organizations" (14). The ruling class always controls the policies and norms that benefit them over the working class. Harison, the owner of the "Prosperity Shipbreakers" exerted a similar kind of power over the shipbreakers.

Anam furthermore points out the lack of job opportunities for the workers who are mostly illiterate with limited skills. The complex division of labor only allows the workers to be skilled in one criterion like the pullers in the novel can only do that specific job, so if they lose the job then it becomes difficult for them to find the same job somewhere else. The workers at the Prosperity Shipbreaking are often very young and are from poor families who must work in order to stay alive. They also migrate from northern villages to work as pullers due to the lack of jobs in their local areas since capitalist growth is only centered around the big cities like Dhaka or Chittagong. There is no guarantee for their job or life since they are seasonal workers with poor wages at the ship-breaking yard. Belal is a puller from the north who has lost almost all his family members except for two of his children in a famine named, Monga that spread

through his entire village so to feed the children he started to work for the shipbreaking yard. One of the workers, Russel says his elder brother came to the shipbreaking yard the previous year and after a few months there was no news from him and he had come to find his lost brother but had no success. Zubaida recalls the pullers' condition similar to the workers who built the pyramid with bare hands and simple tools. It is the right of the workers to have rest and recreation but they are made to work long hours without any breaks. Moreover, accidents occur frequently on the shipbreaking site. The workers are used to witnessing these accidents as Dulal, who is another worker, says, "Same shit here every day. [...] Ship comes, we take it apart. Sometimes a guy dies, or one of us gets cut, loses a leg" (*The Bones of Grace* 246). If workers fall in an accident, they are not taken to the hospital; instead they are left in a small concrete shed in complete darkness. Anam again sheds light on the constitutional right of the citizens to medical care which is also denied by the capitalist business owners. Zubaida witnessed, "I saw a man without legs, another who was wrapped all around his waist and his chest, his bandages glowing in the dim caramel light. The third man, lying on his stomach, a thin layer of gauze shielding his burnt skin, was Belal" (*The Bones of Grace* 359). Although Zubaida and Gabriela wanted to take them to the hospital and report it to the police, the workers refused because they were paid to stay quiet about it. According to Althusser, "A dominant system of ideology is accepted as a common-sense view of things by the dominated classes and thus the interests of the dominant class are secured" (Selden et al. 98). The ideology of the powerful class is interpellated by the workers as a natural thing that happens. The workers are not able to enjoy their constitutional rights as citizens or the facilities that the labor act gives them. Sadly, the workers are cramped in the dormitory but in the other ship breaking beaches, it is worse. The workers are

considered as things and they are valuable as long as they perform maximum with minimum investment from the company.

Bangladesh is one of the largest labor suppliers to the Middle East especially in the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia but they work in unfavorable and unsafe work environments. Anwar's character narrates the devastating condition of Bangladeshi labors at home and abroad. A great number of young boys are fascinated by the stories of a better life and the prospect of jobs in foreign life. Anwar was also convinced by his uncle who works in Dubai and tried to convince him saying, "Dubai, Dubai, son, it's like paradise, shopping malls and television and air con. Marry my daughter and the ticket is in your hand" (179). Anwar was convinced and left Megna and Married Shathi to go to Dubai. He worked there for nine years and it was his responsibility to instruct the new workers about their work and the risk. Anwar advised the new workers, "The whole story is this: you look down, you die ... You are done for, a chapati" (*The Bones of Grace* 177). Anwar has witnessed his coworker die many times and it has become a normal thing. Arthur Rose elaborates, "Anam's novel implicitly acknowledges this pragmatic fatalism by portraying Anwar as far more concerned with the risk of falling (when working on the skyscrapers of Dubai) or being crushed (in the shipbreaking yard at Chittagong) than with any eventual disease he might contract from his work" (153). Any time the workers can get into an accident and fall leading to inevitable death. When the workers die in an accident the authorities do not inform the victims' families. Different human rights organizations have reported on the violations of labor and human rights of migrant workers in the Middle East countries. The laborers work for excessively long working hours with subpar working and living conditions and their salaries are also delayed. In Dubai when Anwar asked for money he was hit by his boss, "He kicks me. I feel his shoe in my stomach. I double up, he kicks me again. My

face explodes. A tooth comes loose. I taste blood. ‘Who pulled you out of the shithole you call a country?’” (185). Anwar is abused in every way possible. The food they received was just rice, dal and little vegetables which were deducted from their pay. The workers can hardly save anything to return home. The employers also abuse the workers physically, sexually or psychologically without getting scrutinized by law.

Poverty often drives young village women to the big cities in search of work and when they fail to secure a job many of them end up in sex work. In a lot of cases, women are trapped and forced to become sex workers. They suffer from violence from the brothel owners or clients and can hardly save any money for themselves. Anam portrays the sufferings of the sex workers through Zubayeda’s twin sister Megna. The novel contains very few dialogues from Megna and most of her story is narrated by other characters like Anwar, Megna’s uncle, or her co-workers from the brothel. This is a very effective way to show society’s negligence towards poor sex workers who are never presented in the metanarrative. Being a daughter of a cleaner, she lived in poverty her whole life. She had no formal education and at a young age, she had an affair with a local boy Anwar and got pregnant. Although Anwar knows that Meghna is carrying his child still he says, “You’re a slut” (179). She begs him to stay but he marries Shathi to go to Dubai. After her mother’s death, she had to leave her village and sought help from her uncle but received no assistance. Megna’s uncle states, “‘We weren’t going to have her, not with another mouth coming ... ‘Carrying around someone’s bastard’” (*The Bones of Grace* 201). She never receives any assistance during her pregnancy or after giving birth to her daughter. Society despises women who get pregnant before marriage. Jean Franco states, “The opposite term to the mother is the virgin - that is, the nun who is pure and uncontaminated and whose space is the convent. The negation of the mother and the virgin is the whore, whose body is open to all men” (Franco

364). A mother who bears a child through marriage is pure like the virgin or nun who belongs to a holy place like a convent but on the other side of the binary is the woman who is considered whore and her place is the brothel. Since Megna got pregnant before marriage, she is considered an impure woman. She is called names and blamed for not protecting her virginity. Even her uncle did not want any association with her and gave her bus fare to go to Chittagong in search of a job. She was ready to work hard and do any kind of job but unfortunately, ended up at a famous brothel in Chittagong. Even when living in poverty she was always kind to the other girls who worked with her. One of the girls at the brothel told Anwar that Megna was a good friend and always shared rice with her. Megna always blamed her fate and accepted her situation. The other girls were able to save some money for themselves and send some to their homes but Megna never used to have money because she owed a big debt to the madam of the brothel. She further added that “The debt meant that Megna had to do whatever. The perverts. Old men. Policemen who got freebies so they left madam alone” (*The Bones of Grace* 242). The corrupt police also turn a blind eye to their case and the madam of the brothel exploits her in every way possible. To raise her daughter Shona, Megna took money from the madam and to repay the debt she worked for her for free. Later she caught ‘the sickness’ and died. It is unclear what kind of illness she had but she did not receive any treatment for her sickness. She did not even receive burial and her body was dumped in the sea. Society only saw Megna as a poor sex worker whose existence made no difference but despite all the miseries she had gone through, she was always a responsible mother. She raised her daughter without any money or help from her family.

In Bangladesh, while the metanarrative considers children as the future and the educated elite class celebrate Children’s day, ironically though, the rate of child trafficking and underage prostitution is increasing alarmingly. The children are sold as labors or as sex workers despite the

existing laws in the constitution. When Megna died Shona was just ten years old and all by herself in the brothel. Anwar went to the brothel often in search of Megna and observed the girls and said, “Last time I can’t remember them being so young” (241). The new girls are much younger than the others. AKM Ahsan Ullah comments that “Being repressed under growing economic crises, women and minor girls are forced to engage in prostitution for survival. More and more children are joining this profession. While most of them initiate this profession under the repression of economic hardship they are exposed to several vulnerabilities” (13). Ullah also adds that many of the children are forced into prostitution or sold to brothels by their own families. Shona is also sold into prostitutes to a man who lived at Prosperity beach. She is often beaten by the man and the abuse left a cut mark on her face. According to the Penal Code, 1890, section 372, if any children under the age of 18 are forced to work as labourers or sex workers or for any other immoral act and the offenders will face up to ten years of imprisonment (Bangladesh, legislative and Parliamentary Affairs Division, Act no. XLV of 1860). The madam of the brothel never got reported or punished for selling children for prostitution. On the beach, she became friends with a boy named Mo who was the same age as her. Mo explains Shona’s condition to Zubaida and seeks her help. To save Shona, he planned to hide in a giant piano case that was going to be shipped outside. Unfortunately, the piano falls and both Shona and Mo get injured and Mo dies in the hospital. However, Shona is reunited with Aunt Zubaida and her father, Anwar and she returns home with him. Shona was lucky because she was welcomed into her family, but unfortunately, not all children are lucky like Shona and hence, live life in trauma and misery.

Anam also focuses on the fact that the police, who should be protecting the rights of the citizens, keep a blind eye towards the financially underprivileged citizens. They take no part in

protecting them or investigating the wealthy and powerful business owners. The poor victims most of the time do not report them to the authorities or the police. Although the labor laws exist in the constitution it is not implemented by the concerned administration. Be it the brothel or the shipbreaking yards the police cooperate with the madams of the brothels or the wealthy business owners. In the brothel underage children like Shona are sold into prostitution but the local police made no effort in saving them. The authors of the UNICEF report of 2015, state that “At local level, no mechanisms exist to provide regular capacity building to communities/professionals on child protection, combined with the overall governance challenges of local-level planning and decentralisation” (Analysis of the Situation of Children and Women in Bangladesh 154). There is a lack of infrastructure and properly trained professionals for protecting children and women from any kind of abuse. When the workers got injured in the shipbreaking, Mo took Zubaida and Gabriela to meet them and refused to file a police report because Ali had already bribed the police. Shumon, who was helping Anwar to find Megna and Shona, warns Anwar that, “Word’s gotten out about my sister. Everyone knows the cops won’t help. They’ll put those RAB guys on you and next thing you know, you’re the one in jail” (206). Unfortunately, Shumon was one of the scammers and when Anwar discovers it and sees all the accomplices, the hotel owner, the rickshaw boys, the kid making the samosas he was captured by them. Anwar recognized a policeman from the hotel, the policeman said, ““You had to see all of us. You think we wanted that?’ I get it now. I dirtied their clean job, they would’ve disappeared, no one would have believed me, but now I knew where they lived” (218). In Anwar’s case when he was scammed by Shumom a police officer was involved and held him, hostage, illegally in the jail and tortured him brutally and demanded ransom from Shathi. Since there is hardly any monitoring or accountability of the police department due to the lack of resources and corruption mentioned in

the UNICEF report and in Anam's novel justice is denied for the marginalized people. The victims are demotivated to report to the police because they fear getting further abused by the police or the criminals who are mostly more powerful than the victims. Despite the efforts from NGOs and the government, the local administering institutions need good training to act upon any kind of crime and protect the victims and help the local institutes to rehabilitate them.

The metanarrative only reinforces the ideology of the ruling class over the poor class and marginalizes them. Although the poor class is marginalized, the whole nation is reliant on them. The farmers, garment workers, workers in the Middle East or the Shipbreakers all are the foundation of the Bangladeshi economy. Yet they are the neglected and alienated group of the society who suffer from the financial crisis, starvation, illiteracy, insecurity and disrespect in the society. There are very few income opportunities outside the big cities to earn money so, the young boys either migrate to foreign countries like Anwar or Pahari or migrate within the country like the shipbreakers from the North who work seasonally in Chittagong. They have to work long hours without proper food at a minimum wage. They face discrimination, physical and psychological torture by their superiors or employers. The workers often get into an accident due to proper safety measures and training but do not receive proper medical care. Karl Marx's *Das Kapital* concerns, "the way, when capitalist goals and questions of profit and loss are paramount, workers are bereft of their full humanity and are thought of as 'hands' or 'the labour force, so that, for instance, the effects of industrial enclosures are calculated in purely economic terms. People in a word, become things" (Barry 151). The workers at Prosperity Shipbreaking and in Dubai are treated like hands or things. The workers have no other way but to silently accept their condition. The ideological repression makes the poor class helpless against the challenges of survival. Lyotard believes that "the idea (or ideology) of perfect control over a



system, which is supposed to improve its performance, is inconsistent concerning the law of contradiction: it lowers the performance level it claims to raise” (56). He explains that the bureaucrats try to control the system to increase productivity or performance but it only dresses it. In the context of the scenario of the working class people, Anam depicts the company that tries to control the workers to improve their performance. All the money that the Prosperity shipbreaking spent to hide accidents and bribe the authorities to get away with their unethical and inhuman treatment of laborers could have been used to develop the working condition which could have increased the productivity of the workers. When the workers are treated well they are more motivated to work and it improves the image of the company to bring in more clients. Such an example is Joy’s textile factory which treats its workers well and is a child labour free organization and financially successful. However, Anwar wants to change his situation by finding Megna and his child but is scammed by a local gang and the police are involved in it. Anam states, “Anwar’s movement to other places and return are very painful, but also gives him a sense of the world. He is no longer going to be the passive recipient of his fate. If he wants to change his life he has some small power in the world. Of course, he gets crushed in the process. Because he is poor and that is what happens to poor people” (Kidd). Since Anwar is poor there is very little that he can do to change his fortune. The economic hegemony deprives the poor class of enjoying their basic rights and improving their lives. The metanarrative legitimizes the capitalist ideology that the workers are only valued by their productivity and silent obedience. The marginalized poverty-stricken people continue living under miserable conditions without any hope of a better life.

## Conclusion

Anam questions the suppression of women, minorities and poor class people in her *Bengal Trilogy* by the metanarrative of Bangladesh. A detailed analysis of Anam's *A Golden Age*, *The Good Muslim* and *The Bones of Grace* is done by using the theoretical framework given by Jean-Francois Lyotard. The first chapter discusses the experiences and struggles of women, which are systematically silenced by the patriarchal ideology reflected in the metanarrative in the post-war setting portrayed in *The Good Muslim*. The women who have contributed to war and nation-building are never recognized as male contributors. The 'War Heroines' or *Birangonas* are blamed for being raped. Their stories of suffering and society's hypocrisy are omitted from the metanarrative, but Anam shows the importance of their testimony for prosecuting war criminals. The curse of superstition and extreme religious beliefs has also subjugated women to their domestic sphere. Maya reclaims the public space by publishing articles about the sufferings of women and minorities. The marginalization of the Urdu speaking minority by the dominant metanarrative is analysed in the second chapter. Anam represents the localized voice of the Urdu speaking community who live in miserable conditions because of the age-old conflict between Pakistan and Bangladesh in *The Golden Age*. Although they are rightful citizens, they hardly enjoy any facilities that other Bangladeshis receive. They are confined in various camps and are subjected to discrimination and hatred. A great number of people of the Urdu speaking community have contributed and fought for the liberation of Bangladesh; they are all generalized as traitors, razakars or enemies. The new generation of the Urdu speaking community is still paying for the crimes of the selective group of the community who betrayed Bangladesh back in 1970. Finally, chapter three discusses the exploitation of poor people in contemporary Bangladesh. In *The Bones of Grace*, Anam focuses on showing the disparity

between the poor and upper class in Bangladesh. Although the whole nation depends on the farmers, garment workers, laborers, shipbreakers, they are only valued for their production. The poor class suffers from starvation, illiteracy and insecurity. Their choices and every aspect of life are controlled by their employers or powerful business owners. They are stripped of their humanity and are forced to work long hours with backdated manual tools without safety gadgets. The metanarrative projects the upper-class ideology that makes the working class believe that they have no other options and it is normal to be abused by employers. There are very few work opportunities in villages, so the poor people flock to cities and fall victim to different kinds of traps and frauds.

In conclusion, this research tries to shed light on the fact that the lack of proper representation of the diversity of Bangladesh in the metanarrative is making the powerful majority intolerant of the other identities and beliefs. Anam represent different perspectives and narratives of the suppressed groups and questions the patriarchal, superstitious and extremism ingrained in the society. The heroic contribution of the women to the war and nation-building can inspire the new generation of women to speak against the dominant ideology. Similarly, the Urdu speaking people who are rightful citizens can coexist with their dual identity respectfully alongside the dominant Bengalis. The working class people can finally live exploitation free with possibility of upward mobility. The totalitarian metanarrative loses its credibility since it deprives people of their right to freedom of speech and choice. As a result, the contemporary metanarrative fails to recreate a meaningful guideline for the future generations. Anam truly believes that voices and local narratives must be allowed to be told to overcome the totalitarian metanarrative of Bangladesh to achieve a better future.

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