



## Women's Voices and the Role of Education in Tahmima Anam's *The Good Muslim*

Swati Suresh Kolekar, Research Scholar. Sangamner Nagarpalika Arts, D. J. Malpani Commerce, B. N. Sarda Science College (Autonomous), Sangamner, Ahilyanagar, Maharashtra, India. Affiliated to Savitibai Phule Pune University, Pune.

Page no. 77-85

**Abstract:** *The aim of the present study is to examine how the novel portrays female agency in post-liberation Bangladesh and how education operates as a medium for empowerment and resistance against man-made structure in Tahmima Anam's novel The Good Muslim. Objectives of the study include exploring how the story shows women shaping their own identities, understanding the impact of sociopolitical changes on women's roles, and evaluating how education influences the way women think and act in society. The present study uses a qualitative approach. By closely examining the text, show how women's character development, dialogue, and patterns of gender roles and education affect them. The study reveals that the protagonist Maya's journey offers a different view from the usual male-centric histories. Education emerges as a central theme that empowers Maya and other women to question religious beliefs and cultural limits. The narrative emphasises how educated women deal with complex intersections of religion, politics, and gender while the nation is rebuilding its identity. In conclusion, the novel shows women's education not merely as a personal success of liberation but as a collective force capable of challenging systemic inequalities. Thus, the novel becomes a critical commentary on the silencing of women and the subversive potential of education in post-war nationhood.*

**Keywords:** *education, women's voice, feminism, freedom, etc*

### Introduction

In contemporary South Asian literature, the themes of partition, gender, and displacement have become a powerful lens through which the experiences of women are narrated and critiqued. Tahmima Anam's *The Good Muslim* portrays the picture of post-liberation Bangladesh, highlighting the struggles of women to assert their voices in a society governed by patriarchy, tradition, and shifting political ideologies. The novel follows the journey of Maya Haque, an educated and politically aware woman who advocates for women's empowerment and transformation, and tries to find her place in a male-dominated society. The term women's voice refers to the expression of women's thoughts, experiences, identities, and emotions, which are often ignored or silenced in traditional societies. In this novel, Maya's voice challenges dominant cultural norms and becomes a medium for social critique, especially concerning women's position, religious extremism and political corruption. Anam portrays women not as passive recipients of history but as active agents whose lives reflect the tensions between public duties and private convictions. Maya challenges conventional roles given to



women and refuses to conform, highlighting the potential for reimagining womanhood in postcolonial societies. Education plays a transformative force in the novel, not only enabling Maya's self-awareness but also equipping her to engage critically with the world around her. It serves as a tool for empowerment and resistance, shaping both personal identity and public engagement. Thus, education in *The Good Muslim* is not just formal learning but learning to think freely, stand up for what is right, and fight for justice. This paper explores women's voices and highlights the empowering role of education in redefining gender roles in a turbulent sociopolitical landscape.

## Review of literature

The study by Ahmed (2019), a paper titled "Questioning Global Muslim Diaspora: Tahmima Anam's *The Good Muslim*", highlights the debates that followed the 9/11 attacks, especially how Islam became linked with terrorism, leading to the dichotomy of "good muslims" and "bad muslims". The paper provides an analysis of how Muslims were viewed and stereotyped after Islam post-terrorism incidents. The article talks about the global Muslim diaspora, emphasising on their experiences, difficulties, and identity of the global Muslims community, specially those living outside their origin countries. The author throws light on the struggles and mental consequences they face in different parts of the world, influenced by various social, political, and cultural settings. The study also shows how war and public opinion affect people's mental and emotional well-being, using the novel *The Good Muslim* as a central reference.

Majid and Jalaluddin (2018) examine the struggles and clashes arising from the intersection of religious and secular ideas in Anam's *The Good Muslim*. The study adds to ongoing discussions on the complex relationship between the secular and religious in the years following the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War. The authors not only show the crises between secular and religious but go deeper into the broader societal, political and cultural dynamics with reference to the characters, setting, plot development, and themes of the novel. The character of Sohail's radical transformation and Maya's response resulted in an estranged relationship and a family tragedy. Their growing distance and the tragedy in their family show how strong beliefs can tear apart personal relationships. Overall, research articles point out the broader social implications of challenging and destabilising binary classifications, particularly those calling someone a 'good' or 'bad' Muslim.

Avishek Bhattacharya's (2017) *Of Erasure and Resistance: Negotiating History and Identity in Tahmima Anam's The Good Muslim* offers a detailed exploration of how the national identity of Bangladesh after its independence is shaped through the two key forces: the loss of historical truth and individual resistance. Through characters like Maya and Sohail, Bhattacharya shows conflicting narratives of secular nationalism versus religious orthodoxy not only divide families but also cause deep tension within the country itself. The paper draws on theories of memory, identity, gender, and nationalism to highlight the marginalisation of



war heroines and children born of rape, revealing how their silences symbolise broader societal repression. In the end, the paper argues that Anam's narrative proposes healing through acts of remembrance and recognition of these hidden parts of the past. By doing so, the story suggests that recovering repressed histories is key to constructing a more inclusive way of building the nation's identity.

The existing research studies focus on the themes of identity, secularism, religion, partition and diaspora, etc. However, none of this work has addressed how education affected and how it helped women to raise their voices after post-war Bangladesh. Identifying this gap, the present study investigates the transformative influence of education in the immediate aftermath of the conflict and explores how it enabled Bangladeshi women to speak out and shape their roles in society, politics, and their personal lives. The study seeks to answer the following questions:

- 1) In what ways does a woman's voice serve as a form of resistance and empowerment during times of socio-political turmoil?
- 2) How does Maya's educational background influence her sense of self and her role in post-liberation Bangladesh?
- 3) In what ways does education empower women to challenge patriarchal norms in Anam's *A Good Muslim*?
- 4) How does education serve as a tool for shaping and reshaping female identity after Bangladesh's independence?

The aim of the study is to critically analyse how women's voices and the theme of education intersect to shape female identity, agency, and resistance in Tahmima Anam's *The Good Muslim* within the socio-political and cultural context of the post-liberation war of Bangladesh. The objectives of the present study;

- 1) To explore how women raise their voices against the patriarchal oppressive culture.
- 2) To examine the role of education in the empowerment or shaping of female identities.
- 3) To investigate how the novel reflects the conflict between tradition, modernity, and women's rights in a post-war Bangladeshi society.
- 4) To contribute to feminist literary discourse by evaluating how Anam's work critiques gender norms and educational inequality.

## Methodology

This study uses qualitative methods to examine women's voices and the portrayal of education in *The Good Muslim*. Using close textual analysis, which is integrated to contextualise gender and education within Bangladesh's sociopolitical backdrop. This approach helps uncover deeper meanings embedded in the text regarding gender and learning.

## Tahmima Anam (b. 1975)

Tahmima Anam is a well-known author in English from Bangladesh. She was born on October 8, 1975, in Dhaka, but spent her childhood in places like Paris and New York. Anam



started her literary career with her debut novel, *A Golden Age* (2007). This book won the Commonwealth Writers' Prize in 2008. Anam is recognised for her *Bengal Trilogy*, which includes *A Golden Age* (2007), *The Good Muslim* (2011), and *The Bones of Grace* (2016). These works depict the story of Bangladesh's past, its people, culture and their struggles, focusing on how different generations deal with change and hardship. Being a Bangladeshi woman, Anam knows the country's traditions, culture, beliefs, and everyday life. Her literature often explores themes like family life, politics, women's issues, national identity, and how patriarchy affects society. She portrays strong female characters who challenge unfair customs and stand up against injustice. Through her female characters, Anam highlights women's aggression, which is often unheard of, and questions the rules that limit women's freedom.

### ***The Good Muslim* (2008)**

*The Good Muslim* continues the story from *A Golden Age*, which was about the 1971 war for Bangladesh's independence. *The Good Muslim* shifted to the aftermath of the war. It is set in Dhaka during the late 1970s and early 1980s, a period when the country was trying to rebuild a newly independent nation. The story continues with Haque's family, Rehana, and her children, Maya and Sohail, as they deal with the changing social and political landscape in post-war Bangladesh. It explores the war's deep wounds and the complexities of a newly independent society. Rehana, a widowed mother, is a powerful character who goes beyond traditional boundaries. She emerges as a modern and bold woman who fights to keep her family safe after the death of her husband, Iqbal. Similarly, her daughter, Maya, becomes more involved in the liberation movement. She fights for equality, standing up for the people of Bangladesh. Maya's character shows the strength of women who speak up and take action, even in difficult times. The novel provides themes such as finding one's quest for identity, love for the nation, women's empowerment, dealing with pain and loss, and the crisis between old traditions and modernity. It also explores how religion affects people's beliefs and the rebuilding of the country after the war. Through her female characters, Anam shows how women faced many complexities but stayed strong, fought for change, and contributed to the Bangladesh liberation war.

### **Women's Voices and the Role of Education**

In this novel, Anam turns the spotlight from the mother, Rehana Haque, to her children, Maya and Sohail, who were once active participants in the liberation war of Bangladesh in 1971. The central female character, Maya, plays an important part in the formation of the nation. She is educated, bold, and thinks freely. Maya is a doctor by profession, showing that she is both intellectually and professionally independent. Her role as a doctor also highlights the challenges faced by women in post-war Bangladesh. Maya's personal and professional life reflects the deeper struggles with ideas, gender expectations, and cultural clashes that shaped Bangladesh after independence.



Maya's journey clearly illustrates the transformative role of education, particularly in empowering women to act as agents of change. Maya goes through a very painful time when she works in a refugee camp, helping young women who were raped by Pakistani soldiers. She gives up her childhood dream of becoming a surgeon and decides to become a gynaecologist instead. She changed her career plans to take care of victimised women during the war. Her early ambition to become a surgeon shows that she has access to education and aspires to break traditional gender roles. The scientifically minded Maya chooses to be a "lady doctor" (Anam 11). She wants to help victimised women and challenge patriarchal superstitions that surround pregnancy and childhood (cited in Shama 13). For her, being a gynaecologist is not just a job; it is her way of resisting the societal norms that women are expected to follow. By choosing a path where she takes care of and supports other women, especially those who have suffered, she represents her feminist approach, advocating for women's health and rights. Her career is not just about work; it's about making a real difference in women's lives and stepping beyond traditional roles expected of women.

As a doctor, Maya works mainly for women in rural areas, as she helps to deliver war babies safely. She also spread awareness about health and hygiene among villagers. "Maya taught everyone in the village how to make oral rehydration fluid: a handful of molasses, a pinch of salt, a jug of boiled water. And they passed that season without a single dead child. By the following year, when she succeeded in petitioning the district to build them a tube well, she believed she had won their hearts" (Anam 12). This line represents Maya's dedication to improving women's health in rural areas and shows her belief in empowering women. Her actions extend beyond medical treatment; she also works to improve women's literacy and independence, helping them take charge of their own health and lives. Maya raises her voice against the unhygienic things. It showed that education is not confined to classrooms; it is most impactful when it directly addresses people's needs. In this sense, education becomes a form of resistance against structures that keep women dependent and voiceless.

In the village of Rajshahi, Bangladesh, Maya started a small clinic. She works hard to help women give birth safely and create awareness about family planning and hygiene practices. Her efforts not only bring down the death rates of children but also the health of the whole village improves. One day, Maya's friend and patient, Nazia, said she wants to dip her legs in the village pond to prove her innocence and that she is not guilty. Her husband, Masud, and many villagers blame her for giving birth to a cursed child. They think the baby is cursed. Masud blames Nazia and punishes her for the child's distinctive appearance. Maya tries to make them understand that the baby looks different because of a disease and not because Nazia did anything wrong. She explains the scientific reason for the baby's appearance and the nature of the disease. Maya stands up strongly in front of a crowd of men and villagers to defend a child with Down's syndrome saying, "It's not a curse, it's Down's syndrome. The child will be different, he'll have problems, but he'll survive, I can show you how to care for him" (ibid



23). Her words show her progressive and scientific understanding of health issues. By finding the diagnosis correctly instead of labelling it a curse, Maya goes against the superstitions and fears that many people in the village still believe in. This moment shows her desire to help women by giving them knowledge and support.

Maya also offers to help the family take care of the child, which reveals her kindness and concern for people who are often marginalised or judged unfairly. Maya believes in using facts and scientific knowledge, which makes her stand out as someone with a clear, modern vision. Through Maya, the author Anam shows the struggle between old beliefs and modernity and how one person can make a difference by choosing understanding over fear. Maya's actions are strong and meaningful because she raises her voice in a space where men usually make the decisions. She does not remain quiet or say what others expect just to avoid trouble. Instead, she speaks out about what is right and wrong and tries to change people's thinking. This shows that women also have the power to lead and make a difference, even in a world where they are often ignored.

During the war, many women were brutally raped and went through deep psychological trauma. They have sacrificed their pride and dignity for the sake of their country. Women gradually lose their confidence, self-worth, and clear thinking because of the terrible things done to them by the Pakistani army, both physically and mentally. Anam shows women's struggle quietly inside themselves, trying to hold on to their basic rights and longing to be accepted. Maya tells their stories and memories, showing how each woman was affected in her own way. "Maya was tasked with telling these women that their lives would soon return to normal, that they would go home and their families would embrace them as heroes of the war" (ibid 69). Maya's kind words are meant to comfort and respect women who have gone through pain. By assuring that they would be seen as heroes, she tried to change how society often views women in such situations as stigmatised. Instead, Maya's words aimed to admire their strength and bravery. She wanted people to understand that these women were not just victims but made great sacrifices. Her actions reflect a strong belief in women's bravery and hope for a better future where women are respected and valued for all they have endured. It also shows a feminist approach that women have the power to make their own choices and deserve to be included and respected in the story of the nation's struggle and healing after the war.

In a society where men usually have more power, it is difficult for girls to live their own way. The birth of a baby girl often shows the ongoing struggle against social prejudices that treat women as less important. When Rokeya feels exhausted from trying to give birth, Maya softly tells her, "You know what? It's a girl. This is your little girl" (ibid 237). These words give Rokeya emotional energy, strength and hope. With that, the delivery became successful. Maya's voice becomes a tool of empowerment, renewing Rokeya's strength. Her whisper is more than just comfort; it stands against the rules of a male-centred world. Rokeya understands the values of her daughter and believes in her potential. Her quiet celebration of



the birth of a girl becomes an act of defiance against unfair traditions. It shows her belief in the strength and importance of women, even in a society that often ignores it. This moment also shows the strong bond between women. It highlights how they support each other, keep going in tough times, and continue to hope for a better future. Maya's words and actions represent that she believes in a world where girls can live independently and happily, showing the feminist idea of gender equality and empowerment. Thus, characters like Rokeya and Maya show the fight for gender justice between men and women by learning, helping each other, and believing in equal rights. Their actions step toward a conservative society that recognises and celebrates the worth of every girl born into it.

Thus, Maya's journey represents the theme of women's voices and how education can change lives. As both a doctor and activist, Maya fights against the conservative structure and asserts her freedom through learning and helping others. Her rejection to conform to traditional roles highlights how education equips women to speak out against unfair treatment. Maya's voice becomes a symbol of resistance, advocating for social reform and gender equity. Despite societal pressures, she remains firm in her convictions. Maya's journey proves that educated women can lead change in society. Her character reaffirms that education is not just knowledge; it's about gaining freedom and speaking against injustice.

## Conclusion

In *The Good Muslim* by Tahmima Anam, the female protagonist, Maya shows how a woman's voice emerges as a powerful form of resistance and empowerment in the socio-political turmoil of post-liberation Bangladesh. As a doctor, activist, and deeply principled individual, Maya refuses to conform to rigid societal expectations. Instead of staying quiet, she speaks out against the injustices she witnesses in society. Her strong commitment to honesty, justice, and women's rights becomes a way for her to push back against both unequal treatment to women and the conservative culture that tries to keep women quiet. Maya stands against the patriarchal norms that expect women to be secondary and weak by asserting their independence, both intellectually and socially. She becomes a doctor and works in villages to help women, which not only defies gendered expectations but also empowers others. Maya refuses to follow the usual path of getting married or being a mother. Through her bold choices and strong beliefs, Maya's character represents the powerful symbol of raising women's voices within a patriarchal society.

Maya's educational background plays a big role in shaping her identity and ideological stance in post-liberation Bangladesh. As a medically trained, secular, and politically aware woman, her learning teaches her to think rationally and a commitment to progressive values, gender equality, justice, particularly women's rights and fairness in society. Education gives her the strength to challenge patriarchal and religious norms, especially those that harm women. It thus not only defines her role as a reformist but also isolates her, reflecting the broader



tensions between secular nationalism and religious revivalism in the newly built nation, Bangladesh.

Education is shown as an influential tool that enables Maya to stand up against unfair rules made by men in post-liberation Bangladesh. As a doctor, Maya thinks logically and questions superstition and oppressive traditional beliefs. Her critical thinking helps her to identify how patriarchal structures harm women and prevent social progress. Education provides her with emotional and economic independence; she earns her own money and feels strong on her own. She doesn't depend on male family members for support, which allows her to make her own choices, such as moving away from home, working in rural areas, and standing by her beliefs. Maya's awareness of politics and justice, gained through her education, pushes her to become an activist for women's fundamental rights and equal treatment. She supports freedom fighters, writes in newspapers, magazines and talks about sexual violence during the war, and tries to make society aware. Through Maya, Anam shows that education is more than just gaining knowledge. It gives them the strength to speak out, take action, and hope for a more equal society.

Education emerges as a potent instrument for shaping and reshaping female identity. Her education empowers her with a secular, feminist consciousness that challenges traditional gender norms and societal expectations in post-independence Bangladesh. Through her medical profession and political activism, Maya reclaims a voice for women in a patriarchal society, asserting autonomy in personal and public spheres, where women expect to follow social laws. It gives her the courage to challenge old rules and create a new space for herself and other women. Education, in this context, isn't just about holding a degree; it is transformative, enabling women like Maya to question, redefine, and reconstruct their roles in a rapidly changing socio-political landscape.

Thus, in *The Good Muslim* by Tahmima Anam, shows education plays a vital role in empowering women to speak up and stand against traditional gender norms. Maya's character proves that learning is not just for personal growth but also a resistance against a male-dominated society, where women are treated as secondary and unfairly. Her knowledge and strength allow her to go beyond social expectations and advocate for other women, especially in villages where such help is rare. Thus, it clearly represents that educated women can bring change by using their voice and strength to question unfair traditions and inspire progress within their communities.

## Worked Cited

- 1) Ahmed, S. Aziz. "Questioning Global Muslim Diaspora: Tahmima Anam's *The Good Muslim*." *Global Research Forum on Diaspora and Transnationalism (GRFDT) Research Monograph* 49, vol. 5, no. 1, January 2019, pp. 4-17.
- 2) Anam, Tahmima. *A Golden Age*. Dhaka: Sahitya Prakash, 2008.



- 
- 3) Bhattacharya, Avishek. "Of Erasure and Resistance: Negotiating History and Identity in Tahmima Anam's *The Good Muslim*". *The Creative Launcher*, vol. II, no. III., 2017, pp. 186-194.
  - 4) Majid, Abdul Amrah and Dinnur Qayyimah Ahmad Jalaluddin. "The Conflicts between the Secular and the Religious in Tahmima Anam's *The Good Muslim*." *GEMA Online Journal of Language Studies*, vol. 18, no. 4, November 2018, pp. 26-41.
  - 5) Shama, Bee. "Patriarchy and female identity in the select novels of Tehmina Durrani and Tahmima Anam". PhD dissertation, *Shodhganga*, Aligarh Muslim University, 2023.