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**“...DEMONS CAME TO HAUNT ME AFTER OUR WAR”¹: READING TRAUMA IN
TAHMIMA ANAM’S *THE GOOD MUSLIM***

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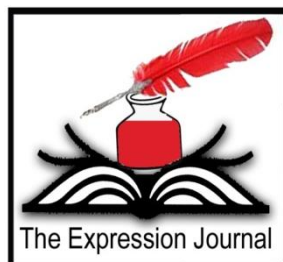
Abstract

Tahmima Anam, the Bangladeshi-British author, can be placed alongside the women novelists like Virginia Woolf, Pat Barker, and Rebecca West who were interested in portraying the domestic repercussions of the war. Anam’s *The Good Muslim* (2011) deals with the impact of the 1971 Bangladesh liberation war on a young freedom fighter, Sohail Haque. This paper aspires to trace the world of Sohail which is hurt by the devastating experiences of war. This “machine-gun sound that echoed in his chest” (Anam) appeared repeatedly in the form of “hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” which can be called, following Cathy Caruth, trauma (*Unclaimed Experience*). Furthermore, the paper will also try to analyze Sohail’s disinclination to explain the war experiences with his sister with whom he shared camaraderie before the war as well as his transformation from a university student to a very conservative Muslim, and, in the process, will try investigate whether these tendencies are connected with the Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Key-Words

Tahmima Anam, The Bangladesh liberation war, *The Good Muslim*, trauma, PTSD.

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But she recognizes the wound in his history, the irreparable wound, because she has one too. His wound is her wound. Knowing this, she finds she can no longer wish him different (Anam 293).

Tahmima Anam’s 2011 novel “The Good Muslim”—a tale of two siblings in the aftermath of the 1971 Bangladesh war of independence—comes to an end with the above mentioned lines which suggest that Maya, one of the major characters in the novel, has learnt, ultimately, to come to term with the transformation that her brother, Sohail, another important character, has undergone. But, the reason, I have began my paper with the above mentioned lines, is its close association with the notion of trauma which will be the primary focus of this paper. It is interesting to note that the word ‘wound’ which has been used by the narrator four times in the above mentioned small passage is the etymological meaning of the Greek term “trauma”. In an article “Trends in Literary Trauma Theory”, Michelle Balaev said “A defining feature of trauma novel is the transformation of the self ignited by an external, often terrifying experience, which illuminates the process of coming to terms with the dynamics of memory that inform the new perceptions of the self and world.” *The Good Muslim* describes the desperate attempt of a sister, Maya, to fathom the transformation of her brother, Sohail, from a university student to a Tablighi Jamaat as a result of his participation in the Liberation War as freedom fighter (‘mukti joddha’) and his subsequent experience of the traumatic events there. This paper will be an attempt to analyze this transformation caused by traumatic memories by taking into account the theories of trauma as put forwarded by the theorists like Freud and Cathy Caruth.

The Good Muslim is the second book in Anam's trilogy the *Bengal Trilogy*. The first book, *A Golden Age* (2007), the winner of the Commonwealth Writer's Prize for Best First Book, narrates the story of the widow Rehana Haque in the backdrop of the Bangladesh war of independence 1971. *The Good Muslim* (2011), the second book in the trilogy, continues the story of Rehana Haque's children, Sohail Haque and Maya Haque, in the aftermath of the Liberation War. The last novel in the trilogy is the recently published *The Bones of Grace* (2016) which is set in the post-independent Bangladesh. Trauma literature is essentially a literature of the survivors. Anam's doctoral thesis, an oral history project on the Bangladesh war, involved travelling around the country gathering little vignettes about people's lives, who their friends were and what cigarettes they smoked". Anam interviewed many of the survivors of the Liberation War, including her parents, who were unable to forget the memories of the war. This served as the basis of creating the character of a freedom fighter like Sohail Haque who is haunted by the traumatic memories of the war.

Before going into the elaborate discussion of Sohail's transformation, let me describe in brief the notion of trauma. As has already been pointed out, the etymological meaning of the word 'trauma' which is of Greek origin is wound. But, in psychology, it does not refer to any physical wound. Rather, it refers to the wound of the mind – "a breach in the mind's experience of time, self, and the world" (Caruth). In his book *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), Sigmund Freud talked about a kind of dreams that present "a more serious exception to the rule that dreams are wish-fulfilments. These were so called "traumatic" dreams. They occur in patients suffering from accidents, but they also occur during psycho-analyses of neurotics and bring back to them forgotten traumas of childhood" (Norton). Freud also argued that trauma is connected to "repetition compulsion" i.e. the victims of trauma have a compulsion to repeat the traumatic experiences. Cathy Caruth, in her book *Unclaimed Experience* (1996), defined the trauma as "an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive occurrence of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena" (15). According to her, the soldier who witnesses the brutality of war in the battle field in a numbed state and relives it "later on in repeated nightmares, is a central and recurring image of trauma in our century" (15). But, there are few people who develop post-traumatic stress disorder as a result of repeated exposure to traumatic events. Professor Neil Greenberg outlined the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder in an article "PTSD Explained, Ten Years After 7/7". This includes the emergence of the nightmares about the traumatic event, an attempt to avoid the memory of the event, negative changes in the behavior of the victim, and "a propensity to be irritable, jumpy on the edge".

The narrative of *The Good Muslim* has been presented largely through the perspective of Maya, a doctor. Maya has come home at the death of his brother's wife, Silvi, after seven years of her self-imposed exile. During all these years, she had been to rural

Bengal performing abortion for the women who became pregnant as a result of rape by enemy soldiers during the war. But this was not the reason behind Maya's self-imposed exile. Failing to cope up with the sudden transformation of her brother, Sohail, she left her home. Before the outbreak of war, her brother, Sohail, was Maya's best friend. They shared their dreams and secrets with each other. The Sohail, Maya used to know in the pre-war days, was a great lover of literature whose favourite authors were Ibsen, Rilke, Lawrence, Fitzgerald, and Hawthorne among many others. He was particularly fascinated by the outcast heroines like Lily Bart, Hester Prynne, and Moll Flanders. But his participation in the Liberation War of Bangladesh as a freedom fighter transformed him beyond recognition. "The change in Sohail began as soon as he returns from the war", says the narrator (Anam 66). But his friends were unable to comprehend this transformation. He became a man of few and exact words. He also became fastidious and started to have bath twice a day, and sometimes, even thrice a day. He refused to join the celebration of freedom. Gradually he began to shun western clothes in favour of kurta pyjamas and also began to grow beard. He began to read the Quran on the rooftop of their house in the heat of April days. He became a follower of Tablighi Jamaat. Sohail even burns all his books in favour of only book – the holy Quran – which was given to him by his mother. Maya was utterly unable to come to term with Sohail's transformation. She held Silvi, Sohail's wife, to be responsible for this transformation. Not only Maya but also Sohail's friends thought that it was Silvi who gave the Book to Sohail. But, it was Reahana, Sohail's mother, who, unable to bear the sudden changes in her son, led him toward religion. But Rehana now ruefully remembers the day she gave the Quran to Sohail.

Freud referred to trauma as the wound of the mind, and distinguished it from the physical wound which is healable. Caruth, following Freud, described it as the "breach in the mind's experience of time, self, and the world". Caruth's description of a soldier in the battlefield, surrounded by the dead bodies and brutalities of war, only to relive it in nightmares and memories, as the central image of trauma, can well be compared to the experiences of Sohail as a freedom fighter who witnessed numerous deaths in the battlefield. Sohail's experience in the guerilla camp with inadequate sustenance was very disturbing. In addition to this, the death of many near and dear ones in front of his eyes was highly unpleasant to a student of his age. But, the death of his close friend Aref came as the most shocking one which changed his outlook on life. But, destiny had something more for him in store. On his way to home, Sohail's discovery of Piya, in an abandoned enemy barracks, brutally raped by the enemy soldiers for a long period of time, shattered his world view completely. All these created a breach in his "mind's experience of time, self, and the world". It was in this state of mind that Sohail mistook an old man to be a disguised enemy and killed him. The description of the murder is significant since it points to the traumatic nature of Sohail's memories:

In the glint of that knife he saw the eyes of the girl in the barracks, her head round and with a dusting of hair, and he was gripped by all the things he had seen and could imagine, things that necessitated his hand across the man's throat... (284)

In my analysis, Sohail develops post-traumatic stress disorder as result of his repeated exposure to traumatic events. One of the symptoms of PTSD, according to Greenberg, is that the victim tries to avoid the event by refusing to talk about that. Maya thought Sohail will reveal his experiences of the battlefield as soon as he arrives home. "Those first weeks Maya waited every evening for him to tell her about the war, hoping he would begin his story as soon as Ammoo had said good night and taken the lamp away, telling them both not to stay up too late." (66). But that was not the case. Sohail was afraid to talk about his experiences. He thought Maya was regarding him hungrily for each small detail of his experience. But he had no stories of heroism to tell his sister. If he had to narrate the experiences of war, he had to tell Maya that he had committed murder. He wanted her to be quiet so that Maya "can hear the roar in his head, thinking that if she could hear that roar, the roar of uncertainty and the roar of death, she might understand." (124)

As has already been mentioned, the primary focus of this paper will be to analyze the transformation of Sohail's character. My argument is that Sohail's transformation is caused by post-traumatic stress disorder. Neil Greenberg, in an article "Dealing with PTSD", stated, "At the core of PTSD is the concept of meaning." Greenberg goes on to say, "People who develop the illness have great difficulty in reconciling the traumatic nature of their experiences with their understanding of how the world should work." Sohail was unable to come to term with the fact that he had murdered an innocent old man considering him to be an enemy. His hands began to shake which he could not control. He also refused to talk about this to his mother considering himself to be too old to discuss about such matters. He was not a religious person before the outbreak of war. Rather, he had been, as Maya remembers, the opposite of a religious man. "He had laughed and joked about it, and he had been angry at a religion that could be so easily turned to cruelty. He had seen it with his own eyes, the boys butchered because they were Hindu, the university teachers shot and piled into graves because they weren't considered Islamic enough." (158) It is for all these reasons that when Sohail embraced Islam, Maya was not convinced. She thought she could still persuade her brother to change his mind. "...Maya believed Sohail's conversion was fragile, like the dew that settled between the grasses at the start of the day, gone by the time the afternoon sun vanished into dusk." (158) But Maya failed to notice that Sohail's conversion was not an easy process. She held Silvi responsible for Sohail's newly found religion. Because, it was Silvi who, after her husband's death, started covering her dead and also began to use burkha for outside activities:

Whatever else had led Sohail to delivering sermons on his rooftop – Piya, the war, the disappointing ordinariness of freedom – Maya had always believed it was Silvi, his older and first love, who had finally brought about the end of his old self. (174)

Michelle Balaev argued that trauma refers to “a person’s emotional response to an overwhelming event that disrupts previous ideas of an individual’s sense of self and standards by which one evaluates society.” The defining feature of “trauma novel”, as has already been noted, “is the transformation of the self ignited by an external, often terrifying experience.” Maya did not notice that Sohail’s conversion to Islam was a long and gradual process. It was Rehana, their mother, who first gave the Quran to Sohail in the hope that this Holy Book would give him respite from “the visions that have him pacing the hallway at night, the ones that leave his pillows wet and his mouth frozen stiffly...” (92). But Sohail did not begin to read the Book as soon as he got it. Rather, he rejected it, because he and other revolutionaries have considered the Book part of the problem before Bangladesh. They thought that it was the Book which separated people from each other, since people were more attached to the Book than to each other. That’s why Sohail let the Book gather dust for days. Then, Rehana decided to read the Book aloud for Sohail. She requested him not to listen to it but just to sit beside her. Rehana began to read the Book aloud during the breakfast so that he could listen to it. Gradually, he began to memorize the words which led to the understanding of these words. Finally, he learned to read the Book which led to his revelation and his conversion. He started to grow beard, began to wear cap on his head, and also started visiting the mosque. It was the Book which told him that he was good, and that it was in his nature to be good. The Book was a miracle to Sohail. The message of it is so simple and so strong that it turns the people brother and guardian of each other. The Book is also important to Sohail for personal reasons, since it provides answers to the questions that the traumatic experiences have given birth to.

The Book spoke to his every sorrow, to every bruise of his life. It spoke to the knife passing across the throat of an innocent man; it spoke to the day his father died, hand on his arrested heart; and it spoke to the machine-gun sound that echoed in his chest, night after night, and to the hollow where Piya had been. (166-67)

The victims of PTSD is haunted by recurrent distressing thoughts or nightmares related to the traumatic event. Sohail’s case is also the same who is haunted by the traumatic memories of the death of his friend Aref, the brutally raped and shaved off face of Piya, and the act of committing the murder of the old man. His newly found identity as a “good” Muslim helped him to battle these traumatic memories. When Maya asked him the reason of his prayer, Sohail, like a true Muslim, answered that he was just praying, not for anything else. To this Maya accused Sohail of religious mumbo-jumbo, to which Sohail responded by saying that prayer is the “abandonment of all other thoughts, all other pursuits.” (127) This is directly associated with his endeavour to stay away from the traumatic memories of the event. Although Sohail tells Maya that these have nothing to do with his war experiences or Piya, Maya is too close to the problem when she, described the problem as shell shock. Indeed, during the First World War, the traumas of the war had been described as shell shock.

It is only at the end of the novel that Maya, ultimately, comes to term with Sohail's transformation. But this comes with the heavy cost of her trauma. However, her trauma does not ensue from war. Her trauma is more of a personal kind – the outcome of a personal tragedy. Michelle Balaev argued that the external event that creates trauma is “not necessarily bound to a collective human or natural disaster such as war or tsunamis.” The event may well be of an intimately personal nature. Maya's trauma is caused by a profound sense of loss created by the death of her nephew, Zaid. When Sohail first decided to send Zaid to a madrasa for his education, Maya criticized Sohail and undertook the task of Zaid's teaching. But when Rehana was diagnosed with cancer and her treatment began, Maya did not have the time to look after him. As a result, Zaid began to roam aimlessly and began to steal. When Zaid's stealing nature came to the notice of Sohail, he sent Zaid to a madrasa. But, Maya, finding out the plight that Zaid was in, decided to bring him back to the house. In the meantime, Maya's political writing in the newspaper drew the ire of political parties. In the midst of all these, Maya went to the madrasa in order to release Zaid. Although, she was successful to release Zaid from the unhappy condition of the madrasa, she could not bring him back to the home and lost him forever. She held herself responsible for the loss of Zaid. At the end of the novel, the traumas of both the siblings, although different in nature, have been described vividly by the novelist:

She will return to that day. She will summon it at every crest and hinge of her life. What if. If only. Sohail had killed a man. He had taken his life and slaughtered him like an animal. Every day he hears the sound of that moment, feels the weight of the knife in his hand, the tear of flesh, the wetness of blood on his fingers. And she will do the same. She will see herself taking the ferry, banging her hands on the door of the madrasa, lifting the boy out of his cell and closing her arms around him and closing her eyes and she will tell herself not to sleep but sleep will come, and every time she opens her eyes it will be too late. What if. If only. (289)

To sum up, I have focused mainly on Sohail's metamorphosis which, I have argued, is the outcome of post-traumatic stress disorder that Sohail developed as a result of his repeated exposure to traumatic events. Maya hit the nail on the head when she said that Sohail is suffering from what is called shell shock (127). Caruth wrote, “Post-traumatic stress disorder is the name given by the American Psychiatric Association to what had previously been called shellshock, combat neurosis, or traumatic neurosis, among other names used at various times in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.” (105) But, it is only at the end of the novel that Maya comes to term with Sohail's transformation because now she herself is suffering from a trauma. It is the knowledge of this that made her realize that she can no longer wish Sohail different.

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Note:

[1] The title has been borrowed from the text. It suggests the traumatic nature of the memories which came to haunt the protagonist Sohail repeatedly after his experience in the battle field.

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Author's Bio-Note

Tushar Kanti Karmakar is pursuing his M. Phil. at The University of Burdwan. He has completed his masters in English literature with a first class from the University of Gour Banga. He has cracked both the NET and West Bengal SET in 2014. He has been awarded the Junior Research Fellowship by the UGC in the same year.

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