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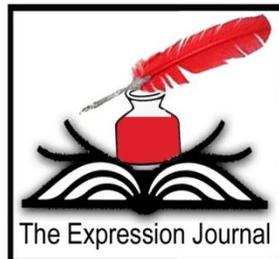
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## **SUBALTERN CAN(NOT) SPEAK: WOMEN'S ENDEAVOUR, SURVIVAL AND ACCOMPLISHMENT IN TAHMIMA ANAM'S WORKS**

**Tazrin Hossain**

**M.A. Student, East West University,  
Dhaka, Bangladesh**

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### **Abstract**

This research explores the complexities of women's life throwing light on Tahmima Anam's trilogy entitled, *A Golden Age* (2007), *The Good Muslim* (2011), and *The Bones of Grace* (2016). Anam's works underline the struggle of the protagonists as well as the other minor women characters who have been suppressed by patriarchy. Simultaneously, these novels critique the expectations of the society, culture, religion upon women and depict the rising of women as their own selves from nothing to everything. Focusing on the ideas of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" and Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, this study manifests that women cannot and can speak at the same time and also questions that does anyone heed? Specifically, it highlights the representation of women as "other" or "subaltern" by the society. However, the paper scrutinizes that women can protest against the injustice not only in verbal manner but also can accomplish triumph by their endurance apparently.

### **Key-Words**

Patriarchy, Suppression, Subaltern, Expectations, Scrutinize, Injustice, Triumph.

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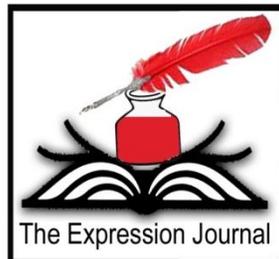
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Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text as into the world and into history by her own movement. Cixous "The Laugh of the Medusa" 875

Helene Cixous emphasizes the importance of history through the voice of the women indicating their suffering as well as achievements that are avoided by the male writers in their prose. Cixous urges the importance of women's writing from the women's perspective which is visible in Tahmima Anam's trilogy elaborately. Though Anam has been criticized for not depicting history accurately, she chooses the path of narrating the history from an individual point of view and indeed from the woman's perspective. Consequently, Anam's works can be called as "meta historical" account of the untold history of women before, during and after the Liberation War of Bangladesh. Thus, Anam has sketched women in our society and culture although, by the novels of her, it can be said that women who are treated as "subalterns" also have their own voice and they can speak by their deeds and accomplishments. Anam portrays powerful women characters through the protagonists as Rehana Haque, Maya Haque and Zubaida Haque in *A Golden Age* (2007), *The Good Muslim* (2011) and *The Bones of Grace* (2016). Along with the protagonists, there are several women characters portrayed by Anam who point not only the frailties but also the strength

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of being women. Borrowing ideas from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1998) and Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949), this study reveals women have voices which are unheard by the patriarchal society and women can achieve victory by protesting verbally and by their heroic deeds too.

Anam's debut novel, *A Golden Age*, portrays the struggle of a widowed mother, Rehana Haq, who sacrifices a lot to gain the custody of her children. Though it is the story of Bangladesh's War of Independence, it simultaneously it depicts the survival of an individual family during the war and after the war. Rehana, Maya, the gin rummy ladies, Sharmeen, Mrs. Sengupta and many other women including the Birangonas contributed in the war through their sacrifice for establishing peace for the country and for the humanity at the same time. *The Good Muslim* manifests the sufferings and losses of the nation during and after the war especially in the case of women. The novel delineates the moral choices of the characters during the traumatic situations of their mental state. In addition, naming the female war victims as Birangonas does not work to give them respect rather it creates more horrible conditions in their lives in a conservative war affected society. *The Bones of Grace* is far more different than the first two volumes of the trilogy but also inter connected at the same time. Here, Anam has drawn the crisis of Zubaida, the third generation of Rehana, finding her innerself and searching her true love and her real root simultaneously. It also depicts the condition of woman in the cage of society and family even the woman is educated and free spirited.

Anam's trilogy conveys the struggle, survival and accomplishments of women's life through the voices of the protagonists and other women characters that show the foremost arguments of Spivak and Beauvoir. Spivak states: "The subaltern cannot speak. There is no virtue in global laundry lists with 'woman' as a pious item. Representation has not withered away. The female intellectual as intellectual has a circumscribed task which she must not disown with a flourish" ("Can the Subaltern Speak?"104). Spivak delineates the negligence of women voices in this globalized world and this is also visible in Anam's *A Golden Age* through Rehana Haque's life. Rehana is a widowed mother of two children named, Sohail and Maya. After the sudden death of her husband, Iqbal Haque, her world is only for her children. But when her brother-in-law, Faiz Haque, wants the custody of her children in the court blaming Rehana is not a good mother as she has taken her children to watch a movie named, Cleopatra which goes against religious morals, Rehana could neither stop him nor the judge to keep her children with her. The patriarchal court goes with Faiz's point: "The judge said Rehana had not properly coped with the death of her husband. She was too young to take care of the children on her own. She had not taught them the proper lessons about Jannat and afterlife" (AGA 5). Judging a woman on a silly issue is not a rare phenomenon in society and when a woman is widow and has no strong financial support, it becomes worse. Rehana cannot speak or raise her point to keep her children and remains

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silent because nobody is going to heed her. In her clarification to her husband in front of his grave Rehana says: "I have given up the only thing you left me. When the judge asked me if I knew for certain whether I would be able to care for them, I could not bring myself to say yes. I was mute, and in my silence he saw my hesitation" (AnamAGA7). So Rehana was actually not happy for her silence in the court but still she knows she is unable and cannot speak.

A similar situation happens in Zubaida Haque's life when she comes to Bangladesh and marries her childhood friend, Rashid, though she loves Elijah Strong, who lives in USA. Here, Zubaida is much more self sufficient than Rehana who is her grandmother. Moreover, Zubaida belongs to a wealthy Bangladeshi family and in spite of being a modern independent woman and a Harvard graduate still she cannot speak or go against her family in choosing the life partner. The society, in disguise of her family, actually compels her to do so and she cannot speak. In her incapability of saying no in the marriage she writes to Elijah: "I would have been able to move through this moment with greater confidence, the confidence to break the old threads and strengthen new ones, but now, in the shadow of this spectacular failure, I became, again, an obedient orphan" (TBOG 79). As an adopted child Zubaida remains loyal to her family by agreeing to the foster parents' decision to marry Rashid. And once again it is proved that the subaltern cannot speak because no one hears her. Here, Zubaida is more independent, lives on her own choices, and have a strong love for Elijah but still she cannot speak out her mind but prefers to please her foster parents.

Independence is more struggling and problematic for women. Hence, the maze of women's life is created by patriarchy. When a woman gets puzzled in the man madelabyrinth, she is judged and cursed by the same patriarchy. The struggles of women are always neglected by the society in many ways. But still women are rising by their deeds and achievingvictory which are mostly silenced by the same society. Anam has brought out the facts of women's struggle in her trilogy. Rehana, Maya, Zubaida have their own struggles that provides the strengths of being a woman and also the frailties of being a woman at the same time. "For when she begins her adult life she does not have behind her the same past as does a boy; she is not viewed by society as the same way; the universe presents itself to her in a different perspective"(Beauvoir *The Second Sex* 691). The situation of a woman's life is far more different than a man's according to Beauvoir. In her masterpiece, *The Second Sex*, she opines that women's realm of life is more critical and more discordant than men that is also shown by Anam in her works. "She should have burnt some chillies and circled them over his heads. Or slaughtered a goat, at the very least. But she hadn't done either, and so he had died"(AGA 6). This is the proof of woman's reality that even so called superstitions are made to blame her. Here, Rehana is blamed for the death of her husband though she was not responsible for this at all. Additionally, this

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monolithic stigma creates more complications in Rehana's life. As a widow of two children, she has no place to go. Being born and brought up as a North Indian and having no one in India as her parents were dead and three of her sisters settled in Karachi, Pakistan, Rehana chooses to stay with her children in Dhaka, the place where she started her nuptial life with Iqbal. Her decision was not liked by Faiz and Parveen as they wanted to take the children with them and the real struggle of her life starts from here. Same but a bit different incident happened with Mrs Chowdhury too and in the novel she utters: "My bastard husband left me when I couldn't give him a son"(AGA 9). Anam has portrayed the stereotypical society where women are blamed for not delivering male children though they are not accountable for this. Apparently, she has brought out the same fact in *The Good Muslim* through the sufferings of Nazia, a friend of Maya in the village of Rajhshahi, who was beaten by hundred and one lashes for giving birth a Down syndrome child. Even in *The Bones of Grace* the in-laws of Fatema, Zubaida's biological mother, teased and taunted her for the death of her husband and made her life miserable too.

Anam presents Rehana as a social pariah in her struggle while making the house "Shona". This house symbolizes the triumph of Rehana but she has to sacrifice a lot while building it. Anam brings the ugly truth of patriarchy by showing the struggle of Rehana. According to Beauvoir, society's expectation of women is very high though she is paid low wages than men. Beauvoir ascribes: "If she is content to get along on her wages, she is only a pariah: ill lodged, ill dressed, she will be denied all amusement and even love" (*The Second Sex* 690). Like Anam, Beauvoir shares the same notion that women are considered as pariah in the society. As a widow, Rehana could not arrange bank loans for making the house as she has no guarantor. She sold out her husband's favorite Vauxhall for making the house though that is not enough to build the house. On the other hand, she has faced sexual harassment by one of the bank worker who said he can give her a loan. "Then a round face man with an oily forehead said yes and took her to his office at the back of a building, where he slipped his hand under her elbow like a question mark, to which she almost said yes, until he came close and she smelled his curry breath and saw the cigarette tracks on his teeth" (AGA 36). Rehana escapes herself from the filthy grasp of that man and runs away. This is the ugly picture of so called men who think women are nothing but play thing in their hands and they can take advantage of any woman at any situation for feeding their lust.

Maya's struggle both in *A Golden Age* and *The Good Muslim* is beyond description. As a stubborn child and owner of her free will, Maya breaks the stereotypical notions of society and joins the Liberation War of Bangladesh in the form of a student protester and a volunteer. Like her, many women contributed in the war to help the wounded persons and to establish humanity. According to Beauvoir: "Once she ceases to be a parasite, the system based on her dependence crumbles; between her and the universe there is no longer any

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need for a masculine mediator” (*The Second Sex* 689). Beauvoir praises the empowerment of women by throwing out the mold and renders that women do not need a “masculine mediator”. Maya’s best friend, Sharmeen, goes against patriarchy too. An activist since the very first of her university life, in the time of war and also before the war, she participated in several protests and did many heroic deeds but still she was seen as a weird woman by many of the women. The gin rummy ladies even do not like her. Though Rehana has a motherly feeling for her as she was driven away from her home but even Rehana did not like her. Sharmeen is indeed a hero portrayed by Anam but she had been raped, tortured and killed brutally in the beginning of the war. Sharmeen’s death reinforced Maya’s contribution in war more drastically. Maya also worked as a volunteer in the refugee camps in Calcutta during the war which was not easy for a woman to serve the wounded in war affected situation.

Women are forcefully kept inside to do household chores and even the least freedom enjoyed by her is not tolerated by the male in society. Rehana, Maya, Zubaida and other women in the trilogy have endured the same predicament. When women go against and start work for the development then she is forbidden by social and religious taboos. In *A Golden Age*, Rehana was blamed as a bad mother as she took her children to watch “Cleopatra” movie. Even Maya was addressed as a bad Muslim not only by others but also by her own brother, Sohail, as she stays at the village to give treatment to the war affected women and supports abortion in *The Good Muslim*. On the other hand, in *The Bones of Grace*, Zubaida’s real mother Fatema was also taunted by her in-laws as an omen for them and her twin sister faces the cruelest reality by going Dubai for earning bread and butter for the family. Thus, all of them have tried to go against the norms and experienced terrible by the patriarchy.

Anam critiques the process of “essentialism” by going with the same notion of Spivak’s “strategic essentialism”. Bringing the example of Birangonas, she utters the pain of these women who are named by the country Birangona. Actually, the women who are raped and tortured brutally by the Pakistani Army on the time of war, was named as Birangona after liberation. According to Spivak: “The ambiguity of the position of the indigenous colonial elite is disclosed in the nationalistic romanticization of the purity, strength, and love of these self-sacrificing women” (“Can the Subaltern Speak?” 97). It is clear that the West Pakistan Army worked as a “colonial elite” in *A Golden Age* and showed their power raping all types of women and once again proved that women are the ultimate sufferers during war. Nevertheless, Anam has thrown light on the treatment of society and nation towards women as “essentialist subject” (“Can the Subaltern Speak?” 103). The fact that Anam draws by showing the suffering of those women in *A Golden Age* and *The Good Muslim* is that naming does not give them respect rather the aspect among the minds of the masses should be changed towards them. In *The Good Muslim* Maya was judged not only by

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the society and religious extremists but also by her jealous brother for helping the war affected women in abortion and giving treatment in a village in Rajhshahi. In *The Good Muslim*, through the character of May, Anam depicts the negligence of society towards the war affected women. Simultaneously, Anam tries to prove that by helping and giving them the healing outlook can make their life better rather than only naming and cursing them.

The power of women's love is vaster than anything in this world. Though they are cursed, criticized, yelled by the patriarchy but still they are capable of loving not only others but also their own selves. The love of Rehana for her children gives her a voice in *A Golden Age* and only for this, Rehana recreates her own establishment by building the house "Shona" and achieves victory by getting her children back. Beauvoir underlines the power of women's love as: "On the day when it will be possible for woman to love not in her weakness but in her strength, not escape herself but to find herself, not to abase herself – on that day love will become for her, as for man, a source of life and not mortal danger" (TSS 679). To Spivak, the real strength of a woman lies in her own self. Whenever she starts to love herself no one can stop her. Simultaneously, the love for children can make a woman rise even she is unable to speak up. Anam has revealed the strong aspects of women through the several heroic deeds of her women characters in the trilogy. Even women can sacrifice their sexual desire to spend the whole life with her children that is demonstrated by Anam in the case of Rehana.

The journey of women's life is not easy and they are controlled by both patriarchy and imperialism. Between the process of "subject-construction" and "object-formation" ("Can the subaltern Speak?" 102), women disappear into nothingness. In spite of that women can rise and achieve victory by proving themselves from nothing to everything. Referring to Maya Angelou's verse from "Still I Rise", I want to conclude this study as:

You may shoot me with your words,  
You may cut me with your eyes,  
You may kill me with your hatefulness,  
But still, like air, I'll rise. (21-24)

Though the paths of women's life are not as smooth as men but still they can rise. Anam's trilogy has beautifully sketched the strength and accomplishments of women. Going on the same directions of Spivak and Beauvoir, this research has proved that women cannot and can speak at the same time. Hence, regarding of all complexities and struggle in life, women are unheard by the patriarchal system but they have voices. Nevertheless, it is also manifested by Anam that women can achieve victory not only by protesting verbally but also by their heroism.

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