

REFUGEE, MIGRATION, DIASPORA

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Lecture38

Lecture 38 : Diasporic Identity and Tahmima Anam's "Golden Age"

Thank you. Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on Refugees, Migration, and Diaspora. So today we are going to discuss diasporic identity through our reading of Tahmima Anam's novel *A Golden Age*. *A Golden Age*, which came out in the year 2007, is a debut novel written by Tahmima Anam. It is a well-acclaimed historical fiction set against the backdrop of Mukti Juddha, also known as the Bangladesh War of Independence or the Liberation War, which took place in 1971.



So this Liberation War or Mukti Juddha forms the major backdrop against which *A Golden Age* is written. The birth of Bangladesh in 1971 marked a significant turning point in South Asian history, representing the emergence of a geographically and culturally distinct entity that had previously been a part of Pakistan. So we see that in 1947, when the Indian subcontinent was partitioned, a new country, Pakistan, was born out of it. At that point, West Pakistan and East Pakistan were actually part of the same country, the same nation.

However, subsequently, we see that language- and culture-based conflicts arise, which result in differences, where the East Pakistani population had a popular sentiment that their raw materials and manual labor were being exploited by West Pakistan, but the revenues

and benefits were more tilted toward the West Pakistani side. So there was basically a hegemonic relationship between West Pakistan and the East Pakistani population. And this difference—this cultural and linguistic difference—and also the sentiment that Urdu was being imposed on the Bengali language and culture, all these differences, these conflicts, actually culminated in the Liberation War, and ultimately the result was the formation of what today we have as a separate country named Bangladesh, right? So, this entire novel, *A Golden Age*, has this birth of Bangladesh as its backdrop.



And the liberation of Bangladesh, the eastern flank of Pakistan previously, was achieved through the concerted efforts of civilians, military personnel, as well as the paramilitary forces. Tahmima Anam is an award-winning British novelist, short story writer, and anthropologist who is known for her compelling narratives. She is the winner of the Commonwealth Writers' Prize. Her work has appeared in prestigious publications, including *Granta*, *The New York Times*, as well as *The Guardian*. Anam is a trained anthropologist from Harvard and is well known for her Bengal trilogy, comprising *A Golden Age*, which was her debut novel, written in 2007.

It was followed by *The Good Muslim*, which came out in 2011, and then *The Bones of Grace*, which was published in 2016. So, *A Golden Age*, *The Good Muslim*, and *The Bones of Grace* are the three novels that form her Bengal trilogy. She is also known for her work, *The Startup Wife*, which is a more recent publication from the year 2021. Her debut novel, *A Golden Age*, narrates the story of her female protagonist, Rehana Haque. She is a young woman from an aristocratic but impoverished Calcutta family.

The novel depicts her tumultuous life as a result of the civil war. In her novel, *The Good Muslim*, there is a depiction of the challenges of the nation-building process. The novel is known for its nuanced and very detailed depiction of the challenges and the difficulties. It



portrays the realities of corruption and compromises that people at various levels have to make or face during the nation-building process. Next, *The Bones of Grace* revolves around the character of Zubaida Haque, who is an adopted daughter of a native Bengali family and finds herself torn between two worlds.

So, this novel explores the dual identity of an individual who has once been part of the diasporic experience or diasporic belonging. Zubaida Haque is torn between her loyalty toward her motherland, Bangladesh, and her attachment to America, where she completed her studies. So, Zubaida has this dual belonging and dual identification. This is what forms the major plotline of *The Bones of Grace*. In *A Golden Age*, the story begins in the year 1959 when Rehana Haque, a young widow, loses custody of her two children, Sohail and Maya, to her brother in Lahore, West Pakistan.

So, the children are actually taken by the brother in Lahore. And this is happening against a backdrop where the Bengali Muslim population is increasingly trying to dissociate itself from its West Pakistani counterpart. Right. So, losing one's children's custody at that point in time to family living in Lahore is actually an extension of the West Pakistan-East Pakistan conflict. Right.

A Golden Age by Tahmima Anam

- *The Bones of Grace* (2016) revolves around Zubaida Haque, an adopted daughter of a native Bengali family who finds herself torn between two worlds – her loyalty towards her motherland Bangladesh, and America where she completed her studies.
- In *A Golden Age*, the story begins in 1959 when Rehana Haque, a young widow, loses custody of her children, Sohail and Maya, to her brother in Lahore, West Pakistan. The narrative then shifts to 1971, during the Bangladesh Liberation War, as East Pakistan seeks independence.
- Rehana's children, now university students, return to live with her. However, they become deeply involved in the revolution, with Sohail joining a guerrilla group and Maya assisting the nationalists as a press writer in Calcutta.



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It is actually—this conflict is seeping in, and the crack is showing at the familial level. The narrative then shifts to the year 1971 when the Bangladesh Liberation War is happening, and we see that East Pakistan is seeking independence from its Western counterpart, as I said. Rehana's children, Sohail and Maya, who are now university students, return to live with her. So, there is a point in the late 1950s when the children had been taken to Lahore by her brother, and then, when the Liberation War is happening, the children come back to live with her.

And they are now university students. They are quite grown up. However, the children become deeply involved in the revolution, with Sohail joining a guerrilla group and Maya assisting the nationalists as a press writer in Calcutta. As Rehana navigates her children's political commitments and ambitions, she constantly grapples with her own feelings of loss and loyalty, especially as her family in West Pakistan disapproves of their political standpoint. So, in the novel, Tahmima Anam shows the struggle of East Pakistan while breaking away from West Pakistan, right?

And although this crack does not appear at the time when the novel begins, we see the family is also set apart, with the children moving to stay with their uncle in Lahore, right? Later, Lahore becomes part of another country, Pakistan, whereas the eastern part becomes Bangladesh, right? So this struggle, this political struggle, is actually seeping into and affecting the familial level. So, Tahmima Anam shows the struggle of East Pakistan while breaking away from West Pakistan,

and Rehana Haque's strong nationalistic sentiments are disapproved by her family in West Pakistan. Because here we need to understand that it is very difficult, rather impossible, to homogenize the Muslim population, the Indian Muslim population. And it is also difficult to homogenize the sentiments or the political inclinations and orientations of the Bengali Muslims. Some Bengali Muslim families had a very strong inclination toward the cause of Bangladesh's formation. So they emphasized a separate entity and existence outside of the Urdu-centric Pakistani, West Pakistani identity.




Whereas there was also a small section of the Bengali populace who adhered to the concept of a unified Pakistan and still wanted to remain part of the larger, you know, Pakistani identity under the umbrella definition of, you know, a Urdu-based Islamic identity. So, many Bengali Muslim sections did not have the desire to break away from the Urdu-based

Islamic identity that West Pakistan cherished and celebrated. So, we see that within the Haq family, this rift is evident. While Rehana and her children have an inclination toward nationalistic sentiments—the formation of a separate nation—it is disapproved by the larger family. Reflecting on her life, Rehana imagines her sister's reactions to her revolutionary activities and highlights her growing connection to her homeland.

So, 'A Golden Age' is inspired by Tahmima Anam's grandmother's experiences, and it explores how historical events shape individual lives and relationships during a time of significant change. So here, we have to understand the standpoint of Tahmima Anam, which does not come from within Bangladeshi society. She is living in a foreign country. She is part of the Bangladeshi diaspora. Right.

A Golden Age by Tahmima Anam

- As Rehana navigates her children's political commitments, she grapples with her own feelings of loss and loyalty, especially as her family in West Pakistan disapproves. In the novel Tahmima Anam has shown the struggle of East Pakistan while breaking away from West Pakistan. Rehana Haque's strong nationalistic sentiments are disapproved by her family in the West Pakistan.
- Reflecting on her life, she imagines her sisters' reactions to her revolutionary activities, highlighting her growing connection to her homeland.
- Anam's novel, inspired by her grandmother's experiences, explores how historical events shape individual lives and relationships during a time of significant change.
- The story weaves themes of passion, hope, and unexpected heroism, capturing the personal and national struggles of a society in turmoil.



She has studied outside Bangladesh. She has grown up outside Bangladesh, and her interface with her ancestral land is through fieldwork, gathering data, research, and also through family stories passed down the generations. She has heard many real-life experiences from her grandmother. From her grandmother. And that is the starting point for the novel—that is where the novel draws its lifeblood.



So the story weaves themes of passion, hope, and unexpected heroism, capturing the personal and national struggles of a society in complete turmoil and unrest. The novel was awarded the Prize for Best First Book in the Commonwealth Writers' Prize in 2008. It was also shortlisted for the 2007 Guardian First Book Award. In this novel, Rehana's journey reflects a deep exploration of identity and resilience in a turbulent socio-political landscape. Her initial feelings of alienation within her aristocratic family set the stage for her struggle against traditional expectations and societal norms.

So, her larger family expects her and her children to deliver, to orient themselves in a certain manner in gender terms and political ideology. And it seems that Rehana and her two children are constantly outgrowing, constantly defying these set yardsticks, right? In terms of her femininity and political ideology, she does not abide by her aristocratic family's values and ideals. The arranged marriage to Iqbal provides Rehana with a glimpse of autonomy and happiness, but this is short-lived. The abrupt loss of her husband plunges her into a precarious situation as a single woman with two children in a patriarchal society.

So, Rehana's sense of home is intricately tied to her identity as a mother, which overrules her position as a nationalist. So, her disposition, her role as a mother, comes to rule over her role as a nationalist. Her life in Bangladesh is shaped by her personal experiences and familial bonds, which overshadow broader political concerns. When Sohail and Maya, her two children, discuss revolutionary movements with passion and fervor, Rehana struggles to grasp their passion. She struggles to understand her children.

In the transnational order of things, the personal and communal aspects of one's identity are constantly being negotiated. So she is, you know, at the same time, this and that. And that's how identities are—with partial affiliations, with, you know, partial dispositions for

different ideals. That's how humans are. We see that humans are not movements, which are in a way whole, which are in their entirety.

Humans are more complicated. Humans are more layered, more complicated, and more difficult than any movement or any political ideology. A family is more checkered. A family is more of a mosaic, with different kinds of orientations and different kinds of debates happening at the familial level. So here is an extended quotation from Anand's novel.

I quote, She did not have the proper trappings of a nationalist. She did not have the youth or the appearance of the words. The correct words, though by now familiar to her, did not glide easily from her tongue. Comrade, proletariat, revolution.


They were hard, precise words and did not capture Rihanna's ambiguous feelings about the country she had adopted. She spoke with fluency, the Urdu of the enemy. No, Rehana did not have the exactness to become a true revolutionary. But she had realized long ago that while the children would remain fixed at the center of her life, she would gradually fade away from theirs. So, her motherhood plays a pivotal role in defining her being, her existence, and her identity more than her nationalist disposition or loyalty toward any kind of ideology.

She is always inadequate in a way. The sum total of her does not match the sum total of the revolution. She is always something more or less than that revolution. She does not use words like comrade and proletariat as easily as a revolutionary, a true-blue revolutionary, should use them. She has a very clear Urdu tongue.

So, she speaks Urdu with a lot of fluency. She does not have all the traits to become a true-blue Bengali nationalist revolutionary. So, Rehana's ambivalence toward her home reflects the tensions that many face when personal and political identities collide, and ultimately, this reveals the multifaceted nature of belonging in any given South Asian context. So, for Rehana, Bangladesh represents a landscape of motherhood, which is filled with both possessiveness and fear, and it emphasizes the complexities of identity and belonging in a transnational world. Through Rehana's journey, Tahmima Anam explores the themes of marginalization and the struggle for agency, illustrating how personal narratives are deeply intertwined with larger national movements.

A Golden Age by Tahmima Anam

- For her, Bangladesh represents a landscape of motherhood, filled with both possessiveness and fear, emphasizing the complexities of identity and belonging in a transnational world.
- Through Rehana's journey, Tahmima Anam explores themes of marginalization and the struggle for agency, illustrating how personal narratives are deeply intertwined with larger national movements.
- In *Global Matters: The Transnational Turn and Literary Studies* (2010), literary critic Paul Jay states that "the transnational turn in literary studies began in earnest when the study of minority, multicultural, and postcolonial literatures began to intersect with work done under the auspices of the emerging study of globalization."
- Rehana's response to the crisis lies in re-watching Bengali movies, such as 'Mughal-e-Azam', and it extends to her "love for Urdu poetry" (Tahmina Anam).



In his work titled *Global Matters, the Transnational Turn and Literary Studies* that came out in 2010, literary critic Paul G. states, I quote, "The transnational turn in literary studies began in earnest when the study of minority, multicultural and post-colonial literatures began to intersect with work done under the auspices of the emerging study of globalization." So, Rehana's response to the crisis lies in re-watching the different Bengali movies such as *Mughal-e-Azam*, and it extends to her love for Urdu poetry, right. So, she is watching a movie called *Mughal-e-Azam*, which is celebrating the Mughal Empire, something that Bengali Muslim identity does not connect with immediately.

So Bengali Muslim identity does not connect with the Mughal dynasty or the Mughal lineage, while that's the kind of culture that is celebrated in her family, and she's watching the film again and again. And she has love for Urdu poetry. She has passion for Urdu poetry. So she does not fit the bill, basically.

Although she has her full support for this revolution, she does not fit the bill. So, L. Shannon Jung's analysis of speciality sheds light on the experience of women in Islamic culture, emphasizing how special limitations affect their identities directly. While Rehana presents as a new Muslim woman, she is still bound by the expectations of her deceased husband, and she often visits his grave in order to seek approval for her different decisions. This practice symbolizes her internalized constraints, the self-made or the self-given constraints that she cannot overcome as she navigates the complexities of independence within a traditionally defined space for women.

So, at one level, we see the independence of Bangladesh happening from different coercive hegemonic forces that have allegedly dominated and suppressed the Bengali Muslim population for decades. At another level, we see the liberation and emergence of a new Muslim woman through Rehana's lens, and the difficulties associated, the problematics

linked with this transformation. On one hand, there are certain social expectations. On the other, she is navigating, constantly negotiating and trying to understand new ways of being and identifying things.

So this narrative ultimately reveals how different ideological boundaries are imposed onto us and how they can be challenged, especially when the fight for a common cause unites Rehana with her daughter Maya. Rehana and her family exemplify transnational figures, having lived in different countries, including India, West Pakistan, and then East Pakistan, which later becomes Bangladesh. Suryahana's brother-in-law, who resides in Kashmir, embodies a strong allegiance to Pakistani nationalism, the West Pakistani, the Punjabi culture. So, contrasting sharply with Rehana's commitment to Bengali nationalism as she establishes her home in Dhaka, we see that the fabric of the family is very motley, full of multiple commitments, loyalties, ideologies, and inclinations.

So within the same family, we have Rehana and her children committed to Bengali nationalism. And Rehana is not as committed as her children. On the other hand, we have Rehana's brother-in-law, who is a strong adherent and loyalist to Pakistani nationalism. This tension illustrates how familial bonds can be strained by conflicting national identities. The fact that Rehana decides to shelter an injured major, who is leading the Bengali revolution, underscores her personal stake in the larger scheme of things.

As the major revives and recuperates, she listens to a few Bengali folk songs, their lyrics change to nationalist slogans. Right. So actually, her association with this major also transforms her, gives her that kind of nationalist zeal, right.

Rehana's daughter Maya embodies the potential of a new generation of feminist leaders. She is bold, educated and aspiring to be a journalist. As a student activist, she passionately embraced communism, even donating her clothes to cyclone victims and then adopting the signature communist style of white sarees. However, Maya's progressive outlook and rebellious behavior creates a rift between her and her mother Rehana, highlighting the tension between tradition and modernity in South Asian Muslim families.

Despite her independent life and a lack of strict adherence with Varda, Rehana is often found as being influenced by her son Sohail while taking her decisions. So she really relies on her son Sohail while taking decisions, which reflects the traditional preference for male children in patriarchal societies in a South Asian context. This dynamic results in Rehana viewing her daughter's ambitions, Maya's ambitions very sceptically, struggling to accept

her daughter's liberal points of view, which defy the conventional norms that are meant for Muslim women.

So she is a little sceptic about Maya's modern outlook, Maya's ambitions that defy the conventional norms that are meant for or that define the Muslim women. In a counter-narrative, Rehana's relationship with the major reveals her latent sexuality and her repressed desires as a young widow. Their secret affair allows her to experience a sense of freedom and authenticity which is unburdened by societal expectations. Through this connection, Rehana is beginning to rediscover her feminine joys, her feminine sense of happiness, femininity through sexuality. She is trying to rediscover her latent, dormant sexuality and needs.


Embracing, she is beginning to rediscover her latent feminine sexuality and desires in embracing her own individuality outside of the social yardsticks and expectations. However, as she becomes increasingly involved in the war effort, her motivations shift from protecting her children to asserting her own political agency. So, this is also a journey. Against the macrocosmic happenings, this is also the microcosmic journey of a woman, a Bengali Muslim woman from identifying primarily in terms of her motherhood to discovering her sexuality and her own political agency within the large scheme of things, right?

When the major expresses concern for her safety, she feels a sense of agitation, recognizing his attempt to assume a protective role which is reminiscent of her late husband. So she is actually beginning to assume an agential position, where she is not very happy that the major wants to protect her. He is imposing his protectionist ideals on her. This paternalistic attitude and protectionist attitude clashes with her newfound independence.

So Rehana's decision to rescue Sabir despite the major reservations marks a pivotal moment in her journey from familial and maternal coordinates toward becoming someone at the political and social level. So she is actually claiming her stake in the larger scheme of things. So, through these dynamics, Tahmima Anam powerfully illustrates how transnational experiences shape identities and resilience amid the chaos of war. After the major's visit to inquire about the whereabouts of her missing children, Rehana tells herself the following: I quote, 'You are a mother.' How many times had she repeated this very phrase to herself?

***A Golden Age* by Tahmima Anam**

- Through these dynamics, Anam powerfully illustrates how transnational experiences shape identities and resilience amidst the chaos of war.
- After the Major's visit to enquire the whereabouts of her missing children, Rehana tells herself the following:
 "You are a mother. How many times had she repeated this very phrase to herself? I'm a mother. Above all things, a mother. Not a widow, certainly not a wife. Not a thief. A mother. But now she was something else – a mother, yes, but not just of children. Mother of a different sort. This mother knew what it was to long for her children. But she also understood the dangers of such longing." (Anam, 140)
- Om Prakash Dwivedi (2022) in "*Writing Feminist Hermeneutics Through Liminality: A Reading of Tahmima Anam's A Golden Age*" says that the novel should be read through an 'alternative lens [...] to look at ways women redefine themselves at the moment of extreme crisis' (176-177).



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'I am a mother.' 'Above all things, a mother.' 'Not a widow.' 'Certainly not a wife.' 'Not a thief.'

'A mother.' 'But now, she was something else.' 'A mother, yes, but not just of children.' 'Mother of a different sort.' 'This mother knew what it was to long for her children.'

But she also understood the dangers of such longing. So, her identity is not just limited to her family level. This actually implies, suggests that she is now identifying with all the mothers of the revolutionaries. Mothers who are actually experiencing the longing for their children, many children who would never make it back to their home. So it's not only waiting for Sohail and Maya anymore.

She is actually empathizing with the feelings of so many mothers who are directly a part of the revolution, who are suffering because of the revolution. Om Prakash Dwivedi in his work *Writing Feminist Hermeneutics Through Liminality*, a reading of Tahmima Anam's *A Golden Age*, states that the novel should be read through an alternative lens to look at ways women redefine themselves at the moment of extreme crisis. Unquote. Furthermore, by plotting the release order through Faiz, who is a prisoner and heading to the police station alone, Rehana crosses, transgresses the boundaries of traditional wifehood and womanhood.


This act symbolizes not just her fight for Sabir's freedom, but also her struggle for liberation from the constraints that are imposed by patriarchal norms in a non-secular society. By doing so, Rehana is reclaiming her agency and challenging the long-standing dominance that women face and forging a path towards self-assertion and empowerment. Anand's portrayal of Rehana challenges the dominant historical narratives which frame women merely as victims. Instead, she emphasizes their courage, resilience and capacity for agency

through a figure such as Rehana Haque. So, this perspective that Anam is bringing in here not only honors the sacrifices of women like Rehana, but also calls for a re-evaluation of how history remembers and represents the female figures.

Tahmima Anam herself is a second-generation diasporic writer, and it is interesting to note that Marianne Hirsch's concept of post-memory is particularly relevant while reading *A Golden Age* because it emphasizes how memories and experiences of one generation can profoundly influence the next. In one of her interviews, Anam revealed, 'I have a complicated relationship with Bangladesh.' She revealed this to *The Guardian* on 13th May 2016. Her own emotions find a channel through Rehana's life story. In the conversation, she also adds, 'I have come to accept it's a long-distance love affair.'

A Golden Age by Tahmima Anam

- Tahmina Anam herself is a second generation diasporic writer and it is interesting to note that Marianne Hirsch's concept of "post-memory" is particularly relevant while reading this text, as it underlines how memories and experiences of one generation can profoundly influence the next.
- In one of her interviews, Anam revealed, "I have a complicated relationship with Bangladesh" (*The Guardian*, 13 May 2016). Her own emotions find a channel through Rehana's life story. In the conversation, she adds - "I've come to accept it's a long distance love affair."
- The acknowledgment of a "long-distance love affair" with Bangladesh illustrates the complexities of belonging and identity faced by many in the diaspora.
- This thorough engagement with the subject matter enriches her narrative, making it a powerful exploration of personal and collective identity.



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So, the acknowledgment of a long-distance love affair with Bangladesh illustrates the complexities of belonging and identity faced by many in the diaspora. This thorough engagement with the subject matter enriches her narrative, making it a powerful exploration of personal and collective identity. Lynne Neary, in her article published in the *Morning Edition*, writes the following about Tahmima Anam. I quote Lynne Neary. The child of a diplomat, Tahmima Anam grew up far away from her native Bangladesh, but all her life she heard about that country's war for independence, which took place before she was born, from her Bengali parents and their friends.


And when she decided to write a novel about Bangladesh, Anam says she couldn't imagine writing about anything else except the war. So how storytelling and story listening shape one's psyche, shape one's understanding of the homeland when one is situated in the diaspora. Sitting in the diaspora, situated in the diaspora, she hears about the Liberation War all the years while she grows up, and then she finally writes a book about Bangladesh, and the backdrop cannot be anything other than the Liberation War, right? It transforms

into her a kind of creative energy; we could say she channelizes her story listening into her creative energy. The above quote underscores the entangled relation between the diasporic identity and native history, which is captured aptly in *The Golden Age*.

Narratives like Tahmima Anam's 'Golden Age' frequently address the postcolonial challenges of nation-building, particularly through their struggles with the concept of belonging. The fluidity is often captured in these writings, which frequently address the challenges of nation-building in a postcolonial context. A central theme in these narratives is the concept of home, which reflects the complexities and conflicts that diasporic communities face in defining their sense of belonging. The movement across national, cultural, and social boundaries that diasporic communities experience creates rich transnational identities and even a rich transnational repertoire. So, with this, we come to the end of our lecture today.

A Golden Age by Tahmima Anam

- Narratives like Anam's *A Golden Age* frequently address the postcolonial challenges of nation-building, particularly through their struggles with the concept of belonging.
- The fluidity is often captured in these writings, which frequently address the challenges of nation-building in a postcolonial context.
- A central theme in these narratives is the concept of home, reflecting the complexities and conflicts that the diasporic community faces in defining their sense of belonging.
- The movement across national, cultural, and social boundaries that diasporic communities experience creates rich, transnational identities.



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Let us meet with a new topic in our next lecture. Thank you.