

Women and the Nation's Narrative in Tahmima Anam's *A Golden Age* and Roma Tearne's *Bone China*

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Abstract

This article aims to discuss gendered parameters of national identity and collective memory in contemporary South Asian women's writing. Tahmima Anam's *A Golden Age* (2007) and Roma Tearne's *Bone China* (2010), in this context, represent the positive transformation of women's roles in the public and private spheres, as well as the understanding of femininity and masculinity in Sri Lanka and Bangladesh during the independence war. In the reproduction of national identity, there is an emphasis on the significance of privatised domestic space, women's involvement in the national struggle, and a feminised collective memory in historically male-constructed nations. In *A Golden Age*, despite her traditional gender roles and controversial national identity, Rehana becomes a defender of Bangladesh due to her altering political views, while her daughter, Maya, symbolises the progressive role of a new generation of women in the movement. In *Bone China*, besides civil war and resistance, immigration enforces a loss of collective identity, whilst women's domestic and public lives are subject to profound change. The two novels promise hope for the transformation of women's roles and status, and emphasise the significance of women's narratives and collective memory in the preservation of national identity.

Key words: Gender, national identity, collective memory, *A Golden Age*, *Bone China*.

Tahmima Anam'ın *A Golden Age* ve Roma Tearne'nin *Bone China* Eserlerinde Kadınlar ve Ulusal Anlatı

Öz

Bu makale, çağdaş Güney Asyalı kadınların eserlerinde ulusal kimliğin ve kolektif belleğin cinsiyet parametrelerini ele almayı amaçlamaktadır. Bu bağlamda, Tahmima Anam'ın *A Golden Age* (2007) ve Roma Tearne'nin *Bone China* (2010) adlı çalışmaları, kadınların kamusal ve özel alandaki rollerinin olumlu anlamda dönüşümünü ve Sri Lanka ile Bangladeş'in bağımsızlık savaşları sürecinde kadınlık ve erkeklik kavramlarındaki değişimi ele almaktadır. Ulusal kimliğin yeniden üretilmesinde, özel alanın önemine, kadınların ulusal mücadeleye katılımına ve tarihsel olarak erkek-egemen milletlerde kadınların oluşturduğu kolektif belleğe vurgu yapılmaktadır. *A Golden Age*'de, geleneksel cinsiyet rollerine ve tartışmalı ulusal kimliğine rağmen, Rehana değişen siyasi görüşüyle Bangladeş'in savunucusu olurken, kızı Maya, direnişte yeni nesil kadınlarının gelişen rolünü temsil etmektedir. *Bone China* romanında ise, iç savaş ve direnişin yanı sıra, göç unsuru kolektif kimliğin yitirilmesine yol açarken, kadınların özel ve kamusal yaşamları büyük bir değişikliğe maruz kalmaktadır. Her iki

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eser de, kadının rollerinin ve statüsünün dönüşümü açısından umut vaat etmekte ve ulusal kimliğin korunmasında kadın anlatılarının ve kolektif belleğin önemini vurgulamaktadır.

Anahtar kelimeler: Cinsiyet, ulusal kimlik, kolektif bellek, *A Golden Age*, *Bone China*.

1. Introduction

This study reads Tahmima Anam's *A Golden Age* (2007) and Roma Tearne's *Bone China* (2010) as gendered narratives of collective memory, arguing that gendered positioning in public and private spheres, as well as the understanding of femininity and masculinity in Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, played a central and formative role in the construction of national identities. Within this postcolonial and nationalist structure, women have commonly been identified with nature/private realms as biological, symbolic and cultural "reproducers" of the nation, and these roles have substantially shaped women's obligations, rights and duties (Yuval-Davis, 1997). These nations are "historically a male-constructed space" (Boehmer, 2005, p. 30) and they commonly perpetuate a masculinised collective memory. The two novels, however, radically represent "the differential integration of women and men into the national project" (West, 2013, p. 11). They demonstrate that the construction of national identity is essentially rooted in the family setting or private domestic space, which is often seen as having minimal impact on the public sphere, through which masculine constructions of nationalism define themselves. In nationalist movements, women's roles are frequently restricted to being only "contributive" in the public sphere, while the men are considered "the main movers of history" because they "organize and set parameters for nationalist movements" (West, 2013, p. 13). In this regard, *A Golden Age* draws attention to third world women's critical status and changing roles in public and private spheres through a family's experiences of nationalist struggle and controversial ethnic, religious, linguistic and political issues in Bangladesh. *Bone China* extends these issues to the transformative nature of migration and generational dynamics in transnational contexts, with a particular focus on changing gender roles, historical and spatial proximity/distance, and the sense of belonging.

After the independence of Sri Lanka (1948) and Bangladesh (1971) from British rule, the two nation-states underwent the transformative effects of civil war in terms of postcolonial national identity, ethnicity, class, caste and religion. Not only individual but also collective identities are located within a range of specific national contexts and these sociocultural categories. The historical circumstances produced significant "material and ideological changes that affected women" (West, 2013, p. 13), whose integration into the national struggles was different from that of the men. This paper is mainly concerned with gendered narratives of collective memory and share in suffering, gender roles mediated by nationalism in the public and private spheres, concepts of femininity (motherhood and widowhood) and masculinity in the national struggle, and the effects of migration and generational dynamics on national identity. *A Golden Age* and *Bone China*, in this context, are literary texts that shed light on the "invisible" history and experiences of third world women in Sri Lanka and Bangladesh.

In *Feminism Without Borders* (2003), Mohanty suggests that third world women do not share a totally same history with women from other areas of the world due to their "particular inheritance of post-15th-century-Euro-American-hegemony, the inheritance of slavery, enforced migration ... colonialism, imperial conquest and genocide" (p. 53). However, they are unified by their experience of oppression, their opposition to war and shared goals. Their political struggle is usually concerned with their participation in organised movements in nationalist and anti-racist conditions. Women in these states are linked to the nation in various roles: "as biological reproducer members of ethnic collectivities and

boundaries of ethnic/national groups, as participators of the ideological reproduction of the collectivity and the transmitters of culture, as signifiers of ethnic/national groups, and participants in national, economic, political and military struggles" (Puri, 1999, p. 12). Although women appear to be a sign or marker of political goals, national identity and carriers of cultural values and traditions, it would be wrong to assume that they can use these assigned roles on their behalf, however. National struggle partially frees women from traditional restraints and allows them to take part in public and political spheres with men that were "disallowed under normal conditions"; yet, it also threatens their role as reproducers through religious, "communal, class and cast" enmities like rape, pregnancy and torture (De Mel, 2001, p. 13). Gendered parameters also style men as the "author and subject of the nation", whilst women represent the nation itself and are expected to maintain its "purity" (Mohanty, 2003, p. 3). Within this scope, the diasporic narratives of Anam and Tearne investigate the issues of "the production of self and collective consciousness" by documenting third world women's life histories (Mohanty, 1991, p. 33). Writing such tales contributes to those communities sharing a particular history by preventing their collective consciousness from being lost. They also promise the "very possibilities of political consciousness and action" for females through telling their stories (1991, p. 35).

2. *A Golden Age: Partition, Motherhood and National Identity*

Published over three decades after the foundation of Bangladesh in 1971, Anam's *A Golden Age* represents a women's narrative of collective memory, which brings with it new questions about the reproduction of national identity through partition, women's changing roles in the public and private realms, motherhood and sexuality during the independence and civil wars. The novel is based on the true story of Anam's grandmother, who experiences the war between West and East Pakistan and provides a feminised perspective on national identity and domestic loss with historical and spatial distance. In the narrative, Rehana is described as a young Urdu-speaking widow who is born in the West but lives in the Bengali East. Having lost a court appeal for custody and sent her children to her brother-in-law in the West in 1959, she reunites with them after a long time. The children, Sohail and Maya, are by this time both politically oriented university students and they gradually get involved in the national struggle. Although Rehana is at first reluctant to support them, she soon finds herself involved in the conflict as a mother trying to protect her children. Her gradually transforming ideas and changing role as a woman contributing to the independence war contest the idea of a masculinised collective identity and draw attention to the significance of private domestic space in the reproduction of national identity.

The national identity conflict Rehana experiences becomes clearer during the civil war between the two wings of Pakistan after the partition of India. In the novel, the simile of "a pair of horns" on either side of India explicates the difficulty of separation, as well as the construction of a Bengali national identity. Rehana's national identity, for instance, is shaped by her socio-cultural and gendered location within the national contexts of East and West Pakistan. As a middle-class Muslim woman from Calcutta, speaking fluent Urdu – now the language of the enemy – in East Pakistan, Rehana holds an ambiguous status regarding traditional expectations in a divided nation. She becomes fully aware of this dilemma when her sister, Marzia, visits her:

She kept asking, again and again, why Rehana hadn't gone to live in Karachi when her husband died. 'Everyone is there,' she said. 'Your whole family'. When they parted at the airport Rehana felt empty ... Marzia had behaved as though Rehana had betrayed them all; she had said things like, 'Your Urdu is not as good as it used to be; must be all that Bengali you are speaking' ... Still, there wasn't a day that went by that Rehana didn't think of them, out there in the sprawling, parched wing of their country. She held them to her by a loose bit of feeling, not fully connected, not entirely severed. (Anam, 2007, pp. 18-9)

However, this confusion decreases once Rehana begins to assist her children in the resistance movement by making pickles, and even sewing kathas for the guerrillas in her small bungalow. Sohail and Maya choose to fight for the independence of the Bengali East, and despite her unconfirmed status as a Bengali woman speaking Urdu, Rehana inevitably takes her children's side as a mother and, when she does so, imagines the letter she would write to her family in the West: "Dear sisters', she would say. 'Our countries are at war; yours and mine. We are on different sides now. I am making pickles for the war effort. You see how much I belong to here and not to you'" (Anam, 2007, p. 104). This approach signifies one of the first major steps in the reconstruction of the Bengali identity, while preserving gendered parameters that were historically male-dominated on both sides.

Throughout the narrative, concepts of femininity, such as widowhood and motherhood, are particularly emphasised as having a decisive impact upon Rehana's life and role in the national resistance. As a widowed housewife, she loses custody of her children and, after many years, she regains it once she is financially stable again. Her struggle to find money pushes her to consider remarrying or even exposure to sexual harassment, which she forcefully avoids. The patriarchal social structure and traditional gender roles, in this sense, are perpetuated through the family institution and restrict women's capacity to be active agents in society (Stapleton & Wilson, 2004, p. 45). Motherhood, on the other hand, precedes all her other roles and plays a crucial role in her involuntary engagement in the resistance. Generational dynamics and historical circumstances also contribute to a gradual transformation of her political opinions. As the educated younger generation, Sohail and Maya set themselves the task of contributing to the independence of the Bengal East, while Rehana initially watches their political involvement with suspicion:

The Dhaka university students had been involved in the protests from the beginning, so it was no surprise Sohail had got caught up, and Maya too. Even Rehana could see the logic: what sense did it make to have a country in two halves, posed on either side of India like a pair of horns? (Anam, 2007, p. 33)

Her children support a mass movement against the military coup of the elected party, pushing for the independence of East Pakistan. An untrained and badly equipped army against military forces attempts to resist West Pakistan's dominance. Sohail saves food and medicine for refugees, shelters guerrillas in his home and later joins the others at the borderland to resist the Pakistani armies. Maya joins military training and later leaves for Calcutta to write articles for newspapers, to alert the public to the violence of the army and encourage them to take part in the resistance. With her children's active participation in the movement, Rehana becomes more interested in the political confusion and the destructive influences of war on her nation and family. Ultimately, she accepts her children's request to shelter refugees, providing food and even hiding guerrillas in her house.

In this way, Rehana's home (as a private domestic space) serves as a shelter for national resistance and contributes to the production of the national Bengali identity. Her courage and support upgrades her position to that of a female "hero" who strives to protect her community against the outrage and take her place in the gendered narratives of collective memory. However, the differential integration of women and men into the nationalist movement of Bangladesh is also disclosed through men organising and joining the resistance more actively than women: they are warriors, while women are expected to preserve the national identity, increase national awareness through media and communication, assist men by working in refugee camps, and help the victims of the war or shelter guerrillas in their houses. Indeed, on some other occasions, they even become the victims of war because of their gender and national identity. Sexual violence, in particular, brings about the need for male protection. Maya's best

friend, Sharmeen, dies in hospital after being raped and made pregnant by enemy soldiers. On the night of the army occupation, Rehana's neighbour, Mrs Chowdhury enforces an immediate marriage ceremony between her daughter Silvi and her fiancée Sabeer to save her daughter's "honor". Parveen, her brother-in-law's wife, on the other hand, uses her husband's position and political power to oppress Rehana and other women.

3. *Bone China*: Displacement, Generational Dynamics and Historical Identity

Unlike the national context in *A Golden Age*, *Bone China* emphasises the difficulty of maintaining a collective national identity through displacement, immigration and generational dynamics in an increasingly global context, with a gendered perspective. However, gender remains one of the central tropes within the national context of the civil war between the powerful Sinhala Buddhists and the militant Tamil community in Sri Lanka. The novel also draws attention to the intersection of women, nationalism, caste and sexuality with regards to the political tension and confusion on the island. The family and younger generation witness history being made. In the narrative, Grace de Silva is a woman with five children who has married "a Tamil man" despite her father's warnings, and she has lost most of her fortune because of her husband's work for the British colonials (Tearne, 2010, p. 7). Due to the increasing ethnic violence in Sri Lanka, the family leaves their house for the British military, first settling down in Colombo, and then finding themselves immigrants in London.

From the beginning of the novel, the effects of a colonised culture are represented through Western classical music and piano playing in private domestic and public spaces. *Bone china*, on the other hand, symbolises the de Silva family's effort to preserve their national identity in a global context. The whole family is interested in Western classical music and Grace's daughter Alicia is a talented Conservatoire student who plays piano at a concert hall controlled by a "Westernized elite" (Tearne, 2010, p. 49). Although Grace quits playing piano after her husband's death, her niece, Anna, carries on this tradition later in London. The significance and symbolic value of the delicate bone china is highlighted when Grace gives them to her daughter-in-law before their immigration to London: "It was a gesture of acceptance of their impending separation; a torch to be held by Savitha in all the long lonely years of their coming exile, until Anna would be old enough to receive her legacy" (2010, p. 177). That is, Grace and Anna are represented as the carriers of nation's inheritance.

The intersection of gender, the cast system and ethnic identity in Sri Lanka also has a dramatic influence on women's position in a national context, sometimes to their advantage. For example, Grace has a long-term sexual relationship with a Tamil man from a lower cast, Vijay, but their future is always ambiguous since she belongs to a higher cast: "It was the hopelessness of their love that hurt her most of all ... 'It is just a dream of ours,' he said. 'How can a high-cast woman like you make a life with someone like me?'" (Tearne, 2010, p. 44). This also reflects that women from the upper classes could have more choices about their sexuality and they are "more likely to represent themselves as active sexual agents, capable of desiring and being desired" but never totally free due to the social system (Puri, 1999, pp. 104-5). Besides the problems of the cast system and marriage, ethnic conflicts increase tension on the island:

The signs of civil unrest had been growing steadily for months. Two weeks before independence had been declared a series of riots had broken out in the north of the island. The poorest outcasts, the coolies, had had their vote withdrawn. Predictions of the trouble swarmed everywhere with a high-pitched whine. Rumours, like mosquitos, punctured the very flesh of the island. Discrimination against Tamils, it was said, had already begun in the north. When she heard the stories it was always Vijay that Grace thought of. (Tearne, 2010, p. 41)

Ethnic differences gradually lead to the emergence of violence and civil war, ultimately endangering the unity of the nation. Vijay's niece dies in a village because they cannot find a doctor "who would treat a Tamil child" and he is deeply disappointed: "There is something wrong with a country that will not unite. There is something wrong with a nation that hates its own people" (2010, pp. 80-1). While the civil war continues on the island, from the family Christopher leaves his "home" looking for consolation in London. Although he initially believes that he will find justice and charity for the poor there, he soon admits that he has been disillusioned:

Now that I am here I can see how wonderful is Ceylon. Our country has so much to offer, its past is so rich and vibrant. All we do is destroy it. Believe me there is nothing here for any of us. I don't belong here and never will. There is no point in any of you coming here. Better to stay and fight for what is ours. (2010, p. 140)

In this passage, there is a deep sense of longing for the motherland and a lost sense of belonging as an immigrant in London. The reference to "the past" addresses the country's rich history and national identity that united different ethnicities in one place. It calls for a need to become aware of what they already have, to preserve the national history and collective identity.

Immigration and inter-generational dynamics in the novel open up a new avenue of transformation for the third world women, improving their gender roles just as male domination and control is endangered. After Christopher and Jacob leave for London, Thornton and his wife Savitha follow them for "all the things no longer possible to give [their daughter] at home" (Tearne, 2010, p. 187). However, home remains a paradoxical concept for the de Silva family since they can never be sure whether home is "a geographical space, an emotional or sensory space" and thus they cannot develop a sense of belonging (Mohanty, 2003, p. 126). They frequently confront the question of whether they should alter their moral values and lifestyle in order to adapt to the Western culture. For instance, on her first day at school Anna becomes conscious of her physical difference: "No, thought Anna Meeka, everything was wrong, from the way she spoke, to what she said, and how she looked ... She was very different from these large, fair-skinned children" (2010, pp. 204-5). After a while, Savitha decides to work and wear the trousers required for her job – which would not be possible in Colombo – however, Thornton hates her working; it makes him "ashamed and angry" and he "privately feels unhappy as the woman he had married was changing" (2010, p. 215). Grace, too, is aware of the change in traditional gender roles and perspectives: "Something puzzling was happening to her principles. More and more since her entry into this country, she found herself being crushed between her old socialist tendencies and a new uncertain alliance with the de Silva's past" (2010, p. 217).

In particular, Savitha's longing for home and Anna's struggle to adapt to the European culture signify the changing understanding of femininity and masculinity in the public and private spheres in a global context. While the men belonging to a patriarchal society (Thornton and his two brothers) prove to be more resistant to adapting to the Western culture, women's understanding of femininity and gender roles gradually transform despite their conflicting ideas. For instance, when her father sees Anna in a miniskirt and make up in her school uniform, he blames his wife for not staying at home and looking after their daughter. Later in the novel, he wishes he had had a son so he got some respect in the family. Thornton's perspective does not change throughout the novel and the passivity of men in the de Silva family highlights that women are more likely to be subject to major changes since their freedom and gender roles are usually restrained by national and patriarchal boundaries.

Towards the end of the narrative, the question of “home” still remains inexplicable to each character, but it is clearer to Grace, who writes to her granddaughter that: “Still no matter what, Ceylon is your home, where you were born. There is something magical in there because it is where you will always belong. One day, Anna Meeka, I hope you will be able to return home safely” (Tearne, 2010, p. 253). Ceylon represents her collective memory and national identity, which defines who she is and where she feels she belongs. Another woman who is aware of the significance of national history to their identity is Savitha:

History was what made you what you are ... History gave you solidity, a certainty in everything you did. She had thought they were escaping to a place where they would call their own, but now, she saw, this could never be ... We are nobody. We are displaced people who had no history left, for carelessly they had lost it along the way ... Suddenly, she felt a great longing for her connections they had shed so lightly, the old certainties of her youth, the simplicity of it all. Looking at her daughter's young face, seeing the struggle ahead, saddened, Savitha kept her own counsel. (2010, p. 315)

This passage suggests that the sense of belonging to Sri Lanka perseveres despite spatial and historical distance. Past experiences and difficulties complement each other in the construction of national identity. The term “displacement” not only signifies geographical dislocation, but also cultural and historical identity endangered by immigration. Many years later, Anna realises that their past “had been buried and the memories no longer spoken” and her identity that she inherited from her Sri Lankan grandmother, Grace's family, was gradually disappearing (2010, p. 400). Once more, she feels a strong desire to go back “home, that long-forgotten place” to remind herself her Sri Lankan identity (2010, p. 399). *Bone China* and *A Golden Age*, in this sense, as Anglophone South Asian women's texts, resist the loss of national identity and revive collective memory in a national and global context.

4. Conclusion

As gendered narratives of national identity and collective memory, *A Golden Age* and *Bone China* represent the transforming gender roles and understanding of femininity and masculinity in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. The two novels demonstrate that national struggles, political conflicts, generational dynamics and migrant experiences have contributed to the improvement of women's status and roles on the public, private and national levels. Despite being challenged by historically patriarchal gender roles, women were more actively involved in national movements and constituted a critical part of the collective memory of national independence. As bearers of national culture, they play a crucial role in the reconstruction of national identity; however, their involvement is often shaped or restricted by a masculinised nation-state and traditions. Their transformation, therefore, triggers socio-cultural change and is decisive in the preservation of the national identity. In *A Golden Age*, despite her traditional role and controversial national identity, Rehana becomes a defender of Bangladesh, as her political views alter and she in turn becomes a more confident woman who is aware of her power. However, her involvement in the resistance is closely linked with her motherhood, whilst Maya symbolises the critical role of the new generation and their collective consciousness in the movement. In *Bone China*, on the other hand, besides national struggle and civil war, the de Silva family experience displacement and a fragmented national identity as immigrants. In the novel, migration and generational dynamics enforce a loss of collective (historical) identity, while women's domestic and public lives are more likely to be subject to a profound change than men's. The understanding of femininity progressively changes despite the lack of a complete sense of belonging. In this scope, both novels promise hope of the transformation of the roles of third world women and draw attention to the significance of women's narratives of nation in preserving collective/national identity.

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