

(DIS)LOCATING HOME AND IDENTITY IN TAHMIMA ANAM'S THE BONES OF GRACE

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ABSTRACT

The Bones of Grace is the semi-autobiographical final novel in Bangladeshi-British author Tahmima Anam's Bengal Trilogy. However, the paper studies the novel separate from the prequels, A Golden Age (2007) and The Good Muslim (2011), as a diaspora novel. Anam's The Bones of Grace negates the idealistic picture of migration and life abroad, representing the hazards of becoming transcultural in the contexts of transnationalism and translocation. The novel presents, among the Bangladeshi, South Asian and Western cultures in the context of late-twentieth century, international migration, while emphasizing on how the protagonist is positioned as insider-outsider and how a Bangladeshi woman struggles for freedom, identity and agency.

KEYWORDS: *Tahmima Anam, (Dis)locating, The Bones of Grace*

INTRODUCTION

Tahmima Anam, the award winning novelist and anthropologist, rose to acclaim with her 2007 historical fiction novel *A Golden Age*. This a story of the Bangladesh War of Independence presented through the eyes of a family bagged her the Best First Book in the Commonwealth Writers' Prize in 2008. The novel presents the point of view of Rehana Haque, a mother who lives a life of strife through the Bangladeshi Liberation War with both her children becoming more and more involved in the war efforts. The book begins with the death of her husband, marking a period of struggle for Rehana as she tries to keep the custody of her children. The novel then brings us to the beginning of the war as she once again struggles to keep her children who are becoming more and more embroiled in the war effort. Rehana here tries to comprehend the notion of nationalism that is winning over her children and struggles to form a personal identity beyond that of being a mother. The novel marks a mental space where nationalism meets the identity of a mother, both striving to gain an inch wherever they can. The record of this struggle comes to an end on December 16, 1971 when the treaty is signed and the book stops. Anam, herself was born in Dhaka and moved to France at the age of two, where she was brought up on stories of the Bangladeshi War in which her father had fought so many years ago. Her second novel in the series, *The Good Muslim* (2011) continues this documentation of the Haque family experiences. Rehana's children, Maya and Sohail stand to represent the varied trajectories of identity produced from the experience of the war. Where Maya, the daughter, becomes a doctor invested in helping women who suffered the traumas of the war, Sohail is shown as a puritanical, religious teacher. These different identities often present an opposition to each other and a continual one to Rehana. *The Bones of Grace* which came out in 2016 is the final semi-autobiographical novel in Tahmima Anam's *Bengal Trilogy*. However, the paper studies the novel separate from the prequels, *A Golden Age* and *The Good Muslim*, as a diaspora novel. Anam's *The Bones of Grace* negates the

idealistic picture of migration and life abroad, representing the hazards of becoming transcultural in the contexts of transnationalism and translocation. The novel presents, among the Bangladeshi, South Asian and Western cultures in the context of late-twentieth century, international migration, while emphasizing on how the protagonist is positioned as insider-outsider and how a Bangladeshi woman struggles for freedom, identity and agency.

The novel can, in fact, be read as an extension of the Bangladeshi transcultural consciousness, for it presents transculturation as a tension between feelings of entrapment and desire to break free. This tension not only involves deciphering the idea of a unified Self but also dismantling the Self, often leading to attempts of reconfiguration and evolvment into a new entity or a being. The encounters and experiences that are inter-cultural in character usually entangle the individuals within the layered boundaries home and cultures. “We acquire transculture at the boundaries of our own culture and at the crossroads with other cultures through the risky experience of our own cultural wanderings and transgressions” (Epstein 330). As a result of this entanglement and entrapment, the individual loses one’s agency, which they try to then reposition or repossess. The paper, thus, explores a complex transcultural identity in the Bangladeshi diaspora experiences. It examines the central character, Zubaida, within the frame of transnational migration and views transculturation through the concept of ambivalence. The aim is to explore how transnational migration contours Zubaida’s transcultural consciousness and how she manages to profile her cultural plurality.

Anam’s novel, while presenting the idea of a fluid transcultural identity, underscores how the course of identity formation also becomes non-linear while negotiating varied power relations. Sissy Helff calls novels “transcultural”:

First, if the narrator and/or the narrative challenge(s) the collective identity of a particular community; second, if experiences of border crossing and transnational identities characterize the narrators’ lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*); and third, if traditional notions of ‘home’ are disputed. All these indicators have a particularly high impact on modes of storytelling, especially if the narrative introduces an unreliable narrator, because the latter challenges both the structure of a text and the reader’s perception (83).

Transculturation, thus, is a form of cultural consciousness, where “trans” refers to “across, through, over, to or on the other side of, beyond, outside of, from one place, person, thing, or state to another” (Ganapathy-Doré 3). Therefore, the concept does not imply a shift to another culture. Rather, it means a dynamic process of cultural interactions, opening the possibilities for flexible and myriad configurations of self and identities. While discarding the notion of “intercultural”, transculturalism does not look at culture as a closed bloc or a monolithic entity. It even steps further than the renewal of that notion in multiculturalism in the form of a compromised cultural plurality (Gunew 15–29). In fact, transculturation questions the stagnant and unchanging, often considered unified representations of cultures. It refers to the blurring of cultural boundaries and borders, a space where transformation takes place.

At another level, the novel highlights how transnational migration has dislodged the stereotypical viewpoint of migration as it manifests a migrant’s relations that are built between and across nations and cultures with different social, economic and political underpinnings. This also refers to means of connecting, intersecting and transcending the primary locus of culture or what one would call a “home”. In “Betwixt and Between: Trajectories and Projects of Transmigration”, Ralph Grillo argues that transmigration is also “a multiplicity of potential trajectories ... which are often unstable, always likely to become something else” (200). He puts forth several trajectories under the categories of “staying on” and “betwixt and between” and divides the latter group into four types: target workers—here, but really there; permanent transmigrants

— neither here nor there; denizens or dual citizens—here and there; cosmopolitans—everywhere (and nowhere). Hence, people as transmigrants live their lives across borders and their life trajectories may change or overlap with another trajectory at any moment in their life of constant movements across places and cultures. This uncertainty is a perpetual feature of the lives of transmigrants (Grillo 200–01). In the novel, Zubaida is one such person. Although she is tied to one nation, she lives her life across borders. She travels across different countries either for a holiday or for her father's business. Even as a student, she keeps shuttling between Dhaka and Boston and later travels to Pakistan and England for research work.

However, it is within the gaps across cultures that Zubaida finds herself trapped, though she tries to transform but only to witness her own downfall. Zubaida is an adopted child of the childless couple, Maya and Joy, and is brought up in an upper class family in Dhaka. However, it is not until the age of nine that Zubaida finds out about her being an orphan and her adoption. The issue is henceforth never mentioned between Zubaida and her adoptive parents. She has a happy girlhood and eventually falls in love with Rashid, who is the only son of Bulbul and Dolly, close friends of Zubaida's adoptive parents. She looks forward to a happy marriage with Rashid and a smooth future but at Harvard, where she is pursuing her doctoral research as a marine palaeontologist on the walking whale, Zubaida falls in love with an American pianist Elijah Strong. The intercultural love affair adds to the crisis of transculturation and complicates Zubaida's sense of belonging to a particular place. Zubaida's dilemma in choosing between Rashid and Elijah is the central to plot—not only as to make a choice between an all-consuming passionate love and marital security but also loyalty towards one's nation and roots and attraction of the new-found scapes of belonging: “Elijah, I thought back at that moment to what you said to me about the longing of the soul. The loneliness of being only in one body, when the spirit wanted nothing but communion” (Anam 119). However, time and again Zubaida finds herself questioning her own identity, for she doesn't feel much attached to the Bangladesh nation: “My heart is a nomad, still, after so many years of being in this country, child to these parents” (Anam 84). She finds the recurring references to the 1971 Liberation War through her life rather annoying and prefers to indulge in her love for transnationalism, even though it is considered against moral and social norms. In fact, the complicated and unhinged territory of diaspora seems to be constantly changing and shifting. Home becomes what Homi Bhabha refers to as a “mythic place of desire”. Zubaida appears to be devoted to her home and yet she is simultaneously sad about her ‘homecoming’. She realizes, while pondering over her migrancy, that her desires and her judgements are not purely her own but influenced by the sensibilities of her parents and Rashid. She never comes across as a tormented migrant, pining for home all the time. She is not ready to sacrifice her aspirations of a better life for the sake of a nation that is like “a burning building” (84) with people trying to evade death.

Rather, she worries about what people will say if she never returns home. The thought of charges like of deceit, disloyalty and treason, which are usually adorned upon migrants and expatriates, proves quite nerve-racking for her. As a result, her actions are not in sync with her character. She represses her longing to live in Boston “where people cared about the bones of animals” (Anam 19), does not accept that the accidental meeting with Elijah was “the clairvoyant moment” (Anam 12) in her life and then she disregards her strange melancholy about her return that she keeps falling into. Gradually, Zubaida loses the sense of freedom and becomes trapped in herself, her home, and her identity.

As the first person narrator, Zubaida, recollects her past while studying at Harvard and puts her memories in the form of a letter that she plans to send to her lost lover Elijah. In this letter, Zubaida puts forth a complex entity, the Self, walking down the long, entwined memory lanes, and describes the psychological conflicts and turmoil that

she had to take upon herself in order to become a transcultural individual. In her account of her past struggle, she also elaborately mentions an episode concerning her brother-in-law, the Dubai immigrant Anwar's memory, to authenticate her assertions: "And somewhere along the way—I have not yet decided where—I will also tell you about Anwar, because his story is as important as ours, the three of us woven together in ways we could never have dreamt" (Anam 27). Anwar had migrated to Dubai but finally returns to Bangladesh. But his experiences of migration coincide with those of Zubaida. Chittagong becomes the site of translocation that interweaves the diverging trajectories of Zubaida and Anwar in one geographical location. Translocation generally means "a shared sense of location" (Edmond 105) or a process of "linking of localities which may lie in different states or in the same state" (Stroh 313–14). *The Bones of Grace* exhibits not merely entrapment but also describes the tension towards breaking free, as a dislocating cultural bondage becomes a painful task. As the narrative shifts from Dhaka to Chittagong, the port city of Bangladesh, Zubaida's quest for the Self is juxtaposed with Anwar's quest for love in that city: "I wasn't the only one in Chittagong in search of a self ... The whole time I was there ... [Anwar] was right beside me, carrying around my secret like a talisman dangling from his neck" (Anam 252). After returning to Bangladesh, Anwar searches for Megna and their child in her village and in Chittagong city. Zubaida also moves to Chittagong with a job to assist Gabriela, British filmmaker, make a documentary on the only shipbreaking yard in Bangladesh. During one such wandering, Anwar and Zubaida unexpectedly meet each other, only to realize that Zubaida is Megna's sister, who became a prostitute after Anwar left her. In fact, Chittagong becomes the site where the pulling together and drawing apart, or what could be called as fluid relationships, that paves the way for Zubaida to discover herself as a new entity. Freedom, the novel seems to suggest, does not come easy but at a price of absolute destruction.

In Chittagong, the shipbreaking yard symbolizes destruction but is also suggestive of resurrection or what could be understood as the process of reconfiguration. Zubaida witnesses the ship's destruction: "*Grace*, the ship that was ground to dust before our eyes" (3) and describes it as both "the end and the beginning" (12). The "bones" of the title of the novel hint at the fragments of a body. After resuscitating the bones of the walking whale from the ground, Zubaida names the fossil Diana, after the name of the Roman goddess of the hunt, and Zamzam refers to her bones as "bones of grace" (Anam 68). He shows an unusual reverence for those bones by whispering prayers to them. Zamzam's action raises questions about bones in Zubaida's mind: "I had spent many years thinking about bones" (Anam 360) and, through her studies, she eventually realises why the resurrected bones are symbols of grace: "When I studied the fossils of *Ambulocetus* and *Pakicetus*, I told myself the souls of those ancient creatures were in their bones. I knew that the fusing of Diana's pelvis would produce a smooth bowl shape that would tell us how *Ambulocetus* had evolved into an amphibian when her ancestors had been terrestrial" (Anam 360). Bones carry the spirits of the creatures and tell the history of their evolution and, hence, bones are a blessing. They are building blocks of existence which endure: "The story of *Ambulocetus* is the story of becoming, of transformation, of leaping between one sort of being and another sort of being, of leaving history behind for the wide swathe of the possible. It is not the story of extinction" (Anam 390).

In her transcultural and transmigratory journey to identify, Zubaida's adoption from former freedom fighters offers one direction but the canvas of her past and identity remains blank owing to no knowledge of her real parents and her ancestry. Alone among men on a fossil study in Balochistan a similar evolutionary blank canvas surfaces in the form of the beached ship "*Grace*". These ghosts from the past in company of Zubaida's own effort to trace her origins mark this (dis)located wasteland.

Rushdie in "Imaginary Homelands" speaks of working with what you have (i.e. "fragments" (12)) no matter where you are. He romances a broken mirror and eulogies the value of the shards that are left in the absence of the ones that can never be traced. In *Zubaida*, one may find the intrigue of identifying with the broken mirror or the pieces lost, or the pieces found for obviously the spectator's spectacle is phantasmically trapped in transitions as well.

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