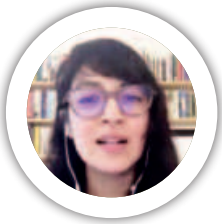


# A Transgenerational Quest for Identity in Tahmima Anam's Bengal Trilogy

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

TAHMIMA ANAM  
The Good Muslim

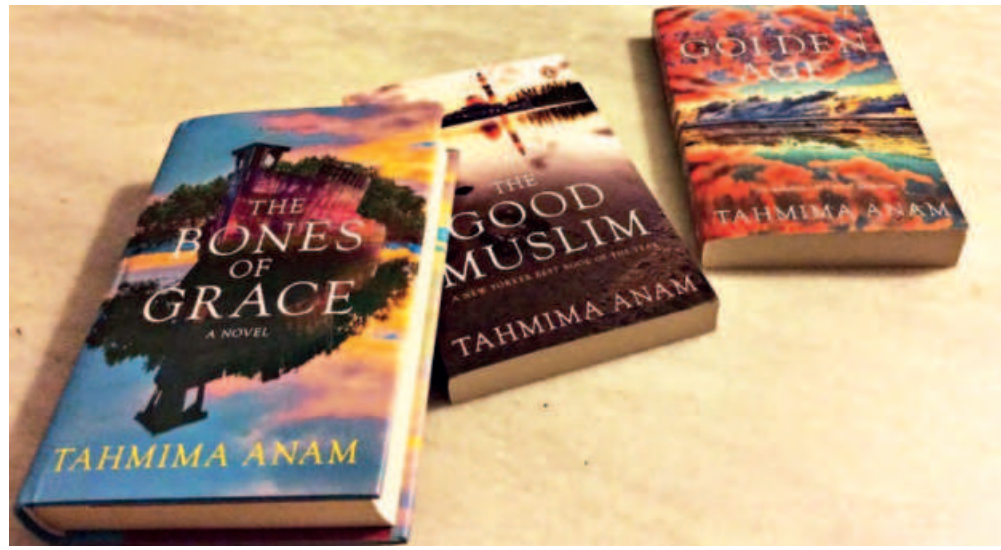


JARIN TASNEEM SHOILEE

Tahmima Anam, the Bangladesh-born British writer, is known at home and abroad for her spontaneous and vivid writing style. She is widely distinguished as a novelist and columnist with a profound awareness of her native and international culture. Although Anam herself said that she has a complicated relationship with her roots, it is Bangladesh that she seeks to explore in most of her fictional works. Some common themes in Tahmima Anam's writing are the complexities of family relationships, the history of 1971 liberation war of Bangladesh, generational trauma associated with the neoliberal and cultural transitions, cultural assimilation followed by diasporic experiences and the like.

Anam is best known for her Bengal trilogy - the sequels of familial stories in the three novels - *A Golden Age* (2007), *The Good Muslim* (2011) and *The Bones of Grace* (2016). In her trilogy, Anam upholds the issues of family history with a special concentration on the transgenerational quest for identity. The trilogy tells the story of three generations of women during and after the 1971 liberation war of Bangladesh. The state of shared emotional space of the generations can be termed as what transgenerational trauma theorists Tihamer Bako and Katalin Zana call as "transgenerational atmosphere," the unconscious way of preserving and transmitting the familial memories when there is no available narrative to process the traumatic event. Here, the collective trauma of the liberation war is passed down from one generation to another and affects the family members on individual level as well.

Anam's first novel *A Golden Age*, is about a female freedom fighter Rehana Haque's "herstory" within the context of the liberation war of Bangladesh. The novel is partly autobiographical because it is inspired by Anam's grandmother. In the novel, Rehana is the first generation of the Haque family to actively witness the atrocities of the war. Rehana is portrayed as a concerned single mother who tries to prevent her children Maya and Sohail from joining the war, but soon she is bound to let them go for the national call of duty. Rehana's transformation from merely a caring, protective mother to an active



participant in the war surprises the readers. Rehana is grateful that her next generation is alive, "This war that has taken so many sons has spared mine. This age that has burned so many daughters has not burned mine." Rehana attempts to negotiate her dual roles as a loving mother and a freedom fighter, exhibiting the fluidity of her identity that also inspires her next generations.

The second novel *The Good Muslim* portrays the second generation - the two siblings Maya and Sohail who attempt to accommodate themselves in the post-liberation war interregnum. Maya, like her mother Rehana, works as a volunteer at the refugee camp with the "birangonas" (the raped women in the war). She returns to her home in Dhaka only to find her brother Sohail as a completely transformed person - a religious fanatic. While Sohail and Maya respectively represent religious fundamentalism and liberalism, they struggle to make their moral choices in the aftermath of the war. The central conflict in the novel is that different ideological positions bring discontentment and hostility in brother-sister relationships. The siblings' identity crisis carries the "crypt" (the hibernating part of the inner self) of their parent Rehana as their life-worlds merge with each other. In other words, the siblings' life-choices bear the testimony of their parents' decisions.

The third novel *Bones of Grace* is about the third-generation story of Maya's daughter Zubaida Haque. It is an example of transgenerational search for motherline as well. Zubaida is torn between her root and route - she can neither break free, nor fully accept her grandparents' history. Although she has not seen any war from her firsthand experience, she sets for digging her familial past because she still must "cobble together an identity." Zubaida as the third-generation woman holds the proof that even though she is a present-time modern woman with a diasporic identity, the past of her ancestors is still present in her life in many forms.

Tahmima Anam's trilogy explore how transgenerational history shapes the identity of an individual but ultimately it is the choices they make that matter. She explores the fact that in order to put up with the route, one needs to check on his/her root every now and then. Anam's trilogy exhibits a brilliant example of transgenerational search for identity. The novels also address how the subsequent generations inherit their previous generation's identity informed by the transmission of history.

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## "Winter Night Ghost Stories" Star Literature Year-End Contest

Winter nights are surely the best time for ghost stories or tales of spirits returning from the dead. This year, *The Daily Star* is preparing for some chilling winter night haunting.

Send your best story to enter the contest titled "Winter Night Ghost Stories 2022." We are looking for original and captivating stories with a scary atmosphere, creepy apparitions, strange phenomena and uncanny occurrences.

### POINTS TO REMEMBER

One writer should only send one story. Sending more than one story will result in disqualification.

The story should have a title and the name of the author.

Each entry must be original work and written in English

Word limit: 600-1000 words

Must be emailed as pdf to - dsliteditor@gmail.com (12 pt. Times New Roman or Arial, double spaced) with email subject line: **Winter Night Ghost**

By entering the contest, the writer is agreeing to let the work be used by *The Daily Star* in digital or print publication.

The best story will receive a monetary award of **Tk 10,000** (Ten thousand Taka)

Deadline to send the stories: 10:00 p.m., November 22, 2022 (Bangladesh time)

The top THREE stories selected by a judging panel will get published online sometime in December, and an award ceremony will be held at *The Daily Star*.

Please note that the staff of *The Daily Star* cannot enter the contest.



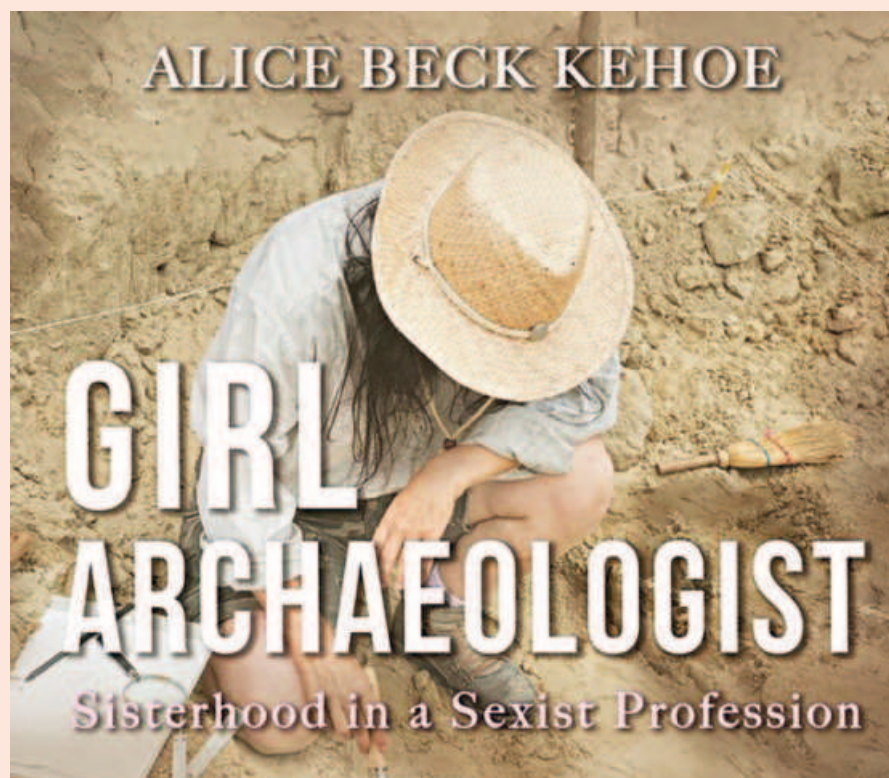
# Alice Beck Kehoe's *Girl Archaeologist* and gender relations in US society

MD. MAHMUDUL HASAN

Alice Beck Kehoe (1934-) is a family friend, and I have her permission to use her first name in short for this essay. After reading Alice's autobiography *Girl Archaeologist: Sisterhood in a Sexist Profession* (2022), Raudah, my wife, recommended the book to me with confidence that I would love it.

Given my training in feminist literature, the title of the book immediately sparked my enthusiasm. I read it voraciously and conceived an idea of using it for major research. The content of the book extends across a whole spectrum of issues including gender, class, race, Native Americans (First Nations), anti-Semitism, ethnocentrism, ethnohistory, pre-Columbian America, politics, colonialism, (the "moral imperative" of) postcolonialism and the decolonization of education. All these made it important for me to engage with the book. In what follows, I will focus mainly on its feminist aspect.

Women in the US today are increasingly visible in public life and have access to many opportunities to exploit their talents and capabilities in almost all sectors. But their condition was quite different in Alice's



**At Harvard, one male professor was reluctant to let Alice enroll in his course because she was pregnant. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 ended such discrimination on the basis of race, religion and sex.**

early days. For example, female education is now taken for granted, but Alice had to fight cultural myths and gender stereotypes to have a fair chance at reaching her full potential in educational attainment.

In *Girl Archaeologist*, she opens a window into an America of the pre-1964 Civil Rights Act where male privilege was quite pervasive. In the book, she shares her experiences as a Jewish girl, woman, wife, mother and academic.

During her high school days in the 1950s, being a good student and bicycling to school bore a double burden of stigma for girls. This constituted a reason why a male classmate was afraid to date Alice in those days, fearing negative social judgment. It was also not considered appropriate for girls to go hiking or enjoy ecstatic mountain views.

Alice's father adopted a "masculine judgment" and believed that women should be homemakers and therefore did not need formal education, as "the thinking" was considered men's job and manual household work, women's. He believed that women who went to college were sluts and whores.

Young women had to abandon their education upon marriage in order to run households, raise children and keep the family together so that their husbands could focus on work in academic and other fields. A generation earlier, Alice's mother stopped composing poetry "the year she married."

Interestingly, even though women's

education faced headwinds and their entry into prestigious sites of learning such as Harvard was denied, their intellectual abilities manifested perhaps in unrecognized ways. Many academic husbands had their wives at home write and publish for them to get tenure - a widely-condoned practice of plagiarism. Or, in academic administration, where a male Head of Department was not very capable of performing his job, his female assistant or secretary managed the department.

At an early age, Alice developed interest in anthropology and archaeology. Academic disciplines like these were off limits for women. Despite that, through a tortuous and obstacle-strewn path, Alice stands very high as an anthropologist and archaeologist. Her struggle bumped her up to the post of president of the Association of Senior Anthropologists, a branch of the American Anthropological Association. She held this position from 2003 to 2008.

In the autobiography, Alice narrates stories of hostility to women in academic settings. For instance, in 1958, in an

academic conference, she sat in a back row with her baby boy to listen to a presentation. Even though her son was asleep and didn't cause any disruption whatsoever, both of them were physically forced out of the conference venue.

Publications in her field were dominated by men who "hardly mentioned women" in their writings. In 1977, all these prompted Alice and her sister academics to organize an archaeological session and title it "The Hidden Hall." With passion and perseverance, she and other women professionals broke out of the cycle of sexism and overcame "thickets of disrespect" and "a lot of condescendence." Alice's lifetime has coincided with the transition from male to female numerical superiority in archaeology with implications for the modes and methods of research in the subject.

Among the many challenges women academics during Alice's career faced was husbands' refusal to share the responsibilities of childrearing and home management. In her family life, her husband "never did any housework or child care or cooking and precious little yardwork" (97). Conversely, Alice had to do "teaching, committee duties, cooking, grocery shopping, cleaning, laundry, yardwork, the PTA [Parent-Teacher Association], and the Cub Scouts pack" she and a female friend ran for their sons (97). This evasive attitude of husbands to working wives forced most women anthropologists to make the difficult choice between motherhood and career.

A common form of gender discrimination was the absence of recognition for women academics. Despite a Harvard PhD in anthropology under her name, Alice was considered only a woman and a wife, and not a professional, whereas her non-PhD husband "looked like an archaeologist" because of his gender.

Given that Alice had an archaeologist husband, one extremely well-meaning Harvard professor advised her against writing a dissertation in archaeology so that people would not presume that her husband did the research for her. Hence, despite her deeper interest and years-long experience in archaeology, she had to choose cultural anthropology for her doctoral research. The title of her memoir - *Girl Archaeologist* - marks her defiance of the notion that she could not become an

archaeologist independent of her husband.

Alice entered Harvard as a PhD candidate in 1957, but her enrolment was in the university's Radcliffe College. Two years later, in 1959, Harvard acknowledged female students, so Alice's degree was awarded by it. Opened in 1949 and established mainly for undergraduate library services, Harvard's Lamont Library denied entry to women "so that the men studying there would not be distracted" (63). The library opened its doors to women in 1967 and the official merger of Radcliffe College with Harvard University occurred in April 1999.

At Harvard, one male professor was reluctant to let Alice enroll in his course because she was pregnant. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 ended such discrimination on the basis of race, religion and sex. That was the year when Alice completed her PhD, so the landmark legislation didn't make any difference for her student life at Harvard.

Upon graduation, Alice continued to face gender discrimination. One of her employers refused to put her on tenure track on account of her gender. Finally, she became a professor at Marquette University in Milwaukee, but upon retirement she found out that she "had been paid nearly 30 percent less than a man with [her] years in rank and a good publication record" (89). Her gender has always coloured her career and somewhat overshadowed her achievements as an academic.

As Alice mentions in *Girl Archaeologist*, in the US, gender and race coalesced as a system for oppression. For example, she refers to a Columbia University law professor, the African American Patricia J. Williams, whose great-grandmother Sophie, aged 11, was purchased by a white man "to practice sex upon her in preparation for his marriage to a young lady" (xiv).

On a final note, *Girl Archaeologist* shows that the America of Alice's early life was not what it is like now. Interestingly, many aspects of her gendered experiences and the male domination she experienced resonate with South Asian cultural beliefs and gender norms, especially those described in the work of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880-1932). That itself is an interesting point for a separate study.

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