

PSYCHO-ANALYTICAL READING OF FEMALE CHARACTERS IN TAHMIMA ANAM'S *A GOLDEN AGE*

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Abstract

The Liberation War of Bangladesh is deeply submerged in the pool of gender-based politics, Bengali genocide, sexual violence, mass killings, rapes or forced impregnation, trauma, and extreme torture on women by the Pakistani army. The wartime circumstances depict that sexual violence, genocide rapes and atrocities on women are silently approved by the Government and Armed forces. It is a clever play of institutionalised patriarchal models of society and power politics to prove their supremacy over the others. Moreover, sexual violence proves to be an authoritative misogynist march by men to topple down women's honour and self-identity. While reading the situations and narratives of the Bangladesh war, the accounts of women's experiences are missing. Women's struggles are often kept away from the social platforms and historical records so that they feel their irrelevance and adopt permanent silence. The present paper is based on the novel '*A Golden Age*' by Tahmima Anam in the year 2007 that highlights the condition of women in a male-dominated society. It also analyses the hardships they went through, before and during the Bangladesh's Liberation War in the year 1971. Tahmima Anam is a British-Bangladeshi with a debut novel *A Golden Age* (2007). The novel represents a mother-daughter tale of the War of Independence of Bangladesh and is set during an exceptional martial law's period. *A Golden Age* is a resistance story told from the margins, from a domestic space known as "Shona." Through the women characters in the novel, Anam depicts the struggles, gender violence, and traumatic incidents women endure while still supporting the cause of the liberation movements in the country. But their contribution to nation-building and independence is neglected on personal, as well as, public platforms. Anam's writings have impactful characters who give a voice to the voiceless women of Bangladesh.

Keywords: Liberation War, Women, Tahmima Anam, Bangladesh, Violence

INTRODUCTION

Tahmima Anam's novel '*A Golden Age*' tells a new literary trend in the period that dealt with both history & literature. The debut novel of Tahmima Anam composed with Bangladesh's liberation war's reference that was occurred in the year 1971. With every probable historical & personal source, Tahmima Anam incorporated the war's pros and cons (Neary). Tahmima Anam produced the very present literature piece in fulfilled manner where the literary & history accomplishment are visible clearly with the application of that references. Anam selected various protagonist in the book with whom Tahmima Anam characterized the events of history into the form of live literary. She shows

how the Bangladeshi Independence war took place, how other coincidental occurrences happened through then East Pakistan, and how West Pakistani armies massacred our innocent people indiscriminately and so on. Though Anam concentrated more carefully on historical representation in her work, her novel contains many literary values which are developed through psychological transformation of all characters, vivid usage of language, reflection of racism and validity of style. *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 (SHAH).

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF 1971

Although the direct war among the East & West Pakistan spread by 25 March 1971 in reality, the liberty fight of Bangalee commenced from the year 1952 because of the West Pakistanis' tortures & brutal actions (Bangladesh Liberation War). Hence, Anam endeavoured the attention of readers not only by popping up reading sense, yet to scoop out the background history of nation from the start of nationalism's growth. Anam repeatedly referred various events of history from 1950's. Afterwards, Anam indicated some political events that showed how used to ignore the rights of politics.

Anam with the protagonist in the novel's time passage, she not only showed the awkward political disparities among those territories, yet also attempted to represent the actual images of other ways of discriminations that the Western Pakistanis practiced in exploiting the Bangalee's rights. Through ample amount, there were various kinds of production in the Eastern Pakistan. Yet after the cultivation of crops & raw materials, they were carried to the western part to feed them & to develop their industries. (Anam 38). Thus, gradually they were exploiting ourselves financially as well.

In addition, she elaborates how the Pakistanis of west looked down upon the Bangalees in the 1970's cyclone & the disastrous that effected the people. In clear Anam shows government's indifference as well as goes to cross her objective style & convey her anguish for the inhumane government's attitude. She goes on to say:

But in 1970, when the cyclone hit, it was as though everything came into focus. Rehana remembered the day Sohail and Maya had returned from the rescue operation: the red in their eyes as they told her how they had waited for the food trucks to come and watched as the water rose and the bodies washed up on the shore; how they had realized, with mounting panic, that the food wouldn't come because it had never been sent (Anam 39).

The passage above is a part of the novel 'A Golden Age' by Aman that shows the readers that through this the writer is expressing her own personal experiences in a mere fictional literature form, somewhat Aman entered into the real intention to represent the history of Bangladesh people to the novel readers that they

were not aware of the atrocities that took place in Bangladesh. Anam expressed her anguish that her own government did not respond during the time that the cyclone hit the nation in the year 1970. Sohail & Maya were the Bangalee people's representatives who were completely nervous. Here Aman goes on to uphold why the Bangladesh's war on liberation was necessary & the Bangalee's emancipation became the one & only option before people. Thereafter, she proceeded the background story of our motherland into a documentary of the birth of a nation.

ROLE OF WOMEN DURING WAR

Bengali woman has indeed made significant contribution to the rising of Bangladesh as a sovereign state. Liberation war is not fought only with guns. War heroes those women who have supported the valiant freedom fighters with food, shelter, fund; who have nursed the wounded & hid the weapons by risking their own lives. They also involved those who have willingly given their sons for the war, who have lost their loved ones & been subjected to sexual abuse & yet endured to voice out their stories (War of Liberation, The). In *A Golden Age* at the beginning of the war, Maya gives warfare training to her fellow girls at the campus of Dhaka University. Her training activities have been quoted in the following lines:

There was a line of girls, and Maya was in the front row, raising her knees higher than all the others and shouting louder than all the others. So this was what she'd been doing. She didn't look timid, or embarrassed that the gun she was holding was just a wooden stick. 'Hut-two-three-four! Hut! Hut!

Hut!' she shouted (Anam 101).

A women freedom fighter who reports in the Kolkata's refugee camp was Maya (Anam 144). The report of Maya was published in newspapers as a writing weapon against Western Pakistan. In her reports in the newspaper, she described the Pakistani army's heinous acts. The writings of Aman gained reactions of foreign behalf of independence war.

The mother of Sohail & Maya was Rehana Haque who did not permit Sohail & Maya to the war at first. Yet, Rehana Haque realized that her

children must join the war in order to safeguard the country from the Pakistan's dictatorship by the passage of time. In the house named Shona, Rehana Haque helped the friend's of Maya & Sohail to hide weapons & ammunitions in the ground. In the season of winter, Maya & Rehana collected old clothes & made blankets & Kathas for the freedom fighters at the war time (Anam 103). In her house, Rehana nursed a Major who was wounded operation time in Dhaka against the army of Pakistan (Anam 155). With the careful nursing of Rehana, major gets back to normal life. Hence, in the favour of independence war, Rehana played a significant role in participating different kinds of helpful activities for the freedom fighter. So Rehana is a crucial protagonist in Tahmima Anam's *A Golden Age* who represents any typical real woman.

A GOLDEN AGE

Tahmima Anam's debut novel "A Golden Age," tells us the story about a young Muslim widow, Rehana Haque who belongs to an aristocratic family in Calcutta. However, due to some economic failures, her family loses its wealth. Rehana enters into an arranged marriage with a businessman from Dhaka. She is living happily with her husband Iqbal and two children—Maya and Sohail. But soon this happiness turns into an extensive phase of misfortunes and grief. Iqbal dies due to sudden cardiac arrest leaving the responsibility of two kids on Rehana. He does not leave any riches or wealth on which the family can sustain after losing their only breadwinner. Soon after the death of Iqbal, his rich brother, Faiz, files a court case for the custody of children. Rehana has no money to fight the case or bribe the judge to win the guardianship of Maya and Sohail. Faiz wins the case and the temporary custody of children is given to him. He takes away Rehana's children to Lahore and leaves her behind. Rehana struggles to attain financial stability and arrange optimum funds to build a new house which can be used as a rented property to get a regular income. Some opportunists try to take advantage of her innocence and circumstances but she fights through every odd situation like a true warrior. Rehana is able to get back her children to Dhaka after building a new house, Shona, and starts earning money by renting it out to the Senguptas. Over time, she becomes emotionally

weak and vulnerable to the thought of losing her children again. After fighting desperately for her children, another force that threatens her is the growing violence between the East and West Pakistan. Maya and Sohail are influenced by revolutionary ideas and explicitly support the Bengali uprising against the biased Pakistani government. The political upheavals in the country silently hamper the personal life of Rehana and her children. Sohail leaves his gentle demeanour and an inherent love for Urdu poetry behind and completely associates himself with the guerrilla operations. Maya adorns the radical fervour and gives away all her coloured clothes. She wears white saris and participates in student rallies, marches and meetings against the discriminatory attitude of the government towards the Bengali people. Rehana has a consistent fear of losing her children due to their dedication towards Bengali liberation. She also tries to unite herself with the Bengali identity by providing a helping hand to the revolutionaries, refugees and guerrilla operations.

The call for independence lights a spirit of hope in the Bengali people but also increases the fear of violence against them by the military. To suppress the revolutionary activities, the Pakistani army enters the city with huge tanks and targets the university campus. They kill innocent people on the streets and impose curfew in the cities. The violence on the Bengali people does not end rather "the attack on Dhaka was only the beginning" (Anam 84). The military targets "one district after another, leaving behind a trail of burning villages" (Anam 84) and wailing families. Many young boys run away from their homes "to join the resistance" against the Pakistani government. There are many refugees who leave the cities to find safer places in their villages. The Senguptas decide to leave Shona and head towards their village in the interiors of East Pakistan.

Maya's best friend, Sharmeen, is raped and killed during this period. Maya is shattered and Rehana is devastated. This incident changes the lives of Rehana, Maya, and Sohail. Maya finds it difficult to get over the incident and leaves for Calcutta to become a writer in a magazine. She decides to use the power of the pen to tell the world about the brutal politics of West Pakistan and the genocide of Bengali people. On the other hand, Sohail establishes Shona as the headquarters of the guerrilla operations in

Dhaka and hides weapons there. He also keeps an injured fellow-revolutionary, Major, in the dingy rooms of Shona. Rehana finds a friend in Major and nurses him with care and affection. For Rehana, Major is an embodiment of Bangladesh and she builds a bond of love and affection with him and shares her deep dark secrets with him. Soon, Rehana leaves Dhaka for her safety and joins Maya in Calcutta. She visits the refugee camps at Salt Lake and volunteers to help people there. She comes across many women who have lost their psychological balance due to the horrific crimes committed on them. At the camp, she runs into Mrs Sengupta – her tenant from Shona who is in a terrible state and a testament of the brutal violence that she had endured. After some time, Rehana returns to Dhaka with Maya and Sohail at a time when the situation is much worse. Sohail plans guerrilla attacks on the Pakistani army. Soon, the army finds out about Sohail and look for him everywhere. To save the revolution, Major steps in and tells the army that he is Sohail and faces the consequences. Over time, with assistance from the Indian armed forces, the liberation movement gathers steam and Bangladesh breathes freedom. While Rehana is relieved that the war spared her children, she is also engulfed in grief thinking about the torture, rapes, and genocides in Bangladesh.

Anam gives her characters an active spark to become participants of struggle, not mere interpreters. Anam tries to depict her protagonist, Mrs. Rehana Haque as an archetype of a powerful woman who fights all odds in her life to save her children from inconvenience and trouble. Besides being a part of the conventional society, Rehana carries an image of a ‘New Woman’ in war narratives. After the sudden loss of her husband, Rehana battles the preconceived notions of society where a widow has no identity without her husband. In patriarchal societies, widowhood is considered painful, inauspicious and humiliating for a woman. Rehana endures humiliation, taunts, indifference, and misbehaviour even at the hands of her relatives. She suffers psychological abuse at the hands of society. She loses her identity and respect due to the death of her husband. In fact, “Even in modern family setup widowhood, and its accompanying miserable existence, is considered as atonement for some sin committed earlier. That is why often a widow’s life is made disconsolate by her inlaws....She is meted out

harsh treatment and often held responsible for her husband’s death” (Reddy 28). However, her sufferings don’t end here. She fights a legal battle against her brother-in-law who wants the custody of her children. The judiciary and legal courts find Rehana incapable of raising her children and awards custody to her brother-in-law. Male supremacy has been prevalent throughout history. As Barlas explains, “Patriarchy is a historically specific mode of rule of fathers that, in its religious and traditional forms, assumes a real as well as symbolic continuum between the ‘Father/fathers’; that is, between a patriarchalized view of God as Father/male, and a theory of father-right, extending to the husband’s claim to rule over his wife and children” (Barlas 12). Rehana is a strong woman who fights all odds and manages to build her house, get tenants, and finally get her children back to Dhaka.

Anam has done a wonderful job of framing the story in a manner that the microcosm of Rehana’s family depicts the macrocosm of the tumultuous times of the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971. In a conversation with Lynn Neary, Anam says, “I thought I would write a sort of epic,” which holds “a very muscular narrative that had battle scenes and political rallies and all the sort of big moments that you see in war novels. But actually, when I sat down to write, I ended up really thinking about what it was like for ordinary people to survive that war” (Neary 1). In the novel, Rehana’s physical appearance has been shown similar or symbolic to the situation of Bangladesh.

At thirty-eight, Rehana’s body had finally caught up with history. People who did not know used to assume she was a student, or that she was unmarried because she didn’t wear a wedding ring or a single piece of gold jewellery, but no longer. She had gained a little weight, and she enjoyed the curve of her belly, the slight effort of movement, an awareness of breath and bone. Her new, comfortable shape came with new imperfections: the bowed line between nose and chin, the slight shadow above her lip, the thickening of her waist and ankles. All fortunate developments of Rehana, as they signified the battle-weary body of a woman who has passed years in the efforts to raise her children. (Anam 58)

Rehana carries a diasporic identity and often feels nostalgic. She is the spokesperson for

Anam who carries similar diasporic identity and longing for her home country. Rehana shares:

Ambiguous feelings about the country she had adopted. She spoke, with fluency, the Urdu of the enemy. She was unable to pretend, as she saw so many others doing, that she could replace the mixed tongue with a pure Bengali one so that the Muslim salutation *As-Salaam Alaikum* was replaced by the neutral *Adaab*, or even *Namoshkar*, the Hindu greeting. Rehana's tongue was too confused for these changes. She could not give up her love of Urdu, its lyrical lilt, its double meanings, its furrowed beat. (Anam 55)

As the story proceeds, the homecoming of Rehana's children coincides with the revolutionary activities in Bangladesh. Like any mother, Rehana wants her children to stay away from all dangers. While initially, Rehana doesn't have the revolutionary zeal like her children, slowly she starts agreeing with the revolution. Soon, Sohail joins the Resistance and actively participates in the freedom struggle and Maya aligns with the communist party. Her brief encounter with Major, helps her embrace her country wholeheartedly. She supports her kids through their activities despite being worried about their safety. In the latter part of the story, when Rehana goes to Calcutta and starts helping people at relief camps, she witnesses the horror that women are living through due to the atrocities committed on them during the revolution. She helps them get through the horror and eventually returns to Bangladesh.

Anam has also done a good job describing Muslim women who despite being confined to the premises of their homes found ways to connect with the larger issues of society. Some even became active participants in the struggle for freedom. She beautifully describes how political agendas disrupt personal lives blurring the line between political and personal issues. Rehana, who never thought about being a part of Bangladesh's freedom struggle, eventually ended helping revolutionaries and battered women in relief camps. Rehana's character is an embodiment of the silent suffering that women go through in a patriarchal society.

Talking about strong women, Maya's character cannot be ignored. Maya is educated, free-willed, and liberal in her thoughts and actions. She believes in making the world a better place

by each one contributing towards it. Maya dreams of a free Bangladesh. She is devastated when her friend Sharmeen is reported missing. The political upheavals and instability finally enter the microcosm of Rehana's family. However, being a strong woman, Maya turns this loss into motivation. When the guerrilla activities from 'Shona' commences, Maya starts helping the revolutionaries write press releases. Eventually, when Maya finds out that Sharmeen was brutally raped, became pregnant, and lost her life at the cantonment hospital, she becomes furious. She decides to leave Dhaka and go to Calcutta since she cannot imagine forgiving the people who had killed her dear friend. Calcutta seems like a more liberal place to work and she decides to join a magazine writing press statements. She wants to tell the world about the atrocities committed by the Pakistani army in Bangladesh particularly women. She also visits the relief camps at Salt Lake to help people in distress. When the situation worsens in Dhaka, Rehana comes to visit her in Calcutta. Together, they help many distressed women in relief camps before returning to Bangladesh.

During the Liberation War, Pakistani soldiers rape and kill thousands of women. These crimes were causing major public outrage but that didn't stop the army from committing crimes against women. The soldiers would abduct women at night and drag them to army camps where they were raped for days and months. During this time, many women got pregnant and even lost their lives. Once Bangladesh got its independence, there was a huge population of rape survivors in the country. "Six days after the end of the war, the new Bangladeshi government publicly designated any woman raped in the war a *Birangona* (a brave or courageous woman; the Bangladeshi state uses the term to mean 'war-heroine') as an attempt to reduce their social ostracism" ("History and the *Birangona*"). But people from their own society did not accept them. Their own families did not offer them space in their homes. The women survivors feel, "despite the 'double violence' they experienced—arrest and torture for fighting for freedom and rape because of their gender—there are no commemorative symbols to remind the nation of women's sacrifices and contributions on behalf of national freedom" (Saikia 105). Anam depicts the plight of women who were warriors of war and turned into victims of sexual violence through Sharmeen's character. Many

of these women were punished for standing up against the Pakistani army and their ruthless laws. Despite having paid an unbearable price for loyalty to their country, their own male partners refused to accept them and they never got their respect back. While men survivors were called heroes of the war and revered for their brave participation, women did not get their deserving position.

There are several other female characters in Anam's novel like Rehana's neighbour, Mrs. Chowdhury and her daughter Silvi. However, Anam provides us with a glimpse of the Bangladesh Liberation War, 1971 through the eyes of Rehana's family. In the novel, several women characters project that despite struggling immensely, they stand nowhere in front of men. Like men, women also put in their best efforts and shouldered their responsibilities for their country. However, the patriarchal mindset never allowed women to be liberated from being put under the lens of judgement and scrutiny. Even in their own country, women lack the feeling of belonging and are made to feel like an 'outsider'.

CONCLUSION

The novel *A Golden Age* criticizes the male-dominated society which floods women's lives with sufferings and miseries, especially during wars. Tahmima Anam tries to voice the suppressed voices and experiences of Bengali women during the Liberation War in Bangladesh. She exposes the rigid social norms and beliefs that force women into the peripheral regions of society and neglect their representation in historical records. She represents female emotions and struggles during war; crises which often go neglected. The evil wars and patriarchy try to supersede women's honour by uprooting them savagely so that they lose the confidence to confront male supremacy. The women are caged in the pre-defined moral codes, social norms and cultural beliefs that lay impediments in creating an individual identity for them. Women are objectified and made to feel like 'Other' or an outsider in her own family and homeland. Anam has pointed out the actions of the Pakistani Army towards Bengali women as the outbreak of misogynist ideas and patriarchal strategy to torture women. No doubt this historical fiction revealed the suppressed emotions of women and

its psychological effects. However, it should be worthy of being noted that the fiction opened the layers of discussion and from this we have many things to learn and to reshape our future.

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