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Relocating Women's Role in War: Rereading Tahmima Anam's *A Golden Age*

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Abstract:

Women had always been portrayed as exploited figures in the war history where the brutality of war and the suffering of nation are measured with the number of victimised and raped women of that particular nation. Such traditional representation of the exploitation of women's body in history has been deconstructed by Bangladeshi diasporic novelist Tahmima Anam in her debut novel *A Golden Age* (2007). Anam emerges as a native writer from the shell of her diasporic identity while dealing with the suffering of Bangladeshi people in the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War against Pakistan turning three million people dead, thirty thousand women brutally raped and millions others migrated. Rehana, a spirited widow based on Anam's grandmother, is born and brought up in Calcutta, married and widowed in Karachi and struggles a lot throughout the novel as a refugee in West Bengal to get the legal custody of her children as well as to establish her own social identity. Rehana suppresses her motherly affection and inspires her son Sohail and daughter Maya to fulfill their mission of liberating Bangladesh. Her courage, tolerance, intelligence, perseverance and self-respect deconstruct the traditional passive role of a woman in a colonised nation.

Keywords: war literature, partition, Bangladesh liberation, war and gender, migration

A Golden Age (2007) is the debut novel of Bangladeshi diasporic writer Tahmima Anam dealing with the passionate story of a mother during the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971. With her protagonist Mrs Rehana Haque, a middle aged widow, Anam has relocated the traditional role of women as exploited, tortured, raped, submissive and passive in the war history. Her heroin is the representative of the "New Women" in the war narratives. Unlike the war victims, she is active, liberal, brave and courageous woman who not only defies the men controlled situations to live in it, but also shows the way for her contemporary women how to cope with the double colonisation faced by every woman in their home and the society. Her role in getting back her children from the custody of their uncle and aunt as well as inspiring them to liberate Bangladesh is truly inspiring and unconventional. Despite being displaced from her abode for several times, she always cherishes the hope to get a country of their own irrespective

of their multiple culture, religion and even language. Tahmima's handling of both history and fiction is truly artistic and this novel has brought her several acclaims. The novel received the award of best debut novel in the commonwealth writers' prize in 2008. The book was also nominated for the prestigious Guardian's first Book award in 2007. The novel brings Bangladesh into the focus of global readership. Amy Finnerty writes in the introductory part of "An Interview with Tahmima Anam"

By framing epic geopolitics on this human scale, Anam makes them accessible to readers from Chicago to Dublin who might otherwise be intimidated by the political and social intricacies of a foreign setting...Anam places readers in her characters' parlours and kitchens, bedrooms and residential enclaves— and inside their heads: the aroma of food steaming on the stove; the heavy premonition of rain; a breeze that finds its way into the folds of a sari. (Finnerty 43)

The first issue of Anam's Bengal Trilogy, *A Golden Age* is a fictionalised history that tells the story of Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971 when India actively helped and patronised Bangladesh against Pakistan. The history is represented alongside the story of love, compassion and the survival of a family. Tahmima has brought many historical incidents throughout her novel aftermath of partition in the Indian subcontinent, though it is human relationship rather than history that gets much priority in her novel. The novel tells the story of the survival of a mother between 1959 to 1971. Sometimes the historical facts seem to be disconnected as Tahmima has only a second hand experience of war and her diasporic identity somehow has restricted her to give much priority on history. But the incidents come in flashes ranging from Mujib's victory in general election, announcement of Bangladesh's Independence, nine months' freedom struggle, loss of three millions lives, the stories of two lakhs rape victims and so on. We get some insights of the brutalities of West Pakistanis against the East through the words of Rehana's son Sohail who is going to emerge as a true revolutionary figure.

If you knew anything about the country you would know that West Pakistan is bleeding us out. We earn most of the foreign exchange. We grow the rice, we make the jute, and yet we get nothing—no schools, no hospitals, no army. We can't even speak our own bloody language! (Anam 13)

Anam has shown how the term "Double Colonisation" can not only be shown to portray the condition of third world women, Bangladesh is a nation having faced double colonisation, under the British rule before the partition and under the Pakistani rule after the partition. The West Pakistani rulers were by no means less than that of the colonial masters and in some of the cases, their brutalities had gone beyond the limit of the previous British colonial masters.

Ever since '48, the Pakistani authorities had ruled the eastern wing of the country like a colony. First they tried to force everyone to speak Urdu instead of Bengali. They took the

jute money from Bengal and spent it on factories in Karachi and Islamabad. One general after another made promises they had no intention of keeping. The Dhaka University students had been involved in the protests from the very beginning. (Anam 17)

Migration, displacement and the crisis of identity are some postcolonial formulations which are perfectly applied in Anam's novel through her protagonist. Rehana is a character of displaced identity and throughout the novel she suffers from identity crisis at different levels. She was born in an aristocratic family in Calcutta in undivided India. In her family she felt herself as an alien as she could not tolerate her father's taste of British aristocracy, music and culture. After her father's death she had to surrender into an arranged marriage in which she did not have any choice. But Rehana's married life with Iqbal in Dhaka seems to be happy and liberal; she started to feel freedom which she could never taste in her parental home. But the fortune does not favour her and she becomes widow at a very early age. The troublesome nation gets mingled with the unprotected single woman in a patriarchal society; both start to face severe threats from everywhere. She lost custody of her children to Faiz, her brother-in-law and his barren wife. They tactfully gained the rights of Rehana's children only on the accusation that a single woman in this society cannot provide better upbringing for her children. Rehana had to accept her fate to send her children away:

... she would find a way to overcome her grief, her poverty, her youth; she would find a way to love them all alone. But no one had believed her, and in a few weeks they would travel across the continent, and she didn't know when she would ever see them again. (Anam xvi)

Anam has relocated the place of third world women through her protagonist who possesses the power of resistance unknown to women of her age to live alone in a restricted society. The concept of "Single Mother", which is trending in present days as an outcome of women's power of resistance, is applied by Anam in her novel in the settings of 1971. In *A Golden Age*, Rehana becomes alone after her husband's accidental death and faces several threats mentally and physically. But unlike others of her age she is not a woman to give up. She continues her attempts how to regain the custody of her children though the social and political environment never favours her. Even the judicial system also seems to be unfavourable for a struggling woman. No one is ready to believe that she can provide a better future for her children alone. She strives a lot to make a better home which would at least resolve her identify crisis along with her children in that society. She sells her valuables and applies for a loan. But this is not a country for the single woman, she starts to realise the bitter truth more evidently. The Bank personnel takes advantage of her early widowhood and tries to seduce her against a bank loan. But in every case Rehana proves to be brave and unconventional. She fights alone to regain her right over her children just like she protects herself alone from the physical threat of the bank employee just with a sharp pen nip. She proves in every case that women do not need sympathy from men; they have enough courage to fight alone for their own survival.

Humanity prevails to be the only religion in Anam's novel to put an end to the genocide and to form a nation with love, affection and empathy instead of religious codes and conducts. Rehana is the character for whom there can be no greater religion than humanism. She is religious from her mind, prays Namaz and teaches her children Islamic codes and conducts. But she always tries to impose humanity in her loving children and hence "She had not taught them the proper lessons about Jannat and the afterlife." (Anam XIV) Religion does never kill her logical sensibility and the sense of humanity. During the troublesome period of Bangladesh Liberation War, she keeps Hindu tenants Mr. and Mrs. Sengupta in her home Shona. She is habituated with the public gathering with Muslims as well as Hindus without any discrimination. She enjoys an unrestricted life when it comes the matter of socialisation. She drinks whisky, loves gathering, goes to watch Cleopatra in theatre and Cricket match in the stadium with her children and Hindu tenants. Her husband was also liberal and inspired Rehana to lead her life upon her own motif. But Rehana never proves to be disloyal with her relationship with her husband, even when her husband deceased leaving her in a very early age. Though everyone inspired her to get married again, she could never think so. Getting custody of her children and creating a better future for them has remained her only motto throughout the novel. She could never take risk of bringing an unknown man into the organised life of them. "It was too risky. It could too easily go wrong. And the thought that some man might be cruel to her children was enough to make the bile rise in her throat." (Anam 08)

Rehana is above all a loving mother who can sacrifice the smallest portion of her life for the sake of happiness for her children. Life became so hard when she lost her husband in an accident and it became intolerable when she lost the custody of her children to Faiz against the accusation that she does not have the proper capability to provide security for her children. Unlike most other women she remained determined and never surrendered to the situation. She did never lose her hope to get back the custody of her children. She sticks to the situation after her husband's death, tolerates the life of widowhood, protects herself from the threats of being widow and single women in a patriarchal society, loses her fortunes but still continues to make a better shelter for her children. She sells the Vauxhall, her husband's favourite car, sells her jewellery and even the memories of her father "to bring the children back, raise them, keep them in ribbons and socks and uniforms." (Anam 19) At last she builds a house on her husband's land and names it as "Shona" where she takes her children back from the custody of her brother-in-law. She feels it to be a mark of victory which she celebrates every year with grand party with the people of her neighbourhood. Her living place "Shona" becomes the abode of love, compassion and happiness.

Life does not have any place to think of personal happiness most specifically during the war and insurgency. Rehana is again defeated here as her lifelong struggle to get back her children proves to be fruitless when Sohail and Maya express their wishes to actively participate into the Bangladesh Liberation War. Sohail participates in the freedom movement directly and Maya goes to West Bengal to help the refugee camps where almost 1 million Bangladeshi

refugees take shelter. Rehana finds no way without supporting her children as the fate of Bangladesh seems to her the fate of her own children.

Tahmima Anam has employed several symbolical devices in her novel and the most important symbol is Rehana herself. Rehana symbolically emerges as the whole nation as a motherly figure during the war time. She is an unusual war heroin who sacrifices a lot to form Bangladesh as a nation and Bengal as a national language against Urdu which is her own mother tongue, the language of the enemy. She utilises her skill of Urdu to privilege the Bengali freedom fighters against the Urdu speaking West Pakistani armies. She never thinks that she may be tortured and raped; her only motto is to support her sons to form a nation where they will have their own definite identity. Now she is not only the mother of Sohail, but also the mother of every freedom fighter. She plays tricks on Pakistani armies to free Sabir, the husband of his son's beloved. The liberation of the country seems to her a sacred duty beyond the personal relationship and personal revenge. She even moves to Calcutta to help her daughter in the refugee camps sheltered by millions of Bangladeshi people.

Motherhood emerges in a broader sense in *A Golden Age* which portrays Rehana's motherhood beyond biological bonding and personal affections. Rehana turns to be a "New Woman" free from the notion of personal love, compassion and sympathy for her children when she comes under the influence of the Major who takes shelter in her house for a certain period during the liberation war. The Major incites the sense of universal motherhood into the mind of Rehana who starts to feel that she should no more think only about Maya and Sohail; it is her sacred duty to emerge as a saviour for the other sons and daughters also. It is the Major to whom Rehana can share the deepest thought of her mind, her past and her cherished love for her children. Gradually Rehana starts to feel love for the Major who sacrifices his life to save the nation ensuring a better future for all the sons and daughters of Rehana. The epistolary form of the novel shows how Rehana had previously sheltered upon her husband for her courage. She paid frequent visits to the grave of her husband who deserted her in a very critical situation. Now she can feel the true love that will never desert her. It is the love for humanity that enables Rehana to fight with all her physical, mental and psychological attributions. During her service for the nation, she is gradually forgetting her task to visit her deceased husband's grave. She gives away the saris which she got as gifts of love from her husband. Christine Pyle writes in her article "Symbolism in *A Golden Age*: Rehana as Bangladesh"

She disassembled the saris, converted them into blankets, and sent them to cover revolutionary soldiers. With this gift to the liberation army, Rehana demonstrated a significant transfer of love and authority. Moving out from the shadow of Iqbal's death, the widow was initiating a courtship with her nation. (4)

Rehana's character is not that of a superwoman, she is woman of blood and flesh and she falls in love with the Major. Rehana's Indian sensitivity provokes her to confess her love for the Major to her deceased husband as merely a "bittersweet episode". "Dear husband, the war will

end today” (Anam 269), the novel ends with the optimistic note of the formation of new nation after nine month’s struggle. Bangladesh becomes independent after a bloody episode and lots of sacrifices of lives, chastity, personal bonding, love and memory. Rehana shows how the selfless love conquers all even during the period of great crisis. The nation is built of love and the novel ends with a great family re-union. “Today I have come here to tell you how we survive... I know what I have done. This war takes away so many boys only my son survives. This time so many girls burn only my girl left.” (Anam 273-274)

Diasporic identity does not become a hindrance for Tahmima Anam in *A Golden Age* to portray the crisis of Bangladeshi people during the Bangladesh Liberation War. Despite being a second generation diasporic writer, Tahmima and her family share a strong connection with Bangladesh’s history and the nation’s survival. Her parents participated in the liberation campaign directly. Her grandmother nourished her with necessary information through telling her the stories of 1971 when she helped the war convicts to hide in her home and provided them weapons for fighting. In an interview with the Guardian, Anam confessed “I have a complicated relationship with Bangladesh” (The Guardian, 13 May 2016). She says that the country’s struggle has endowed her mind with a lot of creative energy and she feels from her heart when the country undergoes any troublesome moment. “I’ve come to accept it’s a long distance love affair,” she says in the same interview. The concept of post-memory is apt for Tahmima who has gained the insight about the history of partition and aftermath in the Indian subcontinent mostly from her grandmother portrayed through the character of Rehana. Tahmima’s writing is full of writer’s passionate love for the history and culture of her root. The novelist’s father, who works as an editor of a reputed Bangladeshi English newspaper, continuously helps her to gain insight about the real struggle of the nation. She took up Bangladesh Liberation War as the subject of her research and she went for interviewing hundreds of freedom fighters before she could proceed for writing about Bangladesh’s struggle. Hence, Tahmima Anam is a postcolonial feminist in the true sense as she has portrayed the real condition of the women of Indian subcontinent after the partition not as an onlooker but from the real experience of the survivors. Lynn Neary writes about the gap between diasporic identity and the sense of native history in the article in the *Morning Edition*:

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. (Neary)

In *A Golden Age*, Tahmima Anam has brought the portrait of an unconventional war heroin who is free from the obligation of being exploited by the enemies. Rehana’s inspiring role as a saviour in this novel relocates the women’s role in the war history which only represents the

women as figure without any individual entity. The novel also deconstructs the conventional myth that women should always submit their chastity to the atrocities of men to gain freedom for the nation. At the end of the novel, Rehana fully comes out from the sphere of biological bonding of a woman and sets herself apart from the domestic sphere. She is no more the biological mother of her children; she emerges as the universal mother free from the womanly weakness. Her liberal mind, sense of patriotism and her sense of duty for the doomed nation turn her to be the mother of every child of *Muktibahini*. “But now she was something else—a mother, yes, but not just of children. Mother of a different sort”(140). Rehana’s struggle provides the generation a better insight about the women who had silently sacrificed for the nation but their courage had never come in the light of history. Women’s individual courage has never been counted as the man made history always prefers to represent women as raped, exploited and victimised to prove themselves as superior sex.

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