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Negotiating Identities: An Intersection between Diaspora and Nationalism in Tahmima Anam's *A Golden Age*

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Abstract:

This research paper investigates the fictional representation of the Bangladesh Liberation War in Tahmima Anam's *A Golden Age*. The study approaches the narrative through a diasporic lens, considering the impact of cross-cultural exchange and nostalgic yearning for a homeland. The paper examines the aftermath of the war, which left deep wounds and trauma from the genocide and rape committed by the Pakistan army. The analysis focuses on the intersection of nation and sexual politics, represented through the struggle of the protagonist, Rehana, as she navigates motherhood and the usurpation of her nation by patriarchy. The research aims to uncover the silenced and regimented voices that emerge from a diasporic perspective, illuminating the aftermath of the Bangladesh Liberation War and its lasting impact on individuals and communities. The findings of this study contribute to a deeper understanding of the representation of historical trauma in South Asian diasporic literature.

Keywords: Diaspora, genocide, trauma, narrative, rape, sexual politics.

A Golden Age by Tahmima Anam is a fictional work that tells the story of the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War from the perspective of a diasporic Bangladeshi woman named Rehana Haque. This narrative explores the socio-political upheavals of the war and delves into the personal space of the female protagonist, capturing her emotions and the sense of turmoil she experiences. The story weaves together the chaos of the Bangladesh liberation war with a poignant depiction of the struggles faced by those living in Bangladesh during the time of revolution. Rehana, who was not originally from Bangladesh, had settled there after marrying her husband Iqbal, who died at a young age, leaving her to fend for herself. Her Bihari origin initially creates a stark contrast with the Bengali nationalist ideology, and her love for the Bengali language and culture helps her understand the challenges faced by East Pakistan during the Liberation War. As Cara Cilano observes, Rehana's identity as a *muhajir* is a crucial aspect of the story, but her *muhajir* identity does not support the creation of Pakistani nationalist myths

or represent any exclusion or displacement from the nation. Instead, Rehana's *muhajir* identity is gradually forgotten as she and her children become more entrenched in another nationalistic narrative. However, with the arrival of war in March 1971, Rehana becomes more and more engrossed and dedicated in creating a resistance to the West Pakistani rule, which lasts until December 1971. (122)

Rehana's story is rooted in her memories of growing up in Calcutta and how her life transformed after moving to Bangladesh. As a widowed woman, she faced challenges in surviving in East Pakistan and sought financial stability to secure a better future, leading her to become a strong, self-reliant individual. She is the mother of two children, and the novel begins with her struggle to regain custody of her children from her brother-in-law Faiz. In her despair, she found the courage to build a house of her own, which she named "Shona" (golden), and rented it to a Hindu tenant, Mr. Sengupta, despite opposition from her in-laws and sisters. She was eventually able to raise enough money to reclaim her children and bring them back to Bangladesh from Karachi. Shona became a place of refuge for them during the tumultuous events of East Pakistan, highlighting the struggle between one's identity in a home-land and host-land.

The house was nearly ten years old now and a little faded. Ten monsoons had softened its edges and drawn meandering, old-age seams into the walls. [...] It was there to remind her of what she had lost and what she had won. And how much the victory had cost. That is why she had named it Shona, gold. It wasn't just because of what it had taken to build the house, but for all the precious things she wanted never to lose again. (Anam, 18-19)

The name Shona holds significance in the novel *A Golden Age*, marking the start of a new era filled with golden aspirations. The name echoes Rabindranath Tagore's song "Amar Shonar Bangla," which unites all Bengalis through its lyrics "My golden Bengal, how I adore you." Anam's choice of the name Shona reflects her love for her motherland, as "Amar Shonar Bangla" is also the national anthem of Bangladesh. Patriarchy exerts a dual control of displacement and isolation, with Shona stabilising Rehana's previously disrupted identity within a patriarchal society. This refers to Rehana's relocated identity as a widow and her endeavours to restore it in an environment under constant observation.

Despite the lack of state-run surveillance, the catastrophic displacement caused by the partition was still a physical and psychological trauma. The large influx and outflow of people

belonging to the same language group resulted in a displacement of unimaginable scale. This type of displacement occurs during the war and the systematic destruction that follows ethnic conflict (Bagchi 25). Anam depicts Rehana as a woman whose anxieties drive her inner thoughts and emotions. She primarily portrays her as a responsible mother who will do anything to guarantee the safety of her children. This novel can be viewed as a diasporic work where Anam has woven in her fears and concerns about the nation and its inhabitants. Antara Chatterjee notes how Anam's representation of the liberation war and the creation of the nation in her fiction can be considered an expression of transgenerational memory, demonstrating how the "homeland" endures and is perpetuated in the memories of generations of people connected to that place.

Anam aims to depict Bangladesh as a developing independent nation breaking away from its ties to West Pakistan. *A Golden Age* recounts Bangladesh's fight for independence from Pakistan and Rehana's role in it. The partition of 1947 resulted in new borders dividing the Indian subcontinent, separating West Pakistan and East Pakistan. The division caused distress to India, and Anam's novel portrays East Pakistan's effort to break free from West Pakistan. This struggle leads to displacement and highlights the pain of being separated from the motherland. Rehana's displacement and her struggles as a mother in Bangladesh can be viewed as a manifestation of the turmoil faced by war victims trying to protect their children in the face of nationalism. Her portrayal as a mother figure reinforces the stereotypical image of the nation as a mother and explores the politically charged site of contention. In nationalist discourse, women hold a crucial position in the representation and building of the nation-state, which is frequently revered as a female entity, particularly as a mother, with imagery of innocence, respect, and caretaking. However, this association also leaves their bodies open to being perceived as the "outsider" or the "other" (Ashfaq 31). The account of the Liberation War includes factual accounts of mass killings and extermination. The use of an omniscient narrative approach in the novel focuses on Rehana's experiences and is limited to her actions. Anam endeavours to highlight the nationalist spirit that is remarkably reflected in Rehana's voice when she comprehends her nationalist zeal. This was when Bengali nationalist sentiment became highly prevalent, distinguishing Bengali nationalism from Bangladeshi nationalism with slogans such as "Joy Bangla" (victory of Bengal).

By the end she found herself shouting Joy Bangla, Joy Bangla, Joy Bangla with the crowd, the rhythm of her words chiming with the hard thump of her chest, and she

recognised, at once, the incendiary thrill of shouting. [...] Rehana suddenly felt young, plunged into a world of limitless possibility. (Anam 58)

The strong nationalist sentiment expressed in Rehana's voice forms a transnational discourse that creates a space for contestation, as Michel Foucault describes as "a simultaneously mythic and real contestation of the space in which we live." (Foucault, 3) The slogans used by the *Mukti Bahini* in the Liberation war embody the Bengali identity and demonstrate how, despite religious differences, Bengalis were deeply concerned about their ethnic identity within a nation. This reflects a sense of community that is comfortable exercising a set of ethnocultural values and incorporating their linguistic strengths. Cultural hybridity protects the dispersed identity of people living in East Pakistan, such as Rehana, Sohail, Maya, and Silvi, who exist on the border of two territories. The concept of dual territoriality focuses on the division between geographic and psychological entities, including the split between hostland and homeland, as exemplars aim to understand diasporic subjects, cultures, and aesthetic effects in terms of this subjective division (Mishra 16). Steven Vertovec, in his book *Three Meanings of Diaspora*, highlights the relationship between globally dispersed yet collectively homogeneous ethnic groups as part of cultural production. Thus, it is not purity but a deeper understanding of diversity that culturally constructs the ethnic identity. The creation of hybrid cultural expressions and "new ethnicities" (as described by Hall in "Old and New") is particularly evident among diaspora youth who have experienced primary socialisation through the intersection of diverse cultural influences. These young individuals often deliberately choose, blend, and elaborate elements of their culture and identity from multiple backgrounds (Vertovec 290).

The Bangladesh Liberation War can be viewed as a struggle of an ethnic minority against the ethnic majority. This novel allows the reader to grasp the pivotal role that the Bengali language played in shaping Bangladesh's new identity. There was a persistent conflict between the Urdu and Bengali-speaking communities. The Bengali minority was restricted from speaking their mother tongue and pressured to adopt Urdu as their national language. This conflict, rooted in ethnolinguistic and ethnocultural values, contributed to the development of Rehana's Bengali identity in East Pakistan. "Ever since 1948, 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" (Anam, 33). For Rehana, her identity in Bangladesh was based on her ethnolinguistic community rather than her religion or nationalism. As Ishtiaq Hossain and Mahmud Hasan Khan note, "Bangla was never thought to be a 'desh' (an independent country)

before the election of 1970 or even before March 7 1971. Although they were always Bengali, the suffix of ‘desh’ is a later appendage” (327).

A Golden Age provides a powerful portrayal of the Liberation War, as seen through the author’s perspective. The novel exposes Pakistan’s strategic violence, including the horrific details of the genocide and rape that took place during the war. On March 25, 1971, the Pakistan army launched “Operation Searchlight,” a brutal armed operation aimed at killing or arresting Bengali intellectuals, student leaders, and Awami League leaders to gain control over East Pakistan. This operation resulted in the death of approximately three million people in East Pakistan and the rape and torture of around four million women by the Pakistan army. The novel depicts in vivid detail the atrocities committed towards the people of Bangladesh. Through Rehana’s eyes, the reader is able to visualise the devastating images of bloodshed in Dhaka.

They were in front of Curzon Hall. The wet ribbon had followed them all the way, and now it poured into a gutter, which was also red, and on the side of the gutter was a pair of hands, the fingers clasped together in prayer or begging, and next to the hands was a face. [...] Beneath the clumped together strands Rehana could see an eye squeezed shut. (Anam, 73-74)

As time went on, the rapidly shifting political landscape of East Pakistan started to reveal itself. The situation became more tense when Mujibur Rahaman was arrested and taken to West Pakistan. Major Zia, the provisional commander-in-chief of the Bangladesh army, made an announcement on Free Bangla Radio Transmission declaring the independence of Bangladesh on behalf of Sheikh Mujibur Rahaman and announcing the formation of a sovereign, legal government under his leadership. He called on all nations to mobilise public opinion against the brutal genocide taking place in Bangladesh. (Anam, 74) Sohail joined the Mukti Bahini and left home to fight for his country, and his mother, Rehana supported his decision. This novel is a diasporic narrative written by the author, who imbued Rehana with a touch of idealism and nationalist fervour.

Initially reluctant, Rehana was opposed to the idea of giving shelter to the Mukti Jodhdhas, but her motherly nature eventually led her to become protective of her children’s well-being. She broke down her reservations and allowed her home to become a guerrilla headquarters where weapons were concealed and a refuge for the Mukti Jodhdhas as they prepared for their operation against the Pakistan army. Rehana’s daughter, Maya, was a student

at Dhaka University, and her own struggle for freedom took a dramatic turn with the disappearance and death of her friend Sharmeen. Sharmeen's brutal rape shook Maya to her core and empowered her to take strong action against the Pakistan army. Rehana became deeply involved in the guerrilla war when she treated a major who was wounded in an explosion at the Inter-Continental Hotel (Anam, 129). This act of kindness was partially in tribute to the officer for saving Sohail's life during the guerrilla attack. She acted as a nurturing nurse to the wounded soldiers and Major, and her connection to the war led her to develop feelings for the Major. Eventually, she fell in love with him and shared many personal secrets. Rehana's approach to their relationship highlights her candid and empathetic approach to love.

Anam is concerned with the diasporic experiences of her own, and as such, Rehana is depicted as somewhat removed from the typical Bangladeshi women born and raised there. The death of Maya's young friend deeply affected Rehana, causing her to empathise with the war victims who were being tortured and raped by the Pakistan army. The rape and death of Sharmeen, as depicted by Anam, highlights the suffering of war heroines who fell victim to rape and torture at the hands of the Pakistan army. Their bodies became spaces of domination and control for the exercise of power. In the 1990s, a few years after Bangladesh gained independence, these rape victims were referred to as *Birangona* or war heroines. (Mookherjee, 5) In the novel, Anam portrays Sharmeen as a dead war victim, and her death serves as a catalyst for Rehana's quest for answers from Faiz, a dominant patriarchal figure from the Pakistan army.

You listen to me. Her name was Sharmeen. They took her and they kept her at the cantonment—not a mile from your house. And the girl was tortured until she died. They did things—unspeakable things—to her. She was the same age as Maya. How do you explain that? (Anam 220)

The question asked by Rehana reflects the patriarchal power dynamics and sheds light on the sexual politics involved in the war narrative of 1971. The violence inflicted serves as a brutal means of suppressing women who challenge the status quo, and is a calculated attempt to instil fear and control the voices of marginalised groups. As Ritu Menon and Kamila Bhasin observe, the rampant acts of violence against women during communal conflicts bring to light the various forms of sexual violence that are perpetuated in a patriarchal society and serve as a symbol of the subservient status of women in gender relations between religious or ethnic communities (41).

The relationship between a woman's body and the nation is a dualistic concept that works hand-in-hand with the discourse of the nation as Nayanika Mookherjee states: "The embodiment of gendered roles as envisaged in the feminisation of the land that enables the body of the woman as mother to be available for the aestheticising impulse of the project of nationalism in Bangladesh" (Mookherjee 38). This is a powerful political act that protects both the community and family honour. When viewed from a feminist perspective, the conflict between community and nation becomes apparent. Bagchi comments that the nation, in the current postmodern attack on modernity, is a metanarrative in which the entire hegemonic establishment is implicated. There is a clear tension between community and nation in this context (20).

In Bangladesh, honouring the rape victims as "Birangonas" is a tactic to restore the dignity of the victims within the family structure and also a way of suppressing their voices. The victim is either remarried or her death is accepted as a result of the tolerance for torture. Sharmeen's death represents the end of her struggle, and her rape symbolises the enemy soldiers' assault on her motherland. Nayanika Mookherjee argues that the individual body of a raped woman can only be represented through the limited expressions of nationhood, either through her death or suicide. On the other hand, the feminisation of the land and raped women reinforce the intervention and masculine power of the nation and male relatives, ignoring the complexities present within these gender roles.

Anam, as a diasporic figure, embraces a liberal and secular approach to religion. She views religion as a peaceful means of expressing oneself rather than a tool to control others. Anam grew up with a strong socialist background instilled by her revolutionary parents. In an interview, she talked about her religious beliefs and emphasised her childhood understanding of religion from a rational perspective. Rehana, on the other hand, approaches religion with a strong spiritual connection. Her focus during religious practices is to seek blessings and comfort for her wounds. Rehana's approach to religion is a secular form of spiritual practice, and she is a firm believer in humanity. Her prayers reflect her belief in the compassion of a higher power:

God is great.

I bear witness that there is none other worthy of worship.

...

Holy are you, and magnificent.

Come to prayer come to felicity. (Anam 128-129)

In *A Golden Age*, Anam, critiques Silvi for her overly conservative perspective on religious practices. Through Silvi's character, Anam sheds light on the communal, essentialist, and fundamentalist thought that was prevalent in Bangladesh at the time. In contrast, Rehana's approach to religion is moderate, as she believes in the freedom of religious expression and the idea that the state should not interfere with people's religious beliefs. This sets Rehana apart from her fellow citizens and emphasises her Bengali nationalist ideals of secularism. Religion plays a subtle role in the novel, as Rehana is shown reciting *Ayat-al-Kursi* and *Surah Yahseen* to bless her children. There are references to *Maghrib* prayers, *Azaan*, and details about *Iftaar* and *Roza*, all of which highlight religious tolerance. In contrast, Silvi's approach to Islamism is traumatic. The author includes intertextual references to works by Dylan Thomas, Thackeray, Rokeya Sekhawat Hossain, and Tagore, which lend a cosmopolitan outlook to the novel. The books on Sohail's shelf and the wall posters in his room reflect his interest in Communist ideology, as indicated by the presence of books by Mao Tse-Tung, Karl Marx, and Che Guevara. Major's love for Jazz music and Nina Simone's voice, Rehana's appreciation for the Indian classic *Mughl-e-Azam*, and Maya's comment about reading *Che Guevara Speak* all suggest a cosmopolitan sensibility. As Antara Chatterjee notes, in the current global landscape, nations are being reconfigured and rearticulated in new ways, influenced by diasporas and transnationalism (133). *A Golden Age* echoes these cosmopolitan themes through its themes of music, poetry, and literature, reflecting Anam's own cosmopolitan identity. Rehana's story explores the diasporic experience of "in-betweenness" and her cosmopolitan insights. Spanning over thirteen years, from 1959 to 1971, the novel covers the socio-political upheavals of Bangladesh, Pakistan, and India during a time of political turmoil.

The novel sheds light on the ways in which individuals' identities can be compromised in a world dominated by men in power and how the process of silencing works. Rehana's final confession to her deceased husband, "I know what I have done. This war that has taken so many sons has spared mine. This age has burned so many daughters has not burned mine. I have not let it" (Anam, 315), speaks to the struggles of women and their experiences of nostalgia and epiphany in a newly liberated country still grappling with the aftermath of the liberation war. In this sense, *A Golden Age* is a conscious attempt to give voice to marginalised perspectives that have been silenced throughout history.

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