

**“YOU’RE JUST A HOUSEWIFE. WHAT ON EARTH COULD YOU POSSIBLY DO?” REHANA’S EPIC BATTLE AGAINST ALL ODDS IN TAHMIMA ANAM’S - A GOLDEN AGE****<sup>1</sup>Dr. Madhvi S Nikam and <sup>2</sup>Dr. Pandurang V Barkale**<sup>1</sup>Associate Professor and <sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor & Head<sup>1&2</sup>Department of English<sup>1</sup>Ramchand Kimatram Talreja College of Arts Science and Commerce and <sup>2</sup>SNDT College of Arts and SCB College of Arts, Commerce & Science for Women<sup>1</sup>Ulhasnagar and <sup>2</sup>Mumbai  
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**Abstract:** Women around the globe have been pushed to the margins and are subjected to patriarchal oppression, subordination, gender segregation, stereotyping and so on for centuries. South Asian women have undergone “double colonization”, simultaneously from colonialism and patriarchy according to Kirsten Holst Peterson and Anna Rutherford. The plight of third world women has been worse than that of their western counterparts. Muslim women in South Asia have been reduced to be liminal beings owing to the patriarchy and religious orthodoxy. The status of widow has been pretty pitiable in the subcontinent. Peaceful existence for a muslim widow with the liability of two under-aged children would be a mere distant dream in the region. Woman’s perspective about any major political incident always differs from a male’s perspective because women have to bear the brunt of the political upheavals entwined with patriarchal pressure. Rehana Haque from Tahmima Anam’s ‘A Golden Age’ (2007) not only wins back the legal custody of her children but also tries to guard them from the heat of war. The novel shows how the war in Bangladesh strained and redefined the equations between gender and nation and provided unforeseen opportunities for women to rebuild themselves within the patriarchal ambit fixed by nationalistic rhetoric. Rehana who is outsider in Dhaka (a city of Bengali speaking Muslims) since she was born in Calcutta and was married to Urdu speaking Muslim. Rehana has many traits of modern woman which are quite unusual to the traditional Muslim Widow. The paper tries to take the stock of Rehana’s crusading battle against the contemporary social mores as well as her own previous self.

**Keywords:** Muslim, Bengali, Urdu, Rape, Widow, Nation, Guerilla, Liberation, Sexuality, Gender, Diaspora.**Article**

Tahmima Anam is a British Bangladeshi novelist who made a mark with her debut novel A Golden Age (2007) which fetched her Best First Book winner award of the 2008 and Commonwealth Writers' Prize in 2013. By dint of her literary feat, she joined the bandwagon of the Granta list of 20 best young writers in 2013. Migration has always been a matter of fascination for Tahmima Anam, since she is the migrant herself. She was born in Dhaka, grew up in Paris, New York and Bangkok and later became a British national. She embodied the ever-shifting, global and transcontinental identities. She completed her graduation from Mount Holyoke College and did her PhD in Anthropology from Harvard University in 2004. Her doctoral thesis was titled "Fixing the Past: War, Violence, and Habitations of Memory in Post-Independence Bangladesh." She also attained a postgraduate degree in Creative Writing from University of London. Anam was conferred upon a Writing Fellowship by the Arts Council of England. Both of her novels explore the chasms and aftereffects of Bangladesh’s Liberation war. She banks on the Bangladesh Liberation War as her subject to write her first novel A Golden Age. Anam felt encouraged by her freedom fighter parents who had actually taken part in Bangladesh independence war. Anam conducted a meticulous research on the Bangladesh’s Liberation war. To bring authenticity in her work she stayed in Bangladesh for two years and interviewed number of war fighters.

The novel ‘A Golden Age’ (2007) takes us through the story of the Bangladesh Liberation War through the eyes of one family, showing its protagonist Rehana Haque’s indefatigable efforts to protect her family as well as her nation. The story also covers the inner turmoil of Rehana, the protagonist, as she loses the custody of her children after her husband's demise. Along with her anxious efforts to win over her children, she also tries to guard them from as they get involved in it.

The novel is based on the writer's grandmother’s actual involvement in the war of Bangladesh Independence. The writer’s grandmother had helped the Freedom Fighters by safeguarding their ammunitions. Once she had handled the situation with the great presence of mind when Pakistani Army came to her house and threatened her that they would take the youngest son of the family if she did not provide them the whereabouts of the guerilla Bengali fighters. Rehana’s character in the novel is based on the true role played by her grandma in the war. The novel has more to offer than just a thrilling war tale. The story also covers the inner turmoil of Rehana Haque as she loses the custody of her children to her brother-in-law after her husband's demise. Besides her anxious efforts attempt to win back her children, she also tries dissuading them from their involvement in the war. When she realizes the importance of her kids’ involvement in the war, she leaves no stone unturned to help them in possible ways. The novel shows how the war in



Cover Page



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The novel is a conscious effort of Tahmima Anam to revisit the history of the creation of Bangladesh from women's perspective. Woman's perspective about any major political incident always differs from a male's perspective because women have to bear the brunt of the political upheavals entwined with patriarchal pressure. Men who credit themselves for making or protecting the nation have a different tone of narrating the history of the battles they fight for the nation. Inevitable contribution of women in the men's version of chronicling the struggle for nation is often neglected. The role of women in national struggle is treated as secondary and hence they are deprived of their deserving mention in the annals of the history of nation. However, in the literary revisiting of the nation's history, such unsung heroines occupy their rightful space.

Anam's novel portrays a single woman's struggle to protect her children after the demise of her husband and her inadvertent contribution to the struggle of making of nation. Anam, through the act of re-telling story of an individual struggle of a woman for her country, throws light on a woman's contribution in the sustenance of the country and the unfortunate maltreatment they receive in their country. Anam seems to describe how liberation of a woman and liberation of a nation is corollary to each other. A liberated woman can serve her nation better than the woman is still oppressed and subjugated by patriarchy.

Rehana, the female protagonist in the novel, defies the dominance of andocentric social order and protects her individual interests. She fights tooth and nail with the men in her family and relatives who try to get her enmeshed. Anam draws heavily on the memoirs, testimonials and oral narratives for the plot of her novel to create a space for a marginalized but heroic woman in the historical and nationalist narratives. Anam also dilates the concept of 'home' for a woman in her narrative. She problematizes the notion of a conventional 'home' for a woman which means taking care of her husband, elders and kids in her family. Anam showcases exemplary craft when she depicts a woman who protects her 'home', and also ends up doing her bit in protecting her nation.

Tahmima Anam was born in Bangladesh, educated in US and lived in London. Her emotional bonding with all these three countries gets partly reflected in Rehana's emotional bonding with the East and West Pakistan which later became two separated countries called Pakistan and Bangladesh. Anam had been long engaged in the larger struggle for women's liberation. She also tried to form a secular form of nationalism. Rehana's character in the novel seems to embolden the spirit of women's liberation. Her approach is also secular in nature. Anam writes, "My name is Sheherezade Haque Maya. I was named after a famous storyteller. My father is dead. I am Lahore-returned. We have a big house called Shona". (TGA 52)

Though Rehana fights for the liberation of Bangladesh, she is not completely bitter or adverse towards Pakistan, the rival country. Due to her association with Pakistan before her husband's death, she can get help from Pakistani authorities in most difficult circumstances. Since her in-laws in Pakistan were politically affluent people, she gets administrative favour from Pakistani government officers. Pakistan was her past home and Bangladesh was her present home. She finds herself in a tough situation when she had to fight with her past home for the sake of her present home. However, she takes command of the situation and does what suits best to her conscience. Anam writes: "One of the first things that Rehana does is to sell her wedding jewelry, divesting herself of any material signs of matrimony" (36). She "pawned the rest of her jewels: the sun-shaped locket and matching earrings, the ruby ring, a few gold chains" (TGA 36). Pawning her wedding jewelry indicates her renunciation of the traditional role of wife. The sacrifice of this traditional role allows her a freedom to be a single woman.

Rehana plans to build a house and rent it out on the plot owned by her in Dhaka. However, the money that she got after pawning gold jewelry was not enough. She preferred necessity over ethics and agreed to marry a wealthy old and blind widower. As she goes to meet the man named Mr. Ali, she inadvertently touches the brush that belonged to his late wife. Sheer out of jealousy he grabs the brush away from Rehana and has the mirror broken in the hustle. In this confusion she spots a jewelry box in his house and makes away with it. Thus, she settles the scores with the old man for her insult and makes arrangement of the money required for building the house. Though her action of stealing gold jewelry is unethical, it can be justified if one thinks it as a desperate act of a grieving mother who pined for getting back her children.

The novel emphasizes how the war in Bangladesh liberation furnishes a providential opportunity for women to empower themselves within the patriarchal structures constituted by a gender-specific nationalist rhetoric in the novel. The novel underscores the literary mission of Anam's writing career. Anam, through the enactment of the gender roles of women characters, tried to dodge the oppressive boundaries of the gender roles. Anam draws on historical accounts of the Bangladesh War to comment on the subtle ways of the subjugating tricks of the forced domesticity of women. The incidents that undermine the individualism of the women characters in this novel do not diminish the self-respect of the women in this novel but, rather, lead to their empowerment.



Cover Page



Rehana, as a female protagonist is shown to be a native speaker of Urdu, the language which is mainly spoken in Pakistan and of the Muslims of north India. Rehana was born and brought up in a wealthy Muslim family of Calcutta. However, her family lost its fortune suddenly when Rehana was three years old. Two of her elder sisters shifted to Karachi, in West Pakistan, after their marriage. Rehana's marriage was fixed with Iqbal Haque, an Urdu speaking person, who lived and worked in East Pakistan. She moves to East Pakistan with him and builds a happy new life with him in the midst of other Bengali-speaking Muslims. Rehana's sisters looked down upon her for living in the middle of Bengali speaking Muslims. They scorned her for living among "Bungalis," as they pronounce the word to express their contempt for Bengali speaking Muslims. The growing alienation between the Muslim population between East and West Pakistan on the basis of language gives the clear hint about the imminent political tension in the country. Soon after Iqbal, Rehana's husband dies, her sisters egg her on leaving West Pakistan. However, Rehana remains firm on living where she finds herself settled. The enmity between Urdu speaking West Pakistan and Bengali speaking East Pakistan is evident in the following paragraph:

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. (TGA 33)

Once the war breaks out Rehana finds her allegiance oscillating between the country she belonged to and the county that she adopted. She speaks fluently in Urdu, a language of a rival nation. She was unable to pretend certain things which could have given her sense of belonging in her host country. She could not replace her mixed language with a pure Bengali. Instead of using Muslim salutation as 'As-Salaam Alaikum', she used the neutral 'Adaab' or even unusual 'Nomoskar', the Hindu way of greeting. She remains attached to Urdu language, especially its lyricism, double meanings and its crinkly beats.

As the war between East and West Pakistan escalates, the self-image of Rehana undergoes a drastic change. Her sisters consider her as a traitor because of her allegiance with the opponent nation. The language she had a deep feeling for, seemed to have affected her personality. Rehana cultivates an emotional bond with both the living and the dead entities. She had adopted a curious custom of visiting her husband's grave and recounting him what happened in her life. In the form of the series of letters, she communicates with her deceased husband and details him about the incidents taking place in her life. She starts writing her series of letters to her husband when she is forced to lose her children to her husband's elder brother, Faiz, and his wife, Parveen, who live in Lahore, West Pakistan. Faiz and Parveen managed to get the custody of Rehana's children because they were childless and they succeeded in convincing the judge that Rehana, the poor widow, is not suitable guardian for the children. Faiz and Parveen also argued in the court that the mother who takes her children to watch the immoral film like Cleopatra, cannot be a right parent for the upbringing of the children. Heartbroken, Rehana writes to her deceased husband how she lost her children's custody:

I have given up the only thing you left me. When the judge asked me if I knew for certain whether I would be able to care for them, I could not bring myself to say yes. I was mute, and in my silence, he saw my hesitation. That is why he gave them away. It was me; my fault. Not others. I don't blame your brother for wanting them. Who would not want them? They are the spitting image of you. (TGA 8)

As the war ensues and the war atrocities escalate, she updates her husband about war. Rehana also explains it to her husband how and why she could not stop the children from joining the wrath of war. In the end of the novel, she also confesses it to her husband about her infatuation with the badly wounded army major who had ditched Pakistani Army and defected to army of guerrillas. The major who she finds her love interest in, was helped by her in nursing him back to health. Rehana, who voices her individualism by making no bones about her attraction for the army major. For a poor Muslim Widow from an underdeveloped country, it was a bold step to confess about her amorous feelings towards a person other than her husband.

Rehana shares it with her husband that she feels defenseless and hard-pressed over the behaviour her daughter Maya who had become cold, reticent and silent after the gang rape and murder of her close friend Sharmeen. Rehana finds it difficult to console her. She finds herself distraught when Sohail leaves with the guerrilla Army formed for the liberation of Bangladesh. Maya, her daughter also moves to India where she works with refugees in the camps for her country's government-in-exile. When Rehana is convinced that she cannot stop Maya from joining the work at refugees in camp, she allows her to go for the undertaken by her. Maya, before she leaves, tells her mother to be careful as she was always worried about her.

Rehana says that she had been always looking for; a small window into her daughter's locked heart from where she can gauge what Maya is brooding over. Anam writes with great alacrity about the inhuman tortures inflicted by the army of West Pakistan. The description of the war atrocities increases the impact of Rehana's emotions towards the safety of her children. Rehana's extreme love for her son Sohail comes to the fore when she promises him to free her neighbour Silvi's husband, Sabbir, a guerrilla soldier who



was captured and tortured brutally by the army of West Pakistan. Sohail had fallen for Silvi but their relationship could not work out and Silvi got married to Sabbir. Sabbir who joined guerrilla army of Bangladesh liberation was unwittingly captured by the opponent troops. Sohail who is still drawn towards Silvi and knows about his mother Rehana's contacts with the influential authorities from West Pakistan, insists her to rescue Sabbir from the prison of the Pakistan. One can understand his deep concern for the fellow guerrilla soldier Sabbir at the same time his silent deep flowing love for Silvi whom he cannot see unhappy.

Rehana takes the task of rescuing Sabbir head on. She had to request her brother-in-law Faiz who she was not on good terms with for years, for administrative favour. Faiz who was appointed as important official whose job was to suppress the rebellion and sign a release order, helps Rehana on her request. Sabbir was released under most difficult circumstances. The release of Sabbir was not of much help because when he was released, he was tortured and mangled beyond recognition. The narrator describes the torture inflicted on Sabbir: "They burned cigarette holes on his back. They hung him upside down. They made him drink salt water until his lips cracked. And they tore out his fingernails. ...They would have made him dig his own grave and buried him" (TGA 248). Rehana could hear a sound like a siren coming from Sabbir's bent head when she pulled at his shoulder. His wailing appeared even louder and fiercer from his disfigured face. Rehana takes the help of Bokul, the rickshaw-puller, to get Sabbir onto the rickshaw. Sabbir's condition was pitiable. He kept screaming and twisting away from Rehana. She released him and then he sank to his knees and started sobbing. Rehana believed that Sabbir, with his mercilessly mangled hands, is a red-fingered bird. Sabbir dies soon after his release.

Rehana and Maya try to console Silvi. Silvi grudges talking about her husband as a martyr rather she relates his death to the God's will. Silvi finds the liberation war of her country as a pointless waste of human life. She thinks that Pakistan should stay together and to separate it into wing is a sin against a religion. Silvi represents a status-quoist mindset of Bangladeshi middleclass women who were still untouched by the wave of the political change that had emerged in the country. Bangladesh finally beat Pakistan and forced it to recognize the independence and sovereignty of the new country emerged out of it. However, the conquest of Bangladesh over its arch rival country turned out to be a pyrrhic victory because it entailed a heavy loss of lives and properties. In the liberation war of Bangladesh, number of villages were burnt, thousands of the war rapes and genocidal rapes were committed and thousands of the revolutionaries were subjected to most brutal and inhuman tortures.

There have been a number of historical and cultural representations of the Bangladesh Liberation War, but novels have always remained the most powerful medium for truthfully capturing the horror and catastrophic devastation of the war. Anam's literary representation of the Bangladesh liberation war is unique in terms of its emphasis on the life a female protagonist who is not just affected by the war but has a capacity to contribute, in her own way, to the war. Rehana, a widow, struggles utmost to keep her children and household together in the era of politically instability. Sohail, her son, who was unable to bear the brutality of the war, comes back triumphantly because he was part of the war and could rejoice in Independence.

Silvi, the daughter of Rehana's neighbour finds herself disengaged from the contemporary political situation of her country and virtually embraces spirituality when her husband as Sabbir plunges in liberation war of the country. She had assumed that it was difficult for Sabbir to come home unscathed from this lethal battle. Silvi detachment from the political situation around her shows the escape into a world of spirituality. Silvi finds respite into religion in the toughest phases that her nation passes through. Her approach is that of ascetic and renunciation. Maya, unlike Silvi, represents the modern woman of the newly-emerging nation who steps forward to guard her nation to the best of her ability. Rehana, who shares half of the characteristics of Silvi since she is middle aged widowed housewife without any support from the elders of her family. She sets her primary goal of protecting her children from the destructive war. However, in her efforts to protect her children from war, she herself gets drawn into war and ends up being a nationalist who fights her all out for the nation under most extraordinary circumstances. Against the most uncertain background she emerges as a hero when she was supposed to be a curtained window according to contemporary social mores. She embodies a fine mixture of a tradition and modernity.

Maya's engagements with the Liberation war are immensely striking as she is shown to be a stronger persona. Another striking feature of Maya's personality is that she is shown to be manlier than the other female characters in the novel. Maya's lack of interest in saris, her craving for joining masculine roles shows how gender roles get affected by volatile political circumstances of the country. Raging war changes women of the warring nations to the extent of threatening their own sexuality. Maya develops hatred for everything that is feminine or is effeminate. There is a tinge of lesbianism in her decorum. She discards all female attributes. Her being woman never becomes a barrier in working with unknown men during the Liberation War. Maya was deeply attached to Sharmeen. Their relationship has homosexual undertones. Sharmeen spots Maya eating a mango and asks her to give her some part of it. The following dialogue between them throws light on their queer attachment:

'Can I have some?'

'I already have licked the whole thing.'

Doesn't matter'. (TGA 52)



There are some other hints from which one can observe their status of relationship. “In the drawing room Sharmeen and Maya locked arm and surveyed the poster” (TGA 53). Maya finds herself completely heartbroken when she learns that Sharmeen has gone missing. When Sohail informs Maya that Sharmeen is in the hospital in Dhaka, she craves to see her. On Sohail’s telling her that Sharmeen is dead and she was pregnant prior to that, Maya retorts confidently, “She hated men. She hated them! She hated sex; did you know that? She never had sex. Everyone else did, but not her” (TGA 141). Maya insists Sohail on telling the names of the people who raped and killed Sharmeen. When he names the soldiers of Tikka Khan-the Butcher of Bengal, she flares up in anger and vengeance. Her grievous and gruesome shouting against Tikka Khan reminds us the earsplitting and vengeful cry of Achilles against Hector on the death of Patroclus.

Maya’s fervent male-like nature and figure, her hiding of her sexuality underscores her rejection of a male dominated society and indicates that women can suppress their feminine identity and can dilate their traditional gender obligations for the cause of nation. What Rehana does is a combination of the social roles played by a man and woman. By sexuality she remains a female but she undertakes the masculine social role of bringing up and protecting her children in the adverse situation that her nation was engulfed in. The lifestyle of Sohail and Maya could have been something else if there was not a war raging in their country. The war carves heroes out of them.

Rehana’s sexual involvement with the Major in a dark room is her departure from the traditional social role assigned to a widow. Her loyalty with the deceased husband who left her in her early years of marriage is approximated with her silent and passionate emotional involvement with a freedom fighter who guides and inspires her children fighting for the cause of nation. Throughout the novel religion and politics are shown to dominate the nation as well as the individual’s life. Gruesome war crimes not only cripple the victims physically but leave them traumatized for the rest of their lives. The victims of genocidal rapes could not bear the child of the rapist in their womb. Rape victims had to undergo inhuman sufferings and humiliation in every step of their lives by the society. Maya’s work as health personnel in the village is to help the war affected women by supporting abortion. Her work openly flouts the norms of religion and patriarchy but it helps women ward off their lifetime sufferings and embarrassment foisted by the patriarchy. There are number of superstitions that reinforce the persecution of women at the hands of patriarchal system.

Rehana is held responsible for the death of her husband though she had no hand in the death of her husband. As a widow of two children, she gets no respectable place in the society. Born and brought up in North India where she had nobody after the death of her parent, she decides to get settled in Karachi, Pakistan with three of her sisters. After the death of her husband, she chooses to stay with her children in Dhaka, where she spent the early marital days with her husband Iqbal. Another case of a husband leaving his wife because of social customs is Mr Chowdhury’s desertion of Mrs Chowdhury. Dejected, Mrs Chowdhury says, “My bastard husband left me when I couldn’t give him a son” (TGA 9).

Thus, Anam portrays the stereotypical society in which women are held responsible for not bearing the male children. Rehana is portrayed as a social pariah in her Anam’s novel. Rehana’s struggle to build the house ‘Shona’ symbolizes her triumph over the contemporary social mores but only after paying a heavy cost. Her struggle lays bare the murkier side of the functioning of patriarchy. As a defenseless widow, Rehana cannot arrange bank loans for building the house, neither she can get a guarantor for the same.

She sold out her husband’s favorite Vauxhall for making the house though it is not enough to build the house. Rehana faces sexual harassment by one of the bank employees who assures to arrange a bank loan for her. Anam depicts the bank personnel as:

Then a round face man with an oily forehead said yes and took her to his office at the back of a building, where he slipped his hand under her elbow like a question mark, to which she almost said yes, until he came close and she smelled his curry breath and saw the cigarette tracks on his teeth. (TGA 36)

### Conclusion

Though Rehana manages to escape the clutches of the man, the incident throws light on male chauvinist mindset of the men considers women as playthings in their hands whom they can use anytime to feed their lust. The novel brilliantly documents the contribution of women in the task of nation making. Rehana, Maya, Sharmeen, Mrs. Sengupta and many other women are shown to be contributing in the war through their individual sacrifices for the sake of country. Women are shown to be at the receiving end of the war crimes. Their sacrifices and achievements during the war may not reflect in the chronicles of the history but occupies its rightful space in the creative writing. Rehana, through her epic battle at domestic and national front, proves that she is not just a house wife but a lot more than that. Her being a female becomes no hurdle in realizing her aspirations; neither has she fallen short in her parenting job in the absence of her husband.



Cover Page



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