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## Formation of Identity through the Presentation of Motherhood in Tahmima Anam's *A Golden Age*

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### Abstract

Tahmima Anam is the first Bangladeshi novelist in English who draws international attention to the Liberation war of 1971 of Bangladesh through the publication of her first novel *A Golden Age* in 2007. The Liberation war is replete with the incident of genocide, rape, inhuman torture, abductions etc. The war has instilled a kind of horror into the psyche of Bangladeshi people. During the war the Muslim majority of people of East Pakistan are in an acute identity crisis. Pakistan was formed on the basis of religion Islam. But even religion cannot unite the two wings of Pakistan. Therefore people are in a identity dilemma between religion and nationalism. They are also in a fix as to whom to support- East or West Pakistan. Anam captures this particular complexity in her novel through the protagonist Rehana Haque. In this paper I will bring forth the complexity of an identity formation through the depiction of motherhood of Rehana Haque from the feministic standpoint.

**Keywords:** Liberation War, Identity Formation, Feminism, Nationalism

Tahmima Anam is a renowned Bangladeshi English novelist of 21<sup>st</sup> century. She comes to fame with the publication of her famous novel *A Golden Age* in 2007. In fact it is the first novel in English of its kind which brings forth the factual chronology of the Liberation War of 1971 before an international readership. This charming novel describes the struggle of a widowed mother Rehana Haque in keeping and raising her children Sohail and Maya in a country that is itself reeling under political turmoil and war like situation. Rehana tries a lot to keep her children out of Liberation War but fails. Her children actively take part in the Liberation war of 1971. She tries to protect them and in the process herself gets involved in War. She metaphorically becomes the representative of nation Bangladesh and her children are the children of Bangladesh. To overcome her social, economical and political dilemma she defies the then male dominated society as much as she can and forms a standard of living of her own. In this paper I will present Anam's presentation identity formation through the depiction of motherhood of the protagonist Rehana Haque from a feminist point of view.

*A Golden Age* is inspired by the real life experience of Anam's grandmother whose eldest son was involved in the Liberation War of 1971. Rehana, the protagonist is modeled on the grandmother. Like the grandmother, Rehana too protects the freedom fighters by allowing them to use her home 'Shona' as their own will. The story begins with the proclamation of Rehana at the grave of her dear husband about the loss of the custody of their children:

"Dear husband,

I lost our children today". (Anam, 2007, p. 3)

This revelation strikes a note of pensiveness. Failing to show necessary requirements for raising her children Rehana loses the custody of Sohail and Maya to Faiz and Parveen after the death of her husband. Rehana struggles, collects money and at last succeeds to get her children back from Karachi. She celebrates this special event by holding every year. But this happy memory is short lived. She faces an acute void when her children yield to the charisma of Sheikh Mujib and when the war starts, they join the Mukti Bahini. Thus in a very short time they forget the hardships their mother experienced to bring them back.

The national identity crisis and conflicting emotions that Rehana experiences become clear during the Liberation War. Anam shows how the powerful masters of West Pakistan mistreat the Eastern wings as a colony and how it is almost suicidal to keep two geographically, culturally and linguistically different locales tied together without fair administration. Thus the novel brings out this important aspect of war in the following lines:

Ever since '48 the Pakistan 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. They Dhaka University students had been involved in the protest from the beginning, so it was no surprise that Sohail had got caught up, and Maya too. Even Rehana could see the logic: what sense did it make to have a country in two halves, poised on either side of India like a pair of horns. (p. 33)

By using the simile of ‘pair of horns’, Anam shows the difficulty of administration as well as the construction of Bengali national identity. In this novel we see the different aspect of identity formation through the protagonist Rehana Haque. Firstly, she is a Calcutta born Urdu speaking woman and all her relatives are from West Pakistan. Naturally she harbors some kind of soft attitude towards West Pakistan. Secondly, her son Sohail and daughter Maya are inspired by Bengali nationalism and therefore she needs to take the side of East Pakistan. Rehana’s national identity is constituted by her socio-cultural and gendered location within the national context of East and West Pakistan. Because of her affiliation to the different wings of Pakistan she holds an ambiguous ambiguity. As Rehana is an Urdu speaking woman, she is by nature inclined to Urdu language and its poetry. Her love for Urdu creates suspicion about her devotion towards Bengali nationalism because Urdu is the language of West Pakistan.

Throughout the narrative of *A Golden Age* motherhood plays the most important role in making Rehana the ‘heroine’. It is the selfless love of a mother for her children that proceeds all her actions and plays a crucial role in her engagement in the Liberation War. Chapman states that “Anam does not dwell on the brutality of war; love is the dominant theme; love of a country, parental love, sibling love, unrequited love and the ties between love and sacrifice.” (Chapman) Generational dynamics and historical circumstances also contribute to the gradual transformation of her political opinions. The concept of single mother is applied in Anam’s *A Golden Age*. The concept is the outcome of women’s power of resistance in a male dominated society. After the death of her husband she gets entangled in a society that is traditionally dominated by patriarchy. She gets threats from every corner of society. She loses the custody of her son and daughter to Faiz and Parveen and after much difficulty she finally brings them back from Karachi. After getting back Sohail and Maya she becomes very much protective about their future. As university students Sohail and Maya are inspired by Bengali nationalism and decide to contribute to the freedom movement of East Pakistan. Rehana watches their political involvement with suspicion. Sohail and Maya support a mass movement against a powerful military of Pakistan. When they express their desire to actively take part in the arms struggle, Rehana leaves no stone unturned to dissuade them from joining the freedom movement. It is natural for her because no mother wants that their son join arms struggle against a powerful army. They don’t want to see their siblings getting killed in the front. Rehana spies on Maya and catches her red handed while taking mock military training. This incident creates a rift between them. She then tries to refrain Sohail from joining the mukti bahini. All these incidents give birth to misunderstanding among them and she is even accused by Maya of being a Pakistani sympathizer. This kind of situation is beautifully explained by Anam Zakaria in her famous *1971: A People’s History from Bangladesh, Pakistan and India* when she interviewed Niaz Zaman, an Urdu speaking Pakistani woman living in East Pakistan during the war. Zakaria illustrated Niaz’s situation in the following lines:

I can only imagine how challenging it has been for people like Niaz Apa who don’t neatly fit into the categories of ‘Pakistani’ or ‘Bangladeshi’. Her family lives in

Pakistan, Punjab is the part of her heritage, but she is not a Pakistani. She is a patriotic Bangladeshi, but not a Bengali. While her ethnicity should not be a criterion for her nationalism or patriotism, I would learn through other conversations that there are distinct political connotation attached to whether one is identified as a 'Bangladeshi' or 'Bengali'. (Zakaria, 2019, p.170)

This reveals the difficulty of identity formation for a mother during the Liberation War who has relation in both the two wings of Pakistan. Even her protective measure for the safety of her children is looked cynically. She is even mistakenly thought to be sympathetic towards West Pakistan. Maya accuses Rehana: "'Sohail' she said 'where is he now'? Probably dead by one of your Pak soldiers!" (p.89). This incident leads Rehana to slap her daughter Maya. After this incident Maya refrains herself from talking to her mother for a long time. However this confusion decreases when Rehana decides to assist Sohail and Maya in the resistance movement. Maya presents before her a bundle of old clothes to make kathas for the freedom fighters. Rehana makes use of old sarees to sew katha and invites her friends to make contributions to the Liberation war by assisting her in making kathas. Asked by Mrs Akram why Rehana is taking so much hardships to provide blankets, Rehana tells her "don't you know? We are at war and my daughter says I have to do something to prove that I belong here. So I am doing something" (p.92). She prepares pickles for the freedom fighters. Sohail and Maya decide to fight for the independence of Bengali East and despite her unconfirmed status as a East Pakistani woman speaking Urdu, Rehana takes her children's side as a mother and when she does so, she imagines the letter she would write to her relatives in West Pakistan: 'Dear sister' she would say "Our countries are at war .Yours and mine. We are on different sides now. I am making pickles for the war effort. You see how much I belong to here and not you" (p.104). This revelation indicates that Rehana has finally been able to cast away her West Pakistani identity. Rehana also manages with much difficulty to release Sabeer, Silvi's husband. This is a glaring example of her brewing Bengali nationalism because she somehow manipulates her pro Pakistani relative Faiz to make arrangements for Sabeer's release even risking her children's lives. Towards the end of the novel we see Bangladesh gets independence from West Pakistan. At this point a complete reversal of fortune occurs. The mukti bahini becomes victorious and the pro Pakistani supporters become the prisoners of war. Parveen comes to her for her husband Faiz's release but Rehana does not do so because she holds him responsible for so many crimes committed towards Bengali people of East Pakistan. Despite her complicated origin of being in the middle of two contending identity Rehana manages successfully to shed off her Pakistani identity and proves her alliance to Bengali nationalism and becomes a true Urdu speaking Bangladeshi citizen.

All through the narrative the concepts of feminism and motherhood play a significant role to shape Rehana's life and her role in the nationalistic resistance. In the very beginning we see Rehana losing the custody of her children after the death of her husband. The loss of the custody of her children is a severe blow to a mother who continues to live in agony until she gets them back. She struggles hard to find money, even considers remarriage or exposure

to sexual harassment which she avoids forcefully. She rejects the idea of a remarriage because of her children. In reply to the wounded major's question as to why she did not get married, Rehana reflects; "I had children, a reason not to marry again" (p.135). Rehana defies the patriarchal gendered role of that society. After her husband's death she fails to get any male person to assist her to get out of difficulty. She manages to get money through treachery, builds Shona, the bungalow herself. As an easy prey of war, she could have been neglected, captured, physically and mentally harassed, or even raped. But she gathers courage and defies the traditional masculine gendered society. Reclaiming woman's body means reclaiming certain emblems of feminism. One instance this is the use of their sarees to make blanket as a sign of protest.

Anam deploys symbolism to artistically show how a single mother emerges to be the representative of the whole nation. The symbolism is applied mostly to Rehana. Metaphorically Rehana becomes the embodiment of Bangladesh and her children as the children of the nation Bangladesh fighting for independence. Without fearing in the least of her life she sacrifices herself for the cause of the nation and lets Sohail and Maya take part in the Liberation war against Pakistan. Oscillating between two contradictory national identity, she finally supports her siblings struggle for the freedom of Bangladesh where they will have a definite national identity. She transcends her narrow private space where she was concerned only for the safety of Sohail and Maya. Life does not permit anyone to think over personal self during the time of war. The same is the case with Rehana. The Liberation of the country seems to her a sacred duty beyond any personal achievement. She finally does not resist Sohail and Maya from joining Liberation war, because she finds no way than to support them. The fate of Bangladesh seems to her to be the fate of her own children. She herself goes to Calcutta to work for the betterment of the refugees in the camps and helps Maya in this matter. A comparison between Rehana and nation can be drawn. As nation shelters all her children under its wide canopy, so also Rehana who metaphorically represents nation Bangladesh provides shelter to the freedom fighters as she allows them to use her Shona as their secret storehouse. She also keeps their activities hidden from the Pakistani Army. Rehana's motherly love for her children goes beyond the narrow personal domestic sphere, rather it takes the shape of universal motherboard. The major who for a short period of time comes to Rehana's house imbibes in her the notion of universal motherhood. She realizes that she should not concern for the safety of her children only, rather it is a secret duty for her to emerge as the savior of other's sons and daughters who actively sacrifice themselves at the altar of the glorious nation. It is the love for humanity that enables Rehana to fight with her physical, mental and psychological attributes. While serving for the cause of the nation she sometimes forgets to visit the grave of her deceased husband. Christian Pyle in her article *Symbolism in A Golden Age: Rehana as Bangladesh* comments:

She dissembled the saris, converted them into blankets and sent them to cove 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. (Pyle, 2010, p.4)

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Bangladesh finally gets its independent after nine months of destructive war. Rehena's dream of an independent Bangladesh comes to true. She does not feel now the emotional chasm of oscillation between two identities. She is now free citizen of independent Bangladesh. Her son and daughter now have a definite identity of being a Bangladeshi. Rehana shows how selfless love conquers all difficulties even at the time of crisis. The novel ends with a happy note of family reunion as the nation is built on love and compassion.

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