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NOVEL AS CONTEMPORARY BANGLADESH HISTORY: A THEMATIC STUDY OF
TAHMIMA ANAM'S A GOLDEN AGE

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ABSTRACT

This research article discusses Tahmima Anam's debut novel, *A Golden Age*, as a novel of historical fiction with a special focus on the impact of the Bangladesh Liberation War (1971) on the people of East Pakistan (present Bangladesh). It explores how West Pakistan (present Pakistan) ruled East Pakistan colonially and tyrannically and subjected them to torture and mental anguish. A Bangladeshi-born British novelist, Anam wrote this novel based on her archival research and interviews conducted by her in Bangladesh. She also collected the historical documents of the Bangladesh Liberation War, which is the main theme of the novel. The main characters namely Rehana Haque and her daughter and son—Maya, and Sohail—played a pivotal role in championing the cause of their independence. East Pakistan's fight for their language, ethnicity, and culture are analysed in this article. There is a symbolic significance of the chief character of Rehana in the novel. The events of her life pass by proportionately with the same tempo as Bangladeshi history does. She transforms herself from her being the mother of Maya and Sohail to becoming the mother of all children of the nation. Anam also describes the pathetic refugee problem and subsequent rehabilitation services rendered to the victims of the War. The novelist depicted how the great political speeches of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman—popularly known as Bangabandhu—contributed to the attainment of their freedom from West Pakistani rulers. East Pakistan becomes an independent and sovereign country called Bangladesh after a horrible experience and several sacrifices of chastity, individual relationships, memory, love, and lives.

Key Words: Army, Bengali Language, Freedom, Historical Fiction, Government, Guerilla, Liberation War, Partition, Refugee, Rehabilitation, Urdu language

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I

INTRODUCTION

The novel of historical fiction is a combination of fictional characters and narratives with historical facts and settings. These novels bring an historical era to life in realistic, interesting, and unforgettable ways. The great writers such as Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, Rabindranath Tagore, Michael Madhusudan Dutt, Toru Dutt, etc., are writers from Bengal by birth and are the forerunners of Bangladeshi Writing in English today. Rashid Askari—a writer, columnist, and the erstwhile Vice Chancellor of Islamic University, Kushtia, Bangladesh—states

that “what we call ‘Bangladeshi writing in English’ has come into being after the Independence of Bangladesh. Although the stream is very feeble, it exists” (Askari 2).

This research article explores how vividly and remarkably Tahmima Anam in her magnum opus *A Golden Age* portrays the history of the Bangladesh Liberation War (1971). This Liberation War gave rise to dreadful massacres, human anguish, ethnic and linguistic segregation of Bengalis, and their relentless struggle for independence. She wrote this novel to deal with the consequential issues of the war. It is to be noted that although the resources of her novel are the aforesaid war history itself, the manner in which she depicted the history is subjective.

Tahmima Anam is a British Bangladeshi Social Anthropologist, novelist, and columnist. She, a post-war child, was born in Bangladesh in 1975. When she was a child, she lived in New York, Paris, and Bangkok. Based on her archival research and interviews conducted by her in Bangladesh, she collected the historical materials of the Bangladesh Liberation War. She made a thorough study of literature and films, which thematically portrayed the Liberation War and the fight for independence. Besides, the novelist also talked to many teachers, students, and guerilla warriors to have comprehensive knowledge about the Liberation War. Shariful Haq Dalim writes, “For Bangladeshis 1971 was the year of blood and tears, for Pakistan deep humiliation and for the Indians of triumph” (Dalim 23).

Anam’s father, Mahafuz Anam, is a renowned journalist. He is the editor of *The Daily Star*, which is the leading English daily of Bangladesh. Her grandfather, Abul Mansur, was also a prominent fighter of the Liberation War. Anam’s mother, Parvin Anam, was a reputed NGO leader. Being brought up in such a well-renowned educated and cultural family, it was easy for Anam to have advantageous access to the then society that proved to be pivotal behind the birth of the new country of Bangladesh. So, she belongs to a family that has umpteen tales linked to Bangladesh history. The social, political, and cultural integrity and unswerving dedication shown by the freedom fighters of her grandfather’s era were instrumental in the making of the country. They were the selfless and committed freedom fighters whose period is known as the golden age of Bangladeshi politics. Lynn Neary, a reporter and newscaster, mentions in her article published on 11 January 2008 in the Morning Edition— an American radio news program produced and distributed by National Public Radio:

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 Morning Edition).

Anam’s novel, *A Golden Age*, depicted many historical events such as the great political speeches of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman—popularly known as Bangabandhu—the Declaration of Independence made from Racecourse ground, the national election of 1970, and various programmes broadcast from Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra. The historical period meticulously selected by the novelist for her novel was from 1959 to 1971. This novel containing 10 chapters follows a sequential order describing the history of a turbulent decade behind the wonderful birth of the new country. Anam deftly and steadily writes about the history of the Liberation War in several sections of her novel. Furthermore, the title of this novel, *A Golden Age*, refers to the historical era that epitomises the year 1971 as an unforgettable moment in history that can be regarded as a golden age—an age of accomplishment, an age of sacrifice, and an age of enlightenment.

In an interview with Star Weekend Magazine, Anam says: “When I was very young I used to listen to many stories from my grandmother, my mother, and my uncle” (Star Weekend Magazine 20). She gathered information by spending a lot of time not only with the ‘Muktujoddas’ (freedom fighters) but also with other people, nurses who used to work in camps, people who were stuck in Pakistan” (Star Weekend Magazine 20-21). Anam carried out a lot of research for her first book, *A Golden Age*, which eventually extended to the second book, *The Good Muslim*, as well. The first book depicts the situation before and during the Liberation War, and the second book depicts the story a decade after the Liberation War. She preferred to personally ask the general public, residing still there, about their experiences before and during the War. She did not like to use books unless they were testimonials or memoirs.

II

DISCUSSION

The novel, *A Golden Age* (Hereafter, *Golden*), begins in 1959 with the words of young Rehana Haque to her dead husband, Iqbal Haque. She said, "Dear husband, I lost our children today" (*Golden* 3). She states that she lost the guardianship of their daughter and son—Maya and Sohail. As she does not have any income to bring up her children and also any money to fight in the court of law against her rich and influential brother-in-law, Faiz Haque, she loses custody of her children. Faiz Haque takes the children to Lahore in West Pakistan. At the beginning of the novel, the death of her husband and her subsequent widowhood aptly represents the post-Partition Bengal.

Through the history of a family and its surrounding community of people, the novelist traces the history of the birth of a new nation called 'Bangladesh'. She is interested in the political history of the Liberation War in 1971. In the opening pages of the novel, she gives the reason for the horrifying incidence of this war: "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!" (*Golden* 29).

Rehana sells everything including her gold jewellery, her husband's most loved vehicle, Vauxhall, etc., "to bring the children back, raise them, keep them in ribbons and socks and uniforms" (*Golden* 35). On the first day of March 1971, Rehana is found preparing Maya and Sohail for the annual party signifying the anniversary of the return of her children. As Rehana, at the end of the day, gets ready for sleep, she ponders over her children and on the increasing social and political turmoil. The hostility between West Pakistan's native language of 'Urdu' and East Pakistan's native language of 'Bengali' is conspicuous in the following paragraph:

Lately the children had little time for anything but the struggle. It had started when Sohail entered the university. 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; it was no surprise Sohail had gotten 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? (*Golden* 33)

Anam describes the miserable plight of Bengali cities. She depicts the imminent war situation and terrible emotional dilemma in her novel: "At ten o'clock the tanks began to fire. It was the sound of a thousand New Year firecrackers of metal pipes being dragged across a stone road of chillies popping in a smoking pan. 'Ya' Allah!' Mrs Chowdhury, a friend and neighbour of Rehana, cried. 'What's happening?'" (*Golden* 55). This devastating war waged by West Pakistani Army reveals the unending civil war movement and its tragic repercussions in East Pakistan. As a true democrat, Rehana shows her compassion towards the victimised people of war.

Arabati Pradeep Kumar in his scholarly research article, *Tahmima Anam's A Golden Age: Post-Colonial Perspectives* that aptly remarks: "The mayhem of the Bangladesh Liberation War appears to loom large in the entire nation. The struggle of Rehana to keep her household life and her motherland unflustered during the wartime pandemonium is akin to the tumultuous story of the people of Bengal from the pre-Partition period to the creation of a liberated nation" (Kumar 154). The Partition of India took place in 1947, which gave birth to the new nation called Pakistan. But unfortunately, today's Bangladesh was under the rule of Pakistan till 1971. Present Pakistan was known as West Pakistan, and present Bangladesh was known as East Pakistan. With the Partition of India East Pakistan was not liberated till 1971. The condition of East Pakistan was not different from their pre-Partition condition. They were under the rule of British colonial rule and also under the rule of West Pakistan even after the Partition in 1947. Therefore, it means that the people of East Pakistan were doubly colonised. It is also known as 'Partition within Partition'. Anam also portrays the frightening situation of War through Mrs Chowdhury's dinner with terrifying surroundings.

Flashes of light came through the window and illuminated the room. Mrs Chowdhury's lamb roast was a half-eaten corpse with naked ribs and a picked-over leg. The tomato was gone but the mouth was still open. Mrs Chowdhury looked as though she might lunge under the dining table, but hand clasped to her breast. 'Allah! Allah! Allah!' she said." (*Golden* 56)

During the civil war, the entire Bengali people of East Pakistan lived there with gripping fear and mental agony. This terrible situation of people is reflected in the following lines: "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 finger clasped together in prayer or begging, and next to the hands was a face. The mouth was tiny, only a pale pink smudge, like the introduction of a bruise" (*Golden* 64).

Anam understands the freedom struggle strongly from an East Pakistani perspective, where the Army of West Pakistan is the real villain. She writes about the genocide, the barbarous acts of kidnapping, torture, and rape, as instructed by the army of West Pakistan. In the history of the Bangladesh freedom struggle, the students of Dhaka University played a pivotal role and actively participated in the angry rallies and protests right from the very beginning. Maya and Sohail actively took part in the freedom movement of East Pakistan. They participated in protests and rallies, extending their helping hand to the armed radicals and ultimately becoming fighters of independence. All people of East Pakistan want to be liberated from the West Pakistani rulers. Maya and Sohail want to get the new nation peacefully. After her children involve themselves in the war, Rehana spends a lonely life at home. In this connection, the novelist writes:

It began to occur to Rehana that any doubts Sohail once had about becoming a soldier had completely disappeared. As with everything else, he had taken it on with a kind of brutal devotion. He was a guerrilla, a man for his country. He would die if he had to. Rehana wondered if she should begin to prepare herself, imagine a life without her son, carve out a hole where he used to be, familiarize herself with the shock of his absence. And as soon as she had this thought, she realized she had no choice. She could not give him up, not to fate or to nation, and if she closes to leave her anyway, there would be no way to prepare. (*Golden* 101)

Initially, Rehana did not think of participating in the Liberation War. But her children were actively involved in the War as true freedom fighters for the independence of East Pakistan. Therefore, Rehana becomes a frustrated, nervous, and helpless mother. Later, she also involves in the War only because of her love for her children. According to Nimni and Khanom (2016),

Rehana is drawn into the fight for Bangladesh's independence largely through her poet-turned-fighter son Sohail, and activist daughter Maya. Though the background of the novel is 1971's Liberation War, Anam's approach to history is subjective. In *A Golden Age*, Rehana's motherhood overshadows her patriotism. Her center holds on her children rather than on the country. It is Rehana's love for her children which leads her to get involved in the war rather than her love for the country (Nimni & Khanom 272).

Rehana came to know that Sohail was in love with Silvi, who is the daughter of Mrs Chowdhury. On the contrary, Mrs Chowdhury wants Silvi to marry a Major of the Pakistan Army. So when this news reaches Sohail, he becomes heartbroken. On the day of the betrothal of Major and Silvi, the West Pakistani government imposed military rule in East Pakistan. At this time, Sohail feels that he has lost the chance to serve the nation. Therefore, Sohail jumped into the war to help the people of his country, and he escaped from his mother to get training in guerrilla warfare.

The West Pakistani forces tried to suppress the East Pakistan's revolt. In this regard, Rehana helps the refugees of East Pakistan with the help of some friends, who lost their families, homes, and children because of the atrocious acts of the West Pakistani Army. Sohail came back home and set up a guerrilla training centre at the back of his house. Christine Pyle writes in her research article, *Symbolism in A Golden Age: Rehana as Bangladesh*, about Rehana: "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" (Pyle 4). There is an allegorical significance of the character of Rehana. The events of her life pass by proportionally with the same tempo as Bangladeshi history does. She transforms herself from her being the mother of Maya and Sohail to becoming the mother of all children of the nation.

Rehana accidentally met the Major of guerrilla war force. The Major was wounded while fighting with the West Pakistani army. Sohail left his mother and East Pakistan and reached Agartala (India). Sohail asks his mother to take care of the Major. Rehana takes care of the Major every day. Rehana shares about her life with the Major. And with the passage of time Rehana falls in love with the Major. Feith (1971), in his convening speech to the audience at the Victorian Committee to support the cause of Bangladesh, clearly regarded the Bengali protests against the West Pakistani army and their struggle for freedom as "an anti-colonial movement" (Feith 24).

The suppression of the East Pakistan civil war was a heinous and brutal act of foolish political leaders of West Pakistan. Bhutto and Yahya Khan, in particular, who were autocratic and inhuman did not want to give freedom and sovereignty to East Pakistan. So, the people of East Pakistan under the leadership of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman rebelled against the West Pakistani army, demanding independence for their nation. The people tried to topple the West Pakistani government from East Pakistan. Therefore, Rehana, as an individual, leads a deplorable life, and her living in anxiety and mental anguish symbolises the pathetic life of all people of her country. "All the beds were pushed up against each other, so that it looked like an unbroken stretched of bodies. She walked through the aisle, stepping over people" (*Golden* 222).

Sabeer is another important character, who is the fiancé of Silvi and Pakistan soldier-turned-freedom fighter for Bangladesh. The West Pakistani soldiers caught and imprisoned Sabeer, the son-in-law of Mrs Chowdhury. Rehana took up the herculean task of saving Sabeer directly. In this regard, she had to request her brother-in-law, Faiz, for an administrative favour. He was appointed an important military official whose job was to suppress the civil war. She requested him to do his signature on the release order for Sabeer to be liberated from the West Pakistani custody. Thus, Sabeer was freed under the most difficult and trying circumstances. But the Sabeer's release could not help him because the West Pakistani army mangled and tormented him brutally. Anam explains the anguish and pain inflicted on Sabeer: "They beat him, broke his ribs. They made him stare at the sun for hours, days. 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" (*Golden* 215).

All Rehana and her daughter have done in the novel are indications of what D'Costa (2009) observes:

As political activists, Bengali women contributed to the anti-colonial nationalist struggle for the independence of the subcontinent. This experience of social and political activism continued to shape the character of the Bangladeshi feminist movement ... During and before 1971, many Muslim Bengali women participated as activists in their country's national movement, many taking to the streets in active resistance. Their unique cultural identity became their symbol... that Bengalis shared similar cultural values irrespective of whether they were Hindu or Muslim; and that Bengali women were more liberated than West Pakistani women. (D'Costa 69).

Rehana could hear a sound like a siren coming from Sabeer'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 Sabeer onto the rickshaw. Sabeer's condition was pitiable. He kept shrieking and twisting away from Rehana. He bent down to his knees and started weeping and moaning. Rehana remarks that Sabeer, with his cruelly mangled hands, is a red-fingered and red-tipped bird. Sadly, Sabeer died immediately after his release from the West Pakistani army.

Besides her children, Rehana also becomes actively engrossed in the Liberation War to emancipate their East Pakistan from the clutches of tyrannical West Pakistani rulers. The protagonist understands the patriotic fervour of her children and finds her own identity despite being a responsible mother. The novel

ends on the momentous day, 16 December 1971, on which East Pakistan attained its freedom from West Pakistan and became an independent country called Bangladesh.

Biswas and Tripathy (2017) write:

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 sense of duty for the doomed nation turn her to be the mother of every child of Muktibahini (Biswas and Tripathy 527-528).

While reading the novel, the reader understands that this struggle for independence appears to Rehana as the most vital responsibility more than her personal affiliations. It becomes clear when she goes to Calcutta to help Maya to give her services for the rehabilitation of the victims in the refugee camps. Here, the novelist vividly portrays the mental agony of the victims of the refugee camps:

There were some that seemed less desperate, almost ordinary. But, despite their attempts to blend in, she could tell they were also refugees. They kept their hands in their pockets and a grateful smile stitched to their lips. They had unwashed hair and dirty shoes. Clothes that looked decent, but looking closely she could see the ragged hems, the worn pleats. And everywhere they went, their memories argued for space, so that they forgot to cross the road when the lights were red, or over-milked their tea, or whispered into their newspapers as they scanned hungrily for news of home (*Golden* 227).

Anam gives the conclusion to her novel, *A Golden Age*, with the positive message of the creation of a new nation after nine months of freedom struggle. Rehana elatedly tells her deceased husband: "Dear husband, the war will end today" (*Golden* 269). Bangladesh becomes an independent and sovereign country after a horrible experience and several sacrifices of chastity, individual relationships, memory, love, and lives. She remarks how unalloyed love can vanquish everyone even during a period of a huge disaster.

III

CONCLUSION

Tahmima Anam in her debut novel, *A Golden Age*, excellently portrayed the history of Bangladesh with a focus on the Liberation War (1971) and its tragic consequences on East Pakistan. The novelist has adroitly created the wonderful character of Rehana Haque as a widowed single mother almost without having any Bengali roots, which fights against different social problems against women and courageously passes through the difficult phases of her life. The reader of the novel finds that the entire plot construction of it is essentially a transformation of Rehana Haque, who overcomes all the impediments in her life with the courage of conviction and gets her identity as a liberated woman. There is an allegorical connotation of the main character of Rehana. The events of her life pass by proportionately with the same tempo as Bangladeshi history does. She transforms herself from her being the mother of Maya and Sohail to becoming the mother of all children of the nation. The Liberation War acts as a catalyst that has made Rehana Haque's naturalisation possible and ultimately guaranteed her a true national identity. Tahmima Anam thematically depicted the Bangladeshi Liberation War (1971) in her first novel and got critical acclaim from the literary circles across the world. With the resonating success of her novel, *A Golden Age*, she has become the brightest star on the firmament of Bangladesh Writing in English.

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