

Tahmima Anam's *A Golden Age*: A Family Saga of Love, Duty and Identity against the Backdrop of War

Mohammad Moniruzzaman Miah*

Department of English, Faculty of Arts and Humanities, Jazan University, PO box-114, Jazan 45142, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

Corresponding Author: Mohammad Moniruzzaman Miah, E-mail: mzaman.m1981@gmail.com

ARTICLE INFO

Article history

Received: January 23, 2020

Accepted: March 19, 2020

Published: March 31, 2020

Volume: 9 Issue: 2

Advance access: March 2020

Conflicts of interest: None

Funding: None

ABSTRACT

The paper explores love and duty as the dominant themes in Tahmima Anam's debut novel *A Golden Age* (2007). At various points of the story, it seems that both love and duty come at the forefront in turn overshadowing the significance of the other. However, it is not hard to notice that the yearning of love and the call of duty almost equally pervade the story. While analyzing these compelling themes, the paper critically examines how Anam aesthetically mediates the conflict between the immediacy of love and the urgency of duty at a time of armed national struggle. It also emphasizes the status of women in pre-independence Pakistan era male dominated Bengali society and their struggle against various misogynistic norms portrayed through the defiant activities of the female protagonist in the novel. Apart from defending her feminine identity against the odds of contemporary androcentric society, the paper also focuses on the issue of the protagonist's non-native past and tends to establish her Bangladeshi national identity even though she comes from a different ethnic, lingual and cultural background.

Key words: Love, Duty, Identity, Struggle, War, Independence

Love and duty and often the consequences due to the conflict between them are two of the most recurring themes in the literature of all ages. Writers since the Greek times down to the contemporary age have written their stories with the profundity and intensity of love and duty. Tahmima Anam's *A Golden Age* (2007) is no exception to this. However, the love and duty and the conflict that arises between them in this novel are significantly different. Set in the most defining period in the history of present day Bangladesh which is its war of independence in 1971 against Pakistan, Anam has woven her plot in such an articulate manner that the sense of love and duty often argues against each other but never falls out. Though not overtly stated, the story almost equally implies the issues of forming the protagonist's feminine as well as national identity against the background of masculine hegemony and nationalistic movements. The initial part of the narrative clearly shows how a widowed single mother named Mrs. Rehana confronts the harsh social realities in the contemporary patriarchal Bengali society and how she establishes her own identity as a self-reliant individual in that hostile environment. In addition to her feminine identity, she faces another serious challenge of proving her loyalty and allegiance to the emerging nation of Bangladesh because the country is not her ancestral land and place of birth. The whole story of the novel is indeed an arduous journey for her in which she must stand on her own feet fighting against the stark realities of life in an unfavorable society, carry out her

duties as a responsible mother and manifest her belonging to the land and its cause in order to cement her own national identity beyond any doubt.

Along with these two major issues, it is the bond of love and duty that reigns supreme throughout the novel. But as has been already indicated, the story of the novel does not center round the passionate love affair between a lover and his beloved. Neither does it focus much on the tragic consequences the couple endure due to many internal and external factors. Anam's novel is a story of triangular love but not essentially that of a romance triangle; hers is basically a familial love triangle that involves the love of a widowed mother for her children, the love between the siblings and a seemingly romantic love affair between a young man and a young woman though not passionate and amorous in nature. Similarly, a strong sense of duty can also be found in almost every move and step these characters take throughout the story. In a recent newspaper article, Chapman (2012) states that "Anam doesn't dwell on the brutalities of war; love is the dominant theme: love of country, parental love, sibling love, unrequited love and the ties between love and sacrifice." (Chapman)

The first instance of motherly sense of love and loss is found when Mrs. Rehana Haque, the mother of Sohail and Maya, upon losing the case to her brother-in-law for the custody of her children, utters in pain in front of the grave of her deceased husband: "Dear Husband, I lost our children

today... Dear Husband, Our children are no longer our children ... My children are no longer my children" (Anam, 2016, pp. 3-5) Her motherly love alone proves to be insufficient to keep the children with her as she must also have to prove before the court that she is financially able to bear the expenses of raising the children. Therefore, the tension between motherly love and parental duty appears to have its first mark at the very outset. However, because of her unwavering love for the children and her determination, she gets her children back after a brief period of just a little more than one year.

Tahmima Anam has tactfully made use of history to narrate her story and given it an aesthetic shape to negotiate between the obligation of love and duty at the time of national urgency. The novel is entirely based on the historical event of Bangladesh's independence in 1971 from Pakistan. In fact, she has artistically portrayed the emergence of a new nation through the scintillating family story of Mrs. Rehana. She has employed the ongoing political movements in Dhaka against the arbitrary behaviors of the West Pakistani military regime as an important setting to heighten the intensity of the events that are about to unfold with the course of time. When Anam brings the children again to the scene, ten years have already passed by since they returned from their foster home in Karachi and reunited with their mother, and now Sohail and Maya are nineteen and seventeen years old respectively. It is the year of 1971 in Dhaka, the then provincial capital of East Pakistan when the most turbulent times are looming large in the horizon. Mrs. Rehana is worried about the political course of events taking place in the eastern part of the country and the possible turmoil that might erupt. Dark clouds are fast gathering in the sky and her peaceful life with her children will soon be in perils. She is about to confront the worst she could ever imagine. Sohail and Maya, now adults and both students of Dhaka university, represent the revolutionary students of the contemporary time who actively took part in protest and political rallies against the wrongdoings of the government based in West Pakistan and who ultimately joined Bangladesh's war of independence.

The author has beautifully shown how the bond of love among family members turn into a bond of duty to the nation. We find reference to the military regime headed by General Yahia Khan who, by postponing the Assembly indefinitely, was delaying the handing over of power to Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the paramount leader of the then East Pakistan who had just won a majority in the parliamentary election and was awaiting to be seated as the Prime Minister of Pakistan. Feith (1971), in his convening address to the audience at The Victorian Committee to Support Bangla Desh, clearly pinpointed the chronology of Bengali grievances against the West Pakistani regime and called their struggle "an anti-colonial movement" (Feith, 1971, p. 24). As a matter of fact, the West Pakistanis considered East Pakistan as their colony because they believed the Bengali people's color, culture and language are inferior to theirs. Even though most of the Bengalis were Muslims by faith, the religion of Islam and its teachings could not stop them from considering the Bengalis as of low birth. So, they established a political culture of

imbalance in all sectors such as administration, military, economy and so on. He stated how the eventual holding of an election in 1970 to curb the "dangerous revolutionary currents" (p. 20), the "complicated series of negotiations" (p. 20) on power transfer and the possibility of a peaceful political solution came to a standstill:

For a time it seemed as if a tightrope walking by both Yahia and Mujib might issue in some kind of agreement. But after early March, when Yahia Khan first postponed the inauguration of the elected parliament, the prospect of a settlement dwindled fast. (p. 20)

It was becoming clear to clearer to the people of East Pakistan that the West Pakistani military leadership is unwilling to bring about a political solution. Anam has talked about how Mrs. Rehana, who was not sure about her position in the beginning, is pursued by her children to go to the meeting at Racecourse Ground in Dhaka on 7 March, 1971, where Sheikh Mujib, in his fiery speech, had given a clear guiding blueprint of what the Bengalis must do in case he is arrested. Amid the ongoing political unrest across East Pakistan and the government's feigned negotiations and discussions, the Pakistani military suddenly started its preemptive attacks on the unarmed civilians in Dhaka on 25 March, 1971 and killed thousands of people with a sizable number of students and professors at various residential halls in Dhaka university campus. This incident infuriated the already boiling situation in East Pakistan that eventually mushroomed into a full scale war of independence. Hardly anyone could remain indifferent to what had been going on especially in Dhaka for a long time before this "Pearl Harbour-like strike" (Feith, 1971, p. 20). With the military's unprovoked but premeditated attack, all options of peaceful resolution had exhausted and the time had finally come for everyone in East Pakistan to take up arms against West Pakistan.

It is important to state at this point of the story that Mrs. Rehana's love for her children is unquestionable but her loyalty and attachment to the cause of the would be emerging nation of Bangladesh is arguable. This is because she hails from an aristocratic Urdu speaking Muslim family that was previously settled in Calcutta which is now located in the present day India. After the partition of India in 1947 and after her father lost much of their family property in a legal battle, she was married to her West Pakistan born husband who later settled in Dhaka. Still all of her kith and kin that include the family of her three sisters and that of her brother-in-law are settled and permanently live in Karachi, West Pakistan. After her husband died a premature death of heart attack, she decided to stay in East Bengal because her late husband left her a spacious mansion in Dhanmondi, Dhaka. She loves the place as it has so many memories attached to her late husband. Here she also feels at home as she has got many friendly neighbors. Most importantly she is now raising her children at relative ease with the little income she gets by renting out part of her property to a Hindu family. Because of all these factors, she has developed a strong sense of belonging to the place. This feeling of love and belonging is clearly expressed when Anam (2016) writes:

Rehana looked at the house with pride and a little ache. 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. (pp. 18-19)

But the ongoing turbulent political situation in her new homeland poses a great challenge to the question of her national identity and belonging to that place. On several occasions, her adherence to the national struggle of Bangladesh is questioned by her own children. They accuse her of lacking any feeling for the country when she tries to dissuade them from joining the war out of her fear for their safety. Therefore, the issues of her ethnic and lingual background, her overall Bengality, and her role during the liberation war will serve as the main criteria to determine her belonging and loyalty to her foster country.

The blend of tumultuous national history through the personal story of a family, its ups and downs and the subsequent sacrifices that each family member makes under the prevailing critical circumstances makes the novel look like an epic voyage into the sea of troubles and uncertainties. Sohail and Maya, the beloved children of Mrs. Rehana, are about to leave the house and their mother to fight for the country. All their personal love for and duty to one another will transcend into the love for and duty toward a noble national cause i.e., to free their motherland from the clutches of West Pakistan. But their goals will not be reached without a hefty price. Just before joining the guerrilla force, Sohail has to concede his childhood love Silvi who is engaged with Lieutenant Sabeer Mustafa and is soon getting married. Sohail feels the anguish but suppresses it since time is not right for lamenting this loss. His love for Silvi becomes secondary to his call of duty to the country. He is more concerned about the fate of the nation rather than the sense of immediacy to his private affair. Though he has tried to stay normal, his mother understands how much a shock her son has been dealing with and that is why, when Sohail is finally leaving for guerrilla training, the author narrates Mrs. Rehana's feelings: "She saw him looking at the creases on her forehead, the ones she had named 1959 and 1960. And she saw the scar under his chin, the one he had named Silvi." (p. 97) In a conversation with his mother, Sohail makes it clear why he must go and fight: "I really struggled, Ammoo, but I realized I don't have a choice... This isn't war. It's genocide... I can't sit back and do nothing, Ma. Everyone is fighting. Even people who weren't sure, people who wanted to stay with Pakistan." (pp. 91-92)

This is just the beginning of a closely knit story of personal loss, contribution and sacrifice that will only increase with the progression of the guerrilla war. In *A Golden Age*, the author has depicted Mrs. Rehana as a concerned mother who will go to any extent to protect her children from any impending danger. On several occasions in the story, she appears to be over protective and possessive over her children since she is found to be trying to stop both Sohail and Maya from becoming a part in the war. However, Anam has drawn a fine balance between a mother's concern and her

limitations to control her children's choice. She is at times seen to be very much aware that her ability to control her children's movements is declining as they become adults. That is why, she succumbs to what her son and daughter want as she knows all her efforts are futile before "their death defying youth" (p. 107). It is this fine balance for which the character Mrs. Rehana looks very credible and convincing because Anam creates such circumstances in the story under which she will also be made to feel compelled to involve herself in the war activities. After her son Sohail returns to Dhaka upon receiving the required training and brings home a wounded major with him for his recovery, Mrs. Rehana's life turns upside down. Because from now on, she will have to be an active participant in the war efforts. Slowly but steadily her motherly love and duties begin to take a new direction towards helping the fleeing refugees, hiding weapons and ammunitions in the yard, feeding Sohail's freedom fighter friends, transforming her house as a covert base for guerrilla operations, and nursing and sustaining the injured major. All on a sudden, she is now exposed to what she has never known in her life. She is now actively contributing to the cause of the nation. 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, 2016, p. 272)

But placing her motherhood above her patriotic duty does not suffice to properly evaluate the importance of her contributions. The risk she has taken by providing the guerrillas a safe haven is something to be regarded as more than just motherhood. It is natural that mothers worry about the safety of their children but Mrs. Rehana's aligning herself with the war activities is doubtlessly heroic as her activities could anytime be catastrophic for the entire family as well the guerrillas. She is not found to be scared for a single moment for what she has been doing to facilitate the war activities. To talk about her continuous contributions to the war efforts, Pyle (2010), in her essay says:

She disassembled 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)

That is why, even though her motherly love and affection for her children is foregrounded, all she has done in the first few months since the start of the war is testimonial to her serious love and loyalty to her adopted country. Though her involvement in the wartime activities is not by choice but by chance, it will turn into an epic journey through the nine-month war time.

However, Mrs. Rehana is also not shown as a taintless character in the novel; she is presented as a single mother with natural human frailties and vulnerabilities, who resorts to committing wrongs in difficult situations. Anam has skillfully spun stories within the story in order to give the whole narrative a realistic look. While the injured major is recovering from his wounds, she uncovers to him a long buried secret of how she managed to accumulate the required money to secure the guardianship of her children by unfair means. She tells him how she had to fight just to keep them with her and goes on to say more about how she badly needed money to bribe the judge to reverse the verdict, money for the roundtrip plane tickets to Lahore to take back the children and to build another building in her plot so that she could rent that out for a steady income. She has also told him how she was sexually molested by a banker when she went to him in the hope of taking a loan. Her pursuit for money did not stop there as she went on to explore another option. In search for a financially capable male guardian to support her cause, she even agreed to marry a blind wealthy widower named T. Ali. But alas! things did not go as she expected. That old blind man was a stubborn and short tempered type of gentleman with an unbreakable attachment to his dead "phantom wife" (p. 171). He invited her in his house and took to show her his deceased wife's bedroom. There Mrs. Rehana accidentally broke the mirror of a dressing table that infuriated him so much that he shouted at her and told her to get out immediately. In the middle of this unpleasant and embarrassing situation, Mrs. Haque found a jewelry box with its mouth open. What she confides to the major is a criminal act of stealing that none would condone and everyone would consider her stealing to be vile and unscrupulous to obtain what she needed.

But a pensive dive into the psychology of a single mother in a patriarchal society will probably prompt us to rethink about Mrs. Rehana. Apart from her young age and financial hardship, the court also argues why the children should not stay with her. According to the judge, the children's moral upbringing was uncertain since she had not taught them the proper lessons about paradise and the afterlife. When told about the incident of taking the children with her to watch the movie *Cleopatra*, the judge, in the most detestable and despicable manner of picturing Elizabeth Taylor's breasts, questioned the suitability of taking minor children to watch a such a movie that was only meant for adults. Finding herself with no defense against a load of parochial attitudes of the court which actually represented the then society as a whole, Mrs. Rehana was left with no option but to give in and give up. However, she still pinned her hopes on getting a loan and then proceeding to bringing her children back. But all her hopes were shattered after the molestation incident leaving her utterly broken and depressed. She did not know where else to go and what else to do. The misogynistic society seemed to be viciously hard on her making her a lonely traveler in a hostile world. Naturally, the question of feminist identity in a male dominated society where women are mostly viewed as sexual objects and subordinates to men arises. What the author has wanted to bring before the

readers is the obstacles that women faced during that time in their day to day life. But the humiliating treatment Mrs. Rehana received from individuals and institutions failed to deter her from pursuing what she wanted. The momentary despair might have halted her march for a while but quickly invigorated her resolution to assert her identity as a woman, a mother and an individual. Mernissi (1987), explains how women are systematically barred from exercising her rights in both domestic and outer spheres of life:

the existing inequality does not rest on an ideological or biological theory of women's inferiority, but is the outcome of specific social institutions designed to restrain her power: namely segregation and legal subordination in the family. (Mernissi, 1987, p. 19)

The sudden prospect of her marriage with that wealthy old widower showed her some glimmering light at the other end of the tunnel. When she saw the prospect was slipping away due to the old man's outburst of anger upon her, the box full of gold jewelry opened up a new chance for her which she grabbed without a second thought. The morality issue that is bound to arise here may be resolved with the well-known English proverb that necessity knows no bounds. When a helpless young widow in a hostile androcentric society fails in all her legal endeavors to accumulate the required money to ensure her financial security and the custody of her children, she is bound to do anything to salvage her out of the wretched condition. To think about right and wrong in such a desperate situation is like dying in the middle of an ocean where the only hope of survival is to keep floating, no matter how.

The transformation of Mrs. Rehana from merely a caring responsible mother into an active member of the war effort is clearly evident on various other occasions too. A lot more is to come in the course of events that will help her pass the litmus test ensuring her a position not just as a concerned mother but as a real war heroine. Throughout the covert activities at her house, she maintains strict secrecy so that the plan and mission of the guerrillas are not jeopardized. She has taken such extreme measures that she does not even disclose the grim truth of the death of one of Sohail's friends to his anxious mother Mrs. Bashir when she comes to visit Mrs. Rehana in the hope of knowing the whereabouts of her son. Anyone may accuse Mrs. Rehana of being an excessively heartless person who does not have any empathy and compassion for another worried mother. However, though her treatment with Mrs. Bashir seems uncaring, it was necessary in the prevailing dangerous context in Dhaka. In fact, this supposedly cruel incident transcends Mrs. Rehana's motherhood into something greater and nobler as the author narrates: "But now she was something else—a mother, yes, but not just of children. Mother of a different sort. This mother knew what it was to long for her children. But she also understood the dangers of such longing." (p. 162)

Meanwhile, Mrs. Rehana comes to know that Lieutenant Sabber Mustafa, Silvi's husband, who has joined the Bangladeshi freedom fighters and been fighting alongside, has been captured by the Pak army and is held somewhere in Dhaka. She is also informed by Silvi that Sohail has come to

meet her, which means that Sohail is in Dhaka now. Shortly after she meets Sohail in a secret location in Dhaka where he beseeches his mother to secure the release of Silvi's husband with the help of his uncle Mr. Faiz. He argues that his uncle is a barrister and has a strong enough connection with the military to get Sabeer out. Mrs. Rehana does not understand why Sohail is going this far to get Silvi's husband freed after all her indifference to him but soon realizes the intensity of his son's love for Silvi. Sohail's love for her never falters throughout the novel even though he was literally betrayed by the passivity of Silvi at the time of her marriage. By trying for the release of Sabeer, Sohail is simultaneously carrying out his duty as a patriot and showing his commitment as a selfless lover. It is no matter to him whether Silvi has betrayed him, married another man or will ever love him; what matters to him most is that he loves her unconditionally and so, he must do whatever it takes to make Silvi happy. The mystery of Sohail's blind selfless platonic love for Silvi may seem implausible but a mother knows what it means to be in love. That is why, Mrs. Rehana reluctantly agrees to meet Sohail's lawyer uncle and says, "It has always been Silvi, ever since I can remember... I'm as much a slave to you as you are to her." (p. 195) But at first, she feels confused and hesitant as she does not know how she will approach Mr. Faiz with this request and beg him to make arrangements for Sabeer's release. This is, after all, the same man who snatched her children away from her by manipulating the law in his own selfish favor and made her life miserably empty without them. She feels confused for a moment but soon resolves to do so as it offers her a scope to make amends for her past failures, guilt and wrong doings. Anam narrates:

Going to Faiz and Parveen. Rescue Sabeer. When she pictured it in her mind, she felt strangely relieved. It was the most distasteful, gruesome task. But it was also an opportunity. Her son was giving her another chance to atone. The years of slavish devotion, the mothering, the theft – she has always known they would not be enough. She could not help welcoming the prospect of some new sacrifice. (p. 194)

Moreover, it is also not an easy task for her to get Faiz's help since she is trying to release an officer who has abandoned his post, stood against the Pakistanis and become a traitor in so doing. To exacerbate the already cold relations with Mrs. Rehana, Mr. Faiz while reading an explosive article in the newspaper against Pakistan discovers that Mrs. Rehana's daughter Maya is the writer of that article. It becomes clear to Faiz on which side his niece stands. An argument ensues between them but she defends her daughter by pointing to the reason that propelled Maya to leave for Calcutta and work as a war news correspondent over there. She tells him about her daughter's friend Sharmeen who was caught by the military and kept as a captive sex slave. She became pregnant and later died a helpless death in a hospital. She points to the psychological impact that incident must have left on Maya. As a matter of fact, that death was really like adding fuel to the fire that hastened Maya's decision to go to Calcutta and be an active part in the war. Mrs. Rehana this time did not obstruct Maya; she told her to write some

good stories instead of telling her to be careful. The over-protective affectionate mother understood what a trauma it was for her daughter to hear about her brutally ravished and dead friend. In the meantime, Mrs. Rehana manages to release Sabeer but finds him in near dead conditions due to the horrible torture he has undergone. She takes him to Silvi but sadly he expires soon on account of the injuries he has sustained in his captivity. Her initial motherly concerns are gradually being overpowered by her continuous brave attempts which are all in the interests of the emerging nation of Bangladesh. Every move she has taken so far is adding to the testimony of her committed duty to the nation that is about to be born.

The constant unfolding of unexpected events has already occupied Mrs. Rehana for the last few months. She along with the other participants of war has so far been safely discharging their duties until the time when Mr. Faiz comes to know the fact that his niece Maya is now an enemy of the state. This knowledge of Faiz poses a great threat to the secret activities of Mrs. Rehana and the others. All their covert activities are now under the threat of being exposed to the military because Mr. Faiz is a Pakistani loyalist who cannot be trusted. The major and Sohail's friend Joy are now worried about the safety of Mrs. Rehana and their mission as they suspect she might have been followed and the house watched by the secret service of the state. It means that time has come for Mrs. Rehana to pack up and leave because of the extreme risks involved if she stays. Harboring the freedom fighters is after all an act of treachery against the state and the backlash must be something brutal. Therefore, she is left with no choice but to leave the place and cross the border to the Indian state of West Bengal.

At this juncture of the story, Mrs. Rehana's service to the national cause takes a new shape as she starts volunteering under a physician at the refugee camp in Salt Lake soon after her arrival in Calcutta. She is greeted with complements there as being "an example to all of them and a hero" (p. 242) for everything she has done; even Maya who previously doubted her loyalty to Bangladesh now appreciates her mother saying that she is braver than she thought. There she accidentally finds her tenant Mrs. Sengupta who fled Dhaka in the fear of Pakistani Army's retribution against the Hindus and finds her in such a deplorable physical and mental condition that she starts nursing her with utmost care and warmth. Suddenly, Mrs. Rehana falls sick and unconscious and is diagnosed with jaundice. When she regains consciousness, she finds Sohail and Maya beside her – both of them tending to their mother. Sohail tells her ailing mother about his next assignment of taking out one of the major power grids in Dhaka. He also informs her of some recent major gains against the Pak Army. Hearing this from Sohail, Mrs. Rehana asks him, "Are we going to win?" (p. 273) This simple little question bears special significance so far as the question of the sincerity of her loyalty to Bangladesh is concerned. By saying 'we', she has renounced all her past affiliations and completely become one among the millions of Bangladeshis in their struggle for freedom.

Her bravery continues even after returning to Dhaka where she has to face non-stop questioning by the Pakistani

Colonel who, along with his contingent, comes to arrest Sohail after they find out that he and his accomplices are behind the attack on a major electricity grid. She now faces the real horrors of war as she witnesses how the sex deprived hungry soldiers stare at her daughter. Though she trembles out of the fear of what may happen to her daughter, she gives steadfast answers to the colonel and denies any wrongdoings. In the middle of this, the soldiers catch the major while he was trying to escape. He is severely beaten in front of her and finally dragged away to be further tortured. Even though the colonel insists that he knows everything about what has been going on in this house during the last few months, he surprisingly spares Mrs. Rehana and Maya without doing any harm to them. By then, the war was nearing an end but Mrs. Rehana's journey through it was yet to be over as she must know the whereabouts of the major.

With this end in view, she goes to the same police station where Silvi's husband was detained. But going there, she realizes that the major is dead due to the horrendous torture he suffered at the hands of his captors. Her going to that place again bears a special significance as this will be a coincidental occasion where she proves her undoubting loyalty to the newly emerged nation of Bangladesh by abandoning her family relation. There she finds her brother-in-law Mr. Faiz locked up by the *Muktibahini* (freedom fighters) for his collaboration with the military. Mr. Faiz frantically pleads her time and again to help him get out of there. But she does not pay heed to his strangled cries. Because while Mr. Faiz was loudly appealing to Mrs. Rehana for help, all the faces that have suffered the most because of this war and the atrocities meted out against them floated before her eyes. Shortly after, she sells the furniture that were still in the apartment of Mrs. Sengupta and sends the money to the refugee camps in Salt Lake. She has not forgotten what an unbearable suffering of the refugees she witnessed there. Even after the war is over, she still feels the stinging of her sense of duty that she must do whatever she can for the wellbeing of the countless number of refugees who fled their home just to survive the war. In her next visit to the graveyard, she tells her husband about the war and the losses it has caused. She also confesses that she fell in love with the major, no matter even if it was for the smallest fraction of time. The novel ends at this point with the reassertion of her belonging to this newly founded land, with the singing of its national anthem, with the clutching of its flag and the remembrance of how she has done what she has done.

Though by now, it is obvious that this novel is replete with the abundance of love and duty and the occasional clash between them, Anam's approach to narrate the story placing a settler woman at the center is of immense importance to adequately appreciate it critically. The major part of the setting of the novel is the wartime Dhaka and Calcutta but it is not essentially a typical graphic war story as Anam has not provided any gruesome details of the war in it. Hers is an epic voyage of a single mother through war in which she is caught up with the dilemma between keeping her children safe and serving her foster country. Anam has beautifully shown how a helpless naïve single mother raises her orphan

children in an unfavorable hostile society, how an immigrant widowed wife cum mother becomes an indispensable part in her adopted nation's war, and in the process how she becomes a mother to the nation itself. By doing the unthinkable, she is coming closer to becoming a universal mother and getting more immersed into the cause of the nation. Biswas and Tripathy (2017) writes:

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. (Biswas and Tripathy, 2017, pp. 527-528)

There has been a common tendency among creative writers and film makers in Bangladesh to depict the tortured women during the liberation war as rape victims or *Birangonas* of the war. Though the word *Birangona* means a heroic woman and bears a positive connotation in Bengali, the popular culture has almost always delineated them as women who suffer unspeakable physical and sexual torture at the hands of their captors. Many researchers like Amena Mohsin (2005), Yasmine Saikia (2011), Bina D'Costa (2011 & 2016), Louise Herrington (2017), Farzana Akhtar (2018) and many others have shown how the contributions of women, especially those of the rape victims have been systematically undervalued by the "politics of national forgetting" (Saikia 7) They have often been shown to be socially rejected if they survive the ordeal or committing suicide before being violated or for the shame they have brought to their family. Hossain (2009), in his presentation at a conference on genocide, truth and justice, has provided a detailed analysis on this trend of literary and visual presentation of these wretched women. He says:

the mainstream national literature of 1971 follows the central pattern of representation, where the loss of chastity or izzat remains the overreaching theme and women's sacrifice in killing themselves prior to enemy invasion of their bodies is looked at as the moral resilience of the nation itself. (Hossain, 2009, pp. 105-106)

Anam neither wanted to portray her central female characters as yielding, submissive and innocent nor as war booties and comfort women to be violated by the barbaric forces of the war. She wanted to create a war heroine who is loving and tough at the same time with the strength and ability to stand up alone against masculine hegemony and execute her duty at a time of almost unsurmountable obstacle, danger and uncertainty. The author also did not want to create a passive female protagonist in a war novel who do not play a substantial role during that armed struggle. The readers find the wartime activities of Mrs. Rehana and Maya in this novel to be diametrically opposite to what Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (1949) talked about women regarding war:

The man knows he can reconstruct other institutions, another ethics, another code; grasping himself as transcendence, he also envisages history as a becoming; even the most conservative knows that some change is inevitable

and that he has to adapt his action and thinking to it; as the woman does not participate in history, she does not understand its necessities; she mistrusts the future and wants to stop time. (Beauvoir, 1949, pp. 727-28)

The valiant role both Mrs. Rehana and her daughter Maya has played in the story is an active participation in the making of Bangladesh. More particularly, the leftist political activities of Maya prior to the start of the war and her participation as an amateur news correspondent to report on the sufferings of the refugees remind us of the long history of women's revolutionary activities in the whole Indian subcontinent. The author has also intended to present the political and cultural identity of Bangladeshi women in a much different way than the common perception that women in Muslim societies are supposed to be confined within the four walls of their house. This is clearly reflected in the characters of Maya and her mother both of whom represent the revolutionary spirit of the educated Bengali women who played a vital role in the making of Bangladesh. Mrs. Rehana, despite her Muslim background, enjoys a relatively free liberal married life with her husband when he was alive. Apart from the judicial mistreatment and the sexual harassment, she leads an unrestricted life throughout as a widowed single mother. Her Muslim background appears to have no impact on her personal and social life as she is found to be watching live cricket match, going to movies, going out alone and doing all her daily staff, socializing with her neighbors, and even falling in love with the major. Though she has remained loyal to her late husband, her brief romantic encounter with the major may seem to be crossing the line on her part. In the typical Indian subcontinental way, Anam has probably wanted to introduce the Bengali version of the "New Woman" that was first coined by the English writer Charles Reade in his novel *A Woman Hater* (1877) and later popularized by British-American author Henry James. All Mrs. 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, 2009, p. 69)

Moreover, all the war memoirs, stories and novels on the liberation war of Bangladesh were written in Bangla by the authors who lived through that war and had firsthand experience of that colossal event. Anwar Pasha's posthumous novel *Rifle Roti Aurat* (1973) [Rifle Bread Women], Selina Hossain's novel *Hangor Nodi Grenade* (1976) [Shark River Grenade] and Jahanara Imam's diary *Ektorer Dingulee* (1986) [Of Blood and Fire] are the most prominent ones that

extensively cover the grisly and horrendous aspects of the war with vivid details. Unlike them, Anam who was born in 1975, four years after the war, had to rely chiefly on her own research and the testimonies and accounts of various war veterans among whom many of her family members and close relatives are also included. Though she could have easily ventured into writing a fiction with explicit harrowing contents in it making use of the information she gathered, Anam's focus in the novel is to dive deep into the psychology of her characters and touch upon the various social, religious and political intricacies of the contemporary time which were not conducive for women in general to get engaged in activities beyond their domestic sphere. She has simultaneously juxtaposed the war narrative with miscellaneous recurrent issues infusing human emotions in it. Finnerty (2015), after interviewing Tahmima Anam, writes an introduction that basically sums up Anam's intention behind writing this piece of fiction. She argues that "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." (Finnerty, 2015, p. 43)

The author has implicitly utilized Mrs. Rehana's immigrant as well as different ethnic and lingual background as a tool to show the migration that happened during the partition of India in 1947 followed by a bloodbath as a result of the communal riots between the Muslim and Hindu communities. For their safety and wellbeing, the Hindus and Muslims at that time migrated either to India or to the newly created Islamic Republic of Pakistan of which the East Pakistan alias East Bengal was a part. At that time of the British departure from India, millions of people lost their ancestral homes along with their ethnic identities and were forced to dislocate and resettle in new territories where they had to assimilate into a somewhat different culture. Mrs. Rehana is a representative figure of those dislocated millions in the postcolonial societies of India or Pakistan. The process of resettling was never an easy and pleasant experience for them as they had to learn the new language and adapt with the new culture. Ashcroft et al. (2007) views dislocation as an energizing experience and states that "The necessity of dislocation does indeed become the mother of invention. Hence the disruptive and 'disorienting' experience of dislocation becomes a primary influence on the regenerative energies in a post-colonial culture." (Ashcroft et al., 2007, p. 65)

This is exactly what has happened to Mrs. Rehana who did not know Bengali when she resettled with her husband in Dhaka and had no close relatives around her. Therefore, she represents, what Ashcroft et al. (2007) consider as "A group that is socially distinguished or set apart, by others and/or by itself, primarily on the basis of cultural or national characteristics." (p. 76) However, she is not meant to fail in the story as most of the displaced after partition did not. Though she faces the dilemma of displacement, suffers from identity crisis, and undergoes social and judicial injustice, she never breaks down but battles them all along the whole way. She is seen to be wearing *Sari*, an identical Bengali dress for women and becoming well-versed in Bengali language, which

are all indications of her assimilation with the local culture. She has subscribed to the Bengali nationalist movement and taken a firm stance against the collaborator with the West Pakistanis. Her lingual and ethnic backgrounds do not seem to be obstructing her from becoming an integral part in the war. What she has done so far should probably be sufficient enough to say that she has renounced all her past affiliations and immersed into the newly founded state of Bangladesh and its social, cultural, lingual and political heritage.

Tahmima Anam has tried to animate the eventful history of Bangladesh portraying the love, duty and heroism of the major characters in the novel. She has also tactfully created an avenue for a widowed single mother with almost no Bengali roots who, at different points of the story, fights against various social adversities against women, and bravely travels through the trials and tribulations of life. The whole story is actually a metamorphosis of Mrs. Rehana who comes out victorious overcoming all the obstacles in life and establishes her identity as a free independent woman and an able single mother. Even though she faces scornful remarks from her own children for her over protectiveness and initial reluctance to be a part in the national struggle of Bangladesh, she rids herself of these accusations and asserts her sense of belonging to the alien land by her unfaltering love for and commitment to her children and her fearless activism throughout the war period in favor of the liberation war of Bangladesh. The war, in fact, acts as a catalyst that has facilitated the process of Mrs. Rehana's naturalization and eventually ensured her a firm national identity never to be questioned and lost again.

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