



Breaking Gender Stereotypes in Tahmima Anam's *A Golden Age*

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Abstract

Tahmima Anam depicts the attributes, qualities, joys, contributions, psychological strength, and sufferings of Bangladeshi women in a magnificent manner in her debut novel A Golden Age. Bangladeshi women balance the roles of mother, mourner, sister, friend, nationalist, daughter, wife, and worker with ease. Bangladeshi society tends to ignore the hardships of women. The author has highlighted the realities of women's lives and brings their resilience to the forefront in her work. Rehana faces her struggles without seeking external help by breaking gender stereotypes. While performing a role and executing her responsibilities, she ignores herself and lives happily for her family. Typically, her sacrifices are unappreciated and devalued but that doesn't stop her from pleasing her children. Despite dedicating her entire life to serving others, her rare personal decisions are closely criticized by the patriarchal society. This research focuses on the writer's effort to portray her protagonist as a survivor instead of a victim. Though the women characters in this novel are confined to their homes, their contributions to the war indirectly have made them unsung war heroines. The author successfully breaks stereotypes by portraying her protagonist as a widowed single mother during the 1971 conflict. Bangladeshi women and their lives during the Bangladesh War of Independence are portrayed with remarkable realism in Tahmima Anam's novel.

Keywords: *single mother, resilience, war of independence, double oppression, the second sex, gender stereotypes, patriarchal society*

Introduction

This research will detail the heroic qualities and sacrifices of a widowed mother, Rehana Haque, her daughter Maya Haque's perseverance and the position of women in a patriarchal society, and the fortitude of women stuck in a war-torn country. In the opening of Tahmima Anam's debut novel, the protagonist Rehana tries to keep her children with her. Rehana is unable to keep her children with her because patriarchal culture considers men to be the ideal guardians of a family. Faiz Haque, the older brother of her husband and a diplomat in East Pakistan, takes them to Pakistan to prove that Rehana lacks the financial independence to raise her children properly. His winning argument in court was that Rehana took the young Sohail and Maya to watch the movie Cleopatra, which violates religious principles. The patriarchal court completely agrees with Faiz. According to the judge, Rehana has not adequately dealt with her husband's death. She is too young to be responsible for the children by herself. She has not adequately taught them about Jannat and the hereafter. It is not an uncommon occurrence in Bangladeshi society; nevertheless, it is exacerbated by the fact that she is a jobless woman with no male guardian. Rehana is invisible without a husband or father which disqualifies her from playing the role of a mother. Hence, Rehana chooses silence in court and says this to her husband in his grave: "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." (Anam 7-8). The above lines prove that Rehana blames herself for losing her children's custody though she is voiceless as a widow in a patriarchal society.

The Bangladeshi culture generally considers a male family member to assume all responsibilities at home. When a wife becomes a widow, she is encouraged to remarry for the safety of her and her family. If she rejects, she is ridiculed for her refusal. Rehana, depicting these helpless widows, too faces similar difficulty. Even when her friends try to convince her to agree to a second marriage, she maintains her boundaries. However, it is noteworthy that, when she desperately needs money to retrieve her children, she accepts to marry an elderly man who is wealthy and able to provide her with financial support, demonstrating her selflessness. The daughters in a patriarchal society are considered a burden until they get married. Due to this concern for Silvi's future, Mrs.



Chowdhury disregards her daughter's childhood crush Sohail, who is not yet settled, unlike Sabeer, a major in the East Pakistan Army. Mrs. Chowdhury pushes Sabeer to marry Silvi promptly on the night of their engagement, as the Pakistani military attack abruptly, to secure Silvi's protection amid the dangerous circumstances in the country. Women are often told that they are unsafe if they do not have the support of a male. As a result, seeking safety among the stronger sex is an idea that is shared by both men and women in Bangladeshi culture. Mrs. Chowdhury represents everyone who thinks marriage is the ultimate solution to settling their daughters though Silvi ends up becoming a widow when Sabeer dies in the war. All the people who think of a man as the protector of a woman.

Anam succeeds in characterizing Rehana as a father figure although she is a mother due to her assigned gender at birth. Though Rehana stumbled a bit after her husband's demise, she eventually pulls up her socks and steps up to the role of a single mother. She is so strong-willed that she doesn't relent to Faiz's wife when she wants to keep Sohail as she is childless. She doesn't seek any outside help in bringing up her children. She allows Maya to continue her college education after schooling though it was frowned upon by the Bengali Society in those days. Despite the restrictions placed on women, there is some acceptance of the decisions taken by women in acknowledgment of their independence. On Silvi's engagement night, Sohail declares with confidence: "...it's her choice. Women must be allowed to choose for themselves." (Anam 58). Tahmima Anam effectively portrays her characters by breaking gender stereotypes.

In Bangladeshi culture, the man of the house is the breadwinner. Due to her inability to leave her children alone at home, a single mother encounters problems in raising them. Due to a lack of funds, Rehana was unable to keep her children with her after Iqbal's passing. In an attempt to apply for a bank loan to build a house, she is assaulted by a characterless bank manager. She also attempts to marry a wealthy elderly man for his money. Eventually, she robs an old suitor to build Shona and the guilt of this incident plagues her for the rest of her life. She believes that if Iqbal had not died unexpectedly, she would not have turned into a thief. She believes her spouse to be the family saviour. This is a prevalent belief amidst women in a patriarchal society that stops them from breaking gender stereotypes. Chandan Mishra, a *littérateur* concurs that women without a male guardian are considered invalids by society. Rehana and Mrs. Chowdhury break gender stereotypes by being financially sufficient.

A Golden Age by Tahmima Anam describes the achievements of Bangladeshi women during the 1971 conflict. Her emotionally driven description of the role of Bangladeshi women in the conflict has been critically analyzed by Sanjib Biswas and Priyanka Tripathi, postcolonial feminist researchers. They have concurred that the women's role in the Bangladeshi War of independence was indispensable. They have pointed out that women played a significant role in the war by hiding guerrilla warriors, hiding arms in their residences, volunteering and writing articles for newspapers and reading the news on radios, and most of all, sacrificing their bodies and life as collateral damage in an inhumane war where their lives had zero value. They have observed acutely:

A few recent narratives, including Tahmima Anam's novel *A Golden Age* (2007) and Dilruba Z. Ara's *Blame* (2015) bear many such references where the traditional image of women as merely a victim of war is removed; they are rather active participants in armed conflict. (161)

Rehana is mentally fragile in her husband's absence. She is even frightened to discuss her son's decision to join the military with him. To prevent Sohail from joining the war, she accompanies him to the grave of her husband. Rehana is bolstered by Iqbal's presence, although he is buried in a grave. As a widow, she believes Iqbal could have prevented Sohail from going to war if he were still alive. She believes that, as a woman, she lacks the insight to do what is best for her son. She asks him in passing not to join the battle, but she does not directly prevent him from doing so. She begs her husband to forgive her for failing in her duty as follows: "I cannot stop him. Perhaps if you were here, you would have done it. But I cannot. It is too great a thing." (Anam 81).

The Bangladeshi society makes women feel incapable of making decisions on their own as they are made to feel inadequate and lack the worldly knowledge that men possess usually. But courageous mothers like Rehana prioritize their children's future over their selfishness. Their resilient motherhood gives them the bravery and self-assurance to overcome obstacles.

Rehana being a patriotic citizen and a little out of maternal love provides shelter for the guerrilla fighters. She disregards their safety amid the country's perilous environment. She is an unsung war heroine who welcomes liberation fighters into her home and uses her costly silk sarees to make blankets for rebels. She conceals them even from her closest friends. As this exchange demonstrates, she embraces Sohail's friends with open arms and acts as their foster mother: "...Joy stood and approached Rehana... 'Such bodmashes we are, Auntie, making a mess of your house.' 'Don't be silly, beta. My house is yours.'" (Anam 110)



Rehana experiences immense sadness but never makes herself a victim and becomes a silent sufferer. During the war, she suppresses her grief at being separated from the children. Rehana lies to Sohail's friend Aref's mother when she inquires about her boys Aref and Joy. As a mother herself, Joy's mother reminds her that she should understand her fears. Then, Rehana mutters to herself-

You are a mother. How many times had she repeated this very phrase to herself?
I'm a mother. Above all things, a mother. Not a widow, certainly not a wife. Not a thief. A mother. But now she was something else – a mother, yes, but not just of children. Mother of a different sort. (Anam 140)

This conversation shows that the mothers experience solitude, despair, and sorrow by sacrificing their children for the greater good of the nation.

Rehana goes to any lengths to please her children. When Sohail requests her to release Sabeer, she endangers her life to make her son happy. She is willing to lie to Faiz and risk going to a prison where the guerrillas are tortured to secure Sabeer's bail. Though the major prohibits her from doing it, she doesn't pay attention to him as she is willing to do anything for her children. When Maya decides to go to Calcutta to volunteer, she encourages her to do her part knowing that this will take her daughter's mind off Sharmeen's death though she will be left alone in the house worrying about her children constantly.

Though it is common in a patriarchal society to consider women as the weaker sex, some men tend to break the stereotype. Anam successfully portrays her men as allies to the women in their life. Unexpectedly, the wounded major who leads Sohail and his friends in war invite Rehana to chant the morning prayer verses which is usually a man's job in Islam. But Rehana breaks that gender stereotype when she utters these words: "It's the morning Azaan. I have to pray... 'Would any of you like to join me?' " (Anam112).

Sohail enlists his mother's help to rescue Sabeer even though Silvi rejected his love to marry another man. He doesn't hold it against her and risks his life to request his mother's help. Sohail is also supportive of Maya's wish to play a prominent role in the war. He arranges her train tickets and sends her in secrecy to Calcutta which shows his feminist attitude.

It is challenging for a single mother to make decisions regarding the future of her children because she fears the ramifications of a wrong decision. Rehana demonstrates her strength and progressiveness as a mother by allowing her children to serve their homeland during a challenging time. She permits Sohail to accompany the freedom fighters and make "Shona" their headquarters. When Maya wants to publish stories to inspire liberation fighters, she immediately gives her permission. She does not prohibit Maya from stressing about her safety and solitude. She laments in her mind and wants to stop her, but her maternal mind cannot deny Maya's wish, so she is allowed to go with the hope that she will compose some excellent stories.

Rehana's life appears to be chaotic because she made unconventional decisions that were challenging society's norms. She chose to educate her daughter instead of marrying her off. She agreed to provide refuge to the major when she was alone in the house. She was willing to make Shona the headquarters for Guerilla activities though it was highly dangerous. Rehana allowed Joy to dig and hide weapons in her backyard. She didn't stop her children from pursuing their ambitions. Rehana chose a life where she is happy and independent without being bound by the duties thrust on women by society. Simone de Beauvoir in her feminist bible "The Second Sex" states:

If the difficulties are more evident in the case of an independent woman, it is because she has chosen battle rather than resignation. All the problems of life find a silent solution in death; a woman who is busy with living is, therefore, more at variance with herself than is she who buries her will and her desires, but the former will not take the later as standard. (695-696)

This reference sums up the reason for Rehana's difficult life. She chose to break boundaries instead of succumbing to peer pressure and becoming a victim.

Generally, patriarchal societies tune women to be faithful to their husbands even if they are disloyal. Rehana feels as if she is betraying her dead husband when she interacts with the major, but she could not stop herself from spilling her secrets to him as he is non-judgemental and justifies her actions as a result of her maternal love for her children. Rehana is ridden with guilt when she finally gives in to a moment of passion and chooses her happiness for once. She immediately runs to Iqbal's grave to repent though she is not sure what for she is begging for his forgiveness. Anam beautifully portrays the way Rehana has sacrificed her sexual desire to spend her whole life with her children.

Rehana is a selfish mother and loses her moral compass when it concerns her children. Similar to her thieving to get her children back, she enters a moral grey area in the climax of the novel. Though Rehana is in love with the major, she sacrifices his life when military personnel storms their home in search of her son. She never considers her happiness and sacrifices her emotions for the major by lying that he is Sohail. Then, before her eyes, they remove the major to mercilessly execute him. She gives up the man she loved without hesitation to save her son's life. Here, Anam illustrates the triumph of motherhood over a woman's romantic love.

Maya volunteers to serve the Hindu refugees that have fled Bangladesh. Maya trains with other female students to fight for their country immediately after the Dhaka University bombings though the chance of them becoming a part of Mukti Bahni was highly unlikely due to their gender. Maya is very patriotic and is willing to serve her country in any form. She writes revolutionary articles supporting the Bangladeshi War of Independence. Though the death of Sharmeen temporarily freezes her emotions, she effectively channels her anger and sadness into serving other rape victims. Maya writes opinion pieces supporting the War of Liberation which makes her mother proud. Maya provides solace to her mother by singing and reading poems when she is melancholic. Thus, Anam beautifully characterizes Maya who does not let her gender stop her from becoming a part of history.

The Bangladeshi people, particularly women, have lost many things because of the Liberation War. They have been humiliated and physically assaulted. More than a thousand Hindu women were raped by Pakistani troops. Some were freed after being assaulted while some like Sharmeen were raped to death, while others were confined in their camps for the duration of the war. During the war, the powerful majority uses rape as a biological weapon to weaken the minority. This reality regarding rape during conflict has been researched and highlighted by Susan Brownmiller. In her book, *Against Our Will*, she discusses the lack of psychological history associated with the act of rape. She writes, "Man's structural capacity to rape woman's corresponding vulnerability is as basic to the physiology of both our sexes as the act of sex itself (13)." She correlates rape and sexual domination as a way for prehistoric men to subjugate women and assert their power thus: "Man's discovery that his genitalia could serve as a weapon to generate fear must rank as one of the most important discoveries of prehistoric times, along with the use of fire and the first crude stone axe (14)." She effectively points out: "The rapes happened during the time of genocide or war are entirely done by the powerful side or intruders only to demean the other side. They use this as a biological weapon to make the enemies feel degraded and humiliated" (13). While doing so, the rapist becomes extremely aggressive, beyond all human bounds, and disregarding the fact that the lady he is degrading is first and foremost a human being. Thus, she depicts the male psyche as: "Rape is a man's right. If a woman does not want to give it, the man should take it. Women have no right to say no. Women are made to have sex. It's all they're good for. Some women would rather take a beating, but they always give in." (29)

Sharmeen is Maya Haque's best friend and soul sister who often stay at their house. She always takes part in the college protests and makes beautiful posters to convey their message. She is kidnapped during the Dhaka University attacks and raped by the East Pakistan soldiers. Sohail brings the news of her death to Maya which shakes her core. Sohail tells her about Sharmeen being pregnant but succumbing to the rape injuries. Though Anam does not directly describe the rape, this incident leaves a deafening impact on the readers. Sharmeen is the only character in this novel who fails to break the shackles of gender oppression and becomes a victim of patriarchy. If the rape victims survived the war, they were ostracised by society when they became pregnant. Thus, women had to bear the brunt when they were abandoned by the society and government without any support due to their gender. Thus, they were double oppressed due to patriarchy and colonialism.

Tahmima Anam has paved the way for many female authors to pen their version of 'her-story' where the woman is not merely the victims but their saviours. Dilruba Z. Ara is a Swedish-Bangladeshi novelist who followed Anam's footsteps by loosely fictionalizing her version of events during the War of Independence in her novel *Blame* (2015). It is a heart-wrenching tale of two courageous women in namely Laila and her friend Gita who are blamed for surviving their sexual assault. They are both abducted and brutally raped during the tumultuous wartime. Though they survive the hard times, they are shunned by their own families as they both become pregnant. Eventually, Laila gives up her child for adoption and Gita half-heartedly chooses abortion. They both seek shelter in the rehabilitation centre and become self-sufficient in the climax by becoming a teacher and secretaries due to their resilience. Ara's protagonists do not succumb to the oppressive patriarchal society similar to Anam's protagonists. Thus, Anam has successfully paved the way for writers to tell the story of Bangladeshi women as "unsung war heroes" rather than victims who were initially considered outcasts in the history of the country.

Conclusion

Women's spirit is invincible. Rehana's unflinching faith that she can raise her children by herself gives her a voice in *A Golden Age*, Anam glorifies motherhood through Rehana who broke stereotypes without any regard for her gender. Beauvoir describes self-love for women in *The Second Sex* as:

On the day when it will be possible for a woman to love not in her weakness but



her strength, not escape herself but to find herself, not to abase herself – on that day love will become for her, as for man, a source of life and not a mortal danger. (679).

Women's lives are difficult because patriarchy and imperialism exert control over them. Despite this, mothers can rise independently and appreciate their children, like Rehana in *A Golden Age*. The willpower to create one's own identity, and the indomitable strength to sacrifice for the sake of others make them victorious by overcoming all of life's obstacles. Even if they are a single mother, the mothers who adore their children view them as a gift and a source of strength that can fuel their happiness. They can make decisions in their children's best interests and be a strong mother for their welfare. Thus, Rehana who is a mere housewife becomes an unsung war hero who did not succumb to the atrocities of the war.

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