

Widowhood in War

E. Monica

Research Scholar,

Research Department of English, The American College, Madurai.

monicaedwin22@gmail.com

Abstract

Women represent their own stories. In times of war, personal story of a woman becomes a parallel account to that of the national conflict. Rehana, the protagonist of “A Golden Age” by Tahmima Anam, struggles and survives as a mother and as a widow in the war. She grows politically aware as her children grow as freedom fighters. She drowns into the male stream against her will. As an ordinary woman, she is caught up in the extraordinary times. This paper shows how a woman overcomes the dilemma in supporting her children’s involvement in war and in fear of their security. This paper will also compare the

psychology of the protagonist with the Id psychic zone of Freud.

Keywords: Motherhood/ Widowhood, patriotism, national struggle, revolutionist, Bangladesh Conflict of 1971, Psyche of Woman.

A Golden Age, the first novel of Anam’s trilogy is the commencement of novels about the Liberation War of 1971 in English. This debut novel of Anam is mostly based on her grandmother’s story during the war. Though she left Bangladesh at the age of two, she covers all the lively moments that had taken place in the streets of Bangladesh during the wartime. The emotional pull towards her country makes

her to interview people who experienced the war and do research on the historical base of the war. Born after the Liberation War and grown up mostly outside the country, the researches she made had helped Anam in writing her fiction. Through *A Golden Age* she fictionally recreates the story about the birth of Bangladesh which is made clear in the article of Prasad as, “The very title suggests that the freedom struggle has dawned a new age, a golden age, Sonar Bangla for the people of Bangladesh.” (52) In the novel she traces out the life of a family with the background of war.

A Golden Age of Tahmima Anam is from the perspective of woman. It is also said that the story of the protagonist Rehana is in a way parallel to the life of Anam’s grandmother. Chatterjee in his article depicts the character of Rehana as,

“Anam’s protagonist in *A Golden Age*, Rehana, can be located

against the backdrop of this cultural discourse surrounding the gendered embodiment of the nation and the mobilization of motherhood as a site of *agency* in the nationalist project.” (139)

The plot opens with Rehana, a widow throwing a party for her children Sohail and Maya in the house she built; meanwhile the country is filled with the excitement of recent election. None of the guests in her party can foresee what will happen in the days and months to come. This time the country that is then East Pakistan is on the brink of war. After this the family’s life is about to change forever. In this chaos everyone like student protestors, rickshaw-wallahs, women, country leaders and army soldiers must make their choices. In the

struggle to keep her family safe, Rehana is caught up with unbearable difficulties.

Rehana is in the fear of losing her children, as she already lost them for a year after her husband Iqbal's death. "Dear Husband, I lost our children today." (3) Her husband's brother Faiz and his wife Parveen take Rehana's children away from her for a year saying that she is not matured enough to take care of them on her own. This loss of her children for a year defies her life. "Just for a few years", Parveen said, "Give you time to recover". As though it were an illness, something curable, like what was happening to the country." (7) So she does not want to lose Maya and Sohail in the screen of war. When Sohail approaches Rehana saying that he is about to join the army to help them in war, she accepts it though she does not want to. She even extends her arm for help by giving her house to bury weapons. In the same way she

allows Maya to India where she becomes a press writer for the nationalist against the Pakistan army in Calcutta. Thus Rehana supports her children unconsciously, though she does not want them to be in war.

As Rehana is a widow, the conflict between the personal loss and the national commitment provokes her constantly. The way she perceives war is different from her children's perception. As a woman and as a mother her contribution to the war is abundant though she is not a nationalist. At first when Sohail approaches her saying that he wants to be in war, she refuses thus:

"They need volunteers'. . . Rehana held her head in her hands and tried not to sound desperate. . . '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" (91, 92)

The involvement of children in war provokes her in doing something to the nation. She allows Sohail and his friends who are involved in war to hide the weapons in her house, Shona. "You want to use Shona'. . . Proud, vacant Shona of the many dreams. 'The house is yours, Sohail. Your birthright'. . . It didn't take long for Sohail to set up Shona as the Dhaka headquarters of the guerrilla operations." (117) She finds herself becoming an involuntary revolutionary. However she is less impelled by the nationalist favour and more by the desire to make her son happy.

Rehana is set against the backdrop of the political and historical discourses that are embedded in the nation. In the beginning Rehana feels that there is no sense in the partition but on seeing the atrocities of

the East Pakistan army and her children's involvement as revolutionists, she is provoked as a nationalist. Though she doesn't belong to Bangladesh, her instinct connection towards the nation makes her to do something by supporting Maya and Sohail. Her children provoke her in becoming a revolutionary, which is obvious with the author's description thus: "No, Rehana did not have the exactness to become a true revolutionary. But she had realized long ago that, while the children would remain fixed at the centre of her life, she would gradually fade out of theirs." (55)

According to Freud the *Id* is based on the pleasure principles, which wants whatever feels good at the time without considering other circumstances. Thus Rehana in *A Golden Age* can be viewed through the lens of the *Id* psychic zone of Freud. She does whatever makes her feel good. She does not act according to the

circumstances. Her deeds are never based on others' words; she acts on her own desires. Rehana is torn between the admiration of her children's bravery and fear for their safety. The novelist records this predicament thus: "Rehana's children were safe. That was the most important thing. She could not help feeling grateful to Mrs Chowdhury for holding Silvi's engagement party that night, keeping her children close to home" (81) As all her friends and neighbours hide in their homes because of war, Rehana becomes revolutionary though she does not want to. Her love for her children makes her become an involuntary revolutionary unconsciously. She is provoked more by the desire to make her son happy than the nationalist admiration. She does not want the nation to be separated, which is clear from the article of Prasad, "Even Rehana sees no sense having a country in two halves, poised on either side of India like a pair of two horns" (44)

But however she becomes a rebel of the Pakistan Army.

According to Freud the Id is entirely unconscious part of the psyche that consist the primary components of personality. The pleasure principle of the Id seeks immediate gratification of all the needs and desires and if the gratification is not possible tension is created. Thus in the case of Rehana, there has been love for the Major for a brief time. Her feelings are good in the presence of the Major is narrated thus: "Rehana looked at him and felt a surge of pride in his solid presence, as though he were a fallen angel, ugly and beaten, but maybe still a little blessed." (135) She never wants him to go from her. She is torn between the dilemma of the love with the Major and her love for her son. But as she is a brave mother more than a lover, she sacrifices her love for Major. Her desire over the Major is not fulfilled, and at the

same time the Id personality in her creates extreme tension but that is replaced with the mother's love. Her maternal love wins in the dilemma. Bruce King depicts the love between Rehana and the Major and Rehana's love for Sohail thus: "The war helps liberate her but forces a choice between love for her children and love of the first man in her life since her husband's death. Love for the children triumphs." (210)

From the perspective of the researcher *A Golden Age* deals with the transformation in the psyche of a widow on seeing her children's involvement in war. Rehana's personality cannot be fixed at one point, it differs invariably. In the beginning she is reluctant to the partition, Sohail joining the Guerilla, Maya joining the communist party in the Dhaka University, the Major's admission and his departure. But she is provoked by the transformation in

her surroundings, in which her children play a vital part. Despite her reluctance over a course of time Rehana learns how to let them go. She does whatever her children say because she is entangled by the love towards them. She is an Urdu speaking woman from west but she has made the Bengali of East as her home. Besides all her desires she is more motivated by the desire to make her children happy. From the beginning till the end of the novel there has been a psychological development in her character.

The ungratified desire of Rehana is alternated by the love over her son. She does not care about the reality, the needs of the Major who was in love with her but on her own satisfaction. Rehana's maternal love wins over her love for the Major. Her satisfaction is to make her son happy and to safeguard him from the war. The *Id* is from the newborn babies. Rehana does not

behave like a child, but she behaves based on her children's pleasure principle. When the id needs, wants or desire for something, nothing else is important. Likewise, Rehana goes to any extent to make her son happy regardless of the consequences. She responds immediately to her instinct. Her instinct is based on her children.

Thus the motherhood/widowhood in war is revealed through the novel *A Golden Age*, which has the background of the Liberation war of 1971.

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