



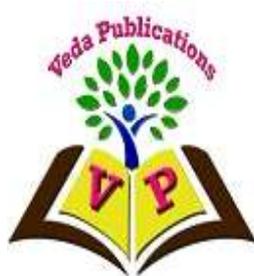
## NATIONALISM IN THE WAKE OF VIOLENCE IN TAHMIMA ANAM'S A GOLDEN AGE

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### ABSTRACT



Throughout the history people have been attached to their native soil, to the traditions of their parents, and to the established territorial authorities. Great men fought for their nation and died as warriors with their true spirit and a national zeal. War, that has left people with tremendous loss left scars on people's mind which cannot be easily erased. There has not been any who has good memories associated with war. War in itself is an organised violence. We have a heart touching story about Rehana Haque, a young widow with her family fighting back for the nation in the wake of violence where no man could have attempted, during Bangladesh war of 1971 presented by Tahmima Anam in her war Trilogy *A Golden Age*. Tahmima Anam is an anthropologist and novelist known as one of Granta's Young Best Novelists for her contribution towards the first book *A Golden Age*. The main characters in the story are Rehana Haque, Maya and Sohail who have involved themselves in activities with a spirit of nationalism. Maya Haque, the daughter nurses and protects war refugees who lost their homes. Sohail on the other hand fights for Bangladesh under Guerrilla against the army who attacked poor and the innocents. War victims suffer from huge losses however they have been treated by Maya and her companions. Rehana Haque first gives shelter to the refugees in her home and also involves herself in counselling and treating the sufferers when she stays in Calcutta with her daughter. As Rehana writes in a letter to her dead husband, the nine months war was like nine generations. This paper is an attempt to explore various facets of the spirit of nationalism in the wake of violence which has brighter flames than violence. An indomitable national zeal is vocal in the novel which appealed us to decipher the minor tissues taking shape of major spirit of nationalism in the text.

**Keywords:** *War, Government, Uprising, Survivors, Rescue operations, Nationalism, violence.*

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Loyalty towards one's nation can be studied in the form of addressing issues at the prevailing need for the country with a great zeal of enthusiasm. Because of its dynamic vitality and its all-pervading character, nationalism is often thought to be very old and conventional; sometimes it is mistakenly regarded as a permanent factor in political behaviour. A heart touching story by Tahmima Anam who has won Commonwealth Writers' prize for her Book *A Golden Age* in the year 2008 presents the characters with true spirit of nationalism, it's an ideology based on the premise that the individual's loyalty and devotion to the nation-state surpass other individual or group interests.

All main characters seem dedicated towards the common goal in the wake of violence where no men could have attempted. As Vivek Sharma writes in his review,

"If Tahmima's first novel is an indication, her name, her characters and her writing, will be recognized by generations to come. We live in an age where such tag-lines accompany every review we read, and we hardly see serious criticism of ordinary work. To fish out a book like *A Golden Age* from a stack of books, all claimed to be pathbreaking and brilliant, requires a dint of luck"(Sharma).

As it is a trilogy the other books are *The Good Muslim* and *The Bones of Grace*, Anam shows the story by connecting it into a sequence of three books. The objective behind is to present war picture and the characters with strong will power and to emerge to be passionate patriots of the nation during the Bangladesh war of 1971. As Sohail says in their conversation with Sabeer and Mrs Sengupta, "God is not the cause of starvation." It is the irresponsible governments. Rehana's Children turned out to be high spirited young blood on whom she has no control. 'There is also talk in the air about delaying the assembly, the students are getting nervous they're worried the elections won't be honoured'.(Anam P-35).

Sohail was a student of the university when the Pakistani authorities ruled the eastern wing of the country. The Dhaka University students were involved in the protests therefore it was no surprise

that Sohail and Maya too caught up. Nationalism had always been there in Maya and Sohail since the beginning and they had rescued people who were hit by the cyclone. Maya had also joined the Communist Party by donating all her clothes to the cyclone victims and keeping herself in only white saris. The family was out for watching cricket match during that time there was a sudden motion in the air. 'The players stared up from the pitch with their shoulders raised in confusion. Rehana looked around her, and the crowd, a moment ago a mass of cheering fans, looked restless; their eyes are angry white specks; the cricket was forgotten, the puffed rice, the panics, the drums. Someone threw a brick on to the field. Someone else threw a cracked wooden stick. Bits of torn newspaper floated down. (Anam P-46) Sohail took Mrs. Sengupta's 1959 Skoda Octiva and wheeled along by taking Mrs. Sengupta, Rehana and Maya in the back seat while Joy and Aref crowded in the front. They then entered into the university compound, their car sped past Curzon Hall, Rokeya Hall, Iqbal Hall.' In front of the Teacher- Student Centre they saw a wave of people in white clothes and black armbands carrying banners, making fists and chanting in circular, overlapping beats. Maya cupped her hands against the window and shouted, 'Joy Bangla! Joy Sheikh Mujib!' (Anam- 48)

There was some air of disturbance with the government and people were afraid and talked to each other that this they knew would happen. Rehana's children were with their friends in the drawing room, Sohail asked Rehana to join the meeting along with youngsters called on 7<sup>th</sup> by Mujib. It was her true nationalism that despite the initial reluctance Rehana was seen at the racecourse on 7<sup>th</sup> of March. People were seen flooding on the grounds with vast sea of shining heads. Sheikh Mujib was a tiny figure from the distance. People in crowd cheered him, called him their father, Mujib would be the Prime Minister and the country would go on as their home they felt. But eventually things took a different turn and the unexpected was yet to come.

Rehana and her family were busy with the engagement party of Mrs. Chowdhury's daughter Silvi and Sabeer. All of a sudden, they could hear the noise of about thousand metal pipes firecrackers being dragged across a stone road, at a distance. 'Ya



'allah!' Mrs Chowdhury cried.'What's happening?' Everybody stay where you are,' Sabeer said. (Anam P-63) Mrs. Sengupta hurried to take her son Mithun in her arms and made for the door. Mrs. Chowdhury lost courage and sank into the chair. When Maya checked with the telephone it was dead. 'Sohail and Lieutenant Sabeer watched the fires of the lit-up city. All of a sudden, the air turned gloomy as they heard the cry due to small children being killed, the uproar of clamour, wailing women, gushing of blood on the streets. It was the uprising of the war atmosphere, in the afternoon there was an exaggerated sound of the megaphones announcing the residents to take down their flags as it is illegal and those who do not follow will be arrested. Maya went to the rooftop and took out the flag and fell asleep in the flag, by morning the dog Romeo was found dead. Rehana went inside and checked all food items the chicken, vegetable, rice and tried to work out how long they will last, at least for three days. In the meantime, the truck came back and announced that Curfew would be lifted from 2 p.m. the following afternoon for four hours. Curfew had been set for 6p.m. and everyone must return to their homes at 6 p.m. If officers found any, will shoot at sight. Again,they made announcement Curfew will be lifted from 2 p.m.continuously for the day.

When Curfew was lifted Sohail and Maya had left for the university, Rehana stayed home. Mrs. Sengupta had brought refugees. They were nearly thirty, they were all Hindus among them were women, children and old men with wrinkled faces. Rehana allowed them to stay in her Shona. Rehana took her chicken out and made curry for elders and korma for children once they had eaten she helped them through the ragged blankets. A few days passed, 'Wild rumours spread around. Mass grave was dug by the army to hide the bodies.Prisoners were tortured somewhere at a warehouse in the outskirts. The animals in Mirpur Zoo, even the Bengal tiger, had all died of fright. But no one seemed to know anything for sure. The newspapers announced, 'Yahya saves Pakistan!' and Dhaka, so long at the centre of the struggle, was now a besieged and vacant city that kept its knowledge close and hidden.' (Anam P-79-80) Mrs. Akram had spent her night screaming for the whole night, it was qayamat the

end of the world. A situation where someone could barely find peace.

By the end of April, they all began to realize that the attack on Dhaka was only the beginning. The army had been spread through the country side, having subdued their forces from one area after another, there had been a trial of Villages set on fire. Young boys ran away from their homes to join the resistance. In all these uprising one-day Sohail's friends Joy, Aref and Partho also came to the bungalow in a truck and Sohail left with them by packing some of his necessary belongings. Rehana said,' I thought you were a pacifist. Sohail replied,' I really struggled Ammoo, but I realized I don't have a choice. This wasn't war.It's genocide.' (Anam P-91) As there was no choice left for her, she took her son to the husband's graveyard and finally said Ayetul Kursi and Surah Yahseen when the son left. Regularly Maya sneaked out of home and spent long hours in the university, Rehana grabbed her arm by catching sight of her being involved in some work with a national spirit. When she found her children doing something, she too was no less, Rehana called Mrs. Rrahman and Mrs. Akram to the bungalow and led them up the stairs to the roof. They saw the mess of some clothes and blankets, when asked, 'What's all this?' She replied,'Don't you know? We're at war, and my daughter says I have to do something. To prove I belong here, therefore I am making blankets for the refugees.'(Anam P-106)

With the same spirit of nationalism Sohail had joined Guerrilla, a secret mission and got himself trained. Sohail appeared at the bungalow and said to the mother that they were planning for an explosive at the InterCon Hotel and hoping there won't be casualties. He also told his mother to bless the boys who are with him at Shona for this mission. She agreed to meet them before sunrise. As she entered, the first thing she noticed was the thick darkness. In that darkness someone asked Partho to turn on the light. A hurricane lamp was lit and passed from one face to the other. Each face glowed one after the other by introducing themselves and giving a smile on their face. She couldn't help thinking they all looked so happy unaware of the difficulty or danger that lay on their way. Not that they might be facing death as though they were about to play cricket match and



found themselves spending a casual afternoon. The next day Rehana heard noises coming from the driveway, it was an hour before dinner, she went to see something must have gone wrong. She saw, 'Sohail pushing a green car towards the house. There were others in the car, though she couldn't make out their faces. Stricken she ran across the garden and through the gate, meeting them just as they were taking the major out of the car. Sohail and Joy were both covered in blood, and with them was a stranger, a slight man in a white coat, looking terrified. The major was between them, motionless and grey. 'Oh, God, he's dead.' Sohail dragged the man out by his shoulders. His head lolled to the side. 'Take his legs!' he whispered. Sweat was pouring down Sohail's face and pooling around his chin. Joy grabbed the Major's legs, and they pulled him to the front door. (Anam P-130) Major's leg was severely wounded and he was nursed by a doctor confidentially in Rehana's home for three months, during which while treating him she had fallen in love and uttered all her life secrets to him.

After some days of explosive at InterCon Hotel Joy came to Rehana's bungalow with full of sweating she suspected something wrong. It was about a telegram he received that his brother Aref had died while executing another mission. Later there was news about Shermeen's death in the hospital attended by Sohail. He found her in pregnancy, the soldiers had brutally raped her and she was found in hospital. The news gave Maya a sting in her breath. Shermeen was her companion from her school days, there has been news about her missing from so many days but she had never believed that would come to her this way.

Soldiers had captured Mrs. Chowdhury's son-in-law Sabeer. On Mrs. Chowdhury's request Rehana went to speak to her brother-in-law after having lunch with Parveen and Faiz she discussed about her neighbour's son-in-law Sabeer who was imprisoned by the soldiers. With great difficulty Rehana reached the station where Sabeer was kept locked. A man brought Sabeer out with the hood. Rehana requested to untie Sabeer's wrists. 'The sleeve of Sabeer's shirt flapped over his hands. The man lifted the hood with a flourish. Rehana kept looking at Sabeer's face to see if it was him. It was. She recognized the bulge of his

Adam's apple, the thickness of his neck, His lips were blistered, a white crust had formed around them, like a ring of coral.' (Anam P-228) His hands were found bleeding as the finger nails were stripped off. He looked scared and not in a state to recognize anyone. In that condition Rehana took him to Mrs. Chowdhury's house in a rickshaw. He passed away after battling with his life some days later.

Rehana went to Calcutta as her house was on eye. They were spied by the soldiers therefore Rehana moved to Calcutta where Maya was taking care of the refugees in a camp. On the next day of her return Maya reached 'Salt Late Refugee Camp with the mother. Her friends Sultana and Mukul were also involved in the rescue operations carried out by their group. Then came a man greeting them my Tuesday Angels, he was Mr. Rao, a doctor looking after the survivors in the camp. Sultana eagerly unpacked the supplies and gave instructions to the half dozen-volunteers who had gathered to follow the instructions. Maya was no less with her untiring spirit joining her wherever need be, and cracking the boxes open with a blade, pointing towards the different shells which made up the medicine stores. Maya was found unwrapping the syringes. She told her mother to take a look, Rehana as ever having a soft heartedness towards others saw a line of ragged families. At the head of a sandy haired man plunged needles into the wounded and the needy. Vaccinations were provided by Maya. Rehana witnessed wailing people men, women and children who survived are in severe trouble, these rescue operations are a real life-giving support for the survivors.

Rehana had involved herself in counselling women and the victims. Slipping herself through the hospital ward, all beds were pushed against each other. 'She walked through the aisle, stepping over people. Anam writes, it was a breath catching sight to see women sitting squatting with their empty breasts holding their children trying to feed them on the streets, then one day she saw a lady with a familiar face, it was her friend Mrs. Sengupta. There was no clue of her husband and son Mithun. She immediately recognized her but Supriya was not in a condition to speak or move. She then washed her hair. After a few days when she was given to write, she scribbled on a



sheet of paper that, she left him and came. The horrors of the war has left her shaky. Her struggle continued. A true picture of nationalism can be witnessed from Rehana, Maya and Sohail.

### CONCLUSION

Rehana, the mother, Maya the daughter and the son Sohail, each one were involved 'in my country' spirit by contributing their energies for the sake of the country during the war struggle. Theo Chapman writes in his review, "Rehana is torn: she can understand why her children want to fight for their country but she knows how dangerous a place the world has become. To avoid alienating her newly radicalised progeny, Rehana agrees to help them by allowing the freedom fighters to use her home as a base". The rescue operations done by Maya staying out of home and looking after the survivors show a true spirit of nationalism whose mother too had a soft nature always ready to stand for the others for those who are in need of some help has been rendered a complete picture. "As her children grow more politically aware, so does Rehana. Her fears for their safety never diminish but her own strengths emerge and she becomes an activist of sorts herself". *A Golden Age* by Tahmima Anam is a story that records a true picture of war sufferings. The uprising of war and its consequences led people to leave their homes, many died, war agony left the survivors with its horror ever to be remembered and give a remainder of the age 1971 Bangladeshi war. Thus, the story by Tahmima Anam, takes a real stand of the characters and they emerge to be victorious with national spirit.

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