

Rehana Haque- A Single Parent, Repressed Mother and a True Revolutionary in Tahmima Anam's *A Golden Age*

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Abstract: Since ages women suffered from gender inequality in various issues such as social, political and other aspects of the society. Women struggle hard for existence in a patriarchal society, in real terms a society where a mother is denied of her very right to own authority towards the upbringing of her children after the death of the husband. However Rehana Haque had succeeded in getting back her children after some years but things are not so easy. As a single parent there had not been less obstacles in her way all through building the house 'Shona' and preparing the needs when no man was around not even her family for the support. Now that her children are with her she wanted to live a peaceful life in her newly built home 'Shona'. There was a sudden civil war, causing eventually the birth of Bangladesh. In order to keep her children safe Rehana struggles hard and finds herself to a heartbreaking dilemma. As the children grew up she lost hold from them both Maya and Sohail wanted to liberate their country and involve themselves in the freedom struggle. Rehana Haque, though not a true revolutionary, but could not resist herself from supporting the cause, by giving shelter to the war refugees in her home. Anam's first novel, *A Golden Age*, is a story about a family headed by a widow named Rehana — a character whose existence is based on Anam's grandmother though the small but remarkable role Rehana played in that war.

Keywords: Parenting, Hardships, Overcome, War, Refugees, Revolution.

1. INTRODUCTION

Tahmima Anam raised in Paris, New York city and Bangkok, born in Dhaka, Bangladesh in 1975, is grand-daughter of a renowned satirist Abul Mansur Ahmed. She studied at Holyoke College and Harvard University and earned a Ph.D in Social Anthropology. Her debut Novel, *A Golden Age* was short listed for the 'Guardian First Book Award' and the 'Costa First Novel Prize' and is the winner of the 'Commonwealth Prize' for the writers, for the best first novel in 2008. Being her first work, this novel has been translated into about 22 languages. In this paper, I would be presenting some of the facts about the hardships met in Rehana's life and her true dedication towards them to overcome. The underlying objectives in presenting these facts is to analyse the life of a lonely woman, parenting the children single handed during her tough times and her never giving up struggle and sustenance in the background of war times is highly challenging. Rehana is a mother who had been denied of the very right of the custody of her children when her husband died.

As a single parent there had not been less obstacles in her way all through building the house 'Shona' and preparing the needs when no man was around, not even her family for the support. "The day when she was told that she has to part from her children, Rehana felt it wouldn't be wise to cry in front of the children, so she finished crying in the rickshaw, the long sobs had caused her holding on to the narrow seat, she repeatedly opened her mouth in a loud, wailing O. The rickshaw- puller made turns and asked, as if he was genuinely concerned, whether she would like to stop for a glass of water. (Anam p- 4)

She took her children to her father's grave and held the round palms of her children".

'Say goodbye to your father,' she said, pointing to her husband's grave.

Sohail raised his fingers to his face. 'La-ilaha-ill-allah.'

'Maya, you too'.

She said, 'My children are no longer my children.'

'Mrs Haque,' the judge had asked, 'What would your husband want?'(Anam p- 5)

Their father would have wished them to be safe, she had said. Yes, he would want them to be safe. But when Rehana refused to sent them, Faiz and Parveen, her brother- in- law and his wife had taken the matter to the court.(Anam P-6)

Now that her children had returned she invites her friends, Mrs. Akram, Mrs. Rahmann, and Mrs. Sengupta, on their returning day every year, she throws a party and celebrates that moment with them." She took her children to their father's grave, now she stood at the foot of Iqbal's grave, facing the headstone that said, in black letters. MUHAMMED IQBAL' HAQUE. Sohail was on the left and Maya was on the right. They cupped their hands and held them up. This was the part when her throat always tightened. She then goes to the husband's grave and began. She addresses the grave saying, Here are the two grown ups, Masha allah, it has been ten years since their return. Maya is seventeen and Sohail is now nineteen. Our children are healthy as well as obedient. She continued,

When I came last time I told you about the elections. At present the condition in the government seem unhealthy, the public is waiting for Mujib to be declared as Prime Minister. There has been unusual delays in the government. Once there is change in the government, things will fall in place and everyone will return to their normal routine. Then she paused, gave a deep breath. Steadied herself. She still wants to say so much, she tells that she missed him every day. Once again addressing the grave, she asks as to why he has left her all alone. "She pressed her palms to her face. 'Goodbye, Husband.'" (Anam P-23) As she lay in the dark, the story of their return began to play itself out like an old film reel, rusty and clicking but with the images still intact, still potent. This was the end of the ritual: a recounting of the past, an attempt at a reckoning.

'Rehana had sold Iqbal's precious Vauxhall. Mrs. Akram had convinced her husband to buy it. Rehana sold her car for a thousand, at first she had refused, but after paying the lawyer she had not enough money left out but 250 so she told Mrs. Akram to take home the car. The Vauxhall brought her a thousand rupees. Still not enough money to bring back her children, raise them, keep them from ribbons to socks and uniforms which was not nerely enough. She pawned the rest of her jewels: the sun-shaped locket and marching earrings, the ruby ring, a few gold chains. She counted the total: 2,652. Still not enough. She sold the carved teak mirror frame above her dressing table, an antique from the house in Wellington Square, sent on a cart to Dhaka after her wedding, with a note from her father: 'I'm sorry, this is all I could save.'"(Anam p-41)

Maya's friend Sharmeen and Sohail's friends were the regular visitors to her house. During one such visit, after Sohail's friends had come and greeted her they insisted her to join them as Mujib may declare independence in Bangladesh. Rehana turned back to the kitchen, she wondered if she should attend the meeting. "They were always telling her to come with them to their rallies and their get- togethers, but, not being young or part of the student movement, and not having attended the elections of the student unions, and not, like Sohail and Maya, having read the communist Manifesto and sat for hours under the banyan tree debating the finest points of the resistance, as a nationalist she did not have proper trappings. She did neither have the appearance nor the youth or even words. The exact words, to be spoken there, did never easily glide from her tongue: 'comrade,' proletariat.'revolution". Those were very hard and precise words which does not capture Rehana's ambiguous feelings about the country she has adopted. In every sense from the point of view Rehana did not have the exactness as one to possess to be a true revolutionary. She always had a realization that if the children remain fixed with their work she would gradually set them free from her. "Despite her initial reluctance, Rehana found herself at the racecourse on the 7th of March. She arrived early but the field was already full. It was as though the whole country had turned up: People flooded the grounds and all Rehana could see for miles was a vast sea of shining black heads, glowing in the sunshine like a restlss horizon of darkness. The scene appeared before Rehana like a glamorous blackand- white picture; there was the white of Mujib's kurta pyjama, the black of his short coat, the white of the tent pitched to cover the stage. By the end she found herself shouting "Joy Bangla, Joy Bangla.'"(Anam p-58)

‘‘On the 25th Mrs Chowdhury had invited all her friends for a special dinner in honour of Lieutenant Sabeer who has been chosen for her daughter Silvi, Rehana and her children were also there. All day there had been strange rumours floating around the city. Mujib was in talks about the election, and no one was saying whether the talking was coming to anything: at the end of Satmasjid road, at the East Pakistan Rifles Compound, the place they have always called Peelkhana, there was speculation about a military attack; some university students had come out with bricks and broke chairs from the dormitories, trying to construct a makeshift barricade’’. (Anam p-62) In that upheaval Sabeer and Silvi were made to place Jasmine garland over each other’s neck. ‘‘At ten o’ clock the firing began. It was the sound of a thousand New Year firecrackers, of metal pipes being dragged across a stone road, of chillies popping in a smoking pan’’. (Anam p-63) In that sudden torment of firing, Mrs. Chowdhury took a decision of marrying Silvi to Lieutenant. Rehana recited verses from holy Quran and they all sat solemnizing the marriage. After that incident there were war refugees who came in for help and sought shelter in Rehana’s house, Shona’s garden. She prepared some food for the refugees. ‘‘When she was finished, she took the trays of food to Shona, picking her way through the ragged blankets. There were children, just as she’d imagined, and women, and old men with wrinkled faces who looked at her had tried to smile in gratitude. But they didn’t speak not even to each other. They sat in silence, shifting through their loose bundles, calculating the sum of what they had salvaged’’. (Anam p-72)

Sanjiv Kr Biswas & Dr. Priyanka Tripathi from Indian Institute of Technology Patna, writes in, ‘The Criterion International Journal in English’ - *A Golden Age* (2007) is the debut novel of Bangladeshi writer Tahmima Anam which deals with the passionate and heart touching story of a mother during the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971. The protagonist being Mrs Rehana Haque, a middle aged widow, Anam in her novel relocated the traditional role of women as exploited, tortured, raped, submissive and passive in the long war history. Her heroine Rehana is one of the representatives of the ‘‘New Women’’ of war narratives’’.

Anam’s Rehana Haque has been identified as a strong woman though exploited and tortured, mentioned by Sanjiv Kr Biswas, has never giving up her spirit, a dedicated lady to be relocated among the modern women. She has not been directly involved in the war but her belongingness and attachment to the city has made her act as a true revolutionary more than once. When Maya and Sohail directly involved themselves in war activities. Rehana helped the refugees to take shelter, besides permitting Sohail, her only son to join Guerrilla. She did not mind her son converting her house Shona into the Guerrilla Headquarters. This shows her true involvement as a revolutionary.

Rehana had witnessed the war afflicted people with great pity in her heart. There had not been any left from less experiencing the war horrors. People who had never really felt to be citizens of the city gradually erased their faint tracks and returned to their villages. Among them were the butchers, the tailors, the milkmen, the rickshaw-pullers, the boys who painted cinema actresses on the back flaps of rickshaws and not to miss the younger boys who made tea in rusting kettles on pavements- all left the place silently, leaving the city carrying bundles on their shoulders, taking children against their back.

After a few days Rehana was seen sewing sack clothes for the war victims with Mrs. Akram and Mrs. Rahman giving it a name, ‘‘Project Rooftop!’’ (Anam p-111)’’ The more time went by, the harder it became, Rehana organized the house; she packed the supplies the boys had left at the bungalow; she sewed the kurthas. It was a lonely, stretched- out time. So by the time Sohail returned to Dhaka, the city had settled back into a sort of routine. On his return the mom had left her ears to the talks going on between the brother and sister, in the meantime she heard him divulging before Maya about his involvement in the warfront and now turning a member of Guerrilla army! Rehana did not take much to decide when the son asked her about their plan for a Headquarter and very soon her Shona turned out to be the Headquarters, where they hid something like iron metallic sounding boxes inside the garden. Rehana watched the huddled figures that came in and out of Shona’’. (Anam p-117)

As a true revolutionary though indirectly ‘‘she rationed the money the Senguptas had left and kept a strict schedule for washing, cleaning, shopping, cooking. And there were the medical supplies to store. She found herself busy and preoccupied all the time. There were few opportunities to dwell on’’ (Aam p-118) rather than worrying about the current state of disruption due to war, she engaged herself in supplying food and clothing to the war victims. His son and all the young boys in Guerrilla, who left their homes a long ago were pleased by the motherly affection and care Rehana rendered them.

2. CONCLUSION

This paper records some of the events of Rehana's ever fighting spirit as a young widow, repressed mother, who had many challenges in parenting her children and a true revolutionary. Rehana Haque is presented as a woman fighting against the hardships of life. She, being a young widow strives hard to get the custody of her children when her children were taken by her brother-in-law. *A Golden Age* is the story of passion and revolution, hope, faith and heroism. It is about the human chaos and conflict, political and social exclusion. It has been set against the backdrop of Bangladesh war of 1971. As a mother she gives her children, freedom to take decisions, to join the war liberation movement. As a revolutionary, she takes care of the needs of the war victims, the sufferers in her place Dhaka. Though being a woman she never gives up to the misfortunes that lie in her way and continuously toils hard to succeed.

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