

**MOTHER (REHANA) AS NATION (BANGLADESH): A STUDY OF  
TAHAMIMA ANAM'S *A GOLDEN AGE***

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**Abstract**

Literature is not only a mirror of the then society. Meaning is given to things ; they are classified and conceptualized, and values are placed on them through 'representation' i.e. by using words about them, by telling stories about them, by producing images of them. Literature produces certain stereotypical images through the 'rehearsal' or the repetitive representation of certain types of gender relations , making them seem the acceptable norm. Nations are narrations. Nations are silhouetted, narrated and mapped through women. Nation manifests itself through women. Nations and women are complementary to each other. Each participates in the formation of another. Men are, as if, tigers. They will perform the much trumpeted, chest- thumping deeds such as fighting, protecting and defending the nation. Like Lord Shiva they will destroy and transform. Women 'will reproduce the nation physically and symbolically'. They are lamb-like. Like Brahma and Vishnu they will create and preserve.

**Keywords:** Women, Mother, Nation, Narration, Representation.

Both nation and gender are constructs. Gender is a social construct i.e. who is masculine and who is feminine is determined by society, and Nation, as Benedict Anderson famously argues , is an 'imagined political community. Homi K. Bhabha like many other thinkers, perhaps takes Benedict Anderson's book *Imagined Communities* (1991) as a starting point to think about nations. He also gives emphasis on nation as an idea; as a discursive and cultural construct. In his own words, nation is a system of cultural signification ... the representation of social life rather than the discipline of social polity. (Bhabha, 1)

Bhabha also says: Nations, like narratives, lose their origins in the myths of time and only fully realize their horizons in the mind's eye.(Bhabha, 1)

To rephrase, nations are imaginations ; nations are narrations. Nations, in other words, are forms of mythology. Gender, as Judith Butler points out, in her 1990 book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* is the effect of reiterated acting. Gender is constructed through one's own repetitive performance of gender.

It is, as if, what Jaques says in , Act II, Scene VII of William Shakespeare's *As You Like It* :

Jaques: All the world's a stage,

And all the men and women merely players;.....

Butler argues that gender is 'a stylized repetition of acts' and is "real only to the extent that it is performed". The fact is that one is not essentially one but one becomes one through his or her acts. Butler in this context gives the reference to the 'drags' who by their everyday gender rituals and, through this repetition of gendered actions reveal that gender is a performance; 'a constructed identity', 'a performative accomplishment'.

There is a parallelism between nation and gender as nations are narrated in gendered terms. Nations are imagined through women. For developing this parallelism, and how both nation and gender take part in the formation of one another I have drawn largely on Rada Ivekovic and Julie Mostov. Nations are narrations, and nations are narrated and mapped through women. Nation manifests itself through women. Nations and women are complementary to each other. Each participates in the formation of another. Narration of nation ascribe women with traditional gender role - Mother, Wife and Maiden. The modern nation-states are defined in terms of geographical territory. Similarly, nations are defined in terms of female body and thus physical space is rendered socio-political.

Nations are imagined and narrated in gendered terms. Practices of nation-building draw on traditional gender roles such as mother and wife, and a national myth is employed that the women as mother and wife are cultural signifiers while nation is the signified. The myth of two lands are created – Motherland and Fatherland.

The Motherland is thought of as weak and passive and Fatherland is thought of as strong and active:

The Motherland provides a passive, receptive, and vulnerable image in contrast to the active image of the Fatherland, which is the force behind government and military action - invasion, conquest, and defense. (Ivekovic and Mostov, 11)

The nation is the Motherland and it is the sacred duty or men's burden to protect the motherland. Women will 'reproduce the nation physically and symbolically' and men will 'protect, defend, and avenge the nation.'

Ivekovic and Mostov says:

Gender identities and women's bodies become symbolic and spatial boundaries of the nation. Women's bodies serve as symbols of the fecundity of the nation and vessels for its reproduction, as well as territorial markers. Mothers, wives, and daughters designate the space of the nation and are, at the same time, the property of the nation. As markers and as property, mothers, daughters, and wives require the defence and protection of patriotic sons. (Ivekovic and Mostov, 10)

Women become tropes. They serve as a metaphor for the nation. The female body is defined in terms of a geographical metaphor as nation. Women are recognized in synecdochic terms - part for the whole. Women are recognized as a 'symbolic collective'. Ivekovic and Mostov continue:

The nation as mother produces an image of the allegorical mother whose offspring are the country's guardians, heroes and martyrs. Individual mothers are celebrated as instances of this image: their pain and suffering, their sacrifices are recognized as part of the nation's sacrifice. (Ivekovic and Mostov, 11)

The Bangladeshi born novelist, Tahamima Anam's *A Golden Age*(2007), her first novel, shortlisted for the Guardian First Book Award and the Costa First Novel Prize, and the winner of the 2008 Commonwealth Writers' Prize for Best First Book tells the story of the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War(*Muktijuddho*) through the eyes of Haque family. Anam was born in Dhaka, Bangladesh in 1975, brought up in Paris, New York, and Bangkok. She was currently domiciled in London. Although Anam grew up far away from her native country all her life, she heard about the country's war for independence, which took place before she was born from her Bengali parents and their friends. And when she decided to write a novel about Bangladesh, Anam says to Lynn Neary, she could not imagine writing about anything else except the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War.

The plot of the novel is allegorical i.e. the plot has a double meaning. There is a primary or surface meaning and a second or under- the- surface meaning. The story can be read at two levels – personal and political. Rehana Haque is the female lead in the novel. Anam focuses on the microcosm of the Haque family to reflect the macrocosm; the chaos and the tumult of the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War, looming large on the national arena. Rehana's struggle to keep her family and her nation together during wartime chaos parallels the tumultuous story of the Bengali people from before Partition to the formation of a distinct nation.

The novel opens in March 1959 with the following words in the Prologue:

Dear Husband,  
I lost our children today.

When the novel begins Rehana's husband Iqbal Haque has died, leaving Rehana a widow. The death of husband at the very beginning and the widowhood of Rehana 'suitably represents post-Partition Bengal. Like an unprotected single mother, the Bengali nation faced a frightening, vulnerable future'(Pyle, 1).

Rehana loses custody of her two children, Maya and Sohail, to her brother-in-law Faiz who took them to Lahore on account of her poverty and youth. "She fought the pinch in her jaw and the acid taste that flooded in her mouth. She fought the fierce stinging in her eyes, the closing of her throat"(Anam, 4). But she could not keep them. She bought them two kites – one red and one blue and tells them, biting down her tongue:

'Go and be brave. You can fly your kite, beta, and I will see it all the way  
from Lahore(Anam, 5).

The buying of kites by Rehana is significant. The kites perhaps suggest alienation of the children from the mother. She sets her children free. Far away from her, their relation will be bound by a thin thread, as if. And there is a slight possibility of their coming back. The opening words work like a refrain because throughout the War, and throughout the novel, Rehana returns to her husband's grave to tell him the story of what is happening around her. It is an opportunity for Rehana to overcome her self-doubt and achieve redemption by emerging from the war-ravaged backdrop.

The life story of Rehana gets handcuffed to the history of the birth of Bangladesh as a nation. Her life and her experiences in the novel are inseparable from the events taking place around her and so she truly becomes a mother of the nation. Happenings in Rehana's life go by, symmetrically, at the same pace as the history of Bangladesh does. Her inner conflicts go with the flow of the Bangladeshi history, in a merry-go-round allegoric manner. Rehana is larger than life figure. She emerges from her motherly emotions to a mother of children of the nation. The first chapter of the novel, 'Shona with her back to the sun' begins in March 1971 with a party thrown by Rehana to celebrate the homecoming of her children, who are the hope of Bangladesh.

When Rehana's Pakistani brother-in-law, Faiz, took the children, he stole the future of Bangladesh. If Sohail and Maya had stayed with Faiz and Parveen, the children would have been transformed into Pakistanis, and Bangladesh would have been metaphorically childless. The void created in the life of Rehana after the death of her husband and the void created in the life of Sohail and Maya after the death of their father is filled by, as Christine Pyle calls, by a 'fierce nationalism' 'The three had a father-void, which was filled when they saw Mujib at the rally' (Pyle, 3) :

They belonged to him now; they were his charge, his children. They called him father. They loved him the way orphans dream of their lost parents: without promise, only hope (Anam, 57).

Although Rehana was initially reluctant, she found herself at the racecourse on the 7<sup>th</sup> of March in a meeting of Sheikh Mujib who says, 'Make every home a fortress' and Rehana responds to the call, as she lets Shona to be the fortress of the Muktibahini.

As the mother of Sohail and Maya Rehana has sacrificed a lot. She suppressed the urge to remarry, to be loved again :

'And the thought that some man might be cruel to her children was enough to make the bile rise in her throat'(Anam, 26).

When she asked for loans, for rebuilding and renovating the house her husband left, the money lender tried to molest her. She was so desperate for the money that she gave a promise of marriage to a rich blind widower T. Ali, entered his household and committed a theft. She named the renovated house Shona and rented it out so that with the money she could bring her children back.

As the mother figure of the nation, she has also sacrificed a lot. Her son Sohail has joined the Resistance and her daughter Maya had joined the Communist Party. When war is brewing outside with the enemy soldiers marching, she is not afraid. She says to Mrs Rahman, one of her 'gin-rummy' companions:

'I tell you, we should all stay here and take a stand'.

She does take a stand. She felt that it is her country and she has to make sacrifices. So she started the Project Rooftop, making blankets for the refugees. She has to take a lot of pain to rebuilt Shona. Mr Abdul Khaleque says, 'The Houses presented in the novels do not merely occupy physical space; they are also portraits of a moral universe. Household members are imbued with high moral ideals to enable them to fight against evil forces and they form wonderful images of ideal homes in an independent country.'

When Sohail asks to use the second house on her property as a hiding place for guerrillas and weapons, she allows him to set up Shona that had given her the children back, that made her dream many dreams as the headquarters of the guerrilla operations. The newly built house, Shona is not only helpful in bringing the siblings to their mother; in bringing reconciliation to the Hoque family, it is also a refuge to the guerrillas of the MuktiBahini; Shona has its important role in liberating the country.

Rehana's body has striking similarity with Bangladesh as an emerging nation. She reproduces Bangladesh as an emerging nation 'physically and symbolically':

At thirty eight, Rehana's body had finally caught up with its history. People who did not know used to assume she was a student, or that she was unmarried, because she didn't wear a wedding ring or a single piece of gold jewellery, but no longer. She had gained a little weight, and she enjoyed the curve of her belly, the slight effort of movement , an

awareness of breath and bone. Her new, comfortable shape came with new imperfections: the bowed line between nose and chin, the slight shadow above her lip, the thickening of her waist and ankles. All fortunate developments for Rehana, as they signified the battle weary body of a woman who had passed years in the efforts to raise her children.(Anam, 58)

When the nation is in its embryo form, it seems to be a 'golden age' to the people of Bangladesh; an age full of possibilities, full of the golden hope of freedom. At thirty eight Rehana's body became 'heavy'. She became aware 'of breath and bone'; there were 'imperfections' in her body, and her body became 'battle-weary'. Harsh reality is replaced by golden dreams. The battle weary country turns into a land of corrupted dictators, which has been presented in Anam's next novel *The Good Muslim*(2011)

But Rehana cannot be reduced to a mere allegoric and symbolic presentation. Rehana's participation in war is purely unintentional. She is an unintentional hero. While the war is going on, she is just in it to protect her children. But later she became a different kind of mother:

Not a widow, certainly not a wife. Not a thief. A mother. But now she is 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 danger of such longing.(Anam, 162)

When Sohail is eager to join along with her friends, Aref, Joy and Partho as volunteers in the *MuktiBahini*, Rehana choked a little bit. Like Sohail, her mind is full of war. Looking at a group of schoolboys she thought, as if, 'they were waiting for the right moment to tell their mothers and disappear'(Anam, 92). But she was strengthened by Iqbal's presence. The only thought that now concerns her is sending her son to war 'with a full stomach.'(Anam, 96)

Kamila Shamsie is right when she says that *A Golden Age* provides windows on a mother's war. Anam says in her interview with Terry Hong that she is interested in women as heroes, in the unexpected ways that women are heroic. Rehana is an unintentional hero. The war is going on, but she's just in it to protect her children. That's just what women do, all over the world: they do what it takes to protect their children. That's the kind of heroism she is interested in. Anam further says that her mother is a feminist leader in Bangladesh. So, she has grown up with all those ideas about strong, able women. She finds that women make more interesting heroines.

In another interview with Hong, Anam revealed that the main character, Rehana, is based on her grandmother - who was left widowed with four children in the 1950s. She decided as Rehana did in the novel not to remarry, but to raise her children on her own, and then had to face the war. The resistance fighters used Rehana's house and dug ditches to bury arms and it corresponds to an event in Anam's grandmother's life. Anam said:

"There were arms buried in my grandmother's garden from the beginning of the war - and at some time, three or four months into the war, the arms were taken away - but they forgot to put the dirt back in the garden".

She continued,

she said 'we're digging a well, because there is no water.'

Neither is Rehana a mere superimposition of Anam's grandmother. She, in the face of all odds goes to Muslim Bazaar to release the prisoner Sabeer, the son-in-law of Mrs Chowdhury. When the war is still going on, she went to Salt Lake. She has already become a 'hero', an

example to all fighting for the *mukti* of Bangladesh (Anam, 242). There she assisted Dr Rao at the refugee camp:

She was trailing Dr Rao through the ward, taking notes on the new patients, writing down their medications and prescriptions.(Anam, 264)

Housewife, widow, and mother, Rehana Haque, exemplifies the power of the individual to resist and ultimately prevail against the ravages of war. Speaking on behalf of the pan-Commonwealth panel, its Chair, the Hon Justice Nicholas Hasluck praised *The Golden Age*(The Asian Writer):

This is the first major fictional account in English of the creation of Bangladesh. Housewife, widow, and mother, Rehana Haque, exemplifies the power of the individual to resist and ultimately prevail against the ravages of war. The assured and lyrical prose evokes the tumultuous birthing of a new nation in an intensely personal family narrative.

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