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Women and War: A Critical Study of Violence on Women in

Tahmima Anam's *A Golden Age*

Deepali Kapur

Abstract:

The Liberation War of Bangladesh is deeply submerged in the pool of gender-based politics, Bengali genocide, sexual violence, mass killings, rapes or forced impregnation, trauma, and extreme torture on women by the Pakistani army. The wartime circumstances depict that sexual violence, genocide rapes and atrocities on women are silently approved by the Government and Armed forces. It is a clever play of institutionalised patriarchal models of society and power politics to prove their supremacy over the others. Susan Brownmiller in her book, *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape*, depicts the plight of rape victims during wars. She remarks, "Rape becomes an unfortunate but inevitable by-product of the necessary game called war. Women, by this reasoning, are simply regrettable victims..." (32). Moreover, sexual violence proves to be an authoritative misogynist march by men to topple down women's honour and self-identity. While reading the situations and narratives of the Bangladesh war, the accounts of women's experiences are missing. Women's struggles are often kept away from the social platforms and historical records so that they feel their irrelevance and adopt permanent silence. The present paper is based on Tahmima Anam's *A Golden Age* (2007) that highlights the condition of women in a male-dominated society. It also analyses the hardships they went through, before and during the Liberation War of Bangladesh in 1971. Through the women characters in the novel, Anam depicts the struggles, gender violence, and traumatic incidents women endure while still supporting the cause of the liberation movements in the country. But their contribution to nation-building and independence is neglected on personal, as well as, public platforms. Anam's writings have impactful characters who give a voice to the voiceless women of Bangladesh. This paper also discusses how sexual violence on women during wars are motivated and strategically put into effect by various power groups. These brutal actions against women are approved by the institutionalised models of patriarchy which try to subjugate women and treat them as mere



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objects. They primarily work on the principles of male supremacy and attaining power that can be achieved easily by suppressing the weaker gender.

Keywords: women, violence, rape, patriarchy

The saga of women exploitation, sexual slavery, and unending cruelty on their identity is spread across our history especially during times of war. These wars crushed human values and scarred the present and future of women, as well as, men! The violence against women “destroyed everyone, particularly the men who in trying to exert manly power destroyed themselves and their humanity in their heinous acts against the vulnerable” (Saikia 13). Also, the activities of Pakistan’s army, “remind us in their penetrating speech that the problem must be evaluated using a larger conceptual framework of the loss of humanity due to men’s inability to accept and tolerate difference, which allowed institutions to reduce people into categories and labels to be attacked and destroyed” (Saikia 13). Women went through the turbulent times of war and were also made victims of the patriarchal notions of society. Manuel Velasquez in his book *Philosophy: A Text with Reading*, critically analyses the cultural beliefs that “associates men with rationality and mind and tends to associate women with the bodily appetites and emotions that must be controlled. “ Reason is male and must rule, whereas feelings are female and must be ruled” (72). These manipulative societal norms subject women to gender-specific roles, gender-identity issues and discriminatory practices against them. Even in the times of peace, women go through regular harassment for their unequal rights, legal discrimination, educational rights, forced marriage decisions, sexual violence, and cultural-religious bounds. Experiences of women are often kept away from the social platforms and historical records so that they can be easily hushed into silence. The “women who were brutally attacked and exploited were annulled from national historical memory, their experiences was a site of shame” (Saikia 55) for their own society and nation. It is a deliberate fabrication by the patriarchal institutions to demean and suppress the women representation in the society with the help of the manipulated teachings of religion, cultural beliefs and power politics. Susan Brownmiller in her book, *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape*, points out that the brutal experiences of women are kept hidden from the outer world because an “aggressor nation rarely admits to rape. Documentation of rape in warfare is something the other side totals up, analyses, and propagandizes when the smoke has



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cleared after defeat” (76). There is deficient documentation over the violence inflicted on women during the difficult times of war. Women face non-acceptance by their own people and society during and even after wars. Sexual violence and genocide rape against women has always been used as the strongest weapon by the enemy forces to terrorise and break the morale of the other country. “Sexual violence has occurred during armed conflicts at all times, on all continents” (Gaggioli, 504). There are numerous records and statistical data on killings and sexual violence on women in the recent conflicts like in Northern Uganda, Anglo-African struggles, Bangladesh Liberation War, political and social upheavals in Pakistan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Communist Revolution of 1959 in Cuba, Taliban in Afghanistan and in India etc., For example during the Taliban rule, the patriarchal laws for women were so stringent that they could not move out of their homes without a burqa or chador (veil). “You rarely see women on the Northwest Frontier or in Afghanistan; you do see moving tents with narrow holes for the eyes...A close up of a Pathan women was more prized and difficult to get than a photograph of the undercarriage of an MI-24 helicopter gunship” (Kaplan 49). During the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, in order to demean and insult the Pathans, the Soviet forces started abducting their women for exploitation. They were raped cruelly and sent back to their villages where they got discarded by their families:

A final weapon of terror the Soviets used against the mujahideen was the abduction of Afghan women. Soldiers flying in helicopters would scan for women working in the fields in the absence of their men, land and take the women captive. Russian soldiers in the city of Kabul would also steal young women. The object was rape, although sometimes the women were killed, as well. The women who returned home were often considered dishonoured for life. (Cummins 393)

The issues of women exploitation and “genocidal violence is part of a cold and rational plan and not irrational, random acts of killing” (Saikia 56) by the rival military groups. These heinous crimes committed by the enemy forces are believed to be the elements of war culture or by-products of the hostilities against each other. The physical and psychological distresses of women are often neglected. Brownmiller suggests, “The very



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maleness of the military...confirms for men what they long suspect, that women are peripheral, irrelevant to the world that counts, passive spectators to the action in the centre ring” (89). The World Health Organisation in its report defines the act of sexual violence as “any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic, or otherwise directed, against a person’s sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting, including but not limited to home and work” (149). Sexual violence has various strands that also undertake the term rape. Wood in his article “Variation in Sexual Violence during War” defines sexual violence as “...a broader category that includes rape, coerced undressing and non-penetrating sexual assault such as sexual mutilation” (Wood 308). Rape and sexual violence together formulate a kind of rape culture that has entered slyly into the larger frame of society. It depicts the misogynistic outlook of males that only saw a woman’s body with hatred and anger. As Simone de Beauvoir states in her book *The Second Sex*:

‘There is a good principle that created order, light and man and a bad principle that created chaos, darkness and woman,’ says Pythagoras. The Laws of Manu define her as a vile being to be held in slavery. Leviticus assimilates her to beasts of burden, owned by the patriarch. The Laws of Solon confer no rights on her. The Roman Code puts her in guardship and proclaims her ‘imbecility’. Canon law considers her ‘the devil’s gateway’. The Koran treats her with the most absolute contempt (91).

The turbulent period of war gives men an opportunity to attack a woman’s chastity and identity openly, without any fear. When the enemy forces indulge in genocide rape and extreme violence against women, the motive is to break the backbone of the country’s honour and prestige. This act brings down the morale of women as they go through extreme physical, psychological and mental trauma and also of men who witness their women getting brutally raped and used for sexual satisfaction by other men. This damages the male psyche living in a patriarchal society and turns men into emotional victims of war. Further, men act based on their learned patriarchal notions and discard their own female partners who are merely innocent victims of war crimes. The women who escape the army camps or become pregnant



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are not accepted by their own families and husbands. Susan Brownmiller believes that “[Rape is] nothing more or less than a conscious process of intimidation by which all men keep all women in a state of fear” (9). The strategic rape concept also works on this principle; it allows men to vent their masculine misogynistic ideas and establish the symbolic male pride and control over the other gender.

Women are objectified to the extent that by conquering them the morale of men from the losing side is shattered. They feel emblematic to the male impotency because they were not able to save their women from getting raped and sexually tortured. In wars, women are just like objects in the battlefield used to weaken the enemies. They have nothing to do with ‘man to man’ conflicts but only to suffer bruises and violence against them. On the other hand Carol Cohn in her book, *Women and Wars: Contested Histories, Uncertain Futures*, critically examines the war times and different roles taken by women like that of innocent civilians, fighters, refugees, sexual slaves, activists, rape victims, nurturers and peace-builders. She says,

The starting point for thinking about women and wars must be that women’s experiences of war and their relations to war are extremely diverse. Women both try to prevent wars and instigate wars. They are politically supportive of wars, and they protest against wars. Women are raped, tortured, maimed and murdered, they are widowed, the children they have nurtured are lost to violence; but women are also members and supporters of the militaries and armed groups that commit these acts. Women stay home, resolutely striving to sustain family and community relationships; and women are displaced, living in camps without any of the structures that they have built to make life possible. Women are empowered by taking on new roles in wartime, and disempowered by being abducted from their homes and forced into armed groups or military prostitution. When the war is over, women work to rebuild their communities, and women are ejected from their families and communities because they have been raped, or been combatants, or lost a limb to a landmine. (1-2)

The battlegrounds become the stage for enemy forces to showcase their masculinity by raping women and also to leave their seeds in the wombs of young girls and women to



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reproduce. They believed that the war babies of these women will infect their whole race with the enemy's blood for generations. This will be the ultimate success for them because these scars of war will always remain fresh on the native's past, present and future.

On the night of 25th March 1971, General Yahya Khan (Commander-in-chief of Pakistan Army) ordered army strike on East Bengal violating political dialogues and peace strategies. The Pakistani Army attacked the unarmed and innocent natives of East Pakistan who were demanding freedom from West Pakistan's supremacy and a separate nation called Bangladesh. The Pakistan Army announced 'Operation Searchlight' on East Pakistan that continued for nine months due to long resistance by the natives of Bangladesh. The Bengali freedom fighters went through severe torture, mass killings and sexual exploitation of women. It was carried out by the Pakistani army as revenge towards the Bengali people for demanding independence from Pakistan. These women's voices have started emerging out of silence. They narrate the ruthless treatment endured by them:

Women were attacked in their homes, stripped naked in front of their family members, raped and thrown into drains. They were imprisoned in the sex camps that were set up, with or without the knowledge of the higher ups in the west Pakistani administration, their hair was chopped off, they were tied and repeatedly raped, forced to take off saris and wear rags or men's shirts, denied the food they were accustomed to, and many starved and died. Imprisoned women were forced to do the physical work of digging graves to bury the dead. (Saikia 57)

A Golden Age

Tahmima Anam's debut novel "A Golden Age," tells us the story about a young Muslim widow, Rehana Haque who belongs to an aristocratic family in Calcutta. However, due to some economic failures, her family loses its wealth. Rehana enters into an arranged marriage with a businessman from Dhaka. She is living happily with her husband Iqbal and two children—Maya and Sohail. But soon this happiness turns into an extensive phase of misfortunes and grief. Iqbal dies due to sudden cardiac arrest leaving the responsibility of two kids on Rehana. He does not leave any riches or wealth on which the family can sustain after



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losing their only bread-winner. Soon after the death of Iqbal, his rich brother, Faiz, files a court case for the custody of children. Rehana has no money to fight the case or bribe the judge to win the guardianship of Maya and Sohail. Faiz wins the case and the temporary custody of children is given to him. He takes away Rehana's children to Lahore and leaves her behind. Rehana struggles to attain financial stability and arrange optimum funds to build a new house which can be used as a rented property to get a regular income. Some opportunists try to take advantage of her innocence and circumstances but she fights through every odd situation like a true warrior. Rehana is able to get back her children to Dhaka after building a new house, *Shona*, and starts earning money by renting it out to the Senguptas. Over time, she becomes emotionally weak and vulnerable to the thought of losing her children again. After fighting desperately for her children, another force that threatens her is the growing violence between the East and West Pakistan. Maya and Sohail are influenced by revolutionary ideas and explicitly support the Bengali uprising against the biased Pakistani government. The political upheavals in the country silently hamper the personal life of Rehana and her children. Sohail leaves his gentle demeanour and an inherent love for Urdu poetry behind and completely associates himself with the guerrilla operations. Maya adorns the radical fervour and gives away all her coloured clothes. She wears white saris and participates in student rallies, marches and meetings against the discriminatory attitude of the government towards the Bengali people. Rehana has a consistent fear of losing her children due to their dedication towards Bengali liberation. She also tries to unite herself with the Bengali identity by providing a helping hand to the revolutionaries, refugees and guerrilla operations.

The call for independence lights a spirit of hope in the Bengali people but also increases the fear of violence against them by the military. To suppress the revolutionary activities, the Pakistani army enters the city with huge tanks and targets the university campus. They kill innocent people on the streets and impose curfew in the cities. The violence on the Bengali people does not end rather "the attack on Dhaka was only the beginning" (Anam 84). The military targets "one district after another, leaving behind a trail of burning villages" (Anam 84) and wailing families. Many young boys run away from their homes "to join the resistance" against the Pakistani government. There are many refugees



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who leave the cities to find safer places in their villages. The Senguptas decide to leave Shona and head towards their village in the interiors of East Pakistan.

Maya's best friend, Sharmeen, is raped and killed during this period. Maya is shattered and Rehana is devastated. This incident changes the lives of Rehana, Maya, and Sohail. Maya finds it difficult to get over the incident and leaves for Calcutta to become a writer in a magazine. She decides to use the power of the pen to tell the world about the brutal politics of West Pakistan and the genocide of Bengali people. On the other hand, Sohail establishes Shona as the headquarters of the guerrilla operations in Dhaka and hides weapons there. He also keeps an injured fellow-revolutionary, Major, in the dingy rooms of Shona. Rehana finds a friend in Major and nurses him with care and affection. For Rehana, Major is an embodiment of Bangladesh and she builds a bond of love and affection with him and shares her deep dark secrets with him. Soon, Rehana leaves Dhaka for her safety and joins Maya in Calcutta. She visits the refugee camps at Salt Lake and volunteers to help people there. She comes across many women who have lost their psychological balance due to the horrific crimes committed on them. At the camp, she runs into Mrs Sengupta – her tenant from Shona who is in a terrible state and a testament of the brutal violence that she had endured. After some time, Rehana returns to Dhaka with Maya and Sohail at a time when the situation is much worse. Sohail plans guerrilla attacks on the Pakistani army. Soon, the army finds out about Sohail and look for him everywhere. To save the revolution, Major steps in and tells the army that he is Sohail and faces the consequences. Over time, with assistance from the Indian armed forces, the liberation movement gathers steam and Bangladesh breathes freedom. While Rehana is relieved that the war spared her children, she is also engulfed in grief thinking about the torture, rapes, and genocides in Bangladesh.

Anam gives her characters an active spark to become participants of struggle, not mere interpreters. Anam tries to depict her protagonist, Mrs. Rehana Haque as an archetype of a powerful woman who fights all odds in her life to save her children from inconvenience and trouble. Besides being a part of the conventional society, Rehana carries an image of a 'New Woman' in war narratives. After the sudden loss of her husband, Rehana battles the preconceived notions of society where a widow has no identity without her husband. In patriarchal societies, widowhood is considered painful, inauspicious and humiliating for a woman. Rehana endures humiliation, taunts, indifference, and misbehaviour even at the



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hands of her relatives. She suffers psychological abuse at the hands of society. She loses her identity and respect due to the death of her husband. In fact, “Even in modern family setup widowhood, and its accompanying miserable existence, is considered as atonement for some sin committed earlier. That is why often a widow’s life is made disconsolate by her in-laws....She is meted out harsh treatment and often held responsible for her husband’s death” (Reddy 28). However, her sufferings don’t end here. She fights a legal battle against her brother-in-law who wants the custody of her children. The judiciary and legal courts find Rehana incapable of raising her children and awards custody to her brother-in-law. Male supremacy has been prevalent throughout history. As Barlas explains, “Patriarchy is a historically specific mode of rule of fathers that, in its religious and traditional forms, assumes a real as well as symbolic continuum between the ‘Father/fathers’; that is, between a patriarchalized view of God as Father/male, and a theory of father-right, extending to the husband’s claim to rule over his wife and children” (Barlas 12). Rehana is a strong woman who fights all odds and manages to build her house, get tenants, and finally get her children back to Dhaka.

Anam has done a wonderful job of framing the story in a manner that the microcosm of Rehana’s family depicts the macrocosm of the tumultuous times of the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971. In a conversation with Lynn Neary, Anam says, “I thought I would write a sort of epic,” which holds “a very muscular narrative that had battle scenes and political rallies and all the sort of big moments that you see in war novels. But actually, when I sat down to write, I ended up really thinking about what it was like for ordinary people to survive that war” (Neary 1). In the novel, Rehana’s physical appearance has been shown similar or symbolic to the situation of Bangladesh.

At thirty-eight, Rehana’s body had finally caught up with 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 of Rehana, as they signified the battle-



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weary body of a woman who has passed years in the efforts to raise her children. (58)

Rehana carries a diasporic identity and often feels nostalgic. She is the spokesperson for Anam who carries similar diasporic identity and longing for her home country. Rehana shares:

Ambiguous feelings about the country she had adopted. She spoke, with fluency, the Urdu of the enemy. She was unable to pretend, as she saw so many others doing, that she could replace the mixed tongue with a pure Bengali one so that the Muslim salutation *As-Salaam Alaikum* was replaced by the neutral *Adaab*, or even *Namoshkar*, the Hindu greeting. Rehana's tongue was too confused for these changes. She could not give up her love of Urdu, its lyrical lilt, its double meanings, its furrowed beat. (Anam 55)

As the story proceeds, the homecoming of Rehana's children coincides with the revolutionary activities in Bangladesh. Like any mother, Rehana wants her children to stay away from all dangers. While initially, Rehana doesn't have the revolutionary zeal like her children, slowly she starts agreeing with the revolution. Soon, Sohail joins the Resistance and actively participates in the freedom struggle and Maya aligns with the communist party. Her brief encounter with Major, helps her embrace her country wholeheartedly. She supports her kids through their activities despite being worried about their safety. In the latter part of the story, when Rehana goes to Calcutta and starts helping people at relief camps, she witnesses the horror that women are living through due to the atrocities committed on them during the revolution. She helps them get through the horror and eventually returns to Bangladesh.

Anam has also done a good job describing Muslim women who despite being confined to the premises of their homes found ways to connect with the larger issues of society. Some even became active participants in the struggle for freedom. She beautifully describes how political agendas disrupt personal lives blurring the line between political and personal issues. Rehana, who never thought about being a part of Bangladesh's freedom struggle, eventually ended helping revolutionaries and battered women in relief camps. Rehana's character is an embodiment of the silent suffering that women go through in a patriarchal society.



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Talking about strong women, Maya's character cannot be ignored. Maya is educated, free-willed, and liberal in her thoughts and actions. She believes in making the world a better place by each one contributing towards it. Maya dreams of a free Bangladesh. She is devastated when her friend Sharmeen is reported missing. The political upheavals and instability finally enter the microcosm of Rehana's family. However, being a strong woman, Maya turns this loss into motivation. When the guerrilla activities from 'Shona' commences, Maya starts helping the revolutionaries write press releases. Eventually, when Maya finds out that Sharmeen was brutally raped, became pregnant, and lost her life at the cantonment hospital, she becomes furious. She decides to leave Dhaka and go to Calcutta since she cannot imagine forgiving the people who had killed her dear friend. Calcutta seems like a more liberal place to work and she decides to join a magazine writing press statements. She wants to tell the world about the atrocities committed by the Pakistani army in Bangladesh particularly women. She also visits the relief camps at Salt Lake to help people in distress. When the situation worsens in Dhaka, Rehana comes to visit her in Calcutta. Together, they help many distressed women in relief camps before returning to Bangladesh.

During the Liberation War, Pakistani soldiers rape and kill thousands of women. These crimes were causing major public outrage but that didn't stop the army from committing crimes against women. The soldiers would abduct women at night and drag them to army camps where they were raped for days and months. During this time, many women got pregnant and even lost their lives. Once Bangladesh got its independence, there was a huge population of rape survivors in the country. "Six days after the end of the war, the new Bangladeshi government publicly designated any woman raped in the war a birangona (a brave or courageous woman; the Bangladeshi state uses the term to mean 'war-heroine') as an attempt to reduce their social ostracism" ("History and the Birangona"). But people from their own society did not accept them. Their own families did not offer them space in their homes. The women survivors feel, "despite the 'double violence' they experienced—arrest and torture for fighting for freedom and rape because of their gender—there are no commemorative symbols to remind the nation of women's sacrifices and contributions on behalf of national freedom" (Saikia 105). Anam depicts the plight of women who were warriors of war and turned into victims of sexual violence through Sharmeen's character. Many of these women were punished for standing up against the Pakistani army and their



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ruthless laws. Despite having paid an unbearable price for loyalty to their country, their own male partners refused to accept them and they never got their respect back. While men survivors were called heroes of the war and revered for their brave participation, women did not get their deserving position.

There are several other female characters in Anam's novel like Rehana's neighbour, Mrs. Chowdhury and her daughter Silvi. However, Anam provides us with a glimpse of the Bangladesh Liberation War, 1971 through the eyes of Rehana's family. In the novel, several women characters project that despite struggling immensely, they stand nowhere in front of men. Like men, women also put in their best efforts and shouldered their responsibilities for their country. However, the patriarchal mindset never allowed women to be liberated from being put under the lens of judgement and scrutiny. Even in their own country, women lack the feeling of belonging and are made to feel like an 'outsider'.

Conclusion:

Maya Angelou in her autobiographical work, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* states, "There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you" (Goodreads). The unspoken women testimonies points on the gendered silencing of their sufferings that indicates a lacuna in the writing of history where gender is ignored and its inter-personal collective memories are kept unheard. The novel *A Golden Age* criticizes the male-dominated society which floods women's lives with sufferings and miseries, especially during wars. Tahmima Anam tries to voice the suppressed voices and experiences of Bengali women during the Liberation War in Bangladesh. She exposes the rigid social norms and beliefs that force women into the peripheral regions of society and neglect their representation in historical records. She represents female emotions and struggles during war, crises which often go neglected. The evil wars and patriarchy try to supersede women's honour by uprooting them savagely so that they lose the confidence to confront male supremacy:

As a politics of sexual differentiation that privileges males by "transforming biological sex into politicized gender, which prioritizes the male while making the woman different (unequal), less than, or the 'Other'". Patriarchy, broadly conceived, is based in an ideology that ascribes social/sexual inequalities to



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biology; that is, it confuses sexual/biological differences with gender dualism/inequality (differences based on sex or biology with inequality based on gender dualisms). (Wadud 12)

The women are caged in the pre-defined moral codes, social norms and cultural beliefs that lay impediments in creating an individual identity for them. Women are objectified and made to feel like 'Other' or an outsider in her own family and homeland. Anam has pointed out the actions of the Pakistani Army towards Bengali women as the outbreak of misogynist ideas and patriarchal strategy to torture women.

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