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Symbolism in *A Golden Age*: Rehana as Bangladesh

In her novel chronicling the dramatic events of Bangladeshi independence, Tahmima Anam focuses on the microcosm of a single family: a widowed mother, Rehana, and her two children, Sohail and Maya. *A Golden Age* tells the story of Rehana's struggle to keep her family and her nation together during wartime chaos. Despite repeated desertion by other male protectors, Rehana preserves her family through the wartime love of a faithful man. The story of this brave woman, in particular how she relates to the men in her life, parallels the tumultuous story of the Bengali people from before Partition to the formation of a distinct nation.

Rehana's Indian childhood and hasty marriage mirror the Bengali experience during Partition. Growing up in pre-partition India, Rehana was the neglected last daughter in her family. She felt alienated from her wealthy father, a "handsome, polished" gentleman with British tastes, such as Thackeray, piano music, and fashionable parties (138, 144). By the time Rehana reached marriageable age, her father had died, and family fortunes had turned upside down, so she escaped into an arranged marriage (137). Similarly, the Bengali had grown up among other "sisters"—the future Pakistanis, the Hindus, etc.—under the paternal hand of Great Britain, a distant, foreign father. When the British government left India, the Bengali regions were united with distant West Pakistan, without much forethought.

Rehana's life with her husband, Iqbal, was a peaceful, prosperous period, during which she was surprised by love for the stranger she had married. Iqbal treated her with attentive love and respect, lavished her with expensive saris, and watchfully guarded the safety of their family. This happy interlude in Rehana's precarious life does not correspond directly with the rocky

transformation of Bengal into East Pakistan. Anam prioritizes Rehana's development as a character above the neatness of the allegory. Rehana is primarily a believable woman; her symbolism is *lagniappe*. Rehana's union with Iqbal is significant for the allegory, though, because it produced the children who would dominate her affections—the children who are the hope of Bangladesh. Furthermore, Iqbal died suddenly, leaving Rehana a widow, a state that suitably represents post-Partition Bengal. Like an unprotected single mother, the Bengali nation faced a frightening, vulnerable future.

Her husband's death left Rehana vulnerable to other men, and the absence of a sympathetic government exposed the Bengali to merciless outsiders. As a poor, single woman, Rehana became prey to the greedy desires of men around her. First, her brother-in-law Faiz and his wife Parveen took advantage of her weakened emotions to gain legal possession of her children, Sohail and Maya. Then, when she asked for loans to get her children back, the money lender tried to rape her (148). The Bengali, in their new formation as E. Pakistan, were weak and exposed. Consequently, unscrupulous leaders of West Pakistan took advantage of East Pakistan, subjugating the Bengali in order to enrich their own state.

At this point in the novel, Rehana became more closely identified with the fate of Bangladesh through her struggle for her children. The children of Rehana are, simultaneously, the children of Bangladesh. They represent the future and promise of the Bengali nation, as well as of Rehana's personal world. For their sake, she begins an undercover resistance against manipulative men, by refusing to remarry (23) and then by stealing from T. Ali. Interestingly, when Rehana committed the theft, she broke a mirror belonging to T. Ali's dead wife, Rose. With her English name, white complexion, and European dress, Rose evoked Britain's colonial

presence. By shattering the mirror, Rehana could be symbolically breaking the Bengali link to the nation's unnatural parent, Britain (152).

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. In contrast to Rehana's fruitful Bangladeshi family, Faiz and Parveen are childless, and Parveen has an insatiable mother-hunger (178). Just as the Pakistani couple attempted to usurp Rehana's children, so bitter, barren Pakistan tried to possess Bengali children through linguistic and cultural domination. This effort eventually fails, so Pakistan must kill the rebellious children of Bangladesh—with Faiz and Parveen as murderous instruments, to complete the allegory. The Bengali, in turn, must launch an undercover resistance.

When the events of 1971 commenced, the story of Rehana and her children became inseparable from that of their nation. The men who had deserted them—Rehana's father and husband—were replaced by a fierce nationalism. The three had a father-void, which was filled when they saw Mujib at the rally: "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" (49). The Bengali saw this political leader as their surrogate father and the whole country as their siblings. On the night of Operation Searchlight, "Maya fell asleep in the flag," cradled in this symbol of her nation like an infant in a father's arms (61). Due in part to desertion by their own fathers, Maya and Sharmeen disavowed relations with men, took on masculine characteristics, and devoted all their energies to Bangladesh. In a sense, through these actions, the girls "married" their country. Therefore, the revolutionary government of Bangladesh became a father and husband figure, a replacement for absent men.

During the ensuing period, Rehana's actions reveal her growing identification with the Bengali revolution at the level of a husband figure. At first, Rehana tried to remain her own source of strength and protection (65). She lived with her eye on the past, focused on her dead husband. However, when she devoted herself to the revolution, Rehana forgot to visit the cemetery (131). She donated her best saris, which were gifts of romantic love from her husband (91). She disassembled the saris, converted them into blankets, and sent them to cover revolutionary soldiers. With this gift to the liberation army, Rehana demonstrated a significant transfer of love and authority. Moving out from the shadow of Iqbal's death, the widow was initiating a courtship with her nation. As she discovered her love for Bangladesh and sealed it with the sari gift, Rehana found a parallel love in the Major.

The Major is the first man in the novel with a real physical and emotional presence. He is identified by manly attributes like his "firm grip" and "the span of his shoulders" (111). The Major was also the first man to suffer wounds for Bangladesh; in previous pages, Anam represented only women's emotional and physical sufferings. The Major evoked in Rehana an awareness of her desire to serve her country, not just her children (111). Not only did he expand her world, but he invited her trust: "He reached over and laid a finger on her arm. 'I understand,' he said" (146). Drawn to the Major's protective, compassionate strength, Rehana finally shared the secret of what she had done—what she would do—to win back her children, the burden which "she knew, should only be hers" (37). When she surrendered the burden of her aloneness, Rehana was able to rest in the protection of a real man and allow him to save her children.

By the end of the novel, Rehana was the mother not only of Sohail and Maya, but of all the young revolutionaries who would form the new Bangladesh. Before a dangerous mission, Sohail asked Rehana to give her blessing to all the young men: "They'll be happy to get your

blessings. Some of them haven't seen their own mothers in a long time" (109). Rehana became aware of her new identity as mother of a country, when she refused to give Mrs. Haque news of her sons: "But now she was something else—a mother, yes, but not just of children. Mother of a different sort" (140). This new Rehana united herself with the Bangladeshi Revolution, and she was involved in the birth pains of a nation. Earlier, she had mused about familial happiness: "She felt an old swell of longing for the unit, the family: man, woman, child. This was the formula for happiness, the proper order of things" (165). In a satisfying allegorical symmetry, Rehana found her perfect unit: Bangladesh (Rehana), the wife; the Bangladeshi liberation movement (the Major), the husband or lover; and young Bangladeshis, their children.

Because the Major represents the Bangladeshi freedom fighters and their selfless love for the emerging country, Rehana's relationship with the Major confirms her as a symbol of Bangladesh. As Rehana's lover, the Major sacrificed for Rehana's children; as the symbol of the Bangladeshi Revolution, he sacrificed for the future of Bangladesh. Bengal had endured a history of rejection and suppression: ignored and discarded by paternal distant Britain, used economically by Urdu-speaking West Pakistan, and, finally, violated through wartime violence. In 1971, two "fathers" stood in the gap for Bangladesh. Mujib rose up to be founder-father of a free Bangladesh. The liberation army, led by faithful commanders—and majors—and composed of devoted sons and daughters, was the sacrificial father. The army's outpouring of passion, youth, blood and life was necessary to give life to the new nation.

The Major's love was not, like that of Faiz, a false love that violated Rehana, nor, like Iqbal's, a love that unexpectedly left her. His departure was a determined choice to give a free life to her and her children, a sacrifice that Rehana believed to be necessary: "your life for mine" (265). She saw their relationship as a deeply-felt but doomed love—a love fated to a set period

of time. She writes to Iqbal, “For the smallest fraction of those ninety-six days, I loved him....Only the briefest moment” (274). Her relationship with the Major was a passionate wartime love that preserved her family. When the war ended, she decided to think of the Major as a bittersweet episode, from which she could move on to watch her children and her nation build a new future. “I will clutch my flag, hold my breath and wait for our son,” she tells her deceased husband (274). Though she released the Major, Rehana’s love for him will live on in her love for her “beautiful and bruised country” (276), the new nation born from a bloodied union of love and sacrifice.

Work Cited

Anam, Tahmima. *The Golden Age*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2007.