

INTROSPECTING THE MEMORY: GENDER VIOLENCE IN

TAHMIMA ANAM'S A GOLDEN AGE

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Abstract

Trauma and Memory are two different fields of study. In Literature, Trauma and Memory both have different histories in regard to interpretation. The Holocaust paved a way to intersect these different fields of study in order to remember the traumatic histories. The conflicts at the national level reflect upon various issues of culture, religion and gender. Though women are not at the central focus of the war, at the backdrop women endure struggle and sufferings. Tahmima Anam's A Golden Age, narrates the events of the year 1971 in East Pakistan. Anam fictionalizes historical events and tragedies through the eyes of a family. The protagonists of the novel Rehena and Maya, as women they are not allowed in the warfront. But their hearts are filled with nationalism. Though they are unable to fight with weapons, they used other means in order to achieve freedom. Maya feels liberated through writing. She voices out issues of warfront and violence against women through her journals. Whereas Rehena helps her son Sohail and his friends by providing their essentials at the war front. Though both Rehena and Maya fight with their spirit, they are traumatized due to violence that destroyed the lives of their close ones. This paper seeks to analyse the interconnection between gender and national movements as part of the history and memory. It also explains how crucial the war is especially to women.

Keywords: violence, trauma, memory, liberation and History.

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ANAM'S A GOLDEN AGE

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The consequences of traumatic events at the global level lead to the intersections of two different studies namely memory and trauma. Events such as 9/11, nuclear disaster, Pacific Tsunami are some of the traumatic memories, with this the current era is considered as an 'age of trauma' according to Stolorow. There is always a memory in world politics starting from the traditional traumatic event Holocaust. There is an existential anxiety among people due to climate change, terrorist attacks, genocide, economic crisis and nuclear proliferation. These are the few factors which arises psychological trauma in particular women gender due to familial pressures and patriarchal pattern of the society.

In the text *A Golden Age*, Tahmima Anam shows the trauma within the particular gender at the time of national conflict with the help of the women protagonists and other sub characters. Rehana, Maya, Silvi, Mrs. Chowdhury face the problems in particular as women and also due to political turmoil in the country. They all consume patriotic feelings and they are traumatized at the family level and also at the outset of the country. Though they have patriotic feelings they are unable to help the country at the war front, rather these women help their sons, brothers and husbands by giving them moral support. Due to their gender women in Anam's novel play the role of victimization due to physical violence such as rape, murder and so on.

This research analyses the text *A Golden Age* through the gender lenses with the intersections of memory and trauma. Cathy Caruth in her book *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* explain that "trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events, in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled and repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena". Caruth's statement on trauma and unclaimed experience is an evident that

physical violence leads to mental stress and several psychological issues which further affects memory in women.

Due to traumatic experiences one's reality is shaken and sometimes languages fail to explain the exact trauma or pain carried by an individual throughout their life in one incident. Trauma makes the receiver more vulnerable and thus it carries related to personal lives as well as political scenario of the country. Partition of the country deals with two contexts such as spatial and temporal, further these two contexts can be intersected with trauma and memory in literature. Through the pedagogic and performative means it is understood that there is always a tension at the national level and also among the writers at the time of partition and while writing about partition.

As this research deals with the gender based violence, women's narratives on the time of war, conflict and partition argues the gendered violent experiences like rape, honour killing, abduction, thus the stories of women have certain intervention in these types of narrations for making trauma and memory. So the prominent discussion of this research is the gendered expression of the East Pakistan, at present Bangladesh. Anam's text discusses feminine identity as well as national identity set in the year 1971. This plot is set in the background of hegemonic masculinity and the movements related to nationalism. The initial phase of Anam's text clearly shows the narration of feminine qualities by exploring the role of the protagonist Mrs. Rehana. Anam shows the harsh societal realities of the patriarchal country by depicting Rehana and also explores her self-identity. Rehana also faces another threat because Bangladesh is neither her ancestral country nor her place of birth. In order to prove her loyalty towards the promising nation she helps the country by allowing her children to take part in the national protests. The whole plot of Anam's text is a difficult journey of Rehana, she faces the problems that exist in the contemporary society and to establish her national identity. Through Rehana's eyes Anam exhibits the memory of 1971 Bangladesh and its partition. Rehana's life itself is totally structured under trauma due to her gender.

Lynn Neary in her article "At Home, at War: Tahmima Anam's 'Golden Age'" explains that, "The child of a diplomat, Tahmima Anam grew up far away from her native Bangladesh. But all her life, she heard about that country's war for independence- which

took place before she was born- from her Bengali parents and their friends... Anam says she couldn't imagine writing about anything else except war" (Neary). This clearly depicts that memory reproduces and it passes from generation to generation, though the migrants does not experience war by themselves. Jonna Bornat in the essay "Oral History and Remembering" explains how memory employs the activity of remembering and how stories from the elders helps to inhabit history in literature and also the importance of oral history in the study of memory. As Bornat says:

Though the planning and outcome of oral history projects will often speak of community and identity-specific groups, migrant, industrial, generational, gendered, ethnic or racialised, the oral historians starting point is the individual recalling the past in dialogue with another person. (Bornat 29)

Bornat and Lynn Neary's article clearly explains that remembering and recalling is the process involved in the study and memory. The introduction part of this essay notes that writers who write about partition also get traumatized in the process. In the same way, Anam's writing on the partition of Bangladesh is the recollection of her personal memories as she herself belongs to the native of that land. Her grandmother inspires to write about the protagonist Rehana. Robyn Fivush in the essay "Autobiographical Memory" describes that "Autobiographical memory is the core of identity. To a large extent, we are the stories we tell about ourselves" (Fivush 13). Fivush's concept on autobiographical memory merges with Anam's fiction as she also writes about the personal life experiences at the time of conflict, though she is not present at that time, through her parents and grandparents experiences autobiographical memory.

In the novel the protagonist Rehana suffers in her personal life as well as due to national conflict. She is a widowed mother of two children, because of her gender her relatives do not allow her to bring up her own children. Her feminine quality can be explained with these lines as she thinks about her circumstance and narrates her state as "Rehana has decided it would not be wise to cry in front of the children, so she had done her crying in rickshaw in sobs that caused her to hold on to the narrow frame of the seat and open her mouth in a loud wailing O" (Anam 4). It is only because of her gender she got humiliated by her own relatives and she couldn't protect her own gender. This kind of

gender based discrimination and humiliation can cause pain and it sometimes disrupts their lives by neglecting the moral activities. Because of her children and societal pressure Rehana do something later out of her moral qualities. After leaving her children to her relatives, she is determined to become rich and so she loots the treasure from a blind man. With that treasure she builds a house and gets back her children Maya and Sohail after ten years of separation. Bangladesh stands as male centric or hegemonic masculine society which prohibits women to live independent because of her widowhood state. This may lead to trauma and may cause certain criminal activities as the country is facing the economic turmoil due to political conflict.

'Site of memory' is an aspect in the study of memory, as the place, event, date or the construction which represents remembering and recalling. In Anam's text graveyard represents the symbol or site of personal memory in the life of Rehana. "The graveyard was dotted with dusk mourners". (Anam 5). This narration states that graveyard stands for mourning as the place represents the death of people and their loved ones mourn, recollect and recall their past memories with the dead person. Iqbal's brother Faiz forcefully gets her children as they do not have children on their own. Faiz' hegemonic nature is depicted as, "It's not safe here, milord, Martial law strikes, people on the streets – not safe". (Anam 5). In this quotation, the word 'safe' implies the political backdrop of the country. Faiz belongs to Lahore in West Pakistan. As East Pakistan is not safe, even martial law is not even followed properly. Women are not considered with importance at their families due to the political state of the country.

To bring back the memories of colonization and the trauma associated with that, Anam uses site of memory. Colonization is the route cause for partition. For example, in India Jalian Wala Bagh massacre is the site of memory which represents the colonial rule and the death of innocent people. From this it is evident that colonization inhibits trauma among the native people. Through Rehana, Anam expresses that, "Tracks had just been opened, and it was not a short trip from the brightly painted station built by a hopeful government to the crumbling colonial building that housed the old carriages of the Raj. It was to be their very first train ride" (Anam 11). Through railway tracks and colonial buildings Anam tries to bring back the political memory. As the Jalian Wala Bagh states the

trauma in connection with colonization, Anam indirectly depicts both memory and trauma in connection with politics.

After the departure of children, Rehana is addressed by her neighbours as, “And there she was, a widow, nothing to recommend her, no family near by. Her parents were dead; her three sisters lived in Karachi” (Anam 6). The society considers her just as a widow and by mentioning her native land Karachi, her national identity becomes unanswerable. J.K. Trivedi’s article on “Psychological aspects of Widowhood and Divorce” explains trauma of the womenfolk due to the loss of their spouse, he depicts that:

Loss of spouse is one of the most negative life events, next only to a loss of child. Ironically the disorganization and trauma that follow a death of a spouse seem to be greater in women than in men whenever either loses their spouse. Widowhood presents a myriad of economic, social and psychological problems...When the husband was the principal breadwinner, his widow is now deprived of his income and the nucleus of the family is destroyed. (Trivedi)

Trivedi’s concept on widowhood in the developing countries explains the exact situation and trauma of the protagonist Rehana. After her marriage she loses her parents, her native land and at the early period of her life she loses her husband Iqbal and because of her widowhood state she loses her own children to Faiz. Though Rehana do not face any kind of physical violence but here gender discrimination and the abide of martial law also stands for certain kind mental stress and sudden shock which causes trauma. The pressure of the society makes her to loot.

In another instance Rehana considers her children as the memory of her dead husband. When she talks to Iqbal in the graveyard she mentions their children as, “They are the spitting image of you” (Anam 7). This represents that children because of their physical appearance represents their parents. That’s how Rehana moves on her life with her children in memory of her husband. Anam explains gender, political and personal memory in the conversation between Rehana and Mrs. Chowdhury. The conversation begins with Mrs. Chowdhury as she compares her state with Rehana and she describes the gender role as, “It is not the end of the world. They’ll be back. And then she turned to Rehana. At least

you had a few good years. My...husband left me when I couldn't give him a son. Took one look at this one, and I never saw him again" (Anam 9). Here the phrase 'end of the world' highlights the political turmoil and national conflict in Bangladesh and the birth of a girl child seems to be unacceptable in the chauvinist society. Mrs. Chowdhury's depiction collides with gender, political memory and personal memory as well.

Sexual abuse and Rape are the severe violence based on gender. Anam discusses this theme by narrating two women characters in her novel. Maya's friend Sharmeen, who is a college student is sexually assaulted by the soldiers at the time of conflict and Sharmeen dies. This causes severe trauma and here due to gender Sharmeen has undergone violent treatment by the masculine gender. After hearing this news Maya's political indulgence becomes strong whereas Rehana is afraid about the threat for women.

Rehana's tenant Mrs. Sengupta belongs to Hindu community. During 1971 conflict in Bangladesh, Hindus are seriously attacked by the West Pakistan soldiers. To narrate this event Anam uses the character Mrs. Sengupta. When Sengupta's family migrates from Bangladesh, her husband and her son are shot by the soldiers. This causes severe memory loss and she become traumatized. She becomes afraid of her own friend. Anam describes her traumatized state as, "She lifted Mrs. Sengupta's head and pulled the soggy hair away from her neck. She saw her friend's eyelids shift, as though she were dreaming, and then she opened them slowly, turning first to the ceiling and then slowly focusing on Rehana" (Anam 241). Anam's depiction of Mrs. Sengupta in refugee camp explains that loss of close ones cause trauma. In the beginning of the text Anam shows Mrs. Sengupta has a rich and elegant woman. But the loss of her husband and son to the cruel society puts her in this stage.

To conclude this article that the intersection of memory and trauma in Tahmima Anam's *A Golden Age* reveals that gender plays an essential role in these aspects. Anam in her novel portrays history of Bangladesh along with trauma and memory by narrating the major characters. Without any Bengali roots Rehana stands as a strong woman by creating her national identity. The whole essay exhibits trauma and memory by portraying the events associated with Rehana, Maya, Sharmeen, Mrs. Chowdhury and Mrs. Sengupta. Gender stands as a barrier to uphold their position in the society especially during war.

Few characters break through the gender barriers whereas other women characters struck in the violence like rape and murder, thus become traumatized.

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