

## **Understanding the Dynamics of War and Peace in the Light of Tahmima Anam's *A Golden Age* and *The Good Muslim***

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### **Abstract:**

War and peace are opposite poles in respect to their meanings. These are not merely words that denote a situation or the political status of a particular place. Rather, war and peace has much deeper connotations. The divergence in the meaning directly affects the condition of living of the masses. This condition has been vividly represented in Tahmima Anam's *A Golden Age* and *The Good Muslim*. In this paper, therefore, an attempt would be made to come to terms with the meaning of war and peace with reference to these two fictions. The implications or the impact of the situations created by war as opposed to peace can be understood from the experiences of the characters or the sufferings of the people of a country on the verge of Partition as narrated in the two selected fictions.

**Key words:** war, peace, representation, inter-relation, Partition, Independence

History has been created by numerous changes in the human civilization. An analysis of the changes that history has recorded in its pages makes it evident that those are mostly initiated by some disorder or some clash of ideologies in the form of wars. The changes brought in by the wars have deep and lasting effect on humanity. Instances for this statement are many, the most remarkable being the two World Wars. Till the date the humans exist, history will keep on reminding these two wars which has shaken the entire world more or less.

Briefing our focus on the important phases that has altered the course of history in South Asia especially in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, the two Partitions – 1947 and 1971 immediately draws our attention. However, the fictions selected for study in this paper deal with the Partition 1971, that is, the Partition of East and West Pakistan. After the Partition of 1947 Pakistan had as a whole occupied two territories – East and West. The wake of Partition 1971 was for the separation of East Pakistan from the common identity of Pakistan. The republic of East Pakistan wanted to give a distinct name that echoed the identity of its people. So, they sought to rename East Pakistan as Bangladesh on the ground that the language that they spoke was totally different from the language the people of West Pakistan used. The people of East Pakistan also claimed that culturally also there is a remarkable difference between the two

places. On these grounds the Bangladesh War of Independence under the leadership of Mujibur Rahman began. This suggests that in order to attain independence the people of East and West Pakistan had to fight with each other. Regretfully, history bears witness to this fact that no Partition of nations has become possible without bloodshed. This darker face of war led by the idea of Partition is the topic which will be taken into consideration in this paper. With reference to the two fictions – *A Golden Age* and *The Good Muslim* by Tahmima Anam – an attempt will be made to identify the inter-relation between war and peace. These two fictions are sequels, the former is an account of the rise of the Bangladesh War of Independence and in the latter the readers get a glance of the scenario after the war/Independence of Bangladesh.

In both the sequels the author has portrayed the whole affair of the War for Independence and its aftermath by relating everything to a family in Dhaka. Rehana, the protagonist of the fictions witnessed all the gruesomeness that the idea of gaining Independence for Bangladesh could exhibit. She felt every bit of the peace transforming into war because the once so united and peaceful family fell prey to the beast of war. The monster of war had gradually torn apart not just the peace but the entire Haque family.

Getting into the details of the narrative will give a better understanding of the effect of war upon the lives of the common man. Here, Rehana stood as the representative of the common man. So, references from her life will aptly serve the purpose of grasping the inter-relation between war and peace.

The inter-relation between war and peace lies in the fact that both are repulsive of each other. In this regard Martin comments, “Peace is the antonym of war...peace and war have been treated as mutually exclusive concepts or state of affairs. One implies violence; the other non-violence” (Martin 45). Hence, the beginning of the War of Independence marked the exit of peace from all spheres of life – political, social, and familial and so on. War is out rightly political. And the politics behind the war discussed here was getting an independent political status for the prospective Bangladesh. Besides, it becomes clear that in order to exert the dictatorial rule in the independent State of Bangladesh, the democratic political leader in *A Golden Age* turned a dictator in *The Good Muslim*. In the social spheres there was chaos. Nothing seemed to be in its place. The war had made people suspicious even of their neighbours. The people who rented Shona from Rehana became insecure when the war broke out. They finally left the house and went to their native village.

When the Bangladesh War of Independence started spreading, like wild fire it caught each and everyone who came in its way. The effect of a political upheaval is sure to influence the young minds. As at a young age the revolutionary zeal of an individual soars the highest, Rehana’s children – Sohail and Maya, who were studying at the university when the vibes of Partition jerked East Pakistan – got highly influenced by it. The War of Independence had such an impact upon students like Sohail and Maya that initially they lied Rehana about their involvement in the processes of war. But in the course of the narrative of *A Golden Age* it is clearly stated that the students in the university began missing their classes and started discussing about how they would contribute to gain Independence for Bangladesh. Their patriotic sentiments arose in such a way that gradually they not only ignored the classes, but they started practicing for guerilla warfare. Driven by her motherly instinct Rehana went there for getting Maya home and saw the active involvement of her two children in the university campus. The

former grew restless at the thought of losing her children once again. This feeling baffled her and she hit Maya when the latter tried to argue with her questioning her national allegiance because her home before marriage was West Pakistan (now Pakistan). With this Rehana's fears came true. War had got into her family a long time back. Her brother-in-law and his wife fought with her immediately after the death of her husband, Iqbal Haque over the custody of her children. They asserted in the court that as Rehana was not economically independent she was incapable of bringing up her own children by providing them the necessities. On this ground they defeated her in front of law and took Sohail and Maya with them to West Pakistan. She was bound to be at the mercy of her in-laws to get a glimpse of the children she had borne. Rehana was not prepared for this war with her in-laws over the matter of her children because this dire situation was created by the death of Iqbal which was uncalled for. But she did not give up. She tried her best to be economically sound so that she could bring back her children. Rehana decided to utilise the stretch of land that was lying vacant in their campus and build a house to give it on rent and get a steady income, which could not be questioned by any law. Unfortunately, when she approached the manager of a bank and told about her requirement he asked for a favour to return his favour of passing the loan to build the house without some document. This condition led Rehana into a war with herself. She fought with her inner self to fulfill the amorous wishes of the manager. She did so to win over her conscience, over her sense of guilt that being their mother she could raise her children herself under her protective shield. If she did not agree with the manager she could not have lived with peace with her conscience because she would have always been blamed by her motherly instinct that she could not efficiently justify with the role of Sohail and Maya's mother. Somehow she felt that she would lose the trust of her dead husband and so neither Late Iqbal nor she would find peace in death if she lost the children to her in-laws. Rehana was successful in building a house after the loan was sanctioned. But she buried the story behind the loan in her heart. When the house was built, which she named Shona because it is as precious as gold for her, she got back her children. With this she won the war that she had to fight with her family. However, the mixed feeling of Rehana after she successfully built the house and brought Sohail and Maya back home is appropriately put in the words:

...every day, as Rehana woke for the dawn Azaan, or when she went to put the washing in the garden, or when, after bathing, she fanned out her long hair on the back of a veranda chair, Rehana looked at the house with pride and a little ache. It was there to remind her of what she had lost, and what she had won. And how much the victory had cost (A Golden Age 18-19).

But this war, the war of the independence of Bangladesh, stood up as the physical realisation of her fears she once had because when her children got swayed by the nationalistic fervor she found herself helpless in maintaining peace in her family. Indeed, how could peace exist when the war had already started? Once again she was strained by the thought of losing her children. However, the tremor behind fighting with this war from entering her family was due to the reason that the wars she fought with her in-laws and herself to live a peaceful life with Sohail and Maya got disrupted by the Bangladesh war of Independence. Unlike the earlier wars she went through this war, she knew, would be merciless. She was afraid that this war for nationhood might take away from her the most prized possessions of her life. And her fear took the shape of trauma when she found out that Sohail had joined the guerilla. When Sohail went with the guerilla Rehana speculated every moment that anytime she might have to hear a bad news. But fortunately she did not have to go through that loss.

Reluctantly, she had to support her son in allowing him and his guerilla friends to hide in Shona. She had to keep quite even though she knew that they had hidden huge number ammunitions by burying in her garden. She was even aware of the fact that Sohail and his comrades were about to use these explosives and ammunitions in the warfare and destroying some public property and even some lives. She played dumb to all this because she was consoled by her motherly feeling that her son was in front of her eyes although Sohail rarely had time to talk to her. However, there came a day when he had to flee from Shona and hide in their guerilla locations. With this returned Rehana's deep seated fear that she would lose her son to this war of Independence. Meanwhile, Silvi, the girl next door – whom Sohail loved a lot since childhood, got married to an army man in a hurry because the groom was called to join the war. In a humble ceremony Silvi's wedding took place and immediately her husband went off to join the war. After a few days the news came that Silvi's husband became a martyr. This was so shocking for Silvi that henceforth she became a recluse.

On the other hand, Maya got influenced by her brother's involment in the war. She too wanted to join the guerilla but had to stay back because of Rehana. But the former extended her support to the war by treating the victims of war who belonged to the prospective Bangladesh. A time came when Maya could not allow her mother to stay alone because the latter might be disturbed by the army of West Pakistan as Sohail had become a guerilla. So Rehana had to leave her house and stay with Maya in the camps where victims of war were treated. Later she came back to her own house in Dhaka. However, she always lived with the fearful speculation that the Bangladesh war of Independence would take away from her her children for whom she had struggled all throughout. Until the day when Sohail came back and stood in front of her she lived with the fear of the unexpected. Rehana felt that it might be because Silvi got married to someone else that Sohail had joined the guerilla. The former considered herself guilty for not trying to understand the strong feelings of her son and ask for Silvi's hand to her mother.

When Sohail came back after Bangladesh attained Independence Rehana did not delay for long and talked to Silvi's mother about the marriage. The readers come to know about this in *The Good Muslim*, the next sequel. This narrative begins with the return of Sohail. Back and forth the narrative moves in the form of a journal or a memoir. The return of Sohail was, however, marked the beginning of another war for Rehana. Such is due to the reason that he returned a changed man and the war remained between him and Rehana and Maya. The marriage between him and Silvi took place. Later, from the narrator suddenly on the day of return of Maya seven years from when Bangladesh became an independent nation it came to be known that Silvi was no more. Moreover, Sohail – one who denied reading the Holy Book when Rehana asked him to do so had become a stunt believer in Islam and he himself started propagating religious teachings and held lectures by religious speakers from other countries as well. For this purpose he reclined to upstairs and built the upper part of the house for these religious gatherings. Rehana stepped back from fighting this war with Sohail because somehow she blamed herself for putting the Holy Book on his hand. She asked him to take recourse to the Quran to find some solace from the damages that the experiences of war had caused him. Rehana tried to bring back peace in the mind of Sohail and also in her family by asking him to heal himself by the precious teachings of the Book. Little did she know that this will start another war in the family and she would not only become an enemy of peace, but also lose her son for good. She remembers with a

heavy heart how she had initiated the ultimate change in Sohail, how gradually he started getting dissociated from her mentally:

This was how it began. It hurt her to remember this, because everything that happened afterwards could be traced to Sohail's first steps towards God, beginning with the Book that she gave him, that gathered dust on his bookshelf, that she prised from between Neruda and Ghalib, that she read aloud while he ate his breakfast, that he was unable to resist, that he began to memorise, then understand, then love, that finally fell into his hands as he learned to read, that wove itself into his heart – that led to revelation and his conversion, the alchemy of which none of his loved ones could trace to a single moment, a single gesture (The Good Muslim 93).

Sohail's is physical presence hardly mattered because he no longer remained Rehana's son. He had moved beyond the point of no return. His detachment from his mother had hurt her deeply and the grief of a mother can be felt from what the narrator had conveyed, "He's not my son, Ammoo said simply. And he's not yours. We do what we can, but you have to remember that" (The Good Muslim 37). Surprisingly, he was not even moved by his fatherly instinct. Maya did not see any grief in his eyes when he had lost his wife. Neither did her bother about the son that Silvi had left as a symbol of their love. What surprised Maya more was that Sohail was least bothered giving Zaid a proper education. Rather, when the former wanted to teach the child Sohail refused saying that upstairs he is getting the education that he is supposed to get. But in the course of the narrative it is ironically represented that the religious education that Sohail tried to impart in his son could instill the moral values in the child because the layer did not know that stealing something is a sin. Maya caught Zaid stealing money from her purse. But when she tried to talk to Sohail about this at first he ignored saying that he will deal with it. It was to no avail, and just because he did not want Maya to get involved with his son, he sent him to a place which was quite far from Dhaka, on the shore of a river to get religious education. Regretfully, when Maya tried to rescue the child from that place – where Zaid was treated like an animal, he was caged and exploited brutally- he was killed by those people. Somehow Maya escaped. It is indeed shocking Sohail did not show any sign of grief at the death of his only child. From these instances it can be drawn that war had dismantled the peace in the mind of Sohail to such an extent that all the human emotions had drained out from him. The Partition that took place was not just of the nations or the Haque family, the Partition divided Sohail as a person. After realising the hollowness of the war and the freedom or Independence he fought for became redundant with Mujibur Rahman turning dictator he took shelter in religion and discarded everything else. When Maya came back after seven years from her sojourn she could not bear the transformation in Sohail. She tried her best to bring out the brother who was her friend, her guide before the war happened. The war of Independence was over when Bangladesh was declared an independent nation. But that war had swept away all the ties in Rehana's family. Sohail's disinterestedness in the family was the result of the war which was going on inside him after being witness to the monstrosity of the war – which he never imagined of. He did not think and he will have to kill someone by joining the guerrilla. Neither did he ever conjecture that he had to come across women like Piya, who was raped in front of their families. The savagery of the war shook him and the images of the destruction it had caused on the innocent lives kept on haunting him. He confessed this to Maya once. The influence his first hand experience in the war prompted him to take recourse to religion. It seems that Sohail felt that may be religion or spreading the word of the Prophet would pay the way to find inner peace because he had lost

faith in humanity. As the apparition of the war had entered in him, he believed that only the teachings of the Holy Book could exorcise it. And Rehana gave up fighting the war to bring her son back to what he earlier was. She knew that war was lurking in and around her and it had devoured the peace of her family. Many a times, she ardently wished for the wheel of time to move backward so that she could pause the happy times with her children and embalm those moments for life. As she could realise that the time gone will never come back, she too became inert and started living with the sense of guilt that she herself had led Sohail in that path and disrupted the family. And in the narrative Rehana expresses her sense of guilt to Maya. The former fought with herself everyday for the state of her son and the tumour that she had, which finally took away her life, seems to be symbolically represented as the result of the war with her conscience.

Again, after diagnosing the tumour of Rehana, the need for an operation, and her deteriorating health Maya considered herself guilty. She could not forgive herself for not being besides her mother for so many years. She felt that if she was near her mother, she could have cured the latter much earlier. Maya could not express her fears in front of her mother. But being a doctor and knowing the status of her mother's tumour a war was going on within herself. She sought the support of Sohail, but to no avail. The memories of the numerous abortions she had done in the rehabilitation camps kept on coming to her. She had helped other women who came to abort the fetus which got germinated when they were raped during the war. But now that her mother was sick she was helpless.

From the analysis of the narrative it becomes clear that when peace is thwarted war begins, whether it is within one's self or a physical one. In addition, the damage war causes can never be renovated, despite any effort by human beings. The scars left by the war on an individual who has got into it cannot be mended. Every character in the two fictions discussed here was fighting some kind of war. In *A Golden Age* the war was a political, physical one and in *The Good Muslim* they fought the war with their selves.

Unfortunately, the irony lies in the point that despite understanding the fact that when war will unleash the sword from its sheath the very first thing that it will demand to be sacrificed is peace, human beings engage themselves in wars. Moreover, from the representation of the Partition of 1971 – both the struggle and its aftermath – it can be conjectured that war demotivates and devours the ones who get involved in it. The political war cease at some point of time, but a war of a different kind continues within them depriving them of mental peace till they live.

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