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Reading Tahmima Anam's Postcolonial Fiction- *A Golden Age* in the Light of Fredrick Jameson's Concept of 'National Allegory'

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ABSTRACT

Tahmima Anam's postcolonial fiction- *A Golden Age* is such a novel that can be called a narrative of the liberation war of Bangladesh. Despite having good art of characterization and universal theme with global appeal, it is plausible to dissect the thought and action of the characters as well as different events of this fiction with the argument of Fredrick Jameson that all the Third-World texts are actually 'National Allegory'. He asserted that even if a text of Third-World seems to contain private feelings and emotions, the underlying meaning is different since the author's main purpose is to demonstrate the collective state of a nation where individual part matters less. That *A Golden Age* is a 'National Allegory' is the prime concern of this article in which it will be shown how Anam, a daughter of a freedom fighter, has portrayed her characters mainly to articulate the saga of 1971 in Bangladesh (the then East Pakistan).

Keywords: Nationalism, Liberation war, National allegory, Identity, Third-world text, Feeling, and Emotion.

INTRODUCTION:

Being born in Bangladesh, Tahmima Anam felt the urge to write the chronicle of this country and so she incorporated the birth pangs of this region through the liberation war in her first fiction- *A Golden Age*. Here she seems to inculcate nationalism through personal as well as socio-political activities of both the major and minor characters at different levels of society. She has shown the struggle of the country and its inhabitants as well in order to form a national identity. Though the feelings and emotions of the characters are vividly portrayed through the lucid language of the author which creates a universal appeal and relevance for global readership, national context influences their predicament from time to time and it justifies this postcolonial fiction to be a 'national allegory' defined by Fredrick Jameson, an American Marxist thinker.

Actually Tahmima Anam is a daughter of a freedom fighter and so she has grown up listening to all the stories of freedom fighting of Bangladesh from her parents as well as other relatives. Her surrounding has certainly created an impact upon her regarding the ins and outs of the liberation war of this country which has inspired her to encapsulate the golden memory of this nation. That age was metaphorically a golden age since all the people of this nation turned up as the valiant soldiers of their motherland in order to protect her from the West Pakistani colonizers.

The Pakistani enemies robbed wealth and deprived the Bengali people of all the facilities whereas the latter were majority in number. The colonizers were hoarding their fortune by exploiting the eastern wing. This was the very reason for which the intrepid folks of the eastern wing roared up and fought for freeing their

native land. The author of this novel has inscribed this proud history of Bengal which gained independence through nine months' liberation war. This article attempts to investigate the narrative of *A Golden Age* and its substantial elements to be termed as Fredrick Jameson's 'national allegory'.

Jameson's Concept of 'National Allegory' & 'Third-World Literature'

Before evaluating Jameson's definition of 'national allegory', it would be pertinent to focus on what this phrase actually signifies in *A Dictionary of Critical Theory*. According to Oxford Reference, 'national allegory' is –

a type of narrative whose essential subject is the nation state. Because the life of a nation, large or small, exceeds the capacity of what any novel can actually accommodate, narrative fiction of this type uses allegory as a means of expressing a dimension of existence greater than that of the lives of its individual characters. National allegory tends to be focused on the lives of ordinary people, however, rather than heads of state or aristocracy, using their mundane daily struggles as a means of illustrating the state of the nation ("national allegory").

In a word, it can be said that national allegory actually implies a fiction to be allegorical where the state of mind of the individual is fully directed and understood by the state of the nation. That is, in national allegory, the daily struggle of the characters is used as a tool to demonstrate the struggle of the whole nation.

Fredrick Jameson, in his article titled 'Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism', revised 'national allegory' and labeled all the third-world texts as 'national allegory'. It sparked intense controversy among the critical thinkers as it dismissed the literatures of the third-world countries, that is, Africa, South America and South Asia as having no global appeal. In this article, the Jameson proclaimed,

"Third-World texts, even those which are seemingly private and invested with a properly libidinal dynamic - necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory: the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society" (p. 69).

Jameson's argument is that there is no individual feeling or emotion emphasized in any Third-World text. All the characters essentially represent the socio-political, cultural and national state of affairs. It is contradictory on his part that being a Marxist thinker, Jameson exposed his racial belief by discriminating literature as First-World, Second-World, and Third-World texts. His ideology signifies that the First-World texts, i.e., the European literatures are superior due to having skilled art of characterization, good narrative technique, universal theme, perfect plot construction and all these criteria attract global readership. On the other hand, the Third-World literatures possess just the opposite characteristics of that of the First-World ones and so they cannot attract any global appeal.

Controversy over 'Third-World Texts' as 'National Allegory'

Aijaj Ahmad vehemently objected Jameson's argument in his article titled "Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness and the 'National Allegory'" as many Third-World literatures maintained universal appeal and thus gained global attraction. He said, "There is no such thing as a 'Third World Literature' which can be constructed as an internally coherent object of theoretical knowledge" (p. 96-97). His argument against Jameson's theory is that no literature can be categorized as superior or inferior on the basis of its author's society, culture and nation. Literary values of all the texts of the Third-World countries cannot be under-mined too. Indian born poet Rabindranath Tagore's *Song Offerings* (English translation of *Gitanjali*) and Columbian author Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* can be cited as examples here as the authors won Nobel Prize for their texts.

In other words, Third-World literatures can be universal too having global approach if there is a global theme. Socio-political condition of human being individually and the nation's craving for forming a singular identity collectively can be intertwined. But the portrayal of the inner psyche cannot be ignored.

Justification of Anam's *A Golden Age* as a 'National Allegory'

However, Tahmima Anam's postcolonial fiction *A Golden Age* can be read as Fredrick Jameson's 'National Allegory' for various reasons. The incessant search for a free nation continues throughout this

novel. In this novel, the Bengali people are seen to shed their blood and sacrifice their lives in order to achieve freedom and they succeed in this battle. They want to drive the Pakistani colonizers away from the land of Bengal and rescue this country from being ravished by those outsiders. As the Bengali people were subdued by the Pakistani enemies in every aspect, it was indispensable for them to crave for a free state with a free identity. The picture of the struggle for freedom and overthrowing the colonizers is lucidly portrayed by the author in her fiction. Here all the characters are embodiment of national crisis as their temperament changes with the temperament of the state (Khan and Akter, 2021).

In fact, *A Golden Age* begins with Rehana's monologue with her dead husband in front of his grave in which her inner torments and pangs due to the upcoming storm of her life are revealed. Here she lays bare her agony due to her children being snatched away from herself with legal procedures by her husband's brother and sister-in law as she is treated as someone both mentally and financially incapable of bringing her children up after her husband's death. She suffers from a keen crisis of identity as she loses her status of being a mother.

Dear Husband,

I lost our children today (p. 3)

My children are no longer my children (p. 5)

It is pathetic for her that after her husband's death, her brother-in-law named Faiz does not trust her custody as suitable enough for the children. As he and his wife Parveen are childless, they want to use the opportunity of taking away the children from Rehana. 'When Rehana refused, Faiz and Parveen had taken the matter to court' (p. 7). Anam narrates, 'The judge said Rehana had not properly coped with the death of her husband. She was too young to take care of the children on her own. She had not taught them the proper lessons about Jannat and the afterlife (p. 5). Finally Sohail and Maya, the children of Rehana and Iqbal are separated from their widowed mother to West Pakistan which is 'thousand miles away on the other side of India' (p. 5). The obsession of parting from her children does not let Rehana be in peace. So she takes any kind of attempt to bring them back and establish her position of an affectionate and sacrificing mother in their minds. She

no more wants to lose their sight and is always restless to keep them near herself.

Anam's portrayal of Rehana's anguish after the order of taking away the children from her being declared by the judge adequately describes the torments suffered by her and her subsequent undertakings in order to prove that she can be a good mother and bring her children up though not luxuriously but properly.

After the verdict,....she had fallen to her knees. She had not been able to convince anyone that even though she was poor, and friendless in this town...she could still be a mother to her children. She had not explained to the children where exactly their father had gone, and she had let them stay home from school, and she had taken them to watch Cleopetra, but she could still be their mother; she could find a way to overcome their grief, her poverty, her youth; she would find a way to love them all alone (p. 8)

Here, Rehana actually represents Bangladesh itself while her children symbolize the wealth of this country. On the other hand, Faiz and Parveen represent the barrenness of West Pakistan who ravish the fortune of East Bengal and dominate this region with extreme religiosity only to serve their own purpose. The event of snatching away the children to West Pakistan and Rehana's wholehearted attempt to bring them back truly allegorizes the West Pakistan's ruling, suppressing and oppressing the East Bengal and the latter's nine months' fight for regaining its freedom. For all these, *A Golden Age* can be labeled as Fredrick Jameson's 'national allegory' in which the national events are represented through the characters and their actions.

Through a different narrative technique, the author has presented the search for a free nation by the Bengali wing from the Western wing of Pakistan. She has vividly drawn the picture of longing for the identity of a free nation in various ways. Here at the beginning, it is seen that the protagonist Rehana goes to her husband's grave and talks to him in the style of dramatic monologue in which one speaks and the listener is silent. She expresses her feeling about the recent happenings both inside her family, that is, about her children and inside the nation. Her speech articulates

the yearning for freedom of the nation from the dictatorial government of Pakistan. That Sheikh Mujib should have been the new president in order to achieve a free nation where there would have been no chaotic environment to disturb the regular life style of the general people is stated below by Rehana's speech.

Last time I was here I told you about the elections. Right now we are waiting for Mujib to be declared Prime Minister. There have been many delays. Your children are waiting for the government to change. In sha Allah, once that happens they will be able to return to their studies (p. 20)

Here the anguish and hope of the protagonist has been reflected which actually represents the collective state of the nation where everyone is pleading for a fair government like Mujib in order to serve the national interest. It certainly validates Jameson's categorizing the Third-World literature as 'national allegory'.

Through the setting of *A Golden Age* being chiefly in Bangladesh, the scenario of Bengal during the period of colonization by the West Pakistani rulers is emphasized. How people struggled for their existence with the West Pakistani oppressors and how they managed to have a peaceful country by different movements and revolution were the prime concern of the author. She actually narrated the saga of the freedom fighters especially the intellectual group of people in this fiction.

When the United Front won in the election of 1970, the Pakistani rulers procrastinated in order to outcast the Bengali leaders and term them as invalid so that they themselves could be in power for long. That is why, anger was roused within the Bengali people and Sohail being a representative of the Bengali students wing, strongly demands Mujib to be the President. At Rehana's home, in a family conversation, Sohail's following speech makes the people's craving for a national identity.

'It's been two months since Mujib won the election. They should have convened the national assembly by now and made him Prime Minister, but they kept delaying. Some of the students are urging Mujib to take more drastic action....He should declare independence.' (p. 28)

Due to the torture carried out and disparity created by the Pakistani rulers, the pangs of the Bengali people becomes clear through Sohail's following words.

'If you know anything about the country you would know that West Pakistan is bleeding us out. We earn most of the foreign exchange. We grow the rice, we make the jute, and yet we get nothing- no schools, no hospitals, no army. We can't even speak our own bloody language!' (p. 29)

Representing all the protesters of Bengal, Sohail became angry for such kinds of suppression, oppression and deprivation being continued by the Pakistani colonizers. At the moment of unbearable irritation, when someone showed logic about God's will for their miseries, he vehemently protested and his following logic expresses his strong desire for a national identity.

'Starvation is not caused by God. It is caused by irresponsible governments.' Sohail rolled and unrolled the sleeve of his kurta. Rehana wondered if he was going to go on talking about the country's fortunes, the jute money, the cyclone. But he looked as though he'd run out of air. *'What we have here is an emergency,'* he said in a tired voice. *'There is no possibility of reconciliation now. Mujib should have declared independence'* (p. 29)

Step by step Sohail's mother Rehana, the protagonist, could deem the reasoning behind protest. Let us have a look on her following thought which gradually comes to her mind reflecting the author's own mind on the brutal history behind the mass upsurge.

The comment had stung because it was probably true. Lately the children had little time for anything but the struggle. It had started when Sohail entered the university. Ever since '48, the Pakistani authorities had ruled the eastern wing of the country like a colony. First they tried to force everyone to speak Urdu instead of Bengali. They took the jute money from Bengal and spent it on factories in Karachi and Islamabad. One general after another made promises they had no intention of keeping. The Dhaka University students had been involved in the protests from the very beginning, so it was no surprise Sohail had

got caught up, and Maya too. Even Rehana could see the logic: what sense did it make to have a country in two halves, poised on either side of India like a pair of horns?

But in 1970, when the cyclone hit, it was as though everything came into focus. Rehana remembered the day Sohail and Maya had returned from the rescue operation: the red in their eyes as they told her how they had waited for the food trucks to come and watched as the water rose and the bodies washed up on the shore; how they had realized, with mounting panic, that the food wouldn't come because it had never been sent (p. 33)

The consequence of the Pakistani rulers' oppression is that Maya and Sohail being the representatives of the student community, started gathering masses and created movement against all sorts of illogical activities that were continued by the oppressors and so –

The next day Maya had joined the student Communist Party. She donated all of her clothes to the cyclone victims and began wearing only white saris... She swallowed, like sugar, every idea passed to her by the party elders. Uprising. Revolution. She bandied the words about as though she had discovered a lost, ancient language (p. 33-34).

In 1971, when the Pakistani army started creating massacre in the Eastern wing, with all the young people Rehana's children- Maya and Sohail also joined which she wanted to prevent wholeheartedly as she could no more bear their absence from her. So 'She kept telling herself she was still in charge, that nothing would be done without her consent. She pitched forward on the seat' (p. 42). She determined not to lose them at any cost. Though Rehana's focus of her search for identity was only her children, when her children joined the student politics in order to free the country from the clutches of the Pakistani heinous rulers, she wanted to help them in that regard. It was the true picture seen in every family in East Pakistan where the mothers did not want to let their children participate in the war for the fear of losing them, but in the end, they approved the revolution themselves too.

When Bangabandhu declared, 'Make every house a fortress' (p. 49), 'Rehana suddenly felt young, plunged into a world of limitless possibility' (p. 49). It is quite

obvious that a free nation was necessary for Rehana too in order to have her children as her own permanently because in a free country no one could dare to take them away from herself. The following picture shows Rehana's being pleased at our country's being possible to be a free one.

Maya leaned over and held her mother's hand- not, as she sometimes did, for a reassuring squeeze but in solidarity, and suddenly Rehana felt sure it would all resolve itself: Sheikh Mujib would be Prime Minister, and the country would go on being her home, and the children would go on being her children. In no time at all the world would right itself, and they would go on living ordinary, unexceptional lives (p. 50).

At the midnight of 25th March in 1971, the Pakistani army suddenly launched for 'Operation Searchlight' butchering a number of innocent and armless people while the engagement programme of Silvi, the beloved of Sohail and Sabeer, an army officer was taking place. The exaggerated sound killed the dog named Romeo in front of the house, made the children shiver in fear clinging to their mothers' breast and created heart attack for many a people. This was the night at which the Bengali people determined to gain freedom at any cost. At that incident, Sabeer, the Pakistani army also changed his mind to betray the command from the Pakistani high officials and to fight for Bangladesh. A small picture of that night says about the anguish of the people.

From Mrs Chowdhury's roof, Sohail and Lieutenant Sabeer watched the fires of the lit-up city. Suddenly they heard everything: the killing of small children, the slow movement of clouds, the death of women, the sigh of fleeting birds, the rush of blood on the pavements (p. 56).

Curfew was set on people's movement from dawn to dusk. Those who broke the curfew were shot by the military. The brutal torture which was carried out by them is presented below.

The army had dug a mass grave to hide the bodies. There was a warehouse, somewhere on the outskirts of town, where they tortured the prisoners. The animals in Mirpur Zoo, even the Bengal tiger, had all died of fright. But no one seemed to know any-

thing for sure. The newspapers announced, 'Yahya saves Pakistan!' and Dhaka, so long at the centre of the struggle, was now a besieged and vacant city that kept its knowledge close and hidden (p. 69-70).

In order to save the country from the brutality of the Pakistani military, everyone beginning from the farmers, cobblers, fishermen, etc. to the intellectuals joined the war in different ways. Everyone contributed to the war according to their ability. The young people tried heart and soul to convince their parents in order to protect the nation and make it free from the grasp of the heinous armies. Sohail's pleading to his mother in order to get permission to join the war makes the whole scenario vivid to the eyes of the reader when he says, 'I can't sit back and do nothing, Ma. Everyone is fighting. Even people who were not sure, people who wanted to stay with Pakistan' (p. 79). He also said, 'Everyone has joined. Everyone. All the young men, fighting side by side. No one cares who anyone is. They've all joined, the peasant and the soldier, together, just as we've been dreaming. But things are bad, you know' (p. 100).

Rehana, being the mother of two children, always thought of the food supplies as she had to feed them. She waited for the barbarous days to be over and listened to the radio so that she could get some good news. But the picture was completely different as it contained killing and making the mothers' wombs empty. Her days were passing in the following ways.

She spent the days in stunned efficiency, counting and recounting the supplies, listening to the radio and discovering the violence that had been wrought upon the country. The deaths. The arrests. The children with no parents. The mothers with empty laps. The ones who simply vanished, leaving behind a comb or a pair of shoes (p. 85).

The author has truly said, 'They had been at war since March. What was strange had become unstrange' (*A Golden Age* 98). The reader can get a glimpse on how much savage the Pakistani heinous armies became through following words of Rehana in which she herself also seems to suffer from neurosis, a psychological disease due to encountering such a wretched condition of Sabeer.

'They beat him, broke his ribs.

'They made him stare at the sun for hours, days.

'They burned cigarette holes on his back.

'They hung him upside down.

'They made him drink salt water until his lips cracked.

'And they tore out his fingernails' (p. 215).

The following narration will also make the scenario of the then Bengal crystal clear to the reader and answer to the question why the Bengali people sacrificed their lives in order to get a free nation and have an identity of their own.

Throughout June, Tikka Khan's soldiers made their way across the summer plains of Bangladesh. They looted homes and burned roofs. They raped. They murdered. They lined up the men and shot them into ponds. They practiced old and new forms of torture. They were explorers, pioneers of cruelty, everyday outdoing their own brutality, everyday feeling closer to divinity, because they were told they were saving Pakistan, and Islam, maybe even the Al-mighty himself, from the depravity of the Bengalis; in this feverish, this godly journey, their resolve could know no bounds.

The Bengali resistance was weak and sporadic. General Zia replied on the youthful spirit of his soldiers, and they had small victories. A blown-up bridge here. An army-convoy ambush there. A captured railway station. They celebrated these victories with the broadcasters of the radio, who sent up cheers in the homes of their listeners, these city dwellers spending long, hot afternoons hugging their wireless radios (p. 129).

In different ways, the freedom fighters continued their fighting till their last breath. According to Maya, 'A whole nation, coming together' (p. 101). Sohail said, 'Our mission is to disrupt the normal functioning of the city. Make sure the world knows what is going on. People will not just stand by and witness the rape of Bangladesh' (p. 101). People were collecting support from the foreign countries in order to live in a free country. The news agencies broadcast the news of the barbarous act committed by the Pakistani soldiers regularly. Once Maya was listening to the news: *This is the BBC World Service... a historic Indo-Soviet treaty... if Indira Gandhi intervenes, the war will surely be won for the people of Bangladesh...* (p.212). That

means, the foreign countries like Russia and India supported us in our search for a national identity.

Maya, along with many people, went to India in the refugee camp where ten million Bengali refugees took shelter. She went there in order to give treatment to the sick refugees where there were many freedom fighters too. She also wrote different articles on the ravishes of the Pakistani military upon the Bengali people. Her write ups spread among the people within a very short period of time through which they could come to know how Bangladesh was bleeding by the hit of the Pakistani soldiers.

The freedom fighters followed different strategies during the war time so that no one could recognize them. Joy's speech- 'We exchanged shirts. He wore Aref's. I took his. Aref had mine' (p. 133) makes their strategy clear to the reader. Due to encountering regular atrocities continued by the Pakistani armies, the Bengali soldiers became determined to free the country and have an individual nation of their own. Sohail's words like 'We're outnumbered, outgunned, outmanned. But sometimes we can beat the hell out of them. I can taste the end. The modhu-roshogolla-honey end' (p. 236) proves that.

In the way to gain the national identity, the women had to sacrifice a lot along with the men of our country. The young girls who were raped by the Pakistani soldiers were taken to the clinic in order to have an abortion so that the evil germ of the enemies could no longer be sprung and brought up on this land. Dreaming of a free nation, Maya made flag and 'whooped, draped the flag around her shoulders and ran to find a bamboo pole so they could secure it to the rooftop' (p. 48) as the flag symbolized the identity of a free nation.

There are a few minor characters in both the fictions- *A Golden Age* and *The Good Muslim* like Silvi, Joy, Pia, Mrs Chowdhury, Faiz, Parveen, Sabeer, etc. Their individual search for identity is significant to explore the author's intention to present the state of this nation during the Liberation War.

During the liberation war in the fiction, suddenly Silvi turns into religious dictates. She starts to search for her identity in the dictates and prohibitions of Islam and maintains Purdah. When everyone of Bengal wants freedom for the country, it is Silvi who wholeheartedly

wants both the wings of Pakistan be united so that the Muslim Ummah can stay together. Her comment is shocking to the other characters as well as to the reader when she says, 'I happen to think this war- all this fighting- is a pointless waste of human life'(p. 248). According to Silvi, the Pakistani army was restoring order and making things safe by killing the Bengali people and so she could utter 'To separate the wings is a sin against your religion... Sometimes you have to make sacrifices' (248p.). This character is the embodiment of the religious sentiment of the then Bengal.

A Hindu female character named Mrs Sengupta presents the paradoxical state of her mind during the Liberation War which truly represents the vulnerable condition of the Hindu community at that time. She is a very modern and high educated lady having a taste for literature. At the outset of the war, when she steps to go back to her village for the concern of security, hearing the question of Rehana whether she is going to India, she feels hurt. Her confident answer is that this is her country too and her identity is linked with this very region. So there is no question of leaving this country. Quite contradictorily, in the refugee camp of India, we see Rehana taking shelter in search of her identity and that identity is the identity of honor. She becomes dumb and cannot talk any more while Reahana meets her at the camp. Through her writing, we can learn that the Pakistani military attacked their house and killed her husband and young son while she ran away in order to save both her life and honour. Her writing shows the vivid picture of that event: '*I left him and ran into the pond. I didn't think about him, I just ran. They shot him*' (p. 232). This scenario of helplessness is very commonly seen when any reader goes through the history of war.

CONCLUSION:

After reading this narrative, it seems that Tahmima Anam, being a patriotic author, has incorporated the tale of this country where thought and action of the characters are the true representation of that of the Bengali people which definitely certifies this text as a 'national allegory.' Despite being poor in wealth and arms how all the Bengalis fought and resisted the Pakistani armies during the Liberation War in order to achieve a national identity has marvelously been narrated by the author. The struggles, the pains, the hopes

and the aspirations of the characters suggest *A Golden Age* to be Fredrick Jameson's 'national allegory' as the underlying sense of nationalism behind all the events has wonderfully been revealed here.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST:

The author declares no prospective conflict of interest with respect to the research.

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