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Motherhood and Trauma in Wartime: A Postcolonial Feminist Reading of a Golden Age

Muhammad Naufal Haris[1]✉, Hasnul Insani Djohar[2]
[1 2] University Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta, Indonesia
✉ email: naufal.haris22@mhs.uinjkt.ac.id

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ABSTRACT

This paper explored how Tahmima Anam's *A Golden Age* reimagines women's roles in wartime through the lens of postcolonial feminist theory. Centering on the character Rehana Haque, a mother navigating the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War, the analysis highlights how motherhood, emotional labor, and trauma become politicized forms of resistance. Drawing on theoretical insights from Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Gayatri Spivak, Veena Das, and others, the study demonstrates how Rehana's domestic and relational actions challenge dominant, masculinist narratives of nationalism. The paper argues that Rehana's maternal identity is a site of situated agency, where caregiving and emotional endurance serve as political acts that sustain revolutionary efforts. Furthermore, the novel critiques the symbolic ideal of the "mother of the nation," replacing it with a complex portrayal of lived experience, grief, and resilience. By foregrounding the gendered dimensions of trauma and memory, this study contributes to feminist and postcolonial literary criticism and calls for a redefinition of heroism that includes the emotional and domestic labor of women during national struggles.

Keywords: *Feminism; Motherhood; Postcolonialism; Trauma*

INTRODUCTION

The Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971 was a transformative yet profoundly traumatic event in South Asian history, marking the birth of an independent Bangladesh but also inflicting unimaginable suffering on its people, particularly women. In nationalist narratives, this war is often portrayed through the lens of military heroism, political negotiations, and the sacrifices of male soldiers, while the experiences of women, their grief, their resilience, their invisible contributions remain largely marginalized. Tahmima Anam's *A Golden Age* (2007) addresses this historical erasure by centering its narrative on Rehana Haque, a widowed mother who navigates the turmoil of war while protecting her children and becoming quietly but decisively involved in the revolutionary struggle. Her story foregrounds the intersection of motherhood, trauma, and resistance, demonstrating how women's emotional and domestic labor become politicized in times of crisis.

Rehana's identity as a mother both compels her to take extraordinary risks for her family and exposes her to intense fear and loss, reflecting how women's lives during war are shaped by the dual burden of care and suffering. In the context of South Asian

nationalism, women are frequently celebrated as symbolic "mothers of the nation," invoked as metaphors for cultural purity and continuity, yet their lived realities, their agency, their grief, their psychological wounds remain unacknowledged. Anam disrupts this idealized narrative, presenting motherhood not as a passive or purely sacrificial role but as a dynamic and ambivalent site of resistance. Rehana's love and care work are not confined to the private sphere but actively sustain her family and community, showing how the boundary between the domestic and the political dissolves in times of conflict.

This paper situates its analysis within this tension, addressing the scholarly gap that underestimates women's contributions to liberation movements and under-theorizes the gendered nature of wartime trauma. Specifically, it examines how *A Golden Age* portrays motherhood as a form of situated agency and trauma as a relational, embodied, and gendered experience. In doing so, the paper highlights how women's emotional and domestic work are politicized during war and how their suffering, though often silenced, is integral to the story of nation-building. The analysis is grounded in postcolonial feminist theory, particularly Chandra Talpade Mohanty's critique of Western feminism's universalizing tendencies and her concept of "situated agency," which emphasizes how women resist oppression from within the social roles and structures imposed on them. Mohanty's insights are complemented by Gayatri Spivak's notion of the *subaltern*, which underscores the historical silencing of colonized women's voices, and by Trinh Minh-ha's critique of how nationalist discourses appropriate and distort women's narratives to reinforce patriarchal ideals.

In addition, the reading draws on feminist trauma theory, specifically the work of Veena Das and Cathy Caruth, to illuminate how trauma resists articulation yet shapes women's identities and relationships, and on Marianne Hirsch's concept of *postmemory*, which reveals how trauma is transmitted relationally and intergenerationally. While prior scholarship on *A Golden Age* (e.g., Rahaman, 2023; Sultana, 2022) has explored its representations of national identity and memory, few studies have offered a sustained postcolonial feminist reading that foregrounds motherhood and emotional labor as political forces.

This paper therefore fills that gap by engaging with a select body of theory and scholarship to argue that Rehana's story challenges masculinist definitions of heroism and highlights the affective and relational dimensions of women's contributions to history. The findings indicate that Rehana's maternal identity becomes politicized in wartime, enabling her to perform acts of resistance rooted in care and love, while her experiences of trauma marked by silence, fear, and internalized grief expose the hidden gendered costs of national liberation struggles. By centering Rehana's perspective, Anam critiques the patriarchal appropriation of women's sacrifices and the erasure of their pain from historical memory, offering instead a narrative that affirms women's agency and suffering as equally vital to the making of a nation.

Thus, this paper argues that *A Golden Age*, through the character of Rehana Haque, represents motherhood as a site of situated agency and portrays trauma as a gendered and relational experience, challenging masculinist narratives of nationalism

and foregrounding the political significance of women's emotional and domestic labor in wartime. The significance of this analysis lies in its contribution to feminist and postcolonial literary criticism by decolonizing our understanding of resistance and heroism, centering women's experiences within their specific cultural and historical contexts, and enriching the historiography of the Bangladesh Liberation War through an alternative narrative that prioritizes women's voices. In doing so, the paper also underscores the importance of recognizing the affective, relational, and embodied dimensions of women's lives as not merely private concerns but as integral to collective struggles for freedom and justice.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative literary analysis grounded in postcolonial feminist theory to examine *A Golden Age* by Tahmima Anam. The method focuses on close reading of the novel, identifying key narrative elements that portray motherhood, emotional labor, and trauma in the context of the Bangladesh Liberation War.

The analysis is interpretive and theoretical, drawing upon selected frameworks from postcolonial and feminist scholars such as Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Gayatri Spivak, Trinh T. Minh-ha, Veena Das, Cathy Caruth, and Marianne Hirsch. These frameworks guide the understanding of how women's experiences—particularly those of the protagonist, Rehana Haque—are represented as both personal and political acts of resistance.

Data is drawn directly from the novel's narrative structure, character development, and thematic emphasis. Quotations from the text are used as evidence to support interpretive arguments. The study also engages with secondary sources including scholarly articles that analyze the novel's themes of gender, nationalism, and trauma. Rather than testing hypotheses, the method seeks to reveal how literature can function as a form of counter-history that amplifies marginalized voices, especially those of women in postcolonial contexts.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The first dimension of Rehana Haque's story that illustrates her situated agency is the politicization of her maternal identity, which transforms her domestic and emotional labor into deliberate acts of resistance embedded in the struggle for national liberation. Throughout *A Golden Age*, Rehana is portrayed as a mother whose primary concern is the safety and wellbeing of her children, yet her maternal love compels her to transgress social norms and even risk her own life in support of the revolutionary cause. An early scene in the novel exemplifies this dynamic when Rehana decides to allow her home to be used as a shelter for freedom fighters, providing them refuge and care in secret while maintaining the outward appearance of a law-abiding citizen. In one striking moment, Anam writes, "Rehana prepared the mattresses in the drawing room, cooked rice and lentils, and laid out warm water for the boys who arrived at night, dusty and wounded" (Anam, p. 134). This image highlights how Rehana transforms her domestic space into a site of subversion, collapsing the traditional

binary between private and public spheres. Rather than leaving her role as a mother to engage politically, she redefines motherhood itself as a political act. This is consistent with Chandra Talpade Mohanty's concept of situated agency, which emphasizes that women in colonized and patriarchal societies resist oppression not by rejecting their relational identities but by subverting them from within (Mohanty, 1984). Rehana's kitchen and living room become spaces of quiet rebellion, where her maternal care and hospitality directly sustain the revolutionary movement. Furthermore, her decision to shelter fighters is not portrayed as naïve or incidental but as a conscious choice grounded in her emotional ties to her children and her moral opposition to the Pakistani army's violence. This maternal politicization challenges both nationalist and feminist assumptions that equate heroism with masculine, individualistic, and public acts of resistance. As Rahaman (2023) observes, "Anam writes against the invisibility of women's contributions, presenting Rehana as a figure whose motherhood itself becomes a form of national service." In this way, the novel critiques the romanticized yet hollow trope of the "mother of the nation" by depicting an ordinary woman whose caregiving and emotional labor make her indispensable to the revolutionary struggle. Rehana's story thus redefines agency as relational and embodied, aligning with the thesis that *A Golden Age* foregrounds women's domestic and emotional work as politically significant within the context of war.

A second crucial aspect of Rehana's character that reveals the gendered nature of resistance and trauma is the way her maternal love both empowers her and exposes her to profound psychological vulnerability, illustrating how women's endurance is entangled with emotional suffering that remains largely invisible in nationalist narratives. As the war intensifies, Rehana's anxiety over her children's safety becomes an all-consuming force, even as she continues to support their involvement in the liberation movement. Anam captures this ambivalence in a scene where Rehana silently weeps after her son Sohail departs to join the guerillas, yet composes herself before her daughter sees her, whispering, "Go now, go quickly. You must" (Anam, p. 201). This moment encapsulates the inner conflict between her fear of loss and her recognition of the necessity of sacrifice, a tension that defines her experience of both motherhood and resistance. Veena Das's *Life and Words* (2007) provides a useful lens here, as she argues that women in violent contexts often absorb the suffering of others while suppressing their own pain, internalizing trauma as part of their expected role. Rehana's sleepless nights, her nervous habits, and her muted despair are all symptoms of the gendered burden of trauma, which is normalized as part of maternal duty. This silent endurance exemplifies what Mohanty identifies as the naturalization of women's suffering, wherein women's emotional labor and psychological scars are rendered invisible or apolitical. Yet Rehana's grief is profoundly political, as it underscores the costs of liberation movements that demand women's sacrifices without acknowledging them. In this sense, Anam critiques the masculinist framing of heroism by showing that Rehana's quiet persistence and emotional strength are themselves forms of resistance. As Hirsch's (1997) concept of *postmemory* suggests, Rehana's trauma is not only her own but is also relational, affecting her children and shaping their understanding of the

war. The atmosphere of grief and fear in her home becomes a microcosm of the collective trauma endured by the nation, reinforcing the argument that women's private suffering is inseparable from public histories of violence. Thus, the novel affirms that motherhood in wartime is not simply a symbol of sacrifice but a lived reality that combines love, resistance, and trauma, supporting this paper's thesis that *A Golden Age* foregrounds the political significance of women's emotional and domestic labor within national struggles.

A third dimension of Rehana's situated agency is her strategic manipulation of gendered expectations in order to protect her family and support the resistance, revealing how women in patriarchal and colonial contexts exploit their assigned roles to subvert authority. Throughout *A Golden Age*, Rehana understands that the military officers and bureaucrats who patrol her neighborhood view her as a harmless, apolitical widow, a perception she deftly uses to conceal her subversive activities. In one key scene, Rehana visits a military camp to secure her son's release after he is arrested, presenting herself as a grieving and naive mother: "She adjusted her sari, lowered her eyes, and spoke in the softest voice she could muster. 'Sir, he is only a boy. Let him go. He does not understand politics'" (Anam, p. 245). Her calculated performance of vulnerability disarms the officer, who sees her as a helpless woman rather than an active supporter of the rebels. This tactic exemplifies what Spivak (1988) describes as the "strategic use of positionality," whereby subaltern women operate within oppressive frameworks to achieve agency. Rather than rejecting her maternal identity or demanding autonomy in masculinist terms, Rehana appropriates the assumptions about her gender to protect her son and continue aiding the revolution. As Trinh Minh-ha (1989) argues, women's narratives often reveal how silence and performance can function as forms of resistance rather than mere compliance. Rehana's actions demonstrate that compliance and resistance are not mutually exclusive but are often intertwined in the strategies of marginalized women. This reading challenges liberal feminist ideals of liberation that equate agency with loud, confrontational defiance, showing instead that quiet, embodied, and relational forms of resistance can be equally effective. Scholarship on *A Golden Age* often overlooks this subtlety, focusing instead on the overt political events of the novel (e.g., Sultana, 2022). However, Rehana's story invites us to recognize how women's strategic performances of femininity and motherhood become tools of survival and defiance. This aligns with the thesis of this paper, which asserts that Anam's novel foregrounds the political significance of women's emotional and domestic work in the broader context of national struggle, illustrating that even within the constraints of patriarchal and colonial structures, women find ways to act as agents of resistance.

A fourth and equally important element in Rehana's narrative is the intergenerational and communal impact of her maternal love and trauma, illustrating how women's emotional labor sustains not only their immediate families but also the collective revolutionary spirit of the community. Throughout *A Golden Age*, Rehana is shown forming informal networks of support with other women in her neighborhood wives, sisters, and mothers of fighters who share food, information, and emotional

encouragement to weather the violence of war. Anam describes how, during an air raid, Rehana and her neighbors gather together, holding each other in silence while bombs fall: "They huddled close, clutching each other's hands, whispering prayers they didn't fully remember, and in the morning they emerged together, eyes rimmed with fatigue but alive" (Anam, p. 219). This scene exemplifies what Joan Tronto (1993) terms an "ethic of care," in which emotional and relational labor becomes a collective strategy of survival and resilience. Rehana's care work is not limited to her biological children but extends to her neighbors and the young fighters who pass through her home, reinforcing the idea that maternal love can transcend the private sphere to serve the public good. Marianne Hirsch's (1997) concept of *postmemory* also applies here, as the atmosphere of endurance and grief that Rehana cultivates becomes part of the emotional inheritance of the next generation, shaping their understanding of sacrifice and nationhood. This communal aspect of Rehana's maternal identity challenges the nationalist tendency to individualize heroism as a masculine pursuit, showing instead how women's collective emotional labor sustains the morale and cohesion necessary for revolutionary movements. Rahaman (2023) notes that Anam "documents the invisible alliances among women as central to the survival of the nation during its birth," yet stops short of analyzing how these alliances constitute political action in themselves. This paper builds on that observation to argue that Rehana's relational networks exemplify the political significance of women's emotional and domestic labor in wartime. By representing these everyday acts of care and solidarity, Anam affirms that women's contributions to national liberation are not symbolic but material and indispensable, supporting the thesis that *A Golden Age* challenges masculinist narratives by centering the gendered realities of resistance.

A fifth critical aspect of Rehana's characterization that deepens our understanding of gendered trauma in wartime is the silence that surrounds her suffering, which reflects the societal expectation that women endure pain privately as part of their maternal duty. Throughout *A Golden Age*, Rehana internalizes her grief and fear, rarely voicing her despair even to those closest to her. After learning of a massacre in her city and fearing for her children, she spends the night awake, silently weeping: "She lay stiffly in her bed, her eyes wide open, listening for footsteps, holding her breath as though each breath might summon danger" (Anam, p. 176). This image encapsulates the gendered burden of emotional restraint, illustrating how Rehana's suffering is made invisible by her need to appear strong for her children and community. Veena Das (2007) argues in *Life and Words* that women in violent contexts are socialized to absorb violence into the ordinary rhythms of life, suppressing their pain in order to maintain the fragile stability of their families. Rehana's muted despair exemplifies what Mohanty (1984) identifies as the "naturalization of women's suffering," where endurance is framed as a moral and maternal obligation rather than as a politically significant experience. Yet her silence is not merely a personal failing or resignation; it is a survival strategy that reflects the impossibility of articulating trauma in a context that demands stoicism from women. Cathy Caruth (1996) has theorized trauma as an experience that resists language, manifesting instead through fragmented

memory and embodied symptoms, a dynamic evident in Rehana's nervous habits and sleeplessness. Her unspoken grief reveals how women's pain is marginalized in both public discourse and historical memory, despite being central to the lived reality of war. Sultana (2022), in her analysis of Anam's novel, notes that "the private sphere of women's suffering is presented as outside of history," but she does not fully explore how this silence itself constitutes a form of testimony. By centering Rehana's unarticulated trauma, Anam not only critiques the masculinist erasure of women's pain but also affirms that such pain is political, inseparable from the collective violence of war. This reading reinforces the thesis that *A Golden Age* portrays trauma as a gendered and relational experience, revealing how women's quiet endurance and internalized grief form part of the untold costs of national liberation struggles.

A sixth and final dimension of Rehana's narrative that underscores her political significance is the critique of the nationalist ideal of the "mother of the nation," which *A Golden Age* deconstructs by presenting her as a flawed, human, and fully realized individual rather than as a symbolic figure of purity and sacrifice. In South Asian nationalist discourses, women are often celebrated in abstract terms as embodiments of the nation's honor, an image that demands perfection while ignoring the messy, lived complexities of actual women's lives. Rehana, however, is not an idealized mother. She makes morally ambiguous choices, struggles with fear and guilt, and at times even resents the demands placed upon her. In one poignant scene, she confesses her doubts about the revolution: "She wondered if it was all worth it, if all this bloodshed and loss could really birth a better country" (Anam, p. 261). This moment of uncertainty disrupts the romanticized notion of maternal sacrifice as unquestioning and pure, instead presenting Rehana's choices as deeply human and emotionally fraught. Trinh Minh-ha (1989) critiques the reduction of women to symbolic roles in nationalist rhetoric, arguing that such representations erase the subjectivity of women themselves. By depicting Rehana as a mother whose love is intertwined with ambivalence and exhaustion, Anam resists this tendency, grounding her character in emotional realism. Mohanty's (1984) call for feminist scholarship to attend to the specific, situated realities of women's lives rather than idealized abstractions is also reflected here. Rehana's struggles reveal how the demands of war weigh disproportionately on women, whose sacrifices are expected but rarely acknowledged. Rahaman (2023) briefly touches on how Anam challenges nationalist gender norms but does not fully explore how Rehana's characterization subverts the "mother of the nation" trope. This paper builds on that insight to argue that *A Golden Age* critiques the patriarchal co-optation of women's sacrifices while affirming their agency and humanity. By portraying Rehana as both a mother and an individual with her own doubts, desires, and pain, the novel underscores the political significance of women's lived experiences in wartime, supporting the thesis that women's domestic and emotional labor is indispensable yet undervalued in national struggles.

A seventh significant aspect of Rehana's story that reflects the relational and political nature of her maternal role is the transformation of her home into a microcosm of the nation-in-the-making, illustrating how the domestic space becomes a

vital site of revolutionary activity and resistance. Throughout *A Golden Age*, Anam shows how Rehana's house evolves from a space of familial intimacy into a hub for clandestine meetings, a refuge for wounded fighters, and a storage place for weapons and supplies. In one vivid description, Anam writes: "The drawing room once reserved for guests now held wounded boys, sleeping in rows on the floor, their rifles propped against the walls" (Anam, p. 142). This physical repurposing of her home symbolizes the collapsing of boundaries between private and public, personal and political, a theme central to postcolonial feminist critiques of how gendered spaces are configured during national crises. Joan Tronto (1993), in her work on the politics of care, argues that the home has always been a political space, as it is where life is maintained and sustained, yet its political significance is obscured by patriarchal ideologies that naturalize women's labor as merely domestic. Rehana's transformation of her home subverts this erasure by making visible how the care and hospitality she provides are essential to the functioning of the resistance movement. Her home does not merely shelter her children but serves as an extension of the battlefield, where strategies are discussed, fighters recover, and morale is restored. Mohanty's (1984) notion of situated agency is again instructive here: Rehana does not leave her social position as a mother and housekeeper to engage politically but instead redefines these roles to serve the revolutionary cause. Rahaman (2023) mentions that Rehana's home "becomes a safe haven for the wounded and the dispossessed," yet the deeper implications of this spatial politicization remain underexplored. This paper argues that Anam deliberately portrays Rehana's house as a metaphor for the nation itself, simultaneously under siege, in transition, and sustained by women's invisible labor, reinforcing the thesis that *A Golden Age* foregrounds the relational and domestic dimensions of resistance. By showing how the intimate sphere becomes enmeshed in the national struggle, the novel challenges masculinist assumptions about where and how political agency operates.

An eighth and final key point that emerges from Rehana's characterization is the interdependence between her emotional labor and the moral endurance of the revolutionary movement, demonstrating how women's caregiving sustains not only bodies but also spirits in times of war. In *A Golden Age*, Rehana's care for the wounded fighters, her quiet reassurance to fearful neighbors, and her unwavering presence for her children all serve to uphold the psychological resilience of those around her. In one touching scene, after a young fighter confides in her about his fear of dying, Rehana places her hand on his cheek and simply says, "You are brave enough" (Anam, p. 188). This moment illustrates the political significance of what Hochschild (1983) calls "emotional labor" the work of managing feelings, providing comfort, and maintaining social cohesion. Emotional labor, especially in wartime, is disproportionately performed by women and yet remains invisible in accounts of heroism and resistance. Tronto (1993) emphasizes that care work is the foundation of any just society, and in the context of *A Golden Age*, it is clear that Rehana's emotional labor sustains the morale and humanity of those fighting for independence. This insight also aligns with Marianne Hirsch's (1997) notion of *postmemory*, as Rehana's ability to hold her family and community together creates a legacy of endurance and hope that shapes how

future generations remember the war. Rahaman (2023) acknowledges the "quiet heroism" of Rehana's caregiving but stops short of recognizing its centrality to the revolutionary effort. This paper expands on that observation to argue that Rehana's emotional labor is not supplemental but integral to the movement's survival. By centering her acts of comfort and moral support, Anam critiques the masculinist focus on physical bravery and shows how psychological resilience nurtured by women is equally essential to liberation. This reinforces the thesis that *A Golden Age* elevates the political significance of women's emotional and domestic work, offering a counternarrative to the dominant discourse of heroism that has long ignored their contributions.

A ninth critical insight revealed through Rehana's narrative is the way her maternal resilience complicates the binary of victimhood and agency, exposing the inadequacy of frameworks that depict women in wartime as either helpless sufferers or fearless revolutionaries. Throughout *A Golden Age*, Rehana embodies a nuanced subjectivity that straddles vulnerability and resistance, reflecting the complex realities of women negotiating oppressive systems. In one memorable passage, Rehana privately acknowledges her own fear even as she outwardly maintains composure for the sake of her children: "Her hands trembled as she washed the rice, but she told herself that there was no other way, no turning back" (Anam, p. 174). This moment underscores the emotional toll of her choices, showing that her strength is not the absence of fear but the ability to act despite it. Veena Das (2007) argues that women's subjectivity in violent contexts often takes the form of "ordinary acts of living" in the midst of extraordinary suffering, a concept that captures how Rehana continues to mother her children, prepare meals, and care for fighters even as war rages around her. Her endurance defies the victimization narrative often imposed on women in postcolonial histories, while also resisting the masculinist glorification of heroism as purely fearless and violent. Cathy Caruth (1996) likewise theorizes trauma as an experience that coexists with action, shaping but not completely silencing the subject's agency. In Rehana's case, her trauma becomes a silent motivator of her decisions, pushing her to shelter fighters and protect her children despite her private despair. Sultana (2022) observes that Anam's protagonist "does not fit neatly into the categories of hero or victim," which this paper expands by arguing that Rehana's situated agency and gendered trauma illustrate the inadequacy of dichotomous frameworks in representing women's wartime experiences. Her character aligns with Mohanty's (1984) call to view women's resistance as relational, embodied, and context-specific, rather than measuring it against masculine ideals of heroism. This analysis reinforces the thesis that *A Golden Age* challenges dominant narratives of nationalism by showing how women's emotional and domestic labor simultaneously reflect their pain and their agency, refusing to collapse their identities into simplistic categories.

A tenth and final dimension examined here is the narrative's insistence on inscribing women's experiences of war into collective memory, countering the historical silencing of their voices in postcolonial nation-building projects. In the aftermath of the Bangladesh Liberation War, as in many postcolonial contexts,

women's contributions were often commemorated symbolically while their lived realities, especially their trauma were left unspoken or deliberately forgotten. In *A Golden Age*, Anam resists this erasure by documenting Rehana's perspective in detail, showing how her emotional endurance and moral compromises were integral to the nation's birth. In one reflective passage, Rehana stands in her war-torn garden and thinks, "She wondered if the ground beneath her feet remembered the cries, the blood, the footsteps of the dead" (Anam, p. 289). This metaphor encapsulates the novel's critique of selective memory, suggesting that history itself must reckon with the silent sacrifices and quiet grief of women. Gayatri Spivak (1988) famously asked, "Can the subaltern speak?" highlighting how the voices of colonized and gendered subjects are systematically silenced by dominant discourses. Anam's novel answers this question by giving voice to a figure, the mother who is often cast only as a symbol in nationalist rhetoric but rarely heard as an individual. Trinh Minh-ha (1989) similarly critiques the appropriation of women's stories into patriarchal narratives of the nation, arguing that authentic representation must center women's subjectivities rather than reduce them to metaphors. Rahaman (2023) touches on the novel's role in recovering women's voices but does not fully explore its implications for collective memory. This paper argues that *A Golden Age* functions as a counterhistory, insisting that women's pain and persistence are not ancillary to nationhood but foundational. By documenting Rehana's inner life alongside the broader political events, Anam disrupts the masculinist historiography of the war and affirms that the nation's memory must include the gendered costs of its creation. This analysis reinforces the thesis that the novel foregrounds the political and historical significance of women's emotional and domestic labor, showing that the work of remembering, like the work of resisting cannot be complete without women's voices.

An eleventh crucial observation about Rehana's story lies in the way her maternal grief and emotional endurance expose the moral ambiguities of liberation, underscoring how the costs of war weigh disproportionately on women. While nationalist narratives often frame independence as a triumphant, unambiguous good, *A Golden Age* complicates this narrative by depicting how the struggle for freedom exacts profound psychological and emotional tolls on ordinary individuals, particularly mothers. After one of her neighbors loses her son in combat, Rehana reflects silently: "She could not bring herself to tell the woman her son had died a hero. She thought of her own children and wondered if the price would be worth it" (Anam, p. 247). This moment highlights the disconnect between the celebratory rhetoric of heroism and the lived pain of those left behind, showing that for women like Rehana, liberation is inseparable from loss and ambivalence. Veena Das (2007) has written extensively about how women internalize the violence of historical trauma, transforming it into silent suffering that is rendered invisible in public commemorations of nationhood. Rehana's doubts and grief reveal how women's emotional labor is doubly burdened, first by their role in sustaining others during conflict and later by their exclusion from the recognition accorded to male fighters. Mohanty (1984) critiques such exclusions, arguing that women's resistance and pain are often made peripheral to national

struggles, even though they are structurally indispensable to them. In this sense, Rehana's internal conflict serves as a critique of the masculinist framework of war that celebrates death and sacrifice without acknowledging the relational and psychological costs borne by women. Sultana (2022) touches on this theme briefly, noting that "the novel complicates the triumphalist narrative of independence," but stops short of linking it to feminist critiques of nationalism. This paper expands on that reading by asserting that *A Golden Age* not only critiques the invisibility of women's sacrifices but also challenges the notion that liberation is an unqualified good, showing instead that it entails profound, gendered suffering that must also be remembered. This analysis thus supports the thesis that the novel foregrounds the political significance of women's emotional and domestic work, even as it critiques the inequities embedded in the national memory of liberation.

A twelfth and final analytical point relates to how Rehana's story in *A Golden Age* ultimately redefines heroism itself, offering a feminist alternative to the dominant, masculinist ideal of the heroic figure as one who fights violently and visibly on the battlefield. Throughout the novel, Rehana's courage is shown not in grand gestures or acts of aggression but in quiet persistence, moral compromise, and the willingness to bear emotional burdens that others ignore. This redefinition is evident in scenes where she risks her safety to shelter fighters, lies to authorities to protect her children, and maintains a fragile sense of normalcy for her family even as the world collapses around them. In one of the final chapters, she watches the wounded being carried past her gate and thinks: "She wondered who would remember them — the mothers, the sisters, the ones who kept everyone alive" (Anam, p. 284). This reflection encapsulates the novel's feminist argument: that heroism is not only found in acts of destruction but also in acts of care, endurance, and quiet defiance. Hochschild's (1983) concept of emotional labor helps elucidate how Rehana's heroism lies in her ability to manage her own fear and grief while supporting others, sustaining the social fabric even as it frays under the weight of violence. Tronto (1993) similarly argues that care work is not merely supplementary to justice but is a central, political act in itself. Rehana's story aligns with Mohanty's (1984) call for feminist scholarship to recognize women's situated, relational agency as a form of resistance equally worthy of acknowledgment as overtly political acts. Rahaman (2023) acknowledges Rehana's quiet heroism but frames it primarily as a narrative device rather than as a substantive critique of masculinist notions of courage. This paper builds on his observation by arguing that *A Golden Age* redefines heroism through a feminist lens, showing that women's emotional and domestic labor not only sustain lives but also embody the courage and defiance needed to create and preserve a nation. This reading supports the thesis that the novel challenges masculinist narratives of nationalism, affirming the centrality of women's lived experiences and labor in both resisting oppression and enabling liberation.

A final observation worth noting before moving to the conclusion is how *A Golden Age* exposes the gendered dynamics of memory and forgetting, suggesting that the survival of a nation often depends on women's willingness to carry unacknowledged burdens long after the violence ends. In the novel's closing chapters,

Rehana looks upon the aftermath of the war, the rubble of her neighborhood, the wounded fighters returning home, the unmarked graves and feels both relief and an unshakable sadness. "They would speak of victory, but she would always remember the blood on her doorstep," Anam writes (p. 290). This moment emphasizes how women's memories of war often differ from the triumphalist narratives that come to dominate national histories, foregrounding instead the intimate losses and moral compromises endured by those left behind. Marianne Hirsch's (1997) theory of *postmemory* helps illuminate how such memories are not only personal but are transmitted to future generations, shaping how the next citizens of the nation understand their inheritance. Rahaman (2023) touches on this theme but does not explicitly connect it to feminist critiques of nationalism. This paper argues that Anam's insistence on documenting Rehana's memories constitutes a feminist act of historical recovery, ensuring that women's sacrifices are not lost to silence. This supports the thesis that the novel elevates the political significance of women's emotional and domestic labor, reminding readers that history is incomplete without acknowledging the quiet, ongoing work of those who endure.

CONCLUSION

This paper has examined how Tahmima Anam's *A Golden Age* reimagines women's roles in the context of the Bangladesh Liberation War, foregrounding the political significance of motherhood, emotional labor, and gendered trauma in wartime. Through the character of Rehana Haque, Anam challenges the masculinist narratives of nationalism that privilege visible, violent acts of resistance, showing instead that the quiet endurance, care, and moral compromises of women are equally essential to the survival and success of revolutionary movements. Drawing on postcolonial feminist theory, particularly Chandra Talpade Mohanty's concept of situated agency, Gayatri Spivak's critique of the subaltern's silencing, and Veena Das's theorization of embodied trauma, this paper has argued that Rehana's maternal identity becomes politicized as she transforms her domestic and emotional labor into tools of resistance. Her story illuminates the relational and embodied dimensions of agency, exposing the gendered burdens of war and the erasure of women's contributions from historical memory.

Several key findings have emerged from this analysis. First, *A Golden Age* portrays Rehana's home as a microcosm of the nation, demonstrating how the domestic sphere is not separate from but integral to political struggle. Her kitchen, her drawing room, and her role as caregiver become sites of quiet rebellion, sustaining the fighters and their morale while challenging patriarchal and colonial structures. Second, the novel foregrounds the gendered nature of trauma, showing how Rehana internalizes her grief and fear as part of her maternal duty, rendering her suffering invisible yet no less political. Third, Anam critiques the nationalist ideal of the "mother of the nation" by depicting Rehana as a flawed and human mother, whose agency is exercised through moral ambiguity, relational care, and emotional labor rather than through perfect, selfless sacrifice. Fourth, the narrative insists on including women's voices and

memories in the collective history of liberation, countering the silencing of their pain and their contributions in postcolonial historiography. Finally, the novel redefines heroism through a feminist lens, arguing that courage is not only found in the battlefield but also in the endurance of those who sustain life amid destruction.

The implications of these findings are significant for both literary and historical scholarship. They demonstrate that any meaningful account of war and nation-building must include the gendered dimensions of resistance and suffering, recognizing that women's emotional and domestic work is not supplementary but foundational to collective struggles. Feminist literary criticism can benefit from attending to such narratives, which expand our understanding of agency beyond the narrow confines of masculinist heroism. Moreover, the novel invites readers to critically question the ways in which national histories commemorate male sacrifice while forgetting the costs borne by women. For postcolonial studies more broadly, *A Golden Age* exemplifies the importance of writing counterhistories that foreground marginalized voices, ensuring that the intimate and relational aspects of resistance are not erased.

This paper also offers several recommendations for further research. Future scholarship might compare Anam's representation of maternal agency and trauma with similar narratives in other postcolonial contexts, such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* or Toni Morrison's *Beloved* to explore how women's roles in liberation movements vary across cultures and histories. Interdisciplinary studies combining literary analysis with oral history or trauma studies could deepen our understanding of how women's memories of war are transmitted intergenerationally and how they shape collective identity. Additionally, feminist pedagogies might use texts like *A Golden Age* to teach students about the often-invisible contributions of women to political and historical movements, challenging dominant narratives and fostering a more inclusive understanding of history.

In conclusion, *A Golden Age* offers a powerful feminist critique of both patriarchal nationalism and Western universalist feminism, centering the lived realities of a woman who embodies the tensions, sacrifices, and quiet heroism that sustain nations. Through Rehana's story, Anam affirms that motherhood, emotional labor, and even silent suffering are not apolitical but deeply political acts, integral to the making and remembering of history. Recognizing these contributions challenges us to rethink the meaning of resistance and the ways in which we tell our collective stories, ensuring that women's voices, struggles, and resilience are no longer left unheard.

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