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## New Historical Reading of Tahmima Anam's *A Golden Age*

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### Abstract

This research paper offers a new historicist reading of Tahmima Anam's debut novel *A Golden Age* (2007), which chronicles the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971 through the perspective of a widow named Rehana Haque. By examining the novel's representation of historical events alongside personal narratives, this study illuminates how Anam weaves micro-histories into the macro-narrative of nation-building. Drawing on Stephen Greenblatt's theoretical framework of new historicism, this paper analyzes how Anam destabilizes official historical narratives by foregrounding female agency, domestic spaces, and individual sacrifices during wartime. Through close textual analysis and contextual examination, this research argues that Anam's narrative technique creates a counter-discourse to male-dominated historiography while simultaneously contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of Bangladesh's struggle for independence. The findings suggest that *A Golden Age* represents a significant contribution to postcolonial literature that reimagines historical events through the lens of ordinary lives and gendered experiences.

**Keywords:** new historicism, Bangladesh Liberation War, Tahmima Anam, postcolonial fiction, gender, historiography.

### Introduction

The Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971, which resulted in the creation of an independent Bangladesh from what was formerly East Pakistan, has been primarily documented through military and political lenses. Traditional historiography has focused on male-dominated narratives of battlefield heroism, diplomatic maneuvering, and political leadership. However, in recent decades, literary representations have emerged that challenge and expand these conventional historical accounts by

exploring the lived experiences of ordinary citizens, particularly women, during this tumultuous period.

Tahmima Anam's debut novel *A Golden Age* (2007) represents a significant intervention in this discourse. As the first installment of her Bengal Trilogy, the novel chronicles the experiences of Rehana Haque, a widow who becomes unexpectedly entangled in the liberation struggle when her children join the resistance movement. Through Rehana's perspective, Anam constructs an alternative historical narrative that foregrounds

domestic spaces, familial relationships, and female agency during wartime.

This research paper employs a new historicist approach to analyze how Anam's novel engages with and reimagines the historical events of 1971. New historicism, as articulated by Stephen Greenblatt, rejects the notion of history as a monolithic, objective account of the past and instead emphasizes the multiplicity of historical narratives, the interplay between text and context, and the significance of marginalized voices (Greenblatt 1). By examining the novel's representation of historical events alongside personal narratives, this study aims to illuminate how Anam weaves micro-histories into the macro-narrative of nation-building.

The research questions guiding this study are: How does Anam's narrative technique challenge traditional historiography of the Bangladesh Liberation War? In what ways does the novel foreground female agency and domestic spaces as sites of resistance? How does the author negotiate the tensions between personal memory and collective history? Through a close reading of *A Golden Age* and an examination of its historical and cultural contexts, this paper argues that Anam creates a counter-discourse to male-dominated historiography while simultaneously contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of Bangladesh's struggle for independence.

### Literature Review

The critical reception of *A Golden Age* has primarily focused on its representation of gender, nationalism, and trauma. Scholars such as Megna Paula have highlighted how the novel challenges patriarchal narratives of nation-building by centering on female experiences and domestic spaces (Paula 45). In her analysis, Paula argues that Anam's portrayal of Rehana Haque subverts traditional gender roles by depicting how ordinary women participated in the liberation struggle through seemingly mundane acts of resistance.

Similarly, Syed Manzoorul Islam examines how Anam's novel contributes to the literary representation of the 1971 war by bringing to light

"the unsung heroes whose sacrifices often remain unacknowledged in official histories" (Islam 78). Islam's analysis emphasizes the novel's role in recovering marginalized narratives and creating a more inclusive historical account of the independence movement.

In a broader context, Claire Chambers situates *A Golden Age* within the tradition of South Asian partition literature, noting that Anam's work shares thematic concerns with novels such as Bapsi Sidhwa's *Cracking India* and Kamila Shamsie's *Salt and Saffron* (Chambers 112). According to Chambers, these narratives collectively challenge the "grand narratives of national independence" by exploring the human costs of political upheaval and border-making.

While these studies provide valuable insights into Anam's literary contributions, there remains a gap in scholarship regarding the novel's engagement with historiography from a new historicist perspective. This paper aims to address this gap by analyzing how Anam's narrative techniques destabilize conventional historical accounts and offer alternative ways of understanding the past.

### Theoretical Framework

This study employs Stephen Greenblatt's theory of new historicism as a framework for analyzing Anam's novel. New historicism emerged in the late 1970s as a critical approach that sought to understand literary texts in relation to their historical and cultural contexts. Greenblatt argues that literary works are not autonomous aesthetic objects but rather products of specific social, political, and cultural circumstances (Greenblatt 3). Moreover, he contends that literature not only reflects historical reality but also participates in shaping it through what he terms "the circulation of social energy" (Greenblatt 6).

New historicism rejects the notion of history as a stable, objective account of the past and instead emphasizes the constructedness of historical narratives. As Louis Montrose explains, this approach entails "a reciprocal concern with the historicity of texts and the textuality of history"

(Montrose 20). In other words, historical documents, like literary texts, are themselves narrative constructions that reflect particular ideological perspectives and discursive formations.

For the purposes of this study, new historicism provides a useful framework for examining how Anam's novel engages with and reimagines the historical events of 1971. By focusing on the interplay between text and context, this approach allows us to analyze how *A Golden Age* both reflects and reconstructs the history of the Bangladesh Liberation War. Additionally, new historicism's emphasis on marginalized voices and counter-narratives aligns with Anam's focus on female experiences and domestic spaces during wartime.

### Methodology

This research employs a qualitative methodology combining close textual analysis with contextual examination. The primary text under investigation is Tahmima Anam's *A Golden Age* (2007), which will be analyzed for its narrative strategies, characterization, and thematic concerns. Particular attention will be paid to the novel's representation of historical events, its construction of gender roles, and its negotiation of the relationship between personal and collective memory.

In addition to the primary text, this study draws on a range of secondary sources, including historical accounts of the Bangladesh Liberation War, critical studies of South Asian literature, and theoretical works on new historicism and postcolonial studies. These sources provide the necessary context for understanding how Anam's novel engages with and reimagines historical events.

The analysis is guided by the following research questions:

1. How does Anam's narrative technique challenge traditional historiography of the Bangladesh Liberation War?
2. In what ways does the novel foreground female agency and domestic spaces as sites of resistance?

3. How does the author negotiate the tensions between personal memory and collective history?

Through a careful examination of these questions, this study aims to contribute to our understanding of how literary texts can offer alternative perspectives on historical events and participate in the ongoing construction of cultural memory.

### Contextualizing *A Golden Age*: The Bangladesh Liberation War

To fully appreciate Anam's literary intervention, it is essential to understand the historical context of the Bangladesh Liberation War. The conflict emerged from a complex interplay of political, economic, cultural, and linguistic tensions between East and West Pakistan—regions separated by over a thousand miles of Indian territory. Following the partition of British India in 1947, East Bengal (later East Pakistan) was incorporated into the newly formed nation of Pakistan based primarily on religious identity. However, this arrangement proved problematic due to significant cultural, linguistic, and economic differences between the two regions.

The Bengali Language Movement of 1952, which protested the imposition of Urdu as the sole national language, marked the beginning of East Pakistan's struggle for cultural and political autonomy. Economic disparities further exacerbated tensions, as West Pakistan dominated government positions, military leadership, and economic resources despite East Pakistan's larger population (Sisson and Rose 25). By the late 1960s, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's Awami League had emerged as the leading political force in East Pakistan, advocating for greater autonomy through a Six-Point Program.

The pivotal moment came in December 1970, when the Awami League won an overwhelming majority in Pakistan's first general election but was prevented from forming a government. Following failed negotiations, Pakistan's military ruler, General Yahya Khan, launched Operation Searchlight on March 25, 1971—a military crackdown aimed at suppressing the Bengali independence movement.

This action marked the beginning of a nine-month conflict characterized by widespread violence, including targeted killings of intellectuals, mass rapes, and the displacement of approximately ten million refugees to neighboring India (Bose 33).

The war concluded on December 16, 1971, when Pakistani forces surrendered to the joint command of Indian and Bengali forces, resulting in the creation of an independent Bangladesh. The conflict's human toll was devastating: estimates suggest that between 300,000 and 3 million people lost their lives, while approximately 200,000 to 400,000 women were subjected to sexual violence (Saikia 57).

Traditional historiography of the Bangladesh Liberation War has primarily focused on military operations, political negotiations, and the roles of prominent male leaders such as Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, General Yahya Khan, and Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. In contrast, Anam's *A Golden Age* shifts attention to the experiences of ordinary citizens, particularly women, whose contributions to the independence struggle have often been overlooked in official historical accounts.

### Reimagining History Through Female Perspective

*A Golden Age* challenges traditional historiography by foregrounding female experiences during the Bangladesh Liberation War. Through the protagonist Rehana Haque, Anam constructs an alternative historical narrative that emphasizes the role of women in the independence struggle. As Rehana observes, "War was men's business, and yet somehow it had fallen into her lap" (Anam 138). This statement encapsulates the novel's central concern with how women, initially peripheral to the political conflict, became integral to the resistance movement.

Rehana's transformation from an apolitical widow concerned primarily with her children's welfare to an active participant in the liberation struggle exemplifies what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak terms "strategic essentialism"—the temporary adoption of a collective identity for political purposes despite individual differences (Spivak 87). Initially reluctant to engage with the

independence movement, Rehana gradually embraces a nationalist identity as she witnesses the brutality of the Pakistani military occupation and becomes concerned for her children's safety.

Significantly, Anam portrays Rehana's political awakening as emerging from maternal concern rather than ideological conviction. When her son Sohail joins the resistance, Rehana's initial reaction is fear: "She wanted to tell him that the liberation he spoke of so passionately meant nothing to her if he was cold and afraid, or worse" (Anam 75). However, her desire to protect her children ultimately leads her to participate in resistance activities, including hiding weapons in her house and sewing blankets for freedom fighters.

Through this narrative arc, Anam challenges the conventional separation between domestic and political spheres. As feminist historian Joan Scott argues, traditional historiography has often reinforced gendered binaries by associating men with public, political action and women with private, domestic concerns (Scott 45). In contrast, *A Golden Age* depicts the home as a politicized space and domestic activities as forms of resistance. When Rehana opens her home to freedom fighters, she transforms her private property into a site of political activity. Similarly, when she sews blankets for guerrilla fighters, she repurposes a traditionally feminine craft for revolutionary purposes.

This blurring of boundaries between public and private realms is further illustrated through the character of Maya, Rehana's daughter, who challenges conventional gender roles by becoming a journalist and directly participating in political activities. Unlike her mother, Maya's political engagement stems from ideological commitment rather than familial obligation. As she declares, "I'm not doing this for you or for Sohail... I'm doing it for my country" (Anam 104). Through the contrasting motivations of Rehana and Maya, Anam presents a nuanced portrayal of female political agency that acknowledges diverse paths to resistance.

Moreover, by centering her narrative on Rehana—a widow who must navigate both personal grief and political upheaval—Anam highlights how historical events intersect with individual lives. As

critic Marianne Hirsch notes, such narratives of personal trauma can serve as "points of memory" that connect individual experiences to collective historical traumas (Hirsch 22). Through Rehana's perspective, readers witness how abstract political conflicts materialize in everyday life, from food shortages and curfews to the constant fear of military raids.

### **Domestic Spaces as Sites of Resistance**

One of the most significant ways in which *A Golden Age* challenges traditional historiography is through its reimagining of domestic spaces as sites of political resistance. While conventional accounts of the Liberation War focus on battlefields, political meetings, and refugee camps, Anam directs attention to private homes as crucial spaces where resistance activities unfold.

Rehana's house, named "Shona" (meaning "gold" in Bengali), becomes a symbolic and literal site of resistance throughout the novel. Initially representing Rehana's triumph over personal adversity—she built the house after regaining custody of her children—Shona gradually transforms into a sanctuary for freedom fighters and a storage place for weapons and supplies. As Rehana reflects, "The house had always been more than a house; it had been her triumph, her battle cry" (Anam 45). This statement takes on new significance as Shona becomes implicated in the larger battle for national independence.

The transformation of Rehana's home mirrors the broader politicization of domestic spaces during the Liberation War. As historian Yasmin Saikia documents, private homes across East Pakistan became makeshift hospitals, meeting places, and hiding spots for guerrilla fighters (Saikia 112). By highlighting this aspect of the conflict, Anam challenges the conventional separation between military and civilian spheres, showing how ordinary citizens converted private spaces into sites of resistance.

Furthermore, Anam's focus on domestic activities—cooking, sewing, gardening—reframes these traditionally feminine practices as forms of political action. When Rehana prepares food for

freedom fighters or sews blankets for guerrilla fighters in the countryside, these seemingly mundane tasks acquire political significance. As she reflects while sewing: "Each stitch was an act of surrender and yet each stitch added to the creation of something new" (Anam 156). This metaphor connects Rehana's domestic labor to the larger project of nation-building, suggesting that both involve processes of creation and transformation.

The novel's attention to domestic spaces also illuminates how the violence of war penetrates the most intimate areas of civilian life. When Pakistani soldiers raid neighboring houses, the boundary between public conflict and private sanctuary collapses. As Rehana observes after a particularly close encounter with military forces, "The war had finally entered her home" (Anam 201). This recognition underscores how historical events are experienced not only on battlefields and in political arenas but also within private dwellings.

Through this focus on domestic spaces, Anam contributes to what feminist historian Durba Ghosh calls "the recovery of everyday life as a site of historical significance" (Ghosh 89). By documenting how ordinary citizens experienced and responded to political conflict within their homes, *A Golden Age* offers a more textured understanding of the Liberation War that extends beyond military operations and diplomatic negotiations.

### **Memory, History, and Narrative**

*A Golden Age* engages deeply with questions of memory and its relationship to historical narrative. As a novel written more than three decades after the events it depicts, the text necessarily confronts issues of historical distance, selective remembrance, and the limitations of representation. Through its narrative structure and thematic concerns, the novel explores how individual memories intersect with and sometimes challenge collective historical accounts.

The novel's opening scene immediately establishes memory as a central theme. As Rehana visits her husband's grave on the anniversary of his death, she performs a ritual of remembrance that connects her personal loss to broader historical

circumstances: "She had, it was true, known greater losses since Iqbal's death. Sometimes it was difficult to believe only ten years had passed. Thousands of lives had been taken since then. An entire country had been lost" (Anam 3). This passage establishes a parallel between personal and national loss, suggesting that individual grief and collective trauma are interconnected.

Throughout the narrative, Anam employs what literary scholar Astrid Erll terms "fictions of memory"—literary techniques that mimic the processes of remembering and forgetting (Erll 34). The novel's non-linear structure, which includes flashbacks to Rehana's earlier life and moments of narrative introspection, reflects the fragmentary nature of memory. Moreover, the frequent use of sensory details—smells, tastes, sounds—evokes what Pierre Nora calls "embodied memory," the way historical events are remembered through bodily experiences (Nora 15).

Significantly, *A Golden Age* also acknowledges the limitations and selectivity of memory. As Rehana reflects on her husband's death, she recognizes how time has altered her recollection: "She had done her grieving so long ago that now she could only remember the grief and not the feeling" (Anam 5). This awareness of memory's malleability extends to national history as well. When Rehana encounters differing accounts of military operations and casualty figures, she confronts the provisional nature of historical knowledge during wartime.

The novel further explores the relationship between memory and narrative through its metafictional elements. Rehana frequently contemplates how to narrate her experiences, both to herself and to others. After witnessing a particularly traumatic event, she reflects: "She would have to find a way to tell this story" (Anam 213). This self-awareness about storytelling points to what historian Hayden White describes as the "emplotment" of historical events—the process by which raw experiences are shaped into coherent narratives with beginnings, middles, and ends (White 67).

Moreover, Anam's novel itself can be understood as an act of postmemorial reconstruction. As the daughter of a freedom fighter who participated in the Liberation War, Anam belongs to what Marianne Hirsch calls the "generation of postmemory"—those who grow up with inherited memories of traumas they did not personally experience (Hirsch 25). Through her fictional recreation of 1971, Anam participates in what Hirsch terms "affiliative postmemory," the adoption and artistic transformation of traumatic events that precede one's birth but shape one's cultural identity.

By foregrounding these issues of memory and representation, *A Golden Age* invites readers to consider how historical narratives are constructed and whose perspectives they privilege. The novel suggests that understanding historical events requires attention not only to official documents and political speeches but also to personal memories, family stories, and imaginative reconstructions.

#### **Language, Identity, and Nation-Building**

The Bangladesh Liberation War was fundamentally a conflict about language, culture, and national identity. The Bengali Language Movement of 1952, which protested the imposition of Urdu as Pakistan's sole national language, laid the groundwork for the independence struggle. In *A Golden Age*, Anam explores how language functions as both a marker of identity and a tool of resistance during the conflict.

Throughout the novel, linguistic differences symbolize the cultural divide between East and West Pakistan. When Pakistani soldiers patrol Dhaka's streets, their unfamiliarity with Bengali marks them as foreigners: "They spoke Urdu, the language of West Pakistan, harsh and foreign to Bengali ears" (Anam 88). Conversely, Bengali becomes a language of solidarity and resistance. When Rehana's neighbors greet each other with the nationalist slogan "Joy Bangla" (Victory to Bengal), they assert a shared identity through linguistic performance.

Anam also examines how language mediates historical understanding. The novel includes fragments of letters, radio broadcasts, and political

speeches that demonstrate how different linguistic registers—formal, intimate, propagandistic—shape the representation of historical events. For instance, the contrast between official military announcements and private conversations reveals the gap between public propaganda and lived experience during wartime.

Moreover, the novel explores what linguist Tove Skutnabb-Kangas terms "linguicide"—the systematic suppression of a language as part of cultural genocide (Skutnabb-Kangas 32). When Pakistani forces target Bengali intellectuals, professors, and journalists, their actions represent an attempt to eliminate not only individual lives but also Bengali cultural production. Against this violence, Anam positions acts of linguistic preservation as forms of resistance. When Maya works for a pro-independence newspaper, she participates in maintaining Bengali written culture during a period of intense suppression.

The novel's exploration of language extends to questions of translation and communicability. At several points, Rehana must translate between Bengali and English, navigating between different linguistic worlds. These moments of translation highlight what theorist Homi Bhabha describes as the "Third Space" of cultural hybridity—the productive tension that emerges when different linguistic and cultural systems interact (Bhabha 54).

Furthermore, *A Golden Age* addresses the relationship between language and nation-building through its attention to naming practices. The renaming of East Pakistan as Bangladesh represents a linguistic reclamation of territory: "Bangladesh. The word was everywhere now... It was no longer East Pakistan; it was Bangladesh" (Anam 167). This passage illustrates what Benedict Anderson terms the "imagined community" of nationalism—the way shared language and cultural symbols create a sense of belonging among people who may never meet face-to-face (Anderson 6).

By focusing on these linguistic dimensions of the conflict, Anam highlights how the Bangladesh Liberation War was not merely a territorial dispute but a struggle over cultural identity and self-representation. The novel suggests that national

independence involves not only political sovereignty but also the freedom to speak, write, and name oneself in one's own language.

### Conclusion

Through a new historicist reading of *A Golden Age*, this research has demonstrated how Tahmima Anam's novel challenges and expands conventional historiography of the Bangladesh Liberation War. By foregrounding female perspectives, domestic spaces, and personal memories, Anam creates a counter-narrative that illuminates aspects of the independence struggle often overlooked in traditional historical accounts.

The novel's focus on Rehana Haque—a widow whose political awakening emerges from maternal concern rather than ideological conviction—challenges the conventional separation between domestic and political spheres. Through Rehana's experiences, Anam illustrates how ordinary citizens, particularly women, contributed to the liberation movement through seemingly mundane acts of resistance such as providing shelter, preparing food, and sewing supplies for freedom fighters.

Furthermore, Anam's attention to domestic spaces as sites of political activity challenges the traditional focus on battlefields and diplomatic negotiations. By depicting how private homes became hideouts for guerrilla fighters and storage places for weapons, the novel reveals the permeability of boundaries between military and civilian spheres during wartime. This focus on everyday life as a site of historical significance contributes to a more textured understanding of how political conflicts unfold in lived experience.

The novel's engagement with questions of memory and representation further illuminates the constructedness of historical narratives. Through its non-linear structure, metafictional elements, and exploration of how characters narrate their own experiences, *A Golden Age* highlights the complex relationship between individual memory and collective history. As a work of postmemorial reconstruction, the novel itself participates in the

ongoing process of making sense of Bangladesh's traumatic birth as a nation.

Additionally, Anam's exploration of language as both a marker of identity and a tool of resistance underscores the cultural dimensions of the independence struggle. By depicting how linguistic differences symbolized the divide between East and West Pakistan and how Bengali became a language of solidarity during the conflict, the novel illustrates how the Liberation War was fundamentally a struggle over cultural identity and self-representation.

In conclusion, *A Golden Age* represents a significant contribution to both postcolonial literature and historical understanding. Through its reimagining of the Bangladesh Liberation War from the perspective of ordinary citizens, particularly women, the novel creates what new historicist scholar Catherine Gallagher calls a "counter-history" that challenges official narratives while simultaneously enriching our understanding of the past (Gallagher 45). By weaving together personal stories and historical events, domestic concerns and national politics, Anam demonstrates how literature can offer alternative ways of accessing and interpreting historical experience.

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