FALSE AND GENUINE WITNESSES IN TAHMIMA ANAM'S *A GOLDEN AGE*

FALSE AND GENUINE WITNESSES IN TAHMIMA ANAM'S *A GOLDEN AGE*:

A RE-EXAMINATION OF WOMEN'S WITNESSING DURING THE 1971

BANGLADESH LIBERATION WAR

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Lay Abstract

This thesis aims to expand the discourse on women's witnessing during the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War to ensure readers, academics, and governments encounter testimonies of crisis with ethics, empathy, and responsibility. I examine Tahmima Anam's *A Golden Age* to reconsider how women and women's spaces like the home and female bodies are witnessed by nations. Additionally, I explore how women witnessed the nation and other women during the war while negotiating national duty with personal identity.

Abstract

This research paper explores the multifaceted role of women as witnesses during the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971, with a specific focus on their embodiment of the nation at war and the profound impacts the conflict had on their lives. I base my analysis on Tahmima Anam's novel *A Golden Age* to provide insights into the practices of witnessing performed by and on women, and their relationship to national and female identities. I argue that women's witnessing of the war can be extrapolated from their specific social, corporeal, and physical spaces and the ways in which these spaces were utilized and received by women and their counterparts. Using postcolonial theory and witness theory stemming from trauma studies, this paper examines the dynamics within women’s spaces to reconsider women's negotiations for autonomy from within predefined social categories during the war. My research highlights the diverse external pressures faced by different groups of women during the Bangladesh Liberation War, underscoring the need to redefine ethical and empathic witnessing when engaging with narratives of trauma. By expanding the discourse on cross-cultural trauma studies, this paper emphasizes the importance of responsibly addressing and engaging with testimonies of crisis. The examination of women's witnessing, and their spatial positioning contributes to a deeper understanding of the complexities of gender, identity, and witnessing in times of conflict.

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Declaration of Academic Achievement

All research and analysis in this thesis, except where otherwise cited and acknowledged, is the sole work of Maria Haque.

Introduction

March 26, 1971, marked the beginning of Bangladesh's declaration of independence and a nine-month long conflict between East Pakistan (Bangladesh) and West Pakistan (Pakistan), that led to the birth of Bangladesh as a nation. Throughout Bangladesh's *Muktijuddho*[1] (Liberation War), women in East and West Pakistan were faced with gruelling acts of terror and displayed respondent heroism in their contrasting roles as defence and offence against the attack carried out by West Pakistan's military in East Pakistan. In Bangladesh's national history, "women provide[d] legitimacy to the political projects of nations" via their roles as both protective caregivers and comrades-in-arms for Bangladesh (Mookherjee, "Gendered Embodiments" 37). Such legitimization is evident through women's involvement in the *Muktijuddho,* and their earlier contributions to the 1947 India-Pakistan partition and the 1948 *Bhasha Andolon* (Bangla Language Movement) – key events responsible for the creation of Bangladesh and a Bangladeshi national identity. The *Muktijuddho* produced countless martyrs and witnesses that have been portrayed and preserved adamantly in Bangladesh's national memory and literary canon, amounting to "over 1200 books on the 'War of Liberation'" being published in Bangladesh between 1992 and 2001; however, most of these narratives focus on men's experiences or are produced by men (Saikia 63). Although women carry with them indispensable stories of courage and trauma that speak to Bangladesh's complex nation-building, women's narratives of the war are contained within a small literary reservoir

1 Muktijuddho is the Bangla term for the 1971 Liberation War.

due to the recency of the war[2] and Bengali women's silent witnessing throughout and beyond the *Muktijuddho*. Production of documentation of women's involvement in the creation of Bangladesh and its national history is still in its initial stages, with the first collection of women's non-fiction war testimonies introduced to the public domain in 1994.

In this project, I address the issue of women's narrative underrepresentation during and beyond the Bangladesh Liberation War by focusing on the colonial and gendered violence women faced at the hands of nations and individual actors. Although women played critical roles in the war as patriots, caregivers, and witnesses amongst many others, their narratives have been largely overlooked or silenced by national and international actors. The government of Bangladesh estimates that approximately 3 million people were killed and 300, 000 women were raped throughout the nine-month war. However, "there are no documents on the rape camps, the use of rape as a strategy of war, or the testimonies of Birangona women" (D'Costa, *Nationbuilding* 99). I aim to address the gap in women's narrative silencing or misrepresentation during the Muktijuddho, which has resulted from inadequate or partial witnessing by local, national, and international actors. To do so, I will employ a literary critical approach using fiction to re-examine the complex identities and narratives of women from the Muktijuddho. Additionally, I will introduce witness theory into my examination of women's narrative silencing during the war. By establishing my research on witness theory, I aim to evaluate

2 Bangladesh achieved independence from Pakistan on March 26, 1971. As of 2023, Bangladesh celebrates its 51st year as a sovereign nation. Books that document women's narratives include Nayanika Mookherjee's *The Spectral Wound* (2015) and Yasmin Saikia's *Women, War, and the Making of Bangladesh: Remembering 1971* (2011).

the ways women witnessed the war from their gendered and social positions and how, in turn, the nation witnessed women as essential actors who were simultaneously responsible for Bangladesh's liberation and narratively silenced by the nation they fought to liberate. In taking up the issues of women's narrative underrepresentation and inadequate witnessing by local, national, and international actors, I hope to situate my thesis in South Asian trauma and witness literary discourse to locate possible avenues of truthfully witnessing women during settings of crisis that ethically receives and preserves their experiences and narratives. Further, this thesis challenges the dominant silence surrounding women's narratives using witness theory to posit alternative readings and reception of women's involvement in the war.

I focus my thesis on Tahmima Anam's *A Golden Age* (2007), a fictional text which takes on the complexities of women's witnessing of the 1971 Liberation War. While Anam is not the only one to address issues of womanhood and national witnessing in the *Muktijuddho,* her novel stands out for its ability to showcase the negotiations of identity, agency, and sacrifices women underwent during wartime conflict, to highlight the need to witness trauma responsibly and ethically. Furthermore, Anam's text distinguishes itself amongst other fictional works because it intertwines the larger national history with individual stories that both express the unsettling emotional experiences of war and solicit readers to witness these horrors, however uncomfortable the task. Anam's text captures women's experiences by looking at womanhood in its varying phases and social categories, for example through motherhood, widowhood, daughterhood, and singlehood. Yet, within Anam's efforts to narrate women's stories, it

is critical to acknowledge Anam's position as a second-order witness. As a second-order witness – someone encountering narratives through other's stories or testimonies – performing the task of storytelling, Anam highlights the difficulties of accurately re-creating a historical narrative in fiction. She navigates the difficulty of narrating events she was not present for by using both narrative visibility and silences to explore women's stories during the *Muktijuddho*. Through narrative choices such as the use of silence, Anam relays the ethical obligations of storytelling and the dilemmas of witnessing stories that are not ours.

Furthermore, I employed a fictional reading of the 1971 war to address the issues of ethical witnessing because fiction offers the possibility of practising genuine witnessing, a form of witnessing that acknowledges subjectivities, ethics, affect, and witness responsibilities to encourage openness and empathy in witnessing testimonies of crisis. While nonfiction accounts of wartime narratives are critical for upholding historical accuracy and preserving war victim testimonies, fictional accounts of wartime narratives are also significant in understanding the accompanied complexities of war such as the ethical dilemmas involved in encountering war narratives and victims, affective nuances of wartime experiences, and the linguistic limitations of wartime witnesses. Through a focus on fictional narrative, I hope to tap into the lesser accessed and understood aspects of women's war narratives like their affective responses and internal identity negotiations through warfare. Though non-fiction can represent affect, fiction is better equipped to take on the challenges of describing the often complex and ambivalent emotions associated with war, which are hard to straightforwardly articulate, by virtue of

its multifaceted narrative capacities. Specifically, I aim to analyse distinct kinds of womanhood in relation to the nation and women's spaces like women's homes and bodies, to extrapolate how women were witness to gendered and social violations and were witnessed by the nation during the *Muktijuddho*.

In this chapter, I begin by laying the historical context of the *Muktijuddho* spanning from India and Pakistan's separation in 1947 to the 1971 Liberation War in Bangladesh, emphasising the central theme of women as witnesses to these events. I follow the 1947 partition into the *Muktijuddho* by referencing key events such as the *Bhasha Andolon* and Operation Searchlight to explore how women were witnessed by nations both domestically and internationally, and in turn how women became witness to the atrocities inflicted upon them. I then discuss the literature review and the public reception of the war in section two, highlighting local, national, and international actors' shortcomings in accurately witnessing women and preserving their narratives. I underscore the issue of silence surrounding women's narratives during the *Muktijuddho*, specifically looking at the *birangona* figure – a label the Bangladeshi government gave to women who were raped during the war. In section three, I turn my attention to the practices of witnessing inherent during times of crisis and offer alternative approaches to witnessing, primarily looking at the genuine and false witness. I approach the discussion on witnessing by acknowledging my choice to use fiction to revisit women's witnessing during the war through a critical literary lens. Lastly, in section four, I lay out a brief outline of the chapters in this paper which focus on witnessing through varying perspectives. For example, I examine women's witnessing of the war and the nation's

witnessing of women through affective witnessing, a type of witnessing that highlights the way emotions impact reception to testimonies. I also explore spatial witnessing which focuses on how spaces witness events and people, and corporeal witnessing which looks at how the female body was witness to the war.

In 1947, while India was under British rule, Cyril Radcliffe, Chairperson of the Boundary Commissions, divided India into two separate states: Pakistan and India (Chowdhury, *Identity* 1-3; D'Costa, *Nationbuilding* 51). During the partition, newly independent Pakistan was cut in half and placed on either side of India, known as East Pakistan and West Pakistan in 1955, severing many extant communities (Chowdhury, *Identity* 1, 2; Ahmed 48-49, 55-57; Chatterji, *Bengal Divided* 277, 279). The new nation states created by the partition established national territories based on religious groupings that led to a mass migration of over 14.5 million people, and incited repeated communal violence across Sikh, Muslim, and Hindu communities in India and Pakistan (Bharadwaj 39; D'Costa, *Nationbuilding* 39; Chatterji, *The Spoils* 34, 56). While this violence is well documented, the gendered violence that accompanied the cultural and geographical displacement of the partition is lesser known and discussed.

In both India and Pakistan, women belonging to the opposing nation were subjected to violations including exclusions from community, public humiliation, abduction, rape, and murder.[3] By violating women belonging to a respective nation,

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3 Following the partition, approximately "50,000 Muslim women in India, and 33,000 Hindu and Sikh women in Pakistan" were abducted (D'Costa, *Nationbuilding* 55). Furthermore, the gendered nature of national warfare in India and Pakistan became solidified through the disproportionately negative social reception of women following the partition. During the mass migration of the partition, women were subjected to rape, public sexual humiliation, or isolation because of widowhood because they represented the nations they came from, specifically the reproductive capacities of their respective nations.

perpetrators felt they had humiliated the opposing nation. While male survivors of partition violence became celebrated heroes, female survivors of partition violence, particularly rape, were looked down upon and shunned (D'Costa, *Nationbuilding* 63). Due to the ideals attached to female sexual purity, raped women were made to survive without any familial or social aid in a patriarchal society.[4] At the same time, women were expected to persevere through the burdens of rape while simultaneously maintaining the traditions of their pre-existing social roles. The events of the partition displayed women's objectification and silencing for the needs of the nation. In this way, the treatment and reception of women during the partition highlighted the influence of gender on nation building.

Although sexually violated women were socially neglected following the partition, women's social involvement in the national struggles of the post-partition states did not stop due to their vulnerable social and gendered positions. Instead, women took on key roles to mobilise and protest for Bengali and Hindu rights during the East and West Pakistan national conflict. Women in East Pakistan participated in national warfare efforts such as the 1954 *Bhasha Andolon* (Bangla Language Movement) through their vulnerable social positions to advocate for the cultural, political, and linguistic rights of Bengali people leading up to the *Muktijuddho.* In the secular Bengali identity, women were "encouraged and applauded" to participate "in the cultural and social space," and they further engaged in the protests themselves, risking their social reputations to

4 The ostracization of sexually violated women following the partition is evidenced in Mahatma Gandhi's appeal to Indian society where he states that "the families of the abducted women no longer want to receive them back [but] to put a blot on them and to say that they are no longer fit to be accepted in society is unjust" (Mookerjea-Leonard 11).

challenge the "repressive [polices] of the central government" (D'Costa, *Nationbuilding* 88). Specifically, women used their influence within the home and leveraged their roles as caretakers to direct men's attention to the significance of the *Bhasha Andolon* for the nation. The *Bhasha Andolon,* headed by Muslim and Hindu students, intellectuals, and women, demanded the recognition of Bangla as a national language in response to West Pakistan's censorship of Bangla which set in motion notions of Bengali nationalism rooted in ideas of unity and individual agency.[5] On February 21, 1952, West Pakistan enforced Urdu as the national language, marginalising the Bengali-speaking majority of East Pakistan, despite 99 percent of East Pakistanis speaking Bangla (Oldenburg 724). Language became a focal point of Pakistan's national identity, neglecting non-Urdu speakers and further marginalising minority groups (Hossain 245; Anisuzzaman 391–404; Constituent Assembly of Pakistan Proceedings 17). For West Pakistan, the fight for Bangla represented a threat and rebellion against the creation of a Pakistani national identity based on religious uniformity. Contemporaneously, for East Pakistan, the *Bhasha Andolon* revealed a new collective desire to claim a national identity based on socio-cultural and linguistic unification rather than religious unity.

The *Bhasha Andolon* triggered a call for national unity in East Pakistan and proved the gendered nature of Bangladesh's start, as Bengali women began physically

5 Following the partition, East Pakistan and West Pakistan remained separated not only geographically but also in their ethnic, linguistic, and national identities, despite sharing a dominant religious identity through Islam. East Pakistan's heterogeneous population included Bengali Hindus, Bengali Muslims, Biharis, and other minority groups. According to the 1961 census, 86 percent of East Pakistan's population comprised Muslims, and out of the "10 million Hindus [in] Pakistan, 9.4 million" resided in East Pakistan, forming 18.4 percent of the province's population (Sanaullah 110-111). In contrast, West Pakistan had a Muslim majority, contributing to a distinct Muslim religious and cultural identity. These differences led to tensions over the national language and exacerbated divisions along religious and cultural lines between the Eastern and Western territories.

symbolising the movement through their appearance (D'Costa, *Nationbuilding* 88). Women started wearing "saris and *teep*, and [...] singing in [Bangla]," leading the "movement consciously [using] the 'image' of women to promote ideas of a secular and liberal Bengali culture" (*Nationbuilding* 89). The linkage between women and nation persisted through the recharacterization of the Bengali language from a national language to a *matreebhasha* (mother's language) (*Nationbuilding* 89). Women's physical involvement in the language movement situated them in the frontlines of oppositional attack because of the way they represented the nation through performance. Women's sartorial choices and activism were agential; however, it placed women in a compromised position. While they began representing the future nation of Bangladesh, they also became targets of violence by Bangladesh's enemy state and did not receive appropriate protection from the nation due to Bangladesh's political and structural fragility and instability as a new nation. Women like "Begum Sufia Kamal, Sanjeeda Khatun and Nilima Ibrahim are well known for their activism [during the *Bhasha Andolon*], along with their colleagues in the Awami League, Amena Begum, Ashalota Sen, Motia Chowdhury and Sajeda Chowdhury" (*Nationbuilding* 88). These women, amongst others, contributed to the movement by partaking "in sartorial and cosmetic practices" but were "targeted as the perceived bearers of Hindu culture and tradition" (*Nationbuilding* 88, 89). Women were targeted because "the central Pakistan government suggested that the sari was 'vulgar', for instance, and pressured Bengali women to stop wearing it; wearing teep or bindi on television or in other public media was also banned (*Nationbuilding* 88, 89). Bangladesh could not protect its female or male citizens because, during the process of

nation-building, the prospective citizens of Bangladesh were fighting for a nation that had not yet established itself or its accompanying systems of governance to provide citizen rights and protection. The lack of actual citizen protection was substituted by the construction of national imaginaries that identified certain groups to certain functions of the nation. For example, women began assuming the motherly, nurturing, and protective role of the eventual nation due to the national imaginaries of patriotism and citizenship but in turn women, alongside men, were physically neglected during the war (D'Costa, *Nationbuilding* 1, 23, 38). Failure to offer protection to to-be citizens of an emerging nation is characteristic of the process of nation-building because the new nation relies on sacrifice to compete with oppositional powers. For this reason, imagined ideologies of togetherness and belonging to a nation are critical in ensuring individual sacrifice for national progress.

The gendered creation of the nation is captured through the characterization of the Bengali nation as a mother or a motherland with references to the nation through gendered language. This is evident in the cultural construct of a motherland. From colonial times, the Bengali nationalist discourse has maintained that "the country is not a piece of land with actual people living on it. It is abstracted from the people and is then personified as the Mother Goddess, the most recent and the most sacred deity in the Hindu pantheon. The people, then, are not the 'desh' itself, but are sons of the Mother, detached from the imagined entity and put in a subordinate relation to it" (Sarkar, "Nationalist" 2011). Further, "in the vocabulary of the home [...] the figure of the mother is dominant," as women are traditionally attributed to occupying domestic spaces like

homes, securing a connection between womanhood and homeland ("Nationalist" 2011). Thus, similar to how women are expected to safeguard and nurture the home at all costs, the citizens of the nation are expected to protect the nation by any means necessary. The redefining of Bengali as a *matreebhasha* solidifies the connection between women and the nation, and further calls citizens to action in protecting the mother tongue thereby defending the nation. The identification of Bangla as a *matreebhasha* underscores the role of language in contributing to the creation of a national identity. Further, attributing gender to the Bengali language reinforces women's part in protecting and nurturing the language. The association of gender to language creates an illusion of gendered national narrative whereby the traditional gender characteristics practised by men and women are integrated into the national ideologies of Bangladesh.

While as a nation Bangladesh is viewed as a symbolic motherland, other South Asian countries like India are argued to be a masculine nation (D'Costa, *Nationbuilding* 35, 38). Veena Das, a South Asian scholar focusing on gender, violence, and the nation discusses the construction of the Indian nation as an imaginary; however, contrary to Bangladesh's imaginary as a motherland, Das argues that the nation of India is imagined as a masculine figure because the nation inscribed violations on female bodies literally and figuratively during the partition (*Life and Words* 59). Das states that "experience of becoming a subject is linked to the experience of subjugation in important ways," suggesting that as a nation, India, while constructing its national identity, may have dominated certain people or regions under its control, causing a process of marginalisation through subjugation during the process of nation-building (*Life and*

Words 59). As an emerging nation fighting for freedom, Bangladesh's goal was to free the people in East Pakistan from West Pakistan's subjugation, not to subjugate its own people. However, in the process of nation-building, certain groups in East Pakistan such as women were subjected to violence and oppression by the imagined ideologies of government East Pakistan was fighting for. By examining India's gendered and imaginary representation, one can assume that Bangladesh adopted the representation of motherland. This choice was driven by the alignment of ideas regarding nurture and protection with the nation's goal to unite Bengali people in safeguarding and sacrificing for the motherland. In return, instead of subjugation, the nation would provide protection to its people. However, even without effort to subjugate Bangladeshi citizens, female citizens endured violation and subjugation from both the mother nation and foreign nations because of their gendered position as women. While the *Bhasha Andolon* created collective unity and revealed the gendered construction of a Bangladeshi national identity, with women playing more critical roles in the national effort, it also revealed the inability of national imaginaries to protect its vulnerable citizens. While the *Bhasha Andolon* united women and gave them reason to join the national cause, women's subsequent involvement in the *Muktijuddho* proved the nation's inability to deliver on its ideological promise of protection.

The *Bhasha Andolon* foreshadowed the silencing and neglect of war victims in the 1971 war as the West Pakistan government's use of censorship, intimidation, and violence carried into the *Muktijuddho* where Bengali and Hindu populations were violently suppressed in their fight for liberation. The movement served to showcase West

Pakistan's rejection of any ideologies conflicting with the authority of the West Pakistani government. Additionally, the movement demonstrated Bangladesh's limited capacity to deal with the violations and oppressions enforced by West Pakistan because of the former's limited capacities as a new nation. During the *Muktijuddho,* West Pakistan maintained centralised authority across its provinces through the West Pakistan military by strategizing ostracization and violence onto Bengalis and Hindus. East Pakistan's attention was not directed at addressing these violences as much as it was on mobilising and fighting for East Pakistan's liberation. Moreover, the previous *Andolon* revealed the unforgiving consequences of speaking out for change. The use of language to oppress and manipulate the Bengali community persisted into the 1971 war, as anyone heard speaking in Bangla or Hindi was violently condemned. Language and communication became a strategic tool to suppress and silence the Bengali community, ensuring they remain under the control of the Pakistani army well into the *Muktijuddho*. The language movement also demonstrated the ways in which the nation shaped personal identities. Through the linkage of language and nationalism, language became a tool in constructing and identifying uniform nationalist identities. Individuals existing outside of binaries such as Urdu-speaking Pakistanis or Bangla-speaking Bengalis, experienced threats from the oppositions of their national groups not only to their identities, but also to their safety. In turn, the forming nation of Bangladesh was unable and unwilling to safeguard citizens who existed outside of neatly drawn categories or even remained within socially defined categories but within a subjugated role like womanhood.

In Bangladesh's nation-building efforts, beginning from the *Bhasha Andolon*, a clear gendered dynamic manifested itself. The Bengali nation became a motherland in need of protection, while its leaders, such as Sheikh Mujib, assumed the role of a father figure (Mookherjee, *The Spectral Wound* 41; D'Costa, *Nationbuilding* 1). Within this gendered framework, women were assigned a primary role as mothers, responsible for shaping the nation's identity (D'Costa, *Nationbuilding* 1). However, this role also came with the implicit acceptance of state control and regulation over women's bodies and sexuality, reinforcing the dominance of a masculine state over women (1). Women's active engagement in safeguarding the Bengali language during the *Andolon* established their significant role in the fight for the nation, alongside men. Nevertheless, women's symbolic relation to the motherland differed from men's relation to the motherland. While men were often cast as defenders and protectors of the nation, women assumed a dual responsibility of protecting the nation's ideals and nurturing them. Feminist scholars argue that "the nation is usually imagined as female whereas the state often claims a male identity", therefore, prior to the formation of a Bangladeshi *state* — a formal government body —, the citizens were attempting to fight for a Bengali *nation* characterised by a unified culture, language, and history (D'Costa, *Nationbuilding* 23). In this process, women nurtured the Bengali national identity through their commitment to the country's cultural and linguistic identity to build a solid basis for the desired future state. Yet, the Bengali nation, built so far only on gendered imaginaries and commitments without an actual state for protection, overlooked women's vulnerability and failed to safeguard them because of the patriarchal ideology that placed them second to male citizens. Thus,

women became secondary citizens, evident through the nation's relentless policing of women where "women's sexuality was rigorously controlled and laws codified to distinguish between 'respectable' women, who were bearers of legitimate male heirs, and non-respectable women, who were the suppliers of men's pleasure" (*Nationbuilding* 23). This strict control not only regulated women's sexuality but also their citizenship, relegating them to secondary roles within the nation (*Nationbuilding* 23). This gendered nature of nation building and state making is underscored throughout the liberation war, particularly during Operation Searchlight. Through Operation Searchlight, women were subjected to violence by enemy nations and were further failed in capacities of witnessing, protection, and address by their own motherland because the war left women unprotected when they no longer fit into conventionally defined social and cultural roles.

The contesting nationalist ideologies of nationhood and sovereign governance produced from religious, linguistic, and socio-cultural differences between Pakistan's Eastern and Western fronts solidified the incitement of Operation Searchlight, a massacre that cemented the horrific events of the 1971 Liberation War. During Operation Searchlight, the West Pakistan military targeted women, students, and suspected Awami League supporters[6], including Hindus, to suppress Bengali nationalism (Mookherjee, *The Spectral Wound* 34; Karmakar 117). During the attack, the West Pakistani military utilised various strategies to destabilise potential Bengali nationalist movements. As a

6 In the 1970 elections, the Awami League led by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman secured a majority win in East Pakistan, fuelling the desire for a distinctive Bengali nationalist identity (Baxter 211-212). However, West Pakistan's leadership, fearing East Pakistan's demand for independence, refused to accept the election results. This led to heightened tensions between East and West Pakistan, culminating in the Operation Searchlight attack by West Pakistan's military to suppress Bengali nationalism.

strategic manoeuvre, the West Pakistan military implemented a tactic of surprise in their ambush. The military executed the ambush during the night-time, attacking unarmed and unprepared civilians in their sleep, resulting in the death of hundreds of thousands of defenceless East Pakistanis (Mookherjee, *The Spectral Wound* 34; Saday Batabyal 17). Additionally, the military strategically targeted intellectuals and students because they were at the forefront of mobilising and supporting protests and rallies against West Pakistan's oppressive policies, exhibited through the *Bhasha Andolon* (Butt 1; D'Costa, *Nationbuilding* 86).

However, the most vulnerable targets of the attack were women. West Pakistan targeted women because of their roles in influencing public opinion and their symbolic relation to the nation. The West Pakistan military sought to upend the social structure and support networks of Bengali society by focusing on women as they represented the Bengali cultural and nationalist identity, demonstrated through women's involvement in the *Bhasha Andolon.* Women were attacked primarily through rape as a war strategy to install fear and destroy the Bengali spirit of resistance. Examples of attacks on women can be found in Nayanika Mookherjee's work on rape victims (*birangonas*) during the war (2015). Through the stories of women like Mosammad Rohima Nesa, Kajoli Khatoon, Moyna Karim, and Rashida Khatoon who were raped in their own homes, Mookherjee points out the connection between women and the home within the larger national discourse (Mookherjee, *The Spectral Wound* XVI). The West Pakistan army attacked and raped women within the home, in doing so, the army violated the home and the Bengali nation because women represented the motherland (Mookherjee, *The Spectral*

Wound 41, 122). Drawing on my previous discussion of motherland in the context of the *Bhasha Andolon,* the gendered views of nationhood become evident once again through the liberation war. Women, representing a motherland in need of protection and yet controlled by the needs of the nation and state, were subjected to gender violence through "systematic rape during violent conflict[s]" (D'Costa, *Nationbuilding* 23). This violation "demonstrates an enemy community's failure to protect its women, thereby 'feminizing' the enemy's land, which is also depicted as the 'motherland'. Moreover, forced impregnation of an enemy's women during wartime is designed to disrupt the so-called purity of the enemy's national identity" (*Nationbuilding* 23). Dividing women into categories of pure and impure alienated women who were raped during the war from the nation and placed their citizen status into question because they no longer fit the ideal image of a woman nor that of an ideal citizen belonging to a motherland. The *Muktijuddho* exposed the role of witnessing as West Pakistan and the international community failed to fully acknowledge the extent of the violations committed against Bengalis and Hindus (Agarwal 24; Kuper 79; Brownmiller 79-85; D'Costa, *Nationbuilding* 21, 79, 95; Mookherjee, "Gendered Embodiments" 39). Yet, the responsibilities of women's narrative preservation relating to the war lies on Bangladesh.

To revisit women's witnessing of the war and the nation's witnessing of women during the war, I return to fictional narratives' capacity to narrate historical events. Among the Bangladeshi fictional literary efforts to preserve women's stories of the *Muktijuddho*, *A Golden Age* takes on the critical role of bearing witness to socially neglected groups and individuals by examining their traditionally overlooked experiences,

resilience, and hardships. Additionally, Anam reconsiders the literary space of memory building by engaging in witnessing that creates spaces for narrative reconsideration to enable readers to address their own subjectivities in learning and remembering marginalized histories and stories. Moreover, Anam takes on the task of conservation by providing a fictional account of the *Muktijuddho* through the lens of women at war with the nation and with their identities as women by revisiting many kinds of womanhood and their nuanced social, political, and personal discourses.[7] Within the grand performances of national struggle, Anam focuses her attention on the often forgotten and silent internal struggles of loss, identity, and trauma experienced by ordinary citizens. Through characters like Rehana, Anam's protagonist and leading mother figure, and Maya, Rehana's daughter, Anam directs readers to witness the war through an intersecting lens of gender and trauma. This lens prompts a reconsideration of narratives that go beyond the national and political discourse of the period, including those that account for the spatial duality women occupied during the war, both within and beyond the home. Anam highlights women's witnessing of the war through an intersection of gender and national identity by emphasising the ways in which gender influenced women's agency and contributions to the nationalist struggle. The *Muktijuddho* demanded that women perform two distinct roles simultaneously, one in the private sphere nurturing the home, and the other as a *Mukti Bahini* (patriot) willing to sacrifice the home. Anam highlights women's witnessing of the war by taking into consideration women's roles and simultaneous

7 While there have been a handful of fictional texts mentioning women's experiences during the Muktijuddho including Anisul Hoque's *Ma* and Shahriyar Kabir's *Ekatturer Pather Dhare*, I focus my research on Anam's *A Golden Age* because it captures and re-considers the stories of women from varying positions of womanhood with a specific focus on women's relationality to each other.

vulnerabilities to the violence of national warfare primarily through the character of Rehana. Rehana's narrative stands out in its ability to portray and preserve the complexities of the ordinary experiences of women during the war, including the challenge of balancing their familial responsibilities with their national obligations.

Through characters like Rehana and Maya, I examine the central issue of women's false witnessing by the nation and by each other because of the collective memory and imaginaries surrounding womanhood during the *Muktijuddho*. I trace the false witnessing of women using fiction to access affective resonance and its effects on women's witnessing of the war alongside on women as witnesses. False witnessing entails a practice of encountering and responding to others without considering the ethical and emotional responsibilities of being a witness. Furthermore, a false witness neglects the responsibilities of acknowledging their own subjectivities and discomfort in the process of witnessing testimonies of trauma which can lead to a silencing of witness testimonies (Oliver, *Witnessing* 19). Through fiction, my goal is to gain insight into the emotional and psychological impact women felt when they were falsely witnessed and, at times, became false witnesses during and after the war, as well as to examine how literature represents these experiences.

Within this inquiry, I seek out avenues of possible re-examination of witnessing to produce genuine and affective witnesses in historical remembering and in narrative production via readers. I examine the complexities of women's representation and the subsequent witnessing of these representations for first order (women in war), second order (authorial retelling of women in war), and third order (readers encountering

narratives of women in war) witnesses. In examining *A Golden Age*, I argue that women and women's spaces are a microcosm of the nation at war while simultaneously being affected by the conflicts of a nation at war. Women's embodiment of the nation leads to a contradictory duality in their role as witnesses during the *Muktijuddho*, ultimately silencing women's needs for the needs of the nation. This can be observed through three tropes of womanhood during the war: the mother patriot, the sexless patriot, and the violated patriot. Although national embodiment restricts women's narratives, women's witnessing of the war can be extrapolated from the specific social, corporeal, and physical spaces they occupied and how these spaces were utilised and received by women and their counterparts. By closely examining the dynamics within these spaces, it becomes possible to unveil women's negotiations for autonomy as silenced witnesses. Women's social, corporeal, and physical spaces serve as sites of negotiation, violence, and empowerment because they represent the nation in microcosm as spaces of contesting visions. It is important to note that in discussing womanhood through categories such as mothers, patriots, and violated women, I seek to illuminate the varying forms of external pressures placed onto different groups of women. Moreover, I call attention to women's multifaceted identities, emphasising that their worth extends beyond predefined labels. As Anam's text reveals, women like Rehana are more than just mothers and wives. Rehana is a woman with unique identities that take shape and function in varying spaces such as the domestic sphere, political stage, and social arena. The particulars of presenting complex womanhood lies in Anam's focus on creating whole characters that are multidimensional by virtue of their lived experiences and evolving identities. Anam presents multiple

women including Rehana, Maya, Mrs. Chowdhury, and Mrs. Sengupta as they go through journeys of self-discovery, which at times is wondrous or horrific. However, the key in establishing the complexities of womanhood is in accepting the evolution these women go through instead of shying away from the discomfort of encountering their narratives.

I intend to analyse Anam's text using witness trauma theory to reconsider women's spaces from the perspective of their social and gendered positions. Within this thesis, my aim is to re-examine women's witnessing during the war, and the types of witnessing performed by scholars and readers when encountering female war narratives in South Asia. This re-examination aims to account for the recurring transgenerational and historical traumas that resurface when confronted with new traumatic events like ones produced from war. Ultimately, these persistent traumas impact the communicability of subsequent traumas, including emotional and physical violations that have been supressed by socio-cultural norms rooted in history. By examining the transgenerational and historical effects on trauma formation, I intend to remember Bangladeshi women's experience of the *Muktijuddho* and explore the nation's false witnessing of women and womanhood during the war. Further, I hope to address the limitations of false witnessing and the benefits of utilising genuine affective witnessing when encountering trauma narratives. I base my analysis of women's witnessing of the *Muktijuddho* by examining two primary forms of witnessing: false witnessing and genuine witnessing. Expanding on the previous definitions of false witnessing, I maintain that false witnessing is a practice where any order of witnesses constitutes their "self" intersubjectively with those they witness and forecloses the responsibility of address that can lead to the silencing of

testimonies (Oliver, *Witnessing* 19, 108). In contrast, genuine witnesses attempt to construct spaces for the responsibility of address by forfeiting the injection of the self in the witnessing of the other that can otherwise lead to the silencing of victims. By this, genuine witnesses accept responsibility for attending to the truths and hurts of others whom they cannot fully understand. As well, they affirm intersubjective relations while making distinctions between their position and that of the traumatised subject.

Section One: Remembering Bangladesh's Nationalist History

The difficulties of recovering women's war narratives are multiple. Although women's narratives of the war and their profound trauma are crucial in understanding the war and its effects more comprehensively, it is difficult to locate these narratives because they have often been marginalised or misrepresented in the Bangladesh war narrative archives. The failure to truthfully capture and preserve women's stories and experiences can be attributed to the politically biased practices of national and international narrative collection, which have subsequently overlooked the ethical aspects of this collection process. Biased practises include failing to accurately respond to the crisis of the Bangladesh war due to political affiliations, causing many narratives of suffering and trauma, such as the narratives of women, to be downplayed. In this section, I explore how the broader historical, political, social, and cultural factors within national and international agendas have contributed to the marginalization of Bangladesh's liberation war and, consequently, the silencing of women's voices from the war. I do so by highlighting the roles key actors such as the government, international organisations, and

other expert groups have played in determining the collection and remembrance of the 1971 war accurately.

Narratives of witness testimonies and war traumas, both false and nuanced, have been gradually emerging out of Bangladesh's intellectual spaces since the inception of the *Muktijuddho*. However, due to political and military interference, the production of war narratives was initially stifled (Bass, "Bargaining Away Justice" 184). War time trauma and the failure of national and global actors to accurately address the war and its consequent effects contributed to the scarcity of documents and witness testimonies produced about *Muktijuddho* victims. Bangladesh's independence movement and its tragedies became spectacles captured by the media and news outlets as the war not only signalled a national warfare but also "an international war, embroiling India, the [United States], China and the former Soviet Union" due to inter-political rivalries between the Soviet Union and the Western Bloc that relied on strong Sino-Indian relations (D'Costa, "Of Impunity" 357). As a result, the geopolitical interests of countries like the United States and the former Soviet Union were directly affected by the outcome of the *Muktijuddho*.[8] The United States' Nixon Administration refused democratic responsibility by denying acknowledgement of the atrocities of the *Muktijuddho* and played a false witness to the war, even though the outcome of the *Muktijuddho* reflected the Western Bloc's geopolitical influence. Arthur Blood, the U.S. general consul in Dhaka at the time of the war, criticized the United States' false witnessing of the *Muktijuddho* in the "Blood

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8 The United States was among the international political actors involved in the outcome of the Bangladesh Liberation War due to its close relation to Pakistan in maintaining geo-political ties with China.

Telegram," stating that the United States "government has failed to denounce atrocities [and] to take forceful measures to protect its citizens [present in East Pakistan during the war]," failing to "intervene, even morally" in the "genocide" of East Pakistanis (Bass, *The Blood Telegram* 255-6; Bachman 3). America's silence about the war aided in silencing the realities of the war victims and of the larger national narrative of the *Muktijuddho* because the United States' lack of action and, more pointedly, lack of acknowledgement, set an example of realpolitik that overlooked governmental moral considerations for political ambitions.[9] Further, the United States' silence aided in the suppression of Bangladesh's national narratives because no real pressure was placed on Pakistan from the United States to end their widespread human rights violations against East Pakistan even though the United States was bound by international law to "maintain international peace and security, and to that end: to take effective collective measures for the prevention and removal of threats to the peace" as a founding member of the United Nations (1945), (United Nations Charter, Chapter I: Purposes and Principles). Instead, the United States' silence enabled Pakistan to adopt and perpetuate a false narrative of the *Muktijuddho*, wherein East Pakistan was portrayed to be a threat as a rebellious separationist group instead of accurately depicting the neglected and oppressed realities of Pakistan's eastern front.

The discrepancies of collective memory regarding the war are revealed through the widely mismatched mortality records produced by governments across the globe. The

9 Alongside non-recognition of human rights violations from the United States and China, Bangladesh and India's government failed to prosecute war criminals produced by the war to attend to political and international security concerns with Pakistan and its allied powers, United States and China (Bass, "Bargaining Away Justice" 148).

Government of Pakistan claims the war resulted in 26,000 fatalities, with its respective ally, the United States, also reporting a higher but still relatively low death figure of 200, 000 people (D'Costa, "Of Impunity" 357; Bass, "Bargaining Away Justice" 151). As well, in recollecting the effects of the war West Pakistani fighters state that "not too many people were killed in East Pakistan, perhaps 50 or 60,000" (Saikia 272). Conversely, the government of Bangladesh estimates over three million fatalities which is also supported by the Soviet Union (D'Costa, "Of Impunity" 357; Bass, "Bargaining Away Justice" 151). The failure of the West Pakistani government and other world governments to accept and accurately remember the war in East Pakistan contributed to a distorted historical account of the *Muktijuddho* (Bass, "Bargaining Away Justice" 140, 157). The *Muktijuddho* is misremembered to such a degree that the creation of Bangladesh through the 1971 war is "incorrectly billed as an India–Pakistan war in online searches" (Mookherjee, "Historicising the Birangona" 588). Through such incoherent recollection, the mischaracterization and denial of the events in the *Muktijuddho* reflects the larger crisis of remembering during moments of conflict.

Section Two: Literature Review

The public reception of the war has revealed the responsibilities of witnessing during moments of crisis. While the global response and memory of the 1971 *Muktijuddho* has been inconsistent, the trauma produced by the war is undeniably clear in its disturbance of ordinary life and wellbeing. I locate my analysis of women's witnessing of the Bangladesh Liberation War in Yasmin Saikia and Nayanika Mookherjee's arguments on women's narrative collections. Both scholars address the nuances of

witnessing stories of trauma on an individual and a larger national scale to bring to light the neglected and partial witnessing of women during the Bangladesh Liberation War. Yasmin Saikia, professor of South Asian Studies, religion, and conflict, examines the disturbance and trauma of the *Muktijuddho* through a focus on the failure of nations to remember the events of 1971 accurately. In her book *Women, War, and the Making of Bangladesh: Remembering 1971* (2011), Saikia explores the gendered violence and the nation's incorrect remembering of women's stories during the 1971 war, arguing that women's narratives were socially neglected and "women's memories survive […] only in the private sphere and are dealt with as private matters by the victims' families, [or] solely by the victim who hides in 'shame'" (63). Alongside focusing on women's victimisation during the war, Saikia highlights women's active roles as caregivers to both the family (caring for children) and nation (mobilising the war). Yet, Saikia notes that through both these roles, women were silenced in their witnessing of the war because both roles required acts of selflessness that overlooked women as individuals (64). Saikia stated in 2011 that only "15 volumes of the Liberation War Documents published by the Bangla Academy (1982)" have made a limited and "incomplete" effort to "develop a social memory based on people's experiences" of the war that highlights individual narratives, particularly women's narratives (Saikia 64). Following 2011, Bangladeshi writers and scholars[10] have made a greater attempt to gather and produce literature and narratives focused on women's witnessing of the war, as alternatives to the overbearing masculine and nationalist narratives of the *Muktijuddho*. Most of the scholarship produced about the

[10] Tahmima Anam 2007; Quazi J Islam, Suraiya Begum, and Surma Zahid 2022; Mustafa Chowdhury 2015

war emphasises men's experiences, in part due to the dominant and active roles men were afforded and for which they were recognized. The dominant male discourse surrounding the *Muktijuddho* can be examined through the hundreds of war novels, memoirs, and documents created after the war for men, by men such as by Abdul Gaffar Choudhury, Ahmed Maola, Humayun Ahmed, Abdur Rouf Choudhury, amongst many others. Yet problems arise even within the efforts to produce and preserve women's testimonies and narratives. As Nayanika Mookherjee, among others, emphasises, as far as women's testimonies of wartime experience have been preserved, they have served to aid the legal justice system in trying war criminals but not necessarily served to provide care for women (*The Spectral Wound* 24-25).

Mookherjee's examination of the public memory of raped women in Bangladesh reveals that women's narratives were primarily collected to aid in the legal justice system while trying war criminals, rather than attempting to accurately witness women survivors and give due diligence to the handling of their stories (*The Spectral Wound* 23, 24). Mookherjee notes that "Bangladeshi feminist and human rights activists" began documenting "histories of sexual violation committed during the 1971 war so as to provide supporting evidence to enable the trial of the [culprits]" following the international government's refusal to accept the *Muktijuddho* as a genocide and the United States recognition of rape as a war crime (*The Spectral Wound* 24). These efforts were led by "left-liberal journalists, feminists, NGO activists, and human rights lawyers" seeking objective truths for a global audience (*The Spectral Wound* 25). However, this professional discourse speaking "on behalf of the victim" often distanced victims from

their own experiences (Das, *Critical Events* 175). Additionally, the focus on legal and historical objectives relegated women's narratives, particularly those related to sexual violations, to the periphery, overshadowing the recognition of traumatised individuals and the complexities of supporting a troubled nationalism.

Like the legal and historical objectives overshadowing the production of women's narratives, the Bangladeshi government's political objectives also overshadowed the production of women's narratives from the *Muktijuddho*. Saikia and Mookherjee explore the flawed public memory of women's experiences during the *Muktijuddho* by exploring the national narrative of heroism imposed onto female victims of war regardless of their abject treatment. The larger national and social narrative superseding women's stories can be found in the construction of the *birangona* – a term "introduced by the first prime minister of Bangladesh, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman [...] to 'acknowledge' the 'sacrifice' of women for the freedom of Bangladesh in 1971" (D'Costa, *Nationbuilding* 13). The use of the term *birangona* publicly identified and reintroduced rape survivors as heroes defending the nation; however, in doing so, the nation perpetuated the harmful notion that enduring sexual violence can be valorised and justified in the name of national struggle which subsequently reinforced patriarchal norms, victim-blaming, and the stigmatization of trauma experienced by the survivors (Saikia 64-65; Mookherjee, *The Spectral Wound* 141; Mookherjee, "The Raped Woman" 380).

While such a reading might at first glance appear affirmative, in fact it is paradoxically entangled with the aftermath of the 1947 partition, in which *birangonas* were seen as "having lost their honour" and thereafter shamed and ostracised within their

own communities because of the effects of purity narratives in relation to women (Das, *The Land of Buried Tongues* 102). Purity narratives surrounding women's sexual and correspondingly social value were used to protect men and blame women. During the 1947 partition in India, "rape [was] constructed as a sexual offence, […] concerned with offences against codes of kinship and alliance rather than concerned with the bodily integrity of all women" (Chatterji, *Wording the World* 106). Through this definition, women violated through rape were categorized by the court as "being devoid of 'virtue' or good 'character'" and thus denied "the right to protection by the State," leading to "women's bodies [being] made to speak to negate their speech in the court" (106). Conversely, during the *Muktijuddho,* the court, through the lens of the nation, viewed rape differently, considering it as a rite of passage into herodom, classifying women who were raped with the title of *birangona.* The Bangladeshi government's public identification of sexually violated women as *birangonas* led to their silencing. This is because women were denied safe spaces to testify as vulnerable and traumatised persons, who did not experience themselves as heroic or "pure" emblems of nationalism. Ideals of women's purity being linked to their sexual status were prevalent within Bengali society, and with the nation's public re-narration of the experience and title of being raped, women who endured sexual violence were silenced in both the social purity narratives and the political hero narratives. In referencing women rape survivors as heroes, women become removed from the sexual violence they endured. Saikia and Mookherjee's research on women's improper reception and subsequent silencing by the nation can be supplemented by a historical perspective. This is evident in the efforts to preserve

women's voices in authentic and nuanced forms in the limited collection of women's non-fictional works since the war.[11] However, for many women survivors of the *Muktijuddho,* articulations of war experiences are still governed by silences enacted by trauma or social neglect due to the social stigma around trauma discourse. The social stigma surrounding trauma has led to a turn away from addressing the affective elements of trauma such as grief, anger, and shame. This is because a focus on affect creates room for witnesses to reconsider their positionalities of power and responsibility which can lead to empathic unsettlement, an experience of discomfort in the process of witnessing. As a result, the absence of emotional witnessing has produced a sterile environment of remembering where post-war generations have a limited grasp of the tragedies that occurred during the war and the personal negotiations women made as national subjects from within their gendered social position.

Mookherjee discusses the complexities of witnessing by referring to Roshid Talukdar, a photographer, whose photographs convey "realistic images of poor, rural *birangonas* portray[ing] *bishonnota, molinota, and bhoy* (despondence, bleakness, and fear), devoid of [symbolism and glamour] [where the] face stands in as a marker for the shame and the inner, muted pain of rape" (Mookherjee, *The Spectral Wound* 188). While the nationalist discourse on *birangonas* attempts to locate their experiences within the discourse of heroism, the images of *birangonas* captured and produced by photographers and artists like Talukdar and Mohammad Shofi capture a different narrative discourse,

11 *Rising From the Ashes: Women's Narratives of 1971*, 2013; *Women, War, and the Making of Bangladesh: Remembering 1971*, 2011; *The Spectral Wound: Sexual Violence, Public Memories, and the Bangladesh War of 1971*, 2015

one which points to the *birangonas'* alienation from society. The contradiction between the nation's reception of raped women and artists' reception of raped women raises questions about the responsibility of address for witnesses. The responsibility of address refers to an "obligation not only to respond, but also to respond in a way that opens up rather than closing off the possibility of response by others, [leaving witnesses] responsible for the other's ability to respond" (Oliver, *Witnessing* 18, 19). While response-ability addresses the obligation to respond to another in ethical ways that allows for conversation, address-ability refers to the act of considering one's own subjectivity and the subjectivity of the speaker to create a space of exchange that is open to reception and engagement. Both concepts make up communication methods in witnessing, and are both, in unison, critical to genuinely witnessing another.

Issues of witnessing others and others' stories of trauma are situated in the ability to recognize subjectivity and objectivity in the act of witnessing. Mookherjee's inquiry into the role of the viewer, photographer, painter, or the artist who captures stories through their art adds to the conversation of responsibility of address on how to intersect subjectivity and responsibility in addressing societal concerns and practice ethical representation. In analysing photographs of *birangonas,* Mookherjee references Naibuddin Ahmed, who believes that "a painter paints from imagination, but a photograph is real" and critiques his observation by noting that photographs undergo aesthetic framing infused with historical and social expectations of subjectivity (*The Spectral Wound* 192). As such, the responsibility to capture art and history ethically and with room for multiple subjectivities even with empathic unsettlement lies on the artist,

creator, and witness. As a member of the academic community attempting to revisit women's silences and witnessing of the war, I am responsible for genuinely witnessing women's narratives in both my response to and in my address of narratives of trauma. To access the silences of women's narratives and offer the possibility to re-witness women through their gendered social positions with a focus on affect, often an uncommunicable element of human response to trauma, I turn my focus to the fictional reception of the *Muktijuddho*. Fiction allows me to engage with women's witnessing ethically and genuinely by engaging with women's intricate affect and perspectives instead of only attempting to witness women's experiences through the perspectives offered by non-fiction, a genre aimed at documenting fact which can interfere with the exploration of complexities of subjectivities.

Section Three: The Role of Fiction in Accessing Barren Narratives

While nonfiction offers illuminating evidence-based engagement with Bengali women's witnessing of the war, it can be limited within its aspirations to objective engagement. Although both nonfiction and fiction can be subject to narrative biases, I chose to offer a literary critique of the liberation war through fiction because it operates within imaginative storytelling that does not claim factual knowledge, but rather explores creative interpretations of varying subjectivities. Fiction's exploration of diverse interpretations and subjectivities is crucial in approaching the examination of women's narratives during the *Muktijuddho* because it creates an opportunity to acknowledge the multidimensional identities and positions women operated within during the war. So, while narrator biases are present in fiction through characters, settings, and narrative

themes, readers are not expected to accept biased narration as fact; rather, readers are able to critically engage with fiction to open avenues of alternative perspectives. Additionally, fiction offers spaces of discourse that allow for acknowledgement and accountability not just for subjects being narrated but also for the reader as a third-order witness. Furthermore, fiction provides opportunities for affective engagement through complex characters, plots, thematic elements, subtexts, and more to elevate the readers ability to empathise and engage with difficult narratives intimately. Fiction achieves genuine engagement with women's narratives using monologues that provide entry into internal thought processes and allows access to the past through a non-linear time progression supported by symbols and allegories which invite varying interpretations that facilitate critical thinking and debate. In giving access to characters' internal monologues and symbolisms, fiction creates a space of reflection and exploration of abstract and affective considerations, while also giving readers the opportunity to engage with subjective biases and confront uncomfortable themes. Situating my focus on *A Golden Age,* I further argue for fiction's capacity to create genuine and affective engagement by highlighting the process of nation building as a mission of imaginaries. Benedict Anderson discusses the origins of nationalism and argues that nations are defined as "an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (6). Further, Anderson states that nations are "imagined as a *community*, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail

in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. It is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings" (7). Anderson's ideas of imagination rely on concepts of story making, a process inherent to the creation of fiction. Thus, while fiction is not based in truth, through its imaginative capabilities, it can produce and lead to real change. Fiction's imaginative capacity can change people in the real world because of its ability to create relationality between people across time and space through attention to shared affect, experiences, and conflict not limited within real world boundaries.

The nation of Bangladesh similarly created its national identity based on an imagined community of comradeship because of the real and ideological borders the nation is confined within and at war to defend. The creation of Bangladesh from East Pakistan, evident from the *Bhasha Andolon* and the partition, demonstrates the role of imaginaries in upholding identities of unity and nationalism – imaginaries that operate by allocating imagined social and national roles to sub-groups within a community. The national movement was made possible because of the collective mobilisation of the Bengali people who acted in union to defend an identity not yet established but thoroughly imagined as emancipatory and capable of providing safety. Within an imagined landscape, women and women's spaces became representations of the imagined state of nationhood and its accompanied requisites. For example, women began representing a nation's imagined reproductions (Ivekovic and Mostov 12-13). However, these representations do not and cannot address women's distinct experiences and voices

because of its narrow identification of women with the state. Fiction addresses the imaginaries of nationhood and womanhood by entering the normally untapped affective monologues of female characters and subtleties of female reception.

I chose to focus on *A Golden Age*, because Anam situates her novel within the rich and simultaneously barren landscape of women's narratives to reconsider the role of witnessing both first-hand through war victims and second-hand through readers. Women's narratives emerging out of the *Muktijuddho* are barren, perceived as lacking or underrepresented, because they are less openly understood due to being shrouded in political and social discourse that prioritises non-female voices. Barren narratives have limited visibility in both historical and contemporary discourse and are restricted in terms of outreach and recognition. Furthermore, women's archival narratives have become barren because of their affective and subsequent linguistic inaccessibility due to a lack of care to tap into the complexities of womanhood that goes beyond superficial relationalities. Though barren, women's narratives are not non-existent. Women's narratives have become barren, therein paradoxically examined into silence, through categorization of socially understood labels to allow nations and political actors to perform witnessing to preserve the subjective self. However, these barren narratives can be re-examined by women through women's voices to renew them of their potentials of narrative release and reflection and redirect them out of barrenness into real and productive discourse.

Anam's fictional novel also allows the potentiality of different modes of witnessing to be practised in real time. For example, genuine and affective witnessing

which opens the responsibility of address by ethically witnessing others through empathy and objectivity, where false witnessing, a failure to ethically receive and respond to witnessing due to the inflation of one's subjectivity with the witness that forecloses address, has been traditionally performed. In doing so, Anam creates an opportunity to challenge the traditional and often failed practices of witnessing that produce limited testimonies by engaging with genuine forms of witnessing. In this instance, although historical analysis provides insightful access into raped women's silencing and false witnessing, fiction allows a reconsideration of the role of witness by giving readers a more empathetic and emotionally immersive experience, enabling them to grasp the complexities and nuances of women's struggles and resilience. This is done by providing a deeper engagement with the psychological experiences of war victims through insight into internal character dialogue and affective responses. It is essential to address the role and responsibilities of a witness due to the implications of witnessing on collective memory, historical preservation, and ethics.

Section Four: Witness Theory and the Function of Affective Witnessing

Extending from Saikia and Mookherjee's arguments on women's silencing in the *Muktijuddho*, I situate my thesis at the intersection of witness trauma theory and gender theory to examine the types of witnessing performed by women in the *Muktijuddho* alongside the kinds of witnessing women were faced with by their communities and their nation. Particularly, my thesis aims to re-member and re-witness how women like Rehana (mother patriot), Maya (sexless patriot), and Sharmeen (violated patriot) were perceived, interpreted, and represented during the *Muktijuddho* by themselves and by the nation to

contribute to the larger discourse on witnessing South Asian women's trauma. Re-witnessing is a practice of returning and reflecting on memories or events after a certain time to gain a better understanding of the memory or event through subjective awareness and to reopen the responsibility of address in considering how individuals were witnessed by or witness to their external settings. To explore genuine witnesses, I draw on Michael Richardson and Kerstin Schankweiler's concept of affective witness that describes affective witnessing as "becoming responsible to [witnessing]" by acknowledging "the centrality of affect and emotion to witnesses and witnessing *and* their inherent relationality" (168). Genuine witnesses practise affective witnessing by accepting responsibility for attending to the truths and hurts of others whom they cannot fully understand. Conversely, false witnesses are unable to withstand the emotional discomfort of witnessing testimonies of crisis and foreclose the responsibility of address that can silence testimonies (Oliver, *Witnessing* 19, 108).

Witness theory extends from trauma theory, a discipline that attempts to "construct an ethical response to forms of human suffering and their cultural and artistic representation" that "[permits] history to arise where immediate understanding may not" (Andermahr 1; Craps 1). To lay the framework for witness theory, I begin by addressing the limitations of trauma theory to explore the relationship between witness and trauma or traumatised individuals. Western and non-Western scholarly approaches to trauma and witnessing differ with Western scholarship emphasising individuality and non-Western scholarship emphasising communal relations (Visser 124, 126). Western trauma theorists like Jill Bennett, Roseanne Kennedy and Stef Craps argue that trauma studies have failed

to break free from Eurocentric modes of "cross-cultural ethical engagement" and engage in transnational cultural trauma engagement within non-Western societies (Craps 2; Bennet and Kennedy 5; Andermahr 1). Craps (2013) notes that without a postcolonial reframing, trauma studies can "marginalise or ignore traumatic experiences of non-Western or minority cultures, [because original Western trauma theorists] tend to take for granted the universal validity of definitions of trauma and recovery that have developed out of the history of Western modernity, [and] often favour or even prescribe a modernist aesthetic of fragmentation and aporia as uniquely suited to the task of bearing witness to trauma, and [which] generally disregard[s] the connections between metropolitan and non-Western or minority traumas" (Craps 2). The "universal validity of definitions of trauma" entails a belief that the Western model of trauma studies can be applied universally to non-Western societies without modification. The universal model of trauma is then viewed as being rooted in Western ideology that emphasizes linear and often individual healing. Examples of this can be located in Holocaust studies following World War Two. The model of trauma studies used during the Holocaust places importance on the Eurocentric model of trauma studies, focusing on Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, transgenerational trauma and the uncertainty or shocks surrounding traumatic experiences (Kidron 6-7; Braga et al. 2; Kurtz 2, 4, 9). However, non-Western scholars and critics recognize that "trauma is not only [...] an individual, psychological, and/or physical response, but also [...] a collective, political, and cultural condition with far-reaching material and immaterial dimensions", highlighting the shortcomings of commonly used definitions in trauma studies like for the term Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. The term

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder is "misleading [...] because trauma is by definition not 'post' but persistent, [and] resisting closure" (Visser 126). When revisiting the universal model of trauma, it is important to highlight the complexities and inadequacies of dominant definitions of trauma and the challenges associated with attempting to create universal definitions at large. For example, acknowledging the importance of constructing definitions of trauma that are socially, culturally, and spatially relevant carve a path towards a reception of trauma studies that is inclusive in its ability to discern the multitude of trauma care and witnessing available to communities and peoples.

The *Muktijuddho* reveals the need for witnessing trauma that accounts for and acknowledges the connections between colonial legacies, nationalist struggles, and the complex trauma endured by individuals and communities in postcolonial[12] contexts. Craps' redefinition of trauma theory as a theory that should "take account of the specific social and historical contexts in which trauma narratives are produced and received and be open and attentive to the diverse strategies of representation and resistance that these contexts invite or necessitate" facilitates a more open and universally appropriate discourse on trauma and witnessing (Craps 5). Similarly, South Asian trauma theorists like Veena Das also argue for the need to situate trauma theory within culturally, spatially, and temporally varying settings. Das states that "the model of trauma and

12 I use the term postcolonial in the strictest political sense to mean a period after a nation or region has achieved independence from colonial rule and has achieved self-governance. In this paper, postcolonial refers to the immediate aftermath of decolonization in the literal sense. The term postcolonial is limited in its ability to address the subjective ongoingness of colonisation and its effects. Further, it overlooks neo-colonial dynamics and structural inequalities to assume a linear progression of colonial history. Indeed, the term postcolonial neglects the ways in which nations and regions continue to experience economic dependencies, power imbalances, and the legacies of colonialism which remain active in shaping societies following formal independence.

witnessing that has been bequeathed to us from Holocaust studies cannot be simply transported to other contexts in which violence is embedded into different patterns of sociality" (*Life and Words* 103). Das asserts that there is a need to reinterpret the Western approach to concepts of violence, trauma, and witness, emphasizing that using Western trauma theory as a template for application in other trauma settings lacks adequacy (103). Moreover, Das elevates her critique of Eurocentric trauma theory and shifts her attention to a critique of literary use of trauma theory by arguing that "the relation between the literary and the everyday has to be worked out patiently so that while we remain mindful of the way that literary genres influence narrativization of experience in everyday life, we also recognize that there are other ways in which relatedness is created and sustained in everyday life" (*Life and Words* 103). I highlight this critique and posit that relatedness can be "created and sustained in everyday life" through an examination of subjectivity during witnessing and an acknowledgement of the varying forms of relatedness between people. Primarily, beyond literary narrative, relatedness, especially within the witnessing of trauma, is not based on knowing. Relatedness becomes a state of address that acknowledges the multitude of avenues to access knowing. The process of relatedness should not operate within an objective of uncovering the inaccessible. Rather, relatedness within witnessing can allow witnesses to operate from the space of the unknown. From this, the approaches to trauma and witnessing by Western and South Asian scholarship lay the foundation for a critical discussion on the responsibility of addressing and witnessing testimonies of crises.

I focus my thesis on witness theory, particularly affective witnessing, as a theoretical and practical framework "of witnessing that centres encounter, embodiment, affect and intensities of experience" which "provides an analytical perspective for attending to aspects of witnessing often overlooked: the social, embodied and constitutively relational dimensions that are present in genuine acts of witnessing" (Richardson and Schankweiler 237). I situate my application of affective witnessing in Anam's text within a revised understanding of trauma that centres on "social and historical contexts" to remain "open and attentive to the diverse strategies of representation and resistance" and understand the gendered and socio-historical trauma subjected onto and endured by female characters in *A Golden Age* (Craps 5). I define a witness as a person who relates or attends to something that has made an impression on them through their proximity to and encounter of the respective event or experience. A witness is someone who encounters, addresses, responds, and contributes to memory building. For example, in the case of a war victim relaying their testimony to another, both the speaker and the recipient are witnesses. To differentiate the levels of witnessing occurring within processes of testimony narration, I locate witnesses within three orders: first order witness, second order witness, and third order witness. A first order witness is someone who directly experiences or sees an event. An example of a first order witness is a war veteran who has first-hand experience of the war. A second order witness is an individual who accesses an event from a first order witness as a secondary recipient. An example of a second order witness is a historian listening to a war veteran's experience of the war. A third order witness is one who learns of an event from a second order witness.

An example of a third order witness is a reader learning about the experience of a war veteran narrated by a historian. Using this sequence of witnesses and their groupings, I transition towards the exploration of affective witnessing as a form of genuine witnessing. As a third order witness, I aim to bring together cross-cultural conversations on witnessing to address rather than drawing on one culture's theoretical approaches alone. I approach cross cultural witnessing through the scholarly research done by Kelly Oliver, Veena Das, Dominick LaCapra, Michael Richardson, and Kerstin Schankweiler.

Affective witnessing allows for a fuller understanding of the socio-cultural and gendered contexts by acknowledging the emotional complexity, cultural nuances, and the embodied aspects of trauma experiences. Affective witnessing is particularly critical in approaching women's narratives of trauma because it:

> Account[s] for both the centrality of affect and emotion to witnesses and witnessing *and* their inherent relationality. It stresses the body in its dynamic relationship to other bodies (human or non-human) as central to witnessing. [...] Acknowledg[ing] witnessing as both social and embodied. Conceptually, affective witnessing meets the challenge of understanding and analysing contemporary testimony by recognising and insisting upon the intensive relationality of the witness, the witnessed and their co-witnesses. [Thus,] affect is at work in multiple ways: not only in the affectivity of the experience of witnessing, but in the witnessing of affect itself – of intensities, forces, and encounters – and in the circulation, reception, and response to witnessing that becomes testimony. (Richardson and Schankweiler 3)

Affective witnessing is characterised by encounter and response. Witness theory scholar Kelly Oliver expands on the practices of affective witnessing and argues that witnessing trauma involves active engagement through empathy and an avoidance of voyeuristic consumption and possession (*Witnessing* 148, 157). Alongside Oliver, Das also explores the act of witnessing and subjectivity, and focuses her scholarship on South Asia, particularly India. She states that witnessing is a "way to understand the relation between violence and subjectivity" (*Life and Words* 78). Further, Das argues that witnessing is "not a matter of all or nothing" but is the act of "engaging everyday life while holding the poisonous knowledge of violation, betrayal, and the wounded self from seeping into the sociality of everyday life" (*Life and Words* 102). In Das's focus on witnessing, she highlights the importance of engaging with subjectivities and ethical witnessing to see and understand others without imposing the discomfort of witnessing onto them or the experience of witnessing (*Life and Words 102-104*).

Dominick LaCapra, too, explores the complexities of representation and the role of interpretation in understanding traumatic experiences during witnessing, noting that witnessing necessitates an experience of empathic unsettlement: that is, an experience of being in a place of un-comfortability and dis-possessiveness towards the suffering of others but still having responsibility towards it (*Writing History* 47, 78, 103) LaCapra essentially highlights the practice of ethical genuine witnessing that recognizes the inherent discomfort in witnessing testimonies of trauma. To avoid voyeuristic consumption of testimonies of trauma, it is necessary to acknowledge one's subjectivity as a witness and recognize one's limits and responsibilities in how one listens to and

responds to those testimonies. From Oliver and LaCapra's considerations of affective and subjective witnessing, I explore the secondary witness in readers, when encountering narratives that engage with trauma-based testimonies. Secondary witnesses like historians, interviewers, or listeners of traumatic testimonies are responsible for not assuming victim's voices and instead should approach witnessing through "empathic unsettlement that should register in one's very mode of address" (LaCapra, *Writing History* 18; "Trauma, Absence, Loss" 699). For example, when a secondary witness like a historian, experiences empathic unsettlement, their mode of address needs to reflect an acknowledgment of the emotional gravity and sensitivity of the subject matter being discussed. Instead of adopting a detached or impersonal stance, a historian would need to demonstrate a genuine willingness to listen, understand, and engage with the experiences and emotions of the person sharing their traumatic testimonies.

The process of narrating stories of first-hand accounts of trauma encapsulates acts of witnessing and testifying which are often embroiled in forms of mindful and unconscious silences stemming from shock, leading to witness testimonies that may be incomplete or misunderstood. Testimonies are "any form – object or act – serving as evidence or proof, [and can be] both [...] survivors' [nonverbal and verbal] narratives, and the survivors themselves" (Horowitz 48). To effectively approach the responsibility of address when encountering victims of trauma, the listener requires empathy and an awareness of the self. Trauma theory scholars Dori Laub and Shoshana Felman examine the Holocaust to establish that testimony plays a transformative and ethical role in the process of bearing witness to trauma for both individuals testifying and the individual

witnessing the testimony (*Testimony* 5, 57). To practise genuine forms of witnessing to testimonies of crisis or silences, Laub highlights the need for empathy in witnessing – a key characteristic of genuine witnessing. Laub writes that "the absence of an empathetic listener, or more radically, the absence of an addressable other, an 'other' who can hear the anguish of one's memories and thus affirm and recognize their realness, annihilates [a] story" (*Testimony* 68). The need for an empathic listener demands a re-evaluation of the act of listening and reception during the witnessing of testimonies. Listening or reception is an act that encompasses "both the situation of address wherein a survivor bears witness to a listener, reader, or viewer and the position one may take as a witness to their interaction" (Trezise 2). The emphasis of relationality in witnessing prompts a consideration of the listener's position as a witness by suggesting that witnessing is a practice of active engagement, not simply an act of passive reception. Examples of relationality in witnessing can be found in the witnessing of patients by caretakers. When patients receive care from caretakers, the exchange of care involves a practice of witnessing, whereby the caretakers not only listen to patients to provide physical care but also listen and engage with the patient's testimony to offer psychological support and create a space of trust through their openness to reception.

Section Five: Chapter Outlines

For the survivors of the 1971 war, listening was limited, and stories were silenced by the false witnessing committed by nations and individuals unwilling to acknowledge the *Muktijuddho* truthfully and further unwilling to accurately witness the victims of the war. In this narrative silence, *A Golden Age* emerges as a fictional account of the war to

discuss women's multidimensional identities. Anam narrates the life of Rehana Haque, a widowed mother who goes on a journey of self-discovery through the 1971 Liberation war. The novel begins before the violent events of the *Muktijuddho* and takes readers through the ups and downs of Rehana's personal life as a woman who loses her husband, children, and autonomy but must fight to regain her children and sense of self. Anam integrates several women's stories through a focus on Rehana, like that of Rehana's daughter Maya, Maya's friend Sharmeen, and Rehana's friends Mrs. Chowdhury, Mrs. Sengupta, and Mrs. Akram. In presenting multiple women's stories, Anam shifts her story out of the personal and into the national by portraying how the effects of the war impacted women from all walks of life beyond their domestic involvements. By tracing the history and birth of Bangladesh through women's social and private spaces in *A Golden Age*, I argue for a necessity to perform genuine and affective witnessing of victims of war. Additionally, I encourage readers to re-examine their roles in encountering narratives of war as secondary witnesses.

My thesis is divided into two parts. In Chapter One, I lay the foundation of how womanhood was constructed in Bangladesh during the war to establish women as a microcosm of the nation. I locate Rehana's identity as a woman within her roles as a widow, mother, family matriarch, and citizen. I examine Rehana's maternal role by analysing how the nation perceived women as mothers and how mothers themselves witnessed the war. This analysis considers their dual roles as providers, obligated to contribute their children to the nation, and as caregivers, expected to bear the loss of their children for the sake of the nation. I explore Rehana's relationality to other women and

her environment, alongside her affective responses. Additionally, I consider how the war created and witnessed the materialisation of distinct categories of women such as freedom fighters (*muktijoddhas*) and contrastingly, women subjected to sexual violations (*birangonas*). In exploring women's embodiment of the war, I refer to the ways women were understood symbolically to represent the nation and the way their bodies materially and corporeally bore the violence associated with the war. This latter depiction complicates and goes beyond the romanticized notion of women as the embodiment of the nation, revealing the limitations and devastating consequences of such symbolism through women's physical presence and experiences.

I begin Chapter Two by highlighting avenues of genuine witnessing in *A Golden Age,* especially through Rehana's character as a mother. I dive into the social pressures placed on Rehana and other women like Maya to underscore the complexities and need to be a genuine witness. I analyse Anam's use of fiction to identify the role of the secondary witness in witnessing testimonies of crisis by engaging with women's social, physical, and corporeal spaces. I inquire into women's private spaces during the war by examining Rehana's home *Shona* to present an alternative form of witnessing for readers: spatial witnessing. Spatial witnessing plays a critical role in facilitating possible genuine witnessing because it enables witnesses to learn about an event or experience through the physical environment and people's relation to such physical environments. The consideration of space in witnessing urges a more comprehensive exploration of testimony reception. Lastly, I expand on Saikia and Mookherjee's discussion of the *birangona* by evaluating how women's bodies embodied the war and became witness to

the processes of nation building. Further, I also explore the ways in which the nation witnessed women's bodies. Through this examination, I raise questions surrounding the tendencies of voyeuristic consumption of trauma in the practice of witnessing.

My paper's focus on the role of false witnesses and genuine witnesses tracks a greater attempt to highlight the need for communities to practice witnessing that is based in compassion rather than witnessing that preserves the subjective self. I aim to perform genuine witnessing by examining the role of fiction in creating possible avenues to access affective witnessing using characters and narrative setting to re-examine conventionally inaccessible experiences like emotional response and varying witness perspectives. My thesis is in conversation with the works produced by scholars examining gendered violence within South Asia like Saikia and Mookherjee, and by witness theory scholars like Oliver, LaCapra, Das, Laub, and Felman that discuss the essential role of witness in encountering, addressing, and remembering testimonies of crisis. By exploring the roles of the mother patriot, the sexless patriot, and the violated patriot, I aim to understand the efforts required to genuinely witness women impacted by war. This exploration challenges historical narratives perpetuating oppression and trauma, emphasising the transformative role of genuine witnessing in healing. Genuinely witnessing testimonies of crises provides actualization not only for those testifying, but also for witnesses who must bear the responsibility of learning, re-learning, and acknowledging truths that are often removed from the ordinary and thus difficult to face.

Chapter One

Section One: Bangladesh's False Witnessing of Womanhood

Throughout the 1971 Liberation War, liminal spaces were erected out of transgressed borders of social, physical, and corporeal female spaces. Liminality describes a transitional state or space where individuals or groups exist between two established states or identities (Thomassen 2, 4). Examples of this can be found in the social positionality of women as mothers during war, wherein women had to navigate between the realms of peacetime domesticity and the realities of warfare, while maintaining the characteristics of both an ideal mother and an ideal patriot. I begin extrapolating the forms of witnessing experienced by women during the war by examining the widowed mother figure through the central female character in *A Golden Age,* Rehana. Rehana exemplifies the complex identity negotiations that mothers underwent during the war, as they faced the prospect of their children being called upon to fight for a country that provided little in return to these mothers. Rehana is a microcosm of the nation at war because her journey as a widowed mother mirrors the larger national struggle for independence and sacrifice. Rehana's witnessing of the war reflects the nation's expectations of her as a mother and a woman, making apparent the contradictory demands of sacrifice and preservation required from Bangladeshi women, particularly mothers, during the *Muktijuddho*. I analyse Rehana's witnessing of the war by locating her social position as a widowed mother within a patriarchal society. Rehana's widowhood reveals women's contested social positions leading into the

Muktijuddho and further establishes the nation's false witnessing of women who fail to conform to an idealised version of womanhood.

The establishment of the ideal Bengali woman traces back to pre-colonial and colonial Bengal. In nineteenth-century literature and ethnographic research, the concept of an all-sacrificing wife and mother is prominent, and this ideology is crucial in upholding a womanhood that gives up the self for the family (Lamb 68; Chatterjee, "Colonialism" 629). Transitioning into colonial Bengal, the concept of an altruistic woman is extended through the *bhodromohila* ("bhodro" meaning well-mannered or gentle, and "mohila" meaning woman) who must be selfless not only for the family but also for the community (Bannerji 50). Under British rule, the civilising mission undertaken by Western women toward Bengali women consisted of a focus on enforcing "[self-criticism] within Bengali women [which] required them to break the habit of inertia and confinement and become more proactive" in philanthropy (Chatterjee, "Gazing" 90). Women's practice of philanthropy is characterised by a noble nature of giving, thus ingraining selflessness as a necessary characteristic within the ideal Bengali woman. The concept of a *bhodromohila* assimilated well into a patriarchal society because the idealised image of a dutiful, submissive, and selfless woman reinforced traditional gender roles, limited women's autonomy, perpetuated gender inequality, and acted as a social control mechanism. The imposition of pre-colonial gender-politics and colonial Western feminism into women's social and domestic spaces amounts to the longstanding war on Bengali womanhood. Postcolonial nationalism also complicates these ideals by reconsidering the role of women who fall outside the scope of traditional femininity by

challenging the limitations and stereotypes placed upon women (Chowdhury, "Feminism" 302). Ideals of selflessness and self-criticism burrow themselves into the construction of the ideal Bengali woman and hold women responsible for the continuous pursuit of an unattainable standard of performance that prioritises others over the self, perpetuating a sense of inadequacy and a constant need for conformity. The need to conform is characteristic of community constructions. The regulation of womanhood enables communities to exert control over women and maintain a patriarchal structure (Ivekovic and Mostov 12-13). Meanwhile perceiving communities as channels for indirect communication through higher authorities reinforces the subjugation of women within patriarchal ideologies (12-13). If the ideologies of obedient womanhood are consistent throughout different communities, the maintenance of a patriarchal society becomes easier, whereas non-conformity to the concept of an all-sacrificing woman threatens the establishment of a patriarchal society.

In Anam's novel, Rehana fails to completely conform to the social construction of a selfless woman because of her conflicted position as a widowed mother, a position that simultaneously alienates Rehana from and binds her to a patriarchal society. We learn of Rehana's contested positionality from 1959 following the death of her husband, Iqbal, and a lengthy legal battle for the custody of her children, Sohail, and Maya. Rehana's identity is initially bound between her widowhood and motherhood, leaving her transfixed within a narrow social position as a widowed mother. Rehana's brother-in-law provides insight into the way widowhood was conventionally viewed in East Pakistan during the 1950s through his admiration of Rehana because she "manage[d] to stay so

cheerful despite all [her] hardships" since there is "no fate worse for a woman" than "being a widow" (Anam 174). In West Bengal (present day eastern portion of India) widowhood historically confined women to seclusion, shame, and suffering, so much so that widowhood is viewed as a woman's failing (Munro et al. 44). The ideologies surrounding widowhood in West Bengal, India were shared by East Pakistan because of East Pakistan's previous status as a province of India before the partition. Rehana experiences alienation as a widow due to her community's dismissal and false witnessing of her, revealing the larger issue of Bengali society's distance from affective address. Addressing affect can force society to acknowledge their role in neglecting women, especially those in marginalized social positions like widowhood, by leading them to confront their complicity in neglecting and ostracizing women. Rehana's in-laws fail to respond to her trauma and fail to genuinely witness her by refusing to be an active and empathetic witness to Rehana's suffering and her socio-political position as a widowed mother. Rehana's sister-in-law, Parveen, exemplifies Bengali society's social distance from affective witnessing when she suggests Rehana needs to recover from her loss and Rehana responds by recognizing that grief and widowhood is viewed "as though it were an illness" (Anam 7). As a married woman, Parveen is removed from the realities of Rehana's grief, and instead of engaging in empathic unsettlement by leaving her place of comfort to meet Rehana at her position of vulnerability, Parveen retracts further into her subjectivity and creates a hierarchy between herself and Rehana. Parveen is unable to genuinely witness Rehana because acknowledging Rehana's status as a widow will force Parveen to acknowledge her own fate as a woman. Yet, Parveen's false witnessing of

Rehana cannot and does not protect her from the injustices endured by all women during the war.

Parveen and Faiz's refusal to witness the suffering and precarity Rehana endures causes her to feel a sense of failure as a wife and mother because she is only being judged and treated based on her new status as a widow. Rehana reaffirms the feelings of failure society imposes onto her by remembering her relationship with Iqbal through the lens of a patriarchal society. In doing so, Rehana continues to feel guilty because she is cognizant of her inability to meet the social expectations of an all-devoted wife even though she acknowledges her relationship with Iqbal did not fit the traditional husband-wife relation as outlined by a patriarchal society. Unlike a traditionally patriarchal husband, Iqbal, as Rehana notes, was devoted to her, demonstrated through his actions of leaving "slippers outside the bathroom door when she went to bathe. Pressing her feet with olive oil [and] speaking [to her] only in gentle tones" (Anam 6). Rehana and Iqbal were happy to exist within an unconventional marriage; however, Rehana recognizes society's presence within the home and marriage as she revisits the same happy memories and recalls that "everyone noticed" her unconventional relation with Iqbal (6). Society's dictation of womanhood within the domestic sphere reveals the alienation and critique of women who do not maintain an ideal womanhood. Additionally, it underscores the transgressions and interlinking of changing boundaries of domination and oppression within both domestic and social spheres. These transgressions and shifting boundaries of power play out in Rehana's personal life as she recalls that her brother-in-law criticised her for being a spoiled wife because Iqbal cared for her with devotion that is traditionally expected from

a wife instead (Anam 6). Such social critiques contribute to Rehana's identity formation as she adopts guilt as a baseline of operation.

Rehana feels responsible for Iqbal's death and blames herself. She remembers that she failed to perform acts of devotion and worship for Iqbal like burning chillies over his head or slaughtering a goat for him to keep him safe, and because "she hadn't done either, [...] he had died" (Anam 6). Although there is no cultural or religious practice of sacrificing animals for husbands in Islam and Bangladesh, Rehana exaggerates the practice of *Qurbani*[13], the act of sacrificing an animal for charity to honour the sacrifice the Prophet Abraham was prepared to make as he demonstrated devotion and submission to God, to demonstrate how society expects her to devote and submit herself to her husband. Rehana uses an extreme analogy to describe her reception to Iqbal's death because she has not processed his death and is made to feel like an inadequate wife by society. Rehana detests her widowhood and is made insecure by it because of the socially oppressive place it confines her to, evident as she refers to herself as a widow with impolite and insecure descriptors like "poor widow" and "stupid widow" (Anam 105, 135). Ultimately, Faiz and Parveen's insistence on defining Rehana and Iqbal's marriage and a refusal to empathically witness her, results in feelings of guilt, failure, and insecurity in Rehana's experience of loss. These emotions take precedence over and

13 *Qurbani* is mandatory for Muslims past the age of puberty who are eligible to pay *Zakat* (a religious obligation for all Muslims who meet the necessary criteria to donate a certain portion of their wealth each year to charitable causes), have a sound mind, and are financially capable. Children and the mentally vulnerable are not required to give *Qurbani*. The purpose of *Qurbani* is to distribute food to the less fortunate and celebrate the end of Ramadan, a religious observance of fasting practised by Muslims to demonstrate solidarity with the poor and needy who do not have access to food and welfare.

overshadow emotions more affirming of Rehana's grief, which would otherwise be separate from external pressures and expectations.

Rehana is traumatised by Iqbal's death and the task of processing his passing is complicated by the expectations of widowhood and motherhood thrust onto her by society. Drawing on Caruth's exploration of delayed and fragmented trauma, I posit that Rehana's grief and trauma of losing Iqbal and becoming a widow is amplified by society's expectations of her as a widow to grieve and take on the role of a widowed mother in certain ways. Caruth views trauma as a "moving and sorrowful *voice* that cries out, a voice that is paradoxically released *through the wound*"; however, Rehana's voice is not able to cry out and therefore address her wound of losing Iqbal because of society's dictation of how she can express her grief (Caruth 11). There is a relationality present in the process of working though traumas, and Rehana's relationality to her society and culture encloses her from accessing her grief and trauma productively. Moreover, due to the obstacles between Rehana and her ability to engage with her trauma, her past (trauma) amplifies and comes back in "repetitive actions" (Caruth 13). Such traumatic repetition is evident in Rehana's repeated monologues with Iqbal in which she shares her internal conflicts with him as if he were alive to listen and respond to her (Anam 3, 5, 7, 20, 269, 271, 273). Further, Rehana repeatedly returns to Iqbal's grave and attempts to perform the role of a devoted wife by planting flowers into his grave because "the sight of rotten flowers" makes her feel as though "she ha[s] somehow betrayed him" (19). While Rehana's trauma is informed by Iqbal's passing, her psychosomatic pain consists of more than just a loss of husband: it also consists of a fear of loss and alienation.

Rehana's trauma as a woman stems from her fear of losing her sense of belonging and identity, tied to her roles as a wife and mother. Rehana's fear of loss and alienation is evident in her description of Iqbal's passing. Rehana begins remembering Iqbal's death and how he fell to his knees but immediately directs her description to how he tried "searching for the pocket watch, as though he wanted to record the hour of his leaving her" (Anam 6). Rehana's shock or encounter with the unexpected is based on losing her social security as a married woman alongside her loss of Iqbal. Rehana's fear of loss and being alone is directly influenced by her social and gendered position as a woman. The influence of social and gendered realities is demonstrated as Rehana resumes her remembering of Iqbal's death but immediately shifts her focus from his passing to her widowhood, highlighting that she had "nothing to recommend her [and] no family nearby" (7). Further, the evidence of Rehana's trauma being informed by a fear of loss can be located through Rehana's family life before marrying Iqbal. Rehana recalls that she comes from an aristocratic family but lost her security as a daughter when her father lost all his fortunes (6). Rehana's father's loss of fortune impacts Rehana's identity formation to such a degree that she requests "her father to find her a husband with little ambition. Someone whose fortunes had nowhere to go" (7). Rehana has witnessed the realities of deprivation because it directly impacts her social position as a woman. As a woman, Rehana is dependent on others' approval of her, through social status, financial support, or protection. The loss of family fortune impacts Rehana intensely as she reveals very little of her family background except for her father's misfortune, remembering details of how her father "knock[ed] around the empty rooms [of their mansion], [with]

his foot-steps spelling defeat, as one truckload after another disappeared down the alley, bound for the coffers of the people to whom he owed money, or gold, or acres" (36). The repeated remembering of her father's loss conveys the reality of trauma based in loss. Rehana's distaste for her widowhood, as much as it is informed by her society and gender, is also a response to her past traumas surrounding loss because widowhood signifies a simultaneous loss of person and social position. Rehana continues to experience negative emotions of inadequacy and insecurity as she appears in court, attempting to prevent Faiz and Parveen from taking her children away due to their perception of her as an unfit mother.

Following Iqbal's death, the court falsely witnesses Rehana, and she loses custody of her children because she is a widow. The court refuses to acknowledge Rehana's social and gendered position as a widow and takes away her children against her perceived best efforts to protect them which retraumatizes her. Rehana is falsely witnessed because the court will not really listen to Rehana without money. The corrupt judicial system is highlighted by Rehana's lawyer when he pleads with her to "find some money. That is the only way…These bastards don't move without a little grease" (Anam 3). The importance of money resurfaces again when Rehana discloses that in order "to get the children back. [she] need[s] money. A lot of money. [she] need[s] money to bribe the judge" (136). While it can be argued that the judge ordered Rehana to be separated from her children based on actual incompetence to care for them, it is also true that the reality of needing to bribe a judge places the judge's ethical position into question.

During the court hearing, Rehana is up against her in-laws in her fight to keep Sohail and Maya. Rehana's in-laws influence the court's decision and again falsely witness Rehana as a widowed mother by convincing the court that Rehana is unfit to be a mother because after Iqbal's passing, Rehana took Sohail and Maya to watch *Cleopatra,* a movie unsuitable for children. Due to Faiz and Parveen's testimony of Rehana, the court rules that Rehana is "too young to take care of the children on her own. She [did] not [teach] them the proper lessons about [...] the afterlife" and so she must give them up (5). However, Rehana reveals that she had taken her children to watch *Cleopatra* because she wished to shield them from the knowledge of their father's death, so she keeps them home from school and takes them to watch a movie to keep their minds distracted (8). While showing the children *Cleopatra* exposes them to the shape of "Elizabeth Taylor's breasts," it also prevents them from being fully exposed to the death of their father (8). Rehana realises her practice of motherhood goes against traditional social expectations of socially prescribed parental duty, but intrinsically her actions prove to preserve the core values of motherhood situated in motherly love for her children. However, while the court and Rehana's in-laws acknowledge Rehana's duties as a widowed mother, they simultaneously refuse to acknowledge the social and affective limitations Rehana faces in her maintenance of both the duty of a guardian and motherly love. Rehana faces social limitations through her lack of financial and individual freedom as a widow. She is surrounded by judgement and given little help to overcome the structural barriers women, especially widows, face in acquiring financial and social autonomy and respect.

Rehana is falsely witnessed because of the court's disregard of her attempts to emotionally shield her children from the death of their father, combined with the court's unethical practice of taking bribes. The court's failure to ethically witness Rehana suggests that when Rehana conveys her situation "about [her] trauma [she is not] being truly heard or truly listened to" causing "the telling [to be] lived as a return of the trauma—a re-experiencing of the event itself" (Laub, *Testimony* 67). As a public and legal entity, the court represents witnessing that seeks out the most objective and comprehensible forms of truth; therefore, the court is legally bound to the ethical imperatives of truth-seeking above all else. However, this version of legalistic and patriarchal "truth" is often limited in its ability to account for the nuances in witness testimonies within specific socio-political settings where witnesses are not entirely able to speak the truth because they are oppressed by potential social or political backlash. Moreover, the court's decision to separate Rehana and her children is not based on ethical practices. The court falsely witnesses Rehana and expects her to perform the role of head of the house in title as she assumes the role of guardian with the passing of Iqbal without outlining possible avenues of government or communal financial aid — resources Rehana lacks as a woman who previously depended on Iqbal to be the family's guardian. In the Bangladeshi nuclear family, "guardianship is defined as the duty of males to provide for dependents" with the assumption that women are dependents that take on the role of caretaker extending to the husband, children, and extended family (Munro et al. 44-46; Chatterjee, "Colonialism" 622). Additionally, in the construction of nationhood, "the imagination of a social contract that would inaugurate the nation-state [sees] men as

heads of households— husbands and fathers— who [become] authorised to initiate the advent of the nation-state only after they [have] shown themselves capable of offering protection to women defined as 'their own women'" (Das, *Life and Words* 38). However, this narrow definition overlooks the contested position of widows who must assume the role of guardian while also maintaining the role of caretaker. Widows are guardians not only of the physical protection of their families, but also, through their primary role as caretaker, of the emotional wellbeing of their families. Thus, in assuming the role of guardian via widowhood, Rehana does not forfeit her role as caretaker to her children; instead, she takes on a dual role as both caretaker and provider. Yet, the court prioritises Rehana's role as a guardian in the patriarchal sense, which emphasises her need to care for her children financially and physically, instead of her role as a guardian as a widow in their ruling on Rehana's custody of her children. Moreover, Rehana faces affective limitations because she is overwhelmed with the emotional weight of having to be strong and nurturing as a guardian during a time of loss and grief. These affective limitations are heightened by the gendered expectations of mothers to suppress their own emotional and material needs for the needs of the children, leading Rehana to become detached from her own emotions of losing Iqbal and the affordances of their marriage.

The court rules that Rehana is unfit to be a mother, following its failure to address the constraints and emotional challenges Rehana faces as a widow. The court's decision instils Rehana with feelings of failure as she instinctively repeats that "[her] children are no longer [her] children" several times throughout her narration (Anam 3, 5). Rehana's repetition of this statement reveals Rehana's psychosomatic pain of losing her children

immediately after losing Iqbal. The court recognizes the impact of Rehana's loss by ruling that Rehana has not coped with "the death of her husband" (Anam 5). However, following this recognition, the court dismisses Rehana's position as a widowed mother and the nuances of loss and grief because the court is not required to perform affective witnessing that considers the witness's emotional response. While the court objectively provides Rehana with the space to grieve her husband, removing her children overlooks her limited social and personal identity as a widowed mother. As a widow, Rehana's identity is limited to the social performance of motherhood, and in losing Sohail and Maya, Rehana is stripped of her only social support system in her children to grieve the loss of her husband and is retraumatised by loss. Trauma is "a psychological wound [that] requires [...] recognition and identification," but the court does not acknowledge the emotional suffering Rehana endures through the loss of her husband, social position, and children (Karmakar 3). Instead, the court retraumatises Rehana by taking away her children without consideration of her social and gendered status as a widowed mother.

Rehana's experience with the court and her in-laws solidifies her fears of loss and inadequacy as she is labelled a bad mother and deprived of her children. In response, Rehana continues to operate within a mindset of trauma by repeatedly overprotecting her children to keep from losing them. Like society's influence over Rehana's role as a wife and widow, Rehana's role as a mother also becomes entangled with patriarchal criticism because of her complicated social position as a widowed mother. Due to feelings of failure and guilt as a widow, Rehana attempts to uphold herself as a selfless and sacrificing Bengali woman through her motherhood to keep membership in her

community which requires women to perform selflessness and sacrifice to prove their womanhood and gain inclusion within Bengali society. However, society interrupts Rehana's practice of motherhood by denying her genuine recognition as a widowed mother and, instead, placing expectations upon her to embody the ideal mother, all the while marginalizing her due to her widowhood. Rehana acknowledges that she needs to "overcome" her widowhood, "her grief, her poverty, her youth" to be a mother, even though it means "lov[ing] them all alone" (Anam 8). Rehana's recognition that she will have to love her children alone reveals the social neglect of widowed mothers in affective and material support. The court and Rehana's in-laws' false witnessing of Rehana retraumatizes Rehana and leads her to practise motherhood based on a fear of loss and inadequacy. Rehana's subjection to false witnessing restricts her abilities to genuinely witness herself and other women around her, turning Rehana into a false witness. For example, as I will highlight in Section Two, Rehana is unable to show empathy towards other mothers who have also lost their children and becomes distant from her friends and family due to the internal conflicts she faces trying to be an ideal woman and mother. Further, Rehana's experience of false witnessing as a widowed mother highlights the oppressive and contradictory relationship between society and women leading into the war.

Section Two: Mother as a False Witness

The *Muktijuddho* reveals the unjust treatment of women during processes of nation building because while women are conditioned to embody "the country itself in [their] image, or [invest] the ideal patriot with [their] qualities, or with the reconstruction

of feminine roles, […] duties, [and] the familial universe, by the nationalist enterprise," they are not regarded or treated as equal citizens of a patriarchal community (Sarkar, "Nationalist" 2011; Ivekovic and Mostov 9-11). Women are "considered *belonging* to the community as property, but not really constituting the community as autonomous subjects or as any essential part of it" (Ivekovic and Mostov 12). Subsequently, the nation alienates women because although "women reproduce the nation physically and symbolically," femininity is viewed as passive and as distinctly separate from the core identity of the nation, which is constructed by men through their role as active protectors of the nation (10-11). As such, women act out the identity of the nation in their roles, but do not receive recognition for it, leading to a simultaneous 'othering' from the nation. The conflict of identity and membership within womanhood is exemplified through the social space of motherhood. Mothers are a microcosm of the nation and reflect the contradictions and unfair relationship women have with the nation, especially one at war. They embody the nurturing aspect of the nation, symbolizing the ideal Bengali women in providing emotional and physical support to its citizens. However, they are also tasked with embodying the nation's sacrifices as they are forced to give up their children by sending them off to fight in war for the nation, symbolizing patriotism and selflessness for the community. The nation's contradictions are revealed as the burden of motherhood becomes heightened yet goes unrecognised. Women are expected to take on the traditional roles of caregiving but are stripped of the very people they are expected to care for, thus, marginalising their contributions and denying them the recognition, protection, and empowerment they deserve as members of a nation in shaping the nation's identity

and future. The nation's refusal to acknowledge the identity conflict mothers face as they are expected to simultaneously be active women and submissive patriots causes women to exist as passive, powerless, and vulnerable actors. Further, the nation's non-recognition of mothers' dual roles in the war results in mothers neglecting their own well-being and autonomy. To escape the fate of alienation, mothers attempt to exist within the boundaries of womanhood that recognizes them as subjects to be tolerated and protected by the nation. While social spaces like motherhood communicate women's passivity by demanding selflessness, and sacrifice from women, such social spaces also situate them as needing protection.

Rehana is engulfed by feelings of guilt at being an inadequate wife because of society's judgement of her and tries to disavow her grief by becoming distant from her emotions associated with her marriage to Iqbal and her role as a wife. Instead, she redirects her focus to her other identity as a mother. Rehana's false witnessing of herself as a widow exemplifies society's unjust treatment of mothers within the patriarchal framework. The patriarchal perspective relegates Rehana to a position of failed wife and mother, overlooking her social and gendered responsibilities and the inherent limitations she faces. Rehana internalises this false witnessing and does not refute it, amounting to false witnessing of herself. Consequently, she becomes emotionally detached from her own response to trauma, and distances herself from acknowledging affects such as grief. Nevertheless, Rehana's practice of motherhood is marred by unacknowledged feelings of grief and guilt. This is because she internalizes society's criticism of her as a wife and widow, and she forms her identity as a woman based on the disdain she endures for what

society perceives as her shortcomings as a wife and widow. Rehana attempts to redeem her failures as a woman within the scope of her marriage and motherhood by practising a form of motherhood that is selfless and sacrificial to regain membership in the nation and her society. Rehana repositions herself within the patriarchal narrative of womanhood by striving to be an ideal mother, practicing a selfless motherhood that prioritizes the needs and wants of the children over the mother. However, she avoids her emotional burdens because delving into her grief would demand a reassessment of her womanhood and entail challenging the norms of patriarchal society. Rehana does not find fulfilment in her practice of motherhood by removing herself from her emotions and situating herself as an ideal mother. This is because she is operating within trauma and further, the ideal motherhood she wants to practice is fundamentally impossible to realise.

As the court retraumatizes Rehana, it forecloses her ability for introspective encounter her trauma, leading her to falsely witness herself. Furthermore, her trauma is compounded when she tries to detach herself from her affective response. Rehana is compelled to sell the keepsakes that remind her of Iqbal to raise enough money to regain custody of Sohail and Maya and bring them back home. Rehana's unresolved and unacknowledged grief discloses itself when Rehana reluctantly prepares to sell Iqbal's car to earn money, but she reveals that she does not "want to see it go" (Anam 35). Although Rehana does not speak on this matter any further, the difficulty and weight of having to give up the physical reminders of Iqbal is made evident through the description of the driveway after the car is taken away. Iqbal's absence and the effect of Rehana's choice to sell the car haunts Rehana. She describes the aftermath of selling Iqbal's car by noting

that in place of the car, there is “only a dark oily stain in the middle of the driveway and four bare patches where the wheels had been” (35). The driveway, once occupied by Iqbal’s car, now stands empty and abandoned, holding the traces of the car’s – and Iqbal’s– absence. The “dark oily stain” left behind indicates the lingering presence of the vehicle, like a ghostly mark on the concrete, an eerie memory of what once stood there, symbolising Iqbal's memory. Likewise, the “four bare patches where the wheels had been” proves a stark contrast between a welcome reminder of her every day, physical life with Iqbal and a devastating reminder of his absence. The car’s absence produces feelings of emptiness and loss. These feelings solidify the effects of Rehana’s decision to sell the car and the erasure of Iqbal’s existence from Rehana’s surroundings.

Moreover, Rehana's abandonment of her own emotions and identity in pursuit of an idealized motherhood is exemplified when she relinquishes the last reminders of her connection to Iqbal and, consequently, her previous identity as a perceived failed wife. Rehana does not address her trauma; subsequently she becomes distant from her own affective responses and accepts that she failed as a wife and a mother without questioning it. Rehana only focuses her attention towards being a selfless mother and cuts off all connection to her previous memories and identities as a wife by “[pawning] the rest of her jewels: the sun-shaped locket and matching earrings, the ruby ring, a few gold chains” to get money to regain custody of Sohail and Maya (Anam 36). Rehana notes the symbolism of gold with marital status in Bengal, by stating that unmarried women were identified by their lack of gold jewellery (Anam 49). Alongside gold’s representation of a woman’s married status, gold also communicates a woman’s confinement within the role of a wife.

Mahua Sarkar cites Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain who "compares the gift of jewellery from a husband to his wife with chains of bondage" (Sarkar, *Visible Histories* 69). In this comparison, Hossain draws out the relationship of domesticity to oppression wherein the gift of gold becomes a transaction which asks women for compliance in return for companionship and celebration. Following the release of Hossain's statement, many women criticised her take on "women's complicity in their own subordination", stating that Hossain "wants to see wanton behaviour among women. Instead of womanly modesty, grace, gentleness, devotion, [and] the willingness to serve . . . [she] wants to see the development of a harsh, abnormal independence…" (Sarkar, *Visible Histories* 69). Hossain's statement and women's reception to her argument highlights the social presence of gender norms within the private choices of women's adornment. While adornments are a private choice, they can carry political and social symbolism because of patriarchal society's injection into the private domains of womanhood. Rehana gives up her memories of marriage to Iqbal and removes herself from her identity as a wife by selling her gold in search of independence because remaining attached to the memories of her marriage is overwhelming for Rehana due to her critical social setting. Selling the gold allows Rehana to shift her focus from the confining social and cultural expectations surrounding married and widowed womanhood to her children and her identity as a mother. Yet, it is important to note that for Rehana the bond to Iqbal is not confining, it is sustaining and a sign of mutual devotion, evident in her repeated monologues with Iqbal after his passing. Therein, Rehana is not attempting to escape Iqbal by selling her gold, as much as she is trying to escape the social sentiments surrounding widowed women and its

associated traumas enforced onto her through her association with wearing gold as a former wife. Rehana is overwhelmed by the trauma she endures when losing her husband and children, so she resorts to falsely witnessing herself by giving up her memories of Iqbal and distancing herself from her trauma to avoid having to confront her losses and its associated emotional effects. However, in distancing herself from Iqbal and her trauma, Rehana keeps herself from accessing her emotions related to loss and, once again, faces re-traumatization because she loses access to her fear of loss and grief that would otherwise allow her to work through her trauma. Without addressing one's trauma by confronting difficult emotions, one cannot move past their traumas because while the trauma becomes inaccessible it remains symptomatic.

Rehana tries to establish and justify her actions of trying to get her children back through a need to perform a selfless motherhood. However, her actions are driven by a need to assuage the loss rooted in her trauma of losing her social security as much as it is rooted in her losing her husband and children. This is exemplified through the hardships Rehana faces as she tries to earn enough money to regain custody of Sohail and Maya. Readers learn that because Rehana is "just a woman. Without a male guarantor, all the banks [turn her] down" (Anam 148). Rehana's isolated and unprotected position as a widow leads her to experience sexual violation. Under the pretext of loaning Rehana money, Mr. Qureishi, a money lender, sexually violates her which leads Rehana to realize she has no choice but to secure social protection through marriage because being a widow in the social world makes her vulnerable to exploitation (Anam 148). From Mrs. Chowdhury's advice, Rehana considers marrying a wealthy blind man, T. Ali. However,

while Rehana considers marrying T. Ali for social security, she ends up realizing the oppressive realities of marriage in a patriarchal society, a reality she did not face within her marriage to Iqbal. Rehana reasons that the marriage “has to be done. It [has] to be borne. It [isn’t] love, but it [isn’t] the worst thing that [can] happen” (Anam 152). Yet, these reasons are not enough to encourage Rehana to marry T. Ali. Marrying T. Ali means giving up her identity which Rehana emphasizes through Iqbal and motherhood. Rehana would have to give up her identity in favour of adopting his lifestyle and identity because T. Ali is consumed by the memories of his deceased wife, Rose, and expects Rose’s memories to be an equal part of the marriage with Rehana. Although marrying T. Ali is the sensible decision for a widow, it means Rehana has to lose more than she gains besides money. The contradictions in Rehana’s actions and thoughts signify the difficulty of deciding to remarry T. Ali. Rehana attempts to rationally convince herself to marry T. Ali; however, her actions of holding onto Rose’s hairbrush against T. Ali’s wishes, resulting in a tussle that breaks Rose’s belongings, communicates a stubbornness between her rational and desire (152). Rehana acknowledges the complexity of her situation by noting that she “[doesn’t] know why” she is refusing to comply with T. Ali (152). When T. Ali yells at Rehana to leave his house after Rose’s mirror shatters, Rehana departs and steals Rose’s jewellery box to take with her (153). The decision to steal T. Ali’s keepsakes weighs on Rehana as she returns home and “[sobs], and [cheers], and [sobs]” (153). Rehana is cognizant of the wrong she commits but she is simultaneously aware of the social security she achieves by stealing the jewellery which can be used to get her children back from the corrupt judicial system.

Rehana occupies a socially isolating position, initially as a wife who doesn't conform to traditional ideals and later as a widow. Subsequently, she attempts to adhere to the ideal of selfless Bengali womanhood through her motherhood to overcome her feelings of loss. However, the demands of motherhood during the *Muktijuddho* once again put her identity at risk of being overshadowed by loss. Rehana not only gives up her memories and identity related to Iqbal, but she also gives up her own autonomy and selfhood to be an ideal mother to her children and so become an accepted part of the nation by embodying its ideals. After Rehana regains custody of her children, she faces another identity negotiation because of the nation's demands of motherhood during war (Anam 15, 53, 55, 56). Rehana's false witnessing of herself and her subsequent attempts at being an ideal mother are not enough to protect her from the vulnerable and unjust relationship women have with the nation. With the onset of Operation Searchlight, the ideas of selfless womanhood enforced by traditions, colonialism, and society, reach their pinnacle through the national call for mothers to be selfless by giving up their children, homes, and identities to the cause of warfare. Although Rehana's identity is framed within her social role as a wife and mother, evident in the efforts Rehana goes through to regain her children, including giving up her own memories and affect, as well as stealing, society refuses to genuinely witness Rehana. Instead, society expects Rehana to refrain from addressing the emotional element of her nurturing role as a mother when they ask Rehana to give up her children to the war (Anam 153). Society is capable of witnessing Rehana through their reception and response to her as an individual and as a member of society. Further, society can witness Rehana by deciding how to document her

experiences within its cultural recognition of her as a woman, as a widow, and as a mother. Witnessing can extend from being an action of individual persons to the action of a society because of society's (communities, nations, cultures) role in perceiving, remembering, and responding to individuals and groups to create a collective memory that speaks for witnesses in their absence.

Rehana's role as a mother parallels her role as a symbol of the nation as she fiercely protects her children, nurtures their growth, and fights for their freedom, while neglecting her own needs and wants. However, the contradictions of motherhood as an embodied state of nationhood begin to come to light when Rehana's practice of motherhood is disrupted by Bangladesh's declaration of independence, which requires Rehana to sacrifice her children for the nation. The demands of war resurface Rehana's trauma of loss because she is once again threatened by the loss of her children. Rehana demonstrates the conflicting social roles of motherhood as she attempts to uphold both an ideal motherhood and ideal patriotism to preserve her identity and membership in the nation. Although Rehana's motherhood enforces an involvement within nationalism, Rehana confesses her identity as being separate from the Bangladesh nationalist cause stating that "she did not have the proper trappings of a nationalist" (Anam 47). She situates her otherness from the nation through her linguistic identity in relation to nation building. Unlike the Bengalis who defended Bangla with their bodies during the *Bhasha Andolon,* Rehana does not have any pull towards the fight for Bangla and in turn the fight for Bangladesh. Rehana loves Urdu, the language "of the enemy" and is not willing to give it up to fit the description of a Bengali nationalist (Anam 119). In response to her

children asking her to join the revolutionary efforts, Rehana realises she cannot accept the revolution if it means that she would have to "give up her love of Urdu, its lyrical lilts, its double meanings, its furrowed beat" as a rejection of Urdu would signal a rejection of her childhood and personal history tied to West Pakistan (Anam 47). Through her contemplation, Rehana realises she cannot become a "true revolutionary" if she cannot become fully Bengali and adopt its language, demonstrating her unwillingness to contribute to the construction of a national Bangladeshi identity and practise collective loyalty to the nation (Anam 47). Furthermore, the notion of a "true" fighter suggests that language directly informs one's relationship to the nation, and Rehana must forsake her own cultural identity for a Bengali national identity.

However, despite the distinction between Rehana's individual identity and the national identity born out of the war efforts, she finds herself compelled to sacrifice her own needs and desires to safeguard her children. Rehana recognizes the frailty of her motherhood against the backdrop of the nation's demands when the general election is cancelled leading to mass social unrest. During the protests, Rehana and her family become engulfed in the chaos while driving home. Rehana wants to "stay inside" the car, but against her wishes, Sohail and Maya become involved in the protest as the "people [knock] against the hood of the car. They [pound] the boot. [Bare] their teeth and [press] their faces against the glass" (Anam 41-42). This spatial dynamic serves as a metaphor for the intrusion of war into Rehana's life. Despite "telling herself she [is] still in charge, that nothing [will] be done without her consent," Rehana realises that the war has already seeped into her children's consciousness, exemplified by them "opening the window" to

the tumultuous events (Anam 41-42). Rehana's anxieties about losing her children and its related practices of motherhood to the war are solidified during a political speech calling Bangladeshi people to declare independence against West Pakistan. Rehana "[finds] herself at" a political speech declaring the unofficial independence of Bangladesh "despite her initial reluctance" because of her children's involvement in the national effort (Anam 49). This incident reveals the conflicts of Rehana's embodiment of the nation and her self-driven need to maintain a selfless motherhood. Rehana's distance from herself and her affect is evident when she gives up her own desires to such an extent that she becomes a part of the war against her own will. Subsequently, against Rehana's efforts, the *Muktijuddho* takes away her children, forcing her to experience loss again. At the speech, Rehana notices that her motherhood is secondary to the fatherhood of the nation, acknowledging that the children are "*His*. They [belong] to him now; they [are] his charge, his children. They [call] him father" (Anam 49).[14] Rehana's observation that her children now belong to the nation underscores the secondary status of her motherhood in the grander narrative of nationhood. This recognition deepens her understanding of the sacrifices she is expected to make as a mother during the *Muktijuddho*.

Increasingly, the social transgressions of war become evident within the family dynamics between Rehana and her children. As a man and now a child of the nation, Sohail represents the nation and repeatedly asks Rehana to sacrifice for him. Sohail's skewed relationship with Rehana reveals the lack of care and protection nationhood and

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14 The difference between women whose motherhood is equated with the body of the nation and men as protective fathers – i.e., property owners, governors – of the nation lies in the way women's motherhood is often associated with the physical and emotional sacrifice for the nation's well-being, whereas men's fatherhood is often linked to their role as property owners and authoritative figures governing the nation.

motherhood provides to women who are expected to be selfless mothers and patriots. However, due to an inability to escape the contested position of motherhood, Rehana continues falsely witnessing herself by ignoring her own emotions when Sohail asks her to save Sabeer, Sohail's lover's fiancé, who has been captured by the military. Following this request, Rehana begins to feel anger and acknowledges her anger instead of suppressing it. Sohail kneels "in front of" Rehana with "his hands [....] on her knees but she [can't] feel them," instead Sohail's voice feels like it is "coming from far away, under water, and hers was unnaturally loud when she said, 'You want me to offer to take Sabeer's place? Should they torture me instead of him? That's what you want?' Rehana could barely see Sohail anymore; he was a blur of hair and mouth" (Anam 168). This moment of anger is followed by an experience of shock, Rehana recognizes that "the feeling of injustice did not vanish" and asks Sohail if he is really "[asking her] to do this?" (Anam 168). Through this interaction, Rehana acknowledges the conflicts in her motherhood. Despite her anger and recognition of the injustice in her situation, Rehana remains entangled in the complex position of motherhood, divided between societal expectations and her own agency. Rehana's moment of affective recognition is short lived due to the complexities and contradictions of being a mother, so she reverts to practising a selfless motherhood that prioritises her children over herself, ultimately leading to a false witnessing of herself by overlooking her own conflicted feelings, as she admits that she is "as much a slave to" Sohail's demands as he is to his desires (Anam 170). This interaction highlights the gendered discrepancy in agency, wherein women, particularly mothers, were given limited autonomy in prioritising their desires, while men enjoyed

greater freedom to pursue their own desires. In continuing to act as an ideal mother, Rehana allows the war into her home because it gives her "another chance to atone. The years of slavish devotion, the mothering, the theft— she had always known they would not be enough. She could not help welcoming the prospect of some new sacrifice" (Anam 169). Rehana engages in patriotic practices not out of a selfless belief in the cause, but rather to fulfil her role as a devoted mother and to secure her position as a member of the nation, implying her allegiance, participation, or acceptance within the national community.[15]

Rehana becomes so involved in the war effort that she begins supporting and organising the rebel attacks against the West Pakistan military with her son and his friends. While Rehana guards the secret location of Sohail and his patriot friends, Aref and Joy, she is approached by Aref and Joy's mother who asks Rehana to deliver their favourite food to them. However, Rehana refuses because it might expose their operations (Anam 140). Rehana has an internal conflict as she maintains a cold and unaffected exterior but internally panics and wonders if their mother knows that Aref is dead. Following Rehana's reluctance to admit her knowledge of the boys, their mother pleads to Rehana by touching on her motherhood, imploring Rehana to remember that she is "a mother also" (140). Rehana ponders this request, agreeing that she is 'a mother. [...] A mother. Above all things, a mother. Not a widow, certainly not a wife," but she wonders "how many times [has] she repeated this very phrase to herself?" and showcases

15 Rehana wants to secure this position as a matter of pragmatic necessity and because she is drawn to identify with the narrative of motherhood.

awareness of the extent to which she integrates nationhood with motherhood (140). Rehana admits that her motherhood is an embodiment of the nation; she acknowledges that “now she [is] something else – a mother, yes, but not just of children. Mother of a different sort. This mother [knows] what it [is] to long for her children. But she also under[stands] the dangers of such longing” (Anam 140). This revelation highlights Rehana’s realisation that her motherhood expands beyond her children, and into the nurturing of a nation as well. Initially Rehana involves herself with the war because of her children's desire to be a part of the national war effort. Yet, following her repeated engagement with the war as both a mother and solely a woman, Rehana takes on a dutiful role towards the nation. Rehana acknowledges the dangers of longing for her children and is cognizant of her symbolic representation of the nation alongside the contradictions and failings of this embodiment. Rehana’s longing for her children and acting out on that longing can endanger her children and other individuals fighting for Bangladesh as its children. Further, this scene of introspection highlights the transformation Rehana goes through as a character. While Rehana is previously focused largely on her personal identity, she now recognizes and responds to the challenges of her national identity.

Although Rehana’s false witnessing of herself and other mothers is interrupted by a moment of affective unsettlement and realisation of the hypocrisies of nationhood and motherhood, she can’t overcome her failed witnessing because she doesn’t have any avenues to access genuine witnessing or recognise the possibility of genuine witnessing, either for herself or for other women. Consequently, the national atmosphere of false witnessing compels Rehana to persist in a narrow performance of patriotism, where her

focus remains limited to traditional ideals of womanhood. She also continues to act as a false witness to other women who attempt to challenge or draw attention to the contradictions and constraints inherent in representing the nation as a woman.

Section Three: False Witnessing the Other Woman

As a mother embodying the nation, Rehana stands up as witness to the complexities of wartime negotiations of female identity by becoming a devoted patriot; however, through this process, Rehana begins falsely witnessing other women that do not fit the ideal patriarchal standard of womanhood. Rehana's transformation from a reluctant widow and mother to an active participant in the *Muktijuddho* because of her children symbolises the nation's transformation and fight for autonomy and self-determination. The conflicting demands of nationhood become apparent through Rehana as her inner struggles related to motherhood reflect the nation's turmoil. This turmoil is partially expressed through gender ideologies as the nation strives to establish itself as an independent country. Further, as an obedient enactor of nationalist ideology, Rehana witnesses her children differently based on their gender. The contrast in Rehana’s treatment of Sohail and Maya is demonstrated through the sacrifices Rehana is willing to make for each child, both materially and affectively. Sohail's pleas to Rehana for assistance in the war prompt her to open her home to the extent that others perceive she has "[gives] up her house" for the nation (Anam 111). Rehana accepts this acknowledgment by remembering that she did it “out of love for her son” (Anam 111). While Rehana openly displays her love for Sohail by giving up her own home, comfort, and desires, she is not able to extend her love to Maya in the same way. Instead, Rehana

thrusts her false witnessing onto Maya because as another woman, Maya provides Rehana with a physical site on which to act out her internal struggles and negotiations with womanhood.

Maya is invested in the war efforts like her brother; however, unlike Sohail who pursues the war as an extension of his patriarchally dominant social position, Maya is eager to join the war to escape the limitations inherent in womanhood. Maya takes every opportunity to assert herself within the national discourse. For example, when Maya is not on campus during the Operation Searchlight attack, she feels "vaguely irritated she'd missed everything. All her friends [have] stories of that night, and, while she [keeps] saying, 'Good thing I wasn't on campus,' there [is] a slight regret at having been side-lined. She [wants] some mark, some sign, that the thing [has] happened to her. A bruise on the cheek. A tear in her blouse" (Anam 71). Maya's desire for a physical "mark" or "sign" like a bruise or tear on her blouse symbolises her yearning to be directly affected by the war, as though these visible scars can grant her a more significant role and a tangible connection to the nation and war. While Maya's reasons to involve herself in the war are initially dictated by self-interested motives, following her friend Sharmeen's rape and death, Maya becomes invested in the war to fight for women's causes at large. In doing so, Maya represents the patriotic women trying to find and propel women's agency in the everyday. While women like Rehana are subjected to oppressive social expectations and forced to remain within them, characters like Maya showcase the progressive women's social movements in Bangladesh during the latter half of the twentieth century, when "both literature and language became a space and tool for

activism and socio-political thinking in Bengal" and women began taking on more active roles in reform for women's issues (Chatterjee, "Gazing" 90-91). Like Rehana, Maya does not physically partake in the active warfare of the *Muktijuddho,* but still becomes a *Mukti Bahini.* A *Mukti Bahini* is defined by the Bangladesh government as "a person who has participated/assisted in the Liberation War of Bangladesh acting to the country's independence between March 26, 1971, and December 16, 1971" (Hafsa 1). Maya's position within the novel allows an insight into the role and witnessing of patriotic women during the war who practise patriotism both in the conventional sense of supporting the nation and as a form of patriotism coded in support of women's liberation.

The defence of patriarchal communities was met with resistance during the twentieth century leading up to the Pakistan and Bangladesh partition. Feminist writers began critiquing the idea of the *Bhodromohila* and put out a literary and social call for Muslim Bengali women to break free from the ideals of selfless womanhood and become proactive in becoming independent and capable within their own right. Feminist writers like Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain published social critiques on women's issues during the early twentieth century, urging women to be "able and willing to take on any job or task, and not [be] confined to ascribed feminine roles" while also recognizing that women will always be discriminated against within Bengali society so long as their identity of womanhood is only linked to the domestic space (Azim and Hasan 110). Leading into the *Muktijuddho,* the social construction of womanhood faced contestation by conflicting patriarchal and feminist ideologies and with the onset of the *Muktijuddho,* the division of ideals surrounding womanhood became further solidified. While some social categories

of women like the *Mukti Bahinis* were able to advance towards feminist modes of womanhood in society, women like Rehana who belonged to the traditional social space of motherhood were limited by the patriarchal demands of womanhood. However, although Maya takes on the role of a patriotic woman who rejects the ideal Bengali womanhood governed by silence and selflessness, her proactive position does not protect her from the unfair nationalist treatment of women. The unfair nationalist treatment of patriotic women like Maya can be extrapolated from Rehana's witnessing of Maya because Rehana witnesses Maya through the patriarchal lens of the nation as an embodiment of the nation.

Rehana enforces her own false witnessing onto Maya because she wants Maya to practise being an ideal selfless woman like herself. Moreover, Rehana expects Maya to perform an idealised form of womanhood to justify her own sacrifices as a mother. Through this thinking, the ideal Bengali woman is identified as selfless and is juxtaposed and justified by the opposing selfish fallen woman who is un-sacrificing and does not contribute to society or family as defined by traditional gender ideologies. The mother-daughter conflict is visible when Rehana situates Maya as belonging outside of femininity and womanhood when she walks in on Maya, Sharmeen, Sohail, and his friends' discussing politics. Rehana feels "awkward, like she had stumbled into the Men Only room at the Gymkhana" (Anam 47). Rehana's perception of the meeting reveals her views of the domain of political discussions as male-dominated and outside the traditional bounds of femininity. Her feeling of awkwardness when witnessing Maya and Sharmeen engaging in politics reflects the societal expectations and gender norms that limit

women's participation in such matters. Maya's presence challenges Rehana's perception of conventional gender roles and offers insight into Rehana's perspective on gender dynamics and identity. Further, there is a mother-daughter conflict because while Maya tries to be a patriot like Sohail, there is a distinctly different expectation on her as a woman than on Sohail as a man. Rehana is more critical of Maya than she is of Sohail. In fact, Rehana compares Sohail to herself and refuses to see herself in Maya (Anam 34). This is due to Rehana's false belief that she can be protected from social judgement and marginalisation if she becomes an ideal woman and positions herself in proximity to the dominant patriarchal ideologies while remaining distant from the realities of her womanhood and femininity.

Rehana's false witnessing of Maya reveals how the nation viewed female patriots, or women removed from the domestic sphere, as flawed. Rehana describes Maya's involvement in the war via writing for women's causes by stating that "the ideas [are] like an affliction; they [have] taken her over so completely she [has] even changed physically: suddenly the angles of her face [have] moved, sharpened, so that she [is] no longer young, or even pretty. And she [wears] only widow's white, which always [feels] to Rehana like an insult" (Anam 76). Rehana's description of Maya's face as "sharpened" reflects the toll Sharmeen's death and her role as a *Mutki Bahini* has taken on her appearance. Simultaneously, such a description removes emotions from the female patriot or self-serving woman. The changes of Maya's features serve as a metaphor for the societal perception that women who venture outside the traditional domestic sphere and engage in pursuits related to patriotism or advocacy for women's rights are somehow flawed or

diminished, losing their youthful charm and attractiveness in the eyes of society. Additionally, Rehana's false witnessing of Maya is evident through Rehana's assumption that Maya's heart is "locked" simply because she refuses to abide by the same standards of womanhood that Rehana operates within (Anam 126). Namely, a womanhood that also distances itself from affect to continue functioning as an ideal vessel of patriarchy. Maya shuts herself off because of her friend's rape and death which supports the idea that Maya's heart is "locked". However, Maya's heart is locked not only because she is cold-hearted out of spite or a lack of care as Rehana assumes, but because of the trauma of losing her friend. Rehana is unable to affectively witness Maya and her trauma of loss because she is unable to see anything outside of her subjectivity. Rehana's subjective biases as a widow are revealed as she states that Maya's choice to transform herself following Sharmeen's death by wearing "only widow's white, [...] [feels] to Rehana like an insult" (Anam 76). Maya's use of white serves as both an expression of genuine mourning for Sharmeen and a resistance to the expectations imposed by Maya's womanhood. This resistance challenges Rehana's experience of womanhood since, for Rehana, the colour white is closely linked to widowhood, and consequently, wearing white signifies a status that is earned through enduring suffering. As well, Maya's choice to wear widow's white, typically associated with mourning and loss, demonstrates her removal from societal gender norms enforced onto a single, young woman such as herself. Rehana disapproves of Maya's departure from traditional gender norms and views it as disrespectful. Nevertheless, at the core of Maya's decision to wear white is an attempt to partake in a form of aesthetic cleansing to grieve her friend. With this change,

Maya reclaims the colour white as a woman and wears the colour with pride rather than shame because it is an expression of grief, not of oppression. Further, by deciding to wear white to mourn Sharmeen, Maya subscribes to the feminist movement ideologies that advocate for women's agency and parting from traditional gender norms. While Maya previously "swallowed, like sugar, every idea passed to her by the party elders. *Uprising. Revolution*," she now challenges social and national ideologies and actively fights against women's oppression by writing newspaper columns on women's violations in the war (Anam 34). This shift from blind compliance to critical engagement signals Maya's personal growth as a character as she begins forming her own identity separate from the one prescribed to female *Mukti Bahinis* like her.

The patriotic woman figure reveals the oppressive bounds of womanhood because of the comparisons made between non-conventional femininity and masculinity. Rehana's focus on Maya's change as a *Mukti Bahini* is confined to physical descriptions of Maya. Moving from her disappointments in Maya's facial peculiarity, Rehana begins to describe Maya's appearance following her involvement in the war efforts, nothing that:

> [Maya has] only two remnants of a gentler self: the thick braid that [snakes] down her back like a swollen, black river, and her singing voice. Both [have] escaped being sacrificed. She often threaten[s] her mother with photographs of women with short hair, the bob that [stares] out of magazine covers, the boy-cut some of her friends [have] dared to ask for at the parlour. But somehow, despite the threats, she [has] never lopped off the hair that so definitively identifie[s] her as Rehana's daughter, in its shine and its straightness, in its dark blue hue, its

> thickness and weight. Rehana […] even [catches] Maya caring for her hair, combing or massaging it with coconut oil, though if she herself ever offered to help she [is] met with a withering stare and a short 'nothing doing'. (Anam 76)

Rehana's attention to Maya's potential sacrifice of her long braid and her fascination with modern hairstyles expose society's expectation that women engaged in unconventional or non-traditional roles, like being a *Mukti Bahini*, should forego elements of their femininity and adopt more masculine attributes. By reducing their identities to physical descriptions and comparing them to traditional masculine traits, society overlooks and devalues the complexity and significance of women's involvement in the war, perpetuating gender stereotypes and reinforcing the unequal power dynamics between men and women during times of conflict. However, Maya constructs her passive revolution and engages in "self-making" by drawing distance from her physical attributes, thereby rejecting conventions of femininity (Bannerji 50). Maya's transition reveals that the realm of patriotic womanhood is characterised by a sense of sexlessness and an absence of traditional femininity.

This characteristic is highlighted by Anam through the ambiguity surrounding Maya's sexuality. While Sohail is given a lover and partakes in a romantic arc, Maya's narrative is limited within her patriotism and relationship to Sharmeen. At times, Maya appears to step out of her heteronormative gender identity, evident when she exclaims that she loves Sharmeen following Sharmeen's passing. Maya's expression of grief mirrors masculine approaches to grief. Maya declares that she "loved [Sharmeen] so much!" and tries to "keep from crying [but] her chin [shakes], and she [keeps]

swallowing and pressing her lips together," realizing that "[she has] to do something. It's so unfair" (Anam 126). Maya's grief and anger transform to a desire for active action instead of passive acceptance. Maya's grief reflects conventionally masculine approaches to emotional experiences, whereby she declares her profound love for Sharmeen and attempts to control her emotions by holding back tears and clenching her jaw to restrict her emotional expression like men are traditionally taught to do. Her later transformation from anger to a proactive desire for action contrasts with traditional expectations of women's emotional expression because women are often taught to remain within their emotional experiences and not manifest them into action. Conversely, men are taught to express anger through protective and assertive behaviours. In response to Maya's intimacy and loss, Rehana replies with a nod and nothing more. Through Maya's character, Anam reveals the nation's oppressive view of women who did not partake in domestic responsibilities of womanhood, and she points to the gendered alienation of women who exist outside of an idealised femininity. If women want to be recognized as part of the nation, they need to reject their identity as individuals and practise a patriarchally idealised womanhood constructed by oppressive narratives. Rehana's false witnessing of Maya and by extension the nation's false witnessing of Maya, reveals the particularly severe oppressive forms of witnessing women are subjected to who do not belong to an idealised vision of womanhood. In trying to hold on to the ideal form of womanhood, Rehana loses her connection to Maya. Regardless, Rehana continues practising false witnessing because her social position as a widowed mother prohibits her

from engaging in genuine witnessing without confronting her own internalised oppression and adherence to cultural conditioning.

Rehana attempts to preserve her 'self' by falsely witnessing others. Yet, when other women such as Mrs. Supriya Sengupta also look to preserve themselves without, however, engaging in false witnessing of the self or others, they challenge Rehana's ideologies of womanhood. Rehana's relationship with her friend and tenant Mrs. Supriya Sengupta shows how removed Rehana is from her affect and the ways in which Rehana's own false witnessing affects her witnessing of other women. Supriya operates from within similar ideologies of womanhood as Maya and is introduced as "[not appearing] to need looking after" (Anam 37). In fact, when Rehana meets Supriya, "she [is seen] writing a novel [because] she [wants] to be just like Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain [author of] *Sultana's Dream*" (37). Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, a renowned Muslim feminist writer, wrote *Sultana's Dream* (1905) as a feminist utopia. In this progressive feminist narrative, the protagonist Sultana wakes up in a world called Ladyland, where women govern the country and handle all social matters, while men are relegated to domestic duties (Hossain 3). This story reflects Hossain's vision of an empowered female-centric society, contrasting sharply with the prevailing system sought during India's fight for independence. Supriya's interest in Hossain's work reveals her desire for womanhood that is not restricted to patriarchal ideals, but rather one that prioritises women. Supriya's desire for agency materialises in her lifestyle. Despite being a woman in the 1970s, Supriya knows how to operate a car and owns a 1959 Skoda Octavia (Anam 43). Supriya's character presents a stark contrast to Rehana who does not drive and does not

own a car. Instead, Rehana relies on public transportation like rickshaws for transport (Anam 3, 4, 5, 18, 25, 63-64, 80). The difference in material mobility reflects the level of symbolic mobility and agency Supriya and Rehana have as women.

Supriya's decision to abandon her husband to save herself reflects a form of womanhood that stands in contrast to the ideal Bengali image of the selfless, devoted mother and wife. Following the worst of the war, Rehana finds Supriya at a refugee camp where, after days of silence and in a post-traumatic state, Supriya reveals to Rehana that she "left [her husband] and ran into the pond" after the West Pakistani military shot is "convinced" that Supriya's separation from her family is "a matter of being lost" (Anam 232). However, when Supriya reveals the reason behind her separation from her family, Rehana is pushed into a state of shock. Supriya's confession of self-preservation over selflessness challenges the conventional notions of womanhood. Rehana's initial dismissal of Supriya's actions as being "lost" highlights her inability to fully comprehend the complexities of Supriya's decision and emotional turmoil. Rehana becomes empathically unsettled and "[can't] bear to see any more" of Supriya (232). Rehana's witnessing of Supriya reveals a missed opportunity to be a genuine witness. Rehana retreats from her emotions of discomfort of learning about Supriya's experience to protect her fragile sense of womanhood instead of acknowledging and engaging in empathic unsettlement. Empathic unsettlement is a fundamental part of genuine witnessing because it requires being present, being affectable, and being able to be responsive to what is being communicated. Rehana does not uphold any of these practices and forfeits the opportunity to genuinely witness Supriya due to her inability to withstand her discomfort

at learning about the kind of woman Supriya represents. Rehana dissociates because she is unable to withstand her own empathic unsettlement, which hinders her ability to genuinely witness and understand Supriya's experiences. Although Rehana becomes a false witness on many occasions, her false witnessing of herself and other women, as we will see, is interrupted through moments of emotional awareness which leads to a practice of genuine witnessing.

Chapter Two

Section One: The Possibility of Genuine Witnessing Through Fiction

In locating avenues of genuine witnessing in *A Golden Age,* I do not seek to establish an absolute truth or knowing, but rather I hope to employ fictional narrative as an avenue into extrapolating potential pathways of genuine witnessing. My objective is to acknowledge the varying layers within the act of witnessing and redirect its path towards alternative modes of reception, such as genuine, affective, and spatial witnessing. In this context, fiction acts as a bridge between the imagined and real-world practices of genuine witnessing in settings of conflict or oppression by serving as an intermediary between the complexities of human experience and narration. Readers can gain insight into characters' affective and spatial witnessing through fiction to then seek possibilities of practising genuine witnessing in the real world. Furthermore, fiction invites readers to genuinely witness characters – like Rehana, who demonstrates the impossibility of embodying the nation and its conflicted ideologies – to imagine how Bangladesh as a nation can begin to genuinely witness women's war experiences at large. I begin the exploration of genuine witnessing by outlining the characteristics and practice of genuine witnessing.

Genuine witnessing is not an end point of being. Rather, it is a process of practising empathic and ethical responses that withstand empathic unsettlement. Empathic unsettlement, as previously expressed, requires being present, being affectable, and being responsive to what is being communicated. However, communication is not always verbally accessible in the context of trauma because of the overwhelming characteristic of psychosomatic pain that can limit memory access and verbal expression. In these instances of linguistic limitations, genuine witnessing can be performed using differing forms of engagement such as affective witnessing, empathic engagement and relational, or spatial witnessing – accessing testimonies via spaces in its relation to people. From this understanding of genuine witnessing and non-verbal modes of witnessing, I fuse ideas of affect into genuine witnessing to refer to a kind of genuine affective witnessing. Genuine affective witnessing is a practice of active engagement that prioritises empathic and ethical address and response to another's experiences using contextualization that addresses relationality, emotion, socio-historic, and linguistic exchange. The complication of genuine affective witnessing is in the nuances of recognizing how to approach affective witnessing without presuming to know another or their feelings completely. I suggest approaching this dilemma through a practice of humility, self-awareness (of subjectivity), and self-reflection. While access to such personal practices of affect is not easily traceable in the real world, fiction allows access to personal affect via inter monologue, character development, and settings that convey messages and metaphors that are traditionally hard to locate. Intrinsically, humans cannot be without subjectivity; thus, genuine affective witnessing stands out as a process of trying to converse and learn in

places where exchange and comprehension of knowledge is restricted or left previously barren. Looking to the concept and practice of genuine affective witnessing, I revisit Rehana's false witnessing of herself and the women around her. While Rehana initially falls victim to practices of false witnessing, her causes for false witnessing are rooted in a trauma-based lack of affective response and a subsequent foreclosure of address both from herself and her environment. Rehana's false witnessing is interrupted by moments of genuine affective witnessing presented to her by other characters and the setting of her home.

I return to Rehana's relationship with Maya and Supriya through a focus on character perspectives in fiction to open avenues of possible genuine affective witnessing. Rehana's reception of Maya can be characterised as limited, evident through Rehana's witnessing of Maya during Sharmeen's disappearance. Two weeks after Sharmeen's disappearance and Maya's sustained silence about the event, Rehana continues to be occupied with her own subjective biases as she wonders "if she [can] help loving one child better. She [has] a blunt, tired love for her daughter. It [is] full of effort. Sohail [is] her first-born, and so tender, and Maya [is] so hard, all sympathy worked out of her by the throaty chants of the street march, the pitch of the slogan" (Anam 75). Rehana is empathically removed from Maya because of her biases surrounding womanhood. Rehana views Maya as existing outside of the ideal woman role because Maya pursues a patriotic identity over a selfless identity rooted in domesticity. In exploring witnessing and caregiving in Rehana and Maya's relationship, it is crucial to note Rehana's awareness of her positionality as a mother being at odds with Maya's role as both a

daughter and an individual. While Rehana maintains her position as a devoted mother, she also fears that she becomes Maya's oppressor because she cannot truly witness Maya unconditionally as an independent agent with her own thoughts and feelings. Instead, Rehana witnesses Maya with a self-driven need to maintain her power as a mother, a need in which her love for her children is tangled up with and shaped by society's ideals of motherhood. The conflict between Rehana and Maya arises at least in part from their parent-child intimacy and their mutual need for the other to be the one that mitigates and listens to the other's pains and suffering. Maya is repeatedly given less leniency in self-expression and freedom in comparison to her brother, Sohail. However, both Rehana and Maya ultimately engage in genuine affective witnessing as will be examined further. This leads Maya to open the possibility of address between Rehana and herself and enables Rehana to realise her unfairness towards Maya.

Anam uses the women in Rehana's life to illustrate possible practices of genuine affective witnessing in place of false witnessing using varying character perspectives. After Sharmeen's disappearance and Rehana's fallout with Maya, Rehana hopes that Mrs. Chowdhury will offer a space of genuine affective witnessing by listening to Rehana in her time of need. However, Mrs. Chowdhury, also stricken by the war and affected by repeated misfortunes, fails to genuinely witness Rehana during her visit because of her own lack of mental fortitude to withstand pessimism. Mrs. Chowdhury previously acts as a genuine witness for Rehana by being there for her during difficult times and encouraging her to stay strong while simultaneously offering her comfort. For example, in the past, Mrs. Chowdhury practises genuine witnessing when Rehana loses custody of her

children. Mrs. Chowdhury encourages Rehana to build *Shona* so she can rent it and make a living for herself (Anam 16). This is a significant display of genuine witnessing for Rehana because Mrs. Chowdhury is the only person who acknowledges Rehana's compromised situation as a widow by acknowledging her need to make money – a reality that is overlooked by others like Rehana's in-laws who are more focused on Rehana's status as a widow rather than how she can overcome the difficulties of widowhood. Mrs. Chowdhury guides Rehana during a time when she is alone and without guidance by encouraging her to build and rent *Shona.* While Mrs. Chowdhury acts as a genuine witness in the past, presently Mrs. Chowdhury is unable to extend herself to Rehana in a meaningful way because of her own shortcomings. Instead, when Rehana goes to Mrs. Chowdhury after the bombings and Maya's disappearance, Mrs. Chowdhury fails to acknowledge Rehana's worries and dismisses them as "nonsense," a response that does not "comfort Rehana" (Anam 83). In their exchange, Rehana notes Mrs. Chowdhury's fingers "which [are] heavy with generations of gold rings" when she goes to her to talk (Anam 83). This observation reveals the weight of generational expectations on Mrs. Chowdhury, whose husband leaves her as a single mother because she failed to give birth to a son (Anam 9). Gold's symbolism is once again highlighted to recognize the gender expectations Mrs. Chowdhury is restricted by, such as the expectation to bear the right kind of children or withstand familial isolation and, therefore, a part of her social identity. During this moment of false witnessing on Mrs. Chowdhury's part, Rehana hopes for a genuine witness in Mrs. Chowdhury. Although Mrs. Chowdhury is unaware of such an expectation, Rehana's desire is expressed through her internal narration, accessible only

to Rehana and the readers. Before her interaction with Mrs. Chowdhury, Rehana notes that she can go to Mrs Chowdhury with her troubles and Mrs Chowdhury "[will] [hold] her hands and [tell] her it [will] all be put right, like she used to," revealing Rehana's view of Mrs. Chowdhury as someone who is open and receptive (Anam 82). Mrs Chowdhury is not always a genuine affective witness and reassurance is not the only criterion for genuine affective witnessing. However, for a character like Rehana who has been constantly shut down in affective response, a potential reassuring response from Mrs. Chowdhury can be a significant step away from false witnessing and into a mode of witnessing that is empathetic and genuine. In this instance, listening and response becomes highlighted as the most immediate form of genuine affective witnessing. However, without the use of ethical and empathic consideration to address as well as respond, listening and response becomes limited. While Mrs. Chowdhury fails to genuinely witness Rehana, her past ability to be there for Rehana allows readers to see the possible ways that Mrs. Chowdhury could have been a genuine witness for Rehana according to Rehana's own needs.

Similar to Rehana's relationship with Mrs. Chowdhury, her relationships with Mrs. Akram and Mrs. Rahman also showcase the potential for possibilities of genuine affective witnessing when these two women encourage Rehana to confront her biases and subjectivity while witnessing Maya. After Rehana shares that she slapped Maya for viewing her as unpatriotic and justifies her actions by saying that she "couldn't help it, [she] just did it. [Maya's] out of control," Mrs. Akram and Mrs. Rahman exchange "cautious looks" (Anam 93). They remind Rehana that although Maya "hasn't exactly

been easy" Rehana too has been "unforgiving of Maya" (93). Rehana is visibly unsettled by this statement as she repeats "unforgiving? Me?" and states that she is "only one person – [she has] to do every- thing – is it possible, humanly possible? But she [knows] they [are] right. The knowledge burned inside her, but she [can't] bring herself to say it. You're right" (93). This moment of empathic unsettlement leads Rehana to consider her own subjectivity when witnessing Maya because instead of distancing herself from the discomfort of this confrontation, Rehana accepts it. However, Rehana and Maya do not have an emotional understanding of each other due to their past interactions of false witnessing. Although Rehana realises her failures, she loses her connection to Maya evident as she waits for Maya to reach out to her during their moments of silence, rather than addressing her own feelings with Maya. Further, Rehana is only able to reach a point of self-determination through genuine witnessing when she begins to accept her emotions and acknowledge them with others. Although Rehana partakes in false witnessing of herself and the women in her life, fiction presents Rehana with a chance to perform genuine witnessing by creating openings for characters like Rehana to confront mistakes and learn to respond differently. This is because fiction enables Rehana to be repeatedly confronted with the truth of her negotiations as a woman and the consequential false witnessing inherent in embodying the nation as a woman. Without her daughter and friends, Rehana's practice of an ideal and selfless womanhood becomes limited.

Readers learn that Rehana's neglect of affect strips her of fulfilment and leads to feelings of loss through her inner monologue. Rehana acknowledges her feelings of guilt for failing to get through to Maya and being empathetic to her daughter's experience with

loss and dissimilarities with herself. The emotional weight of being distant from Maya impacts Rehana to such a degree that she "[can't] sleep. She [thinks] she [hears] Maya in the other room. Ma! she [is] saying, I forgive you! I forgive you! Rehana [leaps] out of bed, [runs] to Maya's room…" (Anam 113). Rehana's guilt pushes her to action, partly because her guilt is reflected in her relationship with her children and her guilt directly contradicts her desire to be an emotionally available mother. In this instance, the presence of love is also highlighted. While previously Rehana's love for her children is intertwined with a need to be an ideal mother, in recognizing the limitations with the ideologies surrounding an ideal motherhood, Rehana's love for her children becomes separated from ulterior motives. Rehana's practice of an idealised motherhood reveals the contradictions of said idealised motherhood during national warfare because it does not allow the witnessing of affect and operates under the assumption that women can operate to nurture an emotionally localised domestic sphere without emotion. The role of affect in creating avenues of genuine witnessing is evident when Maya acknowledges her feelings in relation to Rehana. Maya declares she is "always worried about" Rehana, to which Rehana feels "surprised to hear the words, but realise[s] they must be true, and here it [is], the thing she had been looking for, a small window into her daughter's locked heart" (Anam 126). This interaction reveals the need to address and respond when witnessing to make communication accessible and comprehensible for both parties.

In the same way that Rehana's affective engagement creates a possibility for genuine affective witnessing, affect allows Rehana to reassess and re-witness her friend Supriya. After Rehana initially loses Supriya due to her false witnessing, in response to

which she distances herself from Supriya for weeks, Rehana realises that “home [makes] her think of Mrs. Sengupta” (Anam 233). Although Rehana's affective realisation is based on her own needs, this leads to a reconsideration of Rehana’s social position which is based on the inquiry of why Supriya reminds Rehana of home. By acknowledging affects such as belonging and nostalgia, Rehana can consider the affective counters she is feeling, namely loneliness and loss, as she is separated from her friend due to the maintenance of a social ideology. Thus, through emotional engagement Rehana gains proximity to a potential practice of genuine affective witnessing that allows her to re-examine her priorities of self and others.

Section Two: Spatial Witnessing Through Shona

Fiction allows insight into the possibilities of genuinely witnessing history and people through atypical modes of address like spatial witnessing. The home, as a space of encounter, presents an alternative entry into genuine witnessing and exposes readers to Rehana’s contested position as a mother. Spatial witnessing is the act of experiencing or perceiving events, such as conflicts, through the lens of physical spaces in which they occur. Through spatial witnessing the physical world or other physical spaces like bodies become mediums for registering, comprehending, and responding to events. I use spatial witnessing to address genuine witnessing in war and conflict settings because spaces can be witness to the violences of war that occurs beyond the battlefield. As such, spatial witnessing addresses how women experienced the war within the confines of their homes and their bodies, making women’s spaces witnesses to the impact of war violence. Using Rehana’s home, *Shona,* I hope to aid in the interpretation of the impact of the war and its

violence on women and women's spaces. Through *Shona,* readers can locate avenues of genuinely witnessing Rehana and her trauma. Cathy Caruth states that trauma "is much more than a pathology, or the simple illness of a wounded psyche: it is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available" (Caruth 4). Rehana's trauma of loss follows her through her journey as a wife, mother, and patriot, and although she is not allowed or able to access her trauma, she redirects her pain into the making of *Shona* following the loss of her children. Although trauma theory suggests trauma is unspeakable and unrepresentable, I argue that narratives of trauma can be decoded through domestic spaces because of the proximity domestic spaces have to affective exposure. While second order witnesses such as historians or anthropologists might not have literal access to past places of trauma like the home, literary narratives allow second and third order witnesses (readers) a potential entry into the past to recover and remember witnesses genuinely and affectively through spatial witnessing. The *Muktijuddho* demanded women make social negotiations, such as in motherhood; however, the war also forced women to negotiate their physical spaces to accommodate the war. This process is exemplified through the affective relationship Rehana establishes with *Shona*.

We are introduced to Rehana as she loses her children and through them, her sense of home and identity. Following her loss, Rehana embarks on a journey of reclamation through a practice of home making, both literally and figuratively, as she begins the construction of *Shona. Shona* represents Rehana's chance at agency as we learn that it was "built to save her children" (Anam 16). Shona helps Rehana save her

children by initially bringing in rent, and later by acting as a space of relation building (Anam 16). Furthermore, readers learn of the importance of *Shona* when "Rehana [looks] at the house with pride and a little ache" because it reminds her "of what she [has] lost, and what she [has] won. And how much the victory [has] cost. That is why she [has] named it *Shona*, gold. It [is not] just because of what it [has] taken to build the house, but for all the precious things she [wants] never to lose again" (Anam 16). Rehana views *Shona* not only as a companion but also as a source of self-agency, because as a widow Rehana loses her social agency and is neglected without Iqbal's protection. Yet, while previously gold symbolised the subjections of marriage for women which contributed to Rehana's parting from gold, in this instance, the gold attributed to *Shona* becomes symbolic of independence. For Rehana, the gold of marriage is not an experience of subjection, but rather one of experiencing mutual devotion. However, society does not allow Rehana to maintain a positive connection to her marriage and by relation to the gold from her marriage. The act of owning a home gives Rehana agency and protection which are virtues she loses with Iqbal's passing. Through *Shona,* Rehana finds a way to integrate gold back into her life and reclaim its symbolism as one of devotion and autonomy rather than one of subjugation. Moreover, the burden of her widowhood leads her to consider remarrying, but "the truth [is], she [has] no intention of remarrying. There [is just] that one time she had considered it, before she'd built Shona" (Anam 23). This remark reveals *Shona's* ability to give Rehana autonomy as a widow.

Furthermore, *Shona* acts as a pathway into Rehana's affective discomfort, as it begins to represent Rehana's desires to be independent. While Rehana shares the day she

gained the children back with her community every year in March, the first affective communication Rehana has is with *Shona*. Rehana wakes up every morning, as she has for a decade, and "[slips] into the garden" and "she dip[s] her fingers into the rosebush, heavy with dew, and pluck[s] a flower. She [holds] it in her hand as she wander[s] through the rest of the garden, ducking between the wall-hugging jasmine and the hibiscus, crossing the tiny vegetable patch that was giving them the last of the season's cauliflower, zigzagging past the mango tree, the lemon tree, the shouting-green banana tree. She [looks] up at the building that [will] slowly, over the course of the day, cast a long shadow over her little bungalow. *Shona*." (Anam 15). *Shona* embodies Rehana and her sacrifices as a woman. In the above scene, Rehana shares the joy of regaining her children and her agency with *Shona* before anyone else. Rehana's close relationship with *Shona* is due to the home's sheltering and empowering presence in Rehana's life during her time of need through the loss of her family and subsequently through the war. While others neglect Rehana during her widowhood and loneliness after losing her Iqbal and the children, *Shona* becomes a protector, companion, and symbol of the agency that Rehana attains as she overcomes the challenges imposed by her social and gendered position.

Moreover, as a physical place, *Shona's* contrasting role of simultaneously offering shelter and harbouring war causes it to become witness to the emotional and non-affective negotiations Rehana and her family make. *Shona* is a witness to the identity negotiations Rehana makes as a mother and patriot because it carries Rehana's motivations, loved ones, and eventually the war even as it offers shelter to Rehana and her family. For Rehana, like many mothers during the war, the home becomes a place that takes on the

dual role of combat and respite during the *Muktijuddho*. Readers can access personal spaces by the narrative setting and point of view. Rehana is forced to reassess her motherhood because of her all-encompassing exposure to the war through *Shona*. This is achieved when the war literally enters Rehana's home through ammunition and the Major, a wounded nationalist. The war enters Rehana's life through *Shona* when Sohail asks her to use *Shona* "to store arms. A safe place to hide out before and after the operation" (Anam 101). Following this request, Rehana's identity conflict begins to mirror through *Shona.* Sohail asks Rehana to "use *Shona*" much like how he seeks Rehana's assistance and later asks her to release a wounded soldier from jail (Anam 102). Rehana replies to this request by considering *Shona's* function and reception. She considers how "*Shona* [has] her back to the sun," how "*Shona* [...] [has] given her the children. Proud, vacant *Shona* of the many dreams" and continues by replying that "the house is yours, Sohail. Your birthright" (102). In this scene, Rehana's view of *Shona* is similar to how she views herself. Rehana considers herself an all giving mother for her children who goes to great lengths to regain them and is willing to give herself up at the command of her children. Furthermore, in referring to *Shona* as a "vacant [home] of the many dreams," Rehana hints at her own desires and wishes beyond her children – desires of autonomy from nationalist involvement that she suppresses.

Following Sohail's initial request to use *Shona,* Sohail also forces the war into the home by asking Rehana to hide a wounded Major in the home to aid them in the war efforts. To understand the violations of the home and its impact on and relationship to Rehana's witnessing of the war, I draw on Sukla Chatterjee's discussion on the home.

Chatterjee states that “the home represents one’s inner spiritual self, one’s identity. The world is a treacherous terrain of the pursuit of material interests, where practical considerations reign supreme. It is also typically the domain of the male. The home in its essence must remain unaffected by the profane activities of the material world-and woman is its representation” (“Colonialism” 624). The ideal of the home being a place of security, nurture, and togetherness presents issues of symbolic representation, because it can act to symbolically uphold patriarchy by reinforcing power dynamics inherent within conventional gender roles and be used as a mask to cover up domestic violences and the unfair treatment of women within domestic spaces.

However, in *A Golden Age,* the public space occupied by men and masculine ideologies enters the domestic sphere conventionally occupied by women when the Major enters *Shona.* We understand Rehana’s compromised desires and the extent of her trauma through *Shona* as Rehana is displaced from her home figuratively even before she must physically leave due to real violence. With the Major staying in *Shona,* Rehana gives up her own comfort and safety, and becomes more restricted within her own home and more aware of the space she takes up (Anam 111). Rehana feels displaced within her own home after the Major is wounded and brought into *Shona* to recover. She begins to sense “the wrongness of the place, and then remember[s] [...] looking across the room, she [sees] the rubble from the night before – the stained bandages, the muddy footprints across the floor, the little bits of plaster and wood from the explosion – and account[s] for the tiredness in her limbs” (Anam 116-117). While a home is ideally thought of as a place of comfort and peace, during times of war, such ideals become lost to the reality of war’s

violence. *Shona* takes in the Major, and alongside him the literal violence of the war as blood and destruction intertwines with homely objects to disrupt the sense of home and comfort.

Similar to the space within *Shona,* the gardenscape of Rehana's home also captures the emotional negotiations Rehana and her family are faced with due to the war. This is made possible because of the garden's ability to suspend time to mirror, or at times amplify, character's emotions like that of Rehana and Maya. Significant moments of self-care and affective engagement occur for Rehana within the garden-scape of *Shona*. The garden located in between *Shona* and the outside world is an in-between place of liminality[16], much like an intermediary that is witness between the happenings within *Shona* and the happenings within the outside world. The garden space acts as a place of refuge for Rehana with its teeming landscape of greenery. It is also a liminal space during the war because it presents a place of sanctuary and chaos through its proximity to both the home, which at times is protected from the uncontrolled violence of the war, and the outside world. Further, the garden acts as a liminal space because it encounters and presents affective expressions and experiences that encapsulate the calmness of its natural presence and the chaos of the war spilling into it. Within *Shona,* the garden presents a particularly significant spatial witness, as it is a place of positive affective unburdening and engagement. We discover the role of the garden in allowing Rehana affective refuge when the Major leads Rehana into partaking in self-indulgence and kisses her, lifting her

16 Arnold van Gennep coined the term 'liminal' and 'liminal spaces' to refer to a site of or quality of being in-between two states or things at the same time: in-between transition (Thomassen 3). Examples of liminal spaces include airports, funeral homes, and the space between being awake and being asleep.

up and taking "three long strides to the garden gate" (Anam 256). While Rehana previously remains caught between her identity as a mother and patriot and is forced to be selfless, she finally acknowledges her desires by choosing to engage in the kiss within the refuge of the garden. However, after Rehana allows the Major to kiss her, letting go of herself to partake in the moment of self-indulgence, she re-enters *Shona* and through this re-entry into the home, she returns to a state of worry. Rehana's body is described as "a gust of wind in his arms. Swivelling past the gate, through *Shona's* front door, her bare feet brushing the frame" (Anam 256). The re-entry into *Shona,* made clear using Rehana's closeness to the doorframe, signifies a re-entry in a space of affective heaviness. This is made clear by the ensuing events that take place within *Shona* following the Major and Rehana's return into the home. After Rehana's intimacy with the Major, the army attacks *Shona* in search of Sohail. However, Anam narrates that the soldiers "didn't notice the women. Their eyes were for *Shona*, what *Shona* [will] give up" (Anam 258). In this scene, the soldiers' focus on *Shona* reveals *Shona's* protective and vulnerable role in the narrative. As an extension of Rehana, *Shona* can be understood to try to protect Sohail and by focusing the army's attention to *Shona,* Anam highlights how the army is preparing to violate not just the home, but also Rehana and her attempts to keep her children safe.

The garden also becomes witness to the destruction of war much like *Shona.* However, while *Shona* harbours the violence of the war, the garden more actively takes on the violence of the war momentarily and acts as a place suspended in time as it registers moments of affective engagement such as encroaching danger or tragic news for

Rehana and her family. The garden acts as a lookout for Rehana and warns her of the violations to enter *Shona* when, after Operation Searchlight, Rehana peers "over the boundary wall into *Shona's* garden" noticing that "something [is] moving, rustling the grass" (Anam 62). The garden as Rehana's most prominent place of affective engagement warns Rehana of the emotional turmoil and literal dangers she is about to face because of the war. Moreover, the emotional importance of the garden is evident in Rehana's narration of the moment after Sohail tells Maya of Sharmeen's rape and death. Amidst the tragic news, Rehana "[knows] that for ever afterwards Maya [will] remember where her brother had told her the news, there in the shade of the mango tree, the air expectant, just after rain, the sky dark as though it [is] night, [can] only be night, but [isn't], and the pale glow of the jasmine and the bougainvillea, abundant, perfumed…" (Anam 122 -123). In this scene, Rehana calls to attention the presence of the garden in suspending time and capturing and preserving a memory through its atmospheric elements. The garden becomes a space of memory and emotional expression as it physically leaves a mark on Maya through its scents and climate while simultaneously taking on the disturbance of the news Maya receives as the garden becomes cast with darkness. Moreover, the garden encapsulates and reflects the emotional tension Maya experiences as she learns of Sharmeen's tragic ending through its contrasting atmosphere. While the garden is filled with the abundant perfumes of flowers, it is engulfed by a sky that is dark and resembling of night, a time of sleep and temporal pause from conscious affect. In this way, the garden becomes a space of liminality; in between day and night, reality, and distortions, escape and confinement. This scene highlights the garden's role in capturing and preserving

memories and emotions that are often difficult to confront or are otherwise lost in verbal articulation.

Similarly, after Sohail's request to use *Shona* to store tools, the garden once again provides access into Rehana's affective workings. Rehana feels like she is being trespassed by the war when she "watche[s] as [Sohail] and the other boys [dig] a ditch in the rough grass beside the rosebushes to store their weapons" (102). While Rehana does not outright say she feels violated, her narration of the garden's violations hints at her own feelings of violation. The juxtaposition of rose bushes with weapons reveals the affective negotiations Rehana makes as the war enters her home. Roses, typically symbolic of love, care, and fragility are contrasted with weapons, which symbolise war and the infliction of violence to narrate Rehana's discomfort of having to give up her sanctuary for the nation. The garden once again mirrors Rehana's affect when, after Rehana visits *Shona* for the first time "since the guerrillas had taken over", she notes that "from the outside, nothing [seems] different; she [knows] some of the plants [have] been dug up, but [they] settled back, even though they [look] a little ragged and unkempt. [She] must remember to water everything tomorrow, she [thinks]" (Anam 109-110). This scene reveals how Rehana adjusts to having the war enter her home. Initially Rehana is disturbed by the war's entry into the home and garden, but she becomes less unsettled as she begins to accept the turbulent condition of her garden.

Turning back to the spatial witnessing of the home through *Shona,* I posit that Rehana's identity and negotiations are reflected through *Shona.* Rehana uses the home to speak about herself when she considers what her sisters will think of her if they find out

that “[guerrilla, fighters,] [are] at *Shona*” (Anam 104). While the mention of *Shona* helps to situate Rehana’s proximity to the war, alternatively it also conveys Rehana’s proximity to the ideologies of war. By letting the guerrillas into *Shona,* Rehana allows herself to become part of the war. Therefore, in noting that the guerrillas are at *Shona,* Rehana narrates her own involvement in the war. Rehana continues to use *Shona* to access and verbalise her own affect when she yells at Sohail for his worries about Rehana’s safety after he uses the house to store weapons for the war. In response to Sohail’s worries about Rehana being in danger, Rehana shouts at Sohail, saying “dangerous! There are enough explosives buried under the rose bushes to flatten all of Dhanmondi. You’re worried about putting me in danger?” (Anam 170). Although Rehana outwardly tries to demonstrate compliance, *Shona,* as an extension of her identity under conflict, witnesses her violations. Rehana finally uses the violations of *Shona* to express the violations she feels she is put through. Ultimately, while Rehana, her family, and the community, at times want to revert to safety into *Shona,* including its garden, the physical centre of the war will not allow for such refuge. Instead, *Shona* and the home’s gardenscape stands witness to the ways war intercepted, injected, and transformed the domestic sphere for the needs of the nation.

Section Three: Witnessing War Through the Female Body

Having established the infiltration of the war into the domestic and social spaces of womanhood, I turn my focus onto the corporeal spaces of womanhood in *A Golden Age*. Anam allows readers to see how Maya and Rehana are falsely and genuinely witnessed; however, readers don’t get a detailed narration of Sharmeen or her witnessing.

While Sharmeen's shadowy presence might be seen to reproduce the erasure of rape survivors from the national narrative, I argue instead that Anam is engaging in a form of ethical witnessing that refuses to spectacularize gendered violence. Like the flawed reception of patriotic womanhood and motherhood, the reception of violated women during the *Muktijuddho* reveals complexities of witnessing trauma on both an individual and collective level. As a result of women occupying varying roles during the *Muktijuddho* and representing the nation through their social, physical, and corporeal spaces, women were one of the most vulnerable groups in the war. Like the events of the India-Pakistan partition, during the *Muktijuddho,* Bengali and Hindu women were seen as embodying the Bangladeshi nation and were targeted by the enemy nation to act out political violence against Bangladesh on a microlevel through women's bodies. The most prominent form of violation enacted onto women was sexual violence in the form of rape, both in private and in public. Rape was a transactional currency during the war and was performed to assert power, control, and dominance, in exchange for the imprint of shame, fear, and authority over women, and simultaneously the nations to which they belonged. I develop Saikia and Mookherjee's discussion on the *birangona,* a figure that was falsely witnessed by the nation because of the nation's unwillingness to witness women who were raped, by evaluating how women's bodies embodied the war and produced socio-political witnessing of women's bodies. I examine the character of Sharmeen to discuss how rape and women violated through rape were witnessed by the nation.

During the *Muktijuddho*, testimonies and witnessing of the war were shrouded by silences not only because of the national refusal to accurately witness its rape victims, but

because a large element of the social action to create the nation of Bangladesh relied on the construction of a unified society with one voice. This led to silencing outliers that fell outside of the dominant national discourse or were undefined by it such as women subjected to rape whose experiences could not be neatly communicated nor understood. In ascribing a dominant national narrative of heroism onto rape victims, the nation of Bangladesh performed false witnessing of *birangonas*. False witnessing was pushed onto groups like *birangonas* who had limited resources to fight against socio-political and military oppression, and, instead, the *birangonas'* witnessing became silent and further detached from themselves and attached to a larger social sentiment that required desensitisation to violence. Mookherjee discusses the characteristic limitations of the term *birangona* by referring to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak who states that "the justification behind the term *birangona* constructs rape as a sacrifice in exchange for which the country gained independence" (Mookherjee, *The Spectral Wound* 150). Shamika Shabnam, South Asian researcher on gendered and sexual violence during the 1947 Partition and 1971 Liberation War, adds to this discussion, by stating "the use of 'bir' in bir-angona, evokes male freedom fighters, characterized in nationalist discourse as bir jouddhas" (brave fighters) and "while the bir jouddha man is heavily lauded in government archives and books, the birangona is simply labelled 'war heroine' and left out of dominant war discourse" (Karmakar 110).

The omission and silences of rape victims in dominant war narratives is exemplified through Sharmeen and her character's narrative function. From the onset of Sharmeen's introduction, she represents a silence in the narrative. Sharmeen is introduced

during the middle of the riots protesting the unfair general election results as “a tall young woman with broad shoulders and a tough, ageless face. She [is] a student at the art college, famous on campus for her political posters, and Maya’s best friend, or *comrade,* as she liked to be called” (Anam 44). Sharmeen’s description is characterised by a kind of unknowability. Descriptors like “tough,” “ageless,” “tall,” and “broad shoulder[ed]” create an image of an unconventional woman, as Bengali women traditionally have smaller figures. However, beyond this, readers do not have any way of physically identifying Sharmeen in comparison to the other female characters. Besides her physical appearance, Sharmeen is introduced using her relationality to others such as her position as Maya’s best friend and a comrade for the nation. In further descriptions, readers learn that Sharmeen also does not have any space of belonging, as she spends the holidays in *Shona* “instead of at home with her own family. It appear[s] the girl [has] nowhere else to go” (Anam 45). Instead, Sharmeen becomes a “presence” that Maya accepts (45).

Sharmeen’s presence is only solidified through her actions as a comrade. As a comrade, Sharmeen embodies the nation as a patriot; however, her rape and death define her as a violated patriot. As a symbolic representation of the nation, Sharmeen emulates virtues of sacrifice and resilience; however, as a comrade she experiences the violent realities of wartime brutalities to reveal the unfair request the nation makes of its comrades. Sharmeen’s body becomes emblematic of national warfare by way of her rape and death. Her body parallels the nation and the conflicts occurring within the nation. Through Sharmeen’s physical violations she no longer embodies the nation, because the misogynist violence of the crime is inextricably tangled with the violence of the myth that

women are the nation. By partaking in the *Muktijuddho* as a "comrade," Sharmeen's body becomes an ideologically formed physical space of meaning. Sharmeen's engagement with the war as a comrade informs the space she occupies as a body and the inherent meanings of that space. In this way, Sharmeen's body is a space of the contesting visions of nationhood because of the multitude of cultural, social, and historical ideologies thrust onto it. Sharmeen mentally and physically partakes in the war as a "comrade" who fights for the nation. However, although Sharmeen considers herself as a comrade for the nation, her patriotism and comradery in complicated tension with her status as a woman causes the enemy state to view her body as a space to enact vengeance and authority.

Sharmeen's character is unnarratable because of her dissonance from the imagined space of the nation due to her physical violation. Simon Dwyer, in his discussions on time, space, and body states that "the recent discussion on the body as an embodied paradigm, as a lived body, describes the embodied relationship between the body and the surrounding. People sense and, therefore, understand the world within embodied spatial extension, circumspective understanding, and surrounding space as an extension of the body" (33). He expands on this idea by arguing that "a bodily extension of each member of the group, becoming a one mind-body entity, sharing the space and experiences, generate a united spatial concept that establishes an understanding of the world and dwelling that could be described as a process of place making" (33). Dwyer's ideas of space and sharing space highlight the role of collectivism and unity; however, this framework does not account for the power imbalance and subsequent conflict inherent in place-making. Members of a group can engage in place making through a shared

imagination of a space which is enacted by bodies that embody the respective visions of a group. Yet, power disparities often exist in groups, so to gather a full idea of groups and place making it is critical to consider how individuals within groups can be marginalised due to nonconformity of the mind or body, leading to power imbalances and conflict. While Sharmeen is initially seen engaging in place making with her fellow comrades by participating in the revolution "at Rokeya Hall, where confetti [is] being thrown out of windows and a group of Bauls [are] singing at the bottom of the stairwell," she is subsequently unable to fit into the group or society involved in the war efforts (Anam 54). Moreover, the group or society is unable to understand her due to her contested position as a raped woman. This results in Sharmeen's isolation from the place of the nation, and, conversely, the nation's alienation from people like Sharmeen. This distancing is exemplified through Sohail's reception of Sharmeen's death. Anam's narration only traces Sharmeen's social identity prior to her rape and death. However, following her death, Sharmeen's place-making literally and figuratively seizes because she is not able to extend herself due to her physical demise and is simultaneously avoided by others because of the un-narratability of her rape and death. This is exemplified when Sohail tells Maya that Sharmeen has been in the hospital to which Maya states "Why? Why didn't you tell me? I would have got her out of there myself" (Anam 122). Anam concludes this question with a limited narration on Sharmeen's experience writing that "as though it [...] just occurred to [Maya], she realiz[es] the truth [is] uglier than she had imagined" (122). Although Maya and the readers can deduct from Sohail's narration that Sharmeen was at the hospital because she was raped and became pregnant from being

raped, beyond the immediate knowledge of Sharmeen's rape, pregnancy, and death, the readers nor any of the characters learn of Sharmeen's story or experiences in detail. Anam's unwillingness to narrate Sharmeen's death through the characters or even herself solidifies Sharmeen's departure from the place-making of the nation within society. While Rehana and Maya, both female patriots, are given narrative considerations in relation to the historical context of the war, Sharmeen's narration is excluded because of her status as a raped patriot, a status that requires nuanced inspection as highlighted by scholars like Mookherjee and Saikia.

Anam highlights Sharmeen's un-narratability by accentuating the reception of Sharmeen's rape and death through the other characters. Following Sharmeen's physical description and the establishment of her character in relationality to Maya, Sharmeen's character does not reappear except when Maya learns of her disappearance and death. However, both the narration of Sharmeen's disappearance and death are vague and limited. After Operation Searchlight, Sharmeen goes missing and Anam only mentions her disappearance, once again, only through Maya. Anam narrates that "Sharmeen [can] not be found" and Maya "waited for Sharmeen to show up at the gate, to give her a little of the moment. But on the third day there [is] still no sign of her" (70-71). Maya waits for Sharmeen to share her experience as a comrade actively witnessing the attack. Yet, the reality of her rape keeps her from re-entering the narrative because of the position she occupies as a rape victim. Sharmeen's sexual violation alienates her from the imagined state of pure womanhood. Subsequently, she becomes simultaneously sexless and sexualized. As a comrade, Sharmeen's body becomes the space through which the enemy

state's vision is imposed via rape. Sharmeen's rape characterizes her as a *birangona,* a sexless and simultaneously sexually violated character. I refer to the *birangona* as sexless because of the connotations of the concept of heroism. The term *birangona* is comprised of the prefix "bir" which "is etymologically a male term, used here to bestow heroism on women raped during the war" (Mookherjee, *The Spectral Wound 150*). Therefore, *birangonas* become heroes devoid of "concreteness [that acknowledges women] as flesh-and- blood creatures" and instead synonymous with "some idealised victims whose stories will serve a larger purpose in the name of this or that ideology" (Mookherjee, *The Spectral Wound* IX). In being labelled as heroic, women who were raped become known for their performance of bravery and selflessness to transcend gender. However, while for men "manliness comes to mean freedom from sexual passion the sublimation of sensuality into leadership of society as the nation," for women the removal of gender and sexual situatedness results in them becoming unnarratable (Mosse 13). This paradox is further complicated by the image of women's bravery as patriots, which highlights their agency, in relation to the symbolic representation of the nation as a nurturing mother figure, limiting the extent of their agency as figures involved in the liberation efforts. The complexity of women's incompatible social positions as patriots belonging to a nation represented as a nurturing mother figure underlines the negotiations of identity and social status women had to make during the war. Even as patriots, women were confined to gendered expectations of performance and production.

Rehana initially responds to Sharmeen's disappearance based on patriarchal notions of gender identity and practice wherein women are more silent and compliant,

and men are more dominant and assertive. She thinks that Sharmeen "[is] too big [and] too stormy to simply vanish" and does not think anything of her disappearance (Anam 71). By describing Sharmeen as a woman who is "too big" and "too stormy", Rehana categorises her as a woman that speaks out and attempts to act for herself. Rehana reveals that Sharmeen takes up space. In this narration, Rehana simultaneously places Sharmeen beyond the bounds of conventional femininity and alienates her from the traditional ideals of womanhood. Rehana also highlights the oppressive ideologies of patriarchal femininity during the war that expected women to be submissive and quiet, pointing to the reality that women often "vanish", both physically and figuratively because they recede into submission. Rehana overlooks Sharmeen's gendered vulnerability during the war by placing her within the bounds of masculinity and removing her from the ideals of femininity. While Sharmeen may have conventionally masculine traits, her sex is not immune to the violations of war simply because her conventional gender is not narrowly practised. The reality of war highlights the possibility that Sharmeen's outward appearance is not enough to keep her safe. Anam narrates that "it had been almost two weeks, and Sharmeen [is] still missing. No one [knows] where the girl [is], but she [is] making her presence felt at the bungalow, as they each silently [imagine] what might have happened to her. Still Maya [refuses] to talk about it. She drift[s] through the house like a cloud of dust. Rehana trie[s] to bring it up, but every time she approache[s] Maya it [feels] like a trespass" (Anam 75). Sharmeen's disappearance is felt as a haunting because of the unknowability of it. However, readers are once again able to access Sharmeen's narration through Maya. Maya, being the closest character to Sharmeen, begins to drift

"like a cloud of dust," insinuating that the weight of Sharmeen's disappearance is affecting the people in her life to such a degree that they are mirroring Sharmeen's disappearance through their elusiveness to material being. Maya's description sets the tone of ghastly haunting left in the aftermath of Sharmeen's disappearance.

At one point, Rehana and Maya's relationship takes a sour turn following Sharmeen's disappearance. This is because Rehana struggles with being emotionally expressive. However, fiction presents the opportunity to witness Rehana gradually drawing closer to genuine affective witnessing through her internal monologue. This internal dialogue reveals her concerns, guilt, and deep care for Sharmeen, whom she views as a daughter-like figure that she failed to fully accept. After two weeks of Sharmeen's disappearance, Rehana reveals her limited knowledge of Sharmeen. Rehana recalls that "as the picture of Sharmeen's life [comes] into focus, [Rehana feels] guilty for sometimes resenting [Sharmeen's] presence at the bungalow. She could have been warmer towards her" (Anam 75). In this moment of reflection, Rehana recounts her distance from Sharmeen which also parallels her distance from Maya. Through this reflection, Rehana gains a proximity to emotional engagement, and begins her process of genuine affective witnessing where she explores her emotional absence from her daughter and other daughter-like figures. Nevertheless, Rehana is unable to actively engage with genuine affective witnessing without first addressing her subjectivities and bias, like how she does with Maya. While Rehana initially keeps a distance from the realities of Sharmeen's disappearance, after discovering her rape and death, Rehana begins encountering affect that allows her to become a genuine affective witness. Rehana stands

up for Sharmeen's personhood against her brother-in-law during a pivotal moment of confrontation. Rehana confronts Faiz stating "you listen to me. Her name was Sharmeen. They took her and they kept her at the cantonment – not a mile from your house. And the girl was tortured until she died" (Anam 191). This is one of the few times, besides Maya's declaration of pain, that Sharmeen's death and her character receives affective engagement from another character. While women like Rehana embody the nation through their sacrifices in motherhood, other women like Sharmeen represent the failures of the nation to protect women from the vulnerability to violence and failures in genuinely witnessing violated women's suffering. As a woman, Rehana's genuine and affective witnessing of Sharmeen breaks down the division created between them by patriarchal society and a nation at war.

As a fictional text, *A Golden Age* offers insight into the witnessing of women that embody the nation's violations and failures. Anam "was brought up on stories of the liberation struggle by her parents" (Basu). Having connections to the war through her family, yet being born after the war, Anam writes as a witness attempting to trace a past that is not fully hers. In doing so, her novel takes on the role of more than just a historical retelling. Rather, her work becomes a place of reconsideration of the past in relation to the present and intersects the role of the witness. Anam treks carefully as an author and a witness herself while attempting to recount a history that she cannot fully access. The novel hints at Anam's complex position of witness and transcriber/historian through the moments of silence in her writing that questions the capacities of witnessing trauma.

While Maya's story receives a narrative finality that is observable, her friend, Sharmeen, does not find the same narrative closure.

When the news of Sharmeen's whereabouts is finally revealed, readers are left in a state of lack. Sohail delivers the news of Sharmeen's rape, pregnancy, and death to Maya in a slow but limited succession. He conveys Sharmeen's whereabouts, rape, pregnancy, and death within the span of nine short sentences that work to only deliver the facts of the news (Anam 122). Sohail's delivery lacks any affect and reflection. In response, readers are only left with Maya's shock and no other information about Sharmeen's experience of death. In omitting Sharmeen's end, Anam draws attention to the role of secondary witness and false witness. Anam's refusal to narrate the details of Sharmeen's rape and death serves to convey the impossibility of attempting to describe and further, as a second order witness, ethically grasp the violations of rape on the body and mind. Instead, the omission of details regarding Sharmeen's rape and death gives the reader as a third order witness an opportunity to reconsider their role of voyeur. Our investments as readers dictate our curiosity in wanting to know the details of Sharmeen's ending as a character and embodiment of sexually violated women during the *Muktijuddho*. However, instead of being given access into the traumatising and often unspeakable experience of rape, as readers we grieve and come to accept Sharmeen's death through Maya and Rehana.

Similar to the categories of first, second, and third order witness, Didier Fassin (2008) identifies three categories of witnesses including: a "neutral 'third party' witness of the court (*testis*), the survivor-witness (*superstes*) and the blood witness (*martyr*) who testifies through death" (Richardson and Schankweiler 2). In Anam's text, all three forms

of witness are present and offer critical insight into how women became part of a nation through their embodied witnessing of the nation as citizen, survivor, and martyr. Through these categories of witness, I direct my attention to the co-witness, a third order witness necessary for certain practices of witnessing. For example, witnessing through testimonies creates co-witnesses (third order witness). Characters like Sharmeen occupy the position of a *martyr* according to Fassin's term of witness categorization, or a blood witness who testifies to the atrocities of war and the nation's witnessing of violated women through her death. Anam highlights Sharmeen's death using silence and in doing so, contributes to the notion that *martyrs* require co-witnesses to bear their death (Richardson and Schankweiler 2). Characters in the novel like Maya, Rehana, and Sohail become Sharmeen's co-witness and the national representation she embodies. Beyond these characters, readers also become co-witnesses to Sharmeen's narrative and her embodiment of the nation. This co-witnessing allows readers to reflect on their capacity as witnesses when encountering testimonies of trauma. Subsequently, Anam invites readers to explore their role as genuine witnesses by encouraging them to analyse Sharmeen's death from three distinct perspectives embodied by Maya, Rehana, and Sohail, each representing the nation in unique ways.

Maya's witnessing of Sharmeen's death exemplifies the closest form of genuine witnessing. Maya embodies the nation as a female patriot and in doing so, she occupies the conflicting space of oppression and agency. Maya's response to Sharmeen's death expresses her contradictory role as a female patriot. She initially expresses what might be interpreted as masculine affect and later partakes in feminist affect when she literally

attempts to work to change the acknowledgement of women's pain. Maya does not act to safeguard her position of power, instead she acts to challenge oppressive forces that violate individuals like Sharmeen. In doing so, Maya engages in practices of empathic unsettlement which requires her to reconsider her role as a female patriot. Sexually violated women should not be reduced to symbols representing a nation. Creating a culture of consent, awareness, and gender equality is vital in preventing sexual violence and supporting those impacted by it. By removing Sharmeen's experience from the national narrative in *A Golden Age*, Anam separates women's sexual violence from embodying a collective identity because of the historically negative collective memory of *birangonas*. In distancing Sharmeen's rape and her narrative from representation, Anam attempts to genuinely witnesses victims of sexual violence and prompts a reconsideration of how sexually violated women are witnessed voyeuristically without their consent.

Conclusion

The stories of personal and national struggles narrated in *A Golden Age* invites readers to reflect on the complex and multifaceted nature of witnessing, both as it pertains to the characters within the novel and to our role as readers and scholars engaged in this discourse. Anam's use of fiction allows for a re-examination of the reader's role as a co-witness. Fiction allows the possibility of genuine witnessing not only for Rehana but also for readers by presenting narrative spaces that engage with empathy and relationality. Further, Anam's use of narrative silences encourages a conversation of genuine witnessing for readers and scholars attempting to collect women's narratives of violence during the liberation war. The novel's focus on the formation of personal identity and

collective memory during times of crisis emphasises the need to escape passivity during witnessing and enter a practice of active engagement that prioritises relationality and affect.

Ultimately, this paper hopes to begin a conversation on the ongoing process of being a genuine witness, emphasizing the responsibility of readers and scholars to acknowledge the ethical and moral elements of witnessing. As a third-order witness, I begin to address my responsibilities of examining and relaying my understanding of the past from a critical literary perspective by recognizing the limits of my analysis. While my critical literary efforts are primarily within the domain of academic investigation, I recognize that academic discourse can stifle the translation of thought into practice in non-academic spaces. I approach this dilemma by revisiting my analysis through self-reflection and awareness to keep the responsibility of address open to bearers of testimony. While my interpretation of the past is relevant in its ability to encourage discourse on marginalised narratives, my objective is to highlight marginalised voices over an attempt to completely understand them through my analysis. Therefore, my analysis does not claim to know the truths of women's narratives; rather, it attempts to open avenues of exploring possible narrative interpretations of how witnesses can engage with testimonies and histories of trauma.

I hope to achieve this by raising questions of the transformative possibilities of genuine witnessing when revisiting historical narratives. Particularly, I draw attention to the ways in which genuine witnessing challenges people's tendencies to preserve the subjective self over experience with others and other's testimonies, especially those that

cause affective discomfort. This paper urges readers and academics to assume the role of genuine witnesses, to actively listen to and engage with stories of trauma and to recognise the ethical imperative of collecting and preserving the voices of those whose histories have been silenced or marginalised by larger national discourse. Afterall, a genuine witness is a process of being and practicing, not an end point. Through such practices, I aim to encourage ethical and empathic remembering and relaying of histories and people.

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