

From Tradition to Revolution: Tracing the Evolution of Female Agency in Nationalist Discourses

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Abstract

This article explores the evolution of female agency in nationalist contexts through a comparative analysis of two seminal literary characters: Bimala from Rabindranath Tagore's *Ghare Baire* and Rehana from Tahmima Anam's *The Golden Age*. Bimala, set against the backdrop of early 20th-century Bengal, symbolizes the constraints placed on women within nationalist movements, driven by patriarchal and symbolic roles. In contrast, Rehana, during the Bangladesh Liberation War, represents a modern evolution of female agency, characterized by active participation and strategic influence. Utilizing contemporary critical theories, this study reveals how these characters reflect and critique their respective historical and cultural contexts. The article highlights how Bimala's limited agency underscores the historical constraints faced by women, while Rehana's assertiveness illustrates a significant shift towards empowered female participation in nation-building. By integrating theoretical frameworks from scholars like Rita Felski and Georgina Waylen, and drawing parallels with current socio-political developments in Bangladesh, the study underscores the importance of literary texts by women in understanding historical experiences and the dynamic nature of female agency. This comparative analysis not only enriches our understanding of gender and nationalism but also demonstrates how literature narrates and influences historical change.

Keywords: Female Agency, Nationalism, Literary Analysis, Comparative Literature, Postcolonial Studies

1.1 Introduction

The critical examination of literary texts authored by women offers invaluable insights into the historical experiences of women, particularly within contexts of nationalism and cultural upheaval. Women writers, through their nuanced narratives, provide a rich tapestry of experiences that reveal the often-overlooked dimensions of history. As literary scholars increasingly recognize, texts written by women are not merely reflections of personal or domestic spheres but serve as vital documents that articulate broader socio-political realities. For instance, Rabindranath Tagore's *Ghare Baire* and Tahmima Anam's *The Golden Age* offer profound insights into the gendered dimensions of nationalism and the role of women in socio-political transformations. These narratives capture the complexities of female agency and the ways in which historical contexts shape and constrain women's experiences. By engaging with these texts, this paper tries to uncover the critical historical experiences of women that are frequently marginalized in mainstream historical accounts.

Comparative studies of literary texts from different periods and socio-political contexts further enrich our understanding of how women's experiences have evolved over time. Such studies reveal the underlying historical changes that impact women's roles and agency, providing a more comprehensive picture of their struggles and contributions. For example, comparing Bimala's constrained role in Tagore's early 20th-century nationalist discourse with Rehana's assertive participation in Anam's contemporary narrative highlights shifts in female agency and political involvement. This comparative approach not only underscores the evolving nature of women's roles but also illustrates how literature serves as a dynamic medium for exploring historical change. By examining these literary works side by side, we gain deeper insights into the ongoing negotiation of women's identities and roles within

changing socio-political landscapes. Thus, this paper also undertakes a comparative study of women's literary texts as this becomes essential for understanding the broader historical and cultural shifts that shape women's experiences.

The evolution of female agency in literature, particularly within the context of nationalist movements, has been a subject of intense scrutiny and debate among scholars. The two seminal works, *Ghare Baire* (1916) by Rabindranath Tagore and *The Golden Age* (2007) by Tahmima Anam, offer a compelling lens through which to explore this evolution. Both novels are set against the backdrop of pivotal historical moments—*Ghare Baire* during the Swadeshi movement in Bengal and *The Golden Age* during the Bangladesh Liberation War. Central to these narratives are the characters of Bimala and Rehana, who, despite being separated by nearly a century, represent different stages in the articulation of female agency within nationalist discourses.

Bimala, in *Ghare Baire*, is emblematic of the early 20th-century nationalist ideal, where women's roles were largely symbolic, confined within the domestic sphere, and heavily influenced by the patriarchal structures surrounding them. Her journey from the confines of her home to the outer world is marked by confusion, manipulation, and a lack of genuine agency. Bimala's involvement in the Swadeshi movement is not driven by a clear political ideology but rather by personal emotions and her relationships with the male figures in her life—Nikhil, her husband, and Sandip, the charismatic nationalist leader. Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan critiques Bimala's role, arguing that her agency is significantly limited by the patriarchal underpinnings of the nationalist movement, where her actions are more symbolic than substantive (Sunder Rajan, 1993). Chandra Talpade Mohanty similarly highlights the ways in which Third World women, like Bimala, are often portrayed as victims rather than agents within nationalist struggles, their contributions confined to the realms of domesticity and emotional labour (Mohanty, 1988).

In contrast, Rehana's character in *The Golden Age* offers a more modern and empowered depiction of female agency. Rehana, a widow and mother, actively participates in the Bangladesh Liberation War, driven by a clear sense of purpose and responsibility. Her involvement is not merely symbolic but deeply rooted in her desire to protect her children and contribute meaningfully to the national struggle. Unlike Bimala, Rehana's actions have tangible impacts on the course of events in the narrative. Nira Yuval-Davis's analysis of women's roles in national projects provides a useful framework for understanding Rehana's character, as it emphasizes the shift towards viewing women as active participants in nation-building rather than passive symbols (Yuval-Davis, 1997). Elleke Boehmer's work on postcolonial women's writing further contextualizes Rehana's narrative within the broader themes of resistance and identity, highlighting how modern contexts allow for a more nuanced and empowered portrayal of female characters (Boehmer, 2005).

In the following sections this article will seek to compare the evolution of female agency as depicted through the characters of Bimala and Rehana, using the theoretical frameworks provided by scholars such as Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Nira Yuval-Davis, and Elleke Boehmer. By examining how Bimala's journey is marked by confusion and manipulation, while Rehana's path demonstrates a more independent and assertive role in the political landscape, this article will explore how modern-day contexts enable female characters like Rehana to embody a more active and decisive role in nation-building. This comparative analysis not only highlights the progression of female agency in literature but also reflects the broader societal changes regarding gender, power, and national identity.

1.2 Bimala's Journey: Confusion, Manipulation, and Limited Agency

Bimala, the protagonist of Rabindranath Tagore's *Ghare Baire* (1916), is a complex figure who embodies the tensions and contradictions of early 20th-century nationalist discourse in India. Her journey through the narrative reflects a profound struggle with identity, agency, and the roles imposed upon her by the socio-political environment.

The portrayal of Bimala's character in Rabindranath Tagore's *Ghare Baire* (*The Home and the World*) is deeply embedded within the patriarchal structures of her time. Her actions are often driven more by her relationships with the male figures in her life—Nikhil and Sandip—than by any intrinsic understanding or commitment to the nationalist cause. This dynamic is evident when Bimala reflects, 'I had but one care—to please him. I forgot that I had any other duty.' (Tagore, 2005, p. 27). This statement reveals Bimala's internalization of her role as a wife, where her primary motivation is to gain approval from her husband, Nikhil, rather than actively engaging with the broader political movement. Bimala's susceptibility to Sandip's fiery rhetoric further exemplifies her entanglement within patriarchal expectations. She admits, 'Sandip's words were like the distant roll of thunder. My whole being responded to them. I did not understand them, but I felt that the heart of a woman, living in seclusion, has its share of the burden of responsibility for the country' (Tagore, 2005, p. 84). This indicates that her involvement in the Swadeshi movement is not born out of political conviction, but out of a manipulated emotional response to Sandip's charismatic influence."

Bimala's journey is thus a testament to the limited agency afforded to women within the nationalist discourse, where their roles were often symbolic rather than substantive. The patriarchal structures of her time dictated that her identity and actions be mediated through the men in her life. This is further emphasized by Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan's analysis, where she argues that Bimala's involvement in the nationalist cause is less about the cause itself and more about the patriarchal structures that manipulate her (Sunder Rajan, 1993). The manipulation by Sandip and her ultimate disillusionment highlights how the nationalist movement, while

ostensibly inclusive, often perpetuated the very gender hierarchies it sought to dismantle. Bimala's experience underscores the notion that nationalist movements have historically co-opted women's agency, confining their participation within the domestic and emotional realms.

1.2.1 Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan: Symbolic Agency in the Nationalist Discourse

Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan's critical analysis of female figures within nationalist movements offers a pertinent framework for understanding Bimala's role in *Ghare Baire*. Sunder Rajan argues that women in nationalist discourse often occupy positions of symbolic rather than substantive agency. In Bimala's case, her involvement in the Swadeshi movement is not motivated by a political awakening but rather by the influences exerted on her by her husband, Nikhil, and the charismatic nationalist leader, Sandip. Sunder Rajan suggests that Bimala's actions are largely symbolic, serving as a representation of the idealized womanhood that nationalist leaders sought to mobilize for their political ends (Sunder Rajan, 1993).

Bimala's initial foray into the public sphere is spurred by Sandip's fiery rhetoric and his appeal to her as a symbol of the motherland. However, her involvement remains superficial; she is a pawn in the hands of the men who surround her. Sunder Rajan notes that while Bimala may appear to exercise agency by participating in the nationalist movement, this agency is severely limited by the patriarchal structures that define her role within the movement. Her actions are ultimately driven by her desire to please and align with the male figures in her life, rather than by any genuine political conviction or understanding (Sunder Rajan, 1993).

1.2.2 Chandra Talpade Mohanty: The Confined Agency of "Third World Women"

Chandra Talpade Mohanty's concept of 'Third World Women' as victims of both colonial and nationalist discourses further elucidates Bimala's constrained agency. Mohanty critiques the homogenization of women in the Third World, often portrayed as passive subjects without agency or voice in both Western feminist and nationalist narratives. As Mohanty asserts, 'The average Third World woman leads an essentially truncated life based on her

feminine gender (read: sexually constrained) and her being "Third World" (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, religious, domesticated, family-oriented, victimized, etc.)' (Mohanty, 1988, p. 66). Bimala's journey in *Ghare Baire* mirrors this broader critique, where her agency is co-opted by the nationalist movement, confining her within the domestic and emotional realms, effectively reducing her to the stereotypical role of the "ideal" Third World woman.

Throughout the novel, Bimala's actions are heavily influenced by her emotional attachment to Sandip and her desire to fulfil the role of the ideal wife and nationalist symbol. She confesses, 'When I am with Sandip, his magnetic force overwhelms me...I feel a glow, as though I were gold newly burnished' (Tagore, 2005, p. 53). This illustrates how Bimala's sense of self and agency is entwined with Sandip's overpowering presence, making her more of a symbol manipulated by the nationalist movement than an autonomous actor. Mohanty's critique of how nationalist movements often exploit women's identities and roles to further their own agendas is strikingly evident in Bimala's reflection: 'I realized the petty jealousies that Sandip had played upon to capture me. He had made me the instrument of his plans. I had never been anything but a tool in the hands of the men who used me' (Tagore, 2005, p. 120).

Mohanty's analysis of how Western feminist discourse, by assuming women as an already constituted, coherent group with identical interests and desires, articulates a discursive colonization through the homogenization of women's experiences (Mohanty, 1988, p. 64) resonates with Bimala's experience. Her participation in the Swadeshi movement, rather than being an assertion of her independence, is instead a manifestation of the emotional manipulation she undergoes at the hands of Sandip. Her agency is not her own; it is shaped and controlled by the nationalist discourse that surrounds her, leaving her with little room to navigate her own identity or make autonomous decisions. This dynamic aligns with Mohanty's critique of how both colonial and nationalist discourses can simultaneously suppress and

exploit women's voices, relegating them to roles that serve broader political purposes without genuinely empowering them. As Mohanty poignantly argues, 'The production of the "Third World Woman" as a singular monolithic subject in some recent (Western) feminist texts leads to the colonization of feminist analysis and practice and creates a dynamic where women from the Third World are seen as passive objects of knowledge, rather than as active subjects of their own history' (Mohanty, 1988, p. 79). Bimala's character, caught between her devotion to her husband and her attraction to Sandip's nationalist rhetoric, epitomizes this reduction, where her identity is constructed and manipulated by the patriarchal and nationalist forces surrounding her, rather than allowing her to emerge as an autonomous, self-directed individual."

Bimala's character in *Ghare Baire* is emblematic of the broader struggles faced by women in nationalist movements, where their agency is often illusory and manipulated to fit the ideals of male leaders and the nationalist cause. As Mohanty argues, the portrayal of Third World women as passive subjects strips them of their complexity and reduces their roles to mere symbols within larger political narratives (Mohanty, 1988). Bimala's journey illustrates this reduction, as her participation in the nationalist movement is less about her own beliefs and more about fulfilling the roles imposed upon her by the men in her life. Her internal conflicts and ultimate disillusionment reveal the limitations placed on her agency, reinforcing the idea that nationalist movements, while ostensibly empowering, can often perpetuate the same patriarchal structures they seek to dismantle. Bimala's experience, therefore, serves as a critique of how nationalist discourses can exploit women, confining them to the very domestic and emotional realms that Mohanty critiques in her analysis of Third World women.

1.2.3 Elisabeth Bronfen: Cultural Anxieties and the Conflicting Ideals of Womanhood

Elisabeth Bronfen's theory of the woman as a site of cultural anxieties offers another lens through which to examine Bimala's character. Bronfen posits that women in literature

often become the battlegrounds for cultural and ideological conflicts, embodying the tensions between traditional and modern ideals (Bronfen, 1992).

In *Ghare Baire*, Bimala is caught between the traditional expectations of her role as a devoted wife and the modern ideals of active participation in the nationalist movement. This tension is evident when Bimala reflects on her marriage: “I was a queen in the shrine of my husband's love. I had my seat in the inner apartments, the seat of all that is sacred. The outside world was beyond my world” (Tagore, 2005, p. 16). Bimala’s words here reflect her deep-rooted sense of duty and devotion to her husband, Nikhil, and the traditional values that define her existence within the domestic sphere.

However, as she becomes increasingly influenced by Sandip and the Swadeshi movement, Bimala begins to question her traditional role. She admits, 'I felt I had no right to live and die merely as the shadow of my husband' (Tagore, 2005, p. 47). This quote highlights the inner conflict Bimala faces as she grapples with the expectations of being a 'good wife' while being drawn to the idea of contributing to the nationalist cause.

Yet, Bimala’s participation in the nationalist movement is fraught with ambiguity. While she yearns to step beyond the confines of her domestic role, her actions are still deeply influenced by the men around her, particularly Sandip. She is aware of this manipulation but struggles to resist it, stating, “I had no words left. I felt as if I had lost myself. Sandip Babu’s passionate words had carried me off my feet...I had never heard anything like this before. It was intoxicating” (Tagore, 2005, p. 54). This illustrates Bimala’s internal struggle as she navigates the conflicting demands of tradition and modernity, ultimately revealing her vulnerability within the patriarchal structures that dictate both her domestic and public roles.

These quotations from *The Home and the World* deepen the understanding of Bimala’s character by illustrating the profound internal conflict she experiences, caught between the traditional role of a devoted wife and the emerging modern ideals of nationalism.

Bimala's confusion and ultimate disillusionment are emblematic of the cultural contradictions she navigates. On one hand, she is expected to embody the idealized feminine virtues of purity, loyalty, and devotion, as espoused by her husband Nikhil. On the other hand, she is drawn to the excitement and passion of the nationalist movement, which promises a sense of purpose and agency but ultimately uses her as a symbol rather than a participant.

Bronfen's analysis helps us understand how Bimala's character becomes a site where these conflicting ideals are played out, with her eventual disillusionment reflecting the inherent contradictions in the nationalist discourse regarding women's roles. As Bronfen argues, 'The female body becomes a projection screen for cultural anxieties, a site where fears and desires are played out, often leading to the containment or destruction of female subjectivity' (Bronfen, 1992, p. 97). This insight is particularly relevant to Bimala's journey in *The Home and the World* where her identity is torn between her devotion to her husband and her infatuation with Sandip's nationalist rhetoric.

Tagore captures this conflict when Bimala reflects on her actions "I now see that I had set fire to my own house to warm myself" (Tagore, 2005, p. 136). Bimala's realization underscores the destructive impact of her involvement in the nationalist movement—a movement that promised liberation but ultimately confined her within the same patriarchal boundaries she sought to escape. Her disillusionment is emblematic of Bronfen's analysis, where Bimala's character is not just a participant in the nationalist struggle but a canvas on which the contradictions and failures of that struggle are vividly portrayed highlighting how Bimala's character becomes a focal point for the cultural and ideological tensions of her time.

1.2.4 Partha Chatterjee: The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question

Partha Chatterjee's seminal essay "The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question" further contextualizes Bimala's limited agency within the broader framework of Indian nationalist thought. Chatterjee argues that the nationalist movement in India created a

dichotomy between the home and the world, relegating women to the private, spiritual domain while men engaged in the public, material domain of politics (Chatterjee, 1989). Bimala's journey is a poignant illustration of this dichotomy, where her venture into the public sphere is fraught with confusion and moral dilemmas, ultimately reinforcing her return to the domestic realm.

Bimala's brief engagement with the nationalist movement under Sandip's influence serves as an experiment in transgressing these boundaries, but the narrative ultimately restores the status quo. Chatterjee's analysis highlights how Bimala's character embodies the limitations imposed on women by nationalist ideology, which, while advocating for social and political change, still clung to traditional notions of gender roles (Chatterjee, 1989).

1.2.5 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: Subalternity and the Limits of Representation

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concept of the subaltern and the question of whether the subaltern can speak is relevant to understanding Bimala's character as well. Spivak critiques the ways in which colonial and nationalist discourses often render the voices of subaltern women invisible or misrepresented (Spivak, 1988). In *Ghare Baire*, Bimala's voice and agency are mediated through the perspectives of Nikhil and Sandip, leaving her with little room to articulate her own desires or political beliefs independently.

Spivak's framework suggests that Bimala's limited agency is not merely a reflection of her personal confusion but also of the broader structural limitations imposed on women by both colonial and nationalist discourses. Bimala's inability to effectively navigate her role in the nationalist movement and her ultimate retreat into the domestic sphere can be seen as indicative of the silencing and marginalization of women's voices in the public and political arenas (Spivak, 1988).

1.2.6 Manipulation by Sandip and the Exploitation of Female Agency

Bimala's limited agency is most evident in her manipulation by Sandip, whose nationalist fervour is less about genuine liberation and more about personal power and control. Sandip's character embodies the darker aspects of nationalist movements, where women's contributions are often exploited for the movement's benefit without granting them true empowerment. Bimala's attraction to Sandip and her subsequent actions—such as stealing money from her husband—are driven by Sandip's manipulation, which exploits her emotional vulnerabilities and desire for validation.

This manipulation reflects a broader critique of how nationalist movements can marginalize and exploit women's contributions. While Bimala believes she is making significant sacrifices for the nationalist cause, her actions are ultimately directed and controlled by the men around her. Sandip's use of Bimala as a means to an end underscores the patriarchal nature of the nationalist movement, where women like Bimala are valued more for their symbolic significance than for their actual contributions. This exploitation of female agency highlights the limitations placed on women within nationalist narratives, where their roles are often circumscribed by the needs and desires of male leaders rather than by their own autonomy or empowerment.

In summary, Bimala's journey in *Ghare Baire* is marked by confusion, manipulation, and a severely limited agency. The theories of Sunder Rajan, Mohanty, Bronfen, Chatterjee, and Spivak provide a comprehensive framework for understanding how Bimala's character reflects the patriarchal underpinnings of the nationalist movement and the broader cultural anxieties surrounding women's roles during this period. Bimala's story is a poignant illustration of how women's agency in nationalist movements is often more symbolic than substantive, shaped and constrained by the socio-political structures that surround them.

1.3 Rehana's Path: Independence, Assertiveness, and Active Participation

Rehana, the protagonist of Tahmima Anam's *The Golden Age* (2007), exemplifies a modern evolution in the portrayal of female agency within nationalist struggles. Set during the Bangladesh Liberation War, Rehana's character illustrates a shift from symbolic to active and strategic participation in national endeavours. Her role as a mother intersects with her political actions, marking her as a figure of both personal and national significance. This section explores Rehana's character through contemporary theoretical frameworks, highlighting her agency as a modern and empowered figure in postcolonial literature.

1.3.1 Contemporary Theoretical Perspectives on Female Agency

Rita Felski's concept of "The Limits of Critique" (2015) provides a fresh lens for understanding Rehana's agency. Felski argues that traditional feminist and postcolonial critiques often confine women's roles to passive or victimized positions. Rehana's actions in *The Golden Age* — such as sheltering freedom fighters, providing essential resources, and making strategic decisions—represent a form of agency that goes beyond these traditional limitations. Felski's approach underscores Rehana's role as an empowered individual whose actions shape national history, challenging outdated feminist critiques (Felski, 2015).

Georgina Waylen's research on women's political participation and state formation provides valuable insights into Rehana's role. Waylen emphasizes that 'women's involvement in state-building processes is not only a question of participation but of reshaping the very definitions of citizenship and national identity' (Waylen, 2019, p. 245). Rehana's direct engagement in the Bangladesh Liberation War, including managing resources and sheltering freedom fighters, illustrates her significant impact on the political landscape. In **The Golden Age**, Rehana reflects on her decision to help the freedom fighters: 'I realized that I could not stand by and watch. My children's future depended on this war, and so did mine' (Anam, 2007, p. 178). This moment signifies her shift from a passive observer to an active participant,

embodying the very redefinition of national identity that Waylen discusses. Waylen's analysis reveals that Rehana's contributions are integral to the national project, marking a shift from women's symbolic roles to substantive involvement in the nation-building process. Rehana's actions, from organizing supplies to making strategic decisions, are not just supportive but essential to the success of the liberation movement, reflecting the broader theme that 'women's political agency is crucial in redefining the boundaries of the state and nation' (Waylen, 2019, p. 250).

Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni's theory of "The Politics of African Nationalism" offers additional context for examining Rehana's character. Ndlovu-Gatsheni discusses how nationalist movements often co-opt women's roles while restricting their autonomy (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2022). In contrast, Rehana's narrative subverts this trend, showcasing a character with genuine agency and strategic influence. Her involvement in the liberation struggle challenges the notion that women's contributions are secondary, positioning her as a central figure in the nationalist effort (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2022).

1.3.2 Rehana's Independence and Assertiveness

Rehana's narrative in * *The Golden Age* reflects a more complex and autonomous form of female agency compared to earlier representations. Her active role in the Bangladesh Liberation War is characterized by her significant contributions—sheltering fighters, providing resources, and making strategic decisions. These actions highlight her independence and assertiveness, marking a departure from traditional domestic roles.

1.3.4 Critical Perspectives and Parallels

Rehana's journey provides critical insights into the limitations and possibilities of female agency in nationalist contexts. Her role, while more empowered than earlier representations, still reflects complex dynamics of gender and nationalism. The parallels

between Rehana's actions and the contemporary socio-political climate in Bangladesh illustrate how literature can offer insights into ongoing national struggles and gender dynamics.

Recent political and social upheavals in Bangladesh, including debates over gender equality and national identity, resonate with Rehana's story. Her active participation in the liberation movement mirrors current discussions about women's roles in shaping national politics. As reported by *The Dhaka Tribune*, "Women in Bangladesh today continue to break barriers and influence national discourse, reminiscent of the character of Rehana who actively shaped the course of her country's history" (*The Dhaka Tribune*, 2024). Rehana's character, therefore, serves as both a historical and contemporary symbol of female agency and political participation.

1.4 Conclusion

The comparative analysis of Bimala from Rabindranath Tagore's *Ghare Baire* and Rehana from Tahmima Anam's *The Golden Age* illuminates the evolving roles of women in the context of nationalism and cultural history in the Indian subcontinent. Through these characters, we gain profound insights into the ways in which literary texts function as reflections and articulations of contemporary history and culture.

1.4.1 Bimala's Limited Agency and Historical Context

Bimala's journey in *Ghare Baire* reveals the complexities of female agency within early 20th-century nationalist movements. As Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan and Chandra Talpade Mohanty critique, Bimala's role is emblematic of how nationalist discourses historically co-opted women's participation while confining them to symbolic rather than substantive roles (Sunder Rajan, 1993; Mohanty, 1988). Her actions, though significant, are driven by her relationships with male figures and are circumscribed by the patriarchal structures of her time. Bimala's limited agency and her eventual retreat to the domestic sphere reflect the broader historical and cultural constraints faced by women in nationalist movements. Elisabeth

Bronfen's analysis of women as sites of cultural anxieties further underscores Bimala's embodiment of the tensions between traditional roles and modern ideals (Bronfen, 1992). Bimala's experience highlights how literary texts from this period narrate the struggles of women as both agents and symbols within nationalist contexts, offering a critical perspective on gender and politics.

1.4.2 Rehana's Empowered Agency and Contemporary Relevance

In contrast, Rehana's character in *The Golden Age* represents a modern evolution in female agency, characterized by assertiveness and active participation in the Bangladesh Liberation War. Recent theoretical perspectives, such as those by Rita Felski and Georgina Waylen, offer insights into Rehana's role as a transformative figure who transcends traditional limitations (Felski, 2015; Waylen, 2019). Rehana's engagement in the war—sheltering fighters, providing resources, and making strategic decisions—illustrates a substantial and autonomous form of agency that actively influences national history. Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni's analysis of nationalism provides further context, showing how Rehana's narrative challenges traditional notions of women's roles in nationalist movements (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2022). These perspectives connect Rehana's role to current debates and challenges faced by women in Bangladesh, emphasizing how literary representations continue to resonate with and reflect contemporary socio-political realities.

1.4.3 Literary Texts as Cultural Articulations

The comparative study of Bimala and Rehana underscores the role of literary texts as critical cultural articulations that narrate history and reflect societal changes. As recent critical theories argue, literature serves as a vital medium through which historical and cultural dynamics are explored and understood. For instance, Raymond Williams's concept of "cultural materialism" posits that literature not only reflects but also shapes cultural and historical contexts (Williams, 1980). Similarly, Edward Said's notion of "cultural representation"

highlights how literary texts engage with and represent cultural and historical realities, offering insights into the complexities of identity and power (Said, 1978).

By examining the characters of Bimala and Rehana, we see how literature functions as both a reflection of historical realities and a participant in cultural discourses. Bimala's constrained agency provides a window into the historical limitations imposed on women within nationalist contexts, while Rehana's empowered role offers a lens into contemporary issues of female agency and national identity. Through these characters, literary texts contribute to our understanding of historical and cultural processes, illustrating how narratives shape and are shaped by the socio-political landscapes of their times.

In conclusion, the analysis of Bimala and Rehana highlights the dynamic interplay between literature, history, and culture in the Indian subcontinent. These characters exemplify how literary works can serve as important cultural documents that narrate and critique historical developments, offering valuable insights into the evolving roles of women and the broader socio-political contexts in which they operate. By engaging with these texts through contemporary critical theories, we gain a deeper appreciation of how literature functions as a crucial medium for understanding and articulating the complexities of history and culture.

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