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From Trauma to Resistance: Memory and Meaning in Bangladeshi Protest Poetry of the July 2024 Uprising

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ABSTRACT

The July 2024 student-led uprising in Bangladesh ignited a new wave of protest poetry. Although the uprising received considerable political and historical attention, its literary impact remains critically underexplored. Therefore, this study aims to explore how the poetic works emerging from the uprising serve as both aesthetic responses and symbolic resistance, documenting collective psychosocial wounds and challenging the state narratives. Drawing on postlapsarianism, trauma, cultural memory, and resistance literature scholarship, this research employs a qualitative content analysis of ten poems and two digital protest rap tracks circulated in mainstream online newspapers and on social media platforms between July and August 2024. They were purposively chosen based on themes of trauma, memory, state violence, and resistance. The findings reveal recurring motifs of moral decline, temporal fragmentation, symbolic reclamation, and embodied defiance, illustrating how the texts negotiate disillusionment while restoring ethical visions. These texts preserve memory through symbolic codification, ritualise collective memory by repeatedly invoking past martyrs, reclaim memories of present-day fallen protesters, and resist state-sponsored amnesia through counter-archiving. They frame poetry as a site of disruption and transformation, where broken syntax, ritualised language, and sonic insurgency articulate what official discourse suppresses. Digital hip-hop and chant poetry further weaponise language through repetition, vernacular intensity, and online circulation, converting individual suffering into participatory collective defiance. By positioning these texts within Global South resistance aesthetics, the research enhances understanding of literature's role in mediating trauma, preserving cultural memory, sustaining democratic imagination, and reshaping political consciousness amid post-crisis societies.

Keywords: Collective Trauma; Counter Memory; Digital Dissent; Memory and Identity; Mnemonic Aesthetics

INTRODUCTION

Student activism significantly shaped Bangladesh's socio-political and cultural landscape, driving major changes over the decades. From the 1952 Language Movement, which fostered Bengali nationalism, to the 1969 Mass Upsurge against Ayub Khan's regime, students led efforts to oppose fascism and to value justice, democracy, and human rights. These movements had political and literary impacts, preserving memory, voicing the oppressed, and instilling a sense of national identity through creative expression (De, 2015; Jackman, 2021; Suykens, 2024). Movements like the pro-democracy rallies of the 1980s, the 2013 Shahbagh Movement demanding prosecution for 1971 war crimes, and the 2018 Quotas and Road Safety Movement underscored the youth's continued role in confronting systemic corruption and authoritarianism. These movements

influence Bangladesh's cultural and literary environment, portraying a steady trend of student activism.

Parallel to these movements, literature was both a mirror and an instrument of resistance, capturing a nation's collective consciousness in turmoil. It is a cultural site of negotiation where matter, metaphor, and memory interact to produce and contest meaning (Parui, 2022). Writers such as Zahir Raihan, Munir Chowdhury, and Begum Sufia Kamal documented the struggles for liberation, democracy, and human rights through their works (Saikat, 2017). Novels like *Arek Falgun* (Another Spring), plays such as *Kabor* (The Graveyard), and testimonies like *Ekattorer Diary* (The Diary of 1971) chronicled historical trauma and formed national identity and moral imagination. Similarly, the bloodstained shirt of Asad, the first student martyr of the 1969 uprising, became an enduring metaphor of resistance: "a fluttering national flag of Bangladesh waving proudly against the backdrop of a limitless blue sky" (Christiansen, 2019, p. 14). Thus, Bangladeshi literary traditions consistently served as a medium for preserving memory, articulating dissent, and inspiring collective action.

The July 2024 uprising in Bangladesh marked a new chapter in the country's resistance history. Unlike earlier movements rooted in nationalism or democracy, this uprising began as a non-political demand to reform public employment quotas but quickly evolved into a mass protest against authoritarian governance (Alam, 2024; Elkatmış, 2024). This decentralised, digitally mobilised movement was led by politically unaffiliated youth, unlike previous ideologically cohesive protests (Tribhu, 2024; Umar, 2024). In the contemporary era, the rise of digital activism has led to new forms of resistance, particularly among youth. Platforms like YouTube and Facebook became critical battlegrounds for dissent, with hip-hop, underground zines, and viral poetry serving as vehicles for revolutionary messages. The July 2024 uprising exemplifies this shift, with online spaces serving as platforms for discussion, expressions of trauma, and defiance. Caruth et al. (2019) note:

> The transformation of trauma into testimony is central to the narrative practices of protest literature. These literary works, through their aesthetic forms and symbolic content, allow for the reconstitution of collective memory, turning violence into a coherent, shared experience.
>
> (p. 79)

This accentuates literature's role in transforming trauma into a shared narrative, preserving the uprising's memory for future action. Protest poetry, as an art form, is uniquely positioned to reflect the collective emotional and psychological wounds of a society in crisis. It functions both as a response to political circumstances and as a mode of resistance that redefines national identity and collective moral vision. In protest poetry, poets use language and symbolism to transform the trauma of the event into testimony and to mobilise memory for political action. Harlow and Irele (2010) claim:

> In times of crisis, literature becomes not just a mirror of society but also a tool for its reconstruction. As resistance literature, it does not just document oppression; it actively resists it by offering alternative narratives that challenge the status quo.
>
> (p. 128)

Protest poetry, through symbolic language and fragmented structures, delivers a counter-narrative to official state discourse, offering a radical critique of the social, political, and moral decay perpetuated by the authorities. This aligns with postlapsarianism and trauma theory, which propose that the collapse of social and political structures requires literary responses that reshape collective memory and transform despair into defiance (A. Assmann, 2009; Eagleton, 2017).

The study is particularly relevant in the present-day context of South Asia, where political repression and state violence remain pressing issues. The protests in Bangladesh, India, Nepal, and Sri Lanka over the past few years illustrate a growing trend of youth-led movements challenging authoritarian governance and social injustice. In Bangladesh, the July 2024 uprising mirrors patterns seen in other recent protests across the region, such as the 2015 protest resisting the new constitution and the 2025 Gen Z movement against corruption and social media bans in Nepal, both driven by youth discontent with government policies. These protests underscore a significant shift in the political landscape of South Asia, where young people are increasingly at the forefront of challenging long-standing political structures, using digital platforms to amplify their voices.

Despite the uprising's significance in Bangladesh's cultural fabric, literary responses, especially protest poetry, remain underexplored. While much attention has been on its political and historical aspects, research on literature processing trauma, recording memory, and organising defiance is lacking. This study fills this gap by examining how protest poetry from the July 2024 uprising captures Bangladesh's collective wounds, creates counter-memories contrasting the hegemonic state narrative, and mobilises resistance. It analyses themes, imagery, symbolism, and metaphors in poetry responding to the uprising, showing how poetic language transforms trauma into testimony. It also examines how poetry stirs national identity and moral awareness while critiquing the political status quo. It contributes to a broader understanding of literature as a reflective and creative force during political crises. Analysing poetry as a form of resistance reveals how trauma, memory, and identity intersect within ongoing struggles for justice and democracy in the Global South.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Although Bangladesh became an independent nation-state in 1971, following the Liberation War, the cultural and literary traditions of the region now known as Bangladesh date back to the early twentieth century under British colonial rule and later during the East Pakistan period (1947-1971), in this paper, the term "Bangladeshi literature" is used retrospectively to refer to literary productions originating from the geographical territory of present-day Bangladesh, regardless of its shifting political status. Literary developments during these periods influenced the country's cultural memory and resistance discourse.

Thus, Bangladeshi literature has long served as a mirror to the nation's sociopolitical struggles, weaving collective trauma, resistance, and memory into its narrative fabric. From the anti-colonial writings of the early 20th century to the dystopian critiques of contemporary political and religious authority, literary works both reflected and shaped the moral consciousness of a nation in flux. During the July 2024 uprising, this tradition took a new form, manifesting in protest poetry that articulated collective trauma, disillusionment, and the symbolic preservation of memory. This section contextualises the uprising within Bangladesh's history of protest literature, examines its thematic and formal innovations, and identifies gaps in existing scholarship that this study seeks to address.

The antecedents of this protest tradition are found in literature that confronted successive authoritarian regimes. Early Marxist-inflected works, for instance, criticised capitalist structures while advocating for proletarian consciousness (Abbas, 2023). Poetic expression became a vehicle for direct satire, as in Mohammad Rafiq's extended poem lampooning General Ershad's dictatorship. Abbas (2023) highlights its critical power, noting:

> The sixteen-page critique (poem) 186atirized the regime's pretensions through visceral imagery, encapsulating the absurdity of the dictatorship in lines such as, "All the rascals crave to be a poet / The ant vainly desires to fly / The boar wants to ascend to the throne".
>
> (para. 2)

This literary dissent paralleled embodied acts of resistance, exemplified by the slogan, "Let the autocracy destroy / Let the democracy liberate", inscribed on Noor Hossain's body during the 1980s pro-democracy movements (S. Rahman & Rahman, 2013). Together, these works established a foundational nexus between literary expression, collective trauma, and democratic aspiration.

In its contemporary manifestations, this literary engagement retains its democratic vision while confronting new complexities: political persecution, religious extremism, and deepening socio-economic fissures often masked by the rhetoric of neoliberal progress (Anam, 2011). The dystopian mode emerged as a predominant form for this critique, a genre that Kádár and Tóth (2013) suggest typically arises from post-conflict anxieties to imagine the collapse of social and institutional orders. Contemporary authors experiment with language, imagery, and rhythm to express moral ambiguity and disillusionment, questioning revered institutions. A sense of fall from grace and a yearning for redemption dominate today's protest literature. Writers act as dissidents against religious dogma, casteism, corruption, and elitism. Helal Uddin's poetry, for example, interrogates religion, sexuality, and economic survival through complex metaphors. Mondal (2021) analyses his stark critique of urban elitism:

> Uddin's work explores the dissonance of modern identity, where his critique of urban elitism is starkly rendered in the line, "The urban is perched pirated in the drenching of the urine of urbanites", a metaphor for the corrosive and self-defeating nature of such social hierarchies.
>
> (p. 58)

Such expressions constitute a form of symbolic defiance born from a sense of profound moral rupture. A further development in recent years is a distinct dis-elitist stance, through which literary texts systematically interrogate dominant ideologies and expose societal hypocrisies (Biswas, 2024; H. Uddin, 2023). This critique frequently focuses on the instrumentalisation of religion. Gill (2017) compares institutional religion to a Barbie doll, arguing it is "adorned in appealing yet deceptive layers of tradition and dogma to mask the crude economic and political interests of elite powers, rendering it a pliable tool for social control" (p. 112). Bhattacharya (2023) illustrates this through the plight of Jaigun, a subaltern woman torn between purdah and survival, demonstrating how patriarchal religion and economic deprivation suppress female agency. Similarly, M. J. Uddin (2022) portrays religious leaders as criminals cloaked in piety, critiquing their performative moralism with satirical lines like: "The speech of Fakirah...transcends to unintelligible carol" (Mondal, 2021, p. 54).

The July 2024 uprising, initially led by students demanding quota reform, quickly escalated into a mass revolt that toppled an entrenched regime (Alam, 2024). This historic rupture is expected to inspire a wave of "after-shock literature", as termed by Costa et al. (2024), exploring neuro-psychological trauma and postlapsarian collapse. The movement's intensity, mass casualties, and ideological disillusionment mark a turning point in national consciousness, likely reshaping literary production. While the uprising has been analysed from socio-political and historical perspectives, its literary implications remain underexamined, particularly through a postlapsarian lens. Earlier works, such as Zahir Raihan's *Arek Falgun* and Munir Chowdhury's *Kabor*, celebrated nationalism and heroic sacrifice (Khan, 2017). In contrast, contemporary protest

poetry emphasises disillusionment, trauma, and dystopia as forms of resistance. Lee and Ko (2024) argue that post-crisis literature often shifts from collective idealism to introspective themes like moral ambiguity and exile, a perspective central to this study.

Historically, South Asian protest literature cycled through phases of hope, disillusionment, and resistance, from the Partition to the Liberation War and the Emergency (Sen, 2023). Rafiq Azad's raw line, "Bhat De Haramzada, Noile Manchitro Khabo" (Give me rice, bastard, or I will eat the map), epitomised the desperation of the 1974 famine, just as Shamsur Rahman's "Asad's Shirt" captured the collective mourning of 1969. The July uprising's poetic aftermath echoes these motifs but adds psychological depth, portraying exile, moral collapse, and the yearning for redemption.

While existing studies examined the July 2024 uprising from political and historical perspectives, its literary aftermath, particularly poetry's role in encoding trauma and preserving memory, remains underexplored. Most analyses focus on motifs of loss and exile without integrating trauma theory, cultural memory, and postlapsarianism. This study bridges that gap by interpreting protest poetry as a site of collective trauma, a mnemonic archive, and a symbolic act of defiance. Emerging forms such as revolutionary rap, graffiti verse, and digital lyrics serve as strategic tools for affective resistance, further indicating a formal shift from unified narratives to fragmented, polyvocal dissent. (Al Rousan & Hassan, 2025; Nguyen & Ferguson, 2019). By analysing how these poetic forms aestheticise trauma and reconstruct meaning after political collapse, this research offers critical insights into the evolving role of literature as both a historical document and an instrument of resistance in contemporary Bangladesh and the Global South.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study analyses Bangladesh's July 2024 uprising protest poetry using four interconnected theoretical paradigms. Postlapsarianism explains the thematic and philosophical contours of a fallen political world; trauma interprets catastrophic experiences; cultural memory sees poetry as a counter-archive; and resistance literature regards poetry as political defiance. This synthesis argues that poetry is a form of cultural resistance where aesthetic innovation, psychological depth, and mnemonic labour oppose political fanaticism. The study operationalises specific analytical concepts from each theory for the analysis of the selected texts.

The first analytical lens applied is postlapsarianism, which explores the aesthetics of political disillusionment and the shift from idealism to grim political realities. While its genealogy traces back to theological narratives of a fall from grace, its secular adaptation provides a critical apparatus for diagnosing the collective consciousness after a significant political fall. It conceptualises a historical moment defined by an irreversible descent from a perceived state of collective idealism or political innocence into a condition of exile, struggle, and epistemological crisis, framing societal collapse not merely as decline but as a complex awakening to historical realities. Eagleton (2017) articulates this nuanced perspective, arguing that:

> The fall is thus not just a narrative of decline but also one of emergence: it signifies a tragic yet necessary transition into the burdens of historical consciousness, ethical ambiguity, and political disenchantment, where the loss of innocence is the first step toward a more critical, albeit painful, engagement with the world.
>
> (p. 88)

Guided by this principle, the analysis traces how poems encode an irreversible fall, register the dissolution of moral binaries into zones of compromised agency, depict traumatic awakenings to systemic injustice, and articulate the phenomenological condition of existential exile within a reconfigured social order.

Trauma theory explores how catastrophic memories influence collective consciousness and narratives, analysing the formal and psychological structures of poems. It operationalises the concepts of fragmentation, belatedness, unspeakability, compulsive repetition, disrupted temporality, and affective shock, providing a hermeneutic for understanding how cognitively unprocessed events are encoded in cultural forms. They explain how psychological trauma operates through temporal disjunction and habitual repetition, manifesting not as a linear narrative but through symptomatic returns such as fractured structures, intrusive imagery, and narrative aporias. Caruth et al. (2019) explains this paradox of trauma:

> The unassimilated nature of the event, the way it was precisely not known in the first instance, returns to haunt the survivor. Trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature, the way it was precisely not known in the first instance, returns to haunt the survivor later on.
>
> (p. 4)

These concepts are applied to analyse literary productions of psychological wounds, including structural fragmentation and strategic silences that mimetically enact cognitive disruption; the delayed, cyclical recurrence of symbols indicating unprocessed experiences; and the somatisation of wounds through metaphors of bodily disintegration and pathological affect. They explain poems as a medium where unresolved violence resurfaces indirectly in fragmented forms that embody psychological injuries.

Cultural Memory Studies explores the dialectical processes by which societies construct, institutionalise, and contest historical consciousness through symbolic means. It operationalises the concepts of collective remembrance, counter-memory, sites of memory, memory preservation, mnemonic encoding, commemorative practices, and the affective intergenerational transmission of memory to analyse how poems function as a counter-archive, preserve marginalised histories, transform individual deaths into shared symbols, and negotiate state-sponsored narratives. Poetry is thus interpreted as an active "memory site", where symbolic forms, such as recurring colours, martyrs' names, and ritualised phrases, operate as mnemonic devices that reinforce collective identity and historical consciousness. Parui (2022) further demonstrates how literary texts function as material archives, where metaphor becomes a vehicle for encoding cultural memory and negotiating identity. This mnemonic practice is fundamentally characterised by strategic selection and ideological contestation. As J. Assmann (2011) establishes:

> Cultural memory is based on the principle of selection. It is not about the conservation of the past as such, but about its meaningful reconstruction from a present-day perspective. This involves a continuous process of negotiation, contestation, and re-interpretation, where some stories are elevated to foundational myths while others are marginalised or forgotten, making the archive a battlefield of political identity.
>
> (p. 123)

These concepts are applied to examine poems as instruments of counter-mnemonic practice, analysing how they subvert official historiography, crystallise historical particulars into enduring cultural symbols, transmit traumatic knowledge across generations, and function strategically as forms of archival insurgency that produce durable counter-narratives resisting state-sponsored amnesia.

Resistance literature sees literary production as a deliberate tool of political defiance against oppression. This paradigm understands poetry under repressive regimes as politically charged acts of dissent that transcend mere aesthetic form (Boehmer, 2018; Harlow & Irele, 2010). It is operationalised through the concepts of counter-narrative, aesthetic resistance, performative defiance, digital-age literary dissent, and vernacular resistance (especially in rap/chant forms). These concepts frame poetry not merely as representation but as political action. Nguyen and Ferguson (2019) argue:

> In the digital ecosystems of the Global South, online poetry, protest rap, and hip-hop have emerged as vital tools of narrative reclamation, creating alternative public spheres that circumvent state-controlled media and directly challenge authoritarian discourse through innovative linguistic and formal strategies.
>
> (p. 215)

This idea is particularly relevant to analysing how Bangladeshi protesters utilised digital platforms, including Facebook and YouTube, to bypass censorship and articulate dissent through poetic forms (Tribhu, 2024). Hence, these concepts guide an analysis of how poetic language, particularly in digital rap and chant forms, functions as a strategic tool that galvanises collective audiences, contests hegemonic discourse, creates alternative public spheres, and affirms cultural identity by invoking historical struggles to legitimise present dissent (McKenzie-Mohr & Lafrance, 2017). Through repetition, vernacular intensity, and digital distribution, these forms transform individual expression into collective resistance.

Hence, this integrated framework enables a multidimensional analysis of the protest poems of the July uprising, inspecting how they simultaneously mediate a postlapsarian political reality, formally encode the psychopathology of collective trauma, perform the crucial cultural labour of constructing counter-memory, and function as deliberate political resistance.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative content analysis method to examine literary responses to the July 2024 uprising in Bangladesh, analysing poems and songs published between July and August 2024 to capture both immediate reactions and early post-uprising reflections. The qualitative method was chosen to interpret thematic, symbolic, and narrative shifts in literature that require contextual and subjective analysis rather than numerical measurement. Literary pieces were sourced from prominent Bangladeshi English-language online dailies (*The Daily Star*, *The Daily Observer*) and rap songs from *YouTube*. The authors downloaded, reviewed, and screened the materials for references directly related to the revolution, including the July uprising, student protests, and the killing of Abu Sayeed. Selection criteria also included colour symbolism (black, red, blood, blackout); environmental imagery (fire, flames, hailstorms, rivers, floods); historical and creative motifs (protest songs, slogans, chants, student movements, anti-fascist resistance, war heroes, and martyrs); and emotional and bodily motifs (blood, tears, pain, scars, raised fists, marches, crowds, killing, darkness, repression). Works meeting these criteria were retained, while unrelated pieces were excluded. Bangla rap lyrics were translated into English by the author, prioritising semantic accuracy and cultural nuance over literal equivalence to preserve the affective force of the originals. The selected works were clustered into four subsets according to their thematic alignment, with relevant theories applied to each. They were theoretically analysed to identify patterns, narrative techniques, symbolic representations, and recurring motifs, demonstrating how these works captured the uprising's creative conscience and cultural essence.

THE POETICS OF COLLAPSE: A POSTLAPSARIAN VISION

The poems studied vividly illustrate the political moment as a fall; not a brief crisis, but a shift from a presumed order into a permanently altered landscape of violence, moral ambivalence, and grief. This postlapsarian vision is articulated through imagery of corrupted nature, the normalisation of monstrosity, internal exile, and a fraught, often desperate quest for redemption. Trisha's "The Sky and the Rain" uses apocalyptic imagery to depict this collapse: "My hands are drenched in crimson red./ The red that smells like blood!" (2024, lines 12–13), evoking Miltonic gesture, linking the self to a shared, inherited sin that signifies a point of no return. The recurring symbol of the "July sky" (line 7) represents ongoing moral dislocation, while the "monsoon's return" (line 1) offers no salvation but a cyclical possibility, emphasising the tension between trauma and fragile hope for renewal. The poetics of collapse is grounded in this dialectic: using natural and bodily imagery to portray a world unmoored, where the search for meaning continues amid a landscape forever scarred.

Amaryllis's poem "All Hail July" captures a moment of rupture by transforming the sky into an aggressor. It begins with the deceptive optimism that "the July wind brought in the scent of new beginnings" (2024, line 1), evoking the familiar monsoon cycle and the start of the school year. This hopeful tone quickly darkens as the "bright blue sky" shifts into a "furious hailstorm" that threatens to silence reform (lines 3–4). Here, the weather acts as more than a neutral backdrop; it symbolises weaponised climate, with hailstorms standing in for rubber bullets and batons, clearly reflecting the state's efforts to suppress dissent. Notably, the poem rejects any illusion of simply "going back" to clear skies, insisting the damage "will continue to persist" (line 11), underscoring the irreversible nature of the fall. This fallen state necessitates a new, arduous form of resistance, as "people will continue to fight without fail" (line 8), and leads to pragmatic growth: "we'll learn how to fight as we continue to grow" (line 13). Hence, the poem offers a postlapsarian hope, not a longing for a pristine past but a fragile optimism embedded within a cyclical pattern of trauma. Its final line, "Just because July hailed on us, doesn't mean August won't be a better tomorrow" (line 14), connects Reza's "Interval": "the pale green country will someday become a dreamy utopia" (2024, line 17), suggesting a fragile but enduring vision of redemption. It indicates that hope becomes meaningful precisely because the future falls are inevitable.

Prachi's poem "The Children of the Red Storm" extends this climactic vocabulary. In the opening lines, the narrator addresses the youth: "You've ignited a tempest, a crimson anger, / A defiance burning brighter than the summer's sun" (2024, lines 1–2). While Amaryllis's hailstorm is inflicted from above, Prachi's "tempest" is authored by the protesters themselves. The term "crimson anger" connects meteorology to bloodshed, and "burning brighter than the summer's sun" implies a heat that is both empowering and exhausting. The poem thus locates the postlapsarian world in a permanently altered climate, one in which the "red storm" becomes the generation's defining condition rather than a temporary evil spell.

Aahmed's "Cowardice" brings this fallenness to the level of the self, depicting an inner moral exile where "the cowardice eats my bravery, marking its territory deep into my flesh" (2024, line 7). Here, cowardice is personified as a rent-free "tenant" in the "mansion" of the soul. The speaker watches others march "from the high windows," while the "rebelled fighter" within remains under "strict scrutiny" (lines 11–13). Here, the postlapsarian condition is not heroic martyrdom but the grinding psychological reality of living with fear: the self is split between an inner insurgent and an outer body governed by survival, social surveillance, and perhaps familial responsibility.

Fragmentation and disrupted temporality reflect the breakdown of coherence after collapse. The poems' shifts between despair and defiance depict a world struggling to reassemble meaning. Ramim's "Survival Tactics for 'Peaceful' Protests" brings this condition into the realm of the body: practical instructions such as "Use your name and emergency contact as your lock screen" (2024, line 8) turn protest into survival. Like Milton's fallen Adam and Eve, students confront a hostile world with improvised armours such as books, toothpaste, and emergency contacts, rather than divine protection, revealing their fragile survival strategies.

Postlapsarian motifs recur both symbolically and structurally. From hailstorms, bloodied skies, and hostile environments to disrupted temporality and fragmented syntax, these poems reflect a moral and civic order that fell into chaos. The yearning for redemption here is not merely a return to innocence but a rebirth forged through collective memory, cultural resistance, and sustained poetic effort. Hence, this corpus illustrates a "poetics of collapse" where nature, society, and self all experience an irreversible decline; yet, that very decline becomes the foundation for resilient, rebellious, and informed forms of agency.

THE AESTHETICS OF WOUNDING: TRAUMA EMBODIED

A second cluster of texts enacts the aesthetics of wounding: the way trauma is felt in bodies, narrated in disrupted time, and rehearsed through survival scripts. Here, poems and memoir blur into one another, collectively performing fragmentation, belatedness, and somatisation. Tribhu's memoir "Days in the Blackout" provides a detailed prose account of the internet shutdown and curfew regime, starting with a sentence that captures shock and scale: "The silence forced upon the mass came on a sudden Thursday, as all means of communication were shut down abruptly overnight" (2024, para. 1). The phrase "forced upon the mass" underscores that this silence is coercive, not contemplative, while the everyday marker "Thursday" intensifies the dissonance: trauma arrives in the middle of an ordinary week. The images of "mothers wailing", "fathers running on the streets" to find their sons, and a child who "falls asleep counting the roaring choppers instead of sheeps" (para. 2) illustrate a stark contrast between civilian life and militarised violence. The aesthetic force here lies in the incongruity of children's bedtime routines being colonised by military machinery; the lullaby is replaced by helicopter noise, and sheep by "choppers."

Ramim's poem "Survival Tactics" transforms trauma into a pedagogical script. The speaker instructs: "Stay in a group, never in alleyways / Chaos is your best friend; your voice, a weapon" (2024, lines 1–2). The focus then shifts to sensory overload: "When hit with tear gas, try not to focus on the burning in your lungs / Or the swelling of your chest" (lines 17–18). Later, auditory trauma becomes central: "Cover your ears at the sight of a sound grenade / And open your mouth to neutralise the pressure" (lines 27–28). The poem's form, with its second-person imperatives and an accumulating list of tactics, mirrors the hypervigilant cognition of trauma survivors, who mentally rehearse survival scenarios to maintain a fragile sense of control. In this way, the body becomes a "textbook", replacing formal education with embodied knowledge. The educational trajectory of youth has been violently rewritten: instead of learning calculus or poetry in classrooms, students must learn how to protect their lungs, eyes, and bones. The trauma is thus both physical and developmental, as lessons in survival displace intellectual growth. Therefore, the poem foregrounds the body as the primary site of trauma. Students abandon textbooks for "practicals on the complex structure of bones" (line 12), and instructions such as "Cover your ears

at the sight of a sound grenade" (line 27) transform verse into a manual of physical endurance. Poetry here becomes a collective somatic archive, where pain is both corporeal and existential, demonstrating how trauma rewires awareness and turns the body into the curriculum of resistance.

Reza's "Interval" explores trauma as temporal suspension. The collective "we" sits "between curfews and choppers, / between prayers and broken promises" (2024, lines 5–6), in "the long interval of a nation's dying breath" (line 7). The repetition of "between" conveys a sense of being trapped, unable to move either forward or backwards. When the speaker asks, "What is life / when the streets forget your name, / and the sky forgets your screams?" (lines 9–11), the trauma is not only that the subject suffers but that the world itself seems to have lost the capacity to register that suffering. This is consistent with trauma studies' emphasis on erased or disbelieved witness.

The question of how to depict such wounding surfaces in Reza's "Silence". The speaker asks, "What should I write now? / When everything's dark here / When dead cry dominates all / What you want me to write?" (2024, lines 1–4). This hesitancy becomes an ethical refusal: "I will not decorate your horror with my art… History will be my spokesperson, and silence will be my weapon" (lines 7–9). Trauma produces a negative aesthetic where resisting the transformation of pain into "pretty patterns" is the most ethical stance. Silence is not an absence but a purposeful withholding, charged with meaning and kept in reserve for future testimony. The poem thus evokes an unspeakable agony, where silence screams louder than riots, serving as strategic non-cooperation with voyeuristic audiences and state narratives.

In these texts, trauma functions not only as a subject to describe but also as a means of expression. Memoir uses parataxis and striking juxtapositions, while poetry features lists of bodily instructions, deliberate pauses, and declared silence. Therefore, the aesthetic of wounding is inherently connected to the politics of survival.

FORGING COUNTER-MEMORY: POEMS AS ARCHIVE

A third set of texts positions poetry as a tool for counter-memory, actively working against state attempts to normalise or erase the uprising. The poems construct lineages of resistance, archive embodied knowledge, and coin symbols that can be reused in future struggles.

Rahman's poem "The Color of Courage" offers a clear example. After depicting a lone student facing police rifles, the poem reaches the scene of his death: "Valor lay still on the dusty street, dripping blood, colouring the earth with the colour of courage—RED" (2024, line 7). The capitalised "RED" then becomes the heading for a ten-point list explaining what red represents, from "the colour that screams like police vans" (line 8) to "the colour of rebellion, hundreds of thousands of closed fists, shouting reform" (line 14) and ultimately "the colour of freedom" (line 17). Rahman redefines a single death as a lexicon, where 'red' signifies not just blood but an archive of protest images, including graffiti, Facebook screens, and marches, that future readers can cite.

Ara's "Magic Boys and Girls of Bangladesh" ties present-day students to historical and future struggles. She addresses them directly: "Magic boys and girls of Bangladesh, your beautiful minds" (2024, line 5), followed by "Your daring footprints on the page of history, / Echo the spirit of Abu Sayed; boundless bravery" (lines 6–7). The footprints metaphor encodes both vulnerability (footprints can be washed away) and inscription (they mark a "page of history"), while the reference to Abu Sayed, shot dead during the uprising, grounds the poem in a specific martyr. Later, she invokes historical martyrs such as Asad, Nur Hossain, and Abu Sayed, proclaiming,

"The souls of the martyrs walk with you" (line 11), thereby situating the July 2024 uprising within the longer arc of Bangladesh's liberation history. She describes blood as "fluid gold on the streets of Bengal" (line 13), and students as "under the clouds of flame and fire" "ploughing / The dark land and sowing the seeds of a bright future" (lines 18–19). Here, blood is recoded as value and fertility; the poem insists that these deaths and injuries form part of a national investment in a different future, resisting state efforts to portray them as senseless or criminal.

Prachi's "The Children of the Red Storm" contributes a symbolic shorthand to this archive. The opening lines: "You've ignited a tempest, a crimson anger, / A defiance burning brighter than the summer's sun" (2024, lines 1–2) forge "red storm" as a multi-layered image of anger, blood, and climactic extremity. Later lines about "courage" persisting and "stories yet untold" (lines 5–6) suggest that the storm will be remembered as the crucible in which a generation was formed. Once established, "red storm" can function as a master symbol: a phrase that instantly calls up a cluster of visual and emotional associations without requiring a complete narrative retelling.

Ramim's "Survival Tactics", discussed as a trauma script, also serves as a repository of embodied knowledge. By preserving printed instructions such as "Use your name and emergency contact as your lock screen" (2024, line 9) and advice on coping with tear gas (lines 18–22), the poem resists being limited to short-lived oral transmission and social media sharing, ensuring that these tactics remain accessible to future readers who may face similar situations of state violence. Its placement in the "Star Literature" section, under labels like "quota reform 2024" and "poetry and politics", further embeds these tactics in a searchable, reputable archive.

Finally, Reza's "Chant for Change" exemplifies ritualised counter-memory in verse. The opening quatrain reads: "In Dhaka's streets where voices rise / With youth's defiant, hopeful cries / General students stand for right / With bold voice and strong might" (2024, lines 1–4). The regular meter and end-rhyme ("rise/cries," "right/might") make this stanza easy to memorise and chant. It positions students as the moral centre, "stand for right", and encodes the affective tone ("defiant, hopeful") that the movement seeks to remember. Later stanzas similarly build toward the claim that "the student's call…ultimately changed our beloved land" (lines 13–16). Hence, the poem functions as a script for commemoration that can be reproduced at rallies, anniversaries, and in classrooms.

In all these instances, poems do not merely reflect memory; they create it. By naming martyrs, listing colours, crafting counter-narratives, and scripting chants, they create durable forms of remembering that can outlast news cycles and official reports.

WORDS WEAPONISED: POETRY AS DEFIANCE

The final selection of texts clearly demonstrates the instrumental use of language. The selected Bangla digital protest rap tracks, such as "Awaaz Utha" (Raise Your Voice) by Hannan and "Kotha Ko" (Speak Up) by Shezan, released on YouTube during the 2024 uprising, delivered with raw emotion and rage, act as a counter-hegemonic discourse that weaponises language to confront fascism, violence, digital censorship, and historical erasure. They unmask political euphemisms, reframe protesters, refuse cooptation, document defiance, activate shared archives of suffering, and mobilise resistance through rhythm, repetition, vernacular idioms, and an immediately shareable participatory performance. Hence, these songs reclaim voice, agency, historical consciousness, and moral interrogation, using hip-hop as a revolutionary pedagogical tool.

In "Awaaz Utha", the hook "Raise your voice, Bangladesh" (Hannan, 2024, line 1) functions as a performative speech act, transforming listeners into active participants through collective chanting. Widely shared online, the track produces an insurgent soundscape that bypasses state media and can be easily replayed on phones or at marches. This hook turns solitary listening into a collective chorus whenever someone hits "play" in a crowd, weaponising the word as it is chanted on streets, painted on placards, and looped in headphones. Then tyranny is immediately personified: "A tyrant sits on the throne, how much longer must we endure?" (line 11), followed by a critique of how lives are wasted for power: "How many brothers must die just to secure your Chair for sure?" (line 12). The capitalisation of "Chair" reduces state power to a seat and governance to an object of selfish possession maintained through bloodshed. By insisting on counting bodies, the poem aligns with trauma-informed protest writing. Then it demands accountability: "You shot Abu Sayeed—who gave the order, who's the hand?" (line 15). Martyrdom is then universalised: "Now millions of Sayeeds march, if you've got guts, then stand!" (line 16). Multiplying the name "Sayeed" resists erasure and asserts that each fallen body generates renewed resistance, a process amplified by rap's hooks and collective choruses that convert individual grief into a shared anthem of defiance.

Resistance escalates through deterrence rather than glorified violence: "One you hit, we send ten, how many more you gonna try?" (line 20). The rap balances mourning with resilience: "Golden Bengal will survive, golden sons may fall below" (line 23), acknowledging sacrifice while refusing to surrender, while "Cowards show their true face, keep your courage measured, bro" (line 24) undermines authority through mockery. It rejects dynastic nationalism: "This country isn't anyone's father's; no one could claim it alone" (line 27), and critiques inherited power: "Whatever her father did, she couldn't build a base of her own" (line 28).

The bitter irony of state recognition, "Tomorrow, a medal will hang on the chest, today, why's there a bullet instead?" (line 29), reveals that the authority that kills or permits killing later recognises the victims as "martyrs" with medals and speeches to erase responsibility, replace accountability, and sanitise violence with empty praise. The speaker's refusal to forget is explicit: "We didn't forget '52, then how will you erase '24?" (line 31). Protest poetry acts as a counter-archive, preventing state violence from being rewritten or erased. Declaring non-partisan unity: "We're not of any party, didn't come from any flags" (line 37), and fearlessness: "We hit the streets with shrouds tied tight, death packed in our bags" (line 38), the speaker asserts a grassroots resistance rooted in lived reality rather than ideology. The final line, "I am Sayeed—I'll take the bullet smiling at the gun" (line 39), where the speaker willingly absorbs violence as an act of defiance, completes the poem's transformation of individual martyrdom into collective courage. Digital rap amplifies such lines through repetition, rhythm, and online circulation, allowing poetry to move from the page to the street, from voice to movement.

Similarly, "Kotha Ko" (Speak Up) interrogates the legitimacy of authority, exposing the divide between codified law and historical ownership: "Power writes the law, but who owned this land first? / Batons snap pens, call it peace while the blood bursts" (Shezan, 2024, lines 9–10). The image of "batons snap pens" (line 10) symbolically merges state violence with the suppression of intellectual dissent. The poet further deepens this, "Killed yesterday, killed before, now you're back again, / If a ruler takes his people's lives, whose king is he then?" (lines 11–12), emphasising the cyclical nature of injustice and holding rulers accountable. These lines highlight the protest poets' role in documenting injustices and ensuring that collective memory endures even under threat. Similarly, "They cut like swords, though meant to be shields, / Truth burns tongues soaked in sin—can't face what it reveals" (lines 15–16) critiques institutionalised deception. In response,

the poem valorises collective courage with "Step to strike, we'll strike back, dead or alive, / Night can't scare the brave, the dawn will arrive" (lines 23–24), portraying fearlessness and solidarity while projecting hope for justice and turning audiences into active participants.

The lines "Students brought the language, students built the land, / The hand that held the pen now wears cuffs on command" (lines 35–36) commemorate student activism and intellectual labour, critiquing the recurring criminalisation of dissent. The line performs symbolic reclamation, shifting the narrative from portraying students as unruly mobs, violent, or naive. Here, historical references from 1952 to 2024 are condensed into a memorable hook or chorus to evoke defiance in real time, blending hybrid vernaculars and performative elements. The line, "You stitch our tongues in chains; how many mouths you gonna sew before truth remains?" (line 45), expresses the silencing of dissent. In rap, colloquial inflexions, slang, strategic pauses, and rhetorical questions heighten this confrontational tone, creating immediacy and intimacy with audiences. Through these elements, protest rap extends its reach across digital networks, transforming private anger into public outrage.

The repeated invocation of justice, "You fought for freedom, where's that freedom now?/ If we bleed for language just to end up mute, then how? (lines 37–38), resonates with the chorus-driven structure of rap, ensuring retention of the key message and audience participation. This structure confirms that digital protest rap thrives in both digital and performative spaces, where stylistic innovation amplifies defiance. The line "You sucked us dry for years—still want five more years of pain" (line 33) captures cumulative exploitation across time, converting abstract suffering into a tangible countdown. Digital rap amplifies this effect by circulating the line as a viral refrain, turning poetic accusation into collective verdict. The line "You feast on stolen rights, you'd never let it slide" (line 17) frames injustice as a deliberate act of consumption. transforming political corruption into a visceral act of moral cannibalism. The line "In a land of corpses now, you dare ask for justice—why?" (line 31) starkly critiques seeking justice after mass violence and reveals the illusion of normalcy.

Thus, both the protest rap tracks serve as powerful counter-narrative tools that demand accountability and confront state violence, censorship, and historical denial. Through raw emotion, strategic silence, rhythmic repetition, vernacular expression, and strategic digital circulation, these songs reclaim narratives, agency, and historical consciousness, transforming individual suffering into a unified anthem of defiance. By questioning authority, documenting injustice, and valorising collective courage, these tracks defy state narratives and incite action.

Hence, these digital protest verses transformed the grammar of resistance across the Global South. Circulating through social media, street performance, and collective chanting, they served as mnemonic technologies that generated counter-archives in real time. By transforming trauma into mobilising metaphors, they reframed postlapsarian experience as lived and mediated rather than solely philosophical, where fragmentation, repetition, and sonic insurgency structurally responded to state violence. Hence, digital circulation, performative chant, and hybrid vernacular dissolved the boundary between literary expression and political action, positioning poetry as a key mechanism in the formation of counter-publics. Contemporary protest verse in the Global South, therefore, does more than document crisis; it actively reconfigures political memory and expands the imaginative horizon of collective agency. This perspective urges a reconsideration of literature's role in authoritarian contexts not merely as symbolic dissent, but as a material and affective technology for democratic reimagination.

CONCLUSION

This study examines how the protest poetry of the July 2024 uprising functions as a political intervention, rewriting memory and history while addressing collective trauma and state violence. When official narratives attempt to rewrite violence, they restore testimonies and ethical awareness. Combining studies of postlapsarianism, trauma, cultural memory, and resistance literature, the analysis demonstrates that these texts serve simultaneously as aesthetic expressions, counter-archives, and instruments of resistance. Through fragmented structures, embodied metaphors, ritualised chants, viral soundscapes, strategic silence, and digital circulation, they transform grief into symbolic resistance and preserve memory against erasure.

Findings show that these verses, with their hybrid forms, participatory chants, lyrics, and digital dissemination, actively contest censorship and algorithmic surveillance, signalling a shift from static print poetry to mobile, reproducible, and rhythmically weaponised verses. In contexts of surveillance, internet shutdowns, democratic decline, and digital repression, they create alternative public spaces to reassemble fractured communities and assert agency. They perform three interconnected functions: bearing witness to trauma, creating counter-memories, and activating collective imagination. Instead of mourning lost innocence, they recognise political fallenness as a catalyst for critical awakening.

This shift from idealistic expectation to ethically conscious resistance reflects a broader transformation in contemporary protest literature across the Global South and beyond. This study analyses English-language poems and self-translated Bangla rap lyrics from specific digital platforms during July–August 2024, excluding longer-term literary responses and print or regional media. As a qualitative, theory-driven interpretive analysis, its findings limit statistical generalisability, and the translations may not fully capture the original texts' linguistic and affective nuances. Future research should include multilingual texts, diverse media, longer timeframes, and expanded theories to better understand the uprising's literary impact. It may also explore how digitally circulated protest poetry contributes to the long-term institutionalisation of cultural memory of youth-led movements and the evolving aesthetics of resistance literature across the Global South.

ENDNOTES

[i]All English translations of Bangla song lyrics cited in this article are by the author unless otherwise stated.

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