

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the study

Patriarchy, a system of social structures and practices that reinforce male dominance, has long dictated the roles and limitations imposed on women in many societies. This dominance manifests in subtle and overt forms whether through legal frameworks, cultural norms, or institutionalised discrimination-that suppress women's autonomy and their ability to gain equal opportunities (Gulo et al., 2024). However, along with the development of society, movements that aim to dismantle patriarchal structures have also developed. One such movement is liberal feminism, which advocates for equal rights, freedoms and opportunities for women, seeking to remove barriers that limit women's potential. This feminist ideology provides the main framework for analysing *Mad, Bad, and Dangerous to Know* by Samira Ahmed.

In her contemporary novel, Ahmed blends drama, romance, comedy, and art mystery while exploring deeper themes of identity, cultural struggle, and gender equality. Samira Ahmed is renowned for her exploration of identity and culture, especially in the context of feminism. *Mad, Bad, and Dangerous to Know* exemplifies her signature approach of linking gender and cultural issues, making it an ideal text for feminist analysis. The novel utilises a dual narrative technique, focusing on the lives of two women from different historical periods: Khayyam Maquet, a 17-year-old Muslim girl from Chicago, and Leila, a 19th-century woman in the Ottoman Empire.

Khayyam, who comes from a mixed French-Indian family, embarks on a seemingly peaceful holiday in Paris, which soon turns into an art mystery adventure. As she delves into researching the artwork of Eugène Delacroix, Khayyam faces many obstacles-social stereotypes, personal conflicts, and even teenage love. However, her determination to solve the mystery and her fight for equal education reflect the ambitious spirit of young women in the 21st century. As Ahmed explains in her interview with *The Young Folks*, Khayyam's story is that of an ambitious young woman who wants to overcome social barriers in pursuit of her artistic goals.

In contrast, Leila's story takes place in the 19th century within the harem of the Ottoman Empire. As a "Haseki," the title of a concubine of the Ottoman Sultan who gave birth to a *şehzade* (prince); thus meaning Mother of a Prince. Haseki sultan had an important place in the palace, being the second most powerful woman of the harem after the *valide sultan*, the mother of the sultan, Leila lives under the tutelage of the Pasha. Despite her prestigious position, she feels constrained by the patriarchal restrictions placed on her-she is not given the freedom to even narrate her own life. Leila's struggle to break free from the patriarchal control that confined her illustrates the oppressive boundaries faced by women of her time. Her narrative, influenced by Lord Byron's poem *The Giaour* and Delacroix's paintings, speaks to the silencing of women, whose lives and stories are often overshadowed by the men around them.

Although Khayyam and Leila live in very different contexts-one in the modern West and the other in the historic Ottoman Empire-the two characters are united by their struggle against patriarchal constraints. Through their story, Ahmed emphasises the struggle of feminists in general to challenge and overcome gender

stereotypes. As such, the novel reflects the core principles of liberal feminism, which advocates for women's rights to freedom, equality, and autonomy-principles that are explored through the dual narratives of Khayyam and Leila, set in different times but driven by similar aspirations.

Liberal feminism, as articulated by feminist scholars such as Mary Wollstonecraft, focuses on equal rights, freedoms and opportunities for women. Liberal feminism emphasises the dismantling of legal, social and cultural barriers to women's full participation in society. This framework allows for a more nuanced reading of *Mad, Bad, and Dangerous to Know*, as we can see how far feminist thought has come and how it has evolved to address issues of social, economic, and cultural inequality. Khayyam and Leila's experiences highlight the ways in which feminist ideas have evolved from the 19th century-where the focus was primarily on legal equality-to the 21st century, where feminist discourse increasingly includes issues such as social and economic rights, racial and cultural discrimination, and gender equality in education and employment.

Moreover, the novel offers an important opportunity to explore liberal feminism in the context of Muslim and diasporic identities, which remain underrepresented in existing feminist studies. Khayyam's experience as a Muslim girl exploring the cultural landscapes of the West and the East, and Leila's role as a woman within the patriarchal confines of the Ottoman Empire, shed light on how women from different backgrounds navigate and challenge patriarchal systems.

Previous studies have discussed liberal feminism in literature, particularly regarding gender empowerment, equality, and inclusivity. Pandeewari & Hariharasudan (2022) analysed liberal feminism in the works of Preeti Shenoy,

Rajapandi et al. (2022) examined *Girl, Woman, Other* by Bernardine Evaristo, while Sangeetha et al. (2022) examined the theme of domestic violence in Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You*. Priyadharshini & Kumar (2024) studied Namita Gokhale's work, while Diana (2022) examined the symbol of liberal feminism through the character Celie in Alice Walker's *The Colour Purple*. All of these studies focus on the representation of liberal feminism in various media, depicting female empowerment, gender equality, and challenges to patriarchal norms. While much feminist literary criticism has explored gender empowerment and equality, few studies have examined the intersection of liberal feminism with the unique challenges faced by Muslim women, especially those living in diasporic or postcolonial contexts. The forthcoming study *Mad, Bad, and Dangerous to Know* will analyse the representation of liberal feminism through the characters of Khayyam and Leila in the context of the Muslim diaspora and the Ottoman Empire, filling a gap that has not been widely discussed in existing feminist literature.

This gap in feminist discourse, particularly in relation to Muslim and migrant identities, is the main concern of this research. By analysing the characters of Khayyam and Leila, *Mad, Bad, and Dangerous to Know* provides a unique lens to expand our understanding of liberal feminism, exploring how women from different cultural, historical, and religious contexts experience and resist patriarchal domination. Through these analyses, this research aims to contribute to a more inclusive feminist framework, one that considers the intersectionality of gender, culture, and diasporic identities.

1.2 Research Question

1. How does *Mad, Bad, and Dangerous to Know* represent modern women and women who were Haseki during the Ottoman Empire through the two main female characters?
2. How do the two main characters fight the patriarchal domination of their respective eras?

1.3 Purpose of the Study

1. This research aims to explore how the portrayal of modern women and the representation of women who became Haseki during the Ottoman Empire in the 19th century are depicted in this novel.
2. The purpose of this research is also to analyse in depth the problems experienced by the two main female characters, both from the social, cultural and gender contexts of their respective eras, focusing on how they resisted in the face of existing norms and power structures that made women's roles limited in their respective times.

1.4 Scope of the Study

This research will focus on how the two main characters Khayyam Maquet and Leila are p in their time and how they struggle against patriarchal domination, and how they portray strong liberal feminism. This is so that we can understand the development of liberal feminism and develop it to be more inclusive. It is also to better understand and learn about the struggles and experiences of women from different times and backgrounds. By focusing on two main female characters, this research will apply Mary Wollstonecraft liberal feminism thinking as the main foundation. By applying this thought, it can help to explore the problems

experienced by women in the fields of education, social equality, and freedom from institutional restrictions from different backgrounds and times..

1.5 Significance of the Study

This research can make a significant contribution to the field of liberal feminism by introducing new discussions that explore the intersection between liberal feminism and issues related to the Muslim diaspora. In addition, this research also expands our understanding of the evolution of liberal feminism over time. By applying Mary Wollstonecraft theories, we can study in depth the struggles faced by the two main characters as they seek educational equality and the ability to make their own life choices, unaffected by their circumstances. By examining this novel, this research helps us to better understand how women are treated and the challenges they face in pursuing equality and self-expression in two different eras and backgrounds. As such, this study can be a valuable resource for future research relating to liberal feminism in contemporary fiction.