

Liberal Feminist Narratives in Diaspora Literature: Gender Equality and Global Literacy in Samira Ahmed's *Mad, Bad, and Dangerous to Know*

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Abstract

This study examines the representation of liberal feminism in Samira Ahmed's *Mad, Bad, and Dangerous to Know*, focusing on how the novel constructs female agency through the characters of Khayyam and Leila. Applying Wollstonecraft's liberal feminist framework, the analysis explores how both women negotiate autonomy, education, and self-definition within patriarchal and cross-cultural contexts. Khayyam's intellectual pursuit and self-determination represent modern liberal feminist agency, while Leila's inner resistance and reclamation of authorship reflect subtle acts of defiance in a historical setting. Beyond depicting women's empowerment, the novel also serves as a medium of global literacy, encouraging readers to engage critically with cultural history, gender, and representation across time and geography. However, the narrative also exposes the tensions and limitations of liberal feminist discourse, as Ahmed's portrayal occasionally reproduces Western-centric assumptions that position Muslim women as subjects in need of liberation. Rather than diminishing its value, this ambivalence reveals the novel's capacity to provoke critical reflection on the boundaries of feminist ideology within global literary discourse. By linking feminist analysis with the goals of SDG 5 (Gender Equality) and SDG 4 (Quality Education), this study argues that diaspora literature like Ahmed's serves as both a tool for gender awareness and a platform for cultivating critical global literacy—empowering readers to question, reinterpret, and expand the meanings of feminism across cultural borders.

Introduction

Patriarchy, a system of social structures reinforcing male dominance, has historically dictated women's roles and limitations across societies, manifesting through legal frameworks, cultural norms, and institutional discrimination. 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). In response, movements such as liberal feminism have emerged to dismantle these patriarchal structures by advocating equal rights, freedoms, and opportunities for women, Mary Wollstonecraft's foundational liberal feminist theory in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) provides crucial theoretical underpinnings for understanding this resistance, particularly through her conceptualization of reason as the foundation of virtue and human dignity, and her critique of patriarchal education systems that render women "insignificant objects of desire" rather than rational beings capable of moral and intellectual development (Wollstonecraft, 1792). Wollstonecraft's argument that women's exclusion from natural rights exposes "a fundamental flaw in any constitution, revealing man's tyrannical nature and undermining morality" establishes the theoretical framework for liberal feminism's demand for universal equality based on shared rational capacity rather than gender-specific virtues. Furthermore, her emphasis on economic independence

as a pathway to true freedom, arguing that women must be "educated to earn their own subsistence" to avoid moral degradation through dependency, anticipates contemporary feminist concerns about women's economic autonomy and self-determination. This feminist ideology serves as the primary framework for analyzing Samira Ahmed's *Mad, Bad, and Dangerous to Know*. This young-adult novel blend drama, romance, and art mystery, while foregrounding deeper issues of identity, culture, and gender equality. It focuses on two young women who live in different eras (modern and historical times).

Previous studies have extensively examined liberal feminism in literature, focusing on gender empowerment and equality. Recent scholarship includes analyses of Preeti Shenoy's works (Pandeewari & Hariharasudan, 2022), Bernardine Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other* (Rajapandi et al., 2022), Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You* (Sangeetha et al., 2022), Namita Gokhale's literature (Priyadharshini & Kumar, 2024), and Alice Walker's *The Colour Purple* (Diana, 2022). While these studies effectively explore female empowerment and challenges to patriarchal norms, a significant gap exists in examining liberal feminism within Muslim diasporic and postcolonial contexts.

This research addresses this gap by analyzing *Mad, Bad, and Dangerous to Know*, specifically examining the characters Khayyam and Leila within the Muslim diaspora and Ottoman Empire context. By exploring how women from diverse cultural, historical, and religious backgrounds experience and resist patriarchal domination, this study contributes to a more inclusive feminist discourse that considers the intersectionality of gender, culture, and diasporic identities. This study also offers a critical point of view to see another side of seeing Muslim women between the tensions and limitations of Liberal feminism.

While the novel highlights women's struggles across different eras, the contemporary Muslim diaspora experience of Khayyam and the 19th-century Ottoman context of Leila, its significance extends beyond feminist literary criticism. Diaspora literature, such as Ahmed's, plays a crucial role in transformative education, fostering intercultural understanding and global literacy by presenting narratives that challenge dominant discourses and encourage empathy across cultural boundaries. In this sense, the novel's feminist voices resonate with broader global agendas, particularly the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Specifically, the novel aligns with SDG 5 (Gender Equality) by depicting women's agency and resistance to patriarchal domination, and with SDG 4 (Quality Education) by contributing to educational practices that promote inclusivity, cultural awareness, and critical literacy.

By situating feminist struggles within the framework of global literacy and SDGs, this research aims to explore not only how liberal feminism is represented in Ahmed's narrative but also how diaspora literature contributes to cultural diplomacy and impactful education. Through the juxtaposition of Khayyam and Leila, the study highlights the transformative power of literature in addressing gender equality and fostering global awareness, thereby bridging the gap between literary criticism and the educational mission of sustainable development.

Method

The primary source of data for this research is Samira Ahmed's *Mad, Bad, and Dangerous to Know*, published in 2020 by Soho Teen. The novel serves as the central object of analysis because it provides a narrative framework through which liberal feminist perspectives and broader issues of gender equality can be examined. The study focuses on the struggles of two central female characters, Khayyam and Leila, who live in different historical and cultural contexts yet confront patriarchal domination in ways that resonate across time and place. The data consist of narration, dialogue, and plot details in the form of words, phrases, and sentences that reveal both the representation of patriarchal structures and the acts of resistance undertaken by the characters. To collect the data, the novel was read thoroughly to identify passages that explicitly portray domination, resistance, and expressions of agency. Key narrative elements were highlighted when

they reflected liberal feminist values such as equality, autonomy, and freedom of choice, as well as their relevance to the themes of education, intercultural understanding, and global literacy.

This study employs a qualitative textual analysis within the framework of feminist literary criticism, specifically drawing on Mary Wollstonecraft's liberal feminist principles of equality, education, and autonomy. The study was conducted through three stages. First, the textual evidence was classified into two categories: the representation of women (modern diaspora and Ottoman Haseki) and their forms of resistance to patriarchal control. Second, the categorized data were examined using Wollstonecraft's liberal feminist framework, which emphasizes education, equality before the law, and personal independence. Finally, the analysis was contextualized within the broader global agenda by linking the feminist struggles in the novel to SDG 5 (Gender Equality) and SDG 4 (Quality Education), showing how diaspora literature contributes to both feminist discourse and global literacy.

Results and Discussion

Reclaiming Autonomy in Ahmed's Novel

The representation of modern women is embodied by Khayyam, a contemporary Muslim-American teenager, who emerges as an intellectual agent keenly aware of her identity, emotions, and power. She said that "Time for this woman's story to be front and center, in the light of day and not in some man's shadow" (Ahmed, 2020, p.311). Through this statement, she actively rejects objectification, questions male-dominated historical narratives, and champions the voices of marginalized women, demonstrating a self-aware and independent spirit. Her pursuit of intellectual endeavors, such as her art history investigations, and her confident assertion of competence, exemplify her rational capabilities and desire for self-expression, aligning perfectly with liberal feminist ideals of equal opportunities and freedom. "I wish I could imagine myself like that... I feel like a light bulb that sparks and pops before it fades out" (Ahmed, 2020, p.132–133). At this line she reveals emotional vulnerability not as weakness, but as an act of resistance against stoic femininity. This metaphor of fading light reflects her internal conflict in a society that often extinguishes female ambition. Her confrontation with exhaustion aligns with feminist resistance that humanizes and validates the emotional toll of striving for equality. On the other occasion, she also said "I'm posting this on Instagram the second we part... I have an audience of one." (Ahmed, 2020, p.98). This statement reflects Khayyam's strategic use of social media, illustrating how modern women navigate their identity and self-control in contemporary digital spaces.

Conversely, Leila, a 19th-century woman in the Ottoman Empire holding the 'Haseki' title, represents women constrained by patriarchal structures despite their elevated status "I may be Pasha's favorite... but I still own my name" (Ahmed, 2020, p. 29), reflects a conscious act of resistance. The phrase "own my name" becomes a declaration of self-possession and identity preservation in the face of a system that seeks to redefine her through her association with a man. Rather than allowing her role to overwrite her identity, Leila reclaims her name as a symbol of resistance. Leila said "Though I will soon be forgotten... I seize this power: the freedom to write my own story" (Ahmed, 2020, p.305), echoes Wollstonecraft's belief in education and authorship as tools for liberation. Her final act is not submission to fate, but an affirmation of subjectivity. In writing her own ending, she asserts control over her legacy, refusing patriarchal control even in death. In the other side Leila's plea, "I must escape with you when you leave... I will travel in disguise... A sack of stones as a shroud. Water my grave." (Ahmed, 2020, p.114–115), is a radical rejection of the patriarchal harem system. Her choice to flee, even at the risk of death, is a powerful act of self-liberation. This aligns with Wollstonecraft's assertion that women have the moral right to resist oppression, even when such resistance appears tragic or impossible. Leila chooses dignity over survival in subjugation, making her rebellion unforgettable. The novel powerfully depicts Leila's ability to maintain inner autonomy and dignity even while physically subjugated. Her internal resistance and unwavering spirit, alongside her act of writing her own story, signify a

profound assertion of selfhood and intellectual freedom within oppressive circumstances, underscoring that true empowerment stems from internal strength rather than granted status.

Both characters demonstrate significant resistance against patriarchal domination, albeit in different forms. Khayyam's resistance is characterized by her assertive self-determination and her intellectual and emotional independence; she deliberately chooses her own path, challenges traditional gender expectations, and sets boundaries in her personal relationships. Her dedicated effort to uncover and share Leila's story is a direct act of feminist solidarity, countering the historical erasure of women's voices and contributions. Leila's fight, while more subtle, is equally profound, manifesting through her unwavering mental and emotional freedom despite physical confinement. Her access to education, even if initiated by a male figure, becomes a pivotal tool for her intellectual liberation and a means to critically assess her environment. Ultimately, Leila's decision to escape, despite immense risk, and her act of authoring her own narrative, stand as powerful expressions of self-liberation and a resolute rejection of a life not chosen by herself. Thus, *'Mad, Bad, and Dangerous to Know'* not only vividly illustrates the enduring struggles for women's rights but also emphasizes the critical role of intergenerational solidarity in advancing gender equality and ensuring women's visibility across time and culture.

Ahmed's novel then serves as a compelling narrative exploring liberal feminism, vividly portraying women's struggles and their resistance against patriarchal domination across distinct historical and cultural settings. The novel consistently affirms core liberal feminist principles such as self-determination, identity autonomy, education, and narrative agency as crucial tools for women to combat restrictive gender norms "not merely to forget, but to try and live without regret... to build a life on my own terms" (Ahmed, 2020, p.220) Leila articulates this principle when she explains that she came to France. Her migration signifies more than physical relocation; it is an act of self-authorship that rejects the limitations imposed upon her. Viewed through Alkan's (2021) lens, this moment exemplifies the representation of modern women and Haseki women as agents of reinvention, choosing not just to resist but to rebuild, affirming the feminist ideal of personal narrative and agency. Through its dual protagonists, Khayyam and Leila, this novel represents how modern and historical women reclaim their autonomy. Both figures reveal how women's representation reflects their sociohistorical contexts: one emphasizes visibility and voice, the other survival through inward strength.

When read together, Khayyam and Leila illustrate the evolution of liberal feminism across historical and cultural contexts. Khayyam embodies a form of resistance enabled by modern feminist gains: she can speak openly, claim intellectual authority, and define herself in public. Leila, by contrast, demonstrates how feminist resistance often took the form of survival strategies and quiet acts of autonomy in contexts where women's overt defiance was impossible. Both figures, however, are bound by a common feminist thread: the demand for autonomy, rationality, and self-definition that Wollstonecraft articulated centuries ago.

Global Literacy as a Tool of Empowerment

"Literacy is both a tool for learning and a social practice whose use can enhance the voice and participation of communities and individuals in society" (UNESCO, 2003). Thus, literacy is not simply the ability to read and write, but also a means to understand various global issues such as climate change, gender equality, poverty, migration, and social conflict. Through global literacy, individuals can relate local experiences to global contexts while cultivating critical thinking and cross-cultural communication skills that foster reflective and empowered global citizenship.

In *Mad, Bad, and Dangerous to Know*, global literacy emerges as a form of cross-historical and cross-cultural awareness that empowers women. Through historical and literary research, Khayyam develops a critical awareness of the erasure and marginalization of women in art and cultural history. Meanwhile, Leila writes her story through letters, which later inspire Khayyam to understand the meaning of women's liberation. Khayyam's decision to depict Leila's story

represents an awareness of the power of narrative and the importance of having one's own voice. These two figures highlight the function of literacy as a medium for exposing patriarchal domination and bridging cross-cultural understanding.

Based on Khayyam's story, global literacy functions as an act of reinterpretation, an effort to reclaim silenced women's narratives and place them within a transhistorical feminist discourse. Literacy, in this context, becomes a crucial tool for education and self-autonomy, in line with Wollstonecraft's (1792) principle of education as emancipation, namely that education enables women to think rationally, act independently, and define themselves outside of patriarchal authority. The act of reading and rewriting history through a feminist lens makes literacy not a neutral skill, but rather a political practice for asserting agency and resistance.

Global literacy, in this sense, opens up a space for dialogue between Western feminism and the experiences of Muslim women in the diaspora. Through her two female characters, Ahmed demonstrates that true empowerment arises from the ability to read, write, and critically interpret the world. Literacy is not only a tool for personal advancement but also a means of social awareness and ethical engagement with cultural differences.

However, global literacy is not solely about cross-cultural understanding; it also demands a critical awareness of how power and representation operate within global narratives. Reading Ahmed's novel in this way becomes an exercise in ethical literacy, inviting readers to recognize how cross-cultural feminist ideas, while sometimes empowering, can also be limited by Western frameworks. In this way, the novel's dual narratives encourage readers, especially students and educators, to critically reflect on cultural identity, historical memory, and women's rights. Ultimately, Ahmed's novel demonstrates the transformational role of literature as a medium for education, empathy, and global awareness.

Tensions and Limitations of Liberal Feminist Narratives

Although this novel articulates the values of women's freedom and independence, there is a tension between the liberal feminist narrative and Eastern and Islamic representations. Laila's character in the novel is positioned as a *haseki* within a harem. The harem, inherent to Ottoman Islamic leadership, is depicted as a place limited to sensuality and tends to position women as objects confined within patriarchal hegemony. Peirce (1993) refutes this representation, finding that the harem is a place that provides space for women to participate in government. The representation of the harem in this novel tends to echo Western narratives about the Eastern perspective regarding the constrained position of Muslim women within their culture.

Feeling constrained within the harem, Laila escapes and is aided by Lord Byron, who takes her to England. While on the one hand, Laila is depicted as having the agency to achieve her own autonomy, on the other hand, Laila lacks the power to help herself. She is aided by Lord Byron, who represents the West. The assistance of white Westerners to Eastern women in this case represents Western power as a hero, while simultaneously positioning Muslim and Eastern women as inferior and in need of help. This gives rise to a savior narrative that tends to position the West as superior and capable of rescuing the East from cultural values perceived as restrictive. This narrative pattern echoes what Gayatri Spivak (1988) calls the "white men saving brown women from brown men" trope, which reflects colonial feminist logic in which Western superiority is reinforced through the symbolic rescue of Eastern women.

Laila's escape from the harem in this novel is "celebrated" for her courage and agency in becoming an independent and free woman. She is positioned as a woman who is happy with her autonomy in determining her own life. When Khayyam discovers Laila's story, he too is overjoyed and wants to share her story as a Muslim minority woman during the Ottoman era who bravely fought for her independence. However, on the other hand, this also gives rise to the discourse of a savior narrative about modern women that gives voice to "traditional" women.

Ahmed's narrative portrays a Muslim woman negotiating the constraints of tradition, culture, and religion in her pursuit of autonomy. This aligns with 19th-century Western discourse that portrayed Muslim women as soulless, passive, confined to the domestic sphere, and viewed as

objects. The concept of "soul" was used as a rhetorical tool to assert their inferiority and need for civilization (Karatas, 2025). This concept ignores the agency of Muslim women themselves and results in the West, which considers itself superior, viewing them as a group that needs to be saved. This could spark a critical discussion when linked to Abu Lughod's (2002) question: whether women need help from the West, as he believes they have their own agency in carrying out their religious practices as Muslims. Thus, a critical question that also arises is whether Ahmed is truly opening a new space of empowerment for Muslim women, or whether she is actually reproducing a cultural hierarchy that positions the West as the center of literary and feminist authority. If the latter is the case, she could be considered trapped in re-orientalism, as Lau (2011) argues, in which Eastern authors internalize Western perspectives and reproduce them in their own representations of the East.

Nevertheless, reading Ahmed's narrative through the lens of global literacy allows this tension to be productive rather than reductive. It enables readers to critically engage with how Western feminist ideals intersect with Muslim women's lived realities, transforming the novel into a dialogic space that invites transnational reflection rather than a unidirectional act of cultural instruction.

Conclusions

Samira Ahmed's *Mad, Bad, and Dangerous to Know* affirms how liberal feminism shapes the narrative of diasporic women through the characters of Khayyam and Leila. Both embody two distinct forms of agency: Khayyam openly asserts her intellectual space and personal identity, while Leila demonstrates inner resilience and claims authorship of her own story despite social constraints.

The novel also highlights the role of global literacy as a means of empowerment. By uncovering history and constructing counter-narratives, its female characters demonstrate that literacy functions not merely as an academic tool but also as a strategy to challenge patriarchy and expand intercultural understanding.

However, the liberal feminist narrative in the novel is not free from tension. The representation of the East, particularly through the figure of Leila, reveals a potential for re-orientalism that situates the West as the center of epistemic authority. This indicates that while the novel contributes to SDGs, especially in the discourse on gender equality and global literacy. It simultaneously reflects the limitations of liberal feminism in addressing the diversity of diasporic women's experiences. Thus, Ahmed's work functions not only as a feminist literary text but also as a space for critical dialogue on gender, diaspora, and global literacy, which invites readers to re-examine the boundaries of liberal feminism within trans-cultural contexts.

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