

SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION AND WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN SHAHEEN AKHTAR'S *THE SEARCH*: A CRITIQUE

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Abstract. Currently, women are increasingly assuming the role of catalysts for social change. Nevertheless, this occurrence is infrequent in Bangladesh. In this society, women's empowerment is rarely observed due to its status as a developing country. However, sometimes, we cannot disregard the demeanor of a self-assured individual who illuminated society with their exceptional talents. 'Mariam' is a character featured in the novel *The Search*, written by Shaheen Akhtar. 'Mariam's tenacity instills in us the belief that an individual's resolve can transform their circumstances and environment. Emerging from the remnants, she rose as a phoenix. With this perspective in mind, the study aims to engage in a detailed analysis of 'Mariam', highlighting how she embodies women's empowerment and makes significant contributions to the advancement of women. Since this region was once a united continent, she also serves as a representative of South Asia. The Subcontinental Perspective of women's empowerment through 'Mariam' is illustrated by the similarities between different subcontinents' environments, customs, and lifestyles. The researcher utilizes Feminist theory to support the idea that she opposes all types of injustice against women despite the various social barriers she encounters. This study employs a qualitative approach and utilizes thematic analysis as its research method. The study demonstrates 'Mariam's ability to alter the prevalent attitudes of 'Birangana' (a war heroine) and regular women. This study examines the portrayal of a powerful female character crafted by a female writer from Bangladesh and explores how Feminist theory has influenced both the character's development and the novel's storyline, thereby establishing her as a noteworthy figure in the context of contemporary society. This study demonstrates women's empowerment and capacity for positive societal amendment.

Keywords: *women empowerment, resilience, 'Birangana' (War Heroine), subcontinental perspective*

Introduction

"In the novel, *The Search*, the protagonist, Mariam or Mary, represents the turmoil of Bangladesh as a country. And, another character is Mukti who comes in digging deep into the history of the war, extracting a parallel story with the country's independence and resembles the character of the novel's author herself (Sharma and Ratnawat, 2020)." This study sheds light on the radical change of a naive urban girl 'Mariam' to a mature one who endured all kinds of sufferings and abuses that a woman can have in her life in Shaheen Akhtar's novel *The Search*. The War of Liberation of Bangladesh has turned 'Mariam's life upside down. 'Mariam' is the character who was ahead of her time and society by having a proper education and culture. Her parents have high expectations of her. She was the eldest of four siblings and everyone in the village adored her because of her good manners and culture. A tiny mistake made her fall from everyone's eyes which could be forgiven by considering it as a teenage mistake. The book *The Search* discusses the protagonist 'Mariam' as the prime character to show her changes, both in her life and society. The protagonist 'Mariam' is a fighter whose struggles are portrayed through the description of the book. Akhtar's female protagonist

is uncomplicated but incredibly powerful. Every home in Bangladesh has a domestic environment and domestic affairs. However, from that simple and comforting description, we discover a story that completely blows our minds and compels us to reflect on the gravity of the theme and character. This plain woman's character has such variety and color that it immediately inspires trust in us. Although she draws the figure from real life, she transforms him or her into something extraordinary.

When a writer can persuade the reader to support and empathize with fictional characters, she has mastered her craft. We discover that women are drowned in a man's realm through the stories of other writers, whether they are male or female. Women characters are almost invariably subpar, average, and even weird. In the stories, they are merely supporting characters. Their power, feelings, and emotions are always underutilized or focused on the male characters. Akhtar is a revolt in this area. Men never have the same clarity of apparition as women have. The protagonist of Akhtar's book, 'Mariam', is self-reliant, impulsive, and possesses exceptional self-control and judgment. She is not terrified of threats, which is the exact reverse of what we see in today's stories. She accepts the challenge of living according to her inclinations. The following passage from Akhtar and Dutta (2015) illustrates the theme of the novel:

"The book alternates dexterously between dispassionate and emotional passages displaying hurt, pain, anger, jealousy, apathy and most importantly, helplessness. There is an undercurrent flowing through the novel about the clash of the personal sphere with the public one and the fact that a woman's personal space is also highly political (in terms of power relations) because of the way a woman's body is viewed as a possession by the men, especially in times of war; to emphasize victory/superiority over the enemy side by violating their 'honor'. If this idea is understood, then is it not true that the Biranganas did pay for the freedom of Bangladesh (however unwillingly, helplessly) with much more than political ideologies and blood."

Every woman in the modern era possesses this quality, but they are unaware of it because it can be challenging to recognize one's characteristics even when one is there. The obstacles to women's individuality and independence are revealed by Akhtar. A female youngster learns about her roles and the limitations society has placed on her as she grows up. It is appropriate for women to care for the child, and while they handle home chores, the dominant and stronger male takes on the jobs that call for strength. However, we see that Akhtar attempts to reverse this role that society has assigned to women in her book. We occasionally desire to rebel against certain circumstances or occurrences, but we lack the confidence. However, the characters in Akhtar can do this and demonstrate to us that we all possess the same strength, but we must be aware of it and make use of it. This book uses feminist theory to argue that women are dominated and that the oppression of women in patriarchal nations is a reflection of the exploitation of all women by people everywhere. The vulnerability of women throughout the world is reflected in 'Mariam's frailty. In Akhtar's novel *The Search*, the hunt for a woman's existence frequently comes up. The genuine journey a woman takes to discover her existence is brought to light by this search. Here, the path of the female protagonist is outlined to establish her rights and her opinions on politics and society. Akhtar has a strong understanding of feminism. Differences lead to gender inequity,

especially for women. The researcher has chosen this novel by a South Asian female author from Bangladesh to concentrate on this particular cause.

The main goal of this essay is to highlight Akhtar's feminism in her writing with particular reference to *The Search*, one of her most famous works, and to establish women's empowerment through 'Mariam' and connect her idea to the perspective of the subcontinent. The subcontinental perspective on women's empowerment takes a look at gender equality and women's rights through the particular context and experiences of South Asian countries and territories, such as India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and so on. According to this viewpoint, women's lives and opportunities in this region are shaped by a variety of social, cultural, political, and economic elements. It also recognizes the chances and obstacles that women confront in reaching empowerment. 'Mariam', whom Akhtar portrays, is the ideal woman. Her writing in this book demonstrates how feminism is very much a part of this particular character, who is a very modern woman. To portray 'Mariam' as a social changemaker and to recognize her challenges as being shared by all women worldwide, especially in the South Asian region, this essay studies 'Mariam's character and shows the qualities of feminism via her perspective. In the context of this movement, Shaheen Akhtar has brilliantly portrayed this woman's character, and Akhtar's feminism is evident in her portrayal.

This paper aims to investigate the connection between women's empowerment and social change in Bangladesh, focusing on the consequences of the 1971 Independence War and its aftermath. The first half of the article will discuss the political and historical background of the Bangladesh Liberation War and how it affected women's lives and rights as both participants in and observers of the conflict. After that, the post-war environment as well as the present chances and obstacles for women's empowerment and social change in Bangladesh will be examined, keeping in mind the larger subcontinental viewpoint.

Literature review

The flexible medium for promoting women's rights in the 20th century was literature. As a writer, Shaheen Akhtar excels at utilizing this format. Girls' and women's emotional growth is explored in her book. However, the problem is that very little translation work has been done for the books of Bangladeshi authors because they write in Bangla and very few people are motivated to do it because the market for Bangla literature is not particularly large. Although there isn't a lot of literature in Bangladesh on this topic, some literary works make an effort to highlight the implications of the interaction between women and society. It would be difficult for the researcher to locate reviews of novels or other writings by Bangladeshi authors because their books are not as well-read abroad as those by Indian authors. Books written in Bangla are rarely translated into English. The majority of writers lack the zeal necessary to write in English. The researcher's task of fusing this theory with these texts and the prospective applications of feminist thought would therefore be extremely difficult.

Because of this, the researcher would concentrate on the writings of Bangladeshi authors, using them as primary materials, and try to merge the feminist theory with them to reveal a new element of this theory from Bangladesh's and also from a subcontinental perspective. Shaheen Akhtar's novel, Ella Dutta translates *The Search (Talaash)* from Bengali to English. The narrative portrays the life of "Mariam" via the unavoidable situations and wants of women. In addition to fighting her demons of unfulfilled wishes,

she struggles to fit in with an appropriate culture (Akhtar and Dutta, 2015). On November 1, 2020, author Shaheen Akhtar was honored with the 3rd Asian Literary Award for the Korean translation of her 2004 book *The Search*, which tells the story of the life of "Birangana" women years after the Liberation War. Star Books' Sarah Bari asked her several questions concerning the book. Shaheen Akhtar responded that because 'Mariam' was involved in the sex slave trade during the war, her experience is representative of all women's conditions in a male-dominated culture, but it is amplified and inflected in a particular way. It was relevant to the Korean community because, like Bangladeshi women who suffered at the hands of the Pakistani Army during their liberation battle, Korean women suffered badly from this type of experience at the hands of the Pakistani military during World Battle II (Akter, 2020). This book has been translated from English into Korean due to their similarities.

Akhtar's book seldom includes any idealized female characters, according to Munim (2017) in the Dhaka Tribune: Women and men are perceived equally objectively, and not all males are equally greedy. The female character in this novel is not particularly outstanding, but the author wants to demonstrate that every woman has something unique about her that inspires her to achieve something extraordinary. The researcher here tries to find similar aspects of women's struggle by going through this novel and trying to find out the relation between women and society through the perspective of Feminism. The researcher is aiming to draw comparisons between the current state of women and the period of Bangladesh's ongoing women's liberation war. On March 27, 2021, Akhtar remarked during an interview with Nahar Trina. "There were certain incidents behind *Talaash*. For instance, the Oral History Project of 71 introduced me to some brave women. Not only did they narrate the torture they went through in 1971, but also what they faced afterward. Sometimes, that overshadowed the ghoulish experiences of war; it was indeed miserable, which inspired me to write *Talaash*." The lady battled the Pakistani Army to defend the nation, and now she is battling the avaricious individuals attempting to ruin her for their gain.

Another book *Ami 'Birangana' Bolchhi* by Nilima Ibrahim is unique because it delves further into the ways that the war, the violence inflicted, and the trauma that followed affected these women's lives within the context of the sociopolitical reality of the period. This book is based on the interview of seven women who were brutally sexually abused in the 1971 liberation war. The broad and varied genre of subcontinental literature on women's empowerment in the 19th century captures the social and historical shifts that took place in the area at this time. The impact of nationalism, colonialism, and reform movements on women's lives, the possibilities and problems women encountered in the fields of politics, work, and education, and the expression of women's identity, agency, and creativity are just a few of the issues that are covered in this literature. Several well-known authors who have contributed to this body of work include:

The Bengali feminist activist, educator, and author Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880-1932) promoted women's education and empowerment via her writings, including "Sultana's Dream", *Padmarag*, and *Motichur*. India's Nobel laureate poet, novelist, and philosopher Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) spoke on the suffering and possibilities of women in his books *Chokher Bali*, *Gora*, and *The Home and the World*, among other works. Progressive and controversial writer Ismat Chughtai (1915-1991), a Pakistani author, questioned gender norms and stereotypes in her

writings including *Lihaaf*, *The Quilt*, and *The Crooked Line*. Ananda Coomaraswamy (1877-1947) was a Sri Lankan academic, philosopher, and art historian. His writings, including *The Dance of Shiva*, *The Indian Craftsman*, and *The Status of Indian Women*, discussed the place and status of women in Hindu and Buddhist traditions.

These authors discussed women's emancipation in the subcontinental area throughout the 1800s. They are still recognized for having emancipated women through their literature.

Theoretical framework

Feminist theory focuses on how power, oppression, and inequality affect women and other marginalized groups in society. It provides a vital foundation for understanding these processes. Feminism's theoretical framework aims to alter the world in addition to helping us understand it. It seeks to overthrow repressive institutions and systems and build a more just society for all. Movements and philosophies that have battled for women's equal rights are considered to be feminism. People learn about the connections between issues of gender, racism, and sexual orientation through feminism. It is clear that men currently dominate women, and men, as the dominant figure, uphold power and wealth, which has unquestionable advantages (Anderson, 2009). Feminist Theory: Theoretical Framework provides an understanding of the major tenets of the feminist framework, including class, equality, inequality, and the gender aspect.

Peter Barry (2017) book entitled "Beginning Theory" describes his approach to feminist theory. Within the framework of feminist critique, Barry talks about the development of feminist theory, its function in literary criticism, and the different stages it has faced. In particular, Barry's work is renowned for its ability to clearly explain intricate theories and place feminist critique within the larger context of literary theory. Feminist theory focuses on how power, oppression, and inequality affect women and other marginalized groups in society. It includes how sex and gender are employed to reinforce established roles and expectations, as well as the biological and social disparities between the two examining how women and other groups experience discrimination and promoting equal rights and opportunities are two aspects of the equality and discrimination movement-encouraging women and other oppressed groups to feel empowered. With this notion of feminism, the researcher wants to blend this theory into the book *The Search* to highlight the character 'Mariam' and her struggles to show the strength of a woman.

Materials and Methods

The central idea for this issue is derived from an analysis of Shaheen Akhtar's novel *The Search (Talaash)* and numerous reviews of the book by various critics that have been published in books and literary journals. The study is created in an organized manner to support the topic's development. To conduct the conceptual analysis for this study, secondary sources were used. To locate relevant study materials, the researchers browsed through a variety of literary websites and critical books. To properly prepare this study for publication, the researchers also visited several libraries to obtain a variety of information from journals and critical assessments of *The Search (Talaash)*. According to the above observation about qualitative approaches, this study chiefly depends on the textual analysis of this selected novel by a South Asian female author.

Because of the nature of the research (Literature), it follows the literary or text analysis mainly in terms of their theoretical revelations and thematic dispositions. Data were collected from both primary and secondary sources. To gather information, a thorough library search was conducted along with the examination of numerous websites, digital articles, and e-articles. To conduct this study, the researcher visited several libraries.

Results and Discussion

The status of women during the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War

Two times, in 1947 as a part of Pakistan and again in 1971 as an independent state, the area that is now known as Bangladesh was set free. Muktiyuddo, the Bangladesh Liberation War, got its start from the Bengali nationalist and self-determination movement that gained momentum in East Pakistan and eventually led to Bangladesh's independence. Yahya Khan ordered the Pakistani military junta in West Pakistan to conduct Operation Searchlight against the people of East Pakistan on the night of March 25, 1971, which marked the beginning of the genocide in Bangladesh (Mascarenhas, 1986). Bengali ladies were assumed to be Hindu women, and Pakistani Muslims hated Hindus, thus General Yahya Khan commanded the Bengalis to be "true Muslims" (Schanberg, 1971). The Yahya dictatorship and General Tikka Khan ordered forced pregnancies on Bengali women, according to reports from the perpetrators, even though there is no official proof of this. These women, who were probably Hindus, were sent to "rape camps" where they would be held captive for months at a time and repeatedly raped to conceive Muslim fetuses (Begum, 2023). Reports from "a stream of victims and eyewitnesses" in Dhaka told Joseph Fried of the New York Daily News that "truckloads of Pakistani soldiers...swooped down on villages in the night, rounding up women by force." On the spot, some people were raped. Some were transported to military facilities (Swaggart, 2015). For Bengali women, nothing was left unsaid. The offenders desired to either totally or partially dismantle the entire gang. Furthermore, in a militaristic and patriarchal society, "collective sexual violence...exemplifies an ethic of male exceptionalism," where women are objects that belong to one group or another (Mohabat, 2022). Bangladeshi women were used as weapons in a war that they would never really experience, in an attempt to free themselves.

To create a "pure Pakistan," the Pakistani military was told to rape Bengali women. Journalist Amita Malik witnessed the surrender of Pakistani forces to the Indian Army in Calcutta. "We are going," a West Pakistani soldier boasted, according to her account of his captivity. But with our Seed, we are leaving (Malik, 1972). The horrific circumstances surrounding the mistreatment of Bangladeshi women by the Pakistani army during the 1971 war were exposed to the world's civilization. A minority of women participated in the conflict as guerillas, arranged cultural gatherings to aid the liberation fighters, dared to act as squealers, provided food and shelter to the Muktiyodha, and provided medical care. Due to their attempt to combat the war from their point of view, they suffered the most severely. The Bangladeshi woman was undoubtedly one of the women who suffered collateral injury in every conflict.

History of creating 'Birangana'

The Pakistani army raped nearly 200,000 women during the battle, according to Bangladeshi independence fighters. Many of them left their homes and moved to India

to give birth, and many of them also committed suicide when their families rejected them (Mohabat, 2022). After the 1971's war, the new Bangladeshi government publicly referred to any woman who had been raped during the war as a 'Birangana' (war-heroine) to give them the social status. 'Birangana' is a Bengali term that means "brave woman." In the nine months of the 1971 Liberation War, the Pakistani army sexually assaulted women, and the Bangladeshi government gave them this designation (Mookherjee, 2006).

Perspective on 'Birangana'

Through the sacrifice of the lives of 30 million martyrs and the dignity of 200,000 women, the country now has freedom and a flag. Women made numerous contributions to the liberation struggle. During the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War, hundreds of thousands of women were sexually assaulted. The numbers stated here are an approximation of the number of Bengali women and girls who were sexually assaulted during the 1971 war by the Pakistani military and its allies. This was part of a systematic campaign of rape intended to genocidally impregnate women, primarily Hindu women, to use "blood from the West". Because rape in Bangladesh is stigmatized and shamed by society, many survivors chose not to come forward with their stories, making the true number of victims of rape unknown and possibly much higher than the official numbers. A few of these ladies also went to India, committed suicide, or perished in captivity (d'Costa, 2012). These battle victims, referred to as 'Birangana' give them a different respect in society as they are victims of the liberation war. The phrase, however, has evolved to mean a "dishonored" or "violated woman" and is now connected to rape, abortion, suicide, and war. They were labeled as 'bad girl'. These war victims, known as 'Birangana', are still suffering as the nation marks 40 years of independence. Instead of respect, they got abusive treatment from society (Mohabat, 2022). It seemed that their helplessness became their fault. One of the 'Birangana' named Aleya Begum said that she and her sister Laily were abducted at the age of thirteen she frequently sobs. She stated her condition at that time "The Khans tied our hands, burned our faces and bodies with cigarettes. There were thousands of women like me. They gang-raped us many times a day. My body was swollen; I could barely move. They still did not leave us alone. They never fed us rice, they just gave us dry bread once a day and sometimes a few vegetables. Even the Biharis, who supported the Pakistani army, tortured us. We tried to escape but always failed. When the girls were of little use, they killed them (Mohabat, 2022)." For seven months, the Khans, as the Pakistani Army was known, repeatedly raped her in groups. She was saved by the freedom fighters, but when she returned to her village, the residents started calling her insulting names, so she left and went back to Dhaka to work odd jobs. It was difficult for her to live a decent life in an independent country because she was no longer treated with the same respect as 'Birangana'. They overcame challenges that no man has ever had to face. While the nationalistic were rejoicing in the win, they became prisoners in their bodies. Although these women physically overcame the unimaginable, their homes were empty and their families disapproved when they got back. The rape has an end for the perpetrator. The victim has no chance of recovery in a culture where women are viewed as property and sexual assault victims are shamed. It is "not upon the rapist, but upon the raped" who bears responsibility when a family's honor is damaged. Even in the solitude of their shame, war heroes remain prisoners. The courageous role that women played in Bangladesh's freedom struggle goes unsung and unrecognized.

Women empowerment in sub-continental region

The South Asian Region is represented by 'Mariam'. She speaks about the general situation in that area because she is from Bangladesh, a country in South Asia. The basis for comprehending women's empowerment and conditions in the Subcontinent throughout the 19th century is the historical and social factors that influenced the lives of women in these regions. The effects of caste, religion, race, and class politics on women in South Asia have been explained in this article. The difficulties that women at that time encountered were quite similar to those that 'Mariam' encountered back home. Like all the other countries in that particular region, Bangladesh had an equally archaic perspective of women. Because of their perceived marginalization, women were subject to patriarchal society's dominance. Following independence, the Subcontinent's efforts to empower women slowed down, which helped to alleviate problems. Prejudice, oppression, dowry deaths, unemployment, a declining sex ratio, newborn mortality from inadequate healthcare, etc. all increase as a result. The subcontinent as a whole was experiencing socio-political unrest. In this area, not much was done to promote women's empowerment. There was negligence in the workplace, in schools, and in the medical field. Women's participation in business and politics was incredibly low. But as a character like 'Mariam', there are several in this region to work on to the improvement of the society's transformation and women empowerment. They are the pioneers of making a better society for women. "Women's human rights start with women's experiences as the starting point with which to view human rights. Feminist analysis and rights advocates say that social, political, economic, and legal structures and processes based on gender perspective have a standpoint on women's lived experiences" (Roy, 2022).

Mariam's courage as a women

'Mariam' is far ahead of both her generation and the modern world. She was a remarkable woman. Her way of life, sense of style, mental maturity, and compassion set her apart from other members of society. In that devastating time of the liberation war, she showed her courage to live in the Dhaka house all alone, she tried to survive over there. Instead of thinking of herself, she was thinking of her younger brother Montu. Montu was compelled by 'Mariam' to return to their rural home, but she remained behind, clinging to life as tenacious as she could in a turbulent metropolis. All of her worries were focused on the war and she wished to be a part of those making history amid the turbulent waves of protest and persecution. Amidst the devastation of the war, she went to see her boyfriend, Abed. She even wanted to accompany him to the war to fight for the country. Before she could take part in the war, she was abducted by the Pakistani army caught hold for a long time, and tortured and abused viciously. Many women committed suicide because of these severe tortures but 'Mariam' did think of life amidst this devastation, after the rehabilitation 'Mariam' tried to live a prestigious life by seeking a job. She didn't break down as everyone left her with shame as she was labeled as 'Birangana'. The title should be a prestigious one as she in any way took part in the war, nevertheless, it became a shameful title instead of a respectful one. When life gives her hundreds of reasons to suffer, she finds thousands of reasons to smile. She fights back against the injustices that have been done to her in every area of life and

strives to make things right in her manner. Her entire life is a testament to her bravery, serving as an inspiration to women across the nation and the globe.

Mariam's boldness as 'Birangana'

'Mariam' reveals to Mukti, the interviewer "the title 'Birangana' was like a venomous insect or some communicable disease. As if its touch will cause deadly sores, as if limbs will rot and fall off" (Akhtar and Dutta, 2015). This is the scenario of the condition of 'Birangana' in Bangladesh after the Liberation War (Muktijudho). The title was given to the women who endured the Pakistani army's torture as a sign of respect and recompensation by the Bangladeshi government. But instead of having respect, this title identified them as fallen women. 'Mariam' always wished to disregard the label since she was severely affected by the bad behavior of society and its inhabitants. She thought that because she was known as 'Birangana', she experienced more humiliation than respect. She didn't need to gain anything more from utilizing this title; all she wanted was to be treated with respect as a woman. She was often humiliated as a 'Birangana', and society tried to exploit her since she was seen as a victimized lady. 'Mariam' tells the interviewer Mukti that "It is not just in times of war but in times without conflict, in times of peace, that a woman's life is thought of as a four-wheeled vehicle, with the body as its driver. If the vehicle veers an inch away from the road paved with customs and rules, then it crashes into the rubbish heap. Life has fallen. She becomes a fallen woman" (Akhtar and Dutta, 2015). She is brave enough to face the mistreatment of society for the unknown crimes that she didn't do intentionally. 'Mariam' survives either by having her body pounded and squeezed like meat in a mortar and pestle or by having her life divided up like the sacrificed flesh used in Qurbani. She no longer owns her body beyond that point. She would never again be able to claim her life.

'Mariam': As the embodiment of women empowerment

The article identifies 'Mariam' as a 'change maker', a social transformer. After experiencing this devastating torture by the Pakistani Army 'Mariam' stood up like a phoenix. She tried to balance her life by forgetting everything from the past. Not only that, she worked on changing society's notion of 'Birangana' in a passive way. That's why she is referred to as a social transformer in this article. She used to live alone in her house in Dhaka until Tuki came to live with her. She used to be a great friend of Abed Jahangir and Abed Sameer in their distress. She gave shelter to Debasish when he had no place to live and had been cheated on by his love. She never thought twice to help Debasish to let him live with her in this conservative society. Society did have objection with this and the leaders of the society could not endure the audacity of a woman and forcefully got them married. She was an advanced thinker for a woman in her day. In contrast to other women, she desired to live her life independently of societal expectations. She attempted to help other women since she felt their suffering. By opening a tailor shop called "Ma Meye Tailor", she helped her mother to become independent. She sheltered Tuki and motivated her to work in farming and other jobs so that she could support herself. She always provides people in trouble as a lighthouse, assisting them in coping with their circumstances. She always has a positive attitude toward people and the community. Despite the horrifying treatment she had received,

she did not give up and made an effort to alter the negative stereotypes of "Birangana" held by society.

Women empowerment in sub-continental region

Feminism and 'Mariam'

Women and men should have equal rights, according to feminist thought. There is a persistent belief that women are less than men. In Bangladesh, people still subscribe to this school of thought. In this area, particularly in Bangladesh, the idea of empowering women is unthinkable. Following the liberation struggle in 1971, this idea was at its most vivid. Thinking of women having the same rights as males at the time was inconceivable. 'Mariam' had been defiant of society at the time. To advance women's rights, she struggled alone. She was saved from the worst circumstances by her strong attitude after the war, her ideas on the war, and her ability to stand up again without worrying about the unfavorable attitudes of society when she left the rehabilitation facility. She has a strong personality by is determined to find employment and move on in life. At that time, women were seen with contempt as men's inferiors and were merely utilized as commodities to gratify men's sexual desires. Since they were tortured and raped by the Pakistani army, the "Birangana" in particular are viewed as prostitutes. The majority of males in Bangladesh at the time regarded them as free women who could be used as property because they no longer had any respect for them after losing their virginity. 'Mariam' made an effort to disprove this idea. She wanted to prove that they were tormented and raped against their will and that respect did not reside in their genitalia. They are comparable to the Muktiyoddha who battled for the liberation of their nation; indeed, freedom was also won for their contributions as well. She wished to be accorded the same praise as the male Muktiyoddhas. While the "Birangana" were looked down on with shame, the liberation warriors were respected. She objected to this division because both of them fought for nine months to free Bangladesh and were instrumental in doing so. She wished to alter the way that society thought about women, particularly "Birangana". She was the embodiment of feminism even before the term was coined, thanks to her natural inclination as a strong, independent woman.

Conclusion

'Mariam' can be regarded as the perfect example of Feminism. Without having the least notion of feminism at that time she solely fought against society's pre-set mentality towards women especially to 'Birangana'. She is an extraordinary woman ahead of her time with her activities and mentality. She didn't do such activities with some agenda or intentionally, it's her by-born instinct which drives her to go on the right path and set an example for women. It is not the fact that she would be gaining something from her activities. She did it for herself but it set the precedent for Bangladeshi women as well as for the other South Asian women. We can consider her as the social transformer who worked without any intention to change the traditional mindset of Bangladeshi people towards women and in her way, she tried her best to do so. Her positive vibe spread too many and made them break the stereotypical mentality of women and fight for their equal rights. She represents the challenges and obstacles of women of this particular region. The way she tried to set examples for the women of this South Asian Region can be considered the embodiment of women's empowerment

and social transformer. From a Bangladeshi novel character, she transcends the border and becomes international to show the path to other women to realize their true worth and establish their own identity.

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Conflict of interest

The authors confirm that there is no conflict of interest involve with any parties in this research study.

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