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## The Paradox of Empowered Women: Exploring the Ambivalence of Married Female Academics in Bangladesh through Chopin's "The Story of an Hour"

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### ABSTRACT

In Bangladesh women's access to higher education and academic employment is increasing significantly and it is mostly celebrated as evidence of women empowerment. Despite this scenario, many married academics professional achievement coexists with mental confinement, unequal distribution of domestic work, and symbolic erasure under patriarchal norms. This study examines the paradox of women empowerment by investigating how married female academics negotiate their profession with private restrictions focusing on Kate Chopin's *The Story of an Hour* (1894) as a literary lens to interpret this paradox. The research employs a mixed-methods approach, collecting both quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative data were collected from fifty married female lecturers and qualitative data were collected from semi-structured interviews from a selected group among the participants. The findings reveal three major factors including women's achievements are suppressed by continuous domestic labour, their academic achievements are overshadowed by marital roles as wives, daughters-in-law or mother, and their strategies of resistance, remain constrained within patriarchal norms. These results reveal that empowerment in Bangladesh often manifests as institutional inclusion without having autonomy, echoing the fleeting liberation experienced by Chopin's protagonist Mrs. Mallard. By integrating Simone de Beauvoir's existential feminism and Martha Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach, the study calls for a proper insight of empowerment that allows not only structural transformation but also lived autonomy and emotional freedom.

### INTRODUCTION

In contemporary Bangladesh, the expansion of women's access to higher education and academic employment is often celebrated as a symbol of progress and gender equality. Over the last three decades, growing numbers of women have entered universities as professionals compared men, a shift supported by state policies, NGO interventions, and global development agendas (Jahan 2021; Kabeer 2005). Reports by UNESCO (2022) confirm that Bangladesh has significantly improved women's enrollment in tertiary education, surpassing male enrollment rates in several disciplines. Today, women serve as lecturers, researchers, and administrators across both public and private universities, creating a visible image of gender parity and professional inclusion.

Yet such development is not free of contradiction. While the institutional presence of women suggests empowerment, the lived experiences of many female academics reveal persistent conflict of confinement in the private domain of marriage and family life. Most South Asian studies disclose that women's participation in professional fields equally exist with patriarchal constraints at home, where their autonomy, mobility, and decision-making continue to be curtailed (Sultana 2013; Hossain and Titumir 2017). Feminist scholars warn against assuming that access to education and employment automatically produces empowerment; rather, empowerment must be accepted as an expansion

of freedoms and choice to implement it in all domains of life (Cornwall and Rivas 2015; Kabeer 2005; Nussbaum 2000).

The paradox faced by many married female academics in Bangladesh is powerfully captured in Kate Chopin's *The Story of an Hour* (1894). In this short story, Louise Mallard experiences a moment of profound liberation upon hearing of her husband's death, whispering to herself, "Free! Body and soul free!" (Chopin 352). Yet her liberation is short-lived; her husband's unexpected return extinguishes her vision of autonomy, resulting in her own death. Chopin's narrative dramatizes the ambivalence of women's freedom under patriarchy: moments of independence exist, but they are fragile, conditional, and easily revoked. For Bangladeshi women who appear empowered in public life yet remain bound by private restrictions, Louise Mallard's fleeting glimpse of autonomy becomes a haunting metaphor.

Feminist theory offers critical tools for unpacking these contradictions. Simone de Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex* (1949), famously argued that woman has been historically constructed as the "Other," defined in opposition to man, and denied the status of autonomous subject (de Beauvoir 267). In patriarchal societies, women's identities are relationally framed as daughters, wives, and mothers rather than self-determined individuals. This insight resonates with the narratives of Bangladeshi academics who report being valued more as dutiful wives and

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daughters-in-law than as scholars and intellectuals. Martha Nussbaum, in *Women and Human Development* (2000), critiques development models that overvalue formal access to education and employment while neglecting the lived conditions that enable or restrict women's freedom. For Nussbaum, empowerment must be assessed through capabilities, the substantive opportunities women have to exercise agency, enjoy leisure, and pursue lives they value (Nussbaum 72). Together, de Beauvoir's existential feminism and Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach reveal the tension between institutional empowerment and lived disempowerment.

Sultana (2013) documents gender-based challenges such as wage gaps, unequal promotions, and lack of representation in leadership roles. Uddin (2019) similarly notes the obstacles to career advancement for women in higher education. While these studies are valuable, they remain largely quantitative and structural in orientation, focusing on external inequalities rather than internal and affective experiences. Very few studies explore how married female academics negotiate the emotional labor, symbolic erasure, and identity conflicts that emerge at the intersection of professional and domestic roles. Even fewer employ literary frameworks to analyze women's testimonies, leaving unexplored the symbolic and cultural dimensions of empowerment. This absence constitutes a critical research gap.

The rationale for this study lies in filling that gap by integrating literary analysis, feminist theory, and empirical data to interrogate the paradox of empowerment. By juxtaposing Chopin's nineteenth-century short story with the testimonies of twenty-first-century Bangladeshi female academics, this study highlights the transhistorical persistence of women's ambivalent freedoms. The use of literature is not merely illustrative but analytical: Chopin's narrative provides a metaphorical lens for understanding the fleeting, fragile nature of women's autonomy within patriarchal structures. In connecting Mallard's fictional glimpse of freedom to Bangladeshi women's lived experiences, the study underscores how symbolic erasure and restricted autonomy remain enduring features of women's lives across contexts.

Methodologically, the paper employs a mixed-methods design, combining structured questionnaires with in-depth semi-structured interviews from fifty married female academics working in Bangladeshi universities. This approach allows for both quantitative patterns and qualitative depth, capturing not only the prevalence of restricted autonomy but also the emotional and symbolic registers through which women articulate their ambivalence. By grounding the analysis in both empirical testimony and feminist theory, the study seeks to produce a holistic account of empowerment as a contested, lived process rather than a static institutional achievement.

Accordingly, this paper is guided by three interrelated inquiries. First, it asks how married female academics in Bangladesh negotiate their professional identities within the constraints of patriarchal domestic expectations.

Second, it interrogates the ways in which formal empowerment through education and employment often fails to translate into substantive autonomy, resulting in fragmented identities and deferred aspirations. Third, it considers how feminist literary criticism, when placed in dialogue with empirical data, can illuminate the contradictions of women's empowerment in South Asia. By addressing these inquiries, the study contributes to three intersecting bodies of scholarship. To feminist theory, it offers empirical evidence from South Asia that underscores the enduring relevance of de Beauvoir's notion of woman as the "Other" and Nussbaum's capabilities approach. To development studies, it challenges discourses that equate institutional inclusion with empowerment, calling instead for a holistic redefinition that considers emotional and symbolic dimensions. To feminist literary criticism, it demonstrates the value of literature as a tool for interpreting lived realities, showing how Chopin's nineteenth-century narrative resonates with contemporary Bangladeshi contexts.

Ultimately, this introduction sets the stage for an exploration of empowerment as paradox: women who are simultaneously visible and silenced, independent and constrained, empowered and subordinated. By amplifying their voices and situating them within feminist theoretical and literary frameworks, this study seeks not only to analyze but also to reimagine empowerment as a process that must encompass both structural transformation and lived autonomy.

### Research Objectives

This study is guided by the following objectives:

1. To explore how married female academics in Bangladesh negotiate their professional identities within patriarchal domestic structures.
2. To investigate the paradox between institutional empowerment through higher education/employment and the absence of substantive autonomy in private life.
3. To examine the forms of symbolic erasure and identity fragmentation that affect married female academics.
4. To analyze the parallels between Louise Mallard's fleeting autonomy in Kate Chopin's *The Story of an Hour* and the lived realities of Bangladeshi female academics.
5. To apply feminist theoretical frameworks—particularly Simone de Beauvoir's existential feminism and Martha Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach—to interpret the contradictions of empowerment in South Asia.

### Research Questions

In alignment with the above objectives, this study addresses the following questions:

1. How do married female academics in Bangladesh negotiate their professional identities while fulfilling patriarchal domestic expectations?
2. In what ways does formal empowerment through

higher education and employment fail to secure substantive autonomy in their lived realities?

3. How does symbolic erasure and identity fragmentation manifest in the lives of married female academics?

4. What insights emerge when comparing Louise Mallard's momentary liberation in Kate Chopin's *The Story of an Hour* with the ambivalent empowerment of Bangladeshi female academics?

5. How do Simone de Beauvoir's existential feminism and Martha Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach help explain the contradictions between institutional empowerment and lived disempowerment?

### Theoretical Framework

This study adopts a dual theoretical framework by drawing on Simone de Beauvoir's existential feminism and Martha Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach. Together, these frameworks enable a detailed analysis of the paradox where in institutional and professional empowerment can not be translated into lived autonomy for married female academics in Bangladesh.

### Simone de Beauvoir's Existential Feminism: Woman as "Other"

In *The Second Sex* (1949), Simone de Beauvoir presents one of the most influential critiques of women's subjugation, arguing that woman has been historically introduced as the "Other" to man, deprived of an autonomous subjectivity (de Beauvoir 267). Her famous dictum, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman," highlights how gender identity is not a biological essence but a socially constructed condition, produced by centuries of cultural, legal, and symbolic subordination. Within marriage, this condition intensifies women are expected to embody roles of sacrifice, obedience, and caregiving, thereby sustaining patriarchal order.

This theoretical lens is crucial to understand the experiences of Bangladeshi female academics who despite professional visibility, continue to be relationally identified by her husband's surname. Such symbolic erasure reflects Louise Mallard's condition in Kate Chopin's *The Story of an Hour*, where her fleeting sense of freedom dramatizes the tension between her private self and socially imposed identity. De Beauvoir thus interpret how women in academia enjoy empowerment in public but remain subordinated within their household.

### Martha Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach: Beyond Formal Empowerment

Martha Nussbaum transfers the discussion to the lived conditions of human flourishing, where de Beauvoir critiques the symbolic construction of womanhood. In *Women and Human Development* (2000), Nussbaum questions development models that equate formal access to education and employment with genuine empowerment. For her, empowerment must be measured not by institutional visibility but by individual freedom,

the "capabilities" individuals possess to pursue lives they have reason to value (Nussbaum 72). These include bodily integrity, emotional health, leisure, freedom of movement, and control over one's environment.

Applied to this study, the Capabilities Approach exposes how Bangladeshi women's professional inclusion often masks capability deprivations. Participants frequently reported seeking permission to attend conferences, sacrificing leisure and intellectual pursuits, and shouldering disproportionate household labor. Despite their credentials, their autonomy is restricted by family expectations, illustrating that empowerment is performative rather than transformative when not matched by substantive freedoms. Nussbaum's framework therefore grounds the analysis in practical realities, it is not enough to count women in institutions. One must ask whether those institutions enable them to flourish.

### Complementary Insights and Relevance to the Study

While de Beauvoir reveals the symbolic and existential erasure of women through their reduction to relational roles, Nussbaum highlights the structural and material limits that prevent these women from realizing their capabilities. Taken together, these frameworks provide a comprehensive lens: de Beauvoir diagnoses the ontological condition of being the "Other," while Nussbaum evaluates the degree to which women achieve substantive autonomy. Judith Butler's notion of gender performativity (1990) further strengthens this dual framework, showing how patriarchal expectations are repeatedly enacted until they appear natural, while bell hooks (2000) reminds us that education alone does not guarantee feminist consciousness.

For this study, the combination of existential feminism and the Capabilities Approach is particularly apt. De Beauvoir helps explain why women who are professionally accomplished still experience identity fragmentation and symbolic invisibility, while Nussbaum shows how their lack of practical freedoms undermines their ability to thrive. This dual lens enables a deeper understanding of the ambivalence reported by married female academics in Bangladesh, capturing both the ideological-symbolic dimensions and the practical-structural realities of their constrained empowerment.

### MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to explore the paradoxical experiences of married female academics in Bangladesh. A well-structured Google form was shared among the participants to collect responses quantitatively. Semi-structured interviews were also taken and transcribed to get deep insight of situation. The integration of these two methodologies allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the ambivalence these women navigate in reconciling their professional identities with traditional domestic expectations.

### Participants

The participants in this study were all married female academics at tertiary level, employed at various public and private universities in Bangladesh. The fifty participants were carefully selected ensuring their firsthand experience balancing academic careers and marital responsibilities. The selection criteria also aimed to ensure diversity in terms of institutional affiliation, academic discipline, age, and years of experience. All participants held postgraduate degrees and had been in academia for at least two years. Their marital status was a central criterion, as the research specifically investigates how the institution of marriage interacts with their perceived empowerment and personal autonomy.

### Data Collection Methods

To capture both numerical trends and nuanced narratives, two following complementary data collection tools are used:

#### Questionnaire

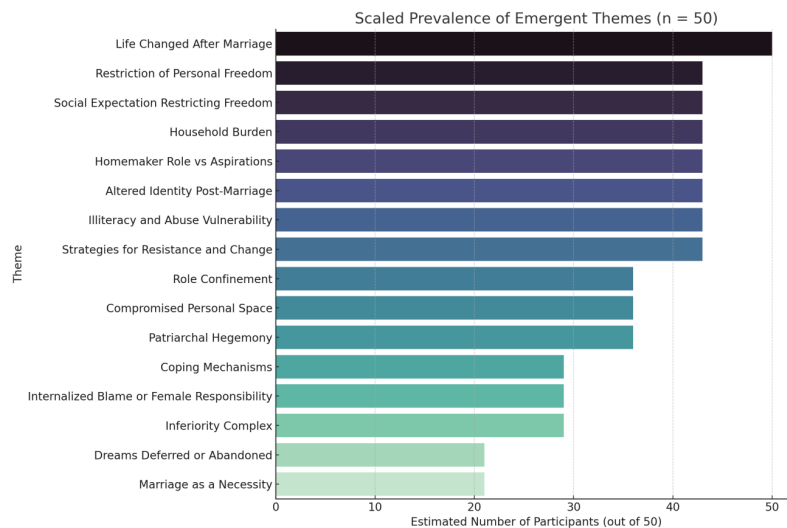
A structured questionnaire was designed and distributed to participants to gather quantitative data on general trends, perceptions, and experiences. The questionnaire included a combination of multiple-choice and Likert-scale questions, along with several open-ended prompts to allow for brief elaborations. Topics covered included autonomy in decision-making, professional restrictions post-marriage, emotional well-being, perception of gender roles, and identity negotiation. The questionnaire data were tabulated and organized thematically to identify patterns that could inform the qualitative portion of the study.

### Semi-Structured Interviews

In addition to the questionnaire, semi-structured interviews were conducted to generate qualitative data and capture in-depth personal narratives. These interviews allowed flexible and dialogue format, where participants could share their lived experiences in their own words. Interview questions probed issues such as emotional ambivalence, domestic resistance to career advancement, internalized gender roles, and identity negotiation within marriage. Interviews were conducted either face-to-face or via digital communication platforms, depending on participant availability and location. Each session lasted between 30 and 60 minutes and was audio-recorded with the participants' consent. Transcriptions were anonymized to ensure confidentiality and were then coded thematically based on recurring concepts and emotional registers.

### RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

The data collected from questionnaires and in-depth interviews reveal a complex picture of empowerment as both achievement and constraint. Using Braun and Clarke's six-phase approach to thematic analysis, fifteen major themes were identified. These themes reflect how professional accomplishments among married female academics in Bangladesh coexist with persistent domestic burdens, symbolic erasure, and limited autonomy. The interpretation of these themes is informed by Simone de Beauvoir's existential feminism, which exposes women's construction as the "Other," and Martha Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach, which emphasizes the substantive freedoms required for genuine flourishing.



**Figure 1:** Scaled Prevalence of Emergent Themes (N = 50)

This bar chart shows the estimated number of participants (out of 50) who experienced each theme, based on scaled analysis from qualitative data. It visually supports the thematic discussion that follows.

#### Theme 1: Life Changed After Marriage (50/50; 100%)

All participants shared a transformation of self-post

marriage, emotional, social, and existential. Many described dual emotional support from their partners, and the burden of new expectations. This echoes de Beauvoir's view that women are shaped into the "Other" after marriage, where identity becomes relational rather than autonomous.

**Theme 2: Restriction of Personal Freedom (43/50; 86%)**

Most participants noted diminished freedom in making life decisions post marriage. From career shifts to everyday mobility, their autonomy was often mediated by family influence. According to Nussbaum, this represents a deprivation of critical capabilities such as practical reason and control over one's environment, undermining substantive freedom despite formal education or employment.

**Theme 3: Social Expectation Restricting Freedom (43/50; 86%)**

The burden of societal expectations, such as being a perfect wife, fulfilling traditional gender roles, emerged prominently. Several participants cited pressure to conform in appearance, behavior, and ambition. These are classic instances of Butler's gender performativity, and de Beauvoir's insight that womanhood is defined in contrast to patriarchal norms.

**Theme 4: Household Burden (43/50; 86%)**

Participants overwhelmingly indicated an unequal distribution of domestic labor. Even in dual-income households, women were expected to lead in caregiving, cooking, and emotional labor. This invisible labor not only exhausts, but also displaces women's energy from personal development a violation of Nussbaum's capabilities related to leisure, bodily integrity, and emotional well-being.

**Theme 5: Homemaker Role versus Aspirations (43/50; 86%)**

Even women who aspired to build careers or pursue hobbies admitted that homemaking responsibilities often impeded these ambitions. One participant mentioned abandoning her dream of becoming a fashion designer. This illustrates capability failure, where rights exist in theory but not in lived practice because of unequal domestic obligations.

**Theme 6: Altered Identity Post Marriage (43/50; 86%)**

Marriage often led to identity erosion, as participants reported being identified primarily through marital or familial roles, such as wife of Mr. X. De Beauvoir's concept of "Other" becomes evident as women feel displaced from their intellectual or professional self despite their performing well in public life.

**Theme 7: Dreams Deferred or Abandoned (21/50; 42%)**

Nearly half of the women admitted to shelving personal dreams, either permanently or temporarily. While not always framed as regret, the pattern reveals internalized sacrifice. Nussbaum's theory shows how systemic role conflicts reduce women's real freedom to pursue self-defined goals.

**Theme 8: Compromised Personal Space (36/50; 72%)**

Participants described scenarios of subtle control,

including needing permission, facing expectations, or being emotionally guilted into decisions. Though not always over abuse, these micro-politics of control result in confinement within partnerships described publicly as equal.

**Theme 9: Coping Mechanisms (29/50; 58%)**

Participants described mechanisms such as poetry, music, journaling, self-isolation, or passive acceptance to cope with emotional exhaustion. These strategies illustrate resistance within submission, a complex form of agency conditioned by structural constraints.

**Theme 10: Patriarchal Hegemony (36/50; 72%)**

Many women linked their struggles directly to patriarchal norms, including in-laws' expectations, public judgment, and male privilege. Others showed an inconsistent understanding, sometimes blaming themselves or other women. This inconsistency confirms bell hooks' claim that education does not guarantee feminist consciousness.

**Theme 11: Internalized Blame or Female Responsibility (29/50; 58%)**

Women often blamed themselves or other women for their predicaments, citing lack of assertiveness or blind conformity. This internalization supports Butler's theory of subject formation under hegemonic scripts, where women can become both enforcers and sufferers of gendered norms.

**Theme 12: Illiteracy and Abuse Vulnerability (43/50; 86%)**

A strong consensus emerged that illiteracy and by extension lack of financial independence, exposes women to abuse. Literacy is seen not just as education, but as empowerment. This supports Naila Kabeer's and Nussbaum's argument that capability building, such as education and income are key to resistance.

**Theme 13: Inferiority Complex (29/50; 58%)**

Several participants described being compared to in-laws and judged for their achievements, these led to feelings of inadequacy. This stems from patriarchal evaluative structures, where women's worth is measured relationally rather than personally.

**Theme 14: Marriage as a Necessity (21/50; 42%)**

Views on marriage were mixed. Some described it as a spiritual necessity, while others framed it as optional or conditional. This reflects a generational tension between traditional norms and modern feminist aspirations for autonomy and choice.

**Theme 15: Strategies for Resistance and Change (43/50; 86%)**

Most women advocated small-scale but potent strategies for change, including open communication, raising gender-conscious sons, and educating future generations. This practical feminist agency embodies both de

Beauvoir's ethics of ambiguity and Nussbaum's internal capability building, where freedom begins with reflexive action.

### Synthesis of Themes

Taken together, these themes reveal that empowerment for married female academics in Bangladesh is deeply ambivalent. On one hand, women have secured higher education, employment, and professional visibility that were historically denied to them. On the other hand, these gains coexist with symbolic erasure, disproportionate domestic responsibilities, restricted mobility, and internalized patriarchal norms. The paradox is that institutional recognition does not automatically translate into substantive autonomy or existential selfhood. De Beauvoir's critique of woman as the "Other" explains why these academics, despite being knowledge producers, remain defined through relational roles, while Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach highlights how their freedoms are curtailed in practice even when rights exist in theory. The coping strategies and small acts of resistance described by participants suggest that agency is not absent, but it is negotiated within boundaries set by patriarchy. Ultimately, the themes demonstrate that empowerment in this context is conditional, fragile, and incomplete. It exists publicly as a sign of progress yet remains privately undermined by cultural expectations and domestic subjugation.

### Comparative Discussion: Louise Mallard and The Married Female Academic

Kate Chopin's *The Story of an Hour* (1894) presents a momentary alongside a deeply felt experience of liberation for Louise Mallard. She is a married woman who, upon hearing of her husband's death, envisions a life lived for herself, beyond the restrictions of marital duty. Her whispered realization, "Free! Body and soul free!" (Chopin 352), has become a potent literary symbol of women's yearning for autonomy, subjectivity, and emotional release. The brevity of this moment, abruptly ended by her husband's return, reveals the depth of repression that structures her life. When juxtaposed with the real-life experiences of married female academics in Bangladesh, Mallard's fictional awakening is no longer just a product of the nineteenth century. Instead it serves as a meaningful reflection of the ongoing gender challenges faced by women at present time. Both contexts expose the ambivalence of empowerment under patriarchy, where glimpses of autonomy coexist with structures that reinforce women's subordination.

### Existential Erasure and Relational Identity

Both Louise Mallard and the participants in this study reveal how marriage can diminish a woman's self of sense and define her solely through her relationships. In de Beauvoir's framework, this process constitutes "Othering" the reduction of women to the position of the other against the male subject (de Beauvoir 267). Louise is identified primarily through her relation

to Mr. Mallard, with little narrative attention given to her individuality outside marriage. Similarly, academic participants consistently reported that they were viewed less as professionals but by their husband's name and dutiful daughters-in-law. One participant noted, "My achievements do not matter at home; what matters is how well I serve the family." This persistent framing underscores how patriarchy continues to negate women's autonomy, even when they achieve professional visibility.

### Emotional Liberation and Its Limits

Louise Mallard's brief awakening, her glimpse of a life directed by her own choices, mirrors the fragile moments of fulfillment described by participants. Participant 4 shared that they felt "truly herself" only when involved in study, engaged in research. This private space echoes Louise's retreat to her room, the symbolic site of her awakening. Yet in Chopin's story, these moments of autonomy are short-lived. For the academics, solitude or self-expression was abruptly ended by household responsibilities, social expectations, or internalized guilt. The collapse of self-hood under domestic pressure illustrates how fragile female autonomy is within patriarchal contexts. Moments of liberation appears only in intervals rather than as a consistent state.

### Capability Deprivation and Domestic Burden

From Martha Nussbaum's perspective, Louise's marriage denied her core abilities such as bodily autonomy, rational judgement, and mastery over her surroundings. Her imagined liberation underscores how deeply it had been structurally denied. The participants' testimonies parallel this deficiency. Though educated and employed, many reported lacking authority over professional decisions such as conference attendance or research travel. One participant explained, "I earn, I teach, I publish. Still I need permission to go to a workshop." Such narratives demonstrate the gap between official empowerment and real-world capabilities, indicating that professional inclusion cannot substitute for genuine autonomy. Both fictional and real accounts reveal how invisible but deeply embedded norms script women's lives, limiting their freedom to flourish.

### Silent Resistance and Internal Conflict

A striking parallel lies in the moral and emotional ambiguity of both Louise and the participants. Louise experiences joy, not grief, at her husband's presumed death, an unsettling response that reflects her buried desire for self-hood. Similarly, participants expressed ambivalence toward their domestic roles. Some admitted hostility at the constraints of family duties, while simultaneously internalizing guilt for wanting independence. As one respondent reflected, "I want more freedom, yet I remind myself that sacrifice is a wife's duty." This tension reflects Butler's theory of gender performativity and subject formation, where women perpetuate the same constraints that restrict them, even while striving to challenge them.

Resistance often remains internal, including moments of solitude, self-reflection, or creative outlets, rather than unconcealed rebellion.

### A Shared Paradox of Empowerment

The narrative of Louise Mallard's embodies the paradox identified by this research, the seeming freedom offered by inherently limiting institutions. Louise's empowerment exists only in the imagined absence of marriage, and her sudden death symbolizes the difficulty of maintaining autonomy in a patriarchal society. The Bangladeshi scholars, though outwardly empowered through education and professional achievement, remain bound by emotional burdens, symbolic erasure, and practical constraints. Their narratives reveal how development frameworks applause women's participation in institutions while neglecting deeper inequalities rooted in cultural and familial expectations.

Both Louise and the academics experience what can be termed contingent empowerment, a freedom that depends on circumstances and is inherently fragile. In the end, patriarchal structures erode this form of freedom. The comparison demonstrates that despite differences in time and geography, the tension between autonomy and obligation remains a defining feature of women's lives. This trans historical relevance points to the need for feminist critique. It must address structural obstacles as well as emotional and symbolic aspects of women's subjectivity.

### Interpretation And Implications

The data indicate a persistent gap between institutional empowerment through education and work and the existing scenario of emotional, domestic, and symbolic restriction. While participants possess professional identities, these are easily neglected that define womanhood in terms of sacrifice, service, and relational duty. The recurring reports of altered identity, domestic burden, and restricted choice identify the problem of linking institutional progress with genuine liberation.

The combination of resistance and internalized submission within the same individuals underscores the complexity of identifying feminist consciousness in a conservative society. De Beauvoir's idea of woman as the "Other" and Nussbaum's emphasis on substantive freedoms help explain reasons professional independence does not result in private independence. At the same time, coping strategies, whether silence, creative outlets, or mentoring, illustrate a notion of resistance within submission.

To conclude, Bangladeshi female scholars do not exist within a binary of empowerment. Their realities are marked by ambivalence that show autonomy alongside constraint, resilience alongside fatigue, voice along with silence. Any attempt to foster gender equity in academic or policy frameworks must go beyond surface level measures. It should also engage with these complex lived experiences.

### CONCLUSION

This study inspected the paradox of empowerment by critically examining the real experiences of female academics in Bangladesh with Kate Chopin's *The Story of an Hour*. The findings illustrate that while these women have earned prominence in both education and academia, their professional recognition is often surpassed by domestic burdens, relational identities, and restrictions on autonomy. Therefore, empowerment emerges not as a direct outcome of institutional inclusion but as an ambivalent condition formed by both resilience and limitation. The comparison with Louise Mallard illustrates that women's hardships for autonomy remain vulnerable and subject to historical and cultural contexts. Through the application of Simone de Beauvoir's existential feminism and Martha Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach, this study discloses how symbolic the concept of other and capability deprivation are, which reveal to limit women's freedoms considerably. The originality of this research lies in its interdisciplinary method, joining feminist criticism with empirical testimony to limelight the complexity of empowerment in South Asia.

Like other qualitative investigations, this research also has its limitation. The number of participants, though purposive, was only fifty, which stops universality. The emphasis on married female academics leaves few unexplored aspects including unmarried, non-academic professionals, and rural women. Additionally, these self-reported narratives illustrate on individualism while detailed information for interpretation, require careful contextualization.

Such limitations suggest important paths for subsequent studies. Comparative studies could examine whether similar patterns exist among women in other professional fields or among men negotiating shifting gender norms. Longitudinal studies could trace how empowerment evolves over time, particularly across different life stages. Cross-cultural research, especially within South Asia, could deepen understanding of how patriarchal structures respond to modernity across different nations. In conclusion, the study argues that empowerment without autonomy remains incomplete, and empowerment without recognition remains unstable. For empowerment to become a real and enduring reality, it must cover aspects beyond access to institutions, emotional freedom, symbolic validation, and substantive capabilities.

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