Since the Second World War, there have been very few women who have ascended the ladder of political leadership. Surprisingly, it was from the Third World that the world’s first female head of the state (Mrs. Bandaranaike of Sri Lanka), emerged. This is surprising because these countries had recently become republics, whereas western countries have been democracies for many more decades and even centuries, and democracies are supposed to provide equal rights for all. Since then, quite a few women leaders have come to lead their nations and dominate world politics. Out of them, Indira Gandhi, Margaret Thatcher and Golda Meir are regarded as powerful women leaders of the world. Their selection as case-studies for this dissertation was determined by the geographical location of their respective countries. Mrs. Thatcher was a representative of the First World, Mrs. Gandhi hailed from a typical post-colonial Third World state and Mrs. Meir was one of the architects of a new state, which was created from the mandated territory of Palestine. They were unanimously characterised as powerful Premiers of the world. In fact, their decisions had strong repercussions on both the international political domain as well as in their domestic theatres. Each of them led their respective countries in international wars and successfully countered and responded to international threats. At the same time, they addressed domestic challenges and political turmoil with firmness, which sometimes created controversy.

This dissertation seeks to analyse and evaluate the behavioural attributes of these three women Prime Ministers. Indira Gandhi of India was the world’s second woman leader to become the head of the government after Sri Lanka’s Sirimavo Bandaranaike. Golda Meir was the third in the ladder, while Margaret Thatcher was world’s fifth woman Prime Minister.
At the same time, all three Premiers were the first and only women leaders to have assumed political leadership in their respective countries till date. They were universally recognised as ‘Iron Ladies’ (although only Margret Thatcher was actually given this appellation) because of their command and control over their respective governments, their ‘conviction’ mindset and their capability to transform and implement their visions and ideas into practical policies.

In the administrative field, these leaders were surrounded by male colleagues and associates. There were hardly any women in their respective Cabinets or governments; although Mrs. Thatcher inducted Baroness Young into her Cabinet, she transferred her to a non-Cabinet department after her a reshuffle. Likewise, the three leaders never portrayed a self-image of being representatives of women. As such, their policies bore no reflection of women-friendly approaches; neither were they supportive of women’s rights, nor did they encourage women’s participation in politics or promote women’s empowerment, otherwise, their administrations and Cabinets may have included more women members. It was because of their personalities and commanding abilities that they were regarded as among the toughest leaders of the world, and at the time, were sometimes personified with their respective countries.

This dissertation first presents a brief analysis of different feminist theories, which seek to explain positions and responsibilities of women in politics from different perspectives. Liberal feminist theorists find no significant difference in the functioning of male and female leaders. On the other hand, radical feminists theorise the matter differently. By highlighting the biological, structural and physiological distinctions between males and females, they have prioritized the ‘difference’ between the two social categories, and claim that women function differently from their male counterparts, in similar circumstances.
Other strands of feminist theory provide other alternatives in analysing the political responsibilities of male and female leaders.

It is in this backdrop that the cases of Mrs. Gandhi, Mrs. Thatcher and Mrs. Meir have been analysed with regard to their domestic and foreign policies. The present dissertation tries to analyse their images, behavioural patterns, and personalities on the basis of their lines of action, policy formulations and the strategies that they undertook to meet challenges to their respective nations. The dissertation also looks into the factors that influenced them in initiating political measures and in shaping their personalities.

However, it is to be noted that this dissertation is not based on feminist or gender theory orientations. It has used feminist theory only as a reference point for the understanding of the functioning and leadership styles of these woman Prime Ministers. Another limitation of this dissertation is its selective use of the domestic and foreign policies followed by the three leaders. Since this is not a biographical narrative, it has used history selectively and chosen only those policies and actions necessary to make a comparative study of the three Premiers.

The focus of the study is on electoral politics, the modes of functioning and the power-sharing patterns of the three women Prime Ministers. It also makes a comparative study of the nature of their leadership, along with the personal and institutional factors that played a role in their access to power. In the context of foreign policy, however, only the major international threats emanating from external aggressions from foreign powers that each of these leaders had to face during their tenures as Prime Ministers, is discussed. As a consequence, the Indo-Pak War of 1971, the Falklands Island dispute of 1982 and the Yom Kippur War of 1973 is analysed from their respective leadership perspectives.
Although many studies have been carried out on each of these Prime Ministers and many biographies have been written, there has been little research on a comparative analysis of the functioning styles of the three leaders. The present dissertation was undertaken with the objective of fitting this research gap. One major limitation has been the lack of access to different libraries and resource centers in the absence of any field trip grant. However, the present researcher has put in her best efforts with whatever material that has been available in India and to a limited extent, in the United States.