

Voices of Women under Repression in Salma's The Hour Past Midnight

Noushad PM

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Hajee Karutha Rowther Howdia College, Uthamapalayam

Abstract

'Women' - the term itself is mesmerizing and captivating. We are already aware of the women like Indira Gandhi and freedom fighters like Jhansi Lakshmi Bai, etc. who established their own image in politics. Though women have reached the superior positions equal to men, they are suppressed by men and patriarchal societies. The atrocities against women are increasing day by day in the technologically advanced modern and civilized society. Writers like Rokkiah Begum Alias Rajathi Salma have set their foot on the right framework of feminism focusing on the aspects where women are suppressed and not valued by the male-dominated society. Her novel *The Hour Past Midnight* focuses on the oppression of female protagonists Rabia, Raheema, Firdaus, Farida and Wahida, who were trapped in the social constraints of the family. The women's subordination makes them fight for their self-identity searching for their space in the vast universe, struggling for a small room.

Keywords: Patriarchal societies, feminism, women's oppression, gender inequality, identity crisis, marginalization, domestic confinement, resistance, selfhood

Introduction

The 21st has seen many changes in the life style of women. The couch potato life style of women has changed making her the center of attraction in the Family segment. Joint families are replaced by nuclear families making women a little liberal in the perspectives of domination. But her subordination continued, making her suffocated under the male domination.

Sarah Grimke rightly points out "Man has subjugated woman to his will used her as a means to promote his selfish gratification, to minister to his sensual pleasure, to be instrumental in promoting his comfort, but never has he desired to elevate her to that rank she was created to fill. He has done all he could do to debase and enslave her mind." (1970: 10).

Women are equal to men in many aspects; of course, Kalpana Chawla could reach space. The role of women continued to flourish in all fields including literature. India is fortunate to have a handful of feminist writers, who are raising their voices on the suppression of women.

Rajathi Salma, commonly known by her pen name Salma, is a prominent Tamil writer and poet born in 1968 in Thuvrankurichi, Tamil Nadu. Her work, marked by bold explorations of gender, sexuality, and societal constraints, reflects both her personal experiences and the broader struggles of women in conservative environments. Despite the challenges of writing in secret, she has made significant contributions to Tamil literature, with notable works including *The Hour Past Midnight*. Besides her literary achievements, Salma has been active in politics and social work, serving as the chairperson of the Tamil Nadu Social Welfare Board and as a member of the Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly,

advocating for women's rights and social justice.

The Hour Past Midnight originally titled Irandaam Jaamathin Kadhai in Tamil, delves into the lives of women in a small, conservative Muslim community in Tamil Nadu. The story revolves around the experiences of its female characters, highlighting their struggles, desires, and the societal constraints they face. Through a series of interconnected narratives, Salma paints a vivid picture of their inner worlds, capturing the complexities of their relationships, the weight of cultural expectations, and their quests for personal freedom. The novel is acclaimed for its candid and empathetic portrayal of women's issues and its critique of patriarchal norms.

Salma's novel, The Hour Past Midnight unravels the lives of Muslim women in a Tamil Nadu village, shedding light on their struggles within the constraints of religious fundamentalism, societal expectations, and cultural norms. The narrative spans a year, primarily focusing on Rabia and her female counterparts. The women, confined by strict restrictions, prepare for Ramadan and Wahida's marriage, revealing the pervasive influence of patriarchal authorities on their lives.

The first theme elaborates on the barriers to Education in this novel, girls are not allowed to get an education, and boys suppress girls to go out. Discourage them to continue their passion. In a few places, girls are allowed to stay at home and help with household things instead of going to school. Sometimes, because of poverty, the girl child is not offered to pay school fees. A girl child's education is stopped by their parents if a girl wishes to get an education, they advise her to be consoled. The second major theme of this novel is Gender roles, women's freedom and desires are restricted by the dominant society they feel ashamed of girls' education. They used girls only for working as a maid and male dominated them. Men in the novel, hold the power to control the women's society. Men's superior power destroyed the women's wishes. This novel tells how this gender roles restrict women's self-role and shape their identities. These people follow the Tamil Muslim culture meanwhile, the beauty and richness of the cultural heritage while also criticizing its special feature. Another theme of the novel is Tradition vs Modern, conflicts between the old and young generations. Old generation people follow the traditional rules and they are dependent the men but nowadays the younger generation people differ from the old tradition they are not suppressed by men because younger generation people most of them got an education and they know how to survive alone without the help of a man. Younger people followed the modern culture and they destroyed the male dominant powers. Education is limited for women, but their new ideas prove them to survive the society. Education is common for all in modern society Rabia needs more freedom this novel explores the tradition and modern conflict.

Rabia belongs to the Muslim community young girl who is eager to change society. She grew up between the conflict, she is a curious and talented girl her innocent character evokes others to live as Rabia. While Rabia is with others she is independent and yearns for others also to be independent. 'So, you can't be bothered to come home when we send for you! What rubbish were you learning, anyway? (11). Her desire for independence inspires others to reimagine their roles. Her confrontation with authority— "What rubbish were you learning, anyway?" (11)—reveals societal fear of educated women. Rahima is a mother of Rabia, she makes numerous sacrifices for her family members. She obeys and follows her husband, is suppressed by her own family she is treated as a maid, her desires are destroyed no one is educated during the period of the old generation. A girl must be modest, you know? Do as you're tell, now,' (13). She represents the older generation of women conditioned to obedience. She sacrifices her desires for family harmony and accepts subjugation as fate. Her belief that "a girl must be modest" (13) reflects internalized patriarchal values that perpetuate female oppression.

Firdaus is a friend of Rabia, who is a more talkative and educated girl. Her beautiful face is attracted by a man her family is trapped in poverty and her parents arrange her wedding; On the same day she stops the wedding because she dislikes to be live as a servant. She is independent and loves to spread the same to all those who are suppressed by men. Her experiences highlight the different aspects of womanhood thoughts. Firdaus shows resistance. On her wedding night, she boldly tells her husband Yusuf that she will not live with him and asks him not to touch her. 'I'm not going to live with you. Don't touch me.' (16).

She had to wed in light of the fact that "... he's from abroad.... He has loads of money..." (Salma, 16). However, she goes with Yusuf, yet won't live with him. She tells Yusuf on the main evening, "I'm not going to live with you. Try not to contact me" (Salma 17). Stunned at her own way of behaving, she second guesses herself, "Why she had a voice unexpectedly? How is it that she could have been so thinking for even a moment to decline a man at the cost of her family notoriety?" (Salma 17). She gets once again to her town to confront claims of being a prostitute and deadbeat, however she actually lives on. At the point when Zohra attempts to reassure her, she says, "Akka, just to see his face rebuffs me. I can't bear his wolf-like highlights and wiped-out body. I can never at any point live with him, Akka. I'd prefer commit suicide" (Salma 17).

Farida is a widow who struggles with her own identity and the societal pressures that come with her status. Farida's character adds emotional depth and narrative richness to the novel, making her story both unique and universally resonant. Without the help of her husband, she faces lots of difficulties. Her confidence level made her to succeed in the society., The control exerted by the older women in Rabia's life, such as her mother and Farida, mirrors the patriarchal structures in society. Even though these are women exerting control, they are enforcing patriarchal norms, indicating how deeply ingrained these norms are. 'It's our fate to do all this, but what on earth possessed you to wake up at this unearthly hour and sit here?' (31)

Wahida is a young girl but older than Rabia, her character is similar to Rabia and different from others. Women are expected to be modest, obedient, and follow the rules. The expectation for her to get married soon after her SSLC examination further underscores the societal pressures and constraints that limit women's opportunities. Why should a girl get married immediately after her SSLC examination she asked; is it written in her fate that we should give her away when she is so young, as if it were the olden days still? (57)

Feminist theory seeks to interrogate power relations that sustain gender inequality and women's subjugation. Simone de Beauvoir asserts that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman," emphasizing how society constructs femininity through social conditioning (The Second Sex). In patriarchal societies, women are socialized into roles of obedience, silence, and sacrifice, while men are positioned as authority figures. Bell hooks argues that patriarchy is a system that normalizes male dominance and female submission across social institutions such as family, religion, and education (Feminism Is for Everybody). This systemic oppression is particularly intense in traditional communities where cultural and religious norms are rigidly enforced. Chandra Talpade Mohanty critiques the homogenization of Third World women and stresses the importance of examining localized forms of oppression ("Under Western Eyes"). Salma's novel aligns with Mohanty's approach by portraying Muslim women not as passive victims but as complex individuals negotiating resistance within cultural constraints.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concept of the "subaltern" is also relevant here, as the women in *The Hour Past Midnight* struggle to voice their desires within oppressive structures that silence them. Salma gives narrative space to these marginalized voices, allowing them to "speak" through fiction.

The domestic space in *The Hour Past Midnight* functions as a metaphorical prison for women. The home, traditionally associated with safety, becomes a space of surveillance and restriction. Kitchens, bedrooms, and inner courtyards symbolize confinement rather than comfort. Feminist critics have long identified domestic space as a site of patriarchal control. Salma's women struggle for a "room of their own," echoing Virginia Woolf's feminist vision. Their yearning for physical and emotional space reflects their desire for autonomy and selfhood.

Firdaus embodies overt resistance. Educated and outspoken, she rejects a forced marriage and boldly asserts control over her body and life. Her declaration "I'm not going to live with you. Don't touch me" (25) marks a radical assertion of agency rarely afforded to women in her society.

Farida's character highlights the vulnerability of widows in patriarchal societies. Despite social stigma and hardship, her confidence enables survival. Her role illustrates how women themselves sometimes enforce patriarchal discipline, reinforcing male dominance indirectly.

Wahida challenges the expectation of early marriage after SSLC. Her questioning of fate and tradition exposes the irrationality of oppressive customs. She represents a generation increasingly unwilling to accept subjugation unquestioningly.

The female characters in the novel exhibit remarkable courage and resilience as they strive to reshape their lives through subtle acts of resistance within the confines of their traditional and everyday existence. Categorized into two groups, some overtly challenge socio-cultural and religious norms, while others subtly attempt to navigate and reshape those norms through inconspicuous acts of defiance.

In the first group, women like Fatima marry Hindu men, Firdaus contemplates rejecting her elderly and unattractive husband on their wedding night, Nafiza engages in extramarital affairs, and Farida has an affair with the Hindu driver Muthu. These women overtly violate societal and religious boundaries, challenging established norms.

The second group comprises women who, though not openly rebellious, quietly seek ways to carve out spaces for more fulfilling lives. Despite engaging in traditional family tasks within the confines of their homes, their conversations reveal desires and aspirations. Notably, Firdaus emerges as the most rebellious among them. Forced into marriage with an older man to alleviate her family's financial woes, she boldly refuses to remain married upon discovering his unsettling appearance, arranged by her brother-in-law based solely on the groom's wealth. Firdaus, encountering her prospective groom for the first time on their wedding night, courageously rejects the union upon witnessing his wolf-like features. Her resilience becomes a powerful symbol of challenging societal expectations and choosing a path aligned with personal convictions.

Conclusion

The Hour Past Midnight is a powerful feminist narrative that exposes patriarchal oppression, gender discrimination, and restricted female autonomy within a conservative cultural framework. Through interconnected female experiences, Salma critiques the denial of education, rigid gender roles, domestic confinement, and internalized patriarchy. The novel affirms women's resilience, resistance, and quest for self-identity.

Salma's work holds immense relevance in contemporary India, where progress coexists with persistent gender inequality. By giving voice to marginalized women, *The Hour Past Midnight* contributes significantly to feminist discourse and underscores the necessity of education, awareness, and collective resistance in dismantling patriarchal structures.

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