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**Subaltern Silence and the Politics of Agency in *Midnight's Children***

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**Abstract**

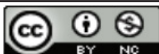
This paper critically examines the representation of subaltern women and their agency in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*. It particularly argues that Rushdie's female characters embody subalternity, with their identities and social positions shaped by the intersecting forces of colonialism and patriarchy in postcolonial India. At the same time, these characters exercise strategic forms of agency within hegemonic discourses structured by colonial, patriarchal, and capitalist frameworks. Through a close textual reading, the paper explores how Rushdie articulates both the silencing and the emergence of marginalized voices, suggesting that silence itself can function as a mode of resistance to patriarchal ideology. The analysis engages with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's postcolonial theory of subalternity and Laura M. Ahearn's concept of agency to illuminate the nuanced ways in which Rushdie's women navigate multiple layers of oppression in textual analysis process. Finally, the study reveals that while the female characters are silenced by imperial and patriarchal systems, they simultaneously enact distinct, context-dependent forms of agency within dominant power structures. It concludes that the politics of agency in *Midnight's Children* is not fixed but fluid, operating within and against the very systems it contests.

**Keywords:** Agency, patriarchy, oppression, silence, subaltern, colonialism

**Introduction**

Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) weaves a complex tapestry of India's postcolonial socio-political and cultural society, which is based on gender inequality and domination. The novel provides a vivid portrayal of the fragmented identities of postcolonial India, wherein the subaltern groups, particularly women, stay largely voiceless or marginalized in the male-dominated discourse. The narrative of the novel captures the zeitgeist of post-independence India, where women played an equally significant role as men in the nation-building struggle; nevertheless, they remained marginalized and silenced. As Ferrazzano (2024) observes: "This

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female role had not developed organically but was ideologically driven and strictly delimited by the design of an androcentric society” (p. 148). Although India achieved independence from British colonial rule in 1947, traditional gender norms and patriarchal legacies continued to influence women’s lives, confining their roles within certain domains of marriage, motherhood, and homemaking. Rushdie portrays the predicament of post-independence women through subaltern figures such as Naseem, Mumtaz, and Padma, who go through traumatic experiences caused by patriarchal and cultural ideologies embodied by Aadam Azis, Ahmed Sinai, and Saleem.

Spivak’s postcolonial theory, particularly her seminal essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) provides a powerful lens for analyzing the subaltern women’s silence in Rushdie’s postcolonial novel, *Midnight’s Children*. Spivak’s proposition that women’s identities, voices, and experiences are systematically silenced is reflected in the lives of Rushdie’s key female characters Naseem, Amina, and Padma, whose experiences mirror the struggles of subaltern subjects navigating the patriarchal and colonial legacies of post-independent India. Spivak applies the term ‘subaltern’ to those, particularly women, who are relegated to the margins of political, social, and cultural hierarchies where they “do not speak directly in archival documents which are usually produced by the ruling classes” (Chakraborty, 2005, p. 478). The subaltern’s voices, histories, and experiences are invariably rendered invisible in the male hegemonic society.

In this article, my objective is to analyze how the intersection of colonialism and patriarchy systematically dominates and suppresses female characters, relegating them to the fringes of the patriarchal framework, and how these female characters assert their agency and resistance within the oppressive structure. To analyze these dynamics, I apply Spivak’s postcolonial feminist theory as a theoretical framework which questions the dual oppression of women as both subaltern subjects and gendered beings. In addition, Laura M. Ahearn’s notion of agency is employed to trace different forms of resistance enacted by Rushdie’s female characters. In the novel, Rushdie depicts two patriarchal family structures – those of Adam Aziz and Ahmed Sinai – that reinforce power and dominance over their wives, positioning them as the ‘other’ within a gendered oppressive hierarchy. Similarly, the protagonist and narrator, Saleem Sinai, perpetuates similar patriarchal power in his relationship with his companion and listener, Padma.

### Literature Review

Critics and scholars have investigated multiple interwoven themes in *Midnight’s Children* since its publication in 1981. Rage (1997) identifies the nationalist movement as a dominant theme of the novel, suggesting that “*Midnight’s Children* remains very emotionally committed to the narrative to the nation” (p. 366). The novel, therefore is not, merely a personal story but a detailed description of India as a nation and India’s transition from British colonialism to independence and its fragmentation after independence. In this sense, the novel unravels the historical events, struggles, and identities of independent India. Similarly, Kluwick (2001) interprets the novel as a historical and political narrative of pre- and post-independence India, noting that “*Midnight’s Children* is more explicit in its use of historical information . . . all of his texts are set in distinct historical periods, and engage intensively with historical developments and events” (p. 43). Rushdie underscores momentous political and historical conflicts such as the origin of Pakistan, Indira Gandhi’s imposition of the Emergency, and the role of the Muslim League in partition, among others.

An important aspect of *Midnight's Children* is Rushdie's use of hybridity and cultural mixing. O'Reilly (2001) observes: "Hybridity is an essential part of Rushdie's work and has a particular significance within an Indian context" (p.26). The novel portrays characters with British, Indian, and diverse religious backgrounds – such as Muslim, Hindu, and Christian. Supporting this view, Horn (2014), argues that "The essential theme of *Midnight's Children* is hybridity, which can be loosely defined as the commingling of ethnicities, religions, cultures, identities, and narratives" (p. 2). The characters embody diverse cultural backgrounds, representing the complex and mixed nature of postcolonial identities.

Some critics, such as Bowers, note the novel for its innovative style known as magic realism. Highlighting Rushdie's magical realistic technique, Bowers (2004) remarks that "Rushdie is probably the most well-known writer of magic realism in English language" (p. 47). In this innovative narrative style, Rushdie blends myth and magical elements with real life and historical facts. For instance, the midnight's children, who were born at the stroke of India's independence, possess magical powers – such as Saleem's telepathic power through which he organizes their conference around India.

Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* has become a focal point of critical commentary among postcolonial feminist critics, who focus on Rushdie's portrayal of female characters and gender dynamics in his writing. Some of the early feminists, according to Horn (2014), find his works "wholly misogynistic" (p. 1). They argue that his female characters are sidelined or assigned stereotypical roles, where they become objects of male desire or emblems of cultural, religious, and national identities without possessing their own subjectivity. Mann (1995) similarly accuses Rushdie of neglecting women's problems, claiming that Rushdie "largely fails to champion the cause of women" (p. 294). She argues that Rushdie's works do not address women's issues, rights, and empowerment. Focusing on Rushdie's male authorial narrative in *Midnight's Children*, Grewal (1994) asserts: "There is a disjunction between the mode of inclusion in which the narrative is written and the authoritative stance of the writer . . . that breaks down the coalition between the writer and women" (p. 125). She contends that Rushdie denies women the authoritative voice of the writer. The way female characters are presented in the narrative neither supports nor empowers them; as a result, it undermines solidarity among women characters.

Observing Rushdie's portrayal of women in passive, cold, and irrational roles, Ahmed (1991) denounces him for producing a "gallery of women who are either frigid and desexualized . . . or demented and moronic . . . or dulled into nullity . . . or driven to despair, suicide, and sheer surreal" (p. 1467). He suggests that Rushdie depicts female characters in a negative and one-dimensional way, rendering them emotionally cold, mentally unstable, and insignificant. Spivak's (1989) critique to Rushdie's use of women is also significant. She notes: "Despite his anxiety to write women into the narrative of history, Rushdie locates his female characters within a confining gender code that is never opened up, never questioned" (pp. 82, 83). Spivak contends that although Rushdie integrates women into the historical narrative, he confines them to rigid gender roles that remain unexplored and unchallenged. In a similar vein, Cundy (1993) observes that "Women . . . are invoked to prove a point about social injustices and inequalities, and then effectively demanded . . . or marginalized by the writing itself" (p. 17). She argues that Rushdie overlooks women's agency, resistance, and capacity to rebel against societal oppression and gendered inequality.

Despite the plethora of feminist critiques of Rushdie's derogative portrayals of women,

Horn (2014) presents a more positive assessment. She asserts that “Although Rushdie’s portrayals of women are often problematic, he is relentless in his determination to challenge patriarchal structures of oppression” (p. 2). Horn acknowledges flaws in his depictions of women, yet argues that he is not gender- biased; rather, he is committed to redressing the oppressive and dominating patriarchal system through his writing. In *Midnight’s Children*, for instance, Rushdie presents female characters with potential for agency and resilience even within oppressive dominance of male characters. Like many postcolonial texts, his novel documents the realities of women’s situations, showing how factors like class, caste, and culture shape women’s predicament in post-independence India. In this context, Upstone (2007) opines that *Midnight’s Children* represents “a unified experience of oppression that reflects [. . .] complex interaction in which the domestic is for both male and female – in a unique way – a sight of power constestation” (p. 271). Rushdie suggests that women’s oppression is not limited to colonialism, but also to patriarchy in indigenous culture. In doing so, Rushdie’s work resonates with Spivak’s assertion that women are doubly oppressed in postcolonial spaces.

The above-mentioned critical comments do not sufficiently analyze how Rushdie’s female characters constantly resist, subvert or remain complicit within the patriarchal framework that marginalize them. Although the critical discourses on the novel and its portrayal of women are considerable, significant gaps remain in the investigation of women’s roles and voices. Existing feminist critics have not examined in detail the nuance interplay between silence, agency, and complicity. Moreover, critics do not seem to have engaged with Spivak’s postcolonial feminist theory regarding the subaltern silence and agency. Thus, this article seeks to fill this gap by applying Spivak’s notion of subalternity to expose the complexities of female representation in the novel.

### Methods and Procedures

This study is grounded in a qualitative interpretative research design, and Rushdie’s novel *Midnight’s Children* is selected as a primary text, focusing on the major female characters in the novel. To explore and analyze the research gap and strengthen my arguments, I use the secondary materials taken from various sources such as the e-library, books, and journal articles. The analysis focuses on the language, narrative structure, and symbolic role assigned to female characters, exclusively in relation to themes of power, identity, and agency, and much attention is given to moments of silence, eraser, and resistance. I am mainly concerned with Spivak’s postcolonial feminist theory to explore the representation of women and their double marginalization, and their agentive strategies are observed from the theoretical perspectives of Laura M. Ahearn in this article.

Spivak in her essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988), addresses the marginalization and silencing of subaltern women at the intersection of colonialism and patriarchy. In such societies, women’s voices and experiences are unheard by both colonial rulers and native patriarchy. Consequently, women are doubly oppressed and rendered mute in both Western and local narratives. She states that colonialism’s imposition of Western norms, system of knowledge, and power frequently influence the roles and rights of women in colonized societies. Thus, the subaltern women are caught between the structures of colonial domination and the social, political, and economic hierarchies of their own cultures. The subaltern women, according to Spivak (1988), occupy “no space from which the sexed subaltern can speak” (p. 307). If they try to articulate,

their voices are distorted, filtered, co-opted. Thus, the central theme of Spivak's proposition is the absence of the subaltern women's articulation in political, historical, economic, and intellectual discourses. This study analyzes Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* based on the popular contentions presented by Spivak in her essay.

### Results and Discussion

The female characters, such as Naseem, Mumtaz, and Padma in the novel represent a subaltern group who are rendered inferior and powerless not because of lack of their ability, but because of the hegemonic patriarchal structure that systematically suppresses their agency. Spivak introduces 'women' as subalterns who occupy positions of inferiority, marginalization, and disempowerment at the intersections of colonialism and patriarchy. According to Spivak (1988), "the 'true' subaltern group, whose identity is its difference, there is no unrepresentable subaltern subject that can know and speak itself" (p. 285). Spivak's arguments provide a perfect backdrop to interpret Rushdie's postcolonial novel *Midnight's Children*. Rushdie demonstrates patriarchal power dynamics in which women are exploited and oppressed, relegating them to the periphery of mainstream socio-political power.

Naseem (hereafter called Reverend Mother) embodies both gendered and cultural subalternity, as her voice and agency are silenced by her traditional and conservative father, Mr. Ghani, and later by her husband, Aadam Aziz, a German returned doctor. She is kept like a tamed animal, deprived of human choices, autonomy, and freedom, behind a perforated sheet – a physical and metaphorical barrier that signifies her fragmentation and objectification – secluding her from the public world. Ghani reinforces Islamic religious and cultural values and compels Reverend Mother to conceal her body, as its public display would be considered a threat to family honor. Thus, she becomes the victim of the interplay of cultural and gendered oppression in the course of maintaining familial and social prestige. Reverend Mother's fragmented and controlled existence echoes Spivak's notion that the voices of subaltern women are invariably subdued within patriarchal and colonial systems, where they can speak neither for themselves nor for others.

Reverend Mother is subjected to patriarchal hegemony after her marriage to Aziz. Her religious knowledge and cultural values are immediately challenged by Aziz's modern, secular, and progressive vision. Aziz perceives her as a primitive figure, devoid of changing political, social, and practical awareness, and as a veiled woman lacking knowledge of the modern world. This act of undermining or distorting women's knowledge and experience, Spivak (1988) terms 'epistemic' violence (p. 280) – a harm inflicted on subaltern women through the suppression or distortion of their knowledge and self-representation within mainstream academic discourse. Thus, Reverend Mother is torn between tradition and modernity, and she is deeply affected both by the changing social, political, and cultural values of post-independence India and by Aziz's modern, scientific and progressive outlook, which challenges her conservative upbringing. She is unable to embrace either set of values, and thus remains in a state of dilemma. Highlighting women's dilemma, Spivak (1988) writes: "Subalterns do not always speak through the scientific frameworks of knowledge Western modernity provides them" and "the 'third-world women' caught between tradition and modernization" (pp. 283, 306). Reverend Mother, therefore, is displaced and caught in the in-betweenness of tradition and modernism.

In a patriarchal society, men exercise control over women through various mechanisms of power. Aziz employs both manipulation and force in his treatment of Reverend Mother. For

instance, Aziz, urges her to abandon the veil, manipulating her by saying: “Forget about being a good Kashmiri girl. Start thinking about being a modern Indian woman” (Rushdie, 1981, p. 39), and when persuasion fails, he burns all of her purdah veils. Although Aziz appears to liberate her from the ‘purdah’, a form of cultural oppression, he is in fact imposing his own authority over her individual choices. This tendency aptly echoes Spivak’s critique of colonialists and Western intellectuals who interpret Eastern culture – such as ‘veiling’ or the ritual of ‘sati’ – through a colonial and patriarchal lens. She argues that colonialists tend to view these practices as signs of oppression, backwardness, and even barbarism requiring a Western civilizing mission to redress. According to Spivak, such perspectives do not ‘speak for’ the complexities of the Third-World women but instead silence their voices and agency. In this sense, Aziz can be seen as an extension of colonialism, reinforcing structures of dominance and power under the guise of liberating his wife from the long-standing cultural practice of veiling. His act of burning her veils thus functions as a mechanism of male authority and control, where Reverend Mother, like subaltern women, lacks the agency to ‘speak for’ herself.

Subaltern women are more vulnerable and pliable due to their lack of power, agency and authority. Their identities remain fluid and shifting under the dominant power of patriarchal men, who can manipulate or coerce them into submission. Mumtaz (hereafter referred to as Amina) epitomizes the nuanced subaltern woman who navigates traditional beliefs and societal expectations. She ultimately loses her identity within the power dynamics imposed by her husband, Ahmed Sinai. He exerts control over her identity when he demands Amina: “Change your name . . . Time for a fresh start. Throw Mumtaz and her Nadir Khan out of the window, I’ll choose you a new name. Amina Sinai. (Rushdie, 1981, p. 81). Here, Ahmed’s act of renaming and redefining her symbolizes how a woman’s life can be manipulated and reshaped under the structures of male authority.

In a patriarchal society, women’s choices are often silenced by male authority, particularly in matters of marriage. When Amina’s first marriage to Nadir – a supporter of non-traditional Muslim League and a refugee in Aziz’s house – is annulled, her father, Aziz, forces her to marry Ahmed, a businessperson, due to Nadir’s impotence. Amina thus enters into a loveless marriage, suppressing her choices and desires, as she knows that society imposes pressures and psychological burdens on women for childlessness, despite male fertility being a common cause. The dread of social stigma forces her to divorce Nadir and accept Ahmed as her husband, and she gradually shifts her love to her new partner. Saleem narrates the doomed and tormented life of Amina as: “The conflict between grandparental skepticism and grand maternal credulity; and above all the ghostly essence of that perforated sheet, which doomed my mother to learn to love a man in segment” (Rushdie, 1981, p. 143). This shows that Amina is torn between inherited beliefs of her parents and her own individual desires. It also reflects how individual life is shaped by the belief systems of others.

Spivak highlights the economic and social marginalization of subaltern women within the intersecting frameworks of colonialism, capitalism, and patriarchy, where they remain economically disadvantaged and structurally silenced. Within the fabric of elite postcolonial discourse, women’s contributions or labor – whether for nation-building or homemaking – are frequently rendered invisible. These forces, according to Spivak, restrict women’s access to economic power and independent agency. Amina faces the same predicament in Ahmed’s household, where he maintains control over financial decisions and the investment of his property

in business ventures. Ahmed expects Amina to speak kindly to him whenever there is an urgent need for money, such as buying groceries or paying bills. Spivak's notion of women's exclusion from decision-making processes is explicitly reflected in the novel when Ahmed unilaterally decides to sell his leather business in Delhi and move to Bombay for permanent settlement.

Amina represents the stereotypical Indian woman overshadowed by dominant male figures both before and after her marriage. She lacks a space to speak for herself and is excluded from history and discourse. Spivak (1988) exposes the reality of subaltern subjects: "If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow" (p. 287). Imperial power and local patriarchy provide women with no platform to fearlessly express their interests and experiences. As Spivak (1988) asserts, "there is no space from which the sexed subaltern subject can speak" (p. 307); thus, women's voices are silenced by both colonial subjugation and by gendered social hierarchies, making it extremely difficult for them to articulate their own experiences and subjectivity. In the novel, Amina's voices and agency are often ignored, distorted, or mediated by intersecting colonial, patriarchal, and class-based structures. Her individual desires, aspirations, and experiences are relegated to the background of societal expectation, reinforcing her passivity and silence.

The theme of patriarchal oppression, domination, and hegemony becomes apparent in Ahmed's treatment of Amina. After the collapse of her business, Ahmed succumbs to alcoholism, becomes erratic and emotionally abusive. He begins to assert authority, instilling his will more forcefully on her. Amina, as a docile and pliant woman, cannot resist Ahmed's misbehavior and harsh language; instead, she simply pleads "don't torture me". Ahmed dismisses her appeal, retorting: "Torture my foot! You think it's torture for a man to ask his wife for attention? God save me from stupid woman!" (Rushdie, 1981, p. 181). Ahmed's response reflects his frustration, anger, and inability to acknowledge Amina's emotion and her loyalty. Rather than recognizing her distress, he sarcastically mocks her feelings. Amina silently endures his misbehavior, protecting her children and maintaining a sense of self and inner resilience without complaint. Highlighting her struggle, Saleem admires her: "Ammma, may be you are mermaid really, taking human form for the love of a man – so every step is like walking on razor blades" (Rushdie, 1981, p. 217). Saleem expresses his sympathy for her suffering, comparing it to the mermaid's pain in fairy tales when she walks on the land. In response, Amina expresses women's destiny saying: "We women must fill up our days" (Rushdie, 1981, p. 197), suggesting that women are condemned to endure pain and dissatisfaction rather than openly express sorrow.

Subaltern women are frequently subjected to critical scrutiny by men, who often harbor suspicions about their moral character, fidelity, and purity. In the novel, Rushdie creates an episode that critiques how patriarchal men invariably cast doubt on women's chastity and loyalty. When Ahmed discovers that Saleem's blood type mismatches his own, suspicion about Saleem's paternity takes root, leading him to consider that Saleem may not be his biological son. Obsessed with this notion, Ahmed suspects Amina's fidelity, despite the absence of any evidence of infidelity. He distances himself both physically and emotionally from Amina, haunted by the belief in her supposed deception and disloyalty. This climatic episode represents the complexities of a postcolonial sexist society in India in which patriarchal norms empower men to control women's reputations and lives, even in the absence of proof or justification.

Rushdie intricately portrays Padma to show how women are often subjected to the narrative authority and control of male figures. Padma comes from a lower working-class background and lacks formal education, working as a cook and caretaker for Saleem. Saleem relates Padma's position and behavior to that of traditional Indian women: "To observe that our Padma Bibi, long-suffering tolerant consoling, is beginning to behave exactly like traditional wife" (Rushdie, 1981, p. 537). Padma is relegated to the role of a passive recipient within Saleem's fantastical narrative, where her voice is subsumed and she is denied full narrative authority. Her position reflects Spivak's assertion that subaltern women are doubly marginalized by both gender and class, which restrict their choices. Spivak (1988) writes: "A figure of 'woman' is at issue, one whose minimal predication as indeterminate is already available to the phallogocentric tradition" (p. 287). She argues that a woman is not regarded as a self-reliant individual capable of independent thought and agency, but instead is constructed as dependent, submissive, or primarily existing for the validation of the male subject within phallogocentric discourse.

In the novel, Padma is trapped within the phallogocentric framing of Saleem, who merely sees her as a body, a foil, or a listener to his story – a role always already 'available' within the phallogocentric tradition. Spivak contends that subaltern women may exist in male narrative, but their voices and experiences are mediated or distorted. Padma's practical wisdom and her contributions are often sidelined, even though she serves as a grounding force in Saleem's life. She sacrifices her personal happiness to care for Saleem, navigating his activities as a selfless woman fraught with love and care; however, she is overlooked and neglected in the domain of Saleem's intellectualism and elitism. Padma guides Saleem, corrects his narrative inconsistencies, and grounds his magical realist storytelling with her pragmatic perspective, yet she is rendered a cheap and worthless object in Saleem's narratives. He views Padma merely as an object of fascination or desire, employing a sensual gaze that reduces her to a bodily presence rather than a fully realized character, as follows:

How I admire the leg-muscles of my solicitous Padma! There she squats, few feet from my table, her sari hitched up in fisherwoman fashion. Calf-muscles show no sign of strain; thigh-muscles, rippling through sari-folds, display their commendable stamina. (Rushdie, 1981, p. 375)

This vivid description of Padma's physical body, attire, and posture mirrors the male gaze on women and reinforces existing power dynamics. Saleem's sensual and fetishistic gaze reduces Padma to an object of voyeuristic pleasure, disregarding her agency and individuality.

Saleem's authority, mirroring that of his grandfather Aziz and his father Ahmed, serves as an extension of patriarchy that exerts stringent control over the lives of women and marginalized individuals in postcolonial India, rather than "listen to or speak for" the subaltern women. Spivak (1988) draws this issue: "In seeking to learn or speak to (rather than listen to or speak for) the historically muted subject of the subaltern woman, the postcolonial intellectual *systematically* 'unlearns' female privilege" (p. 295). Saleem privileges his own voice and experiences, and he is deeply imbued with patriarchal authority, which leads him to exclude or decenter the voices of women. He ridicules Padma's name by comparing it with dung and he conveys his ambivalent feelings and crude remarks by calling her 'bitch-in-the-manger'.

Saleem's broader pattern of patriarchal control, power, and ownership over women is apparent when he appears judgmental, particularly towards his mother. He asserts his authority over her action: "I want to teach you a lesson. Amma, do not go to see other men" (Rushdie, 1981, p. 367). He harbors deep suspicion about his mother's fidelity and begins to question her presumed

unfaithfulness when Amina secretly visits her ex-husband, Nadir. Saleem's patriarchal overtone also becomes explicit when he suspects of his mother's involvement in horse racing to improve their financial situation. He comments: "How is it possible? How could a housewife, however determined, win fortunes on the horses, day after racing day, month after month?" (Rushdie, 1981, p. 198). Here, Saleem articulates a traditional gender ideology that frames risk-taking activities – such as gambling, racing, or betting – as exclusively masculine, considering women timid and fearful in such domains.

In the novel, Saleem presents his ambivalent opinions and misogynistic attitudes toward women who have played dual roles in his life. He remarks: "Women had made me; and also unmade me. From Reverend Mother to the Widow, and even beyond, I have been at the mercy of the so-called gentler sex" (Rushdie, 1981, p. 565). A number of women exert a profound influence on the shaping of Saleem's identity, destiny, and emotional life. He perceives one group of women – such as Reverend Mother, Amina, and Mary Pereira, a hospital nurse – as a creative force while he views another – such as the Widow (Indira Gandhi) – as a destructive force. Reverend Mother, as a powerful matriarch, exerts immense control over the family, subtly but profoundly shaping his upbringing. Amina's emotional world, her choices, and complex relationships, particularly with Nadir, and later Ahmed provide a framework in which Saleem constructs his childhood life. Likewise, Mary Pereira, alters Saleem's destiny and entire trajectory of his life by switching his name tag at birth with that of Shiva, the biological child of Ahmed and Amina. Mary deliberately swaps the infants to give a poor child (Saleem) a wealthy upbringing. The Widow 'unmakes' Saleem by her forced sterilization of him and the other midnight's children during the Emergency, thereby stripping them of the ability to continue their legacy.

Spivak anticipates the possibility of women's voices within dominant patriarchal discourse. She argues that women do speak in various forms – by subverting social norms, through small acts of defiance, or by preserving of cultural practices. She affirms that women "can speak and know their conditions", and "the relationship between woman and silence can be plotted by women themselves" (Spivak, 1988, pp. 283, 287). Thus, women cannot be evaluated merely as passive recipients. Supporting Spivak's assertion, Katawal (2013) writes: "The subaltern speaks nonetheless in bits and traces within the elite discourses. Whenever the elite speak, the subaltern speaks as well" (p. 86). He suggests that even though the subaltern are silenced or unheard in dominant patriarchal narratives, their voices still appears indirectly within the elite discourses. Similarly, Lamichhane (2023) argues that the women as subjugated groups can also "develop consciousness about their condition and convert that into resistance. The subordinate groups struggle against that ideology of subordination" (p. 16). In other words, marginalized women can become aware of their condition and actively resist the systems or ideologies that oppress them.

Agency refers to the "human capacity to act" (Ahearn, 1999, p. 12), to make decisions, and to exert power or influence. Garnett (2017) defines agency as "inner freedom", and "the capacity to act, to do things intentionally or purposively, rather than merely to be moved or to react passively" (p. 3). For him, agency involves individual choices and conscious actions, rather than being driven solely by instincts or external forces. In this sense, Rushdie's female characters – Reverend Mother, Amina, and Padma – in *Midnight's Children* act as agents driven by their own internal motivation within a male-hegemonic society. As Archer (2000) argues that the human subject is a "the linchpin of agency" (p. 17), these women characters intentionally act, make

significant choices, and take purposeful steps to claim their space and position within chauvinistic society.

Thus, Reverend Mother initiates actions against Aziz's domination and control. Emerging from the ashes of two decades of silence, she asserts herself as a figure, liberated from her husband's ideological constraints. She gradually establishes her own sets of domestic rules and disciplines, under which Aziz is not allowed political discussion or express new beliefs, on the one hand, on the other; she openly questions his restrictive tendencies that demand her complete submission to his ideals. She demands obedience, loyalty, and decorum over emotional expression. Therefore, she discourages her daughters from mingling with men, and disapproves her daughter-in-law Pia's professional career as a film actress. Referring to her strength and self-reliance, Saleem narrates: "She was not one to be trapped in anyone's little black box. It was enough for her that she must live in unveiled, bare faced shamelessness – there was no question of allowing the fact to be recorded" (Rushdie, 1981, p. 48). This suggests that she refuses to be restricted or controlled by others' beliefs, desires, and expectations, and her choice to wear 'purdah' or abandon it is an act of individual will, rather than compulsion.

Padma's agentive approaches are similar to those of Reverend Mother. She also appears direct, articulate, and assertive. She frequently interrogates Saleem's mythologizing, lofty, and overwhelming introspective storytelling to give the narrative verisimilitude and to make him more reliable and accountable to his audience. She essentially appears confrontational; raising her voice against Saleem's dominating nature and demanding recognition, dignity, and individuality. In this way, she serves as a counterbalance, playing a metanarrative role as his companion, listener, and critic. Commenting on her dynamisms and resistance to elite discourse Kutwal (2013) states: "Rushdie's subaltern characters, such as Padma, contaminate the elite discourse and knowledge not just by inhabiting them but, more important, by speaking through them strategically" (p. 100). Padma also interrogates Saleem's sexist and androcentric narrative that marginalizes and mystifies women, demanding more realistic portrayals of them.

Spivak contends that subaltern subjects can protest male oppression in more subtle and less visible manners. Thus, agency can also be expressed in silence. Amina does not appear open and direct like Reverend Mother and Padma; rather, she resists her husband's domination and ill-treatment through stoic silence. She suppresses her recurring memories of her pleasant days with Nadir and remains quiet about her past in order to keep her husband happy and present her family as a model. Thus, throughout the novel, Amina performs an agentive role in subtle and less visible ways. Similarly, Reverend Mother enacts her silent protest before she transforms herself from Naseem to Reverend Mother. She applies silence to express her disagreement with Aziz's Westernized views and modern secular beliefs; his decision to harbor Nadir and his unilateral decision to marry Amina to Nadir. These women's silence is not their submission or passivity but rather a defense mechanism and a strategic form of resistance against patriarchal oppression.

Agency is not solely individual autonomy or self-expression; it can also involve "acting on behalf of someone else, not oneself" (Ahearn, 1999, p. 12). Ahearn suggests that agency can be relational or representational. Before her marriage, Reverend Mother maintains her father's reputation and prestige staying back of the perforated sheet. After her marriage, she wields power to uphold family morality, dignity, and social standing. Moreover, she takes action for her daughter Amina's rights when her husband becomes abusive and inhumane. She advises Amina to leave him, and encourages her telling: "There is no shame in leaving an inadequate husband" (Rushdie,

1981, p. 393). By doing so, she challenges the prevailing patriarchal notion that a woman leaving her home is a source of social stigma or shame, emphasizing personal well-being and moral integrity over social expectation. Reverend Mother's advocacy exemplifies a feminist assertion of a woman's right to reject oppressive circumstances. Here, Spivak's notion of 'strategic essentialism' – a political tactic by marginalized groups for the achievement of political or social goals – comes into play.

In a similar manner, Amina, from the very beginning of the novel, sacrifices her own life for societal or familial duty, suppressing her personal desires in order to fulfill the expectation and needs of those around her. Before her marriage, she preserves family's reputation by following her father's political and patriarchal ideology and faithfully obeying her mother's strict rules as an obedient daughter. Likewise, she quits her marriage with Nadir and reluctantly marries Ahmed to safeguard her parents' reputation and maintains social propriety. Later, she acts on behalf of her family's honor, especially when her husband becomes bankrupt and succumbs to alcoholism; she engages in horse racing to restore her family's financial stability. She also performs a relational agency by emphatically nursing and rehabilitating her husband when he is physically ruined. Equally, she assumes a self-sacrificing maternal role, investing herself deeply in Saleem's life even without knowing that he is not her biological son.

Padma also acts for Saleem to shape his character. Emotionally, she assumes a complex maternal role, being present whenever he falls sick or feels isolated. She serves him food, urges him to rest, and supports him when he is lost in memory. Padma articulates her deep sense of emotional labor and selfless devotion to Saleem: "Only believe, mister, how much I have your well-being at heart! What creatures we are, we women, never for one moment at peace when our men lie sick and low" (Rushdie, 1981, p. 267). She underscores how love – whether deep, unrequited, romantic, or familial – can have a powerful and uncontrollable effect on a person, particularly women. Her emotional and physical support becomes a stabilizing force in his life, especially when he is overtaken by illness, broken memories, and hallucinations. Thus, Padma's agency is not self-centered; rather, she acts in relation to and in support of the male protagonist.

Agency can also be performed while living within or being complicit with an ideology. Ahearn (1999) opines: "Agentive acts may also involve complicity with, accommodation to, or reinforcement of the status quo – sometimes all at the same time" (p. 13). This means that choices or assertions of 'will' may align with dominant ideologies, such as patriarchal, social, or political. In *Midnight's Children*, the women characters embody this complex interplay of silence, compliance, resistance, and limited assertion of 'will'. Initially, Reverend Mother looks strong-willed in her marital negotiation with Aziz from behind the perforated sheet. Later, she performs her agency by preserving the cultural practice of 'purdah'. Her staunch advocacy for 'purdah' foregrounds a subtle form of resistance. Saleem describes: "She lived within an invisible fortress of her own making, an ironclad citadel of tradition and certainties" (Rushdie, 1981, p. 47). This is the reason she is critique to Aziz's newly adopted modern, scientific, and secular ideology, since it disrupts the established traditional Islamic belief system. In this way, her agency is complicit with and reinforces the status quo.

Amina, on the other hand, appears independent when she chooses Ahmed as her second husband; however, she later suffers and tolerates Ahmed's business failures, and alcoholism. Despite this, she acts to hold the family together, which reflects her accommodation to patriarchal expectations of a dutiful wife. Thus, she performs her agency by sustaining patriarchal structures.

Likewise, Padma interrupts Saleem's grandiose narrative, demanding clarity and realism, which demonstrates her assertion of agency. Yet her role remains circumscribed when she merely listens, supports, and serves as his audience. Thus, her agency reinforces the centrality of Saleem's male narrative, embodying both challenge and complicity. To sum up, these subaltern women's performative agency not only challenges patriarchal structures but also redefines identity and power. Their agentive acts concern not only with individual empowerment, but also the ways in which women influence political, historical, and patriarchal discourses.

### Conclusion

This study shows that Rushdie in *Midnight's Children* presents women characters, Reverend Mother, Amina, and Padma, who belong to the subaltern group who undergo socio-political, cultural, and economic oppression under patriarchal authority. However, these characters negotiate their agency within the intersecting structures of patriarchy and postcolonial identity. Through Spivak's theorization of the subaltern and Ahearn's notion of agency, it becomes evident that these women strategically perform different forms of agency, challenging traditional notions of subaltern passivity. Reverend Mother enacts her agency by sustaining the cultural tradition of *purdah*. Amina, though apparently submissive, exercises relational agency through stoic endurance, care, and sacrifice to preserve familial and social structures. Likewise, Padma asserts her agency by commenting on Saleem's grandiose and surreal narrative, pressing him for accountability and clarity. These characters' agency is not autonomous; rather, it operates through distinct forms such as silence, accommodation, compliance, and relational negotiation. The multiplicity of agentive performances in the novel foregrounds how women navigate power within the dominant patriarchal structures that constrain them. Ultimately, the novel highlights that the politics of agency is not absolute and fixed but shifting, contingent, and embedded within the very systems it seeks to protest. Thus, *Midnight's Children* explicitly suggests that wherever there is oppression, there is also agency and resistance.

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