Between Menarche and Mobility: Locating Gender in the Works of Hephzibah Jesudasan and Rajathi Salma

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Abstract: Narratives on menarche and its impact on the lives of women demand to be recognized and probed into. Using the frameworks of social psychology and gender studies, the article closely examines the fiction of two Tamil writers, Hephzibah Jesudasan and Rajathi Salma, who have dealt with post-menarcheal female imprisonment in their works. An attempt is made to analyse and juxtapose the concepts of *Irserippu* (former practice in Tamil societies) and the *Purdah* system (former practice in India) as evinced in their fiction to understand the cultural undercurrents of such social mores. In doing so, how such customs are strategically designed by patriarchy to curtail women's mobility and categorize them based on their behaviour will be scrutinized. This phenomenological study accentuates the process of understanding the gendered subjectivities enabled by the socio-cultural doctrines, besides examining the nexus between the seemingly innocuous benevolence of paternalist customs, women's labour and mobility.

Keywords: gender socialization, culture, desire, spatiality, patriarchy, mobility

Introduction

The advent of colonialism in India paved the way for such political dichotomies that made exclusive the "outside/world" as the territory of men as against the "inside/house" as the space of women (Chatterjee 623). Under the pretext of safeguarding the "spiritual" essence of the nation, women's mobility was curtailed, and liberty was questioned (624). Although loosely related to the concept of *Irserippu*, which was practised from the Sangam Age till the colonial period (as evident from the novel), and the *Purdah* system, which was practiced till a few years ago in remote pockets of Tamil Nadu, the aforementioned argument of Partha Chatterjee is vital as he rightly pinpoints the historical contingencies informing bigoted homosocial segregations. Writing about the post-menarcheal female imprisonment and homosocial delimitation of spatiality, how two writers from Tamil Nadu have captured the cultural sentiments and criticized the hypocrisy of such practices like *Irserippu* and *Purdah* will be probed upon in the present study. A phenomenological enquiry is pursued by revisiting female writing as a part of "a historically based conception of feminism as against the liberal-pluralist understanding of feminism" (Alexander and Mohanty xvi). While Hephzibah Jesudasan wrote during the mid-twentieth century, Salma is a contemporary writer. Despite the difference in decades of writing and their varied cultural and religious practices, there is an uncanny overlapping in the concerns of these two writers, which is their take on post-menarcheal female imprisonment. Their semi-fictional narratives portray how the right to education, the freedom to exercise agency, and the chance to socialize with the male members of society come to a sudden halt in the lives of girls following menarche. I employ the "theory in the flesh" concept to analyse the socio-psychological repercussions of sexist socialization to complicate the understanding of the affective contours of the body in the wake of puberty. This phenomenological approach

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accentuates the process of understanding the gendered subjectivities enabled by the socio-cultural doctrines, besides exposing the seemingly innocuous benevolence of paternalist customs. In this connection, to comprehend the subtleness of sexism perpetuated under these specific cultural practices, I employ the tool of "benevolent sexism" that perceives women only in traditional roles and is seemingly positive in approach.

Studies on sexism, stereotypes and internalization cannot be naively disregarded as outdated or irrelevant at any point in history. The Supreme Court of India's act of releasing a handbook on gender stereotypes in August 2023 is a solid attempt to reconcile the concerns of academia with those of the common lot. Irrespective of the studies on gender norms (Lindsey), spatiality and women's roles (Duncan), socialization and adult behavioural patterns (Srinivasan), there is a paucity of research that is comprehensive in its scope while dealing with these issues. Since gender socialization is primarily the means "through which the ideology of sexism is passed on" and "feminism is a struggle to end sexist oppression", the present study intends to bring them together to locate and problematize the origin of gender dichotomy (Harper 9; Hooks 26). Similarly, except for rare critical commentaries on Hephzibah's novels and a couple of studies on Salma's works, an in-depth analysis focusing on the root cause of sexism driven by paternalism is yet to be documented (Chellappa; Lakshmi). This further emphasizes the importance of the present study, which delves into the experiential narratives of the two women writers. In doing so, the present study will look at the idea of space, gender normativity, and socialization as inextricably wedded concepts that consequently mould the experiences of the body.

Steadfast in their purpose of exposing the popular stereotypes associated with their communities, which they represented through novels, both Jesudasan and Salma are vital feminist icons in the canon of Tamil literature. Jesudasan C, a Tamil Professor and the husband of Hephzibah hinted at the predominance of Brahmin writers and the portrayal of their lifestyle in Tamil literature in the late 1950s (Mangai). This motivated Hephzibah Jesudasan to narrate the life she was accustomed to and the lives of the people and community she was a part of. The lives of Christian "Paniyeri Nadars", or the people from the Christian toddy tapering community, are carefully narrativized without losing the charm of the 'Nanjil' region in her novels. On the other hand, Rajathi Salma throws light on the plight of women, particularly Muslim women, whose worlds are often closed behind the doors of their houses. From writing on tattered papers and sanitary napkins hiding in bathrooms during late nights to emerging as a political icon, activist, and writer, Salma vibrantly embodies the idea of emancipated womanhood. Her fiction registers the screaming silences and steaming desires of women who are suppressed by the dictates of male chauvinism.

Mapping 'Her-stories' through 'Histories'

Revealing the multidimensionality of sexism under the terminology 'ambivalent sexism', Susan Fiske and Peter Glick bifurcated sexism into 'hostile' and 'benevolent' forms. While the overtly toxic expressions of sexism are categorised as 'hostile' forms, benevolent sexism is more malevolent than the former as it couches sexism under the ruse of prosocial behaviours (Glick and Fiske 491). The codes of oppression in Hephzibah and Salma's works tend to reflect the ideology of 'protective paternalism', stemming from benevolent sexism, as it hints at the 'dyadic relationship' of men and women (Glick and Fiske 493). Before the textual analysis of such problematic dyadic relationships, it is imperative to make sense of the type of feminism that the texts attempt to engage with. In what can be considered a trailblazing work in the annals of third-world feminisms, the anthology *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1981), Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua propounded the concept of "theory in the flesh". This concept is defined as a study of the physical realities of life, inclusive of one's skin color, the land or concrete one grew up on, and even one's sexual longings, creating a politic born out of necessity (Moraga and Anzaldua 19). Introduced in the context of women of colour, this theory serves to "discern, disrupt and challenge knowledge constructions through the embodied subjectivities" of women (Fernandez 224). This epistemological tool combined with the theory of 'protective paternalism' assist us in reviewing the affective overlapping of the personal and the political. The extension of the same in the context of Salma and Jesudasan is useful in studying how feminism differs from and depends on one's social location. By utilising writing as a form of self-preservation, these writers have clearly illustrated the ways in which women draw their feminism from the culture they grow (42).

Set in the 1940s, Panaivilai, a village in Tamil Nadu, *Putham Veedu*, was initially published in Tamil in 1964. The novel was translated into English as *Putham House* in 2021 as part of the initiative taken by the Tamil Nadu Textbook and Educational Services Corporation. It narrates the lives of *Paniyeri Nadars* through the eyes of the protagonist, Lizzy. She was born into a conservative Christian family headed by the patriarch Kannapachi, Lizzy's grandfather. Kannapachi, the owner of the only tiled house in Panaivilai, is a respected elder and deacon in their village church. The lives of his two sons, Ponnumuthu and Ponnuthambi, are abject and miserable. Despite the declining condition of their house, which is symbolic of her family, Lizzy chooses to see good in everything. The undoing of Lizzy's family and her subsequent marriage to Thangaraj, who is below her family status, comprises the plot of this Bildungsroman novel. The novel also tellingly captures the power dynamics and social changes vis-a-vis caste and class mobility. Originally published in Tamil as *Irandam Jamangalin Kathai* (2004), Salma's debut novel was translated as *The Hour Past Midnight* by Lakshmi Holmstrom in 2009. Narrating the cloistered lives of Muslim women belonging to six families, this novel touches upon various issues, starting from intimate partner violence, sex-based socialization, child marriage and the politics behind female pleasure. Any attempt to summarize the novel is reductive as it is concerned with the multifaceted nature of familial dysfunctionalities. She unabashedly exposes the parochial interpellation in women and reiterates the need for women's solidarity to counter the male hegemony.

The nascent changes in Tamil Nadu in the mid-twentieth century pertaining to class mobility and caste consciousness are vividly documented in Jesudasan's novel. Her depiction of social progress involved portraying people from the lower rungs of society (class) becoming doctors and businessmen, thereby indicating the withdrawal from professions based on family heritage and feudalism. Besides garnering adulation from writers including Sundara Ramasamy (2019) and Ambai (1984), this work is considered integral in constituting the canon of Tamil literature. Appraised by the renowned Czech scholar Kamil Zvelebil as "the first realistic picture of a Tamil Christian community", this novel is overlooked in critical and academic discussions (288). On the other hand, the early 2000s witnessed the emergence of female poets dealing with a range of issues such as body writing, female pleasure, civil wars and landscapes.[1] Belonging to such a tradition of female imagination, Salma's works can be seen as a product of pure feminist consciousness. Anita Roy, an editor from *The Guardian*, heaps praise on Salma as "a female Muslim writer in India is a rarity; one who writes with such frankness about sex and sexuality is even rarer. On top of this, being an active and respected politician and social activist makes Salma unique" (Salma, *The Curse Stories*). The indelible marks that these two writers left through a deft fusion of aesthetics and politics are evident from the critics' appraisals of them.

The very idea of historical contextualization becomes a key factor in apropos of dealing with socialization. The colonial encounter reassembled the patriarchies in India in a way that was inimical to the interests of middle-class women (Chakravarti). The anti-colonial nationalist ideology propounded an ideal womanhood that fed directly into the formation of the middle class during the social reform movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Srilata 312). It should also be noted that Salma and Jesudasan belong to middle-class families and their semi-fictional works often reproduce characteristics pertaining to this class, where women are saddled with the expectation of adhering to certain appropriate behavioural patterns under the ruse of guarding the family/community's honour.

The process of socialization that conditions one's behavioural attitudes works on the principles of "unconscious forces, cognitive schemas and observational learning" (Liss et al. 228). Fundamentally built on the axis of interdependence over kinship and caste fraternity, socialization in India evolves through a natural inclination to be a part of the group and family (Panda and Gupta). Unlike the Western counterpart, in which individualism thrives, India shares a symbiotic relationship between the self and society. In relation to this, the negation of overarching social bindings in Western societies enables them to view menarche only as a "private event that is treated as a hygiene crisis" (Marvan and Alcala-Herrera 29). Considering the positionality of women in a society like India, which is based on interpersonal relationships, the semantic implications underlying the event of girls "coming of age" resists being seen only as a natural biological process (Thapan). The seismic changes produced by menarche in girls' lives in India offer immense scope for research. Specifically, in the context of Tamil Nadu, women are integral in preserving kinship ties, and hence research on menarche, an event which possesses a transformative potential, assumes pivotal significance. The custom of curtailing girls' mobility by confining them to their houses once they attend puberty is considered *Irserippu*. It was followed popularly in Tamil societies from the Sangam age till the colonial period, which is rather proved axiomatic from Jesudasan's narrative. Girls' puberty function or *Manjal/Poopu Neeratu Vizha* in Tamil society, irrespective of one's religion, is perceived as a celebration of womanhood and a way of announcing to society the girls' eligibility as a potential bride. Except for the recent Tamil web series *Ayali*, which alludes to the ideological undercurrents akin to *Irserippu*, the complexities around menarche are not overtly discussed in the field of Tamil media and literature. Since the present study intends to locate Jesudasan and Salma's contribution in the broader feminist discourse, it refrains from incorporating movies.

It is appropriate to examine the definition of *Irserippu* and the *Purdah* rituals before delving into its gendered specificities. Jesudasan's tacit reference to *Irserippu* in the narrative captures the patriarchal schema of curtailing women; she describes the practice as "confining young women to the house is an ancient Tamil custom…She (Lizzy) has come of age. She has taken to wearing half-sari. So, confining Lizzy to the house is of utmost importance" (Jesudasan 29)[2]. On the other hand, Hanna Papanek (1973) observes the system of *Purdah* as "an important part of the life experience of many South Asians, both Muslim and Hindu", and she complicates it further by arguing that "Muslim seclusion begins at puberty" (289). The segregation of facilities and separation of both men and women in both public and private spaces is precisely what defines the dictates of *Purdah* (Chakroborty 277). Thus, the post-menarcheal sexist socialization that mandates the imprisonment of girls is evidently the common thread that ties the two aforementioned concepts. At this juncture, it is essential to note that both writers employ the "half-sari" as a sartorial marker of puberty in girls. Also, in mandating the homosociality of spaces, such cultural practices engineer gender bigotry. The deliberate familiarisation and assimilation of the mentioned customs make it almost impossible for an individual to remove oneself from this sexist matrix without being accused of being an outcaste. Along with the homosocial dictates of caste, yet another key factor in determining one's social location according to the aforesaid custom is class. Given the precondition of demarcated spaces, the capital becomes a crucial quotient. The retainment of property and the regulation of cash flow enable men to create a conducive atmosphere for homosocial practices, advertently ensuring the static immobility of women. Now, the question arises regarding the mobility of women from the margins and their take on the maintenance of moral codes, honor and homosocial customs. In trying to make sense of convoluted homosocial-spatial customs, the present article intends to analyse the following: how does a mundane biological event dictate the subjectivities of women and in such cases, how does the seamless transaction of gender typing occur? how does the politics of class materialize in the texts, and what are the ways it affects the formation of middle-class moralities? Given the uniqueness of such a social setting, what are the ways in which sexist practices are popularised and adopted?

The Dynamics of spatiality and socialization

The right conduct of Tamil women, in general, is often premised on their maintenance of the "premarital virginity and post-marital chastity" (Wadley 153-170). In her edited volume, *The Powers of Tamil Women*, Susan S. Wadley observes that the "puberty rites in Tamilnadu are concerned with controlling female energies" (161). More importantly, the bindings that these rites mandate are the girls' restriction to the house and the indispensability of internalizing self-control, thus conveniently enforcing the sexist surveillance. (161) These physical and psychological restraints laid on women constitute the "nested set of social interiorities" ensuring the continuance of patriarchy (Nakassis 253). Being the product of this culture and upbringing, Salma and Jesudasan bear witness to social evil and critique society to bring about discernible developments.

The front portion of the house that "flanks the entrance and opens on two sides" is referred to as *Adichukootu* in Jesudasan's novel (173). This part of the house serves as the structural embodiment of the gender status quo maintained in the *Putham House*. Due to the privilege quotient attached to this specific spatiality, it is frequented only by Kannapachi. Since Lizzy is his only companion and his failing eyesight necessitates Lizzy to read him newspapers and the Bible, she earns the freedom of stepping at *Adichukootu* even after hitting puberty; however, only in the absence of men. All the other women, including Lizzy's mother, aunt and grandmother, are restricted from here, as they are aware of their place in the house. The sprawling vestibule territorialised by Kannapachi gives him a sense of visibility, due to which he monitors and moderates the visitors' entry into the house. Moreover, this impinging presence of patriarchy foregrounded by the principles of *Irserripu* functions to invisiblise and deterritorialise women even within the premises of their household. A similar scenario can be spotted in Salma's novel as she candidly conveys the plight of the teenager, Wahida as,

> She had never come within sight of men outside the family, nor had she looked at them. When visitors come to the house, they always pressed the bell. On the instant she heard it, she would take to her heels and hid inside her room. It was not in this house alone that this happened. In every house in the village, girls who had come of age ran and hid in exactly the same way (112).

The passage structurally conveys the monotonous uniformity of the lives of girls in the village. The narrative that started with the life of Wahida seamlessly encompasses the lives of all the girls. In doing so, it shows how the practice of *Purdah* adeptly demarcates for them an identity that stands out for its homogeneous categorization. Here, the tone of indifference employed by the omniscient narrator is strategically incorporated to indicate the villager's way of normalizing such a social practice. Similarly, on Ramzan's eve, all the women in the village were seen to be in fine dresses, sharing a few moments of friendly banter. Salma narrates the scenario as "the whole street reverberated with wave upon wave of women's voices and laughter. But this would last only until the men returned to the town" (166). Here, the idea of "street" becomes a metaphor for women's post-marital chastity that mandates them to be within their allocated quarters in the presence of men. (145-158). The homosocial matrix of spatiality exposes the stark disparity in the gender equilibrium besides confirming the affective relational quality of heteronormativity, stringent homosociality and sexual codes (Hammarén and Johansson). In this connection, both the novels utilize a mundane object like a window, especially windows shielded with curtains, as a means of women's gateway to the world outside. The presence of shadowy figures against the curtains is markedly featured in their stories, thus reiterating women's shrinking presence and their lack of autonomy. Such detailing by the authors emphasizes the insouciant way in which the depersonalization of women such as Lizzy's mother, aunt, and Wahida, among other women, occurs uninterruptedly under the mentioned social practices. On the other hand, the reckless encounters and freedom of mobility in the lives of men such as Thangaraj, Vaidiyar, Sayyed, and Sikkander, among others, validate how "space and gender are not innocent of each other but intimately intertwined" (Datta 156). Their sexist socialisation and territorial politics are further foregrounded by cultural adages, like, "If boys are kept inside the house, they'll get spoiled. If girls are allowed outside of the house, they'll get spoiled." The post-pubertal female imprisonment is not merely confined to women's physical restrictions and static mobility, as the cultural norms subject them to heterosexual marriages, thus retaining the structural power of heteronormativity. Given the spatial-cultural dynamics of pubertal implications in the lives of girls, it is now crucial to understand the trajectory of such patriarchal paradigms due to which women perform certain gender-essentialist behaviours.

Morality as the determinant of gender roles

The middle-class morality, which gained momentum in the early nineteenth century, had discernible impacts on the workings of gender in India. Identifying the merging of "the nineteenth century Tamil and Victorian morality", which modified the indigenous norms of gender, Sita Anantha Raman proclaims, "the spread of Victorian notions of female domesticity, suppressed sexuality, and middle-class gentility drove upper-caste women even deeper into their courtyards" (106). This argument corresponds with the condition of women depicted by Salma and Jesudasan as the authors, and most of the key characters hail from middle/intermediate-class/caste backgrounds. With relation to this, the ability to afford separate quarters for both sexes, which amplifies the continuance of *Irserippu* and the *Purdah* system, is often suggestive of one's reputed financial and social status. The narrator in Jesudasan's novel, for instance, comments, "First of all, you must understand that Lizzy belongs to a *respectable family*. The pride of Panaivilai Putham Veedu. So, it *doesn't become of her to step out of the house*" (29) (added emphases). A similar narrative parallel can be drawn with the portrayal of adolescent girls such as Wahida, Farida and Rabia in Salma's novel. The boundaries placed on women via veiling, seclusion, and restricted interaction constitute the 'honour' of their family/community (Still 93). Even as the authors expose the hypocrisy of middle-class moralities, they tacitly suggest the gender dynamics implicit in the lives of women across the caste/class hierarchy. In doing so, they depict how middle-class women's need for the outside world is often vicariously experienced through lower caste-class women hired as maids. However, sometimes, the need for satiation of such experiential demands entails exploitation and oppression. In connection with this, Salma passingly mentions the "two tumbler system", which is still active in some parts of Tamil Nadu. The socially despicable practice of allocating separate tumblers for Dalits denotes a clear form of caste discrimination and untouchability. Salma's critique of women normalizing caste-based inequality can be discerned from Nafiza and Zohra's conversation about Mariyayi. Mariyayi, a domestic labour from a marginalized background, is also the concubine of Zohra's husband, Karim. While Nafiza queried about the usage of utensils given to Mariyayi, Zohra cautiously answered that she reserves a "special steel plate and tumbler" for Mariyayi, precisely implying untouchability (Salma 82). On the other hand, discrimination in Jesudasan's narrative involved a merger of caste and class. Although both Lizzy and Pethi, the domestic help, belong to the same community, their need for capital and the strife for it are divergent. Lizzy is from the subsect that owns land and mansions, while Pethi hails from a different subsect where people pursue toddy tapping for a living. The settled economy of Lizzy is contrasted against the dwindling economy of Pethi's class, which relies on daily wages. Pethi being the only medium for the women of the house to know the world, they were upset when she left Panaivilai. Jesudasan wryly captures the women's turmoil as, "henceforth, who would go to the market? Who would fetch water from the village well? Who would bring them all the village gossip from time to time?" (47). Despite revealing the families' privilege and prejudice in issues regarding mistreatment and exploitation, this episode hints at the mobility that Pethi enjoys and its lack in the lives of the women in the house.

Lizzy and Wahida's internalization of moral codes safeguards them from being at the receiving end of the male gaze. Women serving as custodians of sexism is apparent here, as their interpellation is a result of the normalised gender bigotry passed on to them from the women of previous generations, specifically mothers. The careful utilization of socialization as an instrument for the perpetuation of rigid cultural and social norms rather becomes apparent. Here, the trajectory of the mother's ideology can be further tracked to their cognitive schema of traditional sex roles, which encourages them to promote a "system of sexual apartheid" (Jeffery 103). The root cause of this behavioural pattern is seen to be related to the model of son preference, which is still alive in many parts of South and East Asia, where girl children are considered to be a burden and financial liability (Lindsey 92). Referring to a girl after puberty as "an inferno in the stomach" is a common expression in Tamil Nadu. The pressure of keeping girls in the house in their post-menarcheal stage resulted in a withdrawal from education, and is evident from the plight of girls such as Lizzy, Rabia, and Wahida. The guileful stratagem by paternalistic men to inhibit the education of girls defines their motif of suppressing women's mobility. Even as the pubertal norms curb women's mobility to their houses, it warrants the need to keep them away from attaining independence and subjecthood by prohibiting their education.

Irrespective of it being a knotty issue, it is essential to state the fact that women sometimes institutionalise biological determinist principles and perpetuate them only to ensure the continuation of the conventionalist codes. Not so often is this a case in the lives of women from marginal backgrounds, which is intriguing and demands to be studied. The prescriptive proclivities of middle-class women to uphold the retrograde customs taint their identity as they become guardians and agents of patriarchy. Ismail wins Amina in marriage through a game of cards with her father, Kani Rowther. Besides having reservations about Sikkander's personality, Kader gives his daughter, Wahida, to him in marriage in order to maintain kinship ties and retain the family's properties. Although there were mild protests from the girls' mothers, they gave in to their husband's decisions eventually. These women who are sensible enough to predict the dangers of their daughters' marriage, however, refrained from taking any action. Women's self-effacing behaviour, in turn, is reflective of their anxiety to preserve their social stability attainted through heteronormative marriage and to upkeep the honour of their community. However, an alternate scrutiny of the narrative may perhaps interpret the social construct of marriage as a legitimate expression of hegemonic power relations informing patriarchy. As argued earlier, such constraints are shaped by middle-class concerns with moral rectitude. However, the section of women pushed to inhabit the social periphery are, by and large, not constrained by such ethical stipulations. Strategically staying outside the dictates of marriage, Fatima, a domestic helper and single mother from a marginalised background, pursued her relationship with Murugan, a shop employee. In a way, her identity embodies the semiotics of "killjoy feminism" due to her unwavering recalcitrance of kowtow to the sanctioned codes (Ahmed 35). The conversation between Sherifa, a widowed single mother and Fatima substantiates my argument. Hinting at Fatima's liaison with Murugan, Sherifa reminds her about their community's reputation and her duty as a mother, to which Fatima retorts, "Why do I have to safeguard their honour? If something gives me pleasure, I'll go for it. Besides, I'm not a wealthy woman like you, Amma, to renounce everything and sit in a corner for the sake of the family's honour" (Salma 250). Realizing her shunned social location, who receives only pity from fellow women "a slight envy of Fatima's independence sprouted, and then began to take root quickly" in Sherifa (251). The lives of women in terms of gender roles have been structurally nomativized through the cultural dictates of middle-class morality, as they keep them away from the need for social emancipation. To reiterate, the liberties enjoyed by Fatima stem from her lower societal stature, as the codes of modesty and shame via *Purdah* are specifically imposed on upper and middle-class (ashraf) Muslim and Hindu women (Tignol 2). The idea of having a dialogue between divergent women's experiences while highlighting the hypocrisy of patriarchal codes becomes possible by engaging with phenomenological dialectics. Critiquing the dormant state of gender disparity and women's passive acceptance of benevolent sexism, the writers seem to suggest the need to have constant exposure and familiarisation with feminist pedagogy to ameliorate the condition of women from such unjust ties.

Paternalism driven via gender typing

A holistic analysis of the workings of gender as reflected in the texts will remain incomplete if the article does not factor in the ways, it is preserved and circulated. The dynamics of cultural constituents that shape gender typing in India are premised upon the symbiotic overlapping of the subjects' mutual dependency and their emotional intimacy. A strangely inter-dependable bond demonstrates the dyadic relationship shared between men and women, primarily driven by power, concern and control. While men depend on women to maintain their moral and ethical standards, women are forced to rely on men for affairs regarding finance and decision-making. Since hostile expressions of sexism might evoke resistance, men engage in a seemingly credulous way by inculcating sexist stereotypes under this type of 'protective paternalism', which is all the more insidious (Dardenne et al. 775). Interestingly, the pubertal rites are built on this principle of dominance that can be succinctly defined as "an iron fist in a velvet glove". At this juncture, it is important to trace the strategic nexus between paternalism, the seclusion of sexes and the polarised division of labour (Devi and Kaur; Nasreen). The benevolent paternalists in the fictional worlds of Salma and Jesudasan can be seen as conveniently exploiting women's bodies and labour by keeping them unaware of their exploitation. Women's unpaid household chores in the *Putham House* in relentlessly collecting the *akkeni* or the fresh palmyra sap matches the back-breaking labour that women like Rahima and Zohra perform by cooking on a large scale. For instance, despite fasting, Zohra and Rahima are portrayed as slogging within the asphyxiating walls of their kitchen by preparing food only to eat after the men of the house. Troubled witnessing the withered state of her mother and aunt, Rabia questions the need for such arduous labour; here, the reply given by Zohra clearly illustrates women's unwitting endorsement of patriarchy, as she said, "We have to cook idiappam for the men to eat when they break their fast, don't we?" (Salma 8). Even as they deny the value of their labour, women are seen to be valorising men as they offer them social and financial stability. It is in the revelation of these quotidian details of life, Salma problematizes the idea of benevolent sexism driven by paternalism. This interpellated condition of women who are under the clutch of sexism results from the patriarchy's tactic of capitalizing on women's emotions and sentiments along with their obedience (Mill). Both the writers effortlessly expose the disorientation of women's personalities by sardonically jibing at their self-abnegating attitude. It is due to the ideological cocoon where men define their discriminatory actions as benevolent, women unwittingly often end up as custodians of traditional sex-role theories and, hence, the difficulty in distinguishing dominance from love (Jackman 87).

Another way the paternalist protocols are made a social norm is through the employment of stereotypes. Stereotypes are bluntly defined as mental shortcuts in social psychology (Ahler and Sood). However, gender stereotypes possess deeper meanings as they easily impact and shape one's perception in understanding one's role or the kind of contribution one makes to society. These gender schemas are generally inculcated through daily conversations under sexist socialization. While traipsing through dried leaves on the road, Rabia, who is in her early teenage, is reminded of the reproachment she would receive in her mother's presence, and she instantly mends the way she walks. Rabia's instant realization and rectification of the way she walks reiterate the relative quality of the interpellated mind and body. The affectivity of the cultural memory in training the somatic response as performed through gender typification is thus vividly clear. The embodiment of the essentialist codes by women not only conditions their wishes but also cognitively conditions them to justify the bigoted practices. For instance, the authors lay bare women's problematic obsession with fair skin. Natasha Shevde traces the origin of this notion of 'fair is beautiful' to the advent of the caste system and argues that this fascination was further fuelled during British rule in India. Jesudasan's narrative depicts how Lily's fair skin is perceived to be beautiful as against Lizzy's duskier texture, which is made fun of even by her uncle. The very fact that only girls and women were subject to such skin-tone specifications further elucidates the politics of gender ramifications. Finally, in *The Hour Past Midnight*, after discovering the liaison between Firdaus, a divorced young woman in her twenties, and Siva, a married tenant in Firdaus' house, the first question that Wahida hurls at Firdaus is, "How can you call yourself a woman!" (Salma 382). Albeit the fact that the affair involved both Siva and Firdaus, Wahida's anger is directed at Firdaus, which distinctly unmasks her traditional cognitive policing. It further compels us to question what exactly this "unbecoming" of a woman is. It is rather imperative to ponder on the possibilities that could have indeed compelled Wahida to accuse Firdaus. Is it because of Firdaus's exercise of agency that violates the conventional norm? Or is it because of Firdaus's venture to experience what is traditionally coded as the forte of men, the desire for bodily pleasure? Or is it due to Firdaus' insensitivity to the backlash effects of rigid stereotypes, which mandate punishment for people trespassing its order? The absolute intolerance towards women transgressing this gender typing phenomenon is symbolically conveyed through the death of Firdaus and Fatima, as they attempted to pursue their desire, leading to their jeopardised 'chastity'. Thus, the socially reflexive novels capture women's suffering directly stemming from the functioning of their bodies, which in the case of the study is puberty. In doing so, it illustrates how such customs reduce women's identities, referring them only through their relational terms with men.

Conclusion

Albeit the fact that *Irserippu* and the rituals of *Purdah* have become defunct now, the traces of it still permeate and dictate the codes of gender. Research on such practices, in turn, aids in comprehending the contextual corporeal reality of men and women. In doing so, the article has tried to argue how domestic spaces become sites for the hierarchical delineation of gender roles by reflecting on broader political structures that mould society. By highlighting the changes, the writers have envisioned for society, the article concludes that the writers' narrativization of the gendered seclusion intrinsic to the post-menarcheal phase is a way of reiterating the importance of women's agency, mobility and education. The complexities following menarche, the post-menarchal seclusion, and its associated politics of gender typing could have been avoided in Tamil society if girls were allowed to "surpass puberty, like the boy, towards a free adult future" (De Beauvoir 778). Finally, the study has also examined the intricate overlapping of the personal and the political in Hephzibah Jesudasan and Salma's works as they codify the private spheres like home, as the microcosm of society. In doing so, they have stressed upon the indispensability of the domestic sphere as an integral constituent in the cultivation of gender equality and feminism. The narrative divergences in their works, with regard to the portrayal of gendered dichotomies, show the multi-textured nature of the trajectory of feminism. Perhaps the observation made by Doireann Ní Ghríofa finds fitting in this context: "This is a female text, written in the twenty-first century. How late it is. How much has changed. How little" (5). Through the writing of local realities and regional customs, the authors claim a place of their own in the broader feminist conversations. More importantly, in acknowledging and assessing such isolated instances of gender progressiveness, a holistic picture of feminism emerges.

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Notes

[1] The poems of women poets like Malathi Maithri, Salma, Kutti Revathi and Sukirtharani are anchored in the politics of sexuality and language. In 2003, the 'guardians' of the pristine Tamil culture staged a public protest condemning the works of these poets besides indicting them on grounds of obscenity. Produced by the school of media and cultural studies, Tata Institute of Social Science and directed by Anjali Monterio and K P Jeyasankar, the documentary, 'She Write' captures the repercussions that the women poets faced on the grounds of censorship. Lakshmi Holmstrom edited and translated the poems of these poets under the title, *Wild Girls Wicked Words* in 2012.

[2] The Sangam literature abounds with references to 'Irserripu'. Instances can be drawn from *'Nattrinai'*, *'Agananooru'*, and *'Kurunji Pattu'*. Read more, https://ta.vikaspedia.in/education/ba4baebbfbb4bcd-ba8bc2bb2bcdb95bb3bcd/ குறிஞ்சித்-திணைப்-பாடல்கள்

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