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FREEDOM AND CHOICE IN ARAB MUSLIM WOMEN'S LIVES: A STUDY OF FEMINIST EXISTENTIALISM IN ALIFA RIFAAT'S A DISTANT VIEW OF A MINARET AND OTHER STORIES

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Abstract
This study investigates how freedom and choice are negotiated under patriarchal constraints in Arab Muslim women's lives, as represented in Alifa Rifaat's A Distant View of a Minaret and Other Stories. Using feminist existentialist theory, particularly Simone de Beauvoir's concepts of situated freedom and female subjectivity, and the research examines how women's inner consciousness becomes a site of existential struggle rather than overt rebellion. Through a qualitative thematic analysis, the study focuses on five selected short stories to explore how domestic space, marriage, and silence shape women's lived experiences. The analysis identifies four dominant indicators of feminist existential confinement: restricted agency within marriage, internalization of patriarchal norms, temporal stagnation through waiting and repetition, and silence as an existential response to oppression. Rifaat's narratives emphasize endurance and reflective interiority as forms of survival rather than depicting dramatic resistance. Findings suggest that freedom in Rifaat's fiction operates as a limited and negotiated condition, shaped by cultural, religious, and social structures. This study shows that feminist existentialism offers a meaningful way to understand how Arab Muslim women's lives are shaped by constrained choices. This research extends feminist existentialist discussion beyond its usual Western focus and brings attention to women's experiences in a different cultural context. It also highlights the quiet and everyday dimensions of women's existential struggle. The study aligns with SDG 5 (Gender Equality) by examining how structural constraints limit women's agency and voice.

Keywords: *A Thematic Analysis, Feminist Existentialism, Female Subjectivity, Freedom and Choice, Patriarchy.*

Introduction

In feminist scholarship, freedom and choice have always been major issues, considering that women exist in structures that limit their identity, desire, expression, and life choices. Such structures have their origins in the society's cultural and religious demands. While in most cases of feminism, freedom tends to be associated with defiance and autonomy, this is not always the case for the lives of Arab Muslim women. Their difficulties can't be seen by being defiant. But rather through patience and perseverance, as represented in Alifa Rifaat's A Distant View of a Minaret and Other Stories. Who often experience loneliness and emotional neglect. But still, they keep looking for meaning. Rifaat does not portray women as passive figures alone. She presents them as individuals who remain emotionally aware of their suffering and inner desires. Her stories focus more on women's interior consciousness than on dramatic acts of resistance. This study examines how freedom and choice are negotiated in the lives of Arab Muslim women represented in Rifaat's fiction. The study uses feminist existentialism as its main theoretical framework. In particular, it draws upon the ideas of

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Simone de Beauvoir. In The Second Sex, Beauvoir argues that women are not naturally born into fixed gender roles. Rather, society shapes them into those roles. She famously states that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (Beauvoir 283). Beauvoir explains that patriarchal societies place women in positions of dependence and repetition. Women are often confined to domestic duties, emotional service, and social obedience, while men are associated with independence and self-development (Beauvoir 26–29). Beauvoir's concept of situated freedom is especially important to this study. According to this idea, freedom does not exist outside society. People make choices within social and material limitations (Beauvoir 34). This concept helps explain the lives of Rifaat's female characters. The women in these stories live within marriage, domestic labour, religious expectations, and social control. Their choices remain limited, yet they continue to think, feel, endure, and negotiate their existence within these restrictions. Beauvoir's theory helps reveal how women's identities are shaped through systems that control both the body and inner consciousness (Ashraf et al.). Similarly, Chakraborty explains that freedom in Beauvoir's philosophy develops through engagement with real social conditions rather than separation from them (Chakraborty). The study examines five selected stories from the collection: "A Distant View of a Minaret," "Bahiyya's Eyes," "Badriyya and Her Husband," "Thursday Lunch," and "The Long Night of Winter." Each story presents women living under different social and marital conditions. Yet their experiences often reflect the same emotional struggles. They live with silence, isolation, waiting, and limited control over their own choices.

The study explores how these women continue to live within such conditions. It focuses on their inner thoughts, emotional endurance, memories, and quiet ways of coping with patriarchal life. This research is significant because it extends feminist existentialist discussion beyond its common Western focus. It also contributes to the study of Arab Muslim women's literature by examining how freedom operates within specific cultural and religious contexts. The study further supports SDG 5 (Gender Equality) by highlighting the social and psychological conditions that continue to limit women's agency and voice within patriarchal societies.

Review of Literature

Alifa Rifaat's stories have been extensively examined by researchers due to her portrayal of the lives of women within patriarchal Arab societies. The major topics discussed include the theme of marriage, sexual life of women, religion, silence, and social oppression. Her stories are often discussed in relation to women's emotional suffering and restricted social roles. Critics also examine how her female characters continue to survive within systems that limit their freedom and personal agency. Several researchers argue that Rifaat's fiction should not be read only through Western feminist ideas. Hamdan and Mleitat explain that Rifaat criticizes patriarchal practices while remaining connected to Islamic cultural values (Hamdan and Mleitat). According to them, her stories challenge male authority within domestic life without rejecting religion itself. This perspective is important because many Western feminist readings often treat religion only as a source of women's oppression. Rifaat's work presents a more complex picture. Her female characters often turn toward prayer, patience, and silence while dealing with emotional pain and social restriction. Other scholars also stress the need to study Arab Muslim women's experiences within their own cultural and historical contexts. Yara Yasser Hilal et al. argue that Arab women's experiences should not be measured only through Western feminist standards (Yara Yasser Hilal et al.). The point made by these authors stresses the significance of culture within feminist theory. In the same way, the contemporary issues in feminism in the Global South have created reservations about the presumption that resistance is always overt and political. According to feminist scholars such as Sara Salem and Lila Abu-Lughod, women can resist power through accommodation,

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silencing, perseverance, and survival, among other ways (Salem). This issue is relevant to the female characters in Rifaat's stories because they are emotional in their resistance but not overt in it. The theme of silence appears repeatedly in studies related to Rifaat's fiction. Hamdan and Mleitat redefine silence not as weakness alone, but also as a form of survival within patriarchal structures (Hamdan and Mleitat). In many of Rifaat's stories, women remain silent because speaking openly may lead to shame, violence, or further isolation. Silence, therefore, becomes connected to emotional protection and social survival. Similarly, studies on feminist philosophy explain that women often internalize social expectations and begin to view suffering as natural or unavoidable (Bortolami). This form of internalization influences women's perceptions of themselves and of their place within society.

Feminist existentialists also emphasize the significance of self-awareness in the battles of women. As Mohanraj and Vishok assert, feminist existentialists consider the lives, feelings, and consciousness of women as opposed to their political ideologies (Mohanraj and Vishok). Such a standpoint is immensely significant to the novels of Rifaat since her works deeply probe the psychology of women. It is something that they know by virtue of the emotional aspect of their situation. This kind of knowledge is important since it helps them to maintain their identity. Current criticism has also pointed out the literature written by women outside Western culture in their own cultural and historical context (Kim and Chong). Chandra Talpade Mohanty strongly opposes any feminist interpretation that reduces women in the Global South to helpless victims, neglecting any cultural differences (Rather). This argument is important for understanding Rifaat's fiction. Her female characters cannot be understood fully through Western ideas of freedom and liberation alone. Their experiences are shaped by family structures and social expectations. These factors influence how women experience silence and personal choice in their everyday lives. Research on Arab women's writing further suggests that emotional suffering in patriarchal societies is often expressed quietly through silence, routine, memory, and inner reflection (Igbaria). Nawal El Saadawi argues that many Arab women writers use domestic experiences to reveal wider systems of gender inequality (Fatah). Rifaat follows a similar approach in her stories. She rarely focuses on public rebellion or political activism. Instead, she presents the emotional and psychological effects of patriarchy within ordinary domestic life. Through simple daily moments, Rifaat reveals the hidden emotional struggles faced by women living in restrictive social conditions. Although many scholars have discussed marriage, silence, religion, sexuality, and domestic life in Rifaat's fiction (Nkealah), there is still limited research that studies these themes together through feminist existentialism. Most studies examine her work from social, religious, or feminist perspectives separately. Few studies closely explore how women's inner consciousness becomes a space of existential struggle within patriarchal life.

The feminist existentialist theory offers a valuable tool for analyzing such experiences. According to Simone de Beauvoir, in a patriarchal society, women are put in positions of subordination and repetition. Women are confined to household duties and deprived of the freedom to develop their identity (Second Sex 26-29). Beauvoir's concept of situated freedom is especially relevant because it explains that freedom exists within social limitations rather than outside them completely (Beauvoir 34). Scholars such as Chakraborty further explain that Beauvoir sees freedom as something people negotiate through their real social conditions instead of complete independence from society (Chakraborty). Recent studies also connect feminist existentialism with literary criticism. Shahad Alfaham explains that feminist existentialism helps scholars study women's emotional lives, self-awareness, and social struggles together (Shahad Alfaham). This approach is useful for Rifaat's fiction because her stories focus deeply on women's inner consciousness. Her female characters often experience emotional isolation, waiting, repetition, and restricted agency. Yet they

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continue to reflect on their lives and remain aware of their suffering. Although many studies discuss Rifaat's treatment of marriage, religion, sexuality, and silence, there is still limited research that examines her fiction through feminist existentialism in a detailed way. Existing criticism often studies her stories from social, religious, or feminist perspectives separately. Few studies closely explore how women's inner consciousness becomes a space of existential struggle within patriarchal life. This study attempts to address that gap by applying feminist existentialism to selected stories from A Distant View of a Minaret and Other Stories. It focuses particularly on freedom, choice, silence, emotional endurance, and women's lived experiences within restrictive social structures.

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative research method to examine the representation of freedom and choice in Alifa Rifaat's A Distant View of a Minaret and Other Stories. The research is interpretive in nature and is based on thematic analysis. It employs feminist existentialism as the major theoretical perspective, with emphasis on the notions of Simone de Beauvoir in her seminal work, The Second Sex. Simone de Beauvoir's theory of situated freedom, immanence, transcendence, and femininity is applied in this study. The study examines five selected stories from the collection: "A Distant View of a Minaret," "Bahiyya's Eyes," "Badriyya and Her Husband," "Thursday Lunch," and "The Long Night of Winter," because they closely portray women's emotional and psychological experiences within different social and marital conditions. The analysis focuses on recurring themes such as restricted agency, silence, waiting, repetition, internalization of patriarchal values, and existential struggle. The study uses textual analysis to examine how Rifaat presents women's lived experiences through memory, emotional reflection, domestic space, and narrative technique.

Analysis

Restricted Agency and Emotional Isolation

Rifaat presents existential isolation through the unnamed wife in "A Distant View of a Minaret." The story revolves around her lack of satisfaction sexually and emotionally within marriage. She fails to be emotionally close to her husband. While making love with her husband, her mind often wanders to simple details about their shared home, like the web of the spider in the ceiling, her toenails, and the prayer call. Her body remains present in the moment, but her mind withdraws from the experience. The story shows how alienation can exist inside marriage itself. The woman's emotional needs remain ignored. When she attempts to express desire, she is humiliated and silenced. Her husband's response, "Are you mad, woman?" (Rifaat 2), dismisses her emotions and turns her desire into something shameful. Instead of resisting openly, she begins to blame herself. Her question, "Perhaps it's me who's at fault" (Rifaat 2), reveals how patriarchal judgment becomes internalised. Feminist existentialism explains that women often begin to see themselves through the standards imposed upon them. The woman's silence reflects both emotional suffering and social conditioning. The story also presents prayer as a way of surviving emotional isolation. The woman structures her life around daily prayers, which she describes as "punctuation marks" that divide and organise her day (Rifaat 3). Prayer gives temporary meaning to a life shaped by repetition and emotional neglect. Rifaat does not present religion simply as oppression. Instead, faith becomes a personal space where the woman regains emotional stability. The story suggests that freedom does not always appear through rebellion. Sometimes it exists through endurance, self-awareness, and the ability to preserve inner consciousness within restrictive conditions.

Silence, Fate, and Endurance

In "Bahiyya's Eyes," Rifaat examines the pain experienced by women that resulted from their poor and disadvantaged lives. It uses Bahiyya's recollections to recount her experience. The

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voice shifts from one episode to another, giving a circular and repetitive effect. This technique reflects the feeling of emotional stagnation that defines her existence. Her blindness functions not only as a physical condition but also as a symbol of social and existential limitation. Bahiyya accepts much of her suffering as fate. She repeatedly connects her pain with divine will, the evil eye, and misfortune (Rifaat 10). Feminist existentialism helps explain how women living within restricted social conditions. They begin to understand suffering as unavoidable. Beauvoir argues that when women lack power and independence, they are often pushed toward acceptance. Bahiyya's repeated references to Allah show how religion becomes deeply connected to her understanding of life and suffering. Her statement that "a man will remain a man and a woman will remain a woman" (Rifaat 11) reflects her awareness of fixed gender roles within society. At the same time, her narrative becomes an act of emotional expression. By narrating her pain, memories, and disappointments, she gives value to her own existence. Although she cannot fully change her situation, she remains conscious of her suffering. This awareness itself becomes significant within feminist existentialism because it reflects a limited but meaningful form of self-recognition.

Marriage, Existential Waiting and Freedom

"Badriyya and Her Husband" examines how marriage creates the illusion of freedom while continuing to restrict women's lives. Initially, Badriyya thinks marriage can save her from being poor and lonely (Rifaat 30). This thinking is influenced by the dreams and notions prevalent in society. However, marriage soon becomes another space of emotional exhaustion and waiting. Badriyya finds herself in a state of loneliness due to her husband Omar's confinement and lack of attention from him. Despite having chances to escape from Omar, she remains faithful to him, which is greatly affected by societal judgment and gossip. She explains, "What would people say of a young girl living on her own with her man in prison?" (Rifaat 31). This statement reveals how patriarchal societies control women through social pressure and reputation. Beauvoir explains that women's choices often remain limited because they are made within unequal social conditions (Garcia). Waiting becomes the central experience of Badriyya's life. She waits for Omar's return, his affection, and the possibility of change. Time in the story feels suspended. Her emotional life becomes trapped between hope and disappointment. Even her communication with others slowly weakens. The story's final question, "how to find the strength not to open the door to him" (Rifaat 36), captures her existential conflict. Freedom appears possible, yet emotionally painful. Rifaat presents this struggle with emotional realism rather than dramatic resistance.

Repetition and Emotional Distance

In "Thursday Lunch," Rifaat explores existential confinement within middle-class domestic life. Regular visits of the narrator to her mother every week indicate the repetitiveness of her life. She feels caught up in her routine life. She suffers from a lack of emotional though she performs socially approved duties as a wife, a daughter, and a mother. Her weeping when her husband leaves home, disappointment at her age, and failure to speak out about how she feels show her internal dissatisfaction (Rifaat 26). According to feminist existentialism, women get value only in their associations with other people. Thus, they feel themselves as incomplete persons lacking emotional satisfaction and personal freedom. In this connection, it is necessary to emphasize that silence has much significance in the story. She does not speak about her emotions to her children or to her mother. Social intercourse turns into a mechanical process. Rifaat uses repetition to show how women's lives can become emotionally stagnant within domestic structures. The emotional distance between mother and daughter further reflects the isolation that shapes their lives.

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Memory, Endurance, and Suffering

Rifaat's "The Long Night of Winter" presents the most painful portrayal of women's emotional suffering within patriarchal marriage. The story revolves around Zennouba through one sleepless night of winter, which is full of memories. Her mind continuously shifts from memories of her childhood, the frustration of marriage, to being lonely in the present day. This shift creates an emotional setting wherein time seems unbearable and endless. Zennouba's memories of childhood represent a lost sense of freedom and emotional security. She remembers moments from her earlier life with warmth and comfort. Feminist existentialism explains that marriage transforms their identities into domestic roles. Rifaat presents this condition through Zennouba's emotional and psychological decline. Her emotional pain becomes deeper because she continues to hope for affection and stability even when disappointment repeats itself. Rifaat carefully shows how emotional endurance becomes part of women's daily existence. At one point, Zennouba attempts to demand a divorce. This moment briefly suggests resistance and personal assertion. However, her attempt quickly weakens under emotional pressure and social expectations. Her question, "All men are like that. Even my father?" (Rifaat 57) reflects her painful realization that patriarchal behaviour extends beyond one individual man. Feminist existentialism helps explain this moment as an awakening of consciousness. Zennouba begins to understand the wider structures behind her suffering. The story repeatedly returns to waiting and endurance. Zennouba waits through the long night while reflecting on her failed expectations and emotional loneliness. Time appears suspended. The night becomes a symbol of continuous suffering without resolution. She continues her daily routine despite her suffering. This ending is deeply significant. Rifaat does not offer liberation or dramatic rebellion. Instead, she presents endurance as the reality of many women's lives. Feminist existentialism explains that even limited awareness can become meaningful. Zennouba may not fully escape her situation, but she clearly understands her emotional condition. Her awareness prevents her complete emotional erasure. Through Zennouba's character, Rifaat shows that survival itself can become a form of existential struggle.

Discussion

The findings of this study revealed that freedom and choice in the lives of women are limited, as represented in Alifa Rifaat's A Distant View of a Minaret and Other Stories. From the selected stories, the freedom and choices of women are presented to be confined under societal, religious, and patriarchal limitations. In these stories, freedom is not evident through rebellion and independence. Instead, it appears through small emotional choices, inner awareness, patience, and survival within difficult social conditions. One important finding of this study is that Rifaat focuses more on women's inner emotional struggles than on visible resistance. Her female characters rarely challenge society openly. However, they remain emotionally aware of their loneliness and restricted lives. This reflects Beauvoir's idea of situated freedom, which explains that people make choices within social limitations (Beauvoir). The women in these stories continue to think, remember, and emotionally respond to their situations even when they cannot fully change them. The study also shows that silence has a strong presence in Rifaat's fiction. Silence does not only represent weakness. In many stories, it becomes a way of coping with emotional pain and social pressure. In "A Distant View of a Minaret," the unnamed woman becomes silent after her husband humiliates her emotional and sexual needs. In "Thursday Lunch," the narrator hides her emotional loneliness. Her family's silence reflects emotional exhaustion as well as fear of social judgment. Rifaat presents silence as part of women's everyday survival within patriarchal life. Another important aspect of the stories is repetition and waiting. Time in Rifaat's fiction often feels repetitive and emotionally empty. In "Thursday Lunch," the

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narrator continues her weekly visits to her mother without any emotional variation. In "Badriyya and Her Husband," waiting becomes the crux of Badriyya's existence as she waits for emotional comfort. Similarly, in "The Long Night of Winter," Zennouba spends the night trapped between painful memories and present suffering. Rifaat uses repetition to show how women's lives become emotionally stagnant within domestic structures.

The discussion further shows how patriarchal values become internalised by women themselves. Certain female characters start to believe that pain is a part of life. Religion is also presented in a complex way throughout the stories. Rifaat does not show faith only as a source of restriction. In many cases, religion provides emotional comfort and stability to women living within painful conditions. In "A Distant View of a Minaret," prayer helps the unnamed woman organize her emotionally fragmented life. She describes prayer as "punctuation marks that divided up and gave meaning to her life" (Rifaat 3). Through such moments, Rifaat shows that women may continue to seek meaning and emotional survival within the same structures that limit their freedom. The study also highlights the importance of women's inner consciousness in Rifaat's fiction. Much of the conflict in these stories takes place internally rather than through external action. Rifaat pays close attention to memory, emotional reflection, loneliness, and psychological suffering. Her female characters remain emotionally conscious even when they cannot fully escape their situations. Their awareness becomes important because it allows them to preserve a sense of self within restrictive social conditions. This study contributes to feminist literary criticism by examining Arab Muslim women's experiences through feminist existentialism. It also expands feminist existentialist discussion beyond its common Western focus. Rifaat's stories show that women's struggles do not always appear through open resistance.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Alifa Rifaat's *A Distant View of a Minaret and Other Stories* reveals a unique interpretation of the emotions and psychology of women living in patriarchal societies. It is clear from the selected stories that there is a limitation of freedom and choice for women within society. However, Rifaat's female characters continue to preserve their inner thoughts and self-awareness despite these restrictions. Through feminist existentialism, this study examined how women negotiate silence, endurance, memory, and emotional survival within restrictive social conditions. The analysis showed that women's inner consciousness becomes an important space of struggle and identity in Rifaat's fiction. The study also contributes to feminist literary criticism by extending feminist existentialist discussion beyond its common Western focus and highlighting the lived experiences of Arab Muslim women.

Limitations of the Study

This study is limited to five selected stories from Alifa Rifaat's A Distant View of a Minaret and Other Stories. The research focuses only on feminist existentialism and mainly uses the ideas of Simone de Beauvoir as its theoretical framework. The study is qualitative and interpretive in nature. Therefore, the findings are limited to textual analysis and cannot be generalized to all Arab Muslim women's experiences or all of Rifaat's works.

Future Recommendations

Further research can study Alifa Rifaat's stories from different feminist perspectives or compare her work with other Arab women writers to understand how women's experiences differ across societies and cultures. More research can also be done on themes such as silence, religion, emotional suffering, and gender roles in Arab women's literature.

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