

Gender, Labour and Resistance in Baby Halder's *A Life Less Ordinary*: Reconstructing Female Agency Beyond Domestic Hegemony

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Abstract— *Baby Halder's A Life Less Ordinary* presents a compelling autobiographical account of gendered oppression, domestic labour, and female resistance within the patriarchal family. While the memoir narrates Baby's extraordinary journey from an abused child bride to an acclaimed writer, it simultaneously portrays numerous women who remain imprisoned within the ideology of domesticity. This paper argues that the memoir constructs two contrasting models of womanhood: one represented by housewives who normalize patriarchal domination through silence and obedience, and the other embodied by Baby, whose transformation into an economically independent domestic worker and author challenges the hegemonic structures governing women's lives. The study demonstrates that Baby's resistance emerges through economic autonomy, mobility, literacy, and authorship. Ultimately, the memoir reveals that liberation is achieved not merely by escaping domestic violence but by reconstructing one's identity outside patriarchal definitions of womanhood.



Keywords— *Baby Halder, domestic labour, patriarchy, resistance, memoir, gender*

I. INTRODUCTION

Women's autobiographical narratives have increasingly become important sites for understanding how gender oppression intersects with labour, class, and social mobility. Baby Halder's *A Life Less Ordinary* occupies a distinctive position within this tradition because it not only narrates the author's painful experiences but also exposes the ideological mechanisms through which patriarchy sustains itself inside the household. Unlike fictional representations of female suffering, Halder's memoir derives its political strength from lived experience, revealing that domesticity itself functions as an institution of exploitation. More importantly, the narrative juxtaposes Baby's remarkable journey of self-reconstruction against the lives of several housewives who continue to accept patriarchal domination as natural. The memoir therefore invites a comparative reading between women who internalize oppression and one who actively resists it.

II. GENDER HIERARCHY AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF FEMALE INFERIORITY

Gender hierarchy constitutes one of the foundational mechanisms through which patriarchal societies institutionalize women's subordination. In Baby Halder's *A Life Less Ordinary: A Memoir*, gender discrimination is neither incidental nor confined to isolated instances of familial injustice; rather, it emerges as a deeply entrenched socio-cultural system that regulates women's access to education, labour, mobility, and selfhood. Halder's autobiographical narrative demonstrates how patriarchal ideology constructs female inferiority from childhood by assigning differential value to male and female children. Within this framework, girls are systematically socialized to internalize domesticity, obedience, and self-sacrifice, while boys are positioned as economic and social assets. The memoir thus moves beyond personal testimony to expose the structural nature of gender inequality, revealing

how patriarchal institutions reproduce women's marginalization through everyday familial practices. By foregrounding the lived experiences of a working-class woman, Halder illustrates that gender hierarchy operates not merely through physical coercion but also through ideological conditioning that normalizes unequal social relations.

The family serves as the primary institution through which patriarchal values are inculcated and legitimized. In *A Life Less Ordinary*, the family constitutes the earliest site in which Baby encounters emotional instability and gendered insecurity. Her recollection that members of the household “never lived happily” and “always quarrelled and fought with each other” reveals a domestic environment marked by persistent conflict. Such instability is significant because the family, which should ordinarily provide emotional security, instead becomes a space in which violence, neglect, and unequal power relations are normalized. Baby's childhood experiences demonstrate that patriarchal domination does not operate only through explicit restrictions on women but also through the everyday atmosphere of fear and conflict within the household. The family thus becomes the primary institution through which gendered vulnerability is experienced and reproduced.

Education occupies a significant place in the memoir because it offers Baby an alternative vision of identity beyond domesticity. Despite the poverty and instability of her childhood, she remains deeply committed to schooling. She recalls, “I never missed a day of school, and often, people did not know that I'd come to school without having eaten a thing” (Halder 4). Her determination to attend school despite hunger demonstrates that education represents more than formal learning; it provides her with a sense of possibility beyond the constraints of her domestic circumstances. However, this aspiration is gradually undermined by patriarchal expectations that prioritize marriage and domestic responsibilities over female education. The abrupt transition from childhood to marriage becomes evident when Baby recalls:

One day I saw Baba and my Mami coming back from the bazaar with bags full of vegetables. They gave the bags to me to empty out and I did that carefully. As I came out, I noticed a suitcase lying nearby. I asked Baba about it and he told me it had things for my wedding. (Halder 31)

The suitcase becomes a symbolic reminder of the future being prepared for her: instead of continuing her education, Baby is being directed towards marriage and domesticity. Her experience therefore illustrates how patriarchal

structures restrict female aspirations by transforming girls from students into wives and domestic workers.

Domestic labour in the memoir functions as more than a household responsibility; it becomes a mechanism for disciplining female identity. Through repetitive chores, girls are socialized into obedience, self-sacrifice, and silence, learning to accept domestic service as their primary social role. The invisibility of this unpaid labour further entrenches gender inequality, as women's contributions remain unrecognized despite sustaining the household. Halder's experiences therefore reveal domesticity as a socially constructed institution that regulates women's lives rather than a natural expression of femininity.

Patriarchal control also extends beyond the household through community surveillance and social expectations. Halder recounts that her mother, Ganga, constantly worried about “what would people say?” (Halder 1), illustrating how women's behaviour is governed by concerns over family honour and social respectability. The fear of public judgment compels women to conform to prescribed gender roles, ensuring that patriarchal norms are reinforced not only within the family but also through the collective pressures of society.

The structural nature of this gender hierarchy can be effectively interpreted through Sylvia Walby's theory of patriarchy, which conceptualizes patriarchy as a complex system of interconnected social structures that organize and sustain male dominance (20-37). Rejecting explanations that attribute women's oppression solely to individual male behaviour, Walby argues that patriarchal power is institutionalized within the household, paid employment, culture, sexuality, and the state. Her concept of household production is particularly relevant to Halder's experiences, as it explains how women's unpaid domestic labour becomes a central mechanism through which patriarchal relations are reproduced. Baby's exclusion from education, her assignment to domestic responsibilities, and her treatment as an economic liability illustrate the operation of these structural mechanisms within the family. The memoir thus corroborates Walby's argument that patriarchy functions as an institutional system that systematically restricts women's access to resources, autonomy, and opportunities while simultaneously naturalizing their subordinate social position.

Rather than portraying gender discrimination as isolated familial incidents, Halder's memoir locates it within a broader patriarchal structure that shapes social relations through unequal distributions of power, labour, and opportunity. The devaluation of daughters, denial of education, and normalization of unpaid domestic labour reveal that female inferiority is socially constructed and

sustained through institutional and cultural practices. By narrating these experiences from a working-class woman's perspective, Halder exposes the structural foundations of gender inequality and critiques the patriarchal mechanisms that perpetuate women's subordination.

III. INTERNALIZING PATRIARCHY: HOUSEWIVES, VIOLENCE, AND CONSENT

While physical violence is one of the most visible manifestations of patriarchy in *A Life Less Ordinary: A Memoir*, Baby Halder demonstrates that patriarchal domination is sustained equally through ideological conditioning. Women are socialized to perceive violence as an inevitable component of married life, thereby normalizing inequality and silencing resistance. Through the experiences of Baby, Panna's wife, and Sushila, Halder reveals how patriarchal ideology becomes internalized, transforming oppression into an accepted social reality. Violence in the memoir extends beyond physical abuse to encompass cultural expectations of honour, obedience, and sacrifice, exposing the ideological foundations that legitimize women's subordination.

Marriage emerges as the primary institution through which these patriarchal values are reinforced. Upon entering her marital home, Baby strives to become a humble and decent daughter-in-law, willingly embracing obedience as an essential feminine virtue. She soon accepts the role of a submissive daughter-in-law, treating silence and compliance as moral obligations. This conditioning is further reinforced through cultural symbols such as the veil, when Sandhya advises Baby to cover her head in the presence of Sandhya's husband (Halder 35). Chakravarti argues that patriarchal societies maintain social order by regulating women's sexuality and behaviour through ideals of chastity, modesty, and obedience which is considered to be a mark of distinction (71). The veil functions not merely as attire but as a disciplinary symbol regulating female behaviour and reinforcing ideals of modesty and respectability.

Once obedience is normalized, violence acquires social legitimacy within the marital household. Baby's experience demonstrates how patriarchal conditioning compels women to endure abuse even when they recognize its brutality. Recalling an incident of sexual violence, she describes how her husband began to press his body against hers: "I started to cry out in fear. But then, I thought, what's the points? I just endured everything" (Halder 35). Her response reveals the psychological consequences of prolonged patriarchal domination. The movement from fear to resignation suggests that violence has become so pervasive that resistance appears futile. Endurance is

therefore not evidence of consent but a consequence of a social structure that denies women meaningful control over their bodies and choices. Baby's experience demonstrates how patriarchal power operates simultaneously through physical force and psychological conditioning, making submission appear to be the only viable response to abuse.

The consequences of patriarchal violence extend beyond the immediate victim to the entire family, particularly children who witness violence within the household. Baby recalls the distressing account of a five-year-old child who described the violence inflicted upon his mother: "Do you know Dadu, that for three or four days now Baba had been fighting with Ma and beating her. Yesterday he locked the door of the room and beat her up very badly" (Halder 63). The child's recollection exposes the repetitive and systematic nature of domestic violence rather than presenting it as an isolated incident. The fact that the violence is witnessed and remembered by a young child further demonstrates how patriarchal domination becomes embedded within family life and reproduced across generations. Domestic violence therefore affects not only women as direct victims but also children who grow up within an environment where male authority is expressed through fear and physical force.

A significant transformation occurs when Baby begins to question the unequal distribution of blame and punishment within marriage. Her repeated experience of violence leads her to challenge the assumption that the woman alone must bear the consequences of male misconduct. Reflecting on her husband's abuse, she states, "My husband beat me up time and again and I tried to ask him why it was I who was getting beating, and why not the man who was harassing" (Halder 76). Her question marks an important movement from passive endurance towards critical awareness. She no longer accepts violence as an inevitable feature of marriage but begins to recognize the gendered injustice underlying it. This questioning becomes a crucial stage in her transformation because resistance begins intellectually before it becomes materially possible. By challenging the logic that holds women responsible for men's actions, Baby destabilizes the patriarchal ideology that had previously justified her suffering.

Pierre Bourdieu describes this process as symbolic violence, where domination becomes so deeply normalized that the oppressed come to perceive it as legitimate (1-2). The housewives in the memoir embody this condition, accepting violence and silence as markers of a good wife. Baby, too, initially conforms to this ideal by trying to become a submissive, decent and obedient daughter-in-law (Halder 61). However, unlike the other women, she eventually refuses to normalize abuse. Her decision to leave

her husband marks a decisive break from the cycle of silent endurance, transforming victimhood into an act of resistance.

IV. LABOUR, ECONOMIC INDEPENDENCE, AND FEMALE AGENCY

A Life Less Ordinary reconceptualizes women's labour by exposing the distinction between unpaid domestic work and remunerated employment. While patriarchal society confines women to invisible household labour that reinforces dependence, the memoir demonstrates that economic independence can become a crucial means of challenging gendered subordination. Halder's experiences reveal that labour is never a neutral economic activity; rather, its value is determined by the social structures within which it is performed. The transition from unpaid domestic servitude to paid employment enables Baby to redefine her identity beyond the roles of wife and daughter-in-law, illustrating how financial autonomy creates possibilities for dignity, self-determination, and resistance.

Within marriage, Baby's labour remains largely invisible despite sustaining the household. Cooking, cleaning, and maintaining the domestic space are treated as natural feminine obligations rather than as forms of productive labour. The gendered expectations attached to domestic work are evident when Sandhya states, "...I don't need to see for myself. This is what happens when there is no woman in the house." (Halder 45). The statement appears to concern cleanliness, but it also reveals the gendered assumption that the responsibility for maintaining the household belongs to the woman. Domestic labour consequently becomes a mechanism for reproducing patriarchal relations because Baby is expected to maintain the household while receiving neither recognition nor autonomy in return. Her experience demonstrates that domesticity is not simply a private arrangement but a social structure through which women's labour is appropriated and their subordinate position is maintained.

The memoir marks a decisive turning point when Baby refuses to return to her abusive marriage and begins to imagine an independent life for herself and her children. Although her father continues to insist that she should return to her husband, Baby firmly rejects the expectation: "Baba still thought I would go back to my husband. He kept insisting I should go back and I kept insisting that I would not. I told him I wanted to live on my own now, wanted to see if I could manage to feed and look after my children" (Halder 112-113). Her repeated refusal is significant because it transforms resistance from an internal realization into a conscious decision. By expressing her desire to live independently and provide for her children, Baby

challenges the patriarchal assumption that a woman's security depends upon her husband. Her decision also establishes the foundation for her later economic independence, as paid labour becomes a means through which she can sustain herself and her children outside the marital household.

However, leaving the marital household does not immediately free Baby from patriarchal social expectations. Her decision to live independently produces a new form of social exclusion, particularly within her extended family. Recalling her experience in her brothers' homes, she observes that "my sisters-in-law were behaving as if I was a great burden to them" and that "there was no one even to talk to me politely in my brothers' homes" (Halder 120). These reactions reveal that a woman who separates herself from an abusive marriage may continue to be judged according to patriarchal expectations of dependence, respectability, and marital conformity. Baby's struggle for independence therefore involves more than economic survival; it also requires her to negotiate the social stigma attached to a woman who refuses to return to her husband. Her mobility becomes an act of resistance precisely because it challenges the expectation that a woman's rightful place is within a marital household.

Economic self-reliance also enables Baby to challenge the belief that a woman's identity and her children's future necessarily depend upon a husband. When others argue that living independently would be disastrous for her children's education, Baby refuses to accept this assumption, when she states:

After all, there are women without husbands who get on with their lives, aren't there?... Then there were others, among whom I count my father, who insisted that if I lived alone that would be disastrous for my children's education. To them my answer was: I'll see to it that they study. (Halder 113)

Her response demonstrates a growing confidence in her own capacity to provide for her family. Education, which had been denied to her in childhood, becomes something she is determined to secure for her children. Baby's resistance is not simply a rejection of marriage but an assertion of her ability to assume responsibilities traditionally associated with male authority. Her economic independence consequently becomes inseparable from her reconstruction of herself as an autonomous mother and decision-maker. Simone de Beauvoir's argument that women's liberation is inseparable from economic independence. In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir contends that dependence on men perpetuates women's subordination, whereas access to productive labour enables them to emerge as autonomous subjects rather than passive objects (813). Halder's experiences

strongly affirm this proposition. While unpaid domestic labour confines her within oppressive marital relations, paid employment provides the material conditions necessary for self-respect, decision-making, and independence. The memoir therefore demonstrates that labour acquires emancipatory potential only when it frees women from patriarchal dependence and grants them control over their own lives.

Unlike the housewives, whose unpaid labour reinforces their dependence, Baby's paid work becomes a source of dignity and self-determination. The memoir thus suggests that resistance begins not by rejecting domestic labour itself but by reclaiming ownership over one's labour and the agency it can create.

V. WRITING THE SELF: LITERACY AS RESISTANCE

Autobiographical writing in *A Life Less Ordinary* functions as a site of resistance where the marginalized female self acquires voice, visibility, and agency. The memoir traces Baby's journey from an illiterate domestic worker to a published author, revealing literacy not merely as the acquisition of reading and writing skills but as the recovery of voice and subjectivity. Through autobiographical narration, Halder transforms experiences of marginalization into a discourse of self-representation, challenging the patriarchal structures that had long confined her to silence.

For much of her life, Baby's identity is defined by others as a daughter, wife, servant, and domestic worker. Her experiences remain invisible because they are restricted to the private sphere, where women's suffering is often dismissed as a personal matter rather than recognized as a social issue. A decisive change occurs when Prabodh Kumar encourages her to write about her life. What initially begins as a personal exercise gradually evolves into an act of reclaiming agency, enabling Baby to narrate her experiences in her own words rather than through patriarchal interpretations.

Writing also disrupts the traditional association between literacy and social privilege. Despite limited formal education, Baby demonstrates that lived experience constitutes an equally significant source of knowledge. Her narrative resists literary conventions that often marginalize working-class women, foregrounding instead the authenticity of everyday struggles. The publication of her autobiography transforms what she describes as her agonized life into a publicly acknowledged narrative (Halder 162). Private suffering thus acquires collective significance, exposing domestic violence, exploitation, and

gender discrimination as structural realities rather than isolated personal experiences.

The political significance of Baby's autobiography lies in its refusal to remain silent. By documenting the realities of domestic abuse, economic exploitation, and gendered discrimination, she contests the patriarchal culture that expects women to endure suffering without protest. Her narrative challenges dominant representations of working-class women as passive victims and instead foregrounds resilience, reflection, and self-expression. The act of writing therefore becomes inseparable from the assertion of identity, allowing Baby to emerge as both the subject and author of her own history. Hooks argues that speaking from the margins is not simply an act of communication but a political gesture through which marginalized individuals reject imposed silence and claim authority over their own experiences (5-6). Baby's autobiography exemplifies this process. By articulating her lived realities, she resists the erasure historically imposed upon poor and working-class women and reclaims the power to define herself beyond patriarchal labels.

The memoir transcends the boundaries of personal life writing to become a feminist counter-discourse that interrogates and destabilizes dominant patriarchal ideologies. Halder demonstrates that literacy enables marginalized women not only to document oppression but also to reinterpret their identities on their own terms. Her autobiography thus positions self-writing as an intellectual and political practice through which silenced lives enter public discourse, transforming individual memory into collective feminist testimony.

VI. HOUSEWIVES AND BABY: DIVERGENT RESPONSES TO PATRIARCHAL HEGEMONY

A Life Less Ordinary presents two contrasting responses to patriarchy. The housewives accept domestic labour, marital violence, and economic dependence as inevitable aspects of womanhood, reproducing the gender norms that restrict their lives. Their identities remain confined to the roles of wives and caregivers, leaving little scope for selfhood beyond the household.

Baby's journey follows a different trajectory. Although she initially conforms to the same expectations, she gradually challenges them through paid labour, economic independence, and literacy. Her refusal to remain in an abusive marriage and her emergence as a writer distinguish her from the other women in the memoir. By transforming domestic labour into economic agency and personal experience into public testimony, Baby redefines what it means to be a woman within a patriarchal society.

The memoir thus suggests that while patriarchy is deeply entrenched, resistance becomes possible when women reclaim control over their labour, their voice, and ultimately, their identity.

VII. CONCLUSION

A Life Less Ordinary presents two contrasting trajectories of female existence under patriarchy. The housewives internalize domestic ideology, normalize violence, and reproduce patriarchal values through silence, obedience, and unpaid labour. Their lives illustrate Gramscian hegemony and Bourdieu's symbolic violence, revealing how domination persists because it becomes accepted as natural.

Baby Halder, however, chooses a radically different path. By rejecting domestic servitude, embracing wage labour, resisting marital violence, reclaiming literacy, and writing her autobiography, she reconstructs an identity beyond patriarchal definitions of womanhood. Her transformation validates Walby's understanding of domestic labour, Beauvoir's insistence upon economic independence, Millett's critique of sexual politics, Foucault's theory of disciplinary power, Hooks's politics of self-representation, and Woolf's vision of female intellectual autonomy.

The memoir ultimately demonstrates that resistance is not merely the rejection of oppression but the creation of an entirely new self. While the housewives remain confined within the ideological boundaries of domesticity, Baby swims against the current of patriarchal hegemony and emerges as an economically independent worker, an intellectual, and a writer. Her life becomes a testimony to the emancipatory potential of labour, literacy, and self-articulation.

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