

Female Resistance and Rebellion in Clarice Lispector's *The Hour of the Star*

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Abstract

This paper explores the theme of female resistance and rebellion in Clarice Lispector's *The Hour of the Star*, with a focus on the character of Macabéa. Although Macabéa appears passive and compliant, her existence is examined as a subtle form of resistance against societal and patriarchal expectations. Her non-conformity to traditional gender roles, her indifference to beauty and success, and her quiet endurance of suffering are seen as acts of defiance in a world that devalues her. The narrative further analyzes Macabéa's silence as a tool of resistance and autonomy, highlighting how her refusal to articulate her suffering undermines patriarchal control. Additionally, the paper delves into Macabéa's internal rebellion, symbolized through her dreams and fantasies, which offer her a psychological escape from societal pressures. Through an exploration of narrative techniques, internal defiance, and psychological autonomy, this paper argues that Macabéa's existence embodies a unique and profound form of female resistance in the face of patriarchal oppression.

Keywords: Clarice Lispector, *The Hour of the Star*, female resistance, gender roles, patriarchal oppression

1. Overview of *The Hour of the Star*

Clarice Lispector is celebrated for her unique narrative style, often characterized by deep introspection and philosophical musings that probe the nature of existence, identity, and alienation. Her work defies conventional storytelling, using a fragmented and internalized approach that places emphasis on the psychological and emotional experiences of her characters rather than external events. In *The Hour of the Star*, Lispector shifts between detachment and empathy through her narrator, Rodrigo S.M., a male voice who is both intrigued and repelled by the protagonist, Macabéa. This narrative choice itself raises

important questions about voice, gender, and authority. Rodrigo's attempt to tell Macabéa's story reflects his struggle to understand her inner world, a world largely shaped by societal neglect and existential emptiness. Through this narrative technique, Lispector not only crafts a compelling tale but also challenges readers to question who has the right to tell the stories of marginalized individuals.

The novel centers on Macabéa, a young woman from the impoverished Northeast region of Brazil, who migrates to Rio de Janeiro in search of a better life. Instead, she finds herself trapped in a life of poverty and insignificance. Macabéa's life is a string of monotonous, insignificant

moments: she works as a typist, lives in a run-down apartment, and lacks close relationships or meaningful interactions with others. Her existence is defined by an overwhelming sense of invisibility and worthlessness, as she navigates a society that is indifferent to her struggles. Despite her hardships, Macabéa remains largely unaware of her dire circumstances, displaying a passive endurance that contrasts with typical notions of rebellion or resistance. Her character embodies a form of feminine existence that is often dismissed and overlooked—an unremarkable woman whose very existence defies societal expectations of success, beauty, or agency.

Yet, it is this very passivity and invisibility that makes Macabéa a profound subject of exploration. Lispector uses her as a lens through which to critique societal attitudes toward women, particularly those who exist on the margins of society. Throughout the novel, Macabéa's silent suffering and her ultimate demise force the reader to confront uncomfortable truths about the social structures that perpetuate such invisibility. The novel ends with Macabéa's untimely death, run over by a car shortly after she begins to entertain the possibility of a better future. This tragic conclusion serves as a commentary on the futility of hope for those living in the margins, and it underscores the systemic forces that trap individuals like Macabéa in cycles of poverty, powerlessness, and obscurity.

2. Exploration of Gender Roles

2.1 Analysis of Traditional Gender Expectations Imposed on Women

In *The Hour of the Star*, Clarice Lispector offers a nuanced critique of the traditional gender roles imposed on women, particularly in the patriarchal context of Brazilian society during the 20th century. These societal norms dictate that women must conform to ideals of beauty, docility, and domesticity, often limiting their roles to that of caregivers, subordinates, or objects of desire. A woman's value is typically measured by her physical appearance, ability to attract male attention, and her submission to societal norms of productivity—whether through marriage, motherhood, or service-oriented work. These rigid expectations leave little room for women to develop independent identities or express their individuality.

Lispector's protagonist, Macabéa, challenges these norms through her complete disinterest in traditional markers of femininity. She is unattractive by conventional standards, with no interest in improving her appearance or seeking male validation. Unlike women who seek self-worth through relationships or societal acceptance, Macabéa is largely indifferent to her lack of beauty, financial success, or status. Her physicality is described in terms that make her seem almost invisible—thin, weak, and plain. Macabéa's passive existence is the antithesis of what is expected of women, particularly in a society where femininity is defined by outward display, social standing, and the pursuit of male approval.

Additionally, Macabéa's role as a typist, a profession associated with low pay and subservience, symbolizes her place within a patriarchal system that devalues women's labor. The lack of advancement or recognition in her work mirrors the limited opportunities available to women like her. She exists on the fringes of both economic and gender hierarchies, where her worth is constantly diminished by a society that only sees value in conforming to predefined gender roles. Her mere existence challenges these expectations—she neither strives for beauty nor power, but instead lives an invisible life of quiet endurance.

Lispector also critiques how women are commodified through the male gaze. The narrator, Rodrigo S.M., exemplifies this in his attempt to define and control Macabéa's story. His observations of her as a passive, almost grotesque figure reflect societal tendencies to objectify women and determine their worth based on superficial attributes. Rodrigo's inability to fully understand or connect with Macabéa's inner world highlights how traditional gender roles prevent genuine recognition of women's complexities, reducing them instead to simplistic categories—either conforming to the ideal of womanhood or, like Macabéa, falling tragically short. Macabéa's failure to fit into these categories thus becomes a form of quiet resistance, as she refuses, whether consciously or unconsciously, to participate in a system that demands her conformity.

2.2 Macabéa as a Symbol of Marginalized Femininity and Societal Neglect

Macabéa embodies a unique form of marginalized femininity, one that exists at the

intersection of gender, class, and regional oppression. As a poor Northeastern migrant living in Rio de Janeiro, she is relegated to the fringes of society, occupying the lowest rungs of both class and gender hierarchies. Her position as an impoverished, unattractive woman from a rural background renders her doubly invisible. In Brazil's urban setting, Northeastern migrants are often subject to prejudice and systemic marginalization, while women like Macabéa face the added burden of societal expectations regarding beauty, productivity, and femininity. In failing to meet these standards, Macabéa becomes a symbol of those who are neglected not just by society but by its value system that prizes wealth, beauty, and social mobility.

Her lack of rebellion, her passive acceptance of her situation, and her seeming lack of self-awareness set her apart from conventional depictions of female resistance. Unlike other feminist heroines who actively fight against their oppression, Macabéa is neither empowered nor overtly rebellious. Instead, she quietly endures a life marked by suffering and deprivation, reflecting a form of existence that is largely ignored in both literature and society. This endurance, however, is not framed as strength or virtue, but as a tragic condition of her existence in a world that offers her little chance of escape. Through this portrayal, Clarice Lispector critiques how capitalist and patriarchal systems dismiss women who do not conform to societal ideals of productivity, beauty, or success.

Macabéa's story is also a critique of how society treats women who do not fit into its narrow definitions of value. In a capitalist framework, people's worth is often tied to their economic contribution, while patriarchal structures emphasize a woman's value in terms of her physical appearance and adherence to traditional gender roles. Macabéa, however, fails to meet these benchmarks: she is not beautiful, intelligent, or financially successful, nor does she seek validation through romantic or social success. Her life as a low-paid typist, a job that neither offers fulfillment nor upward mobility, symbolizes the dismal options available to women like her. Her interactions with others, including her boyfriend Olímpico, are marked by neglect and emotional detachment, further emphasizing how women of her class and background are treated as disposable.

Through Macabéa, Lispector highlights the

devastating impact of societal neglect. Macabéa's life is characterized by her complete invisibility; she is ignored by the systems that are meant to support individuals, and her suffering is unnoticed by those around her. Her lack of self-worth mirrors how society has devalued her existence, treating her as insignificant because she does not contribute to or fit within its structures. This invisibility is not just a social or economic condition, but a gendered one—Macabéa's life illustrates how marginalized women are denied agency, worth, and the possibility of change. Lispector uses her character to expose the systemic forces that perpetuate the invisibility of women who do not meet societal standards, critiquing the way in which both capitalism and patriarchy disregard and dehumanize those on the margins.

3. Forms of Female Resistance

3.1 *Subtle Resistance Through Macabéa's Passive Behavior*

Macabéa's character in *The Hour of the Star* serves as a complex figure of passive yet profound resistance to societal and patriarchal expectations. Though she may appear meek, indifferent, and even compliant on the surface, her very existence and the choices she makes can be interpreted as a subtle form of rebellion. Unlike other female characters in the novel, such as Glória, who strive for societal approval through beauty or relationships, Macabéa does not engage in this performative pursuit of validation. Her lack of concern for how others perceive her and her indifference to social expectations—such as the pressure to attract men or achieve financial stability—are forms of non-participation in the system that seeks to commodify and objectify women. In many ways, Macabéa's indifference to traditional gender roles and societal norms challenges the pervasive idea that women must aspire to certain traits or behaviors, such as attractiveness, ambition, or romantic fulfillment, to be considered valuable or worthy.

This refusal to conform, even if unconscious, places Macabéa in quiet opposition to the capitalist and patriarchal structures that dictate what it means to be a successful woman. In a world that commodifies beauty, sexuality, and success, Macabéa's lack of engagement with these values is an unspoken rejection of them. Her failure to care about beauty, romance, or material wealth stands in sharp contrast to the

societal norms that compel women to pursue these ideals. While her resistance may not take the form of overt rebellion or defiance, it is no less significant. Macabéa's existence as a woman who does not fight for visibility or validation highlights an alternative form of female resistance that lies in non-conformity and self-acceptance, regardless of societal pressures.

Furthermore, Macabéa's passive behavior can be seen as a challenge to the assumption that meaningful resistance must be active, vocal, or confrontational. Her passive endurance of her hardships—whether in her thankless job, her loveless relationship, or her poverty—illustrates that survival in a world that continually devalues and marginalizes her is itself a form of resistance. Macabéa's life contradicts the notion that women must either conform to societal expectations or actively fight against them to assert their existence. Instead, she simply survives, and in doing so, refuses to play by the rules of a system that excludes her. This form of passive endurance, while often overlooked, is significant because it challenges the very foundation of societal structures that prioritize active, visible forms of success and rebellion.

Macabéa's survival in a society that has no place for her—neither as an idealized woman nor as an empowered rebel—suggests that existence itself can be a form of defiance when the world around her seeks to erase or invalidate her. Her lack of ambition or desire for change may appear as resignation, but it can also be viewed as a refusal to be complicit in a system that does not value her. Her endurance becomes a quiet act of defiance against a society that both ignores her and expects her to conform to its norms. Thus, Macabéa's passive resistance complicates traditional narratives of female empowerment by presenting survival and non-conformity as valid, if understated, forms of rebellion.

3.2 The Role of Silence as Defiance Against Patriarchal Norms

Silence is one of Macabéa's most prominent and intriguing characteristics, functioning both as a symptom of her oppression and a subtle form of defiance against the patriarchal structures that seek to control her. In a world where women are often expected to express themselves in specific ways—whether through speech, beauty, or action—Macabéa's silence serves as a rejection of these expectations. Throughout the novel, she

rarely articulates her thoughts, desires, or feelings, choosing instead to endure her suffering quietly. This silence can be seen as both an imposed limitation and a chosen form of survival. On one hand, society has rendered Macabéa voiceless by devaluing her existence and limiting her opportunities to express herself. On the other hand, her silence can also be interpreted as an intentional form of non-participation in a patriarchal system that demands women justify their worth through speech or action.

Macabéa's silence reflects the broader cultural tendency to overlook and ignore women, particularly those who do not conform to societal ideals. However, by refusing to articulate her suffering or demand recognition, Macabéa undermines the patriarchal need for control over her narrative. Her silence denies others the satisfaction of categorizing or understanding her within the traditional roles of womanhood, where women are expected to either comply with societal expectations or openly resist them. In remaining silent, Macabéa resists being reduced to these simplistic roles. She retains control over her inner world, a world that remains inaccessible to the narrator, Rodrigo S.M., and the patriarchal structures that surround her.

Through this lens, silence becomes a powerful form of defiance. In a society that expects women to either be compliant or outspoken in their rebellion, Macabéa's refusal to speak or act in prescribed ways challenges the notion that women must always resist visibly or vocally to oppose patriarchal norms. Her silence, while often seen as a sign of weakness or submission, can be interpreted as an active refusal to engage with the structures that seek to control her. It allows her to maintain a degree of autonomy, even if that autonomy is limited to her internal thoughts and feelings, which remain private and impenetrable.

Lispector's portrayal of Macabéa's silence complicates the narrative of what it means to resist patriarchy. Silence, in this case, does not equate to consent or submission; rather, it reflects a form of resistance that challenges societal expectations in a more subtle and ambiguous way. Macabéa's lack of verbal or active resistance underscores the idea that not all forms of rebellion need to be vocal or overt. Instead, her silence functions as a rejection of the societal expectation that women must justify

their existence or suffering through speech or action. In choosing silence, Macabéa denies the patriarchal structures around her the ability to fully control or define her, holding on to a small but significant form of power.

Thus, Macabéa's silence operates on multiple levels. It is both a reflection of her marginalization and a form of resistance against the societal forces that seek to dominate and define her. By refusing to articulate her suffering or explain herself, Macabéa disrupts the patriarchal need to control women's narratives and experiences. This silence, far from being a sign of defeat, represents a subtle, but powerful, act of defiance that challenges the very foundation of patriarchal norms that dictate how women should behave and how their stories should be told.

4. Macabéa's Rebellion Through Identity

4.1 Her Non-Conformity as an Internal Form of Rebellion

Macabéa's non-conformity, while not overt or intentional, serves as a deep and internal form of rebellion against societal expectations that define a woman's worth by her beauty, success, or social standing. In *The Hour of the Star*, Macabéa is indifferent to these pressures, demonstrating an almost unconscious refusal to engage with the ideals that society imposes on women. Unlike her peers, who might aspire to climb the social ladder or seek validation through romantic relationships or physical appearance, Macabéa lives her life without regard for these norms. She neither strives to be attractive nor actively seeks male attention, financial security, or societal approval, setting her apart as a figure of quiet resistance.

This indifference, though passive, represents a significant challenge to the capitalist and patriarchal systems that dictate what women should value and aspire to. In rejecting societal pressures, Macabéa disrupts the idea that a woman's worth is tied to her ability to conform to predefined identities of success and femininity. Her existence on the periphery, embracing her own insignificance in the face of society's expectations, allows her to exist on her own terms. This internal rebellion, though subtle, challenges the notion that women must conform to roles designed to measure their value in relation to patriarchal ideals. In living a life that defies these norms, Macabéa resists becoming a product of a system that seeks to limit her

identity to one of either success or failure based on external achievements or appearance.

Through this lens, Macabéa's life becomes a critique of the rigid identities imposed on women. Her non-conformity suggests that existing in defiance of societal expectations can be an act of resistance, even if it is not accompanied by overt rebellion or confrontation. Macabéa's quiet rejection of these pressures highlights the possibility of alternative forms of rebellion, where the refusal to participate in society's demands can itself be a powerful form of resistance. Her existence in a state of indifference serves as a challenge to societal norms that seek to define and control women's lives, thereby offering a nuanced form of rebellion through non-conformity.

4.2 Symbolism of Her Dreams and Fantasies in Resisting Societal Pressures

Macabéa's dreams and fantasies, though never realized in her external life, play a vital role in her internal rebellion against the societal pressures that confine her. While her waking life is marked by passivity, poverty, and invisibility, her inner world is filled with rich, imaginative scenarios where she transcends the limitations imposed on her by society. In her dreams, Macabéa constructs alternate realities where she is no longer the forgotten typist at the margins of society, but someone of significance—whether that be through beauty, romantic fulfillment, or social recognition. These fantasies offer her a temporary escape from the harshness of her existence, allowing her to imagine a life beyond the constraints placed upon her by her gender, class, and social position.

The dreams and fantasies of Macabéa symbolize a form of psychological resistance, as they allow her to reclaim a sense of control over her identity, even if only in her imagination. Through her inner life, she creates a space where societal limitations do not apply, where she can envision a version of herself that is more than what the world around her sees. These moments of imagined self-worth, though fleeting, represent a rebellion against the life society has dictated for her. While society deems her insignificant, Macabéa's fantasies reflect a deeper yearning for recognition and autonomy, suggesting that her mind, at least, refuses to fully accept the constraints placed on her.

Macabéa's dreams serve as a counterbalance to her outward passivity. They reveal a dimension

of her character that actively resists the narrative imposed on her by both society and the narrator, Rodrigo S.M. While her external circumstances may limit her ability to realize these fantasies, the fact that they exist in her imagination demonstrates her desire to push back against the roles and expectations that confine her. Her inner life, rich with possibilities, becomes a space where she can resist the societal pressures that render her invisible and powerless.

This internal rebellion, expressed through her dreams and fantasies, underscores the importance of the imagination as a tool of resistance. Even when external circumstances make active rebellion impossible, the ability to dream and imagine alternative realities allows individuals like Macabéa to assert their autonomy and identity. Her fantasies provide her with a form of agency, one that transcends the limitations of her external life. Through these dreams, Lispector highlights the power of the inner self as a site of resistance, suggesting that even the most marginalized individuals can find ways to challenge the forces that seek to confine them. Macabéa's dreams, therefore, act as a symbolic rejection of the roles that society expects her to play, offering her a form of internal liberation that contrasts with the passivity of her outward existence.

5. Narrative Technique as Resistance

In *The Hour of the Star*, Clarice Lispector employs narrative techniques that both expose and resist the structures of male dominance and traditional storytelling. The novel's narrator, Rodrigo S.M., represents an embodiment of male authority and control over the narrative. His position as the storyteller allows him to impose his perspective on Macabéa's life, reflecting the broader societal tendency for men to define and shape women's stories. Rodrigo's control over the narrative highlights the power imbalance between the genders, as he interprets and describes Macabéa's life through his own lens, often with detachment and pity. He claims authority over her story, as if she is unable to tell it herself, and in doing so, Rodrigo's voice overshadows Macabéa's lived experience. This narrative dominance mirrors the ways in which patriarchal structures silence and overshadow women's voices, rendering them passive subjects in stories authored by men.

However, Lispector's use of Rodrigo as the narrator is not without critique. Throughout the

novel, Rodrigo struggles with his role as the one controlling Macabéa's story, often expressing ambivalence and discomfort with his ability to fully capture her reality. His frustration and uncertainty about how to tell her story reveal the limitations of male-dominated perspectives in understanding female experiences, particularly those of marginalized women like Macabéa. Lispector's choice to use Rodrigo as the narrator creates a layered narrative, where the act of storytelling itself becomes a site of tension and resistance. By foregrounding Rodrigo's limitations and discomfort, Lispector subtly challenges the authority of the male gaze and the notion that women's lives can be adequately captured by male narratives.

In addition to critiquing male narrative dominance, Lispector's fragmented and non-linear storytelling style resists traditional forms of narrative structure. The novel is not presented in a straightforward, cohesive manner; instead, it is disjointed, introspective, and often digressive. This fragmented narrative style reflects the complexities and contradictions of Macabéa's existence, resisting the neat, linear progression that traditional storytelling often imposes. Lispector's use of this style disrupts the reader's expectations of a conventional plot, much like Macabéa herself disrupts societal expectations of womanhood. By refusing to follow a predictable narrative arc, Lispector mirrors the ways in which Macabéa's life defies societal norms and categories.

Moreover, this fragmented structure reflects a resistance to patriarchal forms of storytelling, which often seek to impose order and meaning onto women's lives. Lispector, through her narrative style, refuses to give Macabéa's life a clear resolution or moral lesson, thereby challenging the reader's desire for closure. This lack of closure, much like Macabéa's invisibility, serves as a critique of the simplistic narratives that often define women's lives in literature. By subverting traditional narrative forms, Lispector resists the conventions of storytelling that have historically been dominated by male voices, offering instead a narrative that reflects the complexity and ambiguity of female existence in a patriarchal society.

6. Macabéa's Death: Rebellion or Defeat?

Macabéa's death at the end of *The Hour of the Star* presents a complex and ambiguous moment that can be interpreted as both a potential act of

liberation and a symbol of defeat. On one level, her death may be seen as a form of liberation from the oppressive societal structures that have constrained her throughout her life. Macabéa has lived in a world that offers her no value or recognition, where she is constantly marginalized due to her gender, poverty, and lack of beauty. Her death, which occurs after she briefly entertains hope for a better future following a visit to a fortune teller, could be read as a release from the constant invisibility and suffering she endures. In this sense, death offers Macabéa an escape from a life that has been defined by neglect and indifference, a life in which she never truly belonged. From this perspective, her death might represent a final, albeit tragic, liberation from the societal norms that sought to erase her existence.

However, the ambiguity surrounding her death complicates this interpretation, as it challenges conventional understandings of rebellion. Macabéa's death is sudden and accidental, the result of a car accident, and she is passive even in this final moment. This passivity raises questions about whether her death can be considered a conscious act of resistance or if it is merely the final outcome of a life dictated by forces beyond her control. Unlike more overt acts of rebellion, Macabéa's demise does not suggest a deliberate rejection of societal norms but rather the culmination of a life shaped by her invisibility and insignificance. In this sense, her death could be viewed as a final defeat, a confirmation of the oppressive systems that have rendered her powerless from the beginning.

The ambiguity of Macabéa's death forces the reader to question traditional narratives of resistance and defeat. Her death does not fit neatly into either category—it is neither a clear act of rebellion nor a straightforward submission to societal pressures. Instead, it exists in a liminal space, reflecting the complexities of her existence as a woman marginalized by class, gender, and beauty standards. Lispector leaves her readers with an open-ended question: Is Macabéa's death an escape from the oppressive forces that have dominated her life, or is it the ultimate consequence of a life lived in submission? This ambiguity challenges conventional interpretations of what it means to resist or rebel, suggesting that, for some, resistance may not always take the form of active defiance but rather a quieter, more

ambiguous disengagement from a world that has failed to recognize their humanity.

7. Conclusion

The Hour of the Star has left a profound mark on feminist literary criticism, particularly through its exploration of marginalized female experiences. Clarice Lispector's depiction of Macabéa challenges traditional feminist narratives by focusing on a protagonist who does not actively resist or rebel in the ways often celebrated in feminist literature. Instead, Macabéa's quiet endurance and passive existence force readers to confront the realities of those women who exist on the peripheries of society—women who are marginalized not only by gender but by poverty, lack of beauty, and social invisibility. The novel invites critical reflection on how feminist discourse can expand to include a broader spectrum of female experiences, especially those that are less visible or traditionally recognized as forms of resistance. Lispector's work continues to be a key text in feminist literary circles, offering valuable insights into the intersection of gender, class, and societal neglect.

Macabéa stands as a lasting symbol of female resistance and marginalization, embodying a form of resistance that is subtle, internal, and often overlooked. Though she does not engage in overt acts of defiance, her very existence in a world that systematically ignores her becomes a form of quiet rebellion. Her life, marked by invisibility and insignificance, reflects the struggles of countless women who are erased by patriarchal and capitalist structures. Macabéa's story remains relevant in discussions about how society values women, particularly those who do not conform to its ideals of beauty, success, or productivity. Through Macabéa, Lispector critiques these societal norms and highlights the endurance of women who, despite being marginalized, continue to exist in spaces that seek to erase them. In this way, Macabéa's character serves as a powerful symbol of the resilience of the marginalized, and her story continues to resonate with readers as a poignant critique of societal neglect.

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