



THE WORLD OF SALMA'S WOMEN: MUSLIM WOMEN COMMUNITY OF SOUTHERN INDIA AS PORTRAYED IN 'THE HOUR PAST MIDNIGHT'.

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Abstract

Salma a Tamil poet and novelist made her mark in the Tamil literary world through her original work 'Irandam Jamankalin Kathai' translated into English by Lakshmi Holmstrom. 'The Hour Past Midnight' expresses her anguish at the treatment of girls belonging to Muslim community. The restrictions imposed upon them inspired her into the writing of the book. It traces the lives of a few Muslim women, though they belong to the well-to-do, the educated, the poor and the destitute there are several common factors that unite them: the major factor is that their lives are not theirs to live. Secondly, they are constantly pushed and pulled around by the men in their households, extended families, friends and neighbours. The present paper discusses the lives of a few Muslim women as narrated by Salma. It portrays their everyday struggles and worries, of relationships, of love and hatred, and of death. It presents the conservative lifestyle of Rabia. It also depicts the circumstances that lead Firdaus break her marriage on the first night itself. The suffering of Wahida explained by the author is heart rendering. It concludes with a few incidents that reveal how they brought a change in their lives by breaking silence.

Keywords: patriarchy, gender equity, ostracization, endogamy, suppression, assertion.

Salma is a well-known name to readers of contemporary Tamil literature. With two volumes of poetry, *Oru Maalaiyum Innoru Maalaiyum* and *Pacchai Devadai*, a novel, *Irandaam Jaamathin Kadhai*, and a short story collection titled *Saapam*, Salma has made her mark as a distinctive literary voice. Speaking up for the marginalized has been a constant for Salma. Whether breaking free of the social constraints imposed by her orthodox Tamil Muslim family or highlighting domestic violence, the poet has never held back on articulating her thoughts through the prism of feminine experience.

'The Hour Past Midnight' discusses the position and plurality of experiences in the patriarchal world constructed through the principles of religious fundamentalism. Although the representation of Muslim women in the book happens through an outsider, it lacks misrepresentation and appropriation of Islam aesthetics. Without disrespecting their religious customs and traditions, a constructive criticism is positioned against the misogyny existing in their domestic space.

Religious fundamentalism distorts the idea of gender equity for various reasons. *Gender equity* is justice and fairness in the treatment of women and men in order to eventually achieve gender equality, often requesting differential treatment of women and men (or specific measures) in order to compensate for the historical and social disadvantages that prevent women and men from sharing a level playing field.

What obstructs gender equity is the construct of male dominated society, which gives special privilege to the gender belonging to a dominant class or caste. To regulate power, order and discipline, and maintain the power relations, the male-centric society uses the concept of gender roles to exercise their superiority. For example, women are often destined the child-bearing and child rearing task which limits their mobilization within a domestic space.

This idea, with time, confined women to domesticity whereas men enjoyed the privilege of travelling and trade, since they took up the role of breadwinners. This framework of exploiting a subordinate gender group is called *patriarchy*, which acts not only on women, but also men of socially inferior position. The idea of patriarchy affixes itself relatively in the different societies using the communal, religious, casteist and lingual differences. Salma discusses these differences using four central characters in her book *The Hour Past Midnight*.

Every time a Muslim woman questions or embraces her sexuality, she is silenced in the Tamil Muslim society. The idea of independent decision making is never trusted upon Muslim women even if it is about their wedding. In Islam, there exists a gender difference whereby Muslim women are not permitted by the Islam culture to be married to a non-Muslim. Additionally, a Muslim woman is not allowed to denounce Islamic culture or religion in order to get married to a non-Muslim man. This is because leaving Islam is not allowed and is believed a religious crime which can lead to death as a penalty. Men on the other hand have been permitted to marry non-Muslim women. Islam does not allow dominance of women because according to their religion woman is supposed to be obedient and should always be submissive to the husband. When

Fathima in the book chooses to marry a Hindu man, the society attacks her mother Nuramma and ostracizes her. Abdullah, a man in his sixties is married to Jasmina who is just twenty-five years of age. He manipulates her poverty by marrying this beautiful young woman. The fact that Suleiman takes the couple around to introduce them among the relations with great pride is noteworthy.

Firdaus, another central character, is reduced to a mere commodity, where she is asked to marry an older man without consent. Even when she expresses her disgust towards the idea of marrying him, she is shown various examples of similar weddings and is asked to 'adjust'. When the patriarchs understand this scenario, they mansplain and gaslight her, pointing towards the poverty of her family. The male gaze and the condescending attitude towards women and gender minorities is never averted in cis-heterosexual men of India.

The idea of money is again a subtext reasoning while the central idea is endogamy to prevent the traffic of property among other religions groups. Wahida's marriage to Sikander is an example of this. Sabia conducts the wedding only for the money that comes along with Wahidha. It reflects that wealth and property is the only base of marriage. It is also evident from the discussion between Kader and Karim. When Kader consults Karim regarding Wahida's marriage, Karim replies, "Our sister's son must marry a girl from our house; that's the way it is. Otherwise, we lose our kinship ties. Don't we have to consider all this?" (67) Karim further adds "Akka has a lot of our property. She has a house. The boy works abroad. More than anything else, there are our kinship obligations." (68).

Islam religion has continuously tried to justify its reasons for discriminating women in public sphere of life mentioning that women are unclean because of issues of unchasteness caused by sexual engagement for a woman. They are regarded as unclean after engaging in any sexual practice with men. Even at two o'clock at night, Wahida remembers what her mother has told her: that immediately after sex she must have a bath and wash her sheets and pillowcase to wash away the pollution. While the men enjoy unlimited freedom in sexual practice, the women are bound by many rules laid by the community.

Women's sexuality is suppressed, and this continues even today, with neo-terms such as Love Jihad. Firdaus, caught in the act of sexual enjoyment with Siva, is poisoned to death by her own mother. To safeguard the honour of the family, the woman forces her daughter to consume poison.

Rabiya is a Muslim girl child, whose voice of reason is used to question the social norms. Children are marginalized due to their inability to represent themselves. *'[p]ower is related to representation: which representations have cognitive authority or can secure hegemony, which do not have authority or are not hegemonic'* (Beverley, 1999, p. 1).

When a powerless child questions the powerful hegemonic framework of the society, the advantage of not being taken seriously gives the literary creators the leverage to criticize the realities. There have been researches on child narratives such as *Children's literature as Tools of and for Activism* (Graff, 2013) which

stresses on importance of children's literature in reforming the society and *Children in literature: the voice of the subaltern* (Hatton) which discusses the suppression of voices of the children in literature.

Her fundamental constitutional right to education is stripped off as she grows up, because of the fear that she might gain autonomy over herself. This idea is conflicted in Muslim dominated Middle east governance, where girl children have their right to education.

The Arab Human Development Report, 2004, summarizes developments in education in the following terms: In most Arab countries women are still subject to numerous forms of discrimination. Perhaps education marks the sole exception to the rule, where girls comprise the majority at certain levels in some Arab countries. - United Nations, United Nations Development Programme, Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development, and Arab Gulf Programme for United Nations Development Organization, Arab Development Report 2004: Towards Freedom in the Arab World (New York: UNDP, 2004).

This brings out the question how Islam is appropriated according to the whimsical attitude of Muslim men.

One day, Rabia and her friends sneak off to the pictures. Caught on her way back home, Rabia gets a thrashing from her mother, Zohra, who sobs as she beats her daughter into submission. Another example is when Karim asks Mariyayi to abort the child, being fully aware that abortion is prohibited in Islam. Religious fundamentalism is limited only to women and against their free will, while men enjoy their patriarchal privilege.

Nevertheless, Salma's women are assertive to a certain extent; they do question the patriarchal conventions. Firdaus, when confronted by Wahida, on her affair with Siva, faces the accusation boldly. When Nuramma is banned from the community, she questions the villagers, "You say it was a sin for my daughter to elope with a Kafir. Is there a single man who hasn't slept with one of our Hindu worker women?"(254).

Across regions, Muslim women are on average in better health and better educated compared to previous generations, and more on a par with the men of their generation. Delaying marriage and having fewer children, Muslim women are rapidly reducing or eliminating the distinction between their marriage and childbearing patterns. Within the male chauvinistic world, Rabia, Zohra, Firdaus, and many others make their small rebellions and negotiations, friendships are made and broken, families come together and fall apart, and almost gradually change creeps in. Thus, Salma's beautiful, evocative, poetic novel recreates the sometimes suffocating, and sometimes heartbreaking world of Muslim women in southern India, showcasing their strengths and weaknesses, discussing their limitations and highlighting their ways of finding happiness within the constricted domestic space.

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