



Beyond Purdah: In-depth Analysis of *The Hour Past Midnight*

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Abstract:

Rajathi Samsudeen, popular as Salma (1968-), writer of *The Hour Past Midnight* (2009) originally published in Tamil as *Irandaam Jaamathin Kadai* (2004) hails from Tamil Nadu. Her shocking and ground-breaking *The Hour Past Midnight* exposes the salient realities of conservative Muslim society, where women do not have decision-making rights. The story is laden with poignant women characters who dwell in stigmatised and patriarchal surroundings. They know Fundamental, Personal, and Family rights but cannot access them. As Salma was head of the panchayat, still she could not save herself from the violent threats of the orthodox Muslim society. *The Hour Past Midnight* has versatile characters, such as Rabia, Madina, Zohra, Rahima, Firdaus, Amina, Nuramma, etcetera. Everyone fights for their existence and adjustments according to the laws and codes of Islam. Some failed, whereas some survived, some died while some still struggling. The novel not only shows women characters as fragile beings but also how they rebelled and why they failed. The exhausting idea behind reading and writing a paper on *The Hour Past Midnight* is to know and share about the plight of Muslim Women, their dehumanizing conditions, and their violation of Rights at a broader level. Other prominent works of Salma are *The Curse Stories* (2020), *Women, Dreaming* (2020), *I, Salma: Selected Poems* (2023), and others.

Keywords: Salma, Rights, Islam, Feminism, Midnight etcetera.

Introduction:

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines Patriarchy as, “a social organisation marked by the supremacy of the father in the clan or family, the legal dependence of wives and children, and the reckoning of descent and inheritance in the male line, broadly: control by men of a disproportionately large share of power”. The literal meaning of patriarchy lies in the principle of the domination by senior males over others, male as well as female, in the family, tribe, or nation, along with the running of descent through the male line.

The Holy Qur'an preaches equality among men and women and their equal rights in all spheres of life, whereas the patriarchal system practices supremacy over women. The Holy Qur'an does not adhere to the concept of sex equality which ignores the natural differences and specific powers and faculties of men and women. It refers to the fitness of men for certain types of work and that of women for other types of activities. Thus, men and women are complementary to each other. So, religions do not oppress women but men do. Religious practices and cultural practices are two unidentical things. Women have always been deprived of their rights under these cultural practices and never demand sexual equality, freedom, and liberation rather they only see their position within the social contexts and prefer gender equity within the traditional framework.

Islam Feminism is another segment that comes under the spectrum of Indian Feminism. Islam Feminism covers the experiences and advancements of Muslim women in India that took place at a slower pace in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Even though, the majority does not consider Feminism in Islam because of still existing insensitive practices in Islam. Such as Triple Talaq and Halala. The Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Marriage) Act, 2019 criminalized Triple Talaq in favour of Muslim Women. Some of these practices are highly unfavourable and unacceptable for enlightened and empowered Muslim men and women in India. A long way to go before Muslim Women not just in India but all over the world will have equal rights, opportunities and positions.

Nikah halala also known as tahleel marriage, is a practice in which a woman, after being divorced by triple talaq, marries another man, consummates the marriage, and gets divorced again in order to be able to remarry her former husband. Nikah means marriage and halala means to make something halal, or permissible. This form of marriage is haram (forbidden) according to the hadith of Islamic prophet

Muhammad. Nikah halala is practiced by a small minority of Muslims, mainly in countries that recognise the triple talaq (Wikipedia).

I

Salma aptly mentioned in *The Hour Past Midnight* “It is beyond doubt that women can face nothing but injustice in a world that refuses to see common humanity beyond the barriers of caste, religion, gender, and sexuality” (Author’s Note: Speaking Silence). The term "woman" connotes such characteristics that reinforce women to behave in a submissive, meek, and docile manner towards men. Women have to face numerous challenges before they realise how they are shaped into patriarchal institutions, their lengthy history of educational deprivation, and their economic dependency on men. Firstly, they have to overcome their ingrained sense of intellectual inferiority. The elimination of these beliefs and responsibilities leads to a distinctive position of women in society and the ability to oppose some aspects of patriarchal ideology and behaviour.

The Hour Past Midnight begins and ends with the description of Rabia as a developing character from adolescence to teenage age. Rabia’s life is experimental, regulated by her young mother Zohra. She refused to give her proper freedom because of her sister Firdaus’ radical behaviour, who left her husband Yusuf just after her Nikah. In the later part of the story, Firdaus commits suicide on the precept of her mother, because of her love affair with a Hindu married man named Siva, which is an outcome of hardcore rules based on the honour and prestige of the Muslim community and their narrow-mindedness, where women are not allowed to remarry and find happiness in the form of love according to their desire. Rabia as a mother plays a strict role but as a wife, she is submissive and compromises her husband Karim’s liaison with Mariyani. As we know, Polygamy is a common practice in Islam, but still, Karim does not marry Mariyani.

The novel has various representations of Muslim culture and customs, rites, and rituals, it depicts from death to marriage ceremonies and long fast in the pious month of Ramadan. Ironically, Salma ridiculed the so-called attitudes of a Muslim male, who prefers to ignore cinemas, sex, TV, etcetera in the holy month of Ramadan, which is otherwise on the common days. It highlights the Purdah system, the significance of Dupatta, enclosed life of women in the four walls of the room to marriage at a very tender age. Even a young lad like Ahmad (Rabia’s friend) has more power than Zohra; he knows how to ridicule Rabia and makes her realize that she cannot have all the advantages he has. She cannot play outdoor games, cannot take higher

education, cannot roam here and there, and cannot watch movies in the cinema hall. Moreover, she is bound by codes of conduct and cannot break the chain by being a girl instead of a boy. Despite these all, throughout the novel, Rabia questions the narrowmindedness of people in her surroundings. Moreover, she is mild but rebellious and knows how to differentiate things.

The sisterhood and friendship between women groups are well-described, how it stands the odd hours and hardships in life. Other times it breaks because of jealousy, competition and wrong acts. For instance, Madina is jealous of Rabia's best friendship with Ahmad, and Zohra breaks the joint family because of her sister-in-law Rahima's past deed with her husband.

In *The Hour Past Midnight*, Salma expounds on how men practise double standards. They do not allow women to marry in other religions but in their cases, it is acceptable. Fatima is a bold character. After the death of her husband, she eloped with a Hindu guy named Murugan, leaving behind her only son Iliaz with her old mother Nuramma. She chooses her happiness over everything else which is societal and men-made just to curb women and show their superiority.

Kader is a sensitive character who respects her wife Rahima's feelings. He allows her daughter Wahida's education. But when it comes to supporting her wife's decision, he shuns his good traits. He let her daughter marry a womanizer Sikander, who is fifteen years older than her. Thus, the rest transpires without controlling the situation. "Karim says: you can't always be thinking about age difference...Once the girl is married, and has a couple of children; it will all work out fine... More than anything else, there are our kingship obligations" (68).

On the ground reality, none of the women characters stop living life on their terms. They have secrets, privacy, and insecurities, but somehow, they manage to lead a dual life one for society and the other for themselves. The novel has minor descriptions, such as women exchanging bawdy jokes when they are in their comfort zone, talking about hysteria or sexual frustration, and so on. After all, the novel has liberal feminist approaches that revolve around Muslim women and their world.

II

When *The Hour Past Midnight* was first published in Tamil, the novel was charged based on obscene language. However, it gained popularity with the coming of the English translation by Lakshmi Holmstrom (1935-2016) in 2009. The novel proposes a sound relationship between Hindus and Muslims, whether they have masters or workers' bonds as a neighbour. There are community beliefs and peace in the environment,

and no riots and bloodshed. The communal peace is there which we are yearning for nowadays. Incidents like the 2002 Gujarat riots, the 2020 Delhi riots and others are some of the incidents based on Hindu-Muslim bifurcation. The novel has multiple dimensions. It deals with the historical war of Singapore and ethnic riots in Sri Lanka to authenticate the facts prevalent in *The Hour Past Midnight*.

Salma has written very tactfully about the teenage, innocent, and promising love story of Rabia and Ahmad. How they are dwelling in their carefree world. They have hope for a new beginning in the future. For these home-centric women like Mumtaz, Nafiza, and Nurnisha, language is a medium to express their latent desires. Slang words, cuss language, and extramarital affairs reveal their innate nature and breaking-of-the-norms attitude. In their way, they are tackling Patriarchy, which is not a matter of less importance. The shocking description of the acts of Wahida's father-in-law Sayyed is indigestible. The old man is crooked and sexually deprived, and his gaze and facial expressions towards Wahida unfurl his lustiness and impotence. Salma writes "Sayyed wanted to speak of something else...His eyes roved over her thin form, and then lowered, having failed to find whatever is sought. Wahida turned her face away, to avoid that gaze that crawled all over her" (376). "Male gaze" is another shameful issue that women have to deal with in their daily lives despite caste, class and religion.

Salma created a complex joint-family story and sub-stories with various day-to-day life characters. She critiqued the hypocrisy of Muslim women, and how they play a dual role as mothers and as mother-in-law. As a mother, a woman appears kind whereas a mother-in-law seems unkind. Are there some special traits attached to being a mother-in-law, sister-in-law, or daughter-in-law? Salma interrogates why women fight with each other on trivial topics. Why do not they support one another and dismantle the planned hierarchy of the men's world? How women break women is so relevant in the scenario of today's world, where so-called feminists endanger the collective self of womanhood. For instance, The intolerable behaviour of Sabia with Wahida. Wahida accused Firdaus, her aunt's sister; somehow, she is the reason behind her death. The way she takes revenge for her crushed married life is evident by her sudden action when she sees Firdaus with Siva, which turns fatal. Salma writes "Today Amina gave her the poison in the very same tumbler. How could she do that? Could all that love turn into hate for just one reason? Her mind was slipping. Still, she wanted to hold on to life...Quietly she died" (390).

III

The situations of the domestic life of Muslim women are fairly discussed in *The Hour Past Midnight*. In the novel, Indian Constitution Laws and Muslim Laws are constantly being violated.

- In Indian Constitution, Article 15 guarantees non-discrimination including on the grounds of sex, and permits affirmative action by the state to promote women's status.
- Muslim Laws: The dissolution of the Muslim Marriages Act of 1939 was introduced following pressure from local authorities as many Muslim women left Islam as a means of ending unhappy marriages (*Knowing Our Rights*, 44).
- India (marriages under Muslim laws): Although no code requires registration, many communities recognize the benefits of registration or, at least, keep a public record of marriage documents (143).
- Mutual inheritance follows the principles of Muslim laws. Other inherent rights are understood from the DMMA (Dissolution of Muslim Marriages Act, Act No. 8, 1939), including the wife's right to control her property and follow her religion (161).
- Demanding dowry is a cognizable, non-bailable offence (Violation in the case of Wahida's Great Muslim Wedding).
- Among Muslim families in Hyderabad, the bride's family has to pay a certain amount of cash to the groom (jode ki raqam). Since the jode ki raqam is not recorded, it cannot be recovered in the event of talaq. The practice of jode ki raqam is the main reason for the marriage of poor, young Muslim girls to wealthy Arabs from the Gulf States (195).
- Under the Special Marriage Act (SMA), 1954: Children of a marriage that has been declared void are legitimate if conceived before the court decree. There are provisions for permanent alimony and maintenance of such children (236).
- Under Section 125 in The Code of Criminal Procedure, Magistrates have the power to order maintenance in the case of both legitimate and illegitimate children, dependent wives, children, and aged parents, who are unable to maintain themselves, can apply.
- Under the Shariat Act of 1937, talaq does not require the involvement of any state authority and, depending upon the particular community's practices, the husband may either pronounce an oral talaq

without any additional procedures, or he may go before the jamaat or some other forum. The wife's presence is usually seen as irrelevant (264).

- Under SMA, Section 27: The husband being guilty of rape, sodomy, or bestiality; or a maintenance order or decree against him, notwithstanding that the parties were living apart (297).

Conclusion:

For Islam, Human Rights are given by God and so, we find dictatorship in the name of Religion. Thus, even today In Islamic society, the unequal treatment of women based on their separate Muslim Laws is prevalent. Muslim Women's Rights are disrupted on the grounds of religious practices, fanaticism, and conventionalism. They are even against the uniform distribution of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 10th Dec 1948. The foundation of the Muslim community will prosper when women gain equal liberty and opportunity. Meanwhile, we need to update the "Universal Islamic Declaration of Human Rights in Pakistan" and "Draft Charter on Human and People's Rights in the Arab World" in 1987, with some special mention and privileges for Women.

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