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Beyond the Vulnerable Body and the Immortal Soul: A Talk with Rajathi Salma

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Born in 1968, Rajathi Rokkaiah Salma is a South Indian Muslim women writer, who writes primarily of the confined domestic lives of Muslim women, with a focus on the inner struggles, desires and sexuality of Indian women. She has published two volumes of poetry *Oru Malaiyum, Innoru Malaiyum* (One Evening and Another Evening) (2000), *Pachchai Devathai* (Green Angel) (2003), one novel *Irandaam Jaamangalin Kathai* (2004) and a collection of short story *Sapam* (2013). Her novel was translated to English by the late Lakshmi Holmstrom in 2009 as *The Hour Past Midnight*, which was shortlisted for the Crossword Book Prize and long-listed for the Man Asian Prize. Her life story was documented by the British filmmaker Kim Longinotto, which had won multi-awards and had been screened worldwide. Salma is also well-known as a socially committed public figure who has served as chairperson of Tamil Nadu Social Welfare Board. Currently she is running an NGO named “Your Hope Is Remaining”.

In this interview she has responded to the questions concerning her multi-faceted identity as a Muslim women writer, politician and housewife whose works reflect the confined domestic world of Muslim lives. Her words are dense and reflects the many realms of marginalization

women face in public and private sectors. Her response here, broadens the scope of analysis of her works and the arrays of social issues she confronts. She elucidates that woman is not mere an objectified body or an immortal soul of deity. Rather she is more humane than all depictions. Her characters reflect the inner psychic waves of women's mind where she shatters all the social taboos inflicted on her body and soul. Salma's insightful narration of her own life had inspired women across the globe, whereby she proves that the female experience remains the same everywhere despite the color, race, cast, religion, social class, nationality and the thousand indifferences we posit to differ them.

What are the factors that influence the identity of a Muslim woman?

To be precise- first is the family, second the religion destined within the premise of that family, third the society where she lives. When we talk about a woman or rather Muslim women in general, these factors seem to mold her identity. A protective shield inflicted by these forces binds her within the constraints of that society. These factors don't allow her to have an independent identity.

To what extent religion accepts her freedom?

A woman's freedom is decided by her family in the foremost place. The religious constancy of that family decides her movements further. Religion redesigns her femininity, the way she talks, walks, dress up everything is structured in the childhood itself. Society further facilitates such chores. Either they watch her movements or control the movement itself. To cross all these barriers and walk off is very difficult in south Indian context.

Are south Indian writers similar in their concerns of writing? After all, there exist four main languages which owns age old traditional substructures.

Not entirely, but at some points they may share similar concerns. Each state of South India has its own language bias, which is entwined within a traditional culture. The writers primarily reflect the lives of people around them, like a prototype of the society where they live. The issues they discuss can be similar in concerns sometimes, but not always. In Tamil Nadu we have age old Tamil literary tradition which is one among the oldest classical literary traditions of India. Likewise, we have in Kerala Malayalam literary saga, in Karnataka Kannada literary tradition and in Andhra and Telangana Telugu literary tradition.

Urdu language is prevalent among Andhra Muslims. Does Urdu literature share major themes and concerns with other regional language biases?

I can't comment authentically on this matter. My language proficiency on Urdu is limited. But I think there is cultural difference among Muslims from different parts of India. Urdu literature is rooted in Perso-Arabic script and it owes much to the tradition of Sufism which originated and flourished in North India. South Indian Muslim writers prefer regional languages as their tongue to narrate the lives around them. Even Arabu-Tamil and its variants in other States, are using an amalgam of Arabic and regional scripts.

Does there exist any cultural differences among the Muslims of South and North India, especially Urdu speakers and non-speakers?

The cultural difference may be rooted in the origin of Islam in north and south of India. The customs and activities of Muslims may not be similar everywhere. Everyone prefers their own cultural elements, even the writers. Urdu writers highlight Urdu culture while regional writers highlight theirs'. Usually people don't encourage marriage alliance among south and north Indian-Muslims. Even though Islam ensures universal brotherhood and equality, people divide themselves in the name of culture.

What kind of cultural division exist among Muslims of today, particularly in the context of global Islam?

Islam originated in Arabia and the Holy Scripture was prophesied in Arabic language. Today the followers of this religion lives across the world. Even then, Arabic is considered as the language of Islam and their culture as the Islamic culture. But religion is entwined with the language and culture of the believers who got converted from an already established religious background. They carry the traits of the culture within which they were destined till then. In the 21st century the number of converters exceeds the number of direct descendents. This stimulate the cultural divisions among the Muslims across the world. We can call it cultural hybridity within the religion.

I am a Muslim and read Quran (both Arabic and other translations). But I can't talk in Arabic or Urdu language. When I went to Pakistan for a conference, the participants were surprised to see a Muslim who don't speak Urdu or Arabic. I was surprised to learn their belief that only Arabic or Urdu speakers are true Muslims. Then what about me, what about the millions of believers around the world. Similar situations exist in India too; Urdu speakers treat others as non-believers sometimes. There is no hierarchy in Islam. There shouldn't be any grading of believers according to their nationality and language.

At what extent the cultural hybridity exists in South Indian Muslim community?

The Muslims of South India follows many cultural elements from the traditional Hindu religion. Dowry system is such a ritual, which is not at all mentioned in Islam. Seemanthaⁱ, cradle ceremony, vayassariyikkalⁱⁱ, for every instance of everyday life we have ritualistic celebrations which is deeply rooted in Indian tradition. Yet we are true believers of Islam and follows life according to Quran and Sharia.

We have Arabi-malayalam, Arwi, Byari literatures which is a blend of Arabic and regional variants of languages and which glorifies the cultural past of South Indian Muslims. The genres, themes, concepts and even styles of writing share many similarities. Is there a possibility of having a traditional or cultural link among the scattered Muslims writers of different South Indian states?

There may be some traditional traits as I mentioned earlier. But I don't think that there are direct connections. Our thoughts and activities are connected to our immediate surroundings. Literature reflects these surroundings and lives confined in it. When I write about the lives of Muslim women particular to my village, it doesn't mean that in whole Tamil Nadu the situation is similar. Muslim women from urban areas were alarmed to read about the distressed lives of Muslim women in the rural areas. For such readers the harem system and

other traditional rituals I narrate seems to be something new. Their experiences are different, but the pain remain the same. They are like two facets of same coin, same heritage but totally different experiences. Regionality influence not only her identity but her experiences too. Each writer reflects the cultural elements of the immediate society.

Sara Aboobacker, the renowned Kannada writer shares similar concerns in her works. She narrates the inequalities inflicted upon women in Muslim community of Karnataka and the rituals that make her a puppet in the hands of a patriarchal society. B.M. Suhara and Khadeeja Mumthaz also depicts similar incidents picturized from their localities. All these writers are from different states and write in distinct languages but their concerns seem to be identical. What can be the reason for these connections?

Women related issues are similar in most of the communities, whether north or south India, the problems will be similar. Recently there was an issue on the concept of triple *talaq*ⁱⁱⁱ. Such issues are common in South India also. Islam, the religion dwells on the Holy Scripture Quran. Sharia is the principle rules to lead life in an Islamic way. The whole world reads the same scriptures and same principles. But they follow it in different ways. The compensation issue related to *talaq* is one such instance where the patriarchy engrosses all other rules. Whole world is domineered by such rules, ensuring a secondary place for women everywhere.

‘*Nikahhalala*’^{iv} is another ritual which is neither mentioned in Qur’an nor in Sharia. But it has been practiced in India for centuries. Sara Aboobacker mentions such an incident in her prominent work *Chandragiriya Theeradalli*. The reunion of a divorced couple is possible only if the wife goes through such disgusting rituals. She should marry another man for a day and get divorce the next day. The whole system of marriage gets nullified here. What’s the purpose of such insane rituals? Even last week such an issue was reported in Uttar Pradesh by some women activity wings. They sent a petition to the Women Commission to eradicate ‘*Nikahhalala*’ stressing that such rituals are mental and physical torture to women. Thirty years before, Sara Aboobacker brought such issues into public discussion. Unfortunately, the condition remains the same in 2016. Religion is postulated as a shield to practice all humiliations against women. It is not the religion but the society that hurls thorns on women. The fundamentalist will claim that they are the hard cord true believers. But they follow many rituals which might not be detailed in the religious scriptures. Such rituals usually heed in favor of men. This exist in all societies including Islamic societies.

Many female scholars are attempting to reread the Holy Scripture now. Especially the theorists and writers from Islamic feminism background are attempting at such ventures. Most of the South Indian writers also shared similar thoughts. Do we need a rereading or reinterpretation of Quran as they claim?

I won’t go with the word reread. A person can read Quran, it is same everywhere. The way s/he understands it only differs. The meaning of Quran gets reinterpreted in readers’ mind. They understand it according to their situation. So we cannot completely rely on a particular rereading or translation. It may mislead us. To follow it blindly without even a rethink is foolishness.

The trouble caused to Amina Wadud in Chennai, shook all the writers here. After the conference in Kozhikode she was invited to Chennai Madras University to attend a conference. Prominent writers of Tamil literature were gathered to receive her. All arrangements were set. Protest outbreak in no time. Some Islamic organizations were against that conference. They gave petition to police commissioner warning that they will flare-up riot if Wadud enters the State. Instead of giving her protection, police asked vice chancellor of the university to cancel the scheduled conference. How can someone judge a scholar without even reading her book or listening to her speech. I couldn't digest the whole situation. India being the biggest democratic country, a woman is denied her right to speak. She follows Quran and practice an Islamic way of life. She even wears Purdah, which I never use. Her research area includes the rights of women in Islam. She came here to deliver a talk related to this topic. Her effort was to bring forth the justifiable rights for women which the Holy scripture ensures. Government and police should have taken the issue in a practical way ensuring security for Amina Wadud. But they just screwed up an academic discussion which had a stronger message to convey. Wadud was very disappointed and blogged this incident as shocking. Such incidents are occurring frequently now. Written rules are there, but no one implements it for the right cause.

Can we bring any changes to such situations?

It is very difficult even to talk about changes here. Situations are becoming more complex as days' passes. In a conference one among the students asked me whether to read or deny Fatima Mernissi's book. Her parents reacted violently when they saw Mernissi's book with her. Her question is how can we judge a book without reading it. Sometimes people react upon presumptions, not reality. People who protested against Wadud might not have read her works, might not have listen to her speech. But they presumed that she is wrong. This is the world of today. Presumptions rule, realities dies.

What can be the reasons for such haste judgements?

There are reasons why people make such hasty judgements. All over the world the true believers of Islam are being testified. The propagandas against Muslims in the name of terrorism has been outspreading vigorously. Political agendas are created to outrage and devastate Muslims. Islam the religion of peace is being crucified in the name of hatred. These are not even hidden agendas, its open. Hatred is mounting against Muslims everywhere, but it's not naturally triggered rather politically implemented in the minds of people. We are becoming puppets in the hands of political pressures. As a response to these chaos Muslims of today are gripping more to their religious identity. To fight against Islamophobia, people are becoming more passionate about Islam. To an extent this act is positive and right. When an outsider intrudes into our very personal space, we deny it. Religion is such a personal space where you crave for the inner peace. When the hegemonic sovereignty invades that personal space, one rolls back to their own religious shell. Mostly it's an act of resistance. But excess devoutness affects the existing religious harmony, especially in South Indian contexts.

Can you elaborate this argument in South Indian context?

Ten years back purdah system was not common in my village. But we used to wrap our head with a white cloth, which was convenient to wear in the hot weather here. But now you cannot see even one single person wearing it in this locality. Fundamentalists insist women to wrap her body including her palms and face. It's difficult to cover the whole body in such a hot weather, especially for the common people who travel by public transportations. Now people follow it as a part of Wahhabism. I had seen this trend in Kerala and Karnataka. When I went to Sri Lanka, majority of Muslim women whom I met was following the same. Everyone admits that the purdah system is a recent phenomenon. The reason can be linked to the points I mentioned earlier. One reason is the intention to stick strongly to one's religious beliefs as a reflex action to the growing Islamophobia. Unfortunately, the religious autonomies are turning stringent towards the women folk around. Do all Muslim men have beard? Do they wear long *kandhura*^v like Arab men? No. It is optional. Man can choose whether to keep a beard or wear a *kandhura*. Then why purdah is compulsory for women. What about her choice?

Purdah is one of the heated arguments in the Islamic critic world today. It is projected either as a tool to suppress women or to enhance her Islamic identity. What is the role of purdah in Islam? How it became a tool to measure the femininity of Muslim women?

Purdah for me is an ornamental attire for women, which veils her entire body. But sometimes it veils her personality. I respect purdah as a personal choice of ornament. But I reject purdah if someone force me to wear it. Islam ensures peace and security to the entire mankind irrespective of gender, caste and other worldly barriers. Purdah was meant to protect the Muslim women of Arabia at the beginning of Islam. It ensured them safety from the terrific climatic variations of the ancient Arabia and also from the hideous tribal rivals. In the pre-Islamic Arabia, it was usual to kill girl child. Prophet Muhammed (PBUH) preached them to love their girl child. He elevated their status from mere a body to a person. But today the process seems to be antithetical, rules are inflicted to make her shrunk from a person to mere a body.

Purdah is now symbolized as a modesty scale which measures the depth of her religiosity. Here imitation plays major role than spirituality. Large influx of people from South India are working in Middle East countries. They seem to admire Arab women as the Muslim women and tries to inflict similar attire to the women back their home. Adapting a particular clothing doesn't make a person more spiritual. But people tend to follow the trend always. Now even the kids are adamant to wear it because everyone around them are wearing it. Surprisingly only women are compelled to follow the trends or traditions, men have the freedom to choose. If purdah is the Islamic attire for women, then *kandura* should be for men.

Does the choice to wear or deny purdah constitutes anything to her identity?

Probably yes. A person's identity is entangled with her multiple identities. Religion is one such layer that mend her identity. When propagandas against Islam gain importance, true believers may stick back to their religious identity. In this revival process, women are forced to adapt to the strict rules implemented by the fundamentalist, as a shield to highlight her

religious identity. When she makes her choice not to wear purdah, she is branded as revivalist by both the fundamentalist and the power centers, former in a negative light and later in an enlightened slant. Islam propagates universal brotherhood and love. Rather than insisting on physical attires, let's illuminate the spiritual radiance of Islam. Rather than going back to cocoon, walk into the midst of the power centers. Only education can take us further.

Historical evidences reveals that during the process of nation formation, spiritual leaders representing Islam were daunting any kind of education except Quran. Records discloses that many scholars and writers were motivating people to take up English education as a tool to fight against British. How far Islam has travelled from its abhorrence against education since independence in India?

During the process of nation formation, there were hidden agendas to deteriorate the position of Muslims in Indian society. British were spreading hatred against Muslims. There was two ways to resist them, either to embrace it and move with the wind or to reject it and stick to the religious core. This twofold approach towards education exist even today, especially in the matter of women's education. In most of the villages here, girls go to school till puberty. After that she is destined to stay at home. Islam doesn't insist to act like that, rather society is implementing such annoying rules. Islam always enhanced the quest to earn knowledge, but the persons who claim themselves as the spiritual leaders avert people from earning knowledge.

During the period 1920's - 60's, women were extensively writing in favor of women's education and English education. But only few names are visible in the historical documents. I happened to read Alhaj Subhako's essay "Why was Women Enslaved? Muslim Women Are Slaves Too! The Plight of Muslim Widows", which questions the assumptions in the Self-Respect Movement and Periyar's misreading of the status of Muslim women (Srilatha 17). Her article was published in 1934. Unfortunately, no other details are available about such a valiant writer. No other name has recorded after that except yours. What can be the reason? Is it because no one is writing or rather they are invisible?

I had read several articles supporting women's education in the past and present. But none of them were Muslims. Periyar's works had inspired me a lot. But now am longing to read Subhako. I had been part of many discussions, both scholarly and political, where Tamil writers' works were being analyzed. No one discussed ever about Tamil Muslim women writers, I was always typified as the only one of the kind. There are some minor writers who publish articles only in Muslim magazines in support of the fundamentalist thoughts. But no one read it except for that limited circle. I was inspired by the writings of Siti Zunaida who extensively published novels (adaptations) during 1970's. I was fascinated by the idea that even Muslim women can write. But now no one knew Zunaida. May be more writers were there, but not well established. Further studies in this area can revive such invisible writers. I really want to read Subako's work.

Subako's work is a revived one, a translation. Original work is not available, only translation exist. What can be the reason?

If her work is revived, definitely there will be an original text somewhere. If scholars start reviving it, we can find more works and more writers who are still in the dark corners of Tamil literature.

How far translations can help in reviving such articles?

Translations though not the exact replica of the original, sometimes serve as a substitute to the original. Some of my poems were published in Tamil latterly after its translation got published in English. Some poems I retain the original version and publish only the translated ones. The reason relies on the readers' response. My works are getting both positive and negative responses. I have to face divisive criticism for writing about the confined lives of Tamil Muslims. Every work is intended for a particular readership. When I publish in English, at least they will read it before responding to the content. When I publish in Tamil, the trouble begins even before the publication.

Can translation replicate the intimacy of your writings? What about the chances of mistranslation?

Translating a work is like writing a new book. It can replicate the idea or the content. But it cannot exactly narrate the intuitive thoughts with which the writer narrates. My novel was translated by Lakshmi Holmstrom. She was not interested in politically hindering the novel. That's why I agreed to her request. But she couldn't grasp many of the innate cultural elements particular to the Muslim community here. So when translating it, she was confused. For instance, the ritual like *Fathiha*^{vi} got a tradition behind it which is innate to the Muslim communities of South India. When the translator is familiar to such cultural elements, the writings will follow that essence. Otherwise the words will turn out to be void. Such issues exist.

Some contents of ChandragiriyaTheeradalli, Sara Aboobacker's novel was misinterpreted when it was translated to Malayalam (Ayshath 2010). Did you face any such difficulties?

Some of my poems which got translated previously are being criticized by my admirers now. They argue that the content itself is misinterpreted. May be the translator didn't apprehend the undercurrents of my narration. Those works are retranslated and to my surprise its totally different. We cannot depend on a particular translator or a translation, particularly for poems. Each person has their own perspectives and politics. It will get reflected in their works. Whether original or translation, the author is visible.

In the short story collection Sapam, most of the women characters reflect their distressed mind which sometimes threw them into the path of insanity. In your novel The Hour Past Midnight, the character Mumthaz uptake the bhootha^{vii} as a reflex action to her changing surroundings. Is it an escapism rather than revival? Are these issues specific to Tamil Muslims only?

Most of my characters are from my own locality, but their experience is not distinct. I have travelled around the world. Everywhere women are experiencing such traumas. They are depressed and distressed, searching for a way out and it may lead them to the eccentric paths. It is because of the stress such psychological issues sprout up. It is not culturally or religiously specific phenomenon. Root cause lies in the social structure where women are portrayed mere as body. She got a mind too, which urges to travel beyond her body. When her body is trashed, the mind tries to vent it in all possible ways. Adhering *bhootha* or similar act is one such way that may save or destroy them. It shouldn't be a revival or an escapism always. Circumstances matters.

How far polygamy has darted the image of Muslims?

I won't deny the fact that polygamy exist even today. But to hold it only as a lustful act of Muslims is senseless. If we take a survey on polygamy rate in various religion, Muslims will be vanquished by others. Marrying more than one women is common in Indian traditional mythology. Unfortunately, only Muslims are portrayed as the polygamist. It's the part of propaganda against Muslims that they marry too many, they have too many kids, they are dirty, uneducated, fools and the like. All these presumptions are folly. We have control over the birth rate and polygamy seems rare today. All these are postulated to portray Muslims in negative light.

Are Muslim women free from the grudges of Polygamy?

Problem lies in the labelling of polygamy in religious light. No woman is free from polygamy unless her husband is loyal to her. When religion is twisted to tame her freedom, she becomes a puppet. Widowhood is not tarnished in Islam, but in other religions it might be a sinful existence to live as a widow. I am not blaming a particular religion. When it comes to the rights of women, religious rules are often twisted to satisfy the male ego. Islam doesn't deny inevitable abortion and family assets for women. Islam granted economic freedom for women from the very beginning. Grooms are supposed to pay a definite amount as bridal money (*mehar*) according to Sharia. But in India, *mehar* is just for namesake. Most of the Muslims follow the dowry system which is rooted in Indian tradition. Men bend rules to gratify their needs. No religion is better in this matter.

How the society is responding to your vision of life and religion?

I am blessed to get a mass reader response. Most of them appreciates. But we cannot wish to get everyone on the right note. Some of them attack even without reading or realizing what I intend to convey. This is not an odd incident happened only to me. Whoever talks the truth which cannot satisfy the ego of the mass majority suffers. Pader Sayyed is another activist and writer from Tamil Nadu. She has been the chairperson of Wakf Board and runs an NGO now.

She has done many progressive activities for the welfare of women. But people spread hatred towards her only because she denies to wear purdah. Some religious organizations attack us saying we are not even Muslims. I strongly believe in the Almighty and Quran. How can someone reject my religiosity? Other writers from Muslim community also shares similar concerns with me. But they are afraid to openly criticize or write anything which shall upset the mass community. I register my haunting thoughts with the aid of my pen. It doesn't change my religious or gender identity. I am a Tamil Muslim women writer. No one can change the fact.

Sara Aboobacker and Banu Mushthaq, the two powerful voices that represent Kannada Muslim women were attacked several time. Do you have such personal experiences to share?

I personally know both of these writers and the traumas they went through. Wherever I went, Muslim writers are being criticized either for supporting Islam or denying it. But most of the time they are criticized even without reading and comprehending what they have wrote. Amina Wadud was very sad about the mutinies here in her name. Such issues are not particular to Muslim women writers. Rasul, one Muslim male writer from Tamil Nadu was attacked for writing a poem where he happened to vent some of his thoughts. In the poem, a daughter is asking her father why there is not even one female prophet among the centuries old lineage of prophets. This question became so heavy for the writer. The book was banned and he was ex-communicated from the religion and the society. Only after begging for pardon publically he was allowed to enter the state. After this incident none of the Muslim writers here, wanted to write any more. We all have family which is precious. We don't want to lose it at any cost.

Do you want to contemplate any questions which you deliberately avoid to publicize?

Of course I have many of them. The frequent thought that taunts my mind is the existence of heavenly *huries* (enchanted women) for the service of men in heaven. What about the women then, no one talk about their bliss? Who will be there in heaven for my service? When I ask such questions the fundamentalist mark me as a whore with disgustful thoughts. It's difficult to face them. That's why Muslim writers especially women are scared to express their feelings. My recent work *Manamyankal* is rooted in Wahhabism and how men dominate women in its name. My editors asked me to thoroughly edit it before publishing. Hope the readers may get the hints within the lines.

Are only Muslim writers who suffers?

Not exactly. The hurdle lies not in a particular religion, but in the mindset of the mass community. Religion is one pillar of society, the others being tradition and culture. When someone talks against the blind believes of the mass community, they are thrashed. Recently there was an issue that shook Tamil literary circles. The controversies allied to the novel *Mathorubhagan (One Part Women)*^{viii} by renowned writer Perumal Murugan, ended up when the author declared that he as a writer was dead. Despite the court order in favor of him, he was attacked and was forced to exile from his own native land. We don't have the freedom of speech here. I travel alone to many places. Now am unsure about my own safety. That's why

I deleted many problematic issues from the new novel. Writers are more censored than movies today.

But the readers want bold writers like you to delineate such issues pertinent to the confined lives of women!

The connotations are still there in the novel. But the words may not be a direct off shoot to the theme. Wahhabism is detailed, second marriage and its psychological acceptance in the society is illustrated, the act of Khula^{ix} is presented in society, all these issues are comprehended. Till now I didn't receive any negative comments. Hope the readers will decode the intricate ideas in it.

Are the writers being monitored by the society?

Writers usually portrays the immediate society around them. The society in turn monitor each count of words which shall mirror the anarchies prevalent in various disguise. If there exist Islamic fundamentalist, there exist Hindu fundamentalist too. They want everything in their control. If someone questions it, they react violently. Kannada writer M.M. Kalburgi's^x assassination was shocking. Even if someone wants to bring in some changes to existing social system, their hands are imprisoned. Society is more powerful than us. We can't override.

The document Salma narrates the enlightening shields from your life. Can you elaborate the contexts that transformed Rajathi - a young innocent girl from Thuvrankurichi, into a bold writer and politician of Tamil Nadu- Rajathi Salma?

At the age of twelve I was forced to quit my schooling. It was a punishment for watching a movie in theatre. In my village girls are not allowed to attend school after attaining puberty. But for me even before that I had to quit, only because I went to theater to watch a movie. I fought a lot at least to join for correspondence, but all doors were closed for me then. There was no other way out except to read and cherish my thoughts. Books opened new array of world for me. It triggered my mind and compelled to think about myself, think about people around and to think about the whole world. Slowly I started to scribble my thoughts into small poems, as there was no other way to tame my growing frustrations. Some of them got published in regional magazines. Soon it became controversial issue in the society as my name along with the locality name was printed in that magazine. I didn't print my photo there, only my name was there. But for the society even that was not acceptable and I became a threat to the confined lives of Muslim women there. They aver that a Muslim woman shouldn't display even her name. I was extremely disappointed but my parents supported me very well. Even they were attacked and mocked publically for that. Everyone was forcing me into a marriage which I never wished to happen. I was literally caged in my own house and was pressurized for marriage from the age of 11. I continued to wet all my frustrations and anger through my poems, which were published under the pseudo name Salma by then. After many years of resistance, I was tricked by my family to marry Najib at the age of twenty-two. Soon I was thrown into a troubled marriage whereby I lost even the freedom to read. My husband's family considered writing as an act of sin and threatened me not to write. Still I wrote, during nights, sitting in bathrooms and whenever I was alone in the room. Salma was

gaining attention in Tamil literary world and no one knew who she was. Kalachuvad magazine was publishing my works and I tried hard to send him my works. He published my first poetry collection during 90's and it happened to voice the women of the time. Only after publishing my poetry collection *KavithaiThoppu*, other women writers started to refine their poetic language. The readers were thriving to meet the author after this publication but I hadn't earned that courage yet to unfold the truth. I was not even able to cuddle my poems in public. Only relished it when am alone.

Panchayat Election (village election) was a turning point in my life. It changed my life forever. Muslim women never competed in election until then. That year a rule came that women candidate should be nominated for election. My husband was a member in DMK. He wished to stand for election that year, but was disappointed. Then he asked me to nominate for the post, pursuing that he will do all the essential amendments, I have to just stand as a cult. I knew this was the moment to grab and I did it. The person who insisted me to sit back at home, took my photo and publicized it in each street in every locality. I thoroughly enjoyed the scene, from the cage on to the vast open society. I won that election and five years I served as the chairperson of that panchayat (village) whole heartedly. Still I had to face stiffness from society and family. By then I had earned the support of my husband.

When did you declared that you are Salma?

After I won election, I had to give interview to several magazines. At that instance I declared that I am Salma. But surprisingly no one bully it as a grave sin then. May be because of the political power. Not every woman gets a chance like this. If I didn't get this opportunity, I might have still lead a caged life inside that household and fear would have slaughtered me by the time.

You have served as the head of Tamil Nadu Social Welfare Board in 2007. How was that experience?

I was truly honored to take such a huge responsibility. From the four walls of my household I was assigned to solve the problems of the women of entire Tamil Nadu. It was challenging and exiting at once. We had several awareness programs, implemented many policies and reformed existing rules to ensure the safety of women from domestic violence and child marriage. We had dealt with problems of women from various religion, cast and social class. I was aware of the fact that everywhere women were deteriorated but was not sure about the possible remedies. From here I learned how to face them. We had stopped many child marriages in Hindu and Muslim families. But still there exist many issues that need attention. No religion is free from such filthy acts. These offences are deeply rooted in our ancestral cultures and social psyche whereby women are looked upon as personal property, a domestic pet.

Does child marriage exist still in your locality?

Child marriage rate has been declined during the last few years, but we couldn't eradicate it completely. Last month a 13-year-old girl was married near to my place. No one informed me. People still accept it as a genuine act. We try hard to make them realize the futility of

such hurry marriages. But next day they will anyhow arrange marriage in some other confined places. It's so easy for them. The age limit for girls to get married in India is eighteen. But most of the Muslim girls are married before that. They are not mingling with the outside much. Their social and psychological growth is limited. They will carry this frustration throughout their life. I had been through it, likewise millions of women too.

Your documentary had gained international attention and won several awards followed by screening across the world. How was your experience working with Kim Longinotto?

She was inspired by my story which she happened to hear in a conference and contacted me through mails. I was the chairperson of Social Welfare Board at that time. She wanted to document the activities and efforts we integrate here to elevate the position of women in the society. She struggled a lot to get the approval from both the governments. Finally, when she reached, I had resigned that post. After few meetings and discussions, she decided to narrate the confined social life of women in my locality. Three months she was here. Daily she used to come and shoot my activities. We traveled to our village and captured the lives around. She narrated my personal life along with the immediate locality of mine. The disturbed past life was jolted again but this time to capture how a woman can conquer the life beyond her dreams.

Why you switched from poetry to fiction?

When I started writing poem, it was from my soul. Now there is a trend in Tamil poetry. Everyone follow the same style. I too wrote it before. But now I want to write innovatively. So I took a break from poetry. There is one more reason for this shift. In poem we can figuratively convey grave issues in simple words. But some issues need more explanation which I can give only through fiction.

'Rabia', 'Wahida' or 'Firdause'^{xi}, who is more close to you?

I am there within Rabia and Wahida. My childhood is reflected in Rabia while my teenage gets reflected in Wahida. Firdause is more rebellious than me, she is bold.

Can we call this novel a semi-autobiographical one?

No. The narration is fictitious and the characters are imaginary. But the issues confronted in the novel are genuine and true. Characters like Rabia and Wahida are common in my locality. They carry traits of my own identity. Child marriage was very common in the society where I live. Inter-religious, inter-cast or inter-regional marriages are not accepted in my village. You can meet people like Karim and Suleiman here. Among the women folk around, you can search for Zohra, Raheema, Mumthaz and Sabia.

Is Firdaus a rebel?

Firdaus is very beautiful and self-conscious lady. She is full of life and knew how to admire it. She secretly admires Jhansi Rani and urges to be bold like her. She doesn't think twice to reject the wealthy husband whose scary looks frightens her during the wedding night. She admires her beauty and believes that she deserves much better life. The act of Khula (women divorcing the man) is permitted in Islam. But the society strictly abandons the person who opt

for that. This one act throws Firdaus into the darkest hole of life where everyone isolates and hate her. She is not able to comprehend the reversed rules for men and women. She is aware of her sexual desires and doesn't deny the passion she develops for Siva.

Firdaus was forced to death by her own mother. How far such honorary killings exist today?

She never wanted such a death. Even after she was caught red hand by Wahida, she fearlessly confronts each of her question. She was bold and reassures how much she loves her life even in death bed. Amina recalls how clearly Firdaus had demonstrated that she would never willingly die and this thought make her crazy. Firdaus was the rebel of my mind. Such honorary killings still exist in various places. Few of them get reported, others die and whither like Firdaus.

Your novel The Hour Past Midnight was shortlisted for the Crossword Book Prize and long-listed for the Man Asian Prize. But when we list the South Asian women writers, it's hard to find someone from South India. What could be the reason?

One reason can be the language within which we publish. Regional writers are not recognized out of that limited space unless their works get translated. If we publish in English, they promote. Even for Man Asian Prize there is two category- original and translation. I was shortlisted for the translation. Arundhati Roy might not have won the Booker prize if she wrote the novel in her native tongue first and then translated. For a writer her language is her strength that carves her further path. If a writer wants a better readership, then she should opt for a global language. We never can compare an original work with its translation. Each work is distinct, so is its translation.

What's your next project?

I am almost done with my new novel, *Toilet*, which shall explicate the sanitation issues faced by rural women. This is the most vital issue that need to be addressed right now.

You published a travelogue recently incorporating your journeys over twenty countries. What fascinated you the most as a solo female traveler?

When I look back it's bit surprising. I yearned to step out from my room once and today am travelling like a free bird. It's a huge blessing from the Almighty. What was more surprising was the reception I got from these places. For women hurdles exist everywhere. Here religion and nationality doesn't make much difference. It is the gender politics that outrages all other powers. Some of the countries offer good education and lifestyle for their citizens. But still the women are assaulted in public and private. Women are positioned same everywhere, secondary and distressed. Her body is objectified and her desire is controlled. Either she is postulated as a mere object to satisfy man's lust or they are deified and worshiped whereby her sexual desires are controlled. She lives beyond her vulnerable body and immortal soul. There are no western and eastern concepts in this matter, women suffer same everywhere despite the color, race, cast, religion, social class, nationality and the thousand indifferences we posit to differ them. That's the reason why an American woman can identify the pain of a native Tamil Muslim character I narrated. My characters may be from a South Indian village,

their experiences are not bound only to that locality, rather its common experience of every women across the globe.

I met a group of Muslim women in Pakistan, highly enthusiastic and lively. They shared concerns regarding honorary killings in the name of religion which I found similar to caste base honorary killings in India. In every country I visited, people had something to share which was rather linked to their age old traditional and cultural history. I share the reel of my life with them and the audience beckon that it reminds them the turmoil they faced at some point of life. Thousands of writers shared their experiences, the enlightening path that changed their lives and the turmoil they walked through. All these excites me, envisages me and gives me strength to fly higher.

ⁱ A ritual where pregnant women is honored with various sweets and presents.

ⁱⁱ Function organized when a girl attain puberty.

ⁱⁱⁱ divorce

^{iv} Nikah-halala or mu'ata marriage is a temporary alliance where the note of marriage is extended only for a day.

^v Arab traditional dress for men.

^{vi} Reciting Qur'an on auspicious occasions.

^{vii} A person possessed by evil spirit.

^{viii} The Kongu Vellala Gounder community, an influential intermediate caste in western Tamil Nadu, had, in particular, accused him of insulting their women and degrading a Hindu deity through his novel. Senior RSS ideologues had justified the attacks on Murugan. In July 2016, however, the Madras High Court ruled that the 'peace meeting' that had led to the withdrawal of Murugan's book was illegal, and dismissed all criminal cases filed against the author by caste groups. (Janardhan Aug 22 2016).

^{ix} The rule that women can divorce her husband with valid reasons.

^x M. M. Kalburgi (77) renowned Kannada writer and former Vice-Chancellor of Kannada University was shot dead on 30 August 2016. He was known for his strong stand against superstitious practices prevalent in the guise of religion. But he loose his life in this battle.

^{xi} Rabia, Wahida and Firdouse are the strong female characters from Salma's *The Hour Past Midnight* (2009). The story unfolds the lives of these three female characters, the ritualistic society, cultural and familial bonds, and the crude stiffness with which life strike backs.

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