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The Female Self in Salma's *The Hour Past Midnight*

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Abstract:

The paper presents an engaging discussion on the lives of Indian Muslim women through literary works of Salma and subverts the stereotypes associated with them. It talks about the idea of self and shows how Muslim women's identity is shaped by the combined forces of patriarchy, religion and class. It also brings in the ideas pertaining to possibility of change through education and a deliberate neglect of this concern in Muslim community. It argues that the constant need of the patriarchal society to control its women comes from the fear of female sexuality. Nonetheless, the Muslim women have continued to raise their voice against all kinds of oppression despite the social restrictions imposed upon them.

Keywords: Muslim Women, Modern Indian Literature, Social Conservatism, Purdah.

The literary world has largely been stereotypical about its perception of the women in 'purdah' or about the Muslim women writers in general. Apart from some of the famous names like Ismat Chughtai and Qurratulain Hyder, one finds it difficult to find Muslim women writers as part of mainstream literary discussions. Such a commonsensical understanding fails to see beyond the surface and takes stereotypes to be granted. The reality is far from the apparent one. There has been a century long tradition of writings in place by Muslim women who have written on any number of subjects. Asghar Ali Engineer argues that the problem of 'social conservatism' is common to the women of all religions in India. However, this situation is rapidly changing for Hindu women residing in urban areas. He writes: "Muslim women are suffering both from internal and external oppression. Muslim men practice what they themselves believe is Islamic and oppress their women and refuse to entertain any thought of change" (Engineer 1). Despite this limited freedom accorded to Muslim women, there is no dearth of literary marvels from this group. From Nawab Sultan Jahan Begum to Bibi Ashraf, from Rashid Jahan to Ismat Chughtai and Qurratulain Hyder— there have always been literary icons in literature by Indian Muslim women. In contemporary times, writers like Nighat Gandhi, Salma and others have created a niche for themselves in modern Indian literature and present themselves as a heterogeneous group of writers that brings out the multi-faceted identity of Indian Muslim women and their respective experiences.

Salma is a prolific writer from South India. After Siddhi Zunaida Begum's novel *Love or Duty* (1938), Salma's *Late Night Story* (2004) was the first novel to be written by a Muslim Tamil woman. This paper aims to analyze the notion of femininity expressed in her works with particular reference to her novel *The Hour Past Midnight* and some of her famous poems like 'A Deserted Place', 'Image', and 'New Bride, New Night'. Through the lives of many female characters in the novel, the paper begins by discussing the struggles of living in a male dominated society where women have no authority over their own selves. The 'self' is defined, determined and constantly controlled by those in power. Even when one wishes to protest, the outcomes are terrifying. Public humiliation and isolation are the most common outcomes of protesting against the established order of society. Further, it talks about the autobiographical element in the aforementioned works of Salma. The responsibility to maintain family honour lies only upon the shoulders of women and the notion of honour is intricately attached to women's body. It is through this notion that men justify the need to protect and govern women's sexuality. Another significant observation is that religion emerges as a strong tool to continue this unjust tradition of gender inequality. It gains weight due to the persistent lack of education in women. The custom of '*purdah*', desirability of early marriage and women's seclusion from public spaces has limited the opportunities of education for Indian women in general and Muslim women in particular. In her report *Muslim Women in India*, Seema Kazi makes a similar point when she argues that the socio-economic marginalization of women in Muslim communities is an outcome of lack of opportunities. She stresses that Muslim women have an even "marginal status within an overall context of social disadvantage for most Indian women" (31). It seems that the women are deliberately and thoughtfully kept away from education so that they never learn the language of protest. Mary Wollstonecraft stresses upon the importance of education for women in her book *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. She argues that an egalitarian society can be formed only if women are also given the opportunities to exercise their rationality. However, by denying a proper access to education, men have always tried to keep woman in a perpetual state of childhood so as to ensure an unquestioning obedience to their tyranny (Wollstonecraft 8). Though the book was published in 1792, it is apt to describe the position of Muslim women even today. Towards the end, the paper makes an attempt to understand the politics of language employed by Salma in her works. It also talks about the struggles that she had to undergo in order to continue as a writer. She might seem a powerful woman with her successful career as a writer and a politician but the journey to reach this position had not only been tedious but scary at times. Nonetheless, she managed to pull off through all her hardships. Time and again, Indian Muslim women have kept writing about the lived realities of their times. Salma is only one of the many examples of this long tradition of female Muslim writers from contemporary Tamil literature.

Born in 1968 in a Tamil Muslim family of Thuvrankurichi, a village in rural Tamilnadu, Salma grew up in an extremely conservative community. At the age of thirteen when she was barely months away from completing her matriculation, her family stopped her from going to school and confined her within the four walls of the house. This confinement was not something

unique to her. Rather, it is a sort of ritual followed by the village when little girls ‘come of age’ i.e. begin to menstruate. Once this biological function began, the girls were not allowed to cross the threshold of their houses. Menstruation has been looked upon as a taboo in most of the communities in India. Even the ritual of isolation is not specific to Salma’s community. For instance, during menstruation, women are debarred from performing religious rituals in Hindu tradition. They are not allowed to enter into the kitchen or any temple during this time. The rules are very much there but they have become outdated in contemporary times owing to increased social awareness among women. However, the way it is employed rigorously in Salma’s community till date is unlikely to be found elsewhere. For almost next twenty years after leaving school, Salma remained in quasi-enslavement first in her familial house and then, in her husband’s house. She had been an avid reader right from her childhood and loved to read the books borrowed from the library. However, all her desires came to halt due to this unwritten law of the society. Her solitude and anguish at being locked away from the outside world pushed her to write her experiences. Regarding her desire to write the experiences of growing up in an orthodox village, Salma said in an interview given to N Kalyan Raman: “Feelings that could not be shared with anyone created a language of intensity.” Through this language she created an idiom for Muslim women to fight against the patriarchal order of their community. The broad framework within which she writes relates to women’s body and desires, their confinement within the domestic space, and a persistent lack of having a say in their own lives.

First published in 2004 as *Irandaam Jamangalin Kathai* in Tamil and then translated as *The Hour Past Midnight* in English, Salma’s novel is a bold text in contemporary Tamil literature that aims to talk about the silence(s) prevalent around the lives of Muslim women. Within a timeframe of less than a year, the narrative is interwoven with the feelings, desires, hopes, dreams, and restrictions of women in a rural community of South India. Be it a liberal lady like Rahima or a conservative like Zohra; daring like Firdaus and Maimoon or educated like Wahida—somehow all of them are trapped in bad marital relationships. None of the women has ever felt or seen what a blissful marriage looks like. They live in a society that is constantly at unease with the rights of women. The patriarchal structure of society controls and manipulates women’s lived reality. Arbitrary boundaries are constructed and maintained by omnipresent men to control women’s lives and particularly, their sexuality. After the death of Amina’s husband, the responsibility of the house is immediately transferred to her son-in-law who “brought everyone under his control” (17). Just to get rid of the responsibility and to save the monetary expenses associated with a marriage, he went ahead with an incompatible marriage between his sister-in-law Firdaus and Yusuf. The rules of matrimony are strict only for women; men can go about having any number of extra-marital affairs without offering any explanation for it. The entire community knew about the extra-marital relationship between Karim and Mariyayi but nobody raised an eyebrow. However, Firdaus’s relationship with Siva culminated with her death. In a society such as this, there is no place for a woman who transgresses her boundary to choose a life of her own. Either she dies in a painful abortion like Maimoon or gets crossed over by a lorry like Fatima. It was the fear of community that forced Amina to ‘murder’ her own child whom

she had loved so dearly all her life. Women are forced to live their life as sexual slaves and child bearing machines. If they fail to perform these functions properly, they are looked down upon by the entire community.

Quite interestingly, the novel focuses upon different familial relationships vis-a-vis their respective relationship with community at large. Only women are the ones who at least think about compatibility in marriage. Both Kadija and Rahima were reluctant to give their daughters in marriage at such a tender age. Zohra wept dearly after she had beaten Rabia for watching a movie. Had it not been for the fear of banishment from community, Amina would have never forced Firdaus to consume poison. In the events following Firdaus's death, the narrator tells about Amina: "She could not believe what she had done in the name of family honour. She felt a fierce pain in her heart as she thought of her dead daughter, whose only sin was that she had wanted to live" (394). Women cannot even choose to show solidarity with other women. They have no choice but to surrender in front of men folk. Kader and Rahima have a marital life that comes quite close to the notion of companionate marriage. Kader understands Rahima and always prefers to include her viewpoint in his decisions. However, in order to comply with the social custom to marry off his daughter to his sister's son, he sidelines the opinion of Rahima altogether. Both Karim and Kader had affection for their respective daughters but there was no language to express that love and affection as far as the customs of their community were concerned. As an individual unit, all these relationships do stand a chance to flourish but the customs of the community would not ever let that happen. The narrative depicts the complex lives of Muslim women in all its hues and colours. Theirs is a world confined through the boundaries of class, caste, gender and religion within which they continue to live stagnated lives. The only relief they have sought for themselves is to laugh, cry, and share their desires to each other. Salma once said about the novel that it is the story of "woman in the set framework, her life's purpose limited to four walls, the walls slowly rising brick by brick, inexplicably; this is not a story about breaking barriers" (Raman).

Most of Salma's poetry and other works tend to have a heavy imprint of autobiographical element. Even when she brings in poetic imagery or some distant event, the source for it somehow draws inspiration from her life in village. For instance, in her poem 'A Deserted Place', Salma writes: "...Someday, the language wrought/ By this loneliness of mine/Might be shaped into verse". One can immediately relate the poem to her years of longing when she hoped to get away from her seclusion and began to write secretly. Similarly, several episodes of the novel *The Hour Past Midnight* come straight from her own life. For instance, the episode where Rabia, Madina and Uma go to watch a movie on the pretext of reading in the library comes from her own childhood when Salma and her three classmates had gone to see a movie and received a severe beating when their mischief came out in the open. On being asked about the autobiographical element in this novel, Salma answered: "I am in many characters in this book, a bit of me is in every character...It is the story of the girl child in the deep South, the story of

daughters and sisters and hapless mothers and grandmothers, all caught in an inexorable web of growing up, getting married, bearing children and dying” (Raman).

Through a close reading of Salma’s life and the novel in particular, one can deduce that there is a constant fear in men about women’s body and their sexuality. For them the female body becomes the site of family honour which needs to be protected at every possible cost. From here springs the need to contain their sexuality and lay down rules and regulations to control it. Menstruation marks the turning of a woman into a sexual subject, vulnerable to outside influence, and a possible threat to the family honour. All efforts are made to ensure that the young lady does not come within sight of any man other than her father and siblings. Ever since Suleiman came to know of a possible relation between her sister Farida and Mutthu, he quickly fixed up a match between Aziz and Farida and forced her to comply without thinking about the suitability of such a marriage. Ironically, the same women who are reared as non-sexual beings right from the childhood are supposed to become enthusiastic partners in bed once the marriage ceremony is observed. Nobody spares a thought about the utter shock of the women who have to go through this change all of a sudden. There is virtually no time to come to terms with their new identity. Wahida is the perfect example of such complicated female identity. She is shocked and at the same time, repulsed by the reality of married life. She longed for affection from her husband but all she received was ‘pollution’. “All the dreams and hopes she had invested in a marriage relationship had shattered in an instant, leaving only a wasteland.” (*The Hour Past Midnight* 314). To instill a sense of fear among womenfolk and to avert them from transgressing the limits of respectable behavior, the all powerful community employs all available tools to continue the reign of patriarchal order. The bonds of patriarchy seem to be so strong that there is no possibility of escape other than death.

Religion becomes a powerful tool to strengthen patriarchy. Somehow, even the Muslim women’s relationship with God seems to be mediated by men. They cannot have a direct access to Him. All the religious rituals and traditions accord an upper hand to men in matters pertaining to the question of power. Women are relegated to serve subsidiary roles of housekeepers at the most. People like Suleiman become ‘Allah’s Guardian’ and maintain that no one departs from the customs of community. Ever since he came back from Singapore, he ensured that there were stricter rules for women. Even the girl children were barred from watching a movie. The elopement of Fatima with a ‘Kafir’ boy resulted in a lifetime struggle for Nuruamma who was banished from the community for the sins committed by her daughter. Her own sin was that she had been unable to keep check on her daughter. This was also done apparently to ensure that no lady would dare to do such an outrageous thing in future. Another significant tool is the aversion of society to educate its women. Even though they are allowed to study in childhood, their education is customarily stopped after attaining puberty owing to a specific custom. Inherent in this is the fear of education. The one who gets educated might not believe in the age old customs and become defiant like the author Salma. She may even demand for her rights at one point of time. The politics of customs is too apparent to be ignored. The idea of education is a real threat

to the notion of patriarchy via which men have continued to exercise their supremacy over women for centuries. About her take on Religion in the novel *The Hour Past Midnight*, Salma replied in an interview that she had kept religion away from the book but she tried to “deal with the social consequences of diktats in the name of religion” (Raman). Despite any number of restrictions and religious diktats, the women of the novel continue to assert their subjectivity. Indeed, their life is not in their control but this does not stop them from making bold choices. Amid the endless number of compromises they have made all their lives, they have not stopped living. They continue to have their seething desires, their expectations and dreams about life. Salma has given a voice to these women whose lives had remained shrouded in silence for so long.

Salma makes a bold and precise use of language to assert her point. She understood the power of the word quite early in life and used it to fight against the oppression that her community had perpetrated against its women. In the novel *The Hour Past Midnight*, she openly talks about the double standards in man-woman relationships. There is a bold depiction of female subjectivity through characterization of Maimoon, Firdaus and Fatima who made a choice to live life on their own terms despite knowing the consequences. Salma lifts the garb of modesty and uncovers the hidden reality of society. Wahida is literally forced to watch a porn movie, apparently with the permission of her mother, when she fails to respond enthusiastically on her first wedding night. Wahida's father-in-law is lecherous fellow who constantly makes irksome remarks to Wahida regarding sexual matters. The feelings of Wahida range from shock, irritation, anger and disgust when she finds her own uncle displaying such disrespect. Even in her poetry, Salma writes with same frankness. While some of her poetry is straightforward in its approach, others reveal a complex imagery that is poignant, provocative and pregnant with meaning. In the poem 'Image' from the collection *Pachai Devadai*, she depicts the feelings of a woman after an ugly sexual union through the imagery of a cockroach being 'crushed to pulp'. In another poem called 'New Night, New Bride', she writes about the gloominess in the mind of a newly wedded lady who visualizes the images of her new life as “the affliction of her own life/ and the empty routine/ of tired, worn out sex”. Owing to her openness about depiction of sexual matters, she was charged with obscenity in 2003 along with three other women poets. However, she has continued to write with the same fearless approach towards social evils against women. In her interview with N Kalyan Raman, Salma talks about the language of her writings. She argues: “Protracted periods of loneliness and the related emotional crises determined the language and content of my poetry”.

Longinotto refers to Salma as the most famous South Indian female writer. Salma's rise to prominence is the outcome of endless struggles she undertook at personal as well as social level. For a woman who was debarred from studying at an early age, becoming a writer was not easy. Yet, words were the only salvation that sustained Salma in her long period of confinement. She began writing on scraps of paper secretly. In her matrimonial house, she used to hide paper and pen in the toilet so that she could give vent to her creative energies. Physical violence followed

when her husband found out that she continued to write despite his warnings. Once he also threatened to kill her through an acid attack. But she was adamant and fearless. Nothing could deter her because she always felt "...there must be a different life for me somewhere. This life that everyone is living can't be the only life" (Longinotto). Though she is largely known as Salma in public discourses, her real name is Rokkiah. She started writing under the pseudonym 'Salma' to maintain anonymity around her identity and largely remained away from public recognition for a long time. Her weirdest nightmare came true when a journalist published her photograph in the newspaper. Her family received a terrible shock and the entire community turned against her because she had defied the codes of femininity and transgressed into a world of her own. However, after the initial setback, the experience became a liberating one as far as Salma was concerned. She was happy that she was no more anonymous and finally had an identity that she had made for herself— away from the boundaries of class, gender and religion. In 2001, the seat for the head of the village council of Thuvrankurichi was declared a seat reserved for woman. Salma contested in the election and became the head of village council. This further helped to shape her identity and gave a political dimension to her career as a writer. Apart from voicing her concerns through writing, she could now directly work towards the betterment of society with this position in her hand.

Kim Longinotto made a documentary movie named *Salma* (2013) based on the life of Salma. The movie shows the journey of Salma back to her native village where she had spent some of the terrible years of her life. About the inspiration behind the movie, Longinotto says that she felt Salma's story was extraordinary because the oppression against woman was "happening for thousands and thousands of years all over the world, to millions of women, and yet so few of them have come out of that situation and told their stories in the kind of intimate and profound way that Salma has". Deeply moved by the struggles faced by Salma, Longinotto compares her to Nelson Mandela. Both of them came out from a period of long imprisonment (due to different reasons) without any feeling of revenge against anybody. However, the journey also points out that nothing much has changed in her village despite the success story of Salma. Though she managed to slightly alter the men of her family, her father and husband; the society seems aloof from any possibility of change. The orthodoxy still prevails with its customs of confining women, averting them from availing education and marrying them off at an early age. As far as her own village is concerned, she is still an exception and not the rule. Nonetheless, she has emerged as a role model for the Muslim women.

Both the novel *The Hour Past Midnight* and Salma's lived experiences tell a gut wrenching tale of struggles of Muslim women growing up in an orthodox village of South India. Combined with that is the resolute desire to speak out and live a life that is truly hers and not the one 'dictated' by others. Salma's life presents one of the finest examples of ultimate rebellion against gender inequality. Hers is a story of undying struggle, resilience and courage; an inspiration for upcoming female generation of her community and women in general. Salma emerges as an added jewel to the generation of Muslim women writers who have always held the banner of

revolt against the oppressive forces of society. Gail Minault calls Begum Shafi, Rashid Jahan, Ismat Chughtai, Shaista Ikramullah and others as the 'Daughters of Reform' in her book *Secluded Scholars: Women's Education and Muslim Social Reform in Colonial India*. If the book were to be written today, perhaps Salma would have found a place in it as another 'daughter of reform' for the sheer struggle that she faced in order to bring about a social awakening in Muslim Women through her writings.

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