PATHETIC CONDITIONS OF MUSLIM WOMEN DEPICTED IN THE WORKS OF SALMA- A PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT
Salma is a Tamil poet and novelist. Her original work ‘Irandaam Jaamathin Kadhai’ is translated in English by Lakshmi Holmstorm. Salma has described her childhood memories in her book, ‘The Hours Past Midnight’. She expresses her anguish at the treatment of girls belonging to Muslim community. The restrictions imposed on them inspired her writing the book. It traces the lives of a few Muslim women, their children and their omnipresent omnipotent men. She throws a light on the lives of a few women from all walks of life. Though they belong to the well-to-do, the educated, the poor and the destitute there are several common factors among them. The first one is that their lives are not theirs to live. Secondly, they’re 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 and her mother Zohra. 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.

Key Words: omnipotent, conservative lifestyle, pathetic, battered, sufferings, pangs, pain

INTRODUCTION
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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 and her mother Zohra. 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.

Over the past millennium the status of women in India has been subject to many changes such as from equal status with men in ancient times, through the low level of the medieval and finally to the promotion of equal
rights in the present century. Thus, the history of women in India is a testimony of the changes the position of women gone through. It is reflected by the positions of women as the President, Prime Minister, Speaker, Members of Parliament and so on. Yet, women in India are generally exposed to numerous social issues. Several stories reveal women as victims, oppressed and beaten down by systems that they did not construct and that hold them powerless. Their agonies are narrated by themselves to their children, friends, neighbours, lovers and husbands. These narratives are open to discussions and debates by several administrators. Women raise their inner voices in the forms of stories and novels throwing light on their pathetic conditions in the family and society. Violence against women has always existed, but when victims share their painful experiences, the phenomenon can no longer be ignored or compartmentalized. Because such outpour impacts both the speakers and the listeners. Thus, battered women recognize that they are not alone and in turn the listeners and the readers including other such battered women start noticing the commonalities and demand change.

One similar woman who has given voice to her thoughts is Salma, a Tamil poet and novelist. Her original name is Rokkiahal and people fondly call her Rajathi. She has started writing under the name of Rajathi even before her marriage. Her bold expressions of female subjectivity and the foregrounding of female desire, in her first collection of poems, came as a rude shock to the male dominated Tamil literary world. Hence, she has faced a lot of criticism from all corners. So, she became an under-ground writer under the pseudonym ‘Salma’ thereafter. This she continued from her marital home. She recalled how she and her mother paid a surreptitious visit to Chennai for the launch of her first book. She was caught on her return home by her male members of her family. When the success came, the cat was out. And nobody could stop or prevent her. Her original work, ‘Irandaam Jaamathin Kadhai’ is translated in English as ‘The Hours Past Midnight’ by Lakshmi Holmstrom. She has described her childhood experiences in it. She expresses her anguish at the treatment of girls belonging to Muslim community. The restrictions imposed on the inspired her writing the book. It traces the lives of a few Muslim women, their children and their omnipresent omnipotent men. She expresses boldly life in traditionally restrictive patriarchal context and personal sensitivities. It evokes a world of love, sexuality, betrayal, frustration, motherhood and a self that will not be silenced, belittled or suppressed. The lives of women in her book, their sufferings, pangs and pains are the reflections of women all over the world. Several women face similar situations.

“Neither my pain or my feelings are solely that of an individual, they belong to all such women” Salma says. Her writings call for social awakening in the Muslim world. She thinks that woman deserves a better treatment without offending the religion and establishment. Debarred from education and confined to her home from the age of 13, in keeping with the rigid conventions of her cloistered community, Salma remained a voracious reader and she gulped down the pages of Tamil translations of Russian literature, Walt Whitman, Kaleel Gbron and Poplon Neruda, which were only books available in the library of her tiny village. And the books were few in the small library; she had read and re-read the same books again and again. Heavy reading material all these, it made Salma those big authors personified and she emerged a fiercely committed writer. Despite periods of personal crisis, she remained firm in her resolve to continue her writing even in a somewhat orthodox marital home. Imprisoned in the house with no body of her age to share her feelings, she felt extremely lonely in the tender age. This loss of liberty ‘angered’ her and to avenge on that only she became a voracious reader, and to express her anger she found a vent with writing, first poetry that condensed her bent-up feelings and then fiction.

The novel tells the story of a community of Muslim women and men living in a Tamil village, from the perspectives of the women. The book sings with different voices, from the child Rabia, a girl who is about to come of age but as yet is still a young girl, her mother and aunt Zohra and Rahima, and the cousins, neighbours and women who make up their small and intimate community. It is a book that rings with laughter and the foregrounding of female desire, in her first collection of stories and novels, throwing light on their pathetic conditions in the family and society. It is a book that rings with laughter and women who make up their small and intimate community. It is a book that rings with laughter and female friendship, and yet can quickly turn heartbreaking and frightening. The novel’s action takes place over a couple of weeks, as the families prepare for Ramadan and the marriage of Rahima’s daughter Wahida to an older man she has never met. Rabia is a growing child in a conservative family in southern India. One day, she and her friends sneak off to the pictures. She was caught on her return home by her mother, Zohra, who cries as she beats her daughter into submission. Rabia fails to understand why her male friend is allowed to go to the cinema whilst she is beaten for doing the same.

The strict differences in the way the sexes are treated is brought sharply into focus with the return to the village from Saudi Arabia of Mumtaz’s husband, and the strict rules he insists the mosque lays down to restrict the freedom of the village women; from banning them from the cinema to far more damaging and violent repercussions for the transgressive, rebellious women who populate the novel. The double standards are also apparent in the women’s marriages. Mumtaz is afraid
that her husband will take another wife when she
doesn't get pregnant; Wahida is dismayed that her
husband has had affairs whilst she is a virgin; Firdaus
is forced to live in disgrace for having left her old and
wealthy husband who she didn't love.
Yet for all that the women are taught to be submissive
and obedient, they are strong, daring and brave. They
are resourceful and clever and loving. The double
standards between male and female behaviour culminates
in a devastating and heartbreaking event with family and
friendship betrayed. Salma demonstrates how religious
morality can result in something of a twisted morality,
where human rights and familial bonds are destroyed in
the name of religion. She describes how the women who
transgress are punished in the name of religion, when really
all they are doing is standing up for their own selves and their
own hearts. Because the story is told from the different
perspectives of the women in the village, Salma can
really exploit how the women view and react to the
situations they are witness to and experience.
The men in Muslim community are allowed to follow
polygamy in marriages. So, Mumtaz is afraid that her
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Wahida is dismayed to know that her husband has had
affairs while she is a virgin before marriage.

There is another character, Firdaus who is forced
important events of her life has [sic] happened, and were
now over”. Her family has had to ask for a talaq because
Firdaus took one look at her husband and refused to live
with him. Later, as her mother wept at having produced
such a “wild and defiant” child, Firdaus was astonished
at her own daring: “How could a village girl like her have
had the courage?”

There's another divorced young woman, Maimoon,
whose parents plan to get her married again. But before
that, something has to be done about the baby she is
carrying. The midwife is summoned in secret to perform
an abortion. But Maimoon’s body cannot withstand the
hellish twig-and-ointment operation. She dies a slow and
painful death along with the baby that drops from her
body in clots of blood.

There's the mistress who agrees to be sterilized so that
she does not lose her married lover; there’s the complex
mix of loneliness and desire driving those women who
do not have love or sex in their lives. Most of all, there
are the “hidden lives” and the lives in which the one
constant is a suffocating sameness. The hidden lives are
best illustrated by a recurrent image: the doorbell rings;
the girls in the house who have “come of age” run to
their rooms and hide. “In every house in the village, girls
who had come of age ran and hid in exactly the same
way”. As for sameness, there is the example of
Waheeda. She has been on a visit to a big town. But on
being asked about it, all she can say is that since the
same rules apply in village and town, there was little she
actually saw or experienced on her trip.

These are the things Muslim women should not do as
per the norms of Muslim Community:

- She should avoid standing on the balcony.
- She should conceal herself while welcoming men
  at the door.
- She should not go out after she has used perfume.
- She should wear her dresses long and not imitate
  unbelieving women.
- She should not speak in a loud voice.
- She should not walk in the middle of the road.
- She should not mingle with men or shake hands
  with them.

Instead these are the things Muslim women should do:
- Speak softly and honorably when walking.
- Walk by the side of the road, and keep away from
  the middle.
- Beware of standing by the door to welcome
  guests.
- Should never leave home frequently for
  unnecessary things.
- Never lower veil outside house under any
  circumstances whatever.
- Should take care of outfits while standing in
  the balcony.
- Beware of shaking hands with strange men.
- Avoid turning around and always look down.

I conclude the paper with a few questions:
- Are such impositions necessary on women?
- When would there be an end to the suppression?
- How long should women suffer?

The women characters in the novel have revolted
and brought about a change in their lives. Is it
possible in real life?

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