



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

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Article Received on :
20/03/2013

Article revised from:
22/03/2013

Article accepted on:
05/05/2013

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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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 Rokkaiah 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 too. She recalled how she and her mother paid a surreptitious visit to Chennai for the launch of her first book of poetry, without divulging details to any other 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 memories 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 Gibron 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 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 husband will take another wife when she doesn't get pregnant.

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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