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Manipulating Women in Islamic Society: A Ruminantion over Salma's *The Hour Past
Midnight*

Abstract

Despite great efforts and reform movements for empowering women, women have yet not received the status they are grappling for. There are still places, where women are struggling to come out of the settled boundaries, where they are pushed to sacrifice their big dreams to adjust into the limited circumference of life designed by the society. They have to force themselves into the rules fabricated by the society. The South Indian Tamil Muslim society is an example of female depravity from feminist rights like the educated city women . The proof of this hidebound mentality is that Salma has been the only Muslim female writer in Tamil literature. Salma's *The Hour Past Midnight* is a vivid elucidation of Tamil Muslim women, whose life go around the routine decided for them by the society, which is a result of sometimes the religion, sometimes of the conservative community and sometimes by the women themselves. The present paper throws light on the condition of women in Islamic culture particularly Tamil Muslim society and how they are deprived form equality in society even in the twentieth century.

Keywords:- Tamil Muslim Society, Female Identity, Marriage, Decision-Making, Discrimination.

The paper concerns with the exploitation and suppression of women in a particular society, where women are treated only as possessions and not as persons. the depravity of their rights can be seen in the song of fifteenth century poet Vidhyapati:

Let no one be born. But if one must Let no one be a girl.

If one must be a girl Then may she never fall in love,

If she must fall in love, Free her from her family.

This paper is an effort to throw light on the pain of being female in the lives of several women, their experiences through sexual psychological and physical exploitation especially in Islamic society and the text taken for this discussion is South Indian Writer Salma's *The Hour Past Midnight*.

Rajati or A. Rokiah is better known as Salma in Indian Literature. Born in rural Tamilnadu, Thuvankurichi in Trichi she comes from a very conservative background yet she holds a place of growing importance in Tamil Literature. She outspokenly talks about the taboos of Tamil Muslim society and her experiences and struggles, faced in conservative families. The paucity of women participation in society outside home can be understood by the fact that Salma is the lone Tamil Muslim woman writer. When she was 13 years old she was forced into marriage. In the semi-autobiographical novel she describes her own experiences. She started writing poems on scrap papers, because she was not even allowed to write in the orthodox family. Salma had a hunger for knowledge and her struggle at last made her successful. She does not belong to the modern emancipated women like us who discuss feminism on dinner tables or in drawing room talks or at some conference halls. She talks about those ladies who are actually neglected and devoid of any enlightenment. The paper is based on the English translation of the novel, originally written in Tamil, by Lakshmi Holmstrom. The novel was shortlisted for Man Asian Booker Prize. British documentary

filmmaker Kim Longinotto was much impressed by the life of Salma and made a film on her life entitled *Salma*. The beautiful film won BAFTA award.

The Hour Past Midnight is a story Tamil Muslim family, although Salma has written the novel with personal account its range is not limited to her or to a Tamil Muslim society. It can be a realistic picture of any Muslim woman who has been raised in a conservative society. She says in an interview with Gopal Ethiraj:-

Neither my pain nor my feelings are solely

that of an individual; they belong to all such women” (Interview by Gopal Ethiraj)

In a traditionalist stable Muslim society women are not given any respectable place. Women had no separate existence apart from home and hearth, had a slaving mind. They are not even allowed to peep out of the houses. By describing both men and women Salma portrays both aspects and tries to give a mixed glimpse so that the readers can themselves decide the actual position of women. The women, who have nothing to say of their own not even identity because in the society the concept of identity for males only. Here I remind of Bengali Baul singer Lalon Shah Fakir who sings,

Jadi sunnat dilay hoi Musalman

Narir tobay ki hoi bidhan?

The Baul here sings that circumcision (sunnat) is a process which turns a boy into Muslim or Muslman. But what about the women? There is no way that can make a woman Muslim. The answer is simple, they are women and they do not need any identity. Identity is for man only, who further identifies a woman; someone’s wife, someone’s daughter, someone’s sister. In a traditional Islamic society, women are not given any right to speak even in the important matters of family. They are deprived of the right to education; they are not allowed to step out of homes without any male assistance; they are not even asked before

fixing their marriages. The difference of marriage is not also seen while marrying off the daughters. When reaches to her menstrual age they are married and sent off with a man to whom they haven't seen or asked for. What is immoral for women becomes justified for man. In the name of religion they are shrouded with purdah while men roam around raping and abusing women and they are not doing anything wrong. The religion that they all follow is used as a strong instrument to snatch their freedom. Rabia, Firdaus, Aamina, Zohra, Rahima, Farida are the characters who are sexualized by the author in the novel.

Among many issues marriage finds most prominent space in the novel as the author herself has been a victim of early marriage, which is clearly visible in the various women of the narrative. The dominance of man in family's decision making is seen very obvious as they are the bread winners and always have an upper hand over others. If there is a variation in the male character or if they respect their counterparts they are not seen respectfully by others. For instance, Karim's brother, Kader, married to Rahima, respects his wife and believes in a participatory decision making process. However, his love and respect for Rahima is interpreted by Karim as his failure to be an ideal husband. Paying attention and considering the wife's likes and dislikes in any major decisions is considered to be 'unmanliness' in certain ways. As a result Kader also turns like others and no more considers Rahima as a partner and treats him as a woman who is there to fulfill his requirements only.

Marriage is posed as the only aim of being woman. And there also women do not play any part in their selections of husbands. Amina is the sufferer of male chauvinistic society. At the age of ten years, her marriage was settled with a man of thirty five years who is also a widower. Her mother's concern about the young daughter's wedding is also ignored by her husband Kani Rowther.

"But she's only just ten years old. I'm wondering why we should hurry, that's all. And then, this Ismail, he was married before and lost his wife; he must be over thirty-five, now..... Is

that all it is? I imagined it was something much more important.....I've given my word.

The nikah is to be held next week, on Friday.” (Salma, 39)

After suffering all her life, Amina becomes helpless at time of her beautiful daughter

Firdaus's marriage with a much elder, mismatching man.

...it is true the bridegroom isn't much to look at. But he's got plenty of cash; that's the main thing. Tell me, in these days, and in this world, who looks for suitability and all that? Besides, considering the position your family is in, it's a great thing that these people even agreed to be your in-laws. There's no father here; there aren't even any brothers to give the appropriate bridal gifts. Somehow they agreed, because of me; in the hope that I would have the odd piece of jewellery made for her. (Salma, 18)

As a result Firdaus disagrees to accept Yusuf as her husband and suffers humiliation all her life. Not only Amina and Firdaus Maimoon also suffers from the curse of similar situation. Wahida, a convent educated girl is married to a fifteen years older man. Money and property are the only ground for marriages. The tendency of ignoring female opinion in marriages is prevalent even in modern times.

Besides marriage, male and female upbringing also shows a great discrimination where women are not allowed to get proper education. At the age of puberty girls are not allowed to go school any more even when they wish to continue their studies. Rabia has to leave her school even before she reaches her puberty because her friend Madina has reached puberty and not going to school.

Zohra had declared Rabia need not study any more. Rabia had pleaded and begged as much as she dared. But Zohra had made her decision the day after Madina menstruated. She said, ‘ it's enough for you to stay at home, and be a well- behaved girl. Madina is not going to school anymore; I don't want you to go alone’. (Salma, 439)

While men are free to spend their lives as they aspire to. Leaving education is their personal concern. Elizabeth Spelman makes a point: ...

“no woman is subject to any form of oppression simply because she is a woman; which forms of oppression she is subject to depend on what “kind” of woman she is. In a world in which a woman might be subject to racism, classism, homophobia, anti-Semitism, if she is not so subject it is because of her race, class, religion, sexual orientation. So it can never be the case that the treatment of a woman has only to do with her gender and nothing to do with her class or race”.

In the name of the religion the moulavis or the priests of the mosque easily pass rulings or fatwa against women. When Suleiman returns from Saudi Arabia, he tries hard lay very stern rules against women of the town. He insists the moulavis to pass fatwa against women's going out of homes without any essential needs. The cinemas were also proposed to be banned for women. However, men can always enjoy going out for merry making. The Hindu women of the town were not included in these authoritarian statements, they were for Muslims only. On Rabia's demand of going cinema, she gets the reply,

But they've decided at the mosque that we are not allowed to go, so how can we see it? If you're a man, you may go. Or if you're a Hindu like Uma, you may go.... If anyone dared to break the rule, no Hazrat nor Nattaamai would ever enter their house to say the Fatiha on any occasion, good or bad. They would not be allowed to join any community function.” (Salma, 362-363)

Belonging to a particular community and a particular sex has been always the reason to be suppressed and to be the objects of torture and tormenting again and again. When Fatima sneaks away with a Hindu man Murugan, her other Nuramma has been expelled from the community in the name of the honour of the community.

...you know what the honour of our community is about. If we don't safeguard it ourselves, who will do it for us?... if we let you off today, tomorrow no one will have any sense of fear, will they?' (Salma, 253)

But the same community closes its eyes and justifies the same act when done by a man. Karim's relation with a Hindu maid, Mariyayi, which is a well-known affair in the town, no one talks of his expulsion, because he is a man and a man is allowed to entertain himself wherever he wishes to. At the same time Mariyayi's religion also helps her in not being humiliated by the society for this relation. Nuramma protests against this decision and makes all of them speechless.

"You say it was a sin for my daughter to elope with a Kafir. Is there a single man who hasn't slept with one of our Hindu worker women?" (Salma, 254)

But the protests of these ladies cannot justify their act by any method before the man made principles of society. The one who has to suffer is woman. Any transgression of rules laid by the society leads to disaster for female. Fatima dies in an accident; Firdaus, who is in love with a Hindu neighbor Siva is made to drink poison; Amina's sister dies in childbirth; Nuramma dies from hunger and exposure. However these failed rebellions do not leave any positive effect on the lives of women left behind rather their existing friendships are slowly dispersed.

Sian Norris rightly comments on this dual standard of the society:

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.

Polygamy has been considered as an act of immorality and as a sin in all the societies and in the law itself but the Muslim society justifies polygamy for man in the name of the religion. When Suleiman introduces his friend Abdullah and his fourth wife, all the men feel proud of it but only the women can understand the pain of a twenty five years old girl who is married to a sixty years old man and joined him as his fourth wife. Zohra criticizes this

“Your husband was prepared to pull out his tongue because Fatima ran after a man, but here he is sticking by this fellow! You should put him wise about that old man, who already has three wives, but goes and marries a fourth, ruining a young woman’s life.”

(Salma, 341)

. But they cannot tell this openly before the world. This anger is shown at many places but as Salma has decided not to be feminist in her writing, there is no scope for betterment for the ladies. Norris says:

Salma can really exploit how the women view and react to the situations they are witness to and experience. We are given a real insight into the characters and their lives. We are also shown how through suffering and oppression, an anger is born that can only have destructive consequences.

Women are only for home and hearth and producing children. If they cannot produce children they live in fear. Mumtaz is concerned about her sterility because she feels that her husband Suleiman will leave her and marry someone else. But her fear is materialized and Suleiman marries to Sherifa. Even Sherifa is forced into marriage without her wish.

Girl child abuse is also hinted at in the novel. However, Salma does not elaborate it at length. Rabia, reminds how a junior hazrat at madrasa touched young girls. But none of them had courage to discuss this at their families. Rather, they tried not to fall in such situation because if the family comes to know about it the girls would not be allowed to go out of

home. Again, after her sister Wahida's marriage she senses similar kind of sexual intentions from Sikander but here again she doesn't disclose this before her sister and tries to keep herself away from Sikander.

Salma tries to portray the condition of women in a particular community although she never directly criticizes the religion but she criticizes the religious practices as they are molded by the man of the community. She has only seen the community in which she lives but somehow these forms of female oppression is true in all related societies and communities. *The Hour Past Midnight* ends with changes that slowly take place in the society. The changes in the relationships of women is also seen, who hitherto used to collect and spend friendly time with each other and discussed all the things which were crime for them even to speak before men. In modern world where we talk of equal participation of women in all concerns, Salma has given the actual glimpse of female depravity from any form of empowerment.

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