

Silent Struggles: Women in Salma's *The Hour Past Midnight*

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Abstract

The paper intends to analyse the heroic lives of Muslim women, who are oppressed in the name of culture, tradition, and religion through a textual analysis of the novel *The Hour Past Midnight*, written by the Tamil writer Salma and translated by Lakshmi Holmstrom. The paper explores the struggles faced by the hero(in)es in the novel. Originally written in Tamil, and entitled *Irandaam Jaamathin Kadhai*, the novel depicts the challenging lives of Muslim women living in a cloistered space. The novel narrates the incidents in the lives of Rabia, her mother Zohra; Rahima, Wahida, Firdaus, Mumtaz, Farida and some other women of the neighbourhood. All of them are victims of the misogynist and patriarchal mind-set of their community. Some of these women stay silent, and endure every kind of pain and suffering with extreme patience and resilience. Others choose to defy the norms which are set for them and live on their terms. They stand up for their individuality, rights, and dignity. Each of these women, nonetheless, demonstrates heroic courage, fortitude, resilience, and resistance. By facing the predicament of their lives boldly, and by challenging the patriarchal institutions, these characters demonstrate that each of them is an individual full of potential.

Keywords- Resistance, Patriarchy, Misogyny, Religion, Culture

The Hour Past Midnight is a novel that covers the lives of women belonging to six Muslim families in a village in Tamil Nadu. The story revolves around the lives of Rabia and a few other Muslim women over a period of one year. The novel's action takes place over a few months, as the families prepare for Ramadan and the marriage of Rahima's daughter, Wahida, to an older man she has never met. The women are confined to their homes and kitchens owing to the restrictions imposed on them by their religious fundamentalists, society, and culture. Although Islam envisions an egalitarian society where women and men are considered equal in the sight of God yet cultural influences diluted the radical nature of the teachings of the *Qur'an* pertaining to women. The *Qur'an* upholds women's individuality at several junctures and asserts that each human is created from a single source of life that entails believers to respect the dignity of women.

O mankind! reverence your Guardian-Lord, who created you from a single person, created, of like nature, His mate, and from them twain scattered [like seeds] countless men and women;- reverence Allah, through whom ye demand your mutual [rights], and [reverence] the wombs [That bore you]: for Allah ever watches over you. (*The Holy Quran* 4:1; trans. by Yusuf Ali)

However, several Muslim societies are far from ensuring women's rights and are susceptible to regional cultural influence, several of which are pre-Islamic. A large number of pre-Islamic traditions and rituals were appropriated by Muslim societies to maintain their control over women and their individuality. Asghar Ali Engineer rightly opines that "*Qur'an* firmly upholds dignity of women as that of men. It does not discriminate between the sexes. It is social environment in which Shari'a formulations were made that is responsible for Islamists' viewpoint about women" (Engineer 129).

Salma highlights the misappropriation of religion by patriarchal powers to control the lives of women. There are several instances in the novel that describe a skewed version of religion disseminated and perpetuated by the men of the community. To highlight women's suffering, the author has ensured a catalogue of character from diverse economic backgrounds. The novel is a poignant narrative of the lives of the women in a small South Indian town and recounts their everyday struggles and worries; a narrative of relationships, love, hatred, and death. It transports the readers into the unseen world of Tamil Muslim women whose lives are choices are dictated by patriarchal authorities. Salma has portrayed a conservative society that forbids women from deciding the course of their lives. The novel not only highlights issues concerning patriarchal structures but it also bravely touches upon the matters of female sexuality and desire, and underlines the uniqueness and significance of female camaraderie.

Among the cast of characters, there are young and old women who belong to various castes and economic backgrounds. The novel revolves around a young girl who belongs to a wealthy Muslim family and whose innocence and naiveté touches the readers profoundly. Rabia is the thread that binds the characters of the novel. Another significant character is that of a beautiful young lady, Firdaus, who is forced to marry an older man. Firdaus demonstrates extraordinary courage and resilience in voicing her opinions by refusing to live with a man whom she finds repugnant. Wahida, Rabia's cousin, forms another valuable character who goes to her new in-laws' house with a fairy tale dream, however, she is pained to learn that reality is nowhere near to what she had imagined. Salma has also included a few Hindu women, as well, such as Mariyayi, the Dalit mistress of Karim, through whom the author highlights the Tamil Muslim's attitude to caste and women; and Uma and Ramesh's mother. No matter how different each character is, they are all bound by the fact that their lives are not theirs to live. Their lives are regulated by the patriarchal authorities in form of religious fundamentalists, society, and culture. They are constantly pushed and pulled around by the men in their households, by their extended families, by friends and neighbours. This comes through strongly in seeing the world through Rabia's eyes, a young adolescent girl who is unable to comprehend why she is treated differently than the boys.

The women characters in the novel demonstrate enormous courage and resilience in their attempt to reconstruct their lives through the small acts of rebellion. Although they live quite mundane and ordinary lives confined in the inner courtyard of their houses engaged in household chores, their conversation reveals their longings and desire. The characters of the novel can be classified into two broad categories: Firstly, those who literally transgress the boundaries of socio-cultural and religious norm; and secondly, those who do not defy the norms openly but try to manoeuvre the rules through small acts of rebellion that remain inconspicuous. In the first group of women, there is Fatima, who marries a Hindu boy; Firdaus who dares to reject her old and ugly husband on the wedding night itself; Nafiza who has an extra-marital affair; Farida who has an affair with the Hindu driver Mutthu. The characters who silently attempt to find the fault lines through which they could live relatively contented lives are equally courageous, resilient, and strong because they register their unhappiness, and make trivial but constant efforts to live life on their own terms.

The most defiant of all these women is the character of Firdaus who is the younger sister of Rabia's mother Zohra. Firdaus, a beautiful young woman, is forced to marry an older man to assuage

the fears of her poverty-stricken mother. However, she is bold enough to voice her opinion when she finds that the man had “wolf-like features” and adamantly refuses to remain married to him. The match was fixed by her brother-in-law, Karim, who considered the wealth of the groom as the only criterion. Since Firdaus had not seen or met her prospective groom, she cannot be blamed. When she saw him, for the first time, on their wedding night, her mind was filled with repugnance on his wolf-like features. She was forced to marry because “... he's from abroad.... He has lots of cash...” (Salma, 16). Though she goes with Yusuf, yet refuses to live with him. She says to Yusuf on the first night, “I’m not going to live with you. Don’t touch me” (Salma 17). Shocked at her own behaviour, she questions herself, “How come she had a voice suddenly? How could she have been so daring to refuse a man at the expense of her family reputation?” (Salma 17). She returns back to her village to face allegations of being a whore and good for nothing, but she still lives on. When Zohra tries to console her, she says, “Akka, just to look at his face repulses me. I can’t bear his wolf-like features and sickly body. I can never, ever live with him, Akka. I’d rather kill myself” (Salma 17).

Patricial Murphy Robinson writes that “Women’s strength as a sexual being is a constant threat” (Robinson, 252). Between the allegations of being a shame to the family, and good for nothing, the author relates Firdaus’s sexual desires. The author deserves applause for underlining female sexuality and desire especially through within women who are confined in the inner courtyards of their homes. Women’s sexuality has been undermined and controlled to effectively create a disconnection between women’s bodies and their sense of self. The book *Our Bodies, Ourselves* published by the Boston Women’s Health Collective writes: “Our bodies are the physical bases from which we move into world. Ignorance, uncertainty and shame about our physical selves creates in us an alienation from ourselves that keeps us from being the whole people we could be” (qtd. Gopal and Sabala p. 47). Firdaus’s physical desires are expressed when she began to fantasize over a man with whom she can never get united. This man is Siva, her neighbour, a married Hindu man with two young children. She eventually transgresses the threshold of her house, in the absence of her mother Amina, and forges a physical relation with him. When Amina learns about it, she forces her own daughter to drink a bowl of poison. Firdaus dies in the name of her family’s honour but her rebellious spirit haunts the air. Her wilful transgression poses a number of questions on society’s attitude towards a woman’s desires. Carol Vance rightly observes that “Sexualise violence has been acted out on women’s bodies to maintain the honour of the community, young girls are killed for having transgressed the boundaries set by the community, women are made to parade naked and publicly humiliated to keep them in fear and terror” (Vance 47).

A widow, Fatima, chooses to prioritize her own happiness above the socio-political and religious norms, and decides to carve a life for herself in which she is happy and contented. She elopes with a Hindu worker named Murugan. The entire Muslim community points out that the elopement of Fatima with a Hindu boy is a sin against the community. The *imams* and the elders of the community banish Fatima and excommunicate Nuramma, Fatima’s mother to set an example to other women. Nuramma challenges the decision by asking a few pertinent and thought-provoking questions in the following words: “... all you elders and big men, so you are going to ban me from the community! Very well, let it be so.... (What about you?) Speak out, let me hear. Let just one of you stand up; I’ll agree my daughter did wrong” (Salma 254). None of the men presents there could respond to her challenges. However, the decision is upheld and she spends the last days of her life in isolation, poverty, and utter disgrace. She, nevertheless, stays resilient and boldly prepared to die.

There are other women characters as well who stay within the claustrophobic spaces assigned to them but silently and secretly thrive to include their own happiness in their lives. Rahima, on her doctor’s advice secretly agrees to go for sterilization. When her husband Kader finds out, he does not speak to her for some time believing that “... she had gone against the Shariat” (Salma 71) by

refusing to accept Allah's will. Another noteworthy character, Nafiza, is married to an older man, Bashir, for whom she is an ideal wife but she has an extra-marital affair with someone else. Although she respects Bashir, she is unable to love him due to their age difference. She was married to him to keep the property within the family without considering their compatibility with each other. She lets her inner desires guide her life and meets her lover, Aziz, secretly. Yet another character, Farida, dares to have a romantic affair with Mutthu, the driver despite the strong hold of Suleiman on the women of his house, Farida

The strict differences in the way the sexes are treated are brought sharply into focus with the return of Mumtaz's husband, Suleiman from Saudi Arabia. He insists that the elders of the mosque should formulate stricter rules to restrict the freedom of women. He manages to get a decree issued which bans women from going to the cinema hall. The novel exposes the subjugated and restricted ways in which women belonging to the community live their lives and how women who dare to transgress the norms encounter damaging and violent repercussions which, often, are life-threatening.

Though women are conditioned to be submissive and obedient, they are strong, powerful, and brave. They are resourceful and clever and loving. Through suffering and oppression, anger is born that has constructive consequences. 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 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 artistically balance the opinions present in the novel by allowing the character to speak for themselves.

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