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AN ANALYTICAL STUDY OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AGAINST MUSLIM WOMEN IN 'THE
HOUR PAST MIDNIGHT' BY SALMA

BRIJESH KUMAR

(Research Scholar)

Department of English & MEL
University of Allahabad, Allahabad.



BRIJESH KUMAR

ABSTRACT

Women have been victim of domestic violence from time immemorial. Their rights have been suppressed in the name of caste, class, society, religion, gender, economic condition and their liberty is curtailed from time to time by patriarchal rules. *The Hour Past Midnight* (2009) is a translation of Tamil novel *Irandaam Jaamathin Kadhai* (2004) which Salma alias Rokkaiya has written. It depicts the exploitation of women due to double standard of various social institutions. The whole story is told from the first person point of view of Rabia, a 13 years girl child. Amina, Zohara, Rahima, Firdous, Mumtaz, Nafiza, Farida, Wahida, Maimoon are other women characters of three generations who bear the burden of patriarchal norms in somewhat similar style. They are forced to live a life of 'inferior other'.

Keywords: Domestic Violence, Patriarchal, Suppressed, Double Standard, Inferior Other

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(The Hour Past Midnight is not the life story of Salma. Nor is it the story of any one woman. It is the story of the daughters and sisters and hapless mothers and grandmothers, all caught in an inexorable web of growing up, getting married, bearing children and dying. It is the story of "woman in the set framework" (The Sunday Tribune-Nov. 8, 2009).

Since the early dawn of the civilization, at least, one thing is very common in different and disparate cultures, however, distant they may be in time and space, that women are considered 'inferior other' of men. Although, India has witnessed tremendous changes in the status and position of women in Indian society after the Indian renaissance, the Gandhian era and the decades after independence. The constitution of India has also guaranteed the equality of sexes as a fundamental right. Even then, the status of women who constitute almost half of the Indian population is not that much encouraging because gender based violence i.e. rape, domestic violence, mutilation, murder and sexual abuse, is a common problem for women across the globe. Such violence becomes much more prevalent in the cases of marginalized women who have to face double discrimination: of being woman in general and being muslim

women in particular which ultimately results into their exclusion and oppression in large numbers. The most pervasive form of gender violence is domestic violence which signifies violence in the family which in turn refers to violence against women in particular, as almost always the victims are women. To define domestic violence against women, two areas ought to be taken into account – physical violence (violence on the body) and emotional/psychological violence (violence on the mind).

The Hour Past Midnight is a translated work of Tamil novelist Salma alias Rokkaiyah. It narrates the doubly disadvantageous stories of many Muslim women in a conservative Muslim community in rural Tamil Nadu. It is a women-centric novel. Salma has enlivened many of her childhood memories through this novel. She expresses her agony at the treatment of girls belonging to traditional Muslim community. The restrictions imposed over her inspired her to write this novel which explores the lives of a few Muslim women, their children and their omnipresent, omnipotent men. It is a story not about the educated, emancipated and economically independent city-dwelling women, but about those women who're still, in this time and age, shackled to their homes and hearth, by notions of religion, by society and sometimes by themselves. It's a poignant narrative of the lives of the women in a small south Indian town, of their everyday struggles and worries, of relationships, of love and hatred, and of death. When, on the one hand, it is very clear that their lives are not theirs to live, on the other, they're constantly pushed and pulled around by the men in their households, extended families, friends and neighbours. Thus their subordination owes to a host of factors, including the social, economic, political, religious and educational marginalization of the Muslim women.

This is a story that covers six Muslim families in a village in Tamil Nadu and moves along chapter by chapter, revolving around the lives of Rabia and a few other Muslim women over a period of one year. The novel opens with the description of daily activities of Rabia and her friends. She goes to school everyday and enjoys a lot with her friends. She wants to study more and more but she lives in such a society where girls are allowed to study only before the age of puberty. It becomes very clear when Wahida, Rabia's cousin, is debarred from education due to her coming of age and more than this she is not allowed even to see men outside of her family. They treat it as if it is a sin and curtail women's freedom for such natural things. Portraying a realistic picture of her childhood once Salma said in an interview, "In the small village where I come from, girls' education was allowed only until they attained puberty. This was a strict, though unwritten, code of conduct which is followed by the entire community."

Even some of the village priests take advantage of the innocence of the people. They always think that people won't easily believe any kind of allegation against them. On the contrary the person who alleged will ultimately be punished. So most of them don't raise their voices against violence inflicted upon them. This usually happens in Rabia's village. No girl student likes the junior Hazrat (Priest teacher) in her village because he pinches the thighs of the young girls if they mispronounce even a single word while chanting verses from Holy Koran. On the other hand, he hits boys with the cane in their hands. To make thing worse, he often invites Rabia to sit next to him saying, "Rabia, come and sit by me. Your mother has sent word that I should teach you really well. And then often he would stroke her cheek and pinch it which fills Rabia with shame and repulsion" (Salma 13). She feels like crying in such moments.

The story is told from the different perspectives of the women in the village. Salma has really explored women's views, experiences and their reactions to the situations they are witnessing. 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.

There are many examples in the novel when women face the similar problems of exploitation by their own family members. Firdous, Rabis's young aunt is forced to marry to such a man (Yusuf) whom she does not like at all and keeps on crying but nobody listens to her. Women usually whisper in her hearing, "What a monstrous thing this is! Is this the best they can do for her, with her look?" (Salma 16). But the family members of Firdous are more anxious about his foreign earning and less about the suitability. Karim, Firdous' brother in law, who is behind the whole management of her marriage, says when his wife suspects about the suitability of the bridegroom, "What does that mean? Look here, 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?" (Salma 18). This marriage does not last long and results in divorce after a few days. And later on, when she increases her intimacy with a man, Shiva, of his own choice from different religion, she is forced to drink poison by her own mother in the same glass in which she used to give her milk to drink in her childhood. She keeps on crying before her mother but she does not relent.

Marriages in this community is not a matter of serious match making. Girls of marriagable age have not any right to select their bridegrooms. Someone is won in the gambling, other is promised in the childhood to be married. They do not have their own choice, they are puppets in the hands of men in their families. They are told about the decisions of men and how they have to follow them without any grudge. If such notions are examined in the light of Koranic verses, it becomes evident that Prophet Mohammad gave such rights of life partner selection to both the sexes. The format had been debashed due to the misinterpretation by the coming generations of priests for their own benefit.

In the family of Rabia, this did not happen for the first time but started much earlier when Amina, Rabia's maternal grandmother was married by her father. One day, her father Kani Rawthor was playing cards with Ismail, an aged man. He put her daughter at stake only just because of a joke and lost her to Ismail. However, it does not affect him the least, instead he is happy with the thought how smartly he had become able to get one of her daughters married. On coming back to his home, he informs his wife about his art of sudden match making as if to ask, "What do you think about my smartness?" (Salma 39). The happiness of Amina's mother has disappeared on listening the name of the expected bridegroom because Ismail is a divorcee from his first marriage and a fully grown man of thirty five while Amina is just ten. When Amina's mother request him to rethink about his decision, he replies, " I have given my word. The Nikah is to be held next week on Friday" (Salma 39). Amina was unaware of all this throughout the event because she was too young for marriage.

Encouraged by his success, Kani Rathour plans to get her second daughter married through his business contacts in somewhat similar style. But this marriage does not last for more that two months. Maimoon, his second daughter, denies to go with her husband. In spite of much persuasion form all members of her family, "I can't", was all she would say (Salma 40). Meanwhile Amina and her mother come to know that Maimoon has got pregnant, they think it a matter of shame for the family. They arrange a local maid to get the fetus aborted without informing anyone in the family. Maimoon dies a very tragic death in course of her abortion. Depicting the very pathetic death of Maimoon, Salma writes, " Maimoon's life ended that day, along with the baby that dropped from her body as fragments and shreds and clots of blood" (Salma 45). This event cripples him and he leaves going out. Now he realises his prior mistakes and all the sacrifices which his daughters had made for him.

The double standards of religious morality and men's untimely and improper promises are the two important factors in this novel which contribute in women's subjugation. They legitimized their wrong doings in the name of ethics and religion. Salma describes clearly how men who transgress are praised even when they are married while the divorced, widowed or single women who stand up for their own selves and their own hearts are punished in the name of religion. Male centric Talaq system allows men to follow polygamy in marriages that's why Mumtaz is afraid that her husband will take another wife when she doesn't get pregnant. Rabia's father, Karim, himself has extra-marital affair with a Hindu woman Mariyayi. Wahida, Rabia's cousin, is dismayed to know that her husband, Sikander, has had affairs while she was a virgin before marriage. When Zohara enquires of Sikandar's illicit relations from Karim, her husband, he replies casually, "So what?, How can we be bothering with all that? Men will be men. Its wrong only when women behave like that. As it is, he is marrying rahter late. How can he control himself so long?" (Salma 158). Wahida's mother does not approve this marriage by heart but unable to say anything because her husband has given words for this marriage. Nothing is changed in this community even after two generations because the marriage of Amina was also performed in somewhat same manner. Unsuitable marriages of Amina, Maimoon, Firdous and many others are the result of such promises made by their male family members. When marriages take place in this

community, suitability hardly matters for them.

Such ideological notions are so deep embedded in minds of people of this community that they cannot get out of it. They are being regulated by the false notions and ideas. This is where western Feminism fails to address the women's problems. For them, women mean those women who are white, work in multi-national companies and sit in air-conditioned chambers. They talk about the well-fed, well-bred, well-educated, well-dressed fair-skinned women. They neglect marginalized women and their pathetic condition in the society.

Women have always been prone to domestic violence in such patriarchal societies from their childhood to the end of their lives because they have to be under the control of father or husband or the son. Domestic violence is not supposed to be a social hurdle but a societal norm to promulgate the patriarchal ideologies in such a tightly religious and ethical society. This is the reason that a number of the victims of domestic violence have either refused to name the perpetrator of the assault or attributed the injuries to other reasons. Therefore, domestic violence is simply not a personal abnormality but rather it roots in the cultural norms of the family and the society. Thus, various norms of the society be it economic, cultural, religious or ethical which are inclined towards patriarchy and masculinity, are the important determining factors of domestic violence as well as the subjugation of marginalized muslim women.

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