

THE THREE FACES OF SALMA

The astonishing journey of one woman who escaped servitude to become a celebrated Tamil poet and social activist

BY KRISHNA WARRIER

It's a January evening at Park City in the US state of Utah, where, at this year's Sundance Film Festival, a packed audience is spellbound as a documentary titled *Salma* is screened publicly for the first time. It's the story of a woman who fought orthodoxy, imprisonment in her own home and marital violence to find her place among Tamil's most important contemporary poets. After the 90-minute screening, the 45-year-old poet is herself introduced to the audience by the film's director. She

gets a standing ovation.

The film has since won four international awards. "*Salma*, for all its celebration of a life lived against the grain," proclaimed US entertainment-trade magazine *Variety*, "has a sweet strain of melancholy that resonates, and suggests the story isn't over." Indeed, for the woman portrayed in that film, the past three decades—during which circumstances gave her three different names—have been a roller-coaster: From total subjugation to heading her town panchayat, being able to publish

PHOTOGRAPHED BY H. K. RAJASHEKAR

The poet at home today.



her poems and short stories, helping others, and travelling the world, her story is stranger than fiction.

“When I was young, I dreamed of freedom,” she says. “Today, I’ve fulfilled that dream, but I am still seeking happiness.” Recently, at her flat in Chennai, I tried to fathom what drives this extraordinary woman to live her dreams.

1 Rajathi, the Sensitive Girl

“Back in my village, when my name was Rajathi, that was my window to the world,” says the tall, attractive woman, pointing to a small window with iron bars in a photograph. “My older sister Najma and I could look out only from that one window.”

“What could you see?”

“Just a bit of street. And since it led to the cemetery, hardly anybody ever came that way.” Yet that window was all-important, a portal to light, air and the outside world. Stuck indoors, and confined to that one room, if any male visitors came by, Najma and Rajathi used to fight over their turn to look out the window.

In remote Thuvarankurichi, in Tamil Nadu’s Thiruchirapalli district, the *jamaat* council at the local mosque set the rules. After a girl attained puberty, the world outside was forbidden territory. One by one, Rajathi’s classmates too were confined, with no hope of any further education. “That’s how it was for Muslim girls, till they got married,”

she tells me. “After that they’d be confined to their marital homes anyway.” At age 11, Rajathi’s marriage too was fixed to Malik, a local boy.

Few people in her village were interested in reading. But Rajathi frequented its small public library. It had several Tamil translations of Russian literature, and the little girl moved on from comics and magazines to Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky.

Restricted to her home from the age of 13, a cousin brought her library books and magazines. With no newspapers at home, Rajathi read random pages in which groceries came wrapped. She remembers thinking desperately: *Is this it? Do I just have to live within these walls like my mother and sister, marry, have kids...and die?* In sheer frustration, she started to write down her feelings about the misogynist society around her, and the unrelenting loneliness—Najma, at age 14, had married and left.

By the time Rajathi was 15, the intensity of her feelings compelled her to switch to poetry. Writing was a release from her troubles. It kept her occupied and gave vent to her grief.

Soon, she was publishing articles and poems in two small magazines—her father posted them to editors. When she was 19, *Kalachavadu*, a leading Tamil magazine, published two of her poems. Its editor, intrigued by the young poet’s sensibilities, and the spelling errors that revealed her unfinished schooling, began to correspond with her.

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All the while, Rajathi’s parents were serious about getting her, too, married. She wept and protested strongly, even going on hunger strikes. Once she pushed a thin metal stick into an electrical socket, in a suicide bid. All she got was a shock and burned fingers. But Rajathi managed to fend off any attempt to get her married until she was 22. Then, one night in 1990, her mother woke the household, complaining of a terrible pain in her chest. The doctor who examined her diagnosed a life-threatening condition. Rajathi hastily agreed to marry. It turned out to be a hoax concocted with the doctor’s help.

2 Rokkaiah, the Bold Bride

Securely married off, she was now under the control of her husband, Malik, a land-owning agriculturist and popular local politician. Malik’s family kept her indoors and renamed her Rokkaiah, because Rajathi, they said, didn’t sound Islamic enough. She continued to write even after her two sons, Saleem and Nadheem, were born. She had to hide her poems from Malik. “Most nights he’d pick a fight,” she recalls. “He’d tell me to stop writing. It could go on all night. One day, he got some kerosene and said he’d kill himself, if I didn’t stop. Another time, he threatened to pour acid on

my face. So I would sleep holding Nadheem against my face, since I knew my husband wouldn’t harm his son.”

Rokkaiah kept her notebook under the bed and wrote while Malik was asleep. Malik found and destroyed it. She then wrote on bits of paper. “I’d hide in the toilet, stand there and write down as much as I could. I hid the pen in a box meant for sanitary towels. I hid my poems in the wardrobe under piles of saris.”

When her mother visited, Rokkaiah would get her to smuggle the poems out so that her father could post them to editors.

Rokkaiah also assumed the pen name “Salma” to hide her true identity. The Salma poems caused a sensation—perhaps no Muslim woman had ever written with such candour and intimacy, with no inhibitions about portraying village culture or sexuality.

Her poem *Oppandam* [The Contract], for instance, became a huge success:

...*The first words I hear
Every night in the bedroom:
‘What’s it tonight?’
These are, most often,
The final words too...*

Oppandam goes on to describe, in the first person, feelings about the man from whom “the mother of your child” craves some real affection.

“NEITHER MY PAIN NOR MY FEELINGS ARE SOLELY THAT OF AN INDIVIDUAL; THEY BELONG TO ALL SUCH WOMEN.”

There isn't any—it's a mere domestic contract ending regularly in sexual intercourse. The everyday metaphors and situations are potent. (English translations, and Tamil originals, of her poems can be read at the website poetsalma.com).

Their author, however, doesn't consider these experiences uniquely personal. “Neither my pain nor my feelings are solely that of an individual; they belong to all such women,” she has said.

Although some readers may find her verse shocking, Salma gets wide critical acclaim. “She writes from her own experience and has developed a unique style,” says Tamil poet and playwright Devi Bharathi. “She is one of the pioneers of modern Tamil writing. Though there are many more women writers now, no one has come close to her.”

Adds UK-based Lakshmi Holmstrom, who has translated some of the works: “I would describe her poems as, at their best, intense, courageous and honest.”

3 From Rokkaiah to Salma

In 2001, following a quota system, the Thuvankurichi town panchayat seat got reserved for women candidates. Malik thought it would give him more power if his mother or his sister

got elected. When they both refused, his only option was to ask his wife. Seeing opportunity and freedom, Rokkaiah agreed—and won.

Soon afterwards, Arul Ezhilan, a Chennai-based journalist and admirer of Salma's poems, learnt from a magazine editor that Rokkaiah was Salma. Ezhilan reached her village and secretly waited in Rokkaiah's sister's house until a woman in a burkha came by.

“I'm Salma,” she said. Ezhilan interviewed her and was captivated. “May I take your photo?” he asked. Salma hesitated and looked around. There was only a little boy there. “Quick!” she said, lifting her veil. Ezhilan clicked.

When the story was published in the widely popular Tamil magazine *Anantha Vikatan* in October 2001, Malik, her in-laws, indeed the whole village was outraged. One of their own was the writer of sensational poetry that exposed so much!

Rokkaiah's five years as chairperson of the town panchayat upset some of the male land-owners, but she won over the women and the oppressed labour class with her hard work. “The government had for long run a self-help initiative,” she says. “I modified it and invited women to join.” That enabled many women to get loans to start small businesses for which Rokkaiah helped train them. Meanwhile, Malik and his family realized they could no



Posing by the old window in her village.

longer control Rokkaiah. She was now the tough, influential Salma. No less.

When her panchayat term ended, she decided to write more—this time openly. In 2004, she published *Iran-dam Jamangalin Kathai*, about girls growing up in a conservative, rural Muslim community, her semi-autobiographical novel. (Its English translation is titled *The Hour Past Midnight*.) She also contested elections to the state assembly. “But my rivals played dirty,” she recalls. “They photocopied pages from my book, which had my views about reforming my community and distributed it among Muslim voters in the constituency.” Salma lost by a small margin of votes.

But a new window was to open for

her. Chief Minister Karunanidhi appointed her Chairperson of the Tamil Nadu Social Welfare Board. Salma shifted to Chennai with her sons.

In the city, Salma's social work, especially for women, gave her life a new dimension. She was instrumental in stopping many child marriages. “I'd get a call and go with a police team,” she says, but regrets it was hard to intervene in Muslim child marriages, because of personal laws. Yet she tried to help wherever she could, giving out her mobile number during her speeches or TV interviews, so that young girls could call her directly.

When the Welfare Board term ended, Salma suddenly had a lot of time at hand. She published *Saabam* [The Curse], her collection of short

stories. Today, she also travels widely. She is invited to literary meets, women's organizations, *Salma* film screenings and award ceremonies. "I now have an identity," she smiles. "Recently when I was in London, a man came running behind me and asked, 'Are you Salma?' This was a bit scary, but he turned out to be a fan and invited me home for dinner. I couldn't go only because I had a flight to catch."

Between writing in Chennai, where she continues to live, she often visits her village, 400 kilometres away, to be with her husband and her parents, and to attend to social service initiatives. There, she's also been trying to get Muslim girls to remain in school—but village elders still don't like her interfering in this.

Even so, Salma's work is admired by many. And her caring for others has changed lives. In 2010 she launched an NGO called "Your Hope Is Remaining" that works towards women's rights.

"Salma madam is like a mother for

me," says a 26-year-old woman, whom we will call Shantha. "If it were not for her, I can't imagine where I'd be today." Shantha's eyes well up as I chat with her at Sahodari, the Chennai YWCA's home and counselling centre for women in distressed situations. Four years ago, Salma had helped rescue Shantha from the clutches of sex traffickers who locked her up and exploited her for eight years, during which she gave birth to a boy, now aged five.

"With Salma madam's help I got my son admitted to a boarding school," Shantha tells me happily. "She arranged for the expenses from a foreign donor."

"Did you know that, many years ago, Salma madam too was locked up in a house?" I ask.

Shantha refuses to believe it. "How can that be? You must be talking about someone else! Salma madam is so fearless."

She had good reason not to believe me. I was talking about Rajathi and Rokkaiah. Shantha had only known Salma.

LIFE LESSONS

- I always prefer to believe the best of everybody; it saves so much trouble. *Rudyard Kipling*
- The first great rule in life is to put up with things; the second is to refuse to put up with things; and the third, and hardest, is to be able to distinguish between the first two. *Sydney J. Harris*
- One day can change your life. One day can ruin your life. All life is three or four big days that change everything. *Beverly Donofrio*