


Book Review: Salma: Filming a Poet in her Village

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Rajathi Salma and Kim Longinotto's *Salma: Filming a Poet in her Village* is a hugely engaging, disconcerting book that takes you behind the scenes of BAFTA award winning Kim Longinotto's beautiful film *Salma*. This is not an academic book but reads more like a travelogue or a personal journal, exploring the experiences of two women who come together to make the film.

Rajathi Salma is now a celebrated Tamil writer, her novel *The Hours Past Midnight* has been long-listed for the Man Asian Booker Prize, but she spent nearly two and a half decades of her life locked indoors against her will and wrote secretly, living in constant fear of getting caught. The documentary film tells her extraordinary story, and the book captures the filming through the eyes of Kim and Salma separately. Salma is the main protagonist, but the two accounts, of filming and of being filmed, emotively depict Salma's experience of patriarchal confinement and control. Though not an elegant literary experience, the book is certainly thought provoking.

Kim's account describes her experience of getting a team together, reaching Chennai, meeting Salma and making the film. She writes in an unpretentious style, almost as if you were reading her journal entries. Full of interesting anecdotes, her account brings to light various elements of life in Salma's village in Tamil Nadu state, including those within which women experience repression. Kim's feeling of distress at some of her encounters are clearly felt through her writing, including the experience of meeting a blind and unmarried 70 year old woman, kept indoors against her will for fifty years. She is intrigued by familial bonds and how "they are a great source of comfort to Salma, but they also suffocate, and ultimately betray her." She is an outsider in Salma's world and as such, most of these encounters are novel for her; she describes what she sees and hears but doesn't comment or openly pass judgement. While one might wish for some engagement with issues such as the politics of location, the orientalist gaze, and the risk of erasing the agency of the "third-world woman" (Mohanty 1988), this may be the filmmaker in her reflected in her writing. She writes "One of the reasons I love making films is that you're not forced to offer a reasoned, definitive argument."

Salma's rendition of being filmed is very intimate. Her writing style feels brutally honest, whether describing her apprehensions about the movie before Kim and her team arrived or her anxious reaction to Kim's short skirt, since "it would be sharply disapproved of when we went to my village." The juxtaposition of Salma's vivid stories and Kim's experiences paint a lifelike picture of the gripping documentary film-making process for the reader.

When Salma writes about her life in the next part of the book, her personal journey and the many gendered challenges she has encountered are overwhelming for the reader. She writes, "The discrepancy between the punishment of my brother and me was a telling insight into the treatment of women in our society." The image of a young Salma locked in a dungeon with a tiny, barred window stays with you long after the book has been read.

The book is peppered with photographs as well as with Salma's poems. The photographs draw your attention even as you read and evoke strong emotions in the reader. When you see the photograph of Salma's husband you instantly dislike him, and the photograph of Salma on her wedding day makes you think about how her mother feigned illness to trick her into getting married. The pictures are riveting, and the fact that they are all in black and white adds to their

poignancy. One cannot help but feel as though the portrayals of apparent physical proximity between husband and wife carry with them a deep, insurmountable emotional distance.

The graphic poems disturb you and leave you with images that shake you from inside.

“This bed, which reminds me / of pregnancy / and fills me with fear, / is the weapon my Master wields.” (No Traces Left)

Loneliness, fear and her attempts to come to terms with her changing body are common themes linking her poems. “My bloated body / and belly creased by stretch marks / are truly repulsive, you tell me; / and that / my body will not change – / not now, not ever / my voice, long buried / in a trough of silence, / mutters to itself: / Yes, it’s true. / your body is / not at all like mine, / with its fanfare / and its flagrancy. “ (Past Midnight) Lines like these tell us of her sufferings and add a lot to the book.

Salma: Filming a Poet in a Her Village does what a book should do. It tells a story. Although it’s a slim paperback it does not make for a breezy read; it jostles your mind.

Salma: Filming a Poet in her Village can be bought from the publisher’s website here: <http://www.orbooks.com/catalog/salma/>

[This post was edited on 3/12/13 to remove an inaccurate reference to FGM.]

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