SALMA

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FILMING A POET IN HER VILLAGE

Rajathi Salma and
Kim Longinotto

WITH KANNAN SUNDARAM
AND URVASHI BUTALIA

OR Books
New York • London

Published by OR Books, New York and London
Visit our website at www.orbooks.com

First printing 2013

Cataloging-in-Publication data is available from the Library of Congress.
A catalog record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-1-939293-13-8 paperback
ISBN 978-1-939293-14-5 e-book

This book is set in New Caledonia. Typeset by Lapiz Digital, Chennai, India.
Printed by BookMobile in the United States and CPI Books Ltd in the United Kingdom.

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DREAMS AND WRITING

My youth was full of dreams and their fragrances. Those days, bereft of contact with outsiders, forbidden as if it were the fruit of Adam and Eve, I spent in conversation with books and with myself. It was a period when the dark, wearisome, and inert hours of the daytime made me yearn daily for nightfall. The night was a time of sleep, and sleep was the pathway to dreams. With every night beginning and ending with dreams, my days began to grow heavy. Just like the protagonists of my novel, I too had a life that was made up of journeys in the night. Later, when it was clear that my dreams were to go unfulfilled, my days began to char and blacken. An innocent girl forsaken by fortune and the gods, I was forced onto a circular path. In that situation, the solitary hope that I clung to was to be found in books and writing.

At the time I scarcely knew the other door which was about to open nor anything of its limitless boundaries. The darkness, rancor, and the pain of not being able to write were escaped through that door, and from then on my world was surrounded by light. I pinch myself to ascertain that the path I am walking on is indeed real.

Today, those dreams of an earlier time are gone; so is my youth; so is the Salma of those bygone years. I am no longer afflicted by the pain of not being able to write. The pages yet to be written, the distance yet to be traversed, and a life that is happy to some degree—all these are solely in my hands. I must spend this life writing with energy and commitment.

Just as books had broadened my perspective then, Kim Longinotto's documentary *Salma* has expanded my world today. By editing and publishing this book, Colin Robinson has tried to give a certain fillip to my writing.

—Salma, July 2013

In the village.
From left to right:
Amina, Salma's
grandmother;
Fatima, Salma's niece;
Salma;
Salma's mother,
Sharbunnisha

FILMING SALMA

Kim Longinotto

In January 2011, I was in Delhi showing my film *Pink Saris*. The festival was held at the India International Center and the screening was outside at night, under a half moon, in the lovely gardens there. During a seminar the following day, Urvashi Butalia, head of the Indian feminist publishing company Zubaan Books, proudly told a group of us about a Tamil writer and poet, Salma, who she'd recently published. Salma's story was so inspiring and unusual that I knew I wanted to make a film with her.

Salma grew up in a village in Tamil Nadu, South India. When she was born, her father was very disappointed to have another daughter. He already had three girls from his first wife and now his new wife, Salma's mother, had failed to give him a boy. So Salma was handed over immediately to her aunt who was just a child herself, only seven years old.

As soon as Salma's aunt reached puberty, she was married off and so Salma had to go back to live with her parents. Salma loved school and having friends but in keeping with village tradition she had to give up studying when she was just thirteen years old. She was kept inside her family home, often restricted to a tiny room, for nine years, until she agreed to marry. After the marriage, Salma's husband still refused to let her go outside and she spent a further fifteen years kept inside except for occasional visits to her mother's house. During this time Salma became a devoted reader and then started writing herself, composing poems that are raw and eloquent expressions of her experience of seclusion.

Using an elaborate system of subterfuge, and with her mother's help, Salma's poems were smuggled out of her home and eventually found their way to Kannan Sundaram, a publisher in Nagercoil, who, recognizing their power and originality, printed them in his magazine. They caused a sensation. No one had ever read Tamil poems like these, composed with such passion, and from a woman's point of view. They were so beautifully written that people imagined they must have been penned by an educated city dweller, man or woman, and written in the persona of a village girl. There was great speculation as to who this "Salma" might be.

ONE EVENING

1.
Another evening
slips withered
into the crevice of loneliness.

Legs too weak
to scale the walls
walk about in the dark
of the inner chambers.

In the heat of breaths
exhaled by the room's
neat arrangements rises
the pungent odour of sulphur.

There can be no second opinion
on the futility of the attempt
to excavate and thaw
dreams long frozen.

There could be species
in this universe that live
in pleasure, subsisting only on
their prey and conjugal courtesies.

The succession of tense nights
and the child's restless whines
will turn into
a source of mockery about me.

2.
This existence
is complicated—
like the life of a cat
that hides in the kitchen.

A thick layer of cream has formed
on the tea waiting to be drunk;
its burnt smell is hounding me.

In the drawing rooms
full of human bustle,

there’s no one with whom
I might strike up an acquaintance.

Solitude in the bathroom
creates fear, stemming from
revulsion over nudity.

Houses erected inside cages
swell their hustle and bustle
solely to frighten me.

In the gardens raised
within walls, there’s no shade
in which to sit and rest.

Nor is privacy ensured
by the open spaces
of the terrace upstairs.

There’s no seat on which
to sit comfortably,
dangling one’s feet.

If my child
loaned me
his crib,
sleep might become possible.

Finally a Chennai journalist, Arul Ezhiland, managed to track Salma down in her village and persuaded her to let him take a quick photograph. Her picture appeared in his magazine and the mysterious Salma was suddenly unmasked as a village woman who had hardly ever been outside her home. The village was scandalized and Salma's life was very, very difficult and dangerous for a long while. Salma's husband, Malik, was the head of the village at the time and, though he himself was hostile to her writing, his powerful position in the village probably afforded her some protection.

The next elections for Malik's position as "Panchayat Leader" came under a special government edict that only women be allowed to apply for the job that year. Malik tried to persuade several women in his family to run as a surrogate for him, but they all refused. Then, in desperation, and at the last minute, he asked Salma. She signed the form and her life was transformed. Her mother-in-law suddenly had to allow her to go out to campaign. Salma could also argue that she would never win votes if her face was hidden from view.

Salma's remarkable journey back to the outside world had begun. She won the election and went on to become an activist

and a political representative. Her fame now extends beyond Tamil Nadu, across all of India and the world.

Salma's story is remarkable. Although her fate as a virtual prisoner kept shut away in her own home is one shared by millions of women, very few manage to fight their way back into the world and live to tell the tale. Urvashi's excitement in sharing Salma's story with us was tangible and infectious, and so I wrote to Salma saying, "I've heard your story from Urvashi, and I think it would be great if we could make a film together about your life." At this point, I thought the film would be structured around Salma's work as President of the Social Welfare Board—a job she'd been doing for four years. I imagined we could film her stopping child marriages and encouraging women who were being abused at home to fight back. I got an email back from Salma almost immediately saying: "When do you want to come?"

She sounded so warm and friendly that I felt even more determined to make the film.

———

The next step was to raise the money for the film. I went to Hamish Mykura at Channel 4 TV in London. I'd made two films with him already and we'd got on really well. He was a perfect

Commissioning Editor, very smart and flexible and interested in making films about people like Salma who are largely unknown in this country. Many people in TV are now obsessed with celebrity and only want to fund films that have an obvious "British angle." Hamish is unusual in that he trusts the audience to watch films with an open mind and see how the stories they are watching resonate with their own lives. When we first met about the project he'd said pretty much straight away, "OK, let's do the film." But then I didn't hear anything from him for weeks and weeks. I began to think he'd changed his mind.

I found myself lying awake at night wondering what I should do. I wrote to him several times but didn't get an answer. Later, I discovered that his assistant, who was new, hadn't passed on my emails. On top of that, he was in the middle of leaving the Channel. In the end I felt I had to call him up. He sounded surprised and reassured me that his initial commitment still stood. The formal commissioning of the film was finalized the day before he left the job. It all got going just in time. I felt very lucky.

I began preparations for the film. I got in touch with Shenny Italia who is based in Delhi, to get the filming permits from the Indian government. She did it really quickly. Then I met Sara

Lima, a sound recordist, who I'd wanted to work with for ages. I also needed a translator to work with. I Skyped several friends of Anupama Chandrasekhar, a lovely playwright who'd worked at the Unicorn with Tony, my partner, and who lives in Chennai. Through her I got to meet Samyuktha PC. She was free to start immediately and seemed really enthusiastic about working on the film.

It turned out that Samyuktha's mother was a friend of Salma's and so she'd been familiar with Salma's work from an early age. She was easy to talk to and I felt an immediate bond with her. She agreed to find us a place to stay in Chennai, where Salma, having left her village, now spent most of her time.

Before setting out for India I also met Lakshmi Holmström, who had translated Salma's novel and many of her poems into English. She had some troubling news: in the lengthy time that had elapsed between my initially pitching the film to Channel 4 and receiving the formal commission, the political party which Salma represented had lost the elections. Salma was now living alone in Chennai without a job. My initial idea of filming her at work, as a politician representing women who had gone through the same experiences, was no longer possible.

I was now worried about finding a central drama; a focus for the film. It seemed hard to imagine what would actually be on the screen. I was used to making "observational" films where the audience can feel a part of the action and learns about the characters and the place through watching events unfold in front of the camera. I'd never liked the idea of relying on interviews to tell a story. It always seemed second best to watching things actually happen.

But I was committed to making this film. I wanted to tell this story and I knew I'd probably never have the chance again if I let this one slip away.

The most extraordinary aspects of Salma's life, the years of struggle and resistance, had all taken place in the past and yet I had to figure out how to tell this very personal, internal story. This would have to be a film about memories and dreams, about what Salma was thinking rather than what she was doing. Most of her adolescence had been spent alone in a small room with a tiny, barred window and later, as a married woman, in a house she couldn't leave. I had to recount these experiences in a way that would hold the attention of an audience. It would have to be a subtle and layered film. The drama of the story would need

to be uncovered. I was horribly afraid that the family wouldn't want to be in the film.

We arrived in Chennai where Samyuktha had found us a wonderful guest house. It was the Young Christian Women's hostel, set in a beautiful park about thirty minutes from where Salma lived. You could get meals in the canteen there. It was perfect.

The next day we went to visit Salma. She lives on the seventh floor in a tower block. It's a pleasant, breezy flat and I loved all the brightly-coloured walls and comfortable sofas. We met Salma's sister, Najima, who was immediately welcoming and seemed happy to meet us.

Salma was a delight to be with from the first moment we met her. She has a lovely, expressive face, and an easy, relaxed manner. She wanted to know what we wanted to film. I explained that we'd have to make this film as a team and we'd largely be guided by her. We said we'd follow her in her daily life and see where it took us.

We soon developed a rhythm in Chennai. We'd turn up at her flat whenever Salma was happy for us to be there. She'd

Our film crew finally together in Salma's flat in Chennai.
From left to right: Kim; Samyuktha PC; Salma; Sara Lima

let us know by text. Then we'd sit around and maybe film her a bit in her kitchen, perhaps chatting to her sister or engaged in everyday things like preparing food or sweeping up. Bits and pieces, not much. She'd make us tea, or her sister Najima would cook lunch.

Things were progressing at a leisurely pace, bordering on the frustratingly slow. I felt lucky that the sound recordist, Sara, never once complained that we weren't getting outside much. She was committed to the film and if that meant sitting around an apartment all day, she seemed happy to accept that. Lots of sound recordists would have made a fuss. They would have wanted to know what we were filming each day and demanded a schedule. Sara was never like that. Samyuktha was also very good at hanging out and going with the flow. She'd happily chat with Salma but she was also able to sit quietly if Salma was writing, or daydreaming, or simply talking to Najima. The longer we were there, the more Salma was comfortable chatting to Sara and me in English. It was nice when she decided to talk to us directly.

After about two weeks I felt able to talk to her a bit in English about the ideas I had for how we could make the film. Salma seemed very receptive.

Samyuktha quickly got into the rhythm of working together. If you're filming an event, then it's easier to know when to start filming. But on a project like this, the translator must concentrate all the time, yet still remain relaxed. It's a hard combination for people to achieve. Cartier Bresson calls it "a state of grace." You're constantly on the alert, but you're also not visibly waiting. Samyuktha, Sara, and I would talk to each other a bit in the car going to and from Salma's about things that would be good to film. It turned out that Samyuktha and I had a lot of cultural tastes in common that allowed us to discuss things with references that made sense to us both. We'd read lots of the same novels by authors such as Jonathan Franzen, Katharine Mansfield, Anjali Joseph, and Aravind Adiga. We also had musical tastes in common: we both liked the Smiths, New Order, and especially the Cure. We'd seen and enjoyed the same films. The way that our cultural references aligned was amazing. Together, we went through Salma's poems and chose the ones we both liked.

We were always ready to begin filming as soon as Salma started to tell her story. It was rare for us to ask her to explain something. Generally she would decide when to talk. Samyuktha had already explained to her that we needed to cover the important phases

MENOPAUSE

As markers of youth
dissolve, the season
for inferring a confluence
of intrigues draws near.

One arid day,
Time, now turned bland and cold,
Is served up as my fare.
These days, after the erasure
of my compassion's traces,
only hard and difficult bargains remain.

Even when the body,
with its slack gait, is ready,
it is never feasible to bind
together the ache in the knees
and the mind's torment

with this age
and protect myself.
A few straggly hairs have
sprouted along the jaw line.

Like an empty polythene bag adrift,
the mind swings this way and that.

I hold on tight to the wind;
the body will twist and strain
to keep the hand from slipping.

Festivals recur, even after
the traces of previous festivals
have faded entirely.

MY ANCESTRAL HOME – 2

During an hour fixed
by prior appointment,

the doctors strip away,
working with unwavering attention,
her womb from the woman
lying unconscious on the bed,
her skin wrinkled
and dark as a raisin.

Like a thick slice of liver meat,
it floats on the silent
expanse of the water-filled pan,
together with its now-exposed mystery.

The excitement pouring forth
from the center of my heart
towards that bit of flesh, where
my life had once found shelter,
turns later into enormous grief.

It might have borne
a life many times; but
for her, like the scalding
heat bred in a latrine,
that organ could
only have been accursed.

Its soul, turned to dry fibre
after relentless predation,
may find its peace at last.
A little before the appointed hour,
after staring intently at the light
lying scattered below the wire mesh
outside her room, she said
in a fearless voice:

“I am a half-woman from now on.”
The rancour, born of a sense
of loss smouldering
in those words, never allowed me,
later, to find my own peace.

of her life: reaching puberty, being kept in seclusion, getting married, smuggling her poems out, her books being published, getting elected, and leaving home. Salma worked at her own pace, when she was ready. She expected us to respond to her moods and to film when it felt right. She was making the film with us. It was a true collaboration. We worked together as a team: me, Sara, Samyuktha, and Salma, the protagonist. She knew what she wanted to say, and it seemed she wanted the story told as much as we wanted to tell it.

I had always thought that it was harder to make the sort of observational films where you capture events as they happen, constantly staying alert to avoid missing a crucial moment. But filming Salma turned out to be just as difficult. With this film the challenge was to do justice to a story that had mainly taken place in the past, while simultaneously making it compelling to watch. I couldn't just have dialogue; I needed meaningful images to make things come alive on the screen. I had to find the emotions that would draw the audience into someone's life and help them experience it for themselves. But I also wanted there to be layers of meaning in the film, subtleties and hints of things that can't be spoken.

For example, when Salma talks about her childhood, she starts by telling us how her mother was always frightened, how her father was always shouting and angry, how he terrorized his young wife. We put these words over a small scene of Salma and her mother cooking together, so we're able to give the audience a sense that even as everyday life in the family seems to run smoothly, under the surface there is the fear, loss, and sadness of a past that no one acknowledges. It's the hidden emotions that haunt most families. Then we cut to her father. He looks straight at us for a while and then he says about Salma, "She's too clever. She condemns us." I think the juxtaposition of these images works very effectively in the film, because Salma is constantly talking about the raw pain of her life, whereas her family members speak very calmly as if nothing momentous has ever happened and as if they weren't emotionally damaged by it. For example, Salma asks her mother why she gave her away at birth and her mother answers us, not Salma, saying in quite a casual way, "I was too young to care." It's evidently safer and less distressing to talk to us about it than to answer Salma directly. Salma had obviously never asked her mother about this before. It's really quite odd.

Everyone is breaking all the rules: they're talking to us about taboo subjects, about the hidden decisions that shaped their lives.

I wanted the film to be like a novel. The film's editor, Ollie Huddleston, suggested it was like a detective story, where the plot progressively uncovers truths that surprise us with their twists and turns. You're going deeper into people's motives, their fears, and their hopes. You have to think flexibly and follow the strands that people offer you. You have to be open to the feelings that people reveal that they wouldn't normally express. The film needed to embrace the complexities and contradictions. For instance, Salma's mother was like her jailer—refusing to let her go out or to go to school. She is also someone who betrayed her in the most profound way by tricking her into marriage. But nevertheless, she loves her daughter and wanted to save her. She helped her escape by smuggling out the poems in the dirty laundry. Salma calls it "the knots and ties of love."

We were in Chennai for about three weeks and the film was moving along very slowly. In an entire day, we might only film a

single shot of Salma reading. We sometimes got travelling shots of Chennai on the way home but overall we didn't seem to be making much progress. I was constantly thinking, "Wow this is hard!" Then one day Salma told us she was ready to go to the village with us. And then she told us about her childhood in a big outpouring that lasted about forty minutes. She was preparing us for what we would find there.

The reason I was so excited about this film in the first place is that Salma's life and her poems give a voice to countless other young girls all over the world who are locked up at puberty and taken out of school. Malala Yussuf has written that she thinks sixty million girls are denied education every year. And every day, without any say in the decision, more than 25,000 girls in India alone are married before they turn eighteen. But it's so hard to know the full scale of the suffering because it often all happens behind the scenes, in secret, in the family. All those wasted hopes and dreams. Sometimes the girls are shut away for the rest of their lives. I knew about this in a general way before making the film, of course. But I'd never faced up to what it actually feels like, the desperation that's involved. When you meet someone and you see where they've been kept, like Salma's

little dungeon with a barred window, it's a completely different thing than knowing about it in theory.

Salma was a lovely companion and subject. She never made us feel that we were a burden to her. In fact, she seemed happy to have us around. You can't spend time in her company without admiring her bravery. She knew we were going to film her for ten weeks straight. It's an extraordinary thing for someone to allow and yet she did it with grace and warmth. I very quickly grew to adore her.

Sitting in the room where she spent much of her adolescence

After about three weeks with us in Chennai, Salma was ready to go back to her village. We went on an overnight train in a sleeping compartment that we shared with a man who snored loudly all night. The train moves very slowly through the dark, stopping at lots of small villages along the way. The 350 kilometer journey took over eight hours.

A family friend of Salma's picked us up at the station and drove us to the village. The sun was coming up over the flooded land as we passed people working in the fields at sunrise. At first sight, the village appears to be extraordinarily beautiful. It's a small community with narrow, busy streets and brightly coloured houses.

But there was something about the place that immediately felt oppressive. I could sense it straight away. Salma dressed differently there. She wore a sari, which she rarely does in the city, and sometimes she'd cover her head. You could feel the pressure on her from the village. She was more subdued. I very quickly came to realize that though her village is just a place, a group of houses, it is also a state of mind, a way of thinking with its own rigid rules and regulations. Everyone we talked to there would say things like: "The village wouldn't allow it" or:

"We were afraid of the village" or: "The village punished her; you can't go against the village."

We couldn't help but notice all the barred windows. They were everywhere and you knew that there were women standing behind them, looking out. Often they were at ground level and you couldn't see in, but you could still sense a watchfulness, a presence there in the dark. There's a bit in the film where Salma is talking to her aunt and her aunt points to a tiny window and says, "There's someone looking at us from there, and over there too," and you realize how brave she's being in talking to us and showing her face. Her every move in the village is being observed.

We stayed in the house belonging to Salma and her husband Malik. They have a spacious, airy flat with tiled floors and lots of light. I shared a bed with Sara in Malik's room and Salma and Salmyuktha slept in the bed in Salma's room. Malik slept on the floor in the main room by the front door.

Unexpectedly, I grew fond of Malik while we were there. He was really very welcoming and kind to us. He would often buy us food for lunch and would get the Hindu newspaper for me every day, because he knew I liked to read it. It helped that Salma's family wasn't hostile to the film. Her father

seemed largely uninterested in what we were doing and her mother was actively enthusiastic. She seemed very proud of her daughter and of her own role in getting the poems safely out of Malik's house. Salma would write them down on small scraps of paper and hide them in her saris, which would then get sent out to her mother's house for washing. Salma's mother would retrieve the pages, put them in an envelope, and then give them to Salma's father to post. Salma's mother knows that she has done something absolutely unique. She has defied the village and survived.

According to Salma, we were the first "foreigners" to stay in the village. We were certainly a big novelty. The girls in the flat downstairs, the one at street level, were very friendly. Even women who didn't dare to be filmed were kind to us. Once, we were walking down the street and a woman came running up to us. She asked us to go to her house and meet her daughter. We went in and a young girl was standing there waiting. She said she'd heard about us and had been dying to meet us this whole time. She showed us the threshold that she was forbidden to cross. Her delight was so touching: she'd learned English at school and was so excited to talk to us. We also visited a woman

The view of the street from Salma and Malik's house in the village

who was blind and unmarried and who had therefore been kept inside her entire life. She was seventy years old and had been kept in that house for more than fifty years. She couldn't stand up, she was too weak,

Salma told us that most of the women in the village couldn't appear on camera. We never filmed anyone unless we knew they were happy for us to do so, and at first that meant we could only film Salma's mother and her aunt. But gradually, as people became more accustomed to the idea, some of them changed their minds and decided they wanted to tell their stories.

Salma's mother-in-law, who had initially been adamant about not being filmed, suddenly changed her mind and, on the very last day we were in the village, said, "Film me, I want to talk to you about Salma." A school friend of Salma's appeared secretly in the night, dressed in a burka, and told Salma: "I always tell my sons about you. I say 'there's a woman called Salma; she escaped the village and now lives in Chennai.'" It was a tremendously brave thing for her to do because she'd been specifically forbidden by her husband to go to Salma's house. Her life had pretty much stopped when

she'd married; she wasn't able to get books anymore and had to give up her studies. We realized that over the years Salma had become a kind of legend in the village for many of the women she left behind.

While we were making the film, I knew I had to try and capture the different layers of meaning attached to the lives of the people we were encountering; shades of emotion that often contradicted one another.

For example, take familial bonds: they are a source of great comfort to Salma, but they also suffocate, and ultimately betray her. They offer a sanctuary from the world, but they are a haven that imprisons. The scenes set around mealtimes encapsulate these contradictory feelings. We watch food being used as a consolation, an expression of love, and also as a weapon. We learn, for example, that when Salma was taken out of school, she tried to starve herself as a protest, and it was the aunt she loved who forced her to eat. We watch the same aunt forcing Fatima, Salma's niece, to eat.

I hope it's clear in the film that everyone has a different perspective, that they are each telling their part of the story, and that the contradictions are sometimes stark. When

WARIS DIRIE

They await their turn
to have their vaginas sewn up,
these little girls
huddling inside the tight grip
of their mothers' hands.

Excised by a nurse's
blunt Instruments,
the waste tissues, resembling
tiny flowers, lie strewn
on the desert rocks.
The little girls'
blood-drenched cry
trembles in the wind.

Inside the vaginal cavity,
cut and sewn tight, inaccessible
to a penis,

piss and menstrual blood
strain for release.

All over the world
they are lined up in a parade,
awaiting use by a stranger—
these brand new vaginas,
safe and guaranteed.

With their ruined libido
and terrible pain,
they are disappearing
inside the pages of history,

these sisters
of Warris Dirie.

Waris Dirie is the author of the autobiography *Desert Flower: The Extraordinary Journey of a Desert Nomad*. Born into a nomadic family in Somalia, she ran away at 13 to escape marriage to a much older man. She is well-known as an activist campaigning against female genital mutilation, which she suffered as a child.

Samyuktha asks Salma's husband Malik why he was so angry all the time you see him puzzling over what his anger was all about. He's struggling to explain it to himself. The question evidently shakes him. He says: "When you're a child you're jealous, when you're a young man you're arrogant, then your children make you angry." The anger is deep in him and you can see that previously he always took it for granted. You also see him torn between acknowledging that he has behaved badly towards Salma, threatening and abusing her, stopping her from writing, and between his great pride in her achievements. We realize that he is still very much a part of a powerful and reactionary village culture that has shaped him. These feelings battle inside him so that one moment he can say, "Anyone else would have divorced her {Salma} by now," whilst at another moment he will wonder aloud, "I don't know what Salma thinks of me, I don't think she appreciates me," revealing what seems a genuine longing to be valued for the huge changes he himself has gone through. For much of the time he seems distressed and confused. It's a condition that pervades the village. The women are shut away and suffer terribly, but nobody else seems truly happy either.

There are lots of other examples of peoples' conflicting emotions throughout the film. When Najima speaks about her son, she says, "I am bound by his love." You can see both the pleasure and the pain she derives from this. This love makes her life worth living but it's also something frightening. She has to pretend to her son that she experiences no pleasure of any kind. She won't express any enjoyment of anything they see or do for fear of upsetting him, but she maintains this pose for his sake because she wants to make him happy.

People often don't know why they do the things they do. Sometimes it's easier just to follow the village rules and feel safe in them, knowing that you are doing what society expects of you. After all, it's a mind-set that has overshadowed peoples' lives for thousands of years. Najima says: "Mother was soaked in the village." You realize then how unique Salma is. She's a true pioneer. People who dare confront the dominant way of thinking have to pay a price. Salma is always going to be an outsider from now on.

One of the reasons I love making films is that you're not forced to offer a reasoned, definitive argument. Life is always more surprising and interesting than that. It's clear that the

Salma with Mailk today

various characters in the film struggle with different emotions. Father is now proud of Salma, but he's also a little afraid of her too. The film can't reflect this by telling the audience what to think. If it works, the film will remind the audience of their own experiences of family and childhood as well as being able to show the contradictory feelings of the people who appear in it. We all feel ambivalence about our early years, about those people who were closest to us when we were growing up, about our own behavior towards them.

I knew that the village had to be the heart of the film. But, at the same time, being there was so claustrophobic and dispiriting for us all. I remember one day Salma just slept for hours. You could feel how difficult it was for her to spend so much time there. We watched her shrinking under the weight of all the demands, the expectations, the fear of censure. She was so much more restrained than she'd been in Chennai. Often she'd be standing quietly somewhere and she'd seem to be slipping back into the past. This adjustment was necessary for her: otherwise her life would be impossible there. She didn't want to disappoint the people she loved and who loved her. She couldn't just be herself: she had to play her part in a community

where sadness and anger are rife, where all the women are in some way damaged.

At the end of each day, I'd try and write down what we'd filmed, just to keep a record of what we'd done, rather than everything we'd been feeling, or the things we hoped for. Time had a strange habit of shifting in the village because people are so burdened by their past there. As I made these lists, I'd often think that I really wanted to film the room where Salma had been kept all those years when she was a young girl. But I felt nervous about asking her to take us there, knowing as I did the bad memories it must hold for her.

One day I told her I couldn't imagine the room where she'd been shut away for so long. I said that I really wanted to see it for myself. I didn't know if we'd film it or not. I thought the main thing would be just to go there and see. To my surprise, she agreed immediately and took us there the next day. I could tell it was difficult for her. In the film, you see her sitting where she used to perch for nine years, next to the small barred window that looks out on a blank wall in the street. I sensed her memories flooding back. She had sat there for such a long time, just looking, with nothing else to do.

PAST MIDNIGHT

In the days after my pregnancy and childbirth,
you search, dissatisfied,
through the familiar nudity of our nights,
for my beauty's unblemished past.

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.

In the years past,
you might have had children
by strange women, in unfamiliar lands.
No traces are left on you, of course—
you can be proud of that.

What can I do?
These stretch marks are
the same as my decline:
not so easy to repair or mend.
This body is not paper you can cut and graft.

Nature's betrayal of me
has been far more terrible than yours.
It was you, after all, who commenced
the first phase of my downfall

The hours after midnight,

when dreams grow and surge,
are far more calamitous
than the hours before.

Now it's past midnight;
leaving his quiet perch inside a mural,
the tiger climbs onto my headboard
and sits there, staring at me.

I don't think she was thinking then about whether I was filming her or not.

We stayed in the village for about eleven days on that first visit but it seemed like months.

It was very intense. I felt an enormous sense of relief when Salma suggested we return to Chennai. She thought we should go and see Kannan, her publisher, and she also wanted to introduce us to Arul, who had taken the very first printed photograph of her.

We went to see Kannan on our own and filmed him in his hotel garden. He is a comforting and reassuring person; a big, gentle man. We could see that he enjoys talking about Salma and how fond he is of her. Arul, too, positively glowed when he mentioned Salma. These two men had changed her life: Salma's cousin had brought the poems to the publisher who had immediately reacted to them and was brave enough to publish them. The photographer unmasked her as the writer of those poems. They each played a crucial part in Salma's story. If Kannan hadn't published her poems, she wouldn't have become famous and Malik probably wouldn't have even thought of putting her up for election. They

were both part of the chain of events that freed her and it was evident how much she means to them both. They seem to feel protective of her.

Samyuktha didn't have to ask them many questions, they were more than happy to talk freely about her. Arul says, "I was very drawn to her. There were many reasons for this: her poems, and also, she's so gorgeous. No point in lying. I was captivated." Kannan talks about his first meeting with her in Chennai and you can see how caring he was: "Everything was so new and difficult

Salma's Tamil publisher, Kannan Sundram, in his office

for her. Crossing the road, having a meal out, it was all new and difficult for her. She'd never been with strangers, especially men, I could tell she'd never crossed a city street, or been in a restaurant. It was all very touching and sad."

We'd been back in Chennai for four weeks, hanging out in the flat and getting to know Najima and Salma's sons, when Salma decided she was ready to go back to the village. It was a different experience when we returned because we'd got to know people a bit on our first visit. They were really very friendly this time, they seemed delighted to see us again and we felt very welcome. But beneath the surface friendliness, we could feel the tension, the constrictions of the village's steely code of conduct, the underlying rules. We felt them more strongly now because we knew their danger. It made us acutely aware of the bravery of the people who dared to talk to Salma and to us.

We were taken to a house on that second visit and the woman who lived there showed us how the building had been constructed specifically so that women couldn't see out of the house at all. The windows were all bricked up and even the roof had a high wall around it, taller than a person. The lack of windows meant that the house was very dark. Because there are so many power-cuts, it was

hard for the little girl who lived there to do her homework. It was like being in a big cell. We got closer and closer to the horror of it all. It seemed so unnecessarily restrictive and cruel.

I always know when a film is finished when we have the last scene, and I knew with Salma's film that we didn't have it yet.

We were scheduled to leave at the end of March but as our departure date grew nearer I knew that there was a missing piece: we needed to have a person or an event which would represent the village mentality. I knew it couldn't be a pundit or an outsider, we had to find something from within the family, someone who could put the village mind-set into words. But I also couldn't imagine where this voice would come from. I felt we had no choice but to extend our stay. Sara and I were forced to spend what seemed like endless hours renegotiating our visas to get an extra four days. We'd go to the passport office in Chennai every day but we didn't seem to be getting any closer. It took a whole week, but, at last, we managed to get the additional four days.

The day before we were due to leave, the son of Salma's sister Najima came to stay in the flat. He works in a city outside

Chennai and comes to stay at the house every month or so. We were filming him sitting there chatting with Najima and Salma after lunch and he suddenly started trying to persuade Salma to wear the burka.

She says to him, "Are you angry with me for not wearing it?" and he replies, "No, not angry, just disappointed." It seemed so perfect because that's how a family works. People pretend that they aren't angry, but that you're hurting them. They play on women's love, their generosity, and of course their guilt. It's all part of the "knots and ties" that Salma says bind her to the village. The next morning, our very last in India, we filmed Najima saying: "First of all, he loves me very much. He really loves me. That's why he tells me not to go to the cinema … I am bound by his love. It pleases him so I change myself, I change myself for my child." It was only then that I knew we had captured a kind of finale to the story.

We returned to London the next day and began editing the film, working at an editing suite in D'Arblay Street in Soho. I was working with the editor Ollie Huddleston, which I was very happy about. Ollie and I have a close understanding of what makes a film work: in particular how to try and preserve

the layers of meaning and contradictions in the attitudes of the characters, while at the same time making the film as universal as possible. This was our sixth project together and I always film things with him in mind. I get the shots I know he'll need, often those I don't much enjoy filming, like street scenes and travelling shots from cars and trains. Before we left for India, he'd told me that I should remember to film Salma when she wasn't talking, but rather just day-dreaming. That turned out to be excellent advice because so much of the film is about her interior monologues, and these shots can be used to represent them.

We were joined at the edit by Hari Rajaledchumy, who translated the dialogue in the film from its original Tamil. Hari, now a student in London, had read Salma's poems while living in a camp in India as a refugee from Sri Lanka. The UN had set up a small library there and he came across a book of Salma's poems. He told us that his mum had found the notebook where he'd copied her poems and burnt it because she found the poems so shocking. Hari was able to translate the scenes for us as we were watching them, which is very difficult to do.

This was the first time any of us had looked at what we'd filmed. In the village, I'd occasionally watch twenty seconds or so just to make sure the camera was working properly, but I needed to conserve my batteries because we had very little electricity there. When we were back in Chennai, I didn't feel like watching the footage. Now we were finding out exactly what we'd got.

Ollie always has a fresh notebook for each film. He writes a heading for each new scene he watches. He gives two or three ticks to the scenes he likes, and one to those he thinks might be useful. Very occasionally, perhaps once in each film, he won't like a scene to which I'm especially attached and I won't say anything at the time, but I'll remember to ask him to look at it again later.

In this film, right at the end, there's one long shot of Salma lying on the floor. When Ollie saw it he thought it looked odd. He told me, "This is a weird shot. You're both lying down." I looked over his shoulder and noticed that he hadn't given it a tick. I remembered how close I'd felt to Salma at that moment and the incredible sadness I'd experienced, just lying there with her in her flat in Chennai. I pointed out to Ollie that it

was one of the last shots we'd looked at that day, after a long exhausting session. I suggested he look at it again the next day and, of course, he agreed: he's always very flexible and open to suggestions.

Eventually it got the vital tick and went into the film. It's one of the scenes I'm most pleased with because Salma talks about why she feels stuck and can never really leave her family and set up a new life of her own.

The first assembly of a film generally runs at about three hours. Ollie will then start paring this down, being as ruthless as possible to get rid of the things we don't absolutely need. Every scene has to fight to stay in the final cut. He uses his imagination to juxtapose scenes to create links that are not immediately obvious, to add another dimension to what the viewer is feeling. In this way, he's also giving the audience the space to explore their own feelings.

It is vital to have an editor whose judgment you trust and respect because, in the end, how you felt when you were making the film means very little. All that really counts is what people are going to feel when they see it on the screen. I can describe the atmosphere and the emotion of the moment to Ollie, but he has

to make it work. He's shaping this thing and making something new out of it.

He'll watch a scene several times, searching for patterns and associations. It's often exhausting for him. He'll then start putting the pieces together. It's the most extraordinary work and I love observing it. For me, the editing process, watching something different emerge from the raw material I've shot, is the best bit of making a film.

As we were editing the film, we were also thinking about what music we could use. We decided that it would be good to commission something original. This was a first for me: I'd never used original music in any of my films. Ollie contacted a composer, Samuel Sim, who he'd worked with before. We gave him a DVD of the film and he took it away and used it to write a preliminary score.

One day, we were in Sam's recording studio discussing the scene where Salma and Najima are sitting on the beach, surrounded by families going in and out of the sea and generally enjoying themselves. The beach in Chennai feels almost like a carnival with lots of little stalls selling food and toys, and horse rides and brightly-painted tourist carts. The

two sisters, sitting there, all in black, look removed from everyone else. It's as if they have brought the village to the beach and it surrounds them, cutting them off from all the colour and gaiety.

We told Sam that we didn't think we had quite the right music for that scene, that we needed something delicate and wistful. There and then, while we were watching the scene, he started playing the piano, just improvising. It was perfect, just what it needed. We were dismayed, however, because we thought he'd never be able to get it quite like that again. He laughed and said, "Don't worry, I recorded it." That piece of music went straight into the film. It was wonderful watching something so spontaneous and creative happen in front of us. Then we went into a recording studio. We watched through the glass as the musicians played what Sam had written. It was the first time they'd seen the score and yet they performed it perfectly. Each bit of the music fitted exactly to each scene.

In the film, the music often acts as a signpost, signaling that we're going back into Salma's memories, into her dreaming. It prepares the audience for an atmosphere, or an experience, rather than an event.

On occasion, when we were with her in India, Salma would stand very still, with an unwavering gaze. You could see she'd been transported back into her past. I suppose you can't be kept inside for twenty-five years and ever live comfortably in the present. There will always be memories that haunt you. On the soundtrack to the film, these moments are often accompanied by an electric cello. It's almost as if the instrument has become Salma's voice. We were thrilled with what Sam was able to bring to the film.

We finished the film in August. We were keen to get input from others, but we were wary of showing it around before Salma had been able to see it.

This wasn't just a matter of etiquette; we needed to be sure there wasn't anything in the film that might be dangerous for Salma, as she is speaking out against a whole way of living, a set of traditions, and an ancient, rigid culture. We'd hoped that she might be able to come to the UK towards the end of the edit. We bought her a ticket and waited for her. But Najima's husband was terribly ill for many weeks, and so she couldn't come. We did, however, show the film to Anna

Filming in Chennai.
From left to right:
Kim;
Najima, Salma's sister;
Sara

Miralis, our commissioning editor at Channel 4 who had replaced Hamish.

Our first public screening was at the Sundance Film Festival. Salma still hadn't seen the film. We wanted to show it to her before the screening, but she said she wanted to watch it for the first time with an audience.We'd done our best but Ollie and I were still really nervous.

We sat on either side of her and glanced covertly at her now and again. Her face was full of emotion. At the end, Salma came to the stage and she was smiling and crying. The audience all stood up and cheered for her. It still makes me feel a bit overwhelmed when I remember it.

BEING FILMED

Salma

One day in the spring of 2012, I received an email from a filmmaker called Kim Longinotto. I'd never met, nor even heard of, Kim and had no inkling then that she and I would soon become the dearest of friends; indeed that she would turn out to be someone who would love me like my own mother.

The gist of Kim's message was that she wanted to make a film about my life. If I agreed, she would submit a proposal and budget to Channel 4, a TV company based in London, and, on receiving their approval, would be back in touch again.

The email was a very pleasant surprise. At the time I received it, my life seemed full of despair and misfortune. Depression is never very far away for me. I think it stems from my childhood when I was taken out of school early and confined first in my parents' house and then the house of my husband.

I had to try to find happiness in small things. A Tamil film was shown on television once every month and I would look forward to it with great anticipation every single day. Sometimes the film would be unwatchable if wind had dislodged the television antenna and I'd be bitterly disappointed. I also used to count down the days to watching cricket matches on television and, again, would be shattered if rain washed out play. I was deeply dismayed by my having to marry a husband I did not choose and who prevented me from reading and writing as I love to do. For all these reasons, my mood was somber when word arrived from Kim to cheer me up.

My general disposition meant I had little expectation that Channel 4 would approve the project. So, after sending Kim my consent, I pretty much forgot about it. Several months later, however, I received a message from Kim saying that Channel 4 had just given their approval and that she would be arriving in January 2012 to begin filming. This news prompted considerable excitement on my part, but also mixed feelings. On one hand, having my experiences documented in such a fashion was a thrilling prospect; on the other, I had serious doubts about whether my life was really significant enough to be made into a film.

On top of these concerns, I also wondered how two white people were going to feel about spending ten weeks in our village in the middle of the Tamil Nadu countryside. Would they be able to deal with all the inconvenience? How would they be received by the other people who lived there? I was worried about whether I'd be able to look after them properly.

Young Salma

Two documentaries had already been made about me. They were filmed in just a few days or, at the most, a week. But this film was to be shot over a much longer period and made by foreigners. I was in a state of some anxiety.

Kim and her sound recordist, Sara, flew to Chennai during the first week of January, arriving at my house early one evening. Kim had been under the impression that I could not speak a word of English and was evidently delighted to find out that we could, in fact, converse directly with each other, albeit at a very basic level. I was feeling quite tense about our meeting but Kim's gentleness and warmth quickly put me at ease. I could tell straight away that we were going to get along with each other. I was however a little concerned about what Sara was wearing. She arrived in a very short skirt and I immediately felt anxious that, though this was acceptable in Chennai, it would be sharply disapproved of when we went to my village. As it turned out, I needn't have worried: once in the village, Kim and Sara wore churidars and tops they bought in Chennai specifically for the trip. Kim told me, "We bought these dresses because we didn't want our clothes to create any

problems for you with the people of your village." I greatly appreciated this thoughtfulness.

We started filming the very next day. I was recorded spending time at home with my children and other members of my family. And Kim and Sara accompanied me to the Chennai Book Fair which was taking place at the time. In the days that followed, Kim filmed meetings I had with some prominent writers who were in town for the fair. Among those we met were T. N. Gopalan, who had written about me and my poetry in the early days, and Kamalamma, the wife of the late Sundara Ramasamy, an important Tamil writer who had been a vital pillar of support for me. We visited her at her house in Nagercoil. We also went to the homes of the Tamil writers Devibharathi and Kavitha. We got together with Shyam, who translated my poems into Malyalam. And we met with my dear friend, the poet Rizio, as well as Vinodhini, who takes me to the movies whenever I am in Chennai. They each talked with Kim and Sara about their friendship and work with me.

One day we decided to film a visit to another translator friend of mine. She was staying at the residence of an upper caste family. The elderly lady who lived there opened the front door

Salma today

and invited us inside. In the hallway, she barked at Kim to leave her footwear outside. The instruction was harshly expressed and we were all a bit shocked by her tone. Kim responded calmly, however, and immediately went out to take off her shoes. We went in, feeling a bit apprehensive. The interior of the house was decorated very tastefully, with expensive furnishings and a variety of glass art objects on show. Statues of various gods were displayed prominently everywhere. My friend rushed up

and hugged me. We started to chat, with Kim sitting filming us. Sara's microphone was suspended at the end of a long pole. In the middle of filming, the elderly lady suddenly shouted at Sara, with an angry expression on her face: "Don't hit anything with that boom. You'll break those glass objects." The impoliteness she displayed towards my guests caused me considerable embarrassment.

We shot continuously for a week in Chennai. It wasn't long before I sensed an undercurrent of frustration in Kim. She was evidently disappointed that film wasn't going as well as she wanted. But, despite this, my primary feeling was one of relief: a warm bond had already formed between Kim and Sara on one side, and me and my family on the other. I was especially pleased that my guests were evidently enjoying our food. Kim's restlessness, it soon emerged, stemmed from an eagerness to begin filming in my village as soon as possible. About two weeks after she and Sara had arrived we left for Chennai by overnight train.

Kim and Sara were clearly very pleased that we were at last going to my village. The almost childlike pleasure with

which Kim took in the comfort of the air-conditioned train compartment was a source of wonder for me. I was surprised to discover that she had never been on an overnight journey by train. She kept saying repeatedly how comfortable the compartment was. The train I always took to my village had suddenly become novel and interesting for me too.

On the train, a middle-aged man occupied the berth opposite Kim's. At night, when we were all preparing to go to sleep, a loud noise made us sit up with a start. It was coming from the man, whose snoring sounded like the howl of a wild animal. Kim said she had never heard anything like it. Her shocked reaction still makes me laugh.

When outsiders visited our village, it was always very exciting news for everyone. Friends from overseas normally just stayed for one day. But for however long the visit lasted, the whole village would focus its attention on them, and indulge in endless gossip. This occasion was no exception. As soon as Kim, Sara, and their interpreter Samyuktha arrived with me, everyone started talking. A steady stream of people called round to my house on some pretext or the other. I knew that their real intention was to

gawk at my visitors. The telephone was constantly ringing with callers conducting intensive interrogations of Malik and me to find out what was going on.

I knew how eager Kim was to film a whole range of different things in the village. She was evidently a bit disappointed when I told her that it was very unlikely that any of the girls would show their faces to the camera. As soon we set foot in our house, my mother-in law told me I shouldn't appear in the film without covering my head. When I translated her instruction, Kim looked a bit surprised.

When they were filming me in the village, Kim and Sara would let me walk ahead of them; on such occasions, a large number of children and adults would follow. Girls who were prohibited from leaving their homes would peep from behind the front door or through a window, or from the terrace, laughing with amusement at the spectacle. I knew that underneath that laughter was an urge to mock me.

When it came to attitudes towards me, the village split into two camps. One group, generally comprising those living below or near the poverty line, had a great deal of love and respect for me. As the President of the Panchayat and Chairman of the

Social Welfare Board for more than ten years, I have worked hard to represent their interests, meeting with them at all hours to help secure the basic provisions to which they are entitled. Whenever we met these people around the village they would treat us with courtesy and respect.

The other group, made up mainly of my relatives and the better-off residents in the village, were less generous towards me. They were upset that I didn't cover my head or wear the

Young Salma

markers of a "family woman" (and a Muslim woman at that). They resented the fact that I appeared regularly in newspapers and on television and saw it as a disgrace that I often travelled alone to different places. Their criticisms of me generally took place behind my back which only made them harder to deal with.

The women in the village were very reluctant to appear in the film. If Kim turned her camera towards them, thinking that they were laughing in a friendly, welcoming way, they would immediately duck out of sight. The only people in the village who expressed no reservations were the children. They would follow us down the street, emitting loud shouts in the little English they knew. They would keep asking, "What is your name? What is your name?" The entire street would resound with their calls of "Kim!" and "Sara!"

When I was a child growing up in the village we would occasionally see Western tourists. They would pass by in their vehicles, taking photographs of the street market, the temple, or the village school. We would generally stand at a safe distance, just gaping at them, or trying to attract their attention by shouting "Hello!" or "Good morning!" On occasion, though, we would pose for photographs, and pester them to give us

presents. Sometimes, once they'd given us such gifts, we would return them. We just wanted to have contact with the visitors. In the same way, these children walked behind us now, shrieking for chocolates and pens.

During the first few days of our stay in the village, I told Kim and Sara about my playmates at school. We decided to go and meet one of them, a friend who had accompanied me as a 13-year-old to see what turned out to be an adult film in the local village cinema. That visit caused quite a stir. I took Kim and Sara to my friend's house and Kim asked her if she would be prepared to talk on camera for the film. She said, "Sure, but I don't know English!" When I told her she could speak in Tamil, she agreed enthusiastically and said that she'd be ready to speak to us the very next day. She needed time to think about those years, she said, and sent us home. Kim didn't sleep the whole night because she was so excited at the prospect of the interview. But I knew what would happen: she wasn't going to speak to us. When we arrived at her house the next morning, she told us that she couldn't talk after all because her brother had forbidden it. She turned us away. Kim was dejected; she'd especially wanted to

interview someone who had shared the experience of seeing the adult movie with me. I felt bad about it.

Nearly all my relatives and friends live close by. Aware that Kim and Sara were in the village, they began asking us to visit, many of them repeating the invitation pretty much every day. I knew they were inviting us primarily for their own amusement and, as I had no intention of turning my guests into a spectacle, I kept declining. However there was one friend, again from my school days, who was especially insistent. When I asked her if she'd speak for a bit in front of the camera, she said she would. So in the end I relented and agreed to take Kim and Sara to see her.

As soon as we entered her house, my friend invited us sit down and served us tea. Kim picked up her camera eagerly, thinking she was going to be able to film. She straightaway told Kim to put the camera down. She then said that if Kim wanted to hear stories about me, she had a lot to say. She started talking on the condition that she'd speak in Tamil, with Samyuktha translating. Without a pause over the next hour, she narrated slanderous stories, one after another, about me. She spoke maliciously about how I started writing, the quality of what I wrote, how I entered politics, and about how much money I earned through being

a politician. In between these tirades, she made Samyuktha translate the full details in English. I didn't say anything while this was taking place, but just sat there with a fixed smile on my face. When my friend had eventually finished, we left and returned home without speaking.

Once we were back at my house Kim broke the silence: "How envious that girl must be about you! It makes me feel really awful," she said. Apart from Samyuktha's translation, she'd been

Looking down at the small, barred window of the room where she spent much of her teenage years

able to gauge my friend's feelings by the expression on her face as she was talking. I told her that I thought my friend was quite representative of the women in my community. While their dreams have been extinguished, I've managed to turn mine into reality. When they see what I've got and compare it with what has been denied to them, they simply can't bear it. I asked Kim not to be angry with her. She said that she understood, but I could see that she and Sara remained shocked that a person could spew such venom so openly.

One day during our stay in the village, I was walking down the street with Kim following behind, capturing the scene on film. En route we ran into four young girls wearing burqas. They were heading in the opposite direction, towards the Madrassa (the religious school). As they drew near, they greeted me and inquired after my welfare. I started talking to them. Except for their eyes, they were entirely hidden by their burqas so I couldn't recognize them. I told them that if they'd tell me who their parents were, I'd be able to talk to them properly. They laughed and identified themselves by their father's name. Then we returned home.

With the aunt who looked after baby Salma until she was given back to her parents six years later

In the early morning the next day, my sister Najima's husband phoned me. "Amma, did you film our girls outside the Madrassa?" he said. "The girls' father is very angry about it. He wants the tape. He wants you to give it to him immediately." I was furious. I told my brother in law: "No, I was simply talking to them. We didn't do any filming." He made me confirm this several times before he hung up. I felt angry all that day. We hadn't filmed

the girls, but even if we had, they were completely hidden from view by the way they were dressed. I don't know how to deal with people who think it's a terrible thing to film girls who are entirely invisible.

In the years that I lived in the village there were frequent power cuts, and they would often last for a long time. When there was no electricity, the air would be so stifling that we'd struggle to breathe. We'd go up to the roof and lie there gazing at the sky. Nights without electricity, a scattering of stars, black sky, and the quiet of the village: the villagers would share all this with the wonder and joy of experiencing them for the first time. I think when Kim and Sara slept on the roof with us they experienced the same magic.

One night we were all lying on the roof. It was pitch dark but the expanse of stars made us feel happy and peaceful. Malik was lying a little way from us, where he'd fallen asleep. Suddenly, at around eleven o'clock, more than a hundred people from the village, men and women, appeared on the terrace. They wanted to speak with Malik in his capacity as head of the village about a problem that had blown up between two groups in the village.

Minor matters, generally related to family arguments, regularly flared into wider disputes in our community. Often one side would take the matter to the police while the other would come looking for us. Malik would try to assess which side was right and advise them accordingly about how to solve the problem. That night a man who was drunk had allegedly beaten his wife. The woman's family reported the matter to the police and then both sides marched over to our house, accompanied, it seemed, by most of the village. Such experiences weren't new to me and so, before waking up Malik, I began speaking to them myself. I could see that Kim and Sara were shocked beyond belief. They couldn't comprehend how so many people could turn up at this time of night or why they had done so. Even after I explained it to them they remained astonished.

Every day, as soon as I woke up, however early, the first thing I'd see would be Sara, standing there, microphone in hand. She'd pretend to brandish it at me, playing at frightening me by saying in a mock threatening voice: "Salma, the mike has come." We both always laughed at this. She knew that the mike, which had

to be fastened to my waist all day, gave off an uncomfortable heat, and she'd try out different positions where it might be less bothersome. Sometimes she would wrap it in a small sock before fixing it to me. I appreciated her kindness in this.

On the days when I wasn't in the village, Kim, Sara, and Samyuktha would go out to film the streets. One day, when they came back, Kim was in tears. She's a very emotional person. I couldn't imagine what had happened out there. When I inquired what the problem was she didn't answer but just went to her room and lay down. I asked Samyuktha. She told me that they'd walked past the house of the woman who worked as domestic help for me and she'd taken them into her home, insisting that her daughter Kuttima wanted to meet them. Kuttima had reached puberty and was still unmarried. She spoke to them in English, which she'd learned at school, and was evidently very excited to meet them. When Kim had asked how old she was, the poor girl said she was seventeen and that she'd stayed indoors ever since the day she got her first period. She added that she knew she would have to stay inside the house, which was quite small, until she got married. Kim simply couldn't bear this.

Salma on the roof of her house in the village

She couldn't accept the idea that young women were still forced to live under the same conditions I'd had to endure twenty-five years ago.

As the two weeks of our first visit progressed, Kim got to know more and more about village life. Initially, I didn't tell anyone the film was about me. A lot of People thought we were making a feature film rather than a documentary, and that I was just an actress in it. Jealousies and rivalries being what they were in the village, my feeling was that the community would be less

hostile under this assumption than if they knew my life was the subject matter of the film, and so I just left people to their own misconceptions.

This turned out to be a mistake. After a great deal of initial speculation as to why foreigners were filming the village and its streets, many of the villagers came to the conclusion that I was trying to record the poverty of the village so that I could show it to people abroad and obtain funds, for my own purposes. A number of villagers came up to me and asked me directly whether this was true. I didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

On some of the days that we filmed, I had to pinch myself to be sure that I wasn't dreaming. What was it that had brought these people from so far away? Was I important enough to be the subject of such a film? Was my life and that of the women in my village really so full of sorrow that it could move Kim to tears? I wasn't certain about the answers to any of these questions.

To explain our way of living to those who have only known complete personal freedom seems like an almost impossible task. Yet, when I look back on my own past, I realize it's an important thing to try and do. I remember one particular day in the village when a magazine reporter came to see me, accompanied by a

photographer. After introducing him to Kim, I told him that we could begin the interview. As Kim prepared to start filming, the photographer said, "I'd like to take some photographs first. Would you please go and change from that churidar into a sari?" When I told him I'd rather not get changed, he was evidently surprised, indignant even. "What kind of dress is that?" he exclaimed, "I can't photograph you wearing it. I really must insist you change into a sari." I could see anger rising in Kim's face as she listened to this. "What's wrong with the dress?" she asked him indignantly. She was shocked that a photographer could tell a writer that he would photograph her only if she changed what she was wearing. She even stopped filming the interview.

As a party official, I'd been given a box of notepads with prominent photographs of the top leaders of the party printed in the margin. All the political representatives here have them. Whenever Kim wanted to write something down, she would tear off a page from the pad. On such occasions I often caught her looking at the images of the leaders a little contemptuously. She'd sometimes make a remark to herself about them and laugh out loud.

One day, I went for an interview at the premises of a local TV channel which was run on behalf of my party. Kim accompanied

me to film the proceedings. The manager at the TV station told Kim and me that we needed prior permission to shoot there. I simply wrote a letter on my party notepad requesting that such permission be granted. He took it from me, looked at it, and promptly gave us the OK. Kim was delighted that we were able to deal with this formality so easily. Recognizing that the miracle had been achieved by way of my notepad, she started calling it "magic paper." That always amused me.

In all, I spent ten weeks together with Kim, Sara, and Samyuktha. As time went by I became less and less conscious that I was being filmed. They made it as easy as it possibly could be. I never once felt that I had been thrown together with strangers. I cared for them, and I knew that they cared for me. The occasional minor hardships and the host of small pleasures that I experienced in the company of these endearing guests were a backdrop to discoveries that, for me anyway, were genuinely surprising. They allowed me to understand where my real commitments lay. Those were days that, in new ways, made me aware of what my life was really about.

—Translated from the Tamil by N. Kalyan Raman

MY LIFE

Salma

My parents named me Rajathi. I was born in a tiny village in Tamil Nadu, Southern India, where tradition prohibits Muslim girls from attending school after they reach puberty. For every girl born in our village education finishes around the age of thirteen. My early years were full of the fear that this day would come for me as well.

I was twelve years old at the time. It was the school holidays and I had gone to the small library near our house with some of my classmates. It was there we heard the only cinema in the village begin broadcasting music to let customers know that the matinee film was about to start. We knew we'd never be allowed to go to the film if we asked our parents' permission, so we just bought tickets and sneaked in without anyone seeing us.

The film had already started. To our great discomfort, we became aware that, apart from us girls, the cinema was filled

Salma at eight years old, with her brother

entirely with men. In the dim light, unable to understand why all the men were looking at us, we turned our eyes towards the screen. Within minutes we realized we had accidentally stumbled into a Malayalam pornographic movie. We buried our faces in our hands, full of shame and humiliation. The doors of the cinema hall were closed. There being no way of stealing out, we remained seated, our eyes covered throughout, until the show ended. My younger brother, who was also in the audience, had seen us there and rushed home to tell tales about us.

On reaching the house I found that my mother already knew what had happened. She not only berated me in the harshest of terms, she also thrashed me. It was the first time in my life she had ever done that. I knew I had committed a very grave mistake and so I accepted the punishment without protest. My brother was given a similar beating. The next morning, when I was about to leave for school, my mother ordered me not to go. My brother was allowed to go as usual. I asked why I was being singled out in this way and was told it was because I was a girl. As such, I had brought disrepute on the family. From that day on, I was told, I was not to step out of the house. I protested and cried when I heard this news but it had no effect on my mother's decision.

Salma's father, Samsudeen, and mother, Sharbunnisha

The discrepancy between the punishment of my brother and me was a telling insight into the treatment of women in our society.

Soon after our visit to the cinema, my periods started. In our village Muslim girls are not allowed outside the house from the day they come of age to the day of their marriage. They are forbidden from meeting any man except their father and

brothers. They can only view the outside world through the small windows of their houses. These laws are unwritten and it wasn't long before I started to question their validity. I just couldn't accept that I had suddenly been forced to become a girl who, shut up within four walls, could only dream about her future husband and the liberty she would achieve through him. There was nobody with whom to share my feelings and, especially at that tender age, I felt very isolated. The rigid hands of loneliness held me in a tight embrace. I surrendered my lonely hours to the windows. They were my only companion, never deserting or cheating me. They presented a succession of new sights, revealing something interesting to me every day.

In the beginning, overcome by grief, I kept begging my parents to enroll me in a correspondence course but they refused; education for teenage girls was something unknown in the village. They would never do anything against the wishes of the community. I cried and argued with them, but to no avail. I was, however, able to read books by myself and, to counter my loneliness, began to read whatever I could get my hands on. Some of the books were borrowed from nearby libraries, picked up for me by one of my cousins. Others were lent to me. I read

novels by authors such as Tolstoy and Chekhov as well as political books by writers like Marx and Periyar. They introduced me to the literatures and philosophies of the world.

My reading raised lots of questions and helped me to develop a critical mind. Who was I? What does it mean to be an individual? Was I just going to abide by the rules society imposes or could I evolve a distinct identity for myself? Was it even possible to liberate myself in such a way without a formal education? Reading helped me both in defining such issues and searching for the answers to them. Books welcomed me in. They made their world my home.

By the age of sixteen, I began to write poems myself. The poems I wrote were mostly about women's life and loneliness. Eventually they started to be published. The first poem I wrote that appeared is called "Breathing." I sent it to a small magazine called Sutrum Vizhi Sudar which I had read in editions I'd received from the library. It was published under my real name and this caused shockwaves in my community. Especially because the poem deals with personal issues and the lives of women, people thought it a disgrace that my family had allowed me to write it.

BREATHING

Everything happens so quickly
before I can feel it.
I keep trying to feel something
before it's too late.
It all happens in my name
without me being there.
Flowers, people,
the world is so much bigger than me.
Should I carry on breathing
if I'm not really here?

Charges were leveled that my family and I were enemies of the village. The very respectability of a family which, it was alleged, had failed to bring up its daughter properly was brought into question. I was young and lacked the strength to face these criticisms. I was extremely frightened. But I was determined that I would not stop writing.

The force of the hostility I was facing began to affect my thoughts. The awareness that every word I wrote was being registered and analyzed by people who wished me ill had a significant impact on my poems. The embarrassment and humiliation heaped not only on me but also on my family as a result of the poems being published in my name worried me a lot. A poem I wrote on talaq (which means divorce in Shari'a law, where the man has prerogative) frightened even me and I decided not to publish it. Around this time a few of those who had come to know and support me as a result of reading my poems suggested that I could escape these pressures by adopting a pen-name. At first I vehemently rejected this idea. Why should I disown my own name? Even though my parents did not know what I read or what I wrote they stood by me.

Salma's engagement party.
Najima on the right.

I turned eighteen and the decision was taken that it was time for me to get married. Back when I was just twelve years old it had been determined that the son of a relative belonging to our village was to be my husband. I hardly knew anything about him but he was already a grown man then, and active in politics.

When talks regarding the marriage began, I slumped into a state of shock. What I'd been dreading all along was about to become a reality. I was dismayed by the prospect of starting the second half of my life with a marriage to somebody I'd not even met, an uneducated man steeped in the backward traditions of the village which I had been working so hard to escape. With my head now full from reading the ideas of Marx and Periyar, how could I go back to this sort of life without being miserable?

By this time I had spent eight years in the confines of my mother's house without knowing anything about the outside world. Now the prospect of having to spend the rest of my life under the same circumstances in another house frightened me. I began actively resisting the plans for my marriage.

One day, the father of the boy engaged to marry me returned from abroad and came to see me. He was shocked to see the books by Marx and Lenin on my shelves. He asked my parents if I had actually read such books and told them that they should be burnt straightaway. Reading such books would not only make me lose touch with the real world, he insisted, it would also make me lose my femininity and become unfit for marital life. He told my parents they were irresponsible; that they clearly did not know how to bring up their daughter. How could they allow me to read such books? And permitting me to write poetry was equally bad. It would bring disgrace not only to my family but also to the entire community.

My future father-in-law kept on in this fashion for some time. I concentrated on not letting him get to me. Finally, he said that if the marriage was to take place I must give him an assurance that I would stop my writing. I was both alarmed and angry. My parents said nothing, they just looked at me.

I decided I could not just sit there passively in the face of his onslaught. I looked straight into his eyes and said in the clearest terms that his conditions were unacceptable. I would read whatever I wished and write whatever I felt like. If he was

Salma's family feeding her as part of the traditional engagement ceremony

not agreeable to this the marriage should be called off. From the expression on his face I could tell that my intransigence had shocked him greatly. For the first time in his life a woman had stood up to him and talked back. I felt good about having taken a stand.

Shortly afterwards he left for his home. I was very pleased that I had stopped the proposed wedding. But after a few days he returned, this time with his wife, to resume the marriage negotiations. The boy's mother explained the reason for his perseverance to my parents. He had decided that once I started a family my reading and writing would be impossible. With a couple of children I wouldn't have time for anything but motherly duties.

My parents tried for days to convince me to change my mind, but to no avail. In the end they just went ahead with the wedding plans without my consent. A dark cloak of unhappiness descended on our house. I alternately sobbed and sulked in my room. I felt so strongly that if I couldn't continue to educate myself then I would be unable to maintain my independence, and I would therefore lose all my self-confidence. I begged my parents to let me marry someone else, someone who was at least

educated and who lived in the city. But they continued to insist that I give my consent to the proposal at hand. They begged me to recognize that the promise they had made when I was just twelve years old should be honored. Cancelling the marriage at this stage would be the cause of unbearable humiliation for the whole family. And they were determined that the relationship between the two families must not be jeopardized.

Such reasons, which appeared to me as less than vital, were evidently of paramount importance to them. Since neither my parents nor I was ready to compromise, a prolonged stand-off ensued. It lasted for nearly two years, during which time I was desperately unhappy. At one point I even attempted suicide.

I frequently went on hunger strike. My mother would do the same thing. The health of both of us declined sharply. One night my mother woke us all up. She had developed severe chest pains and a doctor was summoned to attend to her. Concerned relatives thronged the house and looked at me in a way that suggested this was entirely my fault. I felt terribly guilty. It was unbearable. That night I decided to relent and agree to the marriage.

Within a few weeks the wedding that had been left hanging for two years took place. All my relatives arrived at the house to

A DESERTED PLACE

At a moment
when I believe that I have
hidden this loneliness of mine
within myself, away from prying eyes,
you ask me
why I am always alone.

Among those who walk, unmoved,
past the grief of my loneliness,
you alone ask me this question, waking
a sadness that's been buried
so long and deep in my memory.

Although I find myself
unable to give you an answer—
you, especially—
I must tell you in my endless confusion:
one cannot but be lonely
in a deserted place.

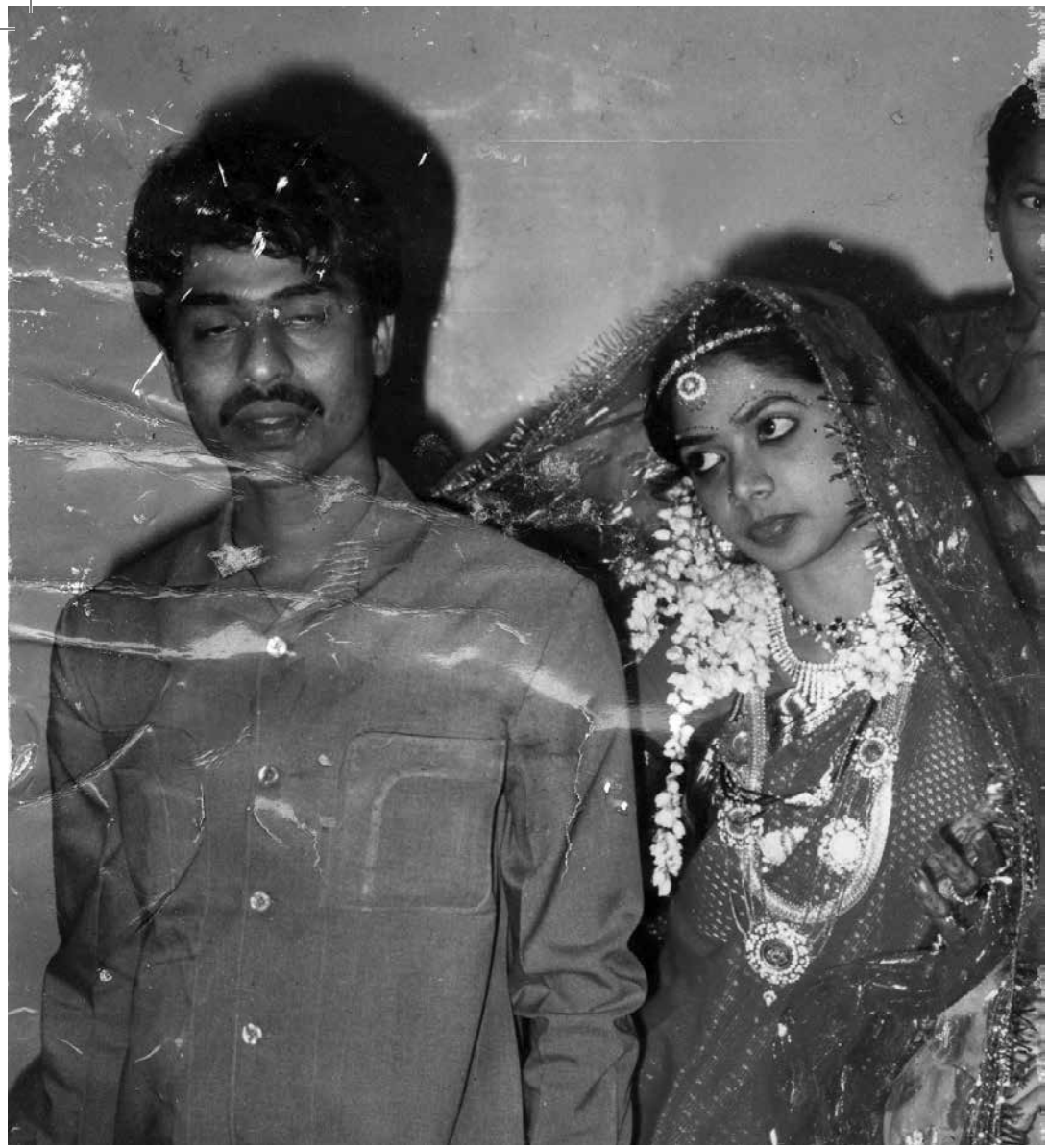
I cling
to this loneliness of mine
like a voice left behind by a stranger
among the tall hills, now wandering lost;
like a twig cast away
by the waves of the ocean.

Only when I was totally forsaken did it commence:
this, my enduring bond with loneliness.

Someday, the language wrought
by this loneliness of mine
may be shaped into verse.

This loneliness of mine
may even meld
into the sky's azure, and
acquire its own hue.

My life is ebbing away
beyond the reach of my will.
With a loneliness that shall never end,
I am living here still.



Salma's wedding photo

join in the ceremony. They were all dressed in their finest and took part in the traditional rituals, activities such as Mehendi drawing, where the palms of the hand are decorated with a green leaf paste. I refused steadfastly to join in and was strongly condemned for doing so.

It wasn't long after the marriage that I found out that my mother's chest pain was merely an act that she'd staged with the connivance of the doctor to get me to agree to the marriage. I was shattered and so furious that I didn't speak to her for eighteen months. Because of her deceit I now had to bond my life with a family that I didn't like and that I felt had absolutely no respect me or for what I did.

Married life turned out to be pretty much what I had expected. I was only allowed to visit my mother's house, just two streets away, once every month. Otherwise I was confined to my husband's residence. I wasn't even allowed to bring my books with me. Nevertheless, I kept writing poems. My husband and his family remained firmly opposed to this. In particular, they explicitly forbade me from expressing the bitterness I felt towards married life in what I wrote. They were also very clear that I should not, under any circumstances, try to find a publisher.

NEW BRIDE, NEW NIGHT

The evening breeze
blows towards the bride
as she takes her leave
on her wedding day.

Her elder sister
pushes her face inside
the purdah, and instructs her
on making love, surrounded
by the scent of flowers.

She riffles in haste
through pages of heavy books
she herself had not known
to tell her sister
which days are best for sex,
when she would, most likely, conceive,
what things are *haraam*, forbidden;

she tells her about prescribed
post-coital cleansing.

Before her small eyes
images intervene:
the affliction of her own life
and the empty routine
of tired, worn out sex.
These she hides within herself.
From time to time
the younger girl, disturbed
by the shameful, falling words,
tries to muzzle them
with her own foolish
self-confidence.

That entire night
the new bride
disentangles her sister's advice
caught in her dangling earrings,
and lays them out carefully
on the marriage bed.

Hindu wedding in the village

My husband found out about my writing through letters and phone calls that I received from my readers. This made him furious and he would regularly threaten to rip up the books in which I wrote, or break the bones in my hands if I carried on reading and writing. There were occasions when he would go further than mere threats, beating me for refusing to bend to his will. More than once he threatened suicide if I didn't stop. The ferocity of his temper and the hostility of his family frightened me as never before. It destroyed my mental peace. In the end he banned all letters and phone calls and he and his family were vigilant that this restriction was strictly enforced.

I soon fell into acute depression. The loneliness that I'd experienced in my younger days continued unabated, but now it was even worse. When I was at my parents' I had felt desperately isolated. There was nobody there with whom I felt I could share my feelings. But now I wasn't just alone; other people were exercising control over everything I did. I could not come to terms with the way the thali (the necklace that my husband had tied around my neck on our wedding day to signify our marriage) had taken power over my entire life. I wanted to snap it, hand it over to my husband and go back to my parents. But that was

impossible; they would not take me back. As they saw it, family honor was at stake and the humiliation they would experience if the marriage ended would be unendurable. I was deeply dismayed when I realized there was no way out for me. But it was then that I resolved I would not surrender to the threats of my husband and his family. No matter what they did, I was not going to give up my individuality and allow myself to become a non-entity.

I came to the realization that in relation to my writing it would be safer for me to abandon my name. If I adopted a pseudonym I would be able to publish my writing without my husband knowing it was me. And so I hid myself behind the pseudonym "Salma." I changed my mailing address to my brother's house. I began to write copiously, working secretly at night when nobody was around. Unable to sleep, I would slip noiselessly into the bathroom, jot down my poems on bits of paper and hide them there in the dirty clothes. The clothes would be sent every two days to my mother's house for laundering. There she would retrieve what I had written and send it on to the publisher. I was grateful to my mother for helping me in this way. Despite her deception over the wedding I realized that she had always tried

CONTRACT

My sister hisses at me in anger
what my mother whispers tactfully:
that all failures
on the conjugal bed
are mine alone.

The first words I hear
every night in the bedroom:
'What's with you tonight?'
These are, most often,
the final words too.

A finger points to whorish barter.
Upon the air of timorous nights, awaiting redemption
from ten million glowing stars,
float words of wise counsel.

Unable to feed its young,
the cat sobs like a child;

and its wail
seizes my heart.

You, too,
must have your complaints.
My stand, though,
has been made clear
by time and history.

To receive
a little of your love,
dreary though it might be—

To fulfil
my duties
as the mother of your child—

To have you bring
sanitary towels and contraceptives
from the outside world;
and to seek more such petty favours—

To order you around a bit,
if I could—

To affirm a little
of my authority—

My vagina opens,
knowing all that it should.

to support me. She felt guilty about my not being allowed to attend school and being forced into my marriage.

My poems were at first published individually in a magazine called *Kalachuvadu*. They appeared under my new name and so my husband and his family came to believe that I had stopped writing. This pleased them greatly.

Days passed and I kept wondering if I would ever get a chance to liberate myself. The misery of sharing my life with a person who had not an iota of love or respect for me affected me severely. But I became used to warding off depression through creative work. The books hidden in the almirah, a small cupboard by my bed, provided company and comfort.

Two years after my wedding I discovered I was pregnant. I wasn't as thrilled as most women are when they hear this news. Up until then I had comforted myself with the notion that, someday, I would be able to escape from the loveless marriage. Now, with my son on the way, I had to come to terms with the stark fact that separation was now impossible. In contrast, my husband and his family were delighted, convinced as they were that the arrival of children would encourage me to settle down to family life.

MY ANCESTRAL HOME – 1

Entirely bereft now
of its identity,
my ancestral house,
where I used to live,
has crumbled to ruin.

Although I do not
live there anymore,
it stays with me still,
along with my childhood.

I used to fly
over the jungle made up
of its mezzanine lofts.

Its pillars hid me
on moonlit nights
and on those
darkened by moonless skies.

Even the wall of the latrine,
witness to the terror
of my first bleeding,
has collapsed to the ground, along
with all its other secrets.

Many were the times
we had sought shelter there:
I, on one side of the wall,
and this neem tree on the other.

With its walls lost to ruin,
the house stands alone,
staring at the ground where it had
once cast its shadow.

Traces of my play hours
still remain, perhaps,
on the wall of an upstairs room.

In this they were quite wrong. Even after the birth of my two children, misery and dissatisfaction continued to haunt my life. Despite my acute unhappiness, I somehow continued to keep writing. My poems were beginning to receive attention. People began to ask questions about this unknown poet: Who is this Salma? Why are no photographs ever published? Is the writer a man or a woman? (In Tamil Nadu men would often write using a woman's nom de plume.) Together with the directness of my writing about taboo subjects, the intrigue helped bring the poems to a widening audience.

Before long the attention my work was receiving led the editor of *Kalachuvadu* to ask if I would be interested in publishing an anthology in book form. I hesitated at first, unsure if this was a good idea. I was worried that my husband and his family would find out. But my publisher was enthusiastic and agreed to print the book without my picture in it, so eventually I agreed.

When the book appeared I was invited to attend an event to mark its publication as part of a major international literary conference being held in Chennai. I very much wanted to go. But how could I get the permission from my husband and his family? How could I even ask for it?

A week before the event I pretended I had a problem with my uterus and that it was causing me a great deal of pain. A doctor who was the wife of a friend of my husband helped me get a medical appointment in Chennai. The plan was for my mother to accompany me. She and my father were party to the deception. We left the village carrying all my old medical reports to reinforce the idea that we were setting out on a medical visit.

At the book launch, I was shocked when my publisher called me forward to take the stage. I refused to do so, and instead hid behind Cheran, a renowned Tamil writer who was introducing my book. I was terrified that word would make its way back to the village. After the event, I asked my publisher to ensure that no photographs of me appeared in the press. When the conference was over, I did not take even a single copy of the book home for fear that my husband might find it.

A flurry of reviews greeted the publication of the book, many of them highly positive. Critics praised me for what they called a new way of writing about women's feelings and experiences. The fact that I was a Muslim woman was often cited by reviewers as making what I'd written all the more remarkable. The responses of the critics buoyed me up and encouraged me to continue

INDELIBLY

You are draining away
this night too, from your remote vantage.

Going past—in my mind—
the residual traces of your touch
on my still perspiring body,
I caress the memories
of our encounter
and melt into the night.

My breath dries
this damp night
with its heat
and folds it neatly.

In the middle of the night,
my lust for you
knocks me down.
Then, like a hazy sketch
drawn with swirls of smoke,

it mingles with the colours of the night
and becomes complete.

Later, in the light of the moon,
it turns into volcanic lava that erupts
and overflows, spreading itself
on the stillness of the street,
incinerating its rulebook.

The moonlight drenches both alike:
the rain that comes later
and my love for you.

Salma's chaperones at one of her early book readings. Far left: Najima, Salma's sister; second from right, Salma's Mother, Sharbunnisha

my creative endeavors. I began work on a novel I had been contemplating for some time. I continued to engage with the same themes of the isolation and mistreatment of women, and especially Muslim women, that I had dealt with in my poetry. And, as in my earlier work, I tried to be as honest and open as I could be about women's sexual needs and desires. The book, when published, was much discussed in literary circles, and also, predictably, in my village, where it earned its author great contempt and hostility.

The "Panchayat" elections to find a village leader that were held at the end of 2001 transformed my life completely. Under a new law designed to empower women, our constituency was reserved for women that year. My husband, who was already active in politics, needed a female member of his family to contest the election as a proxy. None of the other women was willing to take this on and so he had no other choice but to ask me. The understanding was that if I were elected my husband would become the de facto president and exercise complete authority. I would just be a figurehead.

IMAGE

Stepped on in the dark,
the cockroach was crushed
to pulp. All night,
an army of ants have
scoured its flesh,
leaving the carcass behind to show me
the novel sight of myself
with wings that can no longer rise in flight
and stick legs—now redundant, of no use.

Despite these intentions it was apparent to me that I could use the election to my advantage. All the restrictions on the public appearance of my name and photo disappeared overnight. My picture was now posted all over the place on billboards and leaflets. I even spoke on public platforms. Someone who had previously been forbidden to step outside the house was now encouraged to make appearances in villages and towns everywhere.

I fought as hard as I could in the election, placing the provision of basic amenities in my ward at the center of my campaign. I won the election by a substantial margin; my opponent even lost their deposit. In the wake of the victory, my life improved immeasurably. Whilst before I was locked up in my husband's house, I was now actively encouraged by him and his family to travel around the district, meeting people and speaking in public. I could never have dreamed that my life would change in such a dramatic fashion.

I became increasingly recognized in both the literary world and the political domain of Tamil Nadu. In mid-2006, I contested the state elections and came very close to winning.

NO TRACES LEFT

There are objects
everywhere in this room.

Vases await
the visitor's gaze.

This bed, which reminds me
of pregnancy
and fills me with fear,
is the weapon my Master wields.

Why can't this stage mirror,
playing host to my image,
chat with me for a while?

The electric fan, though,
is tricky enough to keep me
from fleeing this room
in search of breeze.

The windows
bring in nothing
from the outside world
these days.

When I rock the crib,
I recall
for no reason at all:

The honey I sipped
through a strange flower's stem;

the almond fruit
I stole, just this one time,
from Chinnani's garden;

The time I ate a poisonous root,
mistaking it for a tamarind stalk.

Taj—a child who peered too close
while I sharpened my pencil,
got her face gashed and wept—
is a mother of three now,
and supplies milk.

The endless loneliness
of the barren old woman
in a white sari.

What refuge remains for a woman
whose traces are wiped clean?

For whom will the morning sun
dawn white on the low sky?

Even as those who are afraid,
and those who are ignorant,
of death, are dying still,
I have a strange dream:
There's a newspaper story
of my being raped by some men
while I was walking alone on the road.

This life—impossible to pursue,
with a myriad of lifeless objects
and one man—
goes on regardless,
inside the same room.

Five years ago, I was appointed Chairperson of the Tamil Nadu Social Welfare Board. This involved working with women and children, and in particular helping women who were in distress as a result of child marriages and domestic violence. I was able to ensure that many of the women returned to education. I found this work both engrossing and fulfilling.

My earlier misery and pain have come to an end. Time has taken me to a position diametrically opposite to my earlier plight. What appeared to be impossible, even in my wildest dreams, has now become a reality. I continue to wonder at this mystery. My husband now asks me why I do not write as much as I used to do. I consider this a great victory.

When I first started writing, around the age of fifteen, I imagined that through reading I was hitching my mind to the infinite expanse of stellar space. I observed and internalized the world and the happenings around me through the words I read, and then put my pen to paper. All this happened, of course, without any clear plan about what exactly I should write. It was part of an effort on my part to understand the meaning or meaninglessness of life.

After a while, social, political, and historical contexts began to appear in my writing along with more personal accounts of my own experiences. My poems became precise and dense. I understood that my life and my work were inseparably tied together at some indistinguishable point.

The language I acquired through voracious and eclectic reading helped me express what had happened to me. I do not believe in imposing any restrictions on my work. When a poem is born a mysterious knot within me gets untangled and frees itself. Through my writings I want to invite the reader into my world and into a profound experience of sharing. Once she has entered my writing, I aim to keep her in an endlessly engaged condition. I want the sound of the voice rising from my text to reverberate at all levels of her mind.

Besides trying to present the situation of women in society, and the problems and hardships they face, in an honest and original manner, I want my work to register the extent to which the human condition as a whole has been debased. I hope to convey what I see as the persistent absurdity of human life that flows from the sense of isolation that surrounds me and which

persists today. Writing finds its proper direction in the quest for self and the pressure of suppressed emotions.

I try to understand the reason for my existence and establish my identity through my writing. In most of my work I have focused on the isolated condition of women, the lack of confidence this produces in them, and the unbridgeable but entirely fabricated gap in the relationships between men and women. The physical restrictions and denial of education faced by the women of my community have found their due place in my texts. Life has taught me a feminist way of thinking.

I have been a mute witness, and also a victim, of the treatment of women as mere objects. The miseries inflicted on women and their suppressed inner feelings find a prominent place in all my writings. I have tried to show in my works how women become vulnerable to violence when they surrender their lives and independence to the beliefs of others and society's restrictions. In recording the murmurs of my inner emotions and the extraordinary desires of my body, feelings that are often excluded as taboo, I try to create tiny ripples in the frozen, silent space. My writing depends on me and I depend on my writing.

I had hoped the themes I engaged with in my novel and poetry would create a healthy public dialogue. But I was also prepared for an adverse reaction amongst my own community. In this respect, my expectations were amply fulfilled. There were those who simply could not accept the justness of what I'd written and who consequently turned against me. In particular there were many men whose mind-set just could not comprehend my portrayal of women characters and dismissed them as figments of a warped imagination. They leveled a barrage of unfair accusations against me. It's a real challenge to get a community to accept charges against it that are so fundamental, let alone to make the necessary changes to put things right. This is particularly true of a patriarchal society that finds it very difficult to examine itself honestly. In such circumstances, writers such as me face an enormous struggle to retain our space.

The writings of women generate continuous opposition from men. The patriarchal society, which is always keen to maintain the moral codes it imposes on women, does not permit them to express openly their sexuality or their desires, or the crises they encounter. Men are generally not prepared to read the writing of women with an open mind. They are constantly searching

for spurious arguments to reject a woman's point of view. This was especially true when it came to my own writing. The ideas I express are seen as particularly radical because they flow from the pen of a Muslim woman. My community is often stricken by fear and in its desperation has hurled empty charges and calumny in my direction. It deludes itself by insisting that my portrayals of the lives of the women are fundamentally false. It turns a blind eye to the love, humanity, compassion, struggle, and anguish that I believe fill my writing. It attempts to isolate me, to deprive me of succor. And yet, despite all of this, I have managed to carve out a space for what I want to say. Time, which stood frozen as an icy rock around me until I was thirty-three, is now thawing. It now leads me with its current.

—Translated from the Tamil by S. Thillainayagam

PUBLISHING SALMA IN TAMIL

Kannan Sundaram

On a summer morning in 1994, I was working in the offices of *Kalachuvadu*, the Tamil language literary magazine that had been founded by my father in Nagercoil in 1988 and which I had subsequently taken over. The office is at the front of the house, facing onto the yard. The room has large windows on the west and north sides. I sit facing the east, with a view of the front gate.

A large vehicle pulled up outside. Several people were visible inside, mostly women with their sari duppatas pulled over their heads. They waited outside the gate for others to get out and join them so they could come in as a group. We were expecting them. I knew one of them was Salma. She was coming to visit my father.

Before he died, eight years ago now at the age of 74, my father ran a very open house. We were quite used to visitors arriving

generally unannounced at all times of the day. Food was prepared in excess, anticipating guests. There were guest rooms upstairs. A literary magazine once ran a box item saying, "Don't waste your money booking a hotel room when you go to Nagercoil. Just go to Suraa's house!" In addition to his hospitality, my father was keen on nurturing young talent. Every day he used to write several letters, mostly to upcoming writers, sharing ideas and suggesting books to read.

The gate opened and they all walked in, a little hesitant. This was probably their first visit to a non-Muslim household. I could immediately pick out Salma; I had seen a photograph of her earlier. She wore her sari slightly above her ankles, the way village women do, and she seemed uncertain in her movements, a hint perhaps of her previously highly secluded life. But to my family and me, she was a wonder we were waiting to meet.

We knew her story through a common friend, Lally. We'd heard that she had been forced to drop out of school, and that her marriage had been arranged at a young age. Her mother had feigned a grave illness, pretending to be on her death bed, in order to obtain a promise from her to go through with the

marriage. She had two children, both boys. She loved literature, and was an enthusiastic reader who had begun to write herself. My father, who had been shown her poems by Lally, found them to be very promising. But her husband and in-laws were hostile to the very idea of her reading and writing. They clearly found all of that subversive. Her own family was not much of a support either.

Her husband had instinctively and accurately guessed that her writing would cast him in a bad light. Her poems were often critical of male domination and revealed her own alienation from the system in which she was forced to live, a discomfort only compounded by the problems she had with her husband.

Salma's cousin, Abdul Hameed, was part of our editorial collective. It was he who had brought her notebook containing a number of poems to our office. Apparently she had written many of them in the bathroom, for want of privacy. The notebook had to be kept well-hidden because her husband suspected its existence and often searched for it.

I had relaunched *Kalachuvadu* as a magazine focusing on literary fiction and non-fiction in 1994 and we published one of Salma's poems in our very first issue, followed by a wider

HIS WORLD BEYOND ME

In recent times,
there has been
no intimacy between us.
I can't get close
to the boy
even if I try.

When I pull him close
and fondly nuzzle his hair,
he flinches from the touch
of my breasts and moves away,
forgetting that they had once
processed my blood to feed his hunger.

When I reach with my hand
to run my fingers through his hair—
tendrils upright like reeds on a riverbank—
he pushes my hand away and moves on.

He, eager to go beyond
childhood's threshold,
and I, wanting to reclaim it—
in this struggle between us
wanes our affinity.

He, who had asked me
on a night of the moon's full retreat
if the sun too would be gone someday,
has no more answers to seek from me.

When the gloom that has found
shelter in my room
asked me today to be let in again,
I was turning back
a dream I once had when I first conceived:

That a radiance would now wash over the gloom
and then gather here, in this room.

selection a year or so later. The poems appeared under the byline Salma, but we knew this was not her real name, only a pseudonym designed to protect her privacy. They immediately drew the attention of readers and critics. We received several queries about her but, at the beginning at least, we made sure her identity remained a secret outside our immediate circle of friends.

Salma's poems began to be widely acknowledged as having set the trend for a new genre of women's poetry in Tamil. Following their publication, other contemporary women poets were inspired to write boldly about their bodies and sexuality. This drew fire on Salma from self-styled guardians of Tamil culture. Islamic fundamentalists who suspected Salma was a Muslim waited for their suspicions to be confirmed.

S. V. Rajadurai and V. Geeta, two well-known intellectuals, translated a number of her poems into English, and they appeared in *Indian Literature*, a journal published by Sakithya Academy, an organization of the Indian government to promote writing. Later, some poems were published in Hindi in another magazine, *Samakalin Bharathiya Sakithya* (*Modern Indian Literature*). Since her contact address was, for obvious reasons,

at my magazine rather than her home, I was the first to read the flurry of letters from readers as far away as Orissa and Kashmir that resulted from their appearance. I would read out these missives to her during our occasional phone calls and could sense her excitement at this acknowledgement of her work. The letters evidently brought a sense of meaning and hope to an otherwise oppressive and empty existence.

In December 1998, *Kalachuvadu* launched four new books. It turned out to be a landmark literary event in Tamil. Salma travelled to Chennai under the guise of needing treatment for a medical condition, to participate in the book release. It was her first exposure to a literary event. Her mother was a hesitant accomplice in this masquerade. For Salma to travel alone was unthinkable!

Shortly after her arrival in town, a few of us invited her to walk with us to a nearby restaurant. She glanced at her mother, and then, receiving a silent message which we could not interpret, came along with us. As we walked, it was obvious she had trouble negotiating the city's crowded pavements and roads. In the restaurant, it was a sight to see her eat a Dosai. We teased her mercilessly but she enjoyed every bit of it. To this day she retains a lovely self-deprecating sense of humour.

A few weeks later, Salma went to attend a meeting of *Kalachuvadu* readers in Madurai, not far from her village. She once more travelled under the pretence of an invented medical condition. Already a minor star, she was invited by the organizers to speak a few words. What happened next was reported to me later, though I also got a feel of it from listening to the audio tapes of the event: Salma walked up to the stage, spent a few minutes before the microphone trying to articulate a sentence, and then walked slowly back to her seat without managing to utter a word.

In the meantime, we continued to publish her poems and also her book reviews: analyses of feminism, poetry, short stories, and novels. Her commentaries were both acute and bold. On the eve of the millennium, *Kalachuvadu* co-organized a World Tamil Conference in Chennai. We called it "Tamil-ini 2000." Salma spent all three days at the conference meeting writers from around the world. The day before the conference opened *Kalachuvadu* organized a book launch. Salma's first poetry collection was among several other books that were released on this occasion. At the event, Salma refused to go on stage, afraid that if a photograph of her was published there would be uproar

in her village and amongst her family. But despite the mounting pressure, she was beginning to assert herself as a writer.

While this was going on her husband was regularly abusive, and occasionally violent. I was shocked when one day she called me sobbing. After great difficulty, I got her to talk about it. Her husband, furious that she was making a name for herself as a writer, had rubbed the dirt on the sole of his foot into her face. She was not hurt physically, but he had made her feel like filth. She braved it all and continued to write.

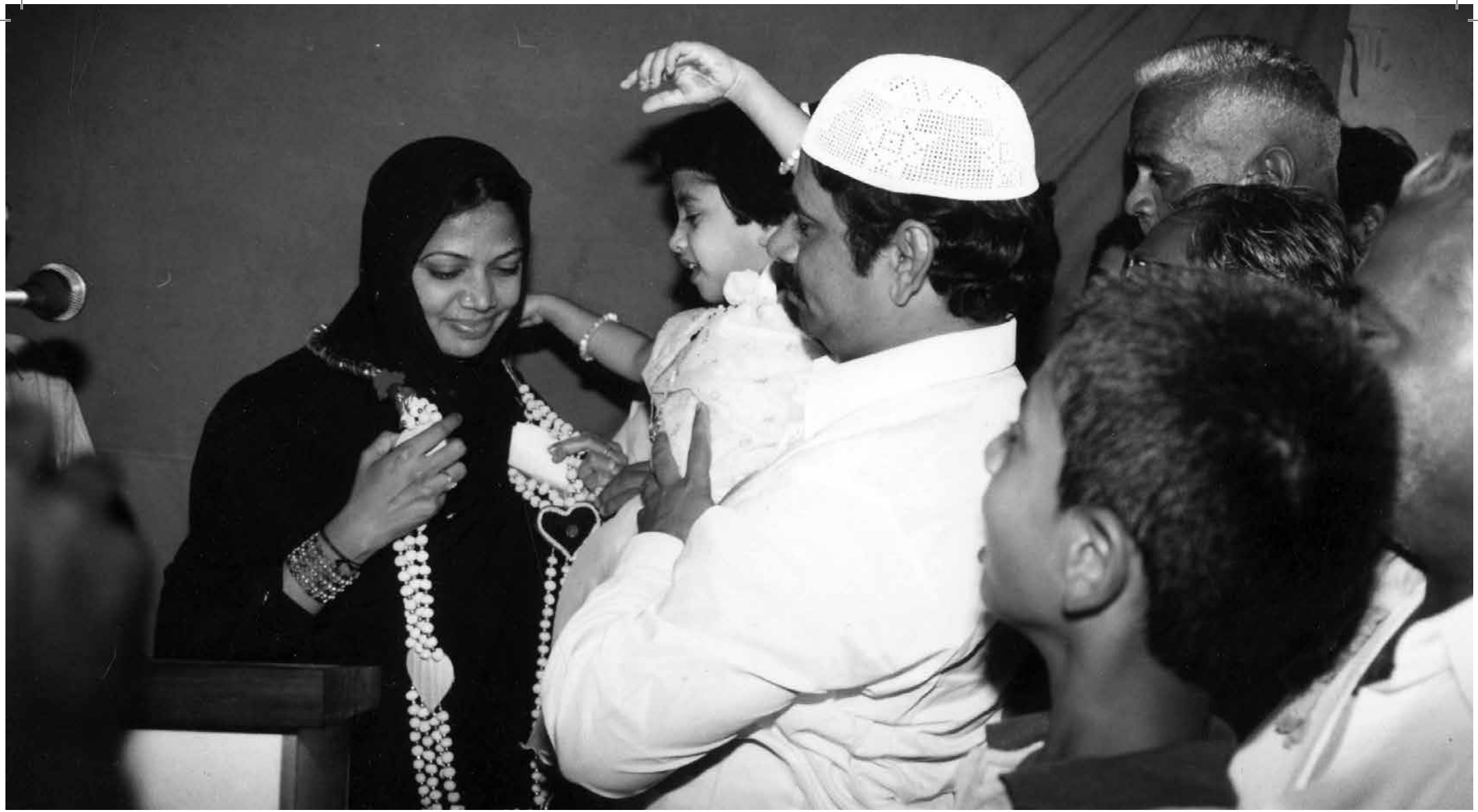
In 2000, Salma was given some blank notebooks by a friend, and, on an impulse, started writing a novel. She finished it the following year, but was afraid to give it to me for publication, anticipating a backlash from her community and family.

Then a totally unexpected turn of events occurred. Panchayat Raj, a scheme by which every village elects a president and committee to manage civic affairs, had been introduced by Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's government in 1992. Elections were due to be held in October 2001, and Salma's Panchayat, Thuvarankurichi, along with a third of the constituencies nationally, was reserved that year for women. Her husband, who had hoped to contest the election, was forced to ask Salma to stand

in his stead. The idea was that she would be a figurehead through which he could exercise power. She agreed and, as the election campaign proceeded, the chains that had previously bound her began to loosen. Instead of trying to keep her a prisoner inside the house, her family now encouraged her to go out on the streets to gather votes. Posters featuring her were put up across the constituency. She addressed a number of public meetings.

Her achievements as a writer were promoted in the election campaign because they helped portray her as an educated woman who could handle the affairs of the Panchayat. The Tamil and English media prominently featured the story of this Muslim woman poet who was running for election. She won easily. Her husband might have hoped to end up running the show from behind the scenes, but things did not turn out that way. Her position as a writer together with the media attention she received meant that she had leverage with government officials that forced them to meet her Panchayat's demands, in a way that her husband clearly could not have achieved. She was in charge.

I remember that on one occasion she called up Cho Ramaswamy, a member of the Rajya Sabha, the upper house of



Salma elected as Panchayat leader

Indian parliament, asking for an appointment to meet him. Cho, legendary editor of the *Thuklak* magazine, was nominated to the Rajya Sabha by the Right Wing Hindu Party, the BJP. When he asked her about the purpose of the meeting she said she wanted him to support her Panchayat with the personal funds allotted to all members of Parliament. He replied that she need not waste her time meeting him; that he already knew about her reputation. He promised to transfer several lakhs of rupees, which he promptly did. Salma was one of those very rare writers in Tamil who find themselves empowered by literature.

This transformation of Salma into a public figure entirely changed the dynamics of her situation at home. She could now write and publish openly and was able to receive magazines and letters at her house. She presently sent me her novel for publication. It was written in several notebooks and she had made no copy. She refused to send the books by post since she was afraid they might get lost, so I sent someone over to her village to bring them to my office by hand. She had scribbled the novel in her child-like writing. Spelling mistakes and grammatical errors were rife throughout the manuscript, a poignant reminder of Salma's misfortune at not being able to

complete school. But, despite the initial roughness of the text, I read through the pages with mounting interest, fascinated by the life of Muslims, especially women, in a Tamil Village. We edited the manuscript carefully over the next two years, working with Salma periodically.

The novel was published in December 2004 and was launched with an event in the Landmark Bookstore in Chennai, attended by well-known writers, poets, and activists who read excerpts from it. Salma sat there, evidently petrified, as portions of her novel that had already been deemed "vulgar" and "blasphemous"

Salma as Minister (center of picture)

were read aloud in front of an audience that included her parents and family.

After becoming the Panchayat chief and a public figure, Salma's every action fell under the close scrutiny of those in her community. She was invited to seminars and conferences in Delhi, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan. It was now impossible for her family to accompany her everywhere, nor were they able to stop her going where she wanted. A Muslim woman travelling alone was unheard of in her village and it created a furor. Her appearances on television, especially when she left her head uncovered, also came in for criticism. Her poetry collections and novel were read carefully by her opponents in village politics. Provocative lines from the poems were taken out of context and displayed on posters by her political adversaries. The religious hierarchies were outraged by her writing. Characters in her novel were identified as actual people, who were then told that they had been featured in a scurrilous story. Sections of the novel that were critical of the village leadership were marked out and read to the community's chief. The photograph of a street in Salma's village that we used on the cover of the book included a woman who was sitting in a doorway. She was traced and informed that

Salma had used her to help sell an irreligious and vulgar piece of trash. She used to come to Salma's home every day and harass her for compensation.

In Tamil literature, few have had to pay such a heavy price to be a writer. Salma was affected emotionally, socially, and politically as result of these denunciations. Muslim magazines published scathing attacks on her under the guise of criticizing her writing. *Kalachuvadu* was attacked for publishing it. That a Muslim girl has a relationship with a Hindu boy in the novel continues to infuriate religious bigots to this day. As recently as 2010, a Muslim magazine featured Salma on its cover with a scathing article inside focusing on her Facebook page which revealed her religious belief as "atheist." It did not fail to mention that in her novel Muslim women are portrayed as having relationships outside marriage, especially with Hindu men. In all these discussions on sexuality in the novel, no reference is ever made to the fact that a Muslim man has an open long-standing relationship with a Hindu-Dalit woman. It's not sexuality itself, but the way Salma deals with the politics of sexuality that infuriates her critics. She has been branded as the Tamil Taslima Nasreen, the bold Bangladeshi writer who has questioned what

she perceives as the anti-women tenets of Islam. But Salma has always taken care not to confront the basic beliefs of her community's religion, and, as a result, the religious extremists have been unable to push the issue beyond a certain point.

In 2006 Salma was invited to deliver the University of Chicago's Norman Cutler Memorial Seminar about her writing. The National Book Trust, British Council, and the Sakithya Academy invited her to book fairs in Frankfurt, London, and China. But, just as recognition for her literary work was growing, she found that politics and the hectic life it imposed on her were increasingly hampering her writing.

As her tenure as Panchayat president neared its end, her family encouraged her to join the DMK, a political party that emerged out of the radical, atheist, and secular ideology of the Dravidian movement. State Assembly elections were due in 2006, so she resigned as Panchayat president and contested the Thuvarankurichi assembly seat, a traditional stronghold of the AIADMK, the ruling party formed after a factional split in the DMK. She lost the election narrowly, by just a couple of thousand votes. Recognizing her abilities and widespread appeal, the party then made her Chairperson of the Social

Welfare Board, a position she held until the DMK lost power in 2011.Though she has been able to help many downtrodden women and children and has joined the fight for the rights of the transgender community, her career as a writer has inevitably suffered. Having to hew to the line of her party, she has been less able to speak out on social issues. It will be a great shame if the party succeeds where her family failed and silences the vital voice of Salma.

It has been two years now since the DMK lost power. The party has become entangled in a vicious power struggle among the heirs of its leader. It remains politically weak. Salma's

Salma, Chair of the Social Welfare Board

involvement has been restricted by the activities of others in the party who do not wish to share the limelight.

The appearance of the documentary *Salma* has helped to reconnect her with a worldwide cultural and literary milieu. This might be an appropriate moment for her to come back to writing full-time. As her publisher and friend, I very much hope she does.

PUBLISHING SALMA IN ENGLISH

Urvashi Butalia

In December of 2004, most newspapers in India were full of news of the devastating Tsunami that had hit several countries in South and Southeast Asia, destroying their lives and homes. One day, as I read story after story about loss and destruction, I came across a small, somewhat unlikely news item. It reported that a publisher in Tamil Nadu, *Kalachuvadu*, had published a novel by a woman who used the name Salma, and that this novel had already stirred up a controversy in Tamil Nadu. The story said that well-known academic Susie Tharu was slated officially to release this novel.

It was an odd story: news about books published in the Indian language does not usually make it to what are known as national (read: "English") papers, and certainly not at a time when there is overwhelming concern about a tragedy as massive as the Tsunami. But there it was, tucked away in one

little corner, high up on a page. I was curious and made a note to find out more.

As publishers, and particularly as feminist publishers, we at Zubaan are always on the lookout not only for interesting manuscripts, but more specifically for books that question the monopoly of knowledge and literature by those in power, usually male, and those who have had the privilege of an education, usually urban and relatively affluent. Who was this woman whose work was making such waves? The news report seemed to indicate that she was not someone well known, not even well educated. How then did the words come to her, and how did she put them down on paper? We resolved to find out more.

At first, it wasn't easy. The newspaper had not mentioned the name of the publisher, so that lead was closed. We tried reaching out to other Tamil writers. Some of them had heard of Salma, but had not read the novel. Others asked us why we wanted to consider something that was apparently not really "literary," but was much more "popular." And then, just as we were beginning to think we would have to give up (we were not so habituated to Google searches then), the breakthrough happened, simultaneously, on two counts. The writer Ambai

(C. S. Lakshmi in real life) put us in touch with the Tamil publisher *Kalachuvadu*, who sent us a copy of the book; and the translator Lakshmi Holmström, whom we approached to read the novel for us, confirmed that it was something worth publishing and, furthermore, that she had nearly finished translating it into English.

After that, things moved swiftly: the formalities were completed and the novel (entitled *The Hour Past Midnight* in English) began its journey into the wider world of national and international publishing. By 2006 the book was in the shops and, in that year, India was to be the focus country at the Frankfurt Book Fair, with Salma being one of the twenty Indian authors invited to present and talk about their work.

Determined that the book would take its rightful place in the world, we put our collective female energy behind making our distributors feel as enthusiastic about it as we were. We told them Salma's story, how she had lived, like many young women in her conservative Muslim society, in purdah, her life hemmed in by restrictions, and how she had defied these restrictions through the power of her writing.

HOME

Though I've travelled far
from my home's smoky yard
to wander across
this stone temple's compound
in an ancient city,
these stone figurines would not
spring to life in me.

Wistful faces
of the children I've left behind
turn silently
in my memory.

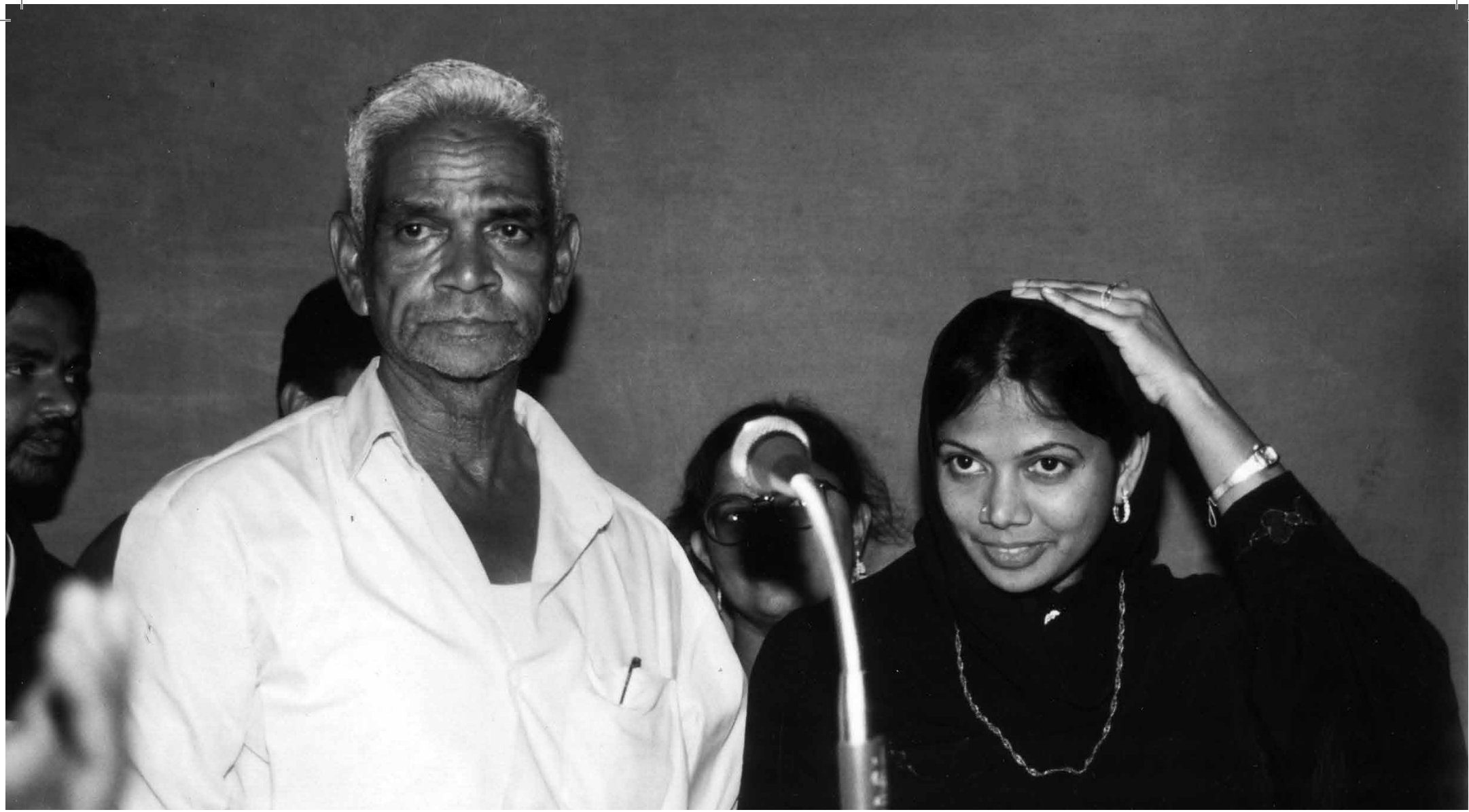
Like the wind rasping constantly
on the sea's surface,
my home, laden with
the weight of my absences,
abrades my heart.

My home's empty spaces
banish me, indirectly,
from this land;
and I return, resolving
never to step beyond
the limits decreed,
to the courtyard of my own house.

We told them how all this had changed with her accidental entry into politics because of a new law (the Panchayat Raj law) that mandated that 33 percent of elected posts at village and municipal levels had to be for women, and how her husband had to vacate his post to make way for a woman. Like many other men who believed that if they placed one of "their" women in such posts, Salma's husband too assumed that power would remain with him. For Salma though, the process of change had well and truly begun. The first thing to come off was the veil, for standing for elections needed first and foremost a "face."

Once having come into the public world, she took to it like a fish to water, bringing to governance all the things that grand politics usually has no place for: attention to schools, sanitation, health centers, women's welfare, water, and that unusual thing, care.

For politically engaged publishers like us, a book is never merely a book. Over and above the "product" that we could sell in the market, and in addition to the fact that it was a wonderful piece of literary work, Salma's writing is rooted in her life, her struggle, and her survival.



Having just won the election for Panchayat leader, with her father

And it is this message that we took to our partners in the world of publishing, to convince them to take this book seriously. Salma had the courage to write and speak out despite all the obstacles in her life: the conservative nature of the society she was born into, the fact of being pulled out of school and kept at home in readiness for marriage, the story of the silences and violence in marriage that mark the lives of so many women. It was this that made the project worthwhile for us, and made us feel honored and privileged to be the trusted bearers of her words.

The relationship wasn't only a simple one of author and publisher. It's never quite like that in feminist publishing,

for every author is an ally, every book a step in the journey of women to a better life. But it was also one that brought us other, unexpected connections. It was because of Salma that we discovered *Kalachuvadu*, the publishing house, and Kannan, her publisher: a discovery that has led to a friendship and collaboration that has extended to several books, and that has worked well for both of us. Indeed it is one that has enabled both of us to go further and seek other partners in other languages in India and elsewhere, for now we have a model of collaborative publishing that we can offer as something that is both democratic and inclusive.

It was Kannan who brought us the first international interest in Salma's novel, from a Galician publisher. We were delighted that the first appearance of Salma overseas was not in a "mainstream" language, but rather one that would recognize both the beauty of her work and its subversive power. And it was our efforts that led to the second such development, with Salma's novel being translated into German and published under an imprint known for its focus on Indian literature. Today, as other avenues open up for Salma internationally, we're proud to have the chance to walk along with her on this journey.

For us, as publishers, every book we do is special, and exciting. It is for this reason that we talk endlessly about our books and our authors.

It was in one such chance conversation with the documentary maker Kim Longinotto at a film festival organized by the International Association of Women in Radio and Televison (IAWRT) that I mentioned Salma and recounted the story of her life, the story of living with violence, of continuing to write, of being exposed to the world through a political development that brought women into electoral politics, and of her subsequent "flight," spreading her wings and becoming her own woman, an important figure in politics. Kim is always on the lookout for interesting ideas and was intrigued by the story. It stayed in her mind.

It might have just remained there had not a chance encounter with another friend, Colin Robinson, who is the joint publisher of this book, brought us together again that evening. Kim, tired and worn out after a long day, allowed herself to be dragged to meet Colin's publisher friend, and found herself talking to Salma's English publisher, the same person she had met that morning and who had recounted Salma's story. We immediately

picked up on our unfinished conversation of the morning and the discussion returned to Salma. By the end of that evening, Kim had decided to make a film on Salma: provided, of course, that Salma agreed. The rest, as they say, is history.

And yet: it isn't, really. For the story I told Kim was one of success, of flight, of a journey from darkness to light. But life doesn't always play out as we would like it. By the time Kim managed to get all the preparatory work done for making her film, Salma's life had changed. Elections in Tamil Nadu had brought to power a different political party than the one to which Salma had given her allegiance and, despite her obvious competence and efficiency, she had been removed from her political post as head of the Tamil Nadu State Welfare Board. Was her journey into politics over? Would she now return to her writing? What about the people in her village, her constituency of loyal followers, all of whom had come to rely on her for their many needs, for whom she had always been caring, generous, and competent?

These are the dilemmas and choices that Salma still faces. She is writing, reading, and speaking more than ever. Her literary self is what currently sustains her. Politics may or may not return

Malik and Salma's wedding

to her life; that depends on circumstances beyond her control. But over the years, her gentleness and thoughtfulness, and the nuanced lens through which she looks at and writes about the world, will be, perhaps, what gives the most meaning to her life. It is certainly what resonates with us, the people who have published her, for whom Salma has become so very important, both as a writer and a person.

CREDITS AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

POETRY CREDITS

All poems translated from Tamil by N. Kalyan Raman except for "Breathing" and "New Bride, New Night" translated by Hari Rajaledchumy

"One Evening and Another": From the Tamil poem, "Oru Malaiyum Innoru Malaiyum" in the eponymous collection.
"Menopause": From the Tamil poem, "Menopause" in the collection, *Pachai Devadai*
"My Ancestral Home – 2": From the Tamil poem, "En Purvika Veedu – 2" in the collection, *Pachai Devadai*
"A Deserted Place": From the Tamil poem, "Yarumilladha Idaththil" in the collection, *Oru Malaiyum Innoru Malaiyum*
Waris Dirie: Previously unpublished
Past Midnight: From the Tamil, "Irandam Jamangalin Kadhai" in the collection, *Oru Malaiyum Innoru Malaiyum*
Breathing: From *Chuttum Vizhichchudar*
A Deserted Place: From the Tamil, "Yarumilladha Idaththil" collection, *Oru Malaiyum Innoru Malaiyum*

New Bride, New Night: Previously unpublished
Contract: From the Tamil, "Oppandam" in the collection, *Oru Malaiyum Innoru Malaiyum*
My Ancestral Home – 1: From the Tamil, "En Purvika Veedu – 1" in the collection, *Pachai Devadai*
Indelibly: From the Tamil, "Neenguthalinri1"
Image: From the Tamil poem, "Padimam" in the collection, *Pachai Devadai*
No Traces Left: from the original poem, "Thadayngal Azhikkappatta Piragu" in the collection, *Oru Malaiyum Innoru Malaiyum*
His World Beyond Me: from the original poem, "Naan Illadha Avan Ulagam" in the collection, *Pachai Devadai*
Home: from the original, "Veedu" in the collection, *Pachai Devadai*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

SALMA:

My thanks to: Kim Longinotto, Kannan, Abdul Malik, my mother Sharbunnisha, father Samsudeen, sister Najima, sons Saleem Jafer and Mohamd Natheem, Lakshmi Submanyan and T. N. Gopalan.

KIM:

Thanks to Andy Dark for his book cover design. Thanks to Sara Lima for her wonderful work and companionship, and to Samyuktha PC for joining us with such enthusiasm. To Urvashi Butalia, Kannan Sundaram and Arul Ezhiland for their generosity and courage. To Anupama Chandrasekhar for all her help. To Salma who changed my life; and to Colin Robinson, who introduced me to Urvashi, who thought of doing this book, and who is the best friend I could ever hope for.

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Kim Longinotto is one of the foremost documentary filmmakers working today, best-known for filming women's stories in an observational style. Her films include *Rough Aunties*, *Sisters in Law* and *Divorce Iranian Style*, which won a British Film and Television Award (BAFTA). Her work was the subject of a major retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art, New York City, in 2009. She teaches at the National Film and Television School in Beaconsfield, UK.