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Salma

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Salma

Abstract

This is a film review of *Salma* (2013) directed by Kim Longinotto.

Keywords

Sundance, Festival, Islam, Women, India, Salma, Poetry

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Author Notes

John Lyden became Editor of the Journal of Religion and Film in 2011. He was Professor of Religion at Dana College from 1991-2010 and is now the Director of the Liberal Arts Core at Grand View University. He is the author of *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals* (New York: NYU Press, 2003), and the editor of the *Routledge Companion to Religion and Film* (Routledge, 2009). He is currently editing (along with Eric Mazur) the *Routledge Companion to Religion and Popular Culture*. He was the 2008 recipient of the Spiritus Award for Outstanding Contributions to the study of Religion and Film.

Salma

directed by Kim Longinotto

(World Cinema Documentary Competition)



Salma grew up in a Muslim village in South India in which it is traditional for girls to marry as soon as possible after they begin menstruating. In the interim, they are frequently locked away, losing the chance for further education or an independent life. Forced into marriages as children, they have no opportunities for escape or questioning of their society, or even for reading books, which are viewed as subversive to their roles.

Salma was a clever girl who wanted an education badly and so resisted marriage, until her mother feigned illness in order to pressure her acceptance of a match. Once she found out, she was angry, but married Malik. Soon after her marriage, however, Salma began to express her resistance in poems she wrote that described her feelings of constriction to a role she had not chosen. Her frank descriptions in her poems of her anger, sexual duties and loss of freedom are striking and beautifully written, and they have made her the most famous Tamil woman poet of her time. What makes this all the more amazing is that she wrote her poems surreptitiously, on bits of paper in the bathroom, hiding them wherever

she could so that her husband would not find and destroy them. Her husband Malik even threatened to kill himself, or throw acid on her face, if she did not stop.

But Salma did not stop writing poetry. Her mother helped her to smuggle the poems to a publisher, and soon thereafter it became known in the village that she had exposed a side of their lives that they did not wish to share with the world. Malik, however, ultimately became supportive of her gift and encouraged her to run for the village council; she was elected, and has continued to work for women's rights, also in her later position as Welfare Board President. This position took her beyond her village, and she discovered the outside world, full of women like herself seeking education and liberation. She does not wear a burka, which some members of her family find difficult; not all of them support the ways in which she has challenged the roles her society sets for women. Still, she continues to try to educate them, as when she reads her poems to her teenage sons, or when she tries to stop child marriages or comforts a woman whose daughter set fire to herself rather than submit to a marriage. Salma clearly knows that the problems are great, and that it is a slow journey towards conquering them, but her voice of protest has been a raft to women seeking a way to challenge them. This film is as troubling as it is inspirational, as it depicts both the tragedy of the situation and her calling to give that tragedy a voice. — John Lyden