



Rebelling through poetry

By Gautaman Bhaskaran

Documentaries can be fascinating. *Salma* is one, which I saw recently. Made by British filmmaker

Kim Longinotto, *Salma* is a Muslim woman – a poet, novelist and short-story writer – from a small Tamil Nadu village. In one important way, Longinotto's and *Salma*'s lives were similar.

When Kim's Italian photographer father went bankrupt, he sent her to a draconian boarding school, whose headmistress punished the girl after she got lost during an excursion. The girls were forbidden to talk to Kim for a whole term. It was as cruel as solitary confinement in a prison.

Salma's home was as good as a jail. For quarter century, she was a prisoner of sorts in her home – first under her father and later, her husband. Of course, *Salma* in the course of an interview with me at her Chennai flat, avers that it may not be the right thing to say that she was “locked up” – as was being stated in the 90-minute documentary on her.

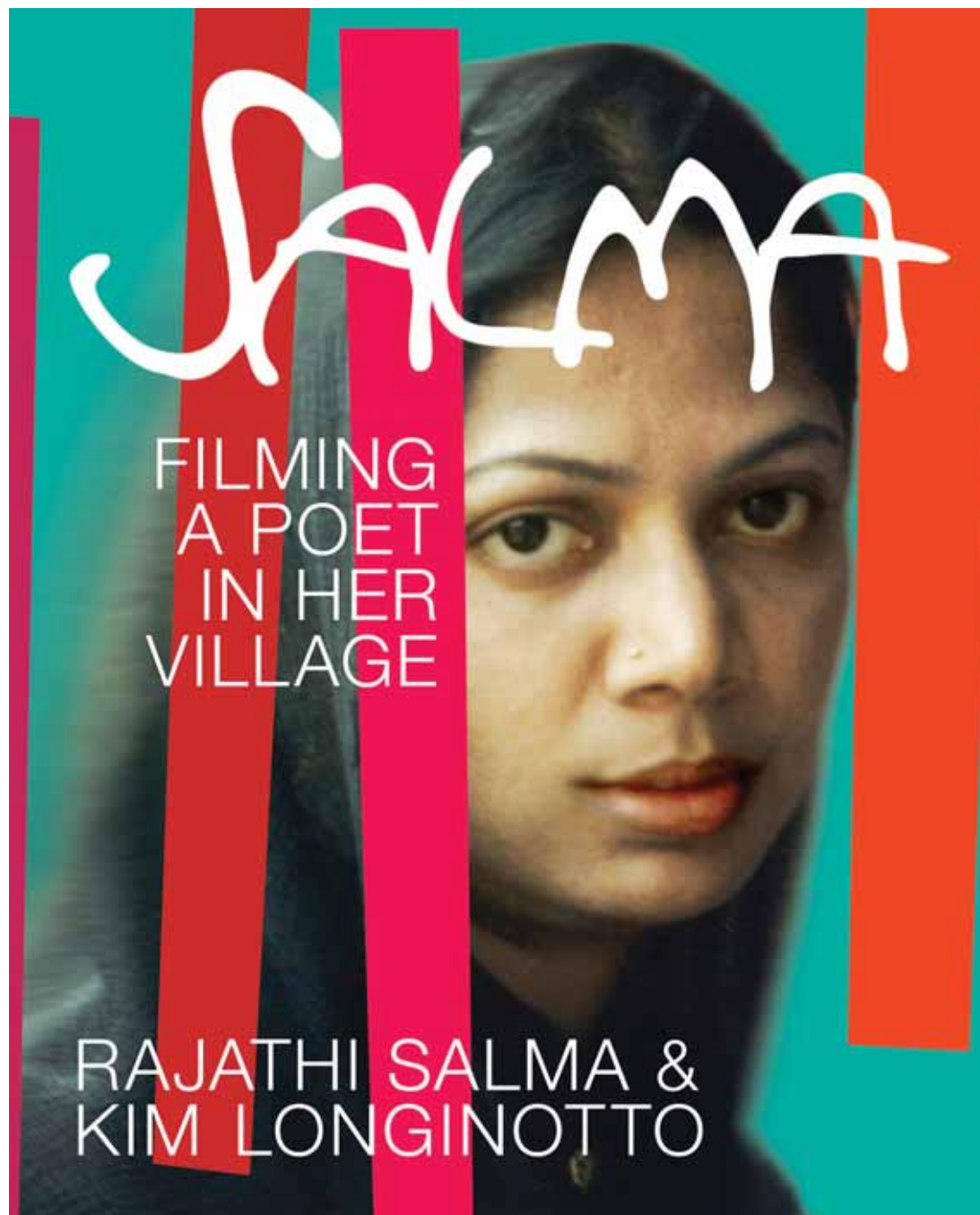
Yes, her freedom to go out of home unescorted by a male relative and the restriction placed on her freedom to write poetry can be termed incarceration. Her talent was not allowed to bloom, her desire to express herself through poems was curbed.

But, then, this was the case with all other Muslim girls in her village. The picture was quite different, though, in cities, because they afforded anonymity and a sense of competitiveness prevailed. “How could you not let your own daughter attend school when your neighbourhood girls were being educated,” *Salma* explains.

And, like *Salma*, who has penned some great poetry, even some daring verses, some fantastic short stories and even a gripping novel, – some of these in the secluded secrecy of her bathroom – and published them in little magazines, Kim grew up to be a renowned moviemaker – although no curbs were placed on her art by either her family or society.

Often described as an observational filmmaker, Kim's cinema is direct and spontaneous. She does not plan anything, just watches her subject and shoots. *Salma* too has been observing the world for a long time, and her poetry reflects the pain and pathos of being a woman in her community.

She says that she – called Rajathi by her family – and her sister had only a small window with grills to look at the world outside. Sadly, the window faced a street which led to a cemetery, and hardly anybody walked by. Yet, that window in that room where the girls were confined most of the time – most certainly when men came visiting the family



– was the source of light and life, a window that nudged and provoked *Salma* to dream of the freedom to write and for greater things.

But this was easier dreamt than done. At her village, Thuvankurichi, in Tamil Nadu's Tiruchirappalli district, Muslim girls were forbidden to step out of home once they attained puberty. Marriage hardly altered things, with the girls stepping from one kind of bondage to another, imposed this time by their husbands.

When *Salma* was barely 11, her marriage was fixed with a local boy, but she managed to ward off the actual wedding till she was 22. After this, she was confined to her husband's home with a new name, Rokkaiah.

But the pangs of poetic hunger forced her out. She managed to frequent a public library and graduated from comics to magazines

and Russian literature, Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky, among this. Her cousin smuggled in magazines, and *Salma* collected the newspapers which were used to wrap groceries. She read them with avid interest.

Her verses – which she wrote under the name of *Salma* – reached little magazines, but it was not until one of her poems was published with her photograph and name on the cover of a leading Tamil journal, *Anantha Vikatan*, in 2001 that her family and village woke up – not in appreciation, but in anger. Her husband threatened to immolate himself, always keeping a bottle of kerosene in his wardrobe.

At other times, he would warn her that he would disfigure her face with acid. So *Salma* would sleep with her little son close to her face. She was sure that her husband would not harm him. Well, nothing happened. *Salma*'s pluck prevailed and

she not only became the head of her town panchayat but achieved poetic stardom. Her work became renowned, and was translated into many, many languages. And now the documentary that has travelled to tens of festivals – and with it *Salma* too – has catapulted her to world stage.

But has she achieved freedom in the real sense of the term? I wonder, because there is a scene in the film, where one of her grown-up sons, is upset that his mother does not wear the burka. He feels it is important for girls/women to wear that, because “men are easily aroused”.

In spite of all this, *Salma* has no rancour or bitterness. She does not blame her family, which had to live by the rules of its village. Otherwise, it could have been ostracised.

Madras
An apt title for director P

Ranjith's work could have been North Madras. For the film is set there, in its lower middleclass tenements, where women wear jasmine flowers and queue up at the break of dawn by the street corner water tap with colourful containers. If Ranjit dared to make a movie, *Madras*, in the city's northern fringes, – perhaps the first time ever for a film to have been shot there – he also deftly captures the area's smells and sounds, its dialect and crudity, which can, though, encompass a certain unique camaraderie, fast vanishing elsewhere.

However, the thin plot by itself does not throw up surprises. It is time worn, beaten to death and absolutely clichéd stretching for well over 150 minutes – much of it wasted in inanity. It is only past the first half that *Madras* gets down to pushing what it actually wants to show.

Which is a rivalry over the ownership of a huge wall that two different political clans fight for, shedding blood and brotherhood. Friendships are crushed and lives wasted. It is really not clear why anyone would want to swing sickles, bad mouth one another other and get into physical fights over a mere wall. Ego probably.

Karthik's Kali is a software employee living in a North Madras locality who is as passionate about football as he is about the wall, the right over which, he hopes, will someday come to the political party he identifies with. Hanging around with his best friend, Anbu, and other cronies, Kali ultimately falls in love with a neighbourhood girl, Kalaiarasi (Catherine Tresa making her debut in Tamil cinema after a stint in Kannada and Malayalam movies). And when Anbu is killed, Kali is driven by rage that threatens his romantic dreams.

Sadly, Karthi, who seemed so very promising in his first outing, Paruthi Veeran, is somehow not showing enough pluck to pick different kinds of roles. He remains a ruffian, the ruffian whom we saw in Paruthi Veeran. In fact, most of his roles have veered towards rough characters.

In *Madras* too, he is short tempered and given to sorting issues through might – traits that push him towards loss and suffering. Catherine is not quite up to the mark, often looking dull and emotionless. The others in the film are disappointing as well adding to the over-dramatisation of the narrative, which mercifully is not peppered with too many songs.

In the end, *Madras* is but another work about gang wars and political rivalry that can only be watched if you stop disbelieving.

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