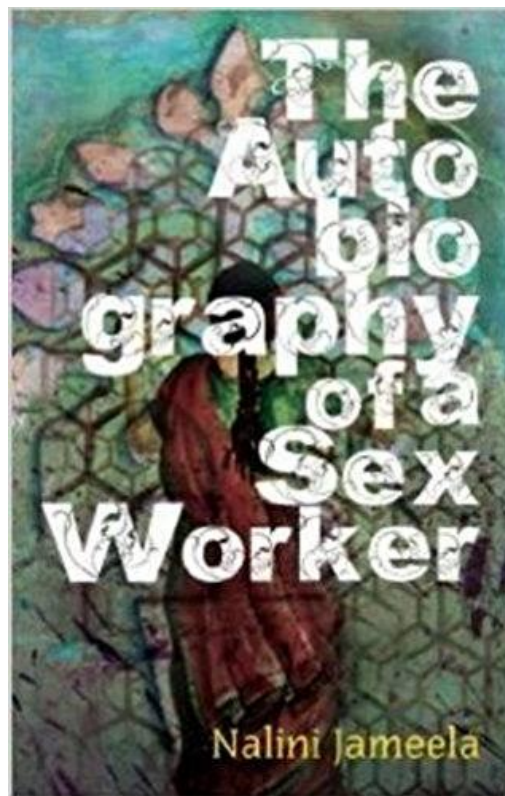


Society and Sex Work in
***The Autobiography of a Sex Worker* by Nalini Jameela**

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Abstract

Sex workers are part of society but they are looked down upon as outcast in Indian society. They are exploited, insulted and humiliated. Even female sex workers are not taken as women rather taken as mere sex objects. Nalini Jameela portrays their plight through her biography *The Autobiography of a Sex Worker*. She herself has worked as a sex worker. She doesn't condemn the sex work rather takes it as a profession. This paper studies the problems faced by the sex workers, dual standards of society, and resilience of the sex workers.

Keywords: Sex work, Prostitution, Devadasi, Treatment of Sex Workers in India, Nalini Jameela

Introduction



Nalini Jameela

Courtesy: <http://bookwiseindia.blogspot.com/2010/08/like-any-of-the-r-woman.html>

Indian society is a male-dominated society. Women are considered inferior to men. They are given secondary status. They are marginalized on the basis of color, class, caste, gender, sexuality and ethnicity. But if a woman is a sex worker as well, she faces double oppression- as a woman as well as a sex worker. She is humiliated, insulted, exploited and marginalized. She is treated as an untouchable and looked down upon as outcast.

It is a hard fact that no woman adopts sex work by her wish, rather society and conditions compel her to venture into this trade. But not many try to find the circumstances in which she had to step into this profession. Nalini Jameela portrays the plight of sex workers through her autobiography-*The Autobiography of a Sex Worker*.

Sex Work

“Sex work is associated with the offering of sexual services, performances or products for monetary gain. It includes not only direct physical contact but also the indirect sexual stimulation. It is a voluntary activity and does not involve human trafficking; the coerced or non-consensual sexual transactions.”(Sex work). It has been practiced since ancient times in different forms. “Its history can be traced to 4000 years back to ancient Babylon.”(Goyal). “Proofs of sex work can also be found in ancient Egypt and Greece, where it was practiced at various socioeconomic levels.”(Sex work). “There are a number of references in the Hebrew Bible which prove that sex work or prostitution was common in ancient Israel. Even, in ancient Rome, it was widespread, legal and public.”(History of Prostitution).

“There is a long history of sex work in the United States. It was deeply rooted from Louisiana to San Francisco in the 18th century. Though there were certain laws, regulating the sale of sex, but they were ambiguous. The sex workers took the advantage of ambiguity and got free from imprisonment. Gradually, they established the sex work as a profession.”(Sex work).

Sex Work in India

In India, sex work, as a profession, can be traced from the Devadasi tradition. *Devadasi* literally means (Dev) God’s (Dasi) female servant. According to ancient Hindu tradition, young pre-pubertal girls were married off or given away in matrimony to God or local religious deity in the temple. The main reason of this system is/was poverty. The poverty-stricken parents used the tradition to unburden themselves of their daughters and used religion to console themselves. The girls were dedicated to worship and service of the deity and the temple for rest of her life. They were enslaved in the name of tradition or godliness. They served or rather sexually satisfied the priests and inmates of the temple. Their service to them was considered as akin service to God. In addition to taking care of the temple and performing rituals, they learned music, dance and other classical artistic traditions. They worked as singers and temple dancers, and enjoyed high position in society. They were respected and culturally enriched.(BhambriPalak).

But patriarchy forced them to sell their sexuality. The local landlords and men in power started to use them in order to satisfy their lust. They (men) made laws and banned temple dancing. It brought upon economic difficulties and cultural estrangement. They had to join the work of prostitution. The Britishers aggravated it further. They encouraged sex work in order to gratify the sexual urge of their soldiers. They set up comfort zones for British troops wishing to make young girls and women into sex tools to satisfy the British soldiers. After independence, the condition further deteriorated.

“The devadasi system has been part of southern Indian life for many centuries. Despite being made illegal in 1988, the system still continues illegally in southern India in one form or other.”(Kidron). The devadasis are forced to lead a miserable life. They are sold and sent to work in the red light areas. They live in subhuman conditions; suffer sexual exploitations, humiliation, cultural subjugation, and political powerlessness. As per government’s records, in 2010, “there were a whopping 6,88,751 registered sex workers in India. Southern states had the largest number of them. Andhra Pradesh led the list with more than one lakh registered female sex workers while Karnataka had 79,000.”(Dash Dipak Kumar). This is the official number but a large number of sex workers go undetected in the records. “According to the Human Rights Watch report, there are more than 20 million prostitutes in India and as many as 35% of them enter at an age less than 18.” (Goyal). As per India TV News Desk, dated 17 December 2013, “three million women were engaged in commercial sex activity in India.”(Shocking Report).

The rich, influential and men in power ever have/had upper hand. They have/had mistresses, concubines and sex slaves who worked as servants. Their lives have/had little or no value. Their aim is/was to provide comfort and pleasure to their masters. Since sexual urges are not limited to the rich and the powerful, the demand of the common man was satisfied by the prostitutes. The prostitutes sell sex to the person who pays and it becomes their dominant mode of survival. Not only poor but “the girls from high society are also engaged in this profession. They are called as ‘call girls’. They are not stigmatized as long as they ply their trade discreetly, and encounter no problems staying integrated in the society.”(Should Commercial Sex).

Role of Patriarchy

Patriarchy also forces girls to enter into this profession. The male dominance gives secondary status to women in society. They are dependent on men in all respects. They are considered weak and inferior to men. They are ill-treated and mercilessly beaten by their fathers, brothers, husbands, or so. They are taken as only sex objects that can be used for male pleasure. They are abused, tortured, molested and even raped sometimes. Most of them have no way of escape other than entering into the work of prostitution.

A woman carries out double duties. She takes care of household chores as well as earns money for the sustenance of family. She faces dual oppression- at workplace as well as at home. She is molested or sometimes raped by her employers. She cannot open her mouth because she needs money to fulfill her needs. Either she has to become the victim or leave the job. In both the cases, she finds prostitution as an option because it is considered an easy way to earn money.

“No girl enters into this profession by choice. She is compelled to join it. Lack of employment, the realization of being unwanted at home, and the hopelessness often force them to take such a drastic step.”(Chaturvedi).

Nalini Jameela and Her Story

Nalini Jameela, herself, has worked as a sex worker. She writes, “A sex worker is not born as a sex worker’s daughter. These are women who come into the trade after having failed their higher secondary school exams, after failing to get a job, or after being kicked out by a husband”(Jameela, 157). The research done by Sanlaap confirms her claim. The study reveals that, in India, ‘the majority of sex workers work as prostitutes in order to support themselves or their children. Most of them choose this profession out of necessity, often after the breakup of a marriage or after being disowned and thrown out of their homes by their families. The children of sex workers also get involved in this kind of work.’(Prostitution in India).

Nalini presents her own story. When she lost her husband, she had been working in a clay-mine and earned not more than three rupees a day. But her mother-in-law asked five rupees everyday to support her children. She had no alternative and had to get into this profession to

bring up her children. She writes, “I had got into this trade to support my kids. Like any other job, this one too had been tiring at times. I’d carried on only for their sake.”(Jameela, 46).

She also describes the story of her friend, Anu. She, too, had to adopt the sex work. She had worked with Nalini in the clay mine. “She had been in love, but her family forced her to marry someone else. The husband had a terrible complex as he was dark and she, fair. The kids born to them were fair-skinned, and that led to terrible fights and beatings.... (She could not bear the torture). She placed her children in an orphanage and became a sex worker.”(Jameela, 103).

Social Evils and Sex Work

Society too has double standards for men and women. Girls are denied education. As a result they fail to secure a respectable job. They have to go for low-paid jobs. Their meager income doesn’t meet the daily needs. They have to enter into this profession in order to earn more money as selling sex is considered a viable means of survival.

There are social evils prevalent in the society. Dowry is one of them. Parents need to pay dowry in marriage. The poor parents do not have enough money for marriage. The ruthless people exploit the poor and misuse the girls. Sometimes the girls fall prey to agents who engage the girls into prostitution. “The All Bengal Women’s Union carried out a survey in 1988 to find the reasons of women’s entry in this trade. The union interviewed a random sample of 160 sex workers in Calcutta. Only 23 claimed that they had come of their own accord, whereas the remaining 137 claimed to have been introduced into the trade by agents. Most of the agents were known people, like neighbors, relatives, etc.”(Prostitution in India).

Demeaning?

Nalini doesn’t find sex-work demeaning. When she finds young sex workers bowed and bent bearing the huge burden of guilt, she tells them, “Once you get into this, it is important to pick yourself up. Stop pitying yourself, hold your head high; tell yourself, ‘This is where I am’ and get a hold on your situation if you don’t want to be exploited.”(Jameela, 170). When, on Asianet News Hour, she was asked what she had been doing to end sex work, she replied “that (her) desire was to maintain it.”(Jameela, 136). She is not against sex work. She refuses to bow

down in shame and refrain from sex work. Even she demands the mainstream society to acknowledge the sex workers.

She takes sex work as a 'profession', but also adds that it doesn't mean that sex workers always enjoy doing it. She presents the example of a construction worker. S/he doesn't take up the work because it is enjoyable, rather takes up to earn the livelihood. Similar is the case with sex workers. They offer sex to the people and earn their livelihood. She asks what's wrong with it. She argues, "... if we ask the teacher to give us (the) wealth of knowledge for free, will he do it? No. He needs a salary. He's accepted teaching as a livelihood precisely for that reason.... So what's the great sin if the sex worker asks for remuneration?"(Jameela, 140-141).

She opines that sex work and sexual exploitation are different from each other. "Sexual exploitation means that people take (a girl) away for their enjoyment and use (her). It is often without (her) consent, or on the false promise of work or marriage."(Jameela, 140). But "if two people want to have sex by mutual consent, if this is in no way a nuisance to others, then it should not be questioned."(Jameela, 137-138).

Sex Racket, Sex Work and Feminism

The 'sex racket' has nothing to do with sex work. In rackets, women are kidnapped and sold to the brothel owners. Even some girls are sold by their parents. The traffickers pay low sums to the parents and rape them repeatedly. Many-a-times, police and NGOs rescue the girls but it is of no use because their families hand them over again to the same broker. "Lalitha Kumaramangalam, the head of the National Commission for Women, has opined that trafficking can be controlled if prostitution is regulated properly."(Samudranil).

J. Devika writes, "Jameela's feminist critics regard her narrative as the neo-liberal Veshya's voice."(Jameela, xvi). But Nalini thinks that "femininity is a woman's strength."(Jameela, 136). She opines that feminists are reluctant to accept sex workers. She believes that sex workers need acceptance, not sympathy or compassion. She views that sex is

not just a man's need; sex is a woman's need as well. She demands that sex work should be decriminalized.

Nalini highlights moral hollowness, pretense, duplicity, and double standards of the society. She exposes the double standard of men. The very same men, both married and unmarried and of all socio-economic status, desire women for pleasure, and at the same time denounce the practice. At a meeting, before the Municipal Office, she delivers an impressive speech, "We aren't the only people to commit this crime. There are lawyers who come to us; there are doctors and businessmen. It isn't fair that all of them are considered respectable and we alone are made into criminals."(Jameela, 87).

Woman Alone Is Not Responsible

She says that woman, alone, is not responsible to become a sex worker, rather men are equally responsible for their plight. When, at Jwalamukhi, other sex-workers speak out about the police arrest, she says that sex-work is not an offence. She raises her voice against discrimination. She argues that man is equally involved in the act. "If sex is the offence then there's one more person who must be punished. How come that fellow is never punished? Isn't he an offender too?"(Jameela, 85).

She presents various incidents of her life which clearly depict the dual character of men. She describes her first encounter with a police officer. It was her first act as a sex-worker. The behaviour of the man was very tender at night, but the same man handed her over to police next morning. It was quite unbelievable for her. She writes, "Men can be both tender and cruel at the same time."(Jameela, 26). She was treated badly and caned at the police station. She shouts, "Police to sleep with by night; police to give a thrashing by day!"(Jameela, 26).

Harassment

The sex workers undergo brutal violence by the police. They are badly harassed, insulted and sexually exploited. If arrested, they need to submit to the demands of the policemen. Young girls are the most vulnerable in this act. Nalini, on Asianet's TV programme, 'Akattalam', exposes dual character of police. The topic of discussion was 'Women and Police'. Nalini was

one of the participants. She writes, “When a senior police officer claimed that they never harassed sex workers, I opposed him with evidence. I cited an incident ... in which twenty-six sex workers had been arrested in Thrissur and put behind bars in Kozhikode....(because) a sex worker had stood next to a magistrate's wife at the KSRTC bus stand. This was thought of as an insult and twenty-six people (sex workers) had been seized from various parts of the town. To my question about the crime for which they had been arrested, he had no reply.”(Jameela, 135).

Women face harassment at the hands of men. Even they earn for their families and toil hard; they do not get basic rights and recognition in the society. Nalini writes that sex workers are exploited by brokers and husbands. Even many husbands are brokers. Irrespective of whether they work or not, they have to be supplied with liquor and money.

Koyakka and Nalini

Koyakka proposes to Nalini. He was a Muslim. He had been married twice, and tells her that since he had no children, he'd divorce both the wives. He promises if they (Nalini and Koyakka) would have children, they would live together for all time. But he had a child from his wife. When Nalini gets pregnant and suggests aborting the child, he doesn't agree. He was good with her until the baby was born, but after child's birth, his interest began to wane. “His argument was that he couldn't accept a child by a woman of a religion different from his own.”(Jameela, 48).

Advisors of Sex

It's not that sex workers are engaged only in physical sex but they also carry out social work. “For many people, sex consists only of talking to each other.”(Jameela, 144). Sex workers give company to the clients and spend time with them. They give them love, care and advice they need. They listen to their problems and advise them. She writes, “A large number of my clients are people who come seeking advice about sex. Some of them want to find out how to keep an excessively eager wife happy. I tell them to find out by experience.”(Jameela, 143). They also make people aware of AIDS and teach them to use condom.

Patriarchy instructs women to preserve their virginity before marriage and be sexually loyal to their husband. Sex workers defy the idea of sex after or within the confines of marriage. Sex work makes them emancipated, economically independent and strong. Nalini takes sex work as strength to women. At a programme by the Kolkata Sex Workers' Forum, She views that sex workers are different from other women. She says, "We are free in four respects. We don't have to cook and wait for a husband; we don't have to wash his dirty clothes; we don't have to ask for our husbands' permission to raise our kids as we deem fit; and we don't have to run after our husbands claiming rights to their property to raise our kids."(Jameela, 106-107).

She points out that many women choose sex work willingly as it helps them to get rid of the male domination. Sex workers have freedom of choice that is absent for most women because they need to follow the dictates of their husbands. She emphasizes on the point that many of the sex workers enter the profession by their choice, so, sex work should be respected like other professions.

Mentality of Indian Male

In her writing, she exposes the mentality of Indian male. She compares the situation with another country- Male. She finds difficulty in getting her daughter married. She accepts the proposal from a boy who was ten years older than her daughter and lived at Male. He had a two-storey house with his own bakery on the ground floor. In spite of being the daughter of a sex worker, he gets ready to marry her. In fact, he needed the girl to work as a sales-girl for the bakery. She compares the conditions of women in two countries. She writes, "In Male, women have more value and status than men. This man's family, however, was from Kerala, so it was just the reverse. To him the wife was only a slave."(Jameela, 116).

She reveals the rotten male mentality in her narrative. Once, during the discussion programme on the Asianet TV channel, about the problems of women, "When a sex worker said that (they) too had husbands and kids and that many of (them) had adopted kids, the Panchayat member, a Congress leader, claimed that (you) wanted to make the children sex workers in the future and that was why (you) had adopted them."(Jameela, 134). But when she tells that she had adopted a boy, he had no answer.

She talks about male domination. Her mother had been working somewhere but she had to quit the job because her (Nalini's) father was a political activist. "After that, Father, and later, (her) older brother, made all the decisions."(Jameela, 125). She writes about her mother, "Father used to beat her when he was in a temper."(Jameela, 125).

She describes not only males but entire society has double standards for girls and boys. Nalini reflects this point when she narrates the incident of her childhood. Both she and her brother were admitted to school. But she was denied education after third standard while her brother was allowed to continue his studies. Vallyamma declares, "This girl has finished the third class, she needn't go anymore.... This will do, she has learned enough to keep paddy-accounts."(Jameela, 2).

She gets into this profession because her mother-in-law asked five rupees a day to support her children. The children also belong to her. She could make compromise, but she didn't. But later, when her children grow up, her mother-in-law refuses to accept the money sent by her so that she (Nalini) could not claim her children.

She narrates another incident. She had settled in Bangladesh colony. There was provision of free distribution of rice porridge to the residents. But she was denied the porridge by telling that she does not belong to the place. "Nalini can't be given porridge.... She's not from this place."(Jameela, 119). The distribution was organized by the government as well as the prohibition committee. But when she goes to film the first meeting of the Prohibition Committee, "These very fellows who'd not give (her) porridge, the very same chaps, served (her) lentil vadas and chutney ..."(Jameela, 120). Even they coax her, "Madam, please eat!"(Jameela, 120).

People have different parameters for different persons. She describes the incident when one young woman was murdered. She was an orphan and mentally disturbed. Sometimes she did sex work in order to meet her financial need. She was raped by eight men and later killed. The local people knew who had done so but no one spoke out. The murderers were not arrested. Society did not move because the deceased was a sex-worker. Another sex worker, Ammu, was

murdered by the thugs. Despite strong evidence, no investigation was made since the dead person was a sex worker. Her murder was erased from the records on the grounds of 'poor evidence'.

Society doesn't recognize a sex worker as a woman. In an interview with J. Devika, she tells, 'If you remember, I had made a short film a while ago. What did many people say? 'A sex worker has made this film', or 'a village bumpkin has made this film', or 'an uneducated person...!', and so on. It was not even 'a woman has made this film'! When they say that 'a sex worker has made this film', they try to define me only as a sex worker.'"(Jameela, 167).

Conclusion

The Autobiography of a Sex Worker exposes the forces of oppression, hegemony and domination. It pulls off the mask of hypocrisy from the so called morally conscious elite society. It is open rebellion against the hegemonic norms of society. The narrative is bold explication of the courage of the oppressed and marginalized women. The narrative talks of the community of sex workers who are tied by the common denominator of moral degradation and promiscuity. The text is future-oriented rather than the reflection of past. It is not mere narrative of pain but the oppression transforms into resistance. The sex workers fight against the inhuman suppression and oppression of the society, find enough courage and strength to fight against them. Nalini narrates action rather than words, courage rather than meekness, strength rather than weakness, resilience rather than pain and suffering.

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