

Conflict Situation: An Ordeal for Survival and Dignity On Reading Nalini Jameela's *The Autobiography of a Sex Worker*

Mayuri Sharma Baruah

"...the important thing to realise is that this is not an issue that permits us to focus on prostitution in isolation from the economic situation of women in a society generally."
(Mudgal 87)

Introduction :

Usually accepted with much reverence, autobiographies of great people are seen as motivational documents. Citing Pascal, Ramakrishnan states that earlier theories of autobiography saw this genre as 'a shaping of the past', imposing 'a pattern on a life' and constructing out of it 'a coherent story'. (Ramakrishnan 2011) But newer theories consider autobiography as the 'shaping of self itself since the acts of narration involves the political acts of self-assertion and self-creation.' (Ramakrishnan 2011) In fact, the very act of writing marks a moment of self-discovery. As we study the history of autobiography and biography, the trend of recording and documenting the lives of people belonging to the mainstream becomes apparent. The life history of an individual, glued to his/her peripheral status probably found no space in such documentation. Likewise, a closer look at the historical timeline exposes a dearth in the biographies of women compared to that of men. M. K. Naik, in his *A History of Indian English Literature* enlists six women autobiographers during the years of 1920 -1947 among whom two were Nehru's sisters and the others were namely, the Maharani of Cooch Behar, Cornelia Sorabji, the novelist Santha Rama Rau and Isvani, a Khoja Muslim. This list clearly shows how women from a higher status, enjoying a privileged position were capable of writing their own, personal life stories. A principal goal of the feminist movement has been, states Mudgal, to recover and honour the specificity of women's experience, history, and cultural significance by making women's voices and stories heard. However, a parallel attempt to suppress the 'undesired' voices has also been continuously made by the activists. Speaking of the status of postcolonial women

belonging to the lower end in the hierarchy, Nayar observes how "[life] writings by such women often present a challenge even to feminists because they resist homogenizing into the larger category of 'Third World women'." (Nayar 152) As such, experiences of women of lower caste, class and 'degraded' professions were made available only as 'stories' in fictions. Though considered the oldest of professions, prostitution is not yet considered a respectable profession. The experiences of a prostitute is never taken account of, rather she faces criticism on moral grounds.

"The institution of prostitution... is shaped by the perception that female sexuality is dangerous and needs careful regulation; that male sexuality is rapacious and needs a "safe" outlet; that sex is dirty and degrading, and that only a degraded woman is an appropriate sexual object" (Mudgal 87) These words demonstrate the collective perspective of society that bars a sex worker's free movement whereas her consumers face no such restrictions. Herein, we notice a gap - unwillingness of the feminist theorists to stand by sex workers. Despite it, 'the prostitute' has been an important theme in twentieth century Indian literature. As remarks Sisir Kumar Das, "It is in some sense continuation and even culmination of the theme so powerfully presented in Indian literature for the first time by Rusva in his classic *Umrao Jan Ada*." (Das 338) Stressing more on the causes leading to women's degradation, the authors expressed their "concern for the exploited and the oppressed." (ibid) Sarat Chandra's portrayal of a noble prostitute had a lingering impact among readers but interestingly enough, Saadat Husain Manto's short stories included in *Cughat* (1948) exhibit an analytical approach. He attempts to explain "the economic factors that compel women to join the flesh trade." (Das 339) By creating images of prostitutes, courtesans, devadasis, various writers have sympathised with their sufferings, pitied their plight but none have cared to protest against the system or worked out a plan for its complete abolition. Perhaps these words of Sisir Kumar Das explain the situation - "Probably the traditional thought that the prostitutes are societal safety valves, alternatives to sexual frustration, worked at the back of their mind." (Das 339) Unless this outlook changes, change in the lives of the sex workers seem difficult. Again, as Sushila Singh puts it, "Human experience for centuries has been synonymous with the masculine experience, with the result that the collective image of humanity has been one-sided or incomplete. Woman has not been defined as a subject either in her own right but merely has an entity that concerns man either in his real life or his fantasy life." (Singh 7)

To note or not :

This being the background, Nalini Jameela, a sex worker from Kerala speaks/writes about her life, her profession and her quest for a dignified identity and gets published. Titled *Oru Laingikatozhilaliyute Atmakatha (Autobiography of a Sex Worker)*, Jameela's autobiography was published in Malayalam in 2005. Termed as a controversial bestseller, it went into six editions in hundred days with the sale of 13,000 copies within a limited time. Criticisms poured in as expected - people were resistant in recognising a sex worker as an

autobiographer. Hailing from a middle class Malayalam family, Nalini begins working in the clay mines at an early age. Later she entered the profession of sex work; it is worth mentioning that in either instance it was her sense of responsibility towards her family. Being a girl child she was deprived of further studies which had an adverse impact on her. The powerful influence of her Valamma and the passivity of her father strengthen the sensitive girl to be supportive - she starts working for the sake of her mother, a dormant member in the family. With the flow of time, Nalini faces many situations tough to be handled and yet somehow she is able to fight back. Life has been a great tutor to Nalini Jameela, a victim of social imbalance who holds her head high in the midst of a hostile environment. As noted earlier, this autobiography will be the base for the present study - to analyze her case against a conflicting situation and to highlight the aspect of social accountability in this regard. As no human is born a criminal, likewise, no woman is born a prostitute. This being the hypothesis, the following section will comprise an intensive analysis of the text.

From Innocence to Experience:

"... what the book really contains is a simple story of an ordinary Indian woman who happens to have chosen an unconventional occupation as a source of her livelihood."

(Review by Sankalpita, Dec.31, 2013)

Divided into seven chapters, the book is a compilation of memories depicting the phases and range of experience by the author. Nalini's decision to work in clay mine came when her mother lost her job because of her communist husband. She shares the responsibility of her mother who was muted by circumstances. Young Nalini's urge to be of help for her family points toward a very common picture available in the households of ordinary Indians. Ironically enough, a society based on the ideals of Manu that man is the bread earner of the family keeps mum when women and in many cases tender aged girls work hard for livelihood. This exposes the hypocrisy of patriarchal ideologies. The father busied with his political activities had no worry regarding her well being. This hints at the trend of treating girl children as burden. In her book Nalini records how she had to save herself from the lusty adults during those days. She speaks of her admirers as well as of her admiration for others. Again, her episode on the behaviour of Ittamash during her job of an ayah proves how vulnerable a girl child is to sexual exploitations. Her anguished mind however, gets no solace rather she grows up as a 'person'. "Twirl them around, get your job done, get good wages. But keep your position without giving in to them" - tuning to this philosophy, Nalini, a fighter in her true spirits, continues her journey of life. Her wedding(s) too was/were unusual one(s). Throwing her out of house for assisting in her brother's marriage, the otherwise apathetic father exhibits his 'male' power. Just eighteen, with none to help her, this girl had to rely on one of her once rejected admirers, Subrahmanyam, a man with all possible evil means. Unfavoured by circumstances, she was compelled to accept him as her husband. This alliance came to an end just after three and a half years of time when he died leaving behind a son (who died when seventeen) and a daughter with Nalini.

Needy women vis-a-vis 'Needing women':

Life had already been difficult with a dominant mother-in-law and after her widowhood; Nalini begins life afresh -as a sex worker! The demand placed by Subrahmanyam's mother for five rupees a day in order to support her children pushes her to this profession. Fearing she might lose them forever, Nalini drops the idea of sending the kids to an orphanage. Instead, her desperation for supporting the kids leads her to the job of 'going along with' a man. And the fact that her very first client handed her over to police the next morning makes her realise that "men can be both tender and cruel at the same time". The second chapter comprises different episodes of her variegated experiences, sweet and bitter as well. From those days of plying to Thrissur and returning back, she settled in a Company House, which actually was a convenient business space for the clients. Initially supported by Rosa Chechi, now Nalini starts independently. Throughout this period, her 'husband's mother' (in Nalini's words) had received the money earned by Nalini out of flesh trade. Once the sum sent home came back unclaimed, Nalini begins thinking of alternative options, since her sole purpose of joining this trade had been to provide assistance to her kids. The pain of never meeting her children haunts her but at the same time a sense of satisfaction embalms her mind.

In Search of Self-Respect :

The institution of marriage once again proves disastrous for Nalini as she becomes the third (?) wife of Koyakka, a 'loader' in the harbour. Her existence in the house was rendered negligent which injures her strong sense of self-respect. By that time she was in her family way, a helpless situation for her. In her sixth month of pregnancy, Nalini shifts to a separate house. The birth of Zeenat does not help much in improving the situation. However, Koyakka's view of Zeenat as one born of haraam (outside the faith) infuriates Nalini and finally, that marriage (twenty-month old) too meets a tragic end. She leaves him behind and walks away, but this time her child accompanies her. Nalini steps into the trade once more, though reasons for it did not vary. As baby Zeenat was with her, it became tough many a time to visit clients. During those days of hardship, Nalini meets a person who wishes not simply to marry her but also to bring up Zeenat as his own child. Being apprehensive Nalini shows no interest in the beginning but 'this man was different' from others. Exhausted of her ordeal, she approves of his desire and for the next twelve years Nalini did not have 'to struggle to raise her daughter'. As her husband was a Muslim, she takes up the name Jameela so that his family does not cause objection. The respect she had craved for came with this alliance. Shahulkka's relatives were fond of her and this perhaps, is the only period in her life that Nalini cherishes as fond memory. On account of Shahulkka's business, both mother and daughter kept on migrating from place to place. Nalini's practicality is seen in her way of giving lessons to Zeenat on love and life - "It's one thing to love someone. It's yet another to give in just to please him and actually believe his wishes are more important. We lose our

freedom when we submit like that." (57) Shahulkka's affair with another woman and the huge loss incurred in their business together causes a relapse of her struggle. Venturing into the business of selling clothes at Beemapalli, Nalini Jameela strives for a respectable life. Till the middle of 1993, "she lived lavishly - as a proud housewife and trader." Her terrible times start in 1994 with her illness. This time she walks out of the alliance after a long span of twelve years. Literally she is on the streets with her adolescent daughter and a suffering body. Those were the days when they had to take refuge in different mosques struggling for livelihood. Preoccupied by her concern for her daughter's security, Nalini had to be on high alert during those days. Terming their stay at the mosque at Attingara as a terrible phase in her life, she narrates, "So at night we would lay the mat in the middle for Zeenat to lie down, and then we would lie down, making a cordon around her on all four sides. The other three were Nadar Women. Molesters would then have to step on our bodies first." (63) She speaks of the episodes of humiliation when Shahulkka's relatives had been hostile and diplomatic to them. Her quest for a normal life proves futile resulting in her decision on returning to prostitution as a source for survival. By this time she confides to her daughter of her profession, the work that fetches cash for their survival.

Respect for Rights :

"Prostitution has many features that link it with other forms of bodily service. ...but the biggest difference consists in the fact that it is more widely stigmatised."

(Mudgal 72)

Once she interacts with Jwalamukhi, a pro-sex worker organisation, and then becomes a part of it. Her sense of obligation and responsibility makes her an active activist. Her emergence as a public speaker has great significance in her personal growth. Differing in views and opinions, Nalini enables a place for herself in the social milieu.

If you think it's an offence, you're sure to be punished. If you think you have committed a robbery, you'll be first clobbered by the local folk, then by the police, and then the court will punish you. How are we offenders? In what sense? 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? (85)

This being her conviction, she decides to 'speak up' for herself, for her community. Bringing in a comparison between the status of devadasis of earlier times and that of the sex workers of contemporary times, she questions the prejudiced attitude of the society at large. Acknowledging the support rendered from her women friends Nalini pinpoints how women can be friends and not foes as assumed and reinforced by patriarchy. Gradually Jwalamukhi becomes a symbol of self-confidence for the entire community.

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. (107)

On her visit to Kolkata for celebrating Indian Sex Workers' Day on March 3 as organised by Kolkata Sex Workers' Forum, Nalini upholds such unconventional view while commenting on the differences between them and other women. Her visits to Thailand on different occasions enrich her in many ways. By that time she had already made her first documentary and people started recognising her potent. Herein she makes special mention of a young Malayali housewife who used to guide them in sight-seeing in Thailand. Nalini recalls, "how she was ready to interact closely with me, out of the pride she felt that a Malayali woman, and that too a sex worker, had become the director of a documentary." She recalls the constant motivation and support of Jayashree, Maitreya, Paulson, Sujata, Raj Thomas, Subhash and Jyotikumar - without these progressive people, Nalini Jameela would perhaps never have attained this status. Talking on her daughter's unsuccessful marriage, Nalini considers that second phase as "truly a trial because (her) daughter was now once-married, thought of as likely to run off with anyone". But somehow that incident too had a positive effect, especially on boosting Zeenat's self-confidence. Later she remarries Sudheer, an autorickshaw driver with whom her life is on the track once again. Nalini recounts the petty happenings that expose double-faced people who fear powerful people only. The role of visual media too is condemned by her as gross violation of human rights.

Grounded to Reality :

The next chapter comprises an assemblage of mixed memories - those of her mother, her passion for movies, her views on religion (based on her personal experience) and of her media ties. "I lost faith in God somewhere between the ages of nine and twelve" - this realization of hers continues and intensifies with time. The sufferings of girls and the abandoned people in the mosques make her doubt the existence of God - "If these people don't receive justice in God's own house, what's the point of talking of God?" Believing femininity to be a woman's strength, Nalini discourages the idea of aping men as a mark of progress and equality. Despite her ordeal, this woman carries the baggage of principles and integrity.

Morality redefined :

Speaking on rehabilitation of sex workers, she emphasizes the need of acceptance for the trade. That sex is not just a man's need - this notion remains incomprehensible to most of the feminists barring a few like Jayashree. In her inimitably honest style Nalini claims that feminists aren't very different from ordinary women. Segregating 'sex work' from 'sexual exploitation' she demands 'decriminalisation', not 'rehabilitation'.

Conclusion:

Saga of Strife for Survival :

Can her life be read against her positioning in a conflicting situation? - in fact, this query constitutes my desire to study the memoir of Nalini Jameela. The detailed analysis made here strongly affirms my conviction. The conflicts present in domestic space and also

in the public domain are major factors in the making of Nalini a sex worker. An unhappy childhood attributed by an irresponsible father marks the first phase of conflicting situation in her life. The typical notion of man being a bread winner for his family goes wrong in her case; an otherwise able person depending on the earnings of his wife and daughter puzzles young Nalini. She behaves accordingly, taking her first lesson on sustenance. Her lone battle for preserving chastity exposes another serious vulnerable issue relevant in our society - the issue of child abuse or sexual harassment. Despite having a father and a brother, she has to safeguard herself among perverts. Subsequently, she matures prematurely. The patriarchal society has contributed in every ways to demolish Nalini Jameela's self-respect, her integrity. Her unsuccessful marriages depict the inequalities prevalent in this social institution. Unlike thousands of submissive women, Nalini shows courage by walking out of the alliances, at least twice. The first marriage ended early on account of her husband's death, but by that time she has seen much of life. Her decision to enter the sex trade for survival (instead of killing herself and her kids) exhibits her love for life; never been an escapist, Nalini faces the challenges that come to her. Keeping in mind the economic factors responsible for this, we may surmise that if this occupation be not chosen by her, a widow of her age would have fallen prey to someone's lust. Instead, Nalini sets her own terms - she does not represent the docile female stereotype, accessible almost everywhere. Constantly motivated by a strong sense of pride, this common woman carves a niche through self-acceptance. Though my objective here is not to propagate sex work, these words of Mudgal echo my views, "So long as prostitution is stigmatized, people are injured by that stigmatization, and it is a real injury to a person not to have dignity and self-respect in her own society." (76) Her clear cut views on remuneration for sex work or on the differences existing among sex workers living in different socio-economic conditions throw light on the practicality of the issue. The pre-conceived notions on sex work and sex workers pose hurdle in recognising the occupation as any other remunerative service. Similarly, the hierarchical pattern within this trade proves unfavourable for the lowest class of sex workers. Critics consider her focus on irrelevance of moral distinctions made between sex work, housework and paid work in lives of marginalised women as one of the powerful aspects of her story. To this, she answers, during an interview with J. Devika (one who translated Nalini's book into English) that as "the struggle to survive is largely the woman's burden" and if it is also "to support others," then [she] won't be concerned with whether the work [she gets] is dignified or not." Thus, women who possess nothing but a body offer that to their clients in return of some hard cash. Herein arises conflict, conflict between

good/bad

ethical/ unethical

moral/immoral

dignified/undignified

acceptance/unacceptance
private/public

Imbibing the feminine traits endowed by patriarchy, numerous women like Nalini Jameela stretch themselves to this extent: in a relentless process of being a caring daughter, mother, sister or even wife (?) they enter this trade (as the last resort). Can this endeavour be negated as immoral, bad, unethical or undignified? Do they deserve outright rejection just because of being sex workers? Situations reversed, how would society project a woman who allows her family to starve in poverty? Unaware of these philosophical or ethical dimensions, marginalised women join sex trade, their sole concern being 'survival'. These deep seated inequalities in our social environment need to be narrowed so that every human being is granted his/her share of dignity. Nalini Jameela's narrative hits at a crucial issue - she challenges the "dominant feminine ideal" in Kerala (appearing as an "oppositional voice" in their public.) Her story, rightly infers J. Devika, "rejects dominant Womanhood not only by relating the hitherto-untold story of the marginalized labouring woman-subject, but also by not seeking to be defined within the home-centred category of Women." (xv) Representing the marginalised sex workers, Jameela voices this muted and abhorred community which had always been criticised on moral grounds. As an insider, Nalini discloses how thin the line lying between domestic and public is in reality. Documenting her quest for dignified identity, Nalini Jameela's *The Autobiography of a Sex Worker* reveals certain shady factors that directly and indirectly contribute towards aggravating the disparities and also decodes many myths about 'them'.

"I am a sex worker among the intellectuals." (169)

As survivor, not victim, Nalini proves that 'dignity of labour' is not a myth for sex workers as well. On the whole, this autobiography by a subaltern woman who is into an unusual profession may be considered an eye-opener for comprehending the lives of sex workers and also for re-thinking on social parity and justice.

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