

# UNVEILING THE MASK OF ‘PURITY’: A STUDY OF NALINI JAMEELA’S *THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF A SEX WORKER*

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A woman’s body is considered to be her greatest weakness. It is the site of violence against women. Female body is beyond the binds of race, colour or caste. A Dalit woman who is untouchable by day becomes very much touchable by night. The priest cannot drink the water touched by her ‘polluted hands’ but he can have intercourse with her without any compunction. This reveals the hypocrisy of our ‘moral conscious’ society.

Violence against women also takes a subtle form when instead of perpetuating violence against woman’s body directly, her body is glorified. Motherhood is represented as the greatest achievement in a woman’s life. Simon de Beauvoir described maternity as the enemy of autonomy. The womb is projected as a woman’s greatest asset, a site of love and protection. The very same womb becomes her weakness when she becomes a victim of rape. The notions of ‘virginity’ and ‘chastity’ have been constructed by the patriarchal society to glorify the female body and thereby clip off their wings so that they can no more fly. We talk about ‘virginity or chastity only with respect to a woman and never with respect to a man.

Of late, the new women writers have tried to show the agenda behind the romanticizing of female body and the apparent glorification of the womb by literature and the media. Autobiography is a genre which unravels the inner most feelings of a writer. For a woman who is taught to be docile and obedient to write about her body, sexuality and her ‘self’ is an achievement in itself. Nalini Jameela’s *The Autobiography of a Sex Worker (2007)* is an outspoken and controversial autobiography that uses the female body as a weapon against the

patriarchy which consider the body of a woman as something on which the family's honour depends.

'Virginity' and 'Chastity', are said to be the defining qualities of a good woman and she can preserve her honour only under the guardianship of a man, the father is in charge of protecting her virginity, the husband her chastity. Nalini Jameela in her autobiography renounces the conventional feminine image by enunciating female desire and celebrating the infinite possibilities of the female body, thus acting as a counter to the images promoted by various instruments of the patriarchal society.

Nalini Jameela who is a sex worker turned activist talks openly about sex and body in her autobiography *The Autobiography of a Sex Worker*. The upheaval created by this 'revealing autobiography' matched the one created by Kamala Das's autobiography *My Story* in the 1970s. The controversy created by Nalini Jameela was even more sharp considering the fact that unlike Kamala Das she came from lower class Dalit background. The fact of her being a sex worker made her work more obnoxious to our 'moral conscious society'.

Nalini Jameela through her work flaunts the conventional family centered feminine enshrined with the Indian new elite and exploded the ideal with an oppositional voice. The *Veshya*-the prostitute figure was always an 'other'. If women's position in the society is marginal a Dalit woman is at the periphery of the peripheral position and if she happens to be a prostitute then she is a non-entity, someone who should make herself invisible because to acknowledge her presence would be a threat to the much glorified ideals of 'chastity' and 'virginity'. A woman who sells her body has no consideration for the so called ideals of womanhood. She is the repugnant 'other', the abhorrent evil. Chastity and Virginity are notions created by the patriarchy to curb women's freedom. They are invisible chains that binds female body from seeking its own pleasure. In fact a woman's body has more power than a man's. She is the bearer of children, the creator of progeny. The much glorified womb is not just a site of love and protection. It can be used as a weapon to subvert and threaten patrilineality by conceiving babies outside of marriage. The patriarchal inheritance law is at stake in such a situation. The patrilineal descent is made meaningless, fragile by such unsanctioned pregnancies of women, hence the concept of chastity and virginity were introduced. So in fact behind the propagation of the concept of purity with regard to the female body lies the insecurity and fear at the heart of the society regarding

what a woman's sexual transgression can do to the society. When women are prevented from deriving equal pleasure from their bodies as men it must be understood that the female body is a site that is capable of rendering the entire patriarchal societal system topsy-turvy.

John Stuart Mill in his **Subjection of Women** (1869) attacks the argument that women are naturally less good at doing things that men can do easily and that it is their biological make-up that makes them the 'weaker-sex'. He questions the argument of 'biological essentialism' by questioning the existence of social constraints on women. If by nature women are weak and incapable of doing certain things why then should we have societal norms that prevent them from doing what they are already not capable of doing. The very existence of prohibitions is an acknowledgement of the possibility that women are as capable as men. Virginity and Chastity are the defining qualities of a good woman. The all-enduring all-suffering women are glorified hence sending the message that to revolt or to question is to be a bad woman.

Jhumur, the protagonist of Taslima Nasrin's novel ***Shodh*** makes herself pregnant by a man other than her husband to subvert patrilineality. The idea of chastity helps to protect a woman's womb to ensure proper descent and family lineage. A woman's body can be used as a weapon to destabilize patriarchy and its ideologies. Female body is a resource of creativity, it is the reservoir of unbounded freedom. Her body is not just an instrument of reproduction it is a site of pleasure and power. In Jameela we see a woman who has recognised the immense possibility of a female body. Her body is not her weakness. In fact by selling her body she is exploiting the sex-hunger of men for her material benefits. By writing openly about her sexuality and trade she poses a threat to the false ideals of womanhood. Nalini Jameela calls herself a *langikathozhilali*, a sex worker, she considers sex work just like any other profession. She mocks at the concept of morality which she feels is a hypocritical one. She doesn't try to evoke our sympathy by projecting a 'victim' image of herself. She chooses to enter the sex trade because she finds it as respectable as any other trade. Her autobiography is a challenge to the prostitute-stereotype.

The society's keeping of double standards for men and women is also brought to light. A woman who is in the sex trade is shunned by the society but not the 'clients' who visit her. Ironically enough, the very same man who preaches morality in the light visits the sex workers in the dark.

Jameela talks about one of her clients Viswanathan who was an important officer in a watch factory. He was the one who taught her how to behave like a 'respectable woman'

*...Tuck the sari pallu in like that ,he'd suggest; don't wipe your face on the sari:don't stare at anyone while eating,don't do this,don't do that...*

*The directions continued even in bed:don't snore,people who snore aren't good,so be careful.And then when he fell asleep,he'd emit gargantuan snores,which could well compete with the Pandava Bheema's fearsome battle-cries*

*...When I talked of my friends,he'd inevitably say, "Not about those dirty women,say something else." (Jameela,33)*

In another instance she talks about her encounter with a police officer who was very soft spoken,romantic and handsome. After spending a night with her he dropped her on the road in a police jeep and she was immediately picked up again by another team of policemen and beaten up severely in custody.She realised that the very same policeman who had slept with her the previous night had arranged the arrest. This shows the hypocritical nature of the 'respectable' men of our society.

Nalini Jameela raises a clarion call for women's liberation through her articulation.She is in all control of her body and life.

*I can't stand people who try to establish their authority over me for very long . One day,I skipped an appointment.That ended the relationship. (Jameela,36)*

When Nalini married Shahul Hameed, a Muslim she changed her name to Jameela though she did not convert to Islam.The marriage lasted for twelve years but later when she realized that he had married her to settle a score with his first wife who had dumped him she decides to leave him

*...I became pretty determined. I decided to leave him before he left me.I set out after telling Shahulkka's older brother.He tried to stop me, but I stuck to my decision. (Jameela,50)*

She doesn't allow herself to be dumped by a man.She values her freedom and self respect more than the societal respect.

Nalini says, “ Sex workers are free in four respects:We don’t have to cook for a husband, we don’t have to wash his dirty clothes, we don’t have to ask his permission to raise our kids as we deem fit: we don’t have to run after him claiming our right to property.”

She says, “How many women in Kerala have to live with men they don’t like,suffering insults,torture and even domestic rape,all because of some false concepts about marital life?”

From an invisible sex worker Nalini Jameela rose to become an activist.She made very daring provocative statements, for instance, “There is no difference between a scientist who uses his brains, a teacher who uses his verbal abilities, a labourer who uses his hands, and a sex worker who uses her body.”

Nalini Jameela’s autobiography raised many eyebrows. In Nalini Jameela we see a deliberate violation of the accepted order of patriarchy.Ethical motherhood and morality defined by patriarchy are identified as pillars to perpetuate female subjugation and they are dethroned and derobbed exposing the stark reality of our hypocritical male dominant society

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