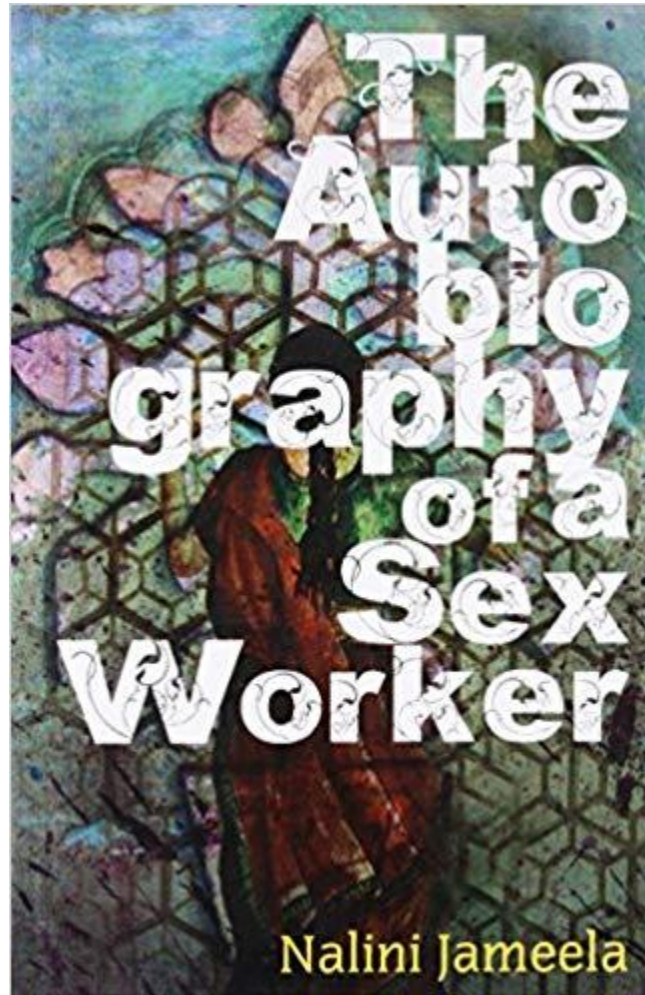


**Re-inventing the Self: A Study of Nalini Jameela's
*The Autobiography of a Sex Worker***

Ratan Das, M.A., M.Phil.



Courtesy: <https://www.amazon.com/Autobiography-Sex-Worker-Nalini-Jameela/dp/8189975110>

Nalini Jameela

“I am 51 years old. And I would like to continue to be a sex worker” (Jameela, 1). This is how the candid and defiant opening statement in Nalini Jameela’s autobiography in Malayalam, ‘Oru Lymgika-thozhialaliyude Atmakatha’ goes. It at once throws a challenge at society’s double standards – harsh on prostitutes and soft on the clients. Nalini Jameela, who is the coordinator of the Kerala Sex Workers’ Forum, reveals her story with ease. By writing her

autobiography Nalini Jameela wants to regain her 'loss of identity' and to represent her-self in this present society. Like American feminist poet, Paula Gunn Allen, she also enjoys the music of life to sketch herself on the pages.

The Word *Self*

The word 'self' is rather a conflict term in the current critical and theoretical space. The idea of self has always captivated a prime position in literary creations. Self is figured in literature in myriad forms, ranging from partial to comprehensive glimpses into the self of the writer. Testimonies, memories, diaries and confessions generally deal with this central concept of the self.

The literary genre which perceives as its principal task the writing of the self is autobiography. As this term, which is Greek in its origin, indicates, autobiography is self life writing. In Greek "autos" signifies 'self'; "bios" 'life' and "graphe" 'writing'. The term 'autobiography' is commonly thought to have been coined by the nineteenth century poet Robert Southey in *British Quarterly Review* in 1809.

In his *The History of Autobiography in Antiquity*, Georg Misch notes:

Autobiography is unlike any other form of literary composition. Its boundaries are more fluid and less definable in relation to form. In itself it is a representation of life that is committed to no definite form. It abounds in fresh initiatives, drawn from actual life: it adopts the different forms with which different periods provide the individual for his self-revelation and self-portrayal. (2)

Battle between Loss of Identity and Self

Through this discussion it is obvious that the autobiography of Nalini Jameela captures the tensions which grow out of a continuous battle between 'loss of identity' and assertion of the 'Self'. She lives in subhuman conditions, suffers economic and sexual exploitations, cultural subjugations and political powerlessness. Representation of 'self' is not new, the genre had its full-fledged formal inauguration in Saint Augustine's *Confessions*. The significance of Augustine's *Confessions* lies not in his personal encounter with the Christian God, but in the evolution of his Christian self.

Even in the 21st century the class-distinction tradition neglects women's autobiographies and the autobiographies of the downtrodden. The determinants of class, race and gender are excluded from the record of autobiography. The task of the feminist writers and the cultural historians has been to recover the lost tradition of women's autobiographies and the autobiographical attempts of the marginalized. The coordinates of marginality extend across colour, creed, caste, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, race and class.

Autobiographies

The Black autobiographies, the Dalit autobiographies, the gay and lesbian autobiographies, autobiographies of geisha and sex workers and so on attain complex

magnitudes, for they question not only the hegemonic, hetero sexual, patriarchal, normative regimes but also bring an alternative sense of the self and identity, worldview and perspective into existence. Nalini Jameela is the first sex-worker in modern India to write an autobiography. As the coordinator of the Sex Worker's Forum, she reveals her sordid story with no trace of compunction.

The dominant Indian society has identified the marginalized communities including Dalits, tribals and sex-workers as 'inferior' and polluted. So Nalini was dismissed as a 'prurient money-spinner' by the Malayalam renowned writer M. Mukundan. She was also called as an 'intellectual among sex workers'. But Nalini responded by saying that she is a 'sex worker among intellectuals' (167). Nalini talks about it: "When I made film, people said a sex worker made a film. When I make a public speech, when I write a book, people used to say a sex worker did it. I dismiss this attempt to define me only as a sex worker. Hence I tried to throw their phrases back at them". (167)

Famous vs. Marginalized Biographies

India's famous autobiographies like Mahatma Gandhi's *The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (1927), Jawaharlal Nehru's *An Autobiography* (1936), Nirad C. Chaudhuri's *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* (1951) or the very recent, Sachin Tendulkar's *Playing It My Way* (2014) have been appreciated through the decades. Belonging to the higher-class society they also analyze the 'self' in their autobiographies. Then, is the space of autobiography only occupied by well-established individual of the society? Probably not. Like other marginalized autobiographies Nalini's was an attempt to secure for herself and her co-workers some sort of dignity, empowerment and freedom. Rather than being just a sex worker, she also speaks as a daughter, wife, mother, and friend; and as a public figure, with a name and a face, rather than remaining anonymous. Nalini's statements as an activist were intended to provoke: "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". (viii)

Nalini, a Victim of Society

The revolutionary Nalini, as an activist and best-selling author, in her autobiography 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 for his permission to raise our kids as we deem fit, we don't have to run after him claiming rights to his property. (207)

With these words, Nalini Jameela stormed the imagination of Kerala in 2005. Her book, *The Autobiography of a Sex Worker*, was originally written in Malayalam. The book went through six editions and sold 13,000 copies in 100 days and it put Jameela among the Kerala literary circle with eminent names as O.V Vijayan, Vaikom Mohammad Basheer, M.T Vasudevan Nair, Mukundan and Kamala Das. It was in the year 2003, that Nalini Jameela finally decided to write her autobiography. In a piece of paper, she wrote "I am Nalini, was born at Kaloor near Amballoor. I am forty-nine years old". (viii) As she could not move beyond a few lines, it was I. Gopinath, who helped her to write and publish the book.

Nalini, a Sex Worker

Nalini's story starts with the descriptions of her childhood when she started learning the lessons of survival and offers a candid picture of street sex workers; their exploitation as well as their pleasures and excitements in life. Born to a humble family she was denied education at the age of nine. Circumstances forced her to work in a clay mine as daily wage labourer to earn a livelihood. Since Nalini belonged to a lower caste, she was abused and ill-treated there.

Nalini's journey to sex work had its origin in her brother's marriage; he wanted to marry a girl three years older than him and she supported his decision. So, Nalini was thrown out of the house. At the age of eighteen, with nowhere to go she entered into an accidental marriage with a drunkard called Subhramanyan. But Nalini writes: "He had all sorts of shady dealings. He was womanizing and heavy drinking. He'd go to the sand mines; but his main work was distilling hooch" (21). He died of cancer after three-and-a-half years of marriage and left a son and daughter for her to bring up. The boy died at the age of 17. Without money, and with a daughter in toe, Nalini decided to peddle sex. Nalini writes:

I started sex work after my husband's death, when his mother began demanding a really large sum from me daily to support my children. Those days, an ordinary woman worker earned two-and-a-half rupees a day. If the work was arduous, the pay would go up to four-and-a-half rupees. My mother-in-law asked for five rupees every-day. (23)

When Does an Indian House-Wife Turn to be a Sex Worker?

My paper proposes a question - when does an Indian house-wife turn to a sex worker? From Nalini it is obvious that to feed her daughter and to keep her body alive, Nalini turned to sex work. After a night she calls 'joyous', Nalini was dropped back on the road in a police jeep. She was then immediately picked up again by another team of policemen and beaten up severely in custody. The cops told her that their boss, the same man who had slept with her a few hours earlier. She screamed out in anger and pain, "Police to sleep with by night; police to give a thrashing by day! . . . Men can be both tender and cruel at the same time" (26). Like other Indian house-wives Nalini also wanted love and secure life. So, she married with the condition to have a child, otherwise it will be dismissed. But her husband's words were: "I'll abandon your girl on the train. The kid born *haraat* (in faith) must be cared for, but not the kid born *haraam* (outside faith)" (48). It lasted for twenty-months only.

Nalini, an Indian House-wife

It was after her third marriage that she assumed the name of Nalini Jameela, as she married to a Muslim, Shahul Hameed. Nalini confesses - 'I didn't do sex work those days' (54). My point is when one gets enough food, hardly goes to sex work. She spent her days as an Indian house-wife (in the traditional sense) in those days. She lived with him for the next twelve years. She was back on the streets with her thirteen-year old daughter. She begged on the streets for some time, moving from one place to another, church to church and somehow reached the medical college at Thiruvananthapuram, where she was treated for a tumour in her leg. When she

recovered, she went back to sex work. One can't imagine how Nalini struggles to take a bowl of porridge and give her daughter a handful of rice!

Nalini, a Social Worker

The suffering of her life made her violent and Nalini's life changed with her association with Jwalamukhi, an organization which works for sex workers' rights. Jameela's entry into the public was through the organizing of sex workers NGOs, as part of AIDS Prevention campaigns. Sex workers began to assert themselves publicity, for instance, around the Malayalam film *Susanna*, (2001). Indeed, sex workers' identification with *Susanna* seems linked to the fact that its chief protagonist highly endowed with womanly qualities engages in multi-partner relationships- making a bid for inclusion.

Sex Work – a Service to the Society

Nalini, a representative of sex workers, represents how they serve the society in another way to satisfy the conjugal life of men. Nalini says: "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" (143). The real humor is that those who go to the sex workers at night, they protest against sex workers at day-light. Do the lower-class people only go to the sex worker? From Nalini's book we get a vivid account of all kinds of men satisfy them-selves going to sex workers. Nalini also participated in a Satyagraha against the state government's availing of loans from Asian Development Bank; she was present at another Satyagraha to defend the rights of prisoners. In 2000, Nalini participated in a workshop on camera training for sex workers in Thailand, and then started making documentaries on the lives of her people. The first of these, *Jwalamukhikal* was produced in 2002 and a second, *A Glimpse of the Silenced* in 2004.

Problem of Rehabilitation

The main problem till today is the rehabilitation of sex workers. The feminist groups extend their support to sex workers, but their rehabilitation policy is unacceptable to the sex workers. Nalini too is against rehabilitation. The legalization of sex work for which Nalini fought, may solve of their problems, especially routine police harassment but even this is only up to a limit. "The Immoral Traffic Prevention Act, 1956" reveals: "Commercial sex work per se is not legal in India. It is tolerated... The Act is intended to protect women from being trafficked, i.e. coerced or forced to participate in selling sex. However, sex work itself is not socially sanctioned but considered a sin or a crime" (14). Today also the legalization of sex work is untrue. A report published as *Legalize Sex Work* which reveals:

In a welcome move Lalitha Kumaramangalam has advocated legalizing sex work. The NDA government has made a start in scrapping archaic laws. Alongside unenforceable laws- which may be well intentioned but have perverse effects on the ground- should also go.

(“The Times of India”, 30th October 2014-10)

Individual Self is Equal to Collective Self

On the very first public speech Nalini picked up the mike and spoke “We are here for the sex workers’ organization. We want our rights to be respected. The police should not beat us.

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The thugs should not harass us” (87). Armed with her fiery voice she travelled through Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, interacting with community-based organizations of sex workers. Her book also embodies a community of women, whose very presence is considered polluting the sanctity of ideal womanhood. Here ‘I’, Nalini, the sex worker is ‘we’ the community, the sex workers. Their very existence is identified by the sense of Otherness- Other to man and Other to the Malayali female ideal.

In this regard Genero Padilla notes in his “*The Self as Cultural Metaphor in Acosta’s Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo*”:

Unlike the traditional notion that the autobiographical ‘I’ stands isolated, consumed in scrutinizing the autonomous self, the fundamental identification between the ‘I’ and the “We” is a principle of ethnic autobiographical consciousness. (254)

Other Autobiographies on the Marginalized

Like Nalini, A. Revathi, a hijra glorifies the self in her autobiography, *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story* (2010). Being born with the ‘body’ of a male was expected to behave like a male but his/her (?) ‘male body’ nurtured the desires and passions of being a ‘female’. So, he/she (?) is thrown out from the civilized society. The most terrible matter is that in India the application form for any government jobs necessarily maintain a column specifying the gender of the applicant, but that specification does not clearly state either a ‘male’ or a ‘female’. So, the tragic part of the story is that it is the society who denies them entry into main stream productive economy, and it is society itself who curses the trans-genders or the third genders for living a parasitic life. Neither Nalini nor Revathi, Sister Jeseme, a nun of Kerala in her *The Autobiography of a Nun* also portrays how the nuns are sexually exploited inside the church.

So, the marginalized autobiographies re-invent their ‘self’ in the civilized society through their autobiographies. Self is a multi-vocal word. Rom Harre, in his *Metaphysics and Narrative: Singularities and Multiplicities of Self* observes: “It (self) appears in personal narratives in at least three psychologically diverse contexts: perception, reflection, and social interaction” (13). The question of how an autobiography is written is primarily a question of how the self is constructed. The autobiographers try to construct a sense of ‘the self’. A. Revathi in her book announces- “I hope this book of mine will make people see that hijras are capable of more than just begging and sex work. I do not seek sympathy from society or government”. (v- vi)

Nalini Re-invents Herself

Nalini in her book *The Autobiography of a Sex Worker* self consciously sets the subaltern autobiographical form (parole) against the traditional form (langue). Writing becomes a surrogate sexual body for Nalini Jameela. Jameela is back with her coming book *In The Company of Men: The Romantic Encounters of a Sex Worker* where she tells: “There were many things which I left out in the first book. Since it was an autobiography, I chose to tell some stories and not all. The new book is more open”. (iii)

Where many such women shy away and live a life of seclusion, Nalini Jameela has set forth an example of self-acceptance and unexceptional valor in her autobiography. It offers deep insights into the way of woman without husband is still looked down upon and treated by our society. It also offers how she re-invents herself in the society. My paper presents she becomes successful to re-invent herself in the society, she tells:

But the best part of the story came later. These very fellows who'd not give me porridge, the very same chaps, served me lentil vadas and chutney on the day I filmed the meeting of the Prohibition Committee. Oh, how they coaxed me, 'Madam, please eat!' (120)

Sex Work – Production of Pleasure and Beauty

Jameela does link sex work to the production of pleasure and beauty – however, through her characterization of sex work as 'counselling' and 'therapy' and claims to possess expertise. She appropriates the former into the later. The legalization of sex workers also proves the re-invention of Nalini. For Jameela, a successful autobiography was her way of both establishing herself as a public person and testifying to the oppression of sex workers in public. Why should we read marginalized literature like Nalini's autobiography? We'll never use the title 'marginalized' to them. By representing her 'self' in the society Nalini celebrates her profession, "I am not Mahatma Gandhi, I'm here to sell my body and my book. Tell me, how many writers distribute their royalty to the poor? Then why do they target me?" (176) At 59, does she have any plan to leave her profession? Nalini deliberately confesses: "This profession has given me everything, fame, money and a name. I will never disown it. I am proud to be a sex worker". (160)

Conclusion

Nalini, I argue, succeeds to rise herself to the higher realm of self-respect, self-esteem and self-celebration. Self-respect is one of the basic premises of self-celebration. She celebrates her 'self' with all vigor and vivacity. She never rejects or disclaims her identity but bravely, loudly proclaims it. She reveals in her difference. Her difference from the main stream society is the root of her identity and self. This celebration of her 'self' gives her a recognition to live in this society with dignity. There should not be any marginalization in the society.

As we read an autobiography to acquire knowledge from his/her life, reading Nalini's autobiography I also learn like Nalini, other marginalized communities are also eager to mix with the civilized society. They are as we are. They have the same right as we have. They have the same recognition, same dignity as the upper-class people have. They may be sex workers or hijras or nuns but have the same identity as per our Indian Constitution. No more oppression, no more 'loss of identity', no more 'puppet' marginalized. To get back their recognition and their freedom, the 'silent' community has become more vocal through their autobiographies. We should respect Nalini as her pen is able to re-invent her 'self' and gives her an identity. The words of Jerome D. Davis in the book *David: Soldier, Missionary*, above all, are very apt for Nalini:

Selfhood in life writing is thus understood as a narrative performance and the text often exhibits the writer's process of self-awareness and struggle for self-representation through narrative structure itself. (vii)

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