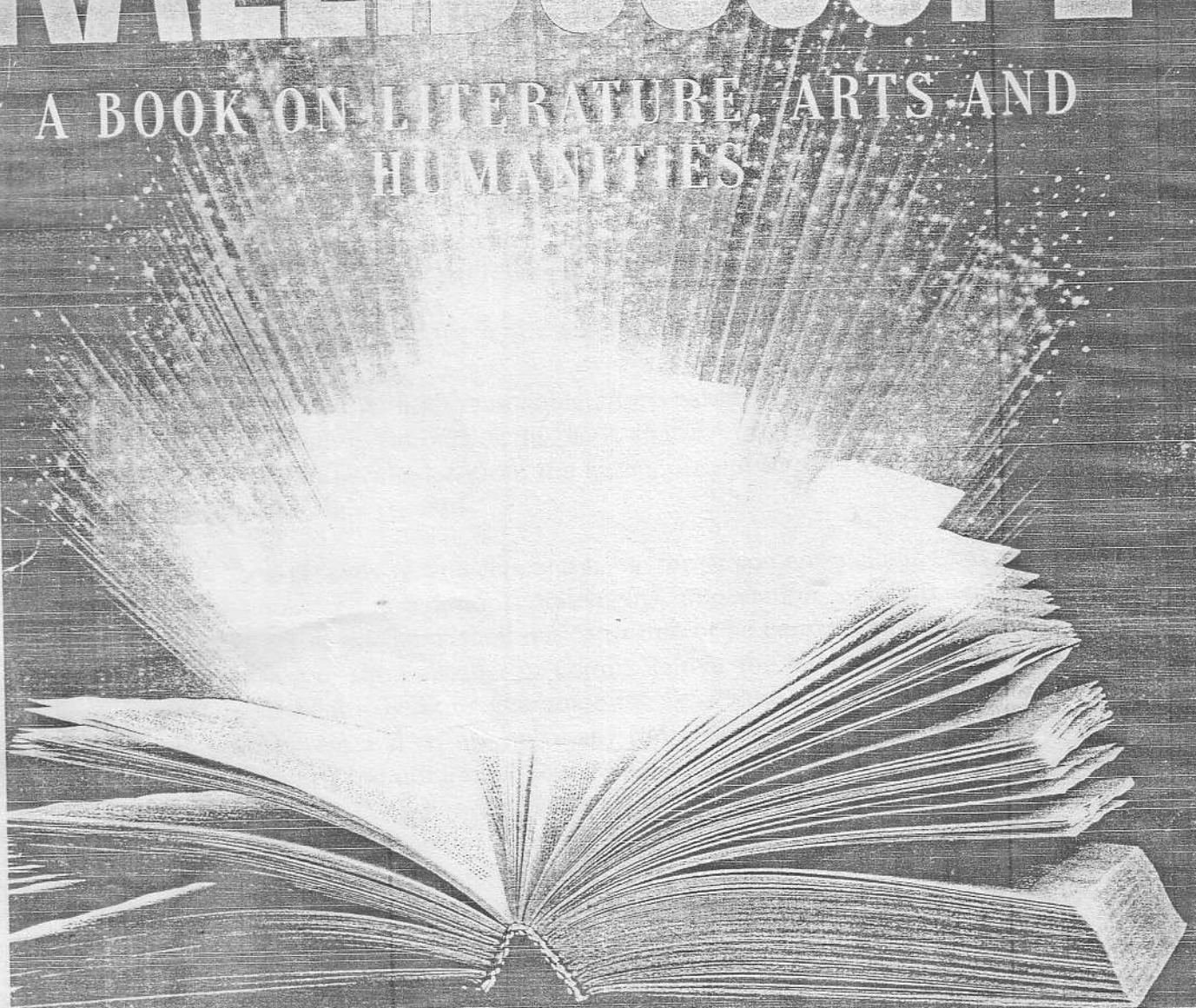


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Contents

vii

Message from the Principal

- <i>Body, Self and Power: A Study on Body Politics as Portrayed in the Autobiography of a Sex Worker</i>	1
- <i>Voices across Borders: An Exploration of Veils, Halos & Shackles</i>	7
- <i>Confrontation with the 'Real' and the '(Im)possibility' of a Dalit Literature</i>	11
- <i>The Question of Extra-terrestrials and Outer Space: The Pleiadians who landed in Gabriel Garcia Marquez's <i>One Hundred Years of Solitude</i></i>	15
- <i>Lost in Translation, a Loss for TL Reader: A Probe into the Untranslatable Priya A. S</i>	21
- <i>Body as a Sign: Reading 'Thumpunkal Chathan'</i>	25
- <i>Mirroring the 'Frame': Scrutinizing the Metafictional Transactions in J. M. Coetzee's <i>Foe</i> and <i>Slow Man</i></i>	31
- <i>God, Monster, Human: Interrogating the Nature and Shifting Rigidities of Culture</i>	41
- <i>Defining a Postmodern Narrative: A Study into the Theme and Narrative Structure of 'Once upon a Time' by Nadine Gordimer</i>	45
- <i>Michael Ondaatje and Human Rights Literature: A Reading on 'Anil's Ghost'</i>	49
- <i>Masculine Anxieties and Dalit Politics: A Reading of Manu Joseph's <i>Serious Men</i></i>	53
- <i>Postmodernism as Reflected in <i>Red Sorghum</i></i>	57
- <i>'Bastuhara Nari' or Feminine Homelessness: Women of the Streets</i>	61
- <i>The Influence of Social Media on the Language Competency of the Youth</i>	73
- <i>Journey of a Contemporary Indian Middle Class Woman as a Diasporan Enduring the Postcolonial Hangover of the English Language Elitism With Reference To the Film 'English Vinglish'</i>	77
- <i>Transmutation of Culture: A Post Colonial Reading on Cultural Imperialism</i>	81
- <i>Contemplations on Biopolitics and the Biopolitical Double-Play</i>	91
- <i>Mammamadam: Of a Woman, Who Hasn't Learned How to Live</i>	97
- <i>Reflecting on the Representation of Divergent Gender Identities in the Selected Malayalam Movies</i>	101
- <i>Nora The Individualist Against Society: An Analys of Ibsen's <i>Dolls House</i></i>	107
- <i>Kadumbashree: An Example from Kerala on Woman Empowerment through Local Governance</i>	113

Body, Self and Power: A Study on Body Politics as Portrayed in the Autobiography of a Sex Worker

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Abstract

Body and self are two ambiguous terms which diverts the attention of readers to the unexplored horizons of identity in every piece of work. The unconscious play of the narratives has a different tale to convey rather than exposing a mere story element in the conscious part. Nalini Jameela's work is such a made where the legacy of prostitution has got a new coinage in the undercurrents – "sex work." The dignity attached to the "labour" serves its way to the complicated notions of identity and self. As the terms prostitute and self don't match with each, the memoir has certain 'dark spots' to mark it. The paper is an attempt to analyze how an ordinary woman who has been doing an 'ordinary work' has challenged the structures with her name, her face, her language, her self-acceptance and the dignity she has shown towards her profession.

The paper also analyses how her struggle has been undertaken through the vicissitudes of notions mentioned above and the challenges which marked her journey from the margins singular in its attempt.

The social construction of power leaves a number of blind spots in society, which produces multiple sources of resistance across its expansion. Elizabeth Grosz notes that the body is "a political object par excellence; its forms, capacities, behaviour, gestures, movements, potentials are primary objects of political contestation" (3). The nexus between body and power serves enough space for a dialectic procedure. The vacuum created out of this 'aporias' gives enough possibility for a realignment and reconstruction. When directed by Foucauldian motto "Power is everywhere," anybody and any 'body' can hold it and be the subjects or objects at their own discretion and glance of the structure.

Nalini Jameela's *The Autobiography of a sex worker* is such a made where we can witness the reversion of power structures in its various strategies. The autobiography in its length and breadth portrays Nalini as an 'ordinary' woman who with all her might struggles to 'live' and not 'fit' to in the society where she 'works.' The pun she carries in her ordinary status and her work gives the crux of the autobiography and it amply testimonies the position the work is likely to occupy in the literary scenario. The way she created a space throughout her work which titled as 'sex worker' is not only an attempt which nullifies the ideologies but also a venture to prove her own existence of herself.

Started as labourer in claymine, she traverses through a number of professions before reaching her right choice. The moment she pauses at her choice, her assertion of the self begins. Her assertive identity is further marked by her involvement as a social worker and political activist.

"I am Nalini. Was born at Kallor near Amballor. Im 49 years old."(preface)

Her discretion to announce her name and age openly shows the way the profession has influenced her life. Her courage to uphold her body and through her body, her identity and self proves its merits later in her life

Transcending the outer limits of the body and finding a way in to the ghettos is always a struggle for resistance rather than for equality. Female body is the site where repression and resistance meet. Though it represses and resists, it is always a nexus of construction. Realization of one's mental, physical and sexual experience constitutes the wholeness of a body. Body, being a site of culturally contested meanings (Foucault, In the History of Sexuality), has to go a long way in making it a 'tabula rasa' – a point to start the resistance. Protest thus involves the formula of unmaking the body and resistance thereby a means to find the self. Nalini Jameela has rightly sensed this relationship with it through her body. Her own engagement with the politics of the body gained her the new status of the self.

For attaining the new coinages of herself and her body, she has meticulously used her name, her face, her language, her self-acceptance and the dignity she has shown towards her profession. The culminating effect of all these factors is that she has created a nether world out of the other world despite her chaotic and unstable existence. While describing about the labours she has undertaken, among the list of her claymine work, her job as a house servant, she with the same run of the mill quality, talks of her getting into sexual work. It is only on a second reading, one is likely to notice the line of attack of Jameela. How she has given a new coinage to prostitution exposes the dichotomy between veshya and sex worker. The notion of work to the clichéd veshyavriti or prostitution is something anew in the cultural context of Kerala. The dignity granted to such a despised 'profession' shows her search for the 'real.'

As identity of an individual is the direct result of his/her actions and roles, performance plays a vital role in determining gender. The repetition of roles confirms ones status and identity. Thus, gender has no direct relationship with body. Judith Butler was highly influential person in affecting a re-definition to gender and sexuality in her work *Gender Trouble* as she argues that gender is performative. Gender, to Butler is an identity tenuously constituted in time, insulted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts. As such, gender is not fixed by sex. (Butler 6-10). In such a context, action is what determines the type. The performative role played by Nalini Jameela as sex worker determines her type. How she views her profession and how she has attached the notions of labour and dignity alludes to her image.

Throughout her narration she blew on the conventional images of 'ideal woman' by her ~~own~~ declaration of 'women on top' angles, which in turn become a blast on conventional ~~images assembled~~ to create the identity of woman. She takes sex beyond its physical realm and ~~conceived~~ it as a search for ideal. While doing this she is actually in par with the zest which ~~Subbaraman~~ has shown in her *My Story*. The divine empire granted to love and sex in her ~~autobiography~~ has a lot in common with *The Autobiography of a Sex worker*. Resistance gets ~~defined~~ when the balance of power relation turned topsy turvey. There are moments in which ~~one~~ becomes aware of one's own body. For a girl, it happens with her menstruation. Later on, ~~at one point or other~~, she is continuously reminded about the 'girlish' qualities of her body. In a ~~way~~, identities expose a signifier-signifier relationship rather than reaching a proper signified.

A small composition of *myself* as a body in the middle of a spatial and temporal world- such seems to be the schema. It does not impose itself on me; it is, rather, a definitive structuring of the self and of the world definitive because it creates a real dialectic between my body and the world...

(Fanon 83-84)

For the reversion of images, Nalini has to transform the entire notions of body which carry the stigmas of repressive ideology. She has deliberately used images and symbols which has nothing to do with a patriarchal culture.

In her journey towards the centre, she leaps out of her conventional pillars of femininity to expose the double standards of society. At many points, she questions the fixing of moulded images and sexual self-control standards of the society as ideal measures. She narrates in detail how she gets into this profession. She was married at a tender age and soon became a mother of two children. The death of her husband Subramaniyan puts her in a sort of ghettos. For nurturing the two children, she has to pay her mother in law. When all other routes for earnings get terminated, one of her friends mentions about Rosa Chechi. When asked about the kind of job, the answer was quite confusing,

"You'll have to 'go along with' a man, she replied. No one would openly mention about sleeping together or sex." (23)

Within her friends comment, 'men need women,' (23) she gets the real sense of the term. On her first occasion of 'using the body', she describes the experience with her first client - the policeman as 'very tender.' Even she opts the will to openly admit that, "my memories of him are warmer than my memories of Subbaretan." (26)

Within no time it was proved that "men can both be tender and cruel." (26) The day after she had this warm experience, she was arrested by the orders of the same police official who shared bed with her. The double standards opted by society in case of prostitution and not 'sex work' obviously have its explanation in her life events. It was the society which pushed her into it later the same society complained and made hues and cries of her involvement in the profession.

The qualities of a woman include maintaining stereotyped images, accepting orders and ~~submitting~~ to restrictions and values without stoicism. The male authored texts about women ~~celebrate~~ the feminine qualities, which include modesty, softness, chastity, virginity and so on. These qualities are embraced as the heroism of women. To be heroic, men must do actions. For ~~females~~, action involves the passive acceptance of values and societal norms. The performance of the individual is supported and altered by the existing structure. Contrary to the readers' expectation of the title as a tale of sexual adventures, Jameela talks in detail about femininity.

"I think that femininity is woman's strength" (113). Rather than a celebration of body's sexual instincts, she elaborates much on reforming the body/self through her profession of 'using the body.' The work is not an occasion of the celebration of porn or sexual fantasies, but an open declaration of the formation of the self through her sexwork. She portrays herself as a common woman who has her own likes and dislikes on matters related to sex. While she finds a comfortable zone with some, she does not find it with some others. These pronouncements are not the usual cup of tea expected from a keralite woman. For a woman to put her desires on discussion is often looked with contempt. Nalini Jameela's work proves its worth in this respect. She poses herself as a threat to the society by her declarations on the so called 'forbidden fruits' for women.

The work has its own provisions to capture moments of Nalini Jameela as an ordinary woman. It is her ordinary lay woman status which grants her the mettle to uphold herself as a woman with identity. Her self-revealing nature is the hall mark of the autobiography, where without any hesitations she stresses her name, her region, her locality, her familial lineage, her relationships and her age. Her whole life is full of events variegated by structures of feelings and emotions. Like every other woman, she loves to have a family, kids and a well settled existence. As life has in store for her a saga of quite different events, she goes with the flow and stands firmly in the soil she is in.

"If your life is a struggle to survive and to support others, then you won't be concerned with whether the work you can get is dignified or not. One must emphasise the meaninglessness of this divide over and over again, in different ways." (Afterword)

In a way Jameela even problematises the question of dignity. The age old definitions of dignity finds a fresh air with her. Prostitution has always been given a derogatory status in the society where sexual-self-control is the dictum. Within the pillars of patriarchal modernity body is perceived as a closed image. Closed in the sense, it does not have the provisions to move out of the ideal images. Whereas the sex work grants the provision for an open image in which none of the traits are being hidden in a sex worker's body. The use of red lipstick always has an age old association with prostitutes. With Nalini Jameela things are granted a new extraction. Though the labour has been attributed an open image, sticking the body to patriarchal stereotypes are largely absent here. Dignity is granted to the labour through such a re-alignment.

Jameela goes to an extent to capture the hypocrisies of society in punishing the sex workers involved in the 'crime,' while the clients are on the safe side. Her involvement with Jwalamukhi grants her strength to pooh-pooh on this tradition.

"If sex is the offence then there is one more person who must be punished. How come that fellow is never punished? Isn't he an offender too? (89)

To her sex work is a 'serious profession' having its own legacy. She talks about the age-old tradition of Ammachiveedukal and Devadasis. At the same time, she vehemently attacks the usage of ugly names like 'petti' and 'tatti.' She even proclaims her liberalist pronouncements on sex work. When she has the freedom to choose a client, a house wife has to go the battering. At one point, she openly admits that she lets her own daughter to take sex work as her profession if she desires it. In a society noted for its hypocrisy, she with her 'unique profession' stands as a blow to it.

The book serves its purpose when Nalini Jameela is very keen in exploding the intricacies involved in the profession. The 'work' is not a bed of roses as understood by the crowd,

as with every other jobs this one has its own threats. She penned out two episodes where she used her intelligence to run out of it. The sneaky escape from Brahmakulam gang and other day from an auto rickshaw driver, Chandran, exemplifies the dangers involved in it. By enumerating the subtleties and nuances of the 'work' she is involved in, she builds up the blocks shrewdly to make it seem like an ordinary woman narrating her ordinary life and her quite ordinary 'work.' It is from this ordinariness, the title gained its momentum. The coinage 'sex work' has become an accepted usage with the time the readers have reached the last page. All the suspicions regarding the term and its implementations prove worthless through this literary pursuit of Jameela.

The whole narrative pattern is adorned with her use of language. The way she used her words and vocabulary shows her deliberate choices. Nalini Jameela, in a way, fights with the language to grant the dignity and honour to herself through the profession, and there by reverting the power strategies involved in 'sex work.' Nowhere in the work has she mentioned the term prostitution or veshya, nowhere she uses derogatory terms. Her uncanny eye for minute details etched out in casual conversation style shows her neo-liberalist tradition. Her linear narrative with occasional zig zag movements in a way oozes out the great message she carries about sex work, which to her is not a physical, material intercourse, but a pursuit which grants her the freedom of choice.

Sex workers are free in four respects. We don't have to cook for a husband, we don't have to ask for his permission to raise our kids as we deem fit; we don't have to run after a husband claiming rights to his property.(107)

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