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Gender and Resistance in Nalini Jameela's *The Autobiography of a Sex Worker*

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ABSTRACT

Gender has been a critical issue in the entrenched patriarchal milieu and resistance of course, has no exception. The present paper "Gender and Resistance in Nalini Jameela's *The Autobiography of a Sex Worker*" includes portrayal of gender and resistance as well as visualizes gender discriminations and several issues underlying it, along with the act of resistance. Especially, it will examine different perspectives of gender issues and question the crisis relating the very existence of woman sex workers. So far our knowledge is concerned, severe financial constraints in someone's life compel her/him to plunge in something that s/he has never thought of. Such an unimaginable story develops in the life of Nalini Jameela. Her candid work "The Autobiography of a Sex Worker" clings into the scrutinised past of the subaltern sex workers, their socio-cultural existence and ties itself with unveiling the women self which has been kept in four walls of the prison since they are born. This paper shows Jameela's enduring effort to face the dominant male society for the acceptance and merging of sex workers in main stream society.

Key words: Nalini Jameela, gender, resistance, patriarchal, gender discrimination, feminist, marginal, subaltern

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Introduction

It was until 1960's that Gender studies was very rarely understood and was not acceptable. But after 1960's it got a huge acceptance worldwide for its more definite dimensions. Gender concerns itself with woman or man in the society. The 8th edition of Oxford Advance Learners Dictionary defines gender as "the fact of being of male and female, especially when considered with reference to socio-cultural difference not differences in biology." Thus, human relationships primarily between men and women are the outcome of socio-cultural difference though they are biologically constructed. It is the result of cultural construction as feminist theory claims that

gender is cultural interpretation of sex. Gender is thus constructed through socialisation and then is culturally constructed which shapes itself in its own way according to the prevailing situation. As a result there is seen gender discrimination.

‘Gender Discrimination’ has been a very resentful issue since the time immemorial. It is used as a sharp tool to discriminate various social issues irrespective of caste, education, income, labour and many more. In the words of Joan W. Scott (2001), "Gender is a constitutive element of social relationship based on perceived differences between the sexes, and gender is a primary way of signifying relationships of power." Furthermore, to Connell, "gender is a social practice that constantly refers to what bodies do, it is not social practice reduced to the body. It exists precisely to the extent that biology does not determine the social". (‘Gender and Power’, 1987: p. 140).

A Reader’s Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory (1997) by a panel of three authors (R. Seldon, P. Widdowson and P. Brooker) has archived the information regarding ‘Suppression of Women’ i.e., Aristotle, the great classic philosopher says, ‘the female is female by virtue of a certain lack of qualities’, St. Thomas Aquinas believes that woman is an ‘imperfect man’, the pioneer metaphysical poet John Donne wrote ‘Air and Angels’ which followed the Aquinas’ view. After studying woman and various issues regarding to it, Simon de Beauvoir (*The Second Sex*, 1949) notes, “One is not born a woman rather becomes one.” Copious publications has been found to diagnose the issues in society and provide potential solutions to ‘eliminate the Violations against Women’. These writings involve Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of Rights of Women* (1792), Oliver Schreiner’s *Women and Labour* (1911), Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* (1929), Simon de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* (1949). Male contributions to feminist approach include J.S. Mill’s *The Subjection of Women* (1869) and Friedrich Engels’ *The Origin of the Family* (1884) etc.

The same kind of piles of literary evidence preserved across the globe will come to our vision if we look periodically from the very past to the 20th century. Gender discrimination, of course can be patent if we look back to our past not only in the Western context but also in our own context. Indian context is not an exception to this beastly horrible act. Women in *Mahabharata*, one of the great religious epics of Hinduism, suffered a lot for their lives and gained very less prestige in the contemporary socio-political as well as socio-cultural world. They are always starving for ‘a room of one’s own’ where they will be able to express their own suffering and will be free from the clutches of so called patriarchal society and their superiority. When gender comes into contact with other spheres of marginalisation, women experiences much more discrimination. As a result, John Stuart Mill, in his *The Subjection of Women* (1869) argued that the subordination of women was both wrong and ‘one of the chief hindrances to human improvement’.

It was after the emergence of feminism as well as the impact of education on society, women started to get more curious regarding their identity, regarding their social status to join in the mainstream society etc. Women of this era very well knew that they are always differentiated from men in terms of power. Moreover, they suspect that it was gender discrimination in society that makes them inferior than man as sometimes it obtains gaps between sexes in literary field, household activities, educational field etc. To say, it distinguishes authoritative nature of men and woman and focuses on the domination of male authority over female. Though women are born without social constraints still throughout their life till death they get to see themselves exploited by the patriarchy.

Describing the past events of bygone days and narrating it seems no easy. Furthermore, in case of a woman who is even not allowed to fight for her liberty, equality, and rights etc. seems more

problematic to narrate her own story. In a country like India, where a woman remains inside the four walls of patriarchal society, a woman who faces gender discriminations in each and every step she takes, at that very moment publication of Nalini Jameela's *The Autobiography of a Sex Worker* (2007) brings out a great revolutionary change in Indian literary scenario giving a thunder shake to the whole world. So, this paper aims at presenting the painful life journey of Nalini Jameela which comes directly from her without any superficiality. The essential things in the writings of a subaltern i.e. her struggling life, the process of earning livelihood for survival, her awareness for self-protection etc. are very well mentioned in Jameela's autobiography. Her candid work visualises her excruciating journey from a clay-mine labourer to a successful businessman, social activist as well as film maker putting forth the voices of the downtrodden, marginalised, oppressed women. Furthermore, she projects resistance as the transformation of the pains, suffering because of exploitations by patriarchal society. In short this texts sharply gets its insights into the life of an ordinary woman and the life of a women sex worker.

Analysis of the Text

Throughout the centuries, women are being under the control of men. They live a twice cursed life where they are not only marginalised, suppressed or oppressed by male society but also subjugated by their own community. Woman in any form (daughter, wife, mother, sister etc.) can't live in peace until and unless they raise their oppositional fierce voice. When Valyamma shouts in a commanding tone towards Jameela's mother accusing,

"Haven't you bathed the children? Haven't you cooked the rice? How dare you say that the rice I gave was full of paddy and tones?" (p.7)

Jameela's mother stands still and scared.

From her childhood Jameela has eye witnessed her mother's suffering because of her father. She herself was also under control of her father. That is what she mentions in the text,

"...However, he tried to control me, tell me how to spend my money, the same way he used to do with mother." (p. 20)

Furthermore, after her marriage with Subrahmanyam she suffered 'unimaginable levels of virulent squabbling'(p.21) in her in-laws house. She was tortured severely by her mother-in-law, sister-in-law as well as from her husband. It was a living hell.(p.21)

This text reflects diverse deteriorate conditions of sex workers in Kerala. After Subrahmanyam's death, she walked on the path which leads towards sex industry. In short, she became a sex worker. For which like other ordinary women, she was not marginalised twice; rather she was thrice marginalised, by patriarchal society, by women and now for being a sex worker. If one looks at this autobiography from feminists viewpoints, s/he can be very well aware of the status and position of women. The tragic burden that women always bears is her struggle for existence that Jameela speaks is,

"If your life is a struggle to survive and support others, then you won't be concerned with whether the work you can get is dignified or not." (p.174)

As a result, when a sex worker, being thrice marginalised writes her own life journey vibrates the whole world with her narratives. Nalini Jameela is a very rare example of such sex worker who speaks her adventurous life through discovering her 'self'. Being a sex worker, she went through various experiences which assisted her to know the man's world better. Every step she takes, she learns a new lesson. Her first client whom Jameela was thinking as her dream lover handed her to the police the next day after enjoying her. And thus she learnt,

“Men can both be tender and cruel at the same time.” (p.26)

It happened not only in the case of Jameela. But other sex workers also suffer from such critical situations. But they are bound to stand erect whatever troubles they may face. That is why Jameela speaks for 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.” (p.170)

Life of a sex worker is not that easy that it looks from its outer name. Like an ordinary woman, she has also family, children, public life etc and Jameela is one among them who carries out all her responsibility accordingly. As she mentions, “Life is not a narrow, one-track path; there are detours one can take, and one can also return to old familiar paths.” (p.175) This is what one notices when for some years she leaves sex work and lives a happy household life with Shahulkka. But as if it was fated earlier, because of family quarrels, ill health, lack of money and the most important is for wellbeing of her only daughter Zeenat, she once again linked herself with sex work.

Jameela in her autobiography questions stereo typing portrayal of prostitutes. She not only declined the concept of considering her as ‘sex worker’ but also she raised her voice to abandon this. Rather she struggles for the acceptance of ‘sex work as profession’. Women sex workers, though play several role not only in household but also in every sphere of society, still society accuses them of various guilt. From feminist point of view one can very well notice that sex workers are harassed by the male society, as well as they are criminalised or stigmatised. Answering the question about turning of women into sex work, Jameela writes in her autobiography,

“A sex worker is not born as a sex worker’s daughter. These are women who come into this trade after having failed their higher secondary exams, after failing to get a job, or after being kicked out by a husband irked at having got only thousand, instead of the fifty thousand promised, as dowry.” (p.157)

Sex-positive feminists opines “women and men can have positive experiences as sex workers and that where it is illegal, prostitution should be decriminalised. They argue that prostitution is not necessarily bad for women if prostitutes are treated with respect and if the profession within sex work are de-stigmatized.” This is also what Jameela mentions, “We demand that sex work be decriminalised.” (p.137) Nalini Jameela, after joining Jwalamukhi, the sex worker’s organisation, made an effort to fight for decriminalisation as well as de stigmatization of the sex workers. She goes onto say that sex workers shouldn’t consider themselves inferior or should not stigmatised or penalised themselves.

When a sex worker, with all her effort puts forth her struggling life before the public domain, the whole world remains stunned. When Jameela, as a social activist-cum-sex worker, joined Jwalamukhi, her entrance to the public domain became obvious. She used to make documentary films on sex workers to bring forth their resistance against the dominant male society. She succeeded in creating a public image of her own. And as a sex worker when Jameela attempts to put forth her communal silenced, muted, murmured voice before public domain, not only she becomes controversial but also somehow touches the heart of crores of people. She initiates the readers to identify the silenced as well as the gendered subalterns as she has bestowed the silenced with resisting voices.

Conclusion

Jameela's autobiography somehow succeeds in presenting voice to the voiceless, resists against violence, projects the genuine truth of life, as well as moves forward and articulates the thoughts and expressions of the gendered subaltern. Gradually, all these pains and suffering described in the text takes the form of resistance through the narratives. As it is said that pen is mightier than the sword, so Jameela uses narrative form to capture all the problems, resistance etc. of the sex workers and publicises the communal self. She tries her best to smash all existing hushes regarding sexuality and life of sex workers as well as makes people believe that all the socio-cultural ethics prevailing in India are only pretensions not reality.

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