

(Re)Framing Sex Work and Prostitution through Sana Munir’s “Maria a wanton one”

Muhammad Aqib
MS English Literature
Department of Humanities
COMSATS University Islamabad, Lahore Campus

Javaria Farooqui
Assistant Professor
Department of Humanities
COMSATS University Islamabad, Lahore Campus

Dr. M. Ammad Ul Haque
Head of Department of Humanities
COMSATS University Islamabad, Lahore Campus

Abstract

Sex work is new dimension of prostitution given by third and fourth wave feminists. Carol Leigh offers respect to prostitution by calling it “Sex Work” at a conference in 1970 and launches sex worker’s rights movement. The conventional concept of prostitution has been challenged by the emergence of this new dimension. This new turn on the one hand declares sex work a profession with secured rights but on the other hand cannot deny the circumstantial compulsion which makes a female prostitute. The gratification between secured profession and circumstantial compulsion, heart between both hands, is sign of interrogation in sex work, a new positive face of prostitution. This study aims to analyze Sana Munir’s “Maria a wanton one”, a short story from *Unfettered Wings*, in order to explore the tendency of Maria’s feelings to her profession in the catalyst of love to re-frame sex work and prostitution. In this study, feminism approach has been used which offers to look the story through the lens of feminists’ views, movements and experiences of the real world.

Keywords: Prostitution, Sex Work, Feminism, Unfettered Wings

This paper explores a prostitute’s feeling about her profession within the context of war between two feminist groups while exploring Sana Munir’s “Maria the wanton one”, a short story from *Unfettered Wings*. The story features sex work, prostitution, love, feelings, and envisions the transformation from brothels to expensive houses.

The new dimension of prostitution known as “Sex-Work” in the contemporary corporate culture has got a new room as an open profession with secured rights demanded by a number of keynote feminists of third and fourth waves known as sex positive feminists. Apart from sex positive feminists, there is a group of radical feminists who are abolitionists and declare that prostitution is the gift of patriarchal hierarchy. Julie Bindel identifies the war between pro-prostitution lobby and abolitionists. “The abolitionists of today stand on Josephine Butler’s shoulders and are, in turn, accused by the ‘sex workers’ rights’ lobby”. On the part of sex workers’ rights lobby, Carol Leigh’s contribution, switching the term from ‘prostitution’ to ‘sex-work’, provides a standing step.

Academia has a number of contributions in the documentation of literary research which highlight the diversity of the arguments for prostitution and sex work in literature. Risa Pareka has evaluated that what has motivated in becoming prostitute to the protagonists in Paulo Coelho’s *Eleven Minutes* and Nawal El Saadawi’s *Woman at Point Zero* through comparative analysis (ix)? The outcomes elaborate that the protagonists of the both novels are motivated, on the part of similarity, by their needs and survival because of their economically low background (33); and, on the part of difference, Firdaus, in *Woman at Point Zero* is compelled by patriarchal culture to be a prostitute while Maria, in *Eleven Minutes*, is motivated by the surroundings to earn money through sex work (38-39). Chatarina Setyastuti Wiedaninggar has focused on Maria’s unsuccessful jobs and successful profession of prostitution (40-45) in order to explore her struggle for her better life (5) in Coelho’s *Eleven Minutes*. Gabriela Ajeng Cahyaning Puspitajati has analyzed through Alfred Adler’s *Individual Psychology* that Maria gets success by managing her distress and eustress applying problem- and emotion- focused coping in Coelho’s *Eleven Minutes* (VII). Nenden Syahbana M has explored the depiction of institution of prostitution within society as a profession for women is opposite to the institutions of social work and marriage in El Saadawi’s *Woman at Point Zero* through deconstruction (56-57). Having a look on the academia contributions, it seems that there should be a research to explore the feelings of a prostitute or sex worker among the war of arguments between pro-prostitution scholars and abolitionists for the sake of realization that how does a prostitute or sex worker feel about her profession?

Prostitution is an old notion which has been ever contentious. So, it is strenuous to conceptualize it because it varies from country to country and often region to region in a country. World Health Organization defines prostitution as a dealing in terms of transaction between buyer and seller in order to provide and get sexual services. Prostitution is a controversial profession which never got dignity. Leigh invents new term, sex work, for the same profession in order to adorn it with dignity. This new dimension provides a sense of realization that prostitution is a flexible social concept which has ability to develop over time and offers us to explore new concept to have an account of understanding of feelings of a sex worker or prostitute about profession.

Beyond fiction, there are a number of researches and surveys which point out the feelings and experiences of prostitutes and sex workers. Sex workers face stigma because of their problems (Scorgie et al., Jasmine et al.). They are prone to stigma because of their experience of violence (WHO). They often experience extreme psychological disorders (Rossler et al.). Business Insider gives the staggering statistics that 42 million prostitutes or sex workers are on the globe while 80% of them are female and the age of three quarters of all ranging from 13 to 25. One million is in Nevada. Bindle mentions, Josephine Butler (the pioneer of The Abolitionist Movement 1860) claims that prostitution is male sexual slavery controlled by profiteers and pimps and flourished as sex trade by state when prostitutes are being blamed and penalized in crime of transmit sexual diseases. Victoria Woodhull, a feminist journalist, demands the elimination of double standard. She publishes, in *Woodhull & Claflin's Weekly*, the names of prostitutes and men who cause to make them so (Woodhull and Claflin, 1). Voltairine De Cleyre's *Sex and Slavery* gives an account of the same double standard. Simon de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* raises landmark slogans for the defense of female in every discipline and in every relation. She draws a complete sketch, through the lens of Existentialism, of female as a prostitute. She points out the entrance a female through multiple doors in the room of professional prostitution which contains cruel experiences, traumatized psyche, dark aspects of life but when once this door is broken then it cannot be closed. She claims, "Female has not vice of prostitution in her blood, but it is in the society" (681). Andrea Dworkin, radical feminist, argues that the foundation of prostitution is patriarchal dominance which not only disturbs female prostitutes but the whole female group (1).

In fiction, there are a number of prominent literary records incorporated with contemporary dimensions which deliver insight of various aspects of prostitution and sex work. El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* is a landmark realistic literary work holding a humanitarian stance to represent the double standard towards prostitutes. El Saadawi takes real female, Firdaus, as the protagonist, who is victim of child abuse, turns into prostitute, kills a pimp and finally gets capital punishment. Patricia McCormick's *Sold* is another bildungsroman story of a girl, Lakshmi, who is sold by her step father for prostitution to a sex trader female, Mumtaz. *Sold* explores the realistic image of an innocent young girl who becomes the victim of cruel patriarchy culture in Nepal. According to National Human Rights Commission Nepal, 112 cases and 123 cases of female trafficking are discovered in 2006/2007 and 2007/2008 respectively. Coelho's *Eleven Minutes* is prominent contribution in literature. It has the theme of prostitution but the author portrays it through a different approach. Maria, the protagonist, selects prostitution herself as a profession for the sake of a handsome income after tempting fate in many jobs. Her encounter with love makes her aware about sacred sex but she could not leave her profession and leaves Rue de Berne, the heart of Geneva's red-light district. Munir's Maria seems Coelho's Maria's updated version of character with a huge experience of profession. Although Muneer does not reveal her Maria's background as a door which let her enter in the profession of sex work but portrays her as a skilled successful professional that males easily can be entrapped in

her wizardry. The sense of transformation of approach is not only claimed by feminist scholar but it is also visible in literary feminist authors' work.

Sana Munir's *Unfettered Wings* is a complete package highlighting women in different relations at multiple positions which brings forth extraordinary stories of ordinary women. "Maria The Wanton one" is a narration about a beautiful skilled professional prostitute while the protagonist is a young passionate desert boy. Baseer, the protagonist, a young rug merchant who comes to Lahore to earn money. After wandering 80 days, he arrives at the posh area, Gulburg. He suddenly looks a beautiful woman, Maria, a prostitute, in a marvelous bungalow. He falls into her love without knowing her profession and stands outside her bungalow. One day she calls him inside to have look on rugs. She says him come to next day because she has not money today but her one attendant, Asif, purchases one rug at twenty thousand rupees. Next day, he visits her early in the morning when she is still on her bed. She stands with her bare back and gives her money for one rug. He refuses to take money and says that he wants to see her. She tells that this city is not good place for him and he should go back to a virgin desert maiden. He comes outside and stands outside her house for months till he has not more money. He goes back to his house Baluchistan and starts business again, becomes successful, marries a woman and becomes father of four children. But Maria remains in her mind as a sexual toxic.

The story has detailed exploration of the qualities of a good "skilled merchant" (43) and "the psyche of the protagonist" (44), owner of strong imagination for a faceless perfect woman, but Muneer leaves reader to notice the professional skills and psyche of prostitute. It seems that protagonist has been borrowed from Shakespeare's *All the World's a Stage*. "And then the lover, sighing like furnace, with a woeful ballad Made to his mistress' eyebrow". Demand for a girl becomes an "inscrutable itch" in his heart through "the tingling sensation the pitch of the dutar". The narrator attaches "the psyche of the protagonist" to the "mystical symphony of dutar". In patriarchal culture the feelings and emotions of a female are ignored while preference is enjoyed by men. A critical feministic evaluation of *All the World's a Stage* can also provide patriarchal insight that although Shakespeare has accepted women as players but he has offered all roles to men on the stage. Muneer has uncovered the soil from historical roots of 'Heera Mandi, a red-light' district in Lahore and linked it with the enjoyment of "army of Mughal emperors" (47). Beauvoir also mentions courtly love as a source of prostitution in the twelfth century. The historical similarity between both different regions strengthens Beauvoir's notion that man uses female as a tool of her satisfaction neglecting her own status and life as a human being. "The prostitute is a scapegoat; man unloads his turpitude onto her, and he repudiates her" (680).

Prostitution is taboo aspect of culture which enjoys the status of open secret but according to Pakistan Penal Code section no. 371A-371B it is illegal in the domestic law of Pakistan. According to UNAID, prostitutes and sex workers in Pakistan, Sana Munir's country, reached 230,000. FBI report presents that 36,605 people (30% males and 70% females) were arrested because of prostitution in 2009. The statistics shows that 58% prostitutes work at home,

40% work at public places and there are only 2% who work in brothels (Blanchard et al.). Tariq Janjua provides a brief account about the shift of prostitutes to expensive houses from brothels. Muneer also refers this transformation through the depiction of both red-light district of prostitutes and expensive house of sex worker. Maria is sketched as the literary representative of sex workers who owned their own wealthy and luxurious life style in one of the posh areas of Lahore, Gulberg, instead of backward and notorious brothel. In the story, there are also two unknown characters, “Fia” and “Simi”, who are in Dubai for a week (59) it may be an image of advance concept of international sex work in the era globalization or a representation of luxurious life style.

Beauvoir shows the analysis of a number of studies which identify the different roads (poverty, seduction, left or compelled by parents or lover, fascination or victim of other women) which “unflower” her and lead to the trench of prostitution (682-692). “Virginité of the maiden desert” may be contrasted with “unflowered female”. For Beauvoir, a female is “unflowered” when she becomes victim of very first hit which makes her prostitute. In *Bodies That Matter*, Butler clarifies that gender performativity was not just a type of acting. she states, ‘I never did think that gender was like clothes, or that clothes make the woman’ (231). This sense leads the reader to the unsolved riddle of tracing out leading factor which made Maria a professional body seller, one of the comfort women. Although, it is arduous for reader to solve the riddle within the boundaries of narration but it is noticeable that Maria does not consider her profession, better for others even for Baseer, a “Jungli—an ignorant wild animal” or “a caveman. Literally!” (49). She finds “innocence on Baseer’s face” (62) and says to him, “Listen to me, Baseer. Go back. There is nothing for a man like you here. You belong in the virginité of the maiden desert” (65). These are feelings of Maria, a sex worker or prostitute, about her profession that she does not unflower innocent Baseer and make him one of the comfort men, literally.

A comparative analysis between “desert” and “city life” seeks some attention. Maria declares that the exhilarating pleasure of “city life” is temporary, later it turns into “heartache”. Beauvoir provides its logic, “she is lost in a big city, no longer integrated into society, the abstract idea of “morality” does not provide any obstacle” (682). This is a compassionate sigh, deep intense feelings which may be released after a lot of years, of a rich sex worker busy in her life with wealthy clients which she has during making realize an innocent jungli. Maria’s compassion, honesty and attraction become vivid when she “touch his cheek with her hand” (65). This seems the same compassion, honesty and attraction which the author suggests a reader to find in “abrisham” by saying “if you have never had the chance to caress abrisham, then you need to hear this tale” (41). Munir’s dutar has a reflection of Rumi’s reed because both are companions of lovers. “Listen, as this reed pipes, its plaint, unfolds its tale, of separations.... Cut from my reedy bed, my crying, ever since, makes men and women, weep” (Rumi). So, there is a chemistry of love among Maria’s touch to Baseer’s cheeks and Baseer’s deep bounding with dutar.

In the start of the story, the author focuses on the qualities of a good rug merchant but gradually narration reveals that there is a practical image of an expert sex worker instead of the practice of qualities of rug merchant. “The tiny errors that escape an ordinary eye are of a greater interest to a skilled merchant..... merchant might not disclose the flaws” (43). There is not any clue of Baseer’s sharpness regarding to professional merchant in his first visit of Lahore. Although, reader gets flaws as his demand of extra money from Asif because of jealousy, his giving the second rug to Maria at no cost even she calls and shouts him again and again to take money, he spends all his earning at nothing and finally goes back as a defeated and heartbroken person. Instead of Baseer, reader finds an expert professional in Maria. “And since she was wanton, she pulled him close and taught him the art her profession had made a master in” (62). She calls him at home and says, “Fyaz tells me you have Persian rugs to sell” (56) while it has been clear that Fayaz, the gatekeeper, does not like him. It means that she, as a perfect professional, has “not disclosed” to him that she herself has noticed him. The reader gets first indication about Maria’s profession when she mocks at Baseer by her “unkind laugh” to respond Fyaz’s misconception about her being busy with Baseer (57).

Her saying, “Come back tomorrow. I am short on cash today but I want to buy” (59) is not only invitation for Baseer but also an implied notion for Asif that she needs more money now. In response of Asif’s asking, “Since when have you been short of cash?”; Maria ironic smile may be telling that she has not money for Asif and demands by him while not a period for Baseer on that time. Hence, there becomes another question that if Maria has been not to purchase the rug that time because of short of money then why she had called him in? And, if she had money and then why does she call him again tomorrow while she can purchase on the same time. The first business of a professional sex worker is the estimation of her customer and for that purpose she calls him in, and her this intent becomes visible when next morning she laughs at his answer, “So? Why are you here? (60), in response of her question, “I...I brought the carpets” (61). Further, she takes more interest in his personal life instead of rugs purchasing. “Tell me, do you have a woman?” (61).

The author puts a question for reader, “Did she feel what he had felt after the fateful experience in her room?”, but the question is to weight the psyche of Prostitute, Maria. Her psyche can be analyzed by opting a realistic approach (from Beauvoir’s philosophy) instead of repentance even after having an attraction and affection with Baseer. She suggests him to back to the desert and leave the city because of its deception, but when she notices that he has not gone away she thinks him as a tool to measure “how potent her charm” is (67). This scale of realistic approach has been set by Beauvoir. “When a door has been broken open, it is then hard to keep it closed” (684). So, according to this approach, there was no door which Maria can close to stop herself from this profession. In this profession, “she could not afford to have a persistent lover”. Her life is like a willow flower, according to her “depiction of sorrow” (61), and her life is like a willow on which different birds come to sit and then fly. “In prostitution, masculine desire can be satisfied on anybody” (681).

All the directions have inverse signals. It is visible through this statement. “But promises are meant to be broken, aren’t they?” Maria proves herself as an extraordinary woman by not breaking the door of dark well of prostitution for Baseer even when she is tempted to “the extent of biting a forbidden fruit” by his admiration of her beauty. (63)

In sum, this research explores that it may be true that the switching the term, from ‘prostitution’ to ‘sex work’, may offer dignity and glamour to the profession but the story portrays such image of the feelings of an expert sex worker, true to her profession, that she cannot like this profession for an innocent good person. This research may offer new room to compare and contrast between Munir’s Maria and Coelho’s Maria’s on the basis of psychological development of a prostitute. Psychological approach can provide an insight to know how far is it true that Munir’s Maria is the updated version of Coelho’s Maria?

Work Cited

1. Blanchard, J. F., A. Khan, and A. Bokhari. "Variations in the population size, distribution and client volume among female sex workers in seven cities of Pakistan." *Sexually Transmitted Infections* 84.Suppl 2 (2008): ii24-ii27.
2. Bindel, Julie. "The Abolitionist Movement." *The Pimping of Prostitution*. Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2017. 1-33.
3. Bullough, B., & Bullough, V. L. (1996). Female prostitution: Current research and changing interpretations. *Annual Review of Sex Research*, 7, 158–181.
4. Business Insider, "There Are 42 Million Prostitutes In The World, And Here's Where They Live". Retrieved 10 March 2019. <https://www.businessinsider.com/there-are-42-million-prostitutes-in-the-world-and-heres-where-they-live-2012-1>
5. Butler, J. (1993/2011). *Bodies that matter: On the discursive limits of “sex”*. New York: Routledge.
6. De Beauvoir, Simone, and Howard Madison Parshley. *The second sex*. New York: Vintage books, 1953.
7. Coelho, Paulo, and Derek Jacobi. *Eleven minutes*. HarperCollins, 2004.
8. Dworkin, Andrea. "Prostitution and male supremacy." *Mich. J. Gender & L.* 1 (1993).
9. El Saadawi, Nawal. *Woman at point zero*. Zed Books, 2007.
10. Federal Bureau of Investigation (2010). *Uniform crime report: Crime 2009*. <http://www.fbi.gov>.
11. Huber, Jasmine, et al. "Exploring beliefs and experiences underlying self-stigma among sex workers in Hanoi, Vietnam." *Culture, health & sexuality* (2019): 1-14.
12. Janjua, T, (2017). "Prostitution a shift from dodgy brothels to expensive houses". <http://pakteahouse.net/2017/04/10/prostitution-a-shift-from-dodgy-brothels-to-expensive-houses/> Retrieved 10 March 2019
13. McCormick, Patricia. *Sold*. New York: Hyperion, 2006.
14. Muneer, Sana, *Unfettered Wings*, India, Rupa Publications, 2018

15. National Report 2011, *National Human Rights Commission. Trafficking in Person Especially on Women and Children in Nepal*. Office of the Special Rapporteur on Trafficking on Woman and Children, 2012.
16. Pareka, Risa. *MOTIVATION OF THE MAIN CHARACTER IN BECOMING A PROSTITUTE: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF PAULO COELHO'S ELEVEN MINUTES AND NAWAL EL SAADAWI'S WOMAN AT POINT ZERO*. Diss. Sanata Dharma University, 2008.
17. Puspitajati, Gabriela Ajeng Cahyaning. *MARIA'S STRESS COPING IN PAULO COELHO'S ELEVEN MINUTES*. Diss. Sanata Dharma University, 2015.
18. Rössler, Wulf, et al. "The mental health of female sex workers." *Acta Psychiatrica Scandinavica* 122.2 (2010): 143-152.
19. Scorgie, Fiona, et al. "'We are despised in the hospitals': sex workers' experiences of accessing health care in four African countries." *Culture, health & sexuality* 15.4 (2013): 450-465.
20. Syahbana M, Nenden. "Dismantling Prostitution as an Institution in Nawal El Saadawi's Woman At Point Zero." *Litera~ Kultura* 2.2 (2014).
21. Woodhull, Victoria, and Tennessee Claflin. *Woodhull & Claflin's Weekly (1871–1872)*. Available online. URL: <http://www.victoria-woodhull.com/wcarchive.htm>. Accessed on March 3, 2019.
22. UNAIDS. "Sex workers: Population size estimate - Number, 2016". www.aidsinfoonline.org Retrieved 10 March 2019.
23. Wiedaninggar, Chatarina Setyastuti. *AN ANALYSIS OF MARIA'S STRUGGLE FOR A BETTER LIFE AS SEEN IN PAULO COELHO'S ELEVEN MINUTES*. Diss. Sanata Dharma University, 2008.
24. World Health Organization (1988). *STD control in prostitution: Guidelines for policy. WHO consultation on prevention and control of sexually transmitted diseases in population groups at risk*. Geneva, Switzerland: Author
25. World Health Organization (2013). "Addressing Violence Against Sex Workers." December 10 2016. http://www.who.int/hiv/pub/sti/sex_worker_implementation/swit_chpt2.pdf