

A Gynocritical Reading of Nalini Jameela's *The Autobiography of a Sex Worker* and Amen: *The Autobiography of a Nun* by Sister Jesme

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Abstract

Women history has been overlooked while writing the canon. It is in recent times that the experience of a woman is given importance to chart the tradition of women's writing. Elaine Showalter coined the term Gynocriticism in her essay "Toward a Feminist Poetics." It refers to a criticism that constructs "a female framework for the analysis of women's literature, to develop new models based on the study of female experience, rather than to adapt male models and theories". Gynocriticism examines the female struggle for identity and the social construct of gender. It is the study of not only the female as a gender status but also the 'internalized consciousness' of the female.

Through a gynocritical reading of Nalini Jameela's *The Autobiography of a Sex Worker* and *Amen: The Autobiography of a Nun* by Sister Jesme I wish to uncover the working of the female subculture and show how the personal experience of women is a complete tradition in itself. The experience is a reality lived and it cannot be ignored as it is representative of many such muted voices and thus holds immense importance in historical documentation and

representation of women's lives.

A Gynocritical Reading of Nalini Jameela's *The Autobiography of a Sex Worker* and Amen:

Introduction

One of the glaring alienation in literary tradition is ignoring and relegating the female experience to a place of non consequentiality in literary canon. It's disturbing not because it is conservative or because it rewards divisive social engineering but because identities are not monochromatic rather they are fluid and inalienable at the same time for ex: A sex worker is a minority in any part of the country and yet she is a majority when it comes to seeing women as being half the population. Therefore Literature must find ways and means to incorporate this difference and diversity. In case of *The Sex Worker* and the Nun, the "Personal is political" in more than one sense. They are in the margins of the sub culture. One is abhorred while other stands alienated.

Elaine Showalter in her Essay *Towards a Feminist Poetics*" gives us the idea of a theory she calls Gynocriticism, which refers to a criticism that constructs "a female framework for the analysis of women's literature, to develop new models based on the study of female experience, rather than to adapt male models and theories". It examines the female struggle for identity and the social construct of gender. It is the study of not only the female as a gender status but also the 'internalized consciousness' of the female.

Thematic Scheme:

We have come a long way from the times when women writers were largely confined to the genres of children's literature and poetry. Women are perceived as emotional beings hence emotionalism in poetry, particularly the one in which feelings, sentiments, and intuition were expressed and celebrated, was considered a "feminine genre," suitable for women writers. As

women increasingly began to write fiction, however, critical reviewers derided the talents of women novelists and writers and found faults as they believed that women are unaware and aren't worldly wise and lack sense of critical judgment, and rationality, the traits which supposedly characterize men and dismissed their works as rants of a disturbed confused mind. Many great novelists like Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, and Mary Shelley among others never completely escaped the condescension of critics whose negative assessments of their works were often based on the author's gender. This sexist prejudice led to a historic dismissal of the work of many of popular, gifted, and influential women writers, who were judged as unworthy of academic interest and study.

“Gynocriticism”, “Women’s Writing”, “Gender” all these words are intensely contested not just in India but across the globe and they mean different things to different people, even as everyone claims to be for them. Since definitions restrict an idea and all these are largely an idea, I would avoid restricting my understanding of the lived human experience to somebody else’s definition or explanation.

A woman’s life and her experiences along with her reactions and logic is an individual personal affair and it cannot be measured with one set of rules. Autobiographies of Nalini Jameela , a sex worker and Sister Jesme become relevant as these are the kinds of experience which Gynocriticism wishes to document. These are real women facing and reacting to resistance from the society. It is these works that bring to the fore the injustice and hypocrisy inherent in society and meted out to those who hover on the margins of the marginalized within the subculture.

Gynocriticism therefore becomes essential to:

- Provide a platform to hidden texts of muted voices
- Exposing Social inequality
- Recognition of difference

- Removing systemic dominance and subordination.

The question at the heart of Gynocritics and radical feminists alike is the relation between equality and difference.

1. What are the differences of a lived experience that we are addressing?
2. Which differences merit public recognition? And more importantly,
3. Which differences should be treated irrelevant to political life and treated instead as private matters?
4. Why is sentimentality a female prerogative alone?

By discussing *The Autobiography of a Sex Worker* by Nalini Jameela and *Amen: The Autobiography of a Nun* by Sister Jesme, I propose to reinstate that their claim of reality of experience, a dark reality, lived by scores of women across the globe has been ignored and treated as “personal”, while the fact of the matter is that it is “political”. Nalini created a storm in the literary world in Kerala in 2005 when her autobiography was first published in Malayalam . This was akin to what happened there in 1970 when Madhavikutty (Kamala Das) referred to as ‘the queen of erotica’ published her ‘revealing’ autobiography titled *My Story*. Nalini took over the crown of thorns but wore it differently. The story of Nalini Jameela who belonged to a lower middle class, lower caste (Ezhava) family, was removed from school at nine, and worked as a labourer and a domestic worker before becoming a sex worker after the death of her husband. Later she became an activist and a filmmaker, but was not very well known outside a narrow sphere. She chose to reclaim her autobiography, by producing a second version.

For Jameela, a successful autobiography was her way of establishing herself as a public person, while testifying to the oppression of sex workers in public. She could not simply withdraw the first version; she had to rewrite it. Her autobiography challenged the idealism

inherent in the society and it was difficult for the patriarchal system to accept the trait of individualistic thinking which defined her personality. The ‘Veshya- the prostitute –figure’ was marginally present in early 20th century Malayali reformist discussions on the shaping of modern Womanhood as its abhorrent other. However, the poor laboring women’s presence was even more marginal. Jameela’s text actually made this voice audible.

J. Devika writes in the introduction to Jameela’s autobiography that it “reveals the exclusion of the dominant home-centered, self controlled feminine ideal and challenged the prostitute-stereotype. Nalini breaks away from set notions and surprise all, firstly in her very title she calls herself a *laingikatozilali*, a sex-worker, claiming the dignity of *tozhil*, a word that can mean both ‘labour’ and ‘profession’ in Malayalam. She rejects the description of herself as a ‘prostitute’ as defined by the forces of morality...she chooses a description defined by labour [which] indicates the distance between elite-centered notions of ‘Womanhood’ and the female laboring poor in Kerala. Secondly, Jameela’s jettisoning of the anonymity that helps her in her work upsets stereotypical expectations regarding biographical writings by sex-workers. Her attempts to note down her personal details ended in her losing a client once he learnt her real age ; thirdly, she inserts a ‘domestic’ into her life-narrative, complicating the image of a ‘public woman’ considerably. Stereotypically, domestic rhythms, familial love and relationships are perceived to be absent from the life of a sex-worker- her life is expected to be essentially a series of sexual adventures. (ix) Her journey displaying grit and determination and a deep sense of awareness of male psyche gives an insight into the hidden male domain and how it manipulates and functions. Her public statement of continuing with sex-work and giving the choice to her daughter and accepting her will is a classic case of emancipation and free expression of her opinions. A successful business woman, a wife, a mother, a social activist Nalini Jameela is unapologetic of her life and the way she lives it. Her conviction in herself and will to survive is a story which gives a new perspective into the lives of women in similar circumstances or worse.

Feminist scholar Helene Cixous has succinctly summarized this state in The Laugh of the

Medusa. She says, “Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time. Write yourself. Your body must be heard.”

Social action cannot have a guaranteed beginning and if at the heart of social action is redistribution then our understanding of equality and difference must take note of not just who has not benefited from redistribution but also of who are less equal and misrecognised. “From a Formidable Fortress to His Safe Anchorage” is how sister Jesme describes her escape after thirty-three years in the convent. She gives us a story from a life of enclosure to a life of exposure she eventually embraces. The details of humiliation, sexual abuse, coercion and mental torture in the seminary are bold insights into an aggressively protected world of religion. Her decision to escape is due to repeated attempts by authorities to declare her insane. Her plea for a reformation of the Church and her brave attempt at exposing the wrongdoings, corruption ,politics of the Church, sexual repression ,pervert attitudes, lesbian Liaisoning , priests asking for sexual favors, sexual exploitation, systemic corruption, abject racism, conflict within, confusion all bring to the fore the good the bad and the ugly in the religious system.

It becomes pertinent that such works are read and documented as they are the muted voices which are seldom heard and which rarely bare all. As Helene Cixous says, “We must kill the false woman who is preventing the live one from breathing.”

Central Arguments:

1. Need for a complete revision and revolution of literary history.
2. Reference to values and objectivity makes society and history turn a blind eye to unaccounted differences there may exist.
3. Individual experiences are paramount and a platform should be provided to every individual to express one’s own experience from his or her subjectivities.

4. Recognition and redistribution must go together. One cannot ignore one at the cost of the other.
5. Like success, a “meaningful life” can only be subjectively defined.

In conclusion, I state that a woman may choose to live her life her way and it matters. The feminist literary critic sees the traditional literary canon as a “culture-bound political construct” and literary posterity as nothing more than a “group of men with the access to publishing and reviewing that enabled them to enforce their views of ‘literature’ and to define a group of ageless ‘classics’.”(Carol Iannone, *The New Criterion*. Vol 4, Nov 1985, p83) .History must provide space for all to express their subjectivities.

To sum it up, I wish to quote Helene Cixous in *The Laugh of The Medusa*)

“Wouldn’t the worst be, isn’t the worst in truth, that women aren’t castrated, that they have only to stop listening to the Sirens (for the Sirens were men) for history to change its meaning? You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she’s not deadly. She’s beautiful and she’s laughing”

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