An Essay on *Oru Laingikatozhilaliyute Atmakatha*

(The Autobiography of A Sex Worker)

- Nalini Jameela

- English Translation: J. Devika

Summary:

Oru Laingikatozhilaliyute Atmakatha (The Autobiography of a Sex Worker), published in 2005, is the autobiography of Nalini Jameela, who is a social rights activist, a filmmaker, and a sex worker from Kerala. The first chapter of the book talks about her childhood. Jameela was born in rural Kerala in the 1950s to a modest Ezhava[1] family and was allowed to attend school until she was nine years old. Things went awry for her family when her mother, the only earner in the house, lost her job. She describes her father as being emotionally absent from family life and abusive towards her mother, and her mother as being meek and timid, easily trampled under the abuse of her husband and his relatives, especially once she lost her job. Her family's financial condition worsened, and they had to depend on their overbearing relatives to survive.

Taking her mother as an example of how respect is linked to the amount of money you bring into the family, Jameela started working in a dangerous tile factory at the age of nine. Though it started out smoothly, with the other mine labourers taking pity on her and helping her out, it eventually led to her escaping sexual assault several times. She then decided to work as a nanny in a rich household, to get better pay and food. But this came to an end when she got molested by her employer and was blamed by his family. She then ended up at a dangerous clay mine to support her family. Describing the caste dynamics at play in the clay mine, she states that it was very common for Ezhavas like her or Dalits to work in such mines. She faced multiple instances of sexual harassment over the years at the mine.

Eventually, her relationship with her father broke down, and she got kicked out of the house. Being just 18 and having no one to turn to, she was offered a place to stay by a colleague's friend. As gossip and word spread, his family members began to recognise her as his wife, and she got married. She was physically assaulted by her mother-in-law numerous times and had to face abuse at her hands. Jameela became addicted to alcohol after her husband forced her to drink it. She had two kids with him, and he contracted cancer and died by suicide. Her son died young, and her daughter still does not maintain any contact with her, out of shame and embarrassment. After her husband died, her mother-in-law threatened to provide her with five rupees every day, in order to look after her children. Out of desperation, she goes to the city of Thrissur to meet Rosa *Chechi*[2] and look for work. This led to her joining the sex industry.

Jameela's first client was a high-ranking police officer. Initially, she felt giddy and happy to have been with an upper-caste man who was also a high ranking police officer. This turned into betrayal as the same man got her arrested the next morning, and as this incident took place during the 1975 Emergency, she was brutally beaten up by the police. She was forced to sleep with another inspector to obtain bail. She kept getting arrested, even months after this incident. She also talks about how her life is often threatened whenever her client is engaged in politics, earning the ire of his opponents.

Eventually, her mother-in-law stopped accepting money from Jameela and prevented her from contacting her children. With her sole reason for engaging in sex work becoming redundant, she decided to leave this

[1] An Other Backward Caste (OBC) in Kerala

[2] A Malayalam word for 'Elder Sister.'

profession. She soon got married to one of her Muslim clients and gave birth to a girl, Zeenat. Her husband abandoned her soon after the birth, claiming that he could not accept a child born in *haraam* (outside the faith). To care for and support her daughter, she reluctantly got married again to a client, changed her name to Nalini Jameela, and converted to Islam to assuage her husband's orthodox relatives. She lived peacefully with her new family for close to a decade. This too came to an end when her husband had an affair and squandered all of their money. She also fell terribly ill at the same time and became bedridden, further widening the rift in her marriage. Her husband ultimately kicked her and her daughter out, and because she was unable to go back to work due to her illness, they started living in mosques. This was also trouble, as lecherous men often looked at them as prey. She describes this period as one of the worst in her life, as she constantly worried for her daughter's safety. She had to beg for alms, and with no money to heal her illness, men started preying on her daughter, thinking her to be vulnerable. When her daughter nearly got molested, she decided to send her away to work as a nanny for her husband's relatives. Taking pity on her condition, they also helped Jameela get her injury healed. Out of desperation and with no money left, she joined the sex industry again.

She then joined an organisation for sex workers called *Jwalamukhi*. There, she became an activist and fought against police brutality. She also organised a public protest against the unlawful imprisonment of sex workers. The organisation she joined also worked to protect sex workers from contracting AIDS, as most clients refused to use methods of contraception. Her confidence grew as she began speaking at government conferences and travelled to different countries to attend workshops and seminars. After the particularly brutal death of one of her colleagues in police custody, her organisation led a protest, which was joined by sex workers all over the country. The Human Rights Commission finally took up the issue, and their plight was brought before the country and was finally acknowledged. She was also jailed for this. This incident brought light to the horrific conditions that sex workers live in. All of this made her a recognisable figure in public. This made the police treat her with caution and respect.

During one of her trips to Thailand for a seminar, the event was televised, and her family finally realised that she is a sex worker. She described her daughter's reaction as not being disgusted but being worried for her mother's safety. Though the element of disgust toward her did not vanish from the hearts of the people around, Jameela states that it was now also mingled with poorly disguised awe. She was compelled to shift to a faraway place where TVs were rarely seen and where people had no idea that she was a sex worker in order to salvage her daughter's marriage prospects. She had to face a lot of trouble arranging her daughter's wedding, not because her mother was a sex worker but because her father was not with them anymore.

In the concluding chapters, she talks about how her life experiences have made her apathetic toward believing in the concept of God. She also discusses how she disagrees with mainstream feminism's idea of rehabilitating sex workers because it would isolate the sex workers by cutting off their social and domestic ties. She instead calls for the decriminalisation and regulation of sex work and for it to be treated as any other profession. She also gives a brief overview of how difficult life is for sex workers in Indian cities. She states that while Karnataka and Kolkata are some of the best places to work as a sex worker, Mumbai is ostensibly the worst. She also talks about how men sometimes come to her not to sleep with her but to just talk and be heard. They look at her as a therapist of sorts and ask advice about married life. The last chapter includes excerpts from one of her interviews. She claims that after she released her short film, it was labelled as "a sex worker's movie" and all critiques looked at it only from that perspective instead of as a piece of art. She says it felt restrictive to have her entire identity reduced to just her profession and have her film looked at from such a narrow perspective.

What I liked about the book:

I like that the book is written in an informal, conversational style. The author often uses sarcasm and humour to talk about some of the most horrifying experiences of her life. Malayali society's ideals of the procreative, obedient, demure, and family-oriented woman are ripped to shreds in this book. Unrepentant about her life choices, much to the chagrin of mainstream feminists, the author categorises sex work as one of the many kinds of labour that is needed in a society.

She highlights the domesticity in a sex worker's life as opposed to the life of sin and lust that is often projected in mainstream culture. Mentions of domestic rhythms and familial relationships form the majority of this book, which I suspect is because the author intends to normalise these concepts in the life of a sex worker. Jameela thinks of her profession as a kind of therapy for men who are lonely and often have no one to talk to. Categorizing sex work as one of the many professions, she calls for it to be decriminalised and regulated instead of banning it outright. She states that if strenuous manual labour holds no stigma, sex work should not either. Through the examples of her clients, she highlights how it is always the sex worker who is shamed and beaten up and not the client. The author says she does not mind being called a '*Veshya*' [3] by her critics, as the moral oppositions that make up the structure of elite society matter little to the non-elites. Interestingly, she calls for the decriminalisation and government-mandated regulation of sex work instead of an outright ban, saying that this would just push more women into poverty.

What I also liked was her commentary on class, caste, religion, and politics in Kerala. She lists out instances of caste discrimination, right from when she was just nine and worked as a labourer. During her initial years in the industry, she speaks of the joy and pride she felt whenever her client was an upper-caste man. This joy soon turns into indifference when she realises that such clients look at her as an inferior woman who exists solely for their pleasure. Her views on religion in the last few chapters intrigued me, as she talks about being abandoned by both Hinduism and Islam during some of the worst times of her life. After nearly being molested in a mosque with her daughter, she abandoned religion. She has also highlighted the stark class difference between different kinds of sex workers, depending on how privileged they were when they joined the industry.

While reading the book, I hardly felt that I was reading a book written by a sex worker, an activist, a single mother, or an oppressed woman who has faced difficulties and struggled with patriarchy all her life. It felt as if I were having a conversation with a self-assured and confident woman who also happens to be a sex worker and has suffered problems in life. I like that she has never once reduced her entire personality to just being a sex worker in the book. The book is in the form of many small excerpts in no chronological order. She talks about her family, motherhood, camaraderie with her colleagues, bizarre clients, and the most mundane events of everyday life. She only asks for acceptance, not sympathy. She refuses to victimise herself or apologise for who she is. Perhaps this is why it gained the rage of mainstream feminists: Jameela did not fit their definition of a repentant and self-pitying sex worker. Another reason why this book made the conservative Malayali society uncomfortable is that it affirms that sex is also something that a woman desires.

What I didn't like about the book:

In some chapters, Jameela is particularly harsh on the idea of women giving up femininity and adopting masculine practices. I feel that this might be a result of her internalised misogyny. In many instances, she keeps repeatedly referring to herself as being free and more independent than a housewife. She seems to revel in being 'different' from most women and almost looks down on them. Ironically, this is where she falls victim to what her critics do: poorly disguised misogyny. Instead of criticising the patriarchal system that cuts off all freedom to women, it is unwise to blame the women, which in turn reinforces the same

[3] A Malayalam word for 'Prostitute.'

patriarchy that Jameela was also a victim of. It is hypocritical of her to harshly criticise traditional femininity as well as women who choose to be housewives. This only widens the chasm between her and them, further cementing the barriers put in place by the men who oppress them both.

The author tends to digress and ramble on a lot. The excerpts in the book are not chronological, and they keep shifting between different decades. This makes it difficult to link the events. Jameela introduces a lot of characters in a very short span and then never mentions them again. There is no structure to the plot, and the excerpts are just scattered around. I felt that the book ended abruptly with a very weak conclusion, almost as if she ran out of things to say. Though the language she used was simple, it was not exactly an easy read due to the aforementioned reasons.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, this book provides a distinctive and perceptive viewpoint on a profession which is frequently veiled in shame and secrecy. Jameela offers a compelling and uncensored depiction of the reality of life as a sex worker from her own personal experiences. She critiques conventional standards and exposes crucial issues regarding the relationship between exploitation, power, and sex, as well as social inequality. Even if the book may have certain shortcomings, it nonetheless makes a significant contribution to the current discussion about sex work and the rights of individuals who engage in it. Overall, this is a daring and intriguing autobiography that sheds light on a section of our society that is often misunderstood.

The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the publisher.