



# Negotiating the Masculinities: Reading the Marginal Worlds in Nalini Jameela's *Romantic Encounters of a Sex Worker*

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**Abstract**— This paper explores the constellation of masculinities portrayed in the memoirs of Nalini Jameela, with a particular focus on her work *Ente Aanungal*, translated into English as *Romantic Encounters of a Sex Worker* (2018). Her negotiation with the complex landscape of masculinities is analysed to understand how life writing as a genre has the potential to present a counter-public discourse that enables the subaltern worlds to assert their voices. Her memoirs also disrupt the hegemonic constructions of gender, sexuality and morality, although there are strategic compromises with the established patterns during many instances. By portraying her experiences with a wide range of masculinities, her narrative brings out the fluid and often contradictory masculinities at play, which are often missed from the regular analysis of mainstream Kerala society. Her autobiographical accounts thus present an alternative perspective on masculinity studies in the context of Kerala. The paper tries to understand how different masculinities are performed and how they are negotiated and resisted within the transactional sexual economies. Her ethnographic-like exploration of her relationships helps us to understand the dualities embedded in Kerala society from a fresh perspective, which can present a cogent critique of the social hierarchies and the moral geographies of this region.



**Keywords**— Masculinities, Kerala Studies, Life Writing, Sex Work, Gender Studies

## INTRODUCTION

The genre of autobiography and life writing has been the preserve of the elites shaped by the hegemonic consciousness of their time. However, as in any other genre, it has the subversive potential to challenge the hegemony. In fact for the subaltern, the literary genre of life writing offers immense opportunity to stamp his/her story as part of the public discourse and history. Unlike other genres, it does not require the training and the cultivated finesse to pass the barrier of classical notions of literariness to enter the highly selective public domain of literary works.

The genre of life writing and autobiography has developed adequate techniques in its repertoire to emerge as a flexible genre. In this genre, subaltern lives can be encoded to challenge the normality and stability of any contemporary perceptions.

It is equally applicable to the territory of Kerala, where autobiographies and life writings have been active agents in the making of consciousness of modern Kerala. It was through autobiographies and biographies about the public personalities that the history of Kerala came to be internalized by Keralites. As Udaya Kumar notes in his work *Writing the First*

*Person: Literature, History, and Autobiography in Modern Kerala* (2017), those Life writings were more or less an amalgamation of macro-narrative of public history and childhood events. It carried the public history of their times forward and documented it forever as it was these titans of Modern Kerala history whose critical interventions shaped the public consciousness of a Modern Malayali. However, once the location of the author starts displacing from the hegemonic centre, the level of subjectivity and the not so 'public' life experiences, starts increasing and life writing practically becomes a project to carve a new space in the public domain, articulating the unspoken realities in the life of Malayali. As we move further towards the margins, this effect and usefulness of the genre of life writing become highly prominent.

### Sex Work and the Reframing of the Agency

In this context, the life writings of Nalini Jameela were path-breaking with the effect of speaking the 'unspeakable' and forcing into the public domain the reality that remained out of the public discourses in Kerala. Her first Life writing, *Autobiography of a Sex Worker (Oru Laingikatozhilaliyute Atmakatha)* (2011), created a huge uproar in the public discourse in Kerala over sexuality and the institution of Sex Work. Sex workers, as a special category of labour, asserted their space, denying the hitherto categories of Prostitution, which carried with it the notions of exploitation and crime. Not only in making the change in the ontological category in labour terms but her complete immersion into the private life and making the public out of it marked the arrival of a new subjectivity and in itself provided a means to write back to the centre. In her first life writing, writing was her profession as well as her subject, which was in the margin. Her no-holds-barred approach brought out the then subterranean domain of 'Veshya' into the public category of 'Sex Work'. Her own subjectivity was placed in the public domain, challenging the intersectional marginalities in terms of gender, class and caste.

As J Devika (2011) notes in her Translator's Foreword to the English Translation of the above work, "Jameela chose to reclaim her autobiography by producing a second version which she felt was satisfactory" (p. 11). She never wanted to place her

work anywhere in the spectrum of fiction, but boldly in the category of life writing. As Devika further notes "it challenged dominant images of decay as the inevitable culmination of a 'sinful life'. Instead, it highlighted the ordinariness of sex work in the lives of the poorest women, its place alongside other strenuous, exploitative and demeaning work — situations quite invisible to Kerala's educated elite" (p. 12). Devika summarizes, "Jameela's autobiography rejects dominant Womanhood not only by relating the hitherto-untold story of the marginalized labouring woman-subject, but also by not seeking to be defined within the home-centred category of Women" (p. 14). Carmel Christy (2019) in her work *Sexuality and Public Space in India: Reading the visible* analyses *Autobiography of a Sex Worker* and finds "her refusal to be the feminine 'other' (p. 101). Carmel Christy also notes, "She seeks her emancipation through her work rather than depending on a male protective figure" (p. 101).

In her second work, *Ente Anungal* (2018) (literal translation - *My Men*), translated to English by Reshma Bharadwaj as *Romantic Encounters of a Sex Worker* (2018), she returns to recollect her life and, as the Malayalam title indicates, presents her memory about the selected men in her life. This work, by the title itself, presents possibilities to study the masculinities of Malayali society, which may not come to the surface in the public domain otherwise. In fact, this work becomes a speaking back to the Centre in two ways. First, the social location of the author and her views present a unique perspective from the margin. Second, the masculinities that interact with women in sex work present another category of masculinities, which are normally not portrayed in other literature- fiction or non-fiction. Thus, the work presents a unique window to have an analytical view of a particular transactional dimension of Malayali masculinity, which is not possible elsewhere.

### Mapping the Masculinities

In the preface itself, Nalini Jameela identifies the hypocrisy of Malayali men in this category and links the same with the geography of Kerala, which permits them to satisfy their 'needs' which they cannot openly satisfy in Kerala. "Those from Northern Kerala usually prefer going to Mangalore.. there is a phrase in Tulu for this- 'Kudappanakkil', which means a

runaway....Men from Kozhikode prefer Mysore. Those from Thrissur leave for Pazhani...Thirunelveli is the preferred location of those from Kottayam and Kanyakumari for Thiruvananthapuram dwellers”(p.10). This observation of the author places the actual geography of Kerala as the territory of hypocrisy and the place outside the Western Ghats as that liminal space of unleashing their desires without restraint. She notes, “Our geography plays an accomplice to the sexual deceit of Malayali men” (p. 10).

A glimpse of this hypocrisy can be seen when she narrates the incident during a bus travel. She felt someone grazing her hand from behind by mistake and she gave a stare at him. The other passengers mistook this for him groping Jameela. When he tried to explain what really happened, the other passengers turned against him, paradoxically not in a mood to side with her. “Our wives would never react against like this. It is doubtful whether she is a good woman!” (p. 12). This has links with the perceived ‘characterlessness’ of a woman travelling alone on a long route at odd hours. Or even asserting a lesson by the public masculinity that “a good wife is one who suffers such groping and pinches in silence” (p. 12). She also points out in her preface the quality demanded by men in a feminine body of being perceived as a respectable wife – “fair-skinned women”. If so, without hesitations, he can rent a room publicly with such a woman in broad daylight. But the darkness of the night obliterates all such differences in skin colour, she notices quirkily. She also notes that in this union of bodies, the craving for a virgin remains another haunting characteristic for these adventurous men. She sarcastically comments that even the moaning of a woman due to the pain of some Sexually Transmitted Diseases will be enjoyed by such men.

However, she says that 25 per cent of such male clientele remain exceptions from the above generalization and the chapters in her new book *Romantic Encounters of a Sex Worker* (2018) are about such men in her life as a sex worker. Even though she takes them as exceptions to the general masculinity dabbling as clientele of sex work, even those masculinities recounted in this book can be studied for the peculiarities they exhibit while performing the role of clientele. But again, it must be

underlined that the masculinities portrayed in this book are those engaging with a sex worker who can exercise her agency. The exploitative conditions that feature in scenarios like human trafficking and modern slavery are absent here and hence, insights from the analysis of the text of Jameela cannot be applied as such to other such categories.

When the text *Ente Aanungal* (2018) was translated from Malayalam to English, two special chapters were excluded. One is an interview with her, and the other is a chapter which has references from her previous life writing. This omitted chapter has significance in terms of presenting an ideal masculinity or, in other words, a hegemonic masculinity represented by a Police Officer, her first client. She says, “A man in a gold-bordered dhoti, with a sandal mark on his forehead” (p. 127). I was an Ezhava, and our community respected Nairs and Nambutiris who carried themselves in this manner. His behaviour towards me that night was very tender. It lasted just one night....This was the person I’d dreamt of, the lover who appeared in my fantasies” (p. 126). But this ideal, hegemonic masculinity, betrays her the very next day. She was thrown into jail just like any other ‘prostitute’. This chapter is crucial in understanding the diffractive analysis she applies to other masculinities. In other words, she suffered badly from the perceived ideal of masculinity, and hence, her reminiscences rarely find such masculinities.

In Chapter Three, titled “The Chittilanjari Story”, she presents a variety of masculinities for deeper study. The most interesting is that of Balan. He is a part-time henchman and supervisor of a wealthy landowner. Though half-goon, he has the malleability to shift to any sort of masculine type. He presents himself in the life of Jameela first as a sort of thug trying to scare the new ‘whore’ out of his neighbourhood. Jameela effectively denoises him using her charm and her command over the consumption of liquor when compared to him. Here, throughout the narrative, Jameela brings up the trope of drinking liquor to intimidate certain types of masculine figures and to tame them by establishing her command over the consumption of liquor. In several episodes of her memory, she suggests her fondness for liquor and her ability to drink it even without diluting, which many of her men found too hard. Thereafter,

Balan is an aspiring client who tries to appease her by running errands for her. Once, with a hard-earned, soiled 5 Rupee note, he becomes her client, and thereafter, he always acts effectively as a manager for her. But his is not the classical pimp masculinity with its authority over the body of a woman in a site of transaction. He makes his intention clear about bringing richer clients to her: "Don't ask for money from me; free for me" (p. 56). His performance of the role of a pimp is to earn the right to be her client for free. However, his aspiration never materialises and thereafter remains just as her manager of sorts. While taking Nalini to a place where an aspiring client, a forest Officer, is sitting, Balan tries to get the Officer's attention to Nalini by saying, "I have ordered your food" (p. 58) that too, as Nalini describes it "in sixteen different ways – he was showing me off" (p. 58). He is remembered as being scared of his wife, Lakshmi, and when she goes to her house, leaving Balan, it is his friend and a client of Nalini who goes to her house and convinces her to come back. This client convinces the wife of Balan and makes her believe that Balan was only an arranger for Nalini for his sake and not a lover of Nalini. Thereafter, Lakshmi, too, behaves affectionately towards Nalini. Nalini concludes her chapter by saying, "Nobody would accuse me of corrupting Balan" (p. 88). Balan aspires to become a symbol of hegemonic masculinity and utterly fails in this endeavour. Instead, he becomes a kind of colluding masculinities in a transactional nature in sex work. It is not exactly complicit masculinity, which Connell identifies as "masculinities constructed in ways that realise the patriarchal dividend, without the tensions or risks of being the frontline troops of patriarchy" (p. 79)

Researcher Max Besbris while studying the gender attitudes in sex work management identifies a type of masculinity termed Revanchist Masculinity to describe the pimp-like characters "to account for this reclamation of rights and specific powers from sex workers, clients, and women more broadly... Revanchist masculinity is, then, a way of doing masculinity by disparaging women's abilities, being suspicious of women's motives when they do work, and claiming certain work-related tasks as inherently masculine" (p. 712). But pimp figures which are recounted in the memoir whether it be 'Cricket Abu'

or Aseez from Chavakkad whom she meets in Vijaya Lodge, cannot quite perform their masculinity to reclaim this lost masculine space as revanchist masculinity. Instead, they become collaborators or even work in subordination to Jameela's authority. Her agency denies the space to the collaborators to assert their authority over her.

In the Third Chapter itself, she sketches her relationships with other clients as well. Another interesting character is Rajan, also known as 'Rajanmuthalali'. Her first encounter with him is taken as an act of irreverence by him. Nalini dared to enter the tea shop adjoining Rajan's grocery shop, through the front door and talk publicly when 'Officer' was there. He openly expresses his disgust, "Those sluts from Thrissur, they are not bothered about anything" (p. 59). These comments of Rajan reached Jameela's ears upon which Jameela decided to fix his scorn. Strangely, Rajan becomes her first client whom Balan arranges. In private space, Rajan transforms into a soft-mannered gentleman with great understanding and respect! He always seeks her consent even for the first act of sex, his transformed self brings into light the flux in masculinity which takes the diverging shapes as per the public-private dichotomy. However, after the first encounter, he remains considerate of Nalini Jameela, at times even at the cost of negligence towards other customers at his shop.

Among male clients, there is a hierarchy in which a steady client stands at the top from the perspective of Nalini Jameela. Sunil, a character from the Chapter "Cricket Abu and the Friendship Group" (p. 105-131) fits this typology. For a sex worker, being a winner means having a steady client with higher standing which can cause other clients to be ignored. As Jameela explains such a client has certain rights as well. "He had a certain right over us...an authority that may be held by a sister-in-law or mother-in-law, but which falls short of the authority held by a husband" (p. 109). Apart from the upfront payment of a relatively higher charge, the rest of the transactions will be on terms decided by this client. As described by Jameela, the personalities of these men seem mild-mannered and of sufficient integrity. They would take the Sex worker to cinema theatres and travel around publicly. This is almost similar to the status of a lover but at a payment.



Another type of Masculinity discussed in her memoir as a sex worker is that of guardian-type goon masculinity. Her work constantly requires such physical protectors as there are chances of rough encounters with some clients. Her recollections regarding Manikka in her previous work detail such masculinities. In *Romantic Encounters of a Sex Worker* (2018), she casually refers to people like Swaraj whom she encounters during her stint in Mangalore whom she could tactically use to push back against the goon Mathews who tried to intimidate her (p.132-146). However, she had to acquire such rowdy masculinity garb on herself to make sure her life goes smoothly wherever she is. As described earlier, her consumption of liquor and bold words to her detractors are masculine strategies she relies upon in this cause. At shops, she will be served first, at arrack shops no one will frown upon her. But this could also be because of her liminal identity as a sex worker which takes her outside the domain of 'normal' femininity, that she remains unquestioned.

Another set of masculinities among the clients is those on the verge of identifying themselves as the lovers or husbands of the sex worker and failing to understand the transactional relationship with her. The anecdotes about Hameed in Mangalore describe such a type of masculinity. They imagine themselves to be in love with the sex worker and behave as if they are husbands, providing for their daily means. In the case of Hameed, even her proclamation of being a lover of 'rowdy' Leila (Jameela was known so in Mangalore) was a means to project his masculinity. Nalini Jameela shares his words "She used to be with Koyakka earlier. Now she is with me! So, see you, *keto*" (p. 145). But being a sex worker, she couldn't afford to have an intimate relationship with a man for a prolonged period. Naturally, she leaves for Thrissur from Mangalore.

Then, another vulnerable masculinity among her clients is represented by Babu, the mirror salesman in Thrissur. His love is often expressed through Masala Dosas which he buys for her. But by the time it reaches her, it would become "stale smelly mish mash" (p. 97). His relationship with her also becomes like this. His body lice become a matter of concern thereafter as it infests both of them. Finally, as his client's relationship with Nalini Jameela is revealed,

his relationship with his 'real' lover is ruined. Out of despair, he blames it all on Jameela. Yet he declines to break ties with Jameela and to escape from this infestation and over-dependence, Jameela slyly goes away from him. However, this episode throws light on another set of masculinities which border on fragility while trying to aspire for dual worlds of pure and impure romantic worlds.

## CONCLUSION

Overall, if we analyze the masculinities represented in her recollections in *Romantic Encounters of a Sex Worker* (2018), the absence of hegemonic masculinities is really conspicuous. It goes in tandem with sociological findings regarding clients of Sex Work that "demand for sexual services coexists with less oppressive and more gender-egalitarian forms of masculinities—flexible, inclusive, or hybrid masculinities that are not entirely dependent upon the negation or exclusion of women (and gay men) in certain leisure spaces" (Brents, et al., 2020, p. 16). In Jameela's work, the masculinities she recounts fit into these flexible types. However, such generalization cannot be applied to the general population in the sex work market as it can operate in coercive environments as well. An empowered individual like Nalini Jameela who can exercise her agency in her work domain may have the wherewithal to manipulate the masculinities around her to navigate her way through. However, she also expresses her desire to leave the job on the streets which is torturous for her too. This can be attributed to the more toxic masculinities she can face on the streets where she is equally vulnerable as any other woman. Instead, she carves a space around her comfortable zones leveraging the masculinities around her and employing her own strategies to survive in this hypocritical Malayali society.

Nonetheless, the life writings of people like Nalini Jameela living in the margins of Kerala's "enlightened" public domains provide a unique opportunity to understand the varieties of masculinities that exist in Kerala society which transact as clients in the not-so-public domain of sex work. Such writings cannot be degraded as trash pulp fiction meant to satisfy their voyeuristic desires and thereby corrupting the public domain, as some

intellectuals criticize. Instead, such life writings from the margins offer immense scope for a social analyst to understand society using new materials and fresh perspectives.

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