



# Dissident Self-Writing in Malayalam: Reading Autobiographical Dissonance as Protest

Anju Mathew

Department of English, VIT, Tamil Nadu, India

Received: 10 Aug 2023; Received in revised form: 12 Sep 2023; Accepted: 23 Sep 2023; Available online: 01 Oct 2023  
©2023 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open access article under the CC BY license  
(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

**Abstract**— My paper attempts to study the autobiographical ‘slips’ of Nalini Jameela’s *Njan Laingikathozhilali* (Trans. *Autobiography of a Sex Worker*) through the conceptual framework of war-machine proposed by Deleuze and Guattari. My paper focuses on the role of colonial modernity in establishing the genre of autobiographical writing in Kerala and reads how Nalini Jameela’s work significantly alters the genre by subverting the dominant notions of ideal woman, cheap woman and autobiographical language. Colonial modernity had a significant role in establishing stabilised characteristics to gender categories and accordingly an ideal woman is supposed to be subservient, family-centric and should function in society-approved manner for the progress of her nuclear family. Nalini Jameela’s work questions these suppositions. I explore the following questions in my paper - What was the impact of colonial modernity in establishing autobiography as a genre in Kerala? By challenging hegemonic modes of ‘telling’, how does the work establish a conflicted political subjectivity? Does Nalini Jameela’s autobiography subvert the established understandings of *veshya*(prostitute)? How does the work de-consecrate the ‘respectability’ notions of angelic domestic woman?



**Keywords**— *Autobiographical Slips, Nalini Jameela, War-Machine, Colonial Modernity, Gender Categories*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Scholars have demonstrated the role of colonial discourse in shaping and establishing modern writing practices such as novels and self-narratives in Kerala. As Udaya Kumar notes, autobiographical writings often blur the categories of agency and passivity - the ‘slips’ in autobiographical writing make it impossible to confine them to any ideology or other essentializing descriptions (2017 p.18). Mobilizing the concept of ‘war-machine’ introduced by Deleuze and Guattari, my paper sketches out the manifold subversions of the autobiography. My paper explores how Nalini Jameela’s autobiography, *Njan Laingikathozhilali* (Trans. *Autobiography of a Sex Worker* by J Devika), experiments with narration and challenges dominant modes of ‘telling’ while establishing a conflicted political subjectivity through the self-narrative. This paper further highlights how the work subverts the hegemonic notions of *veshya*(prostitute) by foregrounding the

ordinariness of sex work in the lives of the poorest women of Kerala.

In Kerala, autobiography as a literary genre developed as a canon in the twentieth century. At its inception, these self-narratives discussed the linkages of one’s identity tied up with the notions of *samudayam* or community. Instead of discussing individual interiorities, early examples of the genre were neither intimately confessional nor deeply introspective (Kumar p.20). The genre modified over time and one’s maturation in the background of rampant political and social changes, one’s contributions to the same, or incredulity of the grand transformations, were recorded. Autobiographies also turned out to be modes that painted a ‘realistic picture’ (although ridden with contradictions) of the so-called respectable ways of living. For e.g., V.T Bhattathiripad’s *Kaneerum Kinavum* ( *MyTears, My Dreams*, 1972) showed the plight of younger Namboothiri men condemned to

bachelorhood, their mundane Vedic training, etc. Kamala Das's *Ente Katha* (Trans. My Story) was one among the first to inaugurate confessional autobiography in Kerala. The work went on to become a controversial best-seller in 1970s.

Nalini Jameela's autobiography, *Njan Laingikathozhilali* (I, A Sex Worker), published in 2005 too was a controversial best-seller that challenged not only established notions of 'Malayali womanhood' but also of dominant modes of 'telling'. The work was labelled "prurient money-spinner" (Mukundan 2005) and became even more controversial when a second version of the autobiography was published after a six months gap (Devika 2006). The book's publicity also focused on its 'unconventional author' – Jameela's deviation from an educated, Savarna person, and her 'indecent' job as a sex worker, all resulted in garnering massive attention in national and international media. Talking about the explosions the book created in Kerala's public sphere, J Devika notes that the work formed some 'inadvertent alliances' between voices from the conservative right and some feminists (2007).

Deploying the concept of 'war-machine' by Deleuze and Guattari, my paper unravels the layered dissents of Nalini Jameela's autobiography. While sketching out models of nomadic writing in their work *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987), Deleuze and Guattari state that such forms of writing "weds a war-machine and lines of flight, abandoning the strata, segmentarities, sedentarity, the State apparatus" (p.59). Elaborating on the concept, Ian Buchanan asserts that the 'war-machine' is an aesthetic concept, a line of deviation inherent in every form that enables it to be transformed – it is in effect, the pure potential for change (Buchanan p.720). My paper focuses on foregrounding the war-machine qualities of the autobiography by exploring three dissident aspects of the work – the unprecedented move of double production of the work, its rejections of dominant notions of 'Womanhood' and its subversion of the self-narrative style.

## II. STRADDLING BETWEEN AGENCY AND PASSIVITY IN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

*Oru Laingika Thozhilayude Atmakatha* (The Autobiography of a Sex Worker) by Nalini Jameela published in June 2005 by DC Books triggered widespread debates in print and visual media. While a number of mainstream feminists condemned the work, activists such as J Devika and A K Jaysree supported it for its defiant rejection of dominant notions of 'Womanhood' (Mokkil, 2020, p.41). The second version of the book was brought out six months later titled *Njan Laingika Thozhilali: Nalini Jameelayude Atmakatha* (Me Sex Worker: The

Autobiography), about which Jameela stated that it was a more reliable account of her life. While the first title suggests that the work is self-narrative of a sex worker, the second one reiterates her subjectivity and visibility by stating "I am a sex worker", thus dignifying the 'condemned' work. It should be noted that Nalini Jameela consistently talks about her job in several visual media and places it on the same pedestal as a teaching job or that of a construction worker. It should be noted that Nalini Jameela does not use the term *Veshya* or prostitute but *Laingikathozhilali* should be understood as a disavowal of hegemonic notions of morality (and the resultant disgust) imprinted on the word *Veshya*. By embracing the word 'thozhil', Jameela claims that she is a labouring subject and that sex work is a profession. This unabashed act of public self-exposure of a sex worker and the 'dignifying' of the work by drawing comparisons with other laborious jobs sent shock waves across Kerala's public sphere. Throughout the work, she addresses people who come to see her as a 'client' thus establishing that her job is a professional activity which should be acknowledged by society.

The first version of the book, which was written with the assistance of her long-time associate I. Gopinath, had the domineering presence of the latter as her 'progressive' supporter. Scholars argued that Jameela's desire to depict her life with all its complexities, and her desire to resist the collapse of her life with a liberal manifesto on sex work (Mokkil p.43) resulted in the second version. Writing a different version of an autobiography because of one's dissatisfaction with the first itself was an unprecedented move. Talking about the second version, Jameela stated that she shared a more 'equal' relationship with the second set of collaborators (Devika, 2007, p.143). Navneetha Mokkil writes:

Her first collaboration placed her in a vulnerable position, and her visibility in the public sphere had multiple risks. The two books are two versions of her life, shaped by different collaborative partnerships – they are interlinked episodic explorations of a fragmented subjectivity of a sex worker (p.45)

As Mokkil notes, the iconoclastic move of a sex worker to take on a status of an author and demand respect for her profession made her dual autobiographies the centre of media attention (p.40). The war-machine quality of the autobiography is to be understood in this context wherein Nalini Jameela produced her autobiography twice by which she contested notions of a 'male-reformer' that directs the work in the 'right' direction. The non-reciprocal relationship between the Reformer Man and the Woman (the object of social reform) in social spheres and in

literature has come to light in recent studies. Talking about Lalithambika Antharjanam's sharp critique of Brahmin Man's community reforms, Devika argues that the former was unconvinced of the need to entrust the Woman to the Reformer-Man's supervision, an idea that was hegemonic within Malayalee Brahmin reformism (Devika, 2013, p. 96). Nalini Jameela's revision of the autobiography is an act of subverting the image of the Malayali Reformer Man itself. Within the autobiography too, Jameela continually criticises narratives of 'let me rescue you' made by both men and women and presents that even the dominant 'progressive' female activists could adorn the roles of the ignorant Reform Man. She writes:

I too have learnt from my experience that the practice of a kind of untouchability which stems from certain prejudices are widely prevalent, that in this, there is little difference between activists and ordinary people. It is women who strut around thinking of themselves as progressive who often behave the worst (p.99).

Thus Jameela untangles and questions the morality notions embedded in dominant feminist narratives.

### III. DE-STEREOTYPING AND EMBRACING THE 'CHEAP WOMAN'

The gender reformulations fostered by colonial governance impacted modern institutions especially modern family. A family bound by compulsory heterosexism that supply productive citizens for the nation-state was seen as a positive entity. Therefore, the Mother and Father figures within the new family were reconfigured within the new dimensions set forth by the modern discourse. This discourse was drawn up from the strong claim that this newly-formed family represented the 'natural foundations' of society (Devika, 2013, p.8).

It should be noted that the discourse of individualism the colonial modern tradition produced, centred around assigning stable characteristics – characteristics that were constructed 'fundamental'-to the categories of Man and Woman. The image of the New Woman – a woman with a modern 'cultured' mind, capable of exercising a non-coercive form of power in performing domestic duties– was consolidated. Devika writes:

In the late nineteenth century, it was specified that the woman reader should focus on reading edifying materials and desist from paying too much attention to the 'prurient tales' that was apparently common in traditional literature. Equally they were to desist from reading too much on such topics such as politics and religion, as the

first women's magazine in Malayalam, *Keraleeya Sugunabodhini* indicated back in 1892 (2013, p.39).

The general consensus was that only such women with cultivated minds would gain recognition in the public domain. The opposite of these characteristics was projected on the Other - a *Chanthapennu*/ 'cheap woman' of modern society. Thus, the history of modern prostitute is evidently linked to the formation of modern woman. This woman in dominant notions was a miserable figure, a 'not-woman', a receptacle of sexuality and nothing more (Devika, 2009, p.29). The sexualised body is completely marginal, hovering in the crevices of society, in spaces of illegality, or in 'rescue shelters' under the reforming eye of the law (p.30). Nalini Jameela's autobiography redefines the 'modern prostitute' and presents numerous questions regarding why only the woman who engages in sex work, not the man participating in it, is condemned by society. She writes:

"How are we offenders? In what sense? If sex is the offence, then there is one more person who should be punished. How come that fellow is never punished? Isn't he an offender too?" (p.87)

Nalini Jameela's work also brings to light the Kerala public sphere's 'overt' fear of 'unbounded' sexuality. Ironically, Jameela's first client was a policeman who behaved gently with her at night and turned her over to the police the next day. When caned and beaten up brutally in the police station, Jameela shouted, "Police to sleep with by night; police to give a thrashing by day!" (p.38). The discourse of respectability mandated that 'mixing' with the abject and the marginalised will be punished or condemned by society and the very people who claimed to be arbiters of the discourse participated in the so-called 'uncivilized act'. In another instance, Jameela mocks the awkward policemen, who were her clients, behaving strangely with her in daylight in the presence of the 'public'. "It was a funny situation. Both the Circle Inspector and the police driver with him were my clients. You should have seen the jam they were in." (p.40). This subtle upsetting of centre-margin power relations continues throughout the work. In another instance, during her first public speech, she brings up the ironic politics of respectability. She says – "There are lawyers who come to us; there are doctors and businessmen. It isn't fair that all of them are considered respectable and we alone are made into criminals" (p.88). "Why should I be ashamed?", "Whose reform is projected onto my body and do I even need it?", and "What gives you the right to rescue me?", are the questions she asks.

It is important to note here that Nalini Jameela's formal education ended at the age of nine when she stopped

going to school and began working in tile factories. Her 'lack' of formal education is never an impediment when it comes to lecturing and reforming the public and the alternative forms of knowledge, she puts forth, are to be acknowledged. Her expertise and pedagogical understanding of the politics of respectability in Kerala's public sphere come from her own lived experience. The role of education in unveiling one's 'authentic' self was a common theme put forward by autobiographies. This meant formal education was generally presented as a life-changing event that made one reflect on oneself, and the society one is part of, and help one realize the 'faults' of living a non-revolutionary life. But Nalini Jameela didn't have to obtain formal education to create an alternative knowledge sphere of her own - formal education was never her aid to rationally argue for her own rights. The general notion that an authoritative figure with 'expertise' has to rescue or teach a prostitute is also upended here. When people approached her saying "...Maitreyan must have taught you to speak; Paulson might have coached you well, they are making you say many things." (p.91), she would insist that they are mere members of the support group. In the complex politics of 'offers to help and 'offers to rescue', the baggage of 'expertise' that is projected on the public-acknowledged rescuer, is laid out and thwarted.

As stated earlier, the role of colonial modern discourses in consecrating the ideal woman within household is well-known. Scholars have noted that the discourse demanded that if a woman were to be recognised as a public figure with substance, she should have fulfilled her duties as an ideal woman within her household - only then she would receive the due recognition. Nalini Jameela's - a sex worker's - active participation in public sphere as an awareness creator of AIDS was rigorously questioned by the public because her life did not align with the 'ideal woman' stereotype. Jameela states that during a convention, formed as a protest against Muttanga police firing on tribals, "a young girl approached the mike and announced loudly that Janu and a sex worker were not to be treated alike", when the former was called to speak (p.50). Jameela accounts the incessant acts of public humiliation faced by the sex workers and calls forth for re-evaluation. But it is important to note that Nalini Jameela started her life as a sex worker when her mother-in-law insisted that the former should pay her Rs.5 per month if the latter is to take up the task of nursing Jameela's child when the former is away (p.8). Jameela's testimonials thus account for the ordinariness of sex work within the poorest section of women and by taking the position of an 'author', she occupies an alternative space that cannot be confined to the binary of 'ideal/cheap' woman. The inclusion of 'domestic' within her everyday life as a sex worker, de-stereotypes the

society-assigned characteristics of a 'cheap woman' - Jameela does not separate her role as a mother from her being as a sex worker.

Through the description of her mother's life after the latter loses her job, Jameela details accounts of humiliation within the household. She writes: "Losing her job had made her lose all control over life. After that, Father, and later, my older brother, made all the decisions" (p.120). Nalini Jameela learns from an early age that to live with dignity in society, one should be financially independent and draws out the hypocrisy of idolising the lives of domestic women within popular discourse. She also describes how her father beat her mother after she lost her value within the family, post job loss. Thus, Jameela depicts the fragile existence of women within households and asks how is being 'angel' of the house safer and better than being a working woman. Between suffering as a jobless woman within her house and having a job, she chooses the latter.

#### IV. AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL DISSONANCE AS PROTEST

As stated earlier, the 'slips' in autobiographical narratives can bring forth the unconscious that contests the claims made by the author. Anderson notes that critics often read autobiographies as a description of a unified self - the scholarship on the genre support the values of an essentialist or Romantic notions of selfhood and according to this view each individual possess a unified, unique selfhood which is also the expression of a universal human nature (Anderson, p.5). But autobiographies does not conform to a unified self but presents a subject-in-process, a term coined by Kristeva, meaning a person's unconscious comes into visibility through autobiographical writings and presents a 'self' different from the authorial claims. This visibility of different varied selves that does not conform to the 'self' claims of the author doesn't make the autobiography less truthful. Anderson writes:

Writing the self involves moments when the self is lost, when cracks appear and unconscious memory floods in... The self is never secure, nor can it form its own narrative. At best there are scenes or moments to return to which 'arrange themselves', and which are 'representative' or enduring. (p.102)

This dissonance of selves is visible in Nalini Jameela's autobiography as well. At many points in the autobiography, Jameela questions the society's treatment of sex workers and states that the job of a sex worker is as respectable as any other work. She attacks the 'holier-than-thou' attitude of her clients to emphasise their double standards. She writes:



Even if you've been with such men a thousand times, there is no change in their attitude: 'I am a respectable individual: you are a whore.' They never arrive at the realisation that they are clients. This insufferable attitude made me leave sex work at one point and become an ordinary housewife. (p.155)

But she seems confused about the 'respectability' of the work herself too. When talking about her daughter's life, Jameela explicitly states that she does not want her to become a sex worker. In another instance she states that kids of a sex worker was 'respectably married off' (p.103). By creating an alternative discourse on sex work, she does not exalt the job but demands the respectability given normally to other 'decent' works. But she also seems at odds with herself at other places. Although the title of the work seems to suggest that this book is an account of life of a sex worker, Nalini Jameela has stated that she has done several jobs other than sex work and describing her only as a sex worker, does not capture her in entirety. These seemingly contrary statements shouldn't be understood as 'untruthful' accounts of a self. If one analyse oneself, to state contradictory opinions is quite common in everyday life. The notions of a unified selfhood is dismantled here by bringing forth non-conforming selves.

The unconventional author's tryst with mainstream language - subverting it and finding a space for her 'I'- too is evident in the autobiography. This unconventionality goes to the extent of confusing the readers with 'strange' sentence and word structures; and this happens because readers are used to a certain mode of language use. For example how do one make sense of this sentence:

There were five of us: Manukka and Kunhappa as body guards and an admirer, Ismail. Unlike today's gang rapes, this was a real celebration. We would all drink and smoke together. I would have sex with Siddique, and lie beside Manukka.(p.43)

It is difficult to figure out what she means by 'unlike today's gang rapes, this was a real celebration.' Should the line be called out for being insensitive to rape survivors? For rape is not a celebration. But that is also a sentence that brings forth the constraints of language which is moulded by hegemonic ideals of morality. Here, an unconventional author breaks down and forms an unconventional language. What Anderson states about Virginia Woolf is relevant here. Jameela uses language to counter the moral rigidities that society upholds and this in turn creates panic to mainstream readers because she strays into the borders of subjecthood when identity is called into question (Anderson p.101). Between the stuttered subject

formation and the 'strange' language the unconventional author uses, a new world of alternative meaning formation and questioning is given birth. Anderson notes that the politicizing of difference is an important aspect of autobiography and factors such as her own discursive subjective position and subjects's own historical location impact the writing (p.104). This insertion of her political self within her writing is impossible without her creating her own language - a language the Kerala public sphere resented.

A teleological narrative of becoming 'self' is absent in Nalini Jameela's work - the writing moves back and forth to bring forth various details of her life and upends the mainstream genre of autobiographical writing as a 'coming of age' work. She starts the work by recalling her childhood and eventual beginning of her life as a sex worker. After the initial chapters that discuss her drifting into many jobs including sex work, chapter five goes to the beginning of her life and this chapter of the autobiography is titled - 'The Girl who Welcomed AKG'. In it she recalls becoming 'leader' of a strike and people showering her with attention. She writes:

When I saw people staring from the roadside, I shouted slogans all the more loudly. Only later did I realise that people were staring because I was beautiful! Though I was only eleven, my body was as mature as a fourteen-year-old's. I was clad in a short knee-length skirt and a half-sleeved blouse. That was to later become Silk Smitha's costume (p.120).

Through her recollection of a childhood incident, Jameela builds a social landscape - a landscape situated in historical time. Placing the child in historical frame and picturing her as an individual allows entry into the social and this allows renewed understanding of adult self too (Anderson, 2001, p. 112). The present can radically change the way past is perceived. The recollection of life as a montage and writing down realisations formed in 'adulthood' is a method followed in many autobiographies. The radical move of a sex worker to self-reflect and question the society through her autobiography makes her writing a non-coercive form of protest.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Anderson, L. (2001). *Autobiography*. Routledge.
- [2] Bhattatirippat, V. T. (2013). *Kanneerum Kinavum: My Tears, My Dreams*. Oxford University Press.
- [3] Buchanan, I. (2018). *A dictionary of critical theory*. Oxford University Press.
- [4] Deleuze, G., & Guattari, F. (1988). *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and schizophrenia*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

- [5] Jameela, N., & Devika, J. (2007). 'Memory, Alive and Clear': An Interview with Nalini Jameela. *Autobiography of a Sex Worker*.
- [6] Jameela, N., & Devika, J. (2007). *Autobiography of a Sex Worker*.
- [7] Devika, J. (2006). Housewife, sex worker and reformer: Controversies over women writing their lives in Kerala. *Economic and Political Weekly*. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4418146>
- [8] Devika, J. (2009). Bodies gone awry: The abjection of sexuality in development discourse in contemporary Kerala. *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, 16(1). <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/097152150801600102>
- [9] Devika, J. (2013). *Womanwriting= Manreading?*. Penguin UK.
- [10] Kumar, Udaya. (2017). *Writing the First Person: Literature, History, and Autobiography in Modern Kerala*. Permanent Black and Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla in Association with Ashoka University.
- [11] Mokkil, Navneetha. 2020. "The Stuttered Process of Subject Formation: A Sex Worker's Experiments with Narration". *(Hi)Stories of Desire. Sexualities and Culture in Modern India*. Indian Institute of Advanced Studies. Cambridge University Press.
- [12] Mukundan, M. (2005). "Sahityattile Nava Asatikal", *Mathrubhoomi Weekly*, 83(37), November 13.