



# The City and the Sex Worker: Reading Caste and Gender in Life Writings

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## The City and the Sex Worker: Reading Caste and Gender in Life Writings

Carmel Christy Kattithara Joseph

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This paper explores the concept of city space as it plays out in the narrative of a sex worker. The paper conceives the idea of “city” as shaped through people’s experiences which points at how it is a lived space rather than being inert or fixed. Lived experience provide depth to the city which reproduce it as a dynamic space where relationships are negotiated, hierarchies are maintained. The life narratives analyzed in this paper is that of Nalini Jameela, a sex worker from Kerala, the southernmost state of India.

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# The City and the Sex Worker: Reading Caste and Gender in Life Writings

Carmel Christy Kattithara Joseph

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## The text

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## Abstract

This paper explores the concept of city space as it plays out in the narrative of a sex worker. The paper conceives the idea of “city” as shaped through people’s experiences which points at how it is a lived space rather than being inert or fixed. Lived experience provide depth to the city which reproduce it as a dynamic space where relationships are negotiated, hierarchies are maintained. The life narratives analyzed in this paper is that of Nalini Jameela, a sex worker from Kerala, the southernmost state of India.

## Keywords:

Sex Work, City, Modernity, Tradition, Caste, Visibility

## La ville et la travailleuse du sexe : Lire la caste et le genre dans les écrits de la vie

## Résumé

Cet article explore le concept d'espace urbain tel qu'il se joue dans le récit d'une travailleuse du sexe. Le document conçoit l'idée de « ville » comme façonnée à travers les expériences des gens, qui montre en quoi il s'agit d'un espace vécu plutôt que d'être inerte ou fixe. L'expérience vécue donne de la profondeur à la ville qui la reproduit comme un espace dynamique où les relations se négocient, les hiérarchies sont maintenues. Les récits de vie analysés dans cet article sont ceux de Nalini Jameela, une travailleuse du sexe du Kerala, l'État le plus au sud de l'Inde.

## Mots-clefs

travail du sexe, ville, modernité, tradition, caste, visibilité

## Sommaire

Introduction	5
Life writing as a genre	7
Sex work: A brief context	8
City: Modernity, Promises, Limits	11
Conclusion	14
References	15

## Introduction

**K**erala, located in the southwest corner of India, is a narrow stretch of land with a vast coastal line. Its peculiar development pattern with high social indicators and low economic growth, has been hailed as the “Kerala Model of Development” in the postcolonial development discourse<sup>1</sup>. The distinction between the city and the village also seems to be thin in Kerala because of better public transport, educational institutions and related facilities compared to other Indian states. However, despite better public health and social indicators, public spaces of Kerala are structured in tandem with the patriarchal norms around gender and sexuality (Christy 2017). For instance, while large numbers of women are educated and are part of the working force, they still face various forms of harassment every day in Kerala’s public places<sup>2</sup>. It is in this public space, that an autobiography of Nalini Jameela, which claims sex work as a profession triggered debates and discussion about sex work, masculinity and patriarchy in Kerala.

Nalini Jameela’s first version of life narratives titled *Oru Lyngikathozhilaliyude Athmakatha* (An Autobiography of a Sex Worker) in Malayalam was transcribed by I.Gopinath, an

ex-Naxalite. It was published in June 2005, but it was disclaimed by Nalini Jameela within a few months. It was an instant hit in the book market and ran into more than four editions. Nalini Jameela came up with another version of her life narrative with a new title *Njan Lyngikathozhilali; Nalini Jameelayude Athmakatha* (Me, Sex Worker; Nalini Jameela’s Autobiography) in the same year. This version was transcribed by her ‘friends’. This book was also translated into English by feminist historian J.Devika in 2007. There have been several academic works on Nalini Jameela’s autobiographies and their significance for gender and sexuality debates in Kerala and India (Christy 2017, Mokkil 2019). This paper focuses on some of the lesser discussed aspects of her autobiography such as the interconnection between caste, sex work and city spaces.

The spike in the number of autobiographies published after the 1990s in India has been read along with the shifts in policy structures, the interpenetration of market and culture, the flourishing of the publishing industry, the visible articulation of identities and other such processes<sup>3</sup>. Minorities, women, sex workers and Dalits, who until the 1990s occupied a minimal presence in public discourse, began to deploy the genre of autobiography to assert their rights and positionalities. However, even in the face of such seemingly encouraging and empowering developments, it is important to note that the text I have chosen for analysis was transcribed by others; they were not written by Nalini Jameela herself. Though they are presented as autobiographies, the very nature of the mediation of another agency makes this form a complex genre of analysis. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (2010) categorise such writings, which are autobiographical in nature yet take on various forms, as ‘life narratives’.

1. This model of attaining social development without obtaining considerable ‘economic development’ as pointed out by eminent economists came under critical scrutiny in the 1990s by various activists’ groups as well as scholars (Kapikkad 2011; Kurien 1995). Kapikkad (2011) observes that the implementation of land reforms, which is considered as the cornerstone of Kerala Model, failed to ensure land for Dalits and Adivasis. Kurien (1995, 71) discusses the fishing community as an ‘outlier’ of the Kerala Model of Development in which case ‘one is confronted with the “normal” relationship of low incomes with the associated poor quality of life’ unlike the central tendency of the model where there is a paradox of low income in contrast to the better social indicators.

2. In the last ten years, there have been a lot of discussions about how women are being harassed in the public spaces in Kerala. An interesting instance is that a Malayalam film titled *22 Female Kottayam* (2012) was promoted with videos which look like real life incidents in which women fight back against sexual harassment in public spaces like buses, parks and roads. The videos are titled ‘Girl in the Bus’, ‘Two Girls and a Woman’ and ‘Aunt in Blue Saree’, which are the kind of titles usually given to porn/ soft-porn videos. It is an interesting mix of politics and market interests directed at consumption that is becoming more visible in these videos.

3. Some of the important autobiographies/biographies in Malayalam during this period include the following: Kallen Pokkudan, *Kandalkkadukalkkidayil Ente Jeevitam* (My Life Amidst Mangrove Forest), ed. Taha Madayi (Kannur: Media Magic, 2002). Another autobiography by Pokkudan appeared later in 2010. See, Kallen Pokkudan, *Ente Jeevitam* (My Life), (Kottayam: DC Books, 2010). Jerina, a Malayali Hijada, published her autobiography titled *Oru Hijadayude Aathmakatha* (The Autobiography of a Hijada) during this period. ‘Dupe’ was the title of the autobiography of Surayya Banu, a junior artist in films.

They explain life writing as ‘a general term that takes a life, one’s own or another’s, as its subject. Such writing can be biographical, novelistic, historical or explicitly self-referential and therefore autobiographical’ (ibid., 4). There have been questions posed about the authenticity of such narratives and about authorship. In spite of these questions, these texts are useful cultural texts that provide entry points to the socio-cultural situation in a specific spatio-temporal moment. Nalini Jameela’s life writings provide a rich repository of the social context of sex work, gender/sexuality relations and spatiality.

*Nalini Jameela’s narrative is always placed in a specific spatiality. They are mostly spaces such as busy streets, bus stations, cinema theatres and so on, which are associated with urban life<sup>4</sup>. These are spaces which are otherwise not easily dwelled upon by ‘women’ in Kerala. Despite higher number of educated and working women, Kerala’s public places are marked by various forms of harassment against women<sup>5</sup>. In contrast to this difficult relationship with the public space for ‘women’, what does Nalini Jameela’s association with these spaces signify for understanding sex work, gender and sexuality in Kerala/India?*

City spaces have always been a significant site for feminist activism in India. They have been sites of organised activities as well as independent protests against sexual violence such as the uprising in December 2012 in Delhi and other cities after the gang rape and subsequent death of a 23-year-old physiotherapist named Nirbhaya. Women’s groups have also organised events such as “Claiming the Night” to claim public spaces for women in many cities such as Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala<sup>6</sup>. These are efforts to make these spaces accessible, relatable, and safe

for women. Visibility in city spaces has been a significant part of women’s protests and feminist activism in India. In this backdrop, how can one read the life narratives of Nalini Jameela, in which urban spaces figure as the site of her work, life and being? How does this narrative present a struggle different from the efforts to make urban spaces accessible for women, as Nalini Jameela discusses a much more complex relationship with these spaces?

To address these questions, the paper dynamically analyses the interrelationship between sex work, caste and gender in city spaces in Nalini Jameela’s narratives. Nalini Jameela introduces the city as a space as differently experienced for a woman sex worker— both as a site of her work as well as torment. Sometimes, in her narrative, this space transforms as her home when she does not have a home to go to. A seemingly public part of the city becomes home to her as well as a place for work. There is a conflation of the private and public spaces of the individual that finds its meaning in the seemingly public place of the city. What does this kind of a narrative of life and the city imply in understanding spaces and subjects? What are its connotations for understanding womanhood as much women’s rights activism has been centered around the claiming of public spaces for women?

While analyzing Nalini’s narratives in its specific socio-cultural context, the paper analyses them not just by looking at what is being written, but also by reading between the lines to see what is not written and why it is not written (Sarkar 2001). To contextualise Nalini Jameela’s narratives, the first section discusses the genre of life writings and the genre’s association with women and caste in India. The second section positions Nalini Jameela’s narratives in the larger debates about sex work and caste in India. The last section foregrounds the interconnection between urban space, sex work and caste wherein I show how “city” is experienced as a space of promise and despair for the marginalised in their struggles towards social justice and aspirations — like in the case of Nalini Jameela.

4. What constitutes a city may differ from region to region. When a cosmopolis could be easily identified as a city, there may be regions which has some aspects of the city, yet retain its distinct regional characteristics.

5. Malayalam writer Zacharia (2010) notes how women’s movement other than for work and education is restrained in public places in Kerala. This has shaped a certain domesticity as the ideal value for womanhood in Kerala.

6. <http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-national/tp-kerala/Claiming-the-‘night-space’/article13980056.ece> accessed on 28 January 2017.



## Life writing as a genre

Life writing has been identified as a genre around which significant political investment was proclaimed by various groups, the feminist movement being one of them. The genre opened up ways of documenting experience as part of the political emergence of the self. Scholars have observed that in Indian society, where, due to the influence of the caste system, collectivity is valorised, rather than individual agency, autobiography has not been a popular genre (Arnold and Blackburn 2004). This seems to have changed since the late 1980s for many historical reasons such as liberalisation policies, which has made access to technology and discourses easier, as well as political assertions increasingly made by diverse groups such as Dalits, lower-castes, women and so on. Studies on Dalit autobiographies have revolved around the contrast these autobiographies offer to a unified subject presupposed in the genre of autobiographies. It has been pointed out how the 'inner' self, which is one of the points of narration in autobiographies, is a rather mitigated presence in Dalit autobiographies (Pandit 2008). For instance, one of the first autobiographies of Dalit women published in the 1980s, by Baby Kamble, uses the plural pronoun 'we' while narrating her life and it is mostly about the struggles of her community in the fight against caste. Her autobiography originally written in Marathi was translated into English as *The Prisons we Broke*. This use of the collective subject in her autobiography has been pointed out as contradicting the generic features of autobiography in which the individual 'I' is identified as the protagonist.

The use of 'we' in Dalit women's autobiographies may be seen as an attempt to forge a collective through the threads of activist experience which has not been possible for most of the stigmatised communities in the past. Thus, 'collectivity' as in this autobiography becomes a site to register the nebulous formation of a community and activism, which is a significant part of claiming the self as

such. 'I' in itself becomes the history of the society in several autobiographies of prominent political leaders, while in the autobiography of Baby Kamble, the self is being constituted through the collective 'we'. In a departure from the hegemonic reading norm, one has to search for the 'I' in this autobiography through a careful reading of the 'we', along with other ways of understanding the politics underlining its use.

The constitution of the 'self' happens in diverse ways, which are also predicated upon the subject's distinct social positions. For instance, autobiographies of important political figures have been used as texts to understand the political history of the region of Kerala. In those autobiographies, the self is an already recognised one – a progressive 'self' – whose struggle/story assumes the position of political history. The fact that this becomes a pattern for most of the male political leaders' autobiographies, such as those of Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and E. M. Sankaran Nampoothiripad (first Chief Minister of Kerala and a prominent Communist leader), is also symptomatic of their social positioning, where they are in a hegemonic position vis-à-vis gender, caste or religion. Kamble's story, on the other hand, centralises the community to narrate the hitherto invisible/unnarrativised histories of the self.

The right to community formation and assertion, which has been denied in the past, becomes a significant rallying point for the claiming of the 'self' in Kamble's narrative. Because of this devaluation of the subjecthood historically, the narrator 'I' does not transcend into the public 'we' automatically in Kamble's case. Instead, Kamble has to use 'we' to assert her being part of the processes of the reconstitution of the community. While the use of 'we' in Kamble's autobiography registers a political assertion, it also indicates a subjugated history through which the self seeks to present itself differently.

Nalini Jameela's life narratives are also marked by this moment of surge in the



number of experiential narratives in India. Like many of these narratives, there is an articulation of the politics of sex workers in Nalini Jameela's books. Rather the political self is being projected in her narratives, which points that it is through this articulation of politics that these books, seek legitimacy in the public realm for an otherwise 'ordinary' life that does not deserve a 'literary' existence. This is articulated by some of the literary figures in their criticism against Nalini Jameela's life narratives. One of the writers remarked that it is a 'prurient money-spinner', not up to a desired literary standard<sup>7</sup>. The often-quoted excerpt which also appeared on the back-cover of the English translation of the second version reads like this:

Sex workers are free in our respects. We don't have to cook for a husband; we don't have to wash his dirty clothes; we don't have to ask for his permission to raise our kids as we deem fit; we don't have to run after a husband claiming rights to his property (Jameela 2005a, 15).

Nalini Jameela's narratives disrupt the notions of the clear binary divisions between private and public through her narrative where the public becomes private at one moment and *vice versa*. Beyond the palpable political assertions that the text offers, there is also a need to look for a nuanced analysis of the incidents and experiences through which Nalini Jameela builds up a politicised sexual self which need not fit into the fixed frames of the political self that is being constituted in and around her life narratives. It is integral to do this exercise also for the fact that Nalini Jameela's life narratives are transcribed by others, but not completely written by her<sup>8</sup>. To do this,

I have contextualised her narratives by placing it in the context of larger debates about sex work and caste which is discussed at length in the next section.

### Sex work: A brief context

Sex work is not criminalised in India on legal terms specifically, but legal Acts such as "The Immoral Trafficking Prevention Act" (1956) and "The Suppression of Immoral Traffic in Women and Girls Act" (1956) practically create an oppressive environment for sex workers. Since the 1990s, sex workers across the country have started organising themselves to fight against the social stigma and police harassment and to assert their rights in a more concerted manner. The Kerala State AIDS Cell, which started safe sex campaigns amongst sex workers after receiving funds from global campaign against HIV/AIDS, has functioned since 1992. In 1997, sex workers published a manifesto from Kolkata. The sex workers of Kerala had formed an all Kerala network by 1999. "Even before this, AIDS prevention works were taken up by the NGOs among sex workers in different towns of Kerala and localised attempts for organization were already there" (Menon, 2002: 63). One such organisation was *Jwalamukhi* ("Woman with the face of fire" — my translation from Malayalam to English) in Thrissur of which Nalini was an active member. A significant share of this activism has happened in city spaces such as Kolkata as well as small towns. I recollect watching Susanna, a Malayalam movie about a middle-class woman sex worker in 2000, with many sex workers coming to the theatre openly in Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala<sup>9</sup>. Thus, sex worker as a new political subjectivity started emerging during the late 1990s (ibid) and one can trace the emergence of Nalini Jameela as an activist to this period<sup>10</sup>. Thus, there was a coming out

7. M.Mukundan, a famous litterateur, made this statement against Nalini Jameela's autobiography which points at the cultural codes expected of the figure of a writer. See, Dasgupta, Uma, Mahadevan. 2007. *Nalini Jameela's Story*, The New Indian Express, 24 February, Thiruvananthapuram, 6.

8. There was a similar life narrative of a sex worker finding space in the magazine *Vāyana* in May 2005. It was written by Sherli Subaida, a sex worker. She narrates how she was cheated into sex work and how she managed to struggle through the difficulties. See,

Subaida, Sherli. 2005. *Kerala Samskarathekurichu Pensariram Parayunna Oradhyayam* (A Woman Body's Account of Kerala Culture), *Vāyana*, Thalasseri.

9. Malayalam is the vernacular language spoken by Keralites.

10. Some scholars and activists have attributed Nalini Jameela's presence in the public space as a result of state-produced discourse on sex work which they identified as a result of globalisation and flow of foreign funds to assist campaigns against AIDS (Ajitha 1998). Though the historical moment in which Nalini Jameela emerges in the public space is facilitated by these

of sorts during this period in the recognised public spaces of cities and small towns. Within this backdrop, Nalini Jameela enters into the cultural sphere of Kerala with her life narratives proclaiming sex work.

Nalini Jameela, who was married thrice and divorced thrice, was living with her daughter, son-in-law and grandchild in Calicut when she published her life writings. The popularity of her writings has ignited debates about sexual morality, literature, womanhood and masculinity in Kerala<sup>11</sup>. The public space of Kerala rarely witnessed open discussion of women's sexuality other than cases of sexual violence till then. It is in such a space that Nalini Jameela's life writings triggered vibrant debates about women's agency and sexuality as opposed to the more visible discourse about violence against women.

Nalini Jameela was born into a lower middle-class lower-caste family in central Kerala<sup>12</sup>. She discusses how she started working from a young age and subsequently gets into sex work to feed her family<sup>13</sup>. As in the above excerpt from her book, Nalini Jameela explains how selling sex requires the skills and tact needed for any profession. The very first instance she narrates about her initiation into sex work is about her meeting with another sex worker under a tree in the city from where she was driven away by her brother. From then on, several places she mentions as sites of her work are public spaces. Her books are

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social processes, I would like to foreground how Nalini Jameela uses this discourse for asserting her rights often not fully subscribing to the state discourse as well.

11. It is through this articulation of politics that Nalini Jameela's books, seek legitimacy in the public realm for an otherwise 'ordinary' life that does not deserve a 'literary' existence. M. Mukundan, a famous litterateur, remarked that Nalini Jameela's book is a 'prurient money-spinner' not up to a desired literary standard. This points at the cultural codes expected of the figure of a writer. See Dasgupta, Uma Mahadevan, (2007), "Nalini Jameela's Story", *The New Indian Express*, 24 February, Thiruvananthapuram, 6.

12. Nalini Jameela was born into an Ezhava family which is categorised as Other Backward Classes (OBC) in the Government classification of castes.

13. Feminist scholars like Pateman (1988) have argued that selling one's body as a commodity raises questions about the sense of self, as sexual activity confirms the experience of womanhood. They have also pointed out how differences in terms of gender, class, caste, race and religion also get figured in the economy of sex work.

about her engagement with sex work and the site of her work is mostly city spaces. Body, which occupies material space, is a central tool in conducting sex work. Some feminist scholars like Pateman (1988) have argued that selling one's body as a commodity raises questions about the sense of self, as sexual activity confirms the experience of womanhood<sup>14</sup>. While some feminist geographers (Nelson and Seager, 2005) have identified "Body" as a space of material, symbolic and political struggle. One can read Nalini Jameela's books as drawing a relationship between the materialistic body and the city space, both of which has been shaped and sustained through differential relations of power such as caste, class, religion and gender. Historically, how does city space and sex work get intertwined more than as a site for organising and coming together for sex workers' rights as a community?

Many Indian cities such as Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata and others have developed organised channels for sex work where they have full-fledged brothels for conducting business<sup>15</sup>. It also needs to be said that most of them operate in exploitative conditions as they face harassment from clients, police and goons.

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14. The debate around sex work has a long history in feminism and otherwise. There is a section of feminists, especially radical feminists like MacKinnon, who consider sex work as the need of a patriarchal society and women are exploited as a part of this, which constitutes the most crystallised form of sexual violence (Barry 1995, 11). Dworkin (1993) argued that sex work objectifies and commodifies human interactions and women's bodies. Some feminist scholars contended that sex work creates a sense of selling the self because of the intrinsic relationship between the body and making sense of the self. Pateman argues that women make sense of their bodies and "femininity" through sex. Thus, sex becomes an integral part in the formation of womanhood itself. Pateman (1988) argues:

...the close connection between sex and the self makes prostitution unacceptable: Sexuality and the body are ...integrally connected to conceptions of femininity and masculinity, and all these are constitutive of our individuality, our sense of self-identity... Womanhood...is confirmed in sexual activity, and when a prostitute contracts out use of her body she is ...selling herself in a very real sense. Women's selves are involved in prostitution in a different manner from the involvement of the self in other occupations (ibid, 207).

15. There has been considerable amount of scholarly literature on sex work in India. See, Kotiswaran (2011), Agrawal (2007), Reddy (2005). Kerala had more informal organisation of sex work spread out in different parts of cities compared to these big cities.

Sex work in India has operated in relation to caste as the caste system successfully perpetuated strict regulation of Brahmin women's sexuality through endogamous marriages and devaluation of Dalit and lower-caste women's sexuality through sexual colonisation of their bodies by upper-caste men (Ambedkar, 1990; Chandrika, 1998)<sup>16</sup>. Sex work has historically been linked to class and other categories of oppression such as race and caste across the globe historically (see, Katsulis, 2008). Body is one of the sites through which caste system has been practiced and sustained in India in the form of taboos around purity, women's sexuality, untouchability, unseeability and so on. Customs such as the Devadasi system in which mostly Dalit and lower-caste women were dedicated to the temple for delivering sexual services to the whole village are instances of structural sexual slavery imposed upon Dalit and lower-caste women<sup>17</sup>. Sex work becomes another site which structurally sustains and exploits Dalit and lower-caste women's bodies<sup>18</sup>. Even today, large numbers of sex workers are Dalit and lower-caste women as has been pointed out<sup>19</sup>. Therefore, the narrative of sex work as a

"choice" is more complicated in the context of India as sex work has an historically organised form of discriminatory aspect attached to it<sup>20</sup>. Thus, coupled with the stigma of sex work, the social background of large numbers of sex workers in the fringes of city spaces becomes another site for their deprived status culturally and materially.

Nalini Jameela is also a lower-caste woman sex worker who works mostly from the streets in city spaces as she describes in her narratives. City spaces such as streets near railway stations, theaters and others which she discusses are busy public spaces in the city. Sex workers like Nalini Jameela access these spaces while, at the same time, their access is informed both by the need to find a client and the constant fear of violence by the police and others. Nalini Jameela mentions that it is the need of the sex worker on the streets to organise for their rights rather than for the sex workers who work from big hotels. Thus, these city spaces are familiar spaces where they work from, but also a space that can turn dangerous any moment. Their relationship with these spaces is something different than liberating and aspirational and yet unavoidable. How can one understand this better through the narrative of a lower-class, lower-caste sex worker's experience of urban spaces?

16. Caste is a structure of social stratification based on which society is divided into four major groups: Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaisya and Sudra. Below these four groups was untouchables who have politically reimagined themselves as Dalits in the postcolonial times. Caste is a graded form of hierarchy that is passed on through birth and it is not possible to interchange castes unlike class.

17. Anuja Agrawal in her book *Chaste Wives and Prostitute Sisters* maps a segment of women from the Bedia community, designated as Scheduled Castes, who are entirely dependent upon sex work as family income. Agrawal (2008, 6) writes that they 'represent their practice as a tradition and undoubtedly the caste system provides a structuring framework for many of their ideologies and practices'. John and Nair note that 'devadasis became the focus of reform initiative launched by colonial authorities as well as indigenous elites, who together undermined both the material as well as the ideological foundations of the system . . . Taken together, it is clear that many of the feminist narratives fail to acknowledge the ways in which wife/non-wife are constituted by the same patriarchal authorities, so that they are structurally yoked in fundamental ways, making the securities and pleasures of one domain unavailable to the other' (John and Nair 1998, 12).

18. It is not to negate the existence of upper-caste women who are also engaged in sex work. Instead, the analysis here looks at a historical pattern which is more or less being sieved into the present. Following this pattern, it is argued that Nalini Jameela becoming the voice of sex workers is not just a historical accident.

19. Dalit is a political term used to refer to the ex-

untouchable castes of India. The term 'Dalit' has evolved as a socio-political category under which ex-untouchable castes tried to organise themselves against the ensuing discrimination prevalent in the Indian society. Dalit women have been asserting their rights across the country by problematising and questioning mainstream feminist practices as well as patriarchy at various levels including Dalit patriarchy, see Rege (1998), Indira (1999).

20. Chandrika (1998) discusses the results of a survey in selected cities by Central Welfare Advisory Board which enumerates the lower-caste women composition of sex workers as 60% – Dalit women – 36% and Women from Backward Class background – 24%. Chandrika argues that the use of the word sex work indicates the appropriation of the capitalist market from a feudal economy. In another context, Katsulis (2008, 2) notes, '... choices should be understood as rational (as opposed to a free choice), according to the distinction made by sex worker activists who acknowledge varying levels of opportunity, agency, and coercion constraining the decision-making ability and autonomy of the social actors involved'.

## City: Modernity, Promises, Limits

Urban spaces have been studied extensively using various frameworks for centuries. There are studies which analyse cities as spaces which are built through centuries of trade, urban planning and exchanges (for instance, see Glover, 2007). Henri Lefebvre (1991) emphasised the significance of social production of space, rather than considering geographies as inert spaces. Recently, there are more studies which analyse urban spaces as lived in and shaped by people in particular ways rather than merely as a built environment. This kind of analysis stems from the understanding that objects and spaces also produce valency that acquire a life of their own— a “sensorium” which gives greater depth and meaning to them more than their static existence (see, Seremetakis, 1994)<sup>21</sup>. In this sense, city spaces, although constituting architecture and immovable objects, acquire meanings and are experienced beyond their physical existence in this sense.

City spaces across the world have become so similar in terms of infrastructure that it becomes difficult to differentiate some parts of a city from another one in the globalised world (see, Koolhaas, 1994; Peck, 2005). For instance, the modern, upmarket streets of Delhi could look similar to parts of the city anywhere else in the world. Yet most the Indian cities have an old town and a new city which narrates multiple stories of modernity and tradition. The transition from the village to the city is not seamless in these cities. The city seems to contain in itself the urban, semi-urban and village characteristics. Such is the case with the city spaces that figure in Nalini Jameela's life narratives — they are modern, but informed by tradition; occasionally liberating, but not always so<sup>22</sup>.

21. Seremetakis (1994) discusses how modernity has prioritised a narrative of instrumentality which ignores the sensorial life of objects and spaces.

22. The first version of Nalini Jameela's autobiography titled *Oru Lyngikathozhilaliyude Athmakatha* (An Autobiography of a Sex Worker) published in June 2005 was transcribed by I.Gopinath, an ex-Naxalite, which Nalini Jameela disclaimed later. It was an instant hit in the book market and ran into more than four editions. But within six months, Nalini Jameela came up with another version of her autobiography with a new title '*Njan Lyngikathozhilali; Nalini Jameelayude Athmakatha* (Me, sex worker; Nalini Jameela's Autobiography). This

Cities and villages have been posited against each other in Gandhian imagination (Nair, 2005)<sup>23</sup>. Even in many popular cultural representations such as films, “city” has been represented as a site of business and modernisation bereft of values while the village represented traditional and cultural values. At the same time, city has also been posited as the aspirational space of growth and hope in the capitalist and developmental narratives. Nair (2005) discusses the development of the city of Bangalore as a metropolis through the shaping of its urban spaces and citizenship. Interestingly, India's complex relationship with modernity and tradition can be very well seen in how regions which transformed into cities retained traditions that are associated with villages. For Dalits, lower-castes and women— for whom tradition and village have been rather oppressive than empowering— considered city spaces as providing them some breathing space.

Political scientist Gopal Guru (2012) draws this connection between space, tradition and modernity in his work on experience. He follows Benedict Anderson's argument that “modernity renders the closed society more egalitarian” (ibid: 81). Guru further shows how Dr. B. R. Ambedkar (1891-1956), champion of social justice for depressed castes, used modern vocabulary of dignity, self-respect, social justice and equality for Dalits to challenge the traditional configuration of power in the form of Brahminism. Ambedkar's engagement with modernity could be taken to reveal how traditional spaces such as villages and *agraharas* were experienced as oppressive for Dalits and women compared to modern spaces such as cities<sup>24</sup>.

This was indeed different from how a capitalist market created and reproduced city spaces. In other words, these marginalised groups were not always the direct beneficiaries

version was transcribed by her ‘friends’. This book also has been translated into English by feminist historian J.Devika in 2007.

23. Gandhi advocated that India's development lies in making its villages self-sufficient (*gram swaraj*) by holding onto its traditional values.

24. *Agrahara* is the Brahmin quarter of the village or town in India. They are inaccessible to Dalits and lower-castes for the strict ritualistic notions around purity as observed by Brahmins.



of the capitalist production in cities, yet the peripheries and the spaces they offered often provided them with an anonymity which was a release from their otherwise oppressed lives. In some sense, even if they were not the direct benefactors of the capitalist market economy operating in cities, it indeed provided them with a space to escape forms of oppression to which they have been traditionally subjected.

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These diverse ways of experiencing the city by different people makes it important to understand a city space beyond its economic and infrastructural organisation. More studies are coming up which attempt to analyse cities in terms of people's emotional responses to places rather than just in terms of infrastructural development (Speake, 2007). These kinds of studies have the potential to analyse cities not just as inert spaces but as spaces experienced and dynamically lived in by people. Thus, city spaces become the site of aspirations, affects, negotiation and so on that acquire a life of their own. This is significant to understand the nuanced ways in which these spaces act as sites of empowerment, marginalisation and negotiation which a macro narrative may not capture.

Nalini Jameela's life narratives identify city spaces as sites of her work, as a valued part of her life, and also as a place that frequently turns unsafe; it is only through a fine balance of negotiation that she seems to engage with city spaces<sup>25</sup>. Nalini Jameela's narration of

her initiation into sex work through a friend begins by watching a movie in the town, after which they get picked up by their client who was a police officer: "We first went to the Ramdas theatre and watched a movie. As we left the theatre, a police jeep picked us up and took us to Ramanilayam" (Jameela, 2007: 20). Similarly, she talks about situations where she had to run for her life from men who tried to attack her in streets:

I was in the railway station at Guruvayur when we noticed that we were being followed by a motorbike. We tried to dodge it many times, but it was still behind us. We could lose them if we entered the town, but if these fellows raised a hue and cry, we would be arrested by the police and the driver of the auto rickshaw would get a severe beating from the police (ibid: 74).

She also mentions about instances when she gets tired of wandering around the streets for clients, but finally decides to stay on in sex work. Thus, city spaces become an active agent in her life through her negotiations with this space as a non-middle class sex worker operating from busy streets. For Nalini Jameela, a city seems accessible during both day and night. But she also has to frequently "invisibilise" her body and presence very often for her safety and "visibilise" herself when required for her to ensure work. For her, accessing these city spaces does not seem difficult, but the question her narrative poses are: Whose presence get recognised in the public space? Why does the presence of a sex worker like Nalini Jameela is not registered in general? What is recognisable presence in the city space and how this has been historically shaped in the Indian context?

Indira (1999) discusses Dalit women's complex engagement with public spaces in contrast to upper-caste women's struggle to access these spaces in India. Dalit women have to toil out in the public realm and have been historically sexually colonised by the upper -caste men while upper-caste women's sexuality was strictly regulated by confining them to private spaces. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar (1990) argues that the caste system was

25. Kotiswaran (2011, 31) notes, 'feminists and activists alike reject the portrayal of sex workers exclusively as victims and are instead invested in "the respectful recognition of subjectivity and personal agency" of even

sex workers working under conditions of debt bondage and indentureship'.

successfully sustained successfully in India by the strict regulation of women's sexuality through endogamous marriages. While the upper-caste women's sexuality was controlled through customs and rituals, Dalit and lower-caste women were exploited for hard labour as well as sexually by upper-caste landlords. This system ensured that the community was always kept in humiliation by not being able to live a dignified life or even be able to form stable families.

In this backdrop, it is interesting to read that Lalithambika Antharjanam (1909-1987), a prominent woman writer in Malayalam, was apprehensive about writing an autobiography earlier in her career. Lalithambika Antharjanam was a *Nampoothiri* (Brahmin caste group in Kerala-- upper in the caste hierarchy) woman writer who also wrote against the yoking practices within her community. Her surname *Antharjanam* literally means women who dwell inside. It is the surname used by Nampoothiri women which also reflect their historical status as confined to the inner spaces of their homes before reforms were enacted in the community. Lalithambika Antharjanam wrote her autobiography in her 70s and she wrote about the reasons for her writing an autobiography later in her life: "I was afraid of looking back at myself. I was shy. I was reluctant. In short, I felt the weakness of an *Antharjanam* who just abandoned her veil and was stepping out into the outside world for the first time" (Antharjanam, 2019; 11)<sup>26</sup>. Nampoothiri women had to wear a veil to cover themselves whenever they stepped out of the house as per the community norms till the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. All these customs were abolished as a result of community reforms and Nampoothiri women abandoned their symbols of patriarchal control such as their veils. Lalithambika uses the material symbols of restrictions on Nampoothiri women to express her reluctance for writing her autobiography in the early stage of her career. In spite of Lalithambika's efforts to fight the yoking practices of her caste as a writer, she found it difficult to disrupt the tradition in her "inner" realm literally and metaphorically when it comes to entering the public realm with her autobiography.

26. My translation of Malayalam to English.

Nalini Jameela's access to city spaces and Lalithambika's reluctance to make herself public in contradiction to the traditional imagination around her as a Brahmin woman are key examples to understanding the parallel relationship these women have with the realms of private and public spaces. As a lower-class, lower-caste sex worker, Nalini Jameela has to find her work in public spaces while Lalithambika, who belonged to a middle-class, Brahmin family, cites the patriarchal protection to which she has been subjected to as the reason for her reluctance to reveal herself in the public space. Lalithambika lived decades ago when the presence of women in public spaces was still not fully accepted. Even today, access to public spaces is not easy for women due to material and cultural restraints. For the same reason, there are programmes such as "Claiming the Night" organised in city spaces by women even now<sup>27</sup>. At the same time, Nalini Jameela's experience with public space points to something deeper than the issue of access to these spaces for women. That is, even if access is granted or negotiated, how do we understand the differential experience of city spaces for women of different class and caste?

Nalini Jameela's narrative reveals a slightly different struggle in which access to city spaces is a reality and yet that does not grant her the recognition which is often considered as an outcome of visibility. Consequently, questions such as what/who is being made visible and how it/she is being made visible become the core to understanding how recognition or the lack of it is conferred. City space and prioritisation of the visible, both of which are offshoots of modernity, promises some ruptures with traditions. However, these ruptures were not powerful enough to open up spaces for the marginalised and make them visible.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, these ruptures are indeed significant for many marginalised to seek other possibilities beyond the repressive shackles of tradition. For the sex worker, access to the city is

27. <http://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/women-across-india-occupy-the-night-streets-to-protest-reported-mass-molestation/story-ZreaXCV9o6Ba4wi4o-FELNN.html> accessed on 26 January 2017

28. Modernity is coeval with the transition to primacy given to the sense of seeing which has been problematised by scholars (see, Seremetakis 1994).

important for her work. As Nalini Jameela's narrative shows, city spaces have also been significant for them to organise themselves as a community. These spaces do provide her with the means of survival and become the site of her activism and life. Yet, her presence in city spaces become mostly an "invisible presence" like that of a sex worker in the city. In this sense, her access to city spaces does not render her with the recognition of *being* in that space. Rather, it is unavoidable for her to be in that space, yet she is not recognised as a legitimate figure to be in that space. Thus, the city, then acts as the space "in-between" space, epitomising her struggle to be recognised as a professional sex worker or simply as a professional worker. This ongoing struggle highlights the manner in which a city space is differently marked in terms of gender, sexuality, class and caste, especially in the case of a sex worker like Nalini Jameela.

## Conclusion

The rupture with tradition which the city offers also emerges from the well-entrenched structures of power that the city manages to retain itself in newer forms. City, in this sense, is intensely experienced as a site of assertion, celebration, struggle for recognition, and so on. It is through such possibilities and constraints that people seem to make sense of cities. As a modern space, there are moments of freedom which the city offers, making it a space for the marginalised people to pitch their aspirations differently than from the binding space of tradition. Yet the city as constituted through people and relations of power among them, reproduces distinctions based on existing structures such as caste and gender in more complex forms, thus meting out differential forms of recognition and respectability for people and spaces. This is not to suggest that this is a cause and effect relationship, but rather one that is constituted through a network of capitalist market economy, dominant relations of power specific to that society and so on. In this sense, the spaces of rupture are also marked by the constraints of power in terms of gender, caste and class. It is indeed not a constant, but an evolving spatial relationship which people develop through the vectors of these categories of power. Thus, historically

the city gets constructed and constituted through people's relations between these categories of power and these spaces.

This becomes all the more relevant as space has been devised in many ways to sustain gender and caste hierarchies in India. While the "private" and "public" spaces were earmarked to control or discipline women, distance between people from different castes was enforced to maintain caste hierarchy in many regions of India historically. Cities also tend to reflect this distinction as indicated by the women's struggle for safe public spaces and Nalini Jameela's invisibility in those same spaces. Spatial organisation of slums in the peripheries of many Indian cities and the presence of large numbers of sex workers, Dalit, lower-caste, and minority people in these slums shows how cities are structured and experienced in multiple ways. Despite this, people thrive in cities under oppression as well as looking for those spaces of ruptures through which the bright yellow street lights seem to shine on them and their lives!



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