



ISSN: 0976-3031

Available Online at <http://www.recentscientific.com>

CODEN: IJRSFP (USA)

*International Journal of Recent Scientific Research*  
Vol. 9, Issue, 1(F), pp. 23277-23279, January, 2018

**International Journal of  
Recent Scientific  
Research**

DOI: 10.24327/IJRSR

## Research Article

### SURVIVAL AGAINST THE SOCIAL TABOOS: NALINI JAMEELA'S JOURNEY

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DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.24327/ijrsr.2018.0901.1435>

#### ARTICLE INFO

##### Article History:

Received 7<sup>th</sup> October, 2017  
Received in revised form 21<sup>st</sup>  
November, 2017  
Accepted 26<sup>th</sup> December, 2017  
Published online 28<sup>th</sup> January, 2018

##### Key Words:

Nalini Jameela, Prostitute, Marginalized,  
Autobiography, Social Taboos.

#### ABSTRACT

The study examines the status of women in the modern India with reference to the stigma of the term 'prostitute' used to denote the protagonist having paid no heed to the trials and tribulations she had undergone and ignoring the fact that she was rather cornered than given a choice. This calls for an analysis of social taboos that have played havoc in the lives of the marginalized women. Nalini Jameela's autobiography translated to English as "The Autobiography of a Sex-worker" in 2007 by J. Devika, is rather the voice of the voiceless against the vice social taboos. Her account of her childhood, the relationship of her mother and father, her unsuccessful marriages, her decision to take up prostitution for survival, her acquaintance with customers clearly ring the bell of societal perception regarding the women who are poorly educated and hardly liberated. This study indirectly highlights the need for women to be well-educated, economically independent, courageous, self-sufficient and able to design their life by choosing the right kinds of choices in every walk of life. In addition to this, it stresses that there is a need to bring in change in the patriarchal structure before we talk about feminist rights or female liberation. The emancipation of women will not be achieved completely until and unless it results in happy females and harmonious society where men and women go hand in hand mutually loving, caring and respecting each other.

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#### INTRODUCTION

A social taboo is a collective perception that a particular kind of behavior is either divine or mean for common folk to undertake. The study examines the status of women in the modern India with reference to the stigma of the term 'prostitute' used to denote the protagonist having paid no heed to the trials and tribulations she had undergone and ignoring the fact that she was rather cornered than given a choice. This calls for an analysis of social taboos that have played havoc in the lives of the marginalized women. Nalini Jameela's autobiography is rather the voice of the voiceless against the vice social taboos. Her account of her childhood, the relationship of her mother and father, her unsuccessful marriages, her decision to take up prostitution for survival, her acquaintance with customers clearly ring the bell of societal perception regarding the women who are poorly educated and hardly liberated. This study indirectly highlights the need for women to be well-educated, economically independent, courageous, self-sufficient and able to design their life by choosing the right kinds of choices in every walk of life. In a nut shell, it insists on women being self-aware.

Feminine consciousness is an awareness that a woman's life is not merely to obey and work according to the norms of the

patriarchal society, but an awareness about her independence and distinct identity. This feminine consciousness to struggle for an independent, dignified life, minus all the indignities, oppression is not a new phenomenon at all but one with a long history. The urge in women to live independently can be traced way back to the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C. as evinced in the Buddhist "Therigatha" (Songs of Nuns):

A woman well set free! How free I am,  
How wonderfully free, from kitchen drudgery

Free from the harsh grip of hunger,  
And from empty cooking pots,  
Free too of that unscrupulous man,  
The weaver of sunshades,  
Calm now, and serene I am...

The overwhelming evidence considered in historical perspective shows that a woman's status and rights were assigned within a patriarchal setup. Simone de Beauvoir's assertion that 'one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman,' encapsulates an argument that a woman's inferior position is not a natural or biological fact but one that is created by society. With reference to subjugation of women, Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986) expresses "Woman herself recognizes

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that the world is masculine on the whole; those who fashioned it, ruled it, and still dominate it today are men. As for her, she does not consider herself responsible for it; it is understood that she is inferior and dependent... Shut up in her flesh, her home, she sees herself as passive..."

In the similar way, the protagonist, Nalini Jameela who significantly possesses an identity of a combination of both Hindu and Muslim traditions, started her childhood as a labour in the clay mines. She has been a battered wife, a caring mother, an entrepreneur and social activist but the role that has been predominantly over-powering is that she was a sex worker-at different stages in her life. Nalini Jameela's known for her exceptionally authentic and down-to-earth panache explains her way of attaining dignity, empowerment and freedom without feeling ashamed of. This is certainly not a cry to be accepted or a platform to convince the society that what she has done are correct or just. It is merely a bold and candid account of her journey towards self-exploration as the book starts with Jameela introducing herself saying "I am Nalini Jameela, a sex worker... I am neither sad nor ashamed about it..."

Born of middle-class parents residing at Amballoor in Ernakulum, Nalini did not have the opportunity to gain primary education and was made to drop school when she was in class three. Owing to the economic crises caused by the loss of her mother's occupation, she was forced to work at the age of nine in a clay mine near her house where she was subjected to sexual harassment numerous times. In her family, the household authority rested in the hands of her father who was an ex-army man and a Communist. Her father's involvement in the Communist Party led her mother lose her job at the spinning mill. As a result, Nalini's mother became penniless and was bound to be at the mercy of her father. It also made her mother lose her confidence in questioning his authority as she was concerned about the well-being of her children. Nalini's observation of this patriarchal oppression on her mother has made her understand the importance of economic independence and self-esteem. She started working at the age of nine and also stood up for herself and her daughter when she lived with her second husband, Koyakka.

At the age of eighteen, Nalini stood by her brother's decision of opting for a love marriage. Her masochistic father threw her out of the house for expressing her view, and ironically, she did not even receive any sustenance from her brother. In his entire life, Nalini's father never spoke for her mother and repeatedly assaulted her out of anger as his authority was unquestionable and not so ironically, was only passed onto her brother. This portrays the women's inferior position in the household particularly and the society largely. Even great thinkers such as Aristotle (384BC-322BC), Schopenhauer (1788-1860) and Machiavelli (1469-1527) take woman's inferiority as axiomatic. Manu, the law-giver of Hindu 'Dharma Shastra' clearly assigns her a subordinate position to man.

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purity and religiosity and a queen in her own realm of the home. She was adored by men due to the fact that:

She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming, she was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult art of family life. She sacrificed herself daily. If there was chicken, she took the leg; if there was a draught she sat in it-in short she was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the mind and wishes of others. Above all- I need not say it- she was pure. Her purity was supposed to be her chief beauty...in those days...every house had its angel.

Further, Nalini expresses how women are manipulated by the patriarchal ideology. For instance, Nalini's father was instigated by his sister-in-law to ill-treat his wife. In addition, when Nalini's brother became the following patriarchal head of the house, his wife began to inspect the actions and movements of Nalini's mother. This is not only a stress factor but an invasion into someone's privacy. Nalini's encounters reveal that patriarchy makes the domestic sphere violent towards women, wherein patriarchal ideology becomes etched within the everyday lives of women.

Having nowhere to go, Nalini married her co-worker unceremoniously and soon after the birth of her children, lost him to cancer. At this juncture, she was bound to take up sex work to provide for her children with no support from her patriarchal and matrimonial families. She started seeing the outside world with its superficial sweetness and intense vulgarity. She recognizes that the patriarchy uses morality as a tool for obscuring oppression and social taboos are propagated to keep the suppressed remain silent. She mocks at the various social taboos and perceptions attached to sex work and brings into light the never-ending attempts to cover up the paradoxes of the patriarchal society that uses tropes of morality. She opines that the men who force women to take up sex work consider themselves to be uncorrupt. She expresses that there's no change in their attitude: "I'm a respectable individual; you are a whore." They feel that it is morally right to demand paid sex and they are fully aware that the woman who does sex work is a 'whore'.

Nalini narrates that those men who entitle themselves to be patriarchal leaders- the harbingers of morality and protectors of women in the family - are the ones who come to her for sexual advice and services. Her encounter with a police officer who was an extremely handsome man completely acknowledges the above-mentioned statement. She was asked to provide him sexual service in the night and the very next day he got her arrested. She sighs that the same group of people that asked for sexual services are the ones who punished her for being illegal and immoral. Nalini's emphasizes the story of her co-worker Sabira who spoke at a seminar in front of legal connoisseurs and Presidents of the *State and National Women's Commission*, regarding the status of sex workers and as a result, she was arrested and tortured by the police and ultimately died of agony the wounds inflicted on her. Nalini also mentions about two other co-workers who committed suicide due to feuds with their families. This calls for the struggle of sex workers' human rights and she has raised her voice multiple times against patriarchal oppression and state negligence against the lives of workers.

This shows that there is a need to bring in change in the patriarchal structure before we talk about feminist rights or female liberation. The emancipation of women will not be achieved completely until and unless it results in happy females and harmonious society where men and women go hand in hand mutually loving, caring and respecting each other. The excellence of Nalini Jameela lies in her determination to face the challenges of life. She does not run away from the problems of life, but she attempts to face them with a better vision without any kind of subterfuge. She does not indulge in any act of cowardice-committing suicide or becoming a neurotic; instead she puts efforts to search for a meaning in their lives, by exploring the possibilities, thereby affirming her existence. She exemplifies the views of Kierkegaard that to exist as an individual is to suffer and to struggle, to develop, to be open to new possibilities.

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### How to cite this article:

Janaki B.2018, Survival Against The Social Taboos: Nalini Jameela's Journey. *Int J Recent Sci Res*. 9(1), pp. 23277-23279. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.24327/ijrsr.2018.0901.1435>

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