

SONIA FALEIRO'S *BEAUTIFUL THING: INSIDE THE SECRET WORLD OF BOMBAY'S DANCE BARS: A WORLD OF PASSIONS, SEX, VIOLENCE, POLICEMEN AND PROSTITUTES*

Jaiwanth Rao
Research Scholar
Osmania University,
Hyderabad, India

Abstract

Sonia Faleiro, an Indian reporter, explains the problems and struggles of bar dancers who have to fight for their daily survival. Their careers are depending on their youth and sexual looks. The book takes the readers to think seriously about the lives of bar dancers. Her works deal with the vulnerable section of the society like sex workers, bar dancers and domestic workers. Sonia's work *Beautiful Thing* about Mumbai's notorious sex industry, it is the book which brings about young women's lives as bar dancers and also prostitutes. Sonia discloses the sexual exploitation in the bars. The paper explains how poverty, gender discrimination and pure desperation will drive innocent people into brothel area.

Key words: Sex, prostitution, freedom, bar dancers

Sonia Faleiro is an Indian reporter and writer. Her first book was *The Girl* considered as an epic. She contributed some anthologies. Her second book *Beautiful Thing: Inside the Secret World of Bombay's Dance Bars* is a work of narrative non-fiction, based on five years of research in Bombay's dance bars. It is a brilliant and unforgettable book. The book is "unbearably bleak at times, but it is saved from doominess by her striking empathy, sensitivity, and sharp ear." (Sanai, 2011: 01) Regarding the work and its painstaking, Peer (2011: 01) says that "Sonia Faleiro's *Beautiful Thing* is a meticulous, moving account of the battle for social mobility and personal freedom in Bombay." Sonia's works deal with the vulnerable section of the society like sex workers, bar dancers and domestic workers. When she had researched the bar workers, she came to know that most of the bar dancer were poor and uneducated young girls. They became victims either sold by a blood relative or raped by somebody. Sonia Faleiro states in her acknowledgement that "while I was present for most of the events described in this book, some dialogues and characters were constructed" (215). She has changed the names of some characters to protect their identity. Bar dancers, sex workers, waitresses and prostitutes are actually ostracized in Indian society. Sonia calls this section of society another community of marginalized dancing girls. Doshi (2011: 01) accurately says that "*Beautiful Thing* is not an easy book to read. It will take you through dark, disturbing places without offering any real solutions for negotiating those territories. In a sense, this is the great limitation of nonfiction, which has

the power to entice you with the truth, but lacks the ability to help you transcend it. Ultimately, you're left with the uncomfortable knowledge that when you close the covers of this book, you have the freedom to carry on with your own life, leaving the characters trapped in the contradictions of theirs."

II

Sonia Faleiro's *Beautiful Thing* is a conscientious story of a bar dancer. She met many bar dancers and conducted over hundreds of interviews with them. She wrote about the world of dance bars. Faleiro meets Leela, a bar dancer in 2005. She is witty, sharp, kind and big hearted with her memories. Through her character, Sonia Faleiro gives a clear picture about the world of bar dances, a world of sex, violence, gangsters, ugly politicians, policemen and prostitutes. Leela is nineteen years old girl and dancing in Night Lovers bar on Mira Road. She occasionally sleeps with customers after trying to extract the largest price in gifts, cash or dinners at restaurants where she couldn't pay her own bill. Leela tells Sonia Faleiro about her past. She was from Meerut, a small town in the north. She was a good student but she was banished in the classroom and playground. Her father, Mahohar used to beat her simple-minded mother, Apsara. He did odd jobs in military cantonment in Meerut. He wanted Leela to act in blue films. When she refused, he sold Leela to the local police station at the age of thirteen. In the police station, she was repeatedly raped and given some money. Her father bought a television set with the money they gave him. He forced her to visit the police station. One night, she escaped from him and got in a train to Bombay. Finally she was caught by a woman whom she believed that she would help her. The lady was the brothel camp who secretly imprisoned orphans and traffic them as sex workers. Leela eventually found her way to the dance floor of Night Lovers. She learnt how to attract the customers by dancing. She likes to show her watchable body parts to customers who are very much pleasing to see and touch her womanhood parts. She proudly stated about her customers "they think I dance for them but really, they dance for me" (13). She became a dancer as well as prostitute. When she was offered more money, she used to sleep with customers. She liked to wear an imported-padded bra and had butterscotch streaks in her long hair. She showed her breasts to customers while dancing. At the same time, she scorned at most of the men who paid to watch her. When they'd toss small denomination rupee notes, she'd mock them: "Is this all you think I'm worth? Why shouldn't I commit suicide? Why shouldn't I stick my head into an oven?" (29) In the beginning, Leela thought that she wanted to work as a dancer, not as a prostitute but her conditions made her as a sex worker. She and her friend Priya had a dream of being house wives and mothers. No pity and no sorrow. They knew that they were sucked by customers and at the end their bodies are not needed to anyone. They dreamt that one day a rich man would come from the town will walk into the bar, fall instantly in love and say: "Your past is your past."

Leela urges the author not to pity her and says that "When you look at my life, don't look at it beside yours. Look at it beside the life of my mother and her mother and my sisters-in-law who have to take permission to walk down the road. If my mother talks to a man who isn't her son, brother or cousin, she will hear the sound of my father's hand across her face, feel fists against her breasts. But you've seen me with men? If I don't want to talk I say, 'Get lost, Oye!' And they do" (27). There are happiness and sad in her heart. The entire bar dancers have pathetic conditions in their lives. Leela explains to Sonia about the life of her friend, Anitha who was raped by her own father and later her own son raped her. Ironically she comforted herself as "at least he didn't hit me. I'm an ugly face in a glamour line and had he damaged me further I would

have been thrown out of the dance bar and forced to become a waiter in a Silent Bar. The humiliation! Merciful God, you saved me” (23).

Ameena was a prostitute. She was so small, so she could have been mistaken for a child. She must have been beautiful once. She had full lips and her thick, black plait coiled all the way down to the floor. But her skin was scaly and covered with a film of sweat and pouches under her eyes were the colour and fullness of ripe plums” (127). Apsara ultimately deserts her husband and starts living with Leela just like a parasite. She ate food, watched T.V. and thoroughly enjoyed her life, which was disliked by Leela. But living with Leela, Apsara became smart enough to start her own business. In the days of crisis when Leela abandoned Apsara, she had opened up a brothel. Soon she was known as Mummy by all. She lost weight, started wearing a crisp polyester sari, toe-rings, a Timex. She used lipstick on her lips and scent on each part of her body. She felt proud of herself now being independent. She said that her life was continued in the shadows of her father, husband, her sons and daughter. When she was with them, nobody asked her whether she had taken meal or not. Nobody cared her. She says: “But then God, in his mercy, gave me another chance. And look around you, I chose to take it. I have my little business, I make a little money. I’m independent. Well, as independent as an old woman can be! But tell me, how many women my age can say that? Tell me? Most of them die dependent” (200).

Some of the prostitutes who get pregnancy were unable to bear the burden of the child. Sonia observed that they kill their own child: But soon they would realize that a child was not a table, it was not a chair. It must be fed, it must be clothed, and it needed toys. “One day the child will go to school. What will happen? I’ll tell you what will happen, because I have seen it with my own eyes. One day I happened to pass a *kachrekadabba* and in it, not even deep inside it, I saw a dead baby...It happened again. Another *kachrekadabba*, another baby.” (130) Sonia eventually proves that poverty make criminals of everyone. The narrative ends up Sharma, in charge of a bar, expresses his long-time experiences about these women who had big dreams. She will sell her daughter, even if she is her only child, her only family, because her mother sold her, and who is her daughter to deserve better?” (211)

Leela too wants a good life with a husband and children. But the situations forced her as a bar dancer. When the dance clubs are closed, Leela had taken the job as a prostitute. She lost a tooth in a beating. She and her friend left to work in Dubai at the urging of a gangster. Sharma says that Leela would perhaps someday presided over a small brother herself and continues to disclose that Leela will “sell her daughter, even if she is her only child, her only family, because her mother sold her, and who is her daughter to deserve better?”

III

In bars the owners of the bars entrap customers also by showing the dancers. It is the place where we can see the illegal activities that are being conducted. There are two types of dancers. One is silent bar dancers who flog hand jobs with the drinks. The other type dancers are with full of sound in body and room. The dancers feel superior to street prostitutes. Dancers sleep with the customers and they get gifts, acting love and more money than prostitutes get. The dancers are exploited some times. Like the prostitute area, Leela’s building was raped or sold by any one of relatives. There every body’s story is similar. The scenes are changed but the climax is same. One of the bar dancers who was raped repeatedly before the age of 10 says: “I decided that if this was going to keep happening to me, then at least I should profit from it, I should eat from it.” (54)

Leela and many other women chose this life as it is a means of easy money. Their social circle is different from common life. They have dancers, sex workers, pimps, hijras. Leela bravely interacts with large number of dancers and prostitutes. She comes across her characters: Apsara (Leela's mother), Leela's friends (Anita, Priya, Ameena), hijras (Barbie, Masti, Maya), pimps (Shetty, Tinkoo, Sharma), Baby (member of NGO), etc, in parties held by them. She also meets their clients, like Raj. *Beautiful Thing* also presents another marginalized and suppressed class of society that is eunuchs, commonly called as hijras. They are oppressed race. Krishna, who belongs to a middle class Hindu family, likes to wear women's clothes. He was named to Masti. His parents send him with hijra community. He is now a 'she. She is a hijra.' (133) Maya, who was a hijra, was entered into this trade. She says "Bad people always found me. My teacher raped me. Then I was raped again." (54) She too eventually turned into a hijra. I was sixteen. It cost me thirty thousand rupees and robbed me of forty days of my life. For forty days, a dai applied hot oil bandages on my wound" (100)

In 2006, Maharashtra government banned the bars on the grounds of wickedness under the Bombay Police (Amendment) Act of 2005. The dance bars were closed on the pretext of obscenity and "having ill effects on society and in particular on safety, public health, crimes traceable to material welfare, disruption of cultural pattern, fostering of prostitution, infiltration of crime, problems of daily life of customers and their dependents and self-abasement apart from the degradation of the women themselves" (Mazzarella, 2010: 2). But its result was brutal. The bar girls, who could make even not more than a thousand rupees a day, ended up on the streets or in the seediest brothels in the city, abused and exploited. There were more than 75000 women employed as dance girls/ waitresses who earn between Rs. 3000-5000 per month, a share of the tips received from customers. More than eighty percent of them live under poverty and unhygienic conditions. They survive in slums, and are illiterate having no other means of earning. This ban forced them to unemployment. They became shelter less. It made their conditions even more badly. It is surprising thing that the ban did not have any effect on dance performances in some of the hotels. The ban mainly violated the bar girls fundamental rights.

No literary work provides solutions to any kind of problems. In the end, after the clubs were closed in Mumbai, Leela and Priya happened to meet Sharma. He had arranged for their flight for Dubai where they would work as bar dancers and sex workers. It could be, therefore, concluded that this world would continue to exist. There would be more Leelas, Priyas and other girls trafficked unless government does not take necessary steps to eradicate these problems.

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