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The Legality of Dancing as a Profession in Sonia Faleiro's *Beautiful Things*

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Abstract

Sonia Faleiro introduces through her non-fictional quasi-anthropological-cum literary writing on Bar Dancers to world of this profession. It portrays intense involvement of love, sex, violence, of customers and gangsters, of police, prostitutes and pimps. All these personalities are in some or the other way involved in this profession though the difference is someone spends money for pleasure and some earn money for their livelihood. What is it that forces these adolescent girls to become bar dancers? Is it poverty, illiteracy, or independence? Is the morality of bar dancing judged objectively, using the same criteria that are applied to other professions too? Or is it simply immoral and highly unethical. It is rather a big question in itself to be asked and judged about. This paper raises these issues in the light of this legal enactment and literary writing on this issue.

Keywords: bar dancers; dancing as a profession; legality; female identity

Dancing is one of the earliest forms of human expression. The term “dance bar” is used in India to refer to bars in which adult entertainment in the form of dances by relatively well-covered women is performed for male patrons in exchange for cash. There are about 2000 bars in Mumbai and nearly a thousand dance bars in which dancing girls entertain the customers. They dance to the new numbers from Bollywood movies and expose their physical endowments either casting away extra clothes or sacrificing some from either top or bottom or both.



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Bar girls and dance bars are allegedly morally corrupting the society, especially, the young generation, and accused of splitting the families, disturbing the marital and personal lives of the people. The allegations put on the bar girls are; that they exploit men, trap them and extract money from them. There are many other issues to be looked into, for example, these bars undermine the self-respect of women. Women should be seen with respect and not lust. Another point of accusation is that such dance bars are one of the factors in making the society morally corrupt and alluring the youth towards a path which is immoral and ignoble.

To a major chunk of population such allegations are acceptable to some extent, but one never tries to think/feel about the factors or the circumstances that force these girls to adopt this profession and leave their homes and families. What is it that forces these adolescent girls to become bar dancers? Is it poverty, illiteracy, or freedom? Who are these girls? Where do they come from? Do they enter this profession out of choice, or are they coerced into becoming bar girls? What kind of lifestyle do they enjoy? Are they respectable?

Sonia Faleiro, an award winning writer of narrative and non-fiction introduces us through her non-fictional quasi-anthropological-cum literary writing on Bar Dancers to a world of these girls. It portrays intense involvement of love, sex, violence, of customers and gangsters, of police, prostitutes and pimps. All these characters are, in some or the other way, involved in this profession though the difference is that some spend money for pleasure and some earn money for their



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livelihood and at this juncture the perception varies. The mindset of people who looks down at such a profession humiliates the girls physically and mentally.

Beautiful Thing is a book that throws the doors open on Mumbai's sex trade. It tells the story about bar dancers and deals with the aftermath of the ban imposed on Bombay's dance bars, by the government. The life of dance bar girls is told through the story of Leela (a bar dancer), her family, her past, her friends from the same profession, her customers, dance bar owners, the underworld, the policemen, the pimps, and the health hazards. The unexpected tragic factors change the life of the protagonist Leela and the others. It is a story which introduces various characters, their past lives, and the circumstances which forced them to adopt the profession of bar dancing. Their upbringing and their life before entering this profession is heart-rending. Here is the story of those people who are betrayed by the very people who are supposed to protect them, raped by parents and police, forsaken by care-givers and the authorities. The factors which forced them to run to Bombay and decide their own destiny were poverty, illiteracy, sold as a mere commodity or being raped by their own relatives. The sad, moving fate to which Leela and the others are pushed to makes the reader think and question the "morality" of society.

Leela and her friend Priya, the bar dancers in *Beautiful Thing* raise all these questions and give answer to all the issues. The shocking facts of their lives are explored, most of them have been raped and forced to opt for this profession. Theirs is a curious kind of emancipation. They dream of being housewives and mothers even though they know no decent man will have them as they



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aren't "good" girls. Despite all the horrors they've been subjected to in their lives, they still yearn for a happy Bollywood ending. They fantasize that one day a "hensum" man from a "bijness family" will walk into the bar; fall instantly in love and say: "Your past is your past!" (Faleiro 39) The innocence of these girls is revealed when they fall in love, often with a customer or a married man. They feel and dream that one day they will live a happy and settled married life.

Leela is similarly "married" to Shetty, her boss in an imaginary world. She too believes that he would marry her one day, thus liberating her from demeaning work she is forced to do. But deep down, even she knows this to be a pipe dream. So when Shetty takes her out of town for a weekend to Lonavla, she gets excited, but realizes later that it is not a promise of deeper commitment but a farewell gift.

The world that emerges is one of the violence and exploitation but also of girt, of dreams, of longing. These girls talk tough, but they dream of finding a man who will give them respect. They spend everything that they earn and many of them also send money to their homes. They enjoy good food, alcohol, and clothes. This kind of lifestyle puts them in more trouble, when the bars were closed and they refused to accept themselves doing some menial jobs or reconcile themselves to doing any other kind of work. For instance, when Sajida, a social worker tries to help Leela by urging her to join mehendi design classes, "Is that she thinks I'm worth?" Leela asks Faleiro. "Or does she presume that because I'm a Barwali I'll take anything thrown my way? *Kaam nahi toh mehendi sahi*, No work, so mehendi? I'm a dancer, not a mehendiwali, not a bawarchi (191).



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When Sonia Faleiro met Leela in 2005, she was 19 and danced in Night Lovers bar on Mira Road. She occasionally sleeps with a customer after trying to extract the largest price in gifts, cash or dinners at restaurants where she couldn't pay her own bill. Faleiro very beautifully draws the portrait of a woman who knows that the world is a cruel place and who believes her job is to fool every man and extract what she can from them before surrendering her only asset: her body. Leela tells Faleiro of her earlier family life in Meerut, a small town in the north. Her father used to beat and rape her mother, and when she hit puberty it was her turn. When he was unable to force her to feature her in his pornographic films he sold her to the local police station where men in uniform repeatedly raped her. Her father bought a television set with the money they gave him. Still Leela continued to go to school, but found herself expatriate in the classroom, the playground, and the ruthless streets of the town. Her father forced her to visit the police station in the evenings. One night, after being forced to eat her own vomit by her father, Leela escaped on a night train to Bombay, and after a brief stint in child brothel she eventually found her way to the dance floor of Night Lovers and that was the beginning of her life as a bar dancer.

When Faleiro once asked Leela how could she manage such a life where she is surrounded by men night after night, who were often drunk and aggressively lustful? She replied:

When you look at my life, don't look at it beside yours. Look at it beside the life of my 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



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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. And if I want a gift or feel like "non-wedge" I just have to tell them and they give me what I want, no questions. They thank me. Every life has its benefits. I make money and money gives me something which my mother never had. *Azaadi*, Freedom, and if I have to dance for men so I can have it, okay then, I will dance for men. (33)

India is a diverse country where people are discriminated on the basis of their class, caste, color, and sex. Indian people conventionally fall into one of the two categories: those who are born into a family which is economically strong and those who are not born into an economically strong family. *Beautiful Thing* is a blend of these two categories. The economically weak people who are always at the fringes of the society, or marginalized are doubly exploited by the elites of the society. Why it is that the marginalized are always exploited and the people who are economically strong have the power and that is how, usually the power structure in the society operates. The poor are always exploited by the elite. Can anyone tell why isn't there any bar dancer belonging to a good family? If dancing is considered a profession why can't all girls dance in the bars? Why the entire bar girls who have opted this profession comes from some small backward village or from a family which is striving hard for the survival? Though the whole society is dominated by the patriarchy, but we also witness how the middle-class women are responsible for the



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subjugation of the lower class women. It is through Leela that we get acquainted with diverse women characters and their roles in the society. On one hand, we see the grand tradition of Indian marriage system, where women are treated as mere slaves and are bound to their husbands for all the necessities of their life whereas, on the other hand we also comes across the hypocrite middle-class wives who just for some exchange of money permit some pimps and their girls to use her rooms as soon as her husband leaves the home for work. We can realize that how these innocent bar dancers are trapped in the false promises of marriage by the middle-class married men. Nevertheless, they are happy with their present lifestyle and don't have any grievances. They are happy with their dreams and the imaginary castles which they have built.

As life offers different shades where we have to change our priorities as per the requirements these bar dancers too had to face another stage of life when in August 2005; the Maharashtra government implemented a ban on dance bars with the passing of the Police (amendment) Bill, 2005. When the Maharashtra Home Minister R. R. Patil announced on 15 August 2005, that all dance bars in the state would be banned, many of them did not understand what was happening and what was he talking about. The law targeted not just the women who danced, but the license holder of the space where the dances were being held. Patil then suggested the women to find work as "home guards" or under the Employment Guarantee Scheme. He insinuated that if they did not find any job it was because they lacked the will to do honest work for standardized pay. The act banned dance performances in eating houses, permit rooms or beer bars-all synonyms for dance bars-that



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were rated three stars or less. In other words, while dancing was banned in dance bars like Night Lovers and Rassbery, it was permitted to continue in high-end luxury hotels. A campaign of vociferous denunciation was initiated, calling them ‘dens of criminals’ and ‘pick up points’ for ‘prostitutes’ that were ‘likely to deprave the public morality’ (176). The announcement led to a predictable media scrum as journalists fell over each other to explore this world of dance bars. Newspapers and TV channels featured first-person accounts of bar girls, spoke to women’s groups and NGOs who were speaking up for these women and against the ban, heard the views of the bar owners who were going to court against the ban and aired the angry rants of the moral brigade who screamed that dance bars were destroying the ‘Indian Family’ (Sharma 1).

The hypocrisy and double standards of the state is revealed as the dance performances in luxury hotels, continued uninterrupted, implying that the poor aren’t entitled to the same fantasies as the rich, or the same moral code. The statute banning dance performances in bars had curiously allowed hotels with three stars or above as well as gymkhanas and clubs to hold such performances to ‘promote culture’ and ‘boost tourism’ (Agnes 1). As the state celebrated the Independence Day, an estimated 75,000 girls, mainly from the lower economic strata, lost their means of livelihood. Soon thereafter, petitions were filed in the Bombay High Court challenging the Government’s move by three different segments — the bar owners associations, the bar girls’ union and social organizations.



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The issue was that the state does not find it offensive to the morals or dignity of women and/or their presence in the place of public entertainment being derogatory, as long as they do not dance. The State's case for prohibiting dance in dance bars is that it is dancing which arouses the physical lust amongst the customers. There is no arousing of lust when women serve the customers liquor or beer in the eating house, but that happens only when the women start dancing. The right to dance has been recognized by the Apex Court as part of the fundamental right of speech and expression. If that be so, it will be open to a citizen to commercially benefit from the exercise of the fundamental right. This could be by a bar owner having dance performances or by bar dancers themselves using their creative talent to carry on an occupation or profession. (Agnes)

While the government succeeded in shutting down dance bars, it failed to rehabilitate the women who earned their livelihood at these bars. Does the state not have an ethical, legal responsibility to rehabilitate these bar dancers? This ban on bar dancing also violates constitutional provision of freedom to pursue any legitimate profession. Classical folk dancing and dancing of girls on popular Bollywood music in cultural functions is very much considered to be part of Indian cultural scenario. However, bar dancing has been perceived as an evil.

What happened to those thousands of girls who were dependent on these dance bars? What did they do? Where did they go? Did they return to their homes and join their families? Will they be accepted by the family members? Did they become sex-workers? The bar girls, who could make a thousand rupees a day, ended up on the streets or in the seediest brothels in the city, abused and



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exploited. Still they fight, to live another day. Being uneducated, illiterate, and unaware of almost everything they enter this profession at their own risk not knowing the aftermath of that life. For instance, these girls are unaware of diseases like HIV aids which results futile, and this is what actually happens to Leela at the end. When she is homeless and devoid of any other work she meets a gangster who offers her employment in a dance bar in Dubai, which was the only option left for these bar dancers. By that time Leela had lost weight, she was thinner and appeared too small and diminished. All these factors hinted that she might have contracted HIV. What worse can happen to a girl who has not seen the world outside the bars, who has only seen the ugly side of the world and can't even imagine about the beautiful side of it. Who was answerable to all these questions which rose due to the announcement of turning down the dance bars? Who would be responsible for pushing them back to the earlier vulnerable life where there was no freedom and still they have to be sex-workers.

Is the morality of bar dancing judged objectively, using the same criteria that are applied to other professions too? Or is it simply immoral and highly unethical. It is rather a big question in itself to be asked and judged about. This paper raises these issues in the light of this legal enactment and literary writing on this issue. One gets the smell, the sound, and the feel of Leela's world, and one is left with the choice of deciding what one feels about it.



The Achievers Journal

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