

Behind the Bars: A Glimpse of The Ugly Reality in *Beautiful Thing*

- G A Ghanshyam

Abstract: John Keats eulogized beauty as truth while William Blake saw a world in a grain of sand and a heaven in a wild flower. Life is beautiful and its presence can startle you at the unlikely places. Beauty is around us, everywhere but the most exquisite beauty is the one that throbs within the human heart. The work is an exquisite piece of journalistic reportage combined perfectly with the art of narration that engrosses, shocks, startles, hurts and also celebrates the spirit of resilience and hope. The present paper makes a modest attempt to analyze Faleiro's work and her concerns in *Beautiful Thing*.

Keywords: Exploitation, Hierarchical structure. Reality, Society, Humiliating transaction, Buoyant optimism, Economically challenged, Nether world, Patriarchal world

*To see a world in a grain of sand, And a Heaven in a wild flower,
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand, And Eternity in an hour.*
- William Blake 'Auguries of Innocence'

The beauty of life reveals itself in the most unexpected of places. One such beauty that defies all conventions and definitions is the beauty of the human heart: the life throbbing heart, full of optimism and hope. Literature offers pleasure to the intellect and to the human soul through its unique representation and expression of beauty. If Keats allures with his enchanting visual imagery in *Eve of St. Agnes* or *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, then the same poet also finds beauty in the season of autumn with its ripe fullness and describes his mood of indolence in exquisite lines. There is a saying in Hindi, "kichud me kamal khilta hai" that loosely translates into 'lotus blooms in mud'. What we ignore and neglect as dirty or unclean may have an inherent beauty within. Sonia Faleiro is a young, talented writer who has captured the elusive beauty hitherto forgotten and lost behind the dark, dingy alleys of Mumbai in her second literary venture; a work of non-fiction entitled *Beautiful Thing: Inside the Secret World of Bombay's Dance Bars* (2010). A fine piece of literary work, the book is written in the form of journalistic reportage with a flavour of a fictional narrative wherein the central character, the protagonist takes the author along with the readers on a journey through her world of emotions, relationships, society, love, betrayal, pain, celebration and hope.

The book depicts the story of the Mumbai dance bar girls, devoid of all colour and pretensions. The life of the girls, their backgrounds and neighbourhood comes alive through Faleiro's excellent narrative that captures attention right from the first line. "Leela told me she was beautiful." (3). Leela is the name of the protagonist or the subject of

Faleiro's research into the lives of the dance bar girls; in fact she is the window to their world. Her confidence and buoyant optimism strikes you from the very first note. Despite the conditions of her life, Leela is an individual bubbling with life and hope.

Reportage literature according to one view is an engagement with reality, with a novelist's eye but with a journalist's discipline. The novelist searches for and engages with the story, the character and the relationship while the journalist maintains a professional distance with the subject. In *Beautiful Thing* there is a unique amalgamation of both that lends a distinctive charm to the narrative. In her choice of genre, Faleiro comments:

Narrative non-fiction is a way for a writer like me to understand and express the disparity in Indian society, and to do it up close, bringing a sense of intimacy to a story that would otherwise have been alien to a regular middle class Indian reader. It combines the rigour of reportage with the elegance of novelistic writing, and the success of *Beautiful Thing* proves that there's interest in and a market for such writing. (Faleiro Interview)

In her narration of Leela's life, Faleiro plays the role of the detached observer. She depicts Leela's past and her family: her mother's apathy and her father's exploitation when he sells her to men. Every minute detail of the exploitation and abuse is narrated with an objective tone. Gruesome details of the extent of abuse that these girls have to face are depicted through Leela's representation of the life of other bar girls. Priya is Leela's friend who belongs to a family that has the tradition of selling one girl to the trade: the unattractive one settles down to marriage and the beautiful one is sold to the highest bidder as the first step towards entering the trade. Telling the story of Priya who was sold to the highest bidder for her first night, Leela remarks with horror, "That night Priya's mother . . . got Priya stoned, on bhang . . . Priya was almost asleep . . . but still her mother went along – to make sure she wouldn't resist . . . Can you believe it? Her mother was in the room when some old man fucked her double-twice" (90). The story of Anita is even more pathetic who has to face the abuse and humiliation at the hands of her father and later her own son. Every story strikes with the extent and intensity of a woman's degradation by her own kith and kin. It is a story of ensuing horror and cruelty. Ameena, another bar girl contracted HIV and is abandoned by her husband who had been living on her income to die; a fate that awaits her baby too. Each story carries an ugly, painful reality that strikes us harshly as we read. This is a life that has always existed in our midst, just beyond our backyards; an ugly truth of our so called civilized life that we all are happy and relieved to ignore and forget. Pushing it at the back, the deepest recesses of our mind, we tend to live our secured, cozy lives in blissful ignorance. The respectable classes of people scorn these low rung levels of our society while the men from these very classes throng the ugly, dingy gullies for a thrill. But when members of the educated and liberal class look down upon them and their own families disown them, exceptions like that of Masti's parents are also there who accept their children as they are without the slightest hesitation or shame. Born as Krishna, he dressed up as girls and soon got himself initiated into the

Hijra community as Masti. His mother simply accepted the change, "The holy books said that man recreated himself through his son. 'Masti is her father ...' (134). Even in this nether world there exists a hierarchical structure and territories; each group zealously guarding their territory like a pack of animals intently preserving their means of survival. It was after all a jungle out there; a wilderness that would gulp you down and swallow the moment you stumbled and fell. The celebration of Gazala's birthday depicts one such tussle of territory between the eunuch, Maya and the uniformed bribe mongering patroller of our civilized society, a constable. Wielding his authority, he had overstepped his territory and the moment he realizes his mistake, he retraces back stealthily. However a moment later everyone forgets the fight and drown themselves in the celebrations, forgetting in the moment the daily humiliating transaction of their physical selves.

In the story about the inmates of infamy, what comes through is the human spirit that throbs and lives on, hopes on for a future of love and security. Leela depends on her relationship with the owner of the dance bar, Purshottam Shetty even when she is fully aware that he is a married man and an eager customer of any new female entrants to his trade. The pretty Priya is in a relationship with Raj, her former customer. No matter how resilient the girls are yet they carry within their inner self, deep, dark scars. Most of the girls are inclined towards self-mutilation. The scars of previous wounds are like medals that they carry with them, displaying them to prove their passion. When Raj tries to have a relationship with another bar girl, Priya tries every trick to get him back, gulping down medicines, cutting her wrists. She proudly displays the scars as, 'The mark of my love!' (65). It was the same with the other women as well, for Leela and also for Barbie, the woman Raj was having a relationship with. Their insecurities revealed, Leela explains the 'whys' and 'hows' of her self-mutilation.

Every time she felt thwarted . . . she would drink . . . And when the euphoria died, she cut herself. She cut deep, she liked bleeding hard . . . Leela cut herself over Shetty because Shetty was married and would never leave his wife. Priya cut herself over Raj for although he was single, he took her love for granted . . . These were the men they hoped to marry . . . (71)

Even when they know that these men would never marry them but use them to make money, for their own sexual gratification and abandon them when they get sick or grow old, yet these girls crave for the elusive security and respectability of marriage. Their relationships and emotions are made a mockery of by the hollow relationships they form which are in lieu of the actual ones; a mere mirage, an illusion of reality but not real. It was only an arrangement of mutual gain whereby the lovers lived like husband and wife but was in truth an arrangement that was purely temporary. Marriage was unattainable and often a failure for the girls yet it was their only "redemption". For the girls as well as Priya and Leela it was their route to a better and a secured life. A man's presence no matter how illusory it might be was better than to be left alone and vulnerable. And so Priya says, "To be held," she said, 'even in the arms of a thief, is something.' All these girls, "... wanted to be rescued through romantic

love, even though they had chosen bar dancing for the independence . . . in particular from men. This was one of the great contradictions of the line and of bar dancers themselves.” (72). Despite the fact that they are being exploited and abused daily, their faith in destiny and love is unshakeable. It's their survival instinct which makes these girls to charter a middle path of pragmatism and romantic illusions; a blend of fact and fantasy that helps them to live their life in the hopeful dreams of the future.

Played as a pawn, the bar girls fail to realize their dreams of a relationship; filial or marital. Yet amongst themselves, they recreate relationships that give them the much needed human link to survive. “Leela's friendship with Priya proved to her that she could love someone and in turn be loved, with no caveat on either side.” (61). Priya, Baby, Ghazala, Masti, and others live, love and survive in the dark alleys of Bombay, challenging the struggles and pain that life puts forth in front of them. Their work sometimes turns their relationships sour and breaks a friendship but it fails to break their spirit. Ridiculed and exploited the girls present a picture of sheer grit and determination. The instinct of self-preservation and survival run strong within these girls whose lives are full of peril and danger. When the ban on the Bombay dance bars is enforced, many of these girls are thrown off the only source of livelihood and a tiny bit of security it had provided to their miserable lives. Some commit suicide; some get murdered at the hands of sadistic customers while others get raped and abused. Priya and her friend Poonam, are picked up by a man and later raped by him and his four friends. After Shetty closes down the bar and breaks off his association with Leela, she joins a gang of girls who do nude dance for customers. When she wants out of the group, she is beaten, abused and raped by their men. Perhaps not an eyebrow would be raised in horror or shock at such gross violation of a person's life and dignity, after all the obvious response would be ‘they asked for it’. One is reminded of Carol's reaction to such a response on Zaitoon's misery in Bapsi Sidhwa's *The Pakistani Bride*.

Women the world over, through the ages, asked to be murdered, raped, exploited, enslaved, to get importunately impregnated, beaten-up, bullied and disinherited. (Sidhwa 226).

One is a work of fiction while the other is a page out of real life, yet the situation and treatment of women is the same. Exploitation of women is not restricted to the illiterate and economically challenged levels of society. Carol, the character from the aforementioned novel is equally objectified and de-humanized as Zaitoon. The bar dancers are objectified and de-humanized every day; in their profession they are nothing more than a commodity to be bought and sold, to be used and discarded. They were not born to the profession and the life that they are living. For them it is a livelihood that destiny and sometimes their own family chose for them. “Beautiful Thing devastatingly shows how a human being can be objectified.” (Sethi). They are the earning machines, milked for their money and when the need arises to be left out alone and dying. Leela's brother cannot take her back home to Meerut because it would give him a bad name. Her brother and the entire family had eaten

off her but when she needs their support; she becomes an obstacle, a symbol of shame. Shetty can exploit the girls to earn the luxuries he enjoys in his life but he cannot offer them any help or support when they are left jobless and begging on the streets.

Used to the life that they have been living since their teens, most of the girls are unable to leave even when an opportunity arises. It is like an addiction that has gone deep into their blood. Leela cannot take the help of Sajida apa who works with an NGO and offers alternative vocations for living. None of them appeal to Leela and she leaves to find the kind of work she is used to. Priya and Leela are still hopeful of a better future. Their romantic dreams of earning and making it big in some 'foren' land is realized through Priya's acquaintance, an agent by the name of Sharma. They are eager to move ahead in life and find it a great opportunity to enter into a contract with him that will offer them good money. Their enthusiasm is infectious, as they are brimming with hope about their trip to Dubai. Sharma confides that "These Dubai trips, they last two years, max three." As soon as the girls enter into a contract and move abroad, they become his property "their chamri belongs to me." (211). It is only for a short duration till the time when they are wanted by the customers; the moment interest dwindles for them they are lost. Sharma further draws up the grim picture of their future when they are old and unable to earn. They would either retire by getting girls into the line and earning off them or if she has a daughter, sell her into business. The author is reluctant to accept Sharma's opinion and counters him by saying that "Leela may want something else." Her emotional response is met with a very practical question by Sharma, "But who will permit Leela what she wants?" (212).

Dancers or 'kothewalis' as they were known earlier can be referred to as the predecessors of the bar dancers. Glamorized by the Bollywood film industry in films like *Pakeeza* or *Umrao Jaan*, the world of the bar dancers or the dirty, narrow lanes of Kamathipura are given an illusory, unreal look. The truth of these women is however far from those portrayed on screen. Their world is hardly the magnificently and richly embellished world of beauty that these onscreen adaptations try to conjure. A contemporary and offbeat movie like *Chandni Bar* does some justice to the reality of their miserable and painful lives, though it seems most unlikely as to its desired effect on the audience. *Chandni Bar*, like Faleiro's book sheds light on the close association of the dance bar business and the underworld. The underworld of Bombay is not strange to such associations; in fact it only highlights the quick sands of a highly commercialized and materialistic, patriarchal world that negates and objectifies women either within the confines of social sanctities or outside through abuse and exploitation. Leela is not a special case, neither is Priya or Ameena, there are millions of them, hidden by the shadows, just beyond the corner: they are there, only we are oblivious of their existence. Yet even in such non-existence, they exist based on sheer grit and determination, braving the odds that life puts forth before them and striving to survive. Life and circumstances might not permit Leela and the other girls another chance to recreate their life anew, to realize

their dreams of love and security but in their hearts, glows the unyielding fire of resilience and optimism. They are beaten, battered and broken, but not in their hopes for the future. Their confidence and the ability to smile, is enviable and so is their lack of fear. The author's apprehensions are met by Leela's buoyant optimism as she says her farewell:

'Look properly,' she insisted, standing still. What am I looking for? I asked. 'Fear,' she said. 'Tell me, do you see it?' I didn't have to think twice. No, I said. I don't think I ever have. (214)

Faleiro is objective in her role as the journalist scrutinizing and observing the life of the Bombay bar girls. Simple flow of her language that is characteristic of Faleiro's work lends the narrative its easy charm. Infused with the distinctive expressions and language of the girls, their crude expressions and frequent use of slang, the vivid descriptions and imagery of the world they reside in and the sequential course of the narrative with flashes into the past of the girls and their present life renders the narrative the feel of a well ordered documentary. Scorned and ridiculed, made to play lewd games to the whims and fancies of the men these abused and exploited girls present an exemplary example of courage and beauty that comes from their heart. Confined to a life behind bars, literal and symbolical, Leela and the other girls transcend the barriers through the force and strength of their life spirit. The ugly reality of our lives that we tend to overlook and ignore however presents the finest examples of beauty that is not merely skin deep but emanates from the warmth of the heart that throbs with life within. Talking of Leela, Faleiro says, "She has incredible wisdom for her years, and at the same time is very funny and vivacious. She's the sort of woman who the moment she enters a room, owns it." (Faleiro Interview). *Kennedy Bridge*, a recent play by Khalid Mohamed is on a similar topic of tawaif culture and its present transformation into the dance bars. The play initiates Mahesh Dattani to applaud Khalid's attempt and the women whom he had endeavoured to represent:

Courageous, desperate women who would otherwise be forgotten because of society's preoccupation with a sanitized history comprising the life and times of only the socially acceptable. (Dattani 74)

Sonia Faleiro also does the same, she records and preserves the beauty of lives, forgotten and obliterated behind veils of social propriety and taboos; she represents the beauty hidden behind the ugliness of life.

References :

- Faleiro, Sonia. *Beautiful Thing: Inside the Secret World of Bombay's Dance Bars*. New Delhi: Hamish Hamilton, 2010.
- Faleiro, Sonia. "Leela was a beautiful thing: Sonia Faleiro" Interview with Anuradha Verma. http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2011-05-2/people/29535427_1_dance-bars-bar-dancers-leela/.1-2.
- Sidhwa, Bapsi. *The Pakistani Bride* (TPB). New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1990.
- Sethi, Anita. Review of *Beautiful Thing*.
- Dattani, Mahesh. "A Bridge across Time" *The Week*. Aug. 28. 2011.

