

Constrained Choices

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STREET CORNER SECRETS: SEX, WORK AND MIGRATION IN THE CITY OF MUMBAI

By Svati P. Shah

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What has sex work got to do with private water tanks or making of hair pins or average rainfall in Marathwada? In *Street Corner Secrets*, Svati P. Shah critically engage with the academic knowledge production which ignores such connections. She debunks the figure of the lonely sex worker lurking timidly among the shadows by the street or who remains confined within brothels. Instead she situates women engaged in sexual commerce firmly amidst thick descriptions of migration, informal labour economy, land speculation, urban housing projects, infrastructure underdevelopment of rural areas, ecological degradation, water scarcity, displacement, caste politics and gendered inequalities in the wage labour market. These also mark the compulsions or constraints surrounding the livelihood choices of women including sex work.

Shah situates the lives and livelihoods of women selling sexual services in the broader, more complicated, and thus more humanizing frames of labour, migration and informal economy. She argues that a 'theory of sexuality must also be a theory of political economy' (p. xi), and demonstrates how the presence of women in certain spatial temporal contexts 'locks' them into certain social types like 'prostitute' to the exclusion of the other ways in which they could self identify like labourers. Instead of the analytical framework which sees prostitution as a state of being from which women are to be rescued, Shah places sexual commerce as a livelihood strategy. She argues that neither identitarianism with its fixed subjective matrix of understanding the subject nor the anti-trafficking framework could effectively capture the layered negotiations entered into by women who opt into sexual commerce as one of the several other forms of economic survival. She questions 'the ways in which sexual commerce and day wage labour are produced as mutually exclusive and even incommensurate categories of analysis in scholarship on prostitution' (p. 3).

This work could be seen as taking further the project 'ethnography of the particular', which by focusing on the nuanced everyday life of the women gives a more complex and layered understanding of subjectivity of women thus engaged (Abu-Lughod

2000; Dewey and Zheng 2013). While revealing the interconnections between structure and agency, the ethnography of the particular has avoided the pitfalls hidden within structural analysis. They have looked into how subtle and explicit forms of protest and agency takes place within structural factors, thus refusing to get caught between the dichotomy of the helpless victims and inhuman agents (Dewey and Zheng 2013, 5). The result is an archival project which gives detailed and sensitive accounts of the lived experiences in 'fleeting moments' (Ahmed 2006, 179). Sara Ahmed qualifies that such fleeting encounters and fluid behaviours can be understood only if we consider 'normal' spaces on streets and in public places as already structured within heterosexual norms, and the disruptions in these spaces become apparent only when we are aware of the 'orientations of bodies' within it (Ahmed 2006, 552). For researchers then it becomes important to understand the performance of normality in orienting spaces, times and subjectivities.

Disparate spaces in the city of Mumbai like the street, *naka*¹ and brothel (Kamathipura) from where women identified as street based sex workers solicit their clients are sites picked out for ethnographic enquiry. Shah demonstrates how urban spaces are discursively produced in relation to one another but as distinct from each other as well. While the red light areas are created as places where public morality and decency do not hold much sway, this in turn produces street or *naka* as public spaces where decency and morality reside under public scrutiny. The method and mode of analysis bring readers to consider ways in which urban spaces both delimit and are configured by gendered conduct, the politics of respectability, and state practices.

Migration, used as an analytical device to bring out the conditions in which women engage in sex work, also shows the fluidity of women while negotiating the urban landscapes. The migratory networks and routes regularly bring economically devastated Dalit, adivasi agricultural communities from

¹ *Naka*—a day wage labour market that forms for a specific period of time in an outdoor space where people solicit contracts for providing manual labour, primarily for construction work (p. 43).

Marathwada, parts of Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh to the precarious occupational conditions of construction labourer in Mumbai. Shah documents the rural urban continuum experienced by the underprivileged women in Indian society quite vividly by mapping the intermeshing of local and global dynamics. In the urban space of Mumbai they constantly have to struggle for potable drinking water, at least one or two working days a month and also face the daily hazard of slum demolition undertaken by metro authorities. The precariousness of their situation keeps them in a perpetual migratory status. What functions as a labour market at certain moments turns to be a soliciting place a couple of hours later.

Through subtle analytical techniques Shah brings out the intricacies of sex work by showing how the expectations of respectability and honour tamper with their ability to create *rishtey*/relationships. In Shah's argument the meaning of *rishtey* expands to include kinship necessitated by circumstances. This is most of the time left unspoken by the women in the book. This ambiguity in disclosure produces complex and internally fluid subjects who move in and out of different positions of visibility. They are not merely subjected by the discourses but also create their own discourses. Neither the public gaze, nor the internal moral gaze instigated by caste affiliations and gendered moral codes is able to frame the subjects. This enables them to keep open a range of possible future scenarios for both individual lives and relationships, for their own sense of self and for their possibilities of relationships to the family and neighbourhood. Their deployment of different layers of visibility and invisibility as survival strategies act also as ploys to gain dignity and acceptability in their family and neighbourhoods. The ways in which caste, class, marginality, decency and ghettoization are working in the urban space of Mumbai is carefully presented throughout the book and that helps contest the static image of Indian women enclosed within the exemplary narrative of marriage and domestication.

Though issues relating to sexuality, sexual commerce, and the cultural and moral codes within which they operate cannot be subsumed under any pan-Indian generalizations, Shah's work does provoke insights in analysing instances elsewhere in the country. For instance, in 1999 the Kerala Government started the poverty eradication programme known as *Kudumbasree*. It aims at women gaining greater empowerment and social capital within the household and public sphere by entering into the income gen-

erating, thrift activities. Women are organized into neighbourhood community groups and all the welfare schemes of the government are channelized to lower income women on the basis of membership in a *Kudumbasree* unit. Initially majority of the income generating activities of the *Kudumbasree* units were waste disposal units known as 'Clean Kerala Business'. All over Kerala, lower caste, working class women organized as *Kudumbasree* units collected waste from the households and cleaned the streets. Many women who did sex work also joined the waste management units in the same urban spaces, where they once used to stand soliciting clients. A job in the *Kudumbasree* gives a uniform (a blue overcoat) and a name tag and a legitimate reason to be on the street without police harassment. In between cleaning, clients would approach them and they could surreptitiously fix time and place and payment for a later rendezvous. The cleaning job sheltered them from the public visibility and scrutiny that invariably follows a sex worker. Failing to be identified as a 'decent' woman is a constant dread not just for the woman concerned, but for the whole social network in which she is embedded. This also meant that women doing sex work have to make themselves invisible using identities other than that which has connections to sexwork.

We are left with a nagging sensation that she renders the next socially acceptable explanation as these migrations being necessitated by economic deprivations, structural inequalities, ecological degradations and other events over which women have no control. This then gets reified into norms as to what narrations are possible for a woman migrant in a regional context. Questions of desire, sexuality, transgressions of familial or caste norms leading to migrations and how these shape their livelihood options in the urban spaces are once again pushed back into the background.

References

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