According to Amrita Pritam, writing life narrative is writer’s personal requirement: “The basic truth is the writer’s own need. This is a continuous process that leads from one reality to another” (178). It was the need to represent and re-present the issues and lives of sex workers which compelled Nalini Jameela to narrate the thorny journey of her life. The Autobiography of a Sex Worker narrates Nalini Jameela’s “life experiences and her observations as a “free” woman.” Nalini Jameela maintains her “dignity” while narrating her life’s trials as a Dalit woman and sex worker. There is no sensational “indecent” account in the life narrative as “may have been expected from the title” (Jacob 2). Nalini Jameela, in her life narrative: “speaks as a sex worker, a description deliberately defined by her profession. She also speaks as a daughter, wife, mother and friend; and as a public figure, with a name and a face, rather than remaining anonymous” (Dasgupta).

The Autobiography of a Sex Worker narrates her life journey from a labourer to sex worker and then to an activist and writer, becoming the voice of downtrodden and oppressed women caught in the vicious life of sex workers. The life narrative attempts to re-present the social, cultural and economic obstacles which force Dalit women to opt for stigmatized ‘sex work’ and also endeavours to re-present and represent the “strength” of Dalit women who despite being “In the midst of harsh and depressing circumstances…never lost courage” (Jacob 2) to struggle for the survival of their family.

The narrative is divided into seven chapters. In Islam, “The number of doors to heaven and hell is also seven” (“7 (Number)”). The Autobiography of a Sex Worker represents seven doors of hell, that is the struggles through which Nalini Jameela passed in her life and ultimately succeeded to create her own heaven, that is her own independent identity. The chapters are numbered not titled and further divided into sections. The sections are not numbered but titled according to the context to underscore that the narrator has used her life narrative to accomplish her motive of creating awareness about the lives of Dalit women as sex workers in the society.

Nalini Jameela’s, life narrative, The Autobiography of a Sex Worker, like the other life narratives of Dalit women discussed in the preceding chapters, also opens with her childhood memories when she started learning the lessons of survival: “…children try
to learn whatever they meet in their environment…” (Illeris). Her “very first recollection” is of her ninety year old grandmother: “…coming up close, on all fours, crawling, because she couldn’t walk. My little brother bawled at her approach” (The Autobiography of a Sex Worker 1). For Nalini Jameela, her reminiscence of her grandmother’s crawling image “contributed to…deep fear of helplessness and victimhood, and her strong need for independence” (Vohra, “Nalini,” 154). Nalini Jameela admits, “The scene is imprinted in my mind: Father’s mother, on all fours, trying to cuddle a screaming infant” (AOS 1). Her description of her grandmother struggling on her four legs matches her own struggle: “I’ve survived – every step in my life has been a grim battle” (Jameela, “Memory,” 169). Nalini Jameela through her grandmother learnt that the life of a Dalit woman is a rigorous struggle for survival.

Besides Nalini Jameela also realized that a Dalit woman is “non-entity” (Jacob 2) when as a child she saw her: “…communist father, most atrocious and patriarchal at home, would often beat his wife…” (Vohra, “Nalini,” 154). Her mother lost her job in the thread mill because her husband “had become active in the Communist Party” (AOS 5). Her mother’s helplessness who wept bitterly without raising her voice against domestic violence gave Nalini Jameela insights “that pride and dignity come only out of having money” (7). The mother/daughter relationship has taken an exclusive meaning as feminists like Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Adrienne Rich, Serafina Bathrick, etc., seek to identify with their mothers in more mutually assertive ways, to discover their mothers’ lives in the attempt to find positive meaning for their own lives: “…women’s primary sense of self as relational, that is, embedded in mutual empathy in…mother/daughter relationships” (Turner 165). Hence, women’s self is related and embedded in the bond shared between mother and daughter.

At the age of twenty-one, she had her photograph taken in which she “wore a traditional sari….When I looked at it, it was a lot like Mother’s photo” (AOS 126). She insists she resembles her mother. She tries to represent herself through her mother by identifying herself with her. However, she never submitted herself to exploitation like her mother. Later on the same bond Nalini Jameela shared with her daughter Zeenat who
tried to find her self in her mother. Nalini Jameela took care to inculcate the conviction to be self-dependent in her daughter:

There’s another thing I’ve impressed on her repeatedly. It’s one thing to love someone. It’s yet another to give in just to please him and actually believe that his wishes are more important. We lose our freedom when we submit like that. There are the dangers that may befall us. When she read the romantic novels serialized in weeklies, I would tell her, ‘My dear, that’s not love you’re reading in there; actually, that tells you how not to love.’ (57)

Nalini Jameela through her struggle in life gained experience of the stark reality of what it means to be a Dalit woman. When Zeenat’s marriage failed, Nalini Jameela who was an emerging voice of sex workers in the public became the source of inspiration for her which “brought about some very positive changes in Zeenat. She became quite fearless, bold enough to face press reporters and take part in public functions (116). With the passage of time Zeenat felt certain that she had her space in the society, which infused in her the confidence to face society.

Nalini Jameela in *The Autobiography of a Sex Worker* condemns the intrigues of patriarchy which crushes womanhood for its survival by creating a rift between/among women: “The *saas-bahu, jethani-devrani, nanad-bhabhi* are traditional enemies….The traditional patriarchal structure thrives on keeping women apart…women…ought to have been squabbling for dominance in the family…” (Gahlot). Women become rivals in the family as it is only in the family women see hope of appreciation and recognition of their worth. Nalini Jameela’s mother became a nonentity in the house, with her husband’s elder brother’s wife, Valyamma making the decisions in their home. Nalini Jameela’s mother lost her job as her husband was a communist. She knew her status as a dependent without a job, therefore, she was unable to free herself and remained in the patriarchal chains whereas Valyamma who was strong and commanding took care of the family property, Nalini Jameela’s father’s elder brother “used to entrust her with selling the tapioca and other crops”, as a result she became “a supreme commander of sorts” (*AOS* 8). Even Nalini Jameela’s father had no guts to question her decision.

Nalini Jameela was “four years old” (1) when her parents admitted her to school but she was allowed to continue studies only up to class three. Valyamma insisted,
“This girl has finished the third class, she needn’t go anymore…she has learned enough to keep paddy-accounts.” In her community, girls’ education was confined only “to know just enough to keep track of how much paddy was sown and harvested.” Her father tried to argue but “the truth was that he had no sense of responsibility. It was Mother who had sent me to school.” Her mother wanted her to study but “none of Mother’s decisions held any weight at home” (2). The pain of removal from the school haunts Nalini Jameela: “A huge sense of loss rises up in my mind when I remember how I used to walk away; there’s still a painful throbbing” (3). Experiencing all this, Nalini Jameela learnt the lesson to be self-reliant. She realized “to be one’s own boss, one had to work. No one had been able to bully us when Mother was working” (5). Nalini Jameela grieves if her mother had been working her life might have been different.

She further observed that her mother “did not have the confidence to stand up for her rights” (8). Valyamma always scolded her mother: “‘Haven’t you bathed the children? Haven’t you cooked the rice? How dare you say that the rice I gave was full of paddy and stones?’” Her mother stood before Valyamma as a “scared and trembling figure.” Observing this, Nalini Jameela became aware that women cannot live in peace until they earn and learn to raise their voice against oppression. Nalini Jameela had seen her mother “choke in this house; and this made me realise that pride and dignity come only out of having money” (7). To help her mother financially, Nalini Jameela decided to work in the tile factory: “I asked a girl I knew who went to work whether I could go with her. She said there was a job in the tile factory where she worked” (8). It pained her mother to see her daughter going to factory as a labourer instead of attending school: “just nine when I started going to work…” (10). Nalini Jameela in The Autobiography of a Sex Worker re-presents and represents the helplessness of a Dalit mother who is unable to send her daughter to school to secure a better future for her. She recalls:

In the evening, I was the last to get out after work. I got one-and-a-half rupees. When everyone bought rice and provisions, I bought some too. I tucked the rice, chilies and coriander into my towel and stepped into the house like a very important person, only to find Mother in anguished tears. Her hope was that I would become someone big through studies. In my mind, I was already a big person. Mother thought that I’d made a huge sacrifice. She would weep, seeing my hands scarred and cut from picking
up the broken tiles. Don’t go to work tomorrow, she would say. But when I went to work the next day, she held her silence. (11)

In India, “existing Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act of 1986, children under 14 are …banned from working in industries deemed ‘hazardous’ such as fireworks, matchstick-making, auto workshops or carpet weaving” (Dewan 539). However, working of the children as labourers was not “…thought of…as child labour…” in her context. Many next door neighbours asked her mother, “‘Though it is her you coddled quite a bit, isn’t it true that she’s the one who’s proving useful?’” Friends and family’s recognition of her as a responsible child gave her consolation. Traditionally, the boys in the family contribute to the income of the family: “…in spite of all the burning in my hands, I’d still feel I was the boss” (AOS 11). Here, it was Nalini Jameela, a girl earning for the family. She had surpassed the boys in her family and the appreciation from the people was a reward for her hardships.

In order to earn more money, she left the tile factory and started working as aayah in her male relative’s house where his sister’s husband Ittamash tried to molest her:

Ittamash’s son came downstairs to tell me that his father wanted a glass of water….I went and got a glass of water…he [Ittamash] crept up from behind me, and hugged me tightly….I could smell danger….He tried to put his hand inside my blouse. I didn’t like that. I freed myself by force, and went downstairs. (13-14)

This experience, again, made her realize her marginalized position in society: “The victimization of woman as a class by discriminatory laws and customs and a collective failure to take sexual violence seriously are historical reality” (Wendy Kaminer qtd. in Vohra, “Nalini,” 160). No one accused the man who tried to molest her but everyone blamed her:

The servants got to know; people began to talk. ‘The girl Ittamash grabbed.’ Everyone said that it was a terrible mistake to have gone alone into Ittamash’s room. All of a sudden, I was at fault. I myself began to feel that I had done something wrong. (14-15)

Nalini Jameela highlights the silent meaning that it is always the girl’s fate to suffer. Nalini Jameela re-presents and represents the sufferings and exploitation of Dalit girls and women who work as domestic workers and are sexually exploited by their
employers: “Women domestic workers experienced poor living conditions and often assumptions of sexual accessibility by employers or male co-workers” (Hoerder 108).

After this humiliating episode Nalini Jameela left the job of aayah and started working in the coal mine where many men tried to be friendly with her. A female who is working outside the house is always the centre of “unwelcome attention” (Jacob 2) from men: “The male-gaze follows women like a shadow” (Arora 1). Some even proposed marriage to her.

Like her mother who suffered much because of a man: her husband, similarly, in Nalini Jameela’s life men brought catastrophe. First it was her father, then her brother, and later the other men she came in contact with. Nalini Jameela developed dislike for her father for beating her mother and not shouldering family responsibilities: “I wasn’t on good terms with Father…” He would never go to work but he “tried to control me, tell me how to spend money, the same way he used to do with Mother. Things began to turn really nasty between us” (AOS 20). Men in the family, like her father, despite being irresponsible and incapable of earning, try to control the women in the family: “…men’s domination of women and men’s aspiration to control women’s lives remain to a greater or lesser extent a reality in human society” (M. Walker 25). Her father was an abusive husband but exerted absolute authority.

The situation worsened when Nalini Jameela supported her brother to marry a woman of his choice. She was rebuked and thrown out of the house by her father. Society wants women to be silent observers and non-interfering. By supporting her brother, Nalini Jameela had broken the rule, and therefore had to pay the price: “It’s not easy for an eighteen-year-old girl to find shelter” (AOS 20). Isolated without support and shelter, Nalini Jameela became the wife of Subrahmanyan without marriage: “A woman leaving home is considered to have committed a socially illegitimate act…” (V. Geetha, Patriarchy 69). This unfortunate incident shows that how a Dalit woman is compelled to make compromises in life. Nalini Jameela accepted her fate. Two children, a boy and a girl were born out of this relationship. There was virulent squabbling by his mother and sister: “Struggling to hold my ground, fighting inch by inch, I was convinced that life is a great struggle: in order to live, one must fight, fight incessantly” (AOS 22). After a few
years, Subrahmanyan was diagnosed with cancer. One day, he mixed poison in his drink and committed suicide leaving behind Nalini Jameela and two children to face the atrocious world.

Nalini Jameela’s mother-in-law demanded five rupees per day from her to support children. It came as a blow to her. This was a large amount: “Those days, an ordinary woman worker earned two-and-a-half rupees a day. If the work was arduous, the pay would go up to four-and-a-half rupees” (23). She was illiterate and when no other option was left, she became a sex worker for her children’s upbringing:

There was nothing else I could have done in those days. There was no possibility of finding a rented house. I had to become part of a Company House in order to survive. Within a year of my husband’s death, it was clear that this couldn’t be. Apart from my brother and father, every man there wanted me. So I didn’t waste much time thinking it over….A sex worker is not born as a sex worker’s daughter. These are women who come into the trade after having failed their higher secondary school exams, after failing to get a job, or after being kicked out by husband irked at having got only thirty thousand, instead of the fifty thousand promised, as dowry. There are school teachers among us. (146-157)

The most frequently reported reasons for Indian women entering into sex work are financial in nature:

…acute poverty or crises due to the death or poor health of a husband, parents or in-laws; a lack of employment opportunities, the need to pay for a daughter’s dowry; having outstanding debts; or divorce or separation from a husband or partner….Chronic poverty within the home – often due to wages from daily labour being insufficient to meet family’s needs – has also been cited as a common reason for entering into sex work. (McClarty et al. 152)

Nalini Jameela’s entry into sex trade highlights the compulsions under which Dalit women are compelled to choose the profession of sex worker. Nalini Jameela was compelled to make this sacrifice for the survival of her children. She left her children in the care of her mother-in-law and never turned back to see them so that her children did not face social exclusion:

In order to save their children from stigma, the majority…send their children to be cared for by family members….The girls experience various forms of psychological abuse from clients, pimps and police, and often
sexual abuse. Boys also experience similar treatment and often become involved in anti-social activities. (Haque 297)

When her family came to know about her working as a sex worker, they severed all connections with her. Her brother also used to visit sex workers: “he was Rosa chechi’s client” (AOS 24) but had different rules for his sister who was working as a sex worker in order to provide for her children: “A woman for existence has to revolt against man-made codes of behaviour” (Vohra, “Nalini,” 152). He never allowed their mother to meet her. It is a pity that the seeds of discrimination are sown by the blood relations themselves. In a patriarchal set-up, the family itself becomes a source of oppression in time of adversity.

Nalini Jameela’s life narrative “throws a bold challenge to the society’s double standards—harsh on prostitutes and soft on the customers” (Ravi). She re-presents and represents the trials and tribulations of the sex workers who are looked upon as bodies to be used and exploited. Her first client was a high ranking police officer, with all the markers of an upper caste man: “A man in a gold-bordered dhoti, with a sandal mark on his forehead” (AOS 25). He slept with her at night and got her arrested and beaten the next day. At the police station, she was beaten on the soles of her feet. In her anger and distress, she shouted, “‘Police to sleep with by night; police to give a thrashing by day!’” An Assistant Station Inspector mocked her: “‘So what did you think? That if you slept with saar at night, he wouldn’t tell us?’” (26). However, a sub-inspector came to her rescue offering: “Come with me for the night, and you will be let off” which she had to accept to save herself. This incident gives rise to many unanswered questions- why was not the guest house raided when they were there? Why did the police wait until they had left the premises? Why did the police arrest Nalini Jameela and let the police officer go free? Nalini Jameela points out, “…there had been many instances like this when they got picked up afterwards so that the clients could be protected” (Ittyipe). Nalini Jameela’s narration of the incident is a depiction of violence performed on the body of a sex worker. This act of violence and its infliction on specific parts of her body heightens the memory of bodily pain. By recreating this incident through the lens of her memory, she voices her desperation and anger. However, there was resistance on her side through her desperate verbal response: “‘Police to sleep with by night; police to give a thrashing by day!’” (AOS 26). The moral hypocrisy of patriarchal society, the violence against sex
workers and their struggle for survival form the core of *The Autobiography of a Sex Worker*.

Life as a sex worker is hazardous. The life narrative focuses on the helplessness and the barbaric conditions which the sex workers are forced to endure. A woman never feels safe in the society. There is always a threat of rape and sexual harassment. The situation becomes worse for women who enter into sex trade due to various compulsions. There is a constant threat of molestation, gang rape and death as every man looks upon sex workers as an open loose commodity for free use; with a right to molest her because she is a “public woman” (Devika xiv) and a public woman has no private space and private life. Even in the public space she is further marginalized and exploited. Her body is considered as public property. The danger of gang rape became a common incident in Nalini Jameela’s life from which many a time she escaped with tact: “It was as if unseen power had saved me…they would certainly have thought of using me. Their major problem would have been how to decide who’d be first. They were of course respectable men…” (*AOS* 30). By addressing those men as respectable, Nalini Jameela mocks and verbally attacks them. These men were on high positions and enjoyed respectable status in the society but the sham is that these high, mainstream persons were exploiting the marginal sex workers’ services. In a patriarchal society, it is never considered that “there should be any punishment or the introduction of punitive laws for pimps and clients, instead they blamed sex workers for luring men into purchasing sex. In the context of a patriarchal society where women have little voice and face discrimination, society as a whole blames the women, never the men” (Haque 293). Men use them, exploit them, judge them morally and kill them but always go scot-free. Nalini Jameela too faced threat to her life from her clients on various occasions:

I had another experience of seeing death face to face. I was trapped by an auto rickshaw driver called Chandran….I’d heard from his friends that there was a fellow who snared sex workers into places where gangs of ten and twenty would use them. Chandran paid me an advance of five hundred, and came at ten at night, saying that he’d take me to a lodge at Thrissur. The auto stopped at deserted place….The excuse was that it had engine trouble….He suggested that we go into the coconut garden nearby. I could smell danger; I was already thinking of escape. We got into the coconut garden….It was very marshy there….He left telling me that he’d
be back soon….I hid in that garden….I dug up the sand in an open area to form a depression, lay down in it and covered myself with the sand. Lying there I counted seventeen men jumping in one after another over the wall. They searched all over the place. One sneeze, and I’d be in their claws….They went away after searching for some more time. I lay there till it was light….Early morning, I went to the police station and wrote a complaint. Seven of the gang were arrested. Though I was also shut up at the station for a whole day, I savoured the happiness of having got Chandran behind the bars. (AOS 95-96)

At another time, she was in an auto and was followed by a motorbike. They tried to dodge the motorbike but it kept following the auto. When it seemed impossible to get away, Nalini Jameela got down from the auto and hailed the bikers: “From my own experience I knew that when danger seemed unavoidable, it was best to co-operate with the attackers…it was useless to run. I would get caught, and get a beating too” (94). She was put on the bike:

…and taken to Brahmkulam. The bike stopped in front of a ration shop, a half-built, empty building, and I was taken to the upper storey. One fellow used me there. He paid up too. But all the time he tortured me mentally with questions like, ‘Can you let me have your daughter?’ These were deliberately meant to provoke me, to get me wild. These were fellows who don’t stop at using; they must also hurt. It was clear from the questions they asked. They would get us wild, and then beat us….The second fellow came and had his turn. He didn’t pay. He too tried his best to get me mad….Then they took me to a terrace some distance away and told me to wait there, promising to put me in a vehicle at daybreak….I began to smell fishy. I got down from there and stepped into the next house….I crept on top of the coconut fibre-heap in that yard, lay down, and covered myself with coconut leaves. I could see those fellows coming back from under my covering. They couldn’t see me. I lay there holding my breath and looking at the road. (94-95)

Reazul Haque observes, “In general, men see women as an object which also influences their contradictory attitudes towards sex workers.” They “consider their sexual drive as ‘natural’ and this forms the basis for their claims of sexual entitlement. For…men, sex workers are the best outlets to fulfill their sexual demands outside of marriage. Some…also consider that if they do not fulfill their sexual needs, then the incidence of rape will be increased” (293). Men think that women are sex objects available for their sexual satisfaction. For these men sex workers are an outlet for their wild desires, aggression and lust. It was only because of her vigilance that Nalini Jameela was able to
escape many dangerous situations: “If you use logic and have the ability to calculate shrewdly in a situation, it’s possible to get yourself out of many a tight spot” (AOS 93). Her life narrative illustrates that in order to survive a woman must act and think smart.

There is no guarantee of security as sex workers are out in the streets day and night in search of clients:

...harassment from the policemen was generally great. If one managed to secure a client, one could spend the night comfortably. If one didn’t, getting through the night was a pain. That was really the most difficult time. Those who waited for clients during the day had other problems….The hassle of standing at pick-up points waiting for clients was bad enough; but even when you secured a client and got your money, the trouble didn’t end. You’d have to wait till it was time for you to go back. (34)

The police remains on alert to get hold of sex workers but let go off their clients. Nalini Jameela grieves: “It isn’t fair that all of them are considered respectable and we alone are made into criminals” (87). She condemns their hypocrisy to punish them and set free their clients who too are participants in this act. In this context Anjani Kant substantiates: “There is no law at all against the client, who is definitely an equal participant in the offence. This bias works strongly against the position of the woman….The threat of arrest, prison term, police or social violence keeps the woman submissive and under control” (137). Hence, law is again used as a means to exploit sex workers.

Sex work is a stigmatized profession and the women who choose this profession are also stigmatized: “They began to shower abuses...because of women like me, apparently, that the country was going to the dogs. I wanted to tell them, ‘It isn’t we who’re making a botch of this place; it’s the men in your country who’re experts at that kind of job!’ But it was wiser to keep silent in that situation; so I didn’t say anything” (AOS 91). There is no safety and always the fear of getting harassed. If the sex workers are tortured or murdered by the clients or others, the investigation or reporting is casual “since the dead person was a sex worker” (98). Ammu “a tribal girl, an adivasi” (97), a sex worker was murdered by some mafia: “The corpse was recovered with sword-gashes on it” (98). After a little investigation the file was closed:
This experience taught me how helpless a sex worker is in life. Despite strong evidence, despite the fact that she had known that she’d be murdered and had told many about it, despite being seen by people just before her death, Ammu’s murder was erased from the records, on the grounds of ‘poor evidence’. No doubt, there was a mafia that worked behind it. (99)

The rape of sex workers is not taken seriously as rape, aspersions are cast because they are not considered respectable and have no izzat (honour). Nalini Jameela narrates the harrowing experience of a young sex worker who was taken to a lonely yard by three men where they were joined by five others:

She screamed when she was raped by eight men. They tried to silence her, and she died of suffocation. All the locals knew who had done it. But they were too intimidated to speak out. We conducted a dharna there in protest. I too spoke at the meeting. It was of no use. The murderers went scot-free. Since it was a sex worker who lost her life, society was not moved at all. (95)

Another sex worker, Sabira was arrested and beaten brutally. Her breasts got infected and filled with pus: “For six whole months, she was entirely bed-ridden….In October 2004, she expired” (101). The incidents not only demonstrate the marginalization of sex workers but also reflect their helplessness and victimization. Instead of presenting the sufferings of sex workers, the media also becomes a handy source for the “politicians” (122) to exploit the sex workers:

The visual media fellows thrust themselves into several houses on this pretext to do their shooting. The gall! Who gave them permission? In the name of reporting the drug trade, they barged like animals into the house of Sarojini, a sex worker. That was outright bestial. There were four mature young women in that house. It’s into that house that a bunch of men forced themselves in one day, rampaging as far as the bathroom. What if one of those girls had been there, taking a bath?

The local boys threw stones at them. Which person with self-respect wouldn’t do that? The lads did this because they loved their sisters. The police are only guard dogs. They also got their share of the stone throwing. The police beat our lads black and blue. (122)

Meena Saraswathi Seshu in her article “Surfacing Voices from the Underground” also testifies that sex workers are completely ostracized from the society: “Some of the rights
denied due to discrimination are freedom from physical and mental abuse, the right to education and information, health care, housing, social security and welfare services” (197-198).

Nalini Jameela draws attention to the insults which Zeenat had to face for being the daughter of a sex worker: “It was hard for her to understand why some people insulted her. One day, when someone abused her, she came to me and said, ‘Amma (Mother), someone called me mayil.’ I told her, ‘Never mind, dear, it’s okay to be called a mayil, a peacock.’ She insisted, ‘No, Amma, they didn’t mean mayil, they meant mayir!’” (AOS 56). Mayil in Malayalam means a peacock—but Mayir (pubic hair) is an offensive obscene word used for insult—it was the latter that was hurled at her to disgrace her verbally. The social stigma of being the daughter of a sex worker, that is “‘bad woman’” (Devika xviii) resulted in the victimization of Zeenat: “…material oppression…denies people opportunities for agency, and symbolic oppression…denies them positive or active definitions of self,” (Paulo Freire qtd. in Cornish 463). The symbolic oppression of sex workers’ children denies the positive definition of self among them. Nineteen sex workers involved in the Sonagachi Project in Kolkata explained to Flora Cornish:

…in their home communities, marriage and motherhood were key criteria for a woman to achieve respect, and that being a prostitute denies them these sources of respect. The stigma of prostitution results in widespread discrimination against sex workers, who spoke bitterly of being rejected by their families, being considered open to sexual exploitation, being evicted from their rented flats, their daughters being considered unmarriageable and their children being taunted at school. (464-65)

Sex workers are outcasts. They are not even allowed to exist on the boundaries of the social structure: “We were always cast out from society” (AOS 156-157). Nalini Jameela remembers her participation in a convention at Manantavadi in protest against police firing on the tribes at Muttanga:

I went there because I was invited. When I was called to speak, a young girl came up to the mike and announced loudly that Janu and a sex worker were not to be treated alike. It was clear that someone had made her do that….This experience was a good eye-opener with regard to the prejudices that even highly motivated political activists lug around. (153)
This incident marks the denial of social space to the sex workers and their children: “…we are all ‘gone cases’” (118). Due to these denials Nalini Jameela was not able to send Zeenat to school for formal education: “It was my little girl’s education that was worst affected.” She hired home tutors to teach her: “I hired tutors to give her the school lessons she missed. I gave her life lessons myself” (55). She never wanted a similar life for her daughter: “…they are not without hopes and dreams for a better life” (Haque 293). Sex workers also aspire for a better life for their children. They are protective towards them. Nalini Jameela had to marry off her daughter in haste as she feared that “my daughter would receive no other wedding proposal now that my organizational activity and sex work had become public knowledge that I agreed to the alliance and the marriage” (AOS 114). However, the marriage proved a failure and she returned to her mother’s house.

Nalini Jameela in her life narrative also highlights the existing stereotypes about sex workers. Most of the clients are of the opinion that since sex workers are engaged in demeaning work, they must be ugly, poor having shabby appearance. Once one of her client:

…was determined to see my face and stubbornly pressed his point. So Rajan put on the light in the hall outside. The man was astonished when he saw me. He’d thought that we kept the lights off because we were ugly and didn’t want to be seen, that people came there hurriedly just for sex. This man wanted to talk to me. He asked, ‘You are pretty, why do you sit in the dark?’

The existing stereotypes and the onlooker’s gaze create the identity and existence of the sex workers as poor and seductive beings, repellent to the so called respectable society. The same kind of objectification Nalini Jameela realized when as a girl she participated in a demonstration for land rights: “The feeling that I was a person worthy of attention overwhelmed me as I walked along raising slogans and holding the flag aloft….Only later did I understand that people were staring because I was beautiful! Though I was only eleven, my body was as mature as a fourteen-year-old’s” (124). She perceived that she was looked at as a sexualized body. In case of Nalini Jameela, these events accentuate how the onlooker’s gaze and perception creates the identity of marginalized women. Nalini Jameela recalls the amazed expression which lit up her client’s face “on
seeing me for the first time remains stamped on my mind even now‖ (36). Nalini Jameela negates the enforced identity and stereotypes of sex workers as weak, powerless and sex objects. She negotiates her identity from victimhood to an individual who is not fragile and an object of sexual pleasure but has an existence of her own as a human being and an individual. The narration exhibits that sex workers too have desires and feelings. They too want to be admired, loved and respected. However, Nalini Jameela’s first incursion as a sex worker made her realize that the clients do not want sex workers’ affection: “‘We don’t care how much you care about us: we will remain distant masters’” (Jameela, “Memory,” 177). For clients, a sex worker is just a body:

To be prostitute is to be a blank screen upon which men project and act out their sexual dominance. Thus the word “prostitute” does not imply a “deeper identity;” it is the absence of an identity: the theft and subsequent abandonment of self. What remains is essential to the “job”: the mouth, the genitals, anus, breasts…and the label. (Evelina Giobbe qtd. in Vohra, “Nalini,” 158)

A client “always speaks from a position of absolute power….He sets the rules…” and sex workers “have to be with him for so much time; you have to do this, this and this, and you’ll get only so much money” (AOS 176). After the realization of her being an object for her clients, Nalini Jameela rejected her objectification: “I began to show them that they weren’t as powerful as they assumed, that they could be cut down to size” (177). Nalini Jameela resisted her identification as an object by her clients. She was firm about her need for dignity, and about setting the rules: “I was insistent that I wouldn’t wiggle my hips and arms to catch anyone; the client had to come to me” (AOS 38). The same kind of resistance can be found in Dacia Maraini’s play Dialogue Between A Prostitute and Her Client (Dialogo di una prostituta col sua cliente, 1978) in which Manila, a prostitute, asks her client to show his body. She tells him, “I realize you’re a customer, but I’d like to have a look at what I’m getting. I’m voyeur. Let me see your chest….I like looking at things. I always do. I look at something. Then I look again, and then suddenly fall right into what I’m looking at” (qtd. in Niwas 132-136). Manila emphasizes that if the client claims to look at her body, a sex worker has an equal right to look at his body. If he makes an object of her body by his look, she is also entitled to objectify his body by her look. It is a simple matter of mutual objectification.
Nalini Jameela kept sending money to her mother-in-law regularly. But once “the sum I had sent came back unclaimed.” Her brother-in-law “had gone off to work in the Gulf and was sending plenty of money back home...they decided not to accept my money. The fear was that if they accepted my money, I might claim my children later.” After this her ties with her children were snapped. She entered “into the trade to support my kids….Now that responsibility had ended; I began to think of other options, including that of leaving the trade” (AOS 46). She decided to settle down and leave sex work. Koyakka, her friend, assured her the status of wife: “He promised to marry me” (46) and they started living together like a married couple in a rented house at Mangalore. Koyakka had already married twice. Soon his second wife returned after her delivery and “things soured” (47) between Koyakka and Nalini Jameela: “I was denied the status I desired. I had a strong sense of self-respect; it wouldn’t allow me to accept a second class status” (47-48). Out of this relationship Zeenat was born: “Until the baby was born, Koyakka used to take care of everything, but after her birth, his interest began to wane.” According to him, “...he couldn’t accept a child by a woman of a religion different from his own.” Nalini Jameela was a Hindu and he did not accept Zeenat as his daughter: “I’ll abandon your girl on the train. The kid born haraat (in faith) must be cared for, but not the kid born haraam (outside the faith).” (48). His views expose the male hypocrisy. A man can have relationship and sex with a woman from a different religion but he cannot accept the child born out of that relationship. Feeling insecure about her daughter’s future Nalini Jameela left Koyakka and went back to Thrissur and again started her life as a sex worker.

In Thrissur, she met Shahul Hameed, who in order to settle score with his wife, conveyed his interest in marrying her. She changed her “name to Jameela. He was insistent that his relatives should be convinced that his wife was a Muslim, even if I didn’t convert” (54). Before this, her name was Nalini as she was born Hindu. Later “I decided: let my name be Nalini Jameela” (134) as some knew her as Nalini and some as Jameela. The marriage lasted for twelve years. During this span, she left her work as sex worker. Shahul Hameed cared for Zeenat as his own daughter and Zeenat also thought of him as her father: “Shahulakka was a good man. He used to think of her as his own daughter” (57).
With the passage of time, Shahul Hameed lost interest in Nalini Jameela and developed an affair with another woman. The situation worsened when Nalini Jameela fell ill and developed “a swelling in the liver – an oedema. There was a tumour, besides. My right leg became inflamed and broke into an open sore” (61). Shahul Hameed wanted to get rid of her. He began to tell neighbours: “I insisted that he sleep with me everyday...” (62). That was too much for her self-dignity. Unable to endure the insult, she left him and then once again she was back on the streets with her daughter. She had no money so she went to stay at the mosque at Attingara. The area was “a trouble-zone.” The place was not safe for women. The memories of the terrible experience in the Mosques and the struggle she faced with her daughter remain fresh in her mind: “That was a terrible phase in my life….I cannot even think of how I raised my girl during those days. I had to take her along with me even when I went for a bath. When I went to the toilet she had to be entrusted to someone” (63).

Nalini Jameela narrates that there were many people around who wanted to take undue advantage of her destitution. They came to her on the pretext of helping her but had their own mischievous motives to resolve. Abdul Razaak met her at Pottalpputhoor mosque and accompanied them to the Yerwadi mosque with an intention to marry Zeenat. But “I was not keen to marry off Zeenu to him. Marrying was usually a trick” (65). So after some days he left them. She then met Abdul Nazer. When he came to know about her miserable condition he offered, “‘Why not let your daughter stay at my house?’” (67). She agreed but after some days he came with the proposal of marrying Zeenat to a mentally disturbed person who was the son of his friend: “They felt they were within their rights to suggest such things, after all, because they were giving her food!” (68). Nalini Jameela called Zeenat back on the pretext that she was ill.

One of her female acquaintances who also had a daughter suggested: “‘...let’s sleep in the mosque at night and the girls can be at the tangal’s house.’” Nalini Jameela agreed for Zeenat’s safety without realizing that the holy man used to abuse the girls sexually who accompanied the sick people. Her friend was part of the intrigue and “The holy man’s idea was to grab both girls” (68) whereas her friend “thought that her daughter would be saved if she sacrificed my daughter” (69). Her friend thought if Zeenat
became the prey of the holy man her daughter would be safe. This reflects how women turn against women to achieve their selfish ends. Hence, women are their own worst enemies: “We are taught that women are “natural” enemies, that solidarity will never exist between us because we cannot, should not, and do not bond with one another. We have learned these lessons well. We must unlearn them….We must learn to live and work in solidarity. We must learn the true meaning and value of sisterhood” (hooks, Feminists Theory 43). Instead of being united and helping each other Nalini Jameela’s friend put Zeenat in danger, forgetting that she is also somebody’s daughter. Somehow Nalini Jameela saved her daughter and left Yerwadi mosque and returned to Attingara mosque. For a while, she went to stay at her relatives but “people weren’t really bothered about helping me in this life” (74). Some told her, “I would have asked you to stay, but there’s no room here” (75). Compelled by circumstances, Nalini Jameela left her daughter in Thiruvananthapuram in the care of a known woman and went back to Thrissur and started working as a sex worker.

Many men came in Nalini Jameela’s life but the relationships were short-lived. She looked for love but only got tension in return. First it was Subrahmanyyan who committed suicide. Koyakka cheated her after she became pregnant. Later, it was Shahul Hameed who married her in order to fulfill his sexual needs and to take revenge on his first wife. She tried to settle in her life and to leave the dicey sex worker’s life: “…a minority expressed that they wanted to lead a conventional married life. These women face rejection in both their public and private lives. This rejection may lead them to be more concerned with the present rather than the future” (Haque 293). Unable to survive, having no place to live in, starvation and stigma compelled her to return to sex work which she tried to leave whenever she got the chance.

A new phase in the life of Nalini Jameela came with her introduction to Jwalamukhi, an organization which was working for the awareness about AIDS with the help of sex workers. Later it became a platform for the sex workers to claim their rights. After getting connected with Jwalamukhi, she decided to continue in sex work: “Having drifted like this from one sort of life to another, sometimes doing sex work, sometimes doing other work, I took a firm decision to stay on in sex work when I began to interact
with Jwalamukhi...” (AOS 83). In Jwalamukhi, she became acquainted with other sex workers: “I define solidarity in terms of mutuality, accountability, and the recognition of common interests as the basis for relationships among diverse communities” (Mohanty 7). A mutual understanding and solidarity developed among the sex workers in Jwalamukhi as they were all struggling for a dignified life, recognition and protection in the society.

Nalini Jameela in Jwalamukhi realized that “a sense of community was more important than personal connections” (AOS 154). She learnt to be ready to extend help to others in difficult time: “‘This is what our organization should mainly do: if you get caught, I must come to your aid. If I’m trapped you must help me out’” (86). Jwalamukhi turned into a stage for sex workers to fight for their cause and rights. It helped the sex workers to look at themselves as individuals and to see themselves as labourers who also labour like other workers in different professions like construction workers, domestic workers, teachers and so on: “Though people gave the Jwalamukhi label to us rather mockingly in the early days, later, it became a symbol of our self-confidence” (104). Nalini Jameela used Jwalamukhi as a platform to discover and re-present herself. Nalini Jameela became an active spokesperson of the sex workers:

‘We are here for the sex workers’ organisation. We want our rights to be respected. The police shouldn’t beat us. The thugs shouldn’t harass us.’ When I reached this far, the shivering stopped. I went on. ‘We aren’t the only people to commit this crime. There are lawyers who come to us; there are doctors and businessmen….’ (AOS 87)

It is miserable that the “…beneficiaries of sex trade such as clients and pimps experience no diminution in their rights. Their children access schooling, can expect a religious burial, marry into a ‘good’ family and live unperturbed in conventional society where as sex workers and their children are socially outcasts” (Haque 293). Nalini Jameela used the organization not only to assert herself as an individual but also used it as a platform to speak up about the victimization of sex workers:

The story was always the same – the police arrests you, you approach the lawyer, the fine is paid in court; once again, the police arrests you – this is how it was. Many had confessed how much money they had had to pay for a lawyer. This wasn’t really necessary at all. Why did one need a lawyer to
pay a fine? We hadn’t really committed an offence. So we had to fight our case claiming that we shouldn’t be punished….If the sex is offence then there’s one more person who must be punished. How come that fellow is never punished? Isn’t he an offender too?....The lawyers wheedle money out of you, get you sentences and make you pay fines. They don’t care about representing you. (AOS 85-86)

Speaking in public helped her “to rid me of my fear and shivering and gave me lots of self-confidence” (87). She spoke as an individual and as a sex worker:

Today we are called veshyas or sex workers. That’s quite all right. But ugly names like petti and tatti must be avoided, that was what I argued. Even if we are not given the status and dignity of the olden days, we shouldn’t be insulted and harassed. And so I began to speak, like the politicians do. Sixteen people there had been arrested, I produced figures to show that their clients hadn’t been arrested. (89)

Since she was a sex worker, many in the audience thought that she must have been trained by the organizers to speak that way. But she insisted that whatever she spoke, she had spoken from her own experience: “Even though I had made the speech, people assumed I was repeating the words of Maitreyan or Paulson. I began to insist that Maitreyan and Jayshree were not sex workers, that they were merely members of our support group” (90).

Nalini Jameela was sponsored by Jwalamukhi to attend a training programme in Thailand that helped sex worker to develop the skills to deal with their problems themselves. She needed the passport. For that purpose, she needed the ration card which she never got as “When I got married, the first thing Father had done was to get my name erased from our ration card.” At that time, she thought that “…well, they’ve lost the two-and-a-half measures of rice and sugar allotted to me, that’s all. I didn’t feel that I’d lost my very identity!” (108). The authority of ration card to bestow legitimacy on her existence brings to the fore how the process of identity and self-formation are embedded in the modes of recognition by modern society. By losing a ration card, Nalini Jameela had lost her official/public mode of recognition. However, after some diligence, she managed to get her passport. In Thailand, she also learnt to handle camera. She made a film: “My concept had three central characters – a well-off young man, a well-off ‘society lady’ and then me. The ‘society lady’ and me were both asking a favour of this
young man….I ask for help as a beggar. He hands me the smallest change….The other woman asks him for some money….He pulls out dollars….‖ (109). This reflects the prevalent class hierarchies in society where vested interests dominate. She went to Thailand for the third time in 2004 to screen her second documentary named “Nisabdarakkapettavarilekku Orettinottam (A Glimpse of Silenced)” and to participate in the discussion. This documentary is about atrocities of the police. Her first documentary was “Jwalamukhikal” (154). She publicly admits, “I never thought I’d take up sex work as my means of livelihood. Never thought I’d fall into it, but I did. It wasn’t a well-thought-out decision” (Jameela, “Memory,” 170). She asserts:

…if your life is struggle to survive and to support others, then you won’t be concerned with whether the work you can get is dignified or not. In order to find and to keep a job, you have to please many people. A woman is expected to offer her body – many women have nothing else. (174)

The burden which women always bear is the struggle for existence. She demands the decriminalization of sex work to prevent atrocities on sex workers:

…sex work be decriminalised. This does not mean establishing licenses. That creates a whole set of new complications: recognition from doctors and the police; the red tape of the law. That will aggravate corruption. By ‘decriminalising’, what we mean is this: if two people want to have sex by mutual consent, if this is in no way a nuisance to others, then it should not be questioned. (137-8).

According to her “‘rehabilitation’” (137) of sex workers cannot be possible as long as sex work will remain a stigmatized job. The society will never accept the women who are labeled as sex workers. She recognizes sex as a part of life and identifies sex work as a profession which like other professions is demanding. She says:

When we talk of work as a ‘profession’, that doesn’t mean that we always enjoy doing it. For example, take a construction worker. No one takes up that kind of work saying that it is enjoyable, and that one is doing it so that one can admire the beauty of the building slowly rising up! The fellow who does scavenging work for the municipality does the job for a living. Sex work is a little above these two kinds of work. These days, those who do construction work are not in a position to keep aside anything for the future. In contrast, if sex workers are given the freedom to work, they need to work only three days a week to make a regular income, and remain healthy. (141)
Nalini Jameela is not concerned with the traditional concept of morality and purity in love. She asserts:

Sex work does not connote only sex…. It can be between people of the same sex, and not just between those of the opposite sex. There’s sex in seeing; in touching and caressing; and then there’s deep, intense sex. These are all different….Why do we insist that all sexual relations should end in family ties? Do we have to wait till life-long relationships are forged, to know about real sex? Why do we decide that women are only for bearing and rearing children? What is wrong in accepting that lesbianism is family planning? Lesbianism is actually family planning. The world doesn’t need so many human beings. But if some are hell-bent on playing Brahma the Creator, let them! (142-144)

Though crude Nalini Jameela, in her life narrative, celebrates female sexuality and femininity when she speaks, “I think that femininity is a woman’s strength. There is not much advantage in aping men, having short hair and wearing pants. I’ve been intimate with many, many men and so I know well that they aren’t that free. So there’s no point in being like them” (136). She is proud to be a female and asserts that every woman should be proud of her femininity as it is her femininity which defines her true self: “…learn to respect women’s choices – from wearing sensuous Galliano gowns to staying at home to raise their children” (Lehrman qtd. in Jeffreys 12). A woman has her own female strength. So women should never perceive femininity as a symbol of weakness.

Nalini Jameela in her life narrative *The Autobiography of a Sex Worker* shuttles between past and present and strings together multiple memories. She records her experience of watching a movie *Kaattutulasi* at the age of fourteen and the way her father had beaten her and her brother when he got to know that they had gone to theatre: “Father didn’t know even when we sneaked back in. But when we began to argue over the story, Father woke up…and a sound thumping followed” (*AOS* 127). Nalini Jameela cherished the memories of her childhood. She cherishes her own image as a girl who welcomed the communist leader A.K. Gopalan and his wife Susheela: “I was dressed up like the heroines of Malayalam ballads….I carried the image of me for a long time. The image of the girl who welcomed AKG” (123). She recalls the titles of the books like *Ramanan* and *Karuna* she used to read when she was young. She remembers her past like moving pictures: “That’s the way my memory is. I remember my past in moving pictures, like a
film, with scenes that are sharp in my mind” (Jameela, “Memory,” 169). Through her life narrative she records and expands all those memories which represent her and have an impact on her like her first memory of her grandmother crawling on her four legs and her realization of women as marginalized beings.

Nalini Jameela never negates her existence as an outcast. She asserts her identity as a sex worker when she compares sex workers to other women and finds sex workers different from other women as “We are free in four respects. We don’t have to cook and wait for a husband; we don’t have to wash his dirty clothes; we don’t have to ask for our husbands’ permission to raise our kids as we deem fit; and we don’t have to run after our husbands claiming rights to their property to raise our kids” (AOS 106-07). She observes, “…the ‘things’ that my clients did to me were almost the same as the ‘things’ their husbands did to them” (Jameela, “Memory,” 172). According to her, the service she provides to her clients is same which the housewives extend to their husbands. The difference is that she is paid for it but housewives are wageless workers and have to work for the same man and have to be dependent on him for their as well as for their children’s survival. This assertion is seen from the beginning of the narrative when she states that the moment Rosa chechi mentioned “‘needing women’, I understood that this had to do with using the woman the way the husband does” (AOS 23). This reflects Nalini Jameela’s consciousness that being a narrator what she is going to convey and claim through her life narrative.

The kind of oppression that is meted out to a sex worker can never be perpetrated against any other regular worker because “sex work is no real work, it is morally sinful” (“Sex Workers’ Manifesto” qtd. in Vohra, “Nalini,” 159). Nalini Jameela articulates the oppression and concerns of women sex workers. She exposes the hypocrisy and debauchery prevalent in society that judge sex workers morally without going into the causes which force them to sell their bodies and lead a pathetic life:

People prefer not to see our struggles to bring our children up – when some poor woman gets arrested and sentenced for sex work, she is separated from the children who must have been left in someone’s care. When her prison term ends, often she has no way of reaching her children; she may not know where they are. And people will use this example to
pillory us: sex workers don’t care for their children! They don’t see the agony; they don’t recognise our sheer helplessness! (Jameela, “Memory,” 176)

Nalini Jameela herself has experienced suffering and humiliation but she boldly puts forward her views and wishes that society might change its attitude towards exploited and agonized women. In reply to the question, on Asianet News Hour, that “what I was doing to end sex work. I replied that my desire was to maintain it. Many did not like this. But since this was a live programme, it couldn’t be edited” (AOS 136). She negotiates her identity from her marginalized space as sex worker and establishes herself as an individual, as mother, as daughter and as Dalit female which society is unable to recognize whereas the society sees her only as a sex worker.

Nalini Jameela in *The Autobiography of a Sex Worker* narrates her search for dignity, empowerment and freedom and re-presents her individual self on her own terms: “Her story embodies agonies of a woman emerging from the state of marginalization, subjugation and bondage, seeking to establish her identity and the self” (Vohra, “Nalini,” 160). Nalini Jameela’s life narrative attempts to re-present and represent the marginalized section as none can speak about and “can represent our life better than us…” (qtd. in Mathoor 467). Through documentaries and by articulating her life experiences, sufferings and victimization in her life narrative, Nalini Jameela offers resistance to the social structure which turns Dalit women into commodities. She attempts to create an identity and space for these voices of distress both in literature and society so that they could be heard. *The Autobiography of a Sex Worker* is re-telling of the sufferings and distress of the marginalized in Indian society. It is a voice speaking for all those silenced for long by the dominant forces in society:

Nalini has come across as a bold and candid person who wants to tell the world that she and many others like her aren’t just anonymous faces and willing bodies. They are individuals with aspirations; they are wives, mothers, sisters and daughters as well. They have real trials and struggles in life and aren’t spiders waiting with a web every minute of their waking day. (Suneetha)

Patriarchal society where “women’s agency is constrained by unequal gender relations…is further limited for sex workers” (Haque 291). Nalini Jameela compels the
society to recognize a sex worker as labourer, individual, mother, wife, daughter and sister who also has feelings, emotions and brain and not just a plain sexual body.

*A Life Less Ordinary* and *The Autobiography of a Sex Worker* are attempts to represent and represent Dalit women’s experiences. Both Baby Halder and Nalini Jameela speak as Dalit women drawing attention to the caste, class and gender marginalization responsible for the sufferings and distress of Dalit women. Both the narrators narrate the mother’s sufferings observing which they realized their own marginalized space within the family as well as in the society and became aware that to resist oppression Dalit women need to raise their voice and for that they need to be economically independent. Being illiterate, both suffered exploitation. Repression at home, that is in private space made them to move into public space, that is society where again they suffered oppression because of their marginalized position as Dalit women and because of their profession. Both the narrators make best use of sources available to them from society to emerge from their victimization. However, along with the similarities, both the narratives show distinctiveness resulting from narrators’ individualities.

To conclude, the life narratives *A Life Less Ordinary* and *The Autobiography of a Sex Worker* give literary representation and voice the concerns and needs of Dalit women. These narratives represent and re-p resent their interests, that is need for equality and getting rid of discrimination because of gender, class and caste: “the only way to get a little measure of power over your own life is to do it collectively, with the support of other people who share your needs” (Irma qtd. in Mohanty 168). Shared needs and concerns bring Dalit women together to work collectively to free themselves of the oppression individually.