
When Sonia Faleiro set out to report on Bombay’s bar dancers, she thought she knew what she would find: voiceless, downtrodden women, the helpless victims of poverty and exploitation in a male-dominated world. Instead she met Leela, a fearlessly outspoken and charismatic nineteen-year-old woman. Leela had been dancing in Bombay’s bars since she was thirteen, having fled the abuse of her father in her native village near Meerut. With her sharp wit and stubborn optimism, Leela was the highest paid dancer in a bar called Night Lovers on the notorious Mira Road. She had a ‘husband’ who was already married and was also the owner of the bar, a few lovers whose names she could not remember, a mother who was parasitically dependent on her and an adored best friend. But when an ambitious politician ordered the shutting down of the city’s dance bars, Leela was forced into the most precarious kind of sex work and had to trade her proud independence for mere survival.

Finally she decided to travel to Dubai to work as a bar dancer there. The account ends on a sombre note with the hint that despite Leela’s fearlessness and grit and desire to emerge a winner, society and all the forces in it are against her. Even if she may want something else, ‘who will permit Leela what she wants?’ (212)

Based upon extensive research conducted in the bars and brothels of Mumbai as well as interviews with bar dancers, bar owners, sex workers, hijras, madams, gangsters, policemen and other characters, this piece of investigative non-fiction is brought alive by the author’s keen powers of observation and description. Leela’s story is not new: it has been playing out for decades in the crowded cities and slums of India, and even in villages, where parents are forced to sell their children into prostitution out of sheer poverty. What makes the story dramatic and soul-touching is the skill of the journalist Sonia Faleiro who crafted it. She has successfully created a vivid and intimate portrait of a young woman fleeing abuse and poverty to build a life on her own terms, in a city bent upon reinventing itself.

It is also the compelling story of an unlikely friendship between two young women from different worlds. ‘From Leela’s point of view, our friendship was an adventure. She was seven years younger than me, but only she could teach me what I wanted to know’ (6).

The author’s skillful use of the slang and peculiar lingo used in such places sparkles with energy and excitement and gives the account a racy and vivid style. Undoubtedly, Faleiro has written a small masterpiece of observation and intimate reportage which opens up a hidden world with startling insight.

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