



From Bars to Brothels?

When Women Dance to Male Power

○ Susan Dewey

whispering, almost in admonishment: “This is the only way we have to survive.”

Cigarette smoke has a way of hanging in the air in a certain kind of light, so that it almost seems to be a solid, albeit transparent object

a more recognizably human form, they all seemed to be shrouded in that still, eerie smoke, which formed a protective wall around them.

“Dancing” is perhaps not the correct way to describe what women do at Heera. As they have to work in shifts of eight hours or more, rather than dance, they stand in groups and undulate seductively to Hindi film music, smiling at the men in the audience while approaching them for money. Words like “*deewana*” (male lover) and “*jaan*” (love of my life) take on a distinctly different tone as they begin to be uttered simultaneously in the Hindi film song lyrics playing in the background and in the conversations between the women and their male clients.

During the time I spent at Heera, I was privileged to earn the trust of three women, whose names and key life details have been changed in order to protect their privacy. Although one individual’s life can by no means be considered representative of an entire population of women who do the same kind of work, their stories do speak about a level of marginalization which characterizes the vast majority of women who work in dancing girls’ bars. From a lower middle-class suburban Bombay Miss India aspirant, to a North Indian single mother supporting her small family, to a teenaged Nepali girl brought to Bombay by a mysterious

It is not easy to dance for money in front of strange men. I began to understand this the moment I followed ten other women out of a dressing room swathed in a soft blue glow onto a rectangular dance floor, the small artificial gems adorning the women’s *cholis* catching and reflecting the light as they moved in a single file toward the circle of waiting men. I had just spent the past two hours in a tiny backroom at an establishment I will call Heera, which was then the most expensive and well-known dancing girls’ bar in Bombay, speaking to the women who support their families by dancing for men as they dressed for a night of work.

When women dance for money in Bombay, they do so barefoot, and often in borrowed clothing. Backstage at Heera, women with playful names like Bobby, Khushboo and Ruby fastened shimmering *lehgas* low on their waists, laced colorfully embroidered *cholis* tightly at their backs, and unbraided their long hair so it would swing as they danced. “*Aachi lagti hai, hamari zindagi?*” asked a younger woman sarcastically as soon as I entered the room: “You like our life?” before switching to English and

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suspended in time. As my eyes began to adjust to the darkness of the dance floor and the men’s faces in the audience gradually began to take on



Seduction, not dance is the name of the game

“uncle” who told her family that she would do office work, the women at Heera all had stories to tell. More often than not, these tales centered on a single theme: economic marginality and a lack of real choices.

Theory vs. Practice

Scholarly and popular work on the subject of female sexuality as a marketable commodity can be divided into four main categories: ethno-historical, activist, that which espouses a rhetoric of victimhood and an implicit plea for male rescue, and theoretical work on the concept of sex for sale.

The first, ethno-historical approach, seeks to examine the specificities of female sexuality as a commodity cross-culturally. While all ethno-historical approaches share an analytic focus on understanding what sexuality and its consumption mean in specific locales, they often withhold any political standpoint on the topic, thus obscuring the fact that, at a very real and structural level, women who are already marginalized by society become even more so when absorbed by the sex industry. This is especially true if one defines the sex industry, as I do, as encompassing anything that positions women’s bodies as objects for sale.

The second main category is that of activist approaches, which seek to fill the gap present in ethno-historical approaches with a specifically political agenda, and one which often positions all sex work as inherently demeaning and marginalizing. A particularly interesting sub-category of this genre occasionally positions sex work as potentially empowering for women with no other means to attain economic self-sufficiency.

The third main category is thoroughly entrenched in the rhetoric of victimhood, which positions women who work in the sex industry as helpless, misguided and in need



of rescue. The vast majority of popular cultural pieces on the issue, which are too varied and numerous to mention in the context of this article, take this approach, which more often than not pertains to deeply entrenched cultural concepts of male rescue of “fallen”, desperate women. These include innumerable newspaper and magazine articles which ostensibly expose the prevalence of violations of women’s rights to physical autonomy through global sex trafficking rings, all of which, the authors insist, “trick” the women into participating in sex work. While this is doubtlessly true in some cases, this approach neglects the reality that women’s choice to enter the sex industry is often anything but

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a choice, but rather a decision made in the conspicuous absence of other options.

The fourth and final category consists of theoretical work on the concept of sex for sale, which attempts to highlight structural marginalities in place in relation to the sex industry without the inclusion of ethnographic details. While certainly valuable for its insight into what female sexuality and its conversion into a commodity means in its respective socio-cultural context, this body of literature almost completely ignores the everyday lived experience of the women most impacted by the very process these scholars seek to document and analyze.

My own research on sex trafficking in post-Soviet Armenia has sometimes been by academic colleagues described as “sexy”. This speaks volumes about the internal assessment by academics of topical trends in their profession. However, to the women whose bodies are routinely brutalized by the sex industry and its consumers, this topic is anything but “sexy”. Instead, it is a matter of survival in dehumanizing circumstances. While my colleague may understand the subject to be one of great public interest, his decision to use such an adjective is indeed telling: the message, clearly, is that interest in women’s bodies as commodities is nothing more than a trend that is of momentary interest, “sexy” as it were, and will soon pass.

Sex work is a reality to which women are subjected to as a result of life in a world cross-cut by gross economic and gender inequalities. There is a need for research which will actually consider not only the socio-cultural meanings of the objectification of women’s bodies, but also the views and everyday realities of those who are the real authorities on the subject: the women themselves.

Objects of Titilation

The routine involved in male/female interaction at a dancing girls' bar can be most succinctly described as a display of women as objects with which to demonstrate male power and prestige. From the entrance of women into the room filled with men to the transfer of money from male patron to female performer, the entire encounter is suffused with a demonstration of male power in its manifold forms.

After the women enter the dance floor in a group to the sound of more erotic genres of Hindi film music, they begin a series of hand motions and gentle swaying of their hips which mimic dance forms popular in contemporary Hindi cinema. Men stay seated on cushioned chairs against the wall with tables in front of them, bundles of ten to fifty rupee notes in their hands or within easy reach. Nearly all of them are drinking alcohol and smoking cigarettes, demonstrations of affluence in their own right. The vast majority of men do not arrive alone, a fact which speaks of the social legitimacy of men patronizing women in this way.

Dancers approach groups of men at random, exchanging brief conversations and compliments, after which a single man gives a bundle of rupee notes to a male attendant. The dancer positions herself close to the male attendant and begins to spin, her *ghagra* rising and fanning out around her lower legs to reveal her bare feet and the *payals* fastened around her ankles. As she spins, her hair loose and flowing around her shoulders, the male attendant begins to shower her with rupee notes, which fall over her body until the money he has been given by the male patron is gone. The entire audience is transfixed by this process. The more money a man gives, the longer the performance. The message is clear: male money and power dictate female actions; structurally, this



Combining seduction with supplication

situation does not necessitate complex analysis.

While I met women at Heera who were from a fairly broad range of ethnic backgrounds, they all shared one common trait: structural marginality. Nearly all of them were migrants to Bombay, with a few notable suburban exceptions. As a uniquely Bombay phenomenon, dancing girls' bars like Heera hire a very specific type of woman, one who is young, fair-skinned and able to tolerate constant comments and propositions from male patrons.

The amount of money a woman in a dancing girls' bar will earn depends largely on the kind of establishment she works in. At some, the average monthly salary, which is derived from gifts from male patrons and divided at the end of the evening, is as low as three thousand rupees per month per

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woman, while at establishments like Heera, some of the more beautiful and compliant women earn closer to ninety thousand rupees per month. These women are often the only wage earners in their family. Their families often claim that their daughter is earning money in a "respectable" office job rather than in a bar. The profit that is earned from their bodies, however, is far greater than they could earn in an office, even if they were to obtain such employment.

Aspirations vs. Reality

The first woman to approach me at Heera was Bobby, a tall woman in her early twenties from a suburban Bombay neighborhood nearly two hours from Heera. I remember instantly wondering what it must be like to leave Heera's opulence to sit on a local train for a long commute home in the early hours before dawn. "I want to be Miss India," she smiled broadly within five minutes of introducing herself. "It's not easy for girls like me," she emphatically stated in English as she brushed out her long hair in front of a tiny, streaked mirror backstage. Bobby wore the tightest, most heavily embroidered *choli* of all the performers, and employed the most risqué dance forms, almost as if she were auditioning for a Hindi film. As we spoke, I realized that this was no accident.

"What am I supposed to do?" she asked, almost defensively as she applied another layer of *kajal* to her upper eyelid, "Get married to some office clerk and be happy making *daal-roti* for the rest of my life? I'm a middle class person, but I have big dreams. For girls like me, it isn't easy to break into films, and while I'm waiting for my opportunity, I have to support myself. For girls like me, it isn't easy. To be perfectly frank, this is the only way we have to survive."

Indeed, Bobby was the most popular performer at Heera, her convent school English and Miss India training program-inspired social skills are definite assets in interacting with her powerful clients. Although she was the woman who was most like the sisters and wives of her clients, Bobby was also the most exotic in the space of Heera, her outspoken ambition and fluent English definitely setting her apart. In many ways, Bobby was the woman with the greatest degree of choice at Heera, and also fortunate in the sense that she was familiar with Bombay as a city. Most of the other women were not so fortunate.

The Only Option?

Khushboo approached me backstage, asking me in quiet and extremely *shuddh* Hindi if I needed to borrow a costume to perform. If I did, she added, she had an extra one she could loan me. "I know what it's like to be in a new place and not know anyone," she whispered. Khushboo had been abandoned by her husband shortly after the birth of their first child. She did not know where he was. He did not provide her or her child with any financial support; to complicate matters, Khushboo's roots were in conservative Lucknow. She and her mother felt that it would create more scandal than it was worth for them to return home, especially as Khushboo's father died several years ago. "I came to Bombay shortly after marriage," she explained, "And soon became pregnant. In a strange city where I knew no one, it was just one

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step from my husband almost never being at home to him actually leaving me and my child. My mother and younger sister, suspecting that something was wrong with my marriage, came to Bombay, and we decided that it was best to stay here rather than returning home."

Returning to Lucknow as a new mother with no husband was simply not an option, she elaborated. "In Lucknow, people talk. Even when a woman has a husband, there is no question of her working—imagine what people would say if we three women went back alone, with a small baby. This is the only option available to me right now."

Khushboo is beautiful in a very North Indian way, with high cheekbones and grey-green eyes, a type of beauty that places her heavily in demand with men at Heera. She showed me a picture of her mother and seventeen-year-old sister, and the resemblance was unmistakable. When I asked about her younger sister's future, Khushboo was emphatic that she did not want her to enter into the profession. "I paid for my sister's dowry," Khushboo sadly smiled, "We haven't found a match as yet, but I have saved the money nonetheless. I am determined that my sister will not live a life like mine."

As she left the dressing room to spend the night dancing for strange men in order to add to the money for her sister's dowry and to support their small family of women, it seemed to me that, in very many ways, Khushboo herself was something of a metaphor for the structural inequalities women faced.

Risking "Bombay Disease"

Ruby asked me for a match to light her cigarette. "I know smoking is a bad habit," she smiled apologetically, "But I feel it makes me seem older, and that protects me here. They leave the older girls alone." Indeed, Ruby would not have been out of place in a school uniform, and I estimated her age at around sixteen, far too young to be in Heera. She sat down next to me, twirling her glass bangles around her wrist as she told me about her life in a village in Nepal. "My family thinks I work in an office. In Nepal, people aren't so worldly. I've been here for one year now and I don't know if I will go back. People may become suspicious. In Nepal, we call AIDS 'the Bombay disease' because so many girls come back to their villages sick, but I don't like to think about it. Everyone in Nepal knows that Indians like Nepali girls. If I go back, and they ask me many questions, how will I answer? What do I know about office work?"

Ruby put out her cigarette and told a story which is heartbreakingly familiar the world over, from Nepal to the republics of the former Soviet bloc. "One of my uncles approached my father and told him that he could use his connections to find me a job in Bombay. My family is very poor, so when that uncle offered money in exchange for my work, how could my father refuse? We are seven daughters, and in Nepal that is something difficult for a father." Ruby was resigned to her life situation in many ways, but I could not help wonder what the future held for her, or the thousands of young women exactly like her. □

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Post Script: The Bombay High Court in an order of April 12, 2006 lifted the ban on dance bars imposed by the Government of Maharashtra on August 15, 2005.

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