

BURGEONING PROSTITUTION IN 19TH CENTURY PARIS –“THE CITY OF PLEASURES”

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Abstract: *Prostitution being an age-old business and problem both, has a universal existence. Each country faces prostitution in its own way-some legalizing it and some treating it as a social taboo. France despite all its glamour, faced the existence of prostitution in its own way. The worldwide fame of France for being the center of haute fashion and film industry also brings to it, the ill fame of being heart of flesh market as well. This paper gives a glimpse of prostitution in France of nineteenth century. French courtesans of this era had gained popularity for their lifestyle, intelligence and their influence on the aristocrats including the royal court. One could find all classes of prostitutes in French society ranging from a street hooker to a classy courtesan. We can observe that these femmes fatales had a strong hold on the male dominant French society. Such was the extent of attraction of the contemporary Parisien society that it endlessly allured beautiful women from different countries, who went on to becoming famous courtesans of this era. The legal system and the social reformers tried to curb its wide spread but were not very successful in their efforts.*

Key words: *Prostitution, Nineteenth Century, Courtesans, Police, legal system, influence, society, bourgeoisie.*

I. INTRODUCTION

France, particularly the name of its capital, Paris “the city of pleasures”, as soon as mentioned, immediately stirs up thoughts of all sorts of luxuries, glamour, riches, literary and artistic gatherings and productions, etc. It is remembered as a capital of “nineteenth century” due to its architectural and industrial revolutions. The mesmerism of city of glamour is such that no one wants to recall that despite all the glitter, it was also the hub for political as well as social unrest which resulted in various revolutions. A common man does not want to think of presence of any dark niche in his dreamland. Still, internally everybody accepts that all good things have some hidden or not so openly discussed corners / as well. This is a human psychology that no one wants to think about these undercover immoralities. One such undercover immoral but very popular and alluring aspect of Parisienne society, was its nocturnal trade of flesh with prostitutes trying to attract their clientele in the dark alleys or sophisticated salons. This article will try to peep through the so-called bewitching but not so beautiful world present behind the Parisienne fashionable scene ie. the world of Prostitutes or Courtesans in the era of 19th century.

II. REVOLUTIONARY TRANSFORMATION OF PARIS
France had to suffer too many political and economic upheavals resulting in social disturbances as well. Paris being the capital, experienced most of the action -both good and bad. Different types of transformations changed the city. After the French revolution, the successor century i.e. the nineteenth one brought to Paris, a whirlwind of transformations all round-Industrially, Economically as well as Socially The city saw a progressive movement with the introduction of Telegraph, Railways, Roads, facilitating easy communication, transportation and commutation. With the easier means of transportation, new industries were established rapidly in Paris, thus, creating new avenues and flooding the capital with people from suburbs and villages, in search of trade and employment. These immigrants to Paris belonged to all types of social strata and hence carried their own habits and cultures. With the industrial development, the citizens saw free flow of money. As has been said by Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Money often costs too much”, this flow of money, took away the old charm of Paris. The old gothic architecture was razed for the new construction. The old times Paris known for its narrow maze of backstreets were replaced by the modern and large ones, imparting it a new modern layout. “Paris is transformed”, said Emile de Labédollière. Under the expertise of Prefect Georges-Eugène Haussmann, the city faced extreme transformations; entire neighborhoods were demolished making way for a network of broad boulevards, imposing monuments and luxurious new homes. French working class with improved living standards was formed due to industrial boom. The peasants also saw an improvised living standard during this phase. A new culture of consumerism was born, bringing with it all sorts of struggle and discontent. For the complete century, this novel commercialization set the stage for debauchery and hedonism. Self-indulgence and wantonness sneaked into all classes. The nineteenth century saw decay in morals with rise in economy. The social and cultural isolation was broken with upward graph of earnings. Paris streets were streaming with all types of people, right from bohemians to the aristocrats and this was the time when a new class came into vogue ie the Bourgeoisie. This class was known to run the Parisian society and introduce new norms to it with their own morals and beliefs. More power was held by this class due to their wealth and they started erasing the supremacy of earlier elite classes or the aristocrats. Unlike old centuries, the bloodline and the ancestral money was no more a ticket to power. The enhanced earnings promoted extravagance and pastures of pleasure in and around Paris. The new “consumer culture” enhanced the temptation for acquisition

of material wealth which resulted in augmented rise in bulk production and commodification. New fashionable boutiques and stores selling modern consumer items made appearance which attracted all-both men and women. Paris became a sort of commercial temple and seductive dreamland to the world. As the commodification of goods increased so did the notion of commodification of women which eventually captured the interest of members of French literary and artistic circles. This shift in view towards women proposed increase in visits to prostitutes as one of the favorite leisure activities.

III. PROSTITUTION

Prostitution has always been a prime social concern for social activists even though prostitution is an age-old profession but it seems that nineteenth century Paris was an epicenter of prostitution. Especially during the period of Second Empire and the beginning of Third Republic, prostitution achieved remarkable popularity. An art historian, Hollis Clayson argued, "The existence of prostitution on a scale so widespread and obvious that it alarmed contemporaries, it was a distinctive and distinguishing feature of nineteenth century Parisian culture."

This trade was so popular that the prostitutes were graded according to their charges and standards. Hence, can be said that not only the wealthy people but the cash deficit bohemians also could enjoy this pleasure according to their financial means. The royals, aristocrats, bourgeois and even the wanderers or students all found it normal to visit prostitutes. A common belief of this century was reflected in a statement of a famous Parisian sexologist, Parent-Du Châtelet, "Prostitutes are inevitable, where men live together in large concentrations, as drains, and refuse dumps....the man who has desires will pervert your daughters and servant girls.....he will sow discord in the home." This statement seems to be defining prostitution as a fundamental evil for the society. The legal status of this trade never let it to be limited as a clandestine affair.

With increase in number of wealthy bourgeois, the number of prostitutes also increased in Paris. These women who adopted prostitution were not prostitutes by birth. Often, they adopted it due to some personal or financial problem but others turned towards prostitution as their own choice. It is not rare to see that whenever there was any dire financial crisis, women have looked upon this trade as a strong supporting pillar for survival. Parent-Duchâtelet, who produced an extensive work on women sex workers, said in *De la prostitution dans la Ville de Paris (1836)*, "all Parisian prostitutes were young working-class women, typically illiterate, who had been driven into prostitution by their economic circumstances." The expansion in industry, employed more women due to less wages and demands, resulting in increased rural flight rather more unmarried females migrating to Paris, to support their families. These women got employed as labor in industries, as sales girls in boutiques and the households of wealthy people. Hard work, need of more money, abusive husbands or boyfriends, and lack of education, escaping hunger and needs for the upkeep of families, exposed them to the male authorities in

all spheres, pushing them towards prostitution. On the other hand, often, they adopted prostitution to fulfill their dream of having their own shop, salon or meeting a wealthy suitor. Still, some girls accepted this profession just because of vain glamour and freedom associated with it. Henceforth, there was not a single reason behind a woman's entry into prostitution. The attitude of the society towards women concerning morality, sex, family, work etc. made sex trade, an appropriate profession choice for plenty. The French society did not allow much freedom to the girls. Women specially ones from bourgeois suffered many constraints from male dominant society. They were expected to be submissive and obedient with strict regulations. Women of all age groups were discouraged to maintain eye contact with men. There special lessons in the French Etiquette classes for incorporating subservience in the then females. Parisian woman, howsoever, efficient was expected to act invisible to the society. Working class women were also assumed to behave recessively like the bourgeoisie, though they were often presumed to have loose morals and having association with prostitution. To assert their presence, some rebels claimed their freedom through one and only easiest way known to them-the prostitution.

IV. REGULARISATION RATHER THAN ERADICATION

The increase in Parisian population and decrease in employment introduced prostitution as an easy source of money leading to the rise in number of prostitutes in the city of pleasure. It cannot be assumed that Paris was not suffering any problem due to ever increasing rise of community of prostitutes. Though Prostitution itself was a social problem but Paris reversed this belief by controlling and regularizing it with the help of law and police. As per Hollis Clayson in her study, *Painted Love:Prostitution in French Art of the Impressionist Era (1991)*, "Prostitutes in Paris were regulated by the police from around 1800, when a city-wide system was created that controlled the movements and health of an officially tolerated population of prostitutes." Prostitutes were tagged as "soumises" if they were under police control else, "insoumises" The insoumises were the ones who were of continuous concern to the police. Despite, strict regulation effort, the "clandestine prostitution", which was practiced by growing number of unregistered prostitutes, normally working as the seamstresses, bar girls, dancers, sales girls etc. was seen as a major social and health threat. Parisian society was afraid of these unidentified streetwalkers of mixing with the respectable society and contaminating the society with their immoral sexual ways. Frequently, the citizens raised concern about protecting innocent young girls from this vice as well as preventing male adolescents from the precocious sexual contact and female adolescents from the traps of seducers. The public also saw these street workers as a danger to their family outings. The men never wanted their women and children to be subjected to the pervert sexual scenes or advances on streets. Regulation was also needed to protect the financial destruction of families. The prostitutes were seen as a trap to catch young men from rich families leading to financial as

well as social destruction.

“Clandestine prostitution is much more dangerous than tolerated prostitution; it is a grave danger to morals through its pernicious influence.”

Police was very strict with the women who were caught for indulging in prostitution. They were at once arrested and their names permanently recorded in the police register. Even after leaving the trade their names remained in the police books. The health of the general public was one of the main issues behind regulation of the prostitutes. These women had to go for regular health check-ups

The hygiene factor was considered important as the general assumption of a prostitute was of one who was associated with foul smell and her body full of infectious fluids causing the decay and infection of the society. Too much indulgence in the sexual relations with prostitutes threaten the man of contacting sexual diseases like syphilis. The clients could carry these contagious diseases from the prostitutes to their own households, hence, to prevent the rot of the modest women and families, controlled check of the prostitutes' hygiene and health was of utmost importance. Even according to the opinion of the famous Dr. Parent-Duchâtelet, “the privileged agents of transmission for the disease is the woman-sewer, the putrid woman, the putain. The commercial workers and the lowly classes who are bound to serve the sexual demands of their influential employers are the most effective agent for destruction of bourgeoisie as a bearer of the deadly syphilis. ”. Henceforth, the best remedy was to identify and regularize these sex workers and prevent them from poisoning the morality and health of upper classes. In order to achieve this, in 1829, Mangin- a Parisian Prefect even tried to enclose them in a network. All the prostitutes whom he had identified, he tried prohibiting them from the alleys of Paris. Despite, such rigorous efforts, one can say, regularization of prostitutes was not very effective step and police was often condemned by people of being biased. Only the prostitutes had to go for health checkups and that too the ones who worked on streets or registered brothels but the high end, powerful prostitutes who were commonly known as courtesans were never called for any sanitary inspection. Adding to the difficulties, police and law faced accusations for being gender biased as well, since it was always assumed that only the women prostitutes were carriers of diseases, and they had to appear for thorough and often humiliating health examinations. Never once, were their male clients asked to be present for any sorts of medical scrutinization.

V. CLASSES OF PROSTITUTES AND CLIENTELE

The French sex trade gained popularity in practically all sectors of society right from the lowest to the highest. Prostitution was not just an ordinary profession; it was considered to be a highly specialized field for the high-end prostitutes. These high-end prostitutes often known as courtesans, worked in a glamorous way with lots of class so as to maintain their standards and charisma. They entertained only the rich and famous. Even the monarchs were amongst their patrons and often were influenced by their intelligent, attractive and fashionable mistresses. One

of the very famous courtesan of Paris was La Valtresse de la Bigne who rose from rags to riches, from being a lorette to a famous courtesan. who was known to rule Paris from her bed. They did not entertain any ordinary man and enjoyed several privileges as compared to the ordinary prostitutes. Another one of these courtesans, known for her lavish life style and blue blood admirers was “Cora Pearl”. Born in England but spell bound by Paris and its rich culture, she never returned to her homeland. Apart from other famous lovers like Duke of Rivoli,, Prince Achille Murat, William the Prince of Orange, her most celebrated loyal admirer was Prince Napoléon known as Prince Jéroôme Bonaparte. He even granted her access to his palace.

These courtesans could spend lavishly on their upkeep as they used to be showered with extravagant allowances and gifts from their wealthy visitors. These popular courtesans were also known for their gimmicks at their exorbitant parties. Cora Pearl can never be forgotten, for pulling out one such scandalous ploy, when she served herself naked (apart from her some parsley sprinkled on her body) at one of her parties.

The courtesans had their own salons frequented by the wealthy and who's who from the literary circles. These salons were very well known for the intellectual discussions, as well. These courtesans had the privilege of forgoing the humiliation of crude medical inspection. There were “filles de maison” who worked in brothels or “fille en carte” who worked independently but who had been identified by the police. Then there were Grisettes who during the day time, served as sales girls in the boutiques or the fashion stores (the new concept of new Paris) but in the dark hours, would often visit the outskirts of the city which was the popular abode of students, artists, thus in search of extra dime to support their families. Grisettes added glamour to the life of people who could not afford lavish lifestyles. But sometimes, these girls just worked as sex workers to add an extra fun to their lives. However, people visiting these fashionable stores also considered the sales girls equivalent to easily available commodities for sale and often allured them with their money.

VI. IMPACT ON LITERARY AND ARTISTIC PERSPECTIVE

The world of prostitution found way into the literary circles of Paris as well. The fast-rising fame of prostitution in the society, the charm of the lifestyle of prostitutes, inspired the Parisian intellectuals, to liberally showcase in their works, the booming sexuality in the contemporary society. Charles Baudelaire, the famous writer even accentuated the them prostitution by just this one liner, “What is art? Prostitution” The famous French writer, Alexandre Dumas fils named this world with a new terminology “le demimonde”. He coined this term for one of his plays in 1855, reserving it for a class of fallen society women but down the century, this term also included the women of higher society but with low morals, with their patrons who were respectable men belonging to the nouveau riche bourgeoisie, royalty, aristocracy, etc. The art connoisseurs did not hesitate in raising the curtain of this new facet of French sexualism. Probably, this was some sort

of modern and novel subject for them apart from the usual ones. The reference of beautifully scandalous “Olympia”, the celebrated work of Édouard Manet cannot be avoided at all. The main attraction of this painting is a reclining nude woman who is a prostitute. the painting when unveiled in Paris in 1863 made Parisian audience violent due to the shocking realism served to them. The gallery had to hire two guards to protect it. Then there was Giovanni Boldini’s “Scene de Fête” au Moulin Rouge in 1889, representing the libertine spirit of Paris.

To name a few, the playwrights like Émile Zola who took inspiration for his work “Nana” from the world of prostitutes, immortalizing famous courtesan, “La Valtresse.” Victor Hugo was another of the maestros to bring forward the miseries of the sex workers in “Les Misérables”(1862). It may seem life’s irony, that these women who had nothing but ill fame, could inspire the contemporary writers to fame. “Païva” the famous courtesan of this century though a poor Russian, came to France and became an influential courtesan. Paiva and her life style was so renowned that even the description of “Huis Clos’ , a work of Jean Paul Sartre, the French playwright and philosopher, seems to be inspired form the salon of Paiva. Alexandre Dumas fils who wrote his first masterpiece “La Dame aux Camélias” took inspiration from his once lady love, Marie Duplessis another famous courtesan of her times. Even the developing print industry came up with an increased number of publications related to sex trade, money, problems and diseases associated with it. Interestingly, there was a French book published in 1826, « Dictionnaire Anedotique des Nymphes du Palais-Royal et autres Quartiers de Paris par un homme de bien. » This book served as a sort of directory of prostitutes, to a person visiting France, and interested in availing services of any prostitute. It contained all information concerning the Parisian prostitutes in proper alphabetical order of their first names and their residential addresses. It went far beyond as much as with the physical appearance details of these prostitutes.

Not to forget, there was a sort of handbook of prostitutes called “The Pretty Women of Paris” published in 1883 with the photographs of best-known courtesans of France and their sexual forte, confirming the belief the rising prostitution in the then Paris. Thus, none of the art and literature modes were left untouched by the spell of prostitutes.

VII. CONCLUSION

As already claimed, prostitution one of the oldest vices has always been considered a taboo for all cultures, in all centuries. Though a necessary evil, prostitutes were always ostracized by the public. Still, France accepted it as an unavoidable thing for the society and tried to regularize and control the sex workers to avoid contamination of the general household and honorable women, but the system failed miserably because of lack of enough resources. The regularization tried to limit the prostitutes to a certain area but its failure resulted in their presence all over the city. Howsoever the strict regulations might be, Paris of 19th century continuously allured prostitutes from all over, even the ones from across the continents migrated to be a part of

the rich and colorful Parisian culture. Paris, a city spilling glitz and glamour all round, held the charm for these prostitutes as on certain destination, to be. They could find countless wealthy patrons who could shower wealth and power on these prostitutes. Some of the prostitutes even known to influence the monarchs and the government. Strong impact of the rise in the infamous trade of prostitution was seen all over France, especially the capital. Even though, prostitutes were considered equivalent to the sewage, nobody can deny its magnetism.

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