

Rebellion against the cult of Devadasi through *Breaking Free: A Novel* by Vaasanthi

Dr. Rashmi Jain,
Assistant Professor,
Department of English,
Iswar Saran Degree College, Prayagraj, India
Email: rashmi.jain23@gmail.com

Abstract

Breaking Free: A Novel by Vaasanthi was translated from Tamil into English by N. Kalyan Raman. Vaasanthi has exposed the turbulent world of devadasis and the complexity of their lives. The stigma of being a devadasi or belonging to devadasi clan leaves an everlasting impact on the family which makes their life difficult and unbearable to live. Chandra Talpade Mohanty opined that women are the first and foremost victim of any kind of violence and suppression and this has been aptly represented in the novel. The double marginalization of women through gender and caste has been highlighted. The subjugation of women particularly who were transformed into devadasi and in general has been exposed. Devadasi (Deva-God and dasi-servant which means servant of God) system exhibited the injustice and exploitation of women. These women were married to God but were emotionally and sexually exploited by the kings and zamindars of the society who acted as their patrons. Devadasi system is a social evil and *Breaking Free: A Novel* exposed the trauma of the disenfranchisement of the community of hereditary courtesan dancers. The lives of Kasturi and Lakshmi who belonged to devadasi clan are intertwined and it diverges finally leading them to meet at crossroads.

Keywords: Devadasi, exploitation, marginalization, trauma, courtesan, caste.

In a patriarchal system, women are subjugated and oppressed, however, female oppression is not unitary since they succumb to the gender norms of their respective caste. Devadasis generally belong to the lower strata of society and were oppressed on the basis of caste, class and gender. Vaasanthi has exposed the turbulent world of devadasis and the complexity of their lives. K.A. Geetha (2021) opined Dalit women were doubly marginalized as they were oppressed based on caste and gender. They suffered both in the private and public domain. Caste Hindu women (upper caste Hindus) suffer from 'private patriarchy' however enjoy a definite status of pativrata or a virtuous wife within caste society if conform to the ideologies of caste. (89) She even adds "On the other hand, since most Dalit women are from economically disadvantaged sections of society, they will have to work in the public realm to earn their living" (88). Men sexually harassed and threatened to rape Dalit women, forcing them to live in fear of being violated specifically in public domain.

The earliest traces of Devadasi institution were found through inscriptional evidence of the eighth century in South India. Their existence has been hinted at in the fifth and sixth century history of Pallavas and Pandiya. The term devadasi is a Sanskritized form of Tamil word 'devaradiyar' which means a female slave dedicated to the service of some specific God or deity in a temple. The primary social identity of the devadasi was associated with the temple, they may or may not be a prostitute or dancers but they provide regular service to the temple. They were unmarried women who were married to God and considered chaste women who acted as the harbinger of auspiciousness to the state and society. These women were well versed in music and dance and on certain specific occasions, they would sing and dance in the temples. They were associated with a patron to fulfil their monetary needs but with the passage of time specifically during the colonial period, corruption encroached and the patron (zamindars/kings/wealthy brahmins) started exploiting the devadasi wanting a share of the sacred body; thus, turning them to prostitutes. These devadasis generally belong to lower caste and were subjugated on the basis of caste, class and gender. Devadasi system was a pan-India phenomenon and devadasi were addressed with different names in different parts of the country. They were identified as devadasi, devnar, kootikal, kuttiyar (in Kerala) sanis, bhogam, jogin (in Andhra Pradesh), suleyar, basvi, jogtis (in Karnataka), jogateen, aradhini (Marathi speaking regions) and many

more. "As per the custom of devadasi order, the selected girls underwent certain ceremonies like pottu kattuthal (tying pottu) gejjā puja (anklet ceremony) and puberty." (Jeevanandam and Pande, 2016, p.25) During the colonial period, the temple economy declined which made devadasis lose temple patronage, which further resulted in economic hardship. Thus, they got entangled in prostitution and concubinage for their survival, thereby shifting from the sacred to profane sphere. The 'nautch' performed by them during public gatherings, feasts and marriages were considered degraded by the British. Probably the entire phase of the national struggle was to protect and strengthen the national culture. The morality was associated with the body of the women. Even various reformers considered the devadasi system as a degradation of society and consequently the movement for abolition of the devadasi system was initiated in 1868 and the world conferences in 1906 and 1907 seriously discussed about its abolition.

Both in terms of economic autonomy, through a denial of control over productive resources, and autonomy in law, women were made appendages of men. Indeed, women themselves were the property, both in terms of their reproductive and their productive labour, of men... The mechanism of controls operated on women through three devices and at three levels. (Chakravarti, 2018, p.70)

Women were controlled through three mediums, the first was ideology; the second was the kinsmen's right to discipline and govern women; and the third was the king's authority to chastise and discipline them for errant behaviour.

Breaking Free: A Novel has exposed the journey of the devadasis and their clan from being sacred to profane and the role of colonization in it. It's a saga of the struggle of four generations of women living in a patriarchal setup out of which two generations were involved in the devadasi system directly and the other two suffered the repercussions of being connected to the clan. The temple appears as an arbitrator and takes control over social identity and sexuality of a group of women who occupy the lowest rungs in caste order, and the Devadasi system is based on caste ideologies. The novel begins with the story of Kasturi and Lakshmi who were born in the devadasi clan and destined to join their mother's profession. Kasturi since childhood was brainwashed however Lakshmi was a rebel, she has developed a sense of anger and hatred for the clan in which she was born, it was a wretched clan for her. While they were learning dancing, Lakshmi was hardly interested and she asked Periya Mirasu, her father to make arrangements for her study, even though she was his illegitimate daughter, he made the arrangements. Lakshmi went to the high school and didn't meet Kasturi for three years. During this time Paati revealed that Kasturi would be married to God, first, it sounded ludicrous to her as it was just an idol but Paati said it was real for them. She said when Kasturi would accept God as her husband uttering:

I am your slave, and wear bottu, you will have higher status than the priest... It's your good fortune- and ours. God is your husband. You will always be an auspicious woman, auspicious forever. There will be no ill fortune in your life. It's a position that everyone born in the clan aspires to... Go stand in the deity's chamber and dance...when you dance to this line, the gates of heaven will open for you. (Vaasanthi, 2022, p. 49)

On the other hand, it can be noticed that the clan of devadasis were treated as an outcast. During the wedding of Periya Mirasu's legitimate daughter Pappa, Thulasi was ill-treated and ignored by Mirasu and his wife. Thulasi and her daughter were asked to sit in the backyard and when everyone has eaten, they will get the food. Lakshmi soon perceived the inhuman treatment meted out to them; they were no more than beggars to Mirasus.

Kasturi was truly in love with her art of dancing, nothing really mattered to her apart from dancing. Later, when she was asked by Paati to go to Raja she was extremely pained. She even asked Paati that if God is her husband, then why she has to go to Raja. Paati again brainwashed her and she came under her spell. Devadasis were emotionally and sexually exploited. Paati said:

We are not housewives. We are born in pursuit of art. We need rich men to take care of us. If we are to develop and safeguard these arts, we shouldn't have to face problems in running our household. That's why we have this custom in our community. We are not going to make any claims on that rich man. Think of it merely as an arrangement...this body is merely a costume, a block of wood, the sages say. Sleeping with Raja will bring no dishonour to you or to your soul. (Vaasanthi, 2022, pp.86-87)

Later, Kasturi met Singaram, a singer and freedom fighter, she was attracted to him and fell in love, however, she was not permitted to love any other man being a married woman (Deity's wife). Devadasis were not allowed to have any interaction with the men of lower caste. Kasturi gets a shock and reality check when she performs in front of a huge gathering and an Englishman -Durai stood all of a sudden and grabbed her waist and hand, Kasturi was astonished and her face turned red with humiliation. When she asked him to stay away, one Zamindar commented "Are you going to melt if he touches you? Why are you acting shy, as if you are a chaste woman?" (Vaasanthi, 2022, p.120) After being humiliated, Kasturi retaliated demanding to be respected as an artist.

Thilakam- Kasturi's sister also had to pay the price of her association with the devadasi clan. She falls in love with Kalyanaraman (Gopalaiyer's son) an upper-caste man, she elopes to get married to him. Thilakam's departure was a thunderstroke for Kasturi as she escaped leaving a letter mentioning that she wanted to lead a respectable life, leaving this despicable life which others are living. These words reminded Kasturi of Lakshmi. Thilakam married for a respectable life but she hardly got any respect as the attitude of the family towards Thilakam was disgusting. They treated her like an outcast and always taunted her for belonging to the devadasi clan. When Kasturi came for the Madras concert, she wanted to know whether Thilakam was happy or not? Thilakam couldn't utter a word about her deplorable condition, she was like a caged bird. Thilakam was mentally, physically and emotionally tortured by her husband. They forbade her singing and restrained her from having any connection with her past life and family. Her husband taunted her for being a whore, for belonging to a cursed clan of devadasis though she would be a whore only at night. Her dreams and expectations collapsed within a week of her marriage. She never imagined that he would lash out in anger anytime and sex would be so fraught with violence. Her personality became underconfident and fearful. Thilakam was beaten badly for singing a hymn in the temple which broke her from inside and she committed suicide. Thilakam was no more than an object for her husband, "attached thereafter to her husband's hearth, she is no more than his chattel and the chattel of the clan into which she has been put. (Beauvoir, 1997, p. 115)

Lakshmi on the other hand struggled and fought her own battle at school and college levels, she was the only woman in the class, and many a times taunted for the community to which she belonged. Later, Lakshmi was enrolled in a medical college; she even helped a child widow named Yogu. Lakshmi became a doctor and a social activist; this led the government to make her a member of the legislative council. There she gave a speech in favour of a law that emphasised abolition of the devadasi system which was covered by all the newspapers. Finally, a resolution was passed called the Devadasis Abolition Act. Many devadasis got together and raised their voices against the resolution but Lakshmi was firm, she advocated "their connection with the land was what tied them to temples, kept them hostage... It was a psychological imprisonment devised by upper caste men..." (Vaasanthi, 2022, p.238)

"In keeping with the requirements of the caste-based society, the most reprehensible cases of adultery are when a woman have sexual relations with men of the lower castes..." (Chakravarti, 2018, p.74) The King thus upheld the current pattern of relations with regard to land and caste order. The purity of caste, both for the present as well as in the future, has been analysed by gender purity and thus social order itself.

Finally, Kasturi realized her mistake, and how she had been targeted by the patriarchal setup. She was charged for having a relationship with a man (Singaram) whom she loved belonged to a lower caste, she had to swear about her purity in front of the deity. For the first time she blamed her mother for creating an unreal image of the devadasi system. She uttered "...my relationship with the temple has become a lie... why didn't I think it like Lakshmi" (Vaasanthi, 2022, p.287) Singaram died as a martyr, fighting for the country's freedom during a procession where he was accompanied by Kasturi. After Singaram's death, Kasturi went to Lakshmi and asked for help, they went far away and was accompanied by Yogu.

The story shifts to the present scenario where Maya contemplates about the death of her mother Dharini. She was puzzled and tried to search for the cause of her mother's suicide. Lost in her thoughts, she moved towards the dense forest and felt stuck, all of a sudden, she saw her mother in a yellow saree. Was she a spirit? She followed her mother and felt as if she was floating on clouds, soon she was out of the dense forest and the spirit vanished. At home, while turning the pages of *The House*

of Blue Mangoes she found a few names and addresses on empty pages in Amma's handwriting mentioning CSI Retreat Centre, Sabapathi, Aranmanai Street, Thanjavur. Later, Maya found Dharini's passport and was astonished to see Kodaikanal as her birthplace. From the CSI Centre she couldn't get any information apart from the fact that her mother made several donations over there. One day while on a stroll with her father, Maya came to know that her famous grandmother was a daughter of devadasi, which astonished her. At the police station, they said that her mother was not mentally sound and this was informed by an old woman from CSI, her name was Yogambul. Later Maya visited the CSI centre and enquired about Yogambul but the nun said she was too old and didn't like to meet anyone. When she gave a card and wrote 'Dharini's daughter', Yogambul agreed to meet but told her to forget everything through gestures as she couldn't utter a word. At home, in the lower drawer of the desk, she found a torn page in which it was written Kasturi Amma passed away. Maya then went to Kodaikanal to meet Sabhapati and enquired about Dharini's visit. He mentioned that her grandmother Lakshmi and his sister Kasturi were close friends. He even said that his son died in a road accident. She again visited to CSI centre but received the news of Yogambul's death, however, Yogambul had left an envelope for her. When Maya opened the envelope, she found an old black and white photo of two women holding a small baby of two months. The woman with a baby looked just like Maya and it was inscribed Kasturi with her child Dharini and me. Maya understood that her mother was Kasturi's daughter whom she gave birth secretly in Kodaikanal. As she was sitting and thinking, a boy came and told her that a man had pushed her mother in the water. The man then headed towards the bus stand and his grandmother asked him to stay quiet. The bus he chose to travel was going to Vathalagundu. The revelation was consoling that Dharini never committed suicide. She stood up and dialled Sabhapati's number and asked the date of his son's death which was the fourth of July, -the day Amma died and disconnected. Maya was intelligent enough to connect the loose ends and finally solved the riddle. The burden of the past is unbearable, still, the mystery was solved. After, knowing her lineage she decided to return to her father in Delhi. She selected her new project and the protagonist would be devadasi Kasturi.

Vaasanthi has shed light on the vulnerable plight of devadasis and their struggles. Kasturi was the victim of the circumstances, patriarchy and caste. Lakshmi was a visionary and strong enough to understand the oppression and take action against it so that it could be helpful to her as well as to others. Dharini and Maya also had to pay a price for belonging to a cursed clan. However, Maya was strong like Lakshmi and took major steps to solve the mystery of her mother's death which made her to identify her lineage. Vaasanthi through this novel explored the oppressive Devadasi system, the exploitation of women and how it shifted from being sacred to profane. Later during the colonial era, the system degraded which led to its abolishment. However, the peculiar aspect is despite the abolition of the devadasi system there are some signs of its existence even today.

References

- Beauvoir, Simone de. (1997). *The Second Sex* (H. M. Parshley, Trans. & Ed.). London: Vintage Books.
- Jeevanandam, S, and Pande Rekha. (2016). *Devadasis in South India: A Journey from Sacred to a Profane Spaces*. Delhi: Kalpaz Publications.
- Chakravarti, Uma. (2018). *Gendering Caste through a Feminist Lens*. New Delhi: SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd.
- Vaasanthi. (2022). *Breaking Free: A Novel* (N. Kalyan Raman, Trans.) Gurugram, Haryana: Harper Perennial.
- Geetha, K.A. (2021). Entrenched Fissures: Caste and Social Differences among Devadasis. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 22(4), 87-96. Retrieved from <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol22/iss4/7>.