
The Female on the Fringe: A Study of the ‘Devdasi’ System in Amita Trasi’s *The Color of Our Sky*

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Abstract

Marginalization is a social phenomenon by which a person or a group of people become relegated or ostracized in our society. Marginalization generally talks about the inequality on the basis of economy, politics, class, caste, religion, race and of course gender. Simone de Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex*, defines women as the “Other”—the marginalized in the patriarchal power-structure. The word *devdasi* is a Sanskrit word which means a female-servant of *deva* or god. Between the ages of eight to thirteen, devdasis are offered or ‘married’ to a goddess according to their rituals and hence, they are unable to marry any ‘mortal being’, which eventually converts them to nothing but sex-workers. Amita Trasi in her debut novel, *The Color of Our Sky*, portrays a heart-rending story of two teenage friends—Tara (a rich upper class girl) and Mukta (a daughter of a devdasi who comes to stay at Tara’s house to avoid her fate). But Mukta, destined to be a temple-prostitute, is kidnapped one night from Tara’s house. In course of the story, we gradually come to know that the two girls are no other than step-sisters. The aim of this paper is to present the plight of the devdasis and to present them as the extremely marginalized beings among the “Other”.

Keywords: *Marginalization, Women, Devdasi, Caste-system*

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Introduction

Amita Trasi in her debut novel, *The Color of Our Sky* (2017), portrays a heart-rending story of two teenage friends—Tara (a rich upper-class girl) and Mukta (a daughter of a devdasi who comes to stay at Tara's house to avoid her fate). But Mukta, destined to be a temple-prostitute, is kidnapped one night from Tara's house. In course of the story, we gradually come to know that the two girls are no other than step-sisters. Amita Trasi was born and raised in Mumbai. She got her MBA in Human Resource Management and has worked with various international organizations and now she is residing in Houston, Texas. The novel consists of thirty-two chapters and the entire story is told by the two main characters—Tara and Mukta—in each alternate chapter in the motif of 'prince-and-the-pauper', thereby, suggesting the incompatibility between rich and poor, noble and kneaded, centralized and marginalized from the very outset of the novel. The novel starts in June 2004 by the story of Tara, the rich upper-class lady in her mid-twenties. She comes back to Mumbai after residing in US for eleven years and now, in search of her kidnapped friend Mukta. She gives us her flashback memories of her childhood and teenage days in Mumbai and also describes of her present search for Mukta. In the very next chapter, we come across the other girl Mukta, the daughter of a devdasi who eventually turns into a prostitute. Mukta starts her story by describing the first ceremony of offering her as a temple-prostitute at a remote village Ganipur in Maharashtra in the year 1986. After spending the life of a devdasi for several months at her village, Mukta is brought to Tara's house in Mumbai by Tara's father Mr. Ashok Deshmukh who is in an NGO which works for finding abducted children and rehabilitation of them.

Who are these 'Devdasis':

The word 'devdasi' is a Sanskrit word which consists of two words—*deva* means 'god' and *dasi* means 'female slave'. The word literally means the 'female slave of god'. In this practice, lower-caste girls are married to a goddess at their very childhood and, therefore, are unable to marry any 'mortal being' in their life-time. They are known by different names in different states of India; for example, *Murali* in Maharashtra, *Basavi* and *Murali* in Andhra Pradesh, and *Jogata* in Karnataka (Shingal 108). Devdasis are usually from 'Dalits'—the lowest among the four castes in India. The marginalization of 'Dalits' has a great impact on all the spheres of their lives, thereby violating basic human rights such as political, economical, social, civil, cultural and educational rights. Structural discrimination against them is very common in our society.

Ankur Shingal states that the practice of devdasi system begins in the 6th century A.D. during Kesari dynasty in the southern part of India, when one powerful queen of this dynasty declares that some extremely talented classical female dancers must be offered to the goddess to please her (109). After being married to a deity (generally goddess *Yellamma*), these girls are considered to be very

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sacred. Apart from taking part in daily rituals of the temple, they have to perform classical dances in various auspicious occasions. But during the British rule, the glory of the devdasis begins to tarnish due to the loss of power of the royal patrons. The loss of patronage and sponsorship lead them to take a life similar to sex-workers (Shingal 110). This relegation of their status is stated by historian William Dalrymple:

The devadasis stand in the direct line of one of the oldest institutions in India. The word comes from Sanskrit: *deva* means “god” and *dasi* means “a female servant”. At the heart of the institution lies the idea of a woman entering for life the service of a deity. The nature of that service and the name given to it have wide regional variations and have changed through time; only recently have most devadasis come to be working in the sex trade. . . . Today, the devdasis are drawn exclusively from the lowest castes—usually from the Dalit Madar caste—and are almost entirely illiterate. The majority of modern devdasis in Karnataka are straightforward sex workers. . . . They usually work from home rather than in brothels or on the streets, and tend to start younger than commercial sex workers. Nevertheless, the main outlines of their working lives are in reality little different from those of others in the sex-trade.

Due to a rare combination of religious views, poverty, social construction, illiteracy, and caste-system, this heinous practice of offering little girl-children to prostitution is going on through generations after generations. The little girl Mukta at the age of ten, is offered to the goddess Yellamma by her own grandmother Sakubai after a series of religious rituals:

The priest asked Sakubai, “Are you willing to dedicate your granddaughter to the Goddess?”

Sakubai nodded. “Yes,” she said just as easily as I had expected she would, without a second thought.

Then the priest addressed to me, while leaning forward and planting a red *tilak* on my forehead. “You cannot marry any man. You are married to the deity and only after worshipping her will you be able to have a meal. You have to fast two days a week and oblige any man who comes to you. If he beats you, you must not retaliate.” (Trasi 73)

The devdasi-families strongly believe that curse will fall upon them if they refuse to dedicate their girl-children to the goddess. Mukta’s grandmother tells her daughter when she refuses to dedicate Mukta to this tradition:

“You will anger the deity. We will have to live with her curse if you insult our tradition. It was decided for us the day we were born.”

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“What tradition? What was decided? That we are going to sleep with men in the name of God, that we are servants of God but the wife of the entire village?” (21)

The prominent contrast between a devdasi and a sex-worker is that, a devdasi is forced to accept the status of a prostitute at her very childhood and that is also by her own family members; and here in case of Mukta, it is her grandmother who forces her. As they are married to a ‘deity’, they cannot marry any ‘mortal being’ and this iniquitous action is again wrapped in the name of serving god, as Mukta’s grandmother says, “We are *nitya sumangali*—free from the evil of widowhood—because we never marry a man. We don’t need one. We have the privilege of marrying the Goddess” (21). And if anyone of them tries to ‘marry’ any human being she is murdered as we are told “the story of Suhana and her lover. Their bloated bodies were found floating in the sea near the Gateway of India, just because Suhana had escaped. She had married a customer and was living in her own home for almost three months until Madam’s *goondas* caught up with them” (251).

People from higher-caste often believe that defloration of a virgin is a prestigious deed. Anthropologist Suzanne Leclerc-Madlala in her essay “On the Virgin Cleansing Myth: Gendered Bodies, AIDS and Ethnomedicine”, says that there is a myth in South African and Asian countries that having intercourse with a virgin maid will be a panacea for venereal diseases including HIV/AIDS and this myth is a potential factor of raping infants by HIV positive men in those countries (87-95). There is always a demand and high price for offering a virgin devdasi to an aristocrat higher-caste man. William Dalrymple says:

More than a thousand girls, usually between the ages of five and ten years, continue to be dedicated to the goddess annually. If the girls are dedicated when they are very young, they return to a normal childhood. When they reach puberty, they are wrenched from their lives and offered to the highest bidder to be deflowered.

Mukta describes the haggling for money between her owner and a customer at the very first day of her defloration:

They haggled about money, with her going higher and him preferring to stay closer to what he had initially offered. I hadn’t understood most of the conversation I heard that day.

“... but I am giving you a virgin,” Madam said.

“I can have others . . .”

“But it is a reasonable price.” (Trasi 75)

The oppressed is unheard:

After spending the life of a devdasi for several months at her village, Mukta is brought to Tara’s house in Mumbai by Tara’s father Mr. Ashok Deshmukh. He brings Mukta home not as his

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own daughter but as a mere rescued girl from trafficking. After the traumatic experience of forced prostitution by her own grandmother, Mukta becomes completely mum for a long time. Even after coming to the safe shelter in Mumbai, she is unable to speak a word. Spivak says, “There is no space from which the sexed subaltern subject can speak” (307). McLeod comments on muteness of an oppressed:

It is not so much that subaltern women did not speak, but rather that others did not know how to listen, how to enter into a transaction between speaker and the listener. The subaltern cannot speak because their words cannot be properly interpreted. Hence, the silence of the female as subaltern is the result of a failure of interpretation and not a failure of articulation. (195)

Mukta’s suppressed agony often comes out in the form of groaning and sobbing during night. But there is none who can transcript her groaning into words. Her involuntary act of groaning fails to reach to a voluntary receiver who can interpret her agony. Furthermore, this groaning, particularly at night, causes a great agitation for the neighbours of the Deshmukh family. They easily find something ‘ominous’ in the crying of an innocent girl:

One man . . . warned us, quite politely, that every night the girl screamed and wailed she invited evil into our home.

“After all,” he said, “how can a mute girl scream?”

A lady standing beside him made a sign of the cross and said the devil must be in her. (Trasi 92)

Truly, “the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow” (Spivak 287).

Child abduction and trafficking:

At one night, Mukta is kidnapped from Tara’s house and sold to the famous bordellos of Kamathipura in Mumbai as a sex-worker. And this heinous deed is done by a neighbour and very close friend of Mr. Deshmukh. One more striking fact is that the money paid to the kidnapper from the buyer, is considered as a ‘debt’ for the girl who is abducted and she has to pay back that amount to the brothel-owners. Mukta meets another girl who is sold by her fake lover and who is still paying her ‘debt’ to the brothel-owner:

For us—the women in our family—the truck drivers who pass on the highway are a regular means of livelihood. We have our houses along the highways so truckers can avail themselves of our services easily. I made one mistake—falling in love, thinking I could have a family. We eloped. He . . . he brought me here, sold me. I did not know then that when the brothel owners buy us, the money they give our kidnappers

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becomes our debt. It has been two years, and I still haven't paid my debt. (Trasi 224-25)

Sometimes girl-children are abducted by mixing drug to their food as another girl shares her experience, "I hadn't eaten in two days. I jumped at it and didn't think. He had drugged it, brought me to Bombay . . ." (225). When Mukta's daughter is born, she is siphoned to Sonagachi in Kolkata with some other girls by a truck full of fish to wile the cops and her little daughter is shifted to somewhere else. According to children rights organization, CRY:

It is the children of poor and marginalized communities who are often trafficked to be forced into labour. Parents of these children are either betrayed or lured due to their poor socio-economic conditions thus forcing them to 'send' or 'sell' their children for better livelihood options. The lack of awareness is a situation that traffickers exploit especially when it comes to uneducated poor living in slums and others backward regions in the country. Traffickers promise daily wages to parents of young children and transport them to big cities where they are often treated as commodities. Families in dire financial conditions are often approached by traffickers with an offer to buy their children and with no other escape from their pitiful conditions, parents comply.

Quest for identity:

The very fact of marginalization deals with the journey of an oppressed in a quest of self-identity. Discriminations against these women take place psychologically, emotionally and physically. Isolated habitation, lack of social acceptability, and illiteracy lead them in a state of identity-crisis. According to sociologist Louis Wirth, a minority group is any "group of people who, because of their physical or cultural characteristics, are singled out from the others in the society in which they live for differential and unequal treatment, and who therefore regard themselves as objects of collective discrimination" (347). Trasi gives a trenchant description of Mukta's quest for her father though in vain:

I saw a man leave the mansion, saunter past the sleeping security guards, and walk up to the car waiting for him outside the gates. . . .

Then something strange happened. I started running toward the man. I don't know what I was thinking when I called out, "Appa!"

The man turned to look, squinted through the sunlight.

"Appa!" I yelled again, even louder, as I stopped a few yards away. . . . When I ran behind the car, the man had looked behind briefly as if he was sorry he had to leave me behind. And I knew then, I knew as the dust that the car left behind blew on my

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face, that my father did not want me, that he would never come to get me. Sakubai had been right all along; I did not deserve a father. (50-51)

Mukta's father Ashok Deshmukh, son of the Brahmin zaminder of that village, knows very well that she is his daughter. Mukta says, "I was too fair for a lower caste, and it was clear I had inherited my looks and my green eyes from my father, who was an upper-caste Brahmin" (14). Later when she is trafficked to the bordellos, she even loses her own name, as Mukta says, "they call me by any name here—sweetie, chameli, chanda—whatever the customer prefers" (249).

Women—Irrespective of Class and Caste—are Marginalized:

Simone de Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex*, says:

Thus humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him: she is not regarded as an autonomous being. . . . For him she is sex—absolute sex, no less. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute—she is the Other. (16)

Not only the devdasis are at the fringe of our society, not only they are coerced, but the upper-class women are in no better situation. Apart from Mukta, the other upper class girl Tara and her mother are also afflicted by the patriarchal hegemony. Tara's parents are from Hindu Brahmin family and they elope from their village and marry without the permission of their parents. Their parents are against this marriage as Tara's mother's horoscope does not match with that of her father. The consequence of the disobedience of this couple is really shocking. Tara and her mother are not allowed to enter the village. Tara says about her parents' deed:

They were the ones who had eloped from their village and married without their parents' permission . . . if she ever dared to step inside that village, her father would have killed her.

"That is what fathers do in my [Tara's mother] village when their daughter does something so dishonourable. It is not safe for you [Tara] to go to their. If you step foot in that village, your life is in danger too." She used to sigh and say, "Only your Papa is forgiven. Only he is allowed to visit the village." (Trasi 57)

It is very astonishing that, after the elopement of the couple, the woman is not allowed to enter the village and is threatened to be killed by her own father because she is a 'woman', but the man is spared only because he is a 'man'. They both are from rich Brahmin caste and in this case the fault is the woman's unmatched horoscope! Tara's mother defines a perfect wife as, "A good woman's life is in her husband's happiness, in being a good wife and a good mother, taking care of the family" (58).

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Marginalization of the HIV Affected:

The people who are affected by HIV/AIDS, frequently face multiple obstacles and are impeded in accessing public services like health-care, housing, employment, education etc. Consequently, they are marginalized and stigmatized in our society. And the sex-workers affected by HIV/AIDS are deterred not only from the mainstream society but from their own community as well. Shalini Bharat et al. say:

Disclosure of HIV status to other sex-workers and to *gharwalis* (literary house owner, but in regard to sex-workers, the woman who owns them because she has bought them for a price) was very rare. Reasons included fear of isolation, ostracism, loss of income, and destitution. The first reaction of most sex-workers to a positive HIV test result was one of denial. . . . Researchers were told that the sight of a sex-worker dying on the streets was not unusual. (55)

It is hinted that Mukta's mother is affected by HIV and when Mukta goes to fetch some medicine from the local *vaidya* (doctor), he aggrieves her. She dies pathetically. Later Mukta is also affected by this disease.

Conclusion

In our society, women, lower-caste people, illiterate people, diseased people, impoverished people are marginalized. So, those very women who are poor, illiterate, diseased and from lower-caste as well are marginalized to such an extent that is almost unthinkable. And the devdasis are from those extremely stymied groups of women. Indian Government effectively makes the devdasi system illegal in the year 1924. Various laws, such as, Madras Devdasi Act (1947), Karnataka Devdasi Act (1982), Andhra Pradesh Devdasi Act (1988) and Maharastra Devdasi Bill (2005) have been passed (Shingal 116). The practice of devdasi system violates a lot of domestic and international laws. Though now this practice is not as widespread as it was once, it cannot be eradicated completely. Trasi's novel clearly shows the status and the extremely ostracised position of the devdasis in India at present.

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