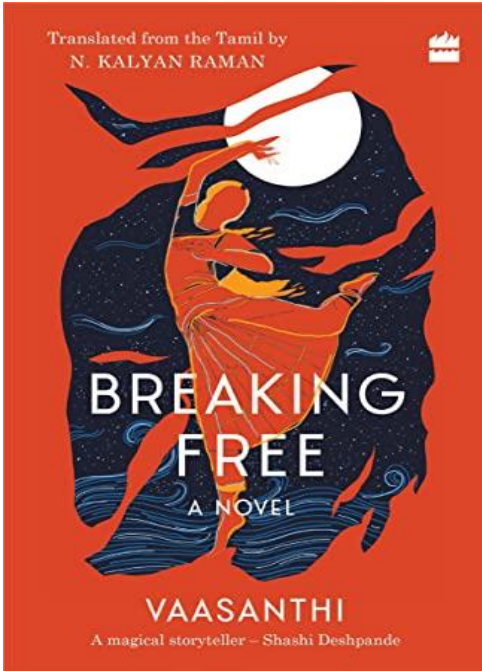


Vaasanthi. 2022. *Breaking Free: A Novel*, Translated by N. Kalyan Raman. Gurugram: Harper Perennial, pp. 343. ISBN: 978-93-9440-759-6.



Vaasanthi's *Breaking Free* offers a rare reading of the struggle for emancipation of the devadasi community of Tamil Nadu. Originally written in Tamil as *Vittu Viduthalaiyagi* (2012), the novel was translated into English by N. Kalyan Raman in 2022. This is the second of Vaasanthi's novel translated by N. Kalyan Raman, the first being *At the Cusp of Ages* (2008). In the "Translator's Note," Raman states, "*Vittu Viduthalaiyagi* (2012)... was the first novel I read that deals with the complex history of the devadasi community through the device of fiction." In the following decade appeared a few novels in English rooted in the same milieu such as Champa Bilwakesh's *Desire of the Moth* (2015), Srividya Natarajan's *The Undoing Dance* (2018), Gitanjali Kolanad's *Girl Made of Gold* (2020), and Maya Goray's *Devadasi* (2021).

The devadasi tradition *Breaking Free* deals with is estimated to have originated in the fourth century CE. It however flourished particularly in the early medieval period when it became an integral part of temple service in the Southern and Eastern regions of India, where the present states of Karnataka, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Orissa lie. About the social implication of the term devadasi, Saskia C. Kersenboom observes: "According to several devadasi informants, there is a devadasi 'life' (*vrtti*), and a devadasi 'order or traditional

right' (*murai*, Tamil) but not a devadasi caste (*jati*)" (54). The term devadasi literally means a slave of God. A devadasi is a young girl, dedicated and married to the temple deity, tutored in the arts of music and dance, and on reaching puberty is usually supported by a patron. This quasi-spiritual privilege levied on a devadasi makes her vulnerable to sexual exploitation and prevents her from embracing wedlock.

It is believed that the devadasi community enjoyed a position of religious and economic privilege until the coming of the British, after which its members were pushed into a life of depravity, poverty, and prostitution. Though the devadasi eludes the binary of "a vestal virgin or ascetic nun" and their opposite "a public woman or secret harlot" (Kersenboom 67), she was unanimously branded as prostitute by colonial authorities by the early 20th century and her life was criminalised for allegedly decaying the moral fabric of society. The efforts of reformers and elite nationalists to redeem the *fallen sisters* and to abolish the devadasi system gained momentum during the twentieth century and, finally, in 1947 the Madras Devadasi (Prevention of Dedication) Act was passed. Unfortunately, however, in certain parts of Southern India, the practice of dedicating girls, usually from Dalit families, continues even today.

Breaking Free is a product of the author's research on the art of the devadasis. The novel is intimately connected to the turbulent history of South India of the early 20th century – a time that witnessed not only the national quest for freedom from colonial dominance, but also the personal struggles of the devadasis to free themselves from the shame and plight of their wretched existence. Spanning through three generations, the novel largely represents the politics of reformation and revival of the devadasi and her dance, and the aftermath of the abolition of the devadasi system. The redemptive narrative represented by devadasi reformists is challenged by counter discourses within the text. The narrative shifts between the pre-independence and the post-independence eras, representing the terrible "burden of history" (Vaasanthi, *Breaking Free* 321). It explores the subjectivities of members of the devadasi community, their encounter with religious and social prejudices, the lingering impact of shame etched in the memory even of their descendants, their desperation to erase any marker of the past. The text is critical of the ways in which ideologies of gender, class, caste, religion, politics, and economy intersect to create a complex web of deceit where the members of the devadasi community continue to find themselves entangled miserably.

Narrated by two voices, *Breaking Free* follows a dual trajectory which unites towards the end. It opens with the first-person narrator, Maya, a young researcher, who sets out to unravel the truth behind her mother Dharini's mysterious demise and closes with her shocking discovery. On the other hand, the omniscient narrative voice, narrates the histories of three devadasi women,

Kasturi, Lakshmi, and Thilakam. Born in the devadasi clan, Kasturi is indoctrinated in believing that her life as a devadasi is a preordained sacred service towards the temple deity. For her, dancing is spiritually liberating. She accepts the customs of the devadasi tradition with unwavering faith only to be disillusioned later in her life. Her sister Thilakam elopes and marries a reformer and cultural revivalist, thinking marriage to be a possible way out from her stigmatised existence. Her hope for freedom is thwarted when the marriage gives way to fresh violence which compels her to hang herself. Lakshmi, on the other hand, is aware of the burden of ignorance, superstition, injustice, shame, and alienation oppressing the people of her clan. She decides to break free by evolving into an independent woman. She pursues the study of medicine, is deeply influenced by Gandhian thought, and launches a mission to eradicate the ‘despicable’ devadasi system (Vaasanthi, *Breaking Free* 173). Vaasanthi states that the character of Lakshmi has been partially modelled after Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy, the daughter of a devadasi and a medical practitioner who actively participated in the abolition of the devadasi system.

Two generations later, when Maya decides to find the cause of Dharini’s sudden death, she discovers that her mother was not the daughter of Lakshmi but of Kasturi, a fact that Dharini herself had discovered just before her life was cut short. The discovery that Dharini was a temple dancer’s daughter had triggered a memory of agony and hatred in her cousin. Maya realises that her Amma (mother) had in some manner become a symbol of the “the burden of history,” “the burden of humiliation” (Vaasanthi, *Breaking Free* 321). Probably, Dharini’s cousin could no further bear this burden and so he pushed Dharini to death.

Memory plays a significant role in the novel, often overshadowing the present. There are instances where the characters attempt erasure of the unpleasant memories – “We were fed up; we didn’t want even a single marker of the past.... The moment anyone talks about those days my son gets very angry. The revulsion won’t fade away for at least two more generations. No one sings or dances now. Such was the stigma we suffered” (Vaasanthi, *Breaking Free* 302). This shows the profound impact of the humiliation and agony experienced by the devadasis and their descendants. A reader naturally wonders how far legislative reforms, influenced by the Anti-Nautch movement, have really offered sustainable solutions to the challenges of the devadasi clan. One also reflects on how far the devadasi women and their descendants can break free from the legacy of wounds, shame and trauma impinging on their existence and how far their community could be liberated from the marginalised identity.

As a feminist text, *Breaking Free* can be regarded as a significant milestone in the annals of Indian writings in English translation. It will make the reader contemplate on woman’s social position in general, her sexual autonomy, the

various institutionalised spaces that define her identity, the latent patriarchy inherent in religious dogmas, the inclusiveness of the reform movement and the very idea of ‘freedom.’ Lakshmi exclaims, “You must be free first. Only then will the nation’s freedom have any meaning” (Vaasanthi, *Breaking Free* 173). Her words show how gaining freedom and agency works at two levels – the personal and the national – and how seamlessly they intersect in the narrative. The narrative also shows how varied and difficult the national dream of freedom was. India cannot be truly free if sections of her population are in thrall.

Though social and historical accounts of devadasis abound, devadasis have rarely occupied a centre stage in works of literature. Early extant literary texts like *The Cilappatikaram: The Tale of an Anklet* incorporates a devadasi character but only as a foil to its chaste protagonist. Stereotyping the devadasi as notorious and scheming has been a common practice in fictional delineations. It is with the onset of the 21st century that we see a growing interest among authors to represent the experiences of the members of this community. In fact, *Breaking Free* stands out as a rare instance in its depiction of such individual experiences at different points of history, woven into the fabric of fiction. As Vaasanthi’s writes in the “Afterword,” “I haven’t written a social history of the institution in these pages. Rather, I have tried to understand its impact on the lives of the people and the era through my fictional characters” (Vaasanthi, *Beaking Free* 328).

Written in a crisp and lucid style, *Breaking Free* offers readers an opportunity to delve into the nuances of the realities of an ostracised community. The novel provokes the reader to reassess the bases of an egalitarian democracy and the multifaceted significances of national freedom in a hybrid, segmented and stratified nation-state. Surely, the labyrinth of complexities reflected in this inter-generational saga will draw greater critical attention of common readers as well as researchers to the life and history of the devadasi community.

References

- Adigal, Ilango. *The Cilappatikaram: The Tale of an Anklet*, translated by R. Parthasarathy, Penguin India, 2004.
- Bilwakesh, Champa. *Desire of the Moth*. UpSet Press, 2015.
- Goray, Maya. *Devadasi*, Vitasta Publishing Private Limited, 2020.
- Natarajan, Srividya. *The Undoing Dance*, Juggernaut, 2018.
- Kersenboom, Saskia C. "The Traditional Repertoire of the Tiruttani Temple Dancers". *Bharata Natyam, A Reader*, edited by Davesh Soneji, Oxford University Press, 2010, pp. 53-68.
- Kolanad, Gitanjali. *Girl Made of Gold*. Juggernaut, 2020.

Vaasanthi. *At the Cusp of Ages*, translated by N. Kalyan Raman, Indian Writing, 2008.

_____. *Breaking Free*, translated by N. Kalyan Raman, Harper Perennial, 2022.

Anindita Das

PhD Research Scholar

Department of English and Cultural Studies

CHRIST (Deemed to be University), Bangalore, India

Email: anindita.das@res.christuniversity.in