

Devadasi and Violence in Sisir Das' *A Bride for Jagannatha* and Maya Goray's *Devadasi*

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Abstract

Devadasi, a socio-cultural-religious system in India, involved ritualistic dedication of young girls to temples. Violent, exploitative, and subjugating, it was a tool of gender discrimination. Though this patriarchal tradition bestowed upon devadasi woman a notional status of a deity, in reality, it ended up objectifying them. Devadasi thus evolved as a double-edged oppressive, a culturally sanctioned power and economic practice. The present paper attempts to explore various nuances of direct and structural violence ranging from physical violence, sexual assault, psychological trauma, societal stigmatisation to political ostracisation through a critical reading of Sisir Das' *A Bride for Jagannatha* and Maya Goray's *Devadasi*. Since the system was fundamentally established on religious principles, devadasi women find it challenging to seek legal interventions against institutionalised assault and oppression. The present paper investigates how the system, overtime, impacts the physical and psychological realities, and the onerous difficulties that they encounter in their attempts to break free from this oppressive and dehumanising cycle.

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Introduction

Violence is a recurring theme in human history and cuts across time and space and various cultural configurations. Despite the variation in languages through which people express themselves, the language of oppression and exploitation embedding and manifesting violence, is universal. Violence as a means of control and suppression is employed by hegemony and imperial masters to maintain and perpetuate socio-cultural-religious power structures. It also serves as a tool of resistance and rebellion against the established order.

Scholars and thinkers are engaged in debates about multiple forms and manifestations of violence, which have unquestionably changed over time. Violence today extends beyond mere physical harm to oneself or to others encompassing a multitude of dimensions and expressions. In other words, violence can be viewed as a “language of oppression” that is not only limited to physical harm but also embeds symbolic and psychological harm and injuries.

The continuous power struggle between the oppressor and the oppressed is particularly evident when the socio-cultural-religious institutions are viewed from the perspective of the hetero-normative gender sensibility. A woman generally occupies a subordinate position in the social paradigm and thus finds herself a victim of various forms of violence instigated and perpetuated by patriarchy. Devadasi³ was a socio-cultural-religious tradition primarily associated with the dedication of young girls to various temples in the past India. Women from different socio-economic strata of society dedicated as devadasis enjoyed a high social status, patronage, and respect serving as cultural ambassadors of their communities. Devadasis enjoyed the royal patronage like other institutions of art, culture and performance. But this turned out to be one such institution where women were subjected to systemic violence⁴ – that is social exploitation and physical assault at the hands of the temple authorities and the patrons who saw them as their “possessions”.

³The term devadasi refers to both the institution, practice, culture, tradition, or system and an individual or female being in the service of dev, i.e., god.

⁴According to Slavoj Žižek “systemic violence” refers to the ways in which institutional arrangements, policies, and power dynamics perpetuate harm and injustice on a systemic level. Such arrangements are found within devadasi that creates conditions for caste-based discrimination, gender inequality, and the exploitation of religious and cultural practices for economic gain that systematically harm and marginalise individuals and communities.

Historically devadasi was practiced in many famous Hindu temples of Southern and Eastern India. Veenus Jain writes: “The famous Rajarajeswara temple of Thanjavur, a monumental contribution of the Chola emperor Rajaraja–I, had more than 600 employees. Of them as many as 400 were dancing girls” (Jain 27). As singing and dancing was an indispensable part of worship in such Hindu temples so were the dancing girls who “were in fact the main attractions of the temple” (69). Devadasis epitomised a revered nexus in which the sacred and profane coexisted together embodying the fusion of spiritual devotion with artistic excellence. The esteemed status and prestige culturally and historically attributed to devadasis hints at the underlying systemic violence at its core where young girls were subjected into dedication and robbed of their childhood. This socially constructed tradition had the rules laid down by man with an insensitive and violent approach towards a woman’s identity and body. Religion sanctioned dedication of young girls to the temples as god’s wives thereby granting power, a complete control and “possession rights” to the mortal men over devadasis fostering an environment of dominance, control, and injustice.

The institution of devadasi bestowed upon a devadasi dancer a status that was supposedly equivalent to that of a deity, but, she was in reality reduced into an exploitable object, a pleasurable commodity in the service of temple priests. First, the tradition forced a woman to succumb to the socio-religious diktats and to sacrifice her right as an ordinary normal woman to marry a mortal man and enjoy the bliss of being a wife and mother. Secondly, after her dedication to the temple, she was considered a property in the possession of the temple authority and its patrons who were free to violate her body at will. This socio-cultural-religious violence was not limited to the ritualistic tradition of dedicating and pledging young girls to the temple in the past; it still continues to manifest variously through socio-cultural stigmas associated with devadasi which isolates this community of devadasis from the mainstream society and denies them their basic human right to a dignified life.

Devadasis assumed various roles in the daily rituals of temples. Their dancing and singing became an indispensable aspect of deity worship. The expenses of devadasis were taken care of either by the patrons, kings, or temple authorities. Inheriting exploitation and physical abuse at the hands of the feudal or patriarchal authorities, the socially accepted devadasi struggled to keep its traditional, religious, and culturally significant identity intact in colonial India. The colonialists’ perception of devadasis as prostitutes, and their art and the ritual of dance were reduced to the dancing act of nautch girls or tawaifs. Pran Nevile, “A secular counterparts of devadasi were nartakis, i.e. court dancers. Nautch girls and tawaifs were a category of dancing girls who inherited the devadasi dance

legacy i.e. Kathak in North and Dasi Attam/Sadir Nautch in South” (24). Rajalakshmi Nadadur Kannan, a scholar of critical religious studies says: “The colonial state did see *devadasis*’ traditions as irrational, which had to be pruned by passing many Anglo-Indian morality laws that created a social stigma on *devadasis*” (245). It was difficult for British colonialists to understand a socially approved system that forced a woman to have various physical relationships under the garb of religion. Kannan says, “*devadasis* and the form of religion [read: Hinduism] that they represented was not the real Hinduism, and rather a perversion of it; in embodying such a perversion, *devadasis* and their lifestyle were deemed profane” (244). The colonial ideals launched an attack on the identity and existence of devadasi and led to the creation of a social narrative of devadasi as a taboo that promoted marginalisation and raised concerns regarding the status of devadasi in the transformation of the nation. The colonial gaze conflated the identity of Indian female performers – dancing/nautch girls, tawaifs, and temple devadasi. The British view these women primarily through the lens of exoticism and Orientalism and failed to recognise the distinction between them based on religious or secular roles as performers and entertainers.

The colonial rules and regulations targeted devadasi women only and empowered their male counterparts immensely. As Shankar states:

The anti-nautch and anti-dedication movements started campaigning devadasi to adopt the moral supremacy of *grabasthi* values. It requested them to voluntarily relinquish all rights to temple service and its privileges. Whereas men belonging to the devadasi community continued to perform both in the temples and people’s home. (142)

The dual assault against devadasi unfolds on two interconnected levels. First, the colonists in their mission to spread moral uprightness considered devadasi’ traditional dance inherently offensive. As a result, the institution of devadasi, which represented a cultural heritage, was outlawed because Victorian moralistic attitude of colonial rulers and the social reformists characterised devadasi culture as immoral and linked it to prostitution and women’s exploitation. This impression fuelled the demand for legal action against the system, thus overlooking the connection between devadasi and their art and their creative expression through dancing. Secondly, deprived of their traditional source of income and religion-mediated societal recognition, many devadasi were forced to turn to prostitution as an alternative for survival. The stifling conditions compelled them to sell their bodies and turned them into helpless victims caught within a cycle of abuse and humiliation. As Pattanaik maintains: “With the arrival of British, sex became bad. The ‘nautch girls’ became ‘bad girls’. Sex was seen as sin, and those who turned sex into commerce were seen as tragic, exploited

beings, who needed saving.” Beyond the apparent instances of structural, sexual, psychological, and physical violence, symbolic violence also cast a grave shadow over the existence of devadasi women. It left a significant scar on the core of their identities since their marginalisation was deeply marked by social symbols, cultural conventions, and general beliefs.

In addition to the physical violence and sexual abuse, already ingrained into the traditional dynamics of the practice, devadasis, during the colonial period, had to tolerate and face the consequences of symbolic and structural violence perpetuated upon them by the British. The decline of royal power centres and the advent of colonial rule, the status of devadasis began to decline leading to their stigmatisation and in due course attempts for the legal abolition of the institute. Despite the legislative interventions like the Bombay Devadasi Protection Act 1934, Madras Devadasis (Prevention of Dedication) Act 1947, Karnataka Devadasis (Prohibition of Dedication) Act 1982, Andhra Pradesh Devadasis (Prohibition of Dedication) Act 1988, and Maharashtra Devadasi Protection and Rehabilitation Act 2005, the institution of devadasi has continued to persist in various forms. Presently, devadasis predominantly hail from the socio-economic marginalised communities and are often vulnerable to sexual exploitation, trafficking, and societal ostracisation.

The ubiquitous presence of a violent social structure makes people accept oppression as normal. This puts the general populace in a deep state of apathy towards the intricacies of exploitation that operate quietly beneath the surface of normalcy. Similarly, symbolic violence⁵ served as an effective tool for devaluing devadasis’ presence, vilifying their identity, denying them agency, and limiting their possibilities for social and economic growth. Focusing primarily on the aspect of possible physicality in the devadasi system and ignoring its art and aesthetic side as well as its socio-cultural-religious space and significance, the coloniser fostered its distorted social worldview that reduced devadasis to mere caricatures of their cultural-religious identity.

Based on the above discussion, this paper aims to unravel the layers of exploitation and prejudices that became a part of the devadasi legacy. It seeks to provide a comprehensive view of the atrocities committed against devadasi women and problematise how the tradition utilises dominant social structures to exert power and maintain control over marginalised individuals and communities.

⁵The concept of “symbolic violence” is given by Pierre Bourdieu in reference to social structures and cultural norms which dominate and maintain power through subtle, symbolic ways. The symbolic power of tradition, religious authority, and patriarchal ideologies legitimises the subjugation of devadasis, framing their exploitation as an inherent part of religious duty or cultural heritage.

It also explores how the practice of devadasi has been transformed from a religious to a cultural identity where various manifestations of symbolic violence come into play against devadasis to obscure the true nature of their oppression.

Unveiling the narrative contours: Fictional takes

Sisir Das' *A Bride for Jagannatha* is a story of Rambha, a young girl who is adopted by Tilottama, a devadasi dedicated to and employed at the Jagannatha temple in Puri, Orrisa. It narrates the subtleties of the devadasi system during its hay days in the socio-cultural environment of Puri. The story portrays the impact of collective hypocrisy, moral corruption, temple politics, and patriarchal influences on Rambha's life as she transits from a little girl to a highly coveted devadasi. Maya Goray's novel *Devadasi* essays the journey of Devaki from being an unwanted child to a "desired" (by choice) devadasi. The novel also provides a critical peep into the life of this so called "dedication" through the story of different generations of devadasi women like Mangala and Devaki and tries to offer contrasting opinions on the subject of "choice" and authority. It debates how a woman's life is a constant subject of oppression and exploitation even across generations.

Goray factors in the contemporary debate on devadasi by employing Gen-Z characters who serve both as spectators and commentators in Devaki's story. The novel opens with a conversation between a Sutradhara/SD and Gen Z audience in the contemporary times, and the narrative later on, moves to the colonial period. The narrative goes beyond the chronicle of Devaki, extending its purview to delineate the dichotomy between traditional Indian culture and the cultural influence imposed by colonial powers in India by navigating the realms of both native and colonial cultures and concluding at the point when these two dissimilar worlds collide. Both the novels deal with the interaction of devadasi women with the socio-political and cultural forces through the stories of Rambha and Devaki. Rambha and Devaki definitely are the victims of devadasi norms but they also become the target of exploitation by the outsider males like Pitra Babu and Albert.

Rambha in *A Bride for Jagannatha* and Devaki in *Devadasi* are not born into the devadasi community, and yet they end up becoming the victims of this oppressive system. Rambha is dedicated as a devadasi at a very young age by her parents as a commitment to Lord Jagannatha in exchange for curing the health of her brother. She is taken to Puri from Gajrajpur by the village priest for the ceremonial initiation into devadasi life where she is fostered by Tilottama, who later becomes her "devadasi mother." What Rambha's parents decide for her, is in tune with their cultural and religious belief and not in consideration of her

personal desires and choices. The imposition of this life-altering decision on Rambha by her parents, locates her as a victim of symbolic violence. Johan Galtung, the sociologist and the founder of Peace and Conflict Studies, asserts:

Under physical violence human beings are hurt somatically, to the point of killing. It is useful to distinguish further between ‘biological violence’, which reduces somatic capability (below what is potentially possible), and ‘physical violence as such’, which increases the constraint on human movements.... But that distinction is less important than the basic distinction between violence that works on the body, and violence that works on the soul; where the latter would include lies, brainwashing, indoctrination of various kinds, threats, etc. (Galtung 169)

The denial of autonomy and the predetermined nature of Rambha’s fate aligns with Galtung’s notion of violence working on the soul, as she is subjected to a socio-cultural environment that limits her freedom of choice and shapes the trajectory of her life without her consent.

Devaki’s path in becoming a devadasi is closely linked with various events. First, she is an illicit child born to Kamala, a lower-class Indian woman who works as a maid at the house of Reginald Smythe, an employee working in the colonial government of British India. Devaki is born due to a disconcerting liaison between Kamala and Anthony, the son of Reginald Smythe. To safeguard her marriage and shield the truth from her husband Velu, Kamala decides to give her child, Devaki, to Mangala because “it might be a very *fair* and beautiful girl” (Goray 55). Mangala’s daughter Lakshmi who suffers a crippling injury due to an accident in her childhood, is permanently excluded from the act of dancing. Consequently, Devaki becomes a strategic prospect in preserving Mangala’s devadasi lineage. Fearing the social ostracisation and loss of her honour because of her extra marital relations with Anthony, Kamala is pressurised to surrender Devaki. This shows how cultural norms and traditions perpetuate and sustain violence against women, affecting their lives in both visible and invisible ways. Moreover “[i]f Devadasis get angry at their parents for selling them off, they tend not to express it openly.... Instead, it emerges in depression or aggression” (Grey 50). In this case, dedication not only serves as a symbol of lifetime social oppression but becomes a tool of psychological violence whose toll continues to fall on the next generation of devadasi women.

Adopting a female child is a common practice in devadasi culture, but Devaki’s case stands out as a notable exception. Lakshmi who is Mangala’s rightful heir is trained rigorously to become a devadasi but her physical disability changes everything. For her, “Devaki was a usurper in more ways than one; she would get the legacy that was rightfully Lakshmi’s” (Goray 77). Lakshmi harbours

intense hostility towards Devaki which leaves her incapable of forming the sisterly bond that Devaki has made with Kumara who is Lakshmi's brother. Lakshmi's psychological trauma stems from her physical pain and subsequent emotional turmoil which redefines her complete life. All these factors contribute to Lakshmi's existence, which is characterised by resentment and animosity towards Devaki. Cultural beliefs support the assumption that Devaki is a "usurper" of Lakshmi's inheritance. The predetermined roles and fate assigned to individuals like Lakshmi and Devaki based on their birth contribute to an atmosphere of cultural violence.

Devadasi had strict laws and its rituals were customised according to different regions wherever the tradition was practised. Rambha after her dedication observes the role of a socially approved and respectfully married wife of lord Jagannatha. She partakes in a series of rituals within the temple of Puri with complete dedication and responsibility. In order to fulfil her religious duties and to mark the consummation of her marriage to the lord, Rambha is mandated to form a physical alliance with the Gajapati (the king of Puri) who is revered as "Jagannatha's first servant or *adyasebaka*" (Marglin 76). In the Jagannatha cult "the sexual relations of the devadasis ought to be restricted to the king and the brahmin priests.... they do not have sexual relations with non-Puri residents, i.e. with outsiders, nor with members of the non-water-giving caste" (90). These devadasi norms restrict women's freedom to choose their lovers and breed ground for sexual exploitation at the hands of the powerful men. In *A Bride for Jagannatha*, Bhitarcha Mahapatra, Rambha's patron desires to have the first right to consummate Rambha's dedication because he has sponsored the grand feast after her initiation ceremony:

The first night belonged to the Gajapati king... [Bhitarcha] kept insisting the first night should be his. Because he has spent so much money on your feast.... [I]t was money that was claiming precedence over convention.... We finally settled that he could see you any night after you had spent time with the king. (Das 113-14)

This shows how devadasi norms furthered the patriarchal agenda and could be easily moulded to accommodate the pride and expectations of men. The exploitation of Rambha's body and her appropriation is not merely a physical one but is also a symbolic expression of patriarchal control and authority. Even before Rambha's body is violated either by Bhitarcha or by Gajapati, the decision by Tilottama and Urvashi to send Rambha first to the king and later to her patron for sexual consummation foreshadows the violence she is bound to bear throughout her life. The Gajapati king tosses his duty to fulfil Rambha's consummation ritual to the King of Talcher as he was "fond of her [Rambha's]

mother” (Das 114). Men exploited devadasi regulations to serve their interests in particular and to reinforce patriarchal authority in general. Rambha is a mere marionette whose strings are controlled either by religious or political masters. Foucault argues that “pre-modern states used the body as a stage on which to perform violence” (Dwyer 9). Similarly, Rambha’s body too becomes a battleground for others to extort violence and assert control. Devadasis like Rambha are often forced into non-consensual sexual relationships with their patrons or other powerful men. Rambha grows up prepared for a life as a devadasi but she cannot fathom the physical trauma she has to endure during her meetings with Bhitarcha who leaves her body “raw and ravaged” (Das 126).

Rambha’s love and dedication for lord Jagannatha neither change nor shift to her relationship with Bhitarcha: “I couldn’t help thinking, it was all about lust, wasn’t it? About carnal hunger. About raw, unleavened sex. There was no emotion in it. The mind, certainly was not a part of it” (Das 127). The spiritual love she feels for Jagannatha in no way can be replicated by any of her patrons. Devadasi’s marriage with the deity is sacred and implies a strong unwavering belief in the importance of particular cultural-religious practices or ceremonies. Rambha perceives her life through a religious lens that does not allow her to doubt or challenge the significance or legitimacy of these rituals; instead, she accepts them with complete trust and conviction. The Gajapati king, the king of Talcher, and Bhitarcha Mahapatra

enjoy autonomy in carrying out their explosive action against the historically battered social groups but such actions happen within the regressive norms of a larger social which is constitutive of the Hindutva design to create one social order based on hierarchy. (Guru 134)

In *Devadasi* the structured social/religious order effectively blurs the lines between tradition of female child being dedicated to the god and the child being abused and sexually assaulted. Men in power thrive by manipulating one’s faith: “Every time a marriage takes place in Talcher, the king spends the first night with the bride. He says he does it as a favour to his subjects. Because he is taking away whatever dangerous powers there are in a virgin, and at great risk to himself” (Das 117). The king’s willingness to spend the first night with the bride reinforces gender roles and traditional hierarchy which consider and treat women as possessions to be owned and subjugated. The king thinks that he is “taking away whatever dangerous powers there are in a virgin,” suggesting that virgin girls can be possessed. Such closed views and superstitions correspond to the acceptance of misleading and harmful biases towards the sexuality of women, further adding to their additional suffering. The “deflowering” ritual (first night consummation) seems to be performed without the bride’s consent or informed approval and is

presented as a “favour” done to her (the subject) by the king as the dedicated girls are deemed to be possessed and vilified as witches. By justifying his actions and framing them as self-sacrificial for the alleged sake of society, the king legitimises a fundamentally violent conduct and frames it as an essential or charitable deed.

Mangala being Devaki’s guardian bears the responsibility of finding a suitable, i.e. rich “*puravalar*/patron” for her. The patron pays the cost of the devadasi’s *prayojanam*⁶ ceremony and maintains her expenses thereafter. The *prayojanam* ceremony represents a significant ritual and by participating in this ritual the devadasi fulfils her social and religious obligations. The economic dependence of Devaki on a patron creates a significant power imbalance and gives the patron substantial control over her life. Incorporating a transactional dimension into the alliance between Devaki and her *Puravalar* potentially subordinates her well-being and agency over the financial interests and it fosters more space for exploitation within the system. Devaki after her *prayojanam* with *Puruvalar* “still chafed in her distasteful role” (Goray140), cries:

Devaki. I was made to do things I don’t like.

Mangala. ‘Puruvalar’ has paid for you and you will have to do whatever pleases him, whatever he wants of you sexually. It is your duty.

Devaki. Oh, and I thought my *duty* was to *God*!

Mangala. What rubbish, Devaki. As if I haven’t told you the patron owns you. You just have to bear it. (140)

Mangala here becomes the symbol of cultural and societal pressures that force girls like Devaki into a position of subservience. Devaki’s sacred duty to god is exploited and manipulated by Mangala into a transactional relationship that devalues and dehumanises a woman. A devadasi’s perceived duty to the patron overrides her supposed duty to god. Mangala’s response highlights a stark distinction between the brutal reality and the glorified perception of the system. Compelled by the fear of jeopardising her economic security, a devadasi is confronted with the risk of acquiescing to and enduring abusive behaviour. In addition, the systemic structure reduces a devadasi to a commodity exchanged in

⁶The *prayojanam* ceremony marks the actual sexual consummation of a devadasi with a patron in contrast to *sadanku* which marks a devadasi’s onset of puberty and confirms her status as an accomplished dancer and full-fledged temple employee and the symbolic marriage of the pubescent to the god. She lays next to a “kattari” and “gives her embryo” to it as a symbolic intercourse ritual that replaces a regular bride’s “deflowering.”

a framework that does not prioritise woman's agency, dignity, or personal well-being.

Hegemonic narratives appeal to the sentiments of the audience often by underlining sexuality with spirituality/religion to give justification for actions that are inconsiderate and inhuman. Maya Goray documents one such narrative in *Devadasi*. This sexual arrangement was justified because of the devadasi's divine status that was a means for the secular lover to be united with god. It is her "dedicated" status that crucially makes her a symbol of social prestige. Otherwise, mere sexual pleasures could be bought from any "kept woman" (129). The exploitation of women has been rationalised by fusing social, religious, and cultural factors. The beneficiaries of devadasi culture attempt to justify the "selling of girls" (Deane 10) in the name of religious devotion or service by creating a link between the devadasi and the divine. The claim that the divine position of a devadasi makes it easier for the secular lover or patron to become "united with God," gives an element of spirituality to his alliance with a devadasi. It emphasises the idea that the benefits of being associated with a devadasi are not just limited to the mundane world; rather this association becomes a means for people to achieve a higher level of spirituality by acting as "God sent men."

Philip Dwyer observes the relationship between religion and violence thus: "Religion offers an 'alternative reality' that provides believers with an ideological framework that can feed into violence. Religion is not necessarily the cause of violence, but it often offers a moral justification" (60). The interplay of religious symbolism in Das' *A Bride for Jagannatha* and Goray's *Devadasi* implies a deliberate attempt to imbue the practice of devadasi with an aura of sacredness to justify the "sanctified/religious prostitution." An attempt has been made by people like the king of Talcher, Gajapati, Mangala, and others involved in the system to raise the significance of devadasi and conceal its exploitative aspects by associating it with the sacred. Thus, the oppressor manipulates norms to silence the voice of the oppressed envisaging any attempt on its part to threaten the privilege of the oppressors.

Religion sanctions a conjugal relationship between a devadasi and her patron but does not bestow this union with a socio-ethical sanction. The arranged/forced relationship between Devaki and her patron is unable to stir any soft feelings in Devaki's heart for her patron. The inherent restrictions and the lifestyle which accompanies a devadasi, make Devaki bitter. She questions the hypocrisy of her existence as a devadasi:

I just can't take it anymore. What am I? I'm just a *sex servant* to my patron, that stinky brute, not his wife. And in every way I'm a slave to God, not

his wife either. I clean the puja vessels, do arathi, dance, do whatever I'm told are His wishes, but that doesn't make me His *wife*. (Goray 153-154)

Devaki's self-assessment reveals her internal struggle and the realisation of her ambiguous status in society. She struggles with her identity and expresses her dissatisfaction at recognising herself as merely a "slave to God" and a "sex servant" to her patron. The lack of genuine emotional connection in Devaki's life leads her to great troubles. Albert Long, an ambitious Assistant Magistrate arrives in town for official business with the temple priest and warms Devaki's heart. She finds herself enchanted by the charms of a "handsome young dorai" (Goray 160). Her infatuation seems to be fuelled by a longing for a connection beyond the confines of her prescribed role. Devaki begins to perceive Albert as her genuine lover and her emotional involvement with him indicates her blindness towards her ground reality. Albert sees Devaki through a colonial lens, viewing her as an exotic subject within the wilderness that a coloniser aims to encroach upon. His behaviour becomes symbolic of the imperialist attitude that objectifies the native inhabitants and sees them as possessions to be acquired. Albert pursues Devaki because "his vanity was titillated by possessing one of "God's own", and it was sweet revenge to be dipping into that priest's pot of gold!" (Goray 162). The Priest's refusal to meet Albert during his visit prompts him to view Devaki as a means of retaliation. Women like Devaki often become pawns in the power dynamics between colonisers and the colonised natives. Albert's liaison with Devaki, a "God's own" (162), bestows an overwhelming sense of entitlement upon him and enables him to take advantage of the emotionally vulnerable Devaki.

Devaki tries to convince Kumara, her brother, about Albert's "sincere" intentions, but Kumara is sceptical since he instantly recognises the white man's exploitative motives. Describing the situation, he says, "The white man comes here to ban our forbidden fruit, and then walks off with the pick of the basket, to feast on surreptitiously" (Goray 195). Kumara's metaphor of the forbidden fruit represents the colonial invasion of native culture and resulting in the exploitation of its resources. Devaki fiercely defends the sincerity of her love for Albert in reaction to Kumara's doubts and ridicule of her feelings for him. She asserts that her relationship with Albert is more than just infatuation:

. . . what I've found is beautiful, not the sex you talk about. And yes, he is beautiful, *all over*. Oh, even when I first saw him, how I wanted his body! Desire yes, but so much more than just desire. His body is only part of what I feel for him.

I felt one with him; it isn't just obsequious worship like it is when I serve god. It is the same kind of overwhelming emotion I've been told I *should*

feel when I dance: an obliterating oneness with the object of one's devotion. I've never felt it. But now I have, with a mere mortal, even in our moments of sheer lust. (Goray 195)

Devaki's emotions express her genuine connection with Albert, transcending typical infatuation and carnal desires. Devaki courageously pursues her love in spite of being well aware of social consequences and the harsh punishments that would befall a devadasi for pursuing a relationship with an outsider, or *vellakaran*/outcaste. Her disregard for societal norms reveals the depth of her affection for Albert.

Franz Fanon's assertion that "[v]iolence contains dimensions of physical and psychological domination by one species of mankind over another" (Roberts 142) provides a lens to analyse Albert's actions in the case of his relationship with Devaki. He takes pleasure in using Devaki's body and does not think twice about the implications of his actions, especially impregnating her. Devaki suffers from tremendous psychological trauma upon learning about Albert's discreet betrothal to someone else. She breaks down emotionally when she learns the truth about his upcoming marriage. Albert's actions, characterised by physical violation and psychological manipulation, significantly impact Devaki's mental and emotional health, ultimately leading to her suicide, a tragic and irreversible end.

The social and religious norms of devadasi forbid a devadasi to have relations with an outcaste patron whereas, "[m]en can have sexual relations with women of lower rank but cannot be fed by them, while women can feed men of lower *varnas* but cannot have sexual relations with them" (Marglin 66). Even in sacred roles as that of devadasi, a woman is subjected to the conventional societal norms that prioritise the desires of men. These social laws enforce a patriarchal order, limit a woman's agency, and perpetuate a system where a woman's devotion is redirected towards a man. These hypocritical laws promote patriarchal dominance and oppress women like Devaki and Rambha. Devaki's passion for Albert diverts her attention away from her temple duties and she finally abandons her obligations towards her patron and the god.

Rambha's character stands in sharp contrast to that of Devaki as a devadasi. Devoted and dedicated, Rambha shows the utmost level of dedication to her role as a devadasi by doing her temple chores, taking care of her patron, and dedicating herself to acquiring college education – all at the same time. When Bhitarcha Mahapatra, her first patron passes away, Rambha honours the temple's set regulations in this regard and simply accepts his son Talachu Mahapatra as her second patron in accordance with the guidelines. Rambha's life is tragically affected by the same terrible fate that befalls both father and son as Talachu too gets killed during an internal conflict among the Pandas about the

pilgrim business in Puri. Rambha becomes a target of prejudice and discrimination and feels humiliated being labelled as “cursed.” She is socially ostracised and marked as a totem of bad luck: “[I]f a Panda has a relationship with her, he’s marked for death” (Das 195). Any person who engages in a relationship with her, is believed to suffer a similar fate which curtails her chances to find another patron. Despite being patron-less, Rambha shows remarkable resilience by refusing to compromise the sanctity of her devadasi status unlike the other devadasis.

Rambha is approached by Kali Yuga, a Panda that she detests, to become her patron. She weighs the situation logically and says: “What objections could I possibly put forth? He was a Panda, who had every right to have a relationship with me. And I didn’t have a patron right now. It’s not for me to object” (Das 198). There is no law higher than Jagannatha’s law and Rambha’s refusal to challenge the Jagannatha rules, despite her disdain, indicates her obedience to the community norms and expectations. Pitra Babu who is Kali Yuga’s non-Brahmin but rich friend desires Rambha as his mistress, which she rejects outright. Rambha’s assertion to live her life according to Jagannatha’s law offends Kali Yuga and Pitra Babu. They both label Rambha as a “prostitute” (Goray 204, 206) because she does not compromise her dignity to become a sacrificial goat in the service of their domination. Historically, penetrating the restricted and dominating the restrained territories can be seen as a display of immense power and control. Similarly, Pitra Babu who is not a member of the temple administration sees having a relation with Rambha as an opportunity to taste the “forbidden fruit” reserved only for Pandas thus, multiplying his power through his successful manipulation of the religious hierarchy.

There is no space for strong assertive women like Rambha in the world of Kali Yuga and Pitra Babu. They both conspire to undermine Rambha. She is charged with “engaging in immoral behaviour” (Goray 218) and is awarded the highest punishment a devadasi could get, i.e. *Deula Basanda*⁷ on the grounds of mere accusations. The purpose of this vengeful act is to damage Rambha’s reputation and give an excuse for not allowing her to serve Jagannatha. Their plan successfully severs her links to the religious tasks that she always has dutifully carried out and with the integrity she upholds. Rambha’s suffering exposes the

⁷Under *Deula Basanda* “the devadasi is barred entirely from performing her ritual duties and even from entering the temple” (Marglin 79). It is considered to be the severest possible punishment given to a devadasi associated with Jagannatha temple, Puri. If any devadasi becomes involved in any relation with a man from lower caste (untouchable called ‘non-water giving caste’), the devadasi will not be allowed to perform her temple duty rituals and her temple privileges will be revoked.

brutal reality of power dynamics between influential individuals and the temple administration. It also serves as a devastating critique of the repercussions suffered by individuals who try to challenge the established quo. Rambha stands up to the injustice by pleading with the Collector to re-evaluate her case to regain her standing in society. She cannot tolerate the idea of being separated and away from Jagannatha because of her intense affection for him whom she views as her husband. For Rambha, Jagannatha is not just a deity but her god-husband and the centre of her existence.

Rambha becomes ill due to her fear of being unable to perform for the *Rath yatra* (car/chariot festival). Rambha's spiritual connection to Jagannatha is not merely a rite of passage to salvation, but also a source of immense meaning and purpose: "At the level of individuals, violence is a cleansing force. It frees the native from his inferiority complex and from his despair and inaction; it makes him fearless and restores his self-respect" (Fanon quoted in Jha 361). Despite her loyalty and dedication to her sacred role as a devadasi, Rambha is unable to escape the suffering induced upon her by the oppressive system. The consistent physical and emotional toll that takes on Rambha, driven by societal prejudice, exploitation, and the denial of justice, pushes her to the verge of physical exhaustion and a nervous breakdown. In her vulnerable state, she experiences hallucinations and dreams about her lord Jagannatha. This transcendent connection becomes a source of solace and inspiration for Rambha, strengthening her desire to dance for him at the festival. The harm that social structures impose upon Rambha, serves as the catalyst for her metamorphosis. The violent nature of devadasi culture frees her from the bondage of hopelessness and inaction and paves the way for her to reclaim a sense of agency and self-respect. Instead of being a sign of mental illness, her hallucinations symbolise her stronger spiritual connection and determination to give her lord one last dance.

Fanon says, "individual can be converted from his previous existence as a 'thing' to his new existence as a 'human being' only through violence" (quoted in Jha 361). Similarly, Devaki chooses violence as the only resort to free a devadasi from the constant brutality that society has imposed upon her. Her suicide symbolises a self-inflicted act of violence that turns into a paradoxical path to liberation. Suicide and death in both narratives under study become a manifestation of individual agency – a desperate attempt to seize control over the destinies of Rambha and Devaki in the face of societal oppression. Both the characters choose a tragic response to a lifetime of systemic violence. Devaki in her final dance, captures the spirit that Mangala and her teacher hoped she would convey in her performances. Her dance movements have drastically changed,

revealing an intense depth and emotional richness in her performance that she previously lacked. Devaki's dance provides an outlet for her suffering, as each step serves as a conduit for the pain and emptiness brought on her by the forbidden love.

The last dance performances both by Rambha and Devaki become a cathartic and tragic manifestation of their internal conflicts. Their acceptance of God as their first love is a transformative power that elevates their performances and artistic expression. Rambha's last dance stands for her resistance to the oppressive forces trying to shatter her spirit. It transcends into an inspirational act whereby she takes back the control of her story, expressing her love for Jagannatha even in the face of adversity. Even before her last dance performance, Rambha has already achieved freedom. As she recalls, "I felt as if Jagannatha had liberated me from the vulgar, punishing world" (Das 253). After this performance, Rambha closes her eyes forever, suggesting a kind of true freedom from all controls in her life. During her dance Devaki has a profound epiphany and realises that "her first love had to be God" (Goray 237). Devaki realises the profound connection between her identity and a divine belongingness in a moment of self-discovery, an awareness that has always been a part of her being as "Devaki" or "God's own."

Conclusion

The institution of devadasi becomes a metaphor for a violent cultural authority as "[i]t is not violence that asserts itself as authority, but authority that, in some circumstances, chooses to manifest itself as violence, or that power can be power only when instituted and defended by violence" (Dodd 46). The oppression of Rambha and Devaki is not just a counter consequence of reform movements like the anti-nautch movement. Instead, the internal dynamics of devadasi, its norms, and its inherent politics exploit women to such an extent that death becomes a redeeming recourse for them. The critical reading of the understudied reveals the complex nature of violence, which goes beyond a mere physical act to include symbolic socio-religious, cultural, and political manifestations. In the narratives, the culture of devadasi transcends its religious origins to become a symbol of cultural identity, exploitation, even resilience, and artistic excellence which shape the collective consciousness of characters like Devaki and Rambha. Hence, the narratives of oppression suffered by disadvantaged groups like devadasi women within specific cultural and religious settings, have been approached to revisit the social marginalisation and to reinvest the devadasi identity and agency with a sense of pride and empowerment.

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