

RESEARCH ARTICLE



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From Sacred Service to Gendered Exploitation: Re-reading the Devadasi System in Amita Trasi's *The Colour of Our Sky*

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Abstract

The Devadasi system occupies a paradoxical position within Indian cultural history. Originally associated with temple worship, music, and dance, it gradually transformed into a mechanism of social and sexual exploitation. This paper examines Amita Trasi's *The Colour of Our Sky* as a literary critique of this transformation. Through the experiences of Mukta, a young girl born into a Devadasi family, Trasi exposes the intersections of caste, patriarchy, poverty, and religion that sustain systemic violence against women. Drawing upon postcolonial feminist perspectives, the study argues that the novel dismantles the romanticized image of the Devadasi tradition and foregrounds the silenced voices of marginalized women. The text ultimately questions whether a cultural practice can retain legitimacy when it perpetuates oppression in the name of spirituality and tradition.

Keywords: Devadasi, Amita Trasi, postcolonial feminism, caste, gender, trauma, exploitation

INTRODUCTION

The Devadasi tradition has long been regarded as an integral component of India's religious and cultural heritage. Historically, Devadasis were dedicated to temple service and participated in sacred rituals through music and dance. They enjoyed a degree of social recognition and contributed significantly to the preservation of classical artistic traditions. Yet, the historical evolution of the institution reveals a more disturbing reality. Economic decline, caste hierarchies, and patriarchal structures

gradually transformed the system into one marked by exploitation and social marginalization.

Contemporary literature has played an important role in revisiting such cultural practices. Rather than celebrating tradition uncritically, modern writers interrogate its contradictions and human consequences. Amita Trasi's *The Colour of Our Sky* offers a powerful exploration of the Devadasi system through the story of Mukta, whose life embodies the enduring trauma produced by institutionalized

oppression. The novel compels readers to reconsider the relationship between culture, religion, and gendered violence.

The Devadasi System and Cultural Contradictions

The historical image of the Devadasi as a sacred servant of the deity often obscures the realities faced by women dedicated to temples. While the institution once provided artistic training and social standing, its later manifestations became deeply intertwined with caste discrimination and economic vulnerability. In many regions, girls from marginalized communities were forced into lives they did not choose, and religious belief functioned as a means of legitimizing their exploitation.

This contradiction lies at the heart of Trasi's narrative. The novel questions the tendency to preserve tradition without examining the suffering embedded within it. Sacred rituals become instruments of control, and spirituality is transformed into a justification for patriarchal authority. The text therefore challenges the assumption that cultural continuity necessarily represents moral progress.

Mukta and the Experience of Trauma

Mukta stands at the centre of *The Colour of Our Sky* as both an individual character and a symbol of collective suffering. Her experiences reveal how inherited systems of oppression shape female identity across generations. She does not freely choose her destiny; instead, her life is determined by social expectations rooted in caste and religious custom.

Trasi portrays trauma not merely as a personal wound but as a structural condition. Mukta's silence, fear, and fragmented sense of self reflect the broader silencing of women whose voices remain excluded from dominant narratives. The novel suggests that exploitation persists precisely because it is normalized through cultural language and communal

acceptance. By foregrounding Mukta's emotional world, Trasi restores humanity to those whom society has historically reduced to symbols or stereotypes.

Religion, Patriarchy, and Social Power

One of the most significant contributions of the novel is its exploration of the relationship between religion and power. The Devadasi system survives not only through economic necessity but also through deeply internalized beliefs regarding divine obligation and social duty. Religious narratives become mechanisms through which patriarchal control is exercised over women's bodies and choices.

The novel does not reject spirituality itself; rather, it questions the misuse of sacred traditions to sustain unequal social structures. Men who benefit from the system invoke divine authority while remaining detached from its consequences. Women, by contrast, bear the burden of preserving customs that deny them autonomy and dignity. This imbalance reveals the intimate connection between patriarchy and religious legitimacy.

Furthermore, Trasi demonstrates how caste intensifies gendered oppression. The majority of women subjected to such practices belong to economically and socially marginalized communities. The Devadasi institution, therefore, cannot be understood solely as a gender issue; it must also be examined as a manifestation of caste-based inequality. The novel encourages readers to recognize these intersecting forms of domination.

Conclusion

The Colour of Our Sky transforms the Devadasi from a romanticized cultural figure into a powerful symbol of resistance against systemic injustice. Through Mukta's story, Amita Trasi exposes the contradictions between sacred ideals and lived realities. The novel reveals how caste, patriarchy, poverty, and

religion collaborate in maintaining structures of exploitation while disguising them as tradition.

By challenging inherited narratives, Trasi contributes to a broader conversation about cultural memory and social reform. Her work reminds readers that traditions must be evaluated not only by their historical significance but also by their ethical implications. A practice that deprives women of agency and dignity cannot be defended solely on the grounds of cultural preservation. Contemporary literature thus serves as an important site for recovering marginalized voices and imagining more just social futures.

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