

The Sacred Cage: Devadasi Tradition and Female Suffering in Amita Trasi's *The Color of Our Sky*

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ABSTRACT

*Marginalization is the process by which certain individuals or groups are deliberately excluded from the benefits and opportunities that are available to others in society. This exclusion happens through various forms of inequality, such as class, caste, gender, religion, race, and economic status. In her book *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir describes women as the "Other" in a society dominated by men, highlighting how they are often placed outside the areas of power and privilege. The term devadasi, which comes from Sanskrit, translates to "female servant of God." It refers to young girls who are dedicated to a deity between the ages of eight and thirteen during a special religious ceremony that is often seen as a symbolic marriage. Amita Trasi's first novel, *The Colour of Our Sky* (2017), portrays this difficult situation through the lives of two girls, Tara, who comes from a wealthy family, and Mukta, the daughter of a devadasi. Mukta tries to escape the fate that tradition has set for her and temporarily stays with Tara's family, but she ends up caught in a cycle of trafficking and abuse. The later discovery that Tara and Mukta are half-sisters reveals the complex ways in which privilege, gender, and social standing intersect, showing how oppression can be shared but experienced differently. Through this story, the novel brings attention to the extreme marginalization faced by devadasi women, exposing the deep and lasting nature of their social exclusion.*

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

Amita Trasi, an author from Mumbai, has become a notable figure in literature with her first book, *The Color of Our Sky* (2017). This novel explores the complex issues of privilege, gender, caste, and the exploitation that is embedded in social systems. Trasi's inspiration comes from her early life in India, where she created the character Mukta as a tribute to a close childhood friend she met when she was nine. Despite her initial focus on a professional career, after completing an MBA in Human Resource Management, her move to the United States in 2007 marked a significant change in direction, leading her to pursue writing. Her stories highlight the harsh reality of human trafficking and celebrate the strength and resilience of women who face discrimination due to caste and class. Through her writing, Trasi consistently aims to give a voice to those who have been marginalized by oppressive traditions, and she actively supports efforts to combat human trafficking.

At the center of *The Color of Our Sky* are the intertwined lives of two young women who represent contrasting social experiences. Tara, from a wealthy Brahmin family, returns to Mumbai in search of Mukta, her childhood friend who disappears under mysterious circumstances after being taken from Tara's home. Mukta, on the other hand, has a life shaped by forced dedication to a deity as part of the devadasi tradition. Over time, this religious practice transforms into a form of sexual exploitation, trapping Mukta in a system that disguises abuse as sacred duty. By bringing these two women into contrast, Trasi creates a powerful narrative about social inequality. The novel shows that privilege does not protect women from suffering or ensure freedom rather, it changes the nature of how oppression is experienced. Tara faces constraints from patriarchal norms and the expectations of her caste, while Mukta is confined within a religious structure that turns devotion into servitude. Despite their different social contexts, both women are ultimately denied autonomy, dignity, and full control over their lives due to patriarchal systems.

The term *devadasi* comes from Sanskrit, combining “deva,” means “god,” and “dasi,” means “female servant.” Although the literal meaning suggests a woman who serves a deity, the practice has evolved into a system where young girls are given to temples, eventually becoming vulnerable to sexual exploitation. In various parts of India, this tradition is known by different names, such as *Murali* in Maharashtra, *Basavi and Murali* in Andhra Pradesh, and *Jogati* in Karnataka (Shingal 108). Initially, the system had important roles in religious, artistic, and ritualistic practices, but over time, it became closely tied to caste discrimination, poverty, and social injustice. Scholars observe that the devadasi system developed in specific regional and historical settings, and its decline came with the loss of royal patronage during the colonial era. This change left many *devadasis* without social acceptance or legal protection (Shingal 109 - 110). As a result, what was once seen as sacred service has become increasingly linked with prostitution. This historical shift is one of the key themes in Trasi's novel, which avoids romanticizing the *devadasi* tradition and instead exposes the suffering hidden behind religious justification. Historian William Dalrymple describes the decline of the *devadasi*'s social status as:

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 devadasis 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.

Mukta's initiation into the *devadasi* tradition is presented with striking emotional and narrative intensity. At the age of ten, she is dedicated to the goddess *Yellamma* through a religious ceremony conducted by her grandmother and the temple priest. Rather than portraying this ritual as an act of sacred devotion, the novel reveals it as the moment when a child's autonomy is permanently surrendered to an oppressive social institution. The ceremony marks not a spiritual commitment but the beginning of a life over which Mukta has no control. The priest asks 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." (TCOOS 73).

This episode forms one of the most powerful critiques in the novel because it demonstrates how authority disguises itself as religious discipline and how violence is legitimized through ritual language. Every instruction imposed upon Mukta strips away a fundamental aspect of her humanity. She loses the freedom to experience childhood, the right to make choices about her own life, the possibility of marriage, and even the right to defend herself against abuse. Religious symbolism is used to sanctify a system that normalizes exploitation, allowing the subjugation of women to appear socially and spiritually acceptable.

The novel further suggests that the endurance of the *devadasi* system depends not only on religious customs but also on deeply internalized beliefs sustained across generations. Families living in poverty continue to uphold the practice because they fear divine punishment if traditional obligations are rejected. Sakubai embodies this inherited mindset when she warns Mukta's mother against resisting the dedication. She declares, "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" (TCOOS 21). Her words reveal that oppression is preserved not merely through ritual but through fear passed from one generation to the next. What is inherited is not simply a cultural practice but a belief that questioning tradition invites inevitable misfortune. Within the same conversation, another voice challenges this unquestioned acceptance by asking, "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?" (TCOOS 21). This moment exposes the contradiction that lies at the heart of the institution. The religious identity of the *devadasi* promises sacred honour, yet her lived reality is defined by sexual exploitation. Although she is described as a servant of the deity, she is ultimately treated as a woman whose body is considered accessible to the men of the community, exposing the vast distance between religious rhetoric and social practice.

The novel also traces the gradual transformation of the *devadasi* from a ritual devotee into a commodity within a commercialized system of sexual exploitation. As soon as Mukta reaches puberty, her body acquires monetary value, and arrangements are made for the sale of her virginity. Trasi portrays this transaction without sensationalism, allowing its disturbing normality to reveal the extent of institutionalized violence. Mukta overhears the negotiation between her keepers: "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.'" (TCOOS 75).

The conversation reduces Mukta's body to an object of financial exchange, where her worth is measured entirely through economic calculation. Her virginity is transformed into a marketable commodity, valued not for its personal significance but for the profit it can generate within a patriarchal system. Through this episode, the novel illustrates how female purity is commercialized and consumed, revealing the intimate connection between gender inequality and economic exploitation. The *devadasi* institution therefore emerges not as an isolated cultural practice but as an entrenched mechanism through which women's bodies are systematically objectified, controlled, and commodified under the combined authority of religion, patriarchy, and commerce.

The persistence of the *devadasi* system cannot be understood without recognizing the combined influence of caste hierarchy and the culture of social silence that protects it. In most cases, women drawn into this institution belong to the lowest sections of the caste order, particularly Dalit communities, who already endure long-standing inequalities in education, employment, housing, and political participation. These structural disadvantages leave little room to challenge inherited practices. The same social order that marginalizes these communities simultaneously profits from the exploitation of their women, creating a cycle in which discrimination and oppression reinforce one another. In this context, Louis Wirth's understanding of minority status offers an important analytical framework. He defines a minority as "a 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” (Wirth 347). Mukta and the women of her community embody this definition in every respect. Their lives are shaped by the intersecting realities of caste, gender, and poverty, each of which deepens their vulnerability. Their exclusion is neither incidental nor temporary, rather, it is sustained through inherited customs, social exclusion, and systems of coercive labour that continually reproduce their marginalized position.

Trasi strengthens this critique by demonstrating that physical exploitation is inseparable from the politics of silence. After enduring repeated violence, Mukta loses her ability to speak, yet her muteness signifies far more than psychological trauma. It reflects the systematic erasure of a voice that society has never been willing to acknowledge. In this regard, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s assertion that “There is no space from which the sexed subaltern subject can speak” (Spivak 307) illuminates Mukta’s condition. At the same time, the novel extends this argument by suggesting that the problem lies not only in the inability of the marginalized to speak but also in society’s refusal to hear them. John McLeod captures this dimension when he observes:

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. (McLeod 195)

Mukta’s condition after her rescue reflects precisely this failure of interpretation. Although speech abandons her, her suffering continues to manifest itself through involuntary cries, groans, and physical expressions of distress that those around her fail to understand. Instead of recognizing these sounds as signs of profound trauma, the community interprets them as evidence of something unnatural. Her neighbours question how a mute girl can scream at night and attribute her cries to the presence of evil spirits. Through this response, the novel reveals how women’s suffering is frequently displaced into superstition whenever compassion and understanding are absent. Rather than acknowledging trauma, society transforms it into another reason for fear and exclusion.

The novel further intensifies its examination of marginalization by linking silence with the organized violence of human trafficking. After finding temporary refuge in Tara’s household, Mukta is abducted and sold into the brothels of Kamathipura, where she becomes part of a larger system sustained by prostitution, debt, and commercial exploitation. Her

kidnapping is not an isolated act of violence but the outcome of calculated betrayal, misplaced trust, and patriarchal complicity. Even more disturbing is the economic structure that follows her sale. The amount paid to purchase her is converted into a debt that she herself is forced to repay, making the victim financially accountable for the crime committed against her. Another woman trapped within the brothel explains this cruel reality:

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

This testimony exposes the multiple layers through which trafficking is sustained. Emotional trust becomes a tool for deception, intimate relationships are manipulated for profit, and economic indebtedness becomes an instrument of continued captivity. The language of debt functions as a powerful mechanism of control, ensuring that women remain imprisoned within the system under the illusion that freedom can be earned through repayment. By exposing this structure, Trasi demonstrates that trafficking extends far beyond physical confinement; it is reinforced through emotional betrayal, financial coercion, and institutionalized exploitation that deny women any meaningful possibility of escape.

Trasi extends her critique by demonstrating that human trafficking operates through far more than physical abduction. The novel reveals a network of coercive practices that includes deception, drugging, manipulation, and the systematic destruction of family relationships. One of the trafficked girls recalls the circumstances that led to her captivity: "I hadn't eaten in two days. I jumped at it and didn't think. He had drugged it, brought me to Bombay" (TCOOS 225). This brief testimony illustrates how traffickers prey upon hunger, desperation, and economic vulnerability rather than relying solely on force. Poverty itself becomes a weapon that weakens resistance and leaves women and children increasingly susceptible to exploitation. The violence portrayed in the novel is therefore institutional rather than incidental, rooted in social inequalities that make marginalized communities easy targets. Mukta's later separation from her own daughter deepens this critique by revealing how exploitation extends beyond a single generation. Her loss demonstrates that trafficking fractures families and perpetuates cycles of displacement, ensuring that inherited suffering continues across generations. In connecting the *devadasi* institution with child trafficking and

the commercial sex trade in urban spaces, the novel exposes a larger system in which impoverished women and children are reduced to commodities that can be bought, sold, and transferred according to market demands.

Although Mukta's experiences constitute the emotional core of the narrative, Trasi broadens her examination of marginalization by showing that patriarchal control transcends caste boundaries. Tara and her mother, despite belonging to a socially privileged household, also confront restrictions imposed by patriarchal values, though these operate in different forms. Tara's parents choose to marry against the wishes of their families, and the consequences fall disproportionately upon her mother. She is forbidden from returning to her native village, while her father continues to enjoy acceptance within the same community. Tara reflects that her mother risks death if she attempts to return, whereas her father is allowed to visit without consequence. This unequal treatment illustrates how patriarchal societies excuse male transgression while severely punishing women who exercise personal choice. The expectations placed upon women are further expressed through Tara's mother's belief that "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" (TCOOS 58). Her words reflect a deeply rooted cultural ideal in which a woman's worth is measured by her devotion to her husband and family rather than by her own individuality or aspirations. Consequently, even within a privileged domestic environment, womanhood continues to be defined through relationships with others instead of through independent selfhood. Simone de Beauvoir's observation powerfully illuminates this condition:

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)

Trasi's narrative affirms this insight by demonstrating that patriarchal authority regulates women's lives across caste divisions, even though the mechanisms through which that authority is exercised differ according to social location.

Questions of identity also occupy a central place in the novel, where belonging is repeatedly shaped by rejection, loss, and the longing for recognition. Mukta's search for her father becomes one of the most emotionally charged moments in the narrative because it exposes the cruelty of abandonment by an upper-caste man who acknowledges her existence

yet refuses to accept responsibility for her. The emotional intensity of this rejection is captured in the following scene:

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 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)

The significance of this episode lies not only in the father's rejection but also in Mukta's gradual acceptance of that rejection as something she believes she deserves. Abandonment ceases to be an external act and becomes internalized as a judgment on her own worth. Earlier in the novel, Mukta observes that she is "too fair for a lower caste" and possesses the complexion and green eyes inherited from her Brahmin father (TCOOS 14). Yet this biological connection offers neither legitimacy nor social acceptance. Instead, it reinforces her position as an unwanted reminder of caste transgression, forcing her to exist as a hidden and inconvenient secret. Her loss of identity reaches its final stage after she is trafficked into prostitution, where even her name is taken away and replaced according to the preferences of her customers, who call her "sweety, chameli, chanda" (TCOOS 249). The erasure of her name symbolizes the erasure of her individuality. By denying her the most basic marker of personal identity, the novel demonstrates how systems of exploitation reduce women to anonymous bodies, stripping them not only of dignity and autonomy but also of the language through which they are recognized as human beings.

The novel further deepens its exploration of marginalization by drawing attention to the relationship between the sex trade and HIV, revealing how illness compounds the discrimination already experienced by women in prostitution. These women endure exclusion not only from the larger society but also from those within their own social circles, particularly when disease exposes their precarious circumstances. As Shalini Bharat and her colleagues observe, disclosure of HIV status among sex workers is uncommon because of the "fear of isolation, ostracism, loss of income, and destitution," while denial frequently becomes the immediate response following a positive diagnosis (Bharat et al. 55). This perspective helps illuminate the social reality represented in the novel, where exploitation

extends far beyond physical abuse to include abandonment and social erasure. The bodies of devadasis and women in prostitution become burdened with multiple forms of stigma, carrying the weight of disease, shame, and exclusion simultaneously. Instead of generating compassion or support, illness further intensifies their invisibility. A society that has already treated these women as expendable becomes even more indifferent once they are associated with HIV. By foregrounding this dimension, Trasi situates the experiences of devadasis within a broader discourse that examines the intersections of public health, gender-based discrimination, and social stigma affecting marginalized women.

The title, *The Color of Our Sky*, itself carries profound symbolic significance, suggesting that although individuals inhabit the same world, their experiences are shaped by unequal social realities. Tara and Mukta live beneath the same sky, yet the meaning of that shared space is profoundly altered by differences in caste, class, and gender. Trasi's narrative therefore extends beyond the personal tragedy of a single protagonist to expose an entire social structure sustained through deeply rooted inequalities. Throughout the novel, religious ritual becomes a means of legitimizing sexual exploitation, the family transforms into a space where betrayal is enacted, and even rescue fails to ensure genuine liberation. Rather than presenting the *devadasi* tradition as a forgotten religious custom, the novel reveals it as an enduring system of coercion that continues to survive through caste discrimination, economic deprivation, and patriarchal privilege. At the same time, the narrative emphasizes that women from privileged backgrounds are not entirely exempt from patriarchal domination, although the forms and intensity of their oppression differ significantly from those endured by women such as Mukta. This nuanced representation strengthens the novel's social critique by resisting simplistic distinctions between privileged and marginalized women while making clear that caste and poverty expose the most vulnerable women to the harshest forms of violence and exploitation.

In conclusion, *The Color of Our Sky* offers a compelling literary indictment of the *devadasi* institution and the wider social structures that perpetuate gendered oppression. Through Mukta's experiences, the novel reveals how a practice publicly celebrated as religious devotion is transformed into a mechanism of child exploitation, sexual slavery, and intergenerational trauma. Her journey exposes the interconnected realities of caste discrimination, poverty, and religious manipulation, while Tara's life demonstrates that patriarchal authority continues to regulate women's existence even within socially privileged households. By portraying silence, trafficking, sexual violence, emotional abandonment, and the erosion of personal identity, the novel illustrates the many ways in which women are

constructed as the “Other” within patriarchal society. Yet Trasi does not confine her female characters to the position of passive victims. Instead, she portrays them as individuals who continue to carry memory, resilience, emotional depth, and an enduring desire for dignity and recognition despite relentless adversity. Within this framework, the devadasi tradition emerges as a “sacred cage”, an institution that simultaneously invokes religious sanctity and enforces lifelong captivity. Consequently, Trasi’s novel stands as a significant literary intervention that challenges the continuing realities of gender injustice, caste oppression, and the cultural practices through which violence is legitimized in the name of tradition.

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