

The Evolving Semantics of Devadasi: An Analysis of the Struggle and Resistance of Devadasis in the Light of Selected Movies

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Abstract currently movies are the most effective and influential form of art. It has an immense role in the building and re-building of cultural codes. And also has an effective role in moulding the mass psyche. Society reflects in movies and in turn movies influence society. So the movies have a bidirectional influence in our society. The portrayal of devadasis in movies shows the easy subjugation of women and the multiple ways in which they are marginalized by the society. The identity of devadasis got negatively transformed when they were forced to enter into prostitution. It is apparent that the subaltern woman who has no choices in her life has to act under the principles of patriarchy and thereby denounces her femininity. The present paper identifies the different elements of subjugation of devadasis in the light of feminist theory. And it also identifies the journey of their battle through the selected movies, Vaisali(1988), Devdas(2002), and Pranali-The Tradition (2008).

Keywords: Devadasis, Subaltern women, Identity, Patriarchy, Femininity

I. INTRODUCTION

The devadasi system is a religious practice in the Southern states of India, where by parents marry their daughters to a deity. The marriage usually occurs before the girl reaches puberty and becomes a prostitute for the upper class community. The system that evolved from religion became reduced to the subjugation of devadasis with the changes in the rules of different beginning, girls were married off to the temple deity and these girls later became prostitute for the men of the upper strata the struggle and battle of devadasis who were forced into this inhumane practice in the light of selected movies. . They were therefore forbidden to enter into a real marriage. Even though this inhumane practice is legally banned in 1988, it is still prevalent in many parts of India. A subaltern can be essentially defined as the one who is marginalized and not recognized as an acceptable member in the society, whether it is social, political, sexual or personal. The profundity of the situation is augmented when the subaltern is a woman. According to Simone de Beauvoire, she is discriminated and is always referred to in terms of her relationship with man and not he 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." (Beauvoire, 1952) Women were subjected to the tyranny of the male and given a subordinate place in the society. The patriarchal ideologies definitely exploits the very self of woman by imprinting inferior status in a male dominant society.

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The predicament of devadasis can be best understood through the movies such as Vaisali, Devdas, and Pranali, The Tradition. The particular movies analyzed are summarized in table 1.

Director	Movie	Language	Year
Bharatan	Vaisali	Malayalam	1988
Sanjay Leela Bhansali	Devdas	Hindi	2002
Hridesh Kamble	Pranali - The Tradition	Hindi	2008

Table 1: Movies selected for the analysis.

II. OBJECTIVE

The objective of this paper is to analyze dynasties. Devadasi's eventually were reduced to the status of mistresses of Kings and Mughal Emperors. In the

III. HYPOTHESIS

Movies influence people and there by the society. It is obvious that people from most walks of life experiences movies and it pushes them to think, if it conveys certain social issues or message. The present study explores the various levels of subjugation; the devadasi women faces in the patriarchal society through the analysis of the selected movies. The movies selected for the study mirrors a social situation in which the devadasi women are the subject of subordination over the ages. Majority of them are forced to take over the profession and undergoes various levels of tyranny. The paper attempts to focus on the predicament and struggle of the major female characters in the selected movies in the light of feminist theory. And it also examines the journey of these subalternwomen who gradually raised voice for their rights.

IV. METHODOLOGY

The present study proposes to examine and attempt to answer the following questions that developed based on the analysis of the movies Vaisali, Devdas and Pranali. The questions that have arisen during the scrutiny of the three particular movies are:

- How the identity of a woman changes when she is forced to take over the profession of a devadasi?



- How they are subjugated under the principles of patriarchy?
- Is there any notable change can be found in the degree of resistance of devadasis overtime in the light of selected movies?

To find the answers of these questions posed we have to examine and analyze these films closely. The first section of the paper is provided with the detailed analysis of the movie Vaisali and Devdas by means of how they are treated in a male dominated society and also provided with a data representation based on the findings. The second section investigates the degree of resistance of the devdasis through the movie Pranali, the tradition and their attempt to empower themselves. And the final section includes the conclusion of the investigation based on the analysis and the findings.

V. ANALYSIS AND MAJOR FINDINGS

The predicament of female subaltern is most represented in the movies such as Vaisali(1988), Devdas(2002), and Pranali(2008). Vaisali a 1988 Malayalam movie, directed and edited by Bharatan is considered as a cult classic in Malayalam cinema industry. The story opens with a crisis that ‘Angarajyam’ under king Lomapadan is suffering from severe drought for the past twelve years. Meanwhile Rajaguru receives a mystic vision, in which his guru advises him to bring Rishyashrungan to perform a mahayaga at Angarajyam. Upon Rajaguru’s advice Vaisali the daughter of Malini was sent to the forest. Rishyashrungan who was unaware of the world outside his ashram is also oblivious of the existence of other human beings on earth. After several attempts Vaisali successfully seduced the teenager by her exotic looks and sensuous dance. But in the event, she falls in love with him and as it was assumed that she would marry Rishyashrungan. Meanwhile he performed the yagam successfully and it rained heavily. The whole nation now in a joyous mood, completely forgets Vaisali and her mother. As per the advice of Rajaguru the king announces the marriage of his daughter Shanta and the young saint. Vaisali is heart -broken and her mother is trampled to death by the crowd. The initial yet obvious rejection faced by the devadasi and her daughter speaks of why the devadasis exist as a marginalized clan. The daughter is not at first considered as a member of group her mother is part of. A new future is expected for her with the task she is asked to

accomplish, the factor that comes between her and her aim is the manner of her birth. The societal norms and the feudal systems that prevailed not only denies her birth right but forces her to follow the parental profession are seen to be the reasons behind the formation of the clan. The depiction of the character of Vaisali in this movie shows the easy subjugation of the woman involved and lack of the ability to question the authority. The king who once used Malini’s body for his sexual pleasures also takes advantage of her daughter’s beauty and charm. Rajaguru also used the situation well to show his deep rooted anger against Vaisali. His son was deeply in love with her, but the relationship was against the social customs. At the end Malini expected that the king would accept Vaisali as his child but all her attempts to reach the king ends in vain and she is trampled to death by the crowd. Even though it is certain that the king is wrong, the belief that nothing surpasses the king’s verdict portrays the kind of life that existed. And it is clear that the subjugated woman has no voice in the society. The evolution of devadasis overtime in movies can be observed when the character of Chandramukhi came up through the movie Devdas. Devdas is a Hindi movie directed by Sanjay Leela Bhansali. The film is particularly based on the 1917 Sharat Chandra Chattopadhyay’s novel Devdas. The film is set in early 1990s and follows Shah Rukh Khan as Devdas, a wealthy and handsome law graduate who return from London to marry his childhood lover Paro played by Aiswarya Rai. However his parent’s rejection of the marriage of Devdas and Paro leads him to depression and alcoholic addiction. He seeks refuge with a courtesan played by Madhuri Dixit. She is shown to have the power to yield with her body and makes precise decision by being coy. It can also be seen that she chooses the men rather than let the men chose her. Though her profession is shown to be dancing and she makes men drink, she is shown to have a heart that does not fit the description of devadasi as shown in the story of Vaisali. The hero Devdas is seen to be captured in the snare of class, cast and social rules. In the movie the hero tells Chandramukhi that ‘the woman is a mother, a sister, a wife or a friend, when she is nothing, she is a tawaif and this apparently questions the identity of a woman being as a ‘tawaif.’ The authority to dominate and the position of hierarchy are however enjoyed by man. The man rules the world he is in and exercises the authority of a master.

VI. DATA REPRESENTATION

Movies	The term used	Female characters	Male characters	Level of subordination
Vaishali	Devdasi/courtesans	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Submissive • Beautiful/attractive • Seductive/exotic • Tolerant • Dependent 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assertive • Independent • Power • Honorable 	High



Devdas	Tawaif/whore	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Compassionate • Attractive • Bold • Selfless 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Power • Independent • Courageous • Proud 	Moderate
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Table 2: Traits of the female and male characters shown in the two movies

Considering the data (see table 2) it is obvious that the subordination of women is most found in Vaisali and Devdas. The character of Chandramukhi often rises up to the situation when someone offends her very self. Even though she has to undertake the profession of a courtesan, she is shown to have a heart of purity. She is attractive and bold but is ensnared in the ideology of patriarchal norms. On the other hand the character of Vaisali and her mother Malini is shown to be totally subservient to the king and his orders. Even though the King understands that Vaisali is his own blood he dares to send her to the mission of seducing the young saint only to accomplish the task. At the end Vaisali and her mother is not even given a chance to speak out the struggles they endured during the most difficult task. They are denied to raise their voice in a male dominated society and knowingly or unknowingly aid in the perpetuation of patriarchy. The male characters in both the movies are shown to be assertive, honorable and powerful. The man designs her life and she has to act accordingly. The film Pranali-The Tradition discusses the journey of a devadasi from temple prostitution to the red light area. The protagonist Pranali is spotted by the village mahant and compels her parents to wed their fourteen year old girl to 'dev' and become a devadasi. She is molested and sold to a politician for twenty acres of land. Even though she

managed to escape from there, the journey of her miserable life continued. She is then sold to Akka the brothel owner and there she happens to meet and befriends another prostitutes. She is forced to accept the reality that she is trapped. In the course of time she gave birth to a child Roshini. She couldn't think of her child surviving in such an obscene condition and decided to educate her child for her bright future. But she faced numerous challenges from the school authority to secure an admission. The school authorities questioned the identity and birth right of her child. And this incident made her think of their existence as asubjugated clan denied of all human rights. Finally an NRI named Vijay helped the community to get out of the redlight area. The NRI and his wife adopt Roshini and provide her better education. They battled to get a legal sanction for prostitution and claimed their rights. Under the leadership of Pranali all the sex workers in the redlight area started a working unit for themselves. So their collective and concentrated effort made them independent. The movie Pranali differs from the other two discussed. The protagonist is depicted as a woman who pulls down the barriers around her and emerges as an independent individual, free of all the shackles that had kept her confined.

Movie	Terms used	Traits of the protagonist	
Pranali-Tradition	The Prostitute/whore/lady of the night.	First part	Second part
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Afraid • Tolerant • Submissive • Ashamed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bold • Resistant • Independent • Hopeful

Table 3: Characteristics of the protagonist shown in the first and second part of the movie.

The first part of the movie Pranali portrays how the women get trapped into this inhumane practice under religious coloring. The protagonist Pranali was deceived by the village mahant and sold to a politician only for his materialistic gain. Majority of women in the red street area are shown to be tolerant, submissive and ashamed of their profession. No one shows the courage to get out from there. The second part of the movie effectively shows the change in the attitude of the protagonist towards the corrupt politicians and the society. Considering the second part of the movie (see table 3) the protagonist Pranali is shown to be bold and courageous. She shows enough courage to speak out the tyranny and oppression they faced. Even though they conducted strikes by demanding their rights, the corrupted politicians manipulated it with their power. But they continued their relentless battles and gradually empowered themselves. Patriarchy is a social system structured on power

hierarchy in which men holds the supreme authority in political, social, and moral realms, and has the control over property. Feminist theories have widely written about patriarchy as a predominant cause of the subordination of women. Shulamith Firestone, who is a radical libertarian feminist, defines patriarchy as a system of oppression of women. Virginia Woolf writes, "Women have served all these centuries as looking glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size." (Woolf, 1929) The women movement of the 1960s has a great impact upon the feminist literary criticism of the present day. The feminist criticism of the 1970s paid great attention to the mechanism of patriarchy, the cultural mindset in men and women which continued sexual



inequality. Feminist literature has persistently brought to the public eye the subjugation experienced by women. Heidi Hartmann defines patriarchy as a "...set of social norms which has a material base and in which there are hierarchical relations between men and solidarity among them which enable them in turn to dominate women... patriarchy is not simply hierarchical but hierarchy in which particular people fill particular places." (Hartmann, 1976, pp.162-163) The word feminist was originated from the French word 'femme' means woman. The basic objective of feminism is the equality of women in every domain of society including literature. The idea of equality of sexes in all realms of society including social, political and economic is the basis of feminist theories. And further the fact that a person belongs to the 'fair sex' should not influence her identity as a social, political and economic right. A welcome change in feminist criticism was brought out by Elaine Showalter in her work 'A literature of their own' (1977). She argued that there are definite patterns and phases in the evolution of female critical tradition: feminine, feminist and female stages. The feminine phase date from about 1842-1880 during which woman wrote in an effort to equal the intellectual achievements of the male culture. In the feminist phase, from about 1882-1920 women are historically enabled to dramatize the ordeals of wronged womanhood, by rejecting the postures of femininity. The female phase that began from the 1920s witnessed the rejection of the two forms of dependency- imitation and protest from the part of women. Instead they began to derive inspiration from the female experience considering it as the source of an anonymous art. They began to redefine and sexualize both external and internal experience. Because of the wide range of positions that exist within it, the 1970s feminist criticism has remarkable significance. Some feminist critics drew their inspiration from the ideas of Marxism and Psychoanalysis. The radical feminist analyzed patriarchy as a system of male superiority and required theoretical priority.

VII. CONCLUSION

It is apparent that the selected movies clearly depict the never ending journey of devadasis and the changes in the portrayal of the clan over time. The identity of the devadasis got negatively transformed when they are forced to enter into prostitution. They are denied to enter into a real marriage or a dignified life. The protagonist Pranali gave a new definition and direction to her life and also molded her companions to lead a new life. She did not allow her child to take over her profession and finds the ray of hope through educating her child. After a long journey of submissiveness and tyranny she came forward to claim their rights. She dares to speak out the essence of her experience as a sex worker. So a considerable change in the voice of the voiceless can be observed through Pranali. The character of Chandramukhi unveils that devadasis also possess a heart that loves for a dignified life. Her love for Devdas was selfless. But she knows that she won't ever be accepted by the hypocritical society. In an instance she even shows the courage to slap on the face of an aristocrat who showered unfavorable comments on her. The level of submission of women is most found in Vaisali under the influence of age. In Vaisali the characters also have the tendency of letting patriarchy rule dominate over them in every way possible. It mirrors her consciousness that she is under the power of

men. And she becomes a mere body to please the men by her exotic looks and charm and thereby she becomes isolated from her body and the very self also. In Foucault's words "a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (Foucault, 1975). Over the ages when other movies caught up in the name Devdas and Pranali, shows the different aspects of the potential and resistance of such women over men and the patriarchal society. As movies have a pervasive influence to change the perception of society, these movies effectively bring out the need to change the frame through which the society looks upon the victims of this inhumane practice. Through the movies it is also evident that the male chauvinism is not completely died down and the need of women to come forward to improve their condition and to empower themselves.

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