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Beneath The Scarlet Veil: Psychological Trauma And Symbolic Patterns In *The Devadasi In Scarlet*

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Abstract:

The Devadasi culture in South India is a complex and multifaceted tradition with a long and contested history. Devadasi tradition is one of the prevalent cultures followed in South India. It traced its origin to the 6th Century Kesari dynasty followed by 7th Century Chera, Chola, and Pandya's rule in Tamil Nadu. This system has its footprints in Kerala, Karnataka, and Andhra Pradesh. Though the devadasi tradition is officially outlawed, it still casts a long shadow. This paper attempts to showcase the life and transformation of a young devadasi named Yashri. Kabbyashree Dasgupta carved the life of her protagonist Yashri and other devadasi's lives in India. The argument posits that social and religious norms along with economic and social pressures contribute to this practice. This system reinforces the control of upper-caste men and their dominance by exploiting the sexuality of lower-caste and 'Dalit' women. The symbolic meaning of 'devadasis' underscores the gender and caste dynamics of control and subordination. This paper explores the psychological impact of this devadasi system through the lens of Yashri and her traumatic experiences throughout her journey. Dasgupta's depiction of Devadasi women in her novel, *Devadasi in Scarlet* offers a rich source for analysing these archetypal characterizations. The characters in the novel are shown not merely as victims of social structures but as bearers of complex psychological legacies, which can be interpreted through Jungian archetypes. This paper explores how the Devadasi woman encounters in society are shaped by the interplay of Jung's archetypes and the collective unconscious. By analysing the psychological depth of the characters, the study aims to shed light on the unconscious dynamics that underpin the Devadasi tradition in South India.

Keywords: Dedication, Traumas, Prostitution, Religion, collective unconscious

Introduction:

Kabbyashree Dasgupta is a prolific Bengali writer who portrays the darker shade of Devadasis due to religious compulsion. She sketches human emotions before picturizing an extraordinary tale. She travels with the lives of Devadasis and their haunted screams as a prostitute. As a media enthusiast, she highlights their transition in life. She is also a Kathak dancer, which makes her go beyond the Devadasi women to learn more about their artistic skills. Through her work, she tries to demystify religious and societal stereotypes. Her debut novel *The Devadasi in Scarlet* is published in the year 2020. This novel shows the strength of every woman who smiles through their life breakdowns. As a woman writer, she states that 'Prostitution is like death. It doesn't knock the door gently. It recklessly bombards into your house and takes away the most precious thing you would have treasured'. This study aims to explore the delineation of psychological traumas faced by Devadasi women from South Indian society. Through the novel *The Devadasi in Scarlet* tries to bring

out how the trauma shapes their life, and how the archetypes examine women from different generations. Even though their struggles and traumas are different from one another their pain and tears are equal.

The Devotees of God:

‘Devadasi’ is derived from a Sanskrit term which means ‘Slave of God’. Here the young girls are married to God in the name of religion and rituals. The young girls at the age of five to twelve sacrifice their lives to serve God intentionally or unintentionally. The hereditary temple dancers and courtesans of medieval South India have long captivating and challenging societal norms. However, their history is often shrouded in misconceptions and stigma, particularly surrounding their complex relationship with agency and autonomy.

According to Jaganathan, The reason behind dedicating a young girl is clearly shown in his article “Yellamma Cult and Divine Prostitution: Its Historical and Cultural Background” (2013), “The girl is born Blind, deaf, dumb, crippled, or has skin ailments or for the wellbeing of the family, poverty, mother was a Devadasi and it is followed from generations, As a religious ritual, father has undergone a successful operation and vowed to dedicate his daughter as Devadasi, if the parents were childless they vowed to dedicate their first child if it happened to be a girl if there were no sons in the family, the girl child was dedicated and could not marry as she becomes a ‘son’ for the family earning the family’s livelihood.”

Literature Review:

In the article “Psychological Study of Devadasi Children,” Ayyappa and Dr. S.P. Melkeri discuss the psychological mindset and problems faced by Devadasi children, but they fail to explain the real traumas faced by Devadasi women. Through the lens of psychology, this study analyses the real psychological traumas faced by Devadasi women in the hands of society. Shweta and Manjula’s article “Devadasi System and its Impact on their Children”, discusses the effects of Devadasi culture on young children. Through Jung’s theory of collective unconsciousness derived the challenges experienced by devadasi mother from their inner state of mind.

Myth Behind the Dedication Ceremony:

Yashri, a young protagonist of this novel is dedicated to Yellamma Devi temple, near the village of Saundatti in the state of Karnataka. According to the folklore based on Hindu mythology one of the stories of Goddess Yellamma is that of the curse of Jamadagni on Renuka, his spouse, who had been charged by him of adultery and beheaded by her son Parashuram at his father’s bidding. Parashuram was given three boons for having accomplished this task. He asked for his mother’s life. But in a hurry, the head of the Matangi woman has been fixed on her body and vice-versa, and she has resurrected as Yellamma or Matangi and Renuka. Jamadagni gives her the boon of being worshipped by women. These women would see Parashuram in all males and agree to satisfy their sexual needs whenever they need without anything in return. The tradition of worshipping Goddess Yellamma began thus, and the women who dedicated themselves to the goddesses became Devadasis. Yashri before attaining puberty, has forced to accept this religious position called devadasi. Society addressed her as Jogini. “With no change, my monotonous courses continued as Jogini” (11). This brings in the emotional struggle Yashri goes through, as she is declined to be called by her real name rather than being called Jogini. This shows the psychological mindset of young children.

Jung’s Theory of Collective Unconscious:

Carl Jung, a prominent Swiss psychiatrist and psychotherapist introduced the concept of collective unconsciousness. His theory of the collective unconscious is a central concept in his work, which differentiates his ideas from those of Freud. The collective unconscious contains knowledge, experiences, and memories from our ancestors, passed down through generations. Jung suggested that this part of the mind contains archetypes or universal symbols and themes in various cultures and mythologies. It is considered as a major aspect of human psychology. The collective unconscious is shared by all humans, and it is inherited rather than acquired through personal experience. This concept is connected with myths, religion, and cultural practices across the world in different societies and periods.

Jung’s collective unconscious in the early 20th century has raised interest in studying dreams, mythology, and religion. The collective unconscious is a universal version of the personal unconscious, holding mental patterns, or memory traces, which are shared with other members of the human species (Jung, 1928). According to him, these archetypes specify some basic human ordeals, which include birth, death, motherhood, and heroism. And they are inherent in myths, religious rituals, dreams, and symbols of various

cultures throughout the world. These are not learned behaviours but rather inherent, pre-existing structures that shape our perceptions and responses to life. He believed that the collective unconscious could explain common themes found in myths and religious stories from diverse cultures, as well as recurring symbols in dreams. Key to Jung's theory is the idea that these archetypes, while not directly accessible to consciousness, influence behaviour, dreams, and emotional life. This connection between the collective unconscious and symbolic forms in religion, mythology, and art generated interest in fields like anthropology, psychology, and comparative mythology, sparking an era of research into how universal symbols and stories resonate across humanity.

Carl Jung's concept of Collective unconsciousness has left an indelible mark on psychology, transcending its original context to influence various domains including arts, literature, and philosophy. This theory represents a level of unconscious emotions shared by members of a particular species containing archetypal experiences. Unlike the Freudian unconscious, driven by personal experiences and feelings, Jung's collective unconscious relies on a more profound and universal layer of the human psyche.

Devadasis and their Psychic Shadows:

The concept of the 'psychic shadow,' in Jungian psychology, the *shadow* represents the repressed and often darker aspects of the psyche that individuals, and even entire cultures, hide from conscious awareness. These repressed elements, however, persist and influence behaviour, emotions, and identity from beneath the surface.

Devadasis often face a deep psychological struggle due to their religious identity and the numerous exploitation they undergo in their lives. This system collapses and leads to significant identity crises, compounded by social stigma and exclusion. Jung's concept of collective unconscious offers additional perspective on Yashri's journey. His concept gives a clear picture of her culture and beliefs which echoes throughout her life. The devadasi tradition itself can be seen as a cultural archetype, which shapes Yashri's identity as she strives to find her unique path despite the constraints which has imposed upon her by her family and society.

According to Lisa Fritscher in her article "Carl Jung's Collective Unconscious Theory: What it Suggests About the Mind," "Collective unconscious is common to all human beings. Jung also believed that the collective unconscious is responsible for many deep-seated beliefs and instincts, such as spirituality, and sexual behaviour". This can be compared with Dasgupta's persona Yashri. Her life is completely under the control of her father Tande. She is forced to adopt this life but it changed her from being a sacred one. Jung believes that the unconscious has been inherited from the past collective experiences of humans, like the character Tande.

According to Franz Von, the collective unconscious serves as a storehouse of inherited, universal experiences that shape human thoughts, emotions, and behaviours. Jung believed that these shared experiences, though not consciously known, influence our perceptions, dreams, and cultural expressions. Archetypes, as manifestations of the collective unconscious, play a pivotal role in connecting individuals to the broader human experience (Von Franz, 1964).

Between Devotion and Destiny:

In the beginning, Yashri is found to be very happy unaware of this traditional practice. To attain this status of 'jogini' she has to undergo several rituals. Yashri is decorated like a pure new bride with a green saree, cheap bangles, red and white beaded jewellery, and fragrant white jasmine flowers. She wholeheartedly tied the knot with goddess Yellamma. "But in all honesty, my soul and body were being dedicated as devadasi" (2). Later she became a temple servant who performed rituals, dances, and music to honour the deities.

In *Serving the Goddess* by William Dalrymple, he says about the character named Rani Bai and she shares her darker side of her life which is equally experienced by Yashri. As the quotes follows:

I was only six when my parents dedicated me," she said. "I had no feelings at the time, except wondering: why have they done this? We were very poor and had many debts. My father was desperate for money, as he had drunk and gambled away all that he had earned and more, and he said, 'This thing will make us rich, it will make us live decently. (Dalrymple 2008)

As a recognized devadasi Yashri feels extremely special and esteemed. The people around her treat her like a queen. She found many young devadasis like her in the temple. Among them, five elder devadasis rituals are considered very special and they serve as a turning point in the life of Yashri. In such traditions, devadasis are dedicated to deities in early childhood, hence undergoing rigorous training in music, dance, and the art of seduction. While their artistic contributions have been celebrated, their personal lives are circumscribed by social and religious structures. They navigate a paradoxical space, revered for their talent yet ostracized for their perceived association with sexuality. Jung as a psychiatrist gives more fundamental strata for the mind. Yet he is quite different from Freud's statement. He believes in the collective unconscious, which has an enormous power to influence the psychical experience of the characters. He also says that collective forces can move an individual to do things far removed from sexuality. In this novel, Yashri tries to move out from sexual harassment in the name of customs and traditions.

Women as a Puppet:

'Women as a Puppet' metaphorically illustrates how women, particularly within certain historical, cultural, or societal contexts, are often controlled or manipulated by external forces, much like a puppet is guided by strings held by an unseen hand. This imagery reflects a lack of agency and autonomy, where the actions, behaviours, and life choices of women are not entirely their own but rather directed by societal expectations, traditional roles, or patriarchal authority. Dasgupta draws Madhu and Yashri as a Puppet in the hands of Tande. Women are portrayed as puppets to rituals, norms, or economic pressures that dictate their lives and identities. This highlights the systemic forces that render women passive, reinforcing power dynamics that prioritize external control over personal empowerment.

The aspects of this theory include instincts and archetypes. Jung defines instincts as natural, unlearned impulses present at birth that inspire psychological motivation. These ancestral memories, which he calls as an archetype, are represented by universal themes in various cultures, as expressed through literature, art, and dreams. Jung postulates four main archetypes or symbols inherited from the past generation. First, the persona is a 'mask', has worn in society to reflect the cultural norms that are appropriate or impressive. Second, 'the shadow' archetype embodies the dark side of the unconscious with destructive tendencies as well as culturally unacceptable instincts. Yashri, as a teenage girl, has to live for her family and society and not for herself. Her life is completely tuned by her father Tande like a puppet. She covers her happiness and pain within herself by wearing a 'mask' called 'smile'. Then she covers her identity while she is in her own house as well as in the pimp's brothel house. This shows unconscious state of destructive lifestyle which is chosen by her father only for money.

In "The Significance of Constitution and Heredity in Psychology" (1929), Jung wrote:

"As modern humans go through their process of individuation, moving out of the collective unconscious into mature selves, they establish a persona which can be understood simply as that small portion of the collective psyche that they embody, perform, and identify with. Dasgupta's portrayal of her young protagonist Yashri is the standard example of Jung's statement about collective unconscious."

Belief from the Roots:

It evokes the idea of deeply ingrained cultural or spiritual beliefs that originate from the foundational layers of a community or tradition. This suggests that certain beliefs, values, or practices are embedded in the very 'roots' of a society, which has passed down through generations and influence individuals on a fundamental level. These beliefs are not superficial or recent but are instead woven into the historical, cultural, and spiritual essence of a group, often shaping their identity, worldview, and behaviour.

During the time of male domination and caste discrimination, devadasis enjoy a high social status due to their artistic expertise and religious association. Daughters are praised and considered equal to sons, who earn money and fortune for the whole family. This is evident in the novel as stated by Yashri's grandmother Ajji. "You should be happy that your daughter is devadasi now. The one who will ensure that Yellamma keeps showering her blessings on us" (3), says sarcastically. However, this culture and lifestyle are new to Yashri. This statement showcases the happiness of the whole family. They are ready to sacrifice their daughter for money. This is because of the collective unconscious state which is totally covered with the collective knowledge that every person is born with the shared experience of all human beings through their ancestors. Yashri's ancestress belongs to Devadasi community. In the present lifestyle, Tande sacrifices his daughter to

fulfil his family crisis. Male domination is not only prevalent in society but also in their own families. Dasgupta, through her writings, brings out the discrimination between men and women, and the domination of all male characters in the family through Tande, Madhu, and Yashri. When Tande asks to wear some pretty clothes at home without a reason, Yashri picturizes her situation through these words “As usual, neither Tayi nor I had the courage to ask ‘Why?’” (19)

Emotional Bond:

Throughout this novel, Dasgupta weaves a holistic bond between mother and daughter. This bond makes Yashri stay strong and keeps her stable when she feels down. As a mother Madhu (Tayi) says “To bring good fortune to our family, you are being dedicated as a female servant of God. You can never marry or receive the happiness of having children” (3). As a jogini, they are not allowed to marry a person because they are made to believe that they already got married to God and goddess with the ‘pottukattal ceremony’. After this dedication ceremony, Yashri faces psychological traumas because she has been separated from her family and thrust into a new unfamiliar lifestyle. She was psychologically imbalanced. As a devadasi, Yashri expects to remain celibate, which leads to emotional distress in her.

Web of Traumas:

Jung also emphasizes the importance of what he calls “individuation”, the process of integrating the conscious and unconscious aspects of our psyches to achieve psychological wholeness and self-realization. Individuation involves confronting and reconciling conflicting aspects of the self, essential for gaining true self-knowledge and achieving personal growth (Stevens, 2001). Yashri, is trapped in a web of traumas in the name of religion. She takes time to understand herself and then she is in the way of searching for her identity within the darkness itself. She tries to get out from the web but can’t, it is because she accepts herself as a devadasi and even serves other men in the name of religion in her unconscious state of mind which is not been erased from her inner self. At the end of the novel, Yashri realizes her individuality and self-realizes her life by overcoming all her psychological traumas.

Shwetha and Manjula in their article says that “the sad reality of young girls after dedicating their whole lives as devadasi is that they must bathe early morning and attend Yellamma’s morning prayer at the temple. She is not permitted to enter the temple. However, she will bow to the deity from outside. After sweeping the temple compound, she goes begging with senior jogatis every Tuesday and Friday. After various religious rites, a girl is consecrated to the shrine of Yellamma and sent to a man who awaits her in the temple’s shrine for union. It is thought that the family that gave the girl to the deity will begin to receive the deity’s grace and prosperity from that day forward”. These are the psychological barriers faced by the Devadasi women.

Yashri, after her dedication ceremony, is not allowed to move out of the temple. She has to obey the temple priests and other zamindars while serving God. This is evident throughout the lines “My whole day was spent in temple activities, but the evenings god drained in pleasing the stakeholders” (7). At first, she is happy to be a part of the temple as a devadasi. She is respected and treated equally to Gods and Goddesses. Her whole day is spent in the temple, serving, cleaning the courtyard, making the arrangements for poojas, singing hymns, and dancing in the temple. In the evening, she is forced to please the stakeholders. She has to dance for them. At last, she gets paid by the stakeholders. This affects Yashri both physically and mentally. This affects the lifestyle of almost all the devadasis and shatters their whole life. This act leads to getting into prostitution and makes them feel ashamed, isolated, and powerless. Although it is portrayed as a kind of devotion, the reality is conflicted. They feel a sense of duty to the temple or deity yet exploited by society. This is evident in Yashri’s life. The trauma of sexual abuse is manifested through various psychological disorders.

Whispers of Wound:

It uncovers the image of quiet but determines the echoes of trauma, loss, or hurt that may not be openly evident but profoundly affect one’s emotions and actions. This culture captures the idea that wounds, especially psychological or cultural, continue to whisper their influence, subtly shaping identity, behaviour, and perception, even if they are not outwardly acknowledged.

“His ogling addressed him, ‘Anna, here is your order. She will be at your service today. You are her first customer, so I offered home delivery’”. (21) says Tande. Yashri is physically and mentally tortured by her father and becomes unstable. Lisa Fritscher in her article *Carl Jung’s Collective Unconscious Theory: What*

It Suggests About the Mind says about a person's psychological makeup from Carl Jung's book *Four Archetypes*. The psychological makeup includes the mother's love, rebirth, spirit, and trickster. Psychologically mother's love was pure like the love of Yashri's mother Madhu "No dear! You are my daughter! Your place in my heart, not at my feet." (17)

Franz Fanon's argument that "[v]iolence contains dimensions of physical and psychological domination by one species of mankind over another" (Roberts 142) provides a lens to analyse Maalik's brutal action over Yashri, he is the first man who rapes her. He enjoys the pleasure of using Yashri's body, but he fails to understand the intention of his actions. Yashri experiences both physical and psychological traumas. On the other hand, the brutal actions of Babuji towards Yashri are characterized by physical violations and psychological manipulations, which impact the mental and emotional life of Yashri. "You are a policeman! You are supposed to protect us citizens. But you yourself are torturing me. This is a sin!" (24). The Policeman degrades her for being a devadasi and asks her to serve him. This shows the physical trauma that has been faced by Yashri in which her life turns into a dream due to brutality. Unlike Yashri, this dream becomes a reality in the lives of many other devadasis. This incident reflects the darkest reality of devadasis residing in India. Some of the sad incidents and unknown realities are clearly penned by Navaneetham, Basavaraju and Arelingiah in their article "Devadasi and their Intimate Partners: Dynamics of Relationships" as,

"...intimate partner is like my unwed husband, expects me to be like his wife, but does not take care of my family needs, to meet my economic needs, I do practice sex work, but my intimate partner feels that I should be loyal to him, he beats me if I do not cooperate and wanted me to satisfy him as his wishes and desires.

...my intimate partner is everything for me, he is like my husband, but I am married to a god, I hope that he would be with me till my end of life, he would not have enough money to main both the families, I need to earn for myself and for my family, I know only sex work as a mean to get money, I do not know will he approve it or do I need to hide and run my dhanda."

The Grandmother – Archetype:

In this novel, Dasgupta also picturizes the role of grandmother in a different way. Being an old woman, Ajji follows harmful societal norms, ancestral customs, and traditions which leads to the oppression of women belonging to the same family. Her actions highlight the devastating consequences of such indifferences and the importance of challenging patriarchal structures that continue to marginalize and subjugate other women including Yashri and her mother Madhu.

In general, the role of grandmothers is to nurture the children and their grandchildren. But here the grandmother Ajji, embodies as a dominating figure where she gives her unwavering support to her son Tande. As a grandmother, she fails to give importance to Yashri's feelings. She is one of the main reasons for Yashri's mental and physical traumas. Her grandmother's insistence on maintaining traditional customs and societal expectations leads to a tragic life for Yashri. Her decision to sacrifice her granddaughter as a devadasi demolishes Yashri's life but she never regrets herself for being the reason behind this. Ajji's character can be understood by the following lines "Ajji understood the hidden actuality. That day, she beat me and my mother with such brutality, that it seemed like we had committed a sin" (14). These lines exhibit the cruel nature of Ajji as well as the psychological state of Madhu and Yashri. Ajji is seen as the best example of Carl Jung's collective Unconsciousness.

Echoes of Broken Mind:

The destructive nature of the Devadasi culture frees her from the bondage of hopelessness and inaction. This paves the way for her to reclaim a sense of agency and self-respect. Instead of being a sign of mental illness, her hallucinations symbolize her stronger spiritual connection and determination to give her lord one last dance. "At the level of individuals, violence is a cleansing force. It frees the native from his inferiority complex and his despair and inaction; it makes him fearless and restores his self-respect" (Fanon quoted in Jha 361).

"The next few months were crucial. I was going through an emotional journey. Experiencing flashbacks and reminiscing about the horrible days and the haunting nights had taken an emotional toll on me" (161) says Yashri. Both these Devadasi systems as well as prostitution involve the exploitation of women's bodies, their origin, purposes, and cultural significance. In the beginning, the Devadasi system has a religious and cultural context and it is later corrupted by economic and social forces, leading to exploitation.

Prostitution, on the other hand, is always seen as a commercial activity with no spiritual or cultural foundation. Both these systems, however, reflect the deep-rooted gender inequalities and patriarchal structures, which historically place women in a vulnerable position.

Mental health has an ancient history and its importance in man's life is recognized from ancient times. In ancient times, mental abnormality or diseases are considered the wrath of God or people believed that ghosts, witches, and evil spirits brought such diseases along. Even today In India, like Devadasis many Adivasi communities, which generally live in villages, cure themselves from such mental diseases by religious rites or superstitions. Agarwal, (2007) stated that "Mental health as state of well-being whereby individuals recognize their abilities, or able to cope with their normal stress of life, work productivity and fruitfully make a contribution to their communities".

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, Yashri chooses violence as the only resort to free a devadasi from the constant brutality that society has imposed upon her. By diving into the rich tapestry in the lives of Devadasis, helps to understand the complexities of gender, caste, and artistic expression in Indian society. *Devadasi in Scarlet* reminds us that history is not a monolithic narrative, but a chorus of diverse voices waiting to be heard unknown, and acknowledged.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, addressing the psychological ordeal of devadasis requires a multi-dimensional approach that combines immediate relief with long-term solutions. By acknowledging the depth of the trauma and committing to targeted reforms, it is better to heal and empower those affected, ultimately contributing to a more just and equitable society. Hence, the narratives of oppression suffer by disadvantaged groups like devadasi women within specific cultural and religious settings, have been approached to revisit the social marginalization and to reinvest the devadasi identity and agency with a sense of pride and empowerment.

The findings of this research paper are that Devadasis identity is influenced by a common cultural memory, which implies that personal pain is not solely individual but also reflects collective historical trauma. The protagonist's turmoil represents a collective struggle over identity, sexuality, and agency. The work shows Devadasis character as embodying Jung's 'sacred feminine' archetype, a powerful but frequently suppressed component of the collective unconscious. This archetype appears in rituals, her relationship with spirituality, or her societal role which emphasizes both her empowerment and marginalization. Analysing the protagonist's journey, it shows a potential cycle of healing in which she faces and absorbs her trauma, which eventually leads to empowerment.

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