

Exploring Agency and Justice in Devadasis Through the Lens of Dharma in *The Undoing Dance and Desire of the Moth*

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ABSTRACT

*This article delves into the themes of agency and justice as portrayed in the novels *The Undoing Dance* by Srividya Natarajan and *Desire of the Moth* by Champa Bilwakesh, focusing on the experiences of Devadasis, or temple dancers, in colonial and post-colonial South India. Utilising the concept of dharma from Hindu philosophy, this paper examines how the protagonists rise above their marginalised status and assert agency in pursuit of justice through their participation in classical dance. Through this bond, they discover purpose and liberation in their ability to express themselves, as classical dance transcends social hierarchy, discrimination, and injustice. While justice has been a prominent theme in Western literature, there remains a noticeable gap in Indian literature. This exploration thus creates a paradigm shift by shedding light on the empowering aspect vividly expressed through their participation in the classical dance form called Bharatanatyam, which allowed them to rise above their injustices rather than confining them within the societal framework of South India. This nuanced perspective forms the crux of this study, suggesting a more transformative view that highlights the ethical aspects of their battle, creating a sense of agency and justice through their dharma.*

Keywords: Dharma; Hindu Philosophy; Devadasi; Justice; Indian Literature

INTRODUCTION

The practice of women dedicating themselves to temples for religious or sacred duties was an enduring and esteemed custom that differed throughout civilisations, depending on the era and cultural practices. Several ancient cultures, such as Mesopotamia, Babylonia, Greece, Egypt, and Cyprus, had a thriving tradition of dedicating women to religious service (Singh, 1990). Since ancient times, it has been a common practice in India to dedicate females, especially those from lower-caste communities, for religious purposes in temples. Consequently, this religious practice gave rise to a community commonly referred to as the devadasis. Goswami (2000) defines the term "devadasi" as someone who serves a god or sacred object within a temple, indicating their role as a servant of the divine. Curiously, these young women were given the chance to acquire expertise in a traditional dance form known as Bharatanatyam. This servant was completely dedicated to worshipping the highest celestial creatures, showing reverence to the Supreme and recognising the omnipresence of their creator. Similarly, Parker (1998) supported this viewpoint by describing devadasis as unmarried temple workers who, from an early age, dedicated themselves to the temple deities through rituals that resembled their "Hindu" wedding ceremonies. Based on a study, the term "devadasi" is a Sanskritized adaptation of the Tamil word "devaradiyar," which refers to a

woman who endured tyranny in return for the patronage of a specific deity or sacred object (Singh, 1990). The term often denotes the feminine variant of *deva-dasa*, which designates a male individual who was subjected to the service of a deity. During the initial stages of South Indian history, Bharatanatyam was a distinctive art form that was only practised, performed, and preserved by the devadasi community, who were revered as goddesses. Bharatanatyam is an artistic form that combines elements of sensuality and spirituality. It communicates the themes of divine connection, love, and the universe via its intricate movements, gestures, and expressions. This art form provides a platform for lower-caste girls to become classical dancers, allowing them to break free from the traditional norms of India's caste-based system. Through this, they are able to explore their sensuality, a privilege that even upper-class women can only dream of. Over time, classical dance played a role in forming a strongly matriarchal society and eventually became a captivating aspect of Indian history. The historical setting of India is incomplete without the presence of the institution of devadasis.

Kersenboom-Story (1987) portrayed the devadasis as arousing sentimental longing for the past. These individuals occupied influential positions among Hindu communities in south India and had strong connections with temple organisations. Undoubtedly, their influence on India's spiritual realm, which is deeply rooted in its diverse culture and heritage, is formidable, transcending the limitations imposed by a caste-based social structure. The temple architecture's craftsmanship is so profound that it resonates through the bright sculptures and paintings found in several temples both in India and abroad. Paradoxically, the mere sound of her name fails to evoke a good sentiment. However, it bears a multifaceted and intricate past of prejudice, exploitation, and inequities to such an extent that its existence as a structure is nearly eradicated from the planet. Their involvement in the artistic aspects of India's vibrant culture and tradition played a crucial influence in shaping the foundation of artistic expression in India. The system of devadasi women was already imbued with a blend of implications, but the government of the country, together with its own regulations and legislation, further convoluted the system. Most scholarly studies on the devadasi community in India focus on highlighting the differences between the current devadasi practices and the supposed traditional practices within the modern devadasi system. These studies also compare the current practices to those from earlier times when the Indian subcontinent was not under Islamic rule. (Shankar and Ganesan, 2021).

Upon examining India's historical records, it becomes clear that the devadasi system, a longstanding and integral part of Indian culture, has been a topic of contention and ethical discourse in society. The rise of these women was quickly accompanied by views and negative assumptions, especially from a caste-based perspective. Vimochana (1985) argues that modern populist reformers have played a role in altering public opinion by depicting devadasis, who were formerly temple slaves, as debased individuals engaged in low-cost prostitution. The quick shift in attitudes led to a significant rupture, resulting in discrimination and inequities within the supposedly dominant matriarchal order. As this process intensified, discrimination persisted, casting a shadow on the profound artistic talent of the Devadasi women. Legal and political measures resulted in a significant transformation that did not safeguard the overall system; instead, it represented a departure from the fundamental principles of the system. Consequently, the Indian Supreme Court recognises the current devadasi group as one that compels underage females into engaging in prostitution and sexual servitude after their consecration to a deity. The devadasi system quickly became widely seen as a morally repulsive and sad institution (Shankar & Ganesan, 2021). Through the works of enlightened writers, particularly contemporary novels, we are able to highlight the rich artistry of the devadasi system, which is intertwined with the legal and political

climate and caste-based discrimination. These authors have played a vital role in documenting the history of the contemporary Devadasi system, ensuring clarity that the Devadasi primarily refers to a community of committed females who uphold the artistry of India's traditional dance within the temple. Their efforts have shed light on the genuine essence of the system and its differences from past practices, providing a more accurate comprehension to individuals who may have been misinformed.

Scholars have studied and explored the devadasi tradition in literature because of the intricate ways in which it intersects with religion, culture, and gender. It has been practised in different parts of India for millennia, during which devadasis were historically exploited and marginalised despite their devotion to worshipping deities through dance and singing. Srividya Natarajan's *The Undoing Dance* and Champa Bilwakesh's *Desire of the Moth* both provide moving depictions of devadasis negotiating their lives in pre- and post-colonisation India, illuminating their fights for autonomy and equality. This paper analyses the protagonists' journeys and how they navigate their hardships in quest of righteousness and empowerment using the conceptual framework of *dharma* from Hindu philosophy.

The Undoing Dance by Srividya Natarajan and *Desire of the Moth* by Champa Bilwakesh were selected as they align with the principles of the *dharma* theory, which emphasises justice and righteousness (Mohanty, 2017). *The Undoing Dance* revolves around Kalyani, the offspring of a devadasi. Following Kalyani's *arangetram*, a prominent individual extends an offer to become Kalyani's patron, essentially her romantic partner. Reluctantly, Rajayi consents to Rachel Carstairs, a missionary residing in Nallur, taking custody of Kalyani in order to protect her daughter. Kalyani receives instruction in English and other proficiencies at the mission house. However, destiny interferes when Rachel becomes sick and departs the nation, compelling Kalyani to return to Kalyanikkarai once again. Fortunately, her intelligent aunt Lila accompanies her to several dancing performances in Madras, where the young and attractive Kalyani captures the attention of widower Balan, who subsequently proposes to her.

For many, the term "devadasi" refers to female dancers in Hindu temples who inherit their profession. Since these temples were supported by monarchs and wealthy individuals, the devadasis received the favour of the kings and became their mistresses, often bearing illegitimate offspring for their patrons. *The Undoing Dance* narrates the tale of a lineage of devadasis, spanning 13 generations, who were both singers and dancers. The lineage traces back to Annakili Naachiyar, who lived in the early 18th century in Kalyanikkarai. The text provides a concise account of the genealogy, starting with Rajayi's mother, Kanaka, who herself was the daughter of Jagadambal, the mistress of the Kalyanikkarai king. Jagadambal's mother, Kalyaniammal, was the paramour of King Lingarayan III. However, during the British administration, the devadasis were left impoverished, and by the 1920s, most of the dancers in Kalyanikkarai had lost their patronage from the royal families. By 1950, they faced societal humiliation and dishonour as ordinary people ostracised them and labelled them as prostitutes.

The Desire of Moth, on the other hand, revolves around a teenage widow, aged fifteen, who hastily crosses a bridge in order to catch a train heading towards Trichi. Sowmya flees from her village in order to comprehend the occurrences that have taken control of her physical and mental state, shattering her entire existence. She is resolute in her desire to escape the fate of being trapped in a state of emotional detachment and seclusion within her social group, the Brahmins of the Thanjavur area in south India. Her plans change abruptly when she encounters a devadasi, an elderly dancer, in her compartment. Upon Mallika opening her drawstring bag and purchasing food for Sowmya, the latter realises the solution to her own predicament as a young lady with only

a thin cotton sari, a shaved head, and few possessions. She inquires Mallika about the means to attain such authority, namely the ability to effortlessly extract money from a bag. Thus commences Sowmya's metamorphosis in the coastal city of Madras, which is currently experiencing its own political and social upheavals while India is grappling with its struggle for independence from the imperial British empire. Here, she acquires an appreciation for the artistry of dance under the guidance of Mallika and experiences the bittersweet emotions of developing romantic feelings for a man who is already married. The cinema offers unprecedented chances and fulfils all her desires for power and wealth, but it also mercilessly engulfs her. Upon receiving a letter, Sowmya embarks on a mission to recover all that was lost during her previous residence in the quaint village nestled beside a meandering section of the Kaveri River.

LITERATURE REVIEW

As noted by Deepa and Suvarna (2016), scholars have characterised the devadasi system as a form of religious prostitution and an ancient religious custom that entraps young girls in India even today, subjecting them to a life of sexual exploitation. Although the devadasi practice was once regarded as honourable and prestigious in the past, it has progressively deteriorated into a system of institutionalised sexual exploitation, primarily affecting the most impoverished sections of Indian society. According to Paul (2007), the overwhelming majority of devadasis belong to the Dalit community, with a significant portion hailing from the Madiga, Valmiki, Mahar, and Matang castes, which are among the most marginalised groups in India (Desai, 2007). Poverty is so deeply rooted in these communities that families, including parents and husbands, often have no qualms about dedicating their female children or wives to the system as a means of generating income for the family (Shivasharanappa, 2012).

The devadasi practice aligns with this description, as children are dedicated to it by their family members and village elders without their consent or a clear understanding of what it entails to be a devadasi. Once dedicated, they become devoted to the deity and are considered the communal property of the deity's devotees. They are subjected to severe exploitation, including sexual servitude or non-consensual sexual acts with one or multiple partners, often at the behest of others (Toast, 2019). Consequently, they are trapped in this cultural role and bear the stigma throughout their lives, unable to escape or renounce it. These women were treated with the utmost respect because it was formerly believed that they were married to immortal souls. These women also earned the moniker "Goddess". They were in charge of caring for the temple, mastering the traditional dances, and offering worship to the gods. Several theories have been proposed to explain the origins of the devadasi system, including the Sanskritization theory (Srinivas, 1985), the Matriarchy to Patriarchy theory (Göttner-Abendroth, 2004), the Mother Goddess theory (Fleming, 1969), the Lineage theory (Kuper, 1982), and the Racial Theory (Winant, 2000). Historical uncertainty surrounds the evolution of the devadasi system, but some references point to the Keshari Dynasty of South India in the sixth century A.D. It is documented that one of the dynasty's queens initiated the practice of marrying classical dancers to the gods as a form of worship. Despite the gaps in historical records, it remains a fact that devadasis are young girls from lower castes who are subjected to sexual exploitation by individuals from higher castes and temple patrons, often being married off to Hindu deities at an early age, sometimes as young as five or six years old (Shingal, 2015).

During the Islamic and British colonial reigns in India, the standing and reputation of the devadasi woman began to wane. They were abused, exploited, and had their possessions taken away from them as the status of temples suffered greatly in the hands of the imperialist governments (Bales, 2012). Consequently, they were compelled to dance at weddings and private locations rather than temples, which resulted in dancing and prostitution's integration into Indian culture (Massey, 2004). As explained in a study done by Kalaivani (2015), the devadasi system worked more effectively in southern India than in the northern part of the country. This emphasises the significance of dancing institutions in South India, a point extensively highlighted in the texts studied for this study.

The severity of this issue is underscored by the International Labour Organisation (ILO), which has identified the devadasi system as a key contributor to the trafficking of girls for commercial exploitation (ILO, 2010). As highlighted by Jeevanandam (2015), the United Nations Supplementary Convention on Slavery explicitly condemns "any institution or practice in which a child or young person under the age of 18 is handed over by one or both of their natural parents or by their guardian to another individual, whether for monetary gain or not, with the intent of exploiting the child or young person." According to Bairagi (2022), though the devadasi system is prevalent only in a few states, the issue is considered a national problem because, despite geographical concentration being very limited (Drishti, 2019), female child trafficking from different parts of India to convert them to devadasis and child prostitutes working in different brothels magnify the present challenges of the practice.

Devadasis, in particular, and their community as a whole had great respect in society and frequently served as the repository of resources like money and land (Chawla, 2021). These patrons of the arts were also reputed to have higher levels of education than other females (Nandagopal, 1990). For instance, they were a significant portion of the literati in Andhra Pradesh. They would converse and collaborate with poets from higher castes to interpret their literary creations and communicate their meaning through the technique known as *abhinaya*, which entails guiding the audience towards an emotional experience (*bhava*) of a mood (*rasa*) (Chawla, 2021). Their practice of the *Guru-Sishya parampara* led to their mastery in a variety of subject areas, from literature to mathematics (Soneji, 2004). It is important to note that this does not mean the old devadasis group was spared from the oppressive effects of a male-dominated culture (Sreenivas, 2011), as they have always been used as pawns in a struggle for power and notoriety, which is a recurring theme in both written and oral traditional stories. It is worthy of mentioning here that political elites have misused and manipulated devadasis myths throughout history, though they acknowledge their property rights and sexual autonomy, allowing them to engage in performance arts, prostitution (although the name "prostitution" does not completely capture the essence of this pre-modern activity), celibacy, and/or sexual relationships with patrons (Ramberg, 2011). However, opinions differ on the extent to which patriarchal systems stifled their rights and benefits. Due to various historical turning points, the traditional devadasis' status as revered members of society have remained a contentious issue in literature. An analysis of stories of their economic standing in society and their reliance on royal sponsorship is usually done before a brief overview of the many sources of evidence for the devadasis system and its dance form, thereby constantly exposing them to criticism.

According to Colundalur (2011), historical research previously labelled the devadasi institution as "sacred prostitution." Nevertheless, in modern times, this tradition has evolved into a type of explicit prostitution, where several destitute families offer their daughters to this system as a means of pleasing the deities. According to the Marxist feminist perspective, women's

subjugation is closely connected to their financial reliance on males in a society that is dominated by men (Barret, 2014). This ideology contends that capitalism is pivotal in the subjugation of women. The widespread impact of capitalism in society sustains a patriarchal framework in which women continue to depend on males economically, hence maintaining social class divisions. Miriam (2005) contends that the Marxist feminist framework perceives economic exploitation as including all manifestations of prostitution and pornography, regarding them as both class-based and sexual subjugations of women. This viewpoint establishes connections between the exploitation of women's sexuality and sexual energy by individuals who buy or control these sexual services and the exploitation of a worker's energy by capitalists for financial gain. This exploitation leads to a disconnection from one's physical abilities and existence (Merry, 2000). Radical feminists and patriarchal theorists both believe that violence against women is caused by deeply rooted institutionalised sexism and paternalistic tendencies (Dobash, 1979). These theories emphasise the structural aspect of men's authority and power over women. Violence and discrimination against women are perceived as expressions of deep-rooted male entitlement within a patriarchal framework, wherein men, the government, and society establish a social environment that legitimises sexist power structures.

In 611 AD, the Ankor Borei Inscription of Cambodia (ancient Kambuja) shows seven female dancers, eleven vocalists, and four violinists at the temple. Ancient Armenian nobility put their unmarried daughters to work for Anaitis. Information on Babylonian devadasis is accessible. Devadasis were Ishtar, the divine being. Girls were traditionally placed in the temple, where people may pay silver to take them. The buyer had the right to date the girls after buying them. Marco Polo also said parents devoted their infants to deities. According to him, the parents kept custody of their daughter for temple dances during important occasions till her marriage. Missore, a famous ancient civilisation, committed girls to "Amman" under the system. According to the Great Harris Papyrus, Ramesis III gave the temple of Amon 84,486 servants, devadasis, and lands. Greek temple priests, emperors, and other powerful people enjoyed the devadasis dance at Apple and Sun God temples. Rome also had dancing girls in Juno, Venus, and Jewish temples (Mishra, 2014). India created the system in the early mediaeval period, while Mesopotamia (Iraq), Egypt, and Greece had it for millennia. Egyptian temples of Osiris and Isis had many dancing women. Many Corinthian ladies were Aphrodite temple members. Additionally, each temple in ancient Sumer, Iraq, housed beautiful women who were part of the god's family, and the wealth of Corinth's Aphrodite temple supported over a thousand courtesans, who were offered to the Goddess by men and women.

Ancient devadasis were divided into seven groups. A parent's daughter is a "Dutta Devadasi" when dedicated to a temple. A lady abducted and forced to become a devadasi is a "Hruta Devadasi". "Birkrita Devadasi" means selling a woman to a temple as a devadasi. A lady who voluntarily becomes a devadasi is called a "Bhrutya Devadasi". A lady who devotes herself to Devadasi is called a "Bhakta Devadasi". An "Alankara Devadasi" is a skilled woman who is provided as a devadasi. A devadasi who is paid for dancing and song is called a "Gopika" or "Rudraganika". The most common devadasis are *Dutta* (presented by a family member), *Hruta* (sold to the temple or priest), and *Bhakta* (Ramberg, 2011). Scholars have long been interested in the devadasi characters in Indian literature as a window into larger discussions of gender, authority, and tradition in India. The struggles of devadasis within patriarchal and traditionalist frameworks have been vividly portrayed in works like *The Pagoda Tree* (2018) by Claire Scobie and *Breaking Free* (2022) by Vaasanthi, drawing attention to the intricate interplay between exploitation and autonomy that defines the lives of these women. Two novels that have recently come to light as

important additions to the literature on devadasis are *The Undoing Dance* and *Desire of the Moth*. While there have been scarce studies conducted on the selected novels, these stories encourage readers to consider the moral implications of the protagonists' plights and the continued relevance of classic principles in dealing with modern problems. This study aims to shed light on the novels' engagement with issues of agency, justice, and *dharma* by placing them within the larger literary landscape. By doing so, it hopes to offer new perspectives on the experiences of devadasis in south India during and after colonial rule.

As such, this article emphasises on *dharma* theory based on the selected novels as it depicts the devadasi community in south India. According to the past literature review, *dharma* is one of the legal principles that works for the community system in South India for justice, morality, and the practice of law. The portrayal of devadasis in both novels resembles the position of that particular community as a discriminated group from various opportunities, and they are seen as sensual objects periodically, especially in the dance (Hogan, 2003). The phrase "*Dharma*" is a significant and complex concept in the history of Indian religions, encompassing Buddhism and Jainism. Even within Brahmanical and Hindu traditions, the term has various interpretations that stem from its original etymological meaning "support" (derived from the Sanskrit word *dhr* - "to hold," "to support"). These interpretations range from "rule" and "law" to "cosmic law," "universal order," and even "religion" in a broader sense (Hogan, 2003). While a particular historical, theological, or regional context may emphasise one of these connotations, it is necessary to acknowledge that the others are also implicitly encompassed. To fully comprehend the concept, one must take into account all of these implications as integral parts of a consistent system that, however, underwent historical evolution. The Hindu idea of *dharma* refers to a comprehensive set of laws governing individual and societal behaviour. The observance of this ritual ensures both the purity of the individual or community and is considered a fundamental requirement for personal salvation (Hogan, 2003). Additionally, it plays a crucial role in upholding the social and cosmic order. According to P. Hacker, *dharma* should be understood as an impersonal principle that is inherently separate from any deity. He adds:

"We should conceive of dharma as primarily a tangible or intangible entity existing beyond the physical realm. Dharma is a tangible framework of conduct that holds significant value for achieving salvation, and it already exists before to its execution, awaiting actualisation".

(2006, p. 36)

Dharma, with its significant essence, is intricately linked to *karman*, which refers to "action and its consequences," another fundamental concept in Hindu soteriology (P. Hacker, 2006). The content of the different rule sets encompassed by the concept of *dharma* is influenced by the position of the individual or social group within the socioreligious framework of Hindu society. This framework is primarily determined by the *varna* (caste) system, but it also takes into account factors such as age, gender, caste, marital status, and stage of life. The concept of *svadharmā* refers to the unique and distinct norms that are specific to each individual. In contrast, there is another set of laws known as *sādhārana dharma* or *sāmānyadharmā*, which are universal principles of behaviour that apply to all members of Hindu society (P.Hacker, 2006). They encompass fundamental ethical principles like as nonviolence (*ahimsā*), truthfulness, and reverence for parents and elders. The convergence of distinct normative systems resulted in a wide range of interpretations associated with the term "*dharma*," including accepted behavioural norms, ritual practices and procedural rules, moral, religious, and pious actions and attitudes (righteousness), civil and criminal legislation, legal procedures and penalties, as well as acts of penance for

violations of *dharma* (P.Hacker, 2006). *Dharma* establishes the principles for ethical and efficient living, as well as for societal structure and engagement. It encompasses societal structures such as matrimony, adoption, legal agreements, legal proceedings, and criminal sanctions, as well as personal actions, including using the lavatory, washing, dental hygiene, consuming food, engaging in sexual activity, and observing social customs (Olivelle, 1999).

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This paper employs the *dharma* theory in Hindu philosophy as its conceptual framework to elucidate how devadasi women were able to rise above their marginalised status and assert agency in pursuit of justice through their participation in classical dance. According to P. Hacker, “*dharma* is a tangible framework of conduct that holds significant value for achieving salvation” (2006, pg. 36). This paper examines conduct in two categories: *svadharma* (duty) and *nyaya* (justice), which manifest through the pursuit of justice in devadasis in the selected novels. Historically, rural communities sometimes subjected devadasis to public ridicule and contempt. Tarachand (1991) delineates a customary practice known as ‘*Sidi attu*’ in the town of Madakeripura in Karnataka. This practice remained prevalent until 1987, when it was proscribed by the government. A devadasi was hanged by a hook inserted into her back, which was attached to one end of a horizontal rod supported by a vertical pole fixed in the ground. The rod was spun by a rope attached to the other end. She greeted the crowd, her clothes billowing as her exposed lower body was fully visible to everyone, providing entertainment. The intention behind this was to bring economic success to the community.

Looking through the selected novels, both characters defiantly stood by their principles in the face of social injustice, exemplifying *dharma*, the principle of righteousness (P. Hacker, 2006). On closer examination, a strong sense of *dharma* drives Kalyani as she confronts repressive social conventions. Instead of giving in to exploitation, she fights for justice for her community and herself. Meanwhile, Sowmya’s commitment to *dharma* is the foundation of her pursuit of artistic duty as a devadasi. She takes a stand against the patriarchal rule and the suppression of Devadasi culture, seeing it as her moral obligation to do so.

Upon deeper examination, the guiding principle of *dharma* plays an important role in the analysis of the selected novels that address the devadasi community. Past studies have revealed that most senior devadasis live in poverty and are socially vulnerable, which is a sad truth. Life is extremely tough for a devadasi when they have many children, no support from their spouse, are poor, landless, and illiterate. Unfortunately, many devadasis are sold to pimps by shady “protectors” nowadays. The “devadasi belt” is a collection of districts in southern India that are home to multiple tiers of human trafficking (Tarachand, 1992). These “procurers” transport the ladies to the seedier parts of major cities like Bombay, Delhi, or others. Some of the prostitutes in Bombay’s brothels around Falkland Road and Shuklaji Street have Yellamma tattoos, and there are little prayer shrines dedicated to her. Menon (1997) reports that fifteen devadasis work in a single brothel in Karnataka, and a major risk for devadasis is the spread of HIV/AIDS.

Additionally, the level of understanding of personal cleanliness is quite poor among women who have several sexual partners. According to Nag (1995), it is estimated that 20% of devadasis are HIV positive. In most cases, these women don’t give much thought to their health since they see such issues as inevitable parts of being a woman. This neighbourhood has an extremely high rate of abortions and stillbirths because the majority of deliveries occur at home and are attended

to by older women. There is complete disregard for the potential impact on her reproductive health. Orr (2000) found that most devadasi women become physically weak and anaemic as a result of their many pregnancies, abortions, and births.

This is correlated with the situation of Kalyani and Sowmya, who have fought for justice as human beings. By standing up to injustice and fighting for what is right, both characters exemplify the concept of *dharma* to assert their agency as temple dancers. Instead of accepting their disadvantaged position, they rise above their injustices and take control of their autonomy, defying social conventions. In living out these *dharma* ideals, both characters show how strong, honest, and dedicated they are to doing what's right. Their deeds demonstrate the moral fortitude and ethical behaviour necessary to overcome hardship while revealing how *dharma* may be a guiding principle in everyday situations.

DISCUSSION

Having situated *The Undoing Dance* and *Desire of the Moth* in the context of *dharma*, this paper will now argue that both Kalyani and Sowmya, as devadasi women, were able to rise above their inequalities, breaking away from the normative discourse of devadasi women often portrayed as prostitutes. The deep, profound connection with classical dance is a significant theme in the selected novels. While this aspect of their lives has often been overshadowed by societal norms, it serves as a source of empowerment and liberation for these women. By embracing their role as patrons of the arts through classical dance, they challenge the restrictive norms imposed on them and find a means of self-expression and identity.

The protagonist, Kalyani, becomes entangled in a network of exploitation and mistreatment within the Devadasi system in *The Undoing Dance*. Despite being marginalised, Kalyani demonstrates her autonomy by questioning traditional norms and advocating for her rights. She exemplifies the values of *dharma* through her deeds, endeavouring to maintain moral integrity and pursue fairness for both herself and her community. Her experience exemplifies the intricacies of balancing traditional and modern values while also showcasing the indomitable strength of the human soul when confronted with challenges.

Glancing through history, the devadasi practice in southern India has been correlated with the debasement and sexual exploitation of women. According to Tejpal (2018), the presence of the caste system and religiosity has greatly impeded the ability of governmental agencies to provide justice to these women. Additionally, Vats (2020) contends that local Indian law enforcement agencies exercise caution when considering the prohibition of the contemporary devadasi system, given its predominant association with the already marginalised Dalit communities. Oftentimes, impoverished families belonging to the lower caste are incentivised by the promise of financial assistance and support to entrust their daughters with the aim of ensuring a brighter future for both the daughters and themselves. Chhabra et al. (2020) acknowledge that a significant proportion of women devoted to deities come from the lowest castes. As a result, they have suffered from widespread mistreatment based on longstanding customs and religious beliefs for centuries in India. The initiation process is driven by poverty and the need for sustenance. Both existing devadasi women and childless couples see this dedication as a way to avoid the uncertain future of old age without financial stability, particularly if they do not have a child, let alone a son.

Through the examination of the female protagonists in both novels, it is revealed that they assert their right to embrace their identity as devadasis despite facing significant discrimination from society and adverse socioeconomic circumstances. For instance, Kalyani is despised by her mother-in-law due to her lower caste background, while Sowmya is cursed by her mother-in-law for becoming a widow at a young age. Within the novels, Kalyani and Sowmya achieve liberation through classical dance, allowing them to embrace their femininity and express themselves freely. This transcends the societal discrimination they face. Establishing a profound connection with classical dance enables them to evade the constraints and prejudices of their daily existence. Through this bond, they discover purpose and liberation in their ability to express themselves, as classical dance transcends social hierarchy, discrimination, and injustice.

KALYANI'S *SVADHARMA* IN *THE UNDOING DANCE*

In *The Undoing Dance*, Kalyani is portrayed as the daughter of a devadasi named Rajayi, who is painfully disconnected from her mother due to the discrimination and injustices endured by the lineage of devadasi women. She is presented as a character experiencing the differences between the past and present devadasi system, where once they "had great respect in society and frequently served as the repository of resources like money and land" (Chawla, 2021). Kalyani grew up witnessing the injustices inflicted upon the Devadasi community, such as the loss of opportunities for economic and educational growth. In an effort to spare Kalyani from the exile faced by devadasi women, Rajayi relentlessly attempts to improve her life by sending her away to the city. However, despite marrying a wealthy man named Balan, Kalyani does not feel emancipated or liberated. She reflects on her life, stating: "My life was a layered confection of lies. Lies that had been told to Balan's extended family about who I was and the slightly different lies that had been told to his colleagues" (2018, p. 31). Kalyani, as a representation of the younger generation of devadasi women, embodies the ongoing discrimination faced due to her lineage, despite her marriage to a wealthy man and living in the city.

Kalyani's guiding *dharma* of *svadharma* leads her to remember her roots as a classical dancer and her ancestral lineage. Even though city life brings about a new identity, Natarajan conveys the assertion of duty as devadasi women trained in the arts of music and dance see it as their obligation to uphold cultural heritage and traditions. Kalyani's longing to reunite with her classical dance is evident, as she sentimentally expresses, "If somebody had said to me, 'Leave all this behind and you can be a dancer,' I might have flown away" (2018, p. 122). This longing arises from her duty to her art, which enables her to rise above injustices and find empowerment through classical dance. Additionally, Kalyani's realisation that her *dharma* to classical dance cannot be forgotten but rather upheld becomes stronger as she lives her life as the wife of a wealthy businessman in the city. Her detachment from classical dance becomes more apparent as she states, "At that time, it appeared immensely enjoyable to be in a state of being both a woman and a goddess, desirable, and completely unattainable" (2018, p. 26). Natarajan evokes a sense of loss of empowerment as Kalyani realises that she must adhere to her guiding principle of *svadharma* to uphold her identity as a devadasi rather than adapt to her newfound life. Her assertion as a devadasi grows stronger when she witnesses others dancing, which ignites her duty to classical dance. Natarajan conveys her feelings, stating, "The sight of other people dancing evoked in me a sensation akin to the pain experienced by amputees" (2018, p. 36).

This observance narrated by Natarajan highlights the fundamental requirement for personal salvation (Hogan, 2003). It conveys that classical dance is not just an art form but rather a *dharma* within the Devadasi community, allowing the protagonist to rise above injustices and obtain empowerment through her participation in classical dance. Natarajan continues to evoke readers with a sense of realisation that Kalyani feels alienated with her newfound identity, as she feels a deep sense of duty towards her cultural heritage and the legacy of the devadasi tradition. Following Kalyani's journey during her life in the city, Natarajan highlights how she strives to reclaim her identity and uphold her *svadharma* by resisting her new identity, as Kalyani states, "I was ashamed that I had been untrue to my craft and to my people" (2018, p. 33). This realisation comes from her experience as a city woman who left her past as a devadasi in hopes of greener pastures. Natarajan narrates not only the strengthened bond between the protagonist and classical dance but also her duty to keep the tradition alive, creating a space where devadasi women were empowered through classical dance. This act of *dharma* emphasises the importance of preserving the art form and her identity as a temple dancer, thus upholding her duty that empowers her despite the injustices rendered upon her and the devadasi community.

As classical dance is an intrinsic element of the devadasi community, the sacred union between the dance and the dancer resembles the divine relationship that empowers the protagonist. While classical dance serves to entertain or serve as a form of worship to the divine, it also represents the shared pain and injustices endured by devadasi women. Despite the hardships as a devadasi woman, the protagonist believes it to be her *svadharma* even in the face of oppression, as she continues to echo her longing to take pride in her identity as a temple dancer, diverting her attention from the gross injustices endured. This duty brought forward by Natarajan encapsulates the importance of classical dance, which brings empowerment to Kalyani. This, in relation, describes her *dharma* as primarily a tangible or intangible entity existing beyond the physical realm (P. Hacker, 2006). Classical dance becomes the entity through which Kalyani finds empowerment despite the discrimination faced as a devadasi. The reassertion of her identity becomes clearer as she expresses her frustration about societal constraints and feeling restricted by external expectations in the city.

"If my legs were crushed and I were cut off from dancing by forces beyond my control, it would - I thought, in the early years of my marriage - be easier than knowing I might have had the use of my limbs if they had not been pinned down irrecoverably by propriety".

(2018, p. 36)

Natarajan's use of metaphor suggests that Kalyani believes physical limitations are more acceptable than those imposed by societal norms. In the same light, her deep passion for classical dance, which is her *svadharma*, portrays her inherent duty as a devadasi, suggesting that dancing isn't merely a hobby but an integral part of her identity as a devadasi woman. Additionally, Kalyani's freedom to pursue her *svadharma* embraces a sense of empowerment, allowing her to reassert her agency as a devadasi. Her *dharma* enables her to rise above the injustices endured, as it is only through her classical dance that she obtains an intangible entity that exists beyond the physical realm (P. Hacker, 2006).

SOWMYA'S *NYAYA* IN *DESIRE OF THE MOTH*

In *Desire of the Moth*, Bilwakesh narrates the Devadasi culture through the eyes of Sowmya, a young Brahmin widow turned Devadasi. In her quest for empowerment, the protagonist confronts the enduring impact of a patriarchal society and the obliteration of devadasi culture in south India. Sowmya's pursuit of justice is closely connected to her endeavours to regain her sense of self and assert her autonomy in a society that aims to suppress her expression. Through her experience as a devadasi woman, the lasting significance of *dharma* as a guiding principle is seen and simultaneously reflects the larger challenges experienced by marginalised communities in asserting their rights and restoring their dignity in the presence of injustices.

Portrayed as a young widow from a Brahmin caste, Sowmya is a manifestation of the social order predominant in India, promoting segregation along the lines of caste and gender (Dushe, 2014). Upon the death of her husband, Sowmya becomes a young widow and is denied her freedom, unable to even cook or enter certain premises within the house, to avoid her curse imparting itself onto her family, as Bilwakesh narrates: "Why would she enter the kitchen and touch the food for the sacrament?" (2015, p. 17). Living in constraint due to the death of her husband, Sowmya is restricted in her freedom, unable to explore her self-expression as a young girl. Sowmya's loss of womanhood is noticeable, as Bilwakesh narrates: "She wanted the garland of jasmine that circled around her mother's braid and to pin it up in her own hair, line her eyes to brilliance with kohl as she had done, retrieve all of these to herself" (2015, p. 22). Sowmya is presented to the readers as a female growing up under the constraints of being a young widow. In a quest to obtain her freedom of self-expression, Sowmya fled from her village and boarded a train to the city. It was during this escape from her village that she transitioned into becoming a Devadasi woman when she met Mallika, a Devadasi by birth.

Sowmya's guiding *dharma* of *nyaya* is highlighted upon her transition into becoming a Devadasi, where readers perceive her newly found identity as a classical dancer. Moving to the city with Mallika, Sowmya finds herself intrigued by the classical dance and 'the swiftness and dexterity of it, its tempo and the melody, its tone and its insistence, "*thai di-di-thai tha! thai di-di-thai tha!*" (2015, p. 94). Upon discovering the dance form, Sowmya becomes deeply engaged, with "the soles of her feet twitched to the beat" (2015, p. 94). As Bilwakesh guides readers along the protagonist's transition, she resurrects from her past and becomes a devadasi, exhibiting a sense of agency as she reasserts her identity as a woman turned Devadasi. This newfound role creates a sense of empowerment within Sowmya, leading not only to her quest for *nyaya* as her *dharma* but also to religiously honour the roots of the devadasi lineage despite the injustices endured by the women.

Upon her transition, Bilwakesh sheds light on the reassertion of identity as she narrates: "It seemed that there was another being inside her who knew how to make those leaps, how to land with the grace of an antelope. She saw the music, she heard the dance" (2015, p. 94). Bilwakesh's description of this profound connection between the protagonist and her classical dance suggests that Sowmya feels deeply attuned to the rhythms of the dance, which not only empowers her but also reflects her *dharma* as she seeks *nyaya* in upholding the devadasi tradition. Sowmya's encounter with Mallika intrigues her when she realises that despite the discrimination that devadasi women encounter, there is still a strong sense of empowerment that enables them to rise above their injustices. Bilwakesh captures the intrinsic powerful sense of identity as a Devadasi woman when Sowmya asks Mallika how she empowers herself through classical dance and as a Devadasi woman.

"I want to be like you. Answer to no one? I want that thing - that thing in your dance that makes me choke with feelings I cannot even name. I want money in my string purse that I would tuck at my waist like you do. How did you get that way?".

(2015, p. 95)

As Sowmya admires the sense of autonomy, her desire for freedom reveals a longing for independence in which she does not constrain her womanhood due to societal expectations. Not only is she deeply moved by the classical dance that evokes a strong, indescribable power, but she also demonstrates the *dharma* that allows her to rise above the injustices endured. It is only through her classical dance that she obtains an intangible entity that exists beyond the physical realm (P.Hacker, 2006). This newfound *dharma* is what propels her toward autonomy.

This newfound *dharma* continues to reveal deeper insights to readers as Bilwakesh crafts the risks of being a devadasi woman with caution. While the classical dance evokes a sense of powerful transformation, the author does not overlook the price that comes with it. Sowmya must be aware of the repercussions of her dedication to becoming a devadasi woman. Readers grasp the underlying risks as Bilwakesh narrates, "This is different; I don't have to tell you. You're a young woman, not a child. And this is not a dedication; it is your betrothal" (2015, p. 112). Sowmya's dedication as a Devadasi woman is revealed not merely as a token gesture but as a promise to uphold the tradition of the Devadasi despite the discrimination endured by the community. Similarly, Bilwakesh emphasises the importance of Sowmya devoting herself to her *dharma*, where she abides by the principle of *nyaya*, upholding her agency as a devadasi woman and committing her life to classical dance.

As Sowmya embodies her *dharma* of *nyaya* through her agency as a devadasi, she confronts the oppressive conditions of the community by honouring the classical dance. This can be seen through Bilwakesh's narration, in which Mallika cautions Sowmya that she must uphold the tradition at all costs and seek justice with dignity as a devadasi woman. The injustices inflicted upon devadasis, whether through societal norms or patriarchal society, must not weaken her; instead, they allow her to strive for her devotion to the classical dance and her identity as a devadasi woman. Sowmya's adherence to the *dharma* of *nyaya* is evident when she agrees to become a devadasi despite the discrimination that would come with it. This is highlighted as Bilwakesh narrates, "The betrothal is to the art. The dance is the deity. It requires consciousness and purpose. This is what gives it beauty. Do you understand?" (2015, p. 112). The author metaphorically refers to the commitment to classical dance as a "betrothal," implying a deep dedication and meaningful pursuit as a devadasi.

Sowmya further exemplifies her *dharma* of *nyaya* through her transcendental experience, which connects her to something greater than herself. The spiritual aspects of the classical dance take centre stage as Sowmya approaches it with consciousness and purpose, abiding by her *dharma* and agency as a devadasi. Additionally, she imbues each movement with meaning and significance, suggesting that her *dharma* lies not only in the physical execution of the movements but also in the intention and awareness behind them. Sowmya positions herself as an advocate of justice as she immerses herself in the classical dance. Her ability to rise above injustices as a devadasi captures the powerful potency of agency that the classical dance empowers her with. Bilwakesh describes her devotion to the classical dance as she narrates, "Something from her depth stepped out and became the *nayika*, the storyteller, and the story all at once. She felt powerful and took possession of the stage. With each step she took, each pose she struck, one moment built upon the other" (2015, p. 122). Sowmya's embodiment of the *nayika* role expresses her *dharma* as a

devadasi. She fulfils her *nyaya* with dedication and skill, portraying her commitment to the classical dance. Additionally, her prowess in bringing the stage to life further highlights her adherence to her artistic duty as a devadasi.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, *The Undoing Dance* and *Desire of the Moth*, employed in this study, provides a profound understanding of the Devadasi community and their pursuit of autonomy and justice in both colonial and post-colonial South India. By utilising the *dharma* theory from Hindu philosophy, this study reveals the guiding principles of two specific *dharmas*, namely *svadharmā* and *nyaya*, found in the selected texts. The female protagonists portray shared experiences as devadasi women who are marginalised and often restricted due to societal norms. Both novels represent characters who uphold their *dharma*, asserting their autonomy as devadasi women. In doing so, they were able to rise above injustices and achieve a sense of empowerment through their connection with classical dance. Their *dharma* towards classical dance reveals how devadasi women refuse to succumb to oppressive conditions by not only upholding their duty in asserting their identity as devadasis but also seeking justice through their artistic duty. Both characters in the selected novels exemplify the duty of a devadasi woman to preserve her tradition while also asserting a sense of autonomy where her *dharma* empowers her in spite of injustices endured as a devadasi woman.

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