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THE VOLITION OF RELIGION IN THE DEVADASI TRADITION WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE
TO AMITA KANEKAR'S *A SPOKE IN THE WHEEL*

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ABSTRACT

The paper deals with the study of Amita Kanekar's *A Spoke in the Wheel* from the feministic perspective. The aim of the paper is to investigate the contribution of religion, art and literature on one hand and the marginalisation of women on personal as well as social arenas on the other hand. The violent side of religion, that handicaps human beings to think reasonably, is exposed through the depiction of Devadasi tradition. Through the character of Sutanuka, a Devadasi in *A Spoke in the Wheel*, the actual functioning of these institutions comes to light. Such institutions continue to chain women even today. The novel also brings to focus how religious beliefs restrict the freedom of women to take part in religious practices and force them to surrender themselves to male supremacy. Simultaneously, the issues of caste, class and economy in the novel find vivid space in this paper. The focus is to look at the Devadasi tradition from the perspective of the cultural construction of gender roles.

Key words: Devadasi, religion, tradition, entertainers, prostitution.

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Amita Kanekar's *A Spoke in the Wheel* is a novel, where glimpses of Devadasi tradition, which is still prevalent in many parts of India, find vivid expression. As an ancient Hindu tradition, Devadasi is generally dedicated to 'Yellama Goddess'. According to a myth, after beheading Renuka's head, the sage Jamadagni beheaded the head of Harijan woman, Yellama, and placed over the body of Renuka, and brought her to life on the request of his twelve year old son Parshuram. After realising the blunder he has done, sage Jamadagni blessed her that she will thereafter be known by the name of goddess Yellama and unmarried girls would dedicate their whole life to her while also fulfilling the physical needs of Parsuram. Also, these girls would see Parshuram in every man coming to them for sexual satisfaction, without asking him anything in return. In this way, under the umbrella of religion, a number of women became the object of male sexual contentment.

By having a set of distinct beliefs, cultural systems, and world views, religion develops a prominent relationship between human beings and divinity. Religion carries diverse meanings varying from person to person as it is defined by some specific communities of believers, dogmas, sacred books, rituals, and

organisations. Crawford in *What is Religion?*, comments that there is no specific definition of religion which defines its actual function. Everybody has interpreted religion in his/her own way. In the general context, people define the functioning of religion as to unite or separate people or comfort those who are placed in miserable situation to which they find respite only and only in the religion and so on. On the other hand, Marx defines religion as the medium to console and compensate the process of exploitation. According to Marx, "religion endorses the status quo by enabling the poor to accept their inequality and teaches that the capitalists' power was God given" (qtd in Crawford 6).

Similar to this attitude towards religion, T. N. Madan in *Religion in India*, states that even the intellectuals both from India and the West have considered religion to be the cause of distress which complexes the way of life everywhere. Even, Jawaharlal Nehru has the same notion about religion. He writes,

We have to get rid of that narrowing religious outlook, that obsession with the supernatural and metaphysical speculations, that loosening of the mind's discipline in ceremonial and mystical emotionalism which comes in the way of our understanding ourselves and the world. (qtd in Madan 116)

One of the main reasons behind this constricted religious approach is that people follow religion without knowing God. So, despite providing momentary happiness to people, religion, at the same time, provokes many ills in society.

One of the fine examples of religious violence finds expression in Kanekar's novel *A Spoke in the Wheel*, where, through the character of Sutanuka, a Devadasi, Kanekar exclaims that religion in the name of tradition like Devadasi exploits women of poor and marginalised communities. These women are dedicated to temple services in the name of Gods and Goddesses. The central character of the novel, Upali, exposes an ugly aspect of this practice when Upali mentions that Devadasis are mere prostitutes who serve royal men. Their status in society is that of beautiful dancers, entertainers and servants to the ruling class. In this way, the character of Sutanuka, in the novel reinforces the fact that religion masks as well as advocates violence against women. In the case of Sutanuka, religion offers no refuge to women in distress. When Sutanuka falls in love with a sculptor named Devadina, she is not allowed to marry him, for she is regarded as a servant of God. Hence, she breaks off with her lover and chooses to continue to serve God in public and rich men in private. So in this sense, religion may even contribute to the distress of women. The priest in the novel, said to Upali regarding Sutanuka,

The girl may be happier, you say, but is that all that matters? What of the sacred laws before which we all are helpless? If she flouts the law, there will be calamity- on her, on her community, on this temple. (Kanekar 148)

This puts forth the reality about religious rulers who take an advantage of women in weaker position. They mould sacred laws according to their convenience which become in one or another way, the medium of women's exploitation, specifically, for those women who are engaged in practices like Devadasi. Simultaneously, Kanekar shows the fact that these religious practitioners, who pretend to serve society, in actuality, are the culprits of society who mislead people in the name of religion.

If one focuses on the place of women in history, he/she will find that women have been revered as a Goddess in many parts of Asian countries. Tate in *Sacred Places of Goddess*, writes that thirty thousand years ago people use to consider woman, the creator of the universe:

Many believe she was the sun, the stars, and the moon. She was the changing seasons, the growing seasons, and the very Earth itself. Her spirit created, permeated, and transformed every living thing. She ruled over the fate of human beings, bestowing sovereignty, blessings, and justice. She was an icon of wisdom and protection. She created the cosmos and everything in it. She gave forth life, and at death it was to her one returned only to be reborn again. The face of the life force itself was that of Goddess, the Divine Feminine. (Tate 10)

In this way, woman used to be worshipped in a sacred realm. Her presence symbolises the fertility, which is necessary for the sustenance of human life. People call her by different names at different places.

Johnstone in *Religion in Society*, states that during the Vedic period (about 1000 B.C.E) women have enjoyed comparative freedom in religious activities. It is the flowering of classical Hinduism in 500 B.C.E that relegates women to second class status. The people of those times have a notion that no woman of any caste can gain salvation in her feminine essence. In the next birth, she must be born as a man to attain salvation. He further argues that, it is in the Buddhist period, women start to gain a respectable place in their home as well as in society (247-248). They feel free to manage the property and to participate in other familial issues. They are no longer forced into marriages as it used to be the case in Hindus. Moreover, they are allowed to leave familial life, to study the sacred teachings of Buddhism, and even become preachers and teachers in their own right.

By showing Buddha's concerns about women, Kanekar in *A Spoke in the Wheel*, writes that:

He was concerned about women rights from the start, insisting that they were perfectly capable of living by Dhamma. His preaching was also different from the rest- he spoke not only about the duties of wives, mothers, daughters and daughters-in-law, on which the Brahmins could also hold forth at great length, but also and in greater detail of their rights. (385)

But the very teachings of Buddhist on Karma faded away within three to four centuries. A new sexual model started to prevail in society which assigns an image, role and order for everything. This suggests that the primary dharma of women is to remain concerned with tasks such as bearing children and becoming a wife and a mother, thus burdening her under the role of a homemaker. And gradually, Buddhism, Hinduism, and society itself take women's domestic role for granted.

The inferior status of women in society is highlighted by Amita Kanekar in *A Spoke in the Wheel*, when Siddharth reveals that he has learnt about the human soul from Tara, a woman. After knowing the source of Siddharth awareness concerning the human soul, his teacher condemns Tara as, "Who is Tara? A follower of Kapila? But a woman? Women were very far from the higher life. . . . According to him, only the dvija were capable of understanding these matters" (110). In spite of being capable of understanding these spiritual matters, Tara's knowledge about human soul is not considered worth mentioning by the priests, because of her being a woman. So, Kanekar's novel depicts women's oppressive role, which has been going on for centuries.

It is the persistence of certain acts in religious boundaries that captures the conscience of people and handicaps them to think reasonably, to recognise the distinction between reality and the reality constructed for their own sake. Karl Marx in *On Religion*, compares religion to opium, which dulls people's sensitivity to understand the difference between reality and the reality constructed for its own sake.

Religious distress is at the same time the expression of real distress and the protest against real distress. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of a spiritless situation. It is the opium of the people. (Marx 42)

Religion in no way makes the man; it is the man who makes religion to overcome their distress and hopelessness. As an illusion, religion revolves around a man and secures him to think logically and realistically. To prove this notion, Dushyant Kumar in *Insights of an Enlightened One*, argues that whatever is beautiful cannot be described logically. Things like religion, beauty, love initiate a person to think rationally. It gives a reason to live in this world. Simultaneously, it provides an escape from the harshness of reality by giving momentary happiness.

This kind of attitude towards religion is clearly visible in the novel, *A Spoke in the Wheel*, when Upali tries to convince Sutanuka, a Devadasi, to marry Devadina, a sculptor. As, Devadasis are not allowed to marry outside this tradition, even a single thought of it is considered to be a crime in this tradition. The fear of being cursed in their future/next life restricts these women to take decisions about marriage. As evident in the novel, when Sutanuka says, "Devadina made me dream for a while, but it's wrong to fight fate, otherwise my next life may be worse. . . . You cannot forsake this life for the next, sister" (Kanekar 151).

It is her blind faith in religion or even the fear of religious holder like the priest and Viceroy in the novel that stops Sutanuka to marry Devadina. Even the forceful attempt of Upali, a monk, goes in vain to

convince Sutanuka to take this step. So, it can be seen that religion plays an important role in one's life, to mold his character, decisions and life.

Considering the different aspects of religion and its effects on human ways of life, it is imperative to note that how religion should be treated as a subject in contemporary society. As a subject, religion can be analysed in different ways by evaluating its diverse forms such as events, beliefs, practices and rituals which have been influencing society in one or the other way. Religion as an institution plays a vital role in changing gender roles in society. The book, *Feminism in the Study of Religion*, mentions that feminism criticises the organised model of religion that supports and perpetuates restrictive gender roles for women by making norms of male dominance that limit women's participation and leadership in religious work. For instance, women are restricted to touch the idol of God Hanumana, Shiv Linga and even to take part in Yagnas in Hindu tradition. As mentioned in *Feminism in the Study of Religion*,

. . . religious beliefs which prohibited women from touching sacred objects such as the relics of the Buddha and from entering sacred areas as the shrines of Hindu Gods and mosques in the case of Muslim women. (208)

In this way, all these religious beliefs restrict the freedom of women to take part in religious practices and force them to surrender herself to male supremacy.

In the present day, numerous religions still restrict women's participation and bar them from leadership roles, including Catholicism, Islam, Greek Orthodoxy Judaism, and many branches of Pentecostalism. (*Religion and American Cultures* 497)

Feminists argue that the threads of male leadership have been completely woven into the fabric of religious doctrine and ritual. Feminists hit hard at the very foundation of religion and encourage women to seek change within their lives and religious tradition that has bound them for centuries. They have a notion that the oppressive and liberating factor of religion depends upon different circumstances, social location, and historical context in which it exists. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, a feminist thinker, shows aggression towards religious practices and considers Christianity as the central source of women's subordination. She also helped to conduct a revised reading of the biblical texts that has resulted in the publication of *The Woman's Bible* in 1892. Thus, there are a number of women leaders who come forward and fight against religious hierarchies such as (Quaker) cofounder Margaret Fell and (Shaker) founder Ann Lee. Feminist biblical scholars like Rosemary Radford Ruether give a vivid account of the history of women in religion. Likewise, Protestant theologian Letty Russell re-examines the biblical texts in a new light. Feminist theologians and ministers also step forward to develop new methods and theologies and rearrange the previous version of religious doctrine and ritual. They attempt to look beyond institutional structures to find new religious meaning within the totality of women's lives and experiences. At the same time, they look upon art, literature, and myth as a site of innovation with which women can reclaim a feminist history of religion.

Similar to religion, art as well as literature also play a prominent role in the depiction of the position of women in any society. Archana Verma in *Temple Imagery from Early Medieval Peninsular India*, states that art as a representational writing transmits the ideas of dominance, subjugation, assimilation, and transformation among the people (2). The images that have been carved in the form of sculptures in temples narrate the ancient traditions to its viewers. By depicting semi-nude couples for religious motifs artists actually depict fertility, propagation of life as well as the sexual subjugation of women in patriarchy. In general, art has always been used to propagate the idea of female objectification. Similar is the case with literature, where women are portrayed differently by different literary artists. In Puranic literature, women have been given a special place of importance where the divine and powerful entities have been represented in the form of women and worshipped as a Devi.

One of such instances finds place in Amita Kanekar's novel, *A Spoke in the Wheel*, where she uses this sensuous imagery, by the temple premises, describing women as a goddess. She writes, "It was believed to be the breast of Yamai, the local mother goddess. . . . She was beautiful, seductive, milk-giving" (162-163).

At the same time, Kanekar depicts the artist's admiration towards them as:

The female figure was beloved of artists; almost every village Upali could remember had their own precious figurines and paintings. But usually as a creator, heavily pregnant and nursing, or a destroyer, with gigantic hips, pendulous breasts and hungry eyes, her image stained with blood and her tongue lolling out for more. She was woman at her most powerful, protector and eater of the tribes. (79)

In this way, Kanekar in *A Spoke in the Wheel*, portray the image of women, who is being considered and treated as an object of beauty, pleasure and giver in the work of literature. Her representation as a mother, seductress in *A Spoke in the Wheel* highlights the different treatment given to women in literature and art.

According to Abraham Eraly, it is the depiction of women in Bhartrihari's poem, the Sanskrit poet, that actually frame the relationship between men and women since centuries. Bhartrihari describes women as:

Irresistible- and utterly repugnant; they are to be adored as goddesses- and execrated as ogresses; they are heaven- they are hell. They are despicable as fickle, sluttish and mendacious creatures, the source of much human misery; but they are also laudable as the wise counselors of their husbands, the slave that soothes the pain of life, and the source of all domestic happiness and of the highest earthly pleasure. (Eraly 349)

Thus, this kind of ambivalence about women, created in most classical texts, creates stereotypes of women, which are still prevalent in the society. They have faced varied discriminations while performing their respective roles in the society. Abraham Eraly in *The First Spring*, mentions that in the earlier times women have been occupied a privileged place in society as they took an active part in religious and social activities. But now, they seem to have been confined to their homes by denying any worthy role in the society. Even laws have considered a woman's life equal to that of an animal. The penance for killing a woman mentioned by *Manusmriti* is "the same as for killing a Sudra, which, again, was the same as for killing 'a frog, a dog . . . an owl, a crow'" (Eraly 350). *Manusmriti*, the most authoritative book of the Hindu code of conduct, goes further to describe women's household duties as equal to the worship of sacred fire. Mentioning the views of Dubois, an American sociologist, Eraly, states that in the classical age the educated women have been taken to be of equal status as that of the courtesans which refrained many women from taking education. Likewise, child marriages in later periods made it impossible for women to pursue their education (351). It is this cultural and educational gap between men and women in the ancient India, which reduces the status of women in society.

In contrast to Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism have favoured woman's education in comparison to her marriage. This does not mean that they treat women equally, but they do let them enjoy their religious and social activities respectfully. Eraly in *The First Spring*, mentions that with the fall of Buddhism during the Gupta age, women's education and social status began to decline. By the sixth century, the number of educated women has decreased immensely in India. The common attitude of orthodox Indians towards women at that time (6th century) is that women are impure both in mind as well as body (351).

Eraly in *The First Spring*, states that Vishnu- purana mentions a woman's character as fickle, gluttonous, selfish and immoral. Eraly writes that, according to *Mahabharata*, "man with a hundred tongues would not be able to finish describing the vices and defects of women, even if he were to live a hundred years and do nothing else throughout his long life" (353). This epic states that god's enviousness towards increasing men's virtues makes Brahma to create women, who with her lustfulness lead men astray. The character of Bhisma in this epic states that, "There is no creature more sinful . . . than woman. Woman . . . is the sharp edge of the razor. She is poison. She is a snake. She is fire" (Eraly 353). In this way, women are depicted primarily as sinners as well as objects of erotic pleasure in classical Indian literature.

The persistent discrimination against women, which is prevalent in every household, in one or another way since ages, finds a prominent place in Kanekar's novel *A Spoke in the Wheel*. This becomes clear when after suffering too much pain during child birth, Maya (Siddarth mother) is not allowed to touch or even seen her newly born child. She dies even without seeing her child. Highlighting the discrimination against

women, Kanekar writes, "'Dibha, bring my son here. . . . Do you hear me?' The Chief' orders were clear- the child was not to be brought to the sickbed" (7).

Similarly, the issues of gender, race, sexuality, and nation continue to influence the ways of women's life since centuries. According to Archana Verma, gender has always been used to describe weakness or power in the representational writings on Indian history such as art, drama and dance. The subjects or objects which have weaker position in society have always been treated as feminine. On the flip side, dominant and influencing position of groups or entities have always been characterised as masculine. Verma in *Territory as Woman, Woman as Territory and Metaphors of Conquest*, mentions that scholars associate India, which is often corresponded with Hinduism, with the feminine entity due to its irrational acts in the name of religion. They consider Hinduism as "a 'place' of lacking rational capacities, as a land of the imaginary, as a land of fantasy" (29). Thus, they are equating irrational nature with the feminine and the rational culture with the masculine.

This kind of gender bias has been reflected by Kanekar in *A Spoke in the Wheel*, as, "An unmarried daughter was later considered a burden and even a curse, but in Siddarth's time she was worse- an insult of heinous proportions to one's ancestors and gods" (206).

This quote from the novel represents the plight of Yashodhara, Siddartha's wife, who does not find any voice in the pages of history. Her anguish has not been voiced or written in any account of the Buddha's quest. Kanekar brings the silence of Yashodhara into speech when she hints at the enormous suffering of her in the novel. She is betrothed to Siddarth at a young age. She has to wait for several years before Siddharth agrees to marry her. She has to suffer the scoffs of her community because she is past her marriageable age. Thus, Kanekar throws light on the gender biasness which is still prevalent in society, where un-married daughters are considered as a burden to family.

In entirety, there are a number of practices all around the world which are pervasive in the name of religion, tradition, culture, and castes that have affected women's position in society. Although, women are still in the shackles of patriarchy, but feminist reworkings & movements prove a mile stone in the building of a women centric society, where, a number of institutions, organisations and projects like NGO, BIRDS, PRERANA, and ICDS are working with the aim to improve the subjugated or marginalised position of women in patriarchy. Feminists are of the view that all religious and cultural practices play a key role to place women in secondary position. As an instrument they continue to subjugate women since centuries. It is mainly the lack of active participation from the side of women in social, economic, political, religious and cultural events that inhibit their social empowerment.

So, in order to set her free from the rigid norms of society, women need to recognise themselves as well as their strengths and competence. This is how a woman would be able to challenge the old social orders that have been the reason for much trouble for women since ages. Kanekar in *A Spoke in the Wheel*, through the character of Sutanuka, a Devadasi, and other women characters in the novel, highlights how lack of participation from the side of women limits them within the boundary defined by patriarchy while also forcing them to do certain things which are beyond their will.

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