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**Haunting Legacies: Generational Trauma and Women's Resistance in Vaasanthi's  
*Breaking Free*****Dr. N. Nagajothi**

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**Abstract**

This research paper examines Vaasanthi's *Breaking Free* as a multi-generational narrative that traces the lasting impact of the devadasi system on three generations of women. Vaasanthi is a prominent Tamil writer and journalist known for her realistic portrayal of women's lives and social injustices. Feminist studies have documented the stigma and marginalization faced by devadasi women, but comparatively less attention has been paid to the psychological and intergenerational effects of this violence. This study addresses the gap through trauma theory, particularly the work of Cathy Caruth, Dominick LaCapra, and Marianne Hirsch, foregrounding memory, repetition, and inherited suffering as the theoretical framework. This paper builds on these perspectives to examine *Breaking Free* as a narrative of transgenerational trauma shaped by caste and patriarchy.

The objective of this paper is to examine how Vaasanthi represents the devadasi tradition as a transgenerational wound embedded within caste-patriarchal structures through Cathy Caruth's concepts of 'belatedness' and 'unclaimed experience'. It also highlights intergenerational traumatic memories through Dominick LaCapra's distinction between 'acting out' and 'working through'. The paper argues that *Breaking Free* does not treat trauma as a closed historical event. Instead, it reveals how inherited traumatic memories continue to haunt generation after generation. It further explores how each woman protagonist - Kasturi, Lakshmi, Thilakam, Dharini, and Maya in the novel *Breaking Free* articulates distinct response to inherited trauma, ranging from silent endurance and activist resistance to postmemorial reconstruction. While foregrounding trauma, the novel also gestures towards feminist possibilities of agency, solidarity, and remembrance.

**Keywords:** Multi-generational narrative, devadasi system, caste patriarchy, trauma, feminism

**Introduction**

Translation has played an important role in the growth of feminist and marginalized literatures in India. The popular Indian writers such as Mahasweta Devi, Bama, and Vaasanthi gained wider visibility through translation since their narrative transforms regional realities into themes of universal human relevance. They vividly depict the suppressed voices, emotional trauma, and resilience of women in their texts. Tamil women writers have also made significant contributions to Indian literature by portraying regional realities and

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women's issues with authenticity and depth. Among them, Vaasanthi occupies an important place as a contemporary writer who boldly addresses women's oppression, domestic violence, and the quest for freedom in a patriarchal society.

Vaasanthi is a prominent Tamil writer and journalist known for her realistic portrayal of women's lives and social injustices. She has written novels, short stories, and essays that reflect the struggles of middle-class women trapped within rigid social structures. Her works focus on women's emotional conflicts, resistance, and gradual assertion of identity. Her writing is marked by simplicity, realism, and deep psychological insight. She gives voice to women who are silenced within marriage and family, highlighting their inner strength and desire for independence. *Breaking Free* is one of Vaasanthi's notable works that powerfully depicts a women's struggle against oppression and their journey towards self-liberation. The novel explores themes such as patriarchy, gender inequality, emotional exploitation, and women's resistance. Vaasanthi's women characters are neither idealized nor passive sufferers; instead, they are realistic individuals who undergo emotional turmoil and gradual transformation. The title of the novel *Breaking Free* itself symbolizes the woman's effort to break free from invisible chains that bind her identity and freedom.

The devadasi tradition in India, often described as a sacred practice of dedicating women to temples. Initially devadasis were respected and held a high social status in some regions. Later, they were sexually exploited and forced into prostitution on the basis of caste. They were also marked as social indignity and disgrace. They were economically dependent on temple authorities and dominant-caste patrons. Although the practice was legally abolished in most Indian states by the mid-twentieth century, its effects continue to shape lives long after its formal end.

Vaasanthi's *Breaking Free* engages this legacy through an intimate, multi-generational narrative centered on women connected to the devadasi system. Rather than treating the devadasi practice as a distant historical phenomenon, the novel reveals how its violence persists through memory, silence, and family relations. The women character's trauma in the novel appears not as a typical event in the narrative but as a continuous presence that shapes subjectivity across generations.

This paper reads *Breaking Free* as a literary representation of cultural and intergenerational trauma. Using trauma theory as its primary framework, it examines how the novel portrays the transmission of suffering through women's bodies, emotions, and relationships. While feminist ideas of empowerment inform parts of the narrative, trauma theory remains central to understanding how caste patriarchal violence is inherited and negotiated. Through close attention to Kasturi, Lakshmi, Thilakam, Dharini, and Maya, the paper argues that *Breaking Free* presents liberation as a gradual and collective process rooted in remembrance, resistance, and narrative re-engagement.

**Literature Review**

Previous research on devadasi narratives has largely focused on resistance, reform, and women's empowerment. Feminist studies have documented the stigma and marginalization faced by devadasi women, but comparatively less attention has been paid to the psychological and intergenerational effects of this violence. This study addresses the gap through trauma theory, particularly the work of Cathy Caruth, Dominick LaCapra, and Marianne Hirsch, foregrounding memory, repetition, and inherited suffering as the theoretical framework. This paper builds on these perspectives to examine *Breaking Free* as a narrative of transgenerational trauma shaped by caste and patriarchy.

**Theoretical Framework: Trauma, Memory, and Generational Inheritance**

Literary trauma theory developed in the 1990s to explain how large-scale historical violence produces forms of suffering that resist straightforward representation. Cathy Caruth describes trauma as a belated experience. It is an event not fully understood at the moment it occurs but expressed later through recurring memories, bodily symptoms, and emotional disturbances. Trauma, therefore, is not simply remembered; it returns in indirect and fragmented ways. This idea helps explain how women in *Breaking Free* experience suffering as an ongoing condition rather than a single identifiable moment.

Dominick LaCapra distinguishes between two responses to trauma: acting out and working through. Acting out refers to the compulsive repetition of past pain without reflection, while working through involves a more conscious engagement with traumatic memory that allows for ethical awareness and future-oriented agency. Importantly, working through does not erase trauma; it reshapes one's relationship to it. This framework clarifies the different trajectories of the women in the novel, who move unevenly between endurance, repetition, resistance, and reflection.

Marianne Hirsch's concept of post memory explains how later generations inherit trauma through stories, silences, and emotional atmospheres. Trauma is thus not only psychological but also social, sustained by institutions and everyday practices that normalize shame and silence. Grounded in Trauma, memory, and generational inheritance perspectives, this study accentuates *Breaking Free* not merely as a story of individual suffering but as a literary account of how caste patriarchal violence is transmitted across generations through family life, cultural memory, and women's bodies.

**Kasturi: Silent Endurance and Internalized Trauma**

Vaasanthi's *Breaking Free* presents trauma not as a single painful event but as an ongoing condition that shapes women's lives across generations. Cathy Caruth explains trauma as a delayed experience—an event that cannot be fully understood when it happens and returns later through emotional distress, bodily reactions, and repeated behaviour. Kasturi, a talented dancer born into the devadasi system, represents the internalisation of cultural trauma through silence and endurance. Kasturi represents the first generation shaped directly by the devadasi system. From childhood, she is trained to dedicate her body and art to the temple. Although this dedication is framed as sacred service, it exposes her to

continuous social stigma and sexual objectification. As a result, the devadasi institution functions not as spiritual protection but as a source of sustained injury. This injury aligns with what trauma theorist Caruth describe as “unclaimed experience.”- trauma that cannot be fully recognized at the moment of occurrence and instead becomes embedded in everyday life.

Kasturi’s response aligns closely with LaCapra’s concept of acting out. She learns to endure humiliation silently, interpreting suffering as duty and discipline. Rather than questioning the system, she internalizes its values, converting pain into what she imagines as spiritual sacrifice. Her trauma appears not through open protest but through emotional withdrawal, bodily restraint, and quiet resignation. This internalized suffering also enters the domestic sphere. Her household becomes a space where trauma is transmitted through behavior rather than speech. Vaasanthi thus shows how caste patriarchal violence survives not only through institutions but through inherited habits of endurance, ensuring that trauma quietly shapes the next generation.

### **Lakshmi: Education, Resistance, and Partial Working Through**

Lakshmi represents a more active response to inherited trauma. If Kasturi represents the internalisation of devadasi trauma through silence and repetition, Lakshmi follows a different trajectory in which trauma becomes a source of critical self-formation and social engagement. Born into the same stigmatized structure, Lakshmi is deeply affected by her father’s refusal to acknowledge her publicly. This early rejection becomes a formative wound that shapes her desire for social recognition. Unlike Kasturi, Lakshmi refuses to accept the devadasi identity as fate. She pursues education and eventually becomes a doctor, reshaping her social position and sense of self.

In Dominick LaCapra’s terms, Lakshmi’s journey reflects a movement toward working through trauma. She transforms her experience of injury into a reflective and future-oriented embarking journey rather than remaining bound to repetitive patterns of victimhood. Lakshmi exemplifies this process. She transforms personal pain into professional purpose, using her medical practice to support marginalized girls. Lakshmi’s activism grows from empathy rooted in shared suffering. Her trauma becomes a source of solidarity rather than isolation. Through her, Vaasanthi gestures toward feminist empowerment, showing how women can convert wounded histories into resistance. Yet Lakshmi’s story also reminds us that working through traumatic memories is incomplete and ongoing process in the forthcoming generation too.

### **Thilakam: False Escape and Destructive Repetition**

Thilakam, Kasturi’s sister, treads on a more tragic path. Seeking escape from stigma, she places her hopes in marriage to a higher-caste man. She believes that a new surname will restore dignity and erase her past. This desire reveals the depth of her earlier wounding. Instead of liberation, marriage reproduces the same structure of control. Her husband silences and dominates her, reinstating her object status within a different institution. Thilakam’s story exemplifies acting out: she repeats patterns of subordination in her attempt to flee them.

She was denied space for self-expression or healing and marital bondage intensifies her trauma. Her eventual death marked by ambiguity must be understood not as personal failure but as the consequence of a social order that offers no viable alternatives. Thilakam stands as a warning within the generational chain, showing that trying to escape without addressing deeper social injustice can lead to tragic consequences.

### **Dharini: Silenced Presence and Narrative Catalyst**

Dharini, Maya's mother and Kasturi's concealed daughter, remains largely silent in the novel. Her suspicious death functions less as an independent trauma narrative and more as the catalyst for Maya's search for truth. Dharini's absence creates an emotional vacuum filled with unanswered questions and unresolved grief.

Her life and death represent how trauma can erase women's voices while continuing to shape future generations. Dharini becomes a shadow figure whose silencing intensifies Maya's need to understand the past, demonstrating how unspoken histories generate post memorial inquiry.

### **Maya: Post memory and Narrative Working Through**

Trauma studies explain that when people lack social support to express pain or imagine better futures, trauma is often repeated in harmful ways. Thilakam's suicide should therefore be seen not as personal failure but as the result of a society that refuses recognition and real change. Her story shows that escape without challenging patriarchy only leads to new forms of confinement. Within the generational narrative, Thilakam becomes a warning figure, revealing how unchallenged violence turns hope into tragedy.

Maya, the third-generation character in *Breaking Free*, represents postmemory: she inherits trauma she never directly experienced, shaped instead by silence, fragmented stories, and emotional tension surrounding her mother's death. Dharini's absence creates unanswered questions that deeply affect Maya, reflecting Cathy Caruth's idea that trauma returns through delayed effects rather than clear memory.

Unlike Kasturi's quiet endurance or Thilakam's destructive repetition, Maya moves toward healing. By trying to understand her family's past, she begins to work through inherited trauma. Her journey shows that true "breaking free" requires confronting history, not escaping it. Though trauma remains, Maya reshapes its meaning through awareness and reflection.

### **Conclusion: Generational Trauma and the Ethics of Remembering**

Viewed through the lens of trauma studies, Vaasanthi's *Breaking Free* presents the devadasi tradition as a form of cultural trauma that shapes memory, identity, and family relationships across generations. Kasturi's silent endurance, Lakshmi's resistance, Thilakam's destructive repetition, Dharini's distant silence, and Maya's post memorial reflection together map a spectrum of responses to inherited trauma.

This paper highlights that trauma is sustained through everyday practices, family relations, and institutional silences by drawing on the perspectives of Cathy Caruth, Dominick LaCapra, and Marianne Hirsch. At the same time, *Breaking Free* does not present trauma as an inescapable condition. Through Lakshmi's professional and political engagement and Maya's effort to recover silenced family histories, the novel suggests that traumatic inheritance can generate forms of ethical responsibility and collective resistance. They demonstrate that critical engagement with trauma can foster collective solidarity rather than emotional or social paralysis.

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