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Mysticism and Supernatural Elements in *Breaking Free* by Vaasanthi



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Abstract

Mysticism and supernatural elements are significant concepts, deeply rooted in Indian literary frameworks which essentially reflect a divergent socio-cultural, religio-philosophical tradition of its regions. It is common to find themes of mysticism and supernatural elements in stories related to devadasis. These stories often intertwine with spiritual and mystical elements due to the unique role devadasis played in temple worship and their association with temple rituals. Breaking Free, a novel originally written in Tamil, by Vaasanthi, extends the mystical elements beyond the divine essence of a devadasi's experience. Through several characters in her novel, the author weaves mystic and supernatural elements into the narrative theme that reflect rich spiritual, cultural, and literary dimensions. This research paper aims to explore and analyze the use of mysticism and supernatural elements in her fiction. This study tries to understand how these elements contribute to the narrative and thematic depth of the novel and reflect socio-cultural-religio-psychological dimensions within the text.

Keywords: Breaking Free, Mysticism, Supernatural Elements, Vaasanthi, Devadasi

Introduction

Mysticism refers to the exploration of spiritual experiences that transcend ordinary human understanding. It is often characterized by the pursuit of a direct, personal connection with the divine power. In Indian literary tradition, mysticism is closely associated with the philosophical and religious tenets of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Sufism, among others. Texts imbued with mysticism often depict characters or narrators engaging in devotional practices to achieve a higher state of consciousness or enlightenment. In Indian literature, mysticism is not merely an abstract or esoteric concept but is frequently depicted as a lived experience that shapes the lives and identities of characters. The mystical experience is often portrayed as one that dissolves the boundaries between the 'self' and the 'Supreme Self', leading to a profound sense of unity with the cosmos. This experience may manifest in visions, inner voices or a heightened sense of reality, which are all common themes in Indian mystical literature.

The supernatural elements in Indian literature refer to the elements that exist beyond the natural world and ordinary human experience. These can include gods, spirits, demons, ghosts, and other beings or phenomena that defy rational explanation. The supernatural element is deeply embedded in Indian cultural narratives, from ancient epics viz. the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* to folk tales and modern literature. In Indian literary frameworks, the supernatural elements often serve as a narrative device to explore complex themes such as morality, fate, and the human condition. Supernatural elements are used to highlight the interplay between the material and spiritual worlds, a concept central to many Indian religious traditions. These elements can also function allegorically, representing internal psychological states or broader societal issues. The supernatural elements in Indian literature are not confined to horror or fantasy genres but permeate various literary forms, including poetry, drama, and prose.

Breaking Free is the translation in English by N. Kalyan Raman, published by Harper Perennial, Haryana in 2022. This work of fiction was originally authored in Tamil as *Vittu Viduthalaiyagi* by a popular writer Vaasanthi, and published by Kavitha Publications, Chennai, in 2012. In the novel *Breaking Free* (2022) by Vaasanthi, mysticism and supernatural elements have been integrated into the parallel narratives of past and present. As literary tools, they help challenge the boundaries of reality and explore deeper philosophical questions. They articulate the complexities of existence, the relationship between the finite and the infinite, and the tension between the physical and metaphysical realms. By employing mysticism and supernatural elements, Vaasanthi delves into the spiritual dimensions of devadasi traditions in India (in the past), while also offering readers insights into the profound and often enigmatic nature of life (at present).

Breaking Free by Vaasanthi: An Introduction

Vaasanthi is a distinguished Indian author, journalist, and political analyst known for her extensive contributions to contemporary Tamil literature and socio-political commentary. Her work is characterized by its deep engagement with social issues, particularly those affecting women, marginalized communities, and the dynamics of power in Indian society. Over the years, she has authored numerous novels, short stories, and essays, many of which have been translated into several languages, thereby reaching a broader audience beyond Tamil readers. Her writing often explores the intersections of gender, caste, and class, offering critical insights into the lives of women in traditional and contemporary Indian society. *Breaking Free*, one of her notable works, exemplifies her ability to weave complex narratives that challenge societal norms while portraying the intricate realities of women's lives.

Breaking Free is a compelling novel that critically examines the lives of women within the confines of a traditional South Indian society, focusing on themes of oppression, identity, and the pursuit of personal autonomy. The narrative mostly centres around two protagonists born in the *devadāsi* (hereinafter devadasi) clan—Lakshmi and Kasturi

(Kastūri)—whose stories are mostly revealed in flashbacks. While Kasturi is typically portrayed as gentle and submissive, Lakshmi is shown to be fierce and daring. The novel traces their respective journeys of ‘breaking free’ from the path preassigned to them for being born in a certain community. Almost opposite in characteristic features, both Kasturi and Lakshmi choose to follow their respective passions and learn the need to set themselves free of the devadasi tradition at different points in their lives. The story of Kasturi and Lakshmi in the past runs parallel to Maya’s story in the present. Maya (Māya), who has returned to her ancestral house after three years of her mother’s demise, is the first-person narrator of many chapters of the novel. After a series of psychologically thrilling experiences, Maya gets caught up with the unresolved mysteries that surround her mother’s death. Eventually, it is revealed that Maya is the granddaughter of Kasturi. Set within a conservative patriarchal context, the novel portrays a society where women are expected to conform to rigid social norms and roles.

Vaasanthi intricately incorporates elements of mysticism and supernatural into the narrative, which function as both metaphors for the protagonists’ internal struggles and as literal challenges to the societal boundaries that restrict her. These elements add depth to the narrative, symbolizing the forces that simultaneously entrap and empower the characters. Through its complex portrayal of characters and the integration of mystical elements, the novel provides a critical commentary on the ongoing struggle for women’s autonomy and self-expression.

Mysticism and Supernatural Elements in *Breaking Free*:

In the novel, mysticism and supernatural elements are integral to both the progression of the plot as well as the development of characters, serving as more than mere narrative embellishments. These elements are deeply embedded in the story, symbolizing the characters’ internal conflicts and reflecting broader societal themes.

Progression of the Plot:

The plot of the narrative has a structured sequence of events that constitute the story, guiding its progression from beginning to end. It serves as the narrative framework, delineating the development of actions and the evolution of characters over time. The plot functions as the essential framework that organizes the narrative, ensuring a coherent and methodical progression from the story’s beginning to its resolution, thereby engaging the reader through a structured sequence of events. The supernatural elements in *Breaking Free* frequently act as catalysts that advance the plot. The encounters with supernatural forces or mystical phenomena challenge the character’s perception of reality, compelling them to question the societal norms and personal beliefs that constrain them. These elements generate critical moments of crisis or revelation, leading to significant turning points in the narrative structure.

Typically, a plot is organized into distinct phases namely ‘exposition’ (provides foundational context, establishment of setting and characters introduction), ‘rising

action’ (progression of plot and introduction of conflicts), ‘climax’ (critical juncture in the plot where the protagonist directly confronts the principal challenge), ‘falling action’ (repercussions of the protagonist’s decisions) and ‘resolution’ (narrative’s conflicts get fully resolved and the characters’ arcs are completed). Mysticism and supernatural elements play a significant role in the progression of the plot in *Breaking Free* throughout the novel i.e., from progression to resolution.

The plot of the novel explores the lives of women born into the devadasi tradition in South India and the aftermath of their choices that impact several generations ahead. The plot revolves around one’s struggle for individual identity, freedom, and dignity within a system that exploits women under the guise of religious devotion. The story of the novel travels back and forth in time to unfold the connection between the characters. Set against the dark backdrop of the exploitation of devadasis in India, the novel introduces the setting in the present as mystical and unnatural. The novel paints a vivid picture of the complexities of the devadasi system, while also highlighting the broader themes of gender, power, and spirituality. The characters from the past like Kasturi and Suppuni are introduced with respect to their connection with the divine, especially established through their daily rituals and practices in the temple. The plot around the characters from the present, especially Maya, develops mostly under unsettling, mysterious, and even supernatural circumstances. The rising actions and conflicts are almost always introduced to the readers via the subconscious thoughts and dreams of the characters. For instance, Maya dreams of blood without being aware of her mother’s demise, Suppuni interacts with the dead people during his meditation at the temple and Thilakam (Tilagam) sinks into deep depression thinking about everything that she has lost in life due to her background from devadasi clan, etc. The climax and resolution are set in different time frames for different characters, but they are all mostly unveiled to the readers through the employment of literary techniques viz. ‘Fragmented Writing’ and ‘Stream of Consciousness.’

The mystical and supernatural occurrences serve as catalysts that propel the plot of the novel forward. They introduce conflict and offer revelations that alter the course of the narrative. As the novel progresses, Kasturi begins to question the very religious framework that has dictated her life. Her experiences lead her to a point where she must reconcile her faith with the injustices she endures. This questioning is not a rejection of the divine itself but a critique of how religious beliefs have been manipulated to justify exploitation and control. Her struggle with the acknowledgement of evils in society is mostly camouflaged by her gentle and obliging social identity for the majority of the plot. However, one gets to know about her condition only through her imaginary conversations either with the divine or around the idea of divinity. The following excerpt captures her loss of belief in the devadasi way of life as she drifts into a state of madness:

In the patch of sky visible outside the window, many faces appear like shadows and fade out. ‘This be the gate, this be the gate,’ Kanagu Paati says. ‘It’s the gate-

way to heaven, girl.'

Paati, I see no gate. Everything is shut. (p. 295)

This is a fragmented segment of interaction that Kasturi has with her dead grandmother about the absolute meeting with the divine. Just before this section, she converses with her dead friend Lakshmi, once again talking about 'godly world' and 'after-world.' In fact, the entire chapter 28 of the novel is a first-person fragmented narration by Kasturi that traces her drifting into old age and sickness, hence progressing the plot in a summative yet deeply insightful manner via the use of mysticism. Mysticism and the supernatural elements in such a context represent abstract concepts such as fate, destiny or the struggle between good and evil. Exploration of complex ideas like the afterlife, the nature of reality or the existence of higher powers adds layers of meaning to the plot, encouraging readers to engage with the story on a more philosophical level.

Background and Setting

The background in a novel refers to the historical, social, cultural, and political context in which the story is set while the setting refers to the specific location and time in which the events of the novel take place. The setting provides the space for the interaction of characters and the progression of the plot. Both background and setting are crucial literary devices that work together to establish the world of the novel, providing context, atmosphere, and a foundation for the story's events and character development. Set against the gloomy background of the wretched past of devadasi women during the British colonial era, *Breaking Free* is a call for change. The mystic setting of the forest in the novel is a vital element that serves as a space where spirituality, transformation, and supernatural converge. It offers a backdrop against which the characters can explore the limits of their own identities and find paths to liberation, making it a key symbol in Vaasanthi's narrative.

In the novel, the forest serves as a mystical setting that plays a crucial role in the quest for its exploration of themes such as spirituality, self-reflection, and transformation. The forest is depicted as a place imbued with an almost supernatural quality, representing a realm that is both otherworldly and deeply connected to the characters' inner lives. The location of Maya's house is near a forest and a lake, both of which symbolize a mysterious and mystic space in the novel. While the mystery around Dharini's death becomes the main motive of Maya's quest into her mother's past, it is the forest and the lake that hold all the witnesses and answers. While it is believed that Dharini (Dhārīṇī) had committed suicide by drowning in the lake, it is only later that one learns that she was indeed pushed into it. The lake as well as the forest area become a haunted space thereafter as people begin experiencing the supernatural forces in this setting especially, after the sunset. The boundaries between the physical and the metaphysical begin to blur, allowing characters, particularly Maya, to encounter deeper truths about themselves and the world around them.

Amidst the mysteries that surround Dharini's death, Maya feels a cold distance from her father. Since it be-

comes suffocating for Maya to spend time in her huge house with the possible killer of her mother, the forest serves as a space of refuge and solace for her. It is also noteworthy that it is the forest where Maya has an encounter with the spirit of her dead mother in a very dramatic setting. Lost in the forest, Maya has a mysterious encounter with her dead mother. The following passage provides a glimpse of her experience:

In the surrounding mist, Amma alone was starkly visible. Then she turned and started walking ahead. As if in a dream, I followed her. Miraculously, I couldn't see a maze. My feet didn't stumble on anything. In that mist-laden forest, it was like walking blindfolded. As though being guided by a thread, I followed Amma's figure. My brain had ceased functioning. At times it seemed that I could catch up with Amma in just a couple of strides. But as I kept advancing, that figure also continued without looking back even once. (p. 95)

Maya hysterically follows her and reaches a house. An old couple from that house indirectly suggests that the experience she just had was, in fact, her encounter with the supernatural and that they are surprised as to how she could make it out of the forest alive. The old man accompanies Maya on her way back to her bungalow. He comments on the developments around the area and also discusses the myths and mysteries that the forest holds. He talks about loneliness and suicide and informs Maya that the forest hasn't been a 'safe' place since a woman's corpse was found in the lake two years ago. Maya is hesitant to reveal that the woman was indeed her mother Dharini since she is already seen as a mysterious girl from 'that house.' The old man's character becomes the voice of the locals. Through him, the readers get an insight into the ongoing in the neighbouring areas, their beliefs, and experiences. Themes of illusions, suspicions, and fantasy fill the thirteenth chapter of the novel as Maya learns of the ambiguity that surrounds her mother's death after her mystical experience in the forest. After coming back home, drained in the rain, Maya struggles to get the events of the day to fade away from her mind. She feels an unusual affection towards her father as he breaks down into tears reminiscing the loss. She feels sympathetic towards her father, who was earlier believed to have instigated Dharini's death. Hence, one may conclude that despite the thrilling experience that Maya has in the forest, it helps her indulge in self-reflection and mend her estranged relationship with her father.

The novel also provides a commentary on religion and faith as Maya recalls her mother as an adamant atheist and her own paralleled belief at the present that "god is nothing but the psychotherapy we need" (p. 130). Furthermore, the connection to nature is also established via the character of Maya's cook Ganesan (Gaṇēsaṇ), who refuses to wear slippers inside the house for sacred reasons. He believes that 'the earth should touch our feet,' further emphasizing the healing powers in traditional beliefs.

3. Character Development

The mystic elements in *Breaking Free* explore the tension between tradition (nature) and modernity (science). The mystic and supernatural elements often mirror the

societal tensions and conflicts faced by the characters. As can be observed in the cases of Kasturi, Lakshmi as well as Thilakam, the mystic and supernatural occurrences represent the societal pressures that burden them or symbolize resistance against these pressures. This interplay enriches character development, as characters navigate both literal and metaphorical challenges posed by the supernatural.

The conflict between tradition and modernity can be easily traced in both the parallelly running plots of the novel—one occurring in the past and another in the present. A noteworthy point is that throughout the novel, there is an unquestionable contrast that has been created between the two protagonists—Lakshmi (representing modernity) and Kasturi (representing tradition). The novel follows their journey as they grapple with the conflicting forces of tradition, family expectations, and their own desires for freedom and self-respect. In several instances, the distinction between the two characters is effectively created by employing mysticism as a literary tool. Kasturi's inner conflict is paralleled by her interactions with the divine. She experiences mystical encounters that deepen her spirituality, yet these also contribute to her questioning of the religious and social structures that bind her. The temple's inner chamber serves as a symbolic setting where Kasturi finds moments of clarity and connection with a more personal, liberating sense of the divine. As Kasturi's rebellion against the devadasi system grows, she faces severe social ostracism and personal challenges. On the other hand, Lakshmi's approach to life is quite vocal, rational, and rebellious. As shall be discussed in the chapter ahead, Lakshmi's dreams also incorporate the dive figures like *Mahabharata*'s Arjuna and *Ramayana*'s Hanuman, but the focus shifts from the peace-providing attributes of the divine to the destructive and even exploitative remnants of divinity.

In a slightly different way than Kasturi, the employment of mysticism also becomes a driving force in the development of Maya's character. The readers get a deeper understanding of her emotional struggles, especially through elaborate narration of her experiences with the mystic and supernatural. The novel begins with Maya's attention being caught by a group of friends laughing carefreely. She wonders if their hearts are as heavy as hers and remarks that if their hearts could be torn open like Hanuman's, one would find no worries burdening them. The reference to the Hindu deity Hanuman is used as a literary experiment to transport the readers to Maya's stream of thoughts as she gets reminded of an idol of Hanuman that she had once seen at a friend's house. As a five-year-old girl, she enquired from her mother about why they didn't have such idols in their home, to which the latter explained that the only gods one needs reside in their good thoughts. This trail of thoughts further presents a chain of examples from Maya's life that made her believe that Dharini was not an 'average' woman. Unlike her peers, Maya never wore vermilion marks on her forehead or had *prasadam* during exams. When she felt scared that she would not perform well since she lacked any 'godly favours,' her mother firmly asserted that she needed none to fight her 'demons.' The introduction of Dharini as a fierce and

independent woman at the beginning of the story emphasizes Vaasanthi's attempt to present a character who is almost a prototype of Lakshmi from the past. Both Dharini and Lakshmi refused to let the moral obligations of society suppress them. They emerge as women of courage and self-worth who fought against the societal demons that withheld their clan captive for several centuries in the past.

Similarly, many other characters of the novel also become active participants in the conflict between traditional beliefs and modern-day possibilities. Both the events of death in Suppuni's family—the demise of Suppuni's siblings as children in the past and Kāmākshi's miscarriage in the present—hint at the lack of medical care in the village. More than the unavailability of medical supervision and trained professionals, there is also a factor of people's distrust of modern science and facilities. Periya Mirasu (Mirāsu), despite being a radically forward and financially secure man, depended on a midwife who was old enough to have assisted his wife's delivery, to deliver Paapa's (sic. Paappaa < Pāppā) child too. Paapa died of heavy bleeding but was not taken to the hospital by Christian missionaries in town. On one hand, Periya Mirasu's beloved daughter Paapa dies during childbirth due to disbelief in science, and his unacknowledged daughter Lakshmi makes it a mission of her life to become a doctor and save women from such brutalities. Likewise, the sixth chapter of the novel introduces Maya's classmate from New York, Joan, whose identity revolves around conflict and trauma partially due to different beliefs practised by her parents in nature and science. Joan's story is an interesting insight into some of the discriminatory practices prevalent in the West. Joan's mother had hidden the fact that she belonged to the gypsy community, which prompted her catholic father to call off their marriage. Joan goes on a hunt to discover more about her ancestry and wonders how her father could break away from their happy and chosen family without making attempts to understand why there was a need for the mother to hide her past in the first place. The ever-so-atheist Joan had stopped taking her antidepressants and found comfort in singing in the choir of the church. Therefore, the theme of mysticism not only intensifies the conflicts in the novel but also presents a resolution that typically coincides with key moments of personal growth, self-discovery, and emancipation.

It may thereby be said that mysticism also functions as a symbol of empowerment within the novel. Characters' engagement with the mystic often represents their struggle to break free from societal constraints and assert their autonomy. These experiences help them gain strength and insight, transforming them from passive victims of circumstances into an active agent of destiny.

4. Thematic Exploration

The elements of mysticism and supernatural elements hold a symbolic significance in the novel as they serve as allegories for broader social, cultural, and existential themes. Vaasanthi efficiently incorporates the elements of local beliefs, folklore, and religious practices into the narrative. Along with the cultural and religious underpinnings of mysticism related to the devadasis in India,

one may also observe the intersection of mysticism with issues of gender, power, and social norms in the novel. Further facilitated through dreams and imaginations, this blends overall aids in invoking emotional as well as intellectual responses amongst the readers.

4.1. Mysticism in the Life of Devadasis

Devadasis, historically consecrated to serve deities in temples, were considered married to the gods they served. This spiritual marriage imbued their lives with a mystical aura, as they were seen as living embodiments of divine energy. Through the character of Kasturi in the novel, Vaasanthi explores the deep spiritual connection of a devadasi with the divine. As a devadasi, Kasturi is introduced in the novel as an 'empress of dance, a picture of elegance' (p. 14). While seeing her perform in front of the deity's chamber, Suppuni wondered, "Was she at all human? Or was she a nymphet from the land of the gods" (p. 16).

Since childhood, Kasturi's entire life was modelled in order to suit her future celestial stature as a devadasi. As a devadasi, her dance, music, and daily rituals were not merely artistic expressions but were also acts of devotion, aimed at invoking the presence of the deity. Kasturi's connection to the divine is deeply rooted in her upbringing and the devadasi tradition, where devotion to the deity became central to her identity. In one instance, when Kasturi feels dejected, she gets consoled by Suppuni that "Wherever you (she) dance, the Lord will be present" (p. 14). Her spiritual practices represent a sincere and personal connection with the divine.

In the novel, Kasturi's devotion serves as a source of strength for her, offering solace amidst the challenges she faces as a devadasi. At a concert in Madras, when a guest publicly insulted Kasturi, calling it to be a 'travesty' that 'a whore' would perform *sadir*, Kasturi asserted her deific demeanour by stating that she has learnt her art 'as per the ancient treatises and perform(s) in the Lord's chamber as per agama rules.' The organizer of the concert Gopalaier (Gōpālayyar) supported her claims by referring to her as 'divine,' resulting in her feeling 'serene.' Similarly, Kasturi's stature and art are described as 'divine' multiple times throughout the novel.

Since many literatures and folktales about devadasis, reflect the belief that due to their proximity to the divine, devadasis were capable of experiencing or invoking supernatural occurrences, there is a scope of viewing many occurrences in Kasturi's life with the same lens. For example, she once saved the life of her patron by praying for a snake to leave him unharmed. In another instance, as shall be discussed in this paper ahead, she had visions and dreams that warned her about the dangers surrounding her and her loved ones. Since it is common to find such a form of mystical experiences, dreams, and visions among devadasis in folkloric tales, her prophetic visions enhance Kasturi's mystical status. Furthermore, Kasturi's supernatural experiences frequently reflect the clash between traditional beliefs and the progressive values championed by Lakshmi. This tension is central to her character development, as she seeks to reconcile these opposing forces within herself

and her environment.

As observed in several traditional accounts, many devadasis are believed to experience possession by the deity at some point in their lives. For Kasturi, this moment may evidently be marked especially at two instances when she dances in the temple—one, during her initiation ceremony, and two, when she reaches the temple in the devastated state to dance as a devadasi for one last time. Her dance is described as 'a conversation solely between her and god' (p. 61). Kasturi's first formal dance in the temple is described in the novel as 'a conversation solely between her and god' (ibid.). Suppuni fondly remembers her majestic dance that day as follows:

When she touched the ground and then her eyes as a mark of respect for the stage, turned towards the deity's chamber and prayed for a moment with her eyes closed, paying obeisance from her posture in aramandi, and then looked up, a change came over her. It was like a chemical transformation. A divine radiance lit up her face as if the Lord himself had merged with her. Once she started dancing, she traversed a different world. It must be Kailasa, the abode of Siva, or Vaikunth, where Vishnu resided, Suppuni thought. (p. 61)

During these performances, she experiences trance-like states which leaves the witnesses completely spell-bound. In traditional contexts, such an occurrence is believed by the locals to be the result of the deity temporarily inhabiting the devadasi's bodies. These accounts, whether historical, literary or anecdotal, were often interpreted as manifestations of the devadasi's devotion and were integral to their identity and role within the religious and cultural framework of their time.

4.2. Metaphor of Life and Death

The theme of life and death is profoundly connected to mysticism, particularly within literary and spiritual traditions, where these aspects of existence are often perceived as interconnected. In *Breaking Free*, the exploration of life and death is frequently mediated through mystical elements, such as visions, dreams, and supernatural encounters. With life and death as central themes of the novel, mysticism manifests through the characters' interactions with the deceased, the receipt of spiritual guidance, as well as the transformative experiences that reveal the interconnectedness of life and the afterlife. *Breaking Free* may, in fact, be read as a story where mystical explorations of different characters align together at the end to construct a complete picture. The driving force of the story is Maya's quest to find the answers related to her mother's mysterious death. This pursuit leads her to dig into her ancestral past as far as possible, which further instigates a series of mystical and supernatural encounters.

Maya's interaction with her dead mother in the forest is a significant moment that blends the supernatural with the deeply emotional, highlighting the novel's exploration of mysticism and inner conflict. She experiences a profound and eerie connection with her dead mother, an interaction that transcends the physical boundaries of life and death. This encounter is not just a mere halluci-

nation or a dream, but rather a mystical experience that serves as a turning point in the narrative. This interaction reveals Maya's deep-seated emotional struggles, particularly her unresolved feelings of loss, guilt, and yearning for maternal guidance. The presence of her mother in this supernatural form provides Maya with both comfort and a sense of closure, yet it also forces her to confront the complexities of her own life, especially regarding her identity and choices. The encounter serves as a catalyst for Maya's personal growth, helping her to navigate her inner turmoil and find a path towards healing. Maya's interaction with her dead mother in *Breaking Free* is a powerful narrative device that deepens the novel's exploration of supernatural elements while also addressing the emotional and psychological complexities of its characters. It serves as both a moment of revelation and a step toward Maya's eventual emancipation from the burdens of her past. This interaction symbolizes the continuing influence of the past on the present. Maya's mother represents the traditions and expectations that Maya has inherited, as well as the unresolved traumas that continue to haunt her. Through this supernatural communication, Maya is able to bridge the gap between the past and the present, allowing her to break free from the shadows of her lineage and forge her own identity.

The plot of the entire novel is indeed driven by the death of several characters and its impact on others. Maya's narrative completely exists around Dharini's death. Her friend Joan struggles to deal with the death of her boyfriend. The death of Yogu's husband unfolds a series of unfortunate events in her life. When Yogu herself wants to end her life, she gets saved by Lakshmi who then aids her complete transformation of life by educating her well and sending her to a convent. Paapa's death gives Lakshmi a new and noble motive in life where she commits to becoming a doctor and saving lives. Suppuni's character undergoes an evident transformation as he deals with the death of his unborn child. Suppuni's father, who is sketched as a man with no emotions throughout the story, maintains his composure for a while before remembering his own children—two boys and a girl—who died at a very young age. He turns emotional and weeps while also consoling Suppuni that it is better to have lost the child at this stage than later and believes that it is all 'God's will'. Next in the row, while Thilakam expresses her preference of being dead rather than being a devadasi in several instances throughout the novel, the readers never clearly learn of the exact cause of her sudden passing. Her death under mysterious circumstances breaks Kasturi's patience and she finally openly laments the atrocities of belonging to a devadasi clan. Their family is vaguely informed that Thilakam had hanged herself and there was no need for them to visit Madras for her last rites. Hit with the shock of her granddaughter's miserable demise, Kanagu Paatti passes away the same night. Kasturi had placed an order of a figurine from Singaram. Once he prepares and hands it over to her, he goes to join the ongoing protests where he gets shot by the police and dies. Several years later, when Dharini visits Kasturi (now in her old age), Sabapathi hands over the same figurine to her and Kasturi dies in peace. By the end of the novel, readers also learn about the

death of most other characters of the novel too, including Lakshmi, Kamakshi and Yogu.

Eventually, Maya's investigation comes to an end as she finally figures out how her mother Dharini actually passed away. Throughout her stay, she is frequently met by an unnamed young boy, who eventually tells her that Dharini was in fact pushed into the lake. Maya eventually learns that this was a result of disgust against devadasis that Sabapathi's (Sabhāpati) son Senthil (Sendil) had taken out upon her in a fit of anger. However, soon after that, Senthil himself died in a road accident on the same day, the fourth of July, while returning home. By the end of the novel, it is suggested that Dharini was indeed Kasturi's daughter who met the fate of death due to the burden of history.

4.3. Symbolism through Dreams, Illusions and Imaginations

Breaking Free offers plenty of psychologically stimulating and even mystical elements as the past stories are revealed via dreams, illusions and imaginations. In the present plot, Maya keeps imagining the possible scenarios that shaped her mother's life. In the past, Thilakam keeps building scenarios about her family's behaviour towards her. In both these timelines, readers learn about the character of Suppuni via his imaginations and illusions. These unspoken and unexpressed encounters serve as an effective tool to convey the stories of all those characters who are caught in lonely circumstances and have nobody else to share their innermost desires or conflicts with. The following excerpt from the novel is noteworthy in this context:

Something had taken hold of him today. He couldn't steady his mind. It seemed to have grown wings of its own will. Two enormous wings and a physique capable of roaming the universe. Like a chowry fanning the idol of the Lord, they flapped slowly and took flight. With every beat they scattered the moments and minutes buried in the dark caves of memory, like tearing off the pages from a calendar. Everything that he had seen and not seen, heard and not heard, understood and not understood, everything that was secret and mysterious assumed a shape as large as the universe and danced before him. Like Sanjaya perceiving the events of the war in the Mahabharata from afar ... the priest gasped for breath. As though he was standing as tall as the sky, laden with the histories of many births on his shoulders, his chest grew wide and his head erect. He imagined that he was at once the blind king Dhritarashtra and his adviser Sanjaya. (p. 15)

The novel introduces the 87-year-old Suppuni as a temple priest in the present-day plot. Following his everyday rituals, he gets dressed in 'ritually pure clothes' and goes to the temple. He sees an illusion of his wife Kamakshi, who had died ten years ago and also has imaginary conversations with his dead father. As he begins his prayers in the temple, he is struck by memories of Kasturi from several decades ago when they were both young. In the novel ahead, the readers learn of Suppuni's sexual desires for Kasturi that were beyond the bounds of morality and religion. Through his thoughts and imaginations, it is revealed that he had always been fond of Kasturi and hated that she took no

note of how others saw her beyond her performance. When Suppuni had seen his father (the then temple priest) conduct Kasturi's wedding ceremony with the deity, he cried in loneliness. Even though he gets married to Kamakshi and starts feeling deeply for her, his longings for Kasturi continue. He not only masturbates to her thoughts but also fantasises about her while having sex with Kamakshi and envies the Raja and all the men who come to see Kasturi perform and give bundles of cash in return. Even after the death of both the women, he sees illusions of Kamakshi as well as Kasturi. In the past, when Kamakshi and Suppuni had lost their unborn child and suffered greatly, Suppuni was not even allowed to look in the direction of her menstruating wife. He suffered in silence for a while and eventually broke down into tears when he witnessed an illusion of the foetus in a heap of blood and flesh in a blaze from burning camphor.

In the case of Lakshmi, although she is one of the most vocal and free-spirited characters of the story, her innermost desires are revealed via some of her childhood dreams. Her mother Thulasi (Tulasi) was a devadasi. Periya Mirasu was Thulasi's patron and Lakshmi's biological father, who visited them only late at night. On the day of his daughter Paapa's wedding, although Thulasi and the then 12-year-old Lakshmi are invited, they are neither treated well nor offered food on time. Out of boredom and hunger, Lakshmi falls asleep at every stance she gets and her dreams give the readers powerful insights into her subconscious mind and rebellious spirit. In one of the dreams, she sees Periya Mirasu clad in silk telling her "I am father to you too" and "You also have a right in this house" (p. 33). At another instance the same night, she dreams of setting fire to the entire *pandal* (a temporary shed with a roof made of plaited coconut leaves or cloth) where one daughter is being celebrated and the other ignored.

There was a blazing torch in her hand, like the one tied to Hanuman's tail. As if she had sprouted wings suddenly, she flew upward carrying the torch. She moved through the air, setting fire to the *pandal*, which stretched all the way from entrance to the backyard. The silver-and-gold tassels singed in the heat. The white roof of the *pandal* was charred. (p. 35)

These dreams not only give the readers a peak into the mind of Lakshmi as a devadasi's daughter. While Kasturi also dreams and imagines the divine, Lakshmi's subconsciousness reveals the destruction caused in the name of the divinity. Anger boils up in her heart as her father ignores her throughout the day as if she were invisible. Vaasanthi delves into what goes inside the mind of a twelve-year-old and how suppressed desires manifest into a rage.

The representation of longing in the form of dreams and imagination is also portrayed via the characters of Maya and Thilakam. When Maya was in the United States, she once dreamt of telling her mother about how successfully she had defended her PhD thesis and offered her red roses, which turned into blood.

Amma appeared in my dreams. I gave her a bunch of red roses. Smiling, she extended her hand and received

it. She spread the flowers on herself, like a young girl. As the red roses were placed on the yellow sari draped over her body, the petals fell away and turned into patches of blood. Crimson-red blood. (p. 97)

Soon after Maya saw this dream, she received the news of her mother's demise suggesting some sort of telepathy between the mother and the daughter. Further in the story, in Maya's imagination, her mother offers to return with as many lotuses as she would want but soon her shadow fades away. While Maya's inner conflict is followed by actions, Thilakam struggles in silence and confinement. Thilakam's desires, expectations and realizations are presented to the readers with the way she imagines the possibility of different scenarios, the way she responds to external stimuli and her eventual quest to attain the answer for what it is that she truly wants. Although she married Kalyanaraman with the hopes of leading a 'respectable' life, she is violently harassed by her in-laws. She was restricted from meeting her family and singing privately. Since she did not have anyone to discuss her plight with, her unhappiness and yearning are only portrayed via her thoughts and imagined conversations. Thilakam feels so traumatized that even in her thoughts, she mostly imagines resentment from her loved ones.

Such fear of resentment is also portrayed in Kasturi's trail of thoughts as she becomes Raja's *dāsi*. She often thinks of Lakshmi and imagines how disappointed she would be at Kasturi's actions and choices. Even in her imagination, Kasturi is hit by Lakshmi's infuriation over her for not being angry enough about her plight and her lack of honour. It may be observed that most of the seventeenth chapter of the novel is a description of what goes on inside Kasturi's mind rather than the actual happenings. Her response to Singaram's condition is almost dramatic where Suppuni's words "invade her brain and paralysed her" (p. 172). She also imagines the resentment of her mother on learning about her affection for Singaram. Hence, it may be comprehended that such individualistic subconscious explorations become integral to plot progression, enhancing character complexity, thematic depth and atmosphere. In *Breaking Free*, these reflective encounters prompt profound introspection, leading to a re-evaluation of circumstances and a deeper self-understanding.

Conclusion

In *Breaking Free*, Vaasanthi employs mysticism and supernatural elements not merely as narrative devices but as crucial components that drive the plot and enrich character development. These elements serve both literal and symbolic functions, reflecting the characters' internal struggles and broader societal issues. Through engagement with the supernatural elements, the characters undergo significant personal transformation, achieving greater self-awareness and empowerment. Mysticism and supernatural elements employed via dreams, illusions and imaginations help the readers gain insight into the innermost unexpressed feelings of the characters. The thoughtful construction of a mystical background and supernatural setting create a specific atmosphere or mood within the narrative, reflecting the

Continued in page 115

சுதந்திரத் தொடர்வண்டியில் ஏறுங்கள்

இன்னும் நிலையத்திற்குள்
சுதந்திரத் தொடர்வண்டிக்காகக் காத்திருக்கிறேன்,
அதன் ஆய்வாளர் எங்கள் பயணச் சீட்டுகளைச்
சரிபார்க்க வந்தார்
நாங்கள் பயணச் சீட்டுக்குப் பணம்
செலுத்தியிருக்கிறோமா எனச் சோதிக்கலானார்.
இறுதியாக, என் மக்கள் தம் உறவினர்கள்,
சகாக்களுடன் வீட்டில் இருப்பார்கள்,
எட்டாத தொலைவுக்குள் மெல்ல மறையும் நகரின்
தொடுவானம் காண அவர்களால் காத்திருக்க
முடியவில்லை,
அது வெவ்வேறு வகுப்புகளைக் கொண்ட ஓரே
தொடர்வண்டி, ஆடம்பரமானது முதல் வகுப்பு,
அதைபடுத்தி நடுத்தர வர்க்கக் குடிமக்கள் வகுப்பு,
பின்னர் பொருளாதாரத்தில் நலிவுற்றோர் வகுப்பு.
அதுதான் மிக மோசமானது. அதில்
இடம்பிடித்துள்ள பயணிகளால் அல்ல,
முக்கியமாக அவர்களின் நிலைகளால்,
அங்கே அவர்கள் விலங்குகளைப்போல
அடைக்கப்பட்டிருந்தனர்,
நீராவி இயந்திரங்களைப்போல வியர்த்தபடி.

"அனைவரும் ஏறுங்கள்!" அதுதான் சுதந்திரத்தின்
கடைசி அழைப்பு.
அதன் இலக்கு ஜனநாயகம், ஒரு சிலரைத் தவிர
மற்ற அனைவருக்கும் சமத்துவம்,
கடைசியில் ஒருசிலர் பொதுமக்களாக இருந்தனர்
உயர் வகுப்பினருக்குப் பயணளிக்கும் வகையில்
அவர்கள் பயன்படுத்தப்படுபவர்கள்.
"தயவுசெய்து பயணச் சீட்டுகள்...சீட்டுகள்",
"அம்மா, நீங்கள் பணம் செலுத்தவில்லை!
சுதந்திரத் தொடர்வண்டியில் இலவசப் பயணம்
செய்ய நினைக்கிறீர்களா நீங்கள்?"

அவன் உடல்நிலை சரியில்லை என்பதும்
அவரை உதவி தேவை என்பதும்
அவருக்குத் தெளிவாகத் தெரிகிறது.
"அம்மா, நான் பாக்டர் அல்ல,
உங்கள் பயணச் சீட்டு மட்டும்தான்
எனக்கு வேண்டும்!"
எனவே, இன்னொரு பயணி இறந்துவிடுகிறார்,
ஏனெனில் தன் இறப்புக்கு மருத்துவ உதவி பெற
அவளுக்கு வசதி இல்லை.
அதனால் அவள் இறப்பின் துன்பத்திற்கு
ஆளானாள்!
செடியிருந்த மக்கள் சட்டத்தின்ந்து
அவளது இறப்பின் வலி
மிதந்துகொண்டிருந்தது,
எங்களுள் இன்னொருவர்
சுதந்திரத்

தொடர்வண்டியிலிருந்து
புறப்பட்டுப் போய்விட்டார்.

காண முடிந்த சிலருக்கு
மலைகள் உருண்டு, பள்ளத்தாக்குகள் காட்சி
அளித்தன,
ஓடும் இந்தத் தொடர்வண்டியில் பணியாளர் யாரும்
இல்லை, ஆனால் இந்த ஆய்வாளர் மட்டும்
இருந்தார்,
பயணிகள் ஒன்றுசேடி, நீதி வெல்லப் பிரார்த்தனை
செய்தனர்,
ஆனால் இயற்பியல் விதிகளுக்குள் வாழ்ந்தனர்
தொடர்வண்டி தம் புரள விதிக்கப்பட்டது!
ஒரு கர்ப்பிணித் தாயின் பீதியில்
அவள் தண்ணீர் உடைந்ததும் துள்ளிக் குதித்தாள்,
நம்பிக்கையே அவளுக்குப் பிறக்காத மகள்,
ஆனால் அவள் பிறப்பு துயரமானது.
விபத்துக்குச் சில நிமிடங்களுக்கு முன்புதான்
அவள் பகல் வெளிச்சத்தைப் பார்த்தாள்,
நிலையான ஒளியுடன் மீண்டும்
அவள் இருளுக்குள் இழுக்கப்பட்டாள்!

சுதந்திரத் தொடர் வண்டியின் இடிபாடுகளால்
ஒவ்வொரு நாளும் இறப்பு எண்ணிக்கை
அதிகரிக்கிறது,
அவர்கள் ஒருபோதும் ஜனநாயகத்தைக்
காணவில்லை, ஆனால் நமக்குச் சொர்க்கம்
விதிக்கப்பட்டிருந்தது,
பொருளாதாரத்தில் நலிவுற்றோர் வகுப்பில்
சிக்கியவர்களே வலியுடனும் துயரத்துடனும்
பிணைக்கப்பட்டுப் பாதிப்புக்கு உள்ளானாகினர்
என்று தெரிகிறது
ஆய்வாளர் ஓட்டுநர்களைச் சரிபார்க்கத்
தொடங்கியிருந்தால்
உயிர் பிழைத்தவர்களைச் சரிபார்க்கும்
இந்த அசிங்கமான காட்சி இருந்திருக்காது,
18 ஏப்ரல் 1980' நாங்கள் நிலையத்தை விட்டு
வெளியேறிய நாள்,
சுதந்திரத் தொடர்வண்டியில் ஏறினோம்
ஆனால் இன்னும் எங்கள் இலக்கான
சுதந்திரத்தை நாங்கள் அடையவில்லை.

— வெளிப்படையாகப் பேசுபவர் (டோங்காய் லெஸ்லி
மகாவா) [Outspoken (Tongai Leslie Makawa)]

'ஜிம்பாபவே சுதந்திரம் பெற்ற நாள்

தமிழில்:

வ. ரிஜயதேவன்



ஜப்பானிய மரணக்கவிதைகள் (தன்கா வகை)

1

என் உடம்பு
காமோ மலைப் பாறைகள்மேல்
கிடப்பதை அறியாமல்
என் காதலி எனக்காகக்
காத்திருக்கிறாள்.

– ஹிட்லோமரோ (7-8ஆம்நூற்றாண்டு)

2

விதி ஒப்புக்கொண்டால்
நான் ஐ வாசிரோக் கரை திரும்புவேன்
உளசியிலை மரத்தில்
நான் சேர்த்துவைத்த
கிளைகளைக் காண்பதற்காக.

– இளவரசன் அரிமா (640-658)

3

நான்
வசந்த காலத்தில்
செரீரீப் பூக்களின் கீழே
முழு வசந்தப் பவ்ணமி நாளில்
இறக்க விரும்புகிறேன்.

– சாங்கியோ (1118-1190)



ஹெரோடு ஒரேயுபை

இறக்கமே