

Voices Beyond Silence Trauma, Gendered Oppression, and Resilience among Devadasi Women in Sudha Murty's Three Thousand Stitches

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ABSTRACT

Three Thousand Stitches: Ordinary People, Extraordinary Lives (2017) by Sudha Murty is an important literary and autobiographical portrayal of women within the parameters of Devadasi and the society around it. This study attempts to look at the titular text, not as the story of philanthropy and rehabilitation, but as a story of trauma, gendered oppression, caste-based marginalisation, voicelessness, agency and collective resilience. The article is interdisciplinary, employing theories of representation, feminist criticism and intersectionality as well as trauma studies. In particular, the study draws on Herman's theory of trauma and recovery and Crenshaw's critique of single-axis models of oppression, because the marginalisation that is mirrored in Murty's story can only be understood in relation to other forms of oppression. A study of Devadasi communities shows how caste, class, sexuality, religious sanction, economic precarity, and patriarchy intersect in historically specific ways to generate differentiated vulnerabilities (Torri, 2009; Geetha, 2021). The paper also uses qualitative textual analysis to decode the women's initial mistrust of Murty, not only as a sign of opposition to reform, but as a possibly protective response in the context of histories of exclusion and unequal power dynamics. It is significant that in the process of their involvement in education, in economic organisation, and in community based projects, they have moved from a situation of being given a victim role to a situation of collective agency. Meanwhile, the paper asks questions about Murty's role as the privileged narrator who intercedes for the experiences of the marginalised. It speaks of the success of rehabilitation, but it also refers to the process of becoming a community: a community of memory, solidarity, dignity and resilience, created through the metaphor of "three thousand stitches." The article therefore suggests a story line of moving from structural oppression and trauma, to distrust and negotiated recognition, to collective voice, agency, and relational resilience.

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Keywords: Sudha Murty; Three Thousand Stitches; Devadasi; trauma; gendered oppression; caste; intersectionality; resilience; agency; subalternity; feminist criticism

1. Introduction

Literary depictions of marginalized women are one such significant field of modern Indian literature as they make the socially hidden, visible, and voice them while they also pose questions of representation, voice, and mediation. When women's lives are being narrated in literature, the questions take on greater significance in the context of multiple identities of caste, gender, sexuality, poverty, religion, and institutional exclusion.

Sudha Murty's *Three Thousand Stitches: Ordinary People, Extraordinary Lives* (2017) offers a valuable backdrop against which to consider these issues. The focal story follows Murty's interactions with women connected to the Devadasi system, and his shift from reacting to them with hostility and distrust to engaging, educating, organizing, and participating with them collectively (2017). While this path may look like a traditional humanitarian story of a privileged reformer coming to the rescue of marginalised women, there are more subtle dynamics of oppression, trauma, mistrust, intervention, agency and resilience to examine.

The paper suggests that the women portrayed in the Devadasi story of Murty's must not be analyzed purely in terms of gender oppression. They become vulnerable through the interwoven structures of caste, class, sexuality, poverty, stigma and institutional power (Geetha, 2021; Torri, 2009).¹ The study draws on the theory of intersectionality of Crenshaw (1989) and on trauma and recovery theory of Herman (1992).² Herman, J. L. (1992). *Trauma and recovery: The aftermath of violence—From domestic abuse to*

political terror. Basic Books. to understand the narrative in terms of a shift from structural marginalization to negotiated recognition, collective participation, agency, and relational resilience.

Meanwhile, the paper discusses Murty's role as a narrator and humanitarian intermediary, in a critical and analytical way. Her story puts voices of the marginalized into the public sphere, but her selection and interpretation puts these voices into the hands of those readers. The study thus explores both the potential empowering and ethical implications of mediated representation.

2. Background of the Study

2.1 The Devadasi Institution and Historical Complexity

The Devadasi institution has always been a female institution. But this was by no means uniform across different regions, castes, eras and socio-economic backgrounds. It is not therefore right to speak of the Devadasis as a homogenous group from historical times.

Caste differences determined the jobs performed by Devadasis, the roles they played in their culture, their socio-economic status, and their status as outsiders, as highlighted by Geetha (2021).³ Similarly, the current forms of Devadasi marginalisation, says Torri (2009), should be examined in the context of caste hierarchy, economic vulnerability, gender relations and the control over women's sexuality.

The study, therefore, does not claim to be a history or ethnographic picture of all the Devdasi groups. It explores a specific literary-

¹ Torri, M. C. (2009). Abuse of lower castes in South India: The institution of Devadasi. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 11(2), 31–48. <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol11/iss2/3/>

² Herman, J. L. (1992). *Trauma and recovery: The aftermath of violence—From domestic abuse to political terror*. Basic Books.

³ Geetha, K. A. (2021). Entrenched fissures: Caste and social differences among the Devadasis. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 22(4), 87–101. <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol22/iss4/7/>

autobiographical presence of women as experienced in Murty's social involvement.

2.2 Caste, Gender, and Structural Vulnerability

The intersectionality is spanned in the vulnerability depicted in *Three Thousand Stitches*. The arguments presented in this paper are illustrated by findings from a study of discrimination through the use of individual social categories by Crenshaw (1989). ⁴When applied carefully in the here and now, intersectionality can be used to examine how gender is related to other characteristics like caste, class, sexuality, stigma, and institutional power.

Torri (2009) mentions the intersections of caste, gender, sexuality and violence as a key area of marginalisation of Devadasis. A similar example of the importance of internal caste differentiation is illustrated by Geetha (2021). Kothari et al. (2019)⁵ also highlight caste, class and gender discrimination as major issues in the implementation of the laws prohibiting Devdasis. Therefore, the oppression that Murty shows in his story is not solely gender-based, but rather, is structurally linked together.

3. Review of Literature

3.1 Torri (2009): Caste, Sexuality, and Violence

Torri (2009) offers a valuable perspective on the process of devasization which goes beyond religion. The study relates the institution to caste domination, economic inequality, sexuality and violence. This would be an appropriate method to be used in Murty's story, since it shows that the problems that the women are facing are not just

their own bad luck. Their vulnerability is set in social structures that limit their options.

3.2 Geetha (2021): Intersectional Differences among Devadasis

Geetha (2021) argues that the homogeneous portrayal of Devdasi communities is incorrect, as it assumes caste differences shaped their socioeconomic and cultural statuses. This is a methodological argument since the experiences told in the book, *Three Thousand Stitches*, are not generalized to all Devdasi women. However, Murty's characters need to be seen as specific women in specific situations.

3.3 Devadasi Prohibition and Intersectional Discrimination

Kothari et al. (2019) explain how the above prohibition laws have been enacted and emphasize the entanglements of caste, class, and gender. Their analysis argues that the mere law is not enough to break down "economic deprivation" and "gripping social hierarchies" that maintain the practice.

Thus, rehabilitation can not only be addressed in terms of the transformation of the individual but also in the context of structural conditions.⁶

3.4 Existing Scholarship on Murty

Feminism, human rights, marginalisation, social reform and resilience are increasingly the focus of Murty scholarship. However, the current research proposes a space for a more holistic interpretation that takes into account trauma, intersectionality, mediated voice, agency and

⁴ Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989(1), Article 8, 139–167. <https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/uclf/vol1989/iss1/8/>

⁵ Kothari, J., Ganesan, D., & Jayalakshmi. (2019). Intersections of caste and gender: Implementation of Devadasi prohibition laws. *Centre for Law & Policy*

Research.

<https://clpr.org.in/publications/intersections-of-caste-and-gender-implementation-of-devadasi-prohibition-laws/>

⁶ Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), 1241–1299. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039>

relational resilience. This blend is the main analytical contribution of the paper.⁷

4. Research Gap

Scholarship has already studied the Devadasi institution in different ways: historical, social, legal and feminist. Least attention, however, has focused on the relationship between the structures of oppression, trauma, distrust, mediated representation, collective agency, and resilience in Murty's titular story.⁸

There are three gaps that are important. Firstly, reformist understandings may downplay women's own agency and focus on the humanitarian mediator. Second, a victim-centred perspective can marginalise women as passive victims of suffering. Thirdly, Murty assumes several roles as a participant, benefactor, witness and narrator, which makes for representational complexities that demand more critical scrutiny.⁹

The paper therefore proposes the interpretative trajectory:

Structural Oppression → Trauma and Marginalization → Protective Distrust → Negotiated Recognition → Collective Voice → Agency → Relational Resilience

This model is applicable to the narrative under study and not a general description of Devdasi experience.¹⁰

5. Objectives of the Study

1. To examine how these aspects of trauma and structural vulnerability manifest in the case of Devdasi women depicted in *Three Thousand Stitches*; and

2. To Discuss and explore intersections of caste, gender, class, sexuality, stigma and religious authority;
3. To understand non-verbal and distrustful reactions to unequal power dynamics; and
4. To explore how externally created victimhood moves towards participation and agency;
5. To see resilience as relational and collective;
6. To critically examine Murty's position as narrator and humanitarian intermediary; and
7. To understand the phrase "three thousand stitches" as a metaphor for "people working together to rebuild".¹¹

6. Research Questions

The study seeks to answer four main questions:

1. How is structural and gender trauma being represented in *Three Thousand Stitches*?
2. What is the interplay of caste, class, gender, sexuality, religion and stigma to create marginalisation?
3. How does the story progress from silence and suspicion to participation and agency?
4. What ethical and representational dilemmas does Murty find himself in as a privileged narrator?

7. Theoretical Framework

7.1 Trauma and Recovery

A significant theoretical basis is Herman's work on trauma (1992). Trauma is viewed not just as

⁷ Kersenboom-Story, S. C. (1987). *Nityasumangali: Devadasi tradition in South India*. Motilal Banarsidass.

⁸ Caruth, C. (1996). *Unclaimed experience: Trauma, narrative, and history*. Johns Hopkins University Press.

⁹ Geetha, K. A. (2020). In perennial oppression: Internalized ideologies of the Devadasis. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 21(2), 67–75. <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol21/iss2/7/>

¹⁰ Deane, T. (2022). The Devadasi system: An exploitation of women and children in the name of God and culture. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 24(1), Article 8. <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol24/iss1/8/>

¹¹ Kermorgant, C. R. (2014). *Servants of the goddess: The modern-day Devadasis*. Vintage Books.

the outcome of a single catastrophic event but as a power, vulnerability, safety, recognition, and reconnection.

This is particularly relevant for *Three Thousand Stitches* as the women are seen as vulnerable in an additive way. Social stigma, poverty, economic dependency, gender inequality and limited opportunities are interwoven over time. Trauma is thus understood as experiential and structural.

7.2 Intersectionality

The second theoretical base is from Crenshaw's (1989) criticism of single-axis approaches. The gender approach is not sufficient to account for the different modes of marginalisation faced by specific groups of women.

This is reinforced by the Devadasi scholarships. Torri (2009) speaks of the interaction between caste, gender, and sexuality and violence and Geetha (2021) stresses the internal differentiation of the caste.¹²

The framework is therefore conceptualized as:

Gender × Caste × Class × Sexuality × Stigma × Institutional Power

The factors interact rather than merely accumulate.

7.3 Voice and Representation

The study also explores the notion of narrative authority. Representation can be a way of making the invisible visible, and can also reflect or reinforce differences between narrator and represented subject.¹³

Through Murty, the women become literary visible, and their experience is conveyed by her writing. The paper thus calls attention to the

difference between representation, mediation and self-representation, on the one hand, and a privileged narrator that just “gives voice” to otherwise voiceless women, on the other.¹⁴

7.4 Relational Resilience

Resilience is understood beyond the individual to psychological resilience. Celebrating marginalized women only for their ability to survive oppression can conceal the structures of oppression.

The study instead understands resilience as emerging through:

Trust + Education + Material Resources + Organization + Social Recognition + Collective Participation

This formulation acknowledges agency without romanticizing suffering.

8. Research Methodology

This study uses a qualitative interpretative research design which is essentially close textual analysis.

8.1 Primary Source

The principal source is Sudha Murty's *Three Thousand Stitches: Ordinary People, Extraordinary Lives* (2017) where the title refers to Murty's relationship with a Devdasi woman.

8.2 Secondary Sources

Secondary sources include peer-reviewed studies, scholarly books, institutional repositories, legal and policy research on the history and caste of the Devadasis, gender, intersectionality, trauma, feminist criticism, agency, representation and resilience.

8.3 Analytical Categories

¹² Anne, M. (2014). Challenging the Devadasi system from a framework of intersectionality [Doctoral dissertation, Texas A&M University]. OAKTrust. <https://hdl.handle.net/1969.1/154224>

¹³ Mohanty, C. T. (2003). *Feminism without borders: Decolonizing theory, practicing solidarity*.

Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822384649>

¹⁴ Ahmed, S. (2017). *Living a feminist life*. Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822373377>

Six categories are used in the analysis of the texts:

- Structural oppression; trauma; silence and distrust; mediated voice; agency; and collective resilience.
- The main text is presented as an autobiographical/literary presentation, not ethnographic data, so as not to be subjected to unsupported sociological generalisation.¹⁵

9. Trauma and the Architecture of Structural Oppression

Instead of attributing the suffering of the women as a one-off, the study describes the suffering as structurally produced. Gender inequalities are one dimension, but vulnerability is exacerbated by a combination of caste oppression, and other factors such as sexuality, poverty, stigma and restricted education and economic opportunities (Geetha, 2021; Torri, 2009).

The analytical question then shifts from "What happened to these women?" to "What made them vulnerable in the first place?" or "What structures created their vulnerability?"

This transformation shifts suffering from a personal issue to a "historically and socially conditioned phenomenon. Trauma is the product of an interaction between material deprivation, limited opportunities, social stigma and unequal power dynamic, which is cumulative.

10. Gender, Caste, and Intersectional Marginalization

The word 'woman' is not enough to encapsulate the Devadasi experience that Murty describes in the text. Intersectionality theory shows how oppression occurs through the interaction of social structures and not the independent action of each (Crenshaw, 1989).

While the formulation of caste and race are different and cannot be confused, intersectionality offers a methodological

approach that can be used to examine the intersection between caste and gender. Geetha (2021) shows the intersectionality of gender, caste and sexuality in the context of the Devadasi institution, whereas Kothari et al. (2019) argues the significance of caste, class and gender in the field of policy implementation.

So, marginality is not just a bundle of discrete disadvantages, but an interactive social disadvantage.¹⁶

11. Silence as a Socially Meaningful Response

The paper's principal discussion is about the reinterpretation of silence and distrust. In many instances silence can be interpreted as being a symbol of powerlessness but also it can mean caution, refusal, self-protection, or resistance.

In Murty's first interactions with the women, they are both resistant and distrustful (Murty, 2017). This version of distrust has been given the label of "trauma-informed" interpretation, which would suggest that such distrust could be comprehended in terms of histories of stigma, unequal power, and exploitation.

The women's refusal is thus an active one. They do not immediately allow an outsider to determine their needs. Goodwill doesn't create a legitimate authority, it must be achieved.

12. From Intervention to Negotiated Recognition

Trust is built through consistent interaction, responsiveness and communication. Initially, Murty has material and institutional resources and has no relational legitimacy.

It is important to note that this is difference and not dissimilar:

Resources = intervention, trust = participation

The next relationship is conceptualized in this paper as negotiated recognition. If Murty's role is to be considered legitimate, then it is due to

¹⁵ Rao, A. (Ed.). (2003). Gender & caste. Kali for Women.

¹⁶ Shankar, J. (1990). Devadasi cult: A sociological analysis. Ashish Publishing House.

continued engagement. Transformation then turns out to be bi-directional; the women have access to new opportunities and the narrator discovers that there is a need to both listen and adapt if meaningful intervention is to be achieved.

13. Education and the Expansion of Agency

Education is a symbolic and material empowerment mechanism. It offers a wider range of options, facilitates occupational mobility, raises institutional literacy and can potentially break intergenerational cycles of marginalisation.

The paper makes a distinction between charity and capacity building. Capacity building builds the capacity of people and communities to meet future needs; while charity addresses current needs. Education then helps to promote agency because it minimizes reliance on outside help in the future.¹⁷

14. Economic Participation and Material Dimensions of Empowerment

Agency also needs to have material resources. People's psychological confidence will not be sufficient to overcome structural inequality if it is accompanied by economic dependency that severely restricts choices.

Murty (2017)¹⁸ portrays the growing involvement of women in organized economic activities and in decision-making within the community. The changes do not indicate a full emancipation from structural inequality but rather an important change from being a passive recipient to an active participant.

15. Collective Resilience

Resilience must be understood with a level of caution in the framework of structural violence. Appreciating women who are “strong” for being “marginalized” can be a way of normalizing the inequalities that create suffering.

The study thus distinguishes between survival and resilience. Survival is about enduring while resilience is about building viable social opportunities.

15.1 Individual Resilience

Individual resilience means being able to envision an identity that is not based on stigma and marginalisation.

15.2 Relational Resilience

Trust, supportive relationships, social connections, recognition, and communication are key elements to relational resilience.¹⁹

15.3 Collective Resilience

Community organization, educational access, economic involvement, solidarity and shared decision making are all ways to develop collective resilience.

This last dimension takes resilience from a psychological phenomenon to a social and political process.

16. Beyond the Victim–Saviour Paradigm

The victim/benefactor narrative is often repeated in humanitarian stories. The research claims that this is insufficient for Three Thousand Stitches.

It is important that Murty comes in as an interventionist, but there are women who are not passive recipients. Refusing the first time is one way of agency, and each additional participation is another. Agency is therefore not fixed, but

¹⁷ Rege, S. (2006). Writing caste/writing gender: Narrating Dalit women's testimonios. Zubaan.

¹⁸ Murty, S. (2017). Three thousand stitches: Ordinary people, extraordinary lives. Penguin Random House India. <https://www.penguin.co.in/book/three-thousand-stitches/>

¹⁹ Soneji, D. (2011). Unfinished gestures: Devadasis, memory, and modernity in South India. University of Chicago Press. <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226768113.001.0001>

shifts along the narrative, even though it is introduced after an intervention.

The paper thus continues to hold a critical distinction:

- Agency can't provide resources.
- Empowerment should be a process involving people whose lives are affected in participation and decision making.²⁰

17. Murty as Narrator: The Ethics of Mediated Voice

The paper is centered on a concept of voice. The devadasi women have their own story, their own choices, their own rebellions, their own viewpoints—but only as it is told to us by Murty.

Thus, their literary voice is mediated.

This creates a moral dilemma. While Murty makes the marginalised experiences public, she is also the one who selects, sequences, emphasizes and interprets a narrative.

Instead of the argument that Devadasi women are given voice by Murty, the paper suggests that Murty creates a public narrative space that makes them visible in a certain way.

This distinction highlights the value and fallacy of literary representation

18. Three Thousand Stitches as a Metaphor of Collective Reconstruction

- The Three Thousand Stitches is a Metaphor of Collective Reconstruction.
- The paper's main symbolic reading is the idea of stitches.
- It may be thought of as:
- Stitch → Individual Experience
- Thread → Relational Connection
- Pattern → Collective Memory

- Fabric → Community Resilience

One stitch is weak, but thousands of connected stitches combine to make a fabric. In the metaphor, the reconstruction is thus synonymous with connection.

Of great importance is the fact that the last symbolic object is created in the collective work of women. This puts the focus of the interpretation from the benefactor to the community. The stitches are a counter-metaphor to fragmentation: trauma is divided, collective participation is joined.

19. Findings

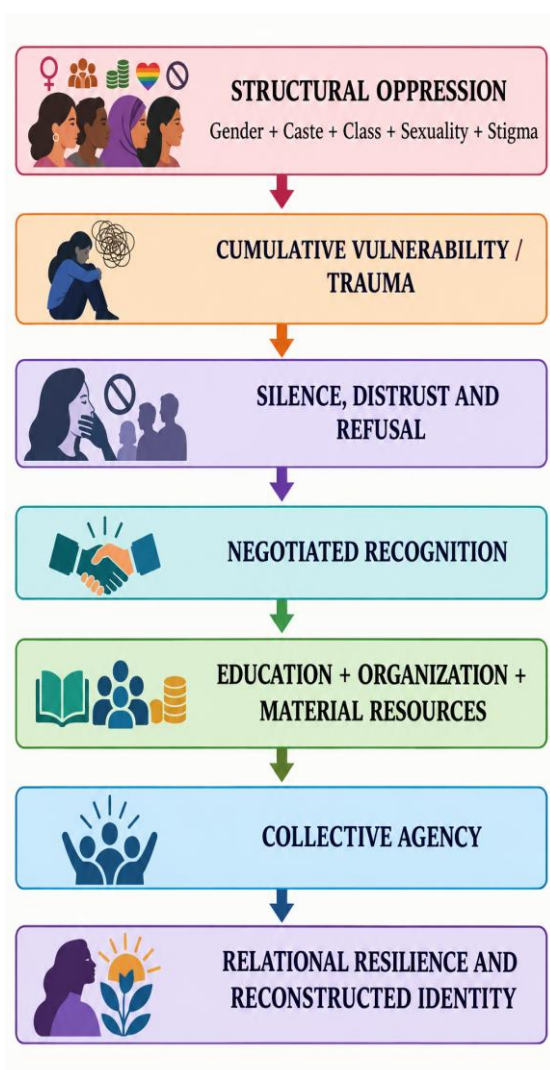
The analysis yields five major results:

- **Intersectional oppression:** Gendered oppression is related to caste, class, sexuality, stigma and institutional inequality.
- **Structural trauma:** Vulnerability is not only from one traumatic experience but also from a pattern of social conditions.
- **Silence as agency:** Anti-passivity agency responses in the form of distrust and refusal.
- **Participatory empowerment:** Empowerment is a sustainable process through education, economic organisation, material resources and decisions.
- **Relational resilience:** Resilience is best understood as a relational or collective, not an individual, phenomenon.

The resulting model:

²⁰ Spivak, G. C. (1988). Can the subaltern speak? In C. Nelson & L. Grossberg (Eds.), *Marxism and the*

interpretation of culture (pp. 271–313). University of Illinois Press.



is:

20. Discussion

The results show that Three Thousand Stitches could not be confined to a celebration of philanthropic success. Its greater meaning is in the way it captures shifting relationships between structural vulnerability, structural interventions, structural agency and structural resilience.

The limitations of gender only analysis have been illustrated by Dr. Crenshaw's (1989) 'intersectional framework' and the need of caste, class, gender, sexuality and economic inequality into the scholarship of Devadasi has been illustrated (Geetha, 2021; Kothari et al., 2019; Torri, 2009).

In addition, trauma theory alters the meaning of resistance. Women's mistrust is not just a barrier

to humanitarian action, it shows that trust is shaped by the social and historical context.

Rather, the central transformation is not:

Victim → Rescued Woman

but:

Marginalized Subject → Negotiating Participant
→ Collective Agent

Resilience also embodies an increase in the number of possibilities that become meaningful through relationships, education, organization, economic resources, recognition and participation.

21. Conclusion

Three Thousand Stitches is a significant literary lens to consider in the context of trauma, gender oppression, caste, voices, agency and resilience. The study shows that marginalisation of the Devadasis is not justifiable on the basis of gender dimension alone. Differentiated forms of vulnerability emerge where there are overlaps in caste, class, sexuality, economic inequality, stigma and social power (Torri, 2009; Geetha, 2021).

A trauma-informed interpretation also restates the meaning of silence and distrust. These replies are not passive, but instead could be seen as an assertive defense of boundaries in unequal social relations.

The steps that follow towards education, economic participation, organization and solidarity illustrate how agency can emerge in the ongoing presence of structure. The role of Murty is important but the women are not just the beneficiaries of philanthropy. Their refusal, negotiation, participation, organisation and collective action are central to the narrative.

This transformation is ultimately summed up in the figure of three thousand stitches. They're all unique stitches, but they're all connected together for strength. The finished product is not a cure for trauma nor a victory for any one individual reformer. Rather, it represents a recomposition of the broken experiences through shared action.

This can be summarized as the main action in the narrative:

- From imposed marginality to negotiated visibility
- From distrust to relational recognition
- from disintegration to unity
- from the imposed to the empowered victim
- From survival to resilience.

22. Limitations and Future Research

The study is not ethnographic but continues to be a literary analysis of Murty's autobiographical representation and not an ethnographic picture of devdasi communities. This is methodologically significant as Devadasi identities and experiences

are different across caste, geography, time and socio-economic context.

Study of Murty's representation could be compared with the Dalit feminist writing, regional literature, oral history and oral testimony, and interviews of women from Devadasi communities in future studies. Comparative analysis may focus, in particular, on the changing nature of agency and voice when women who are marginalized shift from being represented by an intermediary to being authors of their own stories.

This research would enrich the understanding of the interconnections between caste, gender, trauma, testimony, literary representation, self-representation, collective agency, and resilience in contemporary Indian writing

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