



From Devdas to Dev D: A study of the re-incarnation of Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay's classic "Devdas" into AnuragKashyap's popular "Dev-D"

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Abstract:

Indian Cinema has had an interesting history since its first inception by Dada SahebPhalke in 1913. Today, it has become an influential medium and also a huge market industry. "Devdas", originally written by Bengali author Sarat ChandraChattopadhyay in 1917, is one of the most loved stories that have been adapted into Indian cinema. It has been re-incarnated across time, place and culture, keeping in mind the socio-political situation and the commercial demand of the masses. This paper attempts to look into this recreation of the original Devdas, almost a cult Promethean-Romeo figure, into the contemporary good-for-nothing Dev. This drastic change can be read in the lines of Adorno's idea of mass consumption of the popular culture. Representations are influenced by the demand of the market economy and culture industry. McLuhan's idea of how modern machines convert itself to extension of our bodies can also be applied while looking at the modern rendition of Devdas. The rich courtesan culture of Chattopadhyay has been given a new address in the dirty infamous streets of Delhi. The metamorphosis of Paro (Parminder) and Chandramukhi (Leni/Chanda) and its

meanings, both in terms of simple nomenclature as well as depicted sexuality, need to be examined.

Keywords:

Popular Culture; Re-creation; Culture Industry; Old and Modern; Mass; Identification

Index Terms: Devdas; Popular Culture; Contemporary.

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"Every age has its own carriage, its expression, its gestures" –Baudelaire.

Cinema is one of the most powerful ideological tools that capture the mind of the audience. Just about a hundred years old, it has now turned into the biggest form of entertainment that affects people all around the world. The conception, adaptation and reception of movies have travelled a long distance since 1913, the year Dada SahebPhalkeintroduced the first silent film to the 'naive' Indian audience. Today, cinema influences people in many more ways than one and has become a huge industry that thrives on supply and demand.



“Devdas”, originally written by Bengali author Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay in 1917, has been one of the most loved stories that have been adapted into Indian cinema. It has been re-incarnated across time, place and culture, keeping in mind the socio-political situation and the commercial demand of the masses. The original narrative focuses on Devdas, the second son of a rich aristocratic family who returns to his childhood heart-throb Parvati. “Devdas is a complex character cut in the mould of an individuated, Promethean-like Romantic-rebel figure; an aristocrat at odds with the materialist legacy of his land-owning family, a lover who cannot commit, and a repressed, politically disoriented rebel who meets a tragic end of his own making.” (Nag)

While directors like P. Barua(1935), Bimal Roy(1955) and Sanjay LeelaBhansali’s(2002) adaptations stick to Chattopadhyay’s narrative with little difference, AnuragKashyap has an entire different story to tell, making the narrative contemporary, youth-centric, real and bold. “Dev-D” adds multiple and complex layers of signs and signification to the plot and especially the characters.

This paper, therefore, attempts to look into the re-incarnation of Devdas into the 21st century Dev, with its open depiction of sexuality and existential angst. Bhansali’s Devdas (2002) was the ideal hero who falls and pathetically fails in love because he is bound to respect his parents’ orders. After all, in Indian cinema, “It’s all about loving your parents.”(Karan Johar). In within seven years, Devdas reincarnates to Dev-D, the brat who cares for none but himself. What brings about this drastic change? Is it Kashyap’s “vision” which alters the audience or is it a result of the audience’s altering taste? Adorno’s idea of how media content is adapted to mass consumption can be looked into here. The

theory that mass media combines high and low culture and mixes the boundaries between them, to serve the audience a plate full of what is “popular” can also be explored in relation to Dev-D. The very fact that a classic text like Chattopadhyay’s Devdas has been transcreated to Dev-D, a popular narrative, points to the mixing of boundaries between high and low culture.

This paper would also look into how portrayal of Paro and Chandramukhi changes in the Post-modern version of Devdas. The women depicted are no longer a bag of repressed emotions, but strong, independent and highly sexualised characters who know what they want. Unlike Devdas, Dev lives in a globalised world, an age of heightened Communication. He uses mobile phones, cars and gadgets to his convenience. Modern equipment, according to McLuhan, becomes an extension of our body. The ways Kashyap incorporates all of these to give the masses moments of identification with the characters is what i intend to look into.

The modern adaptation signifies not only the birth of the heroic Devdas in popular culture, but also the entry of new heroines, equally aggressive. Devdas becomes DevDhillon (therefore the title Dev D), while Parvati is referred to as Parminder, mostly called Paro. Chandramukhi is metamorphosed to Leni(later called Chanda), a girl who was involved in MMs scam who later turns to prostitution. And Chunnilal, the friend, becomes Chunni, a business man and a pimp. Change in nomenclature is brought about in the modern version to symbolise how the Auteur Kashyap provides them new incarnations in a new world.

Paro has been depicted as a girl who voices her opinions, unlike the Parvati of yesteryears. She



can send nude pictures, beat up boys of her village, demands her share of physicality when she drags a mattress to the field and remains unapologetic about it. She is even ready for pre-marital physical relationship with Dev. However, when Dev does not accept her, she fixes her marriage and dances at her own wedding. Even after marriage, she comes back to Dev to show him his place and tell him how happy she is sexually. "In Dev D, a text located in post-globalisation era, Dev is emasculated and infantilised by representations of empowered femininities." (Sarma,5) Post marriage, Paro gets transformed from the figure of the object to a subject, assuming "an asexual maternal subjectivity". She does his dirty laundry, washes him and takes care of his hygiene just like a mother, denying him any sort of sexual interests and makes fun of his masculinity. "I am showing you your worth" is what she says before leaving. In Freudian terms, Dev has to let go of the body of the "mother". The child gets separated from the object of his desire. Ironically, the castration fear, here, is not brought in by the father-figure, i.e. the husband but through Paro herself. It gives a complete different twist to the characterisation of Parvati and her reception by the audience.

Chattopadhyay's Chandramukhi was placed in the courtesan culture where they served the nobility class and was considered learned. Chanda has been placed in the real world of today. She works as a commercial sex worker in a red light area of Paharganj, who works and pays for her own college education. Almost of out the setting of Jean Genet's *The Balcony*, Chandaplays different roles in the brothel, and has no qualms getting involved in adult films or phone-talk. This modern Chanda does not consider herself Radha or Devdas the Krishan of her life. She closes on to him because she

can identify with Pain, irrespective of the source of it.

Thus, "Kashyap sets up, both visually and thematically, the self-obsessed, the self-destructiveness of Dev D against the grind, competition, commercialism and violence that surrounds him through documentary and documentary-like footage..." Kashyap presents a new India and an identifiable Delhi. Unlike the Nehruvian era's middle class setting, it presents private wealth and an "informal economy based on networks, deals and deception." (Kapur,208) In the original version, Devdas returns back after having completed his study, however in Kashyap's rendition, Dev returns primarily because Paro send him pictures of herself. The feeling is entirely driven by lust and not love, proving right Freudian analysis of how sex is the key driver of all human acts and daydreams.

Having studied in London, Dev has acquired the attitude of a foreign returned individual; however he is still caught up in the traditional concepts of women as the passive one. His male ego does not allow him to accept a sexually aggressive Paro. This time it is not Devdas's father who rejects the match on class inequality, but it is Dev himself who rejects Paro, to keep the gender roles intact. The deep seated insecurity of men with bold, assertive women is, therefore, explored.

Post Paro's marriage, Devdas falls into the sleazy world of drugs and prostitution. It is no longer the alcohol of the 1930s that he is addicted to, but to the latest fad amongst young adults. extremely expensive drugs that showcases what society and class you belong to. It becomes a signifier of who you are; among many other market-generated goods that culture industry feed you. He behaves like the typical aimless youth of the 21st century.

However, Kashyap redeems this anti hero by contrasting him to all the old Devdas-figures who could not accept the love, or for that matter, the friendship of Chandramukhi. They instead prefer to die at the doorstep of Paro and “free” themselves of their guilt. Dev, on the other hand, escapes from death by a whisker and thereby prefers to live. He grabs his second chance in love and in life by giving meaning to the existentialist crisis he faced briefly. The modern Dev, after bouts of depression, prostitution, irresponsible behaviour, undergoes a full circle and finally accepts where he stands in life.

AnuragKashyap completely transcreates the narrative and makes it his own. In one of his interviews, he emphasises how the major theme in Devdas was miscommunication or absence of communication in a relationship. Devdas and Parvati’s communication is restricted only to letters. But what happens when there is abundance of communication in Modern times? Dev and Paro are in constant touch through phones and the internet, often indulging in the erotic. It can here be noted that these mechanical equipments and its extensive use leads to an overstimulation of emotions. Dev’s sole reason for coming back for his brother’s wedding was to get hold of Paro. However, when Paro gives herself to him, Dev is already tired of it, fired by his jealous ego.

McLuhan’s highlights how equipments become extensions of human body and how human relations are also extended to marketisation. It can be seen how use of technology affect the life of the characters in the movie. Mobile phones are used to make an MMS of Lene, the school going girl and flashed in the internet, immediately making her an outcaste by the very society that feeds on the voyeuristic pleasure. Dev buys a new

car using the excess money his father provides and runs over many people killing them instantly. Even his epiphanic realisation of the importance of Life and living comes through the crashing of a car, almost killing him. It can thus be seen what significant role technology plays in the life of Dev, Paro and Chanda, who represent the modern generation that makes machines and internets their own extensions.

All popular literature feeds on the idea of identification, artificial or otherwise. Whether one identifies or not with the character/thing is one of the most important aspects of Popular Culture. Keeping in mind this factor, Anurag Kashyap has done everything in the movie to make it an identifiable product. He cleverly blends Chattopadhyay’s story into contemporary times and situations by inserting the Delhi MMS scandal and BMW hit and run case into his own narrative. These incidents show the contemporary socio-cultural values; thereby mixing the real with the fantastical. Further, the character of Dev reflects present day reality rather than Chattopadhyay’s Devdas and makes it comprehensible. By feeding the bold avatars of women, Kashyap puts forward a narrative of feminist resistance to dominant socio-cultural structures. Modern Indian women may not necessarily be as aggressive as Paro or Chanda, but they definitely fantasise the image of the two characters and see their reflection in them; hence identifying with them. “Adorno concludes ‘Culture Industry Reconsidered’ with the assertion that the “happiness” produced for the masses by the culture industry is imaginary, it induced people to pursue unachievable dreams and represses all those that can oppose it (what Adorno calls ‘mass deception’).” This can be applied to “Dev-D” as well. The final shot of the movie shows Dev and Chanda driving the Bullet

towards the audience, on their way to face the Court charges without any depression or negation of the self. This provides a kind of happy ending to the earlier tragic one, and which appeals to the masses as well. However, how far a personality like Dev and Chanda would go would indeed be left to imagination.

Anurag Kashyap, in the end, manages to be the “engineer” who looked at the same story through a different prism and thereby manages to deliver this customised product to the masses’ demand. The movie, categorised as low budget cinema, was an immediate critical and commercial success. This rendition of Kashyap shows how two different takes on the same story reflect change in popular tastes and ideology over the years with regard to the representation and perception of women, sexuality, and love.

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