

“In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. Woman displayed as sexual object is the leitmotif of erotic spectacle” ... “she holds the look, and plays to and signifies male desire. Mainstream film neatly combines spectacle and narrative.” (Mulvey)

In a 2012 interview with Oorvazi Irani director Anurag Kashyap said regarding the genesis of the core concept of his 2009 film *Dev D*: “The core idea began with Abhay. He was the one who told me this idea of this boy lost in strip bar in LA and that triggered off hell lot of idea that was in my mind and showed me the possibility of adapting *Devdas*.”(Irani) The more than 20 adaptations on screen and television including two major films in the 21st century, more than almost a century after its publication, indicates the persisting appeal of Saratchandra Chattopadhyay’s 1917 novella.

Devdas, both the novella and the eponymous character, have become cult icons in Indian popular culture through various retellings and adaptations in several languages. These include Naresh Mitra’s 1928 silent version produced by Eastern Film Syndicate, the 1935 film starring K.L. Saigal, Bimal Roy’s iconic 1955 adaptation starring Suchitra Sen as Paro and Vijayantimala as Chandramukhi, and Sanjay Leela Bhansali’s 2002 blockbuster version overdosed with spectacle, glamour, grandeur. So much so that the name has become a byword for a heart-broken lover - Devdas is a trope. In common parlance *Devdas* is referred to as a tragic love story, though there are hardly any elements of the tragic as we understand technically. The novel, and the cinematic adaptations mentioned above, deal in melodrama and pathos. Though named after the eponymous character, *Devdas* is as much a story of Parvati and Chandramukhi.

Bhansali doesn’t interact with modernity at all. His setting is an unspecified glamourised version of the feudal past. The film deals in exoticism and escapism to inflated emotions, elaborate sets, lavish costumes – as is the case with most of Bhansali’s films. It is an audio visual spectacle with song and dance and of course superstars in all their glory. It promotes and glorifies the conventional, stereotyped, gendered value system and moral parameters of the feudal society. The film deals in several popular tropes like the love triangle, star-crossed lovers, the tragic romantic hero, drowning sorrows in alcohol, the ghar-ki-lakshmi and bazari aurat binary and the love conquers all cliché. The phalocentric discourse of the film condones physical and verbal violence against women. Shanti Wesley in her essay “Violence and misogyny: Patriarchal Rhetoric in *Devdas*” writes:

While the spectacle is certainly exhilarating, I found myself disturbed by the attitudes toward and treatment of women in the film. I believe the rhetoric of Devdas with respect to the women in the movie is characterized by misogyny and violence. The patriarchal rhetoric condones verbal and physical violence against women and defines them strictly by their relationships with men. (Wesley)

In his relationship with Paro, Dev repeatedly asserts his control and ownership over her. In their first scene together, Dev kills a fly that has been pestering Paro. He says jealously, "thumhe aur koi chuye, mujhe achha nahi lagta" (I don't like it if someone else touches you). (Bhansali) This scene illustrates Dev's sense of entitlement to Paro's body: Paro belongs to him, and no one and nothing else can be permitted to access her, nor does she have autonomy over her own body. Rather than identifying Dev's sentiment as obsessive, possessive and toxic, the film expects the audience to accept it as appropriate protectiveness of a lover.

There are several such glimpses of erotic violence in the film's portrayal of Dev and Paro's relationship. At one point, Dev forcefully throws a deck of cards at Paro in a mock slap. He grabs her hair and twists her wrist at various points in the film. In the scene before Paro's wedding Dev picks up a necklace and hits Paro on her forehead with it; as blood comes out of the wound Dev smears it on her head like sindoor, as if branding her as his possession before she goes on to become another man's possession through her wedding. Here Bhansali makes his Paro sing: "Jo daag tumne diya, usse mera chebra khila. Sajaake rakhoongi, yeh nishaani pyaar ka" (the wound I have received from you has made my face bloom, I will keep it adorned). (Bhansali) Through the rest of the film the scar remains prominently visible on Paro's forehead as a brand or a stamp on her body proclaiming that it "belongs" to Dev.

Such violent acts are common in Hindi cinema, in which intense passion and sexual desire become tantamount to literal physical domination by the man. In that vein in Bhansali's *Devdas* the brutality of Dev's actions, and even words, are not condemned as inappropriately violent, but instead eroticized, normalized and even glorified. Bhansali's Paro has internalized the phallocentric hierarchy of the society she inhabits; she makes no protests when physically assaulted, rather considers Dev's violent abuse as his prerogative. Thus, giving up her autonomy over her self and body, she becomes complicit in her own commodification and marginalization.

In Sanjay Leela Bhansali universe of Devdas, Chandramukhi, a 'tawaif', lives and reigns in grand opulence in her palatial 'kotha'. She meets Devdas when the latter's friend Chunni brings him to one of Chandramukhi's spectacular performances. For Chandramukhi it is love at first sight. In response Devdas has only contempt for her : "aurat ma hoti hai, behen hoti hai, patni aur beti hoti hai. Jab wo kuch nahi hoti, to tawaif hoti hai" (a woman is mother, sister, wife, or daughter. If she is none of these things, she is a prostitute). (Bhansali) This line highlight the film's androcentric perspective: a woman is defined only by the roles she plays in men's lives. Later he says "nehi dekh sakta mai aurat ka ye rup." (I can not tolerate this avatar of women"). (Bhansali) He only frequents Chandramukhi's kotha to drown his sorrows in alcohol. To Devdas Chandramukhi is untouchable, quite literally – she is barred from ever touching him. While Devdas' violence towards Paro was mostly physical he

repeatedly inflicts verbal and emotional abuse towards Chandramukhi, which the latter silently suffers without any protestations. Bhanslai shows Chandramukhi deride and throw out a client. Hence it is not that she has agency. Yet she adores Devdas to such extremes that she forgets her identity and agency. In fact, she literally “adores” him: when Paro comes to look for Devdas in Chandramukhi’s kotha she finds a veritable altar in the room that Devdas used to live.

Kashyap’s *Dev D* is set in 21st century India, in a world of cyber communication, drugs, highway hit and run cases and MMs scandals. Kashyap divides his film into three segments: Paro, Chanda and Dev D. The film is as much about Paro and Chanda as it is about Dev. The women are the protagonists of their segments, while Dev is a supporting character in their stories.

The obstacles in the way of Dev’s and Paro’s union/marriage aren’t external factors like family objections, class. Class does play as a factor but not in the form of societal pressure, rather as an internalized aspect of Dev’s mind which caters to his narcissism and ego. But the main reason for his split with Paro is his sexual jealousy, based on gossip from an unreliable source, and inability to deal with Paro’s uninhibited sexuality. The barriers are all in his own mind. The elements that Dev retains of the original character are his propensity for self-destruction, egotism, narcissism, indecisive vacillation. There is masochism in his morbid fascination for “emotional atyachar” that he inflicts upon himself and others. He is a purposeless quitter savouring his own ennui.

Kashyap gives both the female leads more nuanced treatment than they get in the novella or in previous films. They divide a large chunk of the movie between themselves, with Paro being the focus in the first half and Chanda dominating the latter. Chanda gets a back-story which sketches out her journey to becoming a prostitute. Kashyap doesn’t glamourise his prostitute like Bhansali, nor is Chanda a helpless victim to be pitied upon, nor a femme fatal. She accepts the situation of her life and takes charge of it – “move on karna parta hai” she says.

Both women, Paro and Chanda, go through the loss of innocence arc – loss of innocence in the sense that both are betrayed by those they love and find society inadequate to nurture their free spirit. Both are let down by the hypocrisy and ethical discrepancies of society, especially in relation to female sexuality. The transition is beautifully captured through the song “ye hi meri zindagi hai”.

They are modern in an un-modern society. But instead of languishing in self-pity they “move on”. This “moving on” becomes a major thematic thread. Paro moves on to marriage with Bhuvan. She does come to meet Dev, but not to reiterate her undying love and promise to look after him, but more to spite him for his rejection – sexual and social – and reassert her autonomy over her own body. It is her way of getting closure. The climactic epiphany that Dev experiences is that he too needs to “move on”.

The college topper Paro is uninhibited in her sexuality – be it printing and scanning her nude photograph for her boyfriend, or carry a mattress on her bicycle to a field by the canal to set

up a sexual rendezvous. But Dev's mind is colonized by patriarchal norms. He is unable to handle the doubt about her virginity, though cast by an unreliable source. And when she attempts to initiate their sexual encounter he presumes that it is proof that she is a 'slut'.

Chanda iterates the film's take on society's gaze and duplicitous judgmental standards: "half the country jerked off, and then they turned and called me the slut". (Kashyap) The word gets thrown around a lot, but Kashyap problematises its connotation by de-gendering it. It is no longer a word to censure "loose" women, in Kashyap's film's urban slang 'slut' refers to promiscuity in both genders.

However in the climax of Dev-Chanda relationship Kashyap gives in to traditional archetypes and tropes. Chanda leaves the brothel (and her friends there who had helped her in her hour of need) not because of any new exploitation but she leaves with the dream of someday marrying Dev having found his ring. Chanda gets her happy ending when Dev comes looking for her after an abrupt epiphany. In the final sequence Chanda bathes him with sponge becoming a mother-surrogate for a man-child. The final scene shows Dev taking charge of their lives as he drives Chanda's bike while she sits back representing the exact patriarchal, phalocentric power balance that Kashyap had tried to subvert through most of the film.

Works Cited

- Bhansali, Sanjay Leela, director. *Devdas*. Mega Bollywood, 2002.
- Irani, Oorvazi. "Anurag Kashyap: An Auteur Demystified." *Film Education*. 8 Aug 2012. oorvazifilmeducation.wordpress.com/2012/08/08/anurag-kashyap-an-auteur-demystified-an-indepth-essay-by-oorvazi-irani/ . Accessed 11 May, 2024.
- Kashyap, Anurag, director. *Dev D*. UTV Spotboy, 2009.
- Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Luxonline*. [https://www.luxonline.org.uk/articles/visual_pleasure_and_narrative_cinema\(3\).html](https://www.luxonline.org.uk/articles/visual_pleasure_and_narrative_cinema(3).html). Accessed 11 May, 2024.
- Wesley, Shanti. "Violence and misogyny: patriarchal rhetoric in Devdas.." *The Free Library*. <https://www.thefreelibrary.com/Violence+and+misogyny%3a+patriarchal+rhetoric+in+Devdas.-a095443473>. Accessed 12 May 2024.