

# INDIA THROUGH THE LENS OF *DEVIDAS*: COLONIAL, POSTCOLONIAL, POSTMODERN

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## **Abstract**

*This research aims to trace the periodic reassessment of a narrative, *Devdas* (1917) through four filmic adaptations which offer a palimpsestic reading of the protean conception of 'identity' (across gender, caste, region, class) from the colonial, the postcolonial to the postmodern.*

*From its origins in the plains of Renaissance Bengal with Chattopadhyay's *Devdas* (1917), the story transits to the second phase of the reformist movement through Tagore's influence (P.C Barua's *Devdas*, 1935). In postcolonial India, Bimal Roy recreates the narrative within the frames of the Indian New Wave (*Devdas*, 1955) followed by the flamboyant portrayal in mainstream globalised Bollywood (Bhansali's *Devdas*, 2002) finally culminating in the tangential, almost reversed paradigms of alternate postmodern multiplex cinema with Anurag Kashyap's *Dev D* (2009).*

The eponymous novel was unconventional in its treatment of 'the hero', the feminine and the subaltern. Chattopadhyay anticipates the anti-hero in *Devdas* creating an, irresolute character unable to oppose the social pressures of caste/class (enforced through the patriarch) leading him to forego the love of his childhood playmate, Paro. The suppressed desire is funneled into a wayward lifestyle, where he meets the courtesan Chandramukhi. *Devdas* as the archetypical "self destructive urban hero" becomes an alcoholic, egged on by the monomaniacal desire for Paro and equally perturbed by his pendulistic attraction to the devoted courtesan.

*Devdas* seems to be derived as much from the inaction and latent masochism of Hamlet as from the ambivalent, fragmented mind of the twentieth century. The tragic character resonates in an inter-textual web spawning filmic avatars in *Pyasa*, *Kagaz Ke Phool*, *Phir Subah Hogi*, and *Muqaddar Ka Sikandar*. The dilemma of *Devdas* becomes an interesting trope for filmmakers who interpret it within the frames of the caste reformism of the *Brahmo Samaj*, the freedom struggle, the influence of capitalism, the emergency era, Freudian repression theories, the socio-psychical identity crisis brought on by globalization, amongst others.

The four adaptations of *Devdas* under discussion are located at crucial moments in Indian history, wherein they not only adapt the story of the literary text, they also refer back to specific cinematic imaginings circulated within Barua's *Devdas*, which functions as a master-text of sorts. As well, they self-consciously transform

prior cinematic adaptations of Devdas and reconfigure the archetypal mythical hero Devdas into a character who traverses unexplored terrain and hopes to return to his point of origin, despite the trauma and pain of dislocation. Analyzing these films is important on one level because the recurring motifs, narrative strategies and intertextual dialogues between images, sounds and plot elements in the various adaptations reveal how the cinematic trajectory converges with other arts forms and intersects with codes of oral cultures, theatrical modes, visuals practices and a plethora of subcultures to produce a thick culture of cross references that makes the practice of “adaptation” a distinctly complex process. But more importantly, examining the various adaptations of *Devdas* along with other films that are inspired by the Devdas plot—namely, *Dushman* (1938), *Pyaasa* (1957), *Kaagaz ke Phool* (1959) and *Muqaddar ka Sikandar* (1978)—reveal the ways in which these versions speak to the entangled histories of pre-and post-independence India.

These histories are shaped by significant moments: World War II; the 1947 Partition of British India into India and Pakistan and its resultant multiple displacements; the rural-urban transformations of the 1950s; the interference of modernity with traditional social and political structures; the shift in cinema from the studio system to the independent producer model, accompanied by technological changes and innovations in India; and the increased cross-border migrations and circulation of people, audiences, films and capital in the post-globalization era. Such analysis acquires urgency, especially because Bhansali's *Devdas*, reported as India's biggest film ever (until 2002) became a high point of Bollywood's international success after it was showcased at Cannes in 2000.

The attention that Bhansali's *Devdas* received was, in part, shaped by the global-local interface that began in the 1990s, an interface that pushed the new Hindi cinema toward foregrounding a diasporic imaginaire and tackling its ever-growing worldwide market. Especially in the post-*Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (Aditya Chopra 1995) phase, Bollywood often situates its narratives in the West, as in *Kabhi Alvidha Na Kehena* (2006), *Kal Ho Naa Ho* (2003) and *Salaam Namaste* (2005). The protagonists in these films are typically diasporic youth, who represent non-resident Indian (NRIs) and their return to India. It is in this context that both Bhansali's *Devdas* and Kashyap's *Dev.D*—in which Devdas returns home, not from Kolkata, but from London—may be read.

Indeed, in these films, “travel and return” remain significant themes as the Indian diaspora travels back to India (largely figuratively) to relocate its ambivalent self. Yet this diasporic return—from the West to India—elides the more complex meanings that are enabled by reading the various iterations of *Devdas* in tandem with Bhansali's internationally located work. Within this framework, the paper specially interrogates the endings of these films to demonstrate the ways in which *Devdas* becomes urban folklore within Indian popular culture, and may consequently be read as a representative text of the shifting historical trajectories of the nation.

Chattopadhyay creates Paro as a feminist icon, expressing desire and breaking away from norms of propriety by proposing to Devdas. Arising from the folklore literature of nineteenth century Bengal which gave centrality to female characters and influenced by the occidental slant of theme and technique initiated by the modern age of Bengali literature (Drama: Michael Madhusudan Dutt; Prose: Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay), Paro becomes a centrifugal force of attraction combining tenacity of spirit with the vulnerability of desire. The character's recasting is prismatically explicated on the lines of Freudian conceptions of female identity and desire, Beauvoirian notion of feminism and myth, or regional evaluations such as opened out by Raja Ram Mohan Roy's socio-religious philosophy, the feminism of Tagore and Satyajit Ray and postcolonial feminism as seen in the ideology of Spivak.

Chandramukhi, the erstwhile subaltern courtesan, is given centrality and a definitive voice by the writer. The adaptations vary between the voyeuristic, the mythic and the Victorian in their projections of Chandramukhi. This persona is deeply influenced by the fabric of its audience, getting minimal screen presence in the early films, to a plot reversal towards the postmodern. The Baul and Nazrul musicology as well as the cult of the *tawaif* is integrated in Chandramukhi's character depicting the unconsummated, hopeless devotion of the slut-saint. Chandramukhi and Paro are positioned as doppelgangers reminiscent of the Sita-Draupadi binate which dominates Indian conceptions of femininity.

Writing about Barua's *Devdas* in Film India in June 1940, K. A. Abbas made the following inquiry: "Do you remember it? Out of the very lens of the camera walked away the slender figure of a woman, going further and further...". Certainly, when Barua transformed the plot of Chattopadhyay's novella, the film produced its own gamut of connotations and an undying archetype in the character of Devdas. And when Barua adapted *Devdas*, he introduced several changes. The novel begins with Devdas and Paru's childhood days, their first separation, Devdas's overassertive nature and Paru's selfless love. Contrarily, Barua's film begins with a shot of Paro (not "Paru") as an adult, carrying flowers for prayers, but instead of going to the temple, she stops to offer them to Devdas. Ashis Nandy's point (2001)—that Barua included this shot in order to portray his personal trauma regarding his migration to Kolkata from Assam—is a comment that is somewhat speculative, though intriguing.

A note about the first shot of *Devdas* that is more consequential for film histories, however, is the fact that Barua, in an historic gesture, uses a tracking shot; by featuring a "depth of field" that had rarely been explored in Indian films, the director introduced an array of visual possibilities. It is engaging to examine the ways in which Barua translates elements from the novella into visual images, and chooses to borrow, transform or eliminate certain aspects. Consider, for instance, that mechanical monster (the train), whose bleak movements mirror the tragic and hopeless journey of Devdas's personal desires, dilemmas and discontents, as well as the generation's fears about the violent changes that occurred during colonialism and the interim period between

the world wars. This is charted by the use of low-angle shots, which show the fastmoving train virtually ripping through the land. In such shots, the “train journey” appears to lead not only to the city but also possibly to the death of the protagonist. In the absence of any definite motive, the journey itself becomes the purpose. During the last journey of the film, the sky turns black and the leaves turn white as Devdas gets closer to Paro and to his death (Barua used a special coloured filter to get this dark and disquieting “wash” effect). In the complicated last sequence, images of the door also become signs of Paro's entrapment, as Barua intercuts shots of Paro running through the vast mansion with shots of the huge door gradually shutting her in. Moreover, certain sounds— such as Devdas whispering Paro's name, or the thud produced while Paro hits the humongous door—have travelled through other films, as discussed in this paper.

In fact, it is crucial to consider the processes through which the films mentioned in the paper allude to Barua's powerful visualizations and in a self-conscious way are involved in transforming those. Thus, the last shot of the film—the burning pyre and the archetypal blind-seer (K. C. Dey) singing the song about death (“Teri maut...”/“Your death...”)—provides signs to be used in other films. This departure from the ending in the novella (where the narrator tries to arouse pity for the deceased person) is a permanent departure to which later directors have insistently returned, while the spectre of Paro running toward Devdas also comes back.

The 1935 version with KL Saigal is especially marked by Saigal's distinct thumbprint, his singing as well as the autobiographical element which adds another layer of meaning to the tale. While the narrative talks of unrequited love, liquor and consequent tragedy, the film also has glimpses of India's encounters with early twentieth century modernity, for instance in the subtle insert of a mail box in the song 'Piya Bin'. However, it is in the divided 'Self' of Devdas, struggling to bridge his past and present, that we truly see an image of colonial India. The doomed romance laden with the suicidal instinct seems to echo the social history as much as the archetypal romantic tragedy.

Devdas is often interpreted as a case study of the weakness of the declining feudal elite, especially in the face of the onslaught of the city. However, Nandy astutely observes, it was not about the 'anguish of the first generation rural elite's encounter with the city' but also about a 'sense of exile from maternal utopia'. Nandy suggests that 'Devdas's self destructive longing is a part of a pattern which involves a journey from the village to the city, and then a thwarted journey back to the village. This can be inferred as an escape from the past (village) through a movement towards the present (city), followed by a compulsive thrust back to the past (return to the village). Thus, Devdas's condition is thus showing a mirror to the modern condition of doubt. Faced with the loss of privilege in the village, the young feudal elite flee to the city. Overcome by the anonymity in the city, they seek the village once again. In a sense, asserts, Nandy, this is what the average viewer does when watching an Indian film- seeks in the fabricated realm of cinema- an impossible return to the village. Devdas, of course dies tragically, while we the postcolonial viewers are content to vicariously

experience the same through Saigal's voice.

To further expand on the idea of the modern and postmodern as manifest in the narrative of Devdas, Akbar Ahmed's research can be of extreme value. Ahmed contextualizes the influence of Gandhian values on cinema and writes, "even in action films, despite the hero being an Errol Flynn in his swashbuckling fights, in his morale he was still expected to be a Gandhian". The critic further expands this idea by saying, "in the case of tragic heroes like Devdas, the passive surrender to fate might be another misconstrued form of Gandhianism. Film historian and critic Vamsee Juluri, however offers an important distinction between the passivity of Gandhi and Devdas. Whereas Gandhian passivity is born of an astute control over the Self, Devdas's brand of passivity is general inaction which leads to the destruction of the Self. It is pertinent to note here how Nandy offers a juxtapositioning of Devdas's attitude of 'succumbing to fate' with Vijay's (Amitabh Bachchan) efforts to overpower Fate. This contrast further helps to bring a stark contrast between the colonial sense of helpless inaction in the face of the 'superior-white –Master' (Devdas) with the ferocious socio-cultural backlash to the political excesses of the 1970s as seen in the angry young man (Amitabh Bachchan).

In addition, elements of music, costume, the *Mise-en-scène*, all collude to continuously assess the changing socio-cultural, technological and economic paradigms of modern India. Here, it is imperative to remember that the vast complexity of India is beset with numerous binaries: rural-urban, traditional-modern, proleptic-analeptic, India-Bharat, where multiple periods co-exist within the same time frame. Within this inter-epochal mesh, the trajectory of *Devdas* becomes a Barthesian evaluator of the shifting perception of 'identity', successfully straddling the past, the present and the future.

The myth of the Devdas figure and the processes through which contemporary popular imaginings are worked out in recent adaptations such as Bhansali's *Devdas* and Kashyap's *Dev.D* become crucial for understanding both the sociopolitical shifts in India and the transformations in the history of Hindi cinema in its transnational contexts, in which Hindi cinema now increasingly caters to the diaspora. To this end, it is useful to study these films' varied allusions and alterations to the literary novella as well as to earlier cinematic texts. Close readings of the *mise en scène* of these two films (especially Bhansali's dense, colourful setting and sweeping camera movements, as opposed to Kashyap's desolate landscape) help us to examine the industrial meaning of Bollywood as well as its styles, and to compare it with contemporary global cinema.

These two films seem to be concerned with the problem of relocating Paro's desire and positioning her on the borderline between lustfulness and fidelity. In Bhansali's film, for example, in response to the entry of Devdas, Paro runs through the corridors (of memory), enters her space and wraps herself up in yards of enigma, as it were. Devdas, now an intruder into the private domain of her home, is denied Paro's gaze. However, Bhansali delves into this question of gaze later, when Devdas looks at Paro, who is pretending to sleep under the blue

moonlight. Certainly, as Pooja Rangan shows, Paro “run[s] up several flights of stairs and through various corridors of her enormous parental home, to bashfully defer the moment of taking darsana of Devdas and reciprocally offer herself for his and the spectator's gaze” (2007: 284). When we study the “Raache Krishna rash Radha ke sang” (“Krishna celebrates love with Radha”) song sequence, however, it appears that Bhansali has transformed Paro's character into a more desiring persona than the one portrayed in the novella, or in Barua's and Roy's versions of *Devdas*.

Dev.D goes a step further, by not only having Paro mail naked photos of herself to Dev, but having her go to the (unexplored) fields with a mattress hitched onto her bicycle in order to consummate their relationship. Further, Dev.D gives Chandramukhi a significant backstory and relocates the sex-worker within a middle-class domain and an elite school—unlike Barua's and Roy's films, which reinforced the wife/prostitute and home/world dichotomy. Anindya Sengupta and Paramita Brahmachari suggest that this shift in the portrayal and location of women represents “a disequilibrium that Kashyap remedies by creating his own Leni/Chanda, a polygot prostitute, who can perform multiple personae gleaned from All American/French/Brit porn, and can coo in Tamil, English, Hindi and French.” (Brahmachari). In an era of global-cultural shifts, such transformations are imperative because they seem to comment on a postmodern cultural condition in which the self is split into many. This shift challenges the middle-class concern with the preservation of a moral order. Interestingly, in Bhansali's *Devdas*, the meeting of Chandra and Paro in the preclimax of the film grows transtextually. In a scene filmed largely in mid shots and close-ups, the characters either face each other or have their backs toward each other in iconic confrontational gestures. Paro, the good wife, now acts as the adulteress, while Chandra, the public woman, plays the devotee. Moreover, the star values of both Madhuri Dixit and Aishwariya Rai compete with plot elements. Therefore, a direct confrontation that was left incomplete in Chattopadhyay's novella (in which Parvati and Chandramukhi take the same road yet move in opposing directions) now seems to have been completed through the demands of the new industry and the star systems. To this end, the final dola-re song-and dance sequence is not simply a tribute to Devdas (as Paro puts it in the film), but a recognition of the star-audience relationship. Actors like Aishwarya Rai and Madhuri Dixit become a part of the overall *mise en scène* and visual spectacle produced in the era of digital intermediate and the “Bollywoodization” of Bombay films; in Ashish Rajadhyakshya's words, Bollywood increasingly represents an industry that occupies “a more diffuse cultural conglomeration involving a range of distribution and consumption activities from websites to music cassettes, from cable to radio” (Rajadhyakshya). It is absorbing to study the manner in which Bhansali obsessively uses the *mise en scène* to “narrate” his plot. For instance, the excessively decorative sets with massive structures, along with the particular references to the architecture of Rabindranath Tagore's Upashanalaya (a prayer room in Santiniketan), or the West Asian tile designs (which are used as the Kotha/salon floor) etc., in fact, underline the function of setting in Bhansali's narratives.

In a TV interview in the same year the film was released, Bhansali said that he wanted to make a film that differed from Bimal Roy's *Devdas* (which worked on a realistic, black-and-white depiction of early- 20th-century Bengal). Apparently, Bhansali wanted a more elaborate and extravagant portrayal, or a “Mughal-e-Azam version” of the sorrows of young Devdas. In his film, then, Bhansali refers back not only to the novella but also to other interpretations, as he engages in a dialogue with the popular perceptions of Devdas. While the soundtrack of Bhansali's film is layered and heavy with connotations (including the whipping sound from Ritwik Ghatak's 1960s *Meghe Dhaka Tara*), Bhansali constantly returns to the compositions of Roy's *Devdas*. For instance, he arranges the close-ups of Devdas's face (played by superstar Shah Rukh Khan) in a noticeably similar manner, especially in the scenes in which Devdas takes his mysterious last journey and dies outside Paro's house. Moreover, in the final moment, when Paro hears that “someone is dying out there,” Bhansali reproduces the echo used by Roy. Similarly, when Paro runs in slow motion through the meandering (blue) stairs, her red-bordered sari flutters in vain; this is juxtaposed with close-ups in which Devdas looks out into nothingness. The erotic charge of this sequence becomes conspicuous, through the deployment of sharp cuts; the juxtaposition of long shots with Devdas's close-ups, and eventually as Devdas lets out a sigh and dies after getting an obscure glimpse of Paro. More importantly for this paper, it is imperative to perceive how the image of Paro running toward Devdas floats and grows from one adaptation to another. In fact, one of the key aspects of Bhansali's *Devdas* is the way in which it attempts to speak to its audience (at home and in the diaspora) by recasting Devdas's cinematic past. For diasporic viewers, Bhansali's *Devdas* may ironically cater to the nostalgic demands of diasporic longing by erasing temporal and spatial specificities and emphasizing transnational mobility. For instance, while the film could be set in any place, it produces a sense of nostalgia for an undefined past through its own *mise en scène*: it transports viewers to an imaginary city and rural spaces in India, where the sense of actual chronological time is included within the narrative and in the dialogues (for instance, Paro counts the number of days Devdas been away). And yet, the “passage of time” (or chronology) and the historical time are completely diffused. There is a sense of both physical movement (through the elaborate dances) and stillness, as the sets return like overwhelming painted (still) backdrops to represent an India.

In an interview with Madhuma Mukherjee, Kashyap suggested that—unlike Bhansali—he wanted to make a film that would completely deconstruct the idea of “*Devdas*.” While he references the *Devdas* films of the immediate past (especially Bhansali's), he pays seditious tributes to the earlier texts in the process. Therefore, despite including caricatures of Bimal (Roy) and Barua (who is represented as the lawyer Bimal Barua in *Dev.D*), Kashyap borrows certain fundamental elements of the *Devdas* archetype to both quote from and challenge the previous films.

The three main characters/zones of *Dev. D* are deeply connected to *Devdas*, as well as to the global cinema, to which Kashyap refers. However, it needs to be emphasized that all the “*Devdases*” have been self-referential



viewerly texts of sorts. For instance, when Barua cast Saigal in the Hindi version of the film, he introduced an interesting twist, since a Punjabi man from Jammu was playing out Bengali Bhadrakok aspirations at a national level. Moreover, the predominance of endings that grow from Barua's *Devdas* shifts in Kashyap's film, showing the ways in which popular cinema negotiates collective memory.

In restructuring the earlier *Devdas*, Kashyap makes certain fundamental changes to the plot—especially when Paro's passage to Devdas's room in the night (to ask him to marry/accept her) is transformed into Paro taking Devdas to the fields with a mattress hitched to her bicycle. Likewise, the Chunnilal figure, who returns in all the versions as a drunkard friend, is presented as the scheming dark pimp. While Kashyap's film retains the misogyny of Devdas's character, when the narrative of the film deserts Paro toward the end, the last journey sequence in the film and the whitewashed wasteland (as opposed to the darkened country explored by Barua, Roy and Bhansali) comment on the general lack of motivation displayed by youth in post-liberalization India.

To highlight this aspect, the landscape in *Dev.D* seems to dissolve into India's dystopic fantasies about emergent urban spaces and the uneven histories of development caused by global transformations. A scene toward the end of the film, in which the tired and ravaged Dev is unable to pay his bills to a local shop, is critical in this regard. Thrown out of the shop, Dev befriends a dog; immediately, like a premonition of sorts, a heavily doped driver hits a wall, killing himself. While, on the one hand, Kashyap appears to quote a scene from *Head-On* (2004), our present-day Devdas seems to have escaped his own death by already seeing it. Additionally, Dev's return journey to live with Chanda may not visually quote the well-known passage of Paro through the stairs, but it somewhat disdainfully shows our leap into global cultures, in which images flow, merge and are reworked to narrate stories. Therefore, both Paro (in her last encounter with Dev) and Chandra are shown somewhat meaninglessly washing the dirty linen while they are caught up in utterly romantic situations.

Returning to the questions of Devdas's function as history and its ability to narrate a more complicated history of cinematic development in India, the research proposes that *Dev.D* and other adaptations of *Devdas* show that cinema persistently tries to tell its own history, as well. As a matter of fact, the culture of reproducing quotations and allusions from other films is a common practice in popular cinema. Yet what makes *Dev.D*'s intertextuality notable is that while adapting the Devdas archetype, Kashyap reworks its plot to enter into a dialogue with previous adaptations, both by alluding to them and by subverting them. The contemporary style of the film, along with its heavily layered soundscape, speaks to the self-reflexivity and complexities of the global self. Such shifts in both *Dev.D* and Bhansali's *Devdas* are enabled by the transformed contexts from nation to diaspora, where protagonists return home from abroad to foreground a deep sense of homelessness and highlight how they negotiate the fragmented and diverse histories of migration.

As Jigna Desai has shown, the inflow of capital, its cultural implications and the ways in which people traverse borders are important points for deliberation in considerations of South Asian diasporic cinema. Thus, in this attempt to read the travels and transformation of the cinematic codes through the various adaptations of



Devdas (Bollywood-style), a larger historical trajectory of dislocation becomes evident, showing a deeply complicated history of colonial and postcolonial India and of Bollywood—one that has become even more intricate in the present transnational context.

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