

**Film Appreciation**  
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**Lecture -17**  
**The Devdas Phenomenon**

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Good Morning. So, today's class is about one of the most enduring character in Indian literature as well as in Indian cinema, Devdas. This is what I am going to talk about today, the Devdas phenomenon. And the key points, the key concepts, that I will be discussing is romanticism, melodrama and then, the post liberalization interpretation of Devdas.

as you know, Devdas is one of the most frequently remade film, it has been repetitively made and remade in almost all languages of India. It is, it started its life as a novella by Sharat Chandra Chatterjee, the great Bengali writer who lived between 1876 to 1938. The book was published... the novella was published in 1917. And the other great works by Sharat Chandra Chatterjee that have been adapted on screen are Parineeta and Biraj Bahu.

There have been several versions of Devdas. In 1928, there was a silent version; the Bengali version was released in 1935, starring P.C. Barua and this was followed again in the same year by another Hindi film, starring K. L. Saigal, the great singing sensation, the great singing star. In 1955, Bimal Roy did his interpretation of Devdas and this film

starred with Vyjanthimala, Dilip Kumar and Suchitra Sen.

Now, why this kind of fascination with Devdas? You should also remember, perhaps you should also note, that the great Guru Dutt, he too wanted to have his own version of Devdas and he made Pyasa, which is a story of a doomed lover, a failed idealist and also to an extent someone character who is just drowned in his anguish, sorrow, his disappointments and his sense of failures. Now, Pyasa has distinct echoes of Devdas like character. Vijay, the protagonist, is a prototype Devdas and interestingly, Guru Dutt approached the great Dilip Kumar to enact the role of Vijay who in turn turned it down because he felt that it would be a mere repetition of his Devdas role.

Again, Muqaddar ka Sikandar too is a retelling of the Devdas phenomenon, in more contemporary settings. It was released in the late 70s starring Amitabh Bachchan, Vinod Khanna, Rakhi and Rekha and this too is a story of a failed lover, unrequited love and a lover who sacrifices his all for the sake of his love. So, my question again, why this fascination with Devdas? You have a Tamil version, you have a Telugu version and also a Malayalam version in 1989. The most recent telling of, retelling of the Devdas phenomenon was in 2002 that was a Sanjay Leela Bhansali movie starring Shahrukh Khan and Aishwarya Rai and also Madhuri Dixit, which is considered the most indulgent films of, film of all the versions of Devdas. So, the question is why Devdas? Why this fascination with Devdas?

I will come back to it, but let me now introduce you to the 2002 version directed by Sanjay Leela Bhansali. The film opens with this statement and this is interesting. It says, a tribute to the genius of Sharat Chandra Chattopadhyay, P. C. Barua and Bimal Roy. We will talk about Devdas, which is the 2002 version. This is directed by Sanjay Leela Bhansali and the film opens with the very interesting statement that is a tribute to the genius of Sharat Chandra Chattopadhyay, P. C. Barua and Bimal Roy. Now, in one sentence Sanjay Leela Bhansali has in other words, already acknowledged the masters and he has already told the cinephiles), that you are going to watch a film that is perhaps not may be retelling of this story, but then it, it is indebted. That is the one that it is indebted to the genius of the masters that have gone before. So, in other words he stands on the shoulders of the giants before.

Now, the film was advertised as a grand saga of love and now compare it with 2009 Dev D directed by Anurag Kashyap, which is extremely conspicuous by its irreverence

towards the source. And the byline goes, come fall in lust. So, whereas, on one hand, you have Bhansali who pays tributes to the masters before, Dev D does not do that. It is extremely irreverent in its tone, in its, in all its aspects and the byline is, come fall in lust. It is not a grand saga of love. Now, so this is the entry point to my introduction to the great phenomenon of Devdas.

Now, Devdas, as you know, has had lasting impact on the Indian psyche, particularly the male psyche or it is often believed, that you know, Sharat Chandra was very successful in depicting the male psyche or psychology of the Indian male. How did he do that? So, in the movie, the phenomenon of love, the concept of love is represented as an all-consuming force. It is an ideal, it is an idealized emotion, which depicts lifelong, but socially failed passion.

Devdas is one of the most enduring icons of the Indian film and he is the aristocratic love lorn, almost impotent politically disengaged and the ultimate tragic hero of ours. The emphasis on romantic view of, there is an emphasis on the romantic view of the redemption powers of women's love as Devdas assumes the role of child to the caring women, the caring maternal women. For example, both his women, Paro as well as Chandramukhi, they are also maternal figure. They take care of him. So, this is what I meant when I say, that Devdas, through Devdas Sharat Chandra Chatterjee has been very successful in portraying the psyche of a typical Indian male.

The Devdas narrative is often compared to Goethe's, the German writer Goethe's ,The Sorrows of Young Werther, a 1774 novella where the city bred hero falls for the simple charms of a rural girl and withers away. Goethe's Werther seeks the infinity in life, in love, but the writer regards these attempts as potentially destructive.

Now, let us come to the plot of Devdas. The hero is from a rural land owning class of Bengal. He has childhood friend Parvati who he calls Paro. Devdas from the beginning is an unruly youngster, hot headed and therefore, his parents decide to send him to Calcutta for further the studies. Devdas and Paro grow up loving each other and then the film also plays on, plays out to the Devdas's childhood, the romantic pastoral, which is typified in Indian culture by stories of lord Krishna and Radha, thus creating an ideal eternal love for Devdas. Now, years later when Devdas returns to the village, Paro is all grown up. They decide to marry, however they meet with severe parental objections because of cast differences and also class differences to, to an extent.

Now, there are two turning points in Devdas's plot, which are very well captured in several of its versions. One is when Paro visits Devdas at night and is boldly assertive of her love for Devdas. So, we are also now looking at a burgeoning female sexuality here. Another interesting point or turning point is when Devdas hits Paro in a fit of rage. I will talk about that soon. So, this is followed by Paro's marriage to a much older man with, he is a widower with grown up children. He seeks solace in the company of a dancing girl Chandramukhi, but then things are never the same.

Now, Chandramukhi is the eternal courtesan with her head, heart of gold. She is depicted as a foil to the chaste Paro and is described as a woman or depicted as a woman willing to sacrifice herself for the love of man. In Bimal Roy's version there is a suggestion, that the two have consummated their relationship, but this is not what we find in many other versions. Now, there is, I was just telling you about the scene where Devdas strikes Paro and causes her to bleed from her forehead.

Now, scholar Poonam Arora has done a wonderful analysis of this scene and she says, that this she calls it the fantasy of erotic domination where the erotic and the violent get conflated and this is obliquely repeated throughout the narrative. Even though Devdas does not literally possess Paro, he nevertheless leaves the, quote, unquote, a mark on her. If in Devdas's mind Parvati's beautiful face is comparable to an unsustainable state of perfection. He claims his right to be the first ...he is the first man ever to have caused her to bleed. Poonam also, Poonam Arora also argues, that Indian cinema has immortalized Devdas and Paro not so much for the devotion to each other as for the mutual chastity and to a lesser degree for their defines of societal course.

Another important thing of Devdas is the movement between the village and the city. The story's cycle of departure and return that abets the young men's descent into hell is also fundamental to the experience of Indian modernity and the consequent alienation from tradition. As such the hero's very attractive rebellion is offset by his continually emphasized weakness. He is weak, he is a spineless, he is indecisive, he is our Indian hamlet.

The novel ends, Chattopadhyay's novel ends on a very telling note. The writer says do not know what has happened to Parvati after such a long period, do not feel like knowing more of her, only feel sorry for Devdas. Whoever amongst you reads this story would be sorry like ourselves. There is no harm in dying, but make sure at the time of death there

is a caring hand on the forehead so that the dying can die having his gaze fixed on an adoring face. Be it so, that he dies after seeing a drop of tears of someone.

Now, you can align this to, you can associate these last lines with the way Devdas's death is represented on screen. In Shahrukh's version, you know, that Parvati tries, runs in frenzy, ok, in order to meet Devdas in his last hours in dying moments, but is not successful. The same idea is also, the same scene is also repeated in all the previous versions as well. We have to understand, that the narrator of Devdas is not worried over the fate of Parvati after her attempted move to see Devdas in his dying moments. And while Parvati is in her frenzied state, the narrator's only concern is about Devdas who is the tragic hero of the novel, and Parvati just does not have place in the big world because no one is really interested in her. And this is not the case particularly in Dev D, Anurag Kashyap's Dev D. You see, she is a person, she is her own person and so is Chanda. So, this is important to understand.

Now, from here we move on to discuss Dev D as a post liberalized interpretation of the Devdas phenomenon. According to the director Anurag Kashyap, the film is about love, lost love, identity crises, alienation, and soul searching and also about the youth of today. He feels, that the director felt that Devdas is very applicable in India because ours is a country known for its self-pity. Kashyap was also questioned the reason why he would want to set Devdas in Punjab. You see, Kashyap's Devdas is set in Punjab and also in Delhi. So, why not a Bengali Devdas, as has been the trend.

to that question Anurag Kashyap answered that for me, Punjab represents everything that probably Bengal did when Sharat Chandra wrote Devdas,. It is the richest state in India. Also, when Devdas was written, Calcutta was the capital of India and that is where people moved to automatically. Also, according to Kashyap he wanted to shoot in Paharganj, Paharganj part of Delhi, which was the first thing that he had in mind that is where he felt, that the congregation of the so called lost souls happens. People come to Paharganj from nearby places and Punjab being very close to Delhi seemed like a good option.

So, Kashyap's Dev D is a modern day love story. It reflects the sensibilities, conflicts independence and recklessness of the youth of today. Kashyap is more interested in examining a generation that is jammed between eastern roots and western sensibilities.

From here I would introduce you to the concept of metatextuality, which is a term given

to us by Gerard Genette's in his work *Palimpseste*, which was published in 1982 where Genette proposes the term metatextuality ... the critical relation between one text and another, whether the commented text is explicitly sighted or only silently evolved. So, that is what Genette is interested in. And then, if we look at the critical relation between various text, then in *Dev D* we find kind of hostility towards some of the earlier adaptations including the source novel.

*Devdas* is evoked in *Dev D*. For example, Leni as played by Kalki Koechlin, when she is traveling in a coach, she watches the video of *Devdas* that Paro and Chandramukhi are dancing together. This is a scene, which was much ridiculed by critics, but then it was also a very massy kind of a scene and became, the song and dance scene became extremely popular. So, in Sharat Chandra's novel also this is just an aside, the two women do cross pass just once, which is portrayed in Bimal Roy's version.

Now, *Dev D* nods at the Bimal Roy version with Paro and Chanda sitting across each other in Chandigarh bound train. There are three parts title and we get the cards, very Brechtian, you know, in breaking the fourth wall kind of style. So, every story is told and separated through card. There is calling card stating Paro, Chanda and *Dev D*. Now, for example, when *Dev* of *Dev D*, he is led by Chunni Lal to a bar, he passes the poster of Sharukh Khan in the 2002 version. Leni is also mesmerized by Chandramukhi's dances and renames herself after her. So, she is Leni to begin with and now she is Chanda. Now, this self-reflexivity explores adaptations as demystificatory critique.

Anurag Kashyap exaggerates the novels or earlier film's melodramatic conventions through their filmic equivalence such as idealized characters, soft focus visuals and music. At one point you find Leni reading Alberto Moravia's *Contempt*, which is a modernist book about interrogating relationships, self-debasement and psychological complexities. Now, we are, we also find a reading Lawrence blocks, the girl with a long green heart, which is a Noah novel set in Canada in a brothel. So, possibly a spin on the clichéd portrayal of Chandramukhi so far and I just told you, the stereotyped courtesan with a golden heart.

Now, there are several motives and symbols, which are scattered throughout the film. You have the Radha Krishna angle and this is evoked very subtly with a picture of Lord Krishna as a child conspicuous on the wall of Paro's room. We are also, we should also notice or pay attention to the gum chewing and pod wielding habits of both *Dev* and

Leni. They also occasionally resort to painting their faces in and then, they, also their flaming reds of their respective chambers suggesting greater similarity between Chanda and Dev D rather than Chanda and Paro. There is also very significant presence of the rock band as commentators, observers, again very Brechtian and this is something quiet new to Indian cinema audience. So, this is introduced to alienate these people sort of, you know, function as commentators on the happenings.

Now, characters in Dev D, Devdas is willful and chauvinist. He is rich and spoilt. He is responsible for his tragedy. Unlike the other sources, Anurag Kashyap in Dev D makes protagonist shoulder the blame. It is not the parental pressures or societal obligations, but his own character that leads to his tragedy. Now, Paro or Parmindar is the loyal and devoted beloved, but she is also sexually extremely aggressive. She is uninhibited. She persuades her father to approach the Dev D, Dev's father. She is also proud, extremely proud just like the earlier Parvati. Chanda Leni is born of an Indian father and French Canadian mother. At the beginning she is a schoolgirl, kind of rebel, rich, confused coming of age character. she is trying to come to terms with her sexuality. She experiments with life. She is not at all apologetic about the MMS scandal that she finds herself in, but her tragedy is because of parent's disapproval.

Now, the fourth important character in the Devdas saga is Chunni Lal. Now, in all earlier versions, Chunni Lal's part is always played by very well known actors. For example, in Bimal Roy's 1955 version, it is played by the legendary Moti Lal; in 2002, it was played by the flamboyant Jackie Shroff. In all the earlier versions, the character is portrayed as sophisticated worldly-wise person. In Dev D however, Chunni Lal is a pimp who initiates Leni into the world of prostitution and coke.

Some of the key situations in Anurag Kashyap's Dev D are, Dev in London and his return, subsequent return, Paro visiting Devdas with sexual suggestion and also, Paru's, Devdas and you know, striking Paro in impotent rage, Paro's subsequent marriage and then, Devdas's subsequent descent into alcoholism. Now, Dev's, in Dev D his descent is marked or the beginning of the descent is marked by his sexual encounter with Rasika who is Paro's would be sister-in-law and then the subsequent descent or plunging into drugs in Delhi's Paharganj area. He soon meets Chanda who is already a prostitute. Dev and Paro meet after Paro's marriage and then, Paro soon makes an exit from Dev's life.

The film also weaves real life incidents to make the film more relatable. For example,

you have references to the Delhi's school MMS scandal and the BMW hit-and-run case. So, this is Anurag Kashyap's way of making his Devdas more socially and politically engaged, more relatable and situated in contemporary times.

Now, masks act as a very important conceit in this film. Dev's face is painted as joker by Leni just puncturing the myth of the legendary and eternally doomed tragic hero. We also find Chanda or Leni's, Chanda, Leni's face constantly painted. Her den is full of masks, wigs, and costumes. So, Chanda is a character that Leni plays. You have to understand, she has dual identity; while in brothel she is a college student too and we see two sides of Chanda. So, everyone is acting or enacting a role.

Sets and locations, we have been talking about mise en scene of quite a while. So, you have to read Dev D for its mise en scene as well. So, pay attention to the colors. They differentiate the two spaces and how they, each space is marked by two different palates. So, it is earthy and deep in Chandigarh when Dev in his Paro phase and his own room is in deep shades of red. Chanda's brothel is in shades of pinks, reds, purples. Now, more you know, decadent colors, we also see neon lights on the streets of Delhi as quiet like Hong Kong and poisonous green as Dev plunges in to the world of alcoholism and drugs. Also, pay attention to the graffiti in Dev's hotel room and colors and designs and graffiti and all. It lends a very psychedelic touch to his story. Dev d is almost entirely shot on locations unlike the earlier versions.

We must also pay attention to the rural and urban dichotomy, which is implicit in the Devdas narrative. Here, I would like to refer to Ashish Nandi, the great sociologist who notes, that the divide between Paro and Chandramukhi in the Devdas narrative reflects the divide between an increasingly distant village and the tinsel glitter of India's then burgeoning cities offering their versions of social norms. Dev's self-destruction bears the imprint of both, his ambivalent defiance of the village to which he tries to return before his death in one last effort to reconnect to the old pass.

Now, this is more relevant to Nandi's observations, are more relevant to the earlier versions. Now, let us relate this to Dev D's journey. Now, he moves from rustic Punjab to London and back. He also explores the morbid, dark underbelly of Delhi's Paharganj. From the ballets of Punjab, his musical journey shifts to rock music. His journey, literal and metaphorical takes place among the mountains by the end of the film where he is in search of himself. He, all these things lend to self-discovery and moments of truth. Here,

I would like you to remember or recall *The Hero With A Thousand Faces* by Joseph Campbell who is interested in the progression of hero's character through his literal or metaphorical journey.

Now, Devdas, let us consider Devdas through romantic and also post modernist lens. Now, the earlier versions of the legend, they reflect idealism and not social reform. The romantic notion of how a traditional society denies desire and blights young lives, yet the characters must adhere to the prescribed roles. That is the romantic version. Dev D, however, is more indicative of the globalized Indian youth. This is important that... So, there is a post-modernist shift in the narrative. It is past stage, it is self-reflexive and self-referential and can be read at multiple, multiple levels.

Dev D here is not the doomed lover rather he is a spoilt brat who gets his comeuppance. So, is through these theories, these concepts, that I would like you to read the saga or the phenomenon of Devdas.

Thank you very much.