



Rooted Text, Uprooted Women – Interrogating the Periphery via Devdas’ Heroines in Hindi Cinema

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Abstract

Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay’s Devdas (1917) needs no introduction, being perhaps the most acclaimed and frequently adapted among his works. Enlisted among various limits and liberties exhibited by their screen adaptations in Hindi is the depiction of the two women featuring in Devdas’ life. This is because the films diverge in their depiction when compared to the literary original. All five film adaptations of the novel showcase their heroines with innovative touches, particularly in terms of characterisation.

Chattopadhyay’s composition of Paro and Chandramukhi is largely incongruous with the filmmakers’ envisioning of them. Unrestricted by notions of temporality, contextualization or contemporaneity, this ‘revisional’ portraiture and its reasons deserve attention. Questions of audience acceptability and appeasement may well have been privileged over fidelity. Additionally, was this a corrective measure on their part, seeking to ‘empower’ these women far more than the author did?

The paper seeks to locate these answers and raise further questions, utilising the centre margin theory. Are varying portrayals products of ensuing socio-temporal conflicts between the ‘grand narrative’ of a ‘patriarchal centre’ and the ‘social periphery’ inhabited by women? Moreover, what are their implications? Do these conflicts plunge the reader/viewer into a dilemma, unable to negotiate between affiliations to the original text, and a body of films nearly on the brink of a ‘postmodernist breakthrough’? How does this challenge the contemporaneous representation of women – does it indeed counter the ‘violence’ caused through metanarratives like these? This discourse is sought to be inaugurated.

Keywords: Literature, Cinema, Intertextuality, Centre-Periphery, Women, Postmodernism.

Introduction:

Saratchandra Chattopadhyay’s novel, *Devdas* is perhaps the most widely adapted among all his works. The novel, for its exceptional story and unforgettable character(s), added a unique dimension to the author’s contemporary life and Bengali society in general. It has been widely adapted for film, lacking regard for boundaries of language, culture, time, geographic location and so on. Most adaptations have been specific to the socio-cultural ethos of the time and the target audience catered to. What is it that makes *Devdas* such a cult classic?

Among various limits and liberties that these screen adaptations exhibit, a key question remains: the unique depiction and role of the two major women who enter Devdas' life. Interestingly, the films diverge in their depiction when compared to the Bengali literary original. There exist five versions of *Devdas* in Hindi cinema. In chronological order, the former three are more direct adaptations, sharing the titular nomenclature of the novel itself. The latter is more interpretative: contemporary and contextual. However, an emergent strain runs common through all five 'texts': the rather unconventional portrayal of women, particularly in terms of characterisation.

'Centre' and 'Margin' are two important terms in 'Deconstruction'. Jacques Derrida used 'centre' to represent 'a point of presence, a fixed origin' that limits the 'play' of the structure in which it is made to exist. A 'centre' also becomes a condition, determinant or measure for the meaning generated in the precincts of this structure. Margins (and marginality) are relationally constituted, be it through representation or interpretation, a binary opposition to the 'centre' designating borders, boundaries or the periphery itself.¹

This paper seeks to determine how, in their chronological progressions, each film adaptation has portrayed women differently from the novel. Taking up one film at a time, these divergent portrayals vis-à-vis the novel are sought to be examined, with a linear trajectory of meaning derived through interpretation. Thereafter, the paper would seek to connect this to the larger debate for which it is intended.

The 1936 Adaptation:

The director, P.C. Barua possibly considers it unimportant that the elders of the family comment on Paro's discontinuation of school education since her teacher had hit her, having no future use for it. Feminism, gender equality and the importance of educating the girl-child weren't concerns of the time. Even if the author had mentioned it, the director hadn't felt the need to do so.

Unlike the novel, the film merely touches upon Devdas' discovery in abandon by Chandra, and her nursing of him, completely omitting all details of the elongated quest undertaken and the lengths resorted to. Devdas' use of the word 'wife' for her, 'true love' and devotion are all missing in the film. Barua was unable to bring forth her unrequited, unconditional love. Chandra appears reduced to a flat character in these scenes, serving some banal plot functions. Was Barua way too mindful of her love for Devdas being strong enough to overshadow the romance of the lead pair and the baggage of social norms and customs it came with? Or was he relaying the marginal position and inability of transgression courtesans of the time were condemned to?

Chattopadhyay's Parbati was brave, bold and disregarded social customs inasmuch she considered fit within boundaries of reason. In the film, Paro dominates the narrative through her role, personality, perspective

¹ Klages on Derrida's "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse on the Human Sciences", www.webpages.uidaho.edu/~sflores/KlagesDerrida.html.

Retrieved: June 16, 2021.

and action. The film began with her, the very first shot itself. Most of the dialogues, the best and most prominent ones, were given to her. 'Barua, however, does suggest that the title aside, this is largely Paro's story, as she introduces the narrative.'² Parvati has a joint destiny with the protagonist, Devdas. Her portrayal is a raw representation of Chattopadhyay's but the movie is largely about Paro and defies the title 'Devdas'.³ 'Creekmur observes that Barua's treatment of the Devdas myth had also emphasized Paro's experience.'⁴

There are no surprises in Chandramukhi's portrayal considering the era it was set in. But Barua's tussle with the marginality attributed to Paro is remarkable. While he could do little given his obligation to the novel and its temporal location, he marks the beginning of adaptative innovation to revise Chattopadhyay's 1917 classic. Apparent through a genealogical survey, Barua must be credited for subtly inaugurating the 'centre margin conflict in the spectrum of Devdas' Hindi film adaptations. Slowly but surely, this marks a historical epoch in the postmodernist resistance to prevalent metanarratives like patriarchy, leading to subjugation.

The 1955 Adaptation:

Chattopadhyay's young Parvati was far more selfless than Roy's little girl. Roy's little Paro didn't hesitate to blame Devdas, taking it to his father, who promised to reprimand him for the same. Her family did not disallow her from going to school, she was allowed it as a diversion after Devdas left for Calcutta. The director seemingly skipped the regressively inert role attributed to women, swapping it for a character who knew what she desired. 'A woman of substance would be even more unthinkable in the Bengali Hindu society of Sarat's time, but his characterisation of Parvati has colossal similarities with Elizabeth Bennett. How Parvati refuses Devdas' offer of marriage after her marriage is fixed reminds us of how Elizabeth refused Mr Darcy's marriage proposal – there is similar strength in personality and self-pride, which is highly unexpected of a Hindu Bengali woman in the early 20th century.'⁵ The blazing personality of Roy's

² "Devdas." *Indian Cinema - The University of Iowa*, indiancinema.sites.uiowa.edu/devdas. Retrieved: April 18, 2021.

³ "Devdas Old vs. New: Classic Compared with Contemporary." *Utsavpedia*, 3 May 2017, www.utsavpedia.com/bollywood-beyond/devdas-old-vs-new/. Retrieved: April 15, 2021.

⁴ Creekmur, Cory K. "Remembering, Repeating, and Working through Devdas." *Indian Literature and Popular Cinema: Recasting Classics*, Edited by Heidi R.M. Pauwels, 2007, pp. 186.

⁵ Jitka de Préval. "Heritage and Ruptures: Identity Negotiations of the Hero in the Cinematographic Adaptations of Devdas". *Heritage and Ruptures in Indian Literature, Culture and Cinema*, 2017.

heroine sets the tone for a woman who remained passionate and fairly spontaneous in her expression of emotions, adding consistency to her growth graph vis-à-vis the narrative.

One glaring point of departure from the plot is to be found in Roy's Paro and Chandramukhi crossing paths in the film. 'Paro and Chandramukhi – ostensible rivals but sisters in their doomed passion – view one another on the road. In the original novel, the two central female characters never meet, but filmmakers have been unable to reconcile themselves to their complete isolation from one another. While the most recent version of the story allows its superstar heroines to indulge in considerable female bonding, Roy's film merely suggests this possibility through a quiet but formally powerful moment.'⁶ A directorial alteration of the novel for dramatic purposes, this seems a brilliantly subtle move to establish personal quests, a befitting reply to the patriarchal 'centre' which had doomed women to the margins without any agency of their own. This unknown complicity is not a walk on the path of resignation, but an active intervention challenging their 'marginalised' fate in social terms. Importantly, in consonance with the novel, Devdas acknowledges that Chandramukhi was indeed someone close to his heart – equivalent in terms of the book where he calls her his 'wife', albeit in a single instance.

Unlike Barua, Paro's portrayal by Roy is both a variation of Chattopadhyay's heroine and largely resistant to unacceptable suppression. This stark upliftment from her depiction in the previous adaptation, this time at the level of action, clearly illustrates that the winds of change have begun to blow. Oblivious but acknowledged female bonding occurs, the woman is more assertive. She has begun to break away from her muted self of suffering, learning to cultivate assertion instead. No longer demure and muted, Roy's Paro is more vocal than her literary counterpart, be it in action or body language. The conflict between the centre and the margins has begun, with tiny steps towards the establishment of equality. The deconstruction of patriarchy appears to have commenced.

The 2002 Adaptation:

Paro, seemingly an object of sympathy for Bhansali, is nevertheless crafted rather carefully. Unlike Chattopadhyay, his Paro seems a strange combination of vulnerability and firmness of view. The same woman who exhibited her distress in visiting her lover in the dead of the night was the same who stood up for her 'first love' Devdas when accosted by her husband, retaliating with rules being the same for both of them. She did not once hesitate to visit Chandramukhi to question her on Devdas' whereabouts – social propriety to her was no concern in the face of love. Saratchandra's Paro was almost always a damsel-in-distress and a silent sufferer of fate and servitude. Paro in the film exhibits an attempt to break free, yet conforming to social normativity.

In contrast, the wispiness of Chandramukhi is disturbing. Bhansali's courtesan figure lacks the fiery potential of Chattopadhyay's. 'Chandramukhi that has been played by Madhuri Dixit in the Bhansali

⁶ "Devdas." *Indian Cinema - The University of Iowa*, indiancinema.sites.uiowa.edu/devdas

Retrieved: April 26, 2021.

magnum opus gives the character a dream-like quality that is almost unattainable.’⁷ While she did assert herself in the face of her insult by Kalibabu, it is worth remembering that this is only an addition to the literary original. In terms of equivalence, she is hardly any more than an excessively glamorous alternative available to Devdas. Bhansali’s Chandramukhi has none of the sacrifice, servitude and resignation to austerity that makes Saratchandra’s woman an exception. There is no visualisation of her nursing him, and her accurate monologue on Devdas’ predicament and Paro are omitted.

The parallel narrative created by Bhansali concerning the Paro-Chandramukhi relationship is confounding. Whether to illustrate female bonding or the visual spectacle of the paths of his female lead(s) crossing, Bhansali makes them confront each other, converse and console, and even dance and celebrate their love for Devdas, utilising Durga Puja as the context for all of these. Yet, Paro and Chandramukhi do not visibly illustrate attempts to help Devdas battle his exigency. Both of them are too typically weak and helpless, without agency, and neither actively toil to save Devdas from his devastating end.

Neither Paro nor Chandramukhi are outrightly rebellious, but both kindles hope within the coordinates of traditional roles assigned by the novelist. Yet in their defence of themselves and their love object, they attempt to destabilise and question the centre remaining in the margins. Important questions asked by Chandramukhi, and inclusive attempts by Paro in festival times are both aspects of silent interrogation and revolt, in line with the larger argument.

Dev D (2009):

In Anurag Kashyap’s film, the prioritisation of Chanda’s character over that of Paro is interesting. Not only does the film devote a considerable duration to narrating her background, but it also adds renewed vigour to the ‘supporting’ heroine by giving her enough importance and function. Chanda is so much more than ‘Chandramukhi’. Her efforts in the novel are different, but the motive of Dev’s recuperation and welfare are the same. The fact that she cleansed him in the end (by bathing him) enabled him to make a new beginning. Likewise, keeping him on the right path was a responsibility that she seemed to undertake. Chanda being a woman who had been stripped of her innocence early on, has greater agency than Chattopadhyay’s character, helping reform Dev utilising the same. Her character stands out and shines, and their relationship remains unique till the end of the film. It was perhaps only appropriate that Dev’s token of appreciation (in the form of the ring) reached Chanda in the end, something Sarat’s heroine never managed to acquire. With unimaginably painful adolescence and overcoming suffering, she became the inspiration behind Dev’s moving on, perhaps channelising his self-realisation in the end. Dev manifestation as a tragic hero is averted through Chanda’s help, he disciplines himself, making a fresh start. Their ‘happy ending’, hinted in the form of marital union is appreciable.

⁷ “Devdas Old vs. New: Classic Compared with Contemporary.” *Utsavpedia*, 3 May 2017, www.utsavpedia.com/bollywood-beyond/devdas-old-vs-new/.

Retrieved: May 1, 2021.

However, Paro's role and relationship with Dev is the greatest disappointment concerning the novel. Was the agency given to Chanda stolen from Paro's share of the same? Kashyap's Paro seemed largely deficient of the power attributed to her by the novelist. Submitting to Dev's fancies of sending him a photograph in the nude to catch his fancy, entertaining his sexual requests on the phone to facilitate his return from London – she remains a largely sexual pursuit for Dev, from the very beginning and till their last meeting in his lodging. The sexualization of the Dev-Paro liaison seems utterly problematic considering the relationship of innocence, affection and servitude shared by the duo in the novel. Several scenes are showcase Paro's attempts to fulfil Dev's sexual aspirations, highlighting the baseness of their relationship. Paro's rejoinder to her parents about her steadfastness about their match is brilliantly done when she vented out her anger by pumping the tube well unsparingly but was surprisingly meek in front of Dev when he rejected her. This appears inconsistent with Paro's behaviour shortly before this and is regressive given the era in which the film locates itself. The portrayal worsens with the servitude exhibited in visiting Dev, setting his room in order and washing his clothes, only to be pleaded into becoming his sexual partner, insulted and pushed out when she declined. The portrayal of Paro by Kashyap not only denigrates her as a modern woman but also makes her a sexual prop – the absence of which drove Dev into being with people like Rasika who gave him what he desired till she found out the truth about his intentions.

Paro may not be as impactful as Chandramukhi, but Kashyap compensates through the character of Rasika, almost an alter-ego to her. Rasika appears anything but marginalised, carrying within herself an entitlement available only to men. Like Chanda who bore the brunt of patriarchal violence, she counters this grand narrative in her conduct and treatment of Dev. It is not Dev who uses her for sex, but the other way round. Both Rasika and Chanda outrightly challenge the centre, despite the marginal roles they are assigned. This welcome conflict comes with its baggage: Chanda must revolt from the margins, though Rasika certainly exhibits optimistic, even utopian possibilities.

Daas Dev (2018):

In Sudhir Mishra's political saga, the characterisation of Paro steals the show. Chattopadhyay's heroine was a woman of substance, Mishra's Paro takes it several notches higher, enforcing and enhancing the character in every potential. Perhaps the most impressive portrayal among all the adaptations, Paro isn't the meek heroine who gives a rejoinder once in the form of an outburst. Mishra's female lead is a thorough firebrand who remains true to her ideals and personality for the entire duration. When Dev was beaten up by his money-lender, she did try to get him out of the situation but out of disgust distanced herself from him. Paro refused to identify him in the hospital. She put her self-respect first in her differences with Awadhesh, thereby escorting her father there but not meeting him, given his patronising attitude towards her family. Paro took up social work to overcome her love for Dev and subdue her strength of feeling. Quick to point to Sushila Devi the pitfalls of her son, and the girl who vehemently reacted to Milan for trying to kidnap her, Paro's personality exhibits utmost consistency. Steadfast in her love for Dev, she did not resist mutual attempts to patch up their differences, but did make it clear that she was in it for the love,

not servitude – she would be his wife but not his nurse. The same Paro, insulted by Awadhesh once again, did not think twice before walking out on Dev, given that her self-dignity was compromised. She returned another time to seek refuge and found herself violated again – this time by Dev himself. Paro, unlike the novel's character, decides that this was indeed the last straw. Stunned at his insensitivity regarding her father's implication, she did not hesitate to join the opposition party and marry its leader, Ramashray. Paro did not even want Dev's sympathy upon her father's death, and pushed him away, just as she did subsequently on her wedding day, despite acknowledging loving him. Paro's ideals and virtues were too deeply rooted to interfere with her steadfastness of personality. Moreover, she sought to preserve whatever little sanctity remained in their relationship. Paro never wanted to hate Dev but also never sought to be submissive, unlike in the novel. Mishra's female lead dared to unbiasedly side with the truth, endowed with an unflinching sense of right and wrong. Paro stuck to her beliefs, telling her husband without hesitation that unlike him, her politics were entirely personal as was the cause behind her decision to enter its arena. She fearlessly told her husband that she needed to meet Dev when he called her up in the middle of the night – an equivalent to the nightly visit of Paro – both violations of social normativity. Remaining a well-wisher even after hostility, she advised Dev to remain on the political battlefield and fight for the truth. Years later, it was she who remained in Dev's 'new beginning', drawing the viewers' attention to the eternity of the Dev-Paro relationship, envisioned by the author.

Chandramukhi, here Chandni, proves to be an equally interesting character with a meaty role. Though not assertive like Paro, the filmmaker makes the very basis of her character powerful. She is portrayed as a strategist who lays out a move-by-move advisory for Dev, a guiding force who charts each move to create a position of advantage for him. A fixer in their political party and manager to Dev, Mishra ensures that the strings of Dev's life continue to remain in her control. Additionally, she is pivotal enough to function as the narrator of the film. Guiding Dev at every step, her love stems from her ability to plan correctly and to his benefit. Therefore, Chandni guards him while simultaneously catapulting him toward political success. Functioning using connections of Shrikant Sahay, her vested interest remains Dev for whom her agenda is equally professional and personal. Early enough, she comments on Dev's irresponsible behaviour, cooperating with him to overcome his addiction. Chandni deserves due credit for strategizing Dev's establishment as a true political heir. There is little told of the Dev-Chandni equation, it is more for the audience to estimate and assess. The sole consequence that concerns Chandni is Dev's safety and prosperity – she didn't mind him muttering Paro's name in her arms, nor did she hesitate to sexually pleasure the Chief Minister to work it to his benefit. All this, despite knowing her love would remain unrequited, much like Chandramukhi's. Moreover, she planned to implicate Nawal to leave Dev untainted and unsuspected. But unlike the 'second woman' of the novel who sought to laud the Dev-Paro bond, Chandni strove to uncover the truth to Dev about Paro's press conference as an opposition leader – where she exposed the conspiracy behind Vishambar's death and the dubious moral character of Sushila Devi. She also exhibited her *femme fatale* dimension in getting Shrikant murdered when he began suspecting her complicity in informing his truth to Sushila. It was the same Chandni who in her last meeting with Dev was made the object of his

gratitude, parting with a request to emancipate himself from all the 'political filth'. Chandramukhi's ideal towards Devdas of service before self is given a realistic, active and tangible touch. Mishra establishes her as an extremely intelligent character who functions without any ulterior reward or acknowledgement in return.

With this film, both Paro and Chandramukhi seem to have emerged successful in their struggles over time. They launch outright attacks to the centre from the margins, flagging from their peripheral positions a 'power-play – through repeated retaliations and firm rejoinders, questioning the basis of the centre's existence. This is the closest one can get to the desired goal of deconstructing the centre itself, to enable free 'play', as opposed to confinement in relegated closed spaces that perpetuate marginalisation. Equality is desirable as an end; this adaptation seeks to give its women their due.

Conclusion:

No portrayal can be regarded as innocent with criticism in existence. Paro and Chandramukhi appear to be caught at the crossroads between the 'centre' and the 'margins.' Victims at the hands of the novelist and multiple filmmakers, changing depictions in their cinematic portrayals in tune with visions of the latter, are likely results of ensuing socio-temporal conflicts. Roughly, in the initial three adaptations, there appears to have been a vacillating stance adopted by the filmmakers, moving between the grand narrative of a patriarchal centre that posits women on the periphery of society, by relegating them to the private domain in a state of submission. This does raise pertinent issues. Viewed as a spectrum, the five films are inconsistent in the stance taken on Devdas' heroines. This is enough to put the viewer/critic in a dilemma, particularly since all claim affiliation to the novel. If the genealogy is viewed using the lens of postmodernism, then the two recent films appear to be on the brink of what Gerald Graff calls a 'postmodernist breakthrough', with the final adaptation making the cut. The projection of women is in every probability a proportionately 'acceptable' representation in tandem with the time frame of its creation. However, nothing justifies the violence caused through metanarratives like patriarchy and limitations that constitute social realities for these characters. But optimism is heralded, with the two women beginning to attempt refuting their forced marginalities. This is witnessed in the consistent movement to counter the centre, a partially conscious effort to break the shackles of time that bind them, resisting their confines within the context the novelist had imprisoned them in.

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