Filming a metaphor: Cinematic liberties, *Navarasa* influences and digressions in adaptation in Sanjay Leela Bhansali's *Devdas*
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'Devdas' is a landmark 20th century tragic-romantic Indian novella by Saratchandra Chattopadhyay. In the nine decades since its publication, the story has acquired a cult status in Indian cinema and society courtesy its many stated and inspired film adaptations. When auteur filmmaker Sanjay Leela Bhansali made his opulent 21st-century on screen adaptation, its self-destructive hero had far outgrown the novella to become a national metaphor of "doomed love". The present article identifies the achievement of the "Devdas metaphor" in Bhansali's 2002 film, Devdas, especially in the context of new plot additions and mythical allusions and analyses the role of its eight allegorical songs shot to grandiose mise-en-scène in the perpetuation of that intention. These departures from the original novella, while arguing for reviewing celluloid adaptations as works of art in their own merit, build a case for reviewing Bhansali's Devdas as a refreshing new cinematic tale whose song-driven narrative reaffirms Bollywood's signature story-telling traditions. This is evidenced in a rasa (emotion) based analysis of the film's ornately dramatised songs, which, while portraying elements of the Navarasas as recommended by India's ancient Sanskrit drama (Nātyasāstra) canons are able to unite their overall experience and impact in the single dominant rasa of karuna (or pathos), which is also the dominant sentiment of the novella.

From left: portraits of Parvati, Devdas and Chandramukhi from the promotion stills of the film, *Devdas* (2002)

'Devdas'[1] is a landmark twentieth century Indian novella written by the revolutionary Bengali novelist and raconteur of relatable, realist fiction, Saratchandra Chattopadhyay. In the nine decades since its publication in 1917, the novella has acquired a cult status in Indian society, courtesy its many stated and inspired adaptations in regional Indian language films, apart from 'three landmark makings'[2] in the national Hindi cinema by P.C. Barua (1935), Bimal Roy (1955) and Sanjay Leela Bhansali (2002). These films have sensitised generations of Indian viewers to 'Devdas' as a saga of unrequited love because it revolves around the

doomed interpersonal relationships between each of its three pivotal characters – Parvati, Devdas and Chandramukhi – whose love for each other is never mortally realised.

In Saratchandra's story, Devdas, the younger son of an aristocratic Bengali family, wants to marry his childhood sweetheart, Parvati. Though Parvati's parents agree to the marriage, Devdas' family opposes the alliance citing issues of caste and class, typical to the then Indian society. Parvati is ready to forsake her family and in an uncanny moment of daring undertakes a stealthy midnight visit to Devdas' house and urges him to run away with her. As Devdas dithers about making a decision on the future of their relationship, his family insults and forces Parvati to leave and let go of Devdas for good. She now has no other recourse and resigns herself to the fate planned by her parents. The gentle, introvert,

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[1] 'Devdas' the novella will be referred within single quotes; Devdas, the character will appear non-italicised and *Devdas*, the film will be italicised throughout the essay.

[2] Director Anurag Kashyap's latest on screen take on Saratchandra's novella, *Dev D* (2009), is more of an inspiration than an adaptation with a fairly different story and differently named characters, and is yet to command a classic positioning as the films of Barua, Roy and Bhansali.

and seemingly conforming Devdas watches in regret as Parvati is wed to an aging neighbouring widower *Zamindar* (landlord) with adult kids. The rest of the story then has a guilt ridden Devdas, unable to come to terms with the loss of his only love, drink himself to death, tended by a courtesan, Chandramukhi, who falls in love with him, awed by his detached engagement with the pleasures of a bordello. Devdas eventually dies at the doorstep of Parvati's mansion to fulfil an old promise and realise a life consuming death wish – a parting sighting of his love – as Parvati's husband and family members forcibly restrain her from meeting her dying lover. Thus ends Saratchandra's tragic ode to unrequited love.

Today, the character of Devdas commands an iconic status and identification in India, equivalent to the global status of Shakespeare's Romeo as a popular young tragic hero. Simultaneously, his persona has become an archetype for 'the genre of self-destructive urban hero in Indian cinema' (Chatterjee 2003: 62), while his 'masochistic, romantic relationships [frequently] echoed in films depicting lifelong, socially thwarted, passions, [have] spawned a school full of sad children throughout the history of Indian cinema' (Creekmur 2006). These Devdas inspired characterisations, while garnering sympathy, have lent him a national identification, whereby any intense, unreciprocated, suffering lover, in the Indian society, cutting across all social barriers of caste, creed, class, religion and region is unhesitatingly termed, Devdas.

Hence, when director Sanjay Leela Bhansali released his adaptation of the novella, *Devdas* in 2002, the character had far outgrown its status of a popular fictional creation, to become an iconic metaphor of doomed love in the minds of the Indian viewer. Shah Rukh Khan, the lead actor in Bhansali's film, observes: 'I played Devdas as a metaphor, not as a character' (Guha 2002: xi). For Bhansali, ''Devdas' was a simple story but had a soul, which was big [rather, it had grown to become big, with time]. And, I felt that to do justice to this, it had to be made with grandeur and opulence' (Bhansali 2002) – an auteuristic attribute that has become a signature of his cinematic works before and after *Devdas* (*Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam*, 1999; *Black*, 2005; *Guzaarish*, 2010). Upon release, *Devdas* became Indian film industry's biggest box-office grosser of 2002, and swept the top honours – Best Film, Director, Actor, Actress – at all the popular Hindi Film Award Ceremonies (Filmfare, Screen) of 2003. It also picked up five Indian National Film Awards including the honour for 'Best Popular Film Providing Wholesome Entertainment' for 2002. Further contributing to the film's iconicity, in its 10th year, the makers of *Devdas* have announced its re-release in 3D in 2012.

I intend to identify and appreciate the working of the 'Devdas metaphor' in Bhansali's cinematic adaptation – in its new plot additions and mythical allusions heightened by eight allegorical songs shot to a grandiose *mise-en-scène* – in line with critic Andre Bazin's argument that 'an adaptation is a refraction of one work in another creator's consciousness' (Bazin 2000: 24). The film's deviations from the novella will be analysed to establish *Devdas* as an important film adaptation that while preserving the tragic essence of the original, transforms it into a refreshingly new and popular cinematic tale that reasserts the value of a literary adaptation as a cinematic work of art in its own merit.

Deviating in adaptation to metaphoric imperatives

How does *Devdas* make a cinematic adaptation of a character as metaphor? A 'metaphor' is 'a figure of speech in which a word or phrase is applied to something to which it is not literally applicable' (Oxford Dictionaries 2012). Devdas is a character who suffers in love, but in who his suffering becomes equivalent to the idea of "doomed love", a metaphor is created using a human being to portray and embody the essence or perceived attributes of an emotion.

Next, by frequently alluding to the divine, mythical love story of Radha and Lord Krishna

in all its attendant 'devout imagery'[3] in the cinematic unfolding of the Parvati-Devdas love story – a tragedy where soul mates Devdas and Parvati never marry – Bhansali elevates the status of his mortal characters to that of their godly counterparts, by innovatively ascribing the metaphor of the eternal (mythic-divine) to just another human love story. Like Devdas and Parvati, Lord Krishna and Radha, in spite of being married to other people, remained in love with each other forever, and, only Radha and none of Krishna's many wives is worshipped as his eternal consort in Hindu temples.

The other cinematic introduction that consciously elevates the Parvati-Devdas romance to a superhuman, semi-mythic level is Parvati's ever-burning *diya* (lamp) – a symbolic manifestation of Devdas – which she lit in his memory after their first separation in childhood. It gets extinguished only with Devdas' death. This object manifestation of love never existed in the novella, or in the film's previous true-to-book adaptations, and would look unnatural in its realistic early twentieth century rural setting. But in context of the "Devdas metaphor in adaptation", is an admirable narrative construct contributing to a perceptual growth in the character's stature.

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[3] Apart from their universal, devotional connect as revered Hindu deities, the celestial romance of Radha and Lord Krishna has for centuries been an oft depicted inspiration subject in various Indian art forms like dance, theatre, paintings, literature and devotional songs.

The lamp, in its many appearances, reinforces the adaptation's eternity establishing sub-track, from within its *mise-en-scène*.

It is in Bhansali's imaginative, 'fidelity free, creative mistranslation' (Stam 2000: 62)[4], achieved through new conflicts of dramatic poignancy told to allegoric songs and acted to the *rasa*[5] effecting theatre techniques enabled by cinema's far greater resources for creative articulation than the novel that the film, *Devdas*, establishes and perpetuates the character of Devdas, as a metaphor of "doomed love". It is to be noted that "nine principal *rasas*"[6] or emotions known as the *Navarasas* –

shringara (erotic), *hasya* (comic), *karuna* (sorrow), *raudra* (anger), *veera* (heroism), *bhayanaka* (terror), *bibhatsa* (disgust), *adbhuta* (marvelous) and *shanta* (calm or peace) – are prescribed by the ancient Indian textbook of drama, the *Nātyasāstra*[7] that audiences experience or should be ideally made to experience while watching a performance or play. *Rasa* is the final or lasting state of emotion born from the union of the play with the performance of the actors, as realised by the audience.

Visually, the film's ostentatious look (courtesy of its opulent setting) functions as an established cinematic tool derived from the epic genre to lend a larger-than-life feel. Bhansali's intensely signatorial and extravagant adaptation however, did evoke criticism from fans of true-to-book film adaptations. But such criticism can be dismissed as 'lop-sided film education, [since] literal translations are impossible where a change of medium is involved' (Ray 1976:

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[4] 'As a rich, sensorially composite language, the cinema becomes a receptacle open to all kinds of literary and pictorial symbolism, to all types of collective representation, to all ideologies, to all aesthetics, and to the infinite play of influences within cinema, within the other arts, and within culture generally… Art renews itself through creative mistranslation' (Stam 2000: 61-62).

[5] Though *rasa* has many literal meanings like taste, extract, juice, essence and ultimately bliss, according to ancient Indian drama (*Nātyasāstra*) canons it is used to signify the 'essence of emotion' or the final emotional state of 'relish/satisfaction/ reaction/ aesthetic experience' achieved by a spectator while watching and experiencing a performing art.

[6] These nine *rasas* or *navarasas* were argued to be in direct correlation to the nine principal feelings or permanent human emotions – *rati* (the sexual emotion/love), *hasa* (laughter/amusement), *utsaha* (energy/ heroism), *vismaya* (astonishment), *shoka* (sadness/ sorrow), *krodha* (anger), *bhaya* (fear), *jugupsa* (disgust) and *sama* (serenity) respectively – under which ancient Indian psychology grouped all emotional human activity. Also these happen to be the only emotional moods, whose permanent trigger impulses are directly associated with the four *Purusarthas* or prescribed aims and ends of life described in the *Dharmaśāstras* (an encyclopedic articulation of India's Brahmanical traditions on religion, law, ethics, etc.) – *dharma* (duty), *artha* (money), *kama* (fulfilment of desires) and *moksha* (salvation). Social psychologist William McDoughall endorses their relevance in terms of modern psychology

stating: 'These impulses are the mental forces that maintain and shape all the life of individuals and societies, and in them we are confronted with the central mystery of life, mind and will' (McDoughall 1948: 38). Further according to Rasa Theory proponents these emotions also 'were the only ones fit for exposition' (Pandey 1959: 203) in a dramatic setup.

[7] Also known as the fifth Veda and written between 400 BC and 200 AD, *Nātyasāstra*, is a Sanskrit text on dramatic arts. It is considered to be the foundation for Sanskrit drama and the most comprehensive 'how-to' manual of dance, acting, music and theatre that's 'part theatrical manual, part philosophy of aesthetics, part mythological history, part theology' (Schwartz 2004: 12).

13)[8], because while 'the novel has a single material of expression, the written word; the film has at least five tracks: moving photographic image, phonetic sound, music, noises, and written materials' (Stam 2000: 59). Asserting the scope for an imaginative literary adaptation as directorial 'style' – the possibility for a filmmaker to affirm his or her authorship over his or her creation – Bazin argues, 'It is not impossible for the artistic soul to manifest itself through another incarnation'. Bhansali's "incarnation," by 'opting for a verisimilitude in [the novella's] emotions, not its settings' (Raheja and Kothari 2004: 138), retains its soul, albeit, within a larger body (epic) format. Bhansali argues:

> We have lavishly mounted the film, without offending the spirit of Devdas. We have given the characters a lot of space to compliment their largeness. Their surroundings are as beautiful as them. They have strong minds but tender hearts (Bhansali 2002).

The focus on Devdas as a metaphor, also provides Bhansali the scope to indulge his auteuristic sensibilities for a grandiose *mise-en-scène* – a big and bold telling, whose conflicts are identifiable (believable) enough, to involve his audience – by retaining the essence of its

characters, while refashioning the novel's period-specific narrative twists to relatable, contemporary familial conflicts. For instance, though the book has Parvati getting married at the age of 13, Bhansali's characters are young adults. It helps lend a sense of authenticity to their mature emotions and actions, in sync with its viewers' current social environment. He reduces nearly a quarter of the novel space revolving around Parvati and Devdas as kids, to a single sequence shot of little Parvati pining for Devdas, post his London departure. Incidentally, Devdas in the novel goes to Kolkata for higher studies, from where he returns every vacation to meet Parvati. In the film, his London send off results in 10 years of total separation from Parvati, which along with the deviations discussed below, serve the film's metaphoric showcase in a larger-than-life package – grand settings, great emotional churns and godly character references.

The metaphoric imperative further enables Bhansali to avoid the novel's frequent meanderings into the lives of other characters in his film's near ignore of the nitty-gritty of Parvati's married life, which dominate the novella's second half, or its many events involving Devdas' other family members. These incidents, while adding depth and context to a time-free consumption medium like literary fiction, could seem a digressive irritant for a time-bound consumption medium like cinema. The film instead expands on the

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[8] 'A filmmaker who takes up a classic, sticks to the letter, but wholly misses the spirit arouses little indignation… is the result of lop-sided film education and lack of connoisseurship' (Ray, 1976: 13).

interpersonal dynamics of its central characters – Devdas, Parvati and Chandramukhi – through creation of new situations of heightened melodramatic engagement within the trio that help enhance their greatness. New thrust points like Devdas' symbolic giving away of Parvati at her grand wedding (he was never there in the novella's almost mundane marriage event of Parvati) in its aching imagery, invests their sacrifices with a larger-than-life aura. Also, the 'Paro-Chandramukhi meeting sequence'[9] (which happens as a one line thought in the many fantasies of a dying Devdas in the original) and their subsequent bonding and singing of a joyous ode to the undying memory of Devdas, in spite of his physical absence, makes a symbolic merger of the Devdas character with the Devdas metaphor [within his film lifetime] celebrated to glorious abandon by his two lovers in a spectacular, musical extravaganza. The situation, 'a creative masterstroke insert with tremendous cinematic appeal,'[10] does not appear as an irksome

departure from the novel, by being in sync with the vision of Bhansali's new version. The film, by keeping to the novella's core text of love and loss, 'that has been with readers and audiences over decades, as a metaphor, if not as a written text [irrespective of its deviations] makes it easy for audiences to recognise the film's text as that of the original 'Devdas,' as long as the formulations of the film's text are acceptable on their own term' (Guha 2002: xv).

What favours Bhansali's cinematic liberties is Saratchandra's 'open-text'[11] narrative, which though character driven, yet by not describing their psychological moorings or analysing their actions, unlike most psychological or social novels, 'enables the reader to get into the story themselves, [and] to reconstruct it in their own imagination' (Guha 2002: vii). For a filmmaker, not obsessed about putting a book to screen faithfully, the above-mentioned attributes can be extended to him/her too, 'getting into' a Saratchandra story to reconstruct it as per their imagination – be it Bimal Roy's restrained *Devdas* (1955) in sync with his 'stylistically spare' (Raheja and Kothari 2004: 138) realistic sensibilities or Sanjay Leela Bhansali's lavish film, made 47

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[9] 'This sequence is one of the film's most powerful, as the confrontation between the two women moves from awkwardness to spite to ultimately friendship. Parvati is doubtful of Chandramukhi's honesty at first, and uses the usual clichés to insult a prostitute. Yet, Chandramukhi, the film's most dignified character is never agitated or upset. When Parvati demands that she hand over Devdas to her, she takes her to her room, where there's a small shrine [of Lord Krishna]. "Devdas, isn't here physically, but he is everywhere in spirit," she says. Parvati realises Chandramukhi's love for Devdas, and seems to "let go" of him' (Ahamed 2002).

[10] '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' (Creekmur 2006).

[11] 'Saratchandra's narratives are character-driven, but the characters are not described; they are allowed to develop and reveal themselves in the course of the story. Descriptions and analyses, kept to a minimum… Saratchandra fashioned 'Devdas' a bit like an empty wine glass – an open text – as the novel lives on in your mind, it can hold any love story that you pour into it, it is able to give shape to any imaginative turn of the story you may choose to invent' (Guha 2002: xii).

years later in his "personal"[12] and grandiose vision. According to the novel's English translator, Sreejata Guha:

> The specific story of Devdas, Parvati and Chandramukhi, the way it appeared in the 1917 novel is only one of the possible stories. Other stories can constantly be added on to the core motif of love, loss, desolation and destruction that Devdas belongs to, and they strengthen the metaphor and produce an increasingly palimpsestic text, rich with individual recreations and reinterpretations. The Devdas metaphor is ultimately detachable from the text of Devdas, and this is what lays it open to cultural transitions, adaptations, and new versions. In this adaptability lies the principal strength and universal popularity of the novel (Guha 2002: xii).

Thus while the cinematic nature of Saratchandra's novels is established, here is a brief look at the influence of their respective social contexts on the nature of the adaptation of Bhansali's *Devdas*, vis-a-vis its two landmark Hindi predecessors. While PC Barua's *Devdas* (1935) was filmed in line with early cinema notions of literary adaptations to be true to the book (as in case of early Western cinema), Bimal Roy's objective *Devdas* (1955) was in sync with the post independence realism in vogue in the Indian cinema of the 1950s. Bhansali's version came at a time, when a mood of "resurgent India"[13] was sweeping through the nation with renewed focus and pride on everything traditionally and typically Indian – its customs, way of life, religious philosophies, heritage, music, festivals, literature, folk lore, not discounting its melodramatic theatrical and film sensibilities – all of which find "more than an indulgent echo in every frame of Bhansali's *Devdas* in general"[14], and in its eight songs in particular, choreographed to traditional Indian folk and classical dance styles.

Songs of love, longing and loss constructing a metaphor of eternal tragedy

The "songs"[15] in *Devdas*, (which occupy a third of the film's viewing time), in association with

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[12] 'Devdas did all the wrong things, but was so pure and misunderstood that I felt like reaching out to him. I also saw a mirror of my father in Devdas. He used to react to situations exactly like Devdas did. Then is the fact, that there is a Devdas on every street. I honestly feel that this character exists in every male, especially every Indian male' (Bhansali 2002).

[13] Politically buoyed by the 'India Shining' campaign of the then BJP led Indian national government (1999-2004) echoed on ground by a rapidly growing economy boosted by steady national growth.

[14] 'The new version of *Devdas* is both timely and a necessity. In a land that is increasingly facing an identity crisis, the retelling of a classic Indian tale could have a ripple effect that could bring about new tidings in the way films are made in India, and more importantly, the stories that are told. As a work of art, its credentials and execution are unparalleled in the current world of Hindi cinema – having managed to cut through the glossy exteriors that mask every Hindi movie these days. In the end, *Devdas* is more of a cinematic tribute to the classics of the 1960s than anything else' (Ahamed 2002).

[15] 'The format of Hindi songs can be historically traced to dramatic forms that predated the cinema. [Though in

the film's heavily orchestrated background score (throughout) in their use of Indian folk and classical styles, instruments and occasional Western chorus and orchestration, create a mood and effect that, while being relevant to its melodramatic narrative format, contribute to its eternal, epic feel in service of the Devdas metaphor. My analysis of the film's songs, while legitimising their occurrence as a narrative necessity in the film's format, will in their dramatisation (presentation and choreography) justify their cinematic perspective, and highlight their adherence to "oral"[16] Indian drama traditions of the *Nātyasāstra*. This will help in viewing them as "integral music scenes"[17] (contrary to musico-logical studies viewing Hindi film songs as separate entities from their parent films), in accordance with Indian storytelling traditions, where music has an expressive equivalence to

speech, and hence 'the artificial break which is felt in the West when an actor breaks into a song is less apparent to the Indian viewer' (Beeman 1981: 83)[18].

Bhansali more than adequately emphasises the "theatrical framework of his take,"[19] when Parvati's mother, Sumitra, tells Devdas' mother, Kausalya, before the film's interval: 'There are two acts in a melodrama. In Act one, me and my daughter danced (the word dance here is a metaphor to the churn in their lives brought forth by the story's initial events); Now, in Act two, you and your son will dance,' (*Devdas* 2002) hinting at Devdas' eventual hurtling into emotional turmoil and doom.

While the film's two-act format is in consonance with the "ten types of drama"[20] ranging from one to 10 acts described in the *Nātyasāstra*, its stating of a melodramatic approach to its interpretation highlights the film's dependence on and use of music and dance in narration.

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the immediate context of its evolution], the Hindi cinema inherited its musical format from the urban theatrical traditions of the 19th century, such as the Parsi theatre, Marathi theatre and the Bengali *jatra* [folk theatre], its tradition of music and song as part of dramatic expression goes as far as two thousand years to the Sanskrit theatre [*Nātyasāstra*]… It could be argued that with this background, it would be surprising if Hindi films did not contain songs' (Morcom, 2007: 3).

[16] 'Songs are integral and realistic elements of the Indian oral culture. The presence of songs in the Hindi film narrative can be ascribed to the oral traditions of most Indian drama' (Morcom, 2007: 4).

[17] 'Music in Hindi song and dance sequences provide a critical "bridge" between the narrative function of a song and dance sequence and specific dance sequences. There are very few dance numbers in Hindi films that are performed to music alone. The majority of screen dances visualise songs with lyrics and combine choreography with melody, rhythm and lyrics combined to be performed by the hero or heroine in the film' (See Morcom 2007).

[18] (Morcom quotes Beeman 2007: 4).

[19] Bhansali's directorial vision abounds in all the elements of Indian theatre adopted by popular films like 'extensive use of frontal address (soliloquy), recurring characters based on Hindu mythology, prominence of gesture and exaggeration of facial expression and most significantly the 'idea of drama' as inseparably linked with song, dance and music' (Barnouw and Krishnaswamy 1980: 71).

[20] Rangacharya 2010.

The "melodrama"[21] tag also lends a sense of realism (believability), by legitimising the song situations as an integral element, since 'music is central to the idea of melodrama, [which] refers to a drama accompanied by music [literally], *melo* coming from the Greek word *melos* for music' (Morcom 2007: 14).

Bhansali is one of the rare contemporary Indian cinema directors to be trained in a form of classical Indian dance, Odissi, and possesses a keen sense for "rhythmic editing"[22]. He blends classical and light classical Indian music and dance traditions in *Devdas* in association with music director Ismail Darbar[23] to achieve *bhavas* (imitations of emotions performed by the actors through their acting) evoking the *Navarasas* to heighten the impact of his music scenes. Not only does the film's narrative move seamlessly into and within each of its song sequences, each of them is composed as a complete scene within itself, in their establishment of character feelings at a moment, their contribution to dramatic build-up through enacted "lyrical dialogues"[24] and culmination into a climactic sequence (set to rising music tempo) of revelation, that prepare the viewer for the next major event, churn or turn in the story.

Further, in sync with the *Nātyasāstra* canon that though a play should aim at evoking the nine principal *rasa* reactions, it should be dominated by one; the songs of *Devdas* too, contrary to the visual perception of being in '*shringara* (erotic love) *rasa*' in its frequent female dances celebrating love, are actually dominated by the '*karuna* (pathos) *rasa*,' in sync with the novella's overall theme of love, longing and loss. These will be established next in a brief song specific analysis of each of *Devdas*' eight allegorical songs.

The film's first song *Silsila yeh chahat ka* (The story of my longing), while setting the tone for the rest of its musical score – raga-based in their melodic movement with roots in classical, light classical, folk and theatre music – makes the narrative's first effort at consciously establishing and elevating the Parvati-Devdas romance to a superhuman, semi-mythic level. The theme of the song is that Paro has kept a *diya* (lamp), symbolising Devdas, burning through the years of their childhood separation, both figuratively and

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[21] 'The overload of emotion and moral import in melodrama means that normal speech is inadequate as a means of expression. There is the feeling that there is always more to tell than can be said and hence a reliance on non-verbal forms of communication, read Hindi film songs, which though unrealistic in Hollywood's classical realism are a means of giving explicit voice to real emotions that characters' words and expressions only hint at' (Morcom, 2007: 14).

[22] 'Editing means the use of rhythm, the sound, the relationship with emotions that equally flow through a certain raga' (Bhansali to Kabir 2001: 195-196).

[23] Ismail Darbar is a Mumbai-based music-director known for composing Indian classical and raga-based songs in contemporary Hindi films.

[24] 'The interpretation of the emotions expressed through lyrics is "not always literal," but can also be metaphorical or subtle rather than explicit' (Morcom quotes Coorlawala, 2007: 145).

technically. The notion is reinforced in its continual burning in spite of Parvati's dancing through wind and rain and while running around her house. So a love that survives powerful natural impediments will survive human oppositions (if not on a physical, but a spiritual level) as an eternal love story. Though dramatised in the *shringara rasa* evoked in the joyous anticipation of a girl waiting for her lover, the lyrics highlight the pain of parting and pining thus evoking a feeling of pity. The next song – *Bairi piya* (My lover is heartless) is a playful duet – sung by a non-diegetic voice, making a third person commentary on the romantic equations between Parvati and Devdas in the *Hasya* (comic teasing in love) *rasa*. Their mutual comfort and ownership over each other in the song's situations, moments into their first meeting after a decade, hints at the eternal nature of their love, that has remained unaffected by time or separation. A fleeting image of Parvati and Devdas on a creeper swing alluding to the traditional image of Radha-Krishna in the mythical forest of Vrindavan is made. Devdas tries to put a family bangle meant for his future bride in Parvati's hands in the song, which highlights an unspoken given in their love story – they behave as husband-wife, even without marriage – as soul mates who don't need social sanction to legitimise their love. Devdas' mother, who is seen watching the bangle

exchange sequence with a frown, sets the context for the plot's next dramatic turn, parental opposition to their love.

The third song has Parvati's mother Sumitra (who hails from a family of theatre dancers) perform on behest of Devdas' mother, Kausalya, at the *godh-bharai* (child bearing) ceremony of the latter's daughter-in-law. Sumitra sings a traditional Indian song, dancing to devotional abandon celebrating the love of Radha and Krishna on the banks of river Yamuna, as the sequence cuts to Parvati and Devdas re-enacting the playful tussle between Radha-Krishna depicted in the lyrics of Sumitra's song. For the first time, direct comparison is made between the celestial couple and Saratchandra's earthly characters, as Sumitra sings '*Thumak thumak kar nach rahi thi meri Radha rani, jane kahan se raas rachane aaya chaila Girdhari*' (In gay abandon my little goddess Radha, [Parvati], was dancing, when incognito came young Girdhari[25], [Devdas], to enact the dance of love). The Radha-Krishna metaphor is lyrically and visually juxtaposed on Parvati and Devdas as Parvati balances pots on her head (like Radha), while Devdas attempts a playful seduction. Though the song is a classic celebration of the '*rati bhava*' (romance act) aimed at evoking the *shringara rasa*, but in

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[25] One of the 1000 names of Lord Krishna described in the '*Vishnu Sahasranama*' text of Hindu mythology.

context of the film's narrative it only evokes pity for the dancing Sumitra, who unlike the viewers doesn't know that the dance was set up for her humiliation.

Kahe chede mohe (Why trouble me?), which follows next, happens in courtesan Chandramukhi's performance hall, as she entertains Devdas and her other guests, by singing and enacting a song situation from the ancient Indian epic, Mahabharata, describing the playful harassment of Radha by Krishna performed to the classical Indian dance of Kathak. Though Chandramukhi's performance is again in the *shringara rasa* (love as seduction), Devdas' disgusted viewing of her act, laces the song's *shringara* element with the *Bibhatsa rasa* (disgust), thus evoking a feeling of pity for her character.

The next song, a haunting ballad, *Hamesha tumko chaaha* (I have always desired you), is a poignant, narrative summary of the un-stated emotions of heartbreak, undergone by Devdas and Parvati while going through the rituals of her marriage to an older man. The lyrics of the song convey that though to the mortal world the two lovers may never be husband-wife; their love is eternal, thus reiterating the mythic nature of their love. The idea is symbolically conveyed in the incident leading into the song, when Devdas makes a permanent cut mark on Parvati's forehead next to the forehead parting, where a married Hindu woman puts the vermilion mark to signify her marital status.

Devdas returns to Chandramukhi's house in the film's sixth song *Maar daala* (Killed me!), which indicates an acceptance of sorts by him of the latter, thus triggering a growth in the other angle of the story's love triangle. The joy-de-vivre in Chandramukhi's performance however, is short lived, as it ends to heavily orchestrated melancholic strums of a poignant *bidai* (bride leaving) sequence that dawns upon Devdas the consequential enormity of Parvati's marriage. The realisation that she is now forever beyond his physical reach makes him take to alcohol with a vengeance leading to his eventual death. Thus the words of the song *Maar daala*, assume a metaphorical significance in Devdas' taking to the cause of his death, alcohol. For Chandramukhi, her falling in love with one man (as conveyed through the song) contrary to her profession's need of performing love to many, hints the beginning of her professional death. Her high on *shringara rasa* (love in celebration) performance actually evokes emotions of four other *rasas* – love, wonder, pity and heroism – in the sheer range of expressions, actress Madhuri Dixit (enacting the part of Chandramukhi) lends to her essaying of the oft repeating word "*Maar daala*" in the song. For instance, Chandramukhi's expression (or *bhava*) in her first utterance of "*Maar daala*" (You killed me with your love…) in the concluding stanza of the song is a radiant celebratory reaction over the return of Devdas

in her life, evoking emotions of the *shringara* (erotic) *rasa*. Her second utterance of "*Maar daala*," however is to evoke the *Adbhuta* (wonder) *rasa* as if stating 'Wow, You could kill me!!! You could make me, a woman who plays with the hearts of many men, pine for the love of one man!' Her third utterance of "*Maar Daala*" (You have conquered me) is more of an acceptance of and resignation to the fact that henceforth hers too will be the lot, like other normal women, to pine for one man evoking the *Karuna rasa*, while her fourth and final utterance is in deference to making Devdas realise his unintended conquest evoking, the *Veera* (heroic) *rasa* (Celebrate oh victor, now I am all yours!). The song however ends evoking pity for the wasting away of the lives of the scene's two main protagonists.

Though the film's next song *Dola-re-dola* (The throb) has Parvati and Chandramukhi dance in riotous abandon to Durga Puja festivities, its context is one of irony and pity. A pall of gloom (courtesy Devdas' symbolic performance of his death rites prior to the beginning of the song) looms large rendering futile Parvati's acceptance and symbolic handing over of her rights on Devdas to Chandramukhi conveyed in its lyrics that function as poetic dialogue.

The last and the only song in the film that has Devdas dance in drunken stupor, *Chalak chalak* (an ode to alcohol) as a final toast between friends before his death, is significant in its establishing the film's other metaphorical connect. The song's comparison of Chandramukhi to Meerabai – *Nache Meera jogan banke, O mere Ghanashyam* (Meera dances like an ascetic consumed by your love, O Krishna!) for the first time identifies, acknowledges and elevates Chandramukhi's love for Devdas to the level of the until now constantly eulogised Parvati-Devdas romance, by equating it to the unrequited, self-destructive love of the 16th century Rajput queen Meerabai (who loved Krishna to death). Its situationally motivated lyrics that state the Krishna-Meera allusion, in association with the Radha-Krishna imagery introduced by the film's other songs thus complete the other half of the film's eternal love triangle (Radha-Krishna-Meera) theme.

Thus the songs in *Devdas* function as music scenes set to intentionally composed songs, performed within the film's story, location, action and timing, to ably 'combine cinematic, narrative, lyrical, musical, visual and wider cultural codes to create a textual meaning in the reel world' (Morcom 2007: 11). Another attribute of its songs that highlight their cinematic motivation are the long interludes that facilitate narrative progress.

Moreover, the plot of *Devdas* allows for diegetically performed songs and dances, by either having characters as performers, or by taking place at performance venues with an excuse to dance, like festive occasions. And, to

notionally justify the finesse in their performances (except *Chalak chalak*, which in its impromptu nature justifies its performance by the film's non-dancer characters, including Devdas), are always performed by characters with an established dancing background.

Courtesan Chandramukhi, a dancer by profession gets to perform the film's classical dances, while Parvati and her mother Sumitra perform the theatrical, semi-classical dances, given their theatre lineage. Bhansali seems to have deliberately introduced this plot deviation in their ancestry to legitimize, and render a sense of authenticity to their dance songs. Also, the movement choices in the dances in *Devdas* are not arbitrary. They are grounded in specific perceptions of dance content, in their prescribed function at evoking the *Navarasas*. By hiring Pandit Birju Maharaj (a celebrated Indian cultural icon and exponent of Kathak dance) to choreograph Chandramukhi's dances in the classical tradition, Bhansali uplifts her social status in the narrative by uplifting the quality of her art. The calumny in the nature of her art and its performed space is mitigated in the selection of the music and dance used for its depiction – an Indian classical dance – that enjoys the distinction of a refined, devotional and religious art form.

Finally, the film's background music of symphony orchestra, string ensembles and western choruses while accentuating and "creating a feeling of larger than life

characterisation, grandeur and epic emotions"[26] in its musical eclecticism lends *Devdas* a pan-Indian appeal beyond the novel's state specific (Bengal) roots. 'The broader the musical sources a composer used the less regional and more national was his musical appeal' (Arnold 1991: 200).

Conclusion

Sanjay Leela Bhansali's imaginative re-telling of Saratchandra's novella thus benefits from the director's auteur signature to create a cinematic adaptation that, while celebrating the specific attributes of its new medium renews the focus on its inspiration – literature. It makes an admirable and seamless narrative integration of story telling elements of various art forms that preceded cinema – theatre, dance, music and literature – (in their traditional Indian sensibilities, narrative potential and epic format lending attributes) in service of the film's cinematic goal of filming a metaphor, to make an eternal love story out of a popular romantic novella. In the process, *Devdas* reaffirms Bazin's observation that 'cinema [in adaptation] runs a relay race with drama and the novel, and does not [necessarily]

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[26] 'The large symphony orchestra, large string ensembles, and western choruses like in Hollywood films seem to be used to create a feeling of largeness, grandeur, uplift and epic feeling' (Morcom, 2007: 144).

eliminate them, but rather reinforces them' (Bazin 2000: 25-26).

Incidentally, the film's publicity through framed portraits (in profile and close-ups) of its characters in all its print promotions can be explored as using another art form – painting – to perpetuate the film's eternal theme. It can be read as a subtle, notional hint to the film's potential viewers, in the very premise of commissioning a portrait – immortalisation of its subject. Also, the film's cinematic framing and events, composed and located almost always within picturesque, multi-hued set pieces in all their manually designed (painted) finery is an idea worth exploring and extending into the film's use of painting in the service of its eternity imperative.

I have refrained from analysing every scene of *Devdas* to avoid fidelity obsessed, similarity identifying appreciation exercises that cinema adaptations of novels often indulge in. Instead, by focusing on the film's universally acknowledged musical highlights – its allegoric songs – and most debated new plot additions, my intention is to lend to the review of film adaptations a valuable case for studying how interpreting classic literature through a modern narrative medium like cinema (integrating other older arts) while being in sync with the sensibilities of a new generation of viewers and their social context, can still keep intact the core text or the 'soul' of its inspiration

Comments

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Piyush Roy's article on Sanjay Leela Bhansali's film adaptation of Saratchandra Chattopadhyay's novella, *Devdas* in utilising the *nava rasa* theory from the Sanskrit *Natyasashtra,* illustrates the continuity that the modern Indian visual art form of filmmaking has retained with an artistic tradition that remains valid as the corner stone for the exploration of interpersonal relations and character portrayal. The critique of Devdas as a metaphor for the lovelorn, languishing lover is persuasively defended. The Radha-Krishna parallels in Bhansali's adaptation ground the film in the epic tradition of India, which resonates with Roy's analyses of the songs and accompanying dances as epical evocations of the heavenly l*ila* and reaffirms Bhansali's film as part of the folk imagination of a nation. The consideration of PC Barua and Bimal Roy's earlier adaptations of the novella, establishes the difference in Bhansali's approach as he universalises an Indian iconic figure signifying doomed love through additions and alterations.

The open text narrative and the song and dance extravaganza are well analysed in a study of rasas like *karuna* and *shringara*, and Roy has succeeded in reinforcing Bazin's

critique that films are contiguous to the novel and drama and not as alternative art forms, as exemplified in Bhansali's *Devdas*. This substantiates the New Historicist theory of a 'text' being embedded and implicated in its context, as one informs/influences the other, which Roy could corroborate.

I would like to make two observations in this context. While Birju Maharaj's choreography gives Chandramukhi's performance classical validity, the classical adeptness is also an affirmation of the professional skills of meticulously trained singers and dancers like her in her time, whose professional skills (not just talents) were overlooked by society in these economically independent women (albeit needing rich patrons).

My second observation is that while Devdas can be compared to Romeo, it is best to see that while Romeo and Juliet were star-crossed lovers, Devdas was not ruled by an unavoidable fate. Saratchandra's criticism of a man who lacks volition to realise his love/dream under social pressure, shifts the focus of unfolding events from being pre-destined to a character-driven narrative, which is something Bhansali seems to be aware of. This is modern stuff, where fate and not character is destiny, in what is, a critique of a patriarchal society where 'marriageship ' was the only position open to women, providing

their door to financial stability and social approval.

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