

Devdas into Dev D

Year : (2009)

Director : Anurag Kashyap

Cast : Abhay Deol, Mahie Gill, Kalki Koechlin

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A look at the film posters of *Dev D*, which released in 2009, makes it hard to believe that this is an adaptation of the novel *Devdas*. The comic shortening of the title parodies the short attention span of the generation of audience for whom it has been made. A pair of giant lips painted red (Kalki Koechlin's) seem to eclipse the face of the hero (played by Abhay Deol), drawing attention to the oral fixation and addiction issues of the protagonist. As a black comedy, the film does not even seem to share the genre of its predecessors: the novel and the films based on it.

Corey K. Creekmur notes that the very fact that made the character of Devdas attractive to generations of Bangla readers: his self-pity and early death, is precisely what would make the classical story less accessible to a contemporary film audience. In the context of reviewing Sanjay Leela Bhansali's production of *Devdas*, Creekmur comments that "another version will be necessary to revitalize the tale for contemporary audiences."

It is my contention that *Dev D* manages to do precisely that. It revitalizes a tale of love and pain by re-writing and re-casting it, keeping in mind the sensibilities of the contemporary urban viewer. Though the theme of addiction and self-destruction is synonymous with the name of Devdas, it is the themes of love and the figure of the prostitute, as it emerges in the novel and the film, that are central to *DevD*.

There are however, multiple ways of adapting a literary work in films. Linda Hutcheon has suggested three theories or ways of adapting: “one as a transposition of a particular work...a change of medium (literature to film), leading to a change of context; second, as a creative and interpretative act of appropriation; and third, an extended inter-textual engagement with an adaptive work ”The third method is one that evokes other works that “resonate through repetition with variation”(Hutcheon,8).This third method seems most cumulative and least dependent on the original work.

Privileging the independence of the adaptation are also critics like Robert Stam, who emphasizes the undesirability of literary fidelity:

The shift in adaptation, from a single-tract, uniquely verbal medium like the film, which can play not only with words but also with music, sound effects, and moving images, explains the unlikelihood, and I would suggest even the undesirability of literary fidelity.

It is in this category I would place Anurag Kashyap’s *Dev D*, whose very title marks it as a different kind of adaptation from the other *Devdas* films. Advances in technology, with each succeeding film through the years, make possible accessing a visual culture that encompasses a broad range of images. In interpreting an adaptation, as an interpretation of a novel, one has to grapple with the problem of finding a new theoretical framework to explore new technologies of mass production as markers of cultural identities. What each act of adaptation does is to creatively interpret the literary work and transform it in various ways by playing with the new possibilities that the medium of film constantly brings to the act. In the process, the text itself is revived rather than killed, and reinterpreted in new ways. The film too remains an act of original creation irrespective of what it excludes from or retains from its source.

Dev D breaks new ground in the selective use of the novel by screenplay writers Anurag Kashyap and Vikramaditya Motwane. The adaptation is generically different from the source novel. *Dev D* is more the comedy than the tragedy of *Devdas* and *Dev* acts like a clown or

villain at times. He has no one to blame for his arbitrary behaviour and aimless existence. It is a serious film but fulfils the criteria of the genre of comedy, including a happy ending.

The narrative retains the theme of the protagonist's journey from the village to the city. But surprise offered by the film is the change in location and setting. The rural scenes are set in contemporary Punjab, satirizing the way new money is changing the lifestyles of the youth, from families that had traditionally subsisted on agriculture, dairy farming and village industry. The urban scenes are set in very recognizable seedy by lanes of Paharganj and Daryaganj, near New Delhi Railway Station.

Paro and Dev do not fall out because of a lack of communication. Their love is shaped by technology as they stay in touch with each other across nations (England and India, in London and Punjab), through instant messaging, web –cam and SMS. Paro is refreshingly spontaneous in expressing her love and desire for Dev and acting upon Dev's plea, she even arranges for them to be alone in a field. This parallels Parvati's entering Devdas's room at night in the novel: a crossing of thresholds in more than one sense. In the film, the scene is shot to a breathless pace as she cycles and runs energetically, thus signifying her vitality. Dev breaks up with Paro because of jealousy, when an admirer of Paro instigates him. But as Paro points out to him, this happens after he has in a way cheated on her. He had run away to flirt with Bhuvan's sister Rasika in a poultry farm. The film exposes the double standards of Dev and, perhaps, those of confused young men in the contemporary milieu who expect a woman to be sexually responsive and forthcoming, but are insecure about her past.

The scene where Paro vents her frustration at being rejected by Dev, is shot showing her furiously working a hand pump. Not only does the image have sexual undercurrents, this Paro is overt in her expression of anger and desire, that is only hinted at in the novel. Nor is she weepy on her wedding day; instead she dances in glee as her amused husband looks on. The power games between Paro and Dev are explicit in this film, though it must be noted that, for

all her coyness and touching of Devdas's feet, Saratchandra's Paro is also proud and capable of anger as well as mind games. Sarat Chandra praises her for using her skill in winning over Yashoda, her step-daughter, because though younger than Yashoda, "Parvati was years ahead of her in word games" .

In contrast, in the film, Dev is seen drinking on Paro's wedding day to the accompaniment of the song, 'Emosional Atyachaar'(sic), which means emotional torture; but it adds comic relief to the scene. The song itself derives from a song from Kamal Swaroop's experimental film *Om Durbadar*, which draws upon the conventions of the drama of the Absurd, is existential in theme and surreal in style. *Om Darbadar* won the Filmfare's Critics Choice award in 1989, even as it went largely unnoticed. Swaroop is a friend of Kashyap and a powerful influence on his work as can also be seen in Kashyap's film *No Smoking*. What the song underlies in *Dev D* is Dev's confusion and complete dis-association from his own feelings. It is an ironic expression of self-pity.

The second of the three-part narrative is introduced as Chanda's story, which draws upon the MMS school scandal that rocked Delhi a few years ago. The school girl Chanda has to leave the country, just as reported in the news, and her family disowns her, even though her own father had viewed the clip. She points out that the only reason she was recognized by people everywhere was because, "the whole country got off on it". Kashyap exposes the hypocrisy of a society which feeds on the all- pervasive voyeurism and pornography but refuses to accept or forgive a teenager who made a mistake. Though Chanda willingly adopts her profession as a sex-worker, without being coerced by the (Chunni- substitute) pimp , society is critiqued for leaving her no other options .She is represented as an intelligent, multi-lingual and precocious youngster, who while she pursues college in day time, works at night as an escort proficient in phone sex and kinky role-playing without any guilt, for she has learnt to accept herself as she is. The comic representation in these scenes evokes laughter at her client's preferences, rather

than any denunciation or sentimentalizing of her profession. Like the Chandramukhi of the novel, she falls inexplicably for the charms of the unkempt, unlikely and aggressive hero. She also acts as his counsellor, similar in a way to Chandramukhi. Dev, just like the character Devdas, is not interested in doing anything much with her except talking down to her. She helps him work on his issues relating to commitment, his obsession with and possessiveness about Paro. She teaches him to move on, just as Paro urges Devdas to do so. All the while, Chanda is dressed ridiculously as a fantasy figure of a mock Florence Nightingale, perhaps; this is a comic take on the maternal and nurturing role played by Saratchandra's Chandramukhi, and also, by the self-sacrificing *tawaif* in Hindi films through the years. Chanda tells Dev that he is a slut, not she.

In his representation of the prostitute, Kashyap also seems to be influenced by Harold Pinter, a playwright, whom he admires. Pinter is famous for his 'comedy of menace', his use of pauses, sparse, elliptical, antagonistic dialogues, that reflect failures of interpersonal communication. In Pinter's play *The Homecoming*, a character called Ruth is an American professor's wife who turns to prostitution in order to support his dysfunctional family. Pinter says of Ruth that she is not a harlot in her own mind but takes on a role to subvert the patriarchal family structure. It is a deliberate assumption of a role to which patriarchy confines women, but played in a way that transforms subjection into empowerment. In her different costumes including Florence Nightingale as well as the one of the schoolgirl getup, Chanda seem like a maternal, non-threatening, desirable male –fantasy figure; but she scares Dev away, much as Devdas is scared of Chandramukhi's love. Dev abandons her as soon as a client comes to visit her at her house. Chanda is seen as self- reflexive in that she chooses to name herself after Chandramukhi, as she watches Madhuri Dixit's glamorous portrayal of the character in Bhansali's production of Devdas; which she accesses at the flick of a remote. This is in keeping with the mixing of literary and filmic genres by the film-maker and secondly, the sheer profusion of mechanical

gadgets and gizmos in this film. Reality seems to be accessed only through the virtual realm and it is not only her clients and Dev who confuse reality with fantasy.

When Paro and Dev meet again, Paro seems similar to Parvati (in the novel), in that she seems happy with her new home and children, and wishes to take care of Dev. She makes him take a bath, cleans his room of old bottles and washes his clothes with maternal concern, trying to organize his chaotic existence. However, the resemblance stops here, when he says he wants to love her she retorts:

Log pyaar karte hain. Karna chahna kya hota hai?

This sentence may be translated as, “People love just because they do. What do you mean when you say you want to love me?”, thus, drawing attention to his narcissism and inability to love. When Dev tells her to make love to him, she accepts his invitation only to reject him, to show him his “*aukaat*”, a word that he had used to reject her earlier: *aukaat* referred there to Paro’s being inferior to him in status and demeanour. Unlike Parvati of the novel and the caring and deferential Parvati of the *Devdas* films, she walks out on him, leaving him devastated and descending into a downward spiral of drinks and drugs.

However, unlike the novel, and the earlier films based on it, *Dev D* has a happy ending. After a hit and run accident case (Kashyap is again drawing on news reports from contemporary Delhi here: notably the BMW case), Dev returns sobered and ostensibly more mature. He and Chanda are seen together, and it is refreshing to see that the film does not show this in terms of rehabilitating a prostitute. Chanda rescues Dev and not the other way around.

New possibilities are opened up by adaptation in the context of the new cross-over cinema in India and the technical aspects that appeal to a generation of audience that can and has accessed films in multiple languages and traditions. In fact, a film, unlike a novel, is deeply immersed, as Robert Stam points out, from the very outset in material and financial contingencies. It is “immersed in technology and commerce”.

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This is used to strategic effect in *Dev D* for drawing attention to its originality stemming from the difference in medium. The manipulation of image made possible by a digital camera is used for dramatic effect. Hoardings displaying hotel names and advertisements in Dev D recount a story and bring alive a location like Paharganj in Delhi, which is both a budget destination for tourists (as can be seen in the couple giving a thumbs up to Dev when Paro visits him in his squalid room) and a meeting ground for different cultures and classes.

The instructions on a DTC bus with the letter 'ma' rubbed off from the word 'mahilayen,' signifies the objectification of women in graffiti. The mms clip that takes Chanda's childhood and security away from her brings home how advances in technology can reinforce double standards and women's oppression instead of alleviating it.

The different pace of shots enabled by new kinds of cameras add new nuances to the story telling. The disorientation of a drunk Dev, as well as the lack of focus in his life in general, is effectively conveyed by a new technique of moving the camera. Kashyap felt the need to introduce drugs to Dev's self-destruction, because he says it is more relevant to the contemporary youth as a potent means of destruction, than alcohol. Yet, he did not want to show drugs on-screen so he enlisted the help of Danny Boyle, who suggested the camera he used for *Slumdog Millionaire*. By using a camera that shot 11 frames per second, he could make the camera trip rather than the hero.

There were many other innovative features of this film which attracted the attention of critics and urban audience alike. A look at the blogs, websites and chat forums on the film reveals the young viewers' great admiration for Amit Trivedi's unusual music, the bold representation of Chanda and Paro, and the nods towards Danny Boyle, Kamal Swaroop, Godard and the primarily the psychedelic rock musical. It has also been praised for its self-reflexive style and some mysterious details that are thrown in: like the painted clown face on Dev, the promotional poster featuring a pout: perhaps an indication of the infantile nature and oral fixation of the

hero or the sexual past of Chanda, the origami birds, three men in hats etc. By cleverly throwing these clues to the audience, the film attracts attention to its borrowings from various works of literature and films of different languages and cultures; it foregrounds its own inter-textuality.

The film also stands out for its lighting, especially of the sets used to shoot decadence, and the musical is set to an impressive mix of jazz, rock, Indian classical music, Awadhi, Rajasthani and Punjabi songs that communicate angst, pain and absurdity all at once. A film (in India) works because of music, sound effects, moving images and its manipulation of verbal nuances. To cite an instance, an idiom like “emosional atyachar”, with its code mixing (English and Hindi) and its evocation of maudlin love songs, makes possible an ironic play of language and music not available in the written form. This adaptation far from being flawed or presumptuous in any way, sets new standards in film making, despite moments where the director seems self-indulgent in signalling the influences from international cinema.

Dev D draws upon the original novel to explore the themes of negotiating tradition and modernity, rural and urban lifestyles and self-destructive love and addiction. It, however, offers a different resolution; one that defies social conventions and offers a more healing and wholesome model of love than the passionate and destructive love of Devdas and Paro with its under-currents of violence and sado-masochism. While Dev, like Devdas is defeated more by his inner impulses than just social and cultural restrictions, Chanda like Chandramukhi, emerges as a norm or the stable emotional centre. Chanda in addition to being non-judgemental and generous like Chandramukhi, is also a survivor like her.

The reason that the novel *Devdas* has a universal and continuing appeal to the reader as well as film audience, is partly because across different historical and cultural locations, there is something about a tale of loving an unavailable person and of the anguish of separated lovers that resonates through time. Nevertheless, the greater appeal and significance of this novel and

the films based on it comes from its representation of its vocal women, who though idealized to an extent, show greater initiative and insightfulness than the hero of the tale.

The figure of Devdas is subsumed by the complex and fascinating women: Paro and Chandramukhi; and it is the strategies used to represent the latter that define the film's approach, to remember and rework a classic, in a way that enables engagement with contemporary issues and popular culture. *Dev D* works because it re-writes Devdas's story and is unlike it, even as it is "loosely inspired" by it.

(Note: A few parts of this paper draw upon my paper published as a chapter in the book *Studies in Social Sciences* Vol. II, ed. Partha Dutta. Centre for Human Development and Research. Kolkata: Radiance, Dec 2012: 87-101.)

NOTES:

1. Written by Anurag Kashyap and Vikramaditya Motwane, the film *Dev D* was released in 2009 and starred Abhay Deol as Dev, Mahie Gill as Paro and Kalki Koechlin, the director Anurag Kashyap's muse (much like Jamuna Roy who played Paro in the 1935 *Devdas* was Barua's. Both directors married the leading women), played the part of the courtesan: the Chandramukhi of Sarat Chandra's novel *Devdas*.
2. Creekmur, Pauwels ed., 2007, 180
3. Creekmur, Pauwels ed., 2007, 188.
4. Linda Hutcheon, 8.
5. Linda Hutcheon, 8.
6. Stam, Stam and Raengo eds., 2005, 17.
7. Guha ed. *The Saratchandra Omnibus*, 470.

8. The DPS MMS scandal caused a stir in 2004, when a video of a schoolgirl giving oral sex to a boy (whose face was not shown) went viral without her consent. The case was widely covered by the newspapers in Delhi Stam, 2005, 16).

9. Robert Stam and Alessandra Raengo eds., 2005, 16.

10. In this scene Dev tries to persuade Rasika to come to his room and as she listens in disgust to his crudely worded proposal, she looks up at the notice above the seat on the bus, which signifies the seat one reserved for ladies. The erasure of one letters (ma) marks the manner in which graffiti maps sexuality and women's objectification, as the word *hilayen* means to shake or jerk.

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Source: <http://www.desipundit.com/baradwajranjan/2009/02/07/review-dev-d/>

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