

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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DEVDas 1955 (Hindi language)

Bimal Roy

OVERVIEW

Based on a Bengali novella published by Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyaya in 1917, *Devdas* is one of the most popular stories of twentieth-century India. Among the many films to adapt the story, probably the best-known is Bimal Roy's achievement in 1955 (Roy had been the cinematographer on the first *Devdas* film in 1935).

The plot itself is relatively simple. A landlord's son (Devdas) and a lower-caste girl (Paro) are childhood sweethearts in the village but cannot marry because of the caste barrier between them. Paro is then engaged to an older man with grown children, while Devdas wallows in drink and whoring in Calcutta. There he meets the third person of this love-triangle: a courtesan (Chandramukhi), who falls in love with the morose Devdas. He pays for sex but doesn't love her. After half-hearted attempts to reach Paro and break up the engagement, Devdas dies on her doorstep.

CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

The story told in this film has multiple versions in print (retold in at least twelve different languages) and the big screen (sixteen different films). It is so famous that it became a film within a film: the story of *Paper Flowers* (1959) concerns a director who is making a version of *Devdas*. Like other stories in other cultures (for example, *A Christmas Carol* in England), it has acquired almost mythic status. The principal reason for this popularity is that its theme of longing in love is so resonant with deep culture strands in Hindu culture. The tragic love presented between the three characters involves two cases of unconsummated passion. Although both women love Devdas, neither is kissed or even embraced by him in the film. This is what is known in Indian literature as 'love-in-separation' or 'longing' (*viraha*). The most prominent expression of this theme is in religious poetry made famous in eastern India in the early modern period. In that poetry, Radha pines for her distant lover Krishna, just as Chandramukhi and Paro agonise for the absent Devdas. We are left in no doubt about the importance of this theme when Paro hears a song by a group of wandering minstrels (Bauls), who traditionally sing these poems. 'I miss you, so very much,' the singers say, 'come and meet me.' This is also the refrain that runs through the minds of the two lead females.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Devdas	The male lead.
Paro	Paro is his young love who is married to another man.
Chandramukhi	A courtesan who loves Devdas.
Chinnibabu	Chinnibabu is Devdas's friend, who leads him astray in the city.
Mr Mukherjee	Devdas's father.

STORY

Playmates separated The opening scenes show Devdas and Paro as playmates in a village (similar to the initial scenes in *Pather Panchali*). Both are mischievous, but he is actually mean-spirited at times. Soon, Devdas becomes such a problem at school that his father decides to send him away to Calcutta where he might change his naughty ways. Left alone, Paro is miserable. She meets some wandering folk singers who sing a song about the love-sick pair of Radha and Krishna in Hindu mythology. Paro grows up in the village, still pining for Devdas.



(Paro and Devdas as playmates)



(Paro, right, as a young woman hears that Devdas is returning)

Marriage proposal About ten years later, when Paro is a young woman, she hears that Devdas has returned to the village as a 'gentleman with a cane in his hand, a watch on his wrist, and a gold buttons on his coat.' Paro's grandmother now thinks that this educated, wealthy man from the city would be a good match for her granddaughter and approaches Devdas's mother to discuss a marriage. Her proposal is rejected gently by the mother and forcefully turned down by the father. 'They're not on our level,' he says. In truth, Paro's family is only slightly lower in the caste hierarchy than Devdas's, but that is enough to scupper the marriage. Affronted by this rejection, Paro's father saves face by getting Paro engaged to the first person who is willing to marry her. Unfortunately, he is an older man, a widower with grown children of his own. The tension is all the greater between the two families because they are neighbours.



(Paro pleads with Devdas to marry her)

Desperation Hearing of this marriage proposal, Paro decides that she must act and does something that no respectable woman would do. She sneaks into Devdas's room in the middle of the night and pleads with him to marry her before she is married off to the widower. Devdas, however, is no longer the headstrong youth of their childhood and explains that he cannot oppose his father's resistance to such a marriage. Still, he is moved by Paro's desperation and does speak to his father the next day. But his half-hearted appeal is easily swatted away by his father, who threatens to disown him. Chastened, Devdas returns to Calcutta without even speaking to Paro.

Lovers separated Once in Calcutta, Devdas writes a cold letter to Paro, denying any love for her and offering his good wishes for her future happiness (without him). He posts the letter, realises it is too cruel and rushes to intercept it but fails. Paro receives the letter and is broken-hearted. He then travels back to the village, but Paro refuses to talk with him. Angered and frustrated, he hits her with a stick, which breaks a childhood promise that he 'would never hurt' her and leaves a permanent scar on her forehead. Despite his later apologies, they both acknowledge that they are separated forever. He leaves again for Calcutta, and she prepares for her marriage to the old man.



(Paro reads Devdas's hurtful letter)

The courtesan Seemingly 'free' of Paro, Devdas sinks into depravity in Calcutta. His friend takes him to a club featuring sensual dancers who offer their 'services' to customers. The main act is Chandramukhi, whose patron provides some comic relief, but the focus is on her seduction of the sad Devdas. He visits her saloon but merely watches, without touching, still wallowing in his misery at losing Paro. These sensual scenes in Calcutta alternate with domestic scenes of Paro's married life in a village.



(Chandramukhi entertains Devdas)

Decline News of the death of Devdas's father, brings both Devdas and Paro back to their village. It appears that Paro is still in love with him, but he remains unresponsive on the surface and hides his feelings in alcohol. Back in Calcutta, Devdas rekindles his interest in the courtesan, Chandramukhi, and finds that she has given up her profession and wants to marry him. When Devdas refuses, she leaves Calcutta and goes to a provincial town. Hearing that Devdas is killing himself with drink, however, she rushes back and finds him collapsed in the street. She removes him to her hotel room and dances and sings for him in an effort to revive him. A doctor recommends that he leave the temptations of the city before the drinking sends him to an early grave. Chandramukhi tries to get him to swear off drinking, but Devdas says that he cannot make such a promise.

Death On his way to the train station to go on an aimless journey, he runs into his friend (who introduced him to drink in the first place) and ends up in a drunken stupor. This leads to his final act of self-will, when he travels to Paro's married home. He passes out and lies on the ground just outside the gate to her new home, calling her name. She hears his voice and runs to the gate, but her husband tells the servant to shut the gate. She reaches the gate just as it is closed, barring her from seeing the dying body of Devdas.



(Devdas drowning his sorrows)

THEMES

Female selflessness The dominant theme of this film, and the primary reason for its immense popularity over the years, is the selfless love of two women for a man. Both Paro and Chandramukhi are drawn from opposite ends of the conventional moral spectrum—one is a wife, the other a courtesan—but they are united in their devotion to the weak-willed Devdas. Indeed, his unremitting selfishness emphasises their self-sacrifice. Paro, the childhood sweetheart, risks her own reputation and self-respect by visiting him in the middle of the night and asking him to marry her. And when he demonstrates a lack of courage, she remains faithful to him (in her mind), even after she is married off to someone else. An even greater display of selfless love comes from Chandramukhi. The proverbial ‘tart with a heart’, she loves Devdas without receiving anything from him in return, except his melancholic expressions. Her love transcends the normal jealousy that a woman would feel for her rival. In fact, her love is so selfless that it embraces her rival. Chandramukhi knows that Paro loved him first, and she empathises with her for losing Devdas. She cares nothing for her own tragedy of unrequited love; she cares only for Devdas’s welfare. In a key scene, she says, ‘Promise me you will no longer drink. Do not ruin your life.’ Chandramukhi may be a courtesan, but she is also a self-sacrificing woman.



(Chandramukhi, the courtesan, listening to Devdas’s woes)

Male weakness The other major theme, playing opposite the power of female love, is the inability of men to act and the destructive nature of that weakness. This flaw is writ large in the character of Devdas, the titular protagonist of the film (although some have argued that the women are the real protagonists). His love for Paro is never fulfilled, not only because of caste barriers and an overbearing father but—and this is the point of the film—because of his own inability to take decisions at the key moments. He did not respond to Paro’s desperate plea to marry her and save her from marrying an old man. He also cannot stop drinking or visiting courtesans. The 1955 version of the film (which we are discussing here) is insistent that his weakness is associated with his westernised habits. He comes back from Calcutta looking like a dandy, wearing ‘foreign clothes’, carrying a gold walking stick and smoking cigarettes. It is also suggested (with little credibility) that his drinking habit is a western vice. Made only eight years after India achieved independence from Britain, it was easy to blame flaws in the hero’s character on European influences.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

DEVIDAS Devdas is an ambivalent character. On the one hand, he must be one of the most unlikable heroes in Indian cinema. As a child he is not only spirited and naughty but sometimes cruel and vain. Self-absorbed and self-pitying, he wanders through the rest of the film wallowing in his loss of Paro's love. But he does not seem to care about her loss or her welfare. He is also weak-willed, hesitant and practically a coward. If that weren't enough, he actually strikes out and injures Paro. However, he is the 'hero' of what is arguably the most popular film in India, so he must have something going for him. First, he is good-looking. (He is played by Dilip Kumar, the actor popularly known as the 'king of tragedy' and widely considered one of the best male actors in the history of India cinema.) Then, he is at odds with the authorities, he is sorrowful, he is a loser, and he succumbs to drink and illness, all of which tends to evoke sympathy. And, most important in Hindi films, he sings the most heart-wrenching songs (that is, he is pictured singing, but the songs are sung by a professional singer). The clue to his enigmatic role is that it is easier to love someone who is dissolute and in decline than someone who is rich and famous.

Headstrong The young Devdas is a hellion, a wild boy who runs around without any discipline. A good illustration of this headstrong quality comes in the opening scenes, when he and Paro are in school. The teacher is dozing and his assistant is bored. Devdas rises with a sly smile, goes to the assistant and asks his help with some calculations. The young man sighs but takes the pupil's slate and tries to explain that 'if the cost of oil is 14 rupees and ...', but Devdas suddenly pushes him over so that he falls into a sack of flour. Paro is delighted by these antics and claps in admiration, while Devdas sprints away. The teacher sends the other students to catch him, but they are driven back by a barrage of rocks thrown by Devdas. This fun-loving little boy is not just mischievous, in this scene we are given a hint of his disregard for others

Arrogant It is only a short step from this self-absorption to arrogance and violence. Again, there are multiple instances in the story, but the most dramatic occurs after Devdas has written the letter to Paro claiming that he never loved her. He returns to the village and tries to explain to her that he wrote it in haste, that he didn't mean it and that they must convince their parents to marry (she is still only betrothed at this point). When she brushes aside his 'excuses,' he gets angry and says that she has 'too much beauty.' 'Even the moon has a scar,' he says and strikes her hard with a heavy stick. His later attempts to soothe the bruise and win her affection cannot erase the arrogance of his action.

Weak The most debilitating of Devdas's flaws is his spinelessness. There are several instances when he fails to act at the decisive moment, with terrible consequences, but the most telling (to my mind) comes when she learns that she is betrothed to an old man. Risking scandal, she goes to Devdas in the dead of night and pleads with him to marry her. But his first instinct is to safeguard his own reputation. 'Who saw you come here?' he asks, fearing the rumours that might spread about them. She says that the watchman and servants must have seen her, and he berates her, 'Why did you do this? We'll hang our heads in shame tomorrow.' In other words, he is more concerned with his image than with her desperate situation. Later, he says, 'I'd do anything for you, but...[a long pause]...my parents are against this.' His cowardice is fateful. From his refusal to take the bull by the horns and marry her, everything follows: her sorrow, his pain his slow decline and death. Many have compared his hesitation to Hamlet's indecisiveness, and certainly the two men share the shortcoming of doubt that leads to destruction.

CHANDRAMUKHI Chandramukhi is a courtesan, who is skilled in the arts of singing and dance. Although she works in a high-end, low-moral club in Calcutta, she is soft-spoken and dignified. Falling in love with Devdas, who does not desire her sexually, transforms her so that she has the self-respect required to make the decision to leave her profession.

Self-sacrificing Chandramukhi is the embodiment of self-sacrificial love. Her non-possessive devotion to Devdas is illustrated in a scene toward the end of the film. He returns to Calcutta after his father's death and another separation from Paro. Sensing his sorrow, she opens up her heart and speaks at length. She says that she has given up her profession and wants to devote her life to him. 'I've been in the business of love for a long time, but I've only once loved someone,' she says. 'But love is not just physical attraction. It's understanding.' Then, she selflessly acknowledges that he prefers Paro to her and that she appreciates how much Paro must really love him. Seeing him sunk in sadness, she says, 'Did your Paro hurt you? I know that she loves you very much.' At the end of this revealing monologue, she delivers one of the key lines in the film. 'What could be more tragic than a woman who is not loved by the man she loves, the only man she has ever loved?' Now she is

talking about herself.

Dignified Chandramukhi, the courtesan, displays dignity in many scenes in the film, but perhaps the most moving occurs when she passes Paro on the road. The two women are travelling in opposite directions. Chandramukhi is being carried in a palanquin, while the poorer Paro sloshes through the mud on foot. The two travellers move to the rhythm of a song about the different fates of women in love. The camera shifts back and forth between them, and we know they are coming closer and closer. Finally, the men carrying the palanquin halt for a moment and Chandramukhi looks out to see the face of Paro, frowning in the sun. She knows who it is without asking, but she doesn't say a word. Instead, she inclines her head in a gesture of respect and move on. It is a supremely dignified encounter with her rival.

PARO Paro is the little girl who is Devdas's playmate. She is not only lively, she also turns out to be courageous in her pursuit of her lover. She has her self-respect, too, and can be prideful when offended. In essence, though, she is a loyal and devoted person, to both her parents and her lover.

Devoted Paro has loved Devdas since she was a child. Even after he goes away and stays in Calcutta for about ten years, she does not forget him. The constancy of her devotion is dramatised in a beautiful scene. It begins with women gossiping about Devdas not having returned. 'Men change,' one of them says. 'Yes,' the other replies, 'the city does that to you. Maybe Devdas has changed.' Then he does arrive and finds Paro in a darkened room. She lights a lamp, which is used for prayer rituals, and slowly the shadows retreat and reveal her radiant face. They exchange a few words, she is embarrassed and he leaves. It is a brief but tender scene, which shows Devdas (and the viewer) that nothing has changed in Paro's heart.

Courageous Paro's courage is illustrated in an early scene. Although she has become engaged to an old widower in a far-away village, in her heart she is still bound to Devdas. Talking to a young female friend on the veranda, she says mentions that she is going to get married, which surprises the friend. And when she reveals that she is planning to ask Devdas to marry her, the friend is shocked. 'How can you do that? Aren't you ashamed?' Smiling and confident, Paro strolls around and says, 'Why should I be ashamed? He is my friend, my confidante, my master. Why shouldn't I go to him?' All her poetic expressions, though, will not exonerate her in the eyes of her family and her neighbours. It is an extremely brave action to take, to visit Devdas at night and ask him to marry her. It contravenes social custom and every principle of propriety, but Paro will not be deterred by such artificial conventions. She is in love and that is all that matters.

Hurt pride The flip-side of Paro's courageous love is the depth of her pride when hurt. We see her pride rise up after she has received a letter from Devdas saying that he has never loved her (it is never adequately explained why he wrote the letter, though it is argued that it was his weak attempt to justify his refusal to marry her). Trying to make amends for the cruel letter, Devdas goes to see her in the village, but she ignores him. Even when he forces conversation, she maintains an icy distance. Hurt himself, he accuses her of being egotistical. 'So what?' she says, 'You have an ego, why not me? You may be good looking, but I have my talents, too. Your parents may be rich, but mine are kind and considerate.' We don't see this prideful aspect of her character very often, but it is always there, beneath the surface, waiting to emerge.