



## Victorian Women, Love, Class and Masculinity: A Revisit to Devdas

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*Devdas*, an examination the contemporary patriarchal society of Sarat Chandra deals with the Victorian concept of 'New woman' who battles against traditional value system and rules. By inserting two charming women heroines, Sarat Chandra shows how the novel turns out be a modernist text as it studies the conflict between modern man's individual self and the communal society. Devdas' travel to Calcutta, Parvati's act of taking education at Pathsala create the sense of 'modernity' within the novel. It also shows the clash between between modernity and tradition by his subtle characterization. A modern man is someone who suffers from emotional crisis, dilemma and conflict. Apart from Devdas, two women protagonists tend to be modern for their ethos. Thus, the novel talks of modernity by commenting on the concept of Victorian women, masculinity and love.

*Devdas* by Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay is a cult classic that deals with the theme of romantic love, longing, platonic love, institution of marriage, heartbreak, betrayal, position of women in the patriarchal society, social rituals and codes of conduct assigned to different sexes. Apparently, it is a coming of an age story of two young minds who happen to be the childhood friends. But, it crosses the boundary of mere friendship and becomes a complicated saga of romantic love, conflict, torment and anguish of unrequited romance. This novel poses many questions in the readers' mind:

- What is marriage? Does Parvati betray Devdas by marrying someone else?
- What is the meaning of love? How far do the characters justify the idea of love?
- How does Sarat Chandra depict Chandramukhi in the novel?
- What is the message of the novel that the author intends to impart through the character of Parvati?
- How does the novelist portray the binary of 'the angel in the house' and 'the fallen woman'?
- What kind of society does the author paints in this novel?
- Does Devdas justify himself to be a gentleman?

As usual, this novel follows the tradition of conventional structure of a novel by inserting 'hero', 'heroine,' 'anti-hero/ antagonist' and other important characters, elaborating plot to give it a volume of depth and criticality. Though the title of the novel makes Devdas the 'hero' of the story, the character Parvati takes the spotlight and makes herself a true hero of the story. It shows how Parvati becomes a true woman by undergoing the process of sadness, conflict, moral dilemma and rejection



of the mischievous society. The author posits the other female character Chandramukhi as the binary opposition or the antagonist to Parvati. They are each other's alter ego often displaying the different traits of feminine sensibility and womanhood. Chandramukhi is sketched as a tawaif whereas Parvati is depicted as someone who is taking education. By creating the contrast between the two, Sarat Chandra attempts to blur the binary opposition between the modern concept of 'Good woman' and 'Bad bitch.' In the Victorian England, the patriarchal society was extremely oppressive and did not allow women to assert their desire, sexuality, need and the society imposed various kinds of laws, rules upon women. Women's voices were stifled and silenced for the sake of misogyny and male chauvinism. In this era, women were broadly categorized into two groups entitled as 'The angel in the house,' and 'Fallen woman.' The woman defined as 'angel in the house' tends to be a submissive housewife performing her duties and they remain in the kitchen sacrificing her life to take care of her husband and produce children. On the other hand, the women who transgress the line of morality and rules of the society are termed as 'Fallen woman.' In the later end of the society, the readers can discover the emergence of a new kind of woman who primarily is considered as 'New woman.' In this particular novel, Chandramukhi is depicted as a fallen woman for her profession and status. Ironically, she saved him once and gave him a new life. This act of 'rescue' gives her a status of a good woman though she is neglected and is assumed to be morally low.

Devdas is a sophisticated, rich brat who later plunges into the habit of intoxication. Devdas is not represented as a character who can be someone's peaceful home for his sense of supremacy and ego. He is a snob, disgraceful, proud man whose follies such as jealousy, anger and use of liquor become the root cause behind his fall and demise. He fails to justify himself to be a nobleman as he lacks empathy, the sense of morality and other attributes to be considered a gentleman. He is a misogynist who never cares for the love of Parvati. Always, he bears a sense of superiority complex in his mind that hinders him to fall in love with her genuinely. Initially, Parvati is displayed as an emotional, mild woman. Later, she goes through emotional purgation and turns out to be a new woman. Though Sarat Chandra paints her character as a good woman but she questions the societal rules and flaws. She weeps for her Devdas but marries someone else. Her husband seems to be more powerful than Devdas in terms of wealth, money and age. This act of 'betrayal' attacks the fragile ego and brittle masculinity of Devdas and consequently, she becomes a fallen woman to his eyes. She wrote letters to Devdas and waited and digested the anguish of love. The climax happened when she went to his home at night asking for a shelter in his feet. This could be a shame and disgrace to her character and honor if Devdas wanted to spread the news. By doing so, Sarat Chandra has shown the status of a good woman, weeping woman in the Victorian England as well as in his contemporary society. Later, Parvati did not wait for his approval and married to someone else. This marriage does not occur out of love but it justifies itself to be a social construct. Here, the author satirizes the institution of marriage



as a cultural construction.

When Devdas was found ill and dying, the readers might feel sympathize with his tragic condition. He died alone without the care and humanity of anyone else. He was surrounded with his loved ones but died unnoticed. It also shows the battle between an individual and the society. During the last stage of suffering, Devdas wanted to have a glimpse of Parvati. He loved his mother but did not want to reach her. All those buried agonies, questions, Devdas wanted to ask for the last time to Parvati. Devdas's mother is a central example of good woman encompassing the spirit of purity and innocence while the other two women characters are painted as 'grey' characters. Chandramukhi is like Meera who sings the song of devotional love for Krishna. She celebrates spiritual love, platonic romance towards Devdas while Parvati depicts romantic desire. Later in the novel, Devdas embraces the purity of Chandramukhi while nurturing anger, grudges against Parvati. Parvati turns out to be a rebellious woman who asserts her own sexuality, desire and want. She has a voice of her own. She sheds off the skins of a childhood lover and becomes a true woman. She along with Chandramukhi metaphorically becomes the 'new woman' of the Victorian tradition.

The names of these characters are also symbolic. Parvati is the other name of Devi Durga who is a symbol of purity, energy and strength. Even, the name of Devdas carries off the name of 'Dev' or God. In the novel, Chandramukhi being a tawaif has earned the respect and sympathy of the readers as she took care of Devdas when he was found in the street. She performed the task of a dutiful, good woman whereas Parvati being the carrier of the name of goodness did not become kind and hospitable towards Devdas. She acts as a saviour while Parvati transforms herself into a rebellious woman. It also examines the gap and differences between names and personalities. This deviance shows that the human beings are the mixture of darkness and light, and can never straightjacketed into any category. They have goodness and follies as well that make them human and humane at the same time.

*Devdas* is a novel that portrays the contemporary patriarchal society of Sarat Chandra. His characters become the mouthpieces of the author. By creating such characters, he shows how society can be biased towards certain human beings. Devdas prepares his own unfortunate fall. Through his death, the author paints how an authoritative figure dies. It indirectly sheds light on the death of misogyny and the patriarchal values. Devdas is like the baron of "Rape of the Lock" who humiliates Belinda for cutting off her locks. Baron belongs to the upper class. Similarly Devdas initially discards the decision of marriage to Parvati by taking pride in his wealth and social class.

This comes as a shock and humiliation to Parvati. It also shows how the differences in the social classes create havoc in love and marriage. The author also satirizes the concept of love which is deeply political and gives nothing but torment in return. The author leaves the ending of the novel open so the readers can form their opinions and perspectives. In this last paragraph, he elucidates on the hapless misery of Devdas and how one should not die alone in this world. He also states that all these characters like Devdas should be forgiven. These characters do not know that they dig their own



graves by being impulsive. On the other hand, Parvati and Chandramukhi along with their negative traits and stark differences become the two heroines of the novel by being promoted to the rank/category of the 'New woman'. The entire novel takes the readers through the journey of emotional catharsis.

Literally, this is a story of Devdas but the death of the central male character posits itself to be the epic drama of the lives of women who happen to be the 'heroes' of the novel by challenging the societal values. This novel thus not celebrating the union of love invokes the psychological growth of all the characters to comment on the intricate relationship between romance, women and masculinity. Though it was written a long time ago, the novel should be revisited again and again until the message of the author reaches the audience/ readers. Sarat Chandra has not only written a classic but also a 'modern' text for its plot construction and art of dealing with contemporary issue of women, love, marriage and patriarchy. Therefore, we can see the movie adaptation of Devdas by Sanjay Leela Bhansali, Anurag Kashyp. The main plot of Devas revolves around the topic of marriage and love and how these two concepts can be separated and are different from each other. Marriage is a social construction that happens between two families and thus it prioritises the other social-cultural determiners like age, wealth, status, class, religion and caste. Still now, even today, marriage happens on the basis of these prejudices. To my opinion, these other factors turn out to be the prejudices as they devalue the concept of love and emotion and reduce it to social- political transaction and agreement. Through the portrayal of unrequited love, Sarat Chandra shows how people fall in love and what it means to be a turbulent romance between young minds. On the other hand, the author through the metaphor of Parvati's marriage depicts the traditional, older narratives of union that concentrates on social honor, social recognition and duty.

The author is a narrator of the text so he opines on the burning problems like class, gender and status and how they influence the other. Devdas was a rich brat while Parvati belongs to a middle class family. Devdas' mother was not willing to bring Parvati to their home while Chandramukhi was a tawaif, a notch girl to the eyes of the society who cannot be loved and welcomed at home. Sarat Chandra also raises questions on purity and chastity that proves itself to be an important factor of marriage which is why, the 21st century witnesses the conflicts related to love and marriage. By inserting two different women, the author apparently projects the image of fallen woman and angel in the house but they become grey characters due to their sense of humanity and morality. Apart from it, the character Chunilal drinks and Devdas meets his tragic doom for excessive drinking. This novel sheds light on the patriarchal concept of masculinity and what it means to a man and a woman. Patriarchy is a disease that the society of 21st century still suffers from. Due to the differences in the social status and class, many marriages are cancelled even today. Sarat chandra's novel thematically highlights the concerns of the contemporary age.

It crosses the boundary of time and space and becomes a universal as well as a contemporary



commentary on misogynist society and its ill side. Therefore, no one can bypass its significance as a revolutionary text for being a wake up call or a mirror to the evil, patriarchal society. Consequently, it should be revisited, re-examined and reread from the different perspectives time and again.

**References:**

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