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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

HERITAGE AND RUPTURES: IDENTITY NEGOTIATIONS OF THE HERO IN THE CINEMATOGRAFIC ADAPTATIONS OF *DEVIDAS*

JITKA DE PRÉVAL

There are few figures in world cinema which the filmmakers return to as often as *Devdas*. Born at the beginning of the last century in the pen of the Bengali writer Sarat Chandra Chatterjee,¹ this story of a tragic love triangle, has had a singular destiny. The popular success of the novel, translated upon its release in almost all of the Indian languages, has been expanding rapidly across the country thanks to many film adaptations.² This story of unrequited love has been assimilated with popular mythology in the collective consciousness of Indians. In a century, “*Devdas*” has become a generic term for a specific character: a lovesick, passive and indecisive rich man sinking in alcohol to death. The identity of the character created and recreated by successive adaptations seems to convey values that enable the Indian public to project itself in it without ever being able to solve the mystery of his unease and his sense of resignation.

In this article, I propose to come back to the figure of “*Devdas*” and compare its identity construction through four major adaptations, that of Barua (1935)³, Bimal Roy (1955), Sanjay Leela Bhansali (2002) and Anurag Kashyap (2009). Alongside cinema, a large number of books deal with identity construction in *Devdas*. Among those which helped

¹ The writer's full name is Sarat Chandra Chatterjee (1876-1938), which is a shortened version proposed by the colonial administration of the Bengali name Chattopadhyay.

² There exist at least fifteen versions of *Devdas* in different Indian languages: Naresh Mitra (1928); P. C. Barua (Bengali, 1935); P. C. Barua (Hindi, 1936); P. V. Rao (Tamil, 1936); P. C. Barua (Assami, 1937); V. Raghavaiah (Tamil and Telugu, 1953); Bimal Roy (Hindi, 1955); Vijayanirmala (Telugu, 1974); D. N. Rao (Telugu, 1978); Dilip Roy (Bengali, 1979); O. Mani (Malayalam, 1989); S. L. Bhansali (Hindi, 2002); S. Samanta (Bengali, 2002); A. Kashyap (Hindi, 2009); Iqbal Kashmiri (Pakistani, 2010); Chashi Nazrul Islam (Bangladeshi, 2013); new adaptation program under way: Sudhir Mishra (Hindi), with Kareena Kapoor as heroine (since 2010).

³ Fragments of the Bengali version of P.C. Barua are said to be present in the national cinema archives of Dacca. Only its Hindi print is safeguarded in the National Film Archives of India in Pune and visible at www.indiancine@ma.

circumscribe the identity of the character, I will use the thoughts of Gayatri Chatterjee, Poonam Arora and Corey K. Creekmur.

Let us consider Barua's 1935-1936 *Devdas* in Hindi⁴ as cultural legacy which “incorporates the past to the present and the binds the present to the future.”⁵ If Barua's *Devdas* is a “legacy” inherited from the colonial context, subsequent versions produced after the independence of India (in 1955, 2002, 2009) bear witness to the evolution marked by ruptures or rejection of traditional values, while remaining paradoxically attached to the latter. Each version, although more or less identical to the original model, contains new “elements of reality” involved in the transformation of the archetypes installed by Sarat Chandra.⁶ Only the version of Kashyap throws new light on the history of *Devdas* by placing it in the context of the India of the 2000s. Thus the change brought to the traditional configuration by this film allows us to fathom how the *Devdas* phenomenon operates in a different environment, outside the purview of historical fiction. If the term identity is borrowed from Latin *identitas* “quality of that which is the same,”⁷ Voltaire proposes a definition that specifically identifies the individual and his “being” or his “me.” According to him, identity is “what is permanent” and also an “awareness of the persistence of me.” Madame de Staël highlights the existence of the “sense of our identity” we always have despite “continuous changes in us.” She puts this rhetorical question: “What is it that attests this identity, if it is not me who is always the same?”⁸

Jean-Luc Nancy in his book *Identity: Fragments, Frankness*, written following the controversy surrounding the creation of the Ministry of National Identity in France,⁹ says that

⁴ The “novel like” life of Barua had seeped into the film as much as the story of *Devdas* had impacted the image of the director. Cf. Ashish Nandy “Invitation to the Antic Death: The Journey of Pramathes Barua as the Origin of the Terribly Effeminate, Maudlin, Self-destructive Heroes of Indian Cinema,” in Rachel Dwyer and Christopher Pinney ed, *The History, Politics and Consumption of Public Culture in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), 139-161 or Shoma Chatterji's *Pramathesh Chandra Barua: the crownless prince, the eternal Devdas* (New Delhi : Wisdom Tree) 2008.

⁵ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945), 450. My translation.

⁶ Marc Ferro, *Cinéma et Histoire* (Paris: Gallimard, Folio Histoire, 1993), 75.

⁷ Voltaire, *Loi naturelle*, 1756. The note is from Littré. The idea of the “conscience of persistence of the self” has been reused in psychology.

⁸ Madame de Staël, *Tome quatrième*, 1810, 173.

⁹ For Jean-Luc Nancy, the concept of identity, too complex to be dealt with by civil servants, falls within the ambit of philosophic, psychoanalytical, ethnological,

Identity Negotiations of the Hero in the Cinematographic Adaptations of Devdas

An identity is not something one enters, nor is it something one dresses oneself in, and one cannot identify with one (assuming that there is any sense in treating it as an entity or figure) without at the same time modifying it, modalizing it, perhaps transforming it. Identities are never purely stable nor simply plastic. They are always metastable.¹⁰

Psychology pays particular attention to the case of loss of the sense of our identity, of “self-identity.” This negative feeling is related to the loss of belonging, uprooting, being wrenched apart from a foundation. The pathological case of the loss of identity is amnesia or partial or total loss of memory.¹¹ While the loss of identity because of love could be viewed in the West as a positive fact¹² because love can help to forget the “self,” losing identity is the subject of various Indian schools of philosophy (that of Sankara, for example) that, in short, propose abandonment, detachment and dissolution of the “self” in order to the search for unity with the absolute, non-duality, the *advaita*.¹³

Each work has its own identity made up of a multitude of elements. Films are collective works. Each speaker in the creation of the work (director, writer, director of photography, sound recorder, editor, composers, actors etc.) brings his own personality that blends into the whole and determines the identity of the film. Although filmic adaptations follow the model of the literary character created by Sarat Chandra Chatterjee, we find not only the story but also the figure of Devdas

sociological and political questionings, Jean-Luc Nancy, *Identité, fragments, franchises*, François Raffoul translator (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), originally published in French as *Identités, fragments, franchises* (Paris: Editions Galilée, 2010).

¹⁰ Ibid., 10-11 (English version).

¹¹ In this regard, please see Aki Kaurismäki's *The Man without a Past* (*Mies vailla menneisyyttä*, 2002).

¹² “The one who loves has lost his identity. Who “else” has been able to prevent me from being obsessed with “myself”?” (Marcel Jouhandeau, *M. Godeau intime* (Paris: Gallimard, 1926), 80.

¹³ See Michel Hulin's *Samkhya literature* (Chicago: Harrassowitz, 1978), 3 wherein he develops the theory of aesthetic experience and disindividualization from a discussion on Abhinavagupta's *Abhinavabharati*: “Saying ‘I’ signifies one knows one's self as well as one is radically different from other people, as a unique et incomparable individual. We thus touch upon the psychological and moral register, that of everyday, or rather its reflection in literature (poetry, tale, epic narrative, theatre etc.)”

transformed. This figure evolves, adapts to new contexts and metamorphoses, on the surface and, perhaps, in depth.

The visible transformation of each Devdas occurs during his extended stay in the city (Calcutta for versions 1935 and 1955, in London for recent versions). Barua's Devdas,¹⁴ under pressure from his friend Chunilal, adopts an outfit that is deliberately inspired by the British model: a well-cut jacket, collared shirt, a colonial hat (the ostentatious sign of authority in place) sports shoes and a cane [Fig. 1]. When he returns to the village in this new gear, Parvati remarks that he looks like a "foreigner."

Although Bimal Roy's version remains true to its predecessor's version of which he was the director of photography, his 1955 version abandons the colonial hat for obvious reasons. Without specifying the historical period in which he places his filmic adaptation and discarding colonial accessories, he gives a timeless touch to the film. His Devdas (Dilip Kumar) is partially Westernized [Fig. 2]. He wears a light jacket on a pair of traditional pants and a long shirt with an Italian collar. His outer transformation is announced by Manorama to her friend Parvati before Devdas appears. She describes in detail Devdas's dress change: "I saw with my own eyes. A cane in his hand, a wrist watch, buttons and gold chain. He has become a true gentleman!" Then we learn from her that "Before he came every year for the holidays, and then only once every two or three years."

The 2002 version, transforming the story of Devdas into a great poetic show, puts particular emphasis on Devdas's sartorial habits on his return from London. Indeed, he returns dressed as a Western dandy of undetermined time. His outfit accentuates the difference between the two cultures at the risk of veering into caricature: a felt hat, a collared shirt and a red bow tie with white polka dots, a three-piece suit, a rain coat, two-tone shoes, a cane and an ivory cigarette holder. A timeless western attire not suitable for the supposed climate of Bengal. One detail draws our attention. The western clothes Bansali's Devdas wears are cut too big. The character "floats" in his shirts with sleeves that are too long and trousers that are too wide. Obviously, the director creates the image of a hero who is too small and unsuited to his clothes and therefore to Western culture. The return of Devdas - too late alas - to traditional male clothing (kurta/dhoti) symbolizes the attempt to return to the roots [Fig. 3]

The initial images of Dev. D (Abhay Deol) that we discover at the beginning of the film, alternating with flashbacks of his childhood, set up

¹⁴ Devdas was interpreted in Bengali by Barua, in Hindi by Kundal Lal Saigal, a famous actor and singer belonging to New Theatres.

a series of signs relating to the character: he is dressed in western clothes with a glaringly bad taste. If his body does not correspond to his outfit (a cap, smoke lens sunglasses, an open collared shirt, a scarf, a knitted jacket and a beige coat lined with brown, brown pants and double-colour sneakers), the body-play amplifies the image of a rude, boorish and unsympathetic person. Would it be an anti-hero or a villain? Visible signs indicate a rather negative character preventing a priori any identification or empathy with him [Fig. 4].

The mutation of the appearances of Devdas is dependent on the historical context in which the films were made. The most spectacular visual transformation of the hero appears in the version of Barua's *Devdas*. Parvati is shocked by his disguise as a "foreigner" with attributes that do not lie: they belong to the ruling class, concentrated mainly in the cities.¹⁵ In Roy's film, made in independent India, this transformation is seen as a positive development. The villagers (Manorama and Parvati) find that the hero looks like a "gentleman." His new appearance is not prejudicial to him. Instead, it adds to his charm. It is his detachment from rural areas that makes Roy's Devdas a different person. Bhansali's Devdas, made in a changing world of India, which is open to foreign influences, returns to London in a hybrid disguise to entice foreign audiences and Indians living abroad. However, it means that this disguise is not suitable for the character. As for Dev, he abandons his disguises donned during the journey very quickly, and dresses in the same way as the boys of his age living his village do. During his absence, India had been transformed, the difference between "there" and "here" had faded. Dev is neither the melancholic hero played by K.L. Saigal and Dilip Kumar nor the narcissistic and vain version played by Shah Rukh Khan.¹⁶ He is a cynical and depraved egotist.

¹⁵ Sarat Chandra's *Devdas* was born at the beginning of the last century and bears the imprint of Bengal renaissance. If the dress code traditionally signified belonging to a particular caste or social class, during this period, it also carries a political dimension. The adaptations which interest us here seem to ignore the fact that Sarat Chandra's Devdas had been transformed into a city dweller who not only wears foreign dressess and is interested in hunting and fishing (Western pastimes), but also discusses society, politics, meetings and cricket or even football. Like Tagore's *Gora*, Devdas belongs to the generation of young Bengali artists torn between the attraction to and the rejection of Western culture. Unlike *Gora* (hero of the eponymous novel, Devas does not get integrated in a group either in Calcutta or elsewhere.

¹⁶ Corey K. Creekmur, "Remembering, repeating, and working through *Devdas*," in Heidi R.M. Pauvels ed, *Indian Literature and Popular Cinema, Recasting classics* (London: Routledge, 2007), 186.

I am not what I am

Barua's *Devdas*, in a moment of despair, points out that these disguises as part of the comedy he must perform to meet the expectations of society,

Where did I come from? I also started playing the comedy of my life to tell people that I am not what I am. What I am not is what I am actually, a *matvala*¹⁷

The result of this masquerade¹⁸ is that he loses his bearings, his “sameness” and the only way he finds to get out of this situation is to forget by drowning himself in alcohol.

Who is Devdas? At first sight, although he occupies the place of the hero, he does not represent any heroic quality in the original sense of the word for a “man of great value.” He does not demonstrate any exceptional conduct nor is endowed with a talent or a special quality. According to Edgard Morin “it is necessary that the heroes are endowed with eminently sympathetic qualities,” to bring about “attachment, love, tenderness ... to become idealized alter-egos of the reader or viewer.”¹⁹ Rather, Devdas is often disrespectful and arrogant towards his elders, especially to his mother. Moreover, in contradiction with the dominant convention in popular cinema that favors the happy end, he dies at the end of the film. Yet the Indian public is attached to this complex character despite its tragic fate. But as Morin recalls “the tragic death of a hero integrates in the aesthetic relationship [...] the virtues of one of the most archaic and universal of rites: sacrifice.”²⁰ If the sacrifice doubled by renunciation that Devdas accomplishes in spite of himself can explain the identification and commitment of the Indian public to this complex character, it is the indecisive character of Devdas and his non-membership in an entity that seem to dominate all the filmic versions.

¹⁷A madman, a drunkard. See the scene in Chandramukhi (01 :03 :48) at <https://indiancine.ma/BQL/player/01:03:48.411> (consulted on September 11, 2015)

¹⁸ Cf. Sumitra S. Chakravarty, *National Identity in Indian Popular Cinema, 1947-1987* (Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1993). In the chapter entitled “Masculinity and Masquerade,” she discusses the enigma of masculine identity (199-206).

¹⁹ Edgard Morin, *Esprit du temps* (Paris: Éditions Grasset Fasquelle, 1962), 92-94. My translation.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

“The hero is the man who is devoutly submissive. But to what?”²¹

We find the emphasis on Devdas's submission when confronted with destiny in Bimal Roy's film who is the only one to introduce a sequence where the hero is in a situation where he could control and change the course of his destiny: stop the break-up letter mailed to Parvati before it reaches her. Instead, as if in a trance, Devdas watches the postman hand over his break-up letter to Parvati while he hurried to reach Calcutta before the arrival of the postman. The sequence unfolds slowly to lengthen the time needed to act. Devdas remains a stationary viewer however. He yields to the decision of his father just like one of the most popular heroes in India – Ram, a god who is only “sweetness, submission, and resignation.”²² According to Baldcon Dhindra,

No other person, except Krishna has exerted such a great and lasting influence on such a large number of Indians. [...] His heroism [that of Ram] is in his resigned submission to an unfair decision.²³

The impassivity of the character is rendered particularly sensitive in the version of Barua who favors long shots, staged with two framed characters facing the camera, instead of using the shot/reverse shot technique. These “iconic images”²⁴ or two-shot compositions, filmed mostly with a fixed camera, slow down the course of exchanges between characters whose gazes rarely meet. Apart from the non-responsiveness of Devdas, iconic images create a visual identity of the hero who is not complete without his heroine, or, rather, without his heroines. Bimal Roy comes back a few times, to the staging of iconic images. But

²¹ Joseph Campbell, *Le Héros aux mille et un visages*, H. Crès trans (Paris: Éditions Oxus, “J’ai lu” series, 2010), 31.

²² Baldcon Dhindra, *Indian Cinema and Indian Civilization*, report drafted for UNESCO in 1963, 15.

²³ Baldcon Dhindra incorporates in his report a quotation by Vinobha Bhave, a sage of contemporary India, according to Dhindra. In 1957, Vinoba Bhave pleaded against the lethargy of the Indian people by encouraging them to spread the cult of Hanuman (Rama's disciple in the form of a monkey) who personifies vitality and elementary energy (p.16).

²⁴ See Gayatri Chatterjee “Icons and Events: Reinventing Visual Construction in Cinema in India” in Raminder Kaur and Ajay J. Sinha ed. *Bollywood, Popular Indian Cinema through a Transnational Lens* (London: Sage, 2009), 90-117. Iconic images have been identified as such by Geeta Kapur in her article “Mythical Material” published in 1987 in the *Journal of Arts & Ideas*, 14.

contemporary versions, dependent on fast editing, adopt the shot/reverse shot techniques.

The hero's inaction, highlighted in the various adaptations of Devdas, appears as a constant. Similarly, 2009 Dev is often faced with the possibility of reversing history. One word from Devdas would suffice for Parvati to reconsider her decision to marry another suitor. He prefers to be silent, to not react. He refuses to reach out to a happiness that is within his reach. This trait of the hero seems to fascinate the Indian viewer. Is it in the indecision and resignation when facing destiny that the Indian public recognizes itself? Or is it the sense of not-belonging and poor integration into any (rural or urban) communities which raises the public's interest?

The belonging to one form or another of community (whatever one puts under that name), perhaps even the simultaneous belonging to several communities, is indeed given with birth, which does not mean that there is a mere unchanging constraint.²⁵

If, according to Jean-Luc Nancy, “we fall” in our milieu by virtue of our birth, in all the film versions we are concerned with, the parents wish to move Devdas away from his rural context and provide him with a city education. This happens at the time of adolescence. While in adaptations that faithfully follow the literary model that desire results in the transformation of Devdas into a gentleman, a *babu*²⁶, the vestige of the social model of *babu* also persists in postcolonial versions. The parents, at the same time, organize a break with his childhood friend Parvati. Only Bimal Roy in his version devotes a part of the film to the adolescence of Devdas and his relationship with Parvati, insisting on the idyllic side of childhood. Later versions evoke, through flashbacks of some plans, the children's pain of separation and the detachment of Devdas from his family environment. According to Elisabeth Badinter, the “universal sexual segregation of children” would be common to all human societies. Because, she says, there always comes a moment “when the male and female children separate to form single-sex groups.”²⁷

²⁵ Jean-Luc Nancy, *op.cit.*, p.22 (English version)

²⁶ At the beginning of the 19th century, Calcutta is divided into two sectors : one riche (British) and the other poor (Indian). This separation between British and Indian cultures resulted in the appearance of a new social class, the Babus, Anglophine Indian bureaucrats. Please cf. Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Leçons indiennes, Itinéraire d'un historien, Delhi, Lisbonne, Paris, Los Angeles* (Paris : Alma éditeur, 2015),190.

²⁷ Elisabeth Badinter, *XY De l'identité masculine* (Paris: Éditions Odile Jacob, Le Livre de Poche, 1992, 99.

This distancing shatters not only the relation of the boy with the girl but worse still, with his mother who is an important component in the formation of the young man. The father, in conflict with his son, fears that Devdas will become *unruly* and *soft*. According Poonam Arora, in breaking Devdas's habit of spending time in female company, "there is an indirect suggestion that Devdas needs to be in company of other young men. Indeed an important part of the educational project in Calcutta is the father's plan that Devdas join the company of other aristocratic young men."²⁸ The habit of sending children to boarding schools in adolescence was a common practice in pre-industrial Western societies. Badinter adds: "In Anglo-American countries, more obsessed with virility, masculinization rites have survived longer."²⁹ The distance, in the case of Devdas, results in the loss of references and roots. Lived not as a punishment but as a promotional act administered by his father, the boy accumulates frustrations and disappointments during his long stay in town. His submission to parental decision concerning the prohibition to marry Parvati can be understood as a sign of cowardice but also as a need to his please parents in order to be recognized and appreciated by them. The need to regain his place within the traditional social space from where he was chased away as a teenager.

The removal from the family home of the hero remains an abstract but important fact to understand the identity problems which the hero suffers from.

As in all the versions true to the literary model Devdas discovers alcohol and succumbs to its effects because of the sorrow of parting, the 2009 Dev comes back from the West with a displayed penchant for alcohol.³⁰ Drinking beer and alcohol is part of his transformation, his new identity. The stay in the West degrades him; he becomes depraved, disrespectful, and immoral. This is not the first time an Indian film uses

²⁸ Poonam Arora, "Devdas: India's Emasculated Hero, Sado-Masochism and Colonialism," in *Jouvert, Journal of Post Colonial Studies* 1-1 (1997), paragraph 36. <http://english.chass.ncsu.edu/jouvert/v1i1/DEVDA5.HTM>, consulted September 11, 2015.

²⁹ Elisabeth Badinter 1992, *op.cit.*, 118-120.

³⁰ According to Nicholas Deakin and Dinesh Bhugra: "Rates of alcohol consumption and abuse are going up in India as a result of the increasing middle class and as a result of the impact of industrialization and globalization." ("Families in Bollywood cinema: changes and context," in *International review of psychiatry* 24 (2): 166-72. 2012, 170). If each version of *Devdas* targets a new generation, as Deakin et Bhugra put it, we have to mirror the society and its vices which change in the course of globalization.

Western culture as an evil reference. Rosie Thomas recalls that the concept of the elements of “universal moral ideal,” which has boosted the cinema of Bombay from 1950, were gradually redefined in favor of the westernized figure of evil:

The ideal moral universe of Bombay cinema revolved around the archetypal figures of the Mother and the Villain, a good-evil opposition in which good was subtly conflated with the “traditional”, or that which is Indian; bad with the “non-traditional” and the “non-Indian”. Through this moral universe the films constructed an Other – a cold, calculating, rapacious, but exotic West/outsider – which had implications for the construction of the notion of modern Indianness. The narrative function of the hero/heroine was not to embody good but to mediate between two poles.³¹

If in *Dev. D*, the hero conserves traits similar to those of previous versions of Devdas, the real break has to do with the processing of female characters who lose their purity (maintained in previous versions) and become corrupted, westernized. The distribution of good and evil - the Manichean concept of the classic versions - is turned upside down in Kashyap's film. In this version, we observe that the abandonment of traditional values has the effect of the exploding the family structure and amplifying the individualization of characters. While in the versions of Barua, Roy and Bhansali, the hero keeps in touch with his family environment through his faithful servant, a substitute for the missing mother and father figures, in *Dev. D*, this character disappears and is Dev finds himself alone in the urban jungle.

Devdas's Latent Violence

The character of Devdas was created in the early twentieth century.³² At that time, the city of Calcutta, founded in 1690 by an Englishman named Job Charnock, was considered the intellectual and political capital of India (until 1911). The settlers hold the administrative control over it. Only the sphere of social and religious life of the Indians is supposed to be preserved by the British claiming to practice a policy of “non-interference.” Non-interference does not prevent the British from imposing laws to improve the status of women and protect them from the grip of tradition: in 1829, it was the abolition of Sati (the obligation the widow to

³¹ Rosie Thomas, *Bollywood before Bollywood, Film City Fantasies* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2013), 174.

³² The novel was written in 1901, published in 1917 then quickly translated into the major languages of India.

immolate himself on the pyre of her dead husband), followed in 1856 by the legalization of the marriage of widows and in 1891 the “Consent Act” legislated upon the age of child marriage (which was raised to 12 years).³³ This progress in favor of women, especially the “Consent Act,”

becomes despite the liberal and humanitarian discourse, the expression of colonial contempt for the masculinity of Bengali men finger pointing all their attempts to claim it.³⁴

Given the historical and political context of colonial India, the character of Devdas, hailing from a wealthy provincial bourgeoisie, undergoes multiple pressures. A taking into account of these pressures helps us understand his attitude towards his social space, his anxiety that compels him to repress his virility. Devdas as a “colonial subject” has to repel the woman who loves him and who offers herself more than once to him to contradict the image the British give of Indians: decadent and degenerate, slaves of their desires. He does this “despite himself” with a restrained and controlled violence, turned against himself. He repels Parvati and despite the affection and friendship that bind him to Chandramukhi refuses sexual contact with her. He thereby rebuilds, according to Arora, “his own space of masculinity and honour.”³⁵ While Arora sees in the attitude of Devdas the reconstruction of his identity space, Gayatri Chatterjee evokes the *loss of identity*, deconstruction of identity.³⁶

Devdas's malaise against the power of the establishment is such that it makes him lose his means and his identity to a sense of alienation “that makes him a self-destroyer and destroyer of others around him,”³⁷ says Chatterjee. Devdas's violence seems to be directed more towards the representation of femininity than to a particular woman. Chatterjee

³³ Sarda Act 1956 fixed the age of marriage at 15 years for girls and 18 years for boys. See Liliane Jenkins, *Mâ, l'Inde au féminin* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1986), 122.

³⁴ Poonam Arora in her essay “*Devdas: India's Emasculated Hero, Sado-Masochism and Colonialism*,” devotes attention to the influence of the colonial framework on the behaviour of the masculine gender in Bengal at the beginning of the 20th century: “Despite its liberal and humanitarian rhetoric, it became the focus of the colonial disdain of Bengali masculinity and of Bengali male's attempt to reclaim his masculinity” (*op.cit.*, paragraph 32):

³⁵ “... and despite his deep friendship with a prostitute, deny himself any sexual gratification with her. In doing so, Devdas establishes his manhood and his honor.” *Ibid.*, paragraph 44.

³⁶ Gayatri Chatterjee, *Awaara* (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2003).

³⁷ *op.cit.*, p.65.

explains these reactions as a “symptom” of the era that the cinema conveys by subverting it into elements of pleasure knowing fully well that they hide a crisis from which we can get out only through a social change. The fact that the discomfort of the character resonates within the society and affects the public which identifies with him seems to suggest that this “symptom” that hides an unresolved crisis is still relevant.³⁸

By transforming the discomfort³⁹ of the male character in terms of quality, translated by relationships of chastity between him, the heroine and the courtesan, Sarat Chandra adds an unusual dimension to the story that raises Devdas to the level of mythical heroes. His Devdas becomes a tragic hero. However, Kashyap addresses this dimension of the character by demystifying Devdas and stripping him of his aura of renunciation, unworthy of so depraved a character and plagued by evil.

In all the versions, Devdas loses control of himself when Parvati boasts of her social promotion she will acquire through arranged marriage. Devdas hits Parvati on the face leaving an indelible mark on her forehead, in memory of their love, he says. Kashyap moves Dev's violence to a different target: he does not hit Paro but her alleged lover. If this sequence can be read as an act of jealousy, Dev's behavior indicates that it is more an inner conflict than a settling of accounts between two suitors. We find that Dev, after returning to his village after many years in the West, is uprooted and lost. He discovers a changed India. His country has been modernized, taboos have fallen and traditional ties have been trampled. He strikes neither the woman nor the image of women like his predecessors. His gesture aims at the image of himself that the boy - the symbol of India he does not recognize - returns to him.

The character of Kashyap's Dev, although it is built on the same model as traditional Devdases, is different and suffers for other reasons. The father figure without authority is one of them. His permissiveness and laxity replace the stereotype of the authoritarian and cruel fathers of previous Devdases. The father wishes even that Dev marries Paro although she is the daughter of his employee. If the cause of suffering - the impossibility of a marriage outside the cast - is ruled out, Dev's discomfort persists. It seems that fewer the limits imposed by his father, the further he goes in his cynicism and aggressiveness. Kashyap pushes the feature of

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ In the text Devdas, after returning from his education in Calcutta, does not freely express his sentiments and respond to the explicit advances of Parvati (cf. the famous sequence in which Parvati comes to Devdas's room in the night). For the same reasons, he repels the body of the courtesan.

“self-destruction and destruction of others around” inherent to his character to homicide.

If Kashyap's version reconfigures the hierarchy of relationships between characters, turns the traditional course of the *Devdas* myth and changes the spaces, what is left of the literary model, characters and myth? It should be noted that despite all the apparent changes Kashyap's approach only confirms the conventions of popular cinema. His proposals do not go beyond the traditional framework of the film. They contextualize the story of *Devdas*, bring the characters closer to reality, denote changes in Indian society and adapt spaces to those of the “real” life. On the surface. His film keeps so many fantastic and improbable times typical for a popular Hindi film. The *happy ending*⁴⁰ is one of those improbable but admissible moments in Bollywood fiction. The fact that he introduces musical intervals in his movie anchors his version of Devdas in the Indian cinematic tradition. By reorganizing the filmic space, the film opens the way for an update of the traditional popular cinema by proposing a new aesthetics.

Dev. D - a hero without identity

It [identity] qualifies all determinations that fall to as being "its own". This does not mean that they belong to it, but they find themselves in relation to the "idem" of the identical, to its sameness.⁴¹

If Kashyap's hero always identifies himself through the same components - indecision, immobility, depression, isolation - his uprooting, the internal pressure (moral and emotional), but above all his individualism and non-membership to any group make him a man without existence and without identity. His moral distress is exacerbated by the violence of his social environment. If this is not the first time an Indian film uses the influence of Western mores as reference of the evil, in *Dev. D* it is represented as a generalized gangrene that attacks the urban space and eats away the rural India. The image of contemporary India in the films of Kashyap and *Dev*.

⁴⁰ In postcolonial films called “law dramas” (*Andaz, Awaara, Phir Subah Hogi,...*) heroes who have committed crimes must undergo a punishment, minimal though it may be, as a way to restore *dharma*, according to Michael H. Hoffheimer, “Awaara and the post-colonial origins of the Hindi Law Drama,” in *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 26-3 (August 2006): 341–359. Dev. D, even though he had committed a homicide under the influence of drugs, is released on bail instead of being sent to prison.

⁴¹ Jean-Luc Nancy, *op.cit.*, 19 (English version).

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D in particular upsets traditional representations. The author does not just move the action of the peaceful Bengali village Talsônâpour to a rapidly changing place without identity (an industrialized town in the heart of Punjabi countryside near the Chandigarh airport)⁴². Having located the classic story in the current context, Kashyap subtly transposes the relationships of the characters in similar situations but not quite the same and builds, through a process of deconstruction, a new identity not only of Devdas but also the main female characters, Parvati and Chandramukhi. Thus, one might conclude, borrowing the phrase from Jean-Luc Nancy, that

identity accomplishes the eternal return of the same of which Nietzsche spoke: a return that is not a reprise, a reiteration, but an infinite return to the absolutely different whose sameness is made up of this absolute difference.⁴³

⁴² In *Dev. D*, the hero does not seek refuge in the anonymity of Calcutta but that of Delhi.

⁴³ Jean-Luc Nancy, *op.cit.*, 20 (English version).

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