

## LOCATING THE MOVIE ‘DEVDas’ WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF ARISTOTLE’S CONCEPT OF ‘TRAGEDY’ AND TRACE THE ‘RASAS’ AND ‘BHAVAS’, ACCORDING TO BHARATA’S *NATYASHASTRA*

**Pranjal Protim Barua**

Assistant Professor  
Department of English  
Motilal Nehru College  
University of Delhi, Delhi

The movie ‘Devdas’ is a prolific spectacle where one witnesses a smooth blending of the Indian philosophy of ‘Rasa’ and ‘Bhava’, as mentioned in the quintessential book in Indian philosophy; Bharata’s *Natyashastra*, and the concept of tragedy according to Aristotle’s *Poetics*. The movie by Sanjay Leela Bhansali is adapted from Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay novel by the same name ‘Devdas’. This paper is not looking into the adaptation part of the movie, regarding how far the essence of the original is retained and what is lost. The paper will take on from the movie itself, which is the object of my study in this paper. The scope of the paper is to trace its ‘Rasa-Bhava’ structure, and fit it into the Aristotelian model of tragedy. The thesis statement of the paper is to prove Devdas, the protagonist in the movie as the tragic character according to Aristotelian concept of tragedy, and simultaneously trace the ‘Rasa-Bhava’ structure operating in the movie.

The movie success speaks for itself. What can one say about a film that have “won five National Awards, ten Filmfare Awards including Best Film, and received a BAFTA nomination for Best Foreign Language Film. It was also India's entry for Best Foreign Language Film at the Oscars. It was ranked #74 in *Empire* magazines "The 100 Best Films Of World Cinema" in 2010.”<sup>1</sup> The movie is about two childhood lovers who become prey to the class based feudal landlord societal values of Bengal at that point of time when the novel was written. Devdas’ separation from Paro(Parvati) is the driving force in the movie.

It is prominently Vipralambha Shringara rasa, the erotic sentiment in separation, that comes in operation in the movie, which alongwith Sambhoga Shringara rasa completes Abhinava Gupta’s notion of Shringara rasa as being the blossoming of ‘kama’<sup>2</sup>, and which is suitable to the natural disposition of the human heart and mind. Two songs in the movie, firstly when Devdas goes to Paro<sup>3</sup> to give her the bangles, which his grandmother wishes to see in the hands of his beloved. The bangles become the strong symbol of their mutual commitment and the sense of yearning for each other is shown vividly in the portrayed intimacy between them. The second song is “*kare Krishna raas radha ke sang*”, where both the lovers come in a close union with each other. The song evokes the ‘rati’, the Sthayi bhava corresponding to Shringara Rasa, where both the lovers intimately get closer to each other, thereby making their love correspond to Lord

<sup>1</sup> Accessed from < [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Devdas\\_\(2002\\_film\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Devdas_(2002_film)) > on 09.05.11 at 00:18 hours.

<sup>2</sup> The concept of ‘kama’, according to Vatsayana’s *Kamasutra*.

<sup>3</sup>Paro is Parvati, but she is always known as Paro. Therefore, in the paper I will refer as Paro to keep the essence alive.

Krishna's 'raas-leela'. Even the colour associated to Shringara Rasa is dark blue, and the setting of the song is dark with a bluish background. The setting provided in the song is also similar to Shakuntala's ashram, as mentioned in Kalidasa's 'Abhigyanam Shakuntalam'. The trees, with a small waterfall, and two lovers meeting under the moonlight is a perfect setting from the 'Rati' to arouse the 'Shringara Rasa', where the lovers eliminate the personality of one another, what 'AbhinavGupta'<sup>4</sup> says as the merger of "I" and "you". It is in the subsequent scene that Paro claims Devdas to be her husband for the first and last time in the movie. It also hints at a possible Gandharva marriage between the two, like Shakuntala and Dushyanta. This possibility finds expression when the Devdas hits her on her forehead with a neck-lace for her to bleed on a superficial level, but to fill her 'maang'<sup>5</sup> with blood, which is symbolic of the 'sindoor'<sup>6</sup>, symbolizing their marriage, the marriage about which no one else knew. So, in this case it is also a 'Gandharva vivah'<sup>7</sup>, on the part of Devdas and Paro. Later, she is married off to a wealthy landlord. Nevertheless, this marriage is a constructed one to buy her social security and to give an answer to the insult both Paro and her mother faced on being humiliated by Devdas' father and mother respectively. Later, after the constructed marriage, she walks up to Devdas touches his feet, and seeks his blessing, which is a tradition prominent in Indian tradition.

The relationship between Devdas and Paro in the movie can be classified into a vicious circle of 'Vipralambha- Sambhoga-Vipralambha' Shringara. The ten years separation in the childhood, in which their childhood friendship grows into love, is similar to Kalidasa's 'Meghduta', which says, "in the absence of bhoga (union) with the intensification of desire for the lover, love gets deeper", which is a perfect example of Vipralambha Shringara rasa. In this particular type of the Shringara rasa, there lies a possibility of a reunion. So is the case with 'Paro' who waits for ten long years with burning the oil lamp, which symbolizes 'Devdas's' presence in her life. On the other hand, Devdas also longs to meet 'Paro', whom he has been missing for years together. His eagerness is shown when he first visits 'Paro's' place to see her, rather than his own, which meanwhile annoys his mother and creates grounds for his elder sister-in-law to sow seeds of hatred in the mind Kaushalya, Devdas's mother. Their union after ten years and the songs that are mentioned above shows the intensity of their love, and a want to meet each other for a span of ten long years. Sambhoga Shringara rasa is vividly portrayed in this part of the movie. However, to draw nourishment for the plot, they are separated again. Now, Vipralambha Shringara rasa takes over the course of action. Now, both yearn to come together, but this time their reunion is problematized by various Vyabhicari Bhavas operating simultaneously. The Vyabhicari Bhavas in operation are firstly, *Mada*, which is "intoxication produced by intoxicants. It is of three types and has five (six) bhava-s." the character of Devdas

---

<sup>4</sup> Abhinavagupta (fl. c. 975 - 1025) was one of [India's](#) great literary critics and philosophers. He was a master of the Kula school of 'Shaivism', but wrote commentaries elucidating various texts and schools of thought. His ability to clarify the meaning of ancient texts through the application of [reason](#) and [logic](#), and through his personal experience of religious practice, helped to popularize 'Kashmiri Shaivism'. Accessed from [http://www.thenewyoga.org/guru\\_abhinavagupta.htm](http://www.thenewyoga.org/guru_abhinavagupta.htm) on 09.05.11 at 14:55 hours.

<sup>5</sup> The portion in the verge where the forehead meets the hairline, and which extends from that part back to the mid of the head separating the hair.

<sup>6</sup> The red vermilion, which is put on by women according to the Indian tradition, which is symbolizes their marriage.

<sup>7</sup> Gandharv Marriage can be considered to be Love marriage, as when the bride and groom don't take consent of their parents, the rituals can not be done, so an exchange of the marital Garland marks the marriage. Accessed from <http://www.gandharv.com/gandharv-marriage/> on 09.05.11 at 14:36 hours.

incorporates, all the three kinds- “lively, middling and low”, according to the Arya verses. “One intoxicated person sings, another cries, a third one laughs, a fourth one uses harsh words and the fifth sleeps.”<sup>8</sup> But, in the later part of the movie we get to see that that Devdas has all the Bhavas in his character. He sings with Chunnibabu, cries after missing the moments he had passed with Devdas, laughs at himself and his present condition, uses harsh words on Chandra mukhi, to bring out his anger, and also sleeps after having drunk heavily. Second prominent Vyabhicari bhava is *Smriti*, which is “the remembrance of happy and unhappy experience.” Devdas and Paro remember their past, which is *Smriti*, and its vibhavas are “loss of peace of mind, or a bad night of sleeplessness, worrying constantly by remembering like experiences.” Another important Vyabhicari bhava is *Vrida*, which is a “sense of shame. It is due to not doing one’s duty. Its vibhava-s are disobedience or disrespect to the elders, confession (of guilt), repentance, etc.” In the case of Devdas, the ‘vrida’ is his act of leaving Paro alone all to herself after such a deep and serious commitment, which he later realizes when the times had changed the equation and Paro was then destined and arranged, to be married to another wealthy old landlord. When he leaves his house, because of the anger at his father, he should have taken Paro along, but he does not. He leaves alone, leaving Paro to face the circumstances and situations that had risen. He did not support his love, on the fear of the family values that were so important in that period. Here is a culmination of *Garva*, or ‘arrogance’, which lead to *Visada* or ‘sorrow, regret, disappointment.’ Then follows a series of Vyabhicari bhavas, like *Mati*, *Vibodha*, *Amarsa*, *Unmada*, and finally *Maranam*.

Like Shringara being the prime to all other rasas put together, the relationship between Devdas and Paro is prime to the movie compared to all other relationships put together. However, the paper does not only intend to trace the Shingara rasa in the movie, but also to see other rasas. The movie gets so well embedded in the Rasa-Bhava structure, that the prime protagonist, Devdas incorporates almost all the Sattvika Bhavas, that are involuntary, but arises out of the situation to add vigour to that situation. The Sattvika Bhavas contextualized in situation is the movie, are as follows: *Stambha*(stupefaction), “This is acted by standing still, body unmoving, eyes unseeing and limbs lifeless.” This happens in the movie at the time when Paro goes to marry the landlord according to rituals in the hall. Later, the same thing is also seen when he carries her palanquin. The second Sattvika bhava, *Sveda*(sweating) is not very prominent, but the message it means to convey is incorporated with the first. The third, *Romanca* (feeling thrilled), is perfectly seen in the chemistry between the two lovers when they are united for a rather short time in the movie. The fourth, *Svarabheda*(break in voice), and fifth *Vepathu*(trembling) is seen when he bids farewell to Paro, and later when he expresses his love for Paro, to Chandramukhi. The sixth, *Vairanya*(pallor), is seen when he brings Paro out for her marriage, but finally is forced to leave her hand, when she proceeds to the marriage spot. The seventh, *Asru*(tears), is seen when Paro comes to Devdas on the very next morning of her marriage, to seek blessings as from Devdas by touching his feet, which is generally done by a bride to her groom. In this very incident, Paro wants to return her bangle, which Devdas once gave her as a symbol of their love. But he then gives her another one, which also hints, according to my understanding is that Devdas and Paro are now unofficially accepting each other as life partners. Later even Paro cries when she is leaving her family in general and Devdas in particular, at the point of her departure in the palanquin. The final one, *Pralaya*(death), is seen when he goes to meet Paro at Manikpur, to keep his promise, which he once made to Paro. But,

---

<sup>8</sup> From Ch. 7, *Bharata’s Natyashastra*

his visit goes in vain, as he collapses to death right in front of the Paro's gate, and destiny has been so harsh at them that they do not even see each other for the last time even before his death.

Other prominent rasa seen in the movie is the 'Raudra' rasa. It is very well shown when Devdas is seen confronting with his father, who insulted Paro right in front of him. 'Hasya' rasa is seen when Kausalya, Devdas's mother and Sumitra, Paro's mother, recollects the memories of their respective children. To be honest enough, there was not elements of 'Hasya' rasa in the movie. 'Adbhuta' rasa is seen in the beauty of Paro. 'Bibhatsa' and 'Bhayanaka' rasa is seen when Devdas's health deteriorates to such an extent that he meets death. Eliot's concept of 'Objective Correlative' is also functioning in the movie. The object here is the liquor bottle. The man who did not ever touch liquor, was forced by circumstances to such an extent, that it lead to his fatal and untimely death. It is Devdas's taking recourse to liquor, which he has always avoided the intensity of his emotional grief. It is through this liquor that we can that we can engage our mental faculty in his inner turmoil.

Now, as my paper also claim to include 'Devdas', the movie into Aristotelian model of Tragedy, I would like to briefly summarize his theory of tragedy, and place the movie in the model. For Aristotle, plot was important than the character. Aristotle says, "The incidents and the plot are the end of a tragedy; and the end is the chief thing of all."<sup>9</sup> If it is so, then how can a movie, which is adapted from the novel 'Devdas', which can be classified under the category, 'Bildungsroman'<sup>10</sup>, now take the movie as fitting into the plot taking precedence over characters structure as defined by Aristotle. As the category 'Bildungsroman' is about the development of the character in the plot, the novel or the movie 'Devdas' does not actually talk of development of the character from a low status. The movie shows how the plot proceeds with the fall of the character of Devdas. So here, the word 'development' is important. Now, it is development of the plot with the help of the character. The plot provides the characters with the circumstances, under which the character suffers to fit into the definition of 'Tragic hero'.

As mentioned in the first part of Aristotle's 'Poetics', he defines tragedy as "an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions... Every Tragedy, therefore, must have six parts, which parts determine its quality-namely, Plot, Character, Diction, Thought, Spectacle, Song."<sup>11</sup>, in increasing order of importance.

According to Aristotle, the plot should be of two types: simple and complex. "Plots are either Simple or Complex...I call Simple, when the change of fortune takes place without Reversal of the Situation and without Recognition. A Complex action is one in which the change is accompanied by such Reversal, or by Recognition, or by both."<sup>12</sup> Another important aspect is

<sup>9</sup> Accessed from < <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/poetics.mb.txt> > on 09.05.11 at 18:08 hours.

<sup>10</sup> A *Bildungsroman* is, most generally, the story of a single individual's growth and development within the context of a defined social order. The growth process, at its roots a quest story, has been described as both "an apprenticeship to life" and a "search for meaningful existence within society." Accessed from < <http://www.victorianweb.org/genre/hader1.html> > on 09.05.11 at 17:50 hours.

<sup>11</sup> Accessed from < <http://www.victorianweb.org/genre/hader1.html> > on 09.05.11 at 18:24 hours.

<sup>12</sup> Accessed from < <http://www.victorianweb.org/genre/hader1.html> > on 09.05.11 at 18:24 hours.

that a character of high social status should fall from a higher platform to a lower one. The basic concepts he discusses in the tragedy is ‘Hamartia’, which is the tragic flaw in the character, ‘Anagnorisis’, which is the discovery or realization of the fact that lead to his downfall, ‘Peripety’, which is the reversal of fortune, and ‘Catharsis’, which is the purgation of feelings.

Now, to look at the movie, it does talk of a character of high social status, Devdas, the son of a landlord, who falls from the higher platform of being a lawyer from London to a drunkard staying in a brothel, and finally meet his death. The circumstances created in the plot and its social background, separated the two lovers. Thereby he leaves his home alone and leaving Paro all to herself. The ‘Hamartia’ in his character is his impulsive nature, anger and pride, whose price is paid by Devdas himself, which eventually costs him his life. Out of impulse, without listening to his heart, he writes to Paro that it will be good for them to separate, and forget all the love between them. Later, when he learns of his mistakes in writing such a letter, he realizes what he had done. This is ‘Anagnorisis’ in the movie. As time has changed all the equations, now he is left with the only option, and that is to watch Paro helplessly, getting married not with him but to someone else. After, her marriage, his life completely changes. That is the ‘peripety’ in the movie. The now takes recourse to drinking to overcome his sorrow. Nevertheless, as was the intensity of love, so was the sorrow. Moreover, the intensity of sorrow being such unbearable that he drinks like a fish, which ends his life. He suffered because of his the only big mistake that he had done. If he cannot live without Paro, why then did he leave her alone? The audience can feel the pain and can relate to their personal impulsive situations, and feel the growing fear in them, at seeing the condition of Devdas. Finally, towards the end, Devdas dies at the gates of Paro’s new mansion, and still then, destiny is so harsh with them that, Paro is not allowed to meet him for the last time. The audience can cry out, which leads to the purgation of their feelings; that is ‘Catharsis’. Thus, the movie has the elements to bring out the elements of ‘pity’ and ‘fear’ in the audience.

Therefore, the movie does fit into the Aristotelian model of tragedy. Therefore, in the paper the argument prove to a considerable extent, in showing Aristotle’s tragedy and Bharata’s Rasas and Bhavas, coming together in the movie ‘Devdas’. Thus, the movie can be located in a suspended space where the east and the west converge, or are intertwined with each other.

### **Bibliography:**

1. Bharata. *Natyashastra*. Trans. Adya Rangacharya. New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 2003.
2. *Devdas*. Dir. Sanjay Leela Bhansali. Prod. Bharat Shah. Based on a novel by Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay *Devdas*. Perf. Shahrukh Khan, Aishwariya Rai, Kiron Kher, Madhuri Dixit, Jackie Shroff. Mega Bollywood, 2003.
3. < <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/poetics.mb.txt> >
4. < <http://www.victorianweb.org/genre/hader1.html> >
5. < <http://www.gandharv.com/gandharv-marriage/> >
6. < [http://www.thenewyoga.org/guru\\_abhinavagupta.htm](http://www.thenewyoga.org/guru_abhinavagupta.htm) >
7. < [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Devdas\\_\(2002\\_film\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Devdas_(2002_film)) >