

ESSAY

The progressive depiction of women in 'Devdas'



ILLUSTRATION: AMREETA LETHE

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At the present time when there is, once again, a backlash to feminism and an accompanying glorification of conservative gender norms, whether in the form of think pieces asking if #MeToo has gone too far for prominent public figures blaming women leaving the house for society's decline, the idea that writer born in 1876 could write a text that would be considered as boundary pushing even today may seem beyond strange. But that is the case with Sharatchandra Chattyapadhyay's 1917 novel *Devdas*.

The story is one we're familiar with—the eponymous *Devdas* loses the love of his life Parbati and succumbs to alcoholism, finding in his slow descent and deterioration another caring figure in the form of Chandramukhi, a courtesan whom he rejects, and ultimately dies from complications arising from his excessive alcohol consumption.

In the world that *Devdas* is set, caste, class, and gender are markers that determine which behaviour is considered appropriate from someone. *Devdas* occupies one of the more privileged positions, and it is his higher position in society that leads to his mother rejecting the proposal for marriage from Parbati's family. Unable to go against the wishes of his parents, neither of whom see Parbati as a suitable bride for their house because of her class and caste position, *Devdas* rejects Parbati's affection, despite the severe risk she puts herself in when she visits him at night to speak to him.

Parbati's transgressive behaviour in expressing her affection for *Devdas* is one of the most stark examples of her courage. In some ways, Sharatchandra places the blame for *Devdas*'s ensuing sorrow on his lack of courage, made all the more noticeable in comparison to Parbati's courage in breaking social norms despite the dire consequences it could have for her. That Parbati takes this step despite its potential to tarnish her reputation makes her a character who is unusual. On the other hand, *Devdas*, who is significantly more privileged and thus in a greater position to act more independently, struggles to reciprocate the initiative Parbati took; his misery at eventually losing Parbati becomes even more pitiable as we are made privy to *Devdas*'s mother's thought that she ought to have let Parbati marry him when the proposal first arrived.

On the opposite end of the spectrum of respectability is Chandramukhi, a courtesan who falls in love with *Devdas* and whose reputation cannot be besmirched to the same extent as Parbati's because of her profession. The sympathetic light Chandramukhi is portrayed in is progressive, not only for the time in which it was written, but also at this present age when hyper conservative attitudes across the world have once again led many to openly moralise on various aspects of women's lifestyles regardless of the profession they are in. In order to understand how this portrayal was progressive, it is important to situate the text in the sociopolitical climate of the time.

While on one side there were the liberal aspects of the Brahmo Samaj, there also existed the conservative and traditional social norms, especially regarding women. Supriya Chaudhuri, in a chapter titled "The Bengali Novel" in *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Indian Culture* (2012), mentions how, at the time in which Sharatchandra was writing, popular women novelists such as Anurupa Debi, Nirupama Debi, and even Nurunessa Khatun, a Muslim woman, wrote texts that valorised chastity in women.

Decades later in the latter half of the 20th century, Sudhir Kakkar would write in *The Inner World: A Psycho-analytic Study of Childhood and Society in India* (1978), of the expectations on Indian woman to behave like Sita, the wife of Ram, emphasising the significant ways she is presented as a role model, and the importance placed on her chastity. His words, "Where and when tradition governs, an Indian woman does not stand alone; her identity is wholly defined by her relationships to others", continues to resonate with many women today.

Taking these into consideration, Sharatchandra's decision to not attach Chandramukhi to any male figure and not providing even a backstory for how she ended up in her profession is noteworthy. He depicts her with as much depth and nuance as *Devdas* and Parbati, both figures still contained within the safety net of "respectability". Chandramukhi is shown, not only as kind and caring, but intelligent and highly capable of taking care of both

herself and her community. She is not shown as needing to be saved, nor is she portrayed as a supernatural saviour with god-like powers; she is merely human, and happens to be a courtesan.

It is this human portrayal of his female characters that allows for continued relatability among modern women. To readers today, depicting women as complex individuals with often inexplicable desires may seem unremarkable, but we get a grasp of how progressive this mindset was when we take into account not just the prevailing ideas in the time in which the text was written, but the ideas that have remained in the current age.

Therefore, the inclusion of various flawed women in *Devdas* is also noteworthy. While we are given glimpses of the almost saintly main female characters, we also see characters such as Parbati and *Devdas*'s mothers, *Devdas*'s cruel sister-in-law Jaladbara, Parbati's meek friend Manohara, and others. From being uncaring and cruel to frightened and compromising, and even classist and casteist, the many kinds of women portrayed in the text evades the common issue of the portrayal of women as a monolith.

Devdas also challenges another common convention: women being imagined as representing the nation. This is known, not only to those in academia, but to anyone who has heard of the idea of Mother India or the Statue of Liberty. This may seem like a development that existed at a time before the partition of 1947, but we find iterations of such a belief even in novels

written in 1981 like Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*.

On the surface, this may seem as if women are being given immense respect. However, as C L Innes points out, this identification of women with the nation did not result in improvements in a woman's condition in society. She mentions the case of Sri Aurobindo, another famous Bengali man, who despite exhortations to work for Mother India, did not care for his own wife Mrinalini despite being married to her for nearly two decades.

Such a mentality of equating women with the nation is prevalent, not only in colonial or postcolonial nations but also colonising nations such as Britain and France. In the case of dominated countries such as India and Ireland specifically, the native woman is visualised as frail and fragile; in other words, the native woman was viewed as requiring protection, and the protection would come from colonising powers who would save them from native men. However, despite this portrayal of native men as causing harm to native women, native men of colonised nations were also simultaneously portrayed as effeminate. What this served to do is provide a rationalisation for the colonisation, for the depiction of colonised men as having supposedly feminine qualities such as sensitivity and irrationality allowed the colonising powers to brand their domination as a heroic endeavour where they would be a benevolent guide to the misguided native men who needed their assistance.

Seen in this light, we see how unique and powerful Sharatchandra's sentimental depiction of female characters are. His fiction is not used to reclaim masculinity, nor does it attempt to mobilise a public by turning women into national symbols. Instead, his female characters are written as living breathing human beings who speak up for themselves.

This is not to say that *Devdas* is immune to criticism. From both the female protagonists taking significant risks for *Devdas* unintentionally perpetuating the ideal of the self-sacrificial women to the equation of beauty with positive personal attributes and vice versa, a lot requires discussion and criticism.

However, the potency of the text is undeniable, for even after a century, the plights of Parbati and Chandramukhi resonate with women today. Chandramukhi's statement that it is men who place women on a pedestal and men who denigrate women is powerful, not only for the content of what she said, but the fact that she is able to express herself without hesitation. With harmful stereotypes about women still prevailing and proliferating, this depiction of women being bold and pursuing what they desire while unabashedly speaking their minds, despite their increased vulnerability from doing so, acts as a hopeful model for what women may strive to be.

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POETRY

My scarlet incarnation

JANNATUL NAEEM TASMIAH

Being a woman comes to me naturally
If not me, then who?
I was never asked to be one
I was never asked to cook
To cry less
To dress modestly
To be a mother
To be a server
Being a woman comes to me naturally.
A house full of fetid people
And a sink full of dirty dishes
I was never asked to attend
But if not me, then who?
My divine purpose
My fair skin
My unbearable vivacity
If not me, then who?
So I never bothered to ask
The space between your thighs and mine
Handed me a spatula
And etched in a line
The dread anchored within my lacerated bosom
And the bravado glistening in your chest
Decided my divine purpose
My very own existence
My beige and pink entity
That no longer remained mine.



ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

Can you please tell me now?
Who are you?
The flagbearer of my being?
The apostle of bravado?
Go, tell your father
Do not look for her anymore.
Today,

My original sin
My scarlet incarnation
It is all mine.
I am my very own being.
I own it all.

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