

Re-Reading of Saratchandra Chattopadhyay's *Devdas* as a Socio-Cultural
Construct Foregrounding Patriarchal Perspective

Mrs. Kriti Ameya Chavan

Research Scholar, Department of English, University of Mumbai, Mumbai, (M.S.) India

Abstract

Saratchandra Chattopadhyay's novel, *Devdas*, is a story of Devdas, a young man from a rich Bengali Brahmin family living in India and following all the rituals of Brahminism that staunchly exist in the early 1900s, Parvati, Devdas' childhood friend, a beautiful, modest, young woman from a middle-class Bengali Brahmin family and Chandramukhi, the 'moon-faced' twenty-four-year-old courtesan who lives in Calcutta. Although intense love as an omnipotent and all-pervasive feeling is at the core of the story, *Devdas* is not the story of love blooming to fruition of joy and elation. There is Narayan Mukherjee, Devdas' father, the local zamindar, a disciplined man, although with a kind heart but is an opinionated person, assertive of the staunch societal customs. His rigid thoughts restrict him from accepting Paro, as their daughter-in-law in unison with the biased opinion of Harimati, Devdas' mother, who rejects the proposal sent across by Paro's family on grounds of them being their immediate neighbours, and due to the differences in their financial status. In the novel, Chandramukhi is robbed of money, respectability and social status. Ironically, it is she who is considered as fallen, not the men who seek pleasure by advancing themselves towards her. It is in this context that the present paper attempts to read Saratchandra Chattopadhyay's *Devdas* and show how the prevalent socio-cultural set up culminated in the suffering of pivotal characters under the patriarchal system of society.

Key Words: Saratchandra Chattopadhyay, *Devdas*, patriarchy, gender, etc.

A prominent Greek general Meno, in Plato's *Meno*: An interpretation sums up the prevailing virtues of men and women. He says:

"First of all, if you take the virtue of a man, it is easily stated that a man's virtue is this- that he be competent to manage the affairs of the city, and to manage them so as to benefit his friends and harm his enemies, and to take care to avoid suffering harm himself. Or take a woman's virtue: there is no difficulty in describing it as the duty of ordering the house well, looking after the property indoors and obeying her husband."

Patriarchy is a social system in which the society is organized around the male

authoritative figures. It is in this context that Parvati's father, Nilkantha Chakravarty, has authority over her. "Parvati's father had gone to fix a match for her. He came back having done the deed." But, "It was the end of the world for Parvati." Since patriarchy implies the institutions of male rule and privilege, it is dependent on female subordination. Patriarchy is an unjust social system that is oppressive and exploitative to women.

The patriarchal set up has created the stereotypical notions that pertain to the traits of men and women separately. The social constructs of the male superiority identify themselves with qualities like valour, strength, courage, power as opposed the female being passive,

submissive and frail. Hamlet's memorable phrase "Frailty, thy name is woman." (Draper 110) from his famous soliloquy, alludes to the weak and frail character of all womankind. Conversely, it is observed that Saratchandra comes to light as a writer who speaks for the emancipation of women through his works.

Contrary to the conventional notion, the female characters, in the novel, namely, Chandramukhi and Paro share the centre stage with the male protagonist emerging as being stronger than him. In an instance from the novel when Paro enters Devdas' room around two in the night, she is fearless. Devdas "shuddered with apprehension" (Guha 34) and says, "So late... shame on you. How will you face everyone tomorrow?" (Guha 35) Paro replies, "I have the strength for that." (Guha 35). However, the gendered roles assigned for men and women are different. When it is Devdas' turn to 'shield' (Guha 35) Paro from this situation, she says, 'You are a man. Sooner or later they'd all forget about your disgrace;' (Guha35).

Why does Chandramukhi's profession, become so important so as to judge her on her status, respectability, dignity, and even her capacity to love? Devdas doesn't for once consider the fact that she is ready to look after him irrespective of his feeling of disgust for her. In order to understand her love for him, he would have to see her beyond she being a courtesan, which he isn't able to do. In Devdas' words, Chandramukhi is, "the prime example of how much humiliation and assault, how many jibes and insults a woman can stand." (Guha 70).

Parvati's grandmother is a compassionate woman. It is observed that she, like Narayan Mukherjee is a product of the socio-cultural construct of the society they

are a part of. Although she is sympathetic towards Paro at all times, her ideas are limited and stereotyped perhaps due to the older generation that she belongs to. Distressed at Pundit Govinda's impertinence towards Paro she makes a hasty decision to quit Paro from going to school. On Paro's mother's insistence to let her study, Grandma says, "What's the point? If she can write a few letters and read a few lines of the Ramayana and Mahabharata, it is more than enough. Your Paro is hardly likely to study law or become a barrister." (Guha 13). Contrastingly, Devdas' mother, said to her husband, "Deva is growing into an unlettered bumpkin..." (Guha 19) When Mukherjee babu thinks over it he says, "Let him go to Calcutta. He can stay in Nagen's house and finish his studies". (Guha 19). This serves as an important incident for understanding the male centered scenario where their influence and power pervades socially and the marginalized class of people cooperate in their own suppression.

Manorama, Parvati's childhood friend is a little older than her and has been married off in the previous year. She is the epitome of the ideal wife shaping her behaviour and ideas to perfectly match the societal norms existing in that time frame. She is stunned to see Paro's conviction for getting married to Devdas. She is a perfectly cultured woman who believes in the customs set by the society. She holds high regard for her husband and that becomes evident when she says, "Say it now while you are not married to him and can still take your husband's name." (Guha 29). On her way back home she thinks, "Amazing grit. That is some courage. I would rather die than speak like that." (Guha).

Marriage as one important theme is recurrent throughout the story from the very outset of Parvati's Grandma's opinion of getting her married soon as she turns thirteen. In the novel, "Parvati had just turned thirteen. It was the age when the teenaged body suddenly came to life. The family woke up one day to the fact that their little girl was all grown up. Now there was rush to get her married." (Guha 23). However, the hints that were dropped by the Chakravarty's for the proposed marriage were contemptuously turned down by Devdas' mother. The reason for the rejection was the difference between their family status, financial background, class and caste disparity. Ironically, neither Devdas nor Paro were responsible for the differences. Devdas thought to himself, 'why did his parents object to her when her birth wasn't her fault in any way? With age and an understanding of life which he had gained from his stay at Calcutta Devdas had come to believe that it was wrong to destroy an individual's life in order to preserve a status that was in any case a product of narrow-minded thought.' (Guha 40)

While Manorama's marriage was a conventionally arranged one but according to Paro, "there were women like Manorama who wore their *sindoor* and

their iron bangles, marks of a marriage, to no real purpose." (Guha, 32). Through the character of Manorama, the readers are constantly informed about the ideology of the preconceived qualities for women, like being submissive and subservient, meek and timid.

Marriage for Chandramukhi is far-fetched. Her quest for identity occupies major section of the story. An instance from the novel clarifies this notion. "Chandramukhi begged, 'You will need a maid too, let me once come with you. 'Devdas said, 'Impossible. Whatever I may do, I cannot be so shameless.'" (Guha 116). Chandramukhi was robbed of speech. She wasn't stupid and she understood him well. Come what may, she could not have a place of pride in the world. She could help Devdas regain his health, she could give him pleasure, but she could never give him respectability." (Guha 116).

Thus, Devdas emerges as a social novel. Saratchandra's simply paints a picture displaying the inevitable social scenario, drawing characters caught in circumstances that are prevalent yet weaves a tragic tale of fruitless love story in which the protagonists suffer unrequited love despite being able to love with a pure heart.

Works Referred:

1. Abrams, M.H and Harpham, Geoffrey Galt. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. Cengage Learning, India, 2016. Print.
2. Aristotle. *Poetics*. England: Penguin books. 1996. Print.
3. Barry, Peter. *Beginning Theory: An introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*. Manchester University Press Peter Barry, 2009. Print.
4. Chattopadhyay, Sarat Chandra. *Devdas: A Novel*. Trans. Sreejata Guha. Penguin RandomHouse India, 2002. Print.
5. Daiches, David. *A Critical History of English Literature*. Vol.1. New Delhi: Supernova Publishers. 2014. Print.

6. Das, Sisir Kumar. *A History of Indian Literature 1911-1956: Struggle for Freedom: Triumph and Tragedy*. New Delhi, 1995. Print.
7. Draper, John. *The Hamlet of Shakespeare's Audience*. London: Duke University Press. 1939. Print.
8. Guha, Ranjit and Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak. *Selected Subaltern Studies*. New York: Oxford University Press. 1988. Print.
9. *MLA Handbook, The Modern Language Association of America*. New York, 2016. Print.
10. Sargar, Dr. Shivaji D. *Aesthetics of Subaltern Literature: Protest in African American and Dalit Autobiography*. Kanpur: Shubham Publications. 2018. Print.
11. Hamilton, Edith and Huntington Cairns. *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*. Trans. Lane Cooper. Princeton University Press. 1961. ebook.