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MASCULINE CRISIS AND THE QUEST FOR THE DIVINE FEMININE IN *DEVDAS* AND *DEV.D*: A PSYCHOANALYTIC STUDY

ABSTRACT

This article examines the crisis of masculinity and the quest for the divine feminine in Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay's novel *Devdas* (1917) and Anurag Kashyap's film *Dev.D* (2009) through a psychoanalytic and socio-cultural perspective. It explores how the character *Devdas*'s early attachment to his mother and his relationships with Parvati and Chandramukhi shape his masculine identity and create a conflict between sexual desire and the idealisation of the feminine as maternal and sacred. The study then examines how *Dev.D* reworks this conflict in a globalised and consumer-driven India, where Dev responds to changing femininity through sexual assertiveness, aggression and emotional detachment. The paper argues that, despite their contrasting forms of masculinity, both protagonists remain psychologically dependent on the feminine. Their inability to reconcile vulnerability, desire and masculine identity produces a continuing crisis that takes different forms across historical contexts.

INTRODUCTION

Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay's novel *Devdas* (1917) presents the tragedy of a man whose masculine identity is shaped by his attachment to the feminine.[1] Growing up in a wealthy *zamindar* household in colonial Bengal, Devdas develops a deep emotional bond with both his mother and his childhood companion Parvati. Frequently scolded by his father, Devdas seeks comfort in his mother's arms, sometimes in tears, while Parvati also cares for him in a maternal manner, bringing him food when he hides in the garden out of fear of his father. His father's decision to send him to Calcutta for an English education separates him from this familiar world and introduces him to the values of education, status and masculine respectability associated with the Bengali elite. Yet Devdas struggles to fulfil these expectations. Upon returning to home, he is unable to challenge the social conventions that prevent his marriage to Parvati, and he goes back to Calcutta, where regret, emotional dependence and alcohol gradually consume him. His subsequent relationship with the courtesan Chandramukhi further reveals his conflicted attitude towards women: although he seeks emotional refuge

in feminine figures, he finds it difficult to reconcile sexual desire with the idealised image of the woman as mother, caregiver and sacred figure. His crisis can therefore be understood not simply as the result of lost love, but as a conflict between the masculine identity imposed upon him and his deep psychological dependence on the feminine.

This article examines this conflict through a socio-psychoanalytic and comparative reading of Chattopadhyay's *Devdas* and its twenty-first-century film adaptation *Dev.D* (2009) by Anurag Kashyap.[2] The psychoanalytic dimension helps explain Devdas's attachment to the maternal feminine, his separation anxiety, guilt, sexual restraint and tendency to idealise women. The socio-cultural dimension places these psychological conflicts within changing ideas of masculinity in colonial and contemporary India. Drawing on psychoanalytic perspectives on the mother-son relationship and Indian male subjectivity, alongside scholarship on colonial masculinity and the cultural significance of the goddess, the study explores how the feminine functions as both an object of desire and a source of emotional and spiritual belonging. It argues that Devdas's masculine crisis emerges from his inability to reconcile sexual desire with his idealisation of the feminine as maternal, leading him towards restraint, dependence and the elevation of women towards the divine.

The character of Dev in *Dev.D*, on the other hand, situated in a globalised and consumerist India, reverses this pattern. He responds to the cultural stigma of masculine effeminacy through sexual assertiveness, consumption, aggression and emotional detachment. Unlike the earlier Devdas, Dev does not face the same social pressure to give up Paro because of her social status; instead, he struggles with women who are increasingly independent and assertive. His sexual conquest therefore becomes another form of masculine crisis. His attempt to construct masculinity through power and strength leads him to suppress the feminine qualities within himself, reflected in his tendency to demean, belittle and objectify women, yet his masculine identity remains connected to the feminine he tries to reject. This is particularly significant within the Indian goddess tradition, where the feminine is associated not only with maternal compassion and devotion but also with power and strength. Dev therefore cannot completely separate his idea of masculine strength from the powerful feminine image that remains culturally familiar to him. Neither protagonist achieves a balanced integration of masculinity and femininity. The study thus argues that the masculine crisis in these narratives is not simply a conflict between men and women, but a conflict within masculinity itself. Both protagonists struggle to accept qualities associated with the feminine, such as devotion, nurturing, emotional sensitivity and even strength, without experiencing them as a challenge to their masculine identity.

NEGOTIATION WITH WESTERN IDEALS AND SEPARATION FROM THE FEMININE

Growing up in an upper-caste *zamindar* household in colonial Bengal, Devdas can be situated within the social world of the *bhadralok*, the educated and socially respectable Bengali elite whose identity was shaped by refinement, education, social status and claims to cultural and moral authority.[3] As Gautam Ghosh observes in his discussion of the *bhadralok* in Satyajit Ray's 1958 film *Jalsaghar*, this class positioned itself as a custodian of cultural refinement and, by extension, as a bearer of the moral and

cultural values through which the nation could imagine its progress.[4] Thus, *bhadralok* identity involved a tension between the material and cultural demands of colonial modernity and the preservation of an Indigenous moral and spiritual authority. Devdas's masculine formation can be read within this tension. His father, who functions not only as a patriarchal authority within the family but also as an embodiment of the social expectations imposed upon Devdas, attempts to discipline him into an acceptable form of elite masculinity.

This ideal was also shaped by colonial notions that portrayed the Bengali *bhadralok* as effeminate, encouraging men to assert their masculinity in order to gain the validation and approval of the colonial master. Writing about *Devdas*, Rohan Sharma observes that Devdas's father shows concern that his son is being "emasculated" by being surrounded by his mother's affection and attached to his playmate Parvati.[5] This explains why he sends Devdas to Calcutta, where he is expected to acquire the attributes associated with masculine maturity. His movement to Calcutta is therefore more than just a change of place. It also marks his physical and emotional separation from his mother and the familiar world of childhood. It is an attempt to change Devdas from an emotionally attached village boy into a confident man who can meet the expectations of his social class. The transformation is visible in his changed appearance: "The rustic traits in Devdas had vanished completely with his sojourn in Calcutta. Now he sported foreign shoes, bright clothes, a walking stick, gold buttons, a watch."[6] His external transformation reflects his adoption of the cultural signs of colonial modernity and elite masculinity.

Homi K. Bhabha's concept of mimicry, drawing upon Frantz Fanon's earlier discussion of colonial subjectivity, is useful for understanding this transformation.[7] Colonial power often demands that the colonised adopt and internalise the habits and forms of the colonial master. Mimicry is therefore not a straightforward act of obedience; rather, it is a complex form of resistance. Natives can "return the gaze" of the colonial master; therefore, the mimic becomes a "camouflaged" figure, producing a distorted image of the coloniser that subtly undermines colonial authority.[8] In the novel, Devdas's imitation eventually leads him to resistance towards the Western ideals of masculinity, mainly associated with rationality, power, wealth and sexual conquest, which measure a man's worth. His resistance manifests as a critique of the Western education Devdas has been receiving. Education, in this context, is significant because it was central to the self-conception of the *bhadralok*, whose respectability was closely associated with educational and professional achievement.[9] Devdas says, "Chunni, education, learning, knowledge, success, all they achieve is a false feeling of happiness; however you look at it, they are only meant to pander your own happiness."[10] His criticism is notable, because it does not merely reject education; it questions the promise of fulfilment that education, knowledge and social success are supposed to produce. The statement marks a growing dissatisfaction with the model of masculine achievement that Calcutta represents. The problem for Devdas is not simply that he has become "modern," but that the masculine identity he has been taught to perform fails to provide emotional or moral coherence.

The father's authority is crucial here because the social expectations he represents extend beyond the family. Society continues the same control that the father first imposes on Devdas, revealing the patriarchal structure of the society in which individual

choices are shaped by male authority. The same social order that determines his education, marriage and status also separates him from Parvati. When Parvati breaks all society's conventions and, as a woman, proposes marriage to Devdas at midnight, he gets nervous and cannot gather the courage to fight against social marriage conventions and thus rejects Parvati's proposal, only to regret it later. His inability to act at this crucial moment exposes the limits of the masculinity he has acquired. Although he possesses the external markers of status and education, he lacks the courage to challenge the social structure that determines his choices. His subsequent realisation is therefore important. He goes back to Calcutta and observes 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."[11] The statement reveals his growing awareness that social status, the very basis of the masculine identity he has been taught to value, has come at the cost of individual emotional fulfilment. His decision to return to the village, along with his admission "I have lost a lot, too much, by coming to Calcutta,"[12] can therefore be seen as an attempt to recover something that he had lost while entering the world of elite modernity.

Partha Chatterjee's distinction between the "inner spiritual" and "external material" domains of nationalist thought also help to understand Devdas's relationship to his home village.[13] Chatterjee argues that the *bhadralok*'s engagement with nationalism involved a claim to protect the inner domain of Indian identity that was associated with family, religion, culture and spirituality, even while they entered the 'external' world of education, work, politics and material progress.[14] From the perspective of gender dynamics, Indian women were often placed at the centre of the inner or spiritual domain and were expected to preserve the family's cultural and moral values. This idea has also appeared repeatedly in Indian literature and cinema, where women are often represented through images of the mother, goddess, wife or moral guardian. Parvati can be read through this tradition of representation. She is not simply the woman Devdas has lost; she is connected to the familiar world of home, family, affection and moral values that he leaves behind when he goes to Calcutta.

Ghosh similarly shows that, for the *bhadralok*, family, religious practice, and moral identity were closely connected. He argues that their nationalist historical consciousness gained its emotional force from a "morally and emotionally loaded understanding" of time connected with family deities.[15] Although Devdas is not directly engaged in nationalist politics, this idea helps us understand his movement between Calcutta and the village. In Calcutta, he tries to build his identity through education, status, wealth and other external signs of masculine success, but these do not give him the emotional or moral fulfilment he expects. His return to Parvati can be understood not simply as a retreat from modernity, but as a search for the emotional, familial and moral belonging that his performed elite masculinity has failed to provide.

Devdas's expectation that Parvati would accept him despite his wrongdoings suggests that he still associates her with the emotional security of his childhood. This is where Sudhir Kakar's interpretation of the *Devdas* archetype as the "*Majnun*-lover" becomes relevant. Kakar sees Devdas's longing and desires as an emotional and psychological experience of childhood, where he wishes to completely merge with the mother. His suffering reflects the infant's cry at the absence of the mother. He seeks to reclaim the

"paradise lost," the time when he was not separated from his mother.[16] Devdas's return to Parvati can therefore be understood as a search for refuge in a familiar emotional and moral space. At the same time, Parvati can be read through the wider cultural representation of the feminine as a figure associated with motherhood, spirituality and the preservation of cultural values. Nandini Gupta, drawing on the idea of 'Mother India,' explains how the figure of the mother came to represent "the essence, the inner side, the spirituality and greatness of Hindu civilization."[17] Within this cultural framework, Parvati's significance extends beyond that of a romantic beloved. She becomes associated with a maternal and spiritual ideal that Devdas believes can offer him moral stability. However, Parvati refuses to accept Devdas and speaks of her pride with authority. She challenges Devdas's virtue by calling him "ruthless, reckless, and unwise."[18] Her decision to separate from him further wounds his masculine ego. In a moment of anger, Devdas strikes Parvati on the forehead with a fishing rod. However, he immediately tries to tend to her wound by tearing a strip from his cotton kurta and using it as a bandage. He says, "This wound will heal soon … I have merely left a mark for you to remember our last meeting."[19] Devdas's anger and violence reveal an old patriarchal tool used against women to hide their own inner weakness. Devdas accepts separation, but it becomes a permanent wound for him, repeating an earlier separation from his mother and intensifying his crisis of masculine identity.

Devdas's urge to be united with the mother figure further leads him to the courtesan Chandramukhi's house. The courtesan culture of colonial Calcutta was closely connected with the lifestyle of the *babu*, whose performance of elite masculinity often included drinking, pleasure-seeking and visiting courtesans.[20] Devdas tries to be a part of the society he belongs to, but at the same time, he remains critical about the people who go to a courtesan's house and of courtesan culture as well. Kakar says that the *Majnun*-lover of Indian cinema often finds space for his rejected desires in *kothas* (traditional brothels), yet his experience of pleasure is filled with guilt and sadness.[21] From an Indian perspective, an ideal love is tied to a maternal image of a woman, where sexual desires feel like shame. The dizziness of alcohol provides Devdas a sense of pleasure in Chandramukhi's presence; however, this pleasure is accompanied by persistent guilt, as the idealised image of the mother gradually begins to fracture. Sexual desires distance him from the sacred image of a compassionate mother, and he consistently resists the prostitute, signifying his sexual restraint toward women. This sexual restraint encourages the male psyche to elevate women to a divine status.

REPRESENTATION OF FEMININE AND QUEST FOR DIVINITY IN FLESH-AND-BLOOD WOMEN

The worship of goddesses has an important place in Bengali religious and cultural traditions, where they are often seen as both nurturing mothers and powerful figures. In this context, the name Devdas, meaning a servant or devotee of the divine, can also be read as a *das* of the *Devi*, suggesting his emotional dependence on an idealised feminine figure. This association of the feminine with the divine is also seen in figures such as Radha, the divine feminine, and Mirabai, the devoted saint of Krishna. The representation of Parvati and Chandramukhi as maternal, devotional, morally elevated or quasi-divine figures, echoing the devotional figures of Radha and Meera, can be understood not simply as an inherent quality of these women, but as a projection of the

male subject's psychological and cultural desire for an idealised feminine. In seeking emotional security, moral guidance and qualities associated with devotion and care, male subjectivities often elevate the women around them beyond their ordinary human identities, a pattern reflected in the representation of Parvati and Chandramukhi across multiple film adaptations of *Devdas*, beginning with P.C. Barua's adaptation in 1936.[22]

Dietmar Rothermund describes the period of the 1930s in India as one marked by political tensions surrounding the Civil Disobedience Movement, the Round Table Conferences and growing Hindu-Muslim conflicts, creating a strong need for nationalist cultural expression.[23] In this context, Barua's *Devdas* preserves an older spiritual ideal centred on devotion and the elevated representation of women, offering a cultural space through which nationalist values could be preserved and expressed. Bimal Roy adapted the novel again in post-independence India in 1955.[24] He continues this cultural association by explicitly connecting Parvati with Radha. For instance, when Devdas is sent to Calcutta at a young age and Parvati remains in the village, she remembers him and becomes emotional. In one scene, she cries while listening to the song *Aan milo Shyam saaware, Braj mein akeli Radha khoi khoi phire* ("Come meet me, dark beloved Shyam; Radha wanders alone and lost in Braj"). Chandramukhi, on the other hand, is represented as a woman who cultivates her life by becoming a devotee like Meerabai. While the women remain connected to Devdas, they are not reduced entirely to his romantic desire.

Sanjay Leela Bhansali's 2002 *Devdas* reworks this relationship within a more transnational and diasporic context.[25] Bhansali reconstructs the pre-independence world with no clear reference, using spectacle and glamour and an auteur sensibility to create an aesthetically nostalgic experience rather than a historically realistic one. Here, Devdas is a London returnee who comes back after ten years, portrayed as the beloved child of the family, except for his father, with whom his relationship remains distant. Bhansali also introduces the character of the grandmother to suggest that Devdas is surrounded by maternal affection and emotional care of not one but two mothers. This emphasis on maternal care is important because Devdas's attachment to Parvati and Chandramukhi is presented not simply as sexual desire but as a search for emotional and spiritual belonging. Thus, in all three adaptations, although in different ways, the female characters acquire a devotional or spiritual significance that is shaped by male subjectivities.

This pattern can be further understood through the cultural significance of the mother in Indian masculinity. Sudhir Kakar and Amrita Narayanan argue that Freud's father-centred model of the Oedipus complex is not fully useful in relation to the Indian cultural imagination, where the mother-son relationship often occupies a much more central position. They describe the mother as a deeply valued figure in Indian cultural narratives and suggest that early maternal attachments can continue to shape emotional life beyond childhood. Kakar's concept of 'maternal enthrallment' refers to a deep psychological attachment to the mother, in which the maternal image remains powerful in the individual's emotional life.[26] Jhuma Basak develops this idea more directly in relation to Indian male subjectivity. She describes the Indian mother-son relationship as a culturally intensified bond in which the mother is associated with care, protection and unconditional giving.[27]

These theories of Indian gender identity help clarify the tension already visible in *Devdas*. Devdas's sexual desire creates guilt because it conflicts with the ideal of the pure and sacred feminine figure; therefore, Parvati and Chandramukhi are elevated to divinity. They do not remain ordinary women for Devdas; they are rather considered the voice of his conscience. They represent a symbolic motherly concern that is deeply admired by men. These women consistently teach Devdas the value of humility and push him to come out of his self-absorption. They motivate and support him to become spiritually uplifted through their own practice of devotion and surrender. They have been portrayed as symbols of wisdom for men amidst the chaos of society. Parvati and Chandramukhi carry qualities associated with the maternal and the divine: care, compassion, emotional strength, guidance and self-sacrifice. Devdas is repeatedly drawn towards these qualities, but he cannot fully unite with them as a sexual partner. His attraction to women therefore remains caught between desire and devotion. The women provide him with the emotional security and moral direction associated with the maternal figure, while his own sexual desire threatens to disturb this idealised image. His inability to reconcile these two forms of attachment, sacred and sexual, produces the central conflict in his masculinity. This conflict also suggests that Devdas does not develop masculinity through sexual conquest or physical domination. Instead, he moves towards a form of masculinity based on restraint, vulnerability and dependence. His attachment to Parvati and Chandramukhi shows that femininity is not simply positioned as the opposite of masculinity. Rather, qualities culturally associated with the feminine become part of his own masculine identity. His emotional dependence on women, his inability to assert himself through physical power and his repeated return to feminine figures for emotional and moral support suggest a masculine self that is incomplete without the feminine.

It is interesting to speculate about how, in the Indian goddess cultures, authoritative female speech has created a space for the emergence of the 'incomplete masculine,' a masculine subject who comes to recognise that he is not "omnipotent" and that he must come out of his narcissistic self-perception.[28] This is particularly significant in the colonial context. Poonam Arora, while discussing the psychological imprint of effeminacy on Devdas, suggests that Devdas remains sexually restrained to prove to the colonial gaze that he possesses the very self-control they claim Indians lack.[29] In this context, Devdas's rejection of conventional masculine behaviour can be read differently. His restraint from sexual relationships does not simply indicate weakness or failure. Instead, it allows him to occupy a different masculine position—one that does not depend upon the domination of women or the display of sexual virility. His relationship with femininity also creates an alternative model of the male self. Rather than eliminating feminine qualities in order to become masculine, Devdas remains attached to qualities such as emotional intelligence, sensitivity, surrender and receptivity. Meraj Ahmed Mubarki suggests that "Devdas's spiritual masculinity, and his rejection of carnal pleasures, serves as a counterpoint to Western notions of masculinity that over-emphasise physical strength, virility and assertiveness."[30] Yet this alternative masculinity remains deeply conflicted. Devdas can recognise and even idealise feminine qualities, but he cannot fully integrate, or rather accept, them into his own lived identity. Instead, he locates these qualities in the women around him, idealising them as embodiments of care, devotion and moral guidance. His 'quest' for the divine feminine thus reflects his own unmet emotional and psychological needs.

EUROCENTRIC MODERNITY, CHANGING FEMININITY, AND THE CRISIS OF MASCULINITY

Dev.D, the 2009 film adaptation, reimagines *Devdas* in a contemporary India shaped by globalisation, consumer culture and changing ideas about gender identity. Unlike the earlier versions, Anurag Kashyap, the director of the film, places Dev in a world where women are no longer confined to the roles of the devoted lover, wife or self-sacrificing woman. Parvati (Paro), Chandramukhi (Chanda), and the introduced character Rasika openly express their desires and make bold choices for themselves. In a changing and globalised world, capitalist aspirations are no longer confined to the territory of men, as women too increasingly pursue money, independence and social power. This changing relation between capitalism and identity can also be seen in Paro and Chanda's characters. Unlike earlier versions of Parvati, who lives like an ascetic after her marriage to a much older man and devotes herself to duty and sacrifice, Paro chooses to marry Bhuvan, an industrialist, partly as a response to Dev's insult. Unlike earlier versions, she does not continue living only in Dev's memory but moves forward and chooses a life of comfort and stability with Bhuvan. Similar to Chandramukhi, whose later values were associated with sacrifice and emotional devotion, Chanda's identity is closely linked to economic survival and self-accomplishment. She works as a prostitute at night and studies in college during the day to gain independence. This change in the position of women also changes the way Dev performs his masculinity. He responds to this new social environment by becoming more aggressive, sexually assertive and emotionally distant. His masculinity is therefore closely connected to his attempt to deal with a changing femininity.

One way of understanding this change is through the colonial history of masculinity in India. Virinder S. Kalra notes that Bengali men were stereotyped as "effeminate," while the Punjabis and Pathans were seen as "real men, strong, brave, loyal, independent and so-called martial race."[31] Kashyap's decision to relocate Devdas from Bengal to Punjab is therefore significant. Dev is no longer the visibly emotional Bengali man who cries over separation and expresses his vulnerability openly. The film rather portrays a strong man who suppresses femininity and expresses emotion through anger, addiction and excess. Significantly, Dev does not cry throughout the film, except at the death of his father. In contrast, Devdas weeps repeatedly over his separation first from his mother and then from Parvati, but not at his father's death. Dev's loss, one might suggest, is tied to power and inheritance rather than emotional dependence. This transformation reflects a wider change in the representation of masculinity in postcolonial India. As R.W. Connell's concept of 'hegemonic masculinity' suggests, masculine identity is often established through strength, authority, independence and control.[32] In the Indian context, the colonial association of the Bengali male with effeminacy created an additional pressure to distance the male self from qualities considered feminine. The emergence of the strong, physically assertive male hero in popular cinema can be understood within this larger cultural shift. In independent India, masculinity became tied to rationality, strength and moral superiority, while effeminacy had "no place in this new rhetoric."[33] In cinema too, the "sensitive lover-boy hero was soon replaced" by hypermasculine stars like Dharmendra, a trend later continued by actors such as Salman Khan and John Abraham.[34]

Kashyap intentionally deviates from the original *Devdas*; he explains, "*Dev.D* takes off from the original narrative to depict a modern age defined by fast cars, fast food, fast cash, and instant gratification."[35] The modernity that Kashyap refers to is mainly associated with a consumerist mindset. Dev is represented as someone who leads a luxurious life and believes in finding happiness in materialism. Like Bhansali's version, Kashyap's Dev is also sent to London at an early age and returns only after reaching adulthood. He has internalised the Western cultural codes, where an ideal masculinity is understood as sexually dominant and emotionally restrained. Ross Poole suggests that Western ideals of masculinity rely on "instrumental rationality," particularly guiding masculine identity toward the pursuit of power and consumption, and generating tension in dealing with emotions in the subject.[36]

The change in character from Devdas to Dev is particularly visible in his relationship with women. The modernity that Dev performs tends to materialise women as objects of consumption and sources of pleasure. Dev's sexual assertion remains consistent throughout the movie. First, he pursues Paro for sex, but when he hears the rumour about her affair, he steps back. He then turns to Rasika, treating her primarily as a sexual object. Rasika eventually recognises this and rejects him. Later, when Paro visits him after her marriage, her behaviour recalls the caring figure of the earlier Parvati. She washes Dev's dirty clothes and cleans his room, showing concern for his condition. Dev, however, again responds by trying to sexualise the relationship. Paro refuses him and tells him that "he is not worth it." Her response is important because she no longer accepts the position of the woman who simply provides emotional or sexual satisfaction to Dev. Paro's response reflects the changing position of women in contemporary India. Runa Chakraborty Paunksnis and Sarunas Paunksnis suggest that the changing notion of femininity in India created the 'new women' who express themselves and satisfy their aspirations as a reflection of the economic liberalisation of the late 1990s.[37] Dev therefore encounters women who cannot be easily placed within the earlier maternal or sacrificial image of femininity. His difficulty in dealing with this change produces a crisis in his own masculine identity. He attempts to regain control through sexual behaviour, aggression, alcohol and emotional withdrawal. This is where *Dev.D* differs most clearly from the earlier *Devdas* narratives. Devdas's relationship with women was shaped by an idealised femininity associated with care, sacrifice and the maternal, leading him to restrain sexual desires and elevate the feminine to a sacred position. Dev, in contrast, tries to separate femininity from this sacred position. He approaches women through the body and through sexual desire. Yet this does not give him the satisfaction he expects.

The film[38] provides a visual representation of this conflict through the setting of Dev's Delhi hotel room where he stays. The background wall of his room is painted with many symbols and colours. For instance, there is an image of a man weightlifting that appears below the word "Muscletones," representing exaggerated male strength. Elsewhere on the wall, the phrase "Girls vs. Boys" presents masculinity and femininity as opposing categories. Dev appears to have accepted precisely this opposition: to become masculine, he must distance himself from the feminine. Interestingly, on the same wall there is also an image of the Hindu goddess Kali, which complicates the association of masculinity with strength. Kali in the visual imagery represents a complication in Dev's attempt. Kali, who represents power within the feminine itself,

suggests that the strength Dev tries to claim as masculine cannot be understood as entirely separate from femininity. Mikel Burley explains that the Hindu Divine Mother, particularly in the form of Kali, brings together qualities that may appear opposite, such as "maternity and truculence" and "beneficence and ferocity."[39] Thus, the feminine in the Hindu imagination is not necessarily gentle or passive; it can also be powerful and fierce. The film image can be read as a reflection of a wider social tension, where women are becoming more independent and assertive; masculine identity may be responding by becoming more aggressive in its attempt to retain authority. Dev's increasing toughness can therefore be understood as a response to a femininity that is no longer passive or easily controlled.

Kakar and Narayanan's discussion of Hindu cultural imagination helps develop this point further. Their reading of Hindu God Shiva as *Ardhanarishvara* challenges the idea that masculine and feminine are separated entities. They point to the image of Shiva as "half man and half woman" and discuss the "lingam" and "yoni" as representations of the unity of male and female creative energies.[40] Their argument suggests that Indian cultural imagination provides a form of masculinity that does not require the complete rejection of the feminine. However, the tension becomes even clearer in Kashyap's description of the deleted scene in which Dev imagines Paro as a goddess: "Dev goes to meet Paro, Dev starts hallucinating that Paro has become a goddess, and the house has become a temple."[41] The description is significant because it shows that the association between Paro and the divine remained part of his conception of Dev's character. But this is not the gentle, nurturing image of divinity associated with the earlier *Devdas*. Instead, it suggests a more powerful and fierce form of the feminine, closer to the image of Kali. Dev's struggle reflects a contemporary masculine crisis in which changing female agency does not necessarily make men more secure.

CONCLUSION

This study suggests that the masculinity represented through *Devdas* is deeply shaped by the presence of the mother as a figure of guidance, protection and emotional security. Devdas's separation from his mother creates a longing that he later transfers onto Parvati and Chandramukhi. However, because these women are idealised through a maternal and sacred image, he struggles to reconcile his emotional attachment with sexual desire. His masculinity therefore remains caught between devotion to the feminine and the social expectation to maintain masculine authority. The colonial social order further limits his ability to accept femininity as part of his own masculine identity. In *Dev.D*, this conflict takes a different form. Dev does not display the emotional vulnerability of the earlier Devdas; instead, he adopts aggression, sexual conquest and emotional restraint to establish himself as masculine. Yet his attempt to separate himself from the feminine does not resolve his crisis. The changing agency of women exposes the insecurity of this masculinity. Thus, the movement from sexual restraint in *Devdas* to sexual excess in *Dev.D* reflects a change in the form of masculine crisis rather than its disappearance. Both Devdas and Dev struggle to relate to the feminine, but in opposite ways: while Devdas seeks emotional refuge in women and resists separation from the feminine by elevating it to the sacred, Dev attempts to distance himself from it by reducing women to the sexual. This study therefore suggests that the idea of the divine feminine does not need to turn flesh-and-blood women into embodiments of divinity or

expect them to carry the qualities that men cannot integrate within themselves. Rather, the divine feminine can be understood as a set of qualities that can also exist within the masculine self: compassion, care, nurturing, emotional sensitivity, protection and the capacity to provide, as well as power and strength expressed through the ancient Indian texts in the form of *Shakti*. A more integrated masculinity would therefore require neither dependence upon nor rejection of femininity, but the recognition and acceptance of these qualities as a legitimate part of the masculine self.

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5. Rohan Sharma, "Gods, Anti-Heroes and Heroes: Exploring Masculinity and the Male Lover through Mythological, Textual and Cinematic Narratives in India," in *Violent and Vulnerable Performances: Challenging the Gender Boundaries of Masculinities and Femininities*, ed. Katalin Kis and Aleah N. Ranjitsingh (Brill, 2019), 50.
6. Chattopadhyay, *Devdas*, 22.
7. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto Press, 1986). Fanon examines how colonial subjects may internalise the cultural values and standards of the coloniser, particularly through the pressure to adopt the coloniser's language, behaviour and social ideals. This internalisation can produce a conflicted sense of identity in which the colonised subject seeks recognition through forms associated with the colonial culture.
8. Pramod K. Nayar, *Literary Theory Today* (Asia Book Club, 2017): 199. Nayar discusses Bhabha's concept of mimicry in the chapter "Postcolonial Studies."
9. Ghosh, "God Is a Refugee," 37.
10. Chattopadhyay, *Devdas*, 43.
11. Ibid,40.
12. Ibid,43.
13. Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton University Press, 1993), 26–27. Chatterjee distinguishes between the "spiritual" or "inner" domain, associated with language, religion and personal and family life, and the "material"

or "outer" domain of law, administration, economy and statecraft. He argues that nationalist thought sought to protect the inner domain as a sphere of cultural difference while engaging with modern institutions in the outer domain.

14. Ghosh, "Nobility or Utility?" 686. Ghosh draws on Partha Chatterjee's understanding of the *bhadralok* as a "nationalist elite" that saw itself as the bearer of India's modernity and progress.
15. Ghosh, "God Is a Refugee," 36–37. Ghosh extends this discussion by showing how family deities and religious practices contributed to a morally and emotionally charged understanding of historical time. The connection between family, religious practice and cultural identity provides a useful context for understanding the representation of Parvati within the Bengali cultural imagination.
16. Sudhir Kakar, "Lovers in the Dark," in *Intimate Relations: Exploring Indian Sexuality* (Penguin Books India, 1989), 36. Kakar interprets the *Devdas* figure as the "Majnun-lover," whose longing is rooted in an early desire for complete union with the mother.
17. Nandini Gupta, "Deconstructing the Hailing of 'Mother India,'" *Journal of International Women's Studies* 22, no. 9 (2021): 132, https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol22/iss9/9.
18. Chattopadhyay, *Devdas*, 47.
19. Ibid, 48.
20. Jyotirmoy Sil, "Intoxications, Baiji Dance, and Babu-Culture of Colonial Calcutta: A Literary Survey," *Assonance: A Journal of Russian & Comparative Literary Studies*, no. 23 (2023): 286.
21. Kakar, "Lovers in the Dark," 37.
22. P.C. Barua, dir., *Devdas* (New Theatres, 1936).
23. Dietmar Rothermund, "The Impact of the Great Depression on India in the 1930s," *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 41 (1980): 657.
24. Bimal Roy, dir., *Devdas* (Bimal Roy Productions, 1955).
25. Sanjay Leela Bhansali, dir., *Devdas* (Mega Bollywood and Bhansali Productions, 2002).
26. Kakar and Amrita Narayanan, "The Capacious Freud," in *The Ego and the Id: 100 Years Later*, ed. Fred Busch and Natacha Delgado (Routledge, 2024), 39.
27. Jhuma Basak, "Cultural Invocation of Maternal-Fusion in Males, India and Japan," in *Psychoanalytic Explorations into the Primal Relationship in Japan and India*, ed. Osamu Kitayama and Jhuma Basak (Routledge, 2025), 118–134.
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37. Runa Chakraborty Paunksnis and Sarunas Paunksnis, "Masculine Anxiety and the New Indian Woman in the Films of Anurag Kashyap," *South Asian Popular Culture* 18, no. 2 (2020): 5–6, https://doi.org/10.1080/14746689.2020.1773656.
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