

**Women Across Text and Screen in *Devdas*****<sup>1</sup>Ms. Yamini Mohta**MA English Student  
School of Humanities and Social Sciences  
Vanita Vishram Women's University**<sup>2</sup>Dr. Garima Hariniwas Tiwari**Assistant Professor  
Department of English  
Andaman College (ANCOL)**Abstract**

The conversion of literary works into film frequently leads to substantial alterations in character development, thematic focus, and ideological viewpoints. Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay's *Devdas* (1917) has prompted multiple adaptations, with Sanjay Leela Bhansali's 2002 film being one of the most acclaimed. This research analyses the representation of the female characters Parvati (Paro) and Chandramukhi in the novel and its cinematic version. This study examines, using the frameworks of Adaptation Theory and Feminist Literary Criticism, how cinematic representation reinterprets female agency, identity, and resistance in evolving socio-cultural settings. The novel illustrates the constrictive social frameworks of colonial Bengal, but the film presents a modern version that emphasises emotional resilience, self-expression, and female solidarity. The research also examines the influence of class, caste, and gender dynamics on the characters' fates. This research illustrates that adaptation serves as a transformational medium, reshaping conventional depictions of women while maintaining the emotional core of the original tale through a comparison of literary and cinematic portrayals.

**Keywords:** Adaptation, Agency, Femininity, *Devdas*, Cinema, Representation

## Introduction

The interplay between literature and film has prompted much academic discourse, as both mediums participate in storytelling through unique narrative methods. Adaptations frequently serve as cultural conduits, transporting literary themes into novel historical and creative settings. Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay's *Devdas* holds a distinctive status among Indian literary masterpieces, owing to its lasting popularity and several film adaptations.

Published in 1917, *Devdas* recounts the tragic romance of Devdas, Parvati, and Chandramukhi, while revealing the inflexible social hierarchies of colonial Indian culture. The work examines topics of affection, selflessness, social stratification, and societal norms. Although Devdas is the central protagonist, the female characters Paro and Chandramukhi substantially enhance the emotional and ideological complexity of the tale. Sanjay Leela Bhansali's 2002 version reinterprets these ladies using a visually opulent and emotionally resonant cinematic language. In contrast to the novel, which depicts women primarily inside societal restraints, the film highlights their emotional resilience, self-awareness, and defiance of patriarchal standards. Thus, the adaptation evolves into a reinterpretation that embodies the shifting notions of womanhood and autonomy in modern India. This study conducts a comparative analysis of Paro and Chandramukhi in the novel and its film version to examine the evolution of female characterisation across literary and cinematic mediums.

## Scholarly Perspectives on Adaptation and Female Representation

Adaptation studies have progressed from enquiries about faithfulness to more expansive conversations of interpretation, change, and cultural representation. Linda Hutcheon contends that adaptations must not to be assessed exclusively on their fidelity to the original text; instead, they should be perceived as inventive reinterpretations influenced by many media and audiences (Hutcheon 8).

Robert Stam likewise dismisses fidelity criticism, proposing that adaptations are intertextual creations that converse with their original texts while addressing

contemporary cultural contexts (Stam 25). His viewpoint offers a valuable context for analysing Bhansali's reimagining of Devdas.

Piyush Roy, in his analysis "Filming a Metaphor," contends that Bhansali converts Devdas into an auteur-centric cinematic experience using visual symbolism, mythical allusions, and the aesthetic impact of the Navarasa tradition. Roy posits that Bhansali emphasises emotional intensity and visual splendour to convey the sadness of unrequited love.

Feminist theorists like Simone de Beauvoir and Elaine Showalter have highlighted the significance of literature in shaping gender identities. Beauvoir's claim that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" underscores the socially created essence of femininity (Beauvoir 267).

Showalter's research on women's portrayal in literature illustrates how female characters frequently embody dominant cultural views.

While several studies have analysed Devdas from literary, cinematic, and adaptation viewpoints, there is a relative paucity of research concentrating explicitly on the evolution of female characters throughout literary and cinematic formats. This study aims to fill that gap by examining the developing representations of Paro and Chandramukhi within shifting social and cultural settings.

### **Scope and Objectives of the Study**

- To analyse the representation of Paro's autonomy and femininity in the novel Devdas and its cinematic version.
- To examine the evolution of Chandramukhi's character from a marginalised courtesan in the novel to a dignified and powerful individual in the film.
- To examine the interplay between Paro and Chandramukhi in both adaptations.
- To assess the impact of class, caste, and societal standards on female identity.
- To analyse the impact of cinematic approaches on the reconfiguration of female representation.

### **Theoretical Framework**

## **Adaptation Theory**

Adaptation Theory offers a crucial paradigm for comprehending the conversion of narratives across different media. Historically, adaptations were assessed primarily on their adherence to the original text; however, modern adaptation studies prioritise reinterpretation above simple duplication. Linda Hutcheon posits that adaptation constitutes both a process and a result, entailing the creative reinterpretation and replication of a pre-existing work. Hutcheon thinks that adaptations ought to be seen as autonomous artistic creations that interact with their original texts while addressing the cultural, social, and technical settings of their respective eras. An adaptation is not only a replication of the original; it is a reinvention that produces new significances for diverse audiences.

Robert Stam similarly contests the concept of authenticity criticism, suggesting that adaptations serve as intertextual works that forge connections with other cultural and literary traditions. He argues that film adaptations frequently modify characterisation, narrative structure, and thematic focus to accommodate the visual medium and modern audience expectations. Such alterations do not undermine the value of the source text; instead, they illuminate the dynamic essence of narrative across various mediums.

Sanjay Leela Bhansali's version of *Devdas* retains the core storyline of tragic love while considerably enhancing the emotional and visual aspects of the tale. The film reconstructs the tale using intricate set designs, symbolic imagery, dramatic conversations, and reimagined character relationships, appealing to twenty-first-century audiences. The adaptation notably reinterprets the portrayal of Paro and Chandramukhi by providing them with enhanced emotional depth and narrative importance. Consequently, Adaptation Theory offers a valuable framework for analysing how the conversion from novel to cinema alters female characterisation and reconfigures the ideological issues of the text.

## **Feminist Literary Criticism**

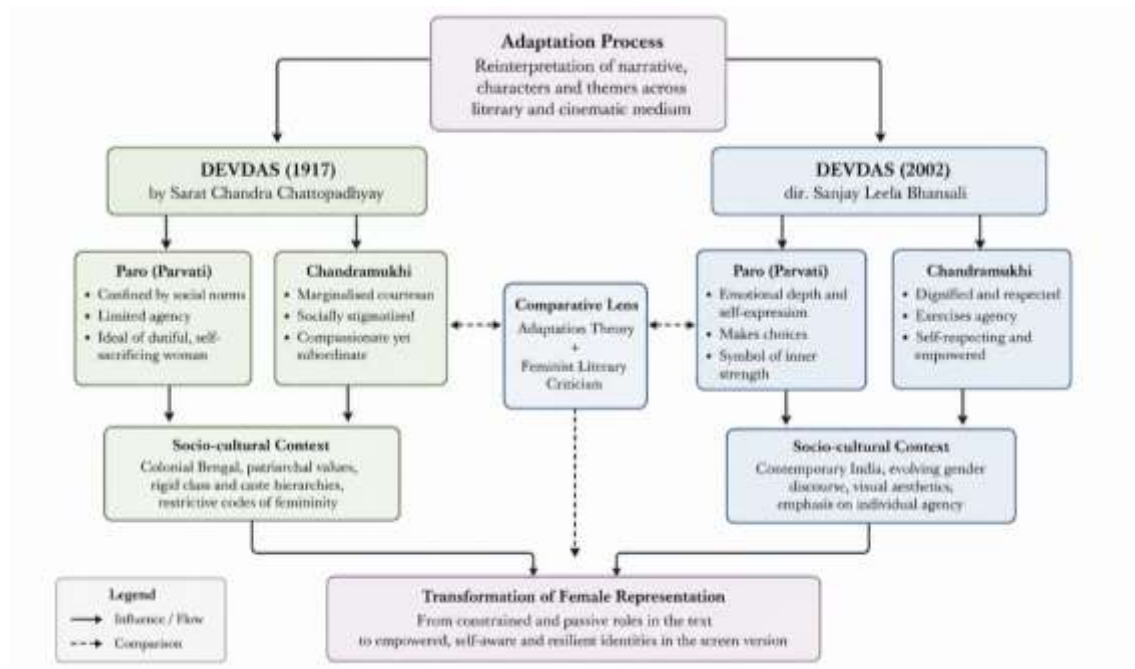
Feminist Literary Criticism analyses how literature depicts women and either upholds or contests gender-based power dynamics. This critical method, originating from the larger feminist movement, aims to reveal patriarchal assumptions inside literary texts and to

examine how female characters navigate systems of social, cultural, and ideological dominance. Feminist critics contend that literature frequently mirrors prevailing social ideals and hence plays a vital role in influencing ideas of gender roles and identities.

Simone de Beauvoir's significant declaration that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" underscores the socially created essence of femininity. Her viewpoint indicates that gender identities are influenced by societal expectations rather than biological determinism. This idea is especially pertinent in comprehending how Paro and Chandramukhi are delineated by the cultural conventions and social stratifications of colonial Indian culture. Their stories illustrate the constraints placed on women by patriarchal institutions, including marriage, socioeconomic hierarchies, and societal acceptability.

Elaine Showalter enhances feminist critique by underscoring the significance of analysing women's experiences and representations in literary traditions. Her notion of gynocriticism advocates for researchers to concentrate on female subjectivity, agency, and the construction of identity. From this perspective, female characters are not only ancillary figures but active agents whose experiences illuminate wider societal truths.

Utilising Feminist Literary Criticism on Devdas facilitates a profound comprehension of Paro and Chandramukhi's navigation through societal constraints and gender norms. Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay's story depicts characters constrained by a patriarchal culture, however Bhansali's adaptation reinterprets them as more aggressive and self-aware individuals. The video highlights their emotional fortitude, endurance, and ability to resist, therefore contesting conventional portrayals of women as passive or submissive entities. Thus, feminist critique functions as a potent theoretical framework for examining the development of female agency, identity, and solidarity in literary and cinematic works.



*Figure 1. Conceptual Framework for Comparative Analysis of Female Representation in Devdas (Novel and Film Adaptation)/*  
*Source: Prepared by the Researchers*

## Comparative Examination of Female Protagonists

### 1. Paro: Transitioning from Submission to Assertion - Agency and Resilience

In Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay's story, Paro's autonomy is limited by patriarchal and societal norms. Her endeavour to convey her emotions to Devdas exemplifies one of the rare instances in which she assertively articulates her aspirations. Devdas, however, disregards her emotional fortitude, exposing the gendered double standards prevalent in their culture. Devdas's reluctance to confront his family compels Paro into an arranged marriage, illustrating the restricted agency afforded to women in colonial Bengal (Chattopadhyay 42–45). A notable literary instance arises when Paro meets Devdas at night to convey her readiness to marry him despite societal impediments. Her action contradicts traditional norms of female modesty. Devdas's failure to reciprocate promotes patriarchal dominance over female autonomy (Chattopadhyay 38). Bhansali's adaption significantly amplifies this scene. The sequence graphically underscores Paro's resolve and emotional fortitude. Utilising close-up images and strong conversation, the

film portrays her not as a submissive lover, but as a woman prepared to confront cultural constraints. The film adaptation elevates a modest literary moment into a compelling assertion of feminine self-expression (Bhansali).

### **Femininity and Identity**

The tale depicts Paro's femininity through sacrifice and household duties. Following her marriage, she wholly dedicates herself to her husband's family, stifling her individual aspirations. This illustrates the conventional expectations placed on women in early twentieth-century Indian society (Chattopadhyay 61). An especially significant instance arises when Paro prioritises familial obligation over individual contentment. Notwithstanding her enduring personal devotion to Devdas, she remains devoted to her marital obligations. Her silence serves as a representation of societal compliance and internalised self-denial (Chattopadhyay 73). Conversely, Bhansali used visual iconography to depict Paro's emotional resilience. The persistent motif of the light represents her steadfast affection and fortitude. Her actions to safeguard the light from extinguishment symbolise her unwavering emotional dedication in the face of hardship (Bhansali).

### **Social Stratification and Boundaries**

The class system significantly influences Paro's destiny. Devdas's family declines the marriage proposal because to Paro's family's inferior social status. This rejection exemplifies how caste and class serve as impediments to personal agency (Chattopadhyay 31). Bhansali amplifies this antagonism via intense confrontations between the families. The film highlights the humiliation endured by Paro's mother, so underscoring the detrimental effects of class bias on women's life (Bhansali).

## **2. Chandramukhi: From Marginalisation to Empowerment, Agency, and Self-Sacrifice**

In the narrative, Chandramukhi has a significant metamorphosis following her encounter with Devdas. Initially presented as a courtesan, she progressively relinquishes her vocation and devotes herself to his care. Her own development is driven by compassion rather than societal approval (Chattopadhyay 89). A significant instance arises when

Chandramukhi chooses to abandon her vocation. This decision demonstrates moral agency and emotional autonomy; however the narrative predominantly characterises her through her association with Devdas (Chattopadhyay 95). Bhansali's adaption empowers Chandramukhi with a more pronounced voice. Her discussions underscore self-respect and inner fortitude. Instead of just giving herself for Devdas, she critically examines the societal frameworks that punish women like her while absolving male conduct (Bhansali).

### **Femininity and Representation**

The story depicts Chandramukhi as a multifaceted character whose occupation relegates her to the margins of respectable society. Notwithstanding her compassion and honesty, societal stigma hinders her from attaining acceptance (Chattopadhyay 102). A pivotal literary instance arises when Chandramukhi perceives that society evaluates her identity only based on her profession rather than her character. This event exposes the hypocrisy inherent in patriarchal moral norms (Chattopadhyay 106). The video reinterprets her femininity via dancing, attire, and visual aesthetics. In the song "Maar Daala," Chandramukhi's sensuality is depicted not as moral degradation but as a form of creative expression and emotional fragility. Bhansali reinterprets her as an emblem of dignity and grace, subverting conventional prejudices linked to courtesans (Bhansali).

### **Social Exclusion and Defiance**

In the narrative, Chandramukhi continues to be socially marginalised despite her inner metamorphosis. Her rejection exemplifies pervasive societal biases against women who diverge from established norms (Chattopadhyay 111). The film presents a more critical viewpoint. An incisive illustration arises when Chandramukhi interrogates societal hypocrisy, enquiring why women are venerated as deities in temples yet denigrated in quotidian existence. This discourse functions as a direct critique of patriarchal perspectives on female identity (Bhansali).

### **Female Solidarity and Redefined Relationships**

### **Engagement Between Paro and Chandramukhi**

A notable distinction between the novel and the film is the connection between Paro and Chandramukhi. In the narrative, the two ladies do not encounter each other. Their separation illustrates strict social differences between respectable ladies and courtesans (Chattopadhyay 118). Bhansali intentionally confronts this dichotomy in the renowned “Dola Re Dola” scene. The scene represents female unity and reciprocal acknowledgement. Instead of vying for Devdas’s attention, the ladies recognise each other’s emotional anguish and resilience (Bhansali).

### **Connections with Devdas**

The narrative depicts both ladies as possessing greater emotional strength than Devdas. Paro exemplifies resilience via her responsibilities, whereas Chandramukhi exhibits compassion through altruistic care. Devdas, conversely, consistently fails to undertake decisive action (Chattopadhyay 122). An illustrative instance transpires near the novel’s denouement when Devdas perishes outside Paro’s abode. Despite Paro’s fervent efforts to approach him, societal norms inhibit her from exceeding the boundary. This image represents the victory of societal standards over individual aspiration (Chattopadhyay 127). Bhansali heightens the emotional impact of this moment. The visual depiction of Paro sprinting towards the closing gates functions as a potent metaphor for the societal constraints put on women (Bhansali).

The theoretical frameworks outlined above establish the basis for analysing the evolution of female characters in Devdas across literary and cinematic forms. Adaptation Theory elucidates how Bhansali reinterprets Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay’s tale for a different media and modern audience, while Feminist Literary Criticism allows for an examination of the changing portrayals of women, agency, and identity. This study utilises complimentary frameworks to examine the reconstruction of Paro and Chandramukhi in the film adaption and how their depictions mirror evolving socio-cultural perceptions of womanhood. This analysis conducts a comparative assessment of these characters to elucidate the intersections of adaptation, gender, and representation in Devdas.

### **Findings, Discussion and Conclusion**

The comparative research of Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay's *Devdas* and Sanjay Leela Bhansali's film version uncovers substantial alterations in the portrayal of female characters. The film amplifies the agency of both Paro and Chandramukhi, bestowing upon them greater narrative significance and emotional complexity than in the original novel. Sarat Chandra's work illustrates the socioeconomic conditions of colonial Bengal, characterised by patriarchal constraints on women's choices, but Bhansali's adaption reinterprets these characters with a modern perspective that emphasises emotional autonomy, self-awareness, and resilience.

The film significantly highlights female solidarity, especially through sequences featuring direct interactions between Paro and Chandramukhi- an aspect lacking in the text. Such additions question traditional depictions of women as adversaries and instead represent them as humans linked by common experiences of love, pain, and social marginalisation. Additionally, Bhansali utilises visual symbolism, intricate mise-en-scène, costume design, and cinematic imagery to enhance the emotional and ideological importance of the female characters, hence broadening the interpretive potential of the original material.

These findings illustrate that adaptation serves not just as a transference of story across mediums but also as an exercise of cultural interpretation and creative reinterpretation. Bhansali's *Devdas* retains the emotional essence of Sarat Chandra's work while concurrently addressing modern feminist issues related to gender, identity, and representation. The film, via enhanced characterisation and visual narrative, redefines Paro and Chandramukhi from passive figures in *Devdas*'s tragedy to active contributors of significance.

In conclusion, the study emphasises the shifting representation of women in literary and cinematic mediums and shows the ability of adaptations to create new cultural significances for developing audiences. By emphasising female autonomy and solidarity, Bhansali's version reinterprets the importance of Paro and Chandramukhi, mirroring wider changes in cultural perceptions of women's roles and identities. The lasting allure of *Devdas* is in its capacity for perpetual reinterpretation throughout generations, rendering it a significant book for exploring the interconnections of literature, film, adaptation studies, and feminist discourse.

## Works Cited

Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Translated by H. M. Parshley, Vintage Books, 2011.

Bhansali, Sanjay Leela, director. *Devdas*. Mega Bollywood, 2002.

Chattopadhyay, Sarat Chandra. *Devdas*. Translated by Sreejata Guha, Penguin Books, 2002.

Hutcheon, Linda. *A Theory of Adaptation*. 2nd ed., Routledge, 2013.

Roy, Piyush. "Filming a Metaphor: Cinematic Liberties, Navarasa Influences, and Digressions in Adaptation in Sanjay Leela Bhansali's *Devdas*." *The South Asianist*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2013, pp. 42–56.

Showalter, Elaine. *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing*. Princeton UP, 1999.

Stam, Robert. *Literature through Film: Realism, Magic, and the Art of Adaptation*. Blackwell Publishing, 2005.

Tiwari, Sandhya. "Adaptation and Reinterpretation in Indian Cinema." *Think India Quarterly*, vol. 22, no. 4, 2019, pp. 112–121.