

Representation of Illness and Death in Bollywood: A Comparative Analysis of *Devdas* and *Dil Bechara*

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Abstract

Since the beginning, Bollywood's depiction of illness and death has been associated with sympathy and sorrow. Adaptations in Bollywood also validates this picturisation of the dying characters, such as Devdas as a pitiful romantic hero in *Devdas* (2002) and Raju as a sacrificing character in *Guide* (1965). However, Bollywood's perspective has now been shifting from pitiful to powerful characters with physical illness. *Dil Bechara* is the first step to emit light on the positivity of life with physical diseases. In the film, the depiction of death and disease does not validate sacrifice or pity; instead, it allows the audience to reflect on the empowerment of the main characters. In this paper, the researcher's attempt is to explore the shift of a new outlook towards physical illness and death in the Bollywood adaptations with special reference to *Devdas* (2002) and *Dil Bechara* (2020). Apart from that, the focus would be to compare these two films based on the depiction of physical illness and death.

Keywords: Diseases, Cancer, Bollywood, Death

According to Ulka Anjaria (2021), "while it is tempting to read Bollywood films as insights into Indian culture, or how Indians think, making a one-to-one association between what we see in these films and what is happening in India would be a mistake" (12). The aim of Bollywood was never to show realism in the films. Characters looking directing into the camera and sometimes talking to the audience was all part of the theatre culture that had been evolving since the centuries,

contributed to the unrealistic conventional style of Bollywood. Also, the addition of unrelated songs in the film shows that the focus of Bollywood was entertainment since the beginning and did not intend to render realism in the films. It would not be wrong to say that Hindi cinema imitates reality because it grasps the attention of its audience with the help of the critical social issues embedded in them. Topics such as dowry, class, poverty, relationships were the crux of the earlier films became a trend. The audience, on the other hand, found themselves attached and felt sympathy towards these characters. Till then, it was acceptable, but when the depiction of the disease seemed impractical and unrelated to real life, it became problematic. The portrayal of the social issues was to create awareness that soon turned diseases such as Cancer and Tuberculosis into the channel to gain sympathy from the audience. Almost every film that filmmaker released started to represent physical illness as weakness. Some of the examples are *Dil Ek Mandir* (1963), *Anand* (1971), *Mili* (1975) and *Akhiyon Ke Jharokhon Se* (1978) that portrayed main characters with untreatable illnesses. These characters gained sympathy from the audience that somehow whitewashed the mind of the audience. The film that depicted Tuberculosis as an enemy, *Dushman* (1939), can be identified as the initiative towards the physical illness. The audience started to see the illnesses of the characters as self-sacrifice and, these diseases created fear in their minds. The scenes where a doctor reveals the information about the disease became common in these films with dramatic elements. Even in the 21st century, people are fearful of these diseases because Bollywood has already implanted the image of diseases in their minds as untreatable. Now, filmmakers' direct films where characters have rare conditions such as Progeria in *Paa* (2009), Asperger's Syndrome in *My Name is Khan* (2010), Autism in *Barfi* (2012), and Cerebral Palsy in *Margarita with a Straw* (2014). Though Bollywood has progressed, the treatment of diseases Cancer and Tuberculosis hasn't changed much. Filmmakers still follow the trend to execute the emotions of the characters. The suffering of the main characters adds flavour to their emotions, and their death becomes an embodiment of sacrifice. Instead of actuality in the details, Hindi cinema focuses on melodrama that is a blend of pathos, moral dilemma of the characters, and

heightened emotions. Consequently, the audience who sees these films assumes Bollywood's representation of these illnesses as real. Meheli Sen puts forth:

...the popular film has long tapped into the expressive possibilities of "illness" in popular cinema; characters suffering from and succumbing to a range of ailments from tuberculosis to inoperable brain tumours to cancer have provided much narrative fuel for a hyperbolic rendition of pathos and sentimentality. Simply put, disease has long been a tried and tested melodramatic engine for a significant body of popular films in India (7).

Even film adaptations of the texts contributed to this phenomenon. The purpose of film versions of a novel is to show the newly created idea and contemporary issue, but sometimes, filmmakers neglect the facts and follow the conventional style. Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay's novella *Devdas* has always been a keen interest to Bollywood filmmakers. The first film adaptation of *Devdas* (1935) was directed by P.C. Barua during the pre-independence era. The first coloured adaptation of the novella that massively influenced the audience is Sanjay Leela Bhansali's *Devdas* that released in 2002 impacted the Indian audience a lot because of its unique aesthetics. From dramatic settings to camera movements to melodramatic content, the audience learnt about the incomplete love story of Paro and Devdas. The film starts with the childhood friends, Devadas and Paro, who got separated. After a few years, when Devdas returned from London, he meets Paro and they both fall in love. Denial of marriage proposal by Devdas' parents leads him to alcoholism and Chandramukhi, a prostitute. Paro's marriage adds fuel to it. As time passes, Devdas' health worsens, but his insistence to visit Paro in the last moments and dying at the doorstep of Paro's house gives dramatic flavour to the film.

Though Bhansali's *Devdas* was released years after the first adaptation, the audience learns that the disease Tuberculosis is still incurable in the film, even when it has a cure in the

contemporary era. Despite upgrading elements such as Devdas' returning from London in his western clothes, the diagnosis of the disease remained the same after sixty-seven years. Chattopadhyay in her article writes:

Shah Rukh Khan's Devdas goes to study law in London against previous versions of the film where Devdas studied in Kolkata. Yet as the closing strains of the rousing (and striking) dance number Chhalak Chhalak play out, Devdas coughs up blood. The physical diagnosis remains the same—tuberculosis, with a wracking, back-bending cough (Chattopadhyay, Livemint.com).

The death scene of Devdas is filled with exaggerated dramatics. Death of the father of Devdas is a good example when it comes to drama and death. Another death that audience sees in the film is of *Devdas* himself. It includes Paro's intuition when she senses the voice of Devdas from a distance, her running in the white saree in the corridors, breaking glass candle stands, her family members stopping her and closing gates. The audience witness death of Devdas under the tree from where flowers fall over him which is considered as a tribute, the camera zooming into his eyes, and tears falling from them, all adds up to the melodrama. Instead of dying a peaceful death, Devdas maintains the promise to visit Paro. The film ends with the extinguished Diya/lamp that Parvati lit in the name of Devdas when they got separated in childhood. This film suggests that Devdas died in order to free Parvati from his love. These elements in the death scene are melodramatic and heightened emotions in the audience. The overdramatic death becomes the main focus of the film. Thus, the portrayal of death in the film does not seem realistic. The dramatic death of Devdas allows the audience to make them believe him as a tragic hero, instead of an ordinary person. His hopelessness and non-resistance towards death turn into the determination to die. His famous dialogue is suggestive of his self-suicide:

Babuji Ne Kaha Gaon Chhod Do... Sab Ne Kaha Paro Ko Chhod Do... Paro Ne
Kaha Sharab Chhod Do... Aaj Tumne Keh Diya Haweli Chhod Do... Ek Din Aayega
Jab Wo Kahege, Duniya Hi Chhod Do (Devdas 2:53:57-2:54:10)

Another problematic issue is that the depression of Devdas is considered grief. The stereotyping of both mental and physical illness negatively impacts the audience's mind and gives the wrong idea about the illness. The psychological problem of a character is visualised as a sacrifice. *Devdas* is not an exception; it is Bollywood's culture to connect disease with sentimentality and pity. The contemporary films that follow this Devdas syndrome and connect emotions with illness are *Waqt: The Race Against Time* (2005), *Katti Batti* (2015), *Sanam Teri Kasam* (2016), and *Ae Dil Hai Mushkil* (2016). These films portray main characters with physical illnesses that are impossible to treat. According to Bollywood, these characters are destined to die. Because of extreme melodrama in the films, the audience ignores the logical sense in the film and blindly trusts the wrong details about the disease. The emotions in the film do not allow them to subjectively judge the film. Thus, it is necessary to differentiate between the real and the unreal. Anjaria writes: "Melodrama... represents emotional states and universal truths rather than material realities" (12).

In contrast to *Devdas*, the Hindi film adaptation of American author John Green's novel *The Fault in Our Stars* gives a new light to the treatment of disease in Bollywood. The audience does not see it only as a romantic film but also a story of individuals who fight cancer. The film starts with a thyroid cancer patient Kizie who befriends Manny and his friend JP, two other cancer patients, with osteosarcoma and glaucoma, respectively. Manny and Kizie fall for each other. They visit Abhimanyu Veer, the songwriter and singer of the incomplete song "Main Tumhara" that Kizie aspires to listen to the remaining lines. The film includes their struggle as cancer patients and their urge to fulfil their desires. Later, with Manny's death, Kizie gets a new hope to live life fully.

Unlike Devdas whose self-destructive nature resulted into death, Kizie stands as a strong character who encourages everyone, including her friends, parents and people around her. The first scene of the film opens with the funeral of someone Kizie does not even know. In this scene, audience acknowledges that her kindness and way of confronting death is not like typical film characters who react over-dramatically over these situations. Unlike other contemporary films that portray cancer as a deadly disease, this film can be seen as a light to the cancer survivors. The eagerness of the characters to stay alive gives the message to cancer patients in real life. These characters don't lose hope and try to live life to the fullest. Kizie mentions in the film that her name refers to "Chipku" which means someone who never let's go. As her disease stick to her, she sticks to life. Though the film is based on a contemporary novel, it is the first time in Bollywood that cancer patients are seen as optimistic individuals who don't need any sympathy or pity from the audience. In contrast to the film *Devdas*, this film hints at the positivity of life. The main characters know the value of life even when they are on brink of death. The death scene in *Dil Bechara* is remarkably opposite to Devdas 'dramatic death. Before the demise of Manny, he wants to hear his funeral speech. This scene represents the bond of friendship between the characters. The filmmaker does not include a scene of Manny's death, because the motive of the film is not calling attention to melodrama, but is to show the value of an individual's life. The unavailability of melodrama is what makes *Dil Bechara* different from other films. The conflict between emotions is not a question in the films as we see in *Devdas*. The emotional bond between friends and parents is not exaggerated with dramatic elements. Unlike *Devdas*, the film does not end with death, it ends with Kizie's smile while watching Manny in their Bhojpuri film. We hear the narration of deceased Manny in the background about the incomplete song he had completed with the help of Abhimanyu. When Manny's health deteriorates, he still acts in the Bhojpuri film because his urge to complete the film shows his viewpoint towards his ambitions. In the Cancer Counselling Group, he mentions his desire to become like Rajnikanth who can fight well, also hints at his determination to live. Before the loss of his second eye, JP wants to direct his Bhojpuri film. When Kizie's health

gets worsens, she tells her wish to Manny to visit Paris in order to complete the song. In the film, Kizie's yearning to listen to the complete song, Manny and JP's wish to finish their film suggests their aspiration to live. Thus, these youthful characters leave a positive message to the audience.

The difference in the portrayal of doctors in both *Devdas* and *Dil Bechara* can be seen. In the film *Devdas*, when Devdas spits blood after dancing on the song "Chhalak Chhalak", this disappointing dialogue by the doctor can be expected in the traditional Hindi films: "Waqt Kisi Bhi Ghadi Beraham Ho Sakta Hai... Jitna Ho Sake, Unhe Khush Rakhne Ki Koshish Kijiye" (*Devdas* 2:29:04-2:39:10).

However, the portrayal of doctors seems more realistic in *Dil Bechara* as compared to *Devdas*. The character of Dr. Raj Kumar Jha, the medical surgeon and doctor of Kizie is extremely caring and supportive towards Kizie. He knows that Kizie's health can worsen at any point, but still, he encourages her to live. In the film, the audience can see him counselling cancer patients in the Cancer Counselling Group including Kizie, Manny, and JP. Thus, the filmmakers of *Dil Bechara* did justice to even doctors and show them in a positive light.

Devdas is seen as a tragic hero in the film because of his sacrifice, but *Dil Bechara's* characters are not portrayed as extraordinary characters who sacrifice everything for love. Instead, their view on life is more realistic and down-to-earth. Manny, the main character of the film dies as an ordinary person, not as a hero which seems authentic and pragmatic to the audience. Till the end of the film, Manny motivates the audience to live a carefree life. Sharma writes:

In every film, the protagonist has lost their lives to cancer without depicting true cancer on screen but this film is a game changer to the entire scenario here also the main protagonist has lost his life to cancer but through his journey, he and other two cancer patients have fought well. One died because of cancer, another one lost both eyes to cancer and still came out strongly as a cancer survivor and the third one fighting

with cancer and fulfilling her wishes. This film did justice upto some extent to the disease, patients, doctors, and survivors and treatment (p.1514).

Devdas and *Dil Bechara*, both have their influence on the audience. If *Devdas* won Filmfare Award for Best Film, then *Dil Bechara* was the most viewed Indian film on the digital platform. However, *Devdas* depicts physical illness in a very dramatic way and the main character Devdas is seen as a tragic hero with pity and full of emotions. Depression of Devdas is considered as sorrow that resulted into sacrifice for love. On the other hand, *Dil Bechara* depicts characters with strong mental health who encourage people to not fear the disease. The main character dies as an ordinary cancer patient. Thus, the representation of physical illness is more accurate according to contemporary times. Till the end, the characters of *Dil Bechara* teaches its audience about the meaning of life which is opposite in Devdas' case where he wants to give up his life. The main focus of the films that depict mental as well as physical illnesses should be the accurate and realistic representation of physical illness such as Cancer and Tuberculosis. Instead of treating illness as a 'masala' to the story and gain sympathy from the audience, filmmakers should portray the characters as ordinary people. Focusing on the dramatic elements while portraying illness should not be the case. The main idea should create social awareness among the audience. As Bollywood is evolving, it should see diseases with a new perspective, so that it doesn't create fear in the minds of the audience.

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