

A Lacanian Analysis of *Dev D*

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Abstract

Cinematic experience appears rather, an easier process on the surface, but it is a very complex process of multi-dimensional communication. Film interact at multiple levels with the audience. On the one hand it subscribes to the symbolic social order, but on the other hand it touches an individual's desires to break its existential chains. Like most other cultural products (paintings, sculptures etc.) the film exists within the symbolic order of social, political and cultural realities, but it often crosses the symbolic boundaries. This paper applies Lacanian insights in analyzing the one aspect of Anurag Kashyap's seminal film *Dev D*.

Keywords: Lacanian analysis; Film Studies.

Introduction

Films are the highest form of art where men and machines are involved. Cinema captures the fascination of people irrespective of caste, color, creed, ethnicity and place of birth or any other perceived or real differences. No other form of creative expression is capable of involving the viewers in it to an extent that one's subjective existence ceases to manifest itself. And the greatest thing about cinema is its non-exclusivity. It has the power to touch the extremes of unconscious desires and fantasies of human beings.

This paper intends to decode the dominant discourse propagated in the Anurag Kashyap's film *Dev D* through the Lacanian analysis. The film is based on the Bengali novel of Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay, *Devdas*, published in 1917. This movie has been chosen for the research as it successfully treads at the intersection of commercial and art cinema. It fixes human subjects on existing ideological structures, which are constituted partly by the state apparatuses of capitalism. Writings of Slavoj Zizek has been used in this paper to identify the multiple layers of meaning in the film. In his book '*How to Read Lacan*' Slavoj Zizek explains complicated ways of looking at the psychological map of society and individuals as developed by Lacan.

Methodology

The methodology is Lacanian analysis. It means application of theoretical underpinnings developed by Lacan which can be applied to all forms of meaning making expressions. No template or formulae or set pattern exists for conducting Lacanian analysis. It is a subjective analysis which includes taking cues from psychological interpretation and insights developed by Jacques Lacan. This research intends to conduct an in-depth Lacanian analysis of one scene of the film *Dev D*.

Lacan has developed the concepts of the symbolic, real and imaginary order. This triad is extension of Freud's triad of id, ego and super ego. But unlike Freud his interpretations are wider in scope and dimension. Human behavior in all societies can be investigated in the light of symbolic, real and imaginary order. Messages contained in the film will be analyzed on the basis of Lacanian triad. It is important to describe Lacanian triad (Real Order, Imaginary Order and Symbolic Order) before applying them for actual analysis. Lacan's writings are complex so this paper uses Zizek's interpretations to understand Lacan. Zizek describes Lacanian triad as follows

'For Lacan, the reality of human beings is constituted by three mutually entangled levels: the Symbolic, the Imaginary, and the Real. This triad can be nicely illustrated by the game of chess. The rules one has to follow in order to play it are its symbolic dimension: from the purely formal symbolic standpoint, "knight" is defined only by the moves this figure can make. This level is clearly different from the imaginary one, namely the way different pieces are shaped and characterized by their names (king, queen, knight), and it is easy to envision a game with the same rules, but with a different imaginary, in which this figure would be called "messenger" or "runner" or whatever. Finally, real is the entire complex set of contingent circumstances which affect the course of the game: the intelligence of the players, the unpredictable intrusions that may disconcert one of the players or directly cut the game short.' (Zizek, 2006, p.8)

It means in the game of chess rules are symbolic, names are imaginary and circumstances during the play are reality. This research paper will also look into the unique behavior of characters of film to find out what they signify? What are the connotations created beyond over the top denotations through events and circumstances created in the film? How film interacts with societal realities and whether it conforms to the symbolic order or attempts to change it?

Analysis and Interpretation

Dev D deals with most puzzling emotions of human beings like desires, fantasies, love, hate, jealousy and guilt etc. Emerging neurobiologists are coming up with varied explanations but the mere recognition of science behind the subject's brain does not change anything at all in reality. Mere knowledge of objective scientific reality behind any cognitive phenomenon does not change anything. One of the key themes of *Dev D* is love. But the trouble is finding text written for academic purposes on the concept of love (Grodal, 2004). Lacan has said love is what fills in the failure of the sexual relation (Badiou, 2003). This film confirms Lacanian perspective on love. As the movie unfolds, the inner beings of viewers also unfold with it. Human lives are full of boundaries, it is in invisible chains.

In the film, *Dev*, the protagonist, returns from London to his hometown in Punjab. The moment Paro and *Dev* see each other. *Dev* jumps on her. But their possible encounter of love making was spoiled by Paro's father. In this case her father was used as a symbol for society and societal compulsions. They always stop and enter between what you feel is right by subscribing to normative realities of particular era.

Mexican soap operas are shot in such a fast rhythm (every single day 25 minutes episode) that the actors do not even get the script to learn their lines in advance; they have tiny receivers in their ears which tell them what to do, and they learn to enact directly what they hear ("Now slap him and tell him you hate him! Then embrace him!"). (Zizek 8)

Human beings function in their life in similar fashion due to symbolic order. It explains our manifested human behavior, our decisions and our actions. Many a times it may confront with our real desires. Then, human beings are good at compelling themselves and adopting certain patterns in their behavior by carefully calculating their interests. In totality society enjoys a kind of subjective control over the individual desires. This happens because man is a social animal. Fear of social reprisals makes human beings pliable.

In short symbolic order signifies the subservient state of individuals under the rules and regulations defined by society as acceptable. It strangles the individuality of individuals. If one adopts over simplistic and reductionist approach, then the start of the film itself tells that the feeling of *Dev* towards his childhood sweetheart is basically driven by sex. It matches the fundamental assumption of Freudian psychoanalysis that sex is the key driver of all human acts and day dreams. On the other hand, Lacan takes the Sigmund Freud to another level by saying love is nothing but what fills the failure of sexual relations. It simply means once the sexual relations are established there will be no need for love.

Strangely, *Dev D* confirms each preposition of Freud and Lacan. Dev's love for Paro never went into oblivion because they could never indulge into a sexual act. However, the moment they met each other for the first time, without sharing a single word, they jumped at each other. When they met again and jumped at each other in the semi dark frame in the film, suddenly, Paro stopped kissing and uttered 'I love you'. As if she wants to legitimize their act by making it acceptable as per the symbolic order. Dev was not averse to the idea of accepting that order, but the reality is very complex thing. It snatched the opportunity from Dev to confirm to Paro that he is willing to go by the symbolic order.

For the symbolic order to succeed, things must replicate or confirm itself in the real order to fulfill the required formalities, but it could never happen in the film. As the film travels from one scene to another scene, viewers also realize that Dev wants to abide by the symbolic reality, but he could not get Paro due to the complex nature of real order. So, Dev and Paro could not realize that love is meaningless and it cannot survive the test of fulfillment.

Here is an analogy. It explains what happens once people establish sexual relationship due to love.

A couple of years ago, a charming publicity spot for a beer was shown on the British TV. Its first part staged the well-known fairy tale anecdote: a girl walks along a stream, sees a frog, takes it gently into her lap, kisses it, and, of course, the ugly frog miraculously turns into a beautiful young man. However, the story wasn't over yet: the young man casts a covetous glance at the girl, draws her towards himself, kisses her - and she turns into a bottle of beer which the man holds triumphantly in his hand. For the woman, the point is that her love and affection (signaled by the kiss) turn a frog into a beautiful man, a full phallic presence; for the man, it is to reduce the woman to a partial object, the cause of his desire (the *objet petit a*). On account of this asymmetry, there is no sexual relationship: we have either a woman with a frog or a man with a bottle of beer. What we can never obtain is the natural couple of the beautiful woman and man. (Zizek 56)

It is a wrongly held notion that realization of fantasy equals to absolute bliss and pleasure. Zizek's analysis based on Lacanian writings tells us lot about human psyche. One kisses a beautiful young man and after one gets too close to him, one notices that he is effectively a frog, by then it becomes too late. But this realization never took place in the film.

Conclusion

The audience travel with the films. It affects the deeply held notions of viewers. Most of the times it reinforces the existing set of thoughts. The same characteristic that make cinema a potent ideological weapon in the hands of ruling elite, those same characteristics make it a viable tool to challenge the very fundamentals of dominant ideology. Any attempt to see the society as it fits under symbolic, imaginary and real order makes us realize how things are managed around us. Not only our own identities are carefully managed, but our dreams and aspirations are also managed to a great extent. The Lacan's triad is subject to a change. It is not a permanent structure. As our society evolves the real order makes changes in symbolic order. For anything to become a part of symbolic order, it is necessary that ruling elite must subscribe to those ideas. This particular film and our attempt to see it from varied dimensions also tells us that emotion is very complicated.

This paper takes forward the tradition of putting Lacanian insights into use for interpreting and defining the real world as it is interpreted in films. This paper makes an implicit statement that messages conveyed through image, visual or audio visual also depends on the knowledge, prior information and intellect of the users. It could be useful for further analysis of other films.

Endnotes

Jacques Lacan (1901-1981) – French psychoanalyst who claimed that the unconscious part of an individual's mind reflect the structure of language he or she speaks. Lacan also divided the psyche into three levels – the imaginary, the symbolic and the real. His ideas have recently been applied to the study of pop culture which is portrayed as symbolic bridge between the imaginary and the real. His major concepts are found in *Ecrites: The first complete edition in English* (2006). (Danesi 170)

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