

Reimagining the Tragic Hero through the Metaphor of the Coin: Love, Fate and Existential Absurdity in Anurag Kashyap's Dev.D

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Abstract

Anurag Kashyap's Dev.D (2009) is a contemporary adaptation of Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay's Devdas which explores the themes of love, sorrow, and existential turmoil. A pivotal scene from 2:13:29 to 2:15:23 highlights the protagonist, Dev (Abhay Deol), struggling with an internal conflict symbolized by a coin. The coin serves as a metaphor for the randomness of life choices it also reflects love's dual nature simultaneously embodying hope and despair. Additionally, the coin represents existential concepts of fate and free will where it suggests that one's life is shaped not by destiny but by individual decisions. Through this symbol, Kashyap conveys the absurdity of existence where the recognition of life's inherent meaninglessness prompts both despair and the possibility of redemption. This scene encapsulates Dev's internal struggle torn between the need for closure and the weight of past regret the he finds inner peace. Kashyap's Dev.D redefines the Tragic Hero's archetype, reshaping the cultural understanding of Devdas. The film, shaped by cultural influences and influencing its audience explores the human struggle in a world where agency, fate, and emotional healing intersect in a fragile balance. This examination underscores the complexities of human existence, focusing on the tension between personal will and external forces.

Keywords: Coin symbolism, Existential Absurdity, Fate and Free Will, Tragic Hero, Archetype.

1. Introduction

Anurag Kashyap's Dev.D (2009), a modernized retelling of Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay's Devdas (1917), significantly deviates from its source material by shifting away from the fatalistic and passive characterization of the protagonist towards a more active, self-reflective figure. The original Devdas, first written by Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay in 1917, is an emblem of tragic inevitability; Dev's fate, bound by his unrequited love and societal constraints, leads to self-destruction. Kashyap's Dev.D challenges this fatalism, framing the protagonist existential crisis not merely as a consequence of love but as the result of his actions, decisions, and the conflict between his desires and his understanding of life's meaning. It is in this transformation that Kashyap redefines the tragic hero archetype. In Dev D, Dev is not merely a victim of unrequited love and societal pressures as the character in the original text rather he is a deeply conflicted individual who grapples with the complexity of love, loss, self-doubt, and the search

for meaning in an indifferent world. The coin is central to the film's thematic exploration, a recurring symbol that encapsulates Dev's internal struggle between fate and free will through the metaphor of the coin, Kashyap engages with existential questions about the randomness of life and the tension between individual agency and external determinism. This paper will examine how Kashyap uses the coin as a metaphor to reframe the tragic hero narrative, offering a critical perspective on the human condition within a modern, postmodern, or existentialist context. [1]

1.1. The Coin as a Metaphor for Fate, Choice, and Love

The most striking metaphor in Dev.D is the coin. A seemingly trivial object, it emerges as a symbol of Dev's fragmented reality and his inability to reconcile with the world around him. In the scene from 2:13:29 to 2:15:23, Dev holds a coin, flipping it as he faces a moment of decision. The flip represents his struggle

with fate versus free will, and his search for meaning in a life that seems overwhelmingly chaotic and devoid of purpose. (Figure 1) [2]



Figure 1 Dev D, Dev calling Someone to Know About his Lover

The scene where Dev flips his last coin in an attempt to find out about Lani (Kalki Koechin) represents the culmination of his emotional journey. It is the moment when he seeks closure, a final effort to resolve his feelings of abandonment and longing. However, the coin flip is futile, as it reveals that Lani has moved out, shattering Dev's last vestige of hope. In this act coin conveys the duality of 'love of lovers', which can simultaneously embody both joy and despair, hope and disappointment. Just as a coin's two sides represent opposites, so too does love in Dev.D straddle the extremes of pleasure and pain. The film underscores that love, in its complexity, is both a source of transcendence and destruction, a duality embodied by the very object of the coin. (Figure 2) [4]



Figure 2 Dev D, Collecting the Coins

Furthermore, the coin symbolizes the tension between fate and free will that lies within his heart. The act of collecting the coins may seem trivial, yet it captures the randomness of Dev's decisions, reflecting a larger philosophical dilemma regarding the degree to which human lives are governed by external forces versus personal agency. (Figure 3) [3]



Figure 3 Dev D, Accident/ Brink of Death

In this critical moment, Dev's actions involving the coin take a tragic turn. By collecting the coin, he inadvertently sets in motion a series of events that bring him closer to the brink of death. This act, which may seem innocuous at first, symbolises his desperate search for meaning and closure. Dev is faced with the harsh reality that his quest for closure may ultimately cost him his life, underscoring the tragic irony of his journey. This duality inherent in the coin and its two sides is similar to the duality of Dev's existence: his desire for love and companionship versus his inclination toward self-destruction. In this Accident the coin is an internal gamble, a momentary surrender to fate and yet, it also embodies the capacity for free will. This tension lies at the heart of Dev's character and his evolution over the course of the scene. By introducing this element, Kashyap critiques the deterministic view of human existence often associated with traditional tragic narratives, particularly the classic Devdas, where fate is presented as an immutable force. In contrast, the coin introduces a notion of agency, where the protagonist's choices, however uncertain, shape his path. While the outcome of the incident is uncertain, it remains an act of fate henceforth, individual choice signifying the potential for human action to

determine meaning and resolution in an otherwise absurd world. [5]

1.2. Existential Absurdity and the Search for Meaning

The film's engagement with the coin as a metaphor also reflects a deeper engagement with existential philosophy, particularly the notion of absurdity articulated by thinkers such as Albert Camus. According to Camus, life is inherently devoid of meaning, and the human condition is characterized by an ongoing confrontation with this absurdity. The coin, in this context, becomes a symbol not only of randomness but also of the futility in the search for the inherent meaning of Dev's struggle with love, his spiralling into addiction and his eventual confrontation with his existential despair all reflect the absurdity of human existence something that must be created or realized by the individual, even in the face of overwhelming absurdity. Dev's internal conflict stems from his recognition that life cannot be reduced to simple narratives of love, loss, and revenge. The absurdity of life is not simply in its lack of inherent meaning but also in the human desire to impose meaning where none exists. The coin's unpredictability reflects this very struggle where no outcome, no decision is final or inherently meaningful yet, Dev continues to challenge his fate, desperate to find some resolution, some purpose, even as he feels trapped in the futility of his search. This existential struggle is encapsulated in the film's closing moments, where Dev finally arrives at a form of personal peace not through any grand resolution of his emotional turmoil, but through an acceptance of life's absurdity. In this way, the coin flips one final time, symbolizing Dev's recognition that he is both the agent and the subject of his fate. [6]

1.3. Redefining the Tragic Hero

In redefining the tragic hero, Kashyap's Dev.D challenges conventional depictions of the protagonist as a victim of fate, offering instead a nuanced portrayal of a modern man in conflict with his sense of identity and agency. In traditional tragic narratives, such as Devdas, the hero is often depicted as a passive figure whose fate is sealed by external forces like love, society, or family. However, in Dev.D, Dev's emotional turmoil and eventual self-destruction are

not merely the result of his love for Paro (Mahi Gill) or the societal pressures he faced his plight is shaped by his own choices, mistakes, and refusal to confront the deeper questions of existence. The coin, as a symbol of both randomness and choice, encapsulates this shift in the tragic hero's agency. The accident happens by the fate of the coin, despite its randomness. This still suggests that Dev still possesses the power to make decisions even if those decisions lead to further suffering. This shift from a passive to an active tragic hero is central to Kashyap's reimagining of the Devdas narrative and its cultural implications. Furthermore, Kashyap's approach to the tragic hero invites a reconsideration of redemption. Unlike the fatalistic tragedy of the original Devdas, where the hero's death is inevitable. Dev.D opens up the possibility for personal growth and healing. The coin flips, in this sense, also suggest the potential for change with Dev's ultimate peace representing a form of redemption not through external resolution, but through an acceptance of his internal conflict and the absurdity of life.

Conclusion

In the original novel, Devdas is an instrument of tragic necessity doomed by love, society, and an innate sense of powerlessness. Kashyap's retelling eschews this determinism however the narrative onto an existential level, where Dev's downfall is not merely romantic but metaphysical in design. Dev.D redefines the tragic hero by emphasizing the complexity of love, fate, and existential choice while using the metaphor of the coin to explore the tension between randomness and individual agency. Through this symbol, Kashyap interrogates existential themes of absurdity and the search for meaning and presents a protagonist who is both the product and the architect of his fate by rejecting the deterministic framework of traditional tragic narratives whereas Dev.D offers a modern reinterpretation of the Devdas archetype, one that privileges individual agency within a world devoid of inherent meaning. Ultimately, the film suggests that redemption and self-realization can be found not through an external resolution of fate but through the acceptance of life's absurdity and the ability to make meaningful choices in the face of uncertainty. Through its symbolic and

thematic layering, this movie not only challenges the classical tragic hero narrative but also invites a deeper interrogation of the human condition. This explores how Kashyap's adaptation, grounded in postmodern and existentialist sensibilities uses the metaphor of the coin to transform Dev into a contemporary absurd hero, one who in the face of metaphysical disillusionment chooses to begin again. Dev (Abhay Deol) is represented as a man afflicted by the meaninglessness of the world with Albert Camus's philosophical concept of the absurd hero being who confronts a meaningless world not with resignation but with defiant revolt. Dev is more than just a victim or a broken heart, he is an introspective person negotiating alienation, guilt, and the unpredictability of contemporary life. His descent into existential despair is self-made rather than predetermined. The coin in the movie is the most powerful symbol. The coin transforms from a motif into a metaphysical pivot between chance and choice. In this way, Kashyap's Dev.D is a film that redefines the tragic hero archetype for a modern audience, showing that in a world governed by uncertainty, it is the choices we make that define our existence. Through the metaphor of the coin, the film explores the deep and often painful contradictions inherent in the human experience, inviting viewers to reflect on the nature of fate, love, and the search for meaning in an uncertain world.

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