Article

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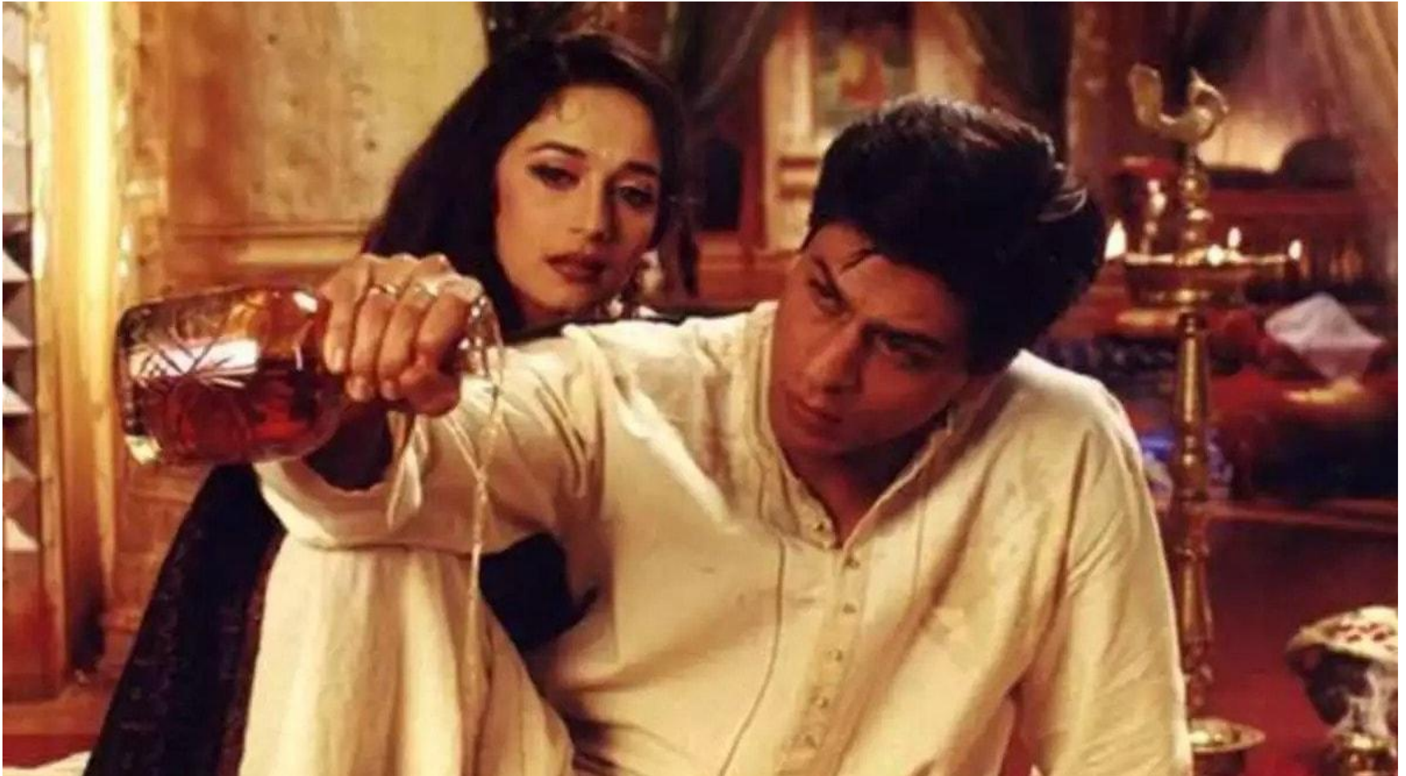
Why Must Beauty Always Save the Beast?



Devdas (Hindi, 2002) by Sanjay Leela Bhansali

Why does love in cinema so often look like a rehabilitation project?

Across many of our cherished romantic fairy tales and films, a pattern keeps emerging. Whether they are set in castles or laboratories, high schools or vampire fantasies, they follow a predictable structure, where a "pure-hearted" heroine is entrusted with loving and redeeming a wounded, monstrous man. At first this seems virtuous, even a triumphant ode to the power of love that sees beyond appearances. But the more we delve into these stories, the more we are left asking, *Why must Beauty always save the Beast?*

Romanticising the Male Monstrosity

The most famous version of this script is the classic *Beauty and the Beast* itself. Whether it be the eighteenth-century French fairytale (known as *La Belle et la Bête*) or Walt Disney's retellings, the lesson conveyed to young girls is fixed - that there is perhaps no virtue more feminine than redeeming a monstrous man. In *Beauty and the Beast*, the story focuses on Belle, a quintessential beauty based in a rural French town, who yearns for her freedom. Feeling suffocated by the conservative townsfolk around her, Belle finds solace only in her books and education. One day, when a beast kidnaps her father, she

sacrifices herself in an attempt to save his life. This is perhaps the most heroic act by anyone in the film, yet is completely overshadowed by Belle's kindness and selflessness towards the beast, which becomes the film's primary virtue. While she is held captive with the Beast, Belle teaches and heals him, sees past his savagery, and falls in love with him. By the end of the tale, the beast finds his redemption by turning into a handsome and beloved prince, while Belle's greatest accomplishment becomes only the role she plays in transforming him into one. The message delivered here becomes quite clear, that the right woman's love can not only civilise a monster; but that doing so is her greatest attraction.

Guillermo del Toro's *The Shape of Water (2017),* set during the Cold War, tells a similar story of Elisa Esposito - she is a mute janitor who works in a high-security American laboratory that houses a mysterious amphibious creature. The creature is a half-man and half-river god, and is held captive by the U.S. military for experimentation. When Elisa finds him locked up inside a glass tank, she responds to him with an unnatural kindness. She feeds him boiled eggs, plays him Benny Goodman records, and over time, wins his affection. The amphibian, though violent when provoked, becomes capable of profound gentleness in her presence. Elisa is never scared of him throughout the film - which would perhaps be the more rational and human reaction. Instead, they both end up forming an intimacy that goes beyond speech, and towards the end Elisa herself is transformed into an amphibian to spend the rest of her life with the creature. At the time of its release, several critics dubbed this film as a "fable of tenderness" and a "shining example of love that transcends speech and race, and even species." But ultimately there is a cruelty in this story too, one that tells women their worthiness lies only in their ability to sacrifice their selfhood and forgive the brokenness of men.

This trope is also illustrated in the 2005 Oscar-nominated *King Kong,* directed by Peter Jackson. The film's heroine Ann Darrow, begins her journey as a starving actress during the Great Depression, desperate for work and survival. When she boards a ship bound for uncharted Skull Island, Ann gets captured by a giant ape *Kong*, a large beast of terrifying strength. Her first contact with the beast is a violent one, and she is dragged by him through the jungle like a plaything. She is kidnapped and kept hidden away from her teammates in Kong's nest, who develops a strange possessiveness towards her, and a hostility towards all her rescuers. As the story progresses, Ann begins to recognise glimpses of tenderness in her captor, and in a series of mute exchanges, she decides to trust him with her life.

Perhaps the most infuriating factor in this story is that Ann is not without a human love interest. Jack Driscoll, a playwright aboard the ship, falls head over heels in love with her. He is gallant and patient, and risks his life many times throughout the film to rescue her. Despite his efforts, however,

Ann's emotional allegiance keeps drifting towards Kong, the giant Gorilla who is her kidnapper. She returns to Kong again and again, drawn to him by what can only be seen as a quasi-maternal compassion. Ann tries to fix Kong's violent nature and redeem his loneliness till the very end. Once again, it is Beauty who saves the Beast.

The apt final entry to this list would be the *Twilight* series, a story only too familiar to every girl that grew up in the 2000s. At first glance, the *Twilight films* seem to be quite far removed from fairy tales. They centre on Bella Swan, a shy high-schooler who falls for Edward Cullen, a brooding immortal who sees himself as a cursed monster. Bella loves him unconditionally, despite knowing that he is a killer who can very well take her life at any moment. Her only role in the films is to constantly reassure Edward of his humanity, while his violent nature and sulking personality are romanticised as something that she alone can understand. Throughout the films, Bella's patience and even at times self-endangerment is rebranded as 'passion.' Ultimately, just like Elisa, she ends up transforming into a vampire to be with the man she loves, completely forgoing her humanity and her family in the process.

Stories like this make one thing pretty clear: that men, no matter how cursed or beastly, will always remain worthy of redemption. Women, on the other hand, must *prove* themselves as worthy of the love they give so unconditionally, and at times, even transform themselves completely to be with the man they love.

A Mythological Perspective

We have only to look at some of the most influential tales in Indian mythology to see that when a woman expresses desire candidly, she often gets punished and humiliated. In the Ramayana, the rakshasi (monster) Surpanakha dares to confess her attraction to Lord Rama and Lakshmana. For that act alone, her nose and ears are violently sliced off. Her ugliness becomes both the joke and moral of the story, teaching its readers that any woman who openly desires a man would be instantly considered grotesque.

These unbalanced gender roles and double standards can be understood through the work of French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir. Beauvoir explains in *The Second Sex* that while society defines women by how they appear, it judges men by what they do. Any woman who is vulnerable or openly expressive of her feelings is considered nothing short of 'ugly.' Taking a similar point of view, American Philosopher Susan Bordo notes in *The Unbearable Weight* that the female body is endlessly disciplined and perfected, all while the male imperfection is considered naturally charming. These beliefs get reflected in the stories we tell too.

It is easy to dismiss these as harmless fantasies, but their influence can be seen in our own lives. Even today, women are told to be patient with male anger, and to treat it as an unfortunate but inevitable trait of his "macho" demeanour. At the same time, when

women show their own messiness or volatility, they are quickly branded as “too much,” “too crazy,” or simply “difficult.”

So why does this way of thinking still persist?

Fear of Female Desire

Women who openly desire, whether on screen or in real life, are still so often treated as a threat. Think of Eve’s curiosity or Surpanakha’s longing - both of which show us that female desire has long been framed as the beginning of disorder. Through patriarchal storytelling, the woman is recast as the one who must always nurture and redeem. The male "beast," on the other hand, can want violently, and his aggression is seen as a part of his charm because, well, it confirms his agency.

This is aptly described by philosopher Julia Kristeva through her concept of the *abject*, which refers to all those things which society rejects in order to maintain its sense of purity. The ‘monstrous woman’ in all these films, becomes that *abject figure.* In order to protect the illusion of order, stories exclude her from romance or force her to become "beautiful" before she can be loved.

The Feminisation of Morality

These tales also rely on what philosophers Simone de Beauvoir and later Carol Gilligan described as the ‘moral division of gender,’ in which society assigns men the freedom to act and err, while expecting women to always clean up afterwards. These are traits that mirror society's larger expectations of women as emotional caregivers. It leads to women serving merely as the conscience of men, but never their equals in moral fallibility.

In Indian filmography, the character of Preeti from *Kabir Singh* embodies this dynamic almost perfectly. Throughout the film she is shown to be endlessly patient and forgiving, existing only to absorb Kabir’s rage and self-destruction without ever asserting her own moral agency. Her sole purpose, like all the heroines in this trope, is to soothe the conscience of a broken man by loving him unconditionally- because after all, that is all the story requires her to do.

The Political Economy of Beauty

In the end, this trope persists because beauty has been turned into a disciplinary tool. In the words of Susan Bordo, when the female body is constantly monitored and corrected, then aesthetic control is mistakenly taken as moral control. Where a beautiful woman symbolises restraint and civility, she reassures society about its own ordering. A "beastly" woman, in contrast, refuses domestication. She is threatening precisely because she embodies freedom.

This is demonstrated well in Oscar-winning *Black Swan*, where Nina’s body is relentlessly disciplined in pursuit of perfection as a ballet dancer. When she finally embraces her inner desire and chaos - or the “black swan” within her, the sequence of her transformation is

depicted as too frightening and grotesque to be seen. She is shown to dramatically descend into madness and her loss of aesthetic control turns into a loss of psychological stability. It ultimately reinforces the message that a woman who cannot regulate herself as a "white swan" ends up becoming dangerous and unhinged.

In the Indian Context

In Indian cinema, the man who punches through walls and slaps his woman is rarely ever seen as the villain, rather as a misunderstood soul who is too *passionate* for the ordinariness of the world. In Sanjay Leela Bhansali's 2002 masterpiece *Devdas*, the eponymous lead is the perfect prototype of this. Devdas drinks himself to death, yet his downfall somehow gets filmed with a lot of reverence. Paro and Chandramukhi, two women of extraordinary empathy, exist solely to romanticise his self-destruction into something tragic and poetic. While the film is famous for dramatically mourning his impending collapse, it also falls into the trap of celebrating the 'purity' of the women who endure him through it.

Kabir Singh (2019), released two decades later, is a film that made this trope popular nationwide. Kabir is shown to be a typical angry young man. His brutality takes form in slapping and controlling his girlfriend Preeti, which is displayed as the intensity of his character. Preeti remains mute and accepting of the violence meted against her, making their love story, like all the others, a case of female submission as an evidence of loyalty and love. The absolute worst part of this story is that when the film hit theatres, many young men across India began hero-worshipping Kabir, imitating his mannerisms, style, and even his aggression towards his girlfriend, as though his volatility were something to aspire for.

In *Tamasha* (2015), the character of Ved played by Ranbir Kapoor is not physically violent like Kabir, but the inner chaos of this mind completely hijacks the narrative. Deepika Padukone's Tara falls in love with his performative energy and ends up becoming the medium of his self-discovery. Although it is her empathy that ultimately restores him, the narrative chooses to focus on his redemption rather than all the exhaustion and ill-treatment she endures while fixing him throughout the film. The story ends with Ved's reconciliation to selfhood. Tara, very symbolically, gets reduced to the woman standing behind the stage, who silently supports him as he basks in the spotlight as a redeemed man.

This glorification of the broken man ultimately pushes us to look inward and question exactly what it is that we have been taught to romanticise. It compels us to look deeper within us and ask: where are the stories in which the woman is allowed to be the beast, and is still desired entirely on her own terms?

When the Beast Is a Woman

When the beast is a woman, there is a noticeable shift in the narrative. What we find is that female monstrosity is rarely given as much nuance or redemption as her male counterpart.

Take *Gone Girl's* Amy Dunne, for example. She is highly qualified and self-aware, appearing almost too good for her husband at times. Her monstrosity alarms the movie-goers precisely because it goes against the gendered norm of storytelling: the "cool girl," the perfect wife, the object of empathy that women are expected to perform. But Amy refuses all these roles. When she finds her husband cheating on her with a younger model, despite giving him her all, she decides to take matters into her own hands to teach him a lesson. Amy weaponises the narrative expectations and uses the illusion of love to regain control, in a world that always treats women only as saints. Hers is the story of an epic revenge, yet it is presented to the audience as the descent of a psychotic woman.

In another example, Phoebe Waller-Bridge's *Fleabag* is an eccentric woman in the series of the same name, who lightly flirts with the idea of female monstrosity. Her character is written as self-destructive and sexually unapologetic, provoking the audience on purpose by baring out her demons. In many ways, she captures what countless women in their twenties experience, which is a longing to be unfiltered and still be accepted for who they are. At one point, she confesses, "I want someone to tell me what to wear every morning… what to eat, what to love, what to hate… I think I want someone to tell me how to live my life." Yet even in her rawest moments, the story doesn't really give her any proper redemption at all. The audience is expected to see her flaws as riveting and comedic at most, but never truly loveable.

Why then, is female imperfection still so hard to love?

Perhaps it is because loving an imperfect woman unsettles the very foundations of how femininity is imagined. We see this logic play out in real life too, when a man who loses his temper is called passionate and at times even magnetic, while a woman who raises her voice is urged to calm down and not be 'hysterical.' Here, of course, what changes is exactly who is permitted the full range of human emotion.

What would it mean, then, to tell a story where a woman's wildness isn't a curse but her truth? Where her anger or darkness don't need to be translated into virtue? Maybe such a tale would no longer be about redemption at all, but just recognition. Because perhaps the real

question isn't "Why does Beauty save the Beast?" but "Why must she always do so?"

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