

Narrative Closure as Cultural Psychology: Colonial Paralysis in Devdas

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Abstract

It has been discussed as narrative closure being perceived as an aesthetic decision or an authorial decision, but these interpretations do not take into consideration systematic generalizations of story endings in various historical and cultural settings. The thesis that the narrative closure is a manifestation of cultural psychology conditioned by historical structure is presented in this paper. In particular, it presents the phenomenon of Colonial Paralysis to provide a tragic narrative resolution of the *Devdas* (1917) by Sarat Chandra Chatterjee. Colonial Paralysis is a group-based psychological phenomenon that is generated by a long-term institutional stalling, social stiffening, and political disempowerment by the colonial rule. This paper shows that passive self-destruction in *Devdas* is not just a personal moral failure but a textual manifestation of structural impossibility, which has been internalized in the culture. The tragic conclusion is a culturally logical solution to a social context in which the institutional methods of transcending barriers of classes and caste were harshly limited. To give the argument the context, the paper briefly compares *Devdas* and Korean story *Chunhyangjeon*, which is an expression of another cultural psychology influenced by the institutional functionality and social mobility. It is in this comparison that narrative closure is marked as a form of encoding culturally specific views of possibility, agency and justice. Finally, this paper hypothesizes that narrative endings are cultural artifacts which can be used to show the psychological impacts of historical structures thus placing literature as a critical point of representing the association between history, culture and imagination.

Keywords: Narrative Closure, Cultural Psychology, Colonial Paralysis, *Devdas*, Sarat Chandra Chatterjee, Cultural Narratology, Colonial India, Comparative Literature.

Introduction

Narrative endings have mostly been interpreted as a work of artistic choice, convention, or personal author preference. Conventional literary criticism is more likely to interpret tragic or comic denouement as an aesthetic choice determined by narratory structure, coherence of theme or effect. Nonetheless, these explanations do not take into account larger trends relating narrative closure to cultural and historical circumstances. As they are studied in varied societies and historical eras, the narrative endings can be observed to have systematic association with societal ideas about possibility, agency and functionality of an institution. This implies that narrative closure is not simply a formal/artistic effect but a cultural phenomenon, which is defined by the collective psychological structures.

This paper claims the existence of narrative closure as a cultural psychology that is shaped by experience in history. In particular, it discusses Sarat Chandra Chatterjee, *Devdas* (1917), as a literary manifestation of what this paper refers to as Colonial Paralysis- a mass collective psychological problem that resulted

as a consequence of structural disempowerment and institutional blockage by the colonial rule. Colonial Paralysis is the inability of social institutions to offer channels of individual mobility, justice, and meaningful resistance over and over again. In the long run, these circumstances promote cultural demands of necessity, despondency, and structural impossibility. These expectations affect both the social behavior and the narrative imagination to have the types of endings that might seem culturally viable or interesting. One of the most powerful literary depictions of this phenomenon is the *Devdas* written at the end of the colonial period in India. The slow alcoholism and subsequent self-destruction of the main character can be viewed as an individual tragedy motivated either by an emotional inability or social restrictions. This paper, however, states that the fate of *Devdas* is not merely a failure of the individual. The fact that he was unable to break caste boundaries, institutional rigidity and social expectations also depict a larger cultural psychology conditioned by structures of colonialism. It is the tragic end of the story that presents a culturally consistent resolution of a historically situated setting where the immobility of systems and institutional marginalization exist.

To elaborate more on this argument, this paper briefly takes into consideration the story of *Chunhyangjeon*, a Korean story, which has a structurally comparable love story, but ends with institutional vindication and social restoration. In contrast to colonial India, Joseon Korea had its own working institutional channels including civil service examinations that not only prevented the social mobility but also supported the cultural ideals of justice and merit. This opposition draws a focus on how the various structures in the past have developed various cultural psychologies that subsequently influence narrative closure.

Based on cultural narratology and historical interpretation, this study hypothesizes that narrative closure is a cultural artifact of encoding group psychological reactions to structural circumstances. In analyzing *Devdas* in a colonial setting this paper would show that literature, as well as reflecting individual experience, also reveals the underlying cultural logic that the historical structures have constructed. Narrative endings can thus be seen to be locations in which the society conceives of the possibility, agency and resolution under the pressures of their historical realities.

Related Research Work

Much academic discussion of Sarat Chandra Chatterjee's *Devdas* has centered on its treatment of social restriction, colonial subjectivity as well as aestheticization of suffering. The novel has been taken by postcolonial critics as a cultural product, which is informed by the psychological effects of colonial domination. A brilliant point that Ania Loomba puts forward is that the discourse of colonialism systematically created colonized subjects as psychologically inferior and socially constrained, which created self-doubt and fatalism patterns that were internalized. In this context, the self-destructive path that *Devdas* follows is not just the symptom of a personal weakness, but also the psychological impact of structural disempowerment. The fact that he can not take decisive action or break social barriers depicts how institutional restrictions are internalized in the case of the colonial subjectivity.

Corey Creekmur goes further and analyzes how melodrama contributed to the emotional and narrative structure of *Devdas*. He says that melodramatic stories turn social misery into aesthetic experience, which enables people to emotionally work through structural injustice without having to confront it. In *Devdas*, suffering is not introduced as an issue that ought to be solved but as a state that ought to be experienced and aestheticized. The slow downfall of the protagonist into alcoholism and subsequent death brings a feeling of emotional catharsis as well as intensifying the idea that structural obstacles are ineffective. This

resignation aestheticization is an expression of the cultural logic where structural impossibility is embraced instead of being opposed.

The institutional conditions of the colonial India that led to such cultural trends have also been studied by social historians. Amartya Sen points out the British colonial rule as having enhanced social immobility by institutionalizing caste hierarchies in the administrative processes using census categorization and by legalizing caste hierarchies. These policies have turned formerly mobile social identities into institutional categories that were highly restrictive of mobility. It is due to this that people started to face more structural barriers that could not be surmounted by only individual efforts. This organisational environment helped to spread common culture beliefs of powerlessness and inevitability.

Meenakshi Mukherjee goes on to note that most of the Indian literature at the beginning of the twentieth century depicts characters who struggle against the overwhelming social restrictions. Such stories tend to portray characters whose dreams are blocked institutionally and systematically. The historical conditions of such tragic narrative patterns are implied by the fact that literary form itself was a product of historical conditions. Instead of showing individual failure as individual, what has been manifested in these works is collective experiences of structural limitation during colonial rule.

Although the available literature has effectively established the correlation between the conditions of colonialism and the literary text, it has not exhausted the study of the role of these historic structures in the closure of the narrative on its part. The majority of the analyses are devoted to thematic content or character psychology or ideological criticism without discussing the rationale of some categories of storylines ending being culturally plausible. In particular, little has been done to examine how the collective psychological states created by institutional frameworks influence narrative anticipation about the possibility, resolution, and agency.

The comparative literary standpoints can give additional information on this association. The Korean story which brought about the Joseon Dynasty is the Korean narrative Chunhyangjeon which depicts a structurally similar story of class barriers and social constraint in the love story. But not like Devdas, its story ends with institutional justice and reinstatement of right. Historians like James Palais have demonstrated that Joseon Korea had an operating institutional mechanism, which included the Gwageo civil service examination system that facilitated limited social mobility. The presence of these institutional avenues created a cultural perception that hard work and diligence could result in the achievement of some social promotion.

This difference helps to emphasize the significance of institutional context towards narrative imagination. In institutions where channels of movement and justice are available, the suffering can be solved more easily by vindication. On the other hand, in the absence of individual agency being systematically blocked by institutions, narratives can solve suffering by resignation and tragedy. Nevertheless, there is still a gap in the existing scholarship that can explain the psychological processes by which historical structures construct narrative closure.

This paper is the continuation of prior research that introduces the term Colonial Paralysis in an attempt to explain how institutional paralysis creates the culture of unavoidability and hopelessness. This paper aims at showing how narrative closure is the expression of cultural psychology which is the creation of historical circumstances as opposed to individual artistic decision.

Theoretical Framework: Narrative Closure as Cultural Psychology

Narrative closure has commonly been interpreted as a formal attribute of storytelling that offers resolution,

coherence and interpretive closure. Classical narratology tends to consider closure as a formal process by which narrative tensions are denied as well as meaning stabilized. Nevertheless, such formalist methods do not adequately explain the reasons for some kinds of closure, especially tragic or vindictory ones, which seem to occur repeatedly in particular historical and cultural circumstances. This implies that narrative closure is not just the structural imperative, but a culturally conditioned process as a result of collective psychological expectations.

A framework in the cultural narratology would be useful in comprehending this relationship. Other scholars like Paul Ricoeur contend that narrative is a basic way in which human beings arrange their time and attribute significance to what has happened. There is no reflection of reality by narrative and narrative actively produces how individuals and communities comprehend causality, possibility and resolution. In the same manner, Hayden white illustrates that even historical accounts are based on literary plot lines like tragedy, comedy and romance as a way of explaining events. Such narrative forms are indicative of cultural presuppositions regarding whether misery results in redemption, justice or irreversibly lost.

It is based on these theoretical foundations that this study predicts, as a thesis, that narrative closure is indicative of cultural psychology developed through the historical experience. Cultural psychology is the commonality of perception, expectation, feeling of a group that results in common experience through interaction with social institutions. Such patterns are psychological but not necessarily individual but are influenced by recurrent experiences of structural factors like political control, economic prospects and institutional availability.

This paper coined the term Colonial Paralysis to represent a distinct type of cultural psychology that was created through institutional paralysis during the colonial rule. Colonial Paralysis comes into being as individuals and communities routinely face structural impediments that do not allow significant social mobility or institutional justice. With the course of time, these experiences result in internalized anticipations of inevitability and structural impossibility. People can develop beliefs in the inability to overcome social constraints as irreversible and permanent and lower perceived effectiveness of agency and resistance.

This mental state not only affects social behavior but cultural imagination as well the scope of things that people view as a possibility or a plausible eventuality. Cultural imagination decides what forms of narrative resolution make any sense in a particular society or not. In settings where institutional functionality is the order of the day, the narratives can reasonably solve suffering of justice, redemption or social mobility. But in an institutional blockage environment, narratives can instead work to resolve suffering by resigning, aesthetic tragedy, or the matters being lost forever.

It is possible to define narrative closure as the ultimate statement of culturally conditioned expectations of possibility and agency. The closure of a story does not necessarily merely represent the inner logic of the narrative but it is a manifestation of the wider cultural suppositions regarding whether structural impediments can be transcended. In the context of a lack of or ineffectiveness of institutional means of change, the normative solution can turn to the tragic closure as a culturally acceptable one. These endings are an expression of shared beliefs that pain is beyond redemption through the existing social institutions. This model places narrative closure at the end of causal connection between historical structure, cultural psychology and narrative imagination. Historical buildings define the overall psychological anticipation of people due to recurrent institutional intermingling. The psychological expectations shape cultural imagination through determining what possibilities or inevitabilities of outcomes exist. The narrative imagination, in its turn, generates stories that have solutions that display these culturally determined

expectations. Narrative closure is therefore a cultural object that inscribes the psychological implications of historical circumstances.

It is against this background that Devdas may be viewed not as a mere tragic love story but as a narrative manifestation of Colonial Paralysis. The fact that the protagonist attempts to break the social barriers but cannot is a manifestation of internalized views of structural impossibility. His self-destructive path and eventual demise is a culturally explanatory solution in a historical setting of inflexible institutions and social stasis. The unfortunate ending to the story reveals general psychological demands informed by colonial institutionalized circumstances.

In order to further explain how this relationship can be explained, the next section reviews how Colonial Paralysis is functioning in the narrative format of Devdas where the influence of historical conditions on the agency of character, narrative logic, and narrative resolution is illustrated.

Colonial Paralysis and Narrative Closure in Devdas

Published in the late colonial era in India in the year 1917, Sarat Chandra Chatterjee gives us Devdas which is a narrative framework formed by the strong institutional inflexibility and social stagnation. Although the novel may be viewed as a tragic love story with its focus on emotional vulnerability or social norm, the cultural-psychological approach shows that the narrative closure can be discussed as a mirror of the overall historical situation. In particular, the failure of the main character to take control of the social wall and his subsequent self-destruction can be interpreted as manifestations of Colonial Paralysis, a general mental state that appeared because of the years of institutional congestion under the colonial rule. The social world being described in Devdas is one of strict caste hierarchy, institutional inaccessibility and few avenues of meaningful social mobility. It does not seem that it is just personal incompatibility between Devdas and Parvati but the established social order that governs marriage, status and legitimacy. These formations are introduced in the story not as human artifacts but as the elements of social reality. Devdas neither makes any significant argument with these constraints, nor is there any institutional mechanism proposed by the narrative that can address the constraints. The lack of such channels indicated a cultural environment where structural hindrances were considered as having no way out.

The internalization of the blockage in the institution is depicted through the psychological reaction of Devdas to these circumstances. Instead of utilizing other courses of action, including social mobility, institutional progress, and collective action, he resorts to withdrawal into inaction and self-destruction. His alcoholism is not only personal frailty but also a mental process of structural impossibility. Resignation is a culturally sensible reaction in a social context where institutional processes are broken or incompetent to offer channels of effective agency. The fact that Devdas does nothing is a cultural reasoning where hard work is seen as pointless and institutional hindrances as externalized as part of the world.

This vision is further reinforced in the story because it shows the suffering of Devdas as something that has meaning and can not be resolved. His affection toward Parvati is described as sincere and permanent, and the story does not imply that the ability to remain emotionally committed to an institution can break through its limitations. Rather his sufferings are aestheticized making structural injustice into individual tragedy. Such aestheticization allows the narrative to generate emotional catharsis without confronting the structural conditions that create sufferings. The tragic closing is then the culturally agreeable solution in a situation whereby change in the institution seems unfeasible.

Notably, Devdas does not even seek to use institutional means to change his condition. He never tries to

obtain an education, career development, and even social bargaining as a method of breaking caste boundaries. His inactivity is a cultural psychology that has resulted in a repeat exclusion in an institution. Agency itself might seem to be ineffective or meaningless when individuals and communities are subjected to structural blockage over long durations of time. In these settings, quitting is no longer a matter of personal choice but rather it is a cultural dictum.

The fact that the main character dies at the doorstep of the house of Parvati signifies the completion of this psychological and structural process. This scene is symbolically important as this is the time when Devdas finds himself at the border of emotional passion and social reality. He comes physically near the object of his affection but is structurally disenfranchised by it. His death strengthens the image that the structural barriers can never be defeated by the perseverance or the passion of the heart. The storyline resolution therefore confirms the undeniable nature of structural impossibility, a culture-based anticipation that is informed by the conditions of colonial institutions.

Such a tragic ending does not seem to be random in the story. Rather, it becomes the natural product of a cultural setting, which is institutional paralysis. The story has not offered any other resolutions like successful resistance, institutional response, or social promotion since such results would be against the existing cultural view of structural reality. The tragic conclusion seems culturally logical, since it adheres to the general psychological anticipation due to the experience of history.

This cultural logic is further supported by the aestheticization of the self destruction of Devdas. His pain is depicted with a dignity that is emotional and also narrative turning the act of resignation into an experience of any significance. Such aesthetic change enables the story to turn structural helplessness into individual tragedy, which makes resignation seem more personal than forced by society. Such narrative techniques indicate the way of culture trying to cope with structural disempowerment via aesthetic representation.

Such interpretation shows that narrative closure in Devdas illustrates the cultural psychology that is influenced by the institutional realities of colonialism. Targeted in passivity, self-destruction, and eventual death are not only narrative tools but the manifestations of internalized structural impossibility of the protagonist. The tragic resolution is a carry-over of collective psychic anticipations that are instilled under long-standing institutional constipation. Narrative closure is therefore a cultural object that will expose the manner in which historical structures interpret possibilities, agency and resolution.

In order to make the cultural particularity of this tragic closure clearer, it is helpful to briefly look at a structurally similar story out of another institutional setting. The Korean story Chunhyangjeon is an example of the effects of different institutional conditions on narrative expectations and resolutions.

Comparative Context: Institutional Possibility and Chunhyangjeon

The connection between cultural psychology and narrative closure is easier to comprehend when Devdas is momentarily taken into account in relation to the Korean narrative Chunhyangjeon. The two stories have a structurally similar premise that contains a romantic relationship limited by the social hierarchy and the institutional authority. The main characters are both confronted with obstacles created by classes and social hierarchy, and their misery is the emotional backbone of the story. Nonetheless, there is a fundamental difference in the manner in which the two stories are resolved. Unlike Devdas, which ends in unavoidable tragedy and self-destruction, Chunhyangjeon ends suffering by institutional intervention and vindication. The difference between this and the other two cultures shows the influence of institutional context on cultural expectation about possibility and resolution.

In contrast to the case of colonial India, where social immobility was mostly upheld through institutional frameworks, in Joseon Korea the social measures remained formal and permitted at least some level of social mobility and institutional justice. Gwageo civil service examination system offered an established channel through which one could be considered an official due to merit. Even though the availability of such institutions was not fully equalized, they still played to cultural norms that hard work and upright morals could be rewarded with significant social progress. In Chunhyangjeon, the male character, Lee Mongrylong, will be able to employ institutional channels by taking the civil service examination and gaining the power that he needs to bring justice back. It is his institutional agency that helps him to get around social obstacles and to clear himself and Chunhyang.

This institutional functionality defines the cultural psychology expressed in the story. Mongrylong is confident that institutional mechanisms will work as evidenced by his actions contrary to Devdas who internalizes structural impossibility and withdraws to resignation. The tragedy of Chunhyang is not aestheticized as something irreversible but as having a temporary wrong, which can be righted through the intervention of the institutions. The narrative closure legitimizes the validity of institutional structures and supports cultural beliefs that justice and mobility is achievable within the existing systems of social structures.

This comparison of these two stories proves the idea that narrative closure is highly cultural in nature, which is a way of expressing culturally defined views of institutional possibility. In the Indian colony, where cultural avenues to caste-crossing were harshly limited, tragic closure stands out as a logically fitting solution to the issue. Vindictory closure seems to be culturally possible in Joseon Korea where institutional mechanisms offered channels on social mobility and justice. This analogy helps to support the thesis that the closure of a narrative contains cultural psychology founded on historical institutional circumstances.

Putting Devdas in this larger comparative framework, then it is evident that its tragic denouement is not just the story-specific design of narratives but a mass psychological conditioning developed through a long institutional stalemate. Colonial Paralysis is therefore a concept that offers some insight into the influence of historical constructs on narrative imagination and resolution.

Conclusion

This paper has maintained that narrative closure is a cultural psychology that is influenced by historical institutional conditions. This paper brought out the concept of Colonial Paralysis to show how collective psychological expectations of structural impossibility were created by prolonged institutional blockage by colonial rule as analyzed through Sarat Chandra Chatterjee, Devdas. These anticipations not only affected the behavior of individuals, but also the cultural imagination where narrative resolutions that emerged to be significant and believable were shaped in the context of colonial society.

This cultural psychology is reflected in the tragic course of the character of Devdas. His failure to break caste restrictions, his withdrawal to self-destructive activity and his eventual death is not a simple manifestation of personal emotional frailty but rather institutionalized views of perceptions of immobility. The story lacks the institutional paths that could help him to solve his plight since the pathways were almost non-existent in the historical reality of colonial India. The tragic closure can be seen as a culturally rational solution in a social setting where structural obstacles were generally viewed as unbreakable and here to stay.

The short comparison between Chunhyangjeon also shows cultural particularity of narrative closure. In contrast to Devdas which indicates institutional paralysis, Chunhyangjeon indicates institutional functionality, hence its story can liberate suffering by justice and vindication. This opposition shows that narrative closure incorporates culturally specific notions of institutional possibility which supports the suggestion that narrative endings represent shared or collective psychological anticipations based on historical forms.

This study by shaping narrative closure as a manifestation of cultural psychology is related to the larger discourse of literary and cultural theory. It shows that literary endings are not only aesthetic resources but they are also cultural ones, which indicate the way societies perceive the possibility, agency and structural constraint. Literature is therefore an excellent aid through which one can study the psychological impacts of historical circumstances.

Finally, Devdas unveils the influence of the institutional circumstances in the colonies on cultural imagination as a source of anticipation of hopelessness and surrender. The tragic ending of the story is not merely a cause of the demise of one character but a psychological shadow of a historical system that limited even the possibility of a solution.

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