



The Anatomy Of Inaction: Tragic Consciousness In Shakespeare's Hamlet And Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay's Devdas

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Abstract:

This paper presents a comparative study of William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay's *Devdas*, examining how two culturally distinct texts construct tragic protagonists shaped by internal flaws and external pressures. Both protagonists—Hamlet and Devdas—are iconic figures whose inability to act decisively leads to their downfall. While Hamlet's procrastination is intellectual and philosophical, Devdas's indecision is emotional and psychological. Grounded in Aristotelian theory and modern interpretations of tragedy, the study explores the evolution of the tragic hero from classical nobility to psychological and social realism. Hamlet is analysed as a Renaissance tragic figure whose intellectual indecision, moral hesitation, and existential reflection function as hamartia, leading to delayed revenge and catastrophic consequences. In contrast, Devdas represents a modern Indian tragic protagonist whose emotional fragility, pride, and inability to resist rigid social hierarchies result in self destruction and unfulfilled love. The study employs a comparative literary methodology, examining how socio cultural contexts, psychological conflicts, and moral dilemmas shape their tragic trajectories. It highlights differences in political versus social frameworks, fate versus social determinism, and moral restoration versus emotional collapse. The paper argues that Hamlet represents existential procrastination rooted in ethical reasoning, whereas Devdas embodies emotional indecision driven by weakness and social constraints. The research highlights how both characters reflect universal human dilemmas, making them timeless tragic figures. Ultimately, the study demonstrates that while tragedy adapts to cultural and historical contexts, the core elements of human weakness, moral conflict, and inevitable downfall remain universal, affirming the timeless relevance of the tragic hero in global literature.

Keywords: Tragic Hero, Hamartia, Psychological Conflict, Social Determinism, Colonial social structure, procrastination, indecision.

Introduction:

Tragedy has remained one of the most compelling and enduring literary forms across civilizations, consistently portraying the complexity of human suffering, moral dilemmas, psychological conflict, and the inevitability of downfall. From classical Greek drama to modern fiction, the tragic genre examines how individual flaws, fate, and social pressures intersect to shape human destiny. In Western literature, Hamlet by William Shakespeare stands as a landmark of Renaissance tragedy, presenting a prince who is intellectually profound yet emotionally conflicted. Hamlet's internal struggle between action and inaction, revenge and morality, thought and responsibility reflect the Renaissance preoccupation with humanism, existential doubt, and the fragility of human will. His tragedy unfolds not merely because of external circumstances but largely due to his psychological hesitation and philosophical introspection, which ultimately lead to catastrophic consequences. In contrast, Devdas by Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay represents a modern Indian tragic narrative shaped by the socio-cultural realities of colonial Bengal.

Devdas is not a prince burdened by political revenge, but an emotionally fragile individual trapped within rigid social hierarchies, family honor, and class distinctions. His inability to assert himself against societal expectations, combined with pride and emotional weakness, drives him toward self-destruction. Unlike Hamlet's intellectual paralysis, Devdas's downfall emerges from emotional indecision, social conformity, and an escapist tendency toward alcoholism and despair. Despite being rooted in distinct historical, geographical, and cultural contexts Elizabethan England and colonial India both texts reveal striking similarities in their portrayal of tragic protagonists who are shaped by internal flaws and external pressures. The background of this study, therefore, lies in exploring how these two literary works, separated by time and culture, converge in their depiction of universal human suffering while simultaneously reflecting the moral, philosophical, and social values of their respective societies. Through a comparative lens, this study seeks to understand the evolving nature of tragedy and the timeless relevance of the tragic hero in global literature.

Conceptual Framework of characters-

This section provides the theoretical and critical foundation upon which the comparative analysis of Hamlet and Devdas is constructed. In literary studies, any meaningful comparison of tragic protagonists requires a clear understanding of what constitutes tragedy and who qualifies as a tragic hero. The concept of the tragic hero has evolved over centuries from classical Greek drama to Renaissance theatre and modern fiction adapting itself to changing philosophical, social, and cultural contexts. Therefore, this section outlines the major theoretical perspectives that define tragedy, including classical Aristotelian principles and modern reinterpretations of tragic character. By doing so, it establishes analytical criteria for examining the protagonists' psychological depth, moral struggle, social position, and ultimate downfall. This framework ensures that the study does not merely compare two characters superficially but evaluates them within a structured theoretical paradigm, highlighting both similarities and cultural distinctions in their tragic construction.

Aristotle's Theory of characters-

The foundation of tragic theory can be traced back to *Poetics* by Aristotle, who systematically defined tragedy as the imitation of a serious and complete action that evokes pity and fear, ultimately leading to catharsis an emotional purification experienced by the audience. Aristotle introduced several key concepts that remain central to the understanding of tragedy as hamartia (the tragic flaw or error in judgment), peripeteia (a reversal of fortune), and anagnorisis (a moment of critical recognition or realization). According to Aristotle, the tragic hero is typically a person of noble stature whose downfall is not caused by pure evil but by a mistake or weakness that leads to suffering. In the context of this study, Aristotle's theory provides a benchmark to examine whether Hamlet and Devdas conform to or diverge from the classical model. Hamlet, as a prince of Denmark, aligns closely with the Aristotelian idea of a noble hero whose fall affects the entire kingdom. His indecision and intellectual over analysis can be interpreted as

hamartia, leading to delayed action and tragic consequences. Devdas, however, challenges the classical model because he is not a political figure of high public responsibility but a socially privileged yet emotionally fragile individual. Thus, Aristotle's theory serves both as a foundational guide and as a point of contrast, enabling the exploration of how tragedy transforms across literary traditions and historical periods.

Classical vs. Modern Theories-

This sub section explores the evolution of the tragic hero from classical drama to modern literature. In classical tragedy, particularly in Greek and Shakespearean drama, the tragic hero is often a king, prince, or leader whose fall disrupts social and cosmic order. His suffering is grand, public, and symbolic of larger moral or political consequences. In contrast, modern tragedy shifts its focus from royal figures to ordinary individuals whose struggles are psychological, social, and existential. The scale of tragedy becomes more intimate, emphasizing inner turmoil rather than political catastrophe. Through this distinction, Hamlet can be understood as a transitional figure between classical and modern tragedy. Although he is a prince, his tragedy is deeply psychological and introspective, reflecting Renaissance humanism and emerging existential concerns. Devdas, on the other hand, represents a modern tragic protagonist whose downfall is rooted in emotional weakness, social rigidity, and personal despair rather than heroic ambition or political conflict. His suffering reflects the pressures of colonial Indian society, class hierarchy, and romantic idealism. By comparing these two models, this section highlights how tragedy adapts to cultural contexts retaining universal elements of suffering while reshaping the nature of the hero according to historical and social realities.

Character Analysis: Hamlet and Devdas

Hamlet

The character of Hamlet in Hamlet by William Shakespeare represents one of the most profound and psychologically layered portrayals of a tragic protagonist in world literature. Unlike conventional revenge heroes who act decisively and swiftly, Hamlet emerges as an intellectual and emotionally complex figure whose tragedy unfolds through intense introspection and moral hesitation. His character reflects the intellectual spirit of the Renaissance marked by humanism, skepticism, and philosophical inquiry while simultaneously embodying the classical elements of tragic downfall. Hamlet is not driven solely by external conflict; rather, his tragedy is deeply internal, shaped by doubt, moral reflection, and existential questioning. The murder of his father by Claudius initiates the narrative crisis, yet the true drama lies within Hamlet's consciousness. His thoughts, soliloquies, and emotional fluctuations reveal a mind burdened by grief, betrayal, anger, and uncertainty. Instead of functioning merely as a political avenger, Hamlet becomes a symbol of the modern individual who questions action, morality, and the meaning of existence itself. At the psychological level, Hamlet's indecision forms the core of his tragic identity. Upon learning from the ghost that his father was murdered, Hamlet is commanded to avenge the crime; however, he does not respond with immediate violence. Instead, he reflects, doubts the authenticity of the ghost, and contemplates the moral consequences of revenge. His intellectual temperament prevents him from acting impulsively. This excessive contemplation leads to paralysis, as he becomes trapped in a cycle of thought and hesitation. His famous soliloquy, "To be, or not to be," demonstrates not only his uncertainty about action but also his profound meditation on life, death, and suffering. Here, Hamlet questions whether enduring life's hardships is nobler than seeking escape through death, revealing his deep existential anxiety. His tragedy, therefore, is not merely situational but psychological rooted in his inability to reconcile thought with action.

Furthermore, Hamlet's struggle extends beyond personal revenge into the realm of moral and philosophical conflict. He is deeply conscious of ethical responsibility and fears that committing murder, even in the name of justice, may corrupt his own soul. His hesitation reflects Renaissance humanism, which emphasized individual conscience and rational inquiry. Hamlet's reflections on mortality,

especially in the graveyard scene where he holds Yorick's skull, reinforce his awareness of life's transience and the inevitability of death. These contemplations transform the revenge narrative into a meditation on human fragility and existential uncertainty. His moral conflict intensifies as innocent characters, including Ophelia and Gertrude, become entangled in the consequences of his delayed action. As a Renaissance tragic hero, Hamlet combines classical nobility with modern psychological complexity. He fulfils the Aristotelian requirement of high social status as the Prince of Denmark, yet his hamartia lies not in arrogance or ambition but in over-intellectualization and emotional sensitivity. His downfall results from both internal flaw and external corruption within the Danish court. Ultimately, Hamlet's death restores moral order but at a devastating cost, emphasizing the tragic consequences of delayed justice and moral conflict. Through his layered characterization, Hamlet transcends the boundaries of time and culture, standing as a universal representation of human doubt, conscience, and tragic self awareness.

Devdas-

The character of Devdas in Devdas by Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay represents a distinct form of tragic protagonist shaped not by royal responsibility or political revenge, but by emotional fragility, social rigidity, and internal weakness. Unlike the classical tragic hero who often occupies a position of public authority, Devdas is a privileged yet psychologically vulnerable young man whose downfall is deeply personal and socially conditioned. His tragedy does not unfold through heroic action but through gradual emotional collapse and self-destructive tendencies. The narrative portrays him as a man incapable of decisive commitment, unable to challenge societal norms, and ultimately overwhelmed by his own inner turmoil. His suffering is rooted less in destiny and more in his inability to reconcile love, pride, and social expectation, making his tragedy intimate, psychological, and socially grounded. Devdas's emotional vulnerability forms the foundation of his tragic identity. From childhood, he shares a deep bond with Parvati (Paro), yet when the opportunity arises to formalize their relationship, he fails to assert himself against family opposition and class prejudice. His hesitation mirrors weakness rather than philosophical doubt; instead of confronting obstacles, he retreats. When Paro is married into another household, Devdas is consumed by regret and guilt, yet he still refuses to take responsibility for his choices. His descent into alcoholism symbolizes his escapism and inability to confront reality. Rather than transforming pain into resilience, he allows suffering to define him. This self-destructive behaviour intensifies his tragedy, as he consciously moves toward ruin while remaining aware of his own weakness.

Love and pride further complicate Devdas's character. His love for Paro is genuine but intertwined with ego and social conditioning. He oscillates between affection and arrogance, unable to fully accept Paro's emotional strength and determination. At the same time, rigid class structures and family honour in colonial Bengali society restrict his freedom of choice. Social constraints act as an external force, yet his failure lies in his unwillingness to resist them. Thus, Devdas becomes both a victim of society and of his own indecision. As a modern Indian tragic hero, Devdas reflects a shift from grand, heroic tragedy to psychological and social realism. His fall does not alter political order, but it exposes the destructive impact of emotional weakness and societal rigidity. His death outside Paro's house symbolizes unfulfilled love and wasted potential, reinforcing the pathos central to modern tragedy. Through Devdas, the novel presents a tragic protagonist whose suffering emerges from the intersection of personal flaw and social structure, making him a powerful representation of modern Indian tragic consciousness.

Comparative Analysis-

The comparative analysis of Hamlet by William Shakespeare and Devdas by Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay reveals both striking similarities and profound differences in the construction of tragic protagonists across cultural and historical contexts. Although separated by geography, language, and literary tradition, both works explore the psychological collapse of central male figures whose internal weaknesses interact with external pressures to produce inevitable downfall. This section synthesizes the

individual character analyses and places the two protagonists in direct dialogue, examining how tragic flaw, fate, love, moral conflict, and social structure function within each narrative. Through this comparison, tragedy emerges not merely as a genre confined to Western classical theory but as a universal literary expression of human suffering, shaped differently by Renaissance humanism and colonial Indian social realism.

Tragic Flaws: Indecision vs. Weakness-

At the core of both tragedies lies the concept of hamartia, or tragic flaw, yet its manifestation differs significantly in each protagonist. Hamlet's flaw is intellectual indecision. His reflective and philosophical temperament causes him to question action repeatedly, delaying revenge and allowing circumstances to deteriorate. His over-analysis leads to paralysis, demonstrating how excessive reasoning can become self-destructive. In contrast, Devdas's flaw is not intellectual doubt but emotional weakness and lack of moral courage. He does not engage in philosophical debate about right and wrong; instead, he succumbs to fear, pride, and insecurity. His inability to confront family authority and social hierarchy reflects psychological fragility rather than intellectual complexity. Thus, while Hamlet's tragedy arises from thinking too deeply, Devdas's tragedy stems from feeling too weakly and failing to assert himself. Both flaws are internal, yet they represent different dimensions of human limitation—one philosophical, the other emotional.

Pessimistic behaviour:

The tension between destiny and personal agency plays a crucial role in both works. In Hamlet, the appearance of the ghost introduces an element of fate, suggesting that the prince is chosen to restore moral order through revenge. However, Hamlet is not merely a puppet of destiny; he repeatedly exercises free will, particularly in delaying action and testing Claudius's guilt. His tragedy arises from the interaction between external obligation and internal hesitation. In Devdas, fate operates in a more social and structural form rather than a supernatural one. Rigid class distinctions, family honour, and societal expectations determine the course of his romantic life. Yet Devdas also actively contributes to his own downfall through conscious decisions most notably his turn to alcoholism and emotional withdrawal. Therefore, both protagonists experience external constraints, but their ultimate destruction is intensified by personal choices, highlighting the complex interplay between fate and free will.

Love, Death, and Moral Responsibility-

Love functions differently in the two texts, shaping the emotional and moral trajectory of each protagonist. In Hamlet, romantic love is overshadowed by political intrigue and moral obligation. His relationship with Ophelia is marked by suspicion and emotional distance, reflecting his broader distrust of the corrupt world around him. Death in Hamlet serves as both punishment and purification; the tragic ending restores political order but leaves profound personal loss. In Devdas, however, love is central and absolute. His entire identity becomes defined by his attachment to Paro and his inability to reconcile with her marriage. Unlike Hamlet, whose moral conflict centres on revenge and justice, Devdas's moral struggle revolves around emotional accountability and personal pride. His death does not restore societal harmony but symbolizes emotional exhaustion and wasted potential. Through this contrast, the two texts illustrate different moral frameworks: one political and philosophical, the other romantic and social.

Individual Agency and Social Structure-

Another significant point of comparison lies in the balance between individual agency and structural constraint. Hamlet operates within a corrupt royal court where political betrayal shapes his actions, yet he retains intellectual autonomy and strategic awareness. His tragedy reflects both personal flaw and systemic corruption. Devdas, on the other hand, is deeply embedded in the social hierarchies of colonial Bengal, where caste and class divisions dictate acceptable relationships. Although he has opportunities to defy these norms, he lacks the psychological resilience to do so. His agency is limited not by external

force alone but by internal surrender. This distinction underscores how tragedy can emerge either from conflict with political power or from submission to social rigidity.

Objectives of Study:

- To analyze procrastination in Hamlet and indecision in Devdas
- To compare psychological and social causes of inaction
- To evaluate how these traits lead to tragedy
- To interpret both characters within their cultural contexts

Literature Review:

Abduqayumovna, S. S., & Muqaddas, M's studies emphasize Hamlet as a symbol of procrastination and philosophical delay. Mangayarkarasi, J., & Shobitha, M. N. explain hesitation to kill Claudius reflects moral conflict and fear of consequences. Other research highlights indecision as a central tragic flaw causing catastrophic outcomes. Salman, S. M., et al showed comparative studies between Hamlet and Devdas suggest both characters achieve immortality through indecision, representing universal human dilemmas. Hussein, A. L., studied cultural context of Hamlet.

Research Methodology:

This study adopts a **comparative qualitative approach**, analyzing:

- Character's psychology
- Narrative structure
- Socio-cultural influences
- Thematic representation of inaction

As primary source literature related to *Hamlet* and *Devdas* is studied. For secondary source scholarly articles and literary criticism selected and data selected.

Findings and Analysis:

Aspect	Hamlet	Devdas
Nature of flaw	Procrastination	Indecision
Root cause	Intellectual & philosophical	Emotional & psychological
Type of conflict	Moral dilemma	Social & personal conflict
Action tendency	Overthinking before action	Avoidance of action
Outcome	Delayed revenge → tragedy	Self-destruction → tragedy

Key Differences -

- Hamlet delays action due to excessive thinking, whereas Devdas fails due to lack of resolve.
- Hamlet is an active thinker; Devdas is a passive sufferer.
- Hamlet's tragedy is external (revenge and politics); Devdas's tragedy is internal (love and self-destruction).

Key Similarities -

- Both suffer from inability to act decisively
- Both cause their own downfall
- Both become symbolic representations of human weakness

Discussion:

The contrast between procrastination and indecision reveals two dimensions of human failure:

- Hamlet represents the danger of over intellectualization
- Devdas represents the danger of emotional weakness

Both characters reflect their cultural backgrounds:

- Hamlet emerges from Renaissance humanism and philosophical inquiry
- Devdas reflects Indian societal norms and emotional constraints

Their tragedies demonstrate that both excessive thinking and lack of determination can be equally destructive.

Conclusion

William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay's *Devdas* present two powerful tragic protagonists whose downfalls arise from the interaction of internal flaws and external pressures. Though emerging from Renaissance England and colonial India respectively, both works explore universal dimensions of human suffering and moral conflict. Hamlet's tragedy develops through intellectual hesitation, existential doubt, and moral overanalysis, which delay his revenge and lead to widespread destruction, making indecision his central hamartia. Devdas, in contrast, is destroyed not by philosophical reflection but by emotional fragility, pride, and his inability to resist rigid social hierarchies, ultimately surrendering to self-destructive alcoholism and regret. While Hamlet's struggle unfolds within a political and ethical framework shaped by questions of justice and revenge, Devdas's suffering is rooted in romantic idealism and social conformity. Fate appears in Hamlet through supernatural obligation, whereas in Devdas it operates through social determinism and class barriers. Hamlet's death restores moral order to Denmark, but Devdas's death symbolizes wasted potential and emotional exhaustion. Ultimately, both characters demonstrate that excessive thought without action and emotion without courage lead to inevitable downfall, affirming that tragedy transcends cultural boundaries while reflecting distinct philosophical and social realities.

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