



The Concept Of Tragedy In Shakespeare's *Hamlet* And Kalidasa's *Shakuntala*

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Abstract

Comparative literature is a field that transcends linguistic and cultural boundaries, offering a broader understanding of literary traditions, genres, and themes across different cultural contexts. This paper delves into the representation of tragedy in two classical works: Shakespeare's *Hamlet* from the Western canon and Kalidasa's *Shakuntala* from ancient Indian literature. Despite emerging from distinct cultural milieus, both works examine existential dilemmas, human suffering, and fate. This paper explores thematic intersections, differences in cultural representation, and the role of literary form in articulating tragedy. Additionally, the study highlights how historical context and philosophical thought shape the depiction of tragic characters and events in both texts.

Keywords: Comparative Literature, Shakespeare, Kalidasa, Tragedy, *Hamlet*, *Shakuntala*

Introduction

Comparative literature is a rich and dynamic field that invites exploration across cultures, languages, and literary traditions. By transcending boundaries, it allows scholars to identify commonalities and differences in the portrayal of universal themes, such as love, justice, and human suffering. In this context, the comparative study of two iconic works Shakespeare's *Hamlet* from the Western literary tradition and Kalidasa's *Shakuntala* from the classical Indian tradition offers a fascinating window into how tragedy is represented across distinct cultural and philosophical landscapes. Both authors, though writing centuries apart and within different cultural contexts, address profound questions about human existence, fate, and

suffering. Shakespeare, the master of Elizabethan drama, brings forward the introspective and existential dilemmas of a troubled prince in *Hamlet*, while Kalidasa, the revered Sanskrit poet and dramatist, offers a lyrical and spiritually resonant portrayal of suffering in *Shakuntala*, a tale that reflects the interplay of love, memory, and divine will.

Literary Context and Historical Background

The historical and cultural contexts in which *Hamlet* and *Shakuntala* were composed play a critical role in understanding their respective approaches to tragedy. These works, though separated by time and space, reflect the values, beliefs, and artistic conventions of their eras.

Hamlet and the Western Tragic Tradition

Hamlet was written in the early 17th century during the English Renaissance, a period marked by the revival of classical learning and a growing interest in individualism, humanism, and the complexities of the human condition. Shakespeare's audience was well-versed in the traditions of classical Greek and Roman drama, particularly the works of Seneca and the concepts laid out in Aristotle's *Poetics*. Tragedy, in the Western tradition, was often defined by the presence of a tragic hero, a noble figure whose downfall is precipitated by a fatal flaw, or *hamartia*, and whose suffering evokes *catharsis* in the audience. Shakespeare builds on these traditions while introducing his own innovations, particularly in his treatment of character psychology and the moral ambiguity that surrounds his protagonists.

In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare presents a deeply introspective character whose internal struggle becomes the central focus of the play. Hamlet's existential crisis, exemplified by his famous "To be or not to be" soliloquy, reflects the Renaissance concern with the nature of life, death, and the human soul. Hamlet is torn between action and inaction, between fate and free will, and his hesitation ultimately leads to his tragic demise. The play's structure, with its five acts and linear progression toward an inevitable tragic conclusion, adheres to the conventions of Western drama, yet Shakespeare's portrayal of Hamlet's psychological depth and moral uncertainty sets *Hamlet* apart as a uniquely modern tragedy.

Shakuntala and the Indian Dramatic Tradition

In contrast, *Shakuntala*, written by Kalidasa during the Gupta period, reflects the values and philosophical principles of ancient Indian society, particularly those associated with Hinduism and the Sanskrit literary tradition. Kalidasa is regarded as one of the greatest Sanskrit poets, and his works are known for their lyrical beauty, emotional depth, and spiritual resonance. *Shakuntala* is a product of the *natya* (theatre) tradition as outlined in the *Natyashastra*, an ancient Indian treatise on drama, which emphasizes the importance of *rasa* (emotions) and *bhava* (expressions) in evoking an aesthetic experience in the audience. Central to Sanskrit drama is the idea of *karma* (the consequences of one's actions) and *dharma* (moral duty), which shape the characters' fates.

Unlike the Western tragic tradition, where the focus is often on individual moral failings, *Shakuntala* emphasizes the role of fate and divine intervention in human affairs. The titular character, Shakuntala, is a victim of circumstances beyond her control, specifically the curse of a sage, which causes her to be forgotten by her lover, King Dushyanta. Her suffering, while deeply personal, is also part of a larger cosmic order that eventually leads to reconciliation and restoration. Kalidasa's use of *rasa*—particularly *karuna* (pathos)—invites the audience to empathize with Shakuntala's plight, while also recognizing the divine justice that underpins her journey. The cyclical structure of the play, with its seven acts and eventual resolution, reflects the Indian worldview of life as a continuous cycle of birth, death, and rebirth, governed by the laws of karma.

Character Analysis: Hamlet and Shakuntala

The protagonists of *Hamlet* and *Shakuntala* serve as representations of their respective cultural understandings of tragedy, fate, and human suffering. Hamlet and Shakuntala both experience profound suffering, yet their responses to fate and the forces that shape their destinies are markedly different.

Hamlet as a Tragic Hero

In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare presents a protagonist who embodies the quintessential traits of the tragic hero, as defined by Aristotle: a noble figure with a fatal flaw that leads to his downfall. Hamlet's tragic flaw is often identified as his indecision or inability to act. Throughout the play, Hamlet is torn between his desire for revenge and his moral and philosophical doubts about the righteousness of such an action. This internal conflict manifests in his famous soliloquies, particularly "To be or not to be," in which Hamlet contemplates the nature of existence and the moral implications of life and death. Hamlet's existential dilemmas, his obsession with the uncertainty of the afterlife, and his vacillation between action and inaction ultimately seal his fate. His tragedy is not merely a result of external forces but is deeply rooted in his psychological and philosophical struggle, making him one of Shakespeare's most complex and introspective characters.

Shakuntala as a Tragic Figure

Shakuntala, on the other hand, is a character whose suffering is more directly tied to external forces namely, the curse placed upon her by the sage Durvasa. Unlike Hamlet, who actively grapples with his fate, Shakuntala is a more passive figure whose tragedy unfolds as a result of circumstances beyond her control. Her suffering stems from being forgotten by her husband, King Dushyanta, after she is cursed, and much of the drama revolves around her emotional pain and isolation. However, Shakuntala's tragedy is not one of personal failing, but rather of divine intervention and the workings of karma. In this sense, her suffering is viewed as part of a larger cosmic order, and her eventual reunion with Dushyanta reflects the restoration of balance and harmony in the universe. Kalidasa's portrayal of Shakuntala emphasizes her grace, dignity, and spiritual resilience in the face of suffering, highlighting the importance of faith in divine justice and the inevitability of fate.

Themes of Fate and Tragedy

Fate in Hamlet

Fate plays a crucial role in *Hamlet*, though its nature is often ambiguous. The appearance of the ghost of King Hamlet sets the tragic events in motion, as the ghost demands that Hamlet avenge his murder. Hamlet's destiny appears to be inextricably linked to this supernatural encounter, yet his own actions or lack thereof contribute to his tragic downfall. Shakespeare presents fate not as an external force that determines Hamlet's actions, but as something intertwined with Hamlet's internal psychological and moral struggle. Hamlet's inability to act decisively, his overthinking, and his existential questioning all contribute to his eventual demise, making his fate a complex interplay of internal and external forces.

Fate in Shakuntala

In *Shakuntala*, fate is portrayed more directly as a function of divine will and cosmic justice. The curse placed upon Shakuntala by Durvasa serves as an instrument of fate, leading to her separation from King Dushyanta. However, unlike the tragic inevitability of Hamlet's fate, Shakuntala's destiny is ultimately one of reconciliation and redemption. Kalidasa's portrayal of fate is deeply rooted in the Hindu belief in karma, where one's actions in past lives or earlier in the current life determine one's future. Shakuntala's suffering is not viewed as unjust but as part of the cosmic order, with the divine intervention serving both to punish and ultimately restore balance.

Philosophical Reflections: Existentialism and Spirituality

Existentialism in Hamlet

The existential themes in *Hamlet* are among the most thoroughly explored in Western literature. Hamlet's constant questioning of the meaning of life, his obsession with death, and his doubts about the afterlife reflect the existential concerns that were beginning to emerge in the Renaissance and would later be fully developed in the existential philosophy of thinkers like Søren Kierkegaard and Jean-Paul Sartre. Hamlet's soliloquies, particularly "To be or not to be," reveal his deep anguish over the apparent meaninglessness of existence, as he grapples with the futility of action in the face of an indifferent universe. His existential crisis ultimately leads him to a kind of nihilism, where he resigns himself to the inevitability of death, thus fulfilling the tragic trajectory of the play.

Spirituality in Shakuntala

In contrast, *Shakuntala* reflects a more spiritual and harmonious worldview, rooted in the Indian philosophical traditions of Hinduism and Buddhism. The concept of *dharma* (moral duty) and *karma* (the law of cause and effect) play central roles in shaping the characters' actions and their ultimate fates. Shakuntala's suffering, while profound, is viewed as part of a larger cosmic order, and her eventual reunion

with Dushyanta is a testament to the divine justice that underlies the universe. Kalidasa's portrayal of tragedy is thus less about individual suffering and more about the restoration of cosmic balance, with human emotions and experiences seen as reflections of the divine will.

Conclusion

In conclusion, both *Hamlet* and *Shakuntala* offer rich portrayals of human suffering and the complexities of fate, yet they do so within very different cultural and philosophical frameworks. While Hamlet's tragedy is deeply existential, rooted in the individual's struggle against an indifferent universe, Shakuntala's suffering is portrayed as part of a divine plan, where ultimate redemption and balance are achieved through the workings of fate and karma. These differences in the depiction of tragedy highlight the importance of cultural context in shaping literary expressions of human experiences. Nevertheless, the thematic intersections between the two works particularly their exploration of fate, suffering, and the human condition underscore the universal resonance of tragic storytelling across cultures.

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