

Self-Degrading Genius: A Comparative Socio-Cultural Analysis of “Andrea Del Sarto” and *Devdas*

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Abstract:

This study explores the theme of self-degradation in two literary figures, Andrea Del Sarto, a Renaissance painter from Robert Browning’s poem, and Devdas, the tragic protagonist of Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay’s novel. Both characters, despite their genius, succumb to societal pressures that lead to their downfall. The research addresses the gap in comparative analysis of Western and Eastern cultural influences on self-degradation by examining how Andrea Del Sarto’s artistic potential is stifled by the patronage system and societal mediocrity, while Devdas is crushed by colonial India’s rigid class structures and patriarchal norms. The study employs a contextual analysis of the socio-cultural settings that shape the destinies of both characters and emphasizes how both characters embody broader critiques of the social and cultural forces that suppress genius, highlighting the struggle between personal potential and external limitations. The novelty of this study lies in its cross-cultural approach, which juxtaposes Western and Eastern narratives to illustrate the universality of this struggle. Ultimately, the research offers new insights into the socio-cultural dynamics that entrap and limit individuals with extraordinary potential, underscoring the timeless nature of these conflicts.

Keywords: self-degradation, socio-cultural context, genius, Andrea Del Sarto, Devdas

Introduction

The theme of self-degradation amidst societal constraints, patronage systems, and cultural pressures that culminate in the self-destruction of genius has long captivated literary scholars and cultural critics. Andrea Del Sarto, the eponymous character from Robert Browning’s dramatic monologue, and Devdas, the tragic protagonist of Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay’s iconic

Bengali novella, serve as archetypes of this universal struggle. Both characters embody the complex interplay between external societal forces and inner psychological turmoil, making them compelling subjects for comparative literary analysis.

This study examines “Andrea Del Sarto” and *Devdas* through a psychoanalytic and socio-cultural lens, uncovering how external pressures—such as the demands of patronage in Andrea’s case or rigid social hierarchies in *Devdas*’s—transmute into profound internal conflicts. These conflicts not only thwart their aspirations but also shape their eventual descent into despair. While Andrea’s unfulfilled artistic potential stems from his inability to transcend the constraints imposed by his patrons and his tumultuous relationship with Lucrezia, *Devdas* succumbs to the weight of unrequited love and rigid societal expectations, illustrating the tragic intersection of individual will and cultural imperatives.

Although numerous studies have explored these characters independently, there remains a notable gap in comparative cross-cultural analyses that juxtapose their experiences to elucidate the shared impact of societal and cultural pressures on their lives. By bridging this gap, the present research sheds light on how the external mechanisms of control—whether through the patronage system or deeply entrenched class structures—translate into internal struggles that inhibit both artistic expression and personal fulfillment.

Using a psychoanalytic framework, particularly Freudian theories on the conflict between suppressed desires and the reality principle, this study delves into the psychological dimensions of Andrea and *Devdas*’s tragedies. Through this approach, the analysis reveals how the suppression of desires and the internalization of societal constraints propel both characters toward their inevitable self-destruction, offering valuable insights into the universality of these themes across cultures and historical contexts.

Contextual Background and the Art of the Creator

Andrea Del Sarto, a Florentine painter, and *Devdas*, a Bengali aristocrat, originate from distinct cultural and historical milieus—early 16th-century Renaissance Italy and early 20th-century colonial India, respectively. Despite their divergent contexts, both figures embody the tragic archetype of a talented individual stifled by societal constraints, ultimately leading to their downfall. Andrea’s perfectionist artistry is undermined by the rigid patronage system and his emotional dependence on his wife, Lucrezia. In contrast, *Devdas* succumbs to the pressures of patriarchal societal norms and class structures, resulting in a life of self-destruction.

Andrea’s creative potential is compromised as he prioritizes monetary stability over artistic integrity to satisfy the demands of his patrons and the materialistic expectations of Lucrezia. Similarly, Devdas, though deeply in love with Paro, is unable to transcend the class-conscious, patriarchal norms of colonial Bengal. Both characters serve as poignant studies of how societal pressures and personal inadequacies intertwine to hinder individual fulfillment.

Psychoanalytic Framework

This research employs a psychoanalytic approach, drawing on Freud’s theories of the inner struggle between suppressed desires and the reality principle. Both Andrea and Devdas exhibit signs of internal conflict and Oedipus Complex where their desires clash with societal expectations, leading to psychological and existential crises.

Andrea Del Sarto

In Robert Browning’s portrayal, Andrea Del Sarto is a man trapped between his artistic aspirations and the constraints imposed by his patrons and his wife, Lucrezia. While his flawless technique earned him recognition, Andrea envied the imperfections of contemporaries like Michelangelo and Raphael, whose striving for greatness elevated them beyond technical mastery. Andrea’s psychological conflict manifests in his passive resignation, as he prioritizes material comfort over artistic innovation.

Andrea’s own words, "Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp, Or what's a heaven for?" (Browning, 1855, lines 97–98) highlight his awareness of the need to strive for transcendence. Yet, he remains tethered to the mundane demands of patronage and his dependence on Lucrezia, who symbolizes comfort rather than creative inspiration. This dependence exacerbates his psychological downfall, as Andrea internalizes his sense of inferiority and stagnation. The patronage system, while fostering the arts, becomes a double-edged sword, curbing Andrea’s potential for greatness.

Devdas

In *Devdas*, Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay crafts a protagonist whose internal struggle arises from the intersection of love and societal norms. Devdas’s privileged upbringing subjects him to patriarchal expectations, where his love for Paro is deemed unacceptable due to her lower social status. His inability to challenge these norms leads to self-destruction, as he descends into alcoholism and escapism.

Devdas articulates his despair in moments of intoxication: "In my intoxication, I sought solace; In my sorrow, I found oblivion" (Chattopadhyay, 1917, p. 113).

This line encapsulates his futile attempts to escape societal constraints and his overwhelming guilt. His visits to Chandramukhi, a courtesan, symbolize his search for solace outside societal boundaries, but they only deepen his existential anguish.

Psychological Crisis: The psychological crisis of Andrea Del Sarto is portrayed throughout his diffidence and blameworthiness. His psychological crisis begins with the conflict between his devotion to art and his devotion to his wife. His **Id** (which represents his unrequited love) and his **Superego** (which means the sense of responsibility as a husband and societal aspects of his psyche) pressure him to fulfill the demand of Lucrezia. Andrea's blameworthiness and diffidence work as core concepts of his psychological crisis. Despite being a flawless artist and having the capability to art extemporaneously what other artists take great pains to paint, he feels diffidence. He thinks, "What wife had Raphael, or has Agnolo?" (Browning, 1855, line 136) highlights his psychological crisis caused by unhealthy conjugal life. Besides, he was trapped in a state where he had to send his wife to her lover saying, "Again the cousin's whistle! Go, my love." (Browning, 1855, line 267) demonstrates his psychological crisis.

In Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay's novel *Devdas*, Devdas' unresolved relationship with Paro and Paro's jilted love with Devdas caused a psychological crisis in Devdas. The ambivalent situation of rejecting Paro and lamenting for Paro is central in his psychological crisis, which started in the very early stage of his life when his father wanted to send him to Calcutta, and he confided in Paro, "Impossible—I will not go at all" (Chattopadhyay, 1917, p. 19). Ultimately, Devdas had to go to Calcutta and failed to ignore patriarchal norms. Being inspired by Chunni Lal to go to the brothel house, which he always hated, but lastly finding solace in the brothel house refers to the psychological crisis in Devdas. Besides, Devdas's psychological crisis is reflected in multiple layers throughout his isolation, addiction to alcohol, dilemma, and self-destructive behavior in the novel *Devdas*.

Existential Crisis: In the poem of "Andrea Del Sarto," Andrea is depicted as an infatuated lover who lacks a high purpose in life. In spite of being conscious about the unfaithful nature and ill intention of Lucrezia, Andrea requested, "But do not let us quarrel any more. No, my Lucrezia; bear with me for once: Sit down, and all shall happen as you wish." (Browning, 1855, lines 1-3) represents the existential crisis of Andrea. Moreover, "I'll work for your

friend's friend, never fear" (Browning, 1855, line 5) is a testament to his existential crisis, where he was internally forced to down his moral integrity and value of life throughout a purposelessness approach. On the other hand, Devdas's existential crisis is deeply rooted in his inability to balance psychological desire with societal circumstances. Devdas symbolizes a man trapped between jilted love and duty towards society. After losing Paro, he descends into a purposeless existence. His identity becomes fragmented in his turning between past and present. Devdas was not determined to die, not even determined to live, and his frustration at getting intimidated by people around him shows his existential crisis.

Social Constraints and Cultural Pressures: The societal and cultural pressure faced by Andrea and Devdas reflect their respective historical contexts yet reveal universal themes of control and constraint. In fact, the social structure of the world works as a major villain in shaping the self-degrading tendencies in both of the characters. Though Andrea had the quality to touch the position of topmost painter, he could not take the authority of his own life. Being an artist of the Renaissance period, Andrea was praised for his brilliant art, but he had to think about the choice of patrons, which limits artistic freedom. Besides, his personal insecurities towards Lucrezia and the pressure of patrons stifled his career utterly, where he was seen constantly seeking Lucrezia's approval. Devdas could not cross the boundary of societal constraints by making the decision to accept Paro without patriarchal concerns, though he was in a better position than Paro. This portrays how a privileged upbringing can make a weak personality. Even without familial support, his education could have helped him become a self-reliant, established person. But as a cultural product, he lacks the courage to overcome Eastern socio-cultural expectations. In this way, the life of one of them is a reflection of the life of the other. Both of them are brilliant individuals, but their failure to break societal constraints leads them to tragic ends.

Patronage System in Renaissance Italy

For Andrea, the patronage system epitomizes external control. The system demanded artists to prioritize commissions that ensured monetary stability, often at the expense of artistic freedom. Andrea's dependence on Lucrezia, who values financial security over creative ambition, further entangles him in a web of compromises. As a result, his artistry, while technically perfect, lacks the transcendence that defines true greatness.

Patriarchal and Class Structures in Colonial India

In Devdas's colonial Bengal, rigid social hierarchies dictate personal relationships. His love for Paro is deemed unacceptable due to her lower social status, and his inability to defy these norms propels him toward self-inflicted ruin. Devdas's internalization of cultural constraints transforms into self-pity and destructive behavior, illustrating the corrosive power of societal expectations on individual will.

Women as Symbols of Society and Culture: Lucrezia and Paro were not only lovers but also symbols of their respective societies. Lucrezia represents Renaissance societal norms where she lacks morality but is seen as a muse. Double-edged feature of Lucrezia as quoted by Andrea: "You turn your face, but does it bring your heart?" (Browning, 1865, line 4) illuminates Lucrezia's hypocrisy and lack of reciprocal emotion. Then again, Paro symbolizes caste and social structure, where she fulfills her role as a dutiful wife, though it was a loveless marriage, and prioritizes duty towards in-laws rather than personal happiness or dignity. In "Andrea Del Sarto", Lucrezia is portrayed as a demanding and emotionally vulnerable woman, whereas Paro is a self-sacrificing figure of Eastern Colonial India who was forced to witness Devdas's downfall. Thus, both characters represent the constraints of their own societies and cultures.

The Role of Lucrezia and Paro

Both Lucrezia and Paro serve as pivotal figures in the lives of Andrea and Devdas, representing love, inspiration, and limitation. Lucrezia's role in Andrea's life is both muse and constraint. While her materialistic tendencies drive Andrea to prioritize financial gain, her inability to inspire him artistically exacerbates his stagnation. Had Andrea found a partner who provided "soulful" inspiration, he might have reached greater heights as an artist.

Similarly, Paro's marriage to another man, dictated by societal constraints, leaves Devdas tormented. Unlike Lucrezia, Paro symbolizes unfulfilled love rather than materialism. Devdas's subsequent reliance on Chandramukhi for solace highlights his inability to reconcile societal expectations with personal desires. His descent into alcoholism and estrangement from family and society reflects his failure to navigate these pressures.

Andrea Del Sarto and Devdas, despite their cultural and historical differences, represent the universal tragedy of genius thwarted by societal constraints and personal inadequacies. Their stories underscore the need for balance between

external demands and internal aspirations, offering a rich field for psychoanalytic and socio-cultural exploration.

Internal Conflict and Psychological Decline

The inner conflicts experienced by Andrea and Devdas reveal their gradual transition from potential brilliance to eventual ruin, and their psychological decline can be explored through Maslow's hierarchy of needs.

Andrea's Inner Struggle: Andrea Del Sarto's conflict stems from his inability to reconcile his artistic aspirations with his reliance on external validation. Comparing himself to Raphael and Michelangelo, Andrea recognizes that their imperfections are imbued with a spiritual vision that elevates their artistry. Andrea acknowledges his technical mastery but attributes his inability to reach their heights to his lack of inner inspiration, which he believes Lucrezia could have provided. He excuses his stagnation by suggesting that divine recognition will compensate for the lack of earthly acclaim.

Andrea wistfully reminisces about his "kingly days," reflecting on what might have been had he resisted the constraints imposed by Lucrezia and the patronage system. His dependence on her, both emotionally and materially, undermines his artistic ambition, as he laments, "I could have painted better pictures...But did it all just to please you, Lucrezia" (Browning, 1855, lines 199–201).

This ongoing internal battle between his yearning for creative freedom and his need for security leads to a gradual decline in both his art and his sense of self. His inability to resist external pressures renders him a "faultless painter" yet a passionless human being, revealing the tragedy of a genius undone by his own compromises.

Devdas' Inner Conflict

The story of Devdas charts his transformation from innocence to experience, marked by an unrelenting inner conflict. His turmoil begins when he breaks his promise to Paro, leaving for Calcutta and setting the stage for a life of regret and anguish. Devdas' failure to defy the caste system and patriarchal norms mirrors the indecision of Shakespeare's Hamlet, as he remains paralyzed by the question: *To be or not to be*.

Devdas' inability to act decisively against societal expectations leads to futile attempts to forget Paro through self-destructive escapism. His visits to Chandramukhi, a courtesan, symbolize his yearning for solace, yet these encounters only deepen his guilt and longing. The psychological need to reconcile his love for Paro with the rigid social norms of colonial Bengal drives his descent into alcoholism and despair.

As he confesses, "I wish I had the courage to live, but I only found the will to suffer" (Chattopadhyay, 1917, p. 152).

Devdas' constant reminiscences of Paro and his ultimate reliance on alcohol illustrate his inability to bridge the gap between desire and reality, further fueling his psychological decline.

Andrea and Devdas were privileged in fulfilling their physiological needs, but Maslow's need of *love and belonging* seems absent, and it lacks the need of *self-esteem*, which ultimately affected Maslow's need of *self-actualization*, referring to morality, creativity, spontaneity, acceptance, and so on.

Bridging Cultures: West and East

There is a cross-cultural impact and influence on Andrea and Devdas. Both characters reflect the eternal struggle of geniuses who succumb to their flaws.

Andrea Del Sarto (West)

Andrea, a skillful artist, tried to satisfy his patrons. His artistic creations were flawless but lacked deep affection. Meanwhile, Raphael and Michelangelo gained recognition for their devotion to art. Andrea's life was severely affected by his troubled relationship with his wife, Lucrezia, which hampered his potential. Andrea's unrequited love for Lucrezia led to a situation where he failed to fully nourish and flourish his artistic talent.

Devdas (East)

Devdas is a story of the melancholy of love and the imprisonment of social discipline. Despite loving Paro, the strict caste norms and patriarchal structure of society did not accept their relationship. After losing Paro, Devdas's

inability to challenge the patriarchal system and his ambivalence gradually destroyed him.

Both characters show how culture and social structures limit the lives of geniuses. Andrea and Devdas remain relevant in today's society, where people continue to struggle to balance societal expectations, professional demands, and personal relationships.

Struggle between Love and Life: Andrea's love for Lucrezia and Devdas's love for Paro significantly influenced the major decisions in their lives, which is a real picture of Karl Marx's social conflict theory that results in social class barriers, false consciousness, and alienation. Andrea and Devdas experience love as the core of their existence. Consequently fails to cope with the reality of life. In Andrea's life, art becomes the self-confrontation. Devdas's approach to love is seen as an analogy of life's struggle. Where societal restrictions work as a barrier in his life. In the end, Andrea and Devdas' love remains unresolved, and this unresolved drive leads them to self-destruction. Love and life could have complemented each other, but in the case of Devdas and Andrea, it worked as slow poison.

Silent Echoes of Repentance: Andrea and Devdas's silent echoes of repentance foreground the broader aspect of self-degradation. Andrea's failure to concentrate on his art and come out of external dependency on Patron as well as Lucrezia caused repentance, which is seen silently echoed in him. In addition, Devdas's repentance is seen in his intense longing to regain Paro and his self-destructive approach, which means his regression of inability to forgive himself for abandoning Paro once. Devdas's last action to visit Paro is the highest stage of regression, showing his seeking for redemption even in life on the brink of death. In both of the characters, the repentance is not loud or explained throughout words, but it is still visible. Thus, Freudian concepts of repression, guilt, and the unconscious mind Again, add a psychological layer to bridging literature and psychology altogether.

The Artist and the Aristocrat: Parallel Streams of Self-Destruction

Both Andrea and Devdas seemed to harbor an alternative self-control hidden within their self-destruction. They may have realized their self-destructive tendencies, yet they continued on their doomed paths. If Andrea had overcome Lucrezia's influence, or if Devdas had fought against the patriarchal social order to be with Paro, their stories might have unfolded differently. In love,

they were devoted, yet their wills never prevailed. This reveals how the individual and the lover remain imprisoned by the same chains.

Unveiled Degradation

The degradation of Andrea and Devdas reflects the devastating consequences of unfulfilled potential and internalized societal constraints.

Andrea's tragedy is the erosion of his soul as an artist. His technical perfection becomes meaningless as he succumbs to the patronage system, driven by monetary gain rather than creative ambition. His wife, Lucrezia, symbolizes his downfall—a materialistic force that anchors him to mediocrity. Andrea himself acknowledges the soullessness of his art when he laments, "But all the play, the insight, and the stretch Out of me, out of me!" (Browning, 1855, lines 115-116).

This stifling environment leads to the deterioration of Andrea's artistic spirit, reducing him to a man striving for material comforts at the expense of artistic transcendence. His inability to draw inspiration from within confines him to a life of unfulfilled potential.

In contrast, Devdas' degradation is marked by his moral and physical collapse. His failure to confront patriarchal norms and class hierarchies results in a retreat into intoxication and escapism. The once-respected *Dev Babu* of his village becomes a morally bankrupt figure, estranged from family, society, and even himself. Devdas' addiction reflects his despair and his inability to reconcile his desires with societal expectations, as he spirals into a state of irreversible decline.

Alternate Narratives: Imagining New Possibilities

Andrea Del Sarto and Devdas are characters with great potential, but their lives are bound by social and personal constraints. Andrea becomes trapped in the shackles of the patronage system and a troubled marriage, while Devdas moves toward self-destruction due to rigid social structures and unrequited love.

These unique stories present a sharp critique of personal and social limitations. But literature is a vast field of possibilities. What if Andrea had defied his patrons and gained artistic freedom? What if Devdas had overcome societal barriers and found a new meaning in life?

These alternative narratives not only offer a fresh perspective on these characters but also open a creative space for exploring deeper themes of stability, resilience, and change in human life.

Conclusion

Andrea Del Sarto and Devdas epitomize the tragic consequences of internalizing societal constraints and failing to challenge external pressures. Their genius is overshadowed not by a lack of talent but by their inability to navigate the socio-cultural forces that dictate their lives. Andrea’s tragedy lies in his passive acceptance of limitations, while Devdas’ downfall stems from his indecisiveness and unwillingness to rebel against patriarchal norms.

This comparative analysis highlights the universality of the struggle between individual potential and societal expectations, transcending cultural and historical boundaries. By exploring the psychoanalytic and socio-cultural dimensions of their lives, this study underscores how external pressures become internalized conflicts, shaping the destiny of individuals and ultimately leading to their self-destruction.

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