

The Eternal Dilemma: Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Human Agency and Identity Formation in Literary and Philosophical Discourse

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Abstract

This interdisciplinary study examines the universal phenomenon of human dilemma as a fundamental aspect of identity formation and agency across diverse cultural, literary, and philosophical contexts. Drawing from Western and Eastern philosophical frameworks alongside contemporary gender and postcolonial theory, this research analyzes how literary representations of moral and existential dilemmas reveal the constructed nature of individual identity and the perpetual tension between authentic selfhood and social conditioning. Through comparative analysis of canonical texts from Shakespeare to contemporary postcolonial literature, we demonstrate that the experience of dilemma serves as a crucial mechanism for understanding human agency within culturally imposed belief systems. Our findings suggest that literary dilemmas function as mirrors reflecting the broader philosophical question of whether genuine individual agency exists or whether human identity is fundamentally derivative. This study contributes to ongoing debates in literary criticism, philosophy of mind, and cultural studies regarding the nature of authentic selfhood in an interconnected world.

Keywords: Dilemma, Identity Formation, Literary Criticism, Cross-Cultural Philosophy, Human Agency, Authenticity, Postcolonial Theory

1. Introduction

The question of human agency has persisted across cultures and centuries, finding its most poignant expression in moments of profound dilemma. From Hamlet's existential uncertainty—"To be or not to be, that is the question"—to Vladimir and Estragon's eternal wait for Godot in Beckett's existentialist drama, literature consistently portrays the human condition as one of perpetual questioning and choice-making under uncertainty (Bradley, 2019; Radhakrishnan, 2018). Similarly, Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* and Albert Camus's *The Myth of Sisyphus* explore fundamental questions about persistence within monotonous human existence, revealing constant uncertainty about life's purpose and meaning.

These existential questions extend beyond Western literature to Eastern philosophical traditions. Arjuna's moral crisis in the *Bhagavad Gita* exemplifies the universal struggle between duty and personal conscience, while contemporary works continue to grapple with the nature of authentic existence in an increasingly complex world. Such literary representations of dilemma serve not merely as narrative devices but as philosophical explorations of fundamental questions about identity, agency, and authentic selfhood.

Oscar Wilde's observation that "Most people are other people. Their thoughts are someone else's opinions, their lives a mimicry, their passions a quotation" (Wilde, 1891, p. 45) encapsulates a central paradox of human existence: the extent to which individual identity is genuinely individual or merely a compilation of external influences. This tension between authentic selfhood and social conditioning manifests most clearly in moments of dilemma, when individuals must navigate between competing values, expectations, and desires.

The complexity of moral decision-making becomes evident when we consider that life rarely presents clear choices between right and wrong. Instead, we often face decisions between competing goods or competing harms, where context shapes meaning and outcomes. This contextual relativity of moral judgment creates the perpetual uncertainty that characterizes human existence. As Rabindranath Tagore noted, "It is very simple to be happy, but it is very difficult to be simple"—a sentiment that captures the inherent complexity of navigating life's moral landscape.

Contemporary scholarship in literary criticism and philosophy has increasingly recognized dilemmas as sites of identity negotiation rather than simple decision-making processes (Butler, 2020; Sen, 2019). This study examines how literary representations of dilemma across cultural traditions illuminate the complex relationship between individual agency and collective influence, arguing that the perpetual nature of human dilemma reflects deeper questions about the possibility of authentic selfhood in an interconnected world.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Philosophical Foundations of Dilemma

The philosophical exploration of dilemma dates back to ancient Greek tragedy, where characters faced irreconcilable conflicts between duty and desire, loyalty and justice (Nussbaum, 2021). Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex* exemplifies this tradition, presenting protagonists caught between competing moral imperatives. Aristotle's concept of practical wisdom (*phronesis*) emerged from recognition that moral decision-making often involves choosing between competing goods rather than between good and evil (Aristotle, trans. 2020). This understanding has evolved through existentialist philosophy, where thinkers like Kierkegaard and Sartre positioned dilemma as fundamental to human existence and authentic choice-making (Kierkegaard, trans. 2019; Sartre, trans. 2018).

Eastern philosophical traditions offer complementary perspectives on dilemma and identity. The *Bhagavad Gita*'s treatment of Arjuna's crisis synthesizes duty (*dharma*), knowledge (*jnana*), and devotion (*bhakti*) as paths through moral uncertainty (Easwaran, 2020). Buddhist philosophy conceptualizes dilemma as arising from attachment and the illusion of fixed selfhood, suggesting that resolution comes through understanding the impermanent nature of identity itself (Rahula, 2019).

2.2 Literary Representations of Identity Crisis

Shakespearean drama provides archetypal examples of characters wrestling with fundamental questions of identity and agency. Hamlet's soliloquies reveal the paralysis that can result from over-analyzing moral choices, while Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking scene demonstrates how suppressed moral conflict manifests in psychological disturbance (Greenblatt, 2018; Bloom, 2017). These characters embody the tension between social expectations and individual conscience that defines much of Western literary tradition.

Postcolonial literature has expanded this framework to examine how dilemma functions within contexts of cultural displacement and identity fragmentation. Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* presents Bakha's internal conflicts as representative of broader social tensions between tradition and modernity, caste-based

identity and individual aspiration (Anand, 2019; Naik, 2020). Such works demonstrate how personal dilemmas reflect larger cultural and political struggles.

Salman Rushdie describes himself as a "psychological refugee" in his collection *Imaginary Homelands*, where he discusses the disconnect between his remembered India and contemporary reality. His nostalgic vision differs significantly from present-day India, illustrating how memory and reality create competing versions of identity and belonging (Rushdie, 2020).

2.3 Contemporary Theoretical Frameworks

Recent scholarship has approached literary dilemma through various theoretical lenses. Poststructuralist critics argue that dilemma reveals the constructed nature of identity, showing how apparently individual struggles reflect broader discourse patterns (Foucault, trans. 2021; Derrida, trans. 2020). Postcolonial theorists examine how dilemmas in colonized subjects reflect the psychological impact of cultural domination and hybrid identity formation (Bhabha, 2019; Spivak, 2018).

Feminist criticism has highlighted how gender shapes the experience of dilemma, particularly regarding conflicts between personal desire and social expectation (Gilbert & Gubar, 2019). Contemporary works exploring previously taboo subjects demonstrate how cultural shifts transform expressions of identity and sexuality that were once marginalized.

These theoretical approaches collectively suggest that literary dilemmas function as sites where individual psychology intersects with broader cultural forces, revealing how marginalized positions can lead to the discovery of core values and potential solutions to long-standing problems.

3. The Paradox of Borrowed Existence

If we had heeded Polonius's counsel in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*—"Neither a borrower nor a lender be"—perhaps we would live more financially prudent lives. This advice emphasizes financial independence and caution in monetary dealings. However, it presents a fundamental paradox, as there exists a considerable gap between moral goodness and practical worldly wisdom.

The paradox deepens when we consider that our very existence appears "borrowed." The air we breathe comes from the atmosphere, the sunlight illuminating our daily activities comes from the sun, and the water we use originates from natural reservoirs. Our food derives from soil, we harvest fruits from trees, and our existence depends on the classical elements: earth, water, fire, air, and space. Given that we exist through these borrowed elements and ultimately return to them, following Polonius's advice becomes philosophically problematic.

Hamlet further complicates our understanding with the observation that "one may smile, and smile, and be a villain." This suggests that outward appearances can mask malevolent intentions, highlighting the deceptive nature of social interaction and creating additional dilemmas about trust and authenticity. Perhaps this explains Shakespeare's counsel in *All's Well That Ends Well*: "Love all, trust a few, do wrong to none."

We exist in a state of *aporia*—philosophical puzzlement—potentially remaining perpetually caught in routine and monotonous existence. This condition mirrors what Albert Camus describes in "The Myth of Sisyphus" and Franz Kafka explores in "The Metamorphosis." Kafka himself embodied questions of mixed identity and hybrid heritage, representing hereditary confusion passed between generations.

Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity, commonly used in postcolonial theory, describes how new cultures emerge in colonization's contact zones. This adds another layer to our catalog of ambiguities. Hybridity

refers to mixture, and humans are indeed mixtures of various influences—cultural, linguistic, and biological. We remain confused by our diffused identities.

Contemporary theorists have attempted to address these confusions. Donna Haraway, in "A Cyborg Manifesto," suggests transcending traditional gender roles, though this concept may seem alien because we are governed by what Louis Althusser terms "ideological state apparatuses," and patriarchal structures prevail globally (Haraway, 2018; Althusser, 2014).

The tendency to understand identities through binary oppositions complicates meaning-making processes. According to Ferdinand de Saussure, there exists only a chain of signification, and we never reach what Jacques Derrida later termed the "transcendental signified" (Saussure, 2011; Derrida, 2020). Life does not present clear distinctions between night and day or honesty and dishonesty. In our hyperreal world, subtle differences exist even within similar phenomena.

Mythological fiction author Amish Tripathi astutely observed that love's opposite is not hate but apathy. While choosing between good and bad may seem straightforward, wiser individuals recognize that the world is an alloy—a mixture where pure categories rarely exist. Gray exists between black and white, just as afternoon and evening exist between night and day.

Consider language's complexity itself. It lacks universal acceptance, uniform structure, or unanimous formation through community consultation. Language remains inherently ambiguous. The relationship between words and meanings appears arbitrary—a tree is called a tree simply because it is designated as such.

Gertrude Stein's famous line from "Sacred Emily"—"a rose is a rose is a rose"—emphasizes inherent nature, suggesting that external factors do not change essential identity (Stein, 1913). Yet this raises questions about the relationship between naming and being.

The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis suggests that language structure influences how speakers conceptualize the world, positing that language shapes thought and adding another dimension to reality's ambiguous nature (Sapir, 1929; Whorf, 1956).

4. Methodology

This study employs comparative literary analysis, examining canonical texts from multiple cultural traditions alongside contemporary theoretical frameworks. Primary sources include works by Shakespeare, classical Indian texts like the *Bhagavad Gita*, and modern postcolonial literature. Secondary analysis draws from philosophical works spanning Western existentialism to Eastern meditation traditions.

The analytical framework combines close textual reading with broader cultural contextualization, examining how specific literary dilemmas reflect universal human experiences while remaining grounded in particular cultural contexts. This approach allows for detailed textual analysis and broader theoretical conclusions about dilemma's nature in human experience.

Texts were selected based on their canonical status, cultural diversity, and explicit engagement with questions of identity and choice. The analysis focuses on moments of crisis where characters navigate between competing values or identities, examining both the content of these dilemmas and their formal literary representation.

5. Analysis and Discussion

5.1 The Architecture of Dilemma

Literary dilemmas consistently exhibit structural characteristics that reveal deeper philosophical signifi-

nce. In Hamlet's famous soliloquy, the binary opposition between "to be" and "not to be" immediately dissolves into complex meditation on action, suffering, and the unknown (Shakespeare, 2021). This pattern—initial binary choice expanding into philosophical complexity—appears across cultural traditions. Similarly, Arjuna's initial reluctance to fight in the *Mahabharata* transforms into comprehensive exploration of duty, knowledge, and devotion (Vyasa, trans. 2020). The dilemma serves as a gateway to deeper philosophical understanding rather than simple choice between alternatives. This suggests that literary dilemmas function less as problems to be solved than as spaces for exploring fundamental questions about human nature and agency.

5.2 Cultural Variations in Dilemma Resolution

Different cultural traditions offer distinct approaches to navigating moral and existential dilemmas. Western literary tradition often emphasizes individual agency and rational choice-making, though frequently reveals purely rational approaches' limitations. Hamlet's excessive rationalization leads to paralysis rather than effective action, suggesting intellectual approaches' inadequacy to moral problems. Eastern traditions typically emphasize accepting uncertainty and cultivating detachment from outcomes. Krishna's counsel to Arjuna focuses on right action performed without attachment to results, offering a framework for navigating dilemma that transcends simple choice-making (Bhagavad Gita, trans. 2020). This approach suggests that resolution comes not through choosing correctly but through transforming one's relationship to choice itself.

Postcolonial literature introduces additional complexity by examining dilemmas within contexts of cultural hybridity and power imbalance. Anand's *Bakha* faces choices constrained by social structures beyond his control, highlighting how individual agency operates within systems of collective oppression (Anand, 2019). These works reveal how cultural context shapes both available choices and evaluation criteria.

5.3 Identity Formation Through Dilemma

The experience of dilemma appears crucial in identity formation, serving as a mechanism through which individuals discover their values, limitations, and authentic desires. Lady Macbeth's psychological deterioration following her manipulation of her husband demonstrates how suppressing moral conflict can lead to identity fragmentation (Shakespeare, 2021). Her sleepwalking scene reveals suppressed moral awareness's persistence despite conscious rationalization attempts.

Contemporary discussions of identity expand this framework to include various forms of gender and sexual identity negotiation. Non-binary and fluid identities present ongoing dilemmas regarding social categorization and self-presentation within binary systems (Halberstam, 2020). Even seemingly stable identity categories involve continuous navigation of social expectations and personal authenticity (Ahmed, 2021).

This pattern suggests that dilemmas function as tests of identity coherence across multiple dimensions of human experience, revealing whether professed values align with deeper psychological commitments. Characters who successfully navigate dilemmas often emerge with greater self-knowledge, while those who attempt to avoid moral conflict frequently experience psychological fragmentation.

5.4 The Social Construction of Individual Choice

Wilde's observation about individual identity's derivative nature finds support in literary representations of dilemma, which consistently reveal how apparently personal choices reflect broader social influences. Hamlet's indecision can be read as a product of his position within Danish court politics as much as individual psychological makeup (Greenblatt, 2018). Similarly, *Bakha*'s aspirations and conflicts reflect

marginalized communities' social positioning rather than purely individual concerns.

This analysis suggests that dilemmas serve as moments where identity's constructed nature becomes visible. The experience of uncertainty and conflict reveals how individual consciousness is shaped by social forces, challenging romantic notions of autonomous selfhood while not necessarily eliminating genuine choice possibilities.

6. Implications and Conclusions

This analysis of literary dilemma across cultural traditions reveals several important insights about human agency and identity formation. First, dilemmas appear fundamental to human experience rather than problems to be eliminated, serving as crucial sites for identity negotiation and self-discovery. Second, dilemma resolution often involves transforming one's relationship to choice itself rather than simply making correct decisions.

Cross-cultural examination reveals both universal patterns in human dilemma experience and significant cultural variations in resolution approaches. While moral and existential uncertainty appears universal, different traditions offer distinct frameworks for navigating such uncertainty. This suggests that while the capacity for dilemma may be universal, specific forms and resolutions remain culturally situated.

Perhaps most significantly, this study reveals how literary representations of dilemma illuminate the complex relationship between individual agency and social construction. Rather than eliminating authentic choice possibilities, recognition of social influences on identity formation may actually enhance genuine agency by promoting greater self-awareness and more conscious decision-making.

The perpetual nature of human dilemma, rather than representing human reason's failure, appears to reflect identity formation's ongoing nature. As social conditions change and individuals develop, new dilemmas emerge, requiring continuous negotiation between authentic selfhood and social belonging. This process, while sometimes painful, appears essential to both individual development and cultural evolution.

Each historical period and life phase brings distinctive dilemmas and unsolved questions. Events like the COVID-19 pandemic and experiences such as adolescence exemplify how different circumstances generate unique challenges for identity formation and moral reasoning. Understanding dilemma as a fundamental aspect of human experience, rather than a problem to be solved, may provide a more constructive framework for navigating life's inherent uncertainties.

The study suggests that literature's enduring fascination with dilemma reflects its central role in human experience. Rather than seeking to eliminate uncertainty, individuals and cultures might benefit from developing more sophisticated frameworks for living with and learning from the inevitable dilemmas that characterize human existence.

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