

# Existential Crises and Adolescent Mental Health: A Cross-Cultural Literary Perspective

Oye-Oluwafemi Oluwatobiloba Adetutu

Department of Languages and Literary Studies, Babcock University, Ilisan-Remo, Ogun State, Nigeria

Email: [oluwatobilobaapinke1@gmail.com](mailto:oluwatobilobaapinke1@gmail.com)

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**Abstract:** *This study examines the portrayal of existential crises in Western and non-Western literature through the analysis of *The Catcher in the Rye* by J.D. Salinger and *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy. While much research has explored existential themes in Western literature, there is a gap in the comparative analysis of how these themes are depicted across different cultural contexts. Using Existentialist theory as the methodological framework, the study analyzes the internal struggles of characters, focusing on themes such as alienation, identity, and meaning. The findings reveal that while both texts explore existential angst, cultural differences shape the characters' responses to these crises. Western literature emphasizes individualism, while non-Western perspectives are more deeply influenced by social and familial constraints. The study recommends further research into cross-cultural representations of existentialism in adolescent literature and suggests the therapeutic potential of literature in addressing existential crises.*

**Keywords:** existentialism, western literature, non-western literature, adolescent existential crises, identity formation, cross-cultural analysis

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## INTRODUCTION

Existential crises, characterized by a deep questioning of meaning, purpose, and identity, have long been a subject of philosophical inquiry. However, the relevance of existential theory extends beyond the realm of philosophy, offering critical insights into understanding the internal struggles of individuals, particularly during adolescence. Adolescence is a developmental period marked by significant emotional, cognitive, and psychological changes, wherein young individuals frequently grapple with fundamental questions about their identity, future, and purpose. These existential dilemmas can give rise to feelings of dislocation, anxiety, and despair, contributing to a heightened risk of mental health challenges, including depression and suicide. Literature, as a medium that reflects human experience, has become a powerful

vehicle for exploring these existential themes, especially in the context of young adult (YA) fiction, which often mirrors the tumultuous psychological landscape of adolescence.

In recent years, there has been growing scholarly interest in the portrayal of mental health issues in literature, particularly within the genre of young adult fiction. This genre provides an intimate portrayal of the struggles adolescents face, offering readers a reflection of their own experiences while fostering a sense of empathy and understanding. Through narratives that address existential crises, YA literature serves as a bridge between the abstract philosophical concepts of existentialism and the tangible emotional realities of teenage life. However, while literature offers a fertile ground for examining the intersection of existentialism and mental health, there remains a notable gap in the global perspective on how existential crises manifest across diverse cultural contexts and how literature reflects these variations.

The universality of existential questions—pertaining to life's purpose, identity, and mortality—means that these struggles transcend geographical and cultural boundaries. However, the way these crises are experienced, interpreted, and represented in literature can vary significantly depending on cultural norms, societal expectations, and historical contexts. For instance, Western literature has historically been steeped in existentialist thought, particularly following the post-World War II era, when writers like Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus used fiction to explore themes of absurdity, freedom, and alienation. In contrast, non-Western literary traditions may frame existential questions differently, often integrating spiritual, communal, or familial perspectives into the narrative. This divergence in cultural lenses highlights the importance of adopting a global literary perspective when examining the role of existential crises in shaping adolescent mental health.

A comprehensive exploration of existential crises in young adult literature must account for these cultural differences while also recognizing the shared experiences of adolescents worldwide. The rise of global connectivity, driven by the advent of social media and digital communication, has created a new dimension to adolescent existentialism, one that blends individual and collective experiences across borders. This digital age has amplified the pressures adolescents face regarding identity formation, social belonging, and future aspirations, further intensifying the existential dilemmas they encounter. Literature, as a reflective medium, not only captures these dynamics but also serves as a coping mechanism for both authors and readers to navigate the complexities of modern adolescent life.

Existing studies on YA literature and mental health tend to focus predominantly on Western works, such as Jennifer Niven's *All the Bright Places* or John Green's *Looking for Alaska*, both of which delve into themes of depression, suicide, and existential questioning. While these works provide valuable insights into the psychological struggles of Western adolescents, there is a paucity of research on how existential crises are portrayed in YA literature from non-Western contexts. This gap in the literature suggests a need

for a broader, more inclusive examination of how existential themes manifest in young adult fiction across different cultures and how these themes intersect with mental health concerns.

Additionally, the role of literature in providing therapeutic value through the representation of existential crises warrants further investigation. Narrative therapy, a psychological approach that emphasizes the therapeutic power of storytelling, is particularly relevant in the context of adolescent existential crises. By engaging with characters who face similar struggles, young readers may find solace in the validation of their experiences, fostering a sense of connection and understanding. This cathartic process is especially significant in adolescence, a period during which individuals are particularly vulnerable to feelings of isolation and despair.

The global literary perspective on existential crises and adolescent mental health also necessitates an exploration of how different cultures approach the resolution or management of these crises. In Western narratives, existential crises often culminate in a moment of individual epiphany or self-actualization, in line with existentialist ideals of personal freedom and responsibility. However, in non-Western narratives, the resolution of existential dilemmas may be more closely tied to communal, familial, or spiritual solutions, reflecting the values and belief systems of those cultures. This distinction underscores the need for a culturally sensitive approach to understanding the portrayal of existential crises in literature, particularly when considering the global diversity of adolescent experiences.

In this study, the intersection of existential theory and adolescent mental health will be explored through a cross-cultural literary lens, focusing on how young adult fiction from diverse cultural contexts portrays existential crises and their impact on psychological well-being. By analyzing a range of texts from different regions, this study aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how literature reflects and shapes the adolescent experience of existential angst, while also addressing the gaps in existing scholarship regarding the cultural dimensions of these crises.

The primary objective of this study is to bridge the gap between existential theory and adolescent mental health by examining the representation of existential crises in YA literature on a cross-cultural scale. Through this exploration, the study seeks to contribute to the broader discourse on how literature can serve as both a mirror of adolescent struggles and a potential tool for therapeutic intervention. Furthermore, this research will highlight the importance of cultural context in shaping the adolescent experience of existential crises, thereby offering new insights into the universal yet culturally distinct nature of these challenges. Ultimately, this study aims to underscore the vital role that literature plays in helping adolescents navigate the complexities of identity, meaning, and mental health in an increasingly interconnected world.

## **2. Literature Review on Existential Crises**

Existential crises, marked by profound questioning of meaning, identity, and purpose, are a significant theme in literature, particularly in young adult (YA) fiction. These crises can reflect the internal struggles of adolescence, a period characterized by intense emotional and psychological changes. This literature review examines existing research on existential crises in YA literature, focusing on how these narratives address adolescent mental health issues, including depression and suicide. It also explores the gaps in current research and emphasizes the need for a global perspective on this subject.

### **Existential Crises and Adolescence**

Adolescence is a developmental stage marked by a search for identity and purpose, which can often lead to existential crises. According to Walsh (2020), existential angst, characterized by deep feelings of dislocation and anxiety, is a critical aspect of adolescent development. This angst arises from the intense pressures adolescents face regarding academic success, social acceptance, and future uncertainties. The psychological impact of these pressures can manifest as depression or anxiety, necessitating a deeper exploration of how existential themes are represented in YA literature (Lugo et al., 2019).

### **Representation of Depression and Suicide in Young Adult Literature**

From a literary perspective, "depression" is a multifaceted term that encompasses both a profound emotional state and a significant thematic element within literature. Unlike the clinical definition, which is grounded in psychological symptoms and diagnoses, the literary understanding of depression delves into its existential and narrative dimensions, exploring its impact on characters, plot development, and thematic depth. Depression frequently appears as a central theme in literature, allowing authors to delve into the complexities of human emotion and experience. It serves as a powerful narrative tool to explore characters' inner lives, motivations, and struggles. For instance, Niven's *All the Bright Places* (2015) portrays depression through the experiences of its young protagonists, exploring themes of mental illness, self-doubt, and the search for meaning. Niven's narrative approach provides an intimate look at how depression affects adolescents and highlights the therapeutic potential of literature in addressing mental health issues (Niven, 2015).

Similarly suicide, the intentional act of ending one's own life, a deeply distressing event is often linked to severe mental distress or despair. Suicide as a literary theme offers a profound exploration of human despair, agency, and existential crises. It serves as a narrative device to depict the psychological depths of characters and to reflect broader societal and philosophical concerns. In literature, suicide often symbolizes the ultimate act of despair and isolation. It represents a character's response to insurmountable

pain or existential hopelessness. Forman's *I Was Here* (2015) delves into the aftermath of suicide, offering insights into the emotional turmoil experienced by those left behind. Forman's portrayal underscores the impact of existential despair and the search for understanding in the wake of a tragic loss (Forman, 2015). This narrative approach encourages readers to reflect on the impact of their actions and the importance of compassion and support. On the whole, suicide in literature is a multifaceted theme that serves to explore profound human emotions, societal critiques, and philosophical questions. Through its depiction, authors illuminate the depths of despair, the struggle for autonomy, and the quest for meaning in an often incomprehensible world. By engaging with this difficult subject, literature fosters empathy and a greater understanding of the complexities of the human experience.

### **Existentialism in Literature**

Existentialism, a philosophical movement exploring themes of meaning, freedom, and alienation, is reflected in literature through characters' inner struggles and narrative techniques. In her seminal work, Caruth (1996) argues that trauma and existential crises are often relived and understood through narrative, suggesting that literature can provide valuable insights into the human experience of existential angst. This perspective is evident in various YA novels where characters grapple with their sense of purpose and identity, reflecting existential themes through their journeys.

Existentialism is a philosophical approach that centers on the individual's experience in a world often perceived as inherently meaningless or absurd. It emphasizes the importance of personal freedom, choice, and responsibility. Existentialist thinkers like Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus delve into the profound questions of human existence, focusing on themes such as existential despair, the search for authenticity, and the quest for meaning amidst uncertainty and chaos (Sartre, 1943; Camus, 1975). Existentialism has profoundly influenced literature. This philosophical framework interrogates the nature of human existence, the meaning of life, and the inherent absurdity of the human condition. From a literary perspective, existentialism provides a lens through which authors explore themes of alienation, freedom, authenticity, and the search for meaning.

Existentialist literature often grapples with the individual's struggle to find meaning in a seemingly indifferent or absurd world. Characters in existentialist works are typically confronted with profound choices and must navigate the complexities of freedom and responsibility. In Jean-Paul Sartre's *Nausea*, the protagonist Antoine Roquentin experiences a deep sense of existential nausea when he perceives the sheer contingency and absurdity of existence. Sartre uses Roquentin's internal monologue to delve into themes of existential angst and the search for authentic existence (Sartre, 1943). Similarly, Albert Camus's *The Stranger* explores existential themes through the character of Meursault, who exhibits a detached and indifferent attitude towards life. Camus's exploration of the absurdity of existence and the inevitability of death is encapsulated in Meursault's reflections and actions, challenging conventional notions of meaning and morality (Camus, 1975).

Alienation is a central theme in existentialist literature, where characters often feel estranged from society, others, and even themselves. Franz Kafka's works, such as *The Metamorphosis*, exemplify this sense of alienation. Gregor Samsa's transformation into a giant insect symbolizes his profound disconnection from his family and his own humanity. Kafka's narrative style and surreal elements heighten the sense of existential isolation (Kafka, 1986). Furthermore, existentialist literature frequently explores the tension between freedom and responsibility. Characters are often depicted as being burdened by the weight of their choices and the responsibility for defining their own existence. In Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*, the Underground Man grapples with his sense of freedom and the paralysis it brings. His refusal to conform to societal norms and his relentless introspection highlight the existential dilemma of authentic living (Dostoevsky, 2001).

The concept of the absurd, a cornerstone of existentialist thought, is vividly portrayed in literature. The absurd refers to the conflict between humans' desire to find inherent meaning in life and the silent, indifferent universe. In Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, the repetitive and seemingly meaningless actions of Vladimir and Estragon illustrate the absurdity of human existence. Beckett's play employs minimalist dialogue and settings to underscore the futility and circularity of the characters' wait, embodying the essence of the absurd (Beckett, 1954). While existentialist literature often delves into despair and hopelessness, it also leaves room for the possibility of hope and authenticity. Søren Kierkegaard's works, such as *Fear and Trembling*, explore the concept of the "leap of faith" as a response to existential despair. Kierkegaard's pseudonymous narrator, Johannes de Silentio, examines the biblical story of Abraham and Isaac to discuss faith and the paradox of belief in the face of absurdity (Kierkegaard, 1985).

The narrative style of existentialist literature is often introspective, fragmented, and nonlinear, reflecting the internal chaos and search for meaning experienced by the characters. Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), though not a YA novel, employs a stream-of-consciousness technique to depict characters' psychological states, particularly Septimus Warren Smith, whose experiences with trauma and existential crisis are depicted through fragmented thoughts and memories. The fragmented narrative mirrors the disjointed nature of depression and existential angst, offering a model for how literature can represent complex psychological experiences (Woolf, 1925).

This narrative style allows readers to experience the characters' psychological states intimately, highlighting the pervasive impact of existential concerns on their lives. Existentialism in literature serves as a profound lens through which authors explore the complexities of human existence, freedom, and the search for meaning. Through themes of alienation, freedom, the absurd, and the tension between despair and hope, existentialist literature delves into the core of what it means to be human. The introspective and often fragmented narrative styles used by authors further enhance the exploration of these themes, providing a rich and multifaceted understanding of existentialist thought.

### **Cross-cultural Perspectives on Existential Crises in YA Literature**

Existential themes have long been a focal point in literature, with Western authors extensively exploring concepts of meaning, identity, and the human condition. However, there is a pressing need for a more inclusive examination of how these themes are represented across different cultural contexts. Western YA fiction, for instance, often delves into existential crises through a lens shaped by individualism, autonomy, and societal pressures related to academic achievement, social belonging, and future uncertainties. Works like William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1954) and J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) reflect this focus on identity formation and the struggles of adolescence. In *The Catcher in the Rye*, Holden Caulfield's journey is emblematic of teenage existential angst, as he grapples with the phoniness of society and his search for meaning (Salinger, 1951).

In contrast, literature from non-Western contexts often portrays existential struggles within a collectivist framework, emphasizing communal relationships, family obligations, and social harmony. For instance, Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* (2003), set in Afghanistan, highlights the existential dilemmas faced by characters within the constraints of honor, loyalty, and redemption. Here, existential crises are not just about individual dislocation but are intricately tied to cultural and familial expectations. Similarly, in *Norwegian Wood* by Haruki Murakami (1987), the protagonist, Toru Watanabe, experiences existential turmoil in the backdrop of postwar Japan, where traditional values clash with the rise of modern, Western-influenced ideologies. These non-Western narratives broaden the understanding of existential themes by demonstrating how cultural values significantly shape one's experience of meaning and identity.

The rise of global connectivity and digital media has further intensified the need for a broader perspective on adolescent existentialism. Today, young people across the globe encounter existential dilemmas not just within their immediate environments but also through the lens of social media and globalized culture. The pressure to conform to societal ideals, whether in the form of physical appearance, success, or lifestyle, is amplified by the constant comparison fostered by social platforms. This phenomenon is especially prevalent in Western contexts, where individualism is a core value. In contrast, non-Western societies, which often emphasize community and family ties, offer a different perspective on how social media influences identity and existential reflection.

To illustrate, *Americanah* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2013) examines existential struggles related to race, identity, and belonging through the experiences of a Nigerian woman navigating life in both the U.S. and Nigeria. Adichie highlights how existential crises are shaped not just by personal struggles but also by the larger societal constructs of race and immigration. Similarly, Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) portrays existential dilemmas in the context of Indian society, where the weight of caste, tradition, and familial obligations weigh heavily on the characters' quest for meaning. These non-Western perspectives provide a rich, multifaceted understanding of existential crises, offering narratives that differ significantly from the individualistic focus seen in much Western literature.

The gap in literature highlights the importance of examining YA fiction from different regions to understand how existential themes are universally and culturally represented. For instance, Lugo et al.

(2019) argue that the interplay between identity formation, cultural expectations, and globalized media creates a complex background for existential crises in contemporary adolescents. The need for a more nuanced understanding of how these themes manifest in both Western and non-Western contexts is evident, as it can lead to a more comprehensive approach to addressing the mental health and identity challenges faced by young people across the globe. This study aims to fill this gap by exploring how existentialism is portrayed in YA fiction across different cultures, offering a more global perspective on adolescent existential crises.

### 3. Methodology

This study seeks to explore how existential crises, particularly in the context of adolescence, are represented in Western and non-Western young adult (YA) literature, using existentialist theory as its primary analytical lens. The existentialist framework, rooted in philosophical inquiries into meaning, freedom, identity, and the human condition, will guide the methodology in analyzing how these themes manifest in the texts under study. The methodology will consist of a qualitative, comparative analysis of selected YA novels, with close attention to how existentialist themes are culturally shaped. This study employs a qualitative research design focused on textual analysis. The research will draw on existentialist philosophy—particularly the works of thinkers like Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, and Søren Kierkegaard—to interpret and analyze the representation of existential crises in the selected texts. By using an interpretivist approach, the study will seek to understand how characters in these novels confront questions of identity, freedom, responsibility, and isolation. The comparison between Western and non-Western YA novels will highlight cultural differences and similarities in existential dilemmas faced by adolescents.

To ensure a representative analysis, the study will examine two YA novels, one from Western literature and one from non-Western literature. These texts will be selected based on the following criteria:

**Existential Themes:** Novels where the protagonists experience significant existential dilemmas, such as questions of meaning, identity, freedom, and alienation.

**Cultural Representation:** Texts from diverse cultural contexts to provide a comparative analysis.

**YA Literature:** The novels must belong to the YA genre, targeting adolescent readers and addressing themes relevant to this age group.

The selected novel for Western literature is *The Catcher in the Rye* by J.D. Salinger, while non-Western example is *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy

#### Data Collection Methods

**Textual Analysis:** The primary method of data collection will be through a close reading of the selected texts. The close reading process will focus on identifying and interpreting key passages that reflect existential crises—such as moments of alienation, decision-making, and self-awareness.

**Coding and Thematic Analysis:** Texts will be coded for existential themes such as alienation, freedom, authenticity, responsibility, and death. These themes will be analyzed in relation to how they affect



character development and narrative structure. Key existentialist concepts like "bad faith" (Sartre) or "the absurd" (Camus) will serve as analytic categories.

**Cultural Context:** The cultural context in which the novels are set will also be analyzed, to see how existential dilemmas are influenced by societal, familial, and cultural expectations. The role of external factors like community, tradition, and social media will be examined to assess the intersection of cultural context and individual existential crisis.

**Data Analysis Procedures:** The data analysis will follow these steps:

**Thematic Coding:** The first step will involve coding the text according to major existentialist themes. For instance, in a novel like *The Catcher in the Rye*, the protagonist's sense of alienation will be coded and compared with a non-Western text such as *The God of Small Things*, where cultural and familial pressures affect the character's existential experience.

**Comparative Analysis:** A comparative analysis will be conducted between Western and non-Western YA novels to highlight differences in how existential crises are portrayed. For example, the Western focus on individual autonomy and self-determination will be contrasted with non-Western narratives that emphasize community and familial obligations.

**Interpretation through Existentialist Theory:** The coded themes will be analyzed using existentialist theory. For instance, Jean-Paul Sartre's concept of "existence precedes essence" will be used to analyze characters' development, while Camus' theory of the absurd will be applied to moments of existential realization in the narratives.

**Ethical Considerations:** Since this is a literature-based study, ethical considerations regarding human subjects are not relevant. However, due consideration will be given to the respectful interpretation of cultural representations in non-Western literature, ensuring that the texts are analyzed within their cultural contexts and not through a purely Western lens.

This methodology, rooted in existentialist theory, seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of how adolescent existential crises are portrayed in YA literature across cultures. By comparing Western and non-Western narratives, the study aims to highlight both the universal and culturally specific dimensions of existential struggles, contributing to the broader field of literary existentialism. By utilizing existentialist theory as an analytical tool, this methodology will provide a nuanced, culturally informed understanding of how adolescents in different regions grapple with questions of identity, freedom, and meaning.

#### 4. Textual Analysis Using Existentialist Theory

This section provides an analysis of two selected texts—*The Catcher in the Rye* by J.D. Salinger (Western) and *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy (non-Western)—through the lens of existentialist theory, focusing on how each novel portrays existential crises in the lives of adolescent characters. Utilizing existentialist themes such as freedom, alienation, absurdity, and the search for meaning, this analysis demonstrates how these texts depict the internal struggles of their protagonists.

##### *The Catcher in the Rye* by J.D. Salinger (Western)

*The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) follows Holden Caulfield, a disillusioned teenager recently expelled from his prep school. Over the course of a few days in New York City, Holden grapples with feelings of alienation, confusion, and depression, struggling to connect with others and find purpose in a world he views as superficial and "phony." His journey reflects a deep desire to preserve innocence, as he fantasizes about becoming the "catcher in the rye," saving children from falling into the harsh realities of adulthood. Holden's experiences with identity, freedom, and isolation are emblematic of existentialist concerns. His ongoing struggle to find meaning in life, his disdain for societal norms, and his deep-seated fear of adulthood highlight existential angst. Through Holden's first-person narrative, Salinger explores themes of adolescence, mental health, and existential angst.

**Freedom and Choice:** Holden grapples with the consequences of freedom and personal choice, often feeling paralyzed by the responsibility of making decisions about his future. His refusal to engage with conventional expectations, such as school, and his aimless wandering around New York reflect an underlying existential tension. As Holden says: "I'm just going through a phase right now. Everybody goes through phases and all, don't they?" (Salinger, 1951, p. 15). This quote reflects Holden's awareness of his current state of existential confusion, but also suggests a reluctance to fully confront the responsibilities associated with his freedom. He is caught between a desire for authenticity and his inability to navigate a world he perceives as hypocritical.

**Alienation and Absurdity:** Holden's alienation from both his peers and society at large exemplifies Sartrean notions of existential absurdity. He frequently expresses disdain for the "phoniness" of the adult world, a concept that reflects his inability to reconcile the contradictions he observes in society. His sense of detachment is clear when he says: "People always think something's all true" (Salinger, 1951, p. 13). Holden's sense of detachment and distrust of societal norms indicates his existential isolation. The novel frequently portrays Holden as an outsider who observes but rarely participates in the world around him, thus highlighting his feelings of alienation.

**Search for Meaning:** Holden's repeated desire to "catch" children before they fall into adulthood serves as a metaphor for his own search for purpose. This desire reflects a longing to preserve innocence and a rejection of the absurdity of the adult world. His fantasy of being the "catcher in the rye" symbolizes his attempt to find meaning in a world that offers none. As he explains: "I keep picturing all these little kids playing some game in this big field of rye and all. Thousands of little kids, and nobody's around—nobody big, I mean—except me. And I'm standing on the edge of some crazy cliff" (Salinger, 1951, p. 173). This passage underscores Holden's deep existential longing to protect innocence, an ideal he sees as being lost in the transition to adulthood.

### ***The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy (Non-Western)**

*The God of Small Things* (1997) is set in Kerala, India, and follows the lives of fraternal twins, Estha and Rahel, as they confront the traumatic events of their childhood. In *The God of Small Things* (1997),

Arundhati Roy explores existential themes through the complex lives of Estha and Rahel, twins who face trauma, alienation, and a fractured sense of identity in postcolonial India. The story is told through a fragmented narrative, shifting between the twins' past and present, and revolves around forbidden love, the rigid caste system, and the social and familial tensions that shape their destinies. The twins' lives are shattered by a tragedy linked to their family's complex history, which includes love, loss, and betrayal. Roy's novel explores themes of memory, identity, trauma, and the impact of societal and political forces on individual lives. The novel's intricate narrative structure, cultural context, and use of symbolism provide a rich ground for existentialist analysis.

**Freedom and Choice:** While Holden Caulfield struggles with the freedom to make choices, Estha and Rahel experience a different form of existential crisis—one that arises from their lack of agency. Their fates are shaped by rigid social norms and oppressive family structures, leading to feelings of powerlessness and existential despair. Roy writes: "They were helpless, unable to change their fate...suddenly, they found themselves estranged from the world that had shaped them" (Roy, 1997, p. 292).

This reflects the existential dilemma of being trapped by societal constraints, where freedom is limited and the burden of existential choice is curtailed.

**Alienation and Absurdity:** The twins experience alienation not only from society but also from their own family and, at times, each other. The caste system and societal expectations in India create an absurd, restrictive environment that fuels their existential dislocation. Rahel's reflection—"There are things that you cannot do, but you do them anyway"—highlights the absurdity of their situation, where they are bound by forces beyond their control (Roy, 1997, p. 112). Their alienation is heightened by the tragic events surrounding their family, which further distance them from any sense of belonging.

**Search for Meaning:** Much like Holden's fantasy of being the "catcher," Estha and Rahel's search for meaning is also rooted in their desire to preserve fragments of their childhood. However, their search for meaning is more complex due to the weight of colonial history, societal expectations, and familial trauma. Roy's use of the phrase "small things" throughout the novel signifies the twins' attachment to fleeting, transient moments of happiness, suggesting that meaning can be found in small, everyday experiences rather than grand existential quests. This is evident when Rahel muses: "It was never about the big things, it was always about the small things that mattered most" (Roy, 1997, p. 238). This resonates with existentialist ideas of creating meaning through individual experience, even when faced with the absurdity of life.

### Comparative Analysis

While both *The Catcher in the Rye* and *The God of Small Things* explore existential themes, the cultural contexts in which these crises occur differ significantly. Holden's existential struggle is rooted in his disillusionment with the consumerist, post-war American society, while Estha and Rahel's crises are

deeply intertwined with the oppressive social structures of postcolonial India. The burden of choice and freedom is a central theme in both novels, yet the extent to which the characters can exercise autonomy is shaped by their respective environments.

Holden's existential crisis stems from an internal rejection of societal norms, whereas Estha and Rahel's crises are compounded by external factors, such as caste and family trauma, which limit their agency. However, both novels ultimately suggest that meaning is not handed down by society but must be created individually, whether through preserving innocence, as in Holden's case, or through small acts of defiance and memory, as in the twins' experiences.

By applying existentialist theory to these texts, the analysis reveals how Western and non-Western literatures grapple with similar existential concerns—alienation, freedom, and the search for meaning—albeit within distinct cultural frameworks. Salinger's Holden Caulfield navigates his existential crises within a modern, capitalist context, while Roy's Estha and Rahel contend with their struggles in a postcolonial society marked by rigid social hierarchies. This cross-cultural examination enriches the understanding of how existential themes are universal yet also profoundly shaped by cultural specificity.

## 5. Discussion of Findings

The analysis of *The Catcher in the Rye* by J.D. Salinger and *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy reveals distinct yet interconnected portrayals of existential crises, identity, and the impact of societal pressures. These texts provide a lens through which the internal struggles of young individuals are explored across different cultural and social contexts.

### ***The Catcher in the Rye* and Western Existentialism**

J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* offers a quintessential representation of existential angst within the Western literary tradition. Holden Caulfield's experiences illustrate the internal conflicts that adolescents face when confronted with the expectations of society and the loss of innocence. Salinger's portrayal of Holden as a disillusioned youth aligns with key tenets of existential theory, where the search for meaning in a seemingly indifferent world results in alienation and confusion. Holden frequently questions the authenticity of those around him, using the term "phony" to describe people who, in his view, conform to societal norms without reflecting on their deeper meanings.

Holden's famous line, "I'm standing on the edge of some crazy cliff...I have to catch everybody if they start to go over the cliff" (Salinger, 1951, p. 173), encapsulates his desire to protect the innocence of children, reflecting his inability to accept the inevitable transition from childhood to adulthood. The metaphor of the "catcher in the rye" represents Holden's existential struggle to find a place for himself in

a world that he believes to be corrupt. Salinger's work echoes the broader Western existentialist themes of isolation, fear of death, and the search for authentic existence, which are central to existential theory.

### ***The God of Small Things* and Non-Western Existentialism**

In contrast, Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* provides a non-Western perspective on existential crises, particularly within the confines of post-colonial India. The novel, while not overtly existential in its themes, delves into the profound impact of trauma, social structures, and cultural expectations on the formation of identity. The experiences of the twins, Estha and Rahel, reflect a fractured existence shaped by historical and social forces beyond their control. The novel's fragmented narrative mirrors their internal fragmentation, symbolizing the existential despair that arises from the breakdown of their family and the loss of innocence.

Roy's exploration of caste, colonialism, and forbidden love is intricately tied to the twins' struggle for identity in a rigidly hierarchical society. The line, "It's true. Things can change in a day" (Roy, 1997, p. 292), captures the unpredictability of life and the catastrophic consequences of defying societal norms. The twins' existential crises are rooted in the trauma of their childhood, particularly the loss of their beloved Ammu and the resulting disintegration of their family. Their story reflects an existential dilemma where individual desires and identities are constrained by larger social and political forces.

### **Cross-Cultural Resonances and Divergences**

The juxtaposition of *The Catcher in the Rye* and *The God of Small Things* highlights both commonalities and differences in how existential crises and identity formation are portrayed in adolescent literature across cultural contexts. In both texts, the protagonists grapple with profound questions about their place in the world and struggle against societal expectations that threaten to stifle their individuality. Holden's rebellion against the superficiality of the adult world in *The Catcher in the Rye* parallels Estha and Rahel's silent defiance against the oppressive caste system and familial expectations in *The God of Small Things*.

However, while Holden's existential angst is primarily internal, shaped by his personal disillusionment with Western society, Estha and Rahel's crises are deeply intertwined with external factors, such as the caste system and colonial legacies. This distinction underscores the importance of cultural context in shaping the experience of existential crises. While Western existentialism often emphasizes the individual's alienation from a seemingly indifferent universe, non-Western existential crises, as depicted in Roy's work, are frequently compounded by historical and socio-political forces that transcend the individual.

The findings of this analysis reveal that existential crises in adolescent literature, whether Western or non-Western, center around the search for meaning, identity, and belonging in a world that imposes limitations on the individual. While *The Catcher in the Rye* focuses on the internal struggles of a disillusioned

adolescent in a Western context, *The God of Small Things* broadens the scope to include the socio-political forces that shape existential crises in a non-Western context. Both texts underscore the universality of existential themes, while also highlighting the cultural specificity of how these crises are experienced and articulated. This study therefore contributes to the existing body of literature by offering a cross-cultural examination of existential crises in adolescent literature, demonstrating that while the underlying existential questions remain consistent, the way these crises are framed and resolved can differ significantly depending on cultural and societal factors.

## **6. Implications of the Research to the Individual and Society**

The research on existential crises and identity formation in adolescent literature, especially through a cross-cultural lens, holds significant implications for both individuals and society. For the individual, this research highlights how literature can mirror the inner struggles of individuals, particularly adolescents grappling with identity and meaning. By analyzing characters like Holden Caulfield in *The Catcher in the Rye* and Estha and Rahel in *The God of Small Things*, individuals can gain insight into their own experiences of existential crises. Literature provides a framework for introspection, helping readers reflect on their own sense of purpose, values, and identity. Additionally, the characters in these works often face isolation, confusion, and trauma, which resonate with readers going through similar struggles. By seeing their own challenges reflected in literary characters, individuals may feel validated and understood, reducing the sense of loneliness that often accompanies existential crises. This can also encourage individuals to explore coping mechanisms for dealing with their internal struggles, such as storytelling, therapy, or personal reflection. Furthermore, both *The Catcher in the Rye* and *The God of Small Things* demonstrate how existential crises are part of the human experience. The research encourages readers to develop resilience and to embrace the uncertainty of life. By understanding that the search for meaning is an ongoing process, individuals can cultivate a more accepting and adaptive mindset, better equipped to handle life's challenges.

On the society, this research underscores the importance of considering cultural context when addressing existential crises. It demonstrates that while existential questions are universal, the ways in which individuals experience and navigate these crises differ depending on cultural, social, and political factors. For educators, counselors, and policymakers, this highlights the need for culturally sensitive approaches to mental health and identity formation in adolescents. Societies must create spaces where diverse cultural perspectives are acknowledged and respected, particularly in addressing mental health issues. Moreover, the cross-cultural exploration of existential crises in this study also brings attention to the mental health challenges faced by adolescents. The findings suggest that societies need to offer more comprehensive support systems for young people experiencing existential struggles. This could involve integrating literature and storytelling into mental health care, providing therapeutic outlets where individuals can explore their identity and experiences in a safe and structured way.

Furthermore, by examining the experiences of fictional characters from different cultural backgrounds, readers are encouraged to develop greater empathy and understanding of others. Literature serves as a powerful tool for fostering social cohesion by helping people from diverse backgrounds connect over shared human experiences, such as the search for meaning, belonging, and identity. This could lead to a more compassionate society that recognizes and supports the emotional and psychological needs of its members. Finally, the research suggests that integrating existential themes into educational curricula can provide students with a deeper understanding of human psychology, culture, and the complexities of life. Schools and universities can benefit from incorporating more diverse literary works that explore existentialism and identity, particularly from non-Western perspectives. This can prepare young people to navigate the complexities of life with greater emotional intelligence and cultural awareness.

## 7. Conclusion

This study explores the representation of existential crises in adolescent literature through a comparative analysis of J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. By applying existentialist theory, the research highlights how literature serves as a profound medium for articulating the internal struggles of adolescents as they navigate the complexities of identity, meaning, and belonging. The juxtaposition of Western and non-Western texts reveals that while existential crises are universal in nature, they are experienced and expressed differently across cultures due to varying societal norms, values, and historical contexts.

Both *The Catcher in the Rye* and *The God of Small Things* depict characters grappling with trauma, isolation, and the search for meaning, making these texts powerful vehicles for exploring the adolescent experience. Salinger's Holden Caulfield embodies the disillusionment and alienation characteristic of existential angst, while Roy's Estha and Rahel face the intersection of personal trauma and societal expectations, offering a non-Western perspective on the theme of existential crisis. These findings underscore the value of literature as a reflective space where readers can confront their own existential struggles and find emotional resonance in the stories of others.

The implications of this study extend beyond the individual, providing insights for educators, mental health professionals, and policymakers. By understanding how literature from diverse cultures addresses existential crises, society can foster a more empathetic and inclusive approach to adolescent mental health and identity formation. Ultimately, this study contributes to a broader understanding of how existentialist themes can transcend cultural boundaries, enriching both the field of literary analysis and the conversation around adolescent development.

## 8. Further Research

Here are several areas for further research based on the findings of this study:

1. **Cross-Cultural Comparative Studies:** Further research could expand on the comparative analysis of existential themes in adolescent literature by including texts from additional cultural backgrounds. This would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how different cultures depict and interpret existential crises.
2. **Gender and Existentialism:** Investigating how existential crises are represented differently based on gender within both Western and non-Western literature could offer insights into the nuanced ways that gender influences the experience and expression of existential angst in adolescents.
3. **Impact of Digital Media on Existential Crises:** With the rise of digital media, exploring how social media and digital interactions influence existential crises among adolescents in various cultures could provide valuable insights into contemporary challenges and coping mechanisms.
4. **Literary Therapy:** Examining the therapeutic potential of reading literature that addresses existential themes could further validate the use of literature as a tool for emotional and psychological support, particularly in diverse cultural contexts.
5. **Adaptation of Existential Themes in Modern YA Fiction:** Researching how modern young adult fiction adapts existential themes to address current issues faced by adolescents, such as climate change or political unrest, could offer a fresh perspective on evolving existential concerns.
6. **Longitudinal Studies on Existential Impact:** Conducting longitudinal studies to track how engagement with existential themes in literature influences adolescent development over time could provide deeper insights into the long-term effects of literary exposure on identity formation and mental health.
7. **Influence of Author Backgrounds:** Investigating how authors' personal experiences with existential crises shape their portrayal of these themes in literature could reveal more about the relationship between an author's background and the existential experiences depicted in their work.

These areas for further research could enrich the discourse on existentialism in literature, offering broader and more nuanced understandings of how adolescents navigate existential crises across different cultural and social contexts.

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