Delmon Publications Impact Factor: 8.186 (SJIF) ISSN: 2583-1232
International Council of English and Literature Journal (ICELJ)
An International Peer-Reviewed and Refereed Journal; Volume-6, Issue-4(Oct-Dec) 2026
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Ancient Wisdom and Modern Identity Crisis: Lessons from B.L. Bhyrappa's *Parva*, Sri Krishna Prem's *The Yoga of Kathopanishad* and Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha*

Dr. G. Subramanian
Associate Professor,PG & Research Department of English, Government Arts College, Coimbatore – 18.
Ms. E. Arulmozhinayaki
Research Scholar,PG & Research Department of English, Government Arts College, Coimbatore – 18.arulmozhi2235@gmail.com

Article Received: 10/10/2026; Article Accepted: 07/11/2026; Published Online: 09/11/2026

Abstract

The modern world is characterized by rapid social transformation, technological advancement, consumerism, and changing cultural values. Although these developments have expanded human opportunities, they have also intensified the struggle for identity, meaning, and belonging. This paper examines the relevance of ancient Indian wisdom to the contemporary identity crisis through a comparative study of S. L. Bhyrappa's *Parva*, *The Yoga of Kathopanishad* and Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha*. Though different in genre and philosophical orientation, these works explore the timeless human quest for authentic selfhood. *Parva* presents epic characters as psychologically complex individuals struggling with social expectations, moral conflicts, and dharma. *The Yoga of Kathopanishad* emphasizes the distinction between temporary pleasure and lasting spiritual truth through Nachiketa's search for the Atman. Similarly, *Siddhartha* portrays enlightenment as a personal journey achieved through experience, suffering, and self-discovery. Through a comparative approach, this paper argues that self-knowledge, ethical responsibility, and inner awakening offer meaningful responses to the fragmentation and alienation of contemporary life. It demonstrates that ancient philosophical insights continue to provide valuable perspectives on the modern search for identity and purpose.

Keywords: Identity Crisis, Ancient Indian Wisdom, Self-Realization, Atman, Dharma, Brahman and Spiritual Awakening.

Introduction

The twenty-first century has intensified the struggle for identity. Global expansion, consumer culture, digital communication and changing social structures have transformed the ways individuals understand themselves and their place in society. Modern identity is often associated with professional achievements, economic status, social recognition and online representation. Consequently, individuals increasingly experience a conflict between their external identities and inner aspirations. Although the term identity crisis is associated with modern psychological discourse, the search for selfhood and the meaning of human existence has been explored in Indian philosophical and literary traditions for centuries. The Upanishads,

particularly *The Yoga of Kathopanishad* investigate the nature of the Self, while Indian epic literature explores human relationships, moral responsibility, and social obligations.

In this context, S. L. Bhyrappa's *Parva*, Sri Krishna Prem's *The Yoga of Kathopanishad* and Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha* offer significant perspectives on the problem of identity. These works approach self-realization through three interconnected dimensions: moral responsibility, philosophical understanding and personal experience. This paper examines how their insights can help contemporary individuals overcome fragmentation and discover a meaningful sense of self.

Understanding the Modern Identity Crisis

Identity is shaped by personal experiences, social relationships, cultural values and individual aspirations. However, contemporary society often encourages individuals to define themselves through external achievements and social approval. Psychologist Erik H. Erikson, in *Identity: Youth and Crisis*, discusses the relationship between identity formation and identity confusion. His ideas provide a useful framework for understanding the uncertainty experienced by individuals when personal aspirations conflict with social expectations.

Modern consumer culture further complicates this situation by encouraging the pursuit of wealth, popularity, and material possessions. Digital platforms also create pressure to maintain idealized public identities, often producing a gap between the individual's actual experiences and projected personality.

The result is frequently psychological fragmentation, dissatisfaction and alienation. The three works examined in this paper suggest that overcoming this crisis requires a deeper understanding of the self rather than dependence on external recognition.

Human Complexity and Moral Conflict in *Parva*

S. L. Bhyrappa's *Parva* reinterprets the *Mahabharata* through a humanistic and psychological perspective. Rather than emphasizing supernatural elements, Bhyrappa presents epic characters as individuals shaped by social circumstances, political struggles, personal relationships and moral choices. Characters such as Karna, Draupadi and Bhishma illustrate the complexity of identity formation.

Karna's experience reflects the struggle for recognition and acceptance. Despite his abilities, his uncertain social position exposes him to humiliation and discrimination. His search for dignity and recognition becomes central to his identity. His loyalty to Duryodhana further complicates his moral position, creating a conflict between personal gratitude and ethical responsibility.

Draupadi represents the relationship between identity, gender, dignity and power. Her experiences reveal the difficulties faced by women in societies governed by patriarchal expectations. Her determination to defend her dignity makes her an important figure in the discussion of individual agency and social identity.

Bhishma, on the other hand, represents the conflict between personal commitments and moral responsibility. His adherence to his vow defines his identity, but it also creates situations in which loyalty to established principles conflicts with the demands of justice.

Through these characters, Bhyrappa demonstrates that identity is shaped not only by inherited social positions but also by personal experiences and ethical decisions.

The concept of dharma is particularly important in this context. In *Parva*, dharma does not always provide simple answers to moral dilemmas. Characters must negotiate competing duties and make difficult choices. This reflects contemporary situations in which individuals struggle to balance personal freedom, family obligations, professional duties and social expectations. Thus, *Parva* suggests that authentic identity emerges through self-reflection and responsible action.

Self-Knowledge and Spiritual Wisdom in *The Yoga of Kathopanishad*

***The Yoga of Kathopanishad* approaches the question of identity through a philosophical dialogue between Nachiketa and Yama, the lord of death. The central concern of this dialogue is the nature of the Self and the distinction between temporary existence and eternal reality.**

1. Preyas and Shreyas

One of the most important teachings of *The Yoga of Kathopanishad* is the distinction between *preyas* and *shreyas*. *Preyas* refers to immediate pleasure, whereas *shreyas* represents lasting good and spiritual well-being. When Yama offers Nachiketa wealth, pleasure, and worldly comforts, Nachiketa rejects them because he seeks knowledge of the ultimate truth. His decision demonstrates the importance of choosing lasting wisdom over temporary gratification (*Katha Upanishad* 1.2.1–2).

This teaching has considerable relevance to modern consumer culture. Contemporary individuals often associate happiness with material possessions, professional success, and social recognition. However, these achievements may not provide lasting fulfillment. Nachiketa's determination reminds us that meaningful existence requires the ability to distinguish between temporary satisfaction and deeper purpose.

2. The Nature of Atman

The Yoga of Kathopanishad presents the Atman as the eternal Self, beyond physical existence and worldly changes. It declares that the Self is neither born nor destroyed (*Katha Upanishad* 1.2.18).

This philosophical understanding challenges the tendency to define identity through physical appearance, wealth, profession, or social position. Such attributes are temporary, whereas the Atman represents a deeper dimension of existence.

The Upanishadic teaching suggests that the identity crisis emerges partly from the failure to recognize this deeper selfhood. By cultivating self-knowledge, individuals can develop inner stability beyond changing social circumstances.

3. The Chariot Metaphor and Self-Discipline

The chariot metaphor in *The Yoga of Kathopanishad* explains the importance of controlling the senses and disciplining the mind. The body is compared to a chariot, the senses to horses, the mind to reins, and the intellect to the charioteer (*Katha Upanishad* 1.3.3–4). The metaphor emphasizes that human beings must develop awareness and self-control to avoid being dominated by uncontrolled desires.

In contemporary society, constant digital stimulation, consumer advertising, and social comparison often create distraction and emotional instability. The Upanishadic teaching encourages individuals to develop concentration, discipline, and reflective awareness. Thus, *The Yoga of Kathopanishad* presents self-realization as a process of overcoming ignorance and discovering the deeper nature of the Self.

Experiential Wisdom in Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha*

Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha* explores the spiritual journey of a young man searching for enlightenment. Influenced by Indian philosophical traditions, the novel examines the relationship between knowledge, experience, suffering, and self-realization.

1. Rejection of Borrowed Knowledge

Siddhartha initially follows traditional religious practices and later encounters Gotama, the Buddha. Although he respects the Buddha's wisdom, he decides not to become his disciple because he believes that enlightenment must be personally experienced. His decision suggests that authentic identity cannot be imposed through external authority. Teachers and philosophical traditions may provide guidance, but self-realization requires personal reflection and experience. This idea is relevant to modern individuals who often struggle between inherited beliefs and personal aspirations.

2. Materialism and Disillusionment

Siddhartha later enters the world of wealth, sensual pleasure, and business through his relationship with Kamala and his association with Kamaswami. Initially, he experiences material success and worldly enjoyment. However, these experiences eventually produce dissatisfaction and spiritual emptiness. His disillusionment demonstrates that wealth and pleasure cannot independently provide lasting fulfillment. This experience parallels contemporary society, where individuals frequently pursue professional achievements and material possessions without finding deeper meaning in life.

3. The River as a Symbol of Unity

The river becomes the central symbol of spiritual understanding in the novel. Through his relationship with the ferryman Vasudeva and his experience of listening to the river, Siddhartha recognizes the interconnectedness of all existence.The river represents continuity, timelessness, and the unity of life's different experiences. Siddhartha gradually understands that joy and suffering, success and failure, and gain and loss are interconnected aspects of existence. His realization suggests that authentic identity develops through the integration of experience rather than the rejection of life's contradictions. Unlike the philosophical instruction of *The Yoga of Kathopanishad*, Hesse emphasizes the importance of personally experiencing life's complexities before attaining wisdom.

Comparative Perspectives: Three Paths to Self-Realization

Although *Parva*, *The Yoga of Kathopanishad* and *Siddhartha* differ in their literary forms and philosophical approaches, they share important insights into the nature of identity.

First, all three works challenge superficial definitions of selfhood. *Parva* questions identities determined by caste, gender, and social status. *The Yoga of Kathopanishad* directs attention beyond temporary pleasures toward the eternal Atman. *Siddhartha* demonstrates the limitations of wealth and material success.

Second, the works emphasize personal responsibility. The characters in *Parva* confront difficult ethical choices, Nachiketa chooses spiritual truth over worldly temptation, and Siddhartha follows an independent path toward enlightenment. Their experiences demonstrate that identity is shaped through conscious decisions rather than passive acceptance of social expectations.

Third, all three texts emphasize the importance of self-knowledge. *Parva* explores self-understanding through ethical conflicts, *The Yoga of Kathopanishad* through spiritual inquiry, and *Siddhartha* through lived experience.

Their approaches are not identical. *The Yoga of Kathopanishad* presents a metaphysical understanding of the eternal Self, while *Siddhartha* emphasizes experiential realization. *Parva*, meanwhile, examines identity within the complexities of human relationships and society. Nevertheless, they collectively suggest that authentic selfhood requires reflection, awareness, and inner transformation.

Relevance to Contemporary Society

The insights of these three works remain relevant to contemporary society, particularly in addressing the psychological and existential problems associated with modern identity. In the digital age, individuals frequently construct identities through online images and public recognition. Karna's search for social acceptance in *Parva* provides a literary parallel to the modern desire for recognition and belonging. *The Yoga of Kathopanishad* challenges consumerism through its distinction between temporary pleasure and lasting good. Its teaching encourages individuals to prioritize meaningful values over immediate gratification.

Similarly, Siddhartha's journey demonstrates that material achievement cannot replace inner fulfillment. His experiences suggest that suffering, disappointment, and personal reflection can contribute to self-understanding.

Together, these works offer several practical insights:

- Develop self-awareness instead of depending entirely on external validation.
- Prioritize lasting meaning over temporary pleasure.
- Recognize ethical responsibility in personal and social relationships.
- Accept suffering and uncertainty as opportunities for growth.
- Seek integration between personal values, actions and experiences.

These principles suggest that ancient wisdom can provide meaningful guidance for contemporary individuals facing uncertainty and alienation.

Conclusion

The modern identity crisis is rooted in the tension between external expectations and inner aspirations. Consumerism, social comparison, digital culture and changing social values have intensified the individual's search for meaning and belonging. S. L. Bhyrappa's *Parva*, Sri Krishna Prem's *The Yoga of Kathopanishad* and Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha* offer complementary perspectives on this enduring human problem.

Parva emphasizes the relationship between identity, social circumstances and ethical responsibility. *The Yoga of Kathopanishad* highlights the importance of distinguishing temporary pleasure from eternal truth and discovering the nature of the Atman. *Siddhartha* presents self-realization as a personal journey through experience, suffering and spiritual awakening. Although their approaches differ, all three works affirm that authentic identity cannot be established solely through material achievement, social recognition or inherited expectations. It requires self-knowledge, moral awareness and inner transformation.

Ultimately, these works demonstrate that the search for identity is also a search for meaning and purpose. Their enduring wisdom suggests that the resolution of the modern identity crisis begins with the courage to examine oneself and discover the deeper values that give life direction.

Works Cited

Bhyrappa, S. L. *Parva: A Tale of War, Peace, Love, Death, God, and Man*. Translated by K. Raghavendra Rao, Sahitya Akademi, 1994.

Erikson, Erik H. *Identity: Youth and Crisis*. W. W. Norton, 1968.

Hesse, Hermann. *Siddhartha*. Translated by Hilda Rosner, New Directions, 1957.

Olivelle, Patrick, translator. *The Early Upaniṣads: Annotated Text and Translation*. Oxford University Press, 1998.

The Katha Upanishad. Translated by Patrick Olivelle, in *The Early Upaniṣads: Annotated Text and Translation*, Oxford University Press, 1998.