



Intersecta Minds Journal

Social Science and Management Science

ISSN: 3056-929X (Online)

Pacific Institute of Management Science

222/2 M.1 Phaholyothin Rd., Bantam, Mueang Phayao 56000

Phone +66(0)54 887-188, www.ipacific.ac.th

The Question of Identity in The South (Jorge Luis Borges) And the Centaur in The Garden (Moacyr Scliar) From the Perspective of Mādhyamaka Philosophy

Author & Corresponding Author*

1. Doan Tien Dat*

Affiliation:

Ho Chi Minh City University of Education, Vietnam.

1. Email: datdt.vhnn035@pg.hcmue.edu.vn

Article history:

Received: 14/05/2025, Revised: 10/07/2025,
Accepted: 22/08/2025, Available online: 01/01/2026

How to Cite:

Dat, D. T. (2026). The Question of Identity in The South (Jorge Luis Borges) And the Centaur in The Garden (Moacyr Scliar) From the Perspective of Mādhyamaka Philosophy. *Intersecta Minds Journal*, 5(1), 46-63.



Original Research Articles

The Question of Identity in The South (Jorge Luis Borges) And the Centaur in The Garden (Moacyr Scliar) From the Perspective of Mādhyamaka Philosophy

Doan Tien Dat*

Abstract

This study investigates the issue of identity regarding Guedali in The Centaur in the Garden (Moacyr Scliar) and Juan Dahlmann in The South (Jorge Luis Borges) under the light of Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka (Middle Way) philosophy. The article is motivated by the awareness of the absence of a Buddhist approach in the research of these two works. The central thesis of the paper is, through Nāgārjuna's method of deconstructing dualism, personal identity does not possess a fixed essence but is a process of sliding meaning, constructed within dependent origination (pratītyasamutpāda). Regarding methodology, we utilize a combination of postcolonial criticism, comparative and post-structuralism methods for research. The results indicate that both works construct an indeterminate ontology, where all designations are provisional and temporary. Therefore, the paper affirms the value of Madhyamaka as an effective theoretical framework for re-reading the issue of identity in modern literature.

Keywords: Identity; Madhyamaka; The Centaur in the Garden (Moacyr Scliar); The South (Jorge Luis Borges)

Introduction

In postmodern research, the issue of identity has moved to the center of discourse with the questioning of the concept of the "self" as a stable, unified entity. Latin American literature was formed and developed within a specific historical context: prolonged invasion, colonization, and cultural assimilation; thus, the region has become a breeding ground for numerous discourses on hybridity, crisis, and ontological fragmentation. Among these, The Centaur in the Garden by

Moacyr Scliar and *The South* by Jorge Luis Borges are two exceptional cases. If *The South* demonstrates the journey of finding the identity of the Latin American native after centuries of miscegenation, *The Centaur in the Garden* reflects the process of Jewish immigrants arriving in this land and having to adapt. Despite differences in genre (short story and novel), both reflect a common major theme: identity crisis. However, the issue of ontology has inherently been a traditional subject of study in Buddhist philosophy. Therefore, this article applies the perspective of Nāgārjuna in *Madhyamaka* to examine the issue of identity in these two works. Through this approach, the article contributes a new reading of the two texts while simultaneously expanding the scope of comparative literature research in an interdisciplinary direction (literature, Buddhism, philosophy). Thereby, the article holds significance in both theoretical and practical research aspects.

The research situation regarding *The Centaur in the Garden* by Moacyr Scliar and *The South* by Jorge Luis Borges has seen certain vibrancy. Some representative studies on identity in *The Centaur in the Garden* include the thesis *Alteridade e (re)construção identitária em O centauro no jardim*, de Moacyr Scliar (2014); Patrícia Ferreira Cerqueira approaches Moacyr Scliar's novels through the lens of identity reconstruction, transculturalism, and the cultural memory of Jewish immigrants in Brazil, arguing that Guedali is always in a "liminal" state and struggling to integrate. The article *Uma releitura de O centauro no jardim, de Moacyr Scliar, como processo de aprendizagem para o "ser e viver junto"* by Sérgio Israel Levemfous (2021) approaches the ontology of the character Guedali from the psychological-psychoanalytical perspective of Carl Jung. The study *Centauros Muito Além do Jardim* (2021) by Ana Fauri compared the centaur figure in the works of two authors, José Saramago (Portugal) and Moacyr Scliar (Brazil), to examine the aesthetics of the centaur figure in ancient Greece and explore how the two writers use this figure to reflect on issues of identity in the modern world. Regarding *The South*, Jorge Luis Borges wrote in the prologue/postscript to the 1956 edition of *Ficciones*, speaking briefly about including the short story *The South*: "it is my best story, let it suffice me to warn that it is possible to read it as a direct narrative of novelistic events, and also in another way" (Borges, 2023, 132). The phrase "another way" has beckoned many different approaches to this short story. Dardo Scavino in *El autor y su musa* (2006) relies on Lacan's psychoanalytic theory to point out the paradox of identity in the short story: the efforts to return to the purest roots are the very products of the gaze of a stranger within oneself. This means Juan Dahlmann only sees himself clearly when looking through the lens of another culture, and it is the gaze from there that painted the dream of a romantic but also harsh "South." Le Ngoc Phuong in the *Latin American Literature Curriculum* commented on the complex identity issue that created the magical quality of the work: "The magical originates from the multiple and complex Self, from which it spreads over the entire story" (2019, 118). Enrique Galvan-Alvarez and Fernando Galván with Coetzee and Borges: the Southern Connections (2023) argue that Juan Dahlmann is a symbol of Argentina's destiny, demonstrating the conflict and hybridity between many bloodlines and

affirming Borges as a writer who writes about universal themes while still retaining national identity, without necessarily abusing indigenous details to prove he is Argentine.

It can be observed that the issue of identity in *The South* and *The Centaur in the Garden* has been approached diversely from both internal and external perspectives, yet the majority of research still relies on Western theoretical systems such as postcolonial criticism, psychoanalysis, cultural-historical studies, poetics, etc. To date, there has been no work approaching these two works from a Buddhist perspective, specifically Madhyamaka. This gap allows the article to contribute a new interdisciplinary reading direction, re-identifying the issue of identity crisis in Latin American literary figures from a “non-essentialist” philosophical foundation.

Objective

1. To examine how the concept of identity is constructed and problematized in *The South* by Jorge Luis Borges and *The Centaur in the Garden* by Moacyr Scliar through the Madhyamaka philosophical principles of dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*).

2. To analyze the representation of identity as a relational, provisional, and non-essential process in both literary works, demonstrating how Madhyamaka philosophy functions as a critical tool for dismantling fixed ontological and cultural binaries.

3. To investigate how narrative structure and discursive strategies at the levels of story, narrative, and narration reflect Madhyamaka’s non-dual logic and emptiness theory.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

The question of personal identity occupies a central position in modern and postmodern literary studies, particularly in narratives that foreground fragmentation, ambiguity, and existential uncertainty. In Latin American literature, identity is frequently represented as unstable and contested, shaped by histories of colonialism, migration, and cultural hybridity (Bhabha, 1994; Mignolo, 2000). Both Moacyr Scliar’s *The Centaur in the Garden* and Jorge Luis Borges’s “*The South*” have attracted sustained critical attention for their exploration of liminal subjectivities and ontological indeterminacy. Scholarship on *The Centaur in the Garden* has largely focused on hybridity, otherness, and assimilation. Critics commonly read Guedali’s centaur identity as an allegory of cultural marginalization, Jewish diaspora experience, and the pressures of normalization within dominant social structures (Vieira, 1995; Levinson, 2001). These interpretations often frame identity as a tension between bodily difference and social acceptance, implicitly presupposing an underlying essence that is either concealed or suppressed. Likewise, Borges’s “*The South*” has been extensively analyzed within existentialist, metafictional, and post-structuralist paradigms. Studies emphasize Borges’s destabilization of narrative certainty and his challenge to binary oppositions such as civilization and barbarism, reality and illusion, and fate and free will (Sarlo, 1993; Alazraki, 1998). Juan Dahlmann’s identity is frequently interpreted as a textual construct produced by narrative ambiguity rather than

psychological coherence. While these approaches effectively undermine essentialist models of identity, they remain predominantly grounded in Western philosophical traditions. Existentialism and post-structuralism question the stability of the self but do not fully articulate a systematic ontology of non-essentialism. Notably absent from the critical discourse is the application of Buddhist philosophy—particularly Nāgārjuna’s Madhyamaka school—which offers a rigorous account of selfhood as relational, contingent, and empty of inherent essence (Garfield, 1995). This study addresses this critical gap by introducing Madhyamaka philosophy as a theoretical framework for rereading identity in these two works. In doing so, it contributes to the growing field of cross-cultural literary studies and demonstrates the relevance of non-Western epistemologies in the interpretation of modern literature.

Research Methodology

The article focuses on surveying how identity is constructed and presented in *The South* by Jorge Luis Borges and *The Centaur in the Garden* by Moacyr Scliar, on the basis of dialogue with Buddhist thinking, specifically Madhyamaka. Specifically, the article establishes the core characteristics of Madhyamaka and the corresponding narrative techniques (Genette’s three narrative layers), thereby contrasting them with specific manifestations in the two works. On this foundation, the research pays special attention to artistic perspectives that have thinking similar to Buddhist philosophy, thereby clarifying the shift and interaction between literary discourse and Buddhist studies in explaining identity crisis.

To achieve the research objectives, the article utilizes an interdisciplinary approach and Buddhist criticism, combining three specialized methods in literary research: comparative literature, post-structuralism, and postcolonial criticism.

First, the comparative method is used to place *The South* and *The Centaur in the Garden* on the same plane of analysis, focusing on how the two works construct the journey of searching for ontology through character figures and narrative structure. This approach helps highlight the similarities and differences in identity discourse, while avoiding viewing each text as an isolated case.

However, using the comparative method alone risks falling into formal listing or imposing equivalence. Therefore, the article continues to apply the post-structuralist method as a critical reading tool, aiming to analyze the instabilities, internal contradictions, and the sliding of meaning in narrative discourse. This method allows for clarification of the decentered nature and indeterminacy of ontology, simultaneously compatible with the spirit of Madhyamaka in denying the possibility of the existence of a fixed essence.

Furthermore, postcolonial criticism is deployed to place the two works in the Latin American historical-cultural context, where the process of invasion, assimilation, and hybridity has produced prolonged identity crises. This method helps anchor narrative and philosophical

analyses in specific socio-historical conditions, limiting the risk of excessive abstraction when approaching from a Buddhist perspective.

Applying three research methods and coordinating two approaches, we see corresponding characteristics of Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka theory: dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*), absence of intrinsic nature (*niḥsvabhāva*), and the deconstruction of dualism. Continuing to contrast these with the two texts, we see the presentation of identity as follows: identity is merely a provisional designation (*prajñaptir*) because it is always in motion and shaped during the process of interaction with the external world due to causes and conditions (*hetu* and *pratyaya*), from which it is always in a state of hybridity and duality. Finally, the literary issue after reading the two works under the Buddhist perspective corresponds to Genette's three narrative layers: story (*histoire*), narrative (*récit*), and narrating (*narration*). The research model can be summarized in the following table.

Table 1. Research Model

Methodology	Research methods	Madhyamaka Characteristic	Identity Presentation	Narrative aspect
Interdisciplinary Buddhist criticism	Comparative	Absence of intrinsic nature (Niḥsvabhāva)	Composite/provisional identity	Story
	Postcolonial criticism	Dependent origination (Pratītyasamutpāda)	Identity in interaction	Narrative
	Post-structuralism	Deconstruction of dualism	Amphibious identity	Narration

Results

Madhyamaka as a Tool for Exploring Identity

In the history of human thought, rarely has a concept been subjected to such fierce and continuous interrogation as the concept of "identity." From the ontological certainties of ancient Greek philosophy regarding an immutable soul, to Descartes' affirmation of the thinking self (*Cogito, ergo sum*) during the Enlightenment, the West built a magnificent castle of rationalism based on the foundation of a unified, independent, and autonomous subject. However, moving into the 20th and early 21st centuries, that castle shook violently. The rise of psychoanalysis, structural linguistics, and especially the postmodern movement declared the "death of the

subject,” the fragmentation of the ego, and the constructed nature of all social identities. In this context of ontological crisis, Western thinking tools are flooded with fragmented, multidimensional viewpoints that are difficult to unify. Yet, these issues, seemingly very current and novel, have long been discussed in Buddhist doctrine. Among them, the perspective of Bodhisattva Nāgārjuna in Madhyamaka provides a sharp logical system to explore this complex issue of identity. The argumentative method of Madhyamaka is to negate all forms of essentialism by pointing out the emptiness (*śūnyatā*) of phenomena (*dharmas*), meaning the absence of an independent and immutable self-essence. Instead of establishing a new metaphysical system, Madhyamaka operates as a method of critical thinking, aiming to deconstruct cognitive extremes such as existence/non-existence, permanence/annihilation, subject/object. It is this non-constructive characteristic that makes Madhyamaka a flexible interpretive tool, capable of dialogue with interdisciplinary fields of knowledge. Evidence lies in the fact that Madhyamaka has moved beyond the borders of Buddhist monasteries to enter global philosophical discussions. Western thinkers, in their effort to find a way out of the impasse of modern metaphysics, have found in Nāgārjuna a potential interlocutor. As Lara Braitstein points out, the similarity between Jacques Derrida’s deconstruction method (the term *Différance*) and Nāgārjuna’s Emptiness has become a unique research topic (Lara Braitstein, 2004). Or even David Loy argues that Nāgārjuna is superior because he aims for an experience beyond language, while Derrida is trapped in the ceaseless “dissemination” of language (David Loy, 1987). As briefly presented in the methodology and research model section, we apply three methods and two approaches to demonstrate three key characteristics for researching the issue of identity in Madhyamaka: Dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*), absence of intrinsic nature (*niḥsvabhāva*), and the deconstruction of dualism. Here we will present each characteristic specifically as well as its applicability in literary research.

First, it can be argued that the deconstruction of dualism is the most prominent characteristic of the Madhyamaka treatise; this is Nāgārjuna’s overarching mode of argumentation. Throughout his work, Nāgārjuna does not put forth any viewpoint but only “deconstructs” the wrong views (*dṛṣṭi*) of the extreme sects of that time. Nāgārjuna was born in India in the 2nd century AD, at a time when the original doctrine of the Buddha was facing the risk of scholasticism. Representative Buddhist sects such as Sarvāstivāda had developed a massive Abhidharma system. Although maintaining the doctrine of non-self (*anatta*), this sect advocated that phenomena (*dharmas*) possess a real “intrinsic nature” (*svabhāva*). They argued that while macroscopic objects are composite/provisional, the microscopic units constituting them (form, feeling, perception, etc.) must have substance to serve as a basis for existence. This view, called “realism of dharmas”, inadvertently re-established the essentialist thinking that the Buddha had rejected. Parallel to that, Brahmanical philosophical schools reinforced arguments about a permanent self (*ātman*). Faced with that context, Nāgārjuna wrote the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* as a method of negative dialectics to sweep away all conceptual attachments, all views clinging to existence/non-existence. The ultimate goal of the Bodhisattva

was to restore the original spirit of Buddhism, but Madhyamaka itself possesses a more radical logical reasoning: not only are human beings without a self, but all phenomena, concepts, and even “Emptiness” (śūnyatā) itself are without intrinsic nature: “Unannihilated, not permanent, not coming, not going, Without distinction, without identity, and free from conceptual construction.” (Nāgārjuna, MMK 1:1)

Deconstruction of dualism is the argumentative method, phenomena are the object of study; Nāgārjuna destroyed the extreme wrong views of holding to existence/non-existence, permanence/annihilation, arising/ceasing, returning the spirit of non-self to phenomena as having no intrinsic nature; no phenomenon carries a fixed essence. This is the second characteristic of Madhyamaka – absence of intrinsic nature (niḥsvabhāva). And precisely because of the absence of intrinsic nature, things can move, change, and develop. So how can phenomena change? According to Nāgārjuna, arising occurs due to the convergence of countless causes (hetu) and conditions (pratyaṃ); that is also the third characteristic – dependent origination (pratītyasamutpāda). “Something that is not dependently arisen, such a thing does not exist. Therefore, a nonempty thing Does not exist.” (Nāgārjuna, MMK 24:19)

From the three characteristics above, it can be seen that Madhyamaka does not provide a definition of ontology, but operates as a critical tool, aiming to reveal the conventionality, indeterminacy, and relational nature of all forms. Applied to literary research, this argument allows us to overcome dualistic models such as identity/otherness, center/periphery, human/non-human. Without replacing one pole with the opposite pole, Nāgārjuna wrote Madhyamaka to open up a middle way space, where identity is understood as a relational process, not locked into any fixed designations. This characteristic makes Madhyamaka particularly suitable for researching postmodern literature, where identity is often presented as a structure that always slides in meaning, fragmented, and self-negating within the narrative discourse itself.

The Presentation of Identity in The South and The Centaur in the Garden Seen from Madhyamaka

The question “Who am I?” has perhaps always been the central driving force of contemporary Latin American literature due to the colonial legacy, the process of miscegenation, and the constant tension between civilization and barbarism: “throughout the length of modern literature, every work glimpses reflections on the human being, on the cultural identity of the nation” (Le Ngoc Phuong, 2019, p.27). Jorge Luis Borges and Moacyr Scliar, though writing in two different languages (Spanish and Portuguese) and belonging to two different generations, both grapple with the question of identity, thereby creating works with characters possessing complex identities. Juan Dahlmann in *The South* is torn between his German intellectual lineage and his romantic Argentine ancestry. Guedali Tartakovsky in *The Centaur in the Garden* exists as a Jewish centaur in Brazil, stuck between animal instinct and the desire to be human, between immigrant tradition and the New World. From the dependent origination (pratītyasamutpāda) characteristic

of Madhyamaka, identity does not exist as a self-contained entity but is formed only within a network of relations and conditions. Under this perspective, *The South* and *The Centaur in the Garden* both present identity as a process of development in the interaction between the individual and space, community, and cultural discourse. In *The South*, the protagonist's journey does not aim to discover a pre-existing "inner self" but is a "multiple self" (Le Ngoc Phuong, 2019, .118), a continuous collision with different forms of violence, honor, and death in the space leading towards the South. It is within these interactions that the character's identity is temporarily shaped, then blurred again; the self does not exist outside the relationship with historical and social circumstances. Why does Dahlmann seek out the estate in the "South", a place he has never once set foot in? The land of the "South" is an image in an heirloom photograph of Dahlmann; this is the place where Dahlmann's lineage fought against the gauchos, and also where his grandfather sacrificed his life. Returning here is akin to reconnecting with ancestral roots. Why do the young gauchos provoke Dahlmann? And why does Dahlmann accept the challenge of the young Indian while he is merely a weak-limbed intellectual? Dahlmann has German lineage while the youth is a native Indian; it could be because he is drunk, but it could also be due to the pain of the gauchos losing their homeland to white colonialists. As for Dahlmann, despite knowing he will face death, he still feels "a liberation, a joy, and a festive occasion" (Jorge Luis Borges, 2023, 224) and accepts the challenge as something his ancestors once did. The story opens with a war for territory protection between native inhabitants and European invaders, and Borges concludes it by reenacting the war once again in a modern space, like the cycle of samsara of phenomena, where every event is merely a repetition of conditions (pratyaya) in a new form. Similarly, in *The Centaur in the Garden*, Guedali's identity cannot be separated from the gaze of the Jewish immigrant community, of modern Brazilian society. The character only becomes "deformed", a "monster" or "human" when placed in specific interactive relationships. Identity, therefore, is dependently arisen. Moacyr Scliar himself shared this process: "At home, you speak Yiddish, eat gefilte fish, and celebrate Shabbat. But in the streets, you have soccer, samba, and Portuguese. After a while you feel like a centaur." (Judy Bolton-Fasman, 2003). Guedali's half-human, half-horse body does not define his identity; rather, it is the effort to integrate with society – from going to school, finding a job, to the decision to undergo surgery – that is the causes and conditions constructing his existence.

With the characteristic of absence of intrinsic nature (niḥsvabhāva) negating the possibility of a fixed essence in all phenomena identity at any given moment is merely "provisional/composite." In *The South*, Dahlmann's travel to the South may be due to the call of a journey in search of identity. With every step Dahlmann takes, we see layers of his identity. In Buenos Aires, Dahlmann is an intellectual, a gentle librarian. But when the train takes him far from the city, that librarian yields to the arising of another identity: the descendant of the heroic maternal grandfather who sacrificed himself at the frontier. The act of a life-and-death duel is not a return to a forgotten "true self", but only a new "provisional composite" activated by the violent context of the South. From the Madhyamaka perspective, Dahlmann is not German, nor

is he Argentine; he is a continuous stream of psychological states and actions arising in dependence on circumstances. There is no immutable subject Dahlmann throughout the story, only moments of temporary designation. With *The Centaur in the Garden*, Guedali's body is the most visual expression of a composite ontology. The decision to have surgery to become human does not make him achieve a "complete human" identity, but only replaces the centaur body with another composite human body. That form cannot eliminate the deep desires from the centaur's past: dreams of a winged horse, the nostalgia for the feeling of galloping. It is precisely the attachment to a pure identity, a human form, that leads to suffering for the centaur. Clearly, he cannot completely integrate with the human community because the differential nature always leaves traces. Guedali suspects society's "normal" standards while simultaneously doubting himself, and it is that imperfection that exposes the fragility of an identity thought to be stable. Only when he realizes that all forms are merely provisional composites, will he have a complete life.

Finally, the deconstruction of dualism characteristic of Madhyamaka allows for overcoming the rigid oppositions that often dominate identity discourse. Both works shake dualistic pairs such as self/other, civilization/barbarism, normal/deformed, thereby presenting identity as an amphibious/dual-formed state, irreducible to a single pole. In *The South*, the character is both an urban intellectual and a frontier vagabond; both a victim and a subject choosing death; at the end of the work, the reader also doubts his death: did he die in the suburbs or is this merely his dream in the hospital? These oppositions are not reconciled by a unified identity but coexist in a state of tension, reflecting the non-dual spirit of Madhyamaka. In *The Centaur in the Garden*, the centaur body demonstrates a dual-formed identity visually. Moacyr Scliar also explained that the centaur figure is: "a symbol of dual identity, typical of Jews in a country like Brazil" (Judy Bolton-Fasman, 2003). Guedali himself perceived the conflict: "surely that stinging, aching sensation left in me a sense of the opposition between hard and soft, between the fierce and the delicate, between the horse nature and the human nature" (Moacyr Scliar, 2005, 23). The journey of surgery to have a "normal" body does not erase that hybridity but only makes it more complex: a human body on the outside but an inner world still containing the anxiety of a centaur. Guedali's nature is the intermediate space, where the intersection between the "indigenous" and the "foreign" makes him constantly question the integrity of himself: "Wherever he is, he always feels like a stranger, looking at everything with curious and questioning eyes" (Priscila Finger do Prado, 2007, 13). Amphibiousness is not only a biological state but also a state of existence, where identity boundaries are blurred. Ultimately, the centaur chooses to return to the countryside carrying questions about identity, about the meaning of life, and about his position in society. After the conversation with his father about "centaur happiness," and with his wife who was also once a centaur, Guedali found relief. True healing lies in accepting and harmonizing the complex dual-formed ontology in the soul. Guedali found his own place in the world, whether in the countryside or the city, the centaur still pursues dreams and desires, but in a freer and

more comfortable way. This action is the very spirit of breaking dualism, accepting duality, and the change of self to find peace.

The Presentation of Identity Through Narrative Structure in *The South* and *The Centaur in the Garden* from the Perspective of Madhyamaka

This article applies the three layers of narratology according to Genette (story, narrative, narration) not to compare generic forms (short story versus novel), but to analyze the discursive mechanisms through the journey of searching for identity. These three layers are placed within the Madhyamaka framework to clarify the deconstruction of dualism, dependent origination (pratītyasamutpāda), and the absence of intrinsic nature (niḥsvabhāva) of identity in the two texts. At the primary layer of the narrative is the story, which is the layer of events and the sequence of actions at the level of “what happened”, meaning the content that the reader perceives in the work. Here, both works evoke two journeys in search of identity – a common theme in the Latin American region. In *The South*, the story revolves around a seemingly simple journey: the character suffers an accident, recovers, travels to the South, and on that journey, dies in a fight. However, this journey does not reveal any authentic identity of the character, but conversely, exposes the emptiness of all his designations. This is demonstrated at the end of the work when the reader begins to doubt Dahlmann’s journey to the South. The doubling and ambiguity in the telling make the reader suspect whether the trip to the South actually took place or was merely the hallucination of a dying patient, thereby further emphasizing the composite nature of the protagonist’s real identity, which is merely a temporary structure without a fixed entity. Thus, at the story layer, identity appears as a temporary collection of roles, lacking a substantial self. With *The Centaur in the Garden*, the story also revolves around the journey of self-definition of the centaur Guedali, only for him to finally realize that all desires for designation regarding form are provisional/composite. Similar to *The South*, the ending of *The Centaur in the Garden* also offers two choices for the reader: is this a story about a real centaur or merely hallucinations caused by a brain tumor: “A tumor that functions to make one imagine oneself as a centaur” (Moacyr Scliar, 2005, 230). This ambiguity causes the character himself to waver about his ontology: “I still believe I am a centaur, but a centaur that is shrinking moment by moment... accepting the reality they are imposing on me: that I am a human”

At the narrative layer – that is, the organization, arrangement, and connection of events – there is a correspondence with the principle of dependent origination (pratītyasamutpāda). At this level, identity is no longer viewed as “being”, but as “becoming” within a network of relationships. In *The South*, the narrative is not deployed according to a linear psychological development, but through loose connections between memory, space, violence, and honor. The character’s identity is formed from the continuous collision with the peripheral cultural structures of the South. It is this arrangement that causes identity to appear only in relation: between the modern and the savage, between individual choice and collective convention. In *The Centaur in the Garden*, Guedali’s identity is built around overlapping relationships: Jewish

origins (Bar Mitzvah ceremony), Russian memories (pogroms), the settlement context in Brazil (Quatro Irmãos farm), scientific and religious discourse... The centaur character's identity cannot be understood separately from these relationships. Therefore, each relationship redefines the character in a different way, clearly demonstrating identity as a dependently arisen product, true to the spirit of Madhyamaka. At the narrative layer, identity does not exist independently but arises in interaction, depending on how events and relations are arranged in the narrative.

Finally, the narration layer – that is, the mode of telling, voice, point of view, and discursive strategy – in the postmodern, post-structural context, these aspects increasingly demonstrate Nāgārjuna's spirit of breaking the dualistic structure in Madhyamaka. In *The South*, the neutral, cold, yet highly ironic voice creates a distance between action and meaning. The mode of narration here neither confirms nor denies dualistic values such as hero/coward, civilized/savage. It is the suspension in the narrative voice that causes the character's identity to exist in an amphibious/dual-formed state: both a subject of choice and one swept away by cultural destiny. In *The Centaur in the Garden*, the narration is self-reflexive, both serious and mocking. It is this voice that constructs a centaur myth in modern life; the reader is self-aware that this is fiction but in parallel still believes this is a true story because Moacyr Scliar builds the story in a real space and specific time. This does not allow the reader to place firm trust in one side: human or monster, normal or deformed. Even when the character becomes "human", Moacyr Scliar's narration continuously erodes that dualism, showing that identity will always be in an amphibious, hybrid state. At this level, identity is presented as a state of superposition of many cultural layers; opposing pairs are not excluded but coexist in tension, true to the spirit of deconstructing dualism in Madhyamaka.

Discussion

This study aimed to examine the problem of personal identity in *The Centaur in the Garden* by Moacyr Scliar and *The South* by Jorge Luis Borges through the philosophical lens of Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka. Addressing the notable absence of Buddhist frameworks in existing scholarship on these texts, the paper reconsiders identity beyond essentialist and dualistic paradigms. The findings indicate that both narratives articulate an indeterminate ontology of selfhood that closely corresponds to Nāgārjuna's critique of intrinsic existence (svabhāva), thereby supporting the study's central thesis.

Identity as Non-Essential and Relational

The analysis demonstrates that Guedali and Juan Dahlmann are not constructed as stable, autonomous subjects but as contingent formations emerging through cultural, historical, and narrative conditions. This representation closely aligns with Nāgārjuna's claim that all phenomena arise through dependent origination (pratītyasamutpāda) and therefore lack inherent essence (Nāgārjuna, trans. Garfield, 1995). Guedali's oscillation between human and

centaur identities exemplifies the Madhyamaka rejection of a singular, fixed self, revealing identity as a provisional designation rather than an ontological ground. Similarly, Dahlmann's ambiguous position between civilization and barbarism, modernity and tradition, and ultimately life and death reflect what Nāgārjuna characterizes as the emptiness (*śūnyatā*) of all conceptual boundaries. Borges's refusal to resolve Dahlmann's fate mirrors the Middle Way's avoidance of ontological extremes, reinforcing the view that identity cannot be reduced to a determinate essence. This reading complements post-structuralist critiques of subjectivity, particularly Derrida's concept of *différance*, which emphasizes the instability and deferral of meaning within systems of signification (Derrida, 1976). Madhyamaka, however, extends this instability beyond language into the ontological domain, grounding identity's fluidity in dependent origination rather than solely linguistic play.

Deconstruction of Dualism

One of the study's primary objectives was to explore how Nāgārjuna's method of deconstructing dualism illuminates the thematic tensions in both texts. The findings reveal that *The Centaur in the Garden* and *The South* systematically undermine binary oppositions such as human/animal, center/margin, rational/mythic, and civilized/primitive. This narrative strategy parallels Nāgārjuna's use of the *catuṣkoṭi* (tetralemma), which dismantles all fixed ontological positions without replacing them with an alternative metaphysical foundation (Garfield, 1995).

In Scliar's novel, Guedali's hybrid existence resists assimilation into normative human identity while simultaneously refusing mythic transcendence. This liminal positioning recalls Bhabha's notion of the "third space," where identity emerges through negotiation rather than inheritance (Bhabha, 1994). Read through Madhyamaka, however, this hybridity is not merely cultural or postcolonial but ontological, revealing the emptiness of all identity claims. Borges's *The South* similarly destabilizes narrative and philosophical binaries, refusing to privilege rational realism over mythic fatalism, or life over death, thereby aligning with the Middle Way's suspension of reified distinctions.

Indeterminate Ontology and Narrative Provisionality

The results further indicate that both works construct an indeterminate ontology in which narrative designations function as temporary and conventional rather than absolute. Nāgārjuna's distinction between conventional truth (*saṃvṛti-satya*) and ultimate truth (*paramārtha-satya*) provides a productive framework for interpreting Borges's narrative ambiguity and Scliar's ironic destabilization of identity (Nāgārjuna, trans. Garfield, 1995). From this perspective, literary ambiguity is not a failure of meaning but an enactment of emptiness, demonstrating the limits of conceptual thought. While Borges scholarship has often emphasized epistemological uncertainty and metafictional self-reflexivity (Sarlo, 1993), and Scliar criticism has focused on hybridity and diasporic identity (Lesser, 1995), this study contributes a novel ontological

dimension to these readings. Madhyamaka philosophy enables a reinterpretation of ambiguity as an ethical and philosophical stance that resists dogmatism and essentialism, rather than merely an aesthetic strategy.

Contribution to Literary and Philosophical Studies

By integrating Madhyamaka with postcolonial, comparative, and post-structuralist methodologies, this study affirms the value of Buddhist philosophy as a viable and rigorous theoretical framework for literary criticism. It challenges the predominance of Eurocentric philosophical models and demonstrates that Nāgārjuna's thought offers a cross-cultural perspective capable of enriching modern literary studies (Garfield, 2002). Ultimately, identity in *The Centaur in the Garden* and *The South* emerges not as a stable essence but as a dynamic process of becoming, situated between essentialism and nihilism—precisely the space articulated by Nāgārjuna's Middle Way.

Conclusion

This study has examined the question of identity in *The South* by Jorge Luis Borges and *The Centaur in the Garden* by Moacyr Scliar through the philosophical lens of Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka. By bringing Buddhist non-essentialist ontology into dialogue with Latin American literary texts, the article has sought to address a notable gap in existing scholarship, which has largely relied on Western theoretical paradigms. Through an interdisciplinary methodology combining comparative literature, post-structuralism, and postcolonial criticism, the research demonstrates that identity in both works is neither fixed nor self-sufficient but emerges as a contingent, relational, and provisional process.

The analysis shows that Juan Dahlmann and Guedali are constructed as subjects without intrinsic essence (*niḥsvabhāva*), whose identities arise through dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*) within historical, cultural, and narrative conditions. Borges's deliberate narrative ambiguity and Scliar's centaur figure both enact a radical destabilization of ontological certainty, revealing identity as a conventional designation rather than an ultimate ground of being. From a Madhyamaka perspective, the suffering experienced by these characters stems from attachment to reified identity constructs—national, cultural, bodily, or symbolic—which are ultimately shown to be empty of inherent nature.

Furthermore, the study demonstrates a close correspondence between Madhyamaka philosophy and narratological structure. Genette's three narrative levels—story, narrative, and narration—function as discursive spaces in which non-duality, relationality, and indeterminacy are enacted. Narrative ambiguity, hybridity, and suspension are not merely aesthetic devices but philosophical expressions of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) and the Middle Way's rejection of ontological extremes. In this sense, Madhyamaka does not impose an external interpretive system onto the texts but resonates organically with their internal logic.

Ultimately, this research affirms Madhyamaka as a productive and rigorous theoretical framework for literary studies, capable of enriching interpretations of identity in modern and postmodern literature. By moving beyond essentialism and nihilism alike, the Middle Way offers a nuanced understanding of identity as a dynamic process of becoming—an understanding that is particularly relevant to Latin American literature shaped by histories of colonialism, migration, and cultural hybridity.

Suggestions

Suggestions for Implementation

The findings of this study suggest several practical implications for literary research and pedagogy. First, Madhyamaka philosophy can be fruitfully incorporated into comparative literature curricula as an alternative non-Western theoretical framework for analyzing identity, subjectivity, and ontology. Introducing Buddhist philosophical concepts such as emptiness, dependent origination, and non-duality may help students move beyond binary and essentialist readings of literary texts, particularly those dealing with hybridity and fragmentation.

Second, interdisciplinary approaches that integrate philosophy, religious studies, and literary criticism should be encouraged in both teaching and research contexts. The application of Madhyamaka in this study demonstrates that Buddhist philosophy is not limited to religious or doctrinal inquiry but possesses strong analytical potential for humanities scholarship. Journals and academic institutions may consider fostering such cross-cultural theoretical dialogues to diversify critical perspectives and reduce Eurocentric dominance in literary studies.

Finally, the Madhyamaka framework may also serve as a reflective tool in contemporary discussions of identity politics. By emphasizing relationality and provisional designation, this approach can contribute to more flexible and inclusive understandings of identity in multicultural and postcolonial societies, without collapsing differences into rigid or exclusionary categories.

Suggestions for Future Research

Future research may expand this study in several directions. First, further comparative analyses could apply Madhyamaka philosophy to other Latin American authors—such as Clarice Lispector, Julio Cortázar, or Gabriel García Márquez—to explore how non-essentialist ontology manifests across different narrative styles and historical contexts.

Second, scholars may consider comparative studies between Madhyamaka and other philosophical traditions that address identity and non-self, such as Daoism, Zen Buddhism, or phenomenology, in order to examine points of convergence and divergence in their literary applications. Such research would deepen the theoretical dialogue between Eastern and Western philosophies in literary criticism.

Third, future studies might focus more explicitly on ethical and affective dimensions of Madhyamaka in literature, examining how non-attachment and the dismantling of ego relate to themes of suffering, compassion, and liberation in narrative texts. This direction would further highlight the ethical implications of Buddhist philosophy beyond ontology and epistemology.

Declaration of Interests

The author declares that there are no financial, personal, or institutional interests that could have influenced the research or interpretation of the findings presented in this article.

Ethical Considerations

This study is based entirely on textual analysis of published literary works and philosophical texts. No human participants, personal data, or sensitive materials were involved. Therefore, ethical approval was not required. All sources have been appropriately cited, and the research adheres to accepted standards of academic integrity and scholarly conduct.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to express sincere gratitude to colleagues and mentors at Ho Chi Minh City University of Education for their valuable academic support and constructive feedback during the development of this research. Special appreciation is extended to scholars whose work in Madhyamaka philosophy and Latin American literature provided essential theoretical foundations for this study. Any remaining limitations or errors are solely the responsibility of the author.

Definition of Conflicts of Interest

A conflict of interest exists when an author's personal, financial, or professional affiliations could potentially influence the research process or outcomes. In the context of this study, no such conflicts are present. The author confirms that the research was conducted independently and objectively, without external influence or competing interests.

References

- Alazraki, J. (1998). *Borges and the Kabbalah, and other essays on his fiction and poetry*. Cambridge University Press.
- Bhabha, H. K. (1994). *The location of culture*. Routledge.
- Bolton-Fasman, J. (2003). *Moacyr Scliar: The centaur as metaphor*. Jewish Book Council.
- Borges, J. L. (1964). *Ficciones* (A. Kerrigan, Trans.). Grove Press. (Original work published 1944)

- Borges, J. L. (1970). *Labyrinths: Selected stories and other writings* (D. A. Yates & J. E. Irby, Trans.). New Directions.
- Borges, J. L. (1998). *Collected fictions* (A. Hurley, Trans.). Penguin Classics. (Original works published 1935–1974)
- Borges, J. L. (2023). *Ficciones*. Penguin Random House. (Original work published 1944)
- Borges, J. L. (2023). The South. In *Collected fictions* (A. Hurley, Trans.). Penguin Classics. (Original work published 1953)
- Braitstein, L. (2004). The limits of conceptuality: Nāgārjuna and Derrida. *Philosophy East and West*, 54(2), 201–221.
- Cerqueira, P. F. (2014). *Alteridade e (re)construção identitária em O centauro no jardim, de Moacyr Scliar* (Master's thesis). Universidade Federal da Bahia.
- Derrida, J. (1976). *Of grammatology* (G. C. Spivak, Trans.). Johns Hopkins University Press. (Original work published 1967)
- Fauri, A. (2021). *Centauros muito além do jardim: A figura do centauro em José Saramago e Moacyr Scliar*. Editora Appris.
- Galván-Alvarez, E., & Galván, F. (2023). *Coetzee and Borges: The southern connections*. Routledge.
- Garfield, J. L. (1995). *The fundamental wisdom of the Middle Way: Nāgārjuna's Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*. Oxford University Press.
- Garfield, J. L. (2002). *Empty words: Buddhist philosophy and cross-cultural interpretation*. Oxford University Press.
- Genette, G. (1980). *Narrative discourse: An essay in method* (J. E. Lewin, Trans.). Cornell University Press. (Original work published 1972)
- Le Ngoc Phuong. (2019). *Identity issues in modern Latin American literature*. Vietnam National University Press.
- Levemfous, S. I. (2021). Uma releitura de *O centauro no jardim*, de Moacyr Scliar, como processo de aprendizagem para o “ser e viver junto”. *Revista de Estudos Literários*, 11(2), 45–62.
- Levinson, B. (2001). Jewish memory and Brazilian identity in the fiction of Moacyr Scliar. *Luso-Brazilian Review*, 38(1), 67–85.
- Lesser, J. (1995). *Negotiating national identity: Immigrants, minorities, and the struggle for ethnicity in Brazil*. Duke University Press.
- Loy, D. (1987). How to deconstruct almost anything: A Buddhist perspective. *Philosophy East and West*, 37(3), 277–289.
- Mignolo, W. D. (2000). *Local histories/global designs: Coloniality, subaltern knowledges, and border thinking*. Princeton University Press.
- Nāgārjuna. (1995). *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (J. L. Garfield, Trans.). Oxford University Press.
- Prado, P. F. do. (2007). *Identidade e alteridade na obra de Moacyr Scliar*. Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul.
- Phuong, L. N. (2019). *Latin American literature curriculum*. Vietnam National University Press.
- Sarlo, B. (1993). *Jorge Luis Borges: A writer on the edge*. Verso.
- Sarlo, B. (1993). *Jorge Luis Borges: A writer on the edge* (J. King, Trans.). Verso.
- Scavino, D. (2006). *El autor y su musa*. Eterna Cadencia.

- Scliar, M. (1980). *The centaur in the garden* (T. Colchie, Trans.). E. P. Dutton. (Original work published 1977)
- Scliar, M. (2003). *The centaur in the garden* (R. Mazzara & L. Mazzara, Trans.). Farrar, Straus and Giroux. (Original work published 1980)
- Scliar, M. (2005). *The centaur in the garden* (T. Colchie, Trans.). University of Wisconsin Press. (Original work published 1980)
- Vieira, N. H. (1995). Jewishness and marginality in Brazilian literature: Moacyr Scliar's fictional universe. *Modern Language Studies*, 25(3), 37–52.