

Trapped in Desired: A Comparative Study of Identity Diffusion in Anna Karenina and Madame Bovary

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
character;
comparative study;
identity diffusion;
identity status;
novel

Article History:

Received : 15/08/2025

Revised : 20/11/2025

Accepted : 22/11/2025

Available Online:

30/11/2025

ABSTRACT

Two female characters from different cultural backgrounds, Russia and France, in the novels *Anna Karenina* and *Madame Bovary*, demonstrate signs of identity diffusion. This study employs a qualitative content analysis method. The analysis involves close reading of the novels, identifying relevant quotations, classifying the data, and interpreting meanings related to identity issues. Data were collected through documentation by selecting quotations that reflect the characters' identity problems. The research instrument is based on eight indicators of identity diffusion proposed by Kroger and Marcia (2011): lack of exploration, lack of commitment, external influence, lack of self-definition, emotional emptiness, isolation, lack of autonomy from role models, and the need for external validation. The findings reveal that Anna and Emma experience identity diffusion, characterized by unstable self-concepts, emotional dissatisfaction, dependence on others' approval, and failure to develop independent identities. However, the causes of their identity crises differ. Anna's identity diffusion is strongly shaped by social pressure and aristocratic expectations, whereas Emma's is influenced by romantic fantasies and literary idealization. These unresolved conflicts lead both characters to psychological decline and self-destruction. Future researchers are recommended to examine other identity statuses in cross-cultural literary works and explore their relevance to social and psychological issues.

How to cite (in APA style): Tlonaen, Z. A., & Dewi, R. F. (2025). Trapped in Desired: A Comparative Study of Identity Diffusion in Anna Karenina and Madame Bovary. *OKARA: Jurnal Bahasa dan Sastra*, 19(2), 289–306. <https://doi.org/10.19105/ojbs.v19i2.21593>

1. INTRODUCTION

In world literature, female characters are often used as a medium to reflect psychological complexity, social pressures, and the deep search for identity (Kang & Kaplan, 2019; Maria, 2024; Nasution et al., 2024). Two monumental works that intensely portray the psychological dynamics of women in this context are *Anna Karenina* by Leo Tolstoy and *Madame Bovary* by Gustave Flaubert. Although set in different socio-cultural contexts, 19th-century Russia and 19th-century France, both novels feature female protagonists who experience deep internal conflicts, especially in pursuing freedom, true

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love, and meaning in life amid gender role constraints. Anna and Emma epitomize women who are discontented with societal conventions and ensnared in restrictive matrimonial bonds. Their discontent with life leads them to pursue escapism through extramarital affairs, which ultimately intensifies their identity diffusion.

Although both novels are classified as classical literature, they remain relevant in contemporary society because the psychological and social conflicts experienced by the characters continue to reflect modern human experiences, particularly related to identity crises, emotional emptiness, social expectations, and dependence on external validation. In the contemporary era, individuals are still confronted with pressures to conform to social standards and idealized images shaped by society and the media, making Anna and Emma's struggles highly relatable across generations. Thus, these novels continue to provide important insights into the universal and timeless nature of identity formation and psychological conflict. This phenomenon warrants further exploration from a developmental psychology perspective, namely identity status theory (Kroger & Marcia, 2011; Marcia, as cited in Tlonaen & Bil Haq, 2022). This theory emphasizes the formation of personal identity through exploration and commitment processes, identifying identity diffusion as a particularly problematic position characterized by a lack of both exploration and commitment to life values.

This study examines identity diffusion in the characters of Anna and Emma and how their social and psychological circumstances contribute to their inability to establish solid identities. This research differs from prior studies that primarily concentrate on intrinsic literary elements (Abbas et al., 2023; Maimunah et al., 2022; Risma et al., 2022; Suhadi et al., 2023) or utilize classical (Abdullah et al., 2021; Vassilieva & Zavershneva, 2020) using the framework of Kroger and Marcia (2011) as its main analytical instrument to examine the identity dynamics of both characters. Identity diffusion manifests in multiple ways, though all share a common characteristic: a deficient or nonexistent phase of self-exploration coupled with difficulty making definitive life choices. Individuals exhibiting identity diffusion may outwardly appear adaptive, charismatic, and exceptionally flexible, frequently conforming to the influences that envelop them (Czyżowska, 2022; Jørgensen & Bøye, 2022).

However, lacking a strong internal sense of identity, they rely heavily on external cues to define who they are and whom they aspire to be (Cao & Ma, 2024). In more troubling cases, these individuals feel disconnected and isolated, experiencing a deep sense of emptiness and lack of purpose (Isenhardt et al., 2021; Rivnyák et al., 2021). Unlike those with foreclosure status, who at least adopt a fixed identity based on authority or tradition, diffused individuals show little connection to early-life role models (Bogaerts et al., 2023; Kroger & Marcia, 2011). Although some may appear well-adjusted outwardly, they are often dependent on external structures or people to provide the direction and stability they cannot generate internally (Kroger & Marcia, 2011). In essence, identity diffusion reflects a fragile self-concept that depends more on external validation than on a clearly defined personal core (Claes et al., 2019; Kroger & Marcia, 2011).

Although various previous studies have explored the characters of Anna and Emma through intrinsic, psychological, and psychoanalytic approaches, limitations remain, both in terms of focus and methodology. Most previous studies have focused on themes, social conflicts, morality, or the general psychological state of characters, without specifically examining identity diffusion within the framework of Kroger and Marcia's (2011) identity status theory. Methodologically, previous studies have also tended to use descriptive

literary analysis and to discuss Anna and Emma separately, resulting in limited comparative analysis of the identity construction of the two characters. Studies such as Tlonaen (2022) have indeed explored identity diffusion in *Madame Bovary*, called Emma, but have not applied a comparative content analysis approach, systematic coding procedures, or cross-textual interpretation of identity diffusion indicators. Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by using a qualitative content analysis approach grounded in Kroger and Marcia's theory to systematically code and compare the emotional experiences, life choices, social pressures, and psychological conflicts of the two characters.

Based on the gap, this study answered the following research question: How is identity diffusion represented and experienced by the main characters in Anna and Emma? Through this comparative methodological framework, the research not only contributes to the study of literary psychology but also to the development of literary research methodology by using structured coding and theory-based interpretation to reveal patterns of identity diffusion in classical literary figures.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Identity Status

Marcia (2002) developed the theory of identity status as an elaboration of Erik Erikson's concept of identity development, which divides adolescents' and young adults' identity development into four statuses based on the individual's level of exploration and commitment. These four statuses are identity diffusion (when an individual lacks a clear direction or commitment and is not actively exploring life options), foreclosure (a commitment formed without going through a process of in-depth exploration, usually due to following the values or decisions of others), moratorium (a stage of active exploration of various options but not yet making a commitment), and identity achievement (a firm commitment achieved after going through a mature exploration process). Marcia emphasized that these four statuses are not linear stages that must be passed sequentially, but rather psychosocial conditions that can change with experience, environment, and individual development. Within this framework, the highest status is identity achievement because it indicates a mature identity that has undergone in-depth exploration. In contrast, the lowest status is identity diffusion, which reflects a lack of clear direction and commitment. These statuses signify situations rather than sequential stages; individuals may transition among them based on their experiences and settings (Afolalu, 2024; Hatano et al., 2022).

2.2 Identity Diffusion Characteristics

Kroger and Marcia's (2011), supported also by Palmeroni et al. (2020) and Sano Sana et al. (2024), provides characteristics for each identity status to make it easier for someone to identify that identity status, including identity diffusion. Identity diffusion status has eight main characteristics. First, no exploration: the absence or weak effort to explore personal identity. Second, no commitment, which is the inability to make firm life decisions or commitments. Third, externally defined identity is when external influences shape the sense of self more than internal beliefs. Fourth, lack of inner self-definition reflects the absence of a stable and coherent self-concept. Fifth, emotional emptiness is characterized by feelings of emptiness and a lack of meaning in life. Sixth, isolation, describes the experience of

feeling disconnected or lost. Seventh is the lack of autonomy from role models, which is the failure to differentiate oneself from influential figures early in life. Eighth, the need for external validation or context indicates a dependence on others or external situations to define one's identity. In literary analysis, these indicators help researchers identify characters' behavior, dialogue, and internal conflicts that reflect identity confusion, dependence on others to shape their identity, and a lack of clear direction in life. Thus, identity diffusion becomes a key concept for interpreting characters' psychological dynamics and understanding the relationship between identity crises and plot development.

3. METHOD

3.1 Research Design

This study used a qualitative content analysis grounded in literary psychology to examine the representation of identity diffusion in the main characters of Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* and Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*. This qualitative content analysis approach was chosen because it enables researchers to systematically identify, categorize, and interpret textual data using psychological indicators derived from Kroger and Marcia's (2011) identity status theory. Through this approach, the study analyzed narratives, dialogues, and character descriptions to identify patterns of identity diffusion reflected in the psychological experiences of Anna and Emma. The primary data for this study are excerpts from narratives, conversations, and character descriptions that demonstrate identity diffusion. To ensure the credibility and reliability of the literary texts used, this study utilized officially published editions and academically recognized English translations. *Anna Karenina* uses Constance Garnett's translation published by The Modern Library (2000 edition), while *Madame Bovary* uses Eleanor Marx-Aveling's translation published by Dover Publications (2005 edition). Both editions were chosen because they are widely used in literary studies and academic research.

3.2 Instrument and Procedure

The research instrument in this study is based on eight indicators of identity diffusion as outlined in Kroger and Marcia's (2011) theory of identity status. These indicators serve as analytical tools for identifying and interpreting the psychological condition of the main characters in *Anna* and *Emma*. 1) *no exploration*; 2) *no commitment*; 3) *externally defined identity*; 4) *lack of inner self-definition*; 5) *emotional emptiness*; 6) *isolation*; 7) *lack of autonomy from role models*; 8) *the need for external validation or context*. These indicators guide the analysis by systematically identifying textual evidence of identity diffusion.

This study used content analysis to investigate identity diffusion in *Anna Karenina* (AK) and *Madame Bovary* (MB). The process commenced with a careful analysis of both works, followed by the identification and selection of textual material, including narration, dialogue, and character descriptions, that illustrate the eight markers of identity diffusion. Every quotation was systematically coded and classified based on these indicators. The data were subsequently arranged into a comparative table to emphasize the similarities and differences between the two personas. The patterns were ultimately analyzed via the lens of Kroger and Marcia's (2011) identity status theory to elucidate how Anna and Emma exemplify the traits of identity diffusion.

3.3 Data Analysis Procedures

The data analysis procedure in this study follows the model of Miles et al. (2018), which consists of three stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. In the data reduction stage, the researcher selected narrative excerpts, dialogue, and character descriptions relevant to the eight indicators of identity diffusion, as outlined by Kroger and Marcia (2011). Each excerpt was then systematically coded to facilitate interpretation and comparison between novels. For example, the code AK-1a.p.1/c. 1 refers to “Anna Karenina,” indicator 1, excerpt a, part 1, chapter 1. Due to the large volume of textual data, the full excerpts are not presented in the discussion section; the researcher used only representative excerpts, along with their data codes, to maintain the analysis’s focus and clarity.

In the data display stage, the coded data were arranged in a comparative table to identify recurring psychological patterns, similarities, and differences between Anna and Emma. The coding process supported interpretation by grouping textual evidence according to the eight indicators of identity diffusion, enabling the researcher to explore how each character represents specific psychological characteristics systematically. Next, in the conclusion drawing and verification stage, the discovered patterns are interpreted using Kroger and Marcia’s theoretical framework to explain how identity diffusion shapes emotional instability, dependence on external validation, and the tragic life decisions of both characters. The interpretation process is also carried out through cross-novel comparisons to strengthen the consistency and validity of the research findings.

4. RESULTS

Both characters, Anna and Emma, experience a deep identity confusion, marked by the eight indicators of the identity diffusion concept as defined by Kroger and Marcia (2011), namely: lack of exploration, lack of commitment, external influence, absence of a clear self-definition, emotional emptiness, isolation, dependence on role models, and the need for external validation (see Table 1).

Table 1
Identity Diffusion in Anna Karenina (AK)

Indicator	Code AK	Excerptions
Lack of Exploration	1a.p1/c.18	<i>“She had no need to ask herself whether she loved her husband or not.”</i>
	1b.p.1/c.18	<i>“She had been brought up in the old ways.”</i>
	1c.p.2/c.5	<i>“She was guided by the opinions of others.”</i>
	1d.p.7/c.31	<i>“I am not the woman I was.”</i>
Lack of commitment	2a.p.4/c.3	<i>“I am his mistress, but I cannot be his wife.”</i>
	2b.p.1/c.18	<i>“I was 18 when I got married, but it was not love.”</i>
	2c.p.6/c.18	<i>“I don’t want to prove anything; I merely want to live.”</i>
	2d.p.7/c.31	<i>“She did not want to talk of her sorrow, but with that sorrow in her heart she could not talk of outside matters.”</i>
Externally defined identity	3.p.2/c.5	<i>“She was guided by the opinions of others.”</i>
	3b.p.1/c.18	<i>“She had been brought up in the old ways.”</i>
	3c.p.1/c.29	<i>“She hardly knew at times what it was she feared, and what she hoped for.”</i>

(Continue on the next page)

Table 1 (Continue)

Indicator	Code AK	Excerptions
Lack of Self-definition	4a.p.1/c.29	<i>"Sometimes she did not know what she feared, what she desired: whether she feared or desired what had been or what would be, and precisely what she desired, she did not know."</i>
	4b.p.2/c.5	<i>"Anna Arkadyevna read and understood, but it was unpleasant for her to read, that is, to follow the reflection of other people's lives. She had too great a longing to live herself."</i>
	4c.p.4/c.3	<i>"I don't think anything," she said, "but I always loved you, and if one loves anyone, one loves the whole person, just as they are and not as one would like them to be."</i>
Emotional emptiness	5a.p.1/c.29	<i>"She hardly knew at times what it was she feared, and what she hoped for. Whether she feared or desired what had happened or what was going to happen and exactly what she longed for, she could not have said."</i>
	5b.p.4/c.2	<i>"She wrote, 'I am ill and unhappy.'"</i>
	5a.p.7/c.31	<i>"She felt that she had been deceived, that she had been led into a trap." (c.p.7/c.31)</i>
Isolation	6a.p.7/c.31	<i>"She felt herself alone."</i>
	6b.p.1/c.29	<i>"She hardly knew at times what it was she feared, and what she hoped for."</i>
	6c.p.7/c.3	<i>"She did not want to talk of her sorrow, but with that sorrow in her heart she could not talk of outside matters."</i>
Lack of autonomy from role models	7a.p.7/c.18	<i>"She had been brought up in the old ways."</i>
	7b.p.2/c.5	<i>"Her husband's presence in her life is miserable and off-putting to her because he represents her lack of freedom and is the main obstacle that stands in the way of her happiness."</i>
	7c.p.7/c.31	<i>"She felt that she had been deceived, that she had been led into a trap." (c.p.7/c.31)</i>
Need for external validation/ Context	8a.p.2/c.5	<i>"She was guided by the opinions of others."</i>
	8b.p.1/c.18	<i>"She had been brought up in the old ways."</i>
	8c.p.1/c.29	<i>"She hardly knew at times what it was she feared, and what she hoped for."</i>

The findings in Table 1 indicate that Anna Karenina exhibits all eight indicators of identity diffusion according to Kroger and Marcia (2011). The most dominant patterns are a lack of self-exploration, emotional emptiness, and a reliance on external validation. Anna repeatedly shows uncertainty about her emotions, life choices, and desires, suggesting an unstable self-concept. The data also show that Anna's identity is shaped more by social demands and traditional values than by her internal self-understanding. Furthermore, the repeated expressions of loneliness, confusion, and emotional dissatisfaction indicate a growing psychological crisis that leads to tragic decisions in her life. These findings suggest that Anna's identity diffusion is evident not only in her personal relationships but also in her inability to establish an independent, meaningful self-identity. All symptoms of diffused identity are also found in Emma (see Table 2).

Table 2
Identity Diffusion in Madame Bovary (MB)

Indicator	Code MB	Excerptions
Lack of exploration	1a.p.1/c.6	<i>"She had believed that love must come suddenly, with great outbursts and lighnings."</i>
	1b.p.1/c.6	<i>"She had read Paul and Virginia, and she had dreamed of the little bamboo house."</i>
	1c.p.1/c.6	<i>"She was the amoureuse of all the novels, the heroine of all the plays, the vague 'she' of all the poetry books."</i>
	1d.p.1/c.9	<i>"She had no idea by what wind it would reach her, toward what shore it would bear her, or what kind of craft it would be."</i>
	1e.p.2/c.6	<i>"She was waiting for something to happen."</i>
	1f.p.2/c.2	<i>"She had made up her mind to love him."</i>
Lack of commitment	2a.p.2/c.2	<i>"She had made up her mind to love him."</i>
	2b.p.2/c.5	<i>"She was not happy--she never had been."</i>
	c.p.3/c.6	<i>"She would have liked not to be alive, or to be always asleep."</i>
	2d.p.3/c.6	<i>"Why—why—did I ever marry?"</i>
External influence	3a.p.1/c.6	<i>"She had read Paul and Virginia, and she had dreamed of the little bamboo house."</i>
	3b.p.1/c.6	<i>"She was the amoureuse of all the novels, the heroine of all the plays, the vague 'she' of all the poetry books."</i>
	3c.p.2/c.2	<i>"She had made up her mind to love him."</i>
Lack of Self-definition	4a.p.1/c.6	<i>"She was the amoureuse of all the novels, the heroine of all the plays, the vague 'she' of all the poetry books."</i>
	4b.p.1/c.9	<i>"She had no idea by what wind it would reach her, toward what shore it would bear her, or what kind of craft it would be."</i>
	4c.p.2/c.8	<i>"She wanted to die, but she also wanted to live in Paris."</i>
Emotional emptiness	5a.p.2/c.5	<i>"But she—her life was cold as a garret whose dormer window looks on the north, and ennui, the silent spider, was weaving its web in the darkness in every corner of her heart."</i>
	5b.p.3/c.6	<i>"Ah! how impossible! Besides, nothing was worth the trouble of seeking it; everything was a lie. Every smile hid a yawn of boredom, every joy a curse, all pleasure satiety, and the sweetest kisses left upon your lips only the unattainable desire for a greater delight."</i>
	5c.p.2/c.6	<i>"She was waiting for something to happen."</i>
Isolation	6a.p.2/c.1 2	<i>"In her life's isolation she centered on the child's head all her shattered, broken little vanities."</i>
	6b.p.2/c.6	<i>"She was waiting for something to happen."</i>
	6c.p.3/c.6	<i>"She would have liked not to be alive, or to be always asleep."</i>
Lack of autonomy from role models	7a.p.1/c.6	<i>"She had read Paul and Virginia, and she had dreamed of the little bamboo house."</i>
	7b.p.1/c.6	<i>"She was the amoureuse of all the novels, the heroine of all the plays, the vague 'she' of all the poetry books."</i>
	7c.p.1/c.9	<i>"She had no idea by what wind it would reach her, toward what shore it would bear her, or what kind of craft it would be."</i>
Need for external validation/ Context	8a.p.1/c.6	<i>"She was the amoureuse of all the novels, the heroine of all the plays, the vague 'she' of all the poetry books."</i>
	8b.p.1/c.6	<i>"She had read Paul and Virginia, and she had dreamed of the little bamboo house."</i>
	8c.p.1/c.6	<i>"She had no idea by what wind it would reach her, toward what shore it would bear her, or what kind of craft it would be."</i>

Table 2 shows that Emma also exhibits all eight indicators of identity diffusion. However, unlike Anna, Emma's identity confusion is more influenced by romantic fantasies and idealizations derived from literary reading. The most dominant patterns are externally defined identity, emotional emptiness, and lack of self-definition. Emma continually relies on idealized images of love and happiness to shape her understanding of herself and her future. The findings also show that her dissatisfaction with life's realities leads to emotional instability, passivity, and a persistent sense of emptiness. Her desire to escape reality and her inability to establish stable commitments demonstrate how identity diffusion drives her psychological decline. Overall, the results of this study indicate that both characters experience identity diffusion, although the sources and forms of their identity crises emerge through different social and psychological contexts.

5. DISCUSSION

This discussion presents the findings and interpretations for each characteristic, with data in code AK-1a.p.1/c.1, meaning that the quotes are taken from *Anna Karenina-indicator 1, quote a, part 1/chapter 1*. Some characteristics were merged because they were connected to other characteristics.

Anna and Emma, despite coming from different cultural backgrounds, exhibit striking similarities in the characteristics of identity diffusion. Both characters struggle with a profound search for meaning in life and feel trapped in unsatisfying existences. Anna, though outwardly perfect and respectable, experiences an inner emptiness that leads her into an illicit relationship with Vronsky, further intensifying her identity crisis and sense of void. Emma, also dissatisfied with her married life, seeks escape through romantic fantasies and affairs with other men, yet constantly feels isolated and unfulfilled. Both demonstrate a lack of commitment to themselves and a dependence on external influences for meaning and validation. The emptiness and loneliness they experience ultimately lead to tragic decisions, suicide. Although their social contexts differ, Anna, within the Russian aristocracy, and Emma, in rural French life, both characters face the same psychological consequences of identity diffusion, illustrating the deep emotional and psychological impact within the narrative of classic literature.

5.1 Lack of Commitment and Exploration

Diffusion identity is characterized by a lack of commitment and exploration as crucial indicators (Kroger & Marcia, 2011; Maree, 2021), in which individuals make little or no attempt to understand their identity and have difficulty making clear, lasting life choices or commitments. Anna Karenina never truly questions her love for her husband. "She did not need to ask herself whether she loved her husband or not" (2b.p.1/c.18) —which reflects an unexamined acceptance of societal norms rather than a self-driven decision. Her statement confirms the absence of emotional exploration before marriage. Anna's upbringing "in the old ways" and her being "guided by the opinions of others" highlight a passive acceptance of her role without questioning or exploring her desires. Her declaration, "I am not the woman I was" (AK-1d.p.7/c.31), shows a shift in identity without clarity, reinforcing instability. Similarly, her remark, "I don't want to prove anything; I merely want to live" (AK-2c.p.6/c.18) reflects a desire for escape from over-commitment to any concrete path or self-definition.

Emma exemplifies identity diffusion via delusion and passivity. Her convictions regarding love are wholly influenced by fiction, indicating that she has assimilated romantic ideas without practical contemplation. Her anticipation, “She was waiting for something to happen” (MB-1e.p.2/c.6), exemplifies passivity and a deficiency in self-direction. Her statement, “She had no idea by what wind it would reach her, toward what shore it would bear her, or what kind of craft it would be” (MB-1d.p.1/c.9), demonstrates a deficiency in autonomy for the formation of her future. Her recurrent choice of “She had made up her mind to love him” (MB-1f.p.2/c.2) signifies emotional impulsivity rather than solid commitment, whilst “She was not happy, she never had been” (MB-2b.p.2/c.5), and “She would have liked not to be alive, or to be always asleep” (MB-2c.p.3/c.6), indicate profound frustration resulting from an inability to investigate her own identity and purpose.

Anna and Emma demonstrate identity diffusion due to a significant absence of exploration and commitment. The case of Anna and Emma illustrates that a deficiency in commitment and exploration frequently arises from unresolved internal conflicts, insufficient self-awareness, and external pressures, including societal expectations and familial influence (Butterbaugh & Wood, 2020; de Carvalho & Veiga, 2022; Rivnyák et al., 2021). Individuals may experience ambiguity over their ideals or objectives, resulting in a reluctance to make conclusive decisions. The apprehension of failure, rejection, or the loss of others’ favor may hinder individuals from actively pursuing several life avenues or dedicating themselves to a singular path (Hihara et al., 2019; Schachter & Galliher, 2018). Consequently, individuals who cannot investigate or commit to an authentic self-experience discontent, instability, and finally, emotional breakdown and tragedy, which are characteristic of identity dispersal.

5.2 Externally Defined Identity

External identity, as defined by Kroger and Marcia (2011), is primarily influenced by external factors rather than internal drives or personal values. Anna and Emma illustrate the impact of external factors on their identities, choices, and emotional states, hence validating the psychological phenomenon of identity dissemination. James Marcia’s thesis posits that persons in a state of identity dispersal frequently lack personal beliefs and are particularly vulnerable to external influences, societal conventions, and cultural narratives.

In Anna’s situation, societal norms and conventional upbringing significantly influence her identity. The quote “She was guided by the opinions of others” (AK-3a.p.2/c.5) explicitly demonstrates that her actions and choices are devoid of intrinsic motivation and are influenced by external perceptions. The statement “She had been brought up in the old ways” (AK-3b.p.1/c.18) similarly emphasizes that Anna’s identity is not self-fashioned but rather acquired through stringent cultural traditions, especially with gender roles and propriety. Her psychological disarray is accentuated in “She hardly knew at times what it was she feared, and what she hoped for” (AK-3c.p.1/c.29), revealing a distorted internal compass and emotional volatility, typical indicators of a self-constructed externally rather than via personal reflection.

Emma, likewise, is deeply influenced by the romantic ideals she consumes through literature. Her internal world is shaped not by reality but by fantasy, as seen in the quote, “She had read Paul and Virginia, and she had dreamed of the little bamboo house” (MB-3a.p.1/c.6). This indicates her early absorption of unrealistic romantic ideals, which set the foundation for her dissatisfaction with married life. Her identity is not rooted in real

experience but is instead derived from fiction, as evidenced in “She was the amoureuse of all the novels, the heroine of all the plays, the vague ‘she’ of all the poetry books” (MB-3b.p.1/c.6). Emma’s inquiry, “Why—why—did I ever marry?” (MB-3c.p.3/c.6) embodies remorse arising from disillusionment, a result of her choice to marry not via authentic self-reflection, but rather through romantic misconceptions. Moreover, her claim, “She had made up her mind to love him” (MB-3d.p.2/c.2), indicates a nearly performative, externally driven choice to seek love, underscoring her reliance on external frameworks of identity and feeling.

Recent studies validate and elaborate on this concept by highlighting the significant impact of external influences on individual identities and the possible consequences of excessive external influence on life outcomes. Recent research indicates that identity transition is significantly affected by external social and environmental elements. The influence can positively affect an individual’s psychology (Cooper et al., 2022; Notley et al., 2022; Rhoden et al., 2022; Yancey, 2023) or negatively impact it due to an overdependence on public validation (Fulay et al., 2023; Liu, 2023). Consequently, the research emphasizes the necessity for equilibrium between external impact and internal identity formation.

5.3 Lack of Inner Self-Definition

The absence of inner self-definition denotes an individual’s incapacity to cultivate a stable, coherent, and consistent self-concept (Kroger & Marcia, 2011). Self-definition indicates that the individual lacks a distinct internal identity or a coherent set of personal values, beliefs, and objectives that consistently guide their actions and choices. Their self-concept is frequently fragmented, inconsistent, or excessively shaped by external influences, including societal expectations, interpersonal interactions, or cultural influences (Atewologun et al., 2017; Genovese, 2015; Kimmons & Veletsianos, 2014).

Anna and Emma’s deficiency in self-definition stems from their failure to articulate distinct personal beliefs and life objectives, rendering them susceptible to emotional volatility and external manipulation. Anna’s quotations “Sometimes she did not know what she feared, what she desired: whether she feared or desired what had been or what would be, and precisely what she desired, she did not know” (AK-4a.p.1/c.29), and “Anna read and understood, but it was unpleasant for her to read, that is, to follow the reflection of other people’s lives. She had too great a longing to live herself” (AK-4b.p.2/c.5) underscore her inner turmoil and aspiration for a significant existence, although she is devoid of the internal structure to articulate what that existence should include. Her identity is divided, oscillating between yearning and despondency, which inhibits her capacity to anchor herself in conflicting views or judgments. This internal gap propels her into emotionally intense yet unstable relationships, as illustrated in “I don’t think anything,” she said, “but I always loved you, and if one loves anyone, one loves the whole person, just as they are and not as one would like them to be” (AK-4c.p.4/c.3), where her affection manifests not as a deliberate decision but as an overwhelming dependency.

Emma’s sense of self is also not very strong. Her quotes “She was the amoureuse of all the novels, the heroine of all the plays, the vague ‘she’ of all the poetry books” (MB-4a.p.1/c.6), and “She had no idea by what wind it would reach her, toward what shore it would bear her, or what kind of craft it would be” (MB-4b.p.1/c.9), reveal that her concept of self comes from romantic and literary illusions instead of real-life events or thinking about herself. She exists in a dreamlike state, anticipating a transformative moment that will define

her, rather than actively participating in the process of self-definition. Her contradictory desires in this sentence, “She wanted to die, but she also wanted to live in Paris” (MB-4c.p.2/c.8), show that she is having an identity crisis and cannot decide between escape and delusion.

The absence of self-definition in both characters renders them reactive rather than deliberate, resulting in impulsive decisions and, ultimately, tragic consequences. People who have this issue may have trouble knowing themselves and often do not know what they want or what direction their life should go in direction (De Meulemeester et al., 2017; Penner et al., 2019). Consequently, they may frequently alter their jobs, principles, or associations based on their surroundings or the others in their vicinity. This instability within oneself can make one emotionally weak, make it hard to make real connections with others, and make it hard to make important life choices. These are all signs of identity diffusion.

5.4 Emotional Emptiness and Isolation

Feelings of meaninglessness, emotional hollowness, and solitude characterize emotional emptiness—feelings of being lost or disconnected (Kroger & Marcia, 2011). The emotional void and solitude encountered by Anna and Emma are crucial to their identity diffusion. These two psychological states not only reveal their inner conflicts but also show how hard it is for them to build a solid, cohesive sense of self. Anna feels empty within, confused, hopeless, and betrayed. The fact that she cannot say what she wants or fears, like “She hardly knew at times what it was she feared, and what she hoped for. Whether she feared or desired what had happened or what was going to happen and exactly what she longed for, she could not have said” (AK-5a.p.1/c.29), which shows that she is not in touch with her true self. Her profound sorrow remains unarticulated as seen in “She did not want to talk of her sorrow, but with that sorrow in her heart she could not talk of outside matters” (AK-6c.p.7/c.3), indicating an emotional barrier that isolates her from others. This quiet, along with her confession of being unhappy, She wrote, ‘I am ill and unhappy’ (AK-5b.p.4/c.2), and her feeling of having been tricked by life “She felt that she had been deceived, that she had been led into a trap” (AK-5c.p.7/c.31) shows that she has become emotionally empty. These feelings are not simply temporary; they show that she is always feeling lost, and they are getting worse as she becomes more alone. She feels alone (AK-6a.p.7/c.31), stuck in a secret sadness that keeps her from the outside world and makes it hard for her to manage her feelings through social interaction or reflection.

Emma also has a big hole in her heart. The author clearly shows how bored and disappointed she is her existence is chilly and unfulfilling as stated “But she—her life was cold as a garret whose dormer window looks on the north, and ennui, the silent spider, was weaving its web in the darkness in every corner of her heart” (MB-5a.p.2/c.5), and every kind of pleasure turns out to be empty “Ah! How impossible! Besides, nothing was worth the trouble of seeking it; everything was a lie. Every smile hid a yawn of boredom, every joy a curse, all pleasure satiety, and the sweetest kisses left upon your lips only the unattainable desire for a greater delight” (MB-5b.p.3/c.6). She is alone not only physically, but also emotionally and spiritually; she feels cut off from her surroundings and has no direction. Emma’s persistent waiting for anything to happen, “She was waiting for something to happen” (MB-5c.p.2/c.6), shows that she is passive in her life, which makes it harder for her to find a stable identity. Her wish to either escape into a fiction or stop existing completely, “She would have liked not to be alive, or to be always asleep” (MB-6c.p.3/c.6), shows that

she is not just emotionally tired but also very disconnected from herself. Her love for her child is also a projection of unmet dreams. "In her life's isolation, she centered on the child's head all her shattered, broken little vanities" (MB-6a.p.2/c.12), which shows how her isolation makes it hard for her to connect with other people in a real way.

Anna and Emma exemplify that emotional emptiness and isolation are not only manifestations of identity diffusion but rather dynamic forces that sustain it. Without significant emotional anchors or a sense of social belonging, both characters descend into a state of non-being, perpetually seeking yet failing to discover their identities (Allan et al., 2020; Berezina et al., 2020). These settings inhibit personal development, clarity, and commitment, all of which are essential for identity consolidation (Bowe et al., 2020; Reinhart, 2021). Their narratives illustrate how psychological and social isolation can lead to a disjointed, fragmented, and eventually lost sense of self.

5.5 Lack of Autonomy from Role Models

The absence of autonomy from role models does not constitute a definitive divergence from early figures in identity development (Kroger & Marcia, 2011). This pattern is shown in Anna and Emma. Anna's upbringing "in the old ways" (AK-7a.p.7/c.18) implies that her attitudes and conduct are influenced by conventional conventions rather than her personal decisions. Her unhappiness with her marriage, in which her spouse represents oppression and a lack of freedom "Her husband's presence in her life is miserable and off-putting to her because he represents her lack of freedom and is the main obstacle that stands in the way of her happiness" (AK-7b.p.2/c.5), shows how profoundly she is stuck in a life that is based on what other people want instead of what she wants. Her feeling of being "led into a trap" in the sentence "She felt that she had been deceived, that she had been led into a trap" (AK-7c.p.7/c.31) shows how passive she is in her life choices. This suggests that she has followed pathways set out by family or society without critically reflecting on them. She cannot break free from the roles forced on her because she has no control over her own life. Emma is also greatly affected by the romantic ideas she reads about in literature. Her aspirations for the "little bamboo house" from Paul and Virginia (MB-7a.p.1/c.6) and her identification with fictional heroines "she was the amoureuse of all the novels, the heroine of all the plays, the vague 'she' of all the poetry books" (MB-7b.p.1/c.6) illustrate that her identity is shaped more by literary role models than by actual experiences or self-reflection. Her aimless longing, as shown in "she had no idea by what wind it would reach her, toward what shore it would bear her, or what kind of craft it would be" (MB-7c.p.1/c.9), shows that she is not connected to her own will and purpose. She is motivated by fantasy rather than self-directed ambition.

During healthy identity formation, particularly in adolescence and early adulthood, individuals are expected to transition from reliance on parental or social figures to developing an autonomous self-concept (Toukhy et al., 2022; Wicks et al., 2019). It entails scrutinizing, assessing, and, when necessary, rejecting the values, attitudes, and expectations imparted by early role models, including parents, educators, and societal conventions. When there is no apparent break from these early figures, it suggests the person has not done the essential exploration or separation. Instead, they keep taking on roles, beliefs, or actions others tell them to without considering whether such ideals fit their experiences, wants, or goals. Consequently, their identity remains externally defined and tenuous, often leading to uncertainty or fragmentation. This inability to achieve autonomy

renders individuals emotionally reliant, unable to make sound life decisions, and exceedingly susceptible to disillusionment when their inherited or adopted goals conflict with reality (Bogaerts et al., 2023; Lucia & Ornella, 2024; Toukhy et al., 2022).

5.6 Need for External Validation/Context

The necessity for external validation or context depends on others or the environment to establish one's identity (Kroger & Marcia, 2011). This psychological tendency denotes an individual's reliance on external entities, including family, peers, societal norms, or cultural expectations, as well as their environment (Albuja et al., 2019; Castillo-Lavergne & Destin, 2019; Mauduy et al., 2023), to ascertain their identity instead of cultivating a stable self-concept internally. It indicates that the individual has not yet established a distinct and autonomous comprehension of their values, beliefs, objectives, or aspirations. The chosen passages from *Anna* and *Emma* vividly demonstrate the characters' profound desire for external validation and context, a fundamental sign of identity dispersal. In *Anna's* case, her statement "She was guided by the opinions of others" (AK-8a.p.2/c.5) reveals that she gets her sense of self from what other people think of her instead of what she believes. The phrase "brought up in the old ways" (AK-8b.p.1/c.18) shows even more how much she relies on inherited societal conventions instead of her own choices. Her emotional perplexity in "She hardly knew at times what it was she feared, and what she hoped for" (AK-8c.p.1/c.29) shows that she does not have an internal compass and instead looks to other people for meaning.

Similarly, *Emma's* identity is entirely shaped by fictional ideals: "She was the amoureuse of all the novels... the vague 'she' of all the poetry books" (MB-8a.p.1/c.6). Her fantasies, shaped by what she read in "Paul and Virginia" (MB-8b.p.1/c.6), create a model for life based not on reality but on literary romanticism. Her aimlessness, "She had no idea by what wind it would reach her..." (MB-8c.p.1/c.6), shows that she is not connected to her intentions and hopes the meaning of life will be disclosed from the outside instead of being made up from the within. Both characters rely too much on outside influences, such as what society expects of them, how they were raised, or romantic literature. It stops them from developing strong, independent personalities. Their quest for self-worth and purpose is influenced by others' perceptions and expectations, leading to emotional instability, disillusionment, and, eventually, tragic outcomes.

The findings of this study also show that identity diffusion in both novels emerges not only as a personal conflict but also as a result of interactions among social pressures, gender constructions, and cultural expectations for women. *Anna* and *Emma* fail to establish autonomous identities because their identities are continually shaped by external norms, including the demands of aristocracy and social morality, and the romanticization of love constructed by literature and imagination. In this context, both characters demonstrate how women in patriarchal societies often experience limited space for authentic self-exploration. This study expands the understanding of identity diffusion by showing that identity crises in classical literature are not only individual and psychological, but also closely related to social and cultural structures that limit the formation of women's identities. Furthermore, the use of indicator-based qualitative content analysis by Kroger and Marcia (2011) makes a methodological contribution by enabling a more systematic and structured psychological interpretation of literary characters through coding, categorization, and cross-text comparison.

6. CONCLUSION

Even though Anna and Emma are from different cultural backgrounds (Russian and French), both exhibit a similar pattern of identity diffusion characterized by indecisiveness, reliance on external validation, emotional emptiness, and a lack of stable self-definition. These findings demonstrate that literary characters can effectively mirror real psychosocial realities and immature identity formation. Theoretically, this study broadens the applicability of Kroger and Marcia's identity status theory by integrating it into a cross-cultural analysis of classical literature. In practice, it offers insights for educators and psychologists, highlighting literature as a pedagogical tool for discussing psychological struggles and enhancing critical reading skills. However, this study is limited by its focus on only two novels (Anna Karenina and Madame Bovary), its reliance on translated texts, and its exclusive use of textual data without reader-response or empirical validation. Future research should explore other identity statuses (moratorium, foreclosure, achievement) across diverse literary works and examine how contemporary readers interpret these issues amid modern dynamics such as digital identity and social media.

Acknowledgment

Not applicable

Availability of Data and Materials

All the data generated or analyzed during this study are included in this published article [and its supplementary information files].

Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Authors' Contribution

Zuvyati Aryani Tlonaen was responsible for the conceptualization, research design, data collection, data analysis, interpretation of findings, and manuscript writing. Rohmatul Fitriyah Dewi contributed to the translation and proofreading of the manuscript.

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