

The Philosophy of Perfection: Eastern Wisdom and Existential Thought in Kate Grenville's *The Idea of Perfection*

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Abstract

Kate Grenville's The Idea of Perfection (1999) challenges the modern preoccupation with perfection and portrays imperfection as a genuine foundation of human existence. Recent research has examined the novel through Feminist, Socio-Cultural, Australian Identity, and postcolonial perspectives; comparatively little attention has been given to its philosophical resonance with Eastern wisdom. This paper explores how Grenville presents the true measure of human fulfilment as authentic existence, which challenges the conventional idea of perfection. This treatise argues that identity is neither fixed nor socially constructed, nor based on personal opinions or ethical relationships. This study also analyses the emotional and psychological journey of Harley Savage and Douglas Cheeseman, as well as the bridge and broken objects, which act as the novel's central symbols and represent resilience, steadiness, and the acceptance of imperfection. In the same way, it explores the mutual understanding between the two people who meet in the rural village of Karakarook, which becomes their existential place and helps them rid themselves of loneliness. Through a close reading of Grenville's narration, it becomes clear that she concedes that perfection doesn't happen when life is flawless, but when people are courageous enough to accept Weakness and obligation. Rather than claiming direct Eastern influence on Grenville, the article explores the novel's thematic affinities with Buddhist non-attachment, Taoist harmony, the Bhagavad Gita's detached action, and Wabi-Sabi aesthetics. This study concludes that The Idea of Perfection portrays ordinary life as a philosophical reflection and insists that philosophical wisdom always occurs within normal human existence.

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Introduction

Kate Grenville's ordinary romantic narrative, *The Idea of Perfection*, becomes a work of contemporary Australian Fiction because it transforms an apparently ordinary romantic narrative into a profound exploration of the human condition. Philosophers, theologians, and writers have long admired this concept.

Wisdom Literature is found in several major cultures of the ancient Near East: Egypt, Mesopotamia, Syria, and Israel, and in peripheral areas. Texts of this type are extant from some two millennia, as early as 2600 B.C.E. to the first century C.E. Works from these areas are demonstrably related in style and content and connected at several points, early and late. Wisdom Literature shows us the ancient Near East functioning as a single world, with distinctive but interconnected cultures (Fox 1).

Today's society often defines perfection through career success, physical attractiveness, emotional well-being, and financial prosperity. People are therefore encouraged to chase unrealistic expectations and judge their value by what they achieve instead of by their inner happiness and personal growth. Grenville's narratives in this novel explore the developing bond between Douglas Cheeseman, an engineer, and Harley Savage, a restorer of old household objects, in the rural town of Karakarook. Above all, these narratives present a philosophical exploration of the human quest for meaning and the imperfection of human existence. Instead of answering these questions through socially constructed ideals of perfection, achievement, and emotional completeness, she presents perfection as an illusion rather than reality because society creates these unrealistic ideas. Therefore, the novel functions as a psychological fiction, shifting its narration from perfection to questioning the idea of perfection that prevents individuals from accepting their genuine selves.

Grenville's novel title suggests a philosophical narration because it refers not to perfection itself but to *The Idea of Perfection*. The word idea has several meanings apart from reality. As the novel reads through Sartre's existential argument that "existence precedes essence," it becomes clear that human beings are not born with fixed identities; they are born to live on their own, with their own choices and desires. Through the novel's characterisation, she suggests that the characters suffer because of society's expectations of perfection, not because of their failures and troubles. Douglas Cheeseman and Harley Savage define themselves only through their public roles, hiding their private worries and troubles. Douglas believes his identity is respected only through his professional competence, while Harley projects an outward appearance of detachment, using emotional restraint and self-defensive habits to conceal her inner vulnerabilities.

Aim and Objectives:

This study analyses Douglas's profession as the central theme for Philosophical exploration. As an engineer, he views reality as a system governed by logic, measurement, and order, and he believes every problem has a solution if it can be overcome through analytical methods. When Douglas encounters the bent bridge in Karakarook, he understands that the bridge is not an object to be repaired and rectified. He saw the bridge not only as a physical object but also as a repository of memory, identity, and human experience. "One pertains to the context-embeddedness of emotional trauma and the other to the claim that the possibility of emotional trauma is built into our existential constitution"(Stolorow 115). Through the epigraph of this novel, Grenville prepares this philosophical argument as Leonardo da Vinci mentions that an arch is two weaknesses which together make a strength. It is clearly stated that strength does not come from perfection; it comes from the mutual dependence of imperfect elements. Douglas and Harley each carry the burdens of emotional trauma, fractured relationships, and psychological insecurity, but later in the narration, Grenville shows how they develop meaningful companionship through their mutual recognition of vulnerability and imperfection.

According to Buddhist philosophy, suffering arises from attachment to desires and idealised expectations, while mindfulness, compassion, and detachment offer a path to liberation. In contrast, Taoism values harmony with nature, encouraging individuals to let go of rigid control and embrace life's fluidity and uncertainty. In the *Bhagavad Gita*, individuals are encouraged to carry out their responsibilities with dedication while remaining detached from the results of their actions. Similarly, Wabi-Sabi celebrates the appealing and philosophical value of simplicity, transience, and imperfection, challenging conventional ideals of flawlessness. Although these philosophical traditions are rooted in diverse cultural and metaphysical contexts, they share a common belief: they reject perfection as the final goal of human existence and instead emphasise acceptance, balance, and inner transformation.

Western philosophy also challenges the belief that fulfilment lies in attaining flawless completion. Western philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre argues that human beings are born to create themselves through free choices and act with freedom. Martin Heidegger also argues that humans must be courageous to live beyond societal expectations. Albert Camus also argues that accepting life's uncertainty is meaningful, rather than escaping it. Analysing the concept portrayed by these writers, it is to be understood that Grenville's novel reveals striking philosophical affinities. In this novel, Douglas moves from his technical certainty to emotional openness, while Harley's Savage respect for damaged objects and the significance of Bent Bridge challenge the modern obsession with perfection and propose a more humane understanding of fulfilment.

Recent research has mainly focused on Australian identity, feminism, rural community, national history, identity, and postcolonial concerns; these studies pay

little attention to the novel's philosophical dialogue with Eastern traditions and Western existentialism. This study explores the comparative philosophical reading of *The Idea of Perfection*. Douglas Cheeseman's transformation and Harley Savage's practice of restoring old objects, along with the symbol of the Bent Bridge, suggest that genuine fulfilment comes through acceptance, not rules and control. By blending Eastern wisdom with Western existential thought, the paper argues that *The Idea of Perfection* is set in Australia but becomes a universal meditation on the beauty of imperfection and the possibility of a normal life.

Discussion

Douglas Cheeseman's arrival in Karakarook tends to be his philosophical journey from certainty to acceptance: "You could see that Karakarook had once taken it for granted that it had a big future. Wool and beef had poured out of it, along the old highway or down the barges on the river" (Grenville 45). He believes that modern belief, scientific knowledge, and technical precision will solve every human problem. His profession as a structural engineer trained him to observe the world with measurements, symmetry, and standards. Grenville presents Douglas as a symbol of contemporary society's faith in progress and perfection, and, in facing the saturated contradictions of lived experience, she shows how this arbitrarily constructed spectrum can fail magnificently. Douglas's profession and the Bent Bridge are among the novel's most significant symbols. From a materialist viewpoint, it appears outdated and structurally irregular. He believes the bridge will be replaced by modern structures and engineering standards, but the people in Karakarook refuse to alter it because it holds memories, local history, and emotional attachment. The conflict arising around the bridge represents the disagreement over architecture, but it is analysed as a philosophical conflict between measurable *perfection* and human experience.

Grenville strengthens this figurative conflict through the novel's epigraph from Leonardo da Vinci's: "An arch is two weaknesses which together make a strength". (Grenville, epigraph). This line looks like a statement, but when analysed philosophically, Leonardo da Vinci suggests that apparent weakness can create steadiness through support and balance. The bent bridge seems imperfect by conventional engineering standards, but it remains the emotional centre of the community. Grenville portrays the bridge as a symbol that imperfection is not the opposite of strength but one of its essential conditions. Initially, Douglas fails to understand imperfection because of his education, but later he begins to recognise that the bridge holds meanings that engineering calculations alone cannot express. Through this realisation, Douglas moves towards what Heidegger calls authentic existence as a mode of being grounded in sincerity rather than dominion.

Douglas's transformation, portrayed by Grenville, is largely shaped by Taoist philosophy, which challenges human desire rather than imposing a rigid order on the natural world; Taoism advocates harmony through flexibility, balance, and alignment with the natural flow of life. Lao Tzu writes, "Nothing in the world is softer

and weaker than water, yet nothing surpasses it in overcoming the hard.” (Tao Te Ching, ch. 78). Grenville’s symbolism of the bridge also associates with the Buddhist concept of impermanence, because it teaches that all material forms are subject to change, and when human beings struggle to maintain fixed beliefs at the face of an ever-changing world, it creates suffering. Douglas’s transformation happens after his interactions with Harley Savage, but she never seeks perfection through mastery or control. Her profession as a restorer reflects a different philosophy of value. Instead of throwing the furniture away and replacing it with new objects, Harley meticulously works to preserve marks of wear and tear and blight. To her, restoration is not about removing traces of imperfection, but about the fact that history is still being written. Grenville says that Harley’s work respects the life already present in each object. It lets the object’s past show rather than hide it. This approach directly questions consumer culture, which usually links value to newness and perfect appearance.

Japanese aesthetic philosophy, Wabi-Sabi, celebrates the beauty in imperfection and incompleteness. It values objects that retain the traces of their history, demonstrating that beauty comes not from destroying imperfection but from embracing it. Grenville clearly portrays the relationship between material objects and human identity itself. In the novel, both Douglas and Harley carry struggles and bitter experiences from their past lives before they meet. Later, these experiences become the foundation of their wisdom rather than evidence of failure. Like Japanese aesthetic philosophy, these characters celebrate the beauty in life’s imperfections. The relationship between Douglas and Harley further illustrates the Eastern philosophical principle of complementary opposites. Douglas initially represents logic, order, and analysis, whereas Harley embodies intuition, patience, and acceptance. Rather than portraying these qualities as contradictory, Grenville gradually reveals their mutual dependence. Their relationship reflects the Taoist principle of Yin and Yang, where opposing forces find harmony through balance instead of competition. Douglas learns compassion from Harley. At the same time, Harley’s quiet strength helps Douglas challenge his views on perfection. Together, they show that real relationships don’t require the same viewpoints; they thrive on accepting each other’s differences.

Douglas’s affection towards Harley reflects the Buddhist principle of non-attachment. In the novel’s opening, he is deeply attached to his profession and standards of success, which creates anxiety by sustaining an impossible image of perfection. Later, he begins to value ordinary moments and shared experiences over professional achievement. This transformation signifies the Buddhist insight that liberation begins when attachment to rigid expectations is abandoned. Through this transformation, it becomes clear that Douglas’s journey is not simply romantic but spiritual, reflecting an inward movement from control to acceptance.

Early Goryeo society had a strong will to integrate the three religions of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism in order to pray for the well-being of the royal family and the nation. In particular, rather than following Taoist rites, they sought to

win the hearts of the people by worshipping deities such as the spirits of heaven and the gods of mountains and rivers in a traditional way, or by performing ancestral rites. Accordingly, it is believed that the early Goryeo monarchs achieved the intended goals of “respect Buddha and satisfy Gods (供佛樂神)”, “monarch and subject of sharing their joy (君臣同樂)”, and “eliminating disasters and praying for good fortune” by leading the Jae-Je, Taoism rituals (醮), and Palgwanhoe. Therefore, in the early Goryeo period, Taoism was limited to a Confucian classics-like approach, and the worship of gods that integrated the three religions, such as Palgwanhoe, dominated the politics and religious rituals of the time (Han 215).

Analysing the depiction of Grenville in the perception of Taoism, Buddhism, Wabi-Sabi and existential philosophy, this novel acts as a meditation on the human search for meaning. Instead of viewing perfection as the ultimate goal in life, Grenville argues that wisdom actually starts where the pursuit of perfection stops.

In Kate Grenville’s novel *The Idea of Perfection*, she explores how perfection is more of a cultural idea than something we can actually achieve. Through the stories of Douglas Cheeseman and Harley Savage, Grenville challenges the belief that happiness comes from being efficient, successful, good-looking, or emotionally stable. Instead, the book shows that real joy comes from embracing uncertainty, recognising our vulnerabilities, and valuing relationships over accomplishments. This turns a simple rural Australian backdrop into a deep reflection on what it really means to be human.

The novel conveys a universal philosophy through a comparative reading of Eastern philosophy and Western existentialism. Douglas’s gradual transformation reflects the Buddhist principle of non-attachment, showing that suffering arises from unrealistic expectations rather than imperfection itself. Harley’s restoration of damaged furniture reflects the Japanese philosophy of Wabi-Sabi because it finds beauty in age, incompleteness, and impermanence. The ethical dimension of Harley’s work further resonates with the *Bhagavad Gita*’s teaching of Nishkama Karma, where meaningful action is performed without attachment to external reward. When all the philosophical perspectives are analysed together, it becomes clear that perfection is not the destination of human life but one of its greatest impressions. Therefore, Grenville rejects the binary opposition between perfection and failure; instead, she proposes incompleteness as the foundation for compassion, resilience, and meaningful relationships.

Grenville invites the reader to reconsider the values that govern contemporary society. In the age of technology and unrealistic expectations of success, this paper implies that perfection is neither possible nor necessary for a meaningful life. Human existence is defined not by flawlessness but by the courage to accept uncertainty with vulnerability and cultivate relationships grounded in compassion and mutual acceptance. By blending Eastern wisdom with Western existential thought, the novel argues that authentic accomplishment emerges not through the pursuit of perfection but through accepting imperfection as the deepest expression of our

shared humanity. This kind of acceptance makes the world happier than expected. Harley recognises that “Perfection was not what she had imagined.” The novel therefore transforms imperfection into a philosophical principle of authenticity and self-acceptance.

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