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Comparative Cultural Philosophy of Life in Javanese and Russian Traditions: Cultural Values, Spirituality, and Existentialism Trough Hermeneutic Analysis of Classical Texts

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ABSTRACT

Background. A philosophy of life serves as a framework for constructing a worldview and a moral compass for human beings; traces of such a philosophy are often found in literary works.

Purpose: This study examines philosophies of life in Javanese and Russian traditions through comparative cultural philosophy and hermeneutics, interpreting and comparing three dimensions: cultural values, spirituality, and existentialism.

Method: This descriptive qualitative study analyzed three Javanese piwulang texts (*Serat Wulangreh, Serat Wedhatama, Serat Kalatidha*) and three Russian novels by Tolstoy and Dostoevsky (Anna Karenina, The Brothers Karamazov, Crime and Punishment). Data were collected through close reading and note-taking, then analyzed in four steps: coding passages on cultural values, spirituality, and existence; interpreting them within their religious and historical horizons; comparing the coded passages across traditions; and drawing conclusions on convergence and divergence.

Results: Serat Wulangreh stresses etiquette, careful selection of teachers, and self-restraint to maintain social harmony (*rukun*); Serat Wedhatama locates evil in the ego (*angkara*) and offers the curbing of desire toward manunggaling kawula Gusti; Serat Kalatidha answers a morally corrupt age with eling lan waspada (mindfulness and vigilance). In the Russian novels, Anna Karenina shows how unchecked desire leads to emptiness while Levin finds meaning in living "for the soul"; Crime and Punishment presents confession and suffering as the road to Raskolnikov's renewal; and The Brothers Karamazov defends inner freedom against the rationalized authority of the Grand Inquisitor. Overall, the Javanese texts portray a preventive philosophy of life, whereas the Russian novels portray a reflective one in which suffering and atonement become the path to spiritual transformation, rooted in Orthodox Christianity.

Conclusion: Despite developing in vastly different geographical, historical, and religious contexts, both traditions reject pure materialism and rationalism and hold that a meaningful life is achieved through an inner process oriented toward God and communal life. This study helps fill a gap in cross-cultural research on Javanese and Russian philosophy, which have largely been studied in isolation.

KEYWORDS

Comparative Cultural Philosophy, Philosophy of Life, Rational Materialism

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INTRODUCTION

Life philosophy is a fundamental element in shaping the cultural identity of a society. Through life philosophy, humans can construct views on life and its meaning. Furthermore, life philosophy provides a society with a value framework that shapes social, spiritual, and moral behavior. This value system helps humans understand the relationship between themselves and the transcendental world around them (Geertz, 1973). Life philosophy is a formula that helps translate the world outside oneself into the structure of human understanding of the world (Krishnananda, 2003), without life philosophy, humans cannot formulate the meaning of their role and significance in the world.

Understanding a philosophy of life is therefore important for at least three reasons. It explains how a community forms its cultural identity, because shared ideas about what a good life is become the basis of a shared sense of "who we are." It also helps explain human behaviour, since everyday choices, from how people treat their elders to how they face loss, are guided by these often unspoken values. Finally, it opens a window onto spiritual values, as most philosophies of life place human existence within a larger order, whether that order is called God, the cosmos, or destiny (Geertz, 1973; Suseno, 1984). Literary works are one of the richest places to observe these three aspects, because they show values not as abstract rules but as lived experience.

In the Javanese tradition, Javanese life philosophy is based on social harmony, balance, self-control, acceptance of life's realities, and etiquette, which then become the moral foundation for human relations (Suseno, 1984; Endraswara, 2018; Savitri et al., 2024). In the relationship between the self and the 'outside self,' Javanese people tend to apply resignation and acceptance, commonly known as *narima ing pandum*. *Narima ing pandum* is an expression of Javanese people who have undergone spiritual practice to eliminate arrogance originating from a sense of ego. Thus, *narima ing pandum* is not merely a passive, inert attitude of resignation, but a reflective acceptance based on spiritual awareness and is psychologically relevant in maintaining the mental well-being of Javanese society(Pratama et al., 2024)

The loss of the concept of ego can also be seen in concepts such as *manunggaling kawula gusti* (Hidayat et al., 2023). In Javanese spiritual understanding, God is considered the source of all existence, making God the ultimate goal of humanity's search for truth. By having God as the ultimate goal, humans can then formulate the direction and purpose of life, namely towards *sangkan paraning dumadi*, the movement towards God, which is a journey towards self-awareness through inner purification (Zoetmulder, 1991).

The Russian intellectual tradition offers equally profound philosophical reflections on the meaning of human life, often encapsulated through the idea of the Russian Soul or *dusha*, an emotional depth and reflective tendency considered characteristic of Russian culture (Chimenson et al., 2022). This can be evidenced linguistically by analyzing phraseology in the Russian language that emphasizes emotional aspects, reflection, and collectivism (Qizi & Qizi, 2025).

This Russian tradition aligns with Orthodox Christianity, which remains the dominant religion in Russia. In Christian tradition, sacrifice is central to doctrine, as Jesus sacrificed himself on the cross for the salvation of all humanity. A Russian person is also often faced with painful sacrifice for a greater purpose/cause. Besides sacrifice, the concept of atonement for sins is also an important factor in understanding the Russian worldview (Apresjan, 2009). This can be seen in the works of Dostoevsky, such as in Crime and Punishment. Humans can be freed from the shackles of guilt and move towards higher consciousness by atoning for sins. For the Orthodox Russian, contemplation and engagement with the "real world" is a necessity, embodied in the concept of *starchestvo*

(Kivelson & Greene, 2003). This journey is an intimate one in human spirituality, involving the unique conditions and contexts of each individual.

To keep the comparison balanced, the Russian tradition can be described with the same three elements used for the Javanese one: its core concepts, its religious foundation, and its view of human existence. Its core concepts include *dusha* (soul), *sobornost* (spiritual community or togetherness), and repentance; its religious foundation is Eastern Orthodox Christianity, which understands salvation as a gradual transformation of the whole person toward God (Lossky, 1957; Ware, 1993) and its view of human existence sees the person as free, and therefore capable of falling and rising again through suffering (Berdyaev, 1990) In parallel, the Javanese tradition rests on the core concepts of *rukun*, *narima ing pandum*, and *manunggaling kawula Gusti*; its religious foundation is a synthesis of older Javanese, Hindu-Buddhist, and Islamic Sufi elements (Ricklefs, 2006; Woodward, 1989) and its view of human existence places the person as a small world (*jagad cilik*) that should be in harmony with the great world (*jagad gedhe*) (Suseno, 1984).

Despite being thousands of kilometers apart, Javanese and Russian philosophies share some similarities, such as how both Javanese and Russian people view God as the ultimate goal. By analyzing and comparing these two life philosophies, it is possible to formulate how Javanese and Russian people view the world and their role within it. This can provide insight into the ways of thinking and behaving of two cultures that are foreign to each other, and potentially open up possibilities for dialectics between the two cultures, resulting in new and nuanced philosophical constructions. Academic studies specifically comparing Javanese and Russian life philosophies are still very limited. Research on Javanese philosophy generally focuses on social ethics and spirituality independently (Endraswara, 2018; Mulder, 2005; Zoetmulder, 1991), while studies on Russian philosophy are more often conducted through literary studies, intellectual history, or Orthodox theology separately separately (Berdyaev, 1990; William, 2008). This gap is the foundation of this research: a comparative study that places both life philosophy traditions within the same analytical framework, using a comparative cultural philosophy approach combined with hermeneutics, to reveal the similarities and differences in philosophical values developing in both cultures.

To make the position of this study clearer, previous research can be grouped into three clusters. The first cluster examines Javanese philosophy of life on its own terms, especially its social ethics and mysticism: maps the principles of harmony and respect (Suseno, 1984), traces *manunggaling kawula Gusti* in the *suluk* literature (Zoetmulder, 1991), discuss Javanese mysticism and its relation to Islam (Mulder, 2005; Woodward, 1989), while more recent studies read particular texts or concepts, such as *Serat Kalatidha* (Amalia et al., 2025) or *narima ing pandum* from the viewpoint of indigenous psychology ((Haryanto, 2014; Pratama et al., 2024). The second cluster examines the Russian intellectual tradition: on the Russian idea (Berdyaev, 1990), on Dostoevsky's poetics and theology (Bakhtin, 1984; Williams, 2008), on Russian literature in general (Emerson, 2014), and on the reflection of spiritual problems in Russian literature (Shadieva & Khujanova, 2024). The third cluster consists of cross-cultural studies of Russian values, but these mostly compare Russia with Western Europe, for example in business or linguistic contexts (Chimenson et al., 2022; Qizi & Qizi, 2025).

Recent studies published confirm this pattern, at the same time, show how lively each field still is. On the Javanese side, scholars have examined the debate on *wahdat al-wujud* in *Serat Wedhatama* and other court manuscripts (Mahamid & Hidayatullah, 2024), the Sufi ethics of the self in Javanese Islam (Bistara & Jali, 2024), female Sufism in *Serat Murtasiyah* (Insani et al., 2024) ascetic practice (*tapa*) in Ranggawarsita's writings (Insani et al., 2024) the shift of Javanese

Sufism from ascetic protest to institutional power (Said et al., 2025), the long-running controversy over the unity of being in the Malay-Indonesian world (Masudi & Saepudin, 2024), and the educational philosophy of Javanese *piwulang* texts (Purwadi, Wahyono, Zuhro & Cahyandaru, 2026). One study has even read a Christian figure, Isa, within Javanese mysticism in *Serat Centhini* (Darmadi et al., 2026), showing that the Javanese tradition can be placed in dialogue with Christianity. On the Russian side, recent work has revisited Dostoevsky's religious thought and its reception (Dobieszewski, 2024; Horvath, 2025). Dostoevsky's defence of personal freedom against materialism (Savelieva et al., 2024), Levin's spiritual search in *Anna Karenina* (Lima, 2025), the moral and emotional dimension of reading Tolstoy (de Carvalho & Villalobos, 2026), Orthodox asceticism and the body (Turcan, 2025, 2026), and the role of Orthodoxy in contemporary Russian identity (Kolstø & Kolov, 2024). Yet none of these recent studies brings the two traditions together, which confirms that the gap identified above is still open.

From this mapping, one thing is clearly missing: none of these studies places Javanese and Russian philosophies of life side by side, reads them through primary literary texts, and compares them with the same set of analytical categories. As a result, we do not yet know whether the two traditions, which both reject a purely materialistic view of life and both place God as the final goal, actually arrive at that goal by similar or different routes. This comparison matters academically for at least three reasons. First, it moves comparative philosophy beyond the usual East–West binary by bringing together two non-Western-European traditions that are rarely discussed together. Second, it tests whether shared ideas, such as the rejection of materialism and the turn inward, take different shapes when they grow out of different religious soils (Hindu-Buddhist and Islamic Sufism on one side, Orthodox Christianity on the other). Third, it offers a concrete reading resource for the growing academic cooperation between Indonesia and Russia, including in the teaching of literature and culture.

It should also be stated from the outset that this study analyses how philosophies of life are *represented* in selected literary works. The findings therefore describe the worldview constructed in these texts, not the character of Javanese or Russian society as a whole, which is far more diverse and continues to change.

Based on this gap, the problem this study addresses can be stated plainly: there has been no systematic analysis that compares Javanese and Russian philosophies of life within one philosophical framework and on the basis of their primary literary texts. This study therefore aims to (1) describe how the selected Javanese and Russian texts represent cultural values, spirituality, and human existence; (2) identify the similarities and differences between the two traditions in each of these dimensions; and (3) explain these patterns in light of their religious, historical, and geographical backgrounds. Using a comparative hermeneutic framework, the study is expected to contribute a clearer picture of how two non-Western-European traditions arrive at similar spiritual goals by different paths, and to offer a model of comparative reading that can be applied to other cultural pairs.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research uses a descriptive qualitative design with a comparative cultural philosophy approach combined with hermeneutics. Comparative cultural philosophy is used to place two traditions within the same set of categories, while hermeneutics is used to interpret the meaning of each text by moving back and forth between the parts of a text and its whole, and between the text and its historical horizon (Ricoeur, 1976; Gadamer, 2004). A society's philosophy of life is operationalised through three dimensions: cultural values, spirituality, and existence.

Methodologically, the study is placed within the interpretive (constructivist) paradigm, which assumes that meaning is not simply found in a text but is built through a careful dialogue between the reader, the text, and its context (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The research design is a comparative library-based case study, in which each tradition is treated as one case represented by three texts.

The primary data for the Javanese tradition are *Serat Wulangreh* (composed by Pakubuwana IV, edition by Purwadi & Wuryanti, 2015), *Serat Wedhatama* (composed by Mangkunegara IV, edition in *Menyingkap Serat Wedhatama*, (Any, 1983), and *Serat Kalatidha* (by Ranggawarsita). The primary data for the Russian tradition are the philosophical novels of Leo Tolstoy and Fyodor Dostoevsky: *Anna Karenina* (Tolstoy, 2007), *The Brothers Karamazov* (Dostoevsky, 1912), and *Crime and Punishment* (Dostoevsky, 1914). Secondary data consist of books and journal articles on Javanese philosophy, Russian thought, Sufism, and Orthodox theology. These texts were chosen because they are canonical works that are widely read as sources of moral and philosophical teaching in their respective cultures.

The unit of analysis is a meaningful textual unit, namely a stanza (*pupuh* or *pada*) in the Javanese texts and a passage of dialogue, narration, or a complete episode in the Russian novels, that expresses an idea about how to live. The primary texts were selected using four criteria: (a) they are recognised as canonical works in their own tradition; (b) they explicitly deal with moral, spiritual, or existential questions; (c) they come from a comparable period, namely the late eighteenth to the late nineteenth century; and (d) reliable editions or translations are available to the research team. Secondary sources were selected if they are scholarly books or peer-reviewed articles that discuss Javanese thought, Russian thought, Sufism, or Orthodox theology, and preference was given to sources written by specialists in each field.

Data were collected through library research using close reading and note-taking. Every stanza, dialogue, narration, or episode that speaks about how people should live, relate to others, relate to God, or respond to suffering was recorded on a data card together with its source location.

Each data card contains a code for the text and location (for example, WR-Dhandhanggula for *Serat Wulangreh* or CP-5.4 for *Crime and Punishment*, part 5, chapter 4), the original quotation, its English translation, the dimension to which it belongs, and a short initial note on its meaning. Javanese quotations were checked against the printed editions, and the Russian novels were read in English translation and checked by the Russian members of the team against the original Russian wording for key terms. All cards were stored in a shared spreadsheet so that every interpretation could be traced back to its source.

The analysis followed four steps adapted from the interactive model (Miles et al., 2014). (1) *Data reduction and coding*: the recorded passages were sorted into the three dimensions (cultural values, spirituality, existence), and passages that did not fit were set aside. (2) *Hermeneutic interpretation*: each coded passage was interpreted in light of its language (including key terms such as *angkara*, *eling lan waspada*, *dusha*), its religious background, and its historical context, supported by secondary sources rather than by the authors' intuition alone. (3) *Comparison*: the interpreted passages from the two traditions were placed side by side for each dimension to identify similarities and differences; these are summarised in Table 1. (4) *Drawing conclusions*: the patterns found in the comparison were formulated into conclusions and checked again against the primary texts to make sure that each claim is supported by textual evidence.

In practice, hermeneutics was applied through a coding scheme that links each of the three dimensions to a set of operational categories (Table 1). Every textual unit was first read in its original language and in translation, then assigned one or more codes. After that, the meaning of the coded unit was interpreted through three hermeneutic moves: reading the unit against the whole text

(the hermeneutic circle), reading it against its religious and historical horizon, and reading it against the corresponding unit from the other tradition. This comparative step enables a "fusion of horizons," through which the meaning of concepts such as eling lan waspada becomes clearer when juxtaposed with Raskolnikov's confession, and vice versa (Gadamer, 2004). Similar hermeneutic readings of Javanese Sufi manuscripts have been carried out in recent studies (Mahamid & Hidayatullah, 2024; Shofiullah et al., 2025), and this study extends that procedure to a cross-cultural comparison.

Table 1. Coding categories used in the analysis

Dimension	Operational categories (codes)	Examples of textual units
Cultural values	CV1 social harmony and etiquette; CV2 self-control; CV3 attitude toward foreign or new values; CV4 moral consequence of action	WR-Dhandhanggula (choosing a teacher); KT-stanza 7 (zaman edan); AK (Anna's passion); CP (Katerina Ivanovna)
Spirituality	SP1 view of God as the final goal; SP2 view of ego and desire; SP3 path to God (asceticism, suffering, repentance); SP4 critique of materialism and rationalism	WT-Pangkur (Panembahan Senopati); WT opening stanza (angkara); BK (Grand Inquisitor, Zosima)
Existence	EX1 meaning of life; EX2 freedom and choice; EX3 response to crisis; EX4 relation of self to cosmos or community	KT (eling lan waspada); CP (Raskolnikov's confession); AK (Levin's search)

To keep the interpretations credible, valid, and consistent, several strategies were used (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). First, *source triangulation*: each interpretation of a primary text was compared with at least one scholarly source from the relevant tradition (Denzin, 1978). Second, *investigator triangulation*: the Javanese texts were interpreted mainly by the Indonesian authors and the Russian texts by the Russian authors, after which the whole team discussed both sets of interpretations together; disagreements were resolved by returning to the text. Third, *systematic comparison*: the same three dimensions and the same coding categories were applied to both traditions, so that the comparison is made on equal terms. Fourth, an *audit trail* was kept through the data cards, which record how each conclusion was reached.

The six works are not claimed to represent the whole of the Javanese or Russian philosophical traditions. They were chosen because each is widely regarded as a classic expression of moral and spiritual teaching in its culture: *Wulangreh*, *Wedhatama*, and *Kalatidha* are among the most frequently taught *piwulang* texts in Javanese education and are still studied today (Purwadi, Wahyono, Zuhro & Cahyandaru, 2026), while *Anna Karenina*, *The Brothers Karamazov*, and *Crime and Punishment* are the novels in which Tolstoy and Dostoevsky most directly address faith, guilt, and the meaning of life (Emerson, 2014). The three Javanese texts are didactic poems, whereas the three Russian works are novels; this difference in genre is acknowledged as a limitation, because a poem gives teaching directly while a novel shows it through characters and events. For this reason, the comparison focuses on the *ideas* expressed in the texts rather than on their literary form. Other important voices, such as the Javanese *suluk* literature or Russian writers

like Leskov and Chekhov, are not included, so the findings should be read as a representation of these traditions through six key texts, not as a full portrait of them.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This section is organised around the three analytical dimensions: cultural values, spirituality, and existence. Each dimension follows the same order. First, the findings from the Javanese texts are presented, followed by the findings from the Russian novels; in both cases, what the texts actually say is presented first and is then interpreted with the help of previous studies. Next, the two traditions are compared directly, and each dimension closes with a short synthesis that links the findings to the aims of the study. A summary of the textual evidence is given in Table 1.

Dimension of Cultural Values

Ethical values as part of the collective consciousness of Javanese society are reflected in didactic texts or *piwulang* such as *Serat Wulangreh* by Pakubuwana IV. Written in *sekar alit/macapat*, *Wulangreh*, which literally means 'lessons in governance,' emphasizes etiquette, self-control, caution in choosing friends and teachers, and obedience to teachers, as a warning so that a person or especially a prospective leader does not fall into bad company and harmful habits that damage character. This teaching prioritizes harmony and alignment as the basis for social functioning (Suseno, 1984), and represents an effort to preserve prevailing values. This teaching gives a strong perennial nuance to Javanese ethical values, where inherited values are seen as a construct that can guide humans to salvation (Ratnawati, 2008).

Within this framework, harmony is viewed as a natural mechanism, not merely a social construct: the Javanese person is understood as a *jagad cilik* or microcosm within the *jagad gedhe* or macrocosm that must reflect cosmic order within themselves. The individual is a small part forming *bebrayan agung* or the great social order; if this small part is unstable, the social cosmos is disturbed, making the maintenance of harmony a collective responsibility of every individual.

The need to maintain this harmony gives rise to the concept of reflective acceptance known as *nrimo/narima ing pandum* (Haryanto, 2014). *Narima ing pandum* is not repression to silence expressions of dissatisfaction, but rather an attitude of maturity that prioritizes collective interests above individual interests (Alaydrus et al., 2025). This attitude is linked to the principle of *eling lan waspada* or mindfulness and vigilance (Amalia et al., 2025), depicted in one of the stanzas of *Serat Kalatidha* by Ranggawarsita:

"Amenangi zaman édan, éwuhaya ing pambudi, mélu édan nora tahan, yén tan milu anglakoni, boya kaduman mélik, kaliren wekasanipun. Dilalah kersa Allah, begja-begjane kang lali, luwih begja kang éling lawan waspada." (translate: In these crazy times, one must be shrewd; going along with the madness is unbearable. If you don't go along with it, you won't get your share and will ultimately go hungry. By God's will, the careless are fortunate, but even more fortunate are those who are vigilant and always on guard).

In this stanza, Ranggawarsita highlights the moral decline and corruption of his era or crazy era, which created a vicious cycle: one corrupt act encourages another. The solution offered is *eling lan waspada*, self-control that prioritizes the common good over self-existence, symbolized by *melik* or worldly possessions/wealth.

The same preventive logic appears in *Serat Wulangreh*, especially in the well-known *Dhandhanggula* stanza on choosing a teacher: *"Nanging yen sira ngguguru kaki, amiliha manungsa kang nyata, ingkang becik martabate, sarta kang wruh ing kukum, kang ngibadah lan kang wirangi..."* (translate: But if you seek a teacher, my child, choose a person who is genuine, of good

standing, who knows the law, who is devout and who keeps away from wrongdoing). The teaching is given *before* the young person makes a choice. In other words, Javanese ethics in this text works like a fence: it tries to prevent a mistake from happening at all.

Russian cultural values, as reflected in the works of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, emphasize human inner turmoil. In the Russian *Weltanschauung*, humans are understood as a canvas of experience who need to taste the bitter and sweet of life to foster moral maturity (Antoniacci, 2015), an orientation that requires moral struggle before a person achieves an understanding of the world and their place within it. The prerequisite is a willingness to engage in reflection and self-improvement. This is rooted in the Orthodox Christian tradition which believes that repentant humans returning to their faith can achieve salvation, so that life's mistakes are never seen as the end (Blank, 2010).

This principle manifests in Russian literature through the colors of contemplation, reflection, and sacrifice. In Anna Karenina, Tolstoy portrays the character Anna who, plagued by dissatisfaction in her marriage, chooses the path of adultery, which ultimately leads her to emptiness. This story implies a subtle message: the consequences of uncontrolled desires. This message is conveyed not through explicit statements but through the plot of the character's actions and their consequences (Emerson, 2014).

19th-century Russian literature also records a critical stance towards the influence of Western European liberalism, seen in the depiction of the *Francophile* Russian aristocratic style, which Tolstoy and Dostoevsky considered a disease afflicting the Russian soul/*dusha*. In the Russian view, there is an attempt by the West to influence and corrupt the *dusha* (Witte, 1998) In Crime and Punishment, the character Katerina Ivanovna Marmeladova lives in poverty but constantly reminisces about her past in the French-speaking intellectual-aristocratic circles. Dostoevsky portrays Katerina as an alienated individual uprooted from her Russian cultural roots, a character who has no place in the Russian socio-cultural landscape.

The meeting point of the two traditions lies in the rejection of pure individualism as a basis for ethics. The difference lies in the approach, where Javanese culture emphasizes caution and preventive self-control to avoid evil. Meanwhile, Russian culture emphasizes understanding truth through experience involving inner turmoil, error, and redemption. Borrowing Islamic terms, Javanese people tend towards *amar ma'ruf nahi munkar* or enjoining good and forbidding evil, while Russians tend towards sincere repentance or *taubatan nasuha.*

The use of two Islamic terms here needs a short explanation, because Islam is a third tradition that belongs neither to the Russian novels nor, exclusively, to the Javanese texts. The terms are used as a heuristic device, not as a claim that either tradition is Islamic in this respect. There are two reasons for this choice. First, Islamic ethical vocabulary is already part of the Javanese texts themselves: *Wulangreh* and *Wedhatama* were written in a Javanese Islamic setting and use concepts drawn from Sufism (Ricklefs, 2006; Bistara & Jali, 2024), so the terms are not foreign to the Javanese side of the comparison. Second, the pair *amar ma'ruf nahi munkar* and *taubatan nasuha* captures in a compact way the difference between preventing wrongdoing and repenting after it, which is the very contrast the texts reveal. The Russian Orthodox tradition has its own term for the second attitude, *metanoia* or a turning of the whole heart to God (Ware, 1993), and readers may substitute it. The Islamic terms are kept here because they speak to the intended readership of this journal, but they should be understood as a bridge for understanding, not as a standard against which the two traditions are measured.

Placed side by side, the textual evidence makes the contrast concrete. In *Serat Wulangreh*, a young man is told in advance whom to follow so that he does not go astray; in *Crime and*

Punishment, Raskolnikov goes astray first, and only after the murder does Sonya urge him to go to the crossroads, bow down, kiss the earth he has defiled, and confess. In *Serat Kalatidha*, the answer to a corrupt age is to stay *eling lan waspada* and refuse to join the madness; in *Anna Karenina*, Anna follows her passion and the novel lets the consequences speak, under the epigraph "Vengeance is mine; I will repay." Both traditions therefore judge uncontrolled desire as harmful, but the Javanese text warns before the fall, while the Russian novels reveal meaning through the fall and its aftermath.

In the dimension of cultural values, the texts show one shared pattern and one clear difference. The shared pattern is that both traditions reject a life led by individual desire alone. The difference lies in timing: the Javanese texts place moral teaching *before* action, as guidance and prevention, while the Russian novels place moral understanding *after* action, as the fruit of error and its consequences. This answers the first and second aims of the study for this dimension and shows that a similar ethical goal can be reached through two different moral logics.

Dimension of Spirituality

Serat Wedhatama by Mangkunegara IV is one of the richest texts depicting the spiritual dimension of Javanese culture. Etymologically, *Wedhatama* comes from *wedha* (Veda, knowledge) and *utama* or highest. This text contains Javanese-esque Sufi teachings centered on the idea of *manunggaling kawula Gusti* or the union of the servant with God. In this view, the human with the highest spirituality is one who succeeds in transcending their egoistic existence. What remains is only awareness of God as the cause of all that exists, an idea known as *sangkan paraning dumadi* or the origin and purpose of creation.

Because terms such as Sufism, Hinduism, and *manunggaling kawula Gusti* carry long and complex theological histories, this study does not treat them as interchangeable. *Manunggaling kawula Gusti* is understood here as a Javanese mystical expression that developed in the *suluk* literature and was debated in relation to pantheism and monism, not as a fixed doctrine (Zoetmulder, 1991). Following Woodward (1989) and Ricklefs (2006), the Islamic element in Javanese spirituality is read as a "mystic synthesis" in which Sufi ideas were absorbed into older Javanese and Hindu-Buddhist frameworks (Woodward, 1989; Ricklefs, 2006). When this article calls the teaching of *Wedhatama* "Javanese-esque Sufi," it refers to this synthesis as it appears in the text, rather than claiming that the text is identical with classical Sufism.

The opening stanza of *Wedhatama*, "*mingkar mingkuring angkara, akarana karenan mardi siwi*" (avoiding evil desires, because one wishes to educate children), is often read merely as an exhortation for self-control. However, etymologically, *angkara* derives from *ahankara* or source of ego (Monier-William, 1899) which shifted in meaning to signify evil and greed. This semantic shift indicates that in the Javanese view, influenced by Hinduism, the source of all evil is the sense of ego itself. The solution to confronting *ahankara* in *Wedhatama's* perspective is *manunggaling kawula Gusti*, dissolving the boundary between self and God. Thus, humans merely become *titah* or servants/creatures who obediently carry out God's commands or aligning themselves with God's guidance and will.

This concept is further translated into controlling *hawa nafsu* or desires, as stated in the following stanza (*Pupuh Pangkur*) of *Serat Wedhatama* (Any, 1983).

Nulada laku utama, Tumrape wong Tanah Jawi, Wong agung ing Ngeksiganda, Panembahan Senopati, Kepati amarsudi, Sudane hawa lan nepsu, Pinesu tapa brata, Tanapi ing siyang ratri, Amamangun karyenak tyasing sesama. (Translate: Take for example, the exemplary conduct of Panembahan Senopati, a prominent figure in Ngeksiganda (the Mataram Kingdom) among the

Javanese people, who was diligent, curbed his desires through ascetic practices both day and night, and strove to bring joy to others).

In this stanza, Panembahan Senopati is cited as a role model *nulada laku utama*, who diligently strives *nyuda* or to reduce *hawa lan nepsu* or desires and passions day and night. In Sufi vocabulary, such control of desires leads one to become a *zahid*. A *zahid* is someone free from worldly shackles and only remembers the union of the self with God. Wedhatama also refers to this achievement as the state of *wong sepuh* or a person 'old'/spiritually mature who has *sepi hawa* or overcome desires and attained the truth of the God-servant relationship.

Recent studies support this interpretation, demonstrating that Serat Wedhatama articulates the concept of the unity of being through Javanese cultural expressions (Mahamid & Hidayatullah, 2024), while Javanese Sufism reflects a dynamic relationship between ascetic withdrawal and social engagement (Said et al., 2025). Similarly, the emphasis on self-discipline embodied by Panembahan Senopati resonates with Sufi ethical teachings in other Javanese manuscripts, in which spiritual virtues are cultivated through the restraint of human passions (Bistara & Jali, 2024)

Russian spirituality, conversely, revolves around suffering and self-sacrifice as paths to salvation. Orthodox Christianity is a primary shaper of this Russian spirituality. The works of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky demonstrate resistance to the spiritual crisis of Western Europe, which, in their reading, leads to materialism and the draining of life's meaning. As a counterpoint, the idea of the Russian soul/*dusha* emphasizes the importance of experiencing life with the heart, not merely through rational-materialistic methods. The Legend of the Grand Inquisitor in The Brothers Karamazov is the most famous illustration. Jesus, returning to the world and greeted joyfully by the people, is instead arrested by the Church and its inquisitorial forces, who accuse him of causing human suffering by giving them free will. This represents Dostoevsky's critique of rationality and authority seeking to reduce the complexity and inner freedom of humans.

Likewise, the terms "Orthodox Christianity" and "Russian soul" are used with caution. The emphasis on suffering, humility, and repentance draws on Eastern Orthodox theology, in which salvation is understood as a gradual transformation of the whole person toward God ((Lossky, 1957); Ware, 1993). The notion of the "Russian soul" (*dusha*), on the other hand, is partly a cultural myth that was shaped by nineteenth-century writers themselves and is reflected in everyday language (Apresjan, 2009). In this study, *dusha* is therefore treated as a literary and cultural idea that the novels help to build, not as an essential trait of every Russian person. In *The Brothers Karamazov*, this idea is voiced most clearly by the elder Zosima, who teaches that each person is responsible to all and for all, a teaching that Dostoevsky sets against Ivan's rational rebellion (Williams, 2008).

Recent studies of Orthodox spirituality also help to explain why suffering in the Russian novels is not simply pain to be endured but a path of transformation. In Orthodox thought, asceticism is understood as a form of freedom from the domination of passions, and the body itself is called to transfiguration rather than rejection (Turcan, 2025, 2026). This view differs from the Javanese emphasis on dissolving the ego, yet both share the conviction that inner discipline opens the way to God. Studies of Dostoevsky's religious imagination likewise show how deeply his novels draw on Orthodox iconicity and on contested ideas of love (Dobieszewski, 2024; Horvath, 2025), while Levin's journey in Anna Karenina is portrayed primarily as a spiritual quest for a faith that can be meaningfully integrated into everyday life (Lima, 2025).

Both Java and Russia believe that God is the ultimate goal of the spiritual journey, and that rationalism-materialism can kill human spirituality. The difference lies in how they respond. In the Javanese approach, this tradition tends to be preventive or avoiding spiritual threats through

asceticism, fasting, and restraint of desires, whereas the Russian approach tends to be reflective or confronting 'sins' that have occurred, then engaging in reflection and self-improvement.

In the dimension of spirituality, both traditions point to God as the final goal and both see unchecked ego and materialism as obstacles. The Javanese texts, as represented by *Wedhatama*, treat the ego as something to be reduced and finally dissolved; the Russian novels, as represented by *The Brothers Karamazov*, treat the person's freedom as something to be preserved, even when it leads to suffering. This contrast between *dissolving the self* and *transforming the free self* is the main contribution of this dimension to the comparative picture.

Existential Dimension

In the existential dimension, Javanese society tends to align itself with traditional rules that have been established for centuries. This alignment also gives rise to cultures of *isin* or shame and *pekewuh* or reluctance. The attitude of *eling lan waspada* becomes the existential foundation. Its meaning is that when faced with existential questions, Javanese people tend to withdraw and retreat, observe their inner condition, and then align it with the fundamental principles of the universe (*jagad cilik-jagad gedhe*). Serat Kalatidha provides a concrete example where Ranggawarsita understands the existence of a civilizational cycle where the *zaman edan* (era of moral decay, rampant corruption) is a zeitgeist that cannot be directly opposed. The solution is not to swim against the current of the times, but to fortify oneself against external evils. An analogy for this mechanism is *pranata mangsa* (knowledge of seasonal cycles), where farmers do not engineer the weather but merely respond to inevitable cycles.

Russian existentialism is rooted in the idea of *free will* in Christian theology. Humans are given the freedom to choose the path of salvation or perdition, so Russian existentialism is based on the search for meaning through suffering and human choice regarding that suffering. In Russian existential philosophy, suffering becomes a driver of the struggle towards good, and the struggle itself brings transformation.

The novels give concrete shape to this idea. In *Crime and Punishment*, Raskolnikov tests a rational theory that "extraordinary" people may step over moral law; the theory collapses under the weight of his conscience, and his renewal begins only in Siberia, through suffering and Sonya's patient love. In *Anna Karenina*, Levin, troubled by the question of meaning to the point of despair, finds his answer in the simple words of a peasant who lives "for the soul" and "remembers God." In both cases, meaning is not discovered by withdrawing from the crisis, as in *Serat Kalatidha*, but by passing through it.

This comparison reveals a fairly radical difference. Where Javanese philosophy is oriented towards balance, caution, and alignment with nature. Meanwhile, Russian philosophy emphasizes the dialectic of crisis-struggle-transformation. Javanese people tend not to emphasize their own role because the self is understood as a small part of something greater (God, the universe), whereas Russians tend to place personal suffering as the justification for the meaning of their lives. Despite these differences, both agree that the meaning of life is not obtained instantly, but through an inner process that demands awareness, self-honesty, and vigilance.

This contrast can be clarified by placing it within the wider literature on existentialist philosophy. Kierkegaard, often called the father of existentialism, insisted that truth must be lived by the individual rather than merely known, and that the self becomes itself through anxiety, despair, and the leap of faith (Stewart, 2024). Dostoevsky shares this concern for the concrete, suffering individual, and the Russian novels can be read as a religious form of existentialism in which freedom is a burden that leads either to destruction or to salvation (Savelieva et al., 2024).

Sartre later radicalised this freedom by removing God from the picture, so that human beings are "condemned to be free" and must create meaning by themselves; recent scholarship continues to debate how far this atheistic version can be separated from its religious roots (Webber, 2024). In Dostoevsky's polyphonic novels, the meaning of existence emerges through dialogue among independent and free consciousnesses, without any single voice having the final word (Bakhtin, 1984). Read against this background, the Russian novels stand closer to Kierkegaard than to Sartre, because freedom and suffering finally lead toward God. The Javanese texts, on the other hand, offer a different existential model. *Eling lan waspada* is not a leap made by an isolated individual, but a constant inner attentiveness that places the self within a larger order, the *jagad gedhe*. In this sense, Javanese existential thought is less concerned with the anguish of choice and more with the right attunement of the self, an emphasis that is also visible in the ascetic practice of *tapa* in Ranggawarsita's other writings (Shofiullah et al., 2025). The comparison thus contributes to existentialist studies by showing that the question "how should I live?" can be answered not only through radical choice, as in European existentialism, but also through attunement and restraint, as in the Javanese texts.

In the existential dimension, the Javanese texts seek meaning through harmony and inner vigilance in the face of an age that cannot be changed, while the Russian novels seek meaning through crisis, choice, and transformation. The two paths differ in direction, inward withdrawal versus passing through the storm, but they meet in the conviction that meaning is not given instantly and must be won through inner work.

Table 2. Summary of textual evidence across the three dimensions

Dimension	Javanese texts (evidence)	Russian novels (evidence)	Pattern
Cultural values	Wulangreh: choose a genuine teacher, keep etiquette; Kalatidha: refuse to join the "crazy era"	Anna Karenina: the cost of unchecked passion; Crime and Punishment: Katerina Ivanovna uprooted by Francophile pride	Javanese: preventive self-restraint; Russian: learning through error and consequence
Spirituality	Wedhatama: curb angkara (ego) and hawa nafsu, following Panembahan Senopati, toward manunggaling kawula Gusti	The Brothers Karamazov: Zosima's responsibility for all vs. the Grand Inquisitor	Both place God as the final goal; Javanese through asceticism, Russian through humility and suffering
Existence	Kalatidha: eling lan waspada; withdraw and fortify oneself in a corrupt age	Crime and Punishment: confession and renewal of Raskolnikov; Anna Karenina: Levin's search for meaning	Javanese: harmony with cosmic order; Russian: crisis–struggle–transformation

Influence of Historical and Geographical Context

The patterns described above become easier to understand when the texts are read against their historical and religious background. These contexts are offered here as explanatory factors, not as causes that fully determine the texts, and they concern the representation of life philosophy in the selected works rather than all Javanese or Russian people. The Javanese texts must be understood

against the historical backdrop of the gradual interaction between Hindu-Buddhist ideas, indigenous Javanese beliefs, and Islamic Sufism, a process that contributed to what has been described as a "mystic synthesis" in Javanese religious culture (Ricklefs, 2006). *Wulangreh*, *Wedhatama*, and *Kalatidha* were all written in the Surakarta courts of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, at a time when royal political power was limited under Dutch colonial control. In this setting, it is understandable that the texts emphasise inner mastery, self-restraint, and vigilance rather than open confrontation, as seen in Ranggawarsita's response to the *zaman edan*.

For the Russian novels, the key background is Eastern Orthodox Christianity, which shaped Russian identity for centuries and placed humility, repentance, and suffering at the centre of the spiritual life (Ware, 1993; Billington, 1966)Tolstoy and Dostoevsky wrote in the second half of the nineteenth century, a period of rapid change after the emancipation of the serfs in 1861 and of intense debate between Westernisers and Slavophiles about Russia's identity (Billington, 1966.; Berdyaev, 1990). This debate explains why the novels so often contrast Western rationalism with the Russian *dusha*, as in the figure of Katerina Ivanovna or the Grand Inquisitor. Seen this way, the historical context does not replace the textual evidence, but helps explain why the Javanese texts lean toward prevention and harmony, while the Russian novels lean toward crisis and transformation, which answers the third aim of this study.

Implications for Cross-Cultural Dialogue and Education

The comparison has several implications. For cross-cultural dialogue, it shows that two traditions which have rarely met share a common ground: both reject a purely materialistic view of life, both see the inner life as the place where meaning is found, and both point beyond the self to God and community. This shared ground can become a starting point for dialogue between Indonesian and Russian communities that goes beyond economic or political cooperation. At the same time, the comparison shows that a shared goal does not require a shared path. Recognising that one culture prefers prevention and harmony while another values struggle and repentance can help people from both sides avoid misunderstanding each other, for instance by not reading Javanese restraint as passivity or Russian emotional intensity as instability. Studies that already bring Javanese mysticism into conversation with Christian figures (Darmadi et al., 2026) suggest that such dialogue is both possible and fruitful.

For education, the findings offer material for teaching literature, character education, and intercultural competence. Javanese *piwulang* texts are already used to teach values in Indonesian schools (Purwadi, Wahyono, Zuhro & Cahyandaru, 2026), and Russian classics such as *Crime and Punishment* are widely taught in Russian schools as a way of discussing guilt and moral responsibility (Yuryeva, 2024) Reading these texts side by side in comparative literature or philosophy classes could help students see that moral questions are universal, while the answers are shaped by culture. Teachers could, for example, pair a stanza from *Serat Kalatidha* with Raskolnikov's confession and ask students to compare how each text responds to moral crisis. In this way, the study contributes not only to comparative philosophy but also to the educational narrative of how different cultures teach people to live well.

CONCLUSION

Based on the discussion of the three dimensions of life philosophy – cultural values, spirituality, and existentialism the researchers conclude several points as follows. The concept of Javanese life philosophy rests on the search for truth culminating in the union of the self with the One Almighty (*manunggaling kawula Gusti*), where humans merely strive to return to their source

(*sangkan paraning dumadi*). The concept of Russian life philosophy rests on suffering and human effort through sacrifice to achieve salvation on God's path. Javanese philosophy tends to be preventive, believing that rules have already been given by God and humans simply need to follow them. Meanwhile, Russian philosophy tends to be reflective (highlighting the importance of life experience and suffering) and emphasizes self-improvement (repentance).

The values shaping the Javanese worldview include *narima ing pandum* (reflective acceptance), yielding (*ngalah*), and harmony (*rukun*), oriented towards social harmony and self-control, based on the attitude of *eling lan waspada* (mindfulness and vigilance). Meanwhile, the values shaping the Russian worldview include spiritual resilience, inner turmoil, atonement for sins, and obedience to God.

Both traditions equally reject pure materialism-rationalism and affirm the importance of harmony and communal life. The fundamental difference lies in how they view the role of the self: in the Javanese tradition, a person is expected to strive to eliminate ego; whereas the Russian tradition seeks to embrace struggle and suffering as the path to finding life's meaning.

Historical and geographical contexts then shape the cultures influencing these life philosophies. The influence of Hindu-Buddhism and Islamic Sufism shapes the search for truth in the Javanese tradition. Meanwhile, Orthodox Christianity and the geopolitical experience as a nation repeatedly invaded shape the Russian emphasis on religious obedience and communal identity.

These conclusions are drawn from six selected texts and therefore describe the philosophies of life as represented in Javanese *piwulang* literature and in the novels of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky. Future studies could broaden the corpus, for example by including other Javanese *suluk* texts or Russian writers such as Chekhov and Leskov, or by comparing these literary representations with ethnographic data on contemporary communities.

DECLARATION OF AI AND AI ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES IN THE WRITING PROCESS

During the writing process, the authors used Claude, an AI assistant developed by Anthropic, only to check the clarity of sentences, point out ineffective wording, and help arrange the order of ideas. The AI was not used to collect or analyse data, to produce interpretations, or to find or generate references. All interpretations, arguments, and conclusions in this article are the authors' own, and every reference has been checked manually against its original source. The authors take full responsibility for the content of this article.

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AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

Author 1: Conceptualized the research, provided data sources for Javanese literary works, analyzed research data, and designed the research methodology.
Author 2: provided data sources for Russian literary works and the analysis results of each Russian literary work.
Author 3: assisted in analyzing research data from the perspective of Physics and Metaphysics.

Author 4: contributed to designing the conceptual framework and analyzing Javanese literary works.
Author 5: assisted in providing Russian literary works and analyzing research data.
Author 6: wrote the initial draft of the article and curated research data.

DECLARATION OF COMPETING INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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