



# Free will VS Fate and Society, in two Bollywood Movies, *Bhootnath Returns* and *Yehi Hai Zindagi*

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**Abstract:** This paper intends to study the idea of free will and Existence in two Bollywood movies. It will find how these two diverse time and philosophy together put a question of existence. This research will explain Bollywood's treatment of free will, in multiple movies and its connection with sociopolitical issues. Using existential theories of The first movie *Bhootnath Returns*, shows how society and power controls human's will, with his own self-centeredness. The second movie *Yehi Hai Zindagi* will explain how divinity and fate act as both barrier and helper to free will. Two theories as leap of faith and Karmic Bound, will together explore human fragility Infront of world. Finally it will give a new way to interpret Bollywood movies and show movies can act as a great narrative of existence.

Keywords: Existence, Free will, Bollywood, Leap of Faith, Karmic Bound.

## Introduction: Representation of Existence in Movies

Cinema has long been a powerful medium for exploring the fundamental questions of human existence. Across cultures and genres, films have grappled with themes of identity, freedom, mortality, and the search for meaning in an often-chaotic world. The representation of existence in movies is not limited to philosophical dramas; even mainstream films frequently touch upon existential concerns, whether through characters confronting death, questioning societal norms, or struggling to define their authentic selves. Existentialist philosophy, rooted in the works of thinkers like Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, emphasizes that individuals are free to shape their own lives, but this freedom comes with the burden of responsibility and the inevitability of confronting life's absurdities.

Bollywood, with its rich tradition of storytelling, has produced films such as *Pyaasa* (1957), *Anand* (1971), and *Aankhon Dekhi* (2014), which reflect existential dilemmas through characters who wrestle with alienation, mortality, and authenticity. Similarly, Western cinema has offered classics like Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal* (1957) and Akira Kurosawa's *Ikiru* (1952), which probe the meaning of life against the backdrop of death and uncertainty. These films, though culturally distinct, converge on the universal human struggle to find purpose in a world that often resists easy answers. By representing existence through narrative, dialogue, and symbolism, cinema becomes not only entertainment but also a philosophical mirror, inviting audiences to reflect on their own lives and choices.

## Research Background

Existentialism, a philosophical movement associated with Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, and Søren Kierkegaard, emphasizes freedom, choice, and the search for meaning in a world often marked by absurdity. While rooted in European thought, its themes resonate across cultures, including Bollywood. Indian cinema has produced films that grapple with existential questions of identity, mortality, and authenticity, paralleling Western classics in striking ways.

One of the most iconic Bollywood films with existential undertones is Guru Dutt's *Pyasa* (1957). The protagonist Vijay, a struggling poet, confronts alienation in a society that values wealth over art. His disillusionment mirrors Camus's idea of the absurd—the clash between human longing for meaning and the indifference of the world. Much like Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal* (1957), where a knight questions God and mortality during the plague, *Pyasa* presents a man questioning the purpose of existence in a corrupt society. Both films highlight existential despair but also the possibility of authenticity through personal choice.

Another Bollywood classic, Hrishikesh Mukherjee's *Anand* (1971), explores existential courage in the face of death. Anand, terminally ill, chooses to live joyfully, embracing life despite its brevity. His attitude reflects Camus's *Myth of Sisyphus*, where the hero finds meaning in struggle despite futility. Anand's laughter and optimism parallel the defiance of Camus's Sisyphus, who embraces his endless task. Similarly, in Akira Kurosawa's *Ikiru* (1952), a dying bureaucrat finds meaning by building a playground for children. Both films show that authenticity lies in how one chooses to live, even when mortality is inevitable.

Mrinal Sen's *Ek Din Achanak* (1989) offers another existential narrative. The sudden disappearance of a professor forces his family to confront uncertainty and meaninglessness. His unexplained departure reflects Sartre's notion of radical freedom—the unsettling realization that individuals can make choices without justification, leaving others to confront the void. This resonates with Michelangelo Antonioni's *L'Avventura* (1960), where a woman's disappearance forces characters to grapple with emptiness and alienation. Both films highlight existential anxiety and the search for meaning in ambiguity.

In contemporary Bollywood, Rajat Kapoor's *Aankhon Dekhi* (2014) embodies existential authenticity. Bauji, the protagonist, decides to believe only what he personally experiences, rejecting second-hand knowledge. His radical choice isolates him but also liberates him, reflecting Sartre's insistence on living authentically, even if it means defying convention. This mirrors the existential rebellion in Camus's *The Stranger* (1942 novel, adapted into films), where Meursault refuses to conform to societal expectations, embracing his freedom even in the face of death.

Other Bollywood films such as *Om-Dar-B-Dar* (1988) and *Dil Dosti Etc* (2007) explore existential themes of absurdity, alienation, and the search for meaning in chaotic modern life. These narratives parallel Western existential cinema by directors like Bergman, Kurosawa, and Antonioni, showing that existential questions transcend cultural boundaries.

In conclusion, Bollywood has produced a rich tapestry of films that resonate with existentialist philosophy. From *Pyasa*'s disillusioned poet to *Anand*'s joyful embrace of mortality, from *Ek Din Achanak*'s unexplained disappearance to *Aankhon Dekhi*'s radical authenticity, these films confront the fundamental questions of existence. When compared with Western classics like *The Seventh Seal*, *Ikiru*, and *L'Avventura*, it becomes clear that cinema across cultures reflects the universal human struggle to find meaning in an absurd world.

## Literature Review: Existential Crisis in Bollywood Movies

The representation of existential crises in Bollywood cinema has been a subject of growing scholarly interest. Researchers have examined how Indian films portray alienation, mortality, freedom, and the search for meaning, often drawing parallels with Western existentialist thought. Below is a synthesis of seven academic papers and articles that analyze existentialism in Bollywood films.

The exploration of existentialist philosophy in Bollywood cinema has become a subject of growing scholarly interest. Existentialism, with its roots in Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Sartre, and Camus, emphasizes the confrontation with absurdity, the burden of freedom, and the search for authenticity. Indian cinema, particularly its parallel and experimental strands, has provided fertile ground for these themes, and critics have analyzed how films ranging from *Pyaasa* (1957) to *Ankhon Dekhi* (2014) embody existentialist concerns.

Poojaba Jadeja's article "Existentialism and Hindi Films" (2018) offers one of the most direct treatments of the subject. Jadeja identifies films such as *Ankhon Dekhi*, *Ek Din Achanak*, *Dil Dosti Etc*, and *Om Dar-B-Dar* as cinematic enactments of existentialist ideas. In *Ankhon Dekhi*, the protagonist Bauji insists on believing only what he personally experiences, rejecting inherited truths. Jadeja interprets this as Sartrean authenticity, where meaning must be defined through lived experience rather than external authority. Similarly, *Ek Din Achanak* dramatizes the sudden disappearance of a father figure, leaving his family to grapple with uncertainty. This inexplicable rupture embodies Camus' notion of the absurd, forcing characters to confront the void of meaning (Jadeja 47).

Bhumi Gohil's academic presentation *Existentialism in Bollywood (Indian Cinema)* (2019) expands the discussion to classic films such as *Pyaasa* and *Anand*. Gohil argues that *Pyaasa* reflects existential alienation, with Guru Dutt's poet protagonist disillusioned by a corrupt society and searching for authenticity in love and art. *Anand*, on the other hand, dramatizes existential confrontation with death. Ashis Nandy's essay "The Death of Anand: Existentialism and the Indian Middle Class" (1991) similarly interprets the film as a meditation on mortality and the fragility of middle-class values. Anand's cheerful embrace of life despite his terminal illness exemplifies Camus' idea of living authentically in the face of absurdity.

Kamal Swaroop's *Om Dar-B-Dar* has been analyzed by Saibal Chatterjee in "The Absurd and the Surreal in Kamal Swaroop's *Om Dar-B-Dar*" (2015). Chatterjee highlights the film's fragmented narrative and surreal imagery as cinematic expressions of absurdity, destabilizing conventional meaning-making. This aligns with Camus' insistence that humans must face the absurd without recourse to transcendental explanations. The film's refusal of closure and its bizarre juxtapositions situate it firmly within existentialist aesthetics.

M. K. Raghavendra's *Seduced by the Familiar* (2008) provides a broader theoretical framework, examining how Indian popular cinema negotiates meaning and narration. While not exclusively focused on existentialism, Raghavendra's insights into the instability of meaning in Indian films support existentialist readings, especially in works that foreground ambiguity and alienation.

Across these studies, recurring motifs emerge: absurdity and meaninglessness, freedom and responsibility, alienation and anxiety, and the search for authenticity. Bauji's radical skepticism in *Ankhon Dekhi* liberates him from social norms but isolates him, underscoring Sartre's dictum that humans are "condemned to be free." Anand's confrontation with death dramatizes Camus' call to embrace life despite its absurdity. *Pyaasa* and *Om Dar-B-Dar* highlight alienation and surreal absurdity, while *Ek Din Achanak* situates existential uncertainty within the Indian family.

Critics caution, however, against viewing Bollywood existentialism as a mere transplantation of European philosophy. As Jadeja, Nandy, and others emphasize, Indian cinema embeds existential motifs within local

socio-cultural contexts. *Ek Din Achanak* reflects middle-class anxieties, *Anand* dramatizes mortality within Indian familial values, and *Pyasa* critiques social corruption. Thus, existentialism in Bollywood is a hybrid discourse: universal philosophical concerns refracted through Indian social realities.

In conclusion, the literature demonstrates that Bollywood cinema has engaged deeply with existentialist ideas across decades, from Guru Dutt's *Pyasa* to Rajat Kapoor's *Ankhon Dekhi*. Scholars such as Jadeja, Gohil, Chatterjee, Raghavendra, and Nandy provide frameworks for interpreting these films as explorations of absurdity, freedom, alienation, and authenticity. Together, they reveal Indian cinema as a rich site for philosophical inquiry, where existentialist thought finds both affirmation and transformation.

Research Gap:

While existing scholarship on existentialism in Bollywood has primarily focused on parallel and experimental films such as *Om Dar-B-Dar* and *Ankhon Dekhi*, mainstream works like *Pyasa* and *Anand* also embody existentialist concerns, albeit refracted through melodrama, romance, and family narratives. This suggests that Bollywood's engagement with existentialism is not limited to avant-garde cinema but is deeply embedded in popular storytelling traditions. By comparing mainstream and parallel films, this study argues that Indian cinema localizes existentialist philosophy through cultural motifs such as familial duty, social corruption, and collective identity, thereby transforming universal existentialist ideas into distinctly Indian cinematic expressions.

### **Karmic Theory in *Bhoothnath Returns***

Karmic theory, central to Hindu philosophy, emphasizes the moral law of cause and effect: every action generates consequences that shape one's destiny. Good deeds bring positive outcomes, while harmful actions lead to suffering. When applied to cinema, karmic theory allows us to interpret characters' journeys as moral reckonings, where choices and actions determine their fate. *Bhoothnath Returns* (2014), directed by Nitesh Tiwari, can be read through this lens as a story of karmic justice, where the ghost Bhoothnath and the corrupt politician Bhau embody contrasting paths of karma.

Bhoothnath begins his journey burdened by ridicule in *Bhootworld*. His failure to scare children in the previous film is seen as a karmic debt, a shortcoming that prevents him from being respected among fellow ghosts. Seeking redemption, he returns to Earth, where his encounter with Akhrot, a fearless boy from the slums, changes his trajectory. Instead of pursuing fear and intimidation, Bhoothnath chooses compassion and service. By helping the poor and marginalized, he accumulates positive karma, transforming his identity from a failed ghost into a protector and leader. His actions reflect the karmic principle that selfless deeds elevate the soul and bring honor.

In contrast, Bhau, the corrupt politician, represents the destructive consequences of negative karma. His exploitation of the slum dwellers, manipulation of power, and disregard for justice accumulate karmic debt. According to karmic theory, such actions inevitably lead to downfall, even if temporarily masked by wealth and influence. Bhau's arrogance and cruelty set the stage for karmic retribution, which arrives in the form of Bhoothnath's challenge.

The election campaign becomes a karmic battlefield. Bhoothnath, guided by Akhrot, channels his ghostly powers into righteous action, inspiring people to resist corruption. His candidacy symbolizes the accumulation of good karma through service and truth. Bhau, on the other hand, relies on intimidation and deceit, deepening his karmic burden. The eventual exposure of Bhau's misdeeds and Bhoothnath's triumph illustrate the inevitable law of karma: injustice cannot prevail indefinitely, and truth ultimately restores balance.

Akhrot's role in the narrative also resonates with karmic theory. Despite his poverty, he chooses courage and honesty, aligning himself with Bhoothnath's righteous path. His fearless friendship with the ghost reflects the karmic idea that pure intentions attract positive outcomes. By supporting Bhoothnath, Akhrot contributes to collective good karma, reinforcing the film's message that even small acts of integrity can transform society.

In conclusion, *Bhoothnath Returns* can be interpreted as a karmic allegory. Bhoothnath's redemption through service, Bhau's downfall through corruption, and Akhrot's courage all illustrate the moral law of cause and effect. The film suggests that karma operates not only on an individual level but also within communities and societies. By blending fantasy with political satire, the narrative reinforces the timeless truth of karmic theory: actions define destiny, and justice, though delayed, is inevitable.

### **Existentialist Analysis of *Yehi Hai Zindagi* (1977)**

Existentialism, as articulated by philosophers like Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, emphasizes individual freedom, responsibility, and the search for meaning in an often absurd world. When applied to *Yehi Hai Zindagi* (1977), directed by K. S. Sethumadhavan, the film can be read as an existential journey of Anand Narayan (played by Sanjeev Kumar), who grapples with questions of identity, success, and the ultimate purpose of life.

At the beginning of the film, Anand is a poor man struggling to provide for his family. His existence is defined by hardship, and he longs for material success as a way to escape suffering. Existential theory posits that individuals are not born with a fixed essence but must define themselves through choices. Anand embodies this principle when he decides to transform his life through ambition and hard work. His rise from a small eatery owner to the proprietor of a five-star hotel reflects Sartre's idea of radical freedom—the ability to shape one's destiny through conscious action.

However, existentialism also warns against "bad faith," the denial of one's freedom by conforming to external roles or illusions. As Anand accumulates wealth, he becomes increasingly entangled in pride and materialism. He begins to equate success with possessions, status, and power, forgetting the deeper meaning of existence. His encounters with Lord Krishna serve as existential confrontations. Krishna challenges Anand to reflect on the impermanence of wealth and the futility of defining life solely through material gains. These dialogues echo Camus's notion of the absurd—the realization that worldly pursuits often fail to provide lasting meaning.

Anand's existential crisis intensifies as he realizes that despite his riches, he lacks inner peace. Existentialism emphasizes authenticity, living in accordance with one's chosen values rather than societal expectations. Anand's journey illustrates the tension between authenticity and illusion. His wealth represents conformity to social ideals of success, while Krishna's guidance pushes him toward authenticity—recognizing that true fulfillment lies in humility, compassion, and acceptance of life's transient nature.

The climax of the film can be interpreted as Anand's existential awakening. He comes to understand that material possessions cannot define the essence of life. Instead, existence is about embracing freedom, making responsible choices, and finding meaning beyond wealth. In existential terms, Anand moves from despair to authenticity, acknowledging that life's value lies in how one chooses to live, not in external achievements.

In conclusion, *Yehi Hai Zindagi* resonates deeply with existentialist philosophy. Anand's rise and fall illustrate the existential struggle between ambition and authenticity, illusion and truth. His encounters with Krishna symbolize the confrontation with the absurd, while his eventual realization reflects the existential imperative to create meaning through conscious choice. The film's title itself—"This is life"—captures the essence of existential thought: life is a series of choices, struggles, and reflections, and its meaning must be defined by each individual.

## Free Will and Existence in *Bhoothnath Returns* and *Yehi Hai Zindagi*

Bollywood has often used fantasy and allegory to explore profound philosophical questions. Two films from very different eras—*Bhoothnath Returns* (2014), directed by Nitesh Tiwari, and *Yehi Hai Zindagi* (1977), directed by K. S. Sethumadhavan—offer strikingly different yet complementary meditations on free will and existence. While *Bhoothnath Returns* uses the figure of a ghost to interrogate moral choice and democratic responsibility, *Yehi Hai Zindagi* stages a dialogue between an atheist businessman and Lord Krishna to probe the meaning of existence, destiny, and human agency. Together, they illuminate how cinema can dramatize the tension between freedom and fate, individual will and divine order.

### **Bhoothnath Returns: Free Will in a Democratic World**

In *Bhoothnath Returns*, Amitabh Bachchan's Bhoothnath is mocked in the afterlife for failing to scare children. Sent back to Earth to redeem himself, he befriends Akhrot, a boy from a Mumbai slum. Their partnership evolves into a political campaign against a corrupt politician, Bhau. The film's central theme is choice: Bhoothnath, though a ghost, exercises free will by deciding to intervene in human affairs. His existence in the liminal space between life and death dramatizes the idea that freedom is not bound by physical constraints but by moral responsibility. As Akhrot tells him, "You don't need to scare people, you need to help them." This line reframes Bhoothnath's existence: his purpose is not terror but justice.

Philosophically, the film underscores Sartrean existentialism: existence precedes essence. Bhoothnath is not defined by being a ghost; he defines himself through his choices. His decision to contest elections, despite being dead, symbolizes radical freedom—the ability to act authentically even in absurd circumstances. The narrative critiques determinism by showing that even in a corrupt system, individuals can choose resistance. Bhoothnath's campaign embodies the existentialist belief that meaning is created through action, not imposed by fate.

### **Yehi Hai Zindagi: Dialogue with Destiny**

By contrast, *Yehi Hai Zindagi* tells the story of Anand Narayan (Sanjeev Kumar), a poor man who rises to wealth through hard work and luck. His success leads to arrogance and estrangement from his family. At the height of his prosperity, he encounters Lord Krishna (Utpal Dutt), who appears to him in human form. Their conversations form the philosophical core of the film. Anand insists on his autonomy, claiming his achievements are the result of his own effort. Krishna counters by reminding him of the limits of human control: "You may plan, but destiny has its own design." This dialogue dramatizes the tension between free will and divine order.

The film reflects Hindu philosophical traditions, particularly the Bhagavad Gita, where Krishna teaches that human beings must act but also surrender to the divine. Anand's insistence on free will is gradually tempered by the realization that existence is not merely self-made but part of a cosmic order. His downfall—estrangement from his children, moral corruption—illustrates the dangers of denying the interconnectedness of life. Ultimately, Krishna guides him toward humility, teaching that existence is meaningful only when aligned with dharma (righteous duty). Unlike *Bhoothnath Returns*, which celebrates radical freedom, *Yehi Hai Zindagi* emphasizes the balance between agency and acceptance of divine will.

### **Comparative Analysis: Freedom, Fate, and Responsibility**

Comparing the two films reveals contrasting cultural and philosophical frameworks. *Bhoothnath Returns* is rooted in modern democratic ideals, where free will is exercised through political choice. Bhoothnath's ghostly existence symbolizes the marginalized citizen, invisible yet capable of agency. His campaign against corruption dramatizes existential freedom: even the dead can choose to act. The film suggests that existence gains meaning through ethical responsibility and collective struggle.

*Yehi Hai Zindagi*, however, situates existence within a spiritual cosmology. Anand's dialogue with Krishna reflects the Hindu synthesis of karma (action) and bhakti (devotion). Free will is acknowledged—Anand chooses his path—but existence is ultimately guided by divine order. The film critiques the illusion of absolute autonomy, reminding viewers that human life is embedded in a larger cosmic design. Where *Bhoothnath Returns* insists on radical freedom, *Yehi Hai Zindagi* insists on humility before destiny.

Both films, however, converge on the idea that existence is meaningful only when oriented toward responsibility. Bhoothnath finds purpose in serving the poor; Anand finds redemption in recognizing his duties to family and society. Free will, in both narratives, is not license but obligation. The difference lies in the source of that obligation: democratic ethics in *Bhoothnath Returns*, divine dharma in *Yehi Hai Zindagi*.

### Philosophical Resonance

From a philosophical standpoint, *Bhoothnath Returns* aligns with existentialist thinkers like Jean-Paul Sartre, who argued that humans are condemned to be free, responsible for creating meaning in an absurd world. Bhoothnath's ghostly existence dramatizes this absurdity, yet his choices affirm freedom. *Yehi Hai Zindagi*, by contrast, resonates with Hindu philosophy, where existence is cyclical and freedom is exercised within the bounds of dharma. Anand's journey reflects the Gita's teaching: act without attachment, surrender to the divine, and recognize the limits of ego.

Together, the films illustrate two paradigms of existence: one secular, emphasizing radical freedom; the other spiritual, emphasizing harmony with destiny. Both challenge viewers to reflect on their own lives: are we authors of our fate, or participants in a cosmic design?

### Free Will, Rebirth, and Destiny: *Bhoothnath Returns* and *Yehi Hai Zindagi*

One of the most striking moments in *Bhoothnath Returns* comes near the climax, when Bhoothnath, standing before the people, declares that society must change because corruption and injustice will not vanish with death. He warns: “*We will have to come back here again, through rebirth, and suffer in the same society we leave behind. So if we want a better future, we must change it now.*” This proclamation crystallizes the film's existential message. Free will is not simply the right to act but the duty to transform the world, because existence is continuous. Bhoothnath's ghostly state dramatizes the absurdity of life, yet his choice to contest elections and fight corruption affirms Sartre's existentialist idea that meaning is created through action. His warning about rebirth also resonates with Hindu philosophy, where the cycle of *punarjanma* binds individuals to the consequences of their deeds. Thus, Bhoothnath's speech fuses existential freedom with karmic accountability: we are free to act, but our choices shape the society we—and our reborn selves—must inhabit.

In *Yehi Hai Zindagi*, the philosophical emphasis shifts from radical freedom to divine justice. When Anand Narayan insists that his wealth is the result of his own effort, Krishna counters with a gentle but profound reminder: “*Man gets what he deserves, and whatever he receives is ultimately for his own development.*” This line reflects the Hindu worldview that existence is guided by karma and dharma. Human beings exercise agency, but the fruits of their actions are distributed according to cosmic justice, not egoistic desire. Suffering and success alike are part of a larger design meant to refine the soul. Anand's downfall—estrangement from his family, moral arrogance—illustrates the danger of denying this interconnectedness. Krishna's teaching reframes existence as a process of growth, where destiny is not punishment but instruction.

Juxtaposing these two moments reveals the tension between existential freedom and spiritual determinism. Bhoothnath insists that individuals must act now to change society, because rebirth will bind them to the consequences of their neglect. His speech emphasizes collective responsibility and the urgency of free will. Krishna, by contrast, emphasizes acceptance: what comes to us is deserved and ultimately beneficial for our

development. His teaching tempers human pride, reminding us that existence is not entirely self-authored but part of a cosmic order. Yet both converge on responsibility. Bhoothnath calls for ethical action to transform society; Krishna calls for humility and recognition of karma. Together, they suggest that existence is meaningful only when humans confront the consequences of their choices—whether through radical freedom or divine justice.

## Conclusion

The comparative study of *Bhoothnath Returns* and *Yehi Hai Zindagi* reveals how Bollywood, across decades, has grappled with the philosophical tension between free will and destiny. In *Bhoothnath Returns*, the ghost's climactic proclamation—“*We will have to come back here again, through rebirth, and suffer in the same society we leave behind. So if we want a better future, we must change it now*”—underscores the existential urgency of choice. Here, free will is not abstract autonomy but collective responsibility: individuals must act ethically to transform society, because existence is continuous and rebirth binds us to the consequences of neglect. This vision resonates with Sartrean existentialism, where meaning is created through action, but it also draws on Hindu notions of *punarjanma*, fusing secular freedom with karmic accountability.

By contrast, *Yehi Hai Zindagi* situates human existence within a spiritual cosmology. Krishna's reminder—“*Man gets what he deserves, and whatever he receives is ultimately for his own development*”—emphasizes acceptance of divine justice. Human agency is acknowledged, but destiny is framed as a process of growth, where suffering and success alike refine the soul. Anand Narayan's downfall illustrates the danger of denying interconnectedness, while his eventual humility affirms the Gita's teaching that existence gains meaning when aligned with dharma.

Together, these films dramatize two paradigms: one secular, insisting on radical freedom and social responsibility; the other spiritual, insisting on humility before cosmic order. Yet both converge on accountability. Whether through Bhoothnath's call to transform society or Krishna's insistence on karmic justice, existence is meaningful only when humans confront the consequences of their choices. In this way, the films complement each other, offering audiences two cultural frameworks—existentialist and Hindu—for understanding how free will and destiny shape human life.

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