

# The Concept of Self in Indian English Literature

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## ABSTRACT

**The concept of self in Indian English literature refers to the exploration and representation of individual and collective identity within the context of Indian society and culture, as depicted in literary works written in English by Indian authors. It involves an examination of how characters, themes, and narratives in Indian English literature reflect and shape notions of selfhood, self-identity, and self-discovery in the Indian context. Indian English literature emerged as a distinct genre during the colonial period when English became an important medium of literary expression for Indian writers. These writers often grappled with the complexities of cultural hybridity, the clash of traditions, and the negotiation of identities in a post-colonial society. The concept of self in Indian English literature therefore encompasses the exploration of individual identities shaped by factors such as colonialism, nationalism, cultural heritage, and socio-political dynamics.**

**Keywords:** self, English literature, writers, identity.

## INTRODUCTION

In Indian English literature, Questions of identity, such as gender, caste, religious affiliation, and regional affinity, are frequently and intimately connected to the concept of the self. Writers delve into the hardships that characters confront as they traverse these multifaceted identities, the conflicts that arise from society expectations and traditions, and the search for self-acceptance and self-realization in their work. In Indian literature written in English, the concept of the self is inextricably tied to wider topics such as cultural authenticity, the process of assimilation, and the act of decolonization.

In addition to this, Indian literature written in English reflects not just the individual self but also the investigation of the Indian national identity. The complex sociocultural fabric of India, as well as its historical legacies and the difficulties of nation-building, are frequently portrayed in literary works. In addition to tackling more general topics such as social inequity, communal cohesion, and the fight for independence and social justice, they wrestle with the difficulties that arise between individual goals and the expectations of society.

The idea of a generational divide gained fresh momentum and assumed a more definitive form in comparison to the years that came before. It was imperative that a new order and a new system be established from the ground up. The emergence of multi-national corporations is yet another very important factor that has significantly contributed to the new form that society has taken. As a result of the rise of international order, education also took on a new shape and a different purpose. Additionally, employment standards were reevaluated. The restrictions placed on the young hopefuls by time and space were eliminated, and they were given greater freedom to move about. The introduction of cutting-edge technology in the realm of computing cleared the way for the liberation of Indian minds, and women played a significant role in the development of this new wave. As a result, it is now abundantly obvious that the society undergone change, and women were not an exception to this transformation. In the old civilization that followed antiquated orders and practises, the arrival of a new woman into the world was an everyday occurrence that could be found in every part of the expansive social structure.

The concept of self in Indian literature written in English encompasses, on the whole, the subtle study of individual and collective identities within the setting of India. It represents the many experiences, challenges, and aspirations of the characters while they are navigating the intersections of their personal, cultural, and national identities. Indian authors who write in English have produced works that contribute to a more in-depth understanding of the individual, as well as of the self in connection to society, culture, and history.

## DEVELOPMENT OF IDENTITIES IN INDIAN ENGLISH LITERATURE

IEL has a history that can be considered contemporary given that it is approximately two centuries old. The *Travels of Dean Mahomet* was the first book written in English by an Indian author. It was published in England in 1794 and was a trip story written by Sake Dean Mahomed. The Western novel served as an inspiration for the early stages of IEL's development. The earliest Indian writers communicated an experience that was fundamentally Indian through the use of pure English, unfettered by Indian terminology. *Rajmohan's Wife*, written by Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay (1838–1894) and originally

published in 1864, is considered the first Indian novel written in English. Chattopadhyay lived from 1838 until 1894. Both Govinda Samanta or the History of a Bengali Raiyat and Folk Tales of Bengal: Life's Secret were written by the same author, Lal Behari Dey, and both were published in the years 1874 and 1912, respectively. The first novel to be written by an Indian woman was "Bianca, or the Young Spanish Maiden," which was published in 1878 by Toru Dutt. Two of the most promising Indian English writers of the nineteenth century, Toru Dutt and Krupabai Sathianandhan, both passed away at an untimely age, in their early twenties and thirties, respectively. Between the years 1887 and 1888, the autobiographical novel Saguna: A Story of Native Christian Life written by Sathianadhan was serialised and distributed through The Madras Christian College Magazine. Kamala: The Story of a Hindu Life, which was published in 1894, is the only other novel written by Sathianandhan.

The non-fictional body of prose-works, which includes letters, diaries, political manifestos, articles, speeches, philosophical works, and other types of writing, that was produced in Indian English literature during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is expansive and full of a wide range of topics and styles. The public addresses given by individuals such as Swami Vivekananda, Rabindranath Tagore, Chittaranjan Das, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Mahatma Gandhi, and Subhas Chandra Bose, to name only a few, were essential in determining not only the course that modern India would take but also the course that the English language would take in India (Auddy, 9-10). Even before R. K. Narayan, M. R. Anand, and Raja Rao, Gandhi's Indian Home Rule or Hind Swaraj (1910) was published in an indigenized variant of the English language and effectively challenged "the hegemony of Standard English" (Auddy, 169).

The Indian philosopher and author Raja Rao (1908–2006) is the mind behind works such as *Kanthapura* and *The Serpent and the Rope*, both of which have a distinctively Indian approach to the art of storytelling. The epic poem known as the *Mahabharata* was first rendered into English by Kisari Mohan Ganguli. This is the only time the *Mahabharata* has ever been translated into its entirety into a European language. Rabindranath Tagore, who lived from 1861 to 1941, was a writer who was fluent in both Bengali and English. He was also the one who translated his own works into English. The first Indian author to receive a literary award in the United States was Dhan Gopal Mukerji (1890–1936), who wrote under the pen name Dhan Gopal. Nirad C. Chaudhuri was a non-fiction writer who lived from 1897 to 1999. He is most well-known for his book "The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian," which was published in 1951 and details the experiences and influences that shaped his life. P. Lal, a poet, translator, publisher, and essayist who lived from 1929 till 2010, established Writers Workshop, an independent press for

Indian English writing in the 1950s. *Autumn Leaves*, the autobiography of Ram Nath Kak (1917–1993), a Kashmiri veterinarian, is widely considered to be among the most evocative depictions of life in Kashmir throughout the 20th century and has developed into something of a literary classic.[who?]

R. K. Narayan (1906–2001) made several contributions over the course of several decades and continued to write up till the time of his passing. Graham Greene was the one who introduced him to publishers in England, therefore one might say that Greene was the one who "discovered" him. Greene and Narayan stayed in touch with one another right up until the end. Narayan invented the fictional town of Malgudi to serve as the setting for his books, much like Thomas Hardy did with the county of Wessex in his work. Some people hold Narayan accountable for the provincial, unattached, and insular universe that he crafted in spite of the rapidly transforming social and political climate in India during the era in which the stories are set.

However, there are many who, like Greene, believe that by reading about Malgudi, they can have a clearer picture of what it's like to live in India. A wonderful example of Narayan's writing style is seen in the novel *Swami and Friends*, which depicts the author's evocation of small-town life and the experiences that come with it through the eyes of the lovable kid protagonist Swaminathan. Mulk Raj Anand (1905–2004), a writer who was considerably different from R. K. Narayan, was earning popularity for his work set in rural India at the same time that R. K. Narayan was gaining recognition for his pastoral idylls. However, Mulk Raj Anand's stories were more harsh and engaged, often brutally, with distinctions of caste, class, and religion. "The writers of the 1930s were fortunate because after many years of use, English had become an Indian language used widely and at different levels of society," the author Lakshmi Holmstrom asserts. "This allowed them to experiment more boldly and from a more secure position."

One of the most famous contemporary authors is Salman Rushdie, who was born in India but currently resides in the United Kingdom. *Midnight's Children*, which was written by Rushdie and won multiple awards for best novel, including the Booker Prize in 1981, the Booker of Bookers in 1992, and the Best of the Bookers in 2008, ushered in a new style of writing. He spoke in a hybrid language, which consisted of English with a fair amount of Indian phrases sprinkled throughout it, to express a concept that might be understood as portraying the broad canvas that is India. The literary subgenre known as "magic realism," which is most closely connected with the works of Gabriel Garcia Márquez, is typically applied to his work. Nayantara Sehgal was one of the first female Indian writers to earn widespread recognition for her work in the English language. Her works of fiction focus on the reaction of

India's upper class to the crisis brought on by political transformation.

Anita Desai was awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1978 for her novel *Fire on the Mountain*, as well as the British Guardian Prize for her work *The Village by the Sea*. Desai was also nominated three times for the Booker Prize, but she was never chosen. *The Inheritance of Loss*, the second novel written by her daughter Kiran Desai, was selected as the winner of the Man Booker Prize in 2006. In 1992, the Sahitya Akademi honoured Ruskin Bond for his collection of short stories titled *Our Trees Still Grow in Dehra* with the Sahitya Akademi Award. In addition to that, he is the author of the historical fiction titled "A Flight of Pigeons," which is based on an event that took place during the Indian Rebellion of 1857.

Author of *The Golden Gate* (1986) and *A Suitable Boy* (1994), Vikram Seth is a writer known for his more traditional use of the English language and his focus on more realistic topics. Since he admits to being a fan of Jane Austen, his focus is on the plot, paying close attention to the specifics as well as the unexpected developments. It is well known that Vikram Seth is an accomplished novelist in addition to being a prolific poet.

Another writer who has contributed immensely to the Indian English Literature is Amitav Ghosh who is the author of *The Circle of Reason* (his 1986 debut novel), *The Shadow Lines* (1988), *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1995), *The Glass Palace* (2000), *The Hungry Tide* (2004), and *Sea of Poppies* (2008), the first volume of *The Ibis* trilogy, set in the 1830s, just before the Opium War, which encapsulates the colonial history of the East. The most recent piece of fiction written by Ghosh is titled *River of Smoke* (2011) and is the second book in his *Ibis* trilogy.

An author who was born in India and currently resides in Canada, Rohinton Mistry was awarded the Neustadt International Prize for Literature in 2012. His debut book, which was released in Canada by Penguin Books in 1987 and titled *Tales from Firozsha Baag*, is a collection of eleven short stories. Great recognition was bestowed upon him as a novelist for his works *Such a Long Journey* (1991) and *A Fine Balance* (1995). In a similar vein, M. G. Vassanji was born in Kenya of Indian descent and immigrated to Canada; he won the Giller Prize twice, for *The Book of Secrets* (1994) and *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* (2003), as well as the Governor General's Award for English-language non-fiction for *A Place Within: Rediscovering India* (2008), which was a travelogue.

*The Great Indian Novel* (1989), written by Shashi Tharoor, is structured similarly to the Mahabharata in that it tells a story, albeit in a comedic manner. Tharoor develops his ideas by jumping back and forth in time. His position as a

UN official, which requires him to live outside of India, has provided him with a vantage point that enables him to contribute to the construction of an objective concept of Indianness. Vikram Chandra is another author who divides his time between India and the United States. Both his first novel, "Red Earth and Pouring Rain," which was published in 1995, and his collection of short tales titled "Love and Longing in Bombay," which was published in 1997, have garnered positive reviews from critics.

His namesake, Vikram A. Chandra, is a well-known journalist and the author of the book "The Srinagar Conspiracy," which was published in the year 2000. *Maximum City* (2004), written by Suketu Mehta, is an autobiographical account of the author's time spent living in the city of Mumbai. Mehta currently resides in the United States of America and is a well-known writer. *The White Tiger*, Aravind Adiga's first novel, earned him the Man Booker Prize when it was awarded in 2008.

Newer authors in India, such as Arundhati Roy and David Davidar, have been showing a trend in the direction of contextuality and rootedness in their writing. Arundhati Roy, who has a background in architecture and won the Booker Prize in 1997 for her novel *The God of Small Things*, refers to herself as a "home grown" writer. Her novel, which was nominated for several awards, takes place in Kerala, a state in southeastern India. Southern Tamil Nadu serves as the backdrop for Davidar's novel *The House of Blue Mangoes*. Both of these volumes place a significant emphasis on the geographical and political contexts of their stories.

Most recently, Rajeeva Nayan Pathak[4] in his love book "The Living Splits"[5] raises awareness about the individuals who require organ transplantation for their lives, and as a result, supports organ donation and cadaver transplantation.

The circumstances of the hill people and tribal people who live in West Bengal and the neighbouring states of Sikkim, Bhutan, and Nepal are depicted in the short tales and novels written by Ratan Lal Basu. The political unrest that has persisted in West Bengal ever since the Naxalite movement of the 1970s is reflected in several of his short works.

The concept of love in its purest form is celebrated in several of his works, including "Blue Are the Far Off Mountains," "The First Rain," and "The Magic Marble." *Oraon and the Divine Tree*, the novel that he wrote, tells the story of a tribal man and his love for a very ancient tree. The author writes in a style reminiscent of that of Ernest Hemingway, transporting the reader into a dreamland populated by people who are inextricably linked to nature.

## CONCEPT AND SEARCH FOR SELF IN INDIAN LITERATURE

It is however interesting to know that the transformations that took place put the conventional value system, which the Indian society was governed by with an autocratic level of control, under attack.

Existentialist evaluate of persons are the primary focus of Anita Desai's literature; hence, the background, politics, history, social contexts, class, and cross-cultural pluralities are only minor considerations in her stories. However, the fact that they are incidental does not imply that they are ultimately superfluous. Both the characters' internal psyches and the exterior conditions that they find themselves in contribute to the feeling of isolation that Desai portrays in her diasporic characters. Because loneliness is a state that can be brought on by both internal and external circumstances, it is possible to feel isolated even when surrounded by other people. Hugo Baumgartner, the Jewish protagonist in Anita's novel *Baumgartner's Bombay* (1998), had grown up in his home country of Germany with his parents during his formative years. Even as a young boy, he is plagued by a sense of isolation, which is brought to mind throughout pivotal points in his periods of success. On the first day of school, when his mother arrives to retrieve him with a cone of bonbons for him, he holds out his prize for the others to see. However, at that moment, "the other children were vanishing down the street," and "no one saw his triumph." He criticises his mother by saying, "You don't look like everyone else's mother," in addition to accusing her of being late.

Hugo's inability to identify with others as a child contributes to his feelings of isolation, even when he is surrounded by people. Even in situations in which he is not disregarded, he experiences the same feelings of isolation. This was made abundantly clear during the Christmas celebrations at the school, when all of his classmates' parents sent gifts to the school to be distributed by their teachers. Hugo's heart is set on possessing the crimson glass ball that sits atop the Christmas tree. When the instructor makes it up as his gift, he immediately realises that his parents have not sent any gift for him, and he steadfastly refuses to accept it, despite the persistent prodding of his classmates to do so. The item was made up by the teacher. It is possible that the feeling of isolation that was experienced by the Jewish population in Germany was a contributing factor in Hitler's ability to fuel the Aryan myth and translate isolation into dread. In Nazi Germany, the Baumgartner family lives in constant terror, which is one of the most extreme forms of loneliness. Hugo has been through a displacement in which he has not physically moved, but the world around him has moved or rather changed, long before the event of his father's suicide, which causes Hugo to experience a literal displacement for

the first time. As a result, Hugo is already struggling with feelings of isolation by the time he undergoes a physical relocation and moves to India when he is a teenager.

It would appear that the change in location has had little impact on his perception of being alone as a result of this. But the changes in one's circumstances also help to exacerbate one's solitude, and as a result, it is not simply an incidental occurrence; furthermore, this fact is extremely appropriate when taking into consideration the estrangement that Hugo experiences from his mother. Baumgartner is not consoled by the fact that Hugo's mother remained in Nazi Germany and that her highly edited letters only bore the brief remark that she was well. This is because Hugo's mother was not allowed to leave Nazi Germany. The recollection of his mother, who is still living in Germany, serves as a persistent barrier that prevents him from giving in to a feeling of isolation. Human life is governed by the influences and counter-influences that shape an individual's views. When the tension that is generated by these opposing pressures reaches a critical level, it is detrimental to the well-being of human beings. The moulding awakens senses that, up until recently, had been in a dormant state.

When Baumgartner is in the company of Lotte, a German cabaret singer, who helps him combat his feelings of isolation while he is in India, Baumgartner's feelings of isolation are reawakened. Hugo's relationship with Lotte, while undeniably important, can at most serve as a feeble stand-in for the other meaningful connections he so desperately seeks. It is possible to draw parallels between Baumgartner's connection with Lotte and the way he cares for the strays he takes in and keeps as pets in an effort to inject some meaning into his otherwise aimless existence. The relationship is significant in and of itself, but it is even more significant since it provides Hugo with some purpose in spite of his "Sisyphus-like" existence, as Taneja (1991) explains in the essay "Anita Desai's Baumgartner's Bombay: A Note". Due to the fact that Baumgartner possessed a German passport, he was detained in a concentration camp in British India during the height of the Second World War. Baumgartner is surrounded by other Jews in the camp, but he chooses to keep his distance from them. This is because, unlike the other Jews, he was unable to discover a solution "to alleviate the burden, the tedium, the emptiness of the waiting days" (Baumgartner's *Bombay*). Even after the war, when he sees one of his campmates, he discovers that he has changed his name from the "too Jewish" Julius to the "very English" Julian. This is because he felt that his former name was too Jewish. Baumgartner may experience an identity crisis without his knowledge if Julius intentionally dilutes his Jewish identity. As a defence mechanism against this, he may develop a sensation that he does not belong in the world.

As a result of the Second World War, the Jewish Diaspora does not have a nation anymore, which has led to an identity issue that is endemic to the group. Baumgartner is unable to return to Germany because the Germany of his youth does not exist there anymore; as a result, his enduring feeling of isolation has not been alleviated. When Baumgartner takes a stoned German kid named Kurt back to his flat in an attempt to reconcile the Germany of his upbringing with the Germany of today, he is robbed and murdered by Kurt. This is the only time Baumgartner makes this attempt. It is possibly the ultimate accusation that there is no possibility of reconciliation, and that any attempts to eradicate the feeling of isolation that comes with diaspora are fruitless. In the novel *Journey to Ithaca*, one German character, Sophie, is very different from the stereotypical hippie lifestyle of India in comparison to another German character, Kurt, who follows this lifestyle. Kurt is German. She has followed her Italian husband, Matteo, who is on a quest for spiritual love to India in order to be with him.

Sophie is unable to empathise with the ideas that Matteo holds, nor does she find the Mother to be as motivating as Matteo does. She gets abandoned in a foreign nation and is left to fend for herself there. When Sophie finds out that the Mother herself is a seeker of divine love and is of Egyptian descent but has travelled all over the world before settling in India, it is a rather ironic turn of events. But by the time she gets around to telling Matteo the truth, the Mother has already passed away, and Matteo has vanished. She is abandoned, and she carries within her the sense of spiritual loneliness that has resulted from the mysticism that has arisen as a result of the collision of various cultures. The members of the Indian community who have moved away from their homeland are equally susceptible to experiencing feelings of isolation. Since the time of Indian independence, the United Kingdom has been a popular destination for people seeking to migrate from India. The earliest of these groups were either composed of "Anglophiles," whose motivation for migrating was to enjoy the unspoiled splendour of England, or of "Anglophobes," who moved there in order to exact the traditional "postcolonial revenge." Both of these categories of migrant Indians are lumped together and referred to collectively as "the Others" in England. This sensation of otherness can sometimes be attributed to overt racism, and different times it can be traced back to the individual's unmet psychological need. When both an Anglophobe and an Anglophile find themselves aboard the same boat, their differences begin to blur as their shared objective begins to become less clear. As a result of their lack of purpose, people experience loneliness. *Bye-Bye Blackbird* is a novel written by Anita Desai that takes place in England during the 1960s and focuses on the lives of migrating Indians. Sarah is Adit's English wife, and the two of them make their home in London.

New to the country from India, Dev is an immigrant from that country. Adit has successfully acclimated to life in the country in which he was adopted, and he has lessened the impact of his feelings of isolation by taking a nonchalant attitude towards the myriad of factors that contribute to them. On the other hand, Dev has some harsh words to say about Adit's demeanour. When someone speaks the word "wog" behind his back, it makes him feel both uncomfortable and angry. When Dev goes into the city, he feels "like a Kafka stranger wandering through the dark labyrinth of a prison" because he has more reasons than most to be lonely. It is obvious that Dev has more reasons than most to be lonely. The spectre of Dev's loneliness slowly fades away, and he makes the decision to remain in England. During this time, Adit is going through something of an identity crisis. He begins to feel homesick for the place he came from and the people he left behind. In addition to the fact that Sarah "had shut him out, with a bang and a snap, from her childhood of one-eared pandas and large jigsaw puzzles," he feels unhappy because of "Mrs. Roscommon-James' sniffs and barks and Dev's angry sarcasm." He is also depressed because of "Mrs. Roscommon-James' sniffs and barks." In the end, he makes the decision to accompany Sarah back to India. The conclusion that can be drawn from this is that the experience of loneliness is not the result of an overwhelming presence but rather a sporadic overpowering that is influenced by conditions that are incidental and constantly shifting. Both the United Kingdom and the United States of America have become popular destinations for Indians seeking academic and economic success. One of these countries is the United States of America.

## CONCLUSION

When one reads her stories, it is clear that there is a tension between the individual values and the social values that are presented. When it comes to expressing oneself, there is a conflict that arises between individualistic inclinations and the demands of society. And the people who play the central roles in her stories reside in a murky borderland, always looking for some kind of order. Selfhood is about having the freedom to choose, the rights to do so, equality with others, logic, and control over one's own actions. Her heroes are caught in the tension between giving in and fighting back, between doing nothing and taking action. This topic is inherently unstable, which means that there is the potential for new developments to emerge from within it. These narratives do have the potential to intervene in the situation. Changes in the society can only be co-opted in the society piece by piece, and even then, only very gradually. However, a total revolutionary and constitutive transformation remains a faraway dream.

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