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# **Identity Formation in Indian English Literature: The Exploration of Self**

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## ABSTRACT

Within the field of Indian English literature, the article "Identity Formation in Indian English Literature: The Exploration of Self" dives into the complex depiction of selfhood and identity that can be found in the literature. The purpose of this research is to investigate how Indian authors writing in English handle topics such as personal identity, cultural belonging, and existential quests within the backdrop of a society undergoing fast change. This research investigates how characters struggle with identity concerns, navigate numerous cultural influences, and strive to establish their sense of self in social, political, and historical upheavals. This is accomplished via an analysis of significant works and critical viewpoints. This research aims to shed light on the delicate interaction between individual agency, cultural legacy, and societal expectations in influencing the creation of the self. This is accomplished by unravelling the complexity of identity development in Indian English literature.

**KEYWORDS:** Self, English Literature, Writers, Identity, Cultural Belonging, Existential Quest, Individual Agency, Societal Expectations.

## INTRODUCTION

Identity-related issues, such as gender, caste, religious affiliation, and regional affinity, are frequently intertwined with the concept of the self in Indian English literature. Writers thoroughly explore the challenges faced by their characters as they navigate multiple identities, grapple with societal norms and expectations, and strive to achieve self-acceptance and self-realization. In Indian literature published in English, the concept of the self is intricately intertwined with larger themes such as cultural authenticity, assimilation, and decolonization.

In addition, the translation of Indian literature into English delves into the complex themes of Indian national identity and the individual self. Literary works often delve into the complex social dynamics of India, exploring its rich history and the obstacles it has faced in its journey towards nation-building. In addition to exploring topics such as societal inequality, community unity, and the pursuit of autonomy and fairness, they also confront the complexities that arise from the clash between personal goals and societal expectations.



Unlike in previous years, the concept of a generational divide has gained significant traction and become more concrete. Creating a new system and structure from scratch was crucial. The rise of multinational enterprises has had a significant impact on the transformation of society. The emergence of international order has led to a transformation in the nature and objectives of education. The criteria for employment were also reassessed. The young individuals were given additional autonomy to explore their surroundings. They were liberated from the limitations of time and place. The advancement of cutting-edge computing technology played a crucial role in enabling the freedom of Indian minds, with women playing a pivotal part in driving this transformative movement. As a result, society experienced a significant transformation, affecting women as well. Every day, a fresh face would emerge in the world, seamlessly integrating into the diverse fabric of an ancient civilization that clung to traditional customs and regulations.

In Indian literature published in English, the concept of self frequently delves into the intricate exploration of individual and collective identities within the Indian context. It represents the characters' wide range of experiences, challenges, and aspirations as they navigate the complexities of their national, cultural, and personal identities. English-language writings by Indian authors have significantly contributed to our understanding of the individual and their relationship to society, culture, and history.

## **THE EVOLUTION OF IDENTITIES IN INDIAN ENGLISH LITERATURE**

Considering the long history of IEL, one might perceive its background as relatively recent. The first book written in English was *The Travels of Dean Mahomet*, authored by an Indian individual. Sake Dean Mahomed authored a travelogue that was published in England in 1794. The influence of Western literature on IEL during its initial stages was significant. The early Indian writers utilized the English language, devoid of any Indian vocabulary or phrases, to effectively communicate the Indian experience. It is widely acknowledged that the first Indian book written in English is *Rajmohan's Wife* by Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, published in 1864. Chattopadhyay's life extended from 1838 to 1894. Lal Behari Dey authored both *Govinda Samanta* or *the History of a Bengali Raiyat* in 1874 and *Folk Tales of Bengal: Life's Secret* in 1912. Authored by Toru Dutt in 1878, *Bianca, or the Young Spanish Maiden*, marked a significant milestone as the debut publication of an Indian woman. Toru Dutt and Krupabai Sathianandhan, both exceptionally gifted Indian English writers from the nineteenth century, tragically passed away at a young age, with Toru Dutt departing in her early twenties and Krupabai Sathianandhan in her thirties. *Saguna: A Story of Native Christian Life*, Sathianadhan's autobiographical essay, was serialized and published in *The*



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Madras Christian College Magazine from 1887 to 1888. Sathianandhan has another book called Kamala: The Story of a Hindu Life, which was published in 1894.

During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, there was a significant amount of non-fiction prose works produced in Indian English writing, encompassing a wide range of subjects and genres. It includes a wide range of written works, including letters, diaries, political manifestos, essays, speeches, and philosophical writings. Speeches delivered by renowned Indian public speakers have played a crucial role in shaping modern India and the Indian English language (Auddy, 9–10). Notable individuals who graced the event with their presence included Swami Vivekananda, Chittaranjan Das, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Mahatma Gandhi, Rabindranath Tagore, and Subhas Chandra Bose. Hind Swaraj, Gandhi's Indian Home Rule (1910), posed a significant challenge to the dominance of Standard English before it was published in a version of English that was more rooted in the indigenous culture. This happened before the works of R. K. Narayan, M. R. Anand, and Raja Rao came into the picture (Auddy, 169).

Raja Rao (1908–2006), an Indian philosopher and writer, has crafted literary masterpieces that offer a unique Indian perspective on storytelling. Notable works include Kanthapura and The Serpent and the Rope. The Mahabharata, an epic poem, was originally translated into English by Kisari Mohan Ganguli. No one has ever undertaken the task of translating the Mahabharata into a European language in its entirety. Rabindranath Tagore was a highly skilled writer, proficient in both Bengali and English. He lived from 1861 to 1941. He was the individual responsible for translating his works into English. As a dedicated scholar, Dhan Gopal Mukerji (1890–1936) achieved the remarkable feat of being the first Indian writer to be honored with a prestigious American literary award. Nirad C. Chaudhuri was an incredibly prolific nonfiction writer, with a career spanning from 1897 until his passing in 1999. His 1951 autobiography, The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian, brought him widespread recognition as he delved into the individuals and events that had a profound impact on his life. During the 1950s, an independent publication emerged Writers Workshop was established by P. Lal (1929–2010), a renowned poet, essayist, publisher, and translator. The journal focused on Indian English literature. Autumn Leaves, the autobiography of Ram Nath Kak (1917–1993), a Kashmiri veterinarian, is highly regarded as a literary masterpiece and a captivating portrayal of life in Kashmir during the twentieth century.



R. K. Narayan (1906–2001) was a prolific writer who remained active in publishing until his passing, making numerous significant contributions throughout his career. Graham Greene came across him, so to speak, when he introduced him to publishers in England. Throughout their lives, Narayan and Greene maintained a strong connection. Narayan created the fictional town of Malgudi for his writings, similar to how Thomas Hardy crafted the county of Wessex. In light of the dynamic social and political landscape of India during the time of the novel, Narayan has received criticism for his portrayal of a secluded, detached, and isolated society.

However, there is a widespread belief that studying Malgudi can provide valuable insights into Indian culture. *Swami and Friends*, one of Narayan's finest works, delves into the life of a young boy named Swaminathan. The story beautifully captures his experiences in a small village and the obstacles he encounters. R. K. Narayan became renowned for his pastoral idylls, while Mulk Raj Anand (1905–2004) gained equal fame for his rural Indian writings. On the other hand, the stories by Mulk Raj Anand were characterized by a more intense and biting tone, shedding light on the disparities related to religion, social class, and caste. "The writers of the 1930s were fortunate as English had become a widely used language in India, at various levels of society," stated author Lakshmi Holmstrom. "This enabled them to conduct more daring experiments and from a position of greater security."

Salman Rushdie, a highly acclaimed writer of our time, hails from India. Currently, he is living in the United Kingdom. *Midnight's Children* received numerous prestigious accolades, such as the Booker Prize in 1981, the Booker of Bookers in 1992, and the Best of the Bookers in 2008, propelling it to the forefront of a burgeoning literary movement. He proposed an idea that could be interpreted as representing the vast Indian subcontinent through a predominantly English language with a sprinkling of Indian words. One of the literary subgenres often linked to Gabriel García Márquez's works is magic realism. That's quite impressive. Nayantara Sehgal was a highly esteemed Indian woman writer who gained recognition for her English writings. The focal point of her novel revolves around the response of the privileged class towards the calamity that ensued due to the political turmoil in India.

Anita Desai was honored with the prestigious British Guardian Prize and the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1978 for her remarkable novels *Fire on the Mountain* and *The Village by the Sea*. Desai also received three nominations, but unfortunately, she never received the prestigious Booker Prize. Kiran Desai's second book, *The Inheritance of Loss*, was awarded the prestigious 2006 Man Booker Prize. Ruskin Bond was honored



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with the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award by the Sahitya Akademi for his remarkable collection of short stories, titled *Our Trees Still Grow in Dehra*, which was published in 1992. In addition, he penned *A Flight of Pigeons*, a captivating historical fiction piece that draws inspiration from a real-life event during the 1857 Indian Rebellion.

Vikram Seth, a renowned author, is known for his ability to craft realistic fiction. His works, such as *A Suitable Boy* (1994) and *The Golden Gate* (1986), showcase his talent for writing in the traditional English genres. He openly declares his admiration for Jane Austen. He demonstrates a keen eye for the plot, effortlessly capturing subtle details and surprising twists. Vikram Seth is widely recognized for his exceptional writing skills and his accomplishments as a poet.

Amitav Ghosh has significantly influenced Indian English literature. *The Circle of Reason*, his debut novel, was published in 1986. He has an impressive collection of literary works, including *The Glass Palace* (2000), *The Hungry Tide* (2004), *The Shadow Lines* (1988), *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1995), and *Sea of Poppies* (2008), which is the first volume of *The Ibis* trilogy. This trilogy takes place in the 1830s, right before the Opium War, and documents the colonial history of the East India Company. Ghosh's latest work of fiction is *River of Smoke* (2011), which is part of the *Ibis* trilogy.

Rohinton Mistry, a writer based in Canada but born in India, was honored with the prestigious 2012 Neustadt International Prize for Literature. The debut collection of short stories, *Tales from Firozsha Baag*, was published in 1987 by Penguin Books in Canada. It comprises eleven captivating stories. The novels *Such a Long Journey* (1991) and *A Fine Balance* (1995) received widespread critical acclaim. M. G. Vassanji, an author with a deep understanding of both India and Canada, has been recognized for his exceptional writing. His travelogue *A Place Within: Rediscovering India* earned him two Giller Prizes, while *The Book of Secrets* (1994) and *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* (2003) were both honored with the prestigious Governor General's Award for English-language non-fiction.

*The Great Indian Novel* (1989) by Shashi Tharoor is a comedic narrative that adopts the style of the Mahabharata. Tharoor skillfully navigates through different time periods to explore and expand upon his ideas. As a UN envoy, he must reside outside of India. This provides him with a distinct perspective that can assist in establishing an impartial definition of Indianness. Vikram Chandra is a writer who resides in both India and the United States. His debut novel, *Red Earth and Pouring Rain*, published in 1995, and his



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collection of short stories, *Love and Longing in Bombay*, released in 1997, garnered favorable reviews.

Vikram A. Chandra, the renowned journalist and author of the 2000 book *The Srinagar Conspiracy*, is widely recognized in his field. *Maximum City*, a memoir by Suketu Mehta published in 2004, delves into the author's captivating encounters while residing in Mumbai. Mehta is currently based in the US and is widely recognized as an accomplished writer. In 2008, Aravind Adiga received the prestigious Man Booker Prize for his debut novel, *The White Tiger*.

Contemporary Indian writers such as Arundhati Roy and David Davidar have shown a notable inclination towards contextuality and rootedness in their works. Arundhati Roy, with a background in architecture, achieved the remarkable feat of winning the prestigious Booker Prize in 1997 for her novel *The God of Small Things*. She introduces herself as a writer with a unique perspective. Located in the beautiful Indian state of Kerala in the southeast, her book garnered numerous award nominations. *The House of Blue Mangoes* is set in Southern Tamil Nadu, providing a rich backdrop for Davidar's novel. Both books highlight the political and geographical contexts of the stories.

In his latest book, *The Living Splits*, Rajeeva Nayan Pathak sheds light on the importance of organ donation and cadaveric transplantation, emphasizing the struggles faced by individuals who depend on these procedures for their survival.

Ratan Lal Basu's stories and novels offer a vivid portrayal of the lives of the hill and tribal communities in West Bengal and the neighboring regions of Sikkim, Bhutan, and Nepal. Some of his shorter works delve into the enduring political turmoil in West Bengal, tracing its roots to the Naxalite rebellion of the 1970s.

He explores the themes of unconditional love in works such as *Blue Are the Far-Off Mountains*, *The First Rain*, and *The Magic Marble*. In his novel *Oraon and the Divine Tree*, he explores the profound connection between a tribal man and an ancient tree, delving into the depths of their love affair. The author immerses the reader in a captivating realm where individuals forge deep connections with the natural world, evoking a writing style reminiscent of Ernest Hemingway.



## IDEOLOGY AND SELF-DISCOVERY IN INDIAN LITERATURE

It is intriguing how these shifts challenged the established norms that had tightly controlled Indian society for a significant period of time.

Context, history, social status, class, and cross-cultural pluralism are overshadowed by the pervasive influence of existentialist thought in Anita Desai's writings. While they may be considered secondary, it does not mean they are completely unnecessary. The alienation experienced by the diasporic characters in Desai's work is a result of a combination of internal thoughts and external situations. Loneliness can be experienced even in the presence of others, as various internal and external factors can contribute to this feeling. Hugo Baumgartner, the main character of Baumgartner's *Bombay*, written by Anita in 1998, had a childhood in Germany alongside his parents. He experiences a sense of isolation that haunts him from an early age and resurfaces during crucial moments in his otherwise successful life. As he arrives at school, he eagerly displays his candy cone to his classmates, beaming with pride. Regrettably, at that precise moment, nobody witnessed his moment of victory, while the rest of the children were disappearing down the street. He criticizes his mom for her tardiness and remarks, "You have a unique appearance as a mother."

Due to Hugo's previous struggles in forming friendships, he experiences a sense of loneliness regardless of his location. Despite receiving attention from others, he continues to experience a sense of isolation. The parents' generosity was evident at the school's Christmas celebration, as each student's parents brought gifts to share with their teachers. Hugo is determined to complete the task of adorning the Christmas tree with the red glass ball. Despite the persistent urging from his friends, he adamantly declines to accept the teacher's gift, as he is aware that his parents have not given it to him. This was all devised by the instructor. Germany's Jewish population may have experienced a sense of disconnection, enabling Hitler to exploit the Aryan ideology and turn their isolation into a reign of terror. Residing in Nazi Germany, the Baumgartner family experiences an unparalleled sense of isolation that is difficult to comprehend: an unending state of unease. Hugo had already experienced a shift in his environment before his father's tragic passing. This marks Hugo's initial experience of genuine displacement. Thus, Hugo begins to experience the impact of solitude as he embarks on a physical journey and moves to India during his teenage years.

Despite the change in location, his feelings of loneliness remain unchanged. However, it is no mere happenstance that one's circumstances are shifting, further intensifying the depth of one's solitude. This is crucial given the separation of Hugo and his mother. Baumgartner derives minimal comfort from the fact





that Hugo's mother stayed in Nazi Germany and that her heavily edited correspondence only mentioned briefly that she was doing fine. Hugo's mother was unable to leave the country due to the restrictions imposed by Nazi Germany. Recalling his mother, who resides in Germany, helps him resist succumbing to feelings of solitude. Human life is profoundly impacted by the various factors that shape individuals' perspectives and the formidable challenges they encounter. When the overwhelming pressure from these conflicting factors reaches a tipping point, it can have detrimental effects on individuals' well-being. The shaping process has the ability to reawaken sensations that have been dormant until recently.

Baumgartner experiences a renewed sense of isolation while in India, but finds solace in the company of Lotte, a German cabaret singer who assists him in overcoming his feelings of loneliness. Hugo is in dire need of additional strong relationships, and although his connection with Lotte is significant, it is insufficient to compensate for this lack. Baumgartner finds meaning in his otherwise directionless life by caring for stray animals he rescues and keeps as pets, which may be linked to his connection with Lotte. According to Taneja (1991) in "Anita Desai's Baumgartner's Bombay: A Note," the bond holds great importance, particularly because Hugo finds meaning in it while living a life reminiscent of Sisyphus. During the height of WWII, Baumgartner, a German citizen, found himself imprisoned in a British Indian concentration camp. In the camp, Baumgartner prefers to maintain his solitude, even though there are many Jewish people around. What sets him apart from other Jews is his inability to find a solution to "relieve the weight, the monotony, the emptiness of the days spent waiting" (Baumgartner's Bombay). After reconnecting with a former campmate, he discovers that his friend had decided to change his name from Julius to Julian, considering the former to be "too Jewish" and the latter to be more "English," even after the war had come to an end. He decided to change his name due to personal reasons. Julius may unknowingly be exacerbating Baumgartner's struggle with identity by deliberately downplaying his Jewish heritage. He might experience a sense of displacement as a protective response to this situation.

The Jewish diaspora is currently grappling with an identity crisis following the aftermath of WWII. Due to the transformation of Germany over the years, Baumgartner finds himself unable to revisit his past, resulting in a persistent sense of isolation. Baumgartner arrives back at his apartment accompanied by a young German named Kurt, who seems to be under the influence of drugs. Together, they embark on a journey to reconcile the Germany of Baumgartner's past with the Germany of the present. During this period, Kurt commits a robbery and takes the life of Baumgartner. Baumgartner refrains from pursuing any further endeavors in this regard. One could argue that repairing relationships and trying to overcome the sense of



detachment that comes with being spread thin is a futile endeavor. In *Journey to Ithaca*, Sophie, a German woman, stands in stark contrast to Kurt, another German character who embraces a nonconventional hippie lifestyle in India. Kurt hails from Germany. She accompanied her Italian husband, Matteo, on a journey to India in search of spiritual enlightenment, so that they could be united in their quest for love.

Sophie fails to appreciate Matteo's admiration for his mother and struggles to understand and value his religious convictions. She discovers herself stranded in a distant land, completely alone. Through a surprising turn of events, Sophie uncovers the fascinating story of the Mother, a woman who embarked on a quest for divine love that took her across the world before finding her home in India. Regrettably, Mother has already passed away, and Matteo has disappeared before she has the chance to reveal the truth to him. Feeling disconnected from the spiritual realm, she experiences a sense of abandonment as the diverse cultural influences fail to provide the mysticism she seeks. Individuals of Indian descent who have migrated from their home country often encounter a sense of isolation. India's independence marked the beginning of a strong preference among Indians for the United Kingdom as a foreign destination. Individuals in the first group, who have a deep admiration for England, were drawn to the country for its exquisite natural scenery.

On the other hand, individuals in the second category, known as "Anglophobes," were driven by a desire for traditional "postcolonial revenge." These Indian immigrant communities in England are often referred to as "the Others" in a general sense. One possible explanation for this distinct sense of self-identity is overt racism, but there is also the possibility of an unmet psychological need. When two individuals with contrasting perspectives on English collaborate towards a common goal, their divergences tend to diminish in prominence. Numerous individuals undergo a sense of solitude stemming from a dearth of direction in their lives. The novel *Bye-Bye Blackbird* by Anita Desai delves into the lives of Indian migrants living in England during the 1960s. Sarah, Adit's spouse from England, resides in London.

Dev, a recent arrival in the country, immigrated from India. Adit's feelings of loneliness have diminished over time as he has effectively adjusted to life in his adopted country. However, Dev had some strong criticisms regarding Adit's actions. He gets upset and scared when someone uses derogatory language towards him without his knowledge. As he enters the city, Dev experiences a sense of isolation similar to that of a Kafkaesque stranger navigating through the intricate maze of a prison. This feeling is shared by numerous individuals. Dev has a compelling reason to feel isolated, more so than others. Dev's sense of solitude gradually diminishes, leading him to choose to stay in England. Currently, Adit is experiencing a



period of self-discovery. A strong sense of nostalgia for his homeland and the loved ones he parted ways with starts to engulf him. Sarah had abruptly excluded him from her nostalgic memories of one-eared pandas and challenging jigsaw puzzles from her childhood. He is annoyed not only by that but also by the constant interruptions and sarcastic remarks from Mrs. Roscommon-James and Dev. Adding to his sadness are the constant sniffs and barks of Mrs. Roscommon-James. Ultimately, he and Sarah decide to go back to India. Thus, the experience of loneliness is shaped by various unpredictable factors, rather than being a persistent and overwhelming force. The United States and the United Kingdom have emerged as highly sought-after destinations for Indians aspiring to achieve academic and professional excellence. The USA is a country that fits into this category.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, "Identity Formation in Indian English Literature: The Exploration of Self" highlights the intricate and dynamic process of constructing identity in Indian literature. Indian English literature has been a rich source for exploring the intricacies of cultural identity and selfhood, with notable authors such as R.K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, Arundhati Roy, and Amitav Ghosh contributing their unique perspectives.

Indian English literature offers valuable insights into the human condition and the diverse experiences of individuals within the Indian environment. It does so by depicting characters who grapple with self-discovery, feelings of alienation, and the search for a sense of belonging. Writers delve into the intricate dynamics of identity formation in a multicultural society by exploring the tensions that arise between tradition and modernity, the individual and the communal, and the local and the global.

It is crucial to delve deeper into the concept of self in Indian English literature, ensuring that diverse voices and perspectives are given equal importance, and thoroughly analyzing how identity intersects with other social, political, and cultural aspects. Indian English literature contributes to broader conversations about identity politics, cultural pluralism, and the evolving nature of identity in an increasingly interconnected world by thoughtfully examining matters of selfhood and identity.



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