

Reclaiming the Sacred: The Bhagavad Gita and the Construction of Indian Identity in English Literature

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Abstract

This paper examines how the Bhagavad Gita—a central sacred text of Indian spiritual and ethical thought—has been reclaimed and reimagined within Indian English literature to construct, contest, and communicate notions of Indian identity. Moving beyond mere religious exegesis, writers and intellectuals have used the Gita's concepts (dharma, karma, detachment, self-realization) as ethical vocabulary, narrative strategy, and political rhetoric to respond to colonial modernity, anticolonial nationalism, and postcolonial self-fashioning. By examining historical reception (including Gandhian appropriation), and close readings of key anglophone authors—Raja Rao, R.K. Narayan, and representative critical commentary—this paper argues that the Gita functions in Indian English writing as a flexible cultural resource: a source of moral authority, a model of interiority, and a symbolic anchor for a distinctly Indian modernity. The paper situates literary uses of the Gita within broader socio-political movements—Gandhian nationalism, cultural revivalism—and demonstrates how literary reclamation has resisted colonial denigration of native traditions while negotiating Indian identity in a global literary idiom.

Introduction

The meeting between the English literary forms and the sacred tradition of India produced a rich, often fraught field in which notions of identity were negotiated. Among the many sources of Indian spiritual and ethical thought, the Bhagavad Gita stands out for its philosophical density and its cultural resonance. Embedded within the epic Mahabharata, the Gita comprises a dialogic exchange between Arjuna and Krishna that addresses duty, action, devotion, and the nature of the self. In the colonial and postcolonial contexts, Indian intellectuals and writers turned to the Gita both to recover indigenous moral vocabularies and to articulate a modern Indian identity that could stand on its own terms in global conversation. This paper examines the processes by which Anglophone Indian writers reclaimed the sacred—recasting the Gita not simply as scripture but as a usable cultural text within English-language novels, essays, and public discourse.

Scholars have traced several lines of Gita's reception, namely religious-philosophical reinterpretation, political appropriation, most notably by Mahatma Gandhi, and literary reworking in prose and poetry. This study brings those streams together by focusing on the outcomes that are literary in nature, looking closely at the ways in which Gita's ethical grammar inflects characterization, plot, and thematic design in Indian English literature, and how this literary redeployment participates in identity formation both at the national and personal levels. After

analyzing Gandhian readings, I undertake close readings of representative authors such as Raja Rao and R. K. Narayan, whose works best exemplify the different ways in which Gita-inspired thought has been integrated into English writing. I conclude by reflecting on how contemporary writers inherit, transform, or resist these earlier modes of reclamation.

Historical and Intellectual Context: The Gita in Modern India

Understanding literary reclamation requires briefly considering the Gita's modern reception. Through much of the 19th and early 20th centuries, Indian revivalists and Western Orientalists alike read the Gita in ways that shaped its modern profile. Western Romantic and Transcendentalist thinkers such as Emerson and Carlyle found in the Gita resonances with universal spiritual themes, while in India, intellectuals and reformers invoked the Gita against colonial narratives that cast Hindu traditions as backward or superstitious. The Gita thus became a site for asserting cultural profundity and ethical sophistication on the global stage. Recent scholarship and accessible overviews highlight the Gita's broad cultural influence across centuries and its renewed attention within modern literary contexts.

Most significantly for literary identity formation, however, was Gandhi's appropriation of the Gita. He characterized the Gita as a formative text—his "spiritual dictionary"—and elaborated an interpretation that foregrounded nonviolence, selfless action, and moral discipline. Gandhi's public readings, commentaries, and lived practice of Gita-inspired ideals made the scripture a political and ethical resource for the anticolonial movement; in his hands, the Gita served not just as metaphysical guide but as a practical manual for political action and moral resistance. It is here that Gandhi's emphasis on karma-yoga (selfless action) and detachment from fruits of action provided a moral vocabulary for swadeshi, satyagraha, and civil disobedience that fed into literary imaginations of Indian national character.

This twin influence—global philosophical reception and Gandhian politicization—created fertile ground for the reclamation of the Gita by English-language writers. Indian authors in English could use its concepts to resist colonial marginalization of Indian thought and create modern narratives that meld indigenous ethical registers with Western narrative techniques.

The Gita as Ethical Vocabulary: Dharma, Action, and Interior Conflict

A central reason the Gita resonates with novelists is its focus on moral choice under crisis. Arjuna's paralysis before battle becomes a universal metaphor for ethical dilemma; Krishna's counsel proposes action rooted in duty (dharma) and detachment from results. Literary characters faced with vocation, moral ambiguity, or political responsibility can be read through this Gita-shaped frame. This is not merely an allegorical reading: many Indian English novels consciously adopt Gita-inspired structures where protagonists move from confusion to action through an interiorization of duty.

The Gita's conceptual vocabulary of dharma, karma, yoga, and sattva/rajas/tamas (the three gunas) provides novelists with a conceptual toolkit for articulating characters' ethical positions. Novelists frequently dramatize the tension between personal desire and social duty/dharma, or trace how detachment from ego-centric rewards enables a morally consistent public life. Because these concepts are philosophically capacious yet narratively actionable, they bridge theological discourse and fictional politics, and make the Gita the prime candidate for literary reclamation in the service of identity formation.

Gandhian Reclamation and Literary Ripples

The reading of the Gita by Gandhi had an enormous cultural pull. This view—highlighting karma-yoga and unattachment as compatible with active, nonviolent resistance—transmogrified the Gita from metaphysical abstraction into lived ethic. Gandhi's practice and promotion of Gita's ideas made those ideas central to modern Indian self-understanding and therefore to Indian writing in English, which often inhabited the intellectual and political spaces opened by him. And scholars have observed how Gandhi's appropriation rendered the Gita simultaneously a moral resource and also a national emblem for Indians asserting political legitimacy under colonial rule.

Literary consequences followed. Novels and short fiction of the nationalist era and shortly thereafter incorporate Gandhian language and ethos: spinning, swadeshi, sacrifice, and moral discipline appear alongside explicit references to scripture. Writers used Gandhian motifs-himself a public interpreter of the Gita-to configure characters who embody a modern Indian moral interior: principled, self-sacrificing, and oriented toward communal uplift. This patterned use of Gita-derived ethics in literature helped familiarize English-reading publics-both Indian and international-with a modern Indian identity rooted in indigenous moral authority.

Case Study I: Raja Rao — Spiritual Discourse as National Narrative

Raja Rao occupies a pivotal place in Indian English literature as a novelist who explicitly weaves Indian spiritual thought into English narrative form. His novels—most notably *Kanthapura* (1938) and later works—treat the village and its people as repositories of Indian cultural and spiritual identity, while using narrative voice and structure that blend oral storytelling with philosophical reflection. Rao's conception of literature as *sadhana* (spiritual discipline) made philosophical texts—implicitly and explicitly—integral to his fiction. Critics argue that Rao creates a literary space in which Indian metaphysical concerns (often resonant with Gita's ethos) are made compatible with and expressive through English prose.

Kanthapura is often read through the double lens of Gandhian politics and Indian spiritual tradition. The novel's engagement with village life and caste structures, along with Gandhian *satyagraha*, makes the Gita's emphasis on duty and community visible, even if not always cited verbatim. Rao's later works reflect a more explicit infusion of metaphysical discourse, articulating inner quests for the Absolute which resonate with the Gita's

soteriological aim of self-realization. In short, Rao's fiction reflects the ways in which the Gita can be transformed into narrative principles which refashion Indian identity as anchored in spiritual continuity and moral resilience.

Case Study II: R. K. Narayan — Everyday Indianness and Quiet Moral Vision

R. K. Narayan's fiction, largely set in the fictional South Indian town of Malgudi, operates as a subtler mode of Gita's influence. Unlike Rao, Narayan seldom frames his narratives in overtly philosophical terms; critics have, nonetheless, located Gita-like echoes in his portraits of characters who learn to accept limitations, to practice humility, and to reconcile desire and duty. Various readings of *The Guide*, *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*, and other works point to ethical archetypes akin to Gita's valorization of self-control and inner steadiness. In other analyses, Sastri and Nataraj, among others, become Arjuna-figures counseled by Krishna-like agents or figures who undergo interior transformation analogous to Gita's moral pedagogy. These readings suggest how Gita's moral grammar saturates the texture of everyday Indianness in Narayan's English-language fiction.

Narayan's approach to the matter of identity construction is important because it naturalizes the ethical ideals of the Gita, making them accessible through humor, quotidian dilemmas, and small-town sociality. Where Rao dramatizes spiritual questing, Narayan domesticates spiritual virtue as part of ordinary life. Both contribute to a composite Anglophone Indian identity: one lofty and metaphysical, the other approachable and socially embedded.

Theoretical:

Mid-Century to Postcolonial Shifts: Reclaiming vs. Reworking the Sacred

Following independence, Indian English writers negotiated a set of new pressures: the necessity of defining a postcolonial nation, critiquing internal social hierarchies, and engaging global modernity. The symbolic utility of the Gita dramatically shifted. For some, it remained a source of moral anchoring and cultural pride; for others, its language of duty and hierarchy invited critical scrutiny—particularly where dharma could be used, or misused, to justify social conservatism.

In postcolonial literary practice, the recuperation of the Gita from colonial denigration necessarily implied transformation to speak to modern injustices. Thus, several authors rearticulate dharma in egalitarian terms or insist on the existential humanism of the Gita to attack rigid social orders. Scholars working on modern reimaginings argue that the Gita in Indian English literature becomes a mutable heritage-resistant to monolithic or authoritarian readings, available for ethical reappraisal.

This ambivalence-between reverent reclamation and critical reconfiguration-is a sign of mature literary engagement with the sacred source material. The Gita is neither nostalgically fossilized nor uncritically venerated; it is dialogically reentered, contested, and repurposed to serve emergent notions of justice, identity, and modern citizenship.

The feet seem to be able to take in everything that's happening.

The Gita and Gendered Narratives: Inclusion and Exclusion

Though much critical attention focuses on male protagonists and nationalist discourse, there is an important genealogical thread connecting Gita inflections to gendered identity construction. Feminist critics have interrogated classical scripture's masculine orientation, asking whether Gita-inspired ethics can be reframed to support gender justice. Some women writers and contemporary novelists rework Gita motifs to explore female agency, either by aligning female protagonists with Gita's inner strength or by subverting dharma-based expectations that limit women's autonomy. While a full feminist history of Gita's literary reception exceeds the scope of this paper, it is important to note that reclamation is not monolithic; it can be mobilized to both reinforce and contest gendered norms. See broader discussions in modern critical literature for expanded treatments.

Contemporary Reimaginings: From Canonical Echoes to Experimental Forms

The late 20th and early 21st centuries have produced varied reworkings of the Gita in English-language contexts. Some contemporary novelists incorporate direct intertextual references; others echo Gita-like ethical dilemmas in secular settings—corporate ethics, diasporic identity struggles, and environmental ethics. Academic analyses published in recent years document a renewed interest among Indian English writers in the Gita as both literary motif and philosophical interlocutor. These contemporary engagements often emphasize plurality: the Gita is read as a polyphonic text that can sustain multiple, even conflicting, modern appropriations.

Furthermore, adaptations and pedagogical reworkings-poetic translations, retellings, and critical essays-have made the Gita accessible to newer anglophone audiences; this cultural circulation reinforces its continuing role in identity-making. As scholarship shows, reimagining the Gita in Indian English literature is an ongoing project that responds to changing political, social, and cultural contexts.

Synthesis: How the Gita Constructs Indian Identity in English Literature

From the previous analyses, the following mechanisms can be identified as to how the Gita participates in identity construction within Indian English literature:

1. **Ethical Framing:** The Gita furnishes a set of moral categories-dharma, karma, detachment-that writers employ to frame character motivation and narrative resolution. This ethical lexicon enables authors to shape Indian protagonists whose moral rationale diverges from European liberal individualism and thus articulates a particular Indian subjectivity.
2. **Political Symbolism:** Through Gandhian appropriation and nationalist rhetoric, the Gita becomes a political talisman. Authors use such symbolism to build national character in the mold of self-sacrificing, morally disciplined, and oriented toward welfare.
3. **Spiritual Interiority:** Most Indian English novels are invested in interior moral growth rather than exterior progress alone. The Gita's emphasis on the transformation from within finds easy correspondence with any narrative of selfhood and allows authors to craft characters whose identity is spiritual and reflective.
4. **Cultural Legitimation:** Reclaiming the Gita in English serves to legitimize indigenous intellectual resources within a colonial language. By showing that Indian philosophical texts can be parsed, dramatized, and repurposed in English, authors assert cultural parity and complexity.
5. **Dialogic Reinterpretation:** Finally, literary engagement is rarely univocal. Writers represent the Gita as a site of contested heritage-available for emancipation, critique, or reformulation-thus generating an Indian identity that is neither essentialist nor static.

Together these mechanisms illustrate that reclaiming the sacred through English language literature operates as both a defensive (against colonial condescension) and creative enterprise which creates new modernities.

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Conclusion

The Bhagavad Gita's journey into Indian English literature is exemplary of the complex cultural negotiations of colonial and postcolonial modernity. Through historical reception, Gandhian appropriation, and case studies of Raja Rao and R.K. Narayan, the Gita functions as an adaptable cultural resource—a moral authority, a narrative structure, and a political rhetoric that undergirds the anglophone Indian identity. Reclaiming the sacred is not about reiteration; it's transformation. Indian English writers, writing in a colonially inherited tongue, have adopted the Gita to express ethical orientations, craft interior subjectivities, and legitimate indigenous intellectual traditions before both national and international audiences.

Crucially, literary reclamation has not been monolithic. While some writers insist on the Gita's unifying spiritual claims, others rework its categories to include discourses on gender, caste, and social inequities. In their own reimaginings of the text, contemporary narratives continue the dialogic pattern within which the Gita remains a living text in English literary formations. This interplay between sacred text and English narrative continues to mediate how Indian identity is imagined, contested, and narrated in the modern era.

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