

Exploring Human Values through the Lens of Indian English Literature

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Abstract

Values are a collection of principles or beliefs that impact and shape an individual's words and actions. As defined by Princeton Word Net, values are the "beliefs held by a person or social group to which they are emotionally attached." These values are a reflection of human perceptions, desires, interests, and preferences, and they can vary from one person to another, ranging from conservative to liberal. Without these values, individuals look like flowers without aroma. Professional ethics are deeply rooted in these fundamental human values. From a societal standpoint, these values form the basis of behavioral norms that individuals adhere to in order to maintain interpersonal relationships. In the contemporary world, human values play a crucial role in promoting peace and safeguarding society. When put into practice, these values contribute to upholding morality within the community. By connecting human values with personal connections, individuals can coexist harmoniously with others. This study seeks to investigate how Indian English literature integrates and reflects human values through diverse themes, characters, and narratives, as well as to uncover how these literary works depict the essence of human values, offering readers profound insights and meaningful reflections on life, society, and humanity.

Key Words: *Indian English Literature, values, life, society*

Introduction

**“Keep your thoughts positive because your thoughts become YOUR WORDS.
Keep your words positive because your words become YOUR BEHAVIOR
Keep your behavior positive because your behavior becomes YOUR HABITS
Keep your habits positive because your habits become YOUR VALUES
Keep your values positive because your values become YOUR DESTINY”**

— Mahatma Gandhi

Values are not inborn but learned. Moral codes vary across cultures and are acquired externally. Values are composed of different characteristic traits. Most of the imbibed values are learnt in the very early stages. The initial process of inculcating human values commences during childhood and is primarily facilitated by parents. These values are then reinforced throughout the child's upbringing. As the child progresses through different stages of life, they acquire a deeper understanding of these values from various sources such as friends, teachers, elders, leaders, and society, ultimately shaping their personality. The values encompass honesty, discipline, love, peace, justice, trust, civility, loyalty, appreciation, and environmental consciousness. Individuals who embody these exceptional human values are often esteemed and admired. This is particularly evident in professions like teaching, medicine, and law, where individuals are expected to uphold a high moral and ethical code of conduct. Society highly encourages these noble human values, while discouraging negative ones.

Literature has played a crucial role in promoting human values and contributing to the development of morally virtuous individuals, as well as in the development of societies by fostering empathy, critical thinking, and a deeper understanding of the human experience. It is through literature that one can connect with the lives of successful

individuals and cultivate moral values. By means of storytelling, literature possesses the ability to convey significant ethical and moral lessons, thereby nurturing empathy, understanding, and compassion in its readers. Throughout history, writers have explored the multifaceted relationship between individuals and society. Each era is characterized by its own set of compulsions, tensions, fears, aspirations, and logic, which are reflected in the literary works of that time. By depicting characters facing moral dilemmas and ethical challenges, literature encourages readers to reflect upon their own values and behaviors, thus contributing to personal and societal growth.

Indian English Literature, in particular, is a vibrant and insightful component of the literary world. It offers profound perspectives and insights into human values, social norms, and cultural ethics prevalent in India through its narratives. Emerging from a unique intersection of colonial history and indigenous traditions, this literary genre has evolved to reflect the complexities and diversities of Indian life. It delves deep into the exploration of human values such as family bonds, cultural identity, social justice, spirituality, freedom, and empathy. Indian English literature illuminates the essence of the Indian experience, shedding light on the universal aspects of the human condition while also embracing the richness of its particular cultural context.

Human Values in Indian English Literature

Family and Social Bonds

Family and societal connections play a crucial role in Indian literature, showcasing the communal essence of Indian civilization. The significance of family, loyalty, responsibility, respect for elders, and the social structure are recurring themes portrayed with profound insight.

For example, Vikram Seth's novel "A Suitable Boy" vividly illustrates the lives of four families, highlighting the importance of familial ties, arranged marriages, and the societal constraints that influence individuals' destinies in post-independence India. The narrative delves into a fundamental aspect of Indian heritage, exploring the complex dynamics among family members. The character of Mrs. Rupa Mehra serves as a poignant illustration of a mother deeply committed to the welfare and prospects of her children, particularly in securing a suitable match for her daughter, Lata. Rupa's character epitomizes the significance of familial obligations and societal norms.

"The God of Small Things" by Arundhati Roy serves as a prime example of a novel that delves into the intricate dynamics within the Ipe family. It explores the notion that family bonds can simultaneously provide strength and give rise to conflicts. Rather than following a linear narrative, the story unfolds in a non-sequential manner, presenting a series of events from different time periods that harmonize with one another. Spanning across three generations, the plot sheds light on the profound connection and empathy shared between the twins, Rahel and Estha. This semi-autobiographical and fictional work is widely regarded for its portrayal of the complexities within familial relationships.

Cultural Identity and Tradition

The recurring theme of the conflict between tradition and modernity is often explored by Indian English writers. These writers delve into the ways in which individuals and communities negotiate their cultural identities in a world that is rapidly changing. Within literature, the search for belonging emerges as a common and captivating theme, as characters navigate the complexities of their identities, relationships, and their yearning for connection. By examining characters' quests for belonging, profound insights into the human experience and the profound impact it can have on their lives are revealed. They may perceive themselves as outsiders or misfits, longing for acceptance and understanding. Additionally, characters may encounter prejudice, discrimination, or marginalization due to the intersections of their identities. Consequently, they may struggle to find spaces where they are fully recognized and accepted. The exploration of these external challenges sheds light on the social structures and power dynamics that influence the experiences of individuals with overlapping identities. Ultimately, literature serves as a platform for raising awareness and fostering empathy towards the diverse experiences of individuals who navigate multiple identity intersections.

"The Inheritance of Loss" by Kiran Desai is a novel that delves into the lives of various characters residing in the northeastern Himalayas as well as an illegal immigrant in the United States. These characters are profoundly knotted with their ancestral choices, inaccuracies and accomplishments. The novel explores themes such as cultural displacement, identity crisis, and the influence of globalization on traditional values. Among the characters, the judge serves as a powerful symbol of the past. He is torn in between the ideal of justice and corruption in reality which he has witnessed in his profession. Another character, Sai, struggles with her own sense of identity, torn between the expectations of her upbringing and the appeal of a changing society. Additionally, the novel examines how historical events have caused trauma that spread through subsequent generations, shaping their lives in profound ways.

In Jhumpa Lahiri's novel "The Lowland", the characters' struggles with their identities are central to the narrative. The novel spans multiple generations and geographical locations, primarily focusing on two brothers, Subhash and Udayan Mitra, and their diverging paths. Subhash's decision to leave India for the United States represents his desire to distance himself from the political turmoil in his homeland. In America, he attempts to assimilate by pursuing a career in academia and adopting American customs and values. Despite his efforts, Subhash remains deeply connected to his Indian roots, struggling with his dual identity. Gauri's, after the death of Udayan, sense of alienation is heightened by her physical and emotional displacement. Her struggles to fit into American society and reconcile her past with her present illustrate the complex nature of cultural identity for immigrants. Bela's upbringing in the United States by her father Subhash, who assumes the role of her father after Udayan's death, adds another layer to the exploration of cultural identity. Bela's experiences as an American-born individual with Indian heritage embody the challenges of navigating bicultural identity. The novel offers a profound exploration of cultural identity, portraying the complexities and nuances of the immigrant experience.

Social Justice and Equality

Indian Literature has been grappling with themes of social justice and equality for a long time. Various works have addressed social inequalities and emphasized the importance of justice, which is a reflection of India's diverse and often divided society. These narratives bring to light issues such as caste discrimination, gender inequality, and economic disparities. From the ancient epics like the "Mahabharata" and "Ramayana," which delve into moral dilemmas and the responsibility to uphold justice, to contemporary works, the quest for social justice remains a recurring theme. Indian Literature, with its diverse range of stories not only serves as a mirror reflecting societal issues but also acts as a powerful tool for advocating social justice and equality.

"Untouchable" by Mulk Raj Anand is a powerful novel that critiques the caste system through the character Bakha, a young sweeper in colonial India. Set in a single day, the novel vividly depicts Bakha's daily life struggles with discrimination and humiliation because of his societal status as an "untouchable". The narration meticulously exposes the reality of dehumanizing people like Bakha who are condemned to live an unsecured and restricted life. The abuse the character faces depicts the relentless oppression highlights the caste based discrimination in the Indian society. Through the eyes of Bakha, the readers witness the societal prejudice and his sense of longing for dignity that prevails in every aspect of his existence when he encounters with the upper caste people. The novel ends in a powerful plea for change with an impactful meeting with Mahatma Gandhi, who initiates the abolition of untouchability and social upliftment of the marginalized. Thus the author uses Bakha's story to advocate social reform and equality and emphasize the need of empathy calling the readers to recognize the urgent need for a societal change.

In "The White Tiger," Aravind Adiga presents an examination of social justice and equality through the life of Balram Halwai, the protagonist who rises from a village teashop worker to a successful entrepreneur. Balram's suffering represents the larger systemic inequalities faced by the poor in India. As a member of a low caste, he is trapped in a cycle of poverty and exploitation, which he refers to as the "Rooster Coop" – a metaphor for the oppressive societal structures that keep the underprivileged unresponsive and submissive. Despite his intelligence and ambition, Balram is constantly humiliated and exploited by his wealthy employers, who see him as nothing more than a disposable servant. His journey from servitude to self-made success involves moral compromises and criminal acts, reflecting the desperate measures one must take to break free from systemic oppression. Adiga uses Balram's story to critique the deep-seated corruption and inequality in Indian society. The narrative exposes the vast chasm between the wealthy elite and the impoverished masses, highlighting the injustices that perpetuate this divide.

Spirituality and Moral Values

Spirituality is intricately woven into the fabric of Indian culture and literature, narratives with profound moral and ethical dimensions. Indian English literature frequently explores the existential quest for meaning and truth, delving into the complexities of human existence and the search for spiritual fulfillment. Authors draw upon ancient wisdom, religious philosophies, and cultural traditions to illuminate the inner self of characters struggling with moral dilemmas, ethical choices, and the pursuit of higher consciousness. Through evocative storytelling and nuanced portrayals of spiritual journeys, Indian literature offers readers a glimpse into the transformative power of spiritual insights and moral values in shaping individual destinies and communal harmony. These narratives not only celebrate the diversity of spiritual traditions within India but also challenge readers to contemplate universal truths about compassion, forgiveness, and the interconnectedness of all life. In exploring spirituality and moral values, Indian English literature serves as a timeless depository of wisdom, inviting readers to reflect on the eternal quest for inner peace and ethical enlightenment amidst the complexities of contemporary existence.

Rabindranath Tagore's poetry "Gitanjali," meaning "Song Offerings" is a collection of poems reflects Tagore's spiritual vision and idealistic musings. The poems explore themes of divine love, the beauty of nature, and the quest for spiritual enlightenment. The poetry goes beyond the boundaries of religious belief and embraces a universal spirituality that exceeds cultural and societal barriers. His verses speak to the primary longing of the human soul to unite with the divine, irrespective of religious affiliations. Through his poetry, he aims to dissolve the artificial divisions created by humanity and encourages a sense of unity and brotherhood among all. In addition to the spiritual and philosophical themes, "Gitanjali" also highlights the beauty of everyday life and the importance of living in the present. Tagore celebrates the simple joys and wonders of survival, encouraging the readers to find satisfaction and fulfillment in the ordinary. He emphasizes the value of being fully present in each moment, immersing oneself in the beauty of nature, human connections, and the small miracles that surround in everyone's life.

R.K. Narayan's acclaimed novel, "The Guide," depicts the transformative journey of its protagonist, Raju, who undergoes a series of changes from being a tourist guide in Malgudi to becoming a spiritual guide. This narrative underscores the significance of social bonds and responsibilities. The novel delves into the clash between traditional Indian values and Western influences, which is evident in the character of Rosie. Rosie, who arrives in Malgudi with her husband, becomes emotionally attached to Raju, who encourages her to pursue her passion for dancing. Through Raju's relationships with his mother and Rosie, the novel explores the impact of personal choices on both family and society, while also examining Indian social values.

Human Rights and Freedom

Human rights and freedom are enduring themes that resonate deeply in Indian English literature, offering profound insights into the complexities of personal, political, and societal liberation. Throughout history, literature has served as a powerful lens through which authors examine the struggles, triumphs, and ethical dilemmas inherent in the quest for justice and dignity. In the context of India, where the fight for independence from colonial rule intertwined with profound social and cultural upheavals, writers have chronicled the multifaceted dimensions of human rights through narratives that illuminate both individual experiences and collective histories.

Khushwant Singh's "Train to Pakistan" and Amitav Ghosh's "The Shadow Lines" stand as exemplary works that delve into these themes with striking clarity and depth. Through their respective narratives, Singh and Ghosh explore the impact of historical events on personal freedoms, the complexities of communal strife, and the resilience of individuals striving to assert their rights amidst turbulent times. These novels not only confront the stark realities of violence, displacement, and political oppression but also underscore the enduring human spirit that seeks liberation and justice.

In "Train to Pakistan," Khushwant Singh paints a haunting portrait of the partition of India in 1947, a watershed moment marked by communal violence and the struggle for survival. The novel depicts the brutal realities faced by individuals during the partition, where communal tensions shoot up into widespread violence and atrocities. Singh portrays the human rights violations committed during this period, including massacres, forced conversions, and displacement. Through characters like Juggut Singh, a local gangster, and Iqbal Singh, a magistrate, the novel illustrates the stark choices people faced—between loyalty to community and personal integrity. The protagonist, Mano Majra, a village magistrate, represents the struggle of ordinary people caught in the crossfire of partition. His

journey reflects the broader quest for personal and collective freedom amidst political turmoil. Singh critiques the erosion of justice and dignity during times of conflict. Through the character of Hukum Chand, the district magistrate, the novel explores the complexities of maintaining order and upholding human rights in the face of communal violence. Hukum Chand's attempts to protect the villagers, despite overwhelming odds, highlight the ethical dilemmas and moral courage required in defending human rights. Singh's narrative not only exposes the brutality of partition but also underscores the resilience and humanity that endure amidst adversity.

Meanwhile, Amitav Ghosh's in his novel, "The Shadow Lines" examines the significance of boundaries—both physical and ideological—in shaping perceptions of freedom and identity. The novel spans across generations and continents, linking the personal histories of characters with broader geopolitical events such as World War II and India's independence movement. This interconnected narrative underscores how political boundaries impact individual lives and freedoms. The novel delves into the complexities of allegiance and resistance in the face of authoritarian regimes and societal norms. Characters like Tridib, who becomes entangled in political activism, and Ila, who challenges societal expectations, embody the struggle for personal freedom within oppressive environments. Ghosh critiques the constraints imposed by social hierarchies and political regimes on individual rights and freedoms.

Compassion and Empathy

Compassion and empathy serve as foundational principles that shape human interactions and moral dilemmas in literature, offering profound insights into the complexities of relationships and community dynamics. These values not only illuminate the intrinsic goodness within individuals but also underscore the transformative power of understanding and solidarity amidst adversity. In Indian literature, authors adeptly weave narratives that explore the nuances of compassion and empathy, portraying characters whose actions and growth are driven by these fundamental human values. Through their storytelling, they invite readers to contemplate the significance of empathy in fostering connections, healing wounds, and navigating the moral landscapes of diverse societies.

Ruskin Bond's short story, "The Blue Umbrella" exemplifies how compassion and empathy permeate everyday interactions, shaping destinies and forging bonds of kinship. The story revolves around Binya, a young girl from a remote Himalayan village, who cherishes her prized possession—a blue umbrella gifted to her by a tourist. As the narrative unfolds, Binya's act of generosity towards a needy boy transforms her life and those around her, illustrating the profound impact of empathy in fostering compassion and solidarity within a close-knit community.

Meanwhile, Rohinton Mistry's "A Fine Balance" delves into the complexities of empathy amidst the backdrop of socio-political turmoil in 1970s India. Through the lives of four protagonists—Dina, Ishvar, Omprakash, and Maneck—Mistry portrays the indomitable human spirit amidst adversity. The characters' interconnected journeys underscore the transformative power of empathy in transcending barriers of caste, class, and ideology, as they navigate through personal tragedies and societal injustices with resilience and compassion. In "A Fine Balance," Mistry adeptly explores how acts of empathy—small and profound—shape the characters' destinies and redefine notions of humanity and justice. The novel's poignant narrative challenges readers to confront the harsh realities of inequality and prejudice, while celebrating the enduring bonds of compassion that defy the odds and sustain hope in the face of despair.

Together, "The Blue Umbrella" and "A Fine Balance" exemplify the enduring relevance of compassion and empathy in Indian literature, offering profound reflections on the transformative potential of kindness and understanding in forging meaningful connections and fostering collective resilience. Through their narratives, Ruskin Bond and Rohinton Mistry invite readers to ponder the ethical imperatives of empathy and compassion in navigating the complexities of human existence, ultimately reaffirming the universal importance of these values in shaping a more compassionate and empathetic world.

Conclusion

Indian English literature, with its vibrant narratives and multifaceted characters, offers a deep and resonant exploration of human values. Through the evocative storytelling of authors, readers are invited to reflect on the enduring significance of family, the complexities of cultural identity, and the urgent need for social justice and equality. These literary works do more than just tell stories; they challenge perceptions, inspire empathy, and advocate for a more compassionate and just society. By intertwining personal and collective histories, they highlight the intricate balance between tradition and modernity, spirituality and morality, and freedom and responsibility. As such, Indian English literature not only enriches one's understanding of India's cultural landscape but also offers universal lessons on the human condition, making it a vital and enduring part of the global literary canon. Through their timeless appeal and profound insights, these works continue to resonate with readers, encouraging us to appreciate the deep-seated values that bind us together as a human family.

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