



# REVIEW OF RESEARCH

ISSN: 2249-894X

IMPACT FACTOR : 5.7631 (UIF)

VOLUME - 9 | ISSUE - 7 | APRIL - 2020



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## A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF RURAL AND URBAN MORALITY IN CONTEMPORARY INDIAN ENGLISH LITERATURE

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### ABSTRACT

*This study examines the representation of rural and urban morality in contemporary Indian English literature, focusing on how shifting socio-cultural realities influence ethical frameworks in modern India. Through a comparative analysis of selected works by authors such as R. K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, Anita Desai, Arundhati Roy, and Chetan Bhagat, the paper explores how moral values are constructed, contested, and transformed across rural and urban settings.*

*The study argues that rural morality, often rooted in tradition, community cohesion, and cultural continuity, is portrayed as both ethically grounded and socially restrictive, particularly in its reinforcement of caste, class, and gender hierarchies. In contrast, urban morality is depicted as dynamic and individualistic, shaped by modernity, globalization, and economic mobility, yet frequently characterized by moral ambiguity, alienation, and ethical relativism.*

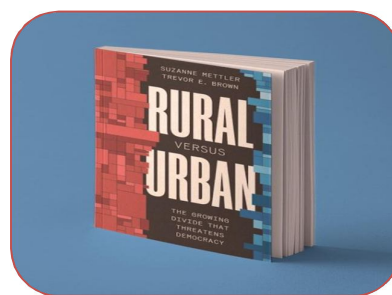
*By analyzing characters, narrative strategies, and thematic concerns, this research highlights the fluid interaction between these two moral paradigms. It further demonstrates that contemporary Indian English literature resists binary oppositions, instead presenting hybrid moral identities formed through migration, social mobility, and cultural negotiation. The study concludes that morality in these texts is not fixed but evolves in response to changing societal conditions, reflecting the complexities of contemporary Indian life.*

*Ultimately, this comparative inquiry underscores the role of literature as a critical space for examining ethical dilemmas and redefining moral consciousness in a rapidly transforming society.*

**KEYWORDS:** Rural Morality; Urban Morality; Contemporary Indian English Literature; Tradition and Modernity; Ethical Conflict; Social Change; Cultural Values; Moral Ambiguity; Individualism; Community Ethics; Postcolonial Society; Identity Formation; Migration and Mobility; Caste and Class; Gender Dynamics.

### INTRODUCTION

Contemporary Indian English literature reflects the profound transformations that have reshaped Indian society in the wake of urbanization, globalization, and economic change. One of the most significant thematic concerns in this body of writing is the contrast and interaction between rural and urban moral frameworks. These frameworks are not merely geographical distinctions but



represent deeply embedded systems of values, beliefs, and social practices that influence human behavior and ethical decision-making.

In the works of writers such as R. K. Narayan and Mulk Raj Anand, rural life is often portrayed as rooted in tradition, community cohesion, and cultural continuity. These narratives highlight moral values such as duty, honesty, and collective responsibility, which form the foundation of rural society. However, they also expose the limitations of such systems, particularly in terms of rigid social hierarchies, caste discrimination, and restrictions on individual freedom.

On the other hand, contemporary authors like Anita Desai and Arundhati Roy explore the complexities of urban life, where morality becomes more fluid and subjective. Urban settings are often depicted as spaces of opportunity, personal growth, and liberation from traditional constraints. At the same time, they are marked by alienation, fragmentation of relationships, and ethical uncertainty. In novels such as *The God of Small Things*, the interplay between rural and semi-urban environments further complicates moral boundaries, revealing how both spaces can simultaneously sustain and challenge ethical norms.

The emergence of popular contemporary writers like Chetan Bhagat adds another dimension to this discourse by portraying urban morality shaped by consumerism, career ambitions, and changing social relationships. His works reflect the aspirations and dilemmas of a new generation navigating between traditional expectations and modern lifestyles.

This study aims to undertake a comparative analysis of rural and urban morality as represented in contemporary Indian English literature. It seeks to examine how these moral systems are constructed, how they interact and conflict, and how characters negotiate their identities within these shifting ethical landscapes. By doing so, the study highlights the evolving nature of morality in India and underscores the role of literature as a powerful medium for exploring the ethical complexities of a rapidly changing society.

## AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

### Aim

The primary aim of this study is to undertake a comparative analysis of rural and urban morality in contemporary Indian English literature, examining how ethical values are represented, negotiated, and transformed in response to changing socio-cultural contexts. Through the works of writers such as R. K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, Anita Desai, Arundhati Roy, and Chetan Bhagat, the study seeks to explore the evolving moral consciousness reflected in literary narratives.

### Objectives

1. To examine the portrayal of rural morality in selected Indian English novels, with particular attention to tradition, community values, and social structures.
2. To analyze the representation of urban morality, focusing on individualism, modernity, and ethical ambiguity in contemporary settings.
3. To compare and contrast the moral frameworks of rural and urban societies as depicted in literary texts.
4. To investigate how factors such as caste, class, gender, and economic change influence moral values in both rural and urban contexts.
5. To study the impact of migration and the movement between rural and urban spaces on characters' moral choices and identities.
6. To explore how contemporary Indian English novelists critique, challenge, or reinforce existing moral systems.
7. To identify the emergence of hybrid moral identities resulting from the interaction of traditional and modern value systems.
8. To assess the role of literature in reflecting and shaping ethical perspectives in contemporary Indian society.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The theme of rural and urban morality in Indian English literature has attracted considerable scholarly attention, particularly in the context of India's socio-cultural transformation. Critics and literary historians have examined how Indian novelists portray moral values shaped by tradition, modernity, and the tensions between them.

Early critical works such as K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar's *Indian Writing in English* provide a comprehensive overview of the development of Indian English fiction, highlighting how writers like R. K. Narayan and Mulk Raj Anand depict rural life with a focus on ethical simplicity, social realism, and human values. Iyengar emphasizes that while rural settings often symbolize moral rootedness, they also expose entrenched social evils such as caste discrimination and poverty.

Similarly, M. K. Naik in *A History of Indian English Literature* discusses the evolution of Indian fiction from colonial to postcolonial phases, noting the shift from collective moral concerns to individual psychological struggles. Naik's work is significant in understanding how urbanization has influenced the moral fabric of literary narratives, leading to more complex and ambiguous ethical representations. Postcolonial critics such as Bill Ashcroft and Edward W. Said provide theoretical frameworks that are useful for analyzing the cultural and moral tensions in Indian English literature. Their works, particularly *The Empire Writes Back* and *Orientalism*, help contextualize the conflict between traditional and modern value systems within broader discussions of colonial legacy, identity, and cultural transformation.

In the domain of contemporary literary criticism, Pramod K. Nayar offers insights into cultural theory and its application to Indian texts, emphasizing issues such as identity, globalization, and shifting moral paradigms. His work supports the view that morality in contemporary literature is increasingly shaped by transnational influences and socio-economic changes.

Scholars have also focused on individual authors to explore moral dimensions in their works. Studies on Anita Desai highlight her exploration of urban alienation, psychological conflict, and moral introspection, where characters often struggle with inner dilemmas rather than external social codes. Similarly, critical analyses of Arundhati Roy, especially her novel *The God of Small Things*, examine how both rural and semi-urban settings expose the breakdown of moral structures shaped by caste, gender, and power relations.

Recent studies on popular fiction, particularly the works of Chetan Bhagat, address the emergence of urban middle-class morality influenced by consumerism, career aspirations, and changing social relationships. These studies argue that contemporary urban narratives reflect a shift toward individual-centered ethics, often at the cost of traditional communal values.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative and comparative research methodology to examine the representation of rural and urban morality in contemporary Indian English literature. The approach is primarily analytical and interpretative, focusing on selected literary texts to explore how moral values are constructed, contrasted, and redefined within different socio-cultural contexts.

### Research Design

The study is based on a **comparative textual analysis** of selected novels by prominent Indian English writers such as R. K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, Anita Desai, Arundhati Roy, and Chetan Bhagat. The texts are chosen based on their thematic relevance to rural and urban settings and their engagement with moral and ethical concerns.

### Sources of Data

#### 1. Primary Sources

The primary data consists of selected novels that depict rural and urban life, including works such as *The Guide*, *Untouchable*, *Cry, the Peacock*, *The God of Small Things*, and *Five Point Someone*. These texts form the basis for close reading and analysis.

## 2. Secondary Sources

Secondary data includes critical books, journal articles, and theoretical texts by scholars such as K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar, M. K. Naik, Pramod K. Nayar, Bill Ashcroft, and Edward W. Said. These sources provide critical frameworks and contextual support for the analysis.

### Method of Analysis

- **Close Reading:** Detailed textual analysis is employed to examine themes, characters, narrative techniques, and moral dilemmas.
- **Comparative Approach:** Rural and urban moral frameworks are compared across different texts to identify similarities, differences, and points of interaction.
- **Theoretical Application:** Postcolonial theory and cultural studies are used to interpret the moral tensions arising from tradition, modernity, and globalization.
- **Thematic Analysis:** Key themes such as caste, class, gender, identity, migration, and ethical conflict are systematically analyzed.

### Scope of the Study

The study is limited to selected contemporary Indian English novels that explicitly or implicitly engage with rural and urban settings. It focuses on moral and ethical representations rather than linguistic or stylistic aspects, although narrative techniques are considered where relevant to moral interpretation.

### Limitations of the Study

- The study is restricted to a limited number of texts and authors, which may not represent the entire spectrum of Indian English literature.
- Interpretations of morality are subjective and may vary depending on critical perspective.
- The research primarily relies on textual analysis and does not include empirical or field-based data.

## STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

In contemporary India, rapid urbanization, globalization, and socio-economic transformation have significantly reshaped social values and ethical perspectives. Modern Indian English literature reflects these changes, often exploring the tensions between traditional rural morality and modern urban ethical frameworks. Rural settings are frequently portrayed as spaces rooted in community, tradition, and cultural continuity, emphasizing values such as duty, honesty, and social responsibility. At the same time, they reveal structural inequalities related to caste, class, and gender, highlighting the limitations of rigid moral systems.

Urban environments, by contrast, are depicted as arenas of individualism, personal ambition, and moral ambiguity. Cities offer opportunities for self-expression, mobility, and social negotiation, but they also foster alienation, ethical relativism, and fragmented relationships. Contemporary authors such as R. K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, Anita Desai, Arundhati Roy, and Chetan Bhagat depict characters negotiating these divergent moral spaces, illustrating the fluid and often conflicted nature of ethical consciousness in contemporary India.

Despite the critical attention given to individual authors or specific settings, there is a lack of systematic comparative studies examining how rural and urban morality are simultaneously represented, contrasted, and evaluated across multiple texts. The central problem, therefore, is to investigate **how modern Indian English novels construct, critique, and negotiate moral values in rural and urban contexts**, and to understand the ways in which literature reflects the evolving moral consciousness of Indian society.

## DISCUSSION

The comparative study of rural and urban morality in contemporary Indian English literature reveals a nuanced and complex portrayal of ethical life in India. Rather than presenting morality as a

simple binary of “good rural values” versus “corrupt urban life,” modern novelists explore the contradictions, tensions, and interactions between these two moral spheres.

In the works of R. K. Narayan, rural and small-town settings are depicted as morally cohesive communities where values like honesty, social responsibility, and human empathy govern everyday life. However, Narayan also exposes the limitations of these systems, such as conformity, resistance to change, and the marginalization of individual desires. Similarly, Mulk Raj Anand portrays rural morality through a lens of social realism, highlighting injustices such as caste discrimination and economic exploitation. Anand’s novels demonstrate that rural moral codes, while grounded in tradition, are often complicit in systemic inequalities.

Urban morality, as represented in the works of Anita Desai and Arundhati Roy, contrasts with this rural idealization. Cities are shown as spaces of personal ambition, choice, and ethical experimentation. Characters navigate fragmented social structures and shifting moral expectations, often confronting dilemmas that challenge conventional notions of right and wrong. In *The God of Small Things*, for instance, both rural and semi-urban spaces reveal moral complexity, where caste, gender, and family structures intersect to shape ethical decisions.

Popular fiction by Chetan Bhagat adds another dimension by reflecting urban middle-class morality shaped by consumerism, career pressures, and globalized lifestyles. While these narratives emphasize individual choice and freedom, they also highlight ethical compromises, relational conflicts, and the negotiation of personal versus social responsibility.

A recurring theme across these works is the **movement between rural and urban spaces**, which intensifies moral conflict. Migration—whether for education, employment, or personal freedom—forces characters to reconcile inherited values with new social realities. This results in hybrid moral identities that challenge binary categorizations of “rural virtue” versus “urban decadence.” Overall, modern Indian English novels do not privilege one moral system over the other. Instead, they reveal that both rural and urban moralities are **dynamic, context-dependent, and intertwined**. Rural morality provides ethical grounding but can be restrictive, while urban morality offers flexibility but risks fragmentation and ethical ambiguity. Literature, therefore, functions as a critical space for examining moral complexity, demonstrating how ethical frameworks evolve in response to social, economic, and cultural change.

## CONCLUSION

The comparative study of rural and urban morality in contemporary Indian English literature demonstrates that moral frameworks in India are complex, dynamic, and context-dependent. Through the works of R. K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, Anita Desai, Arundhati Roy, and Chetan Bhagat, it is evident that rural and urban spaces do not simply represent opposing moralities; rather, they interact, overlap, and influence one another.

Rural morality is often depicted as rooted in tradition, community cohesion, and cultural continuity. It emphasizes collective responsibility, ethical consistency, and interpersonal relationships. However, this morality is not without limitations—it can reinforce social hierarchies, restrict individual freedom, and perpetuate inequalities based on caste, class, or gender.

Urban morality, in contrast, reflects modernity, individualism, and ethical fluidity. It provides characters with opportunities for personal growth, self-expression, and social mobility, but it also introduces moral ambiguity, alienation, and relational fragmentation. Contemporary urban narratives, especially in popular fiction, highlight the tensions between personal ambition and ethical responsibility, illustrating the challenges of navigating a rapidly changing social landscape.

A key finding of this study is that migration and movement between rural and urban spaces foster hybrid moral identities. Characters often negotiate between inherited traditions and contemporary realities, revealing morality as a dynamic and situational construct rather than a fixed code.

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