



The Politics of Selfhood: Identity, Agency, and Resistance in Rohinton Mistry's and Anita Rau Badami's Selected Novels

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Abstract: The fiction of Rohinton Mistry and Anita Rau Badami offers a sustained exploration of how individuals negotiate selfhood within oppressive and unstable social worlds. Their novels depict subjects shaped by caste, class, patriarchy, migration, communal tension, illness, memory, and historical trauma, yet these subjects are not merely passive victims of circumstance. Rather, they struggle to preserve dignity, emotional integrity, and moral agency in conditions that repeatedly threaten to reduce them to silence, dependency, or displacement. This article examines the negotiation of selfhood through the interrelated categories of identity, agency, and self-assertion in Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey*, *A Fine Balance*, and *Family Matters* and Anita Rau Badami's *Tamarind Mem*, *The Hero's Walk*, and *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* It argues that in Mistry, selfhood is frequently forged in confrontation with political violence, caste oppression, urban insecurity, and familial responsibility, while in Badami it is often mediated through domestic memory, gendered subjectivity, migration, intergenerational tension, and diasporic trauma. Across both oeuvres, self-assertion appears not only in overt resistance but also in quieter forms such as caregiving, economic independence, emotional endurance, reinterpretation of memory, refusal of humiliation, and the preservation of ethical selfhood. By reading these novels comparatively, the article demonstrates that selfhood in contemporary Indian English fiction is neither fixed nor autonomous; it is negotiated in relation to history, community, family, and power. The selected novels reveal that the self is fragile yet persistent, and that the struggle for recognition, dignity,



and autonomy remains central to modern literary representations of Indian and diasporic experience.

Keywords: selfhood, identity, agency, self-assertion, Rohinton Mistry, Anita Rau Badami, Indian English fiction, diaspora, gender, memory, trauma, caste, family, marginality

Introduction

Indian English fiction has repeatedly returned to one of the most difficult and enduring questions of modern life: how does an individual preserve a sense of self in the face of social coercion, political violence, cultural displacement, and emotional fracture? In postcolonial and diasporic contexts, this question becomes especially urgent because the self is never simply private or autonomous; it is constantly shaped by history, community, class, religion, caste, gender, migration, and memory. The self in Indian writing is therefore not a stable essence but a site of negotiation, pressure, and resistance. Among contemporary novelists who engage deeply with this issue, Rohinton Mistry and Anita Rau Badami occupy a significant place. Though their thematic emphases and narrative textures differ, both writers portray individuals whose identities are formed within restrictive structures yet who continue to seek autonomy, recognition, and dignity. Their fiction is profoundly concerned with selfhood as struggle.

Rohinton Mistry's novels *Such a Long Journey* (1991), *A Fine Balance* (1995), and *Family Matters* (2002) are deeply invested in the ordinary lives of people navigating the pressures of post-independence India. Mistry's fictional world is marked by the Emergency, communal unease, caste violence, urban precarity, illness, aging, and the vulnerabilities of the Parsi minority. His protagonists—bank clerks, widows, tailors, aging fathers, sons, and caregivers—are not epic heroes but ordinary people whose humanity is tested by structures far larger than themselves. Yet within these hostile circumstances, they continue to negotiate selfhood through resilience, ethical commitment, labor, memory, and emotional endurance. In Mistry, self-assertion often emerges as the refusal to surrender one's dignity to a brutal social order.

Anita Rau Badami's fiction, by contrast, foregrounds family memory, women's emotional interiority, intergenerational tensions, migration, and diasporic consciousness. *Tamarind Mem* (1996), *The Hero's Walk* (2000), and *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* (2006) are deeply attentive to the ways in which selfhood is shaped by domestic spaces, silenced desires, familial obligations, displacement, and the afterlives of historical trauma. Badami's characters often inhabit the intimate spaces of the household, but these spaces are never apolitical. They are marked by patriarchy, nostalgia, migration, and the burden of memory. Her fiction repeatedly asks how women and men come to recognize themselves beyond the roles assigned to them by family, gender, or nation. If Mistry frequently stages selfhood against the violence of institutions and public history, Badami often locates it in the emotional and mnemonic textures of everyday life.

This article studies identity, agency, and self-assertion as the key terms through which selfhood is negotiated in these selected novels. It argues that both Mistry and Badami reject any simplistic understanding of the self as sovereign and self-made. Instead, they portray selfhood as relational, precarious, and historically conditioned. Their characters are constrained by social hierarchies and historical events, yet they are not wholly defined by them. Self-assertion may appear as economic independence, moral refusal, caregiving, memory work, emotional honesty, migration, or resistance to caste and patriarchal control. In all these forms, the self emerges not as a completed identity but as a continuous act of negotiation.

Theoretical Framework: Selfhood, Identity, Agency, and Self-Assertion

The concept of selfhood in literary studies refers not simply to the existence of an individual consciousness but to the dynamic formation of subjectivity in relation to history, society, memory, and power. The self is neither a fixed core nor an isolated entity; rather, it is constituted through interactions with institutions, communities, and symbolic structures. Identity categories such as caste, gender, religion, class, ethnicity, and nationality shape how subjects are recognized and how they recognize themselves. But selfhood exceeds these categories because it also involves interiority, memory, desire, moral consciousness, and the capacity to imagine a life otherwise.



Identity may be understood as the social positioning of the self, while selfhood refers to the lived experience of that positioning. Identity is often assigned, regulated, and policed; selfhood is what emerges when the individual negotiates, resists, internalizes, or transforms those assignments. In the context of Indian English fiction, identity is inseparable from structures such as caste, patriarchy, communal belonging, migration, and minority consciousness. A Parsi bank clerk in Bombay, an “untouchable” tailor in the city, a widowed woman living alone, a dissatisfied housewife, or a diasporic Sikh woman in Canada—all inhabit identities that are socially overdetermined. Yet the novels under study insist that within such determinations there remains a space, however fragile, for agency.

Agency refers to the capacity to act, choose, reinterpret, and resist. It does not necessarily imply total freedom or spectacular rebellion. In literary narratives, agency may be subtle and partial: a decision to work, to care, to remember, to refuse humiliation, to reinterpret a mother’s life, to leave a home, to protect a dependent parent, or to preserve ethical integrity in a corrupt world. Agency is particularly important in postcolonial and feminist criticism because it allows us to read marginalized subjects not merely as victims but as active negotiators of their circumstances.

Self-assertion is one of the most visible expressions of agency. It can be defined as the articulation or defense of one’s identity, dignity, autonomy, or moral position against forces that attempt to diminish, erase, or control the self. Self-assertion may be social, emotional, economic, or political. For women in patriarchal settings, it often involves the claim to voice, emotional autonomy, and the right to self-definition beyond wifehood or motherhood. For lower-caste or working-class men, it may involve the refusal of humiliation and the struggle for labour, livelihood, and recognition. For migrants and diasporic subjects, it may take the form of reconstructing belonging across dislocated spaces.

The selected novels of Mistry and Badami are particularly fruitful for such a framework because they reveal that selfhood is negotiated under unequal conditions. Their characters do not possess unqualified freedom; they inhabit structures of domination. Yet the novels also refuse fatalism. They show that the self may persist through care, work, memory, endurance, and



refusal. Selfhood is thus both vulnerable and resistant—formed under pressure, but not extinguished by it.

Rohinton Mistry: Selfhood under Political Pressure, Social Violence, and Familial Obligation

Rohinton Mistry's fiction is populated by characters whose lives are constrained by the pressures of postcolonial India—state corruption, caste oppression, communal tension, poverty, ageing and family duty. What distinguishes Mistry's treatment of selfhood is his ability to locate moral and emotional complexity in ordinary people. His characters do not simply “represent” social issues; they inhabit them in their bodies, relationships, and inner lives. Selfhood in Mistry is negotiated not through grand declarations but through daily acts of endurance, work, responsibility, and fragile connection.

Gustad Noble in *Such a Long Journey*: Selfhood as Moral Responsibility

In *Such a Long Journey*, Gustad Noble appears as a modest middle-class bank clerk trying to hold together his family, finances, and faith in a Bombay increasingly marked by instability and corruption. Gustad's life is circumscribed by the anxieties of a Parsi household, the educational future of his children, the disappointment of paternal authority, and the political intrigue surrounding Major Bilimoria. He is not a radical figure; he is conservative, worried, dutiful, and emotionally burdened. Yet it is precisely this ordinariness that makes his struggle for selfhood significant.

Gustad's identity is anchored in responsibility. He sees himself as provider, protector, husband, father, and moral citizen. The problem is that each of these roles becomes unstable. His son Sohrab refuses the career path Gustad has planned for him, exposing the fragility of paternal authority. His involvement in Bilimoria's secretive request places him in a morally dangerous proximity to corruption and state deception. His neighborhood itself becomes a site where national anxieties and minority insecurities seep into everyday life. Gustad's world is thus one in which public disorder invades private identity.

His self-assertion lies in his commitment to ethical coherence. He may not be politically powerful, but he resists moral collapse. He continues to care, to worry, to provide, and to hold

himself accountable. His selfhood is neither triumphant nor revolutionary; it is a practice of moral endurance. In *Gustad*, Mistry shows that the middle-class self in postcolonial India is deeply vulnerable, yet capable of asserting itself through responsibility, loyalty, and refusal of complete cynicism. The novel also complicates paternal selfhood by confronting Gustad with Sohrab's agency. Gustad must learn that his son's life cannot be an extension of his own ambitions. Selfhood, the novel suggests, cannot be possessed or imposed; it must also accommodate the autonomy of others.

A Fine Balance: Selfhood under the Emergency

If *Such a Long Journey* portrays the pressure of politics on domestic life, *A Fine Balance* offers Mistry's most devastating account of selfhood under systemic violence. Set during the Emergency, the novel brings together four characters—Dina Dalal, Ishvar Darji, Omprakash Darji, and Maneck Kohlah—whose lives intersect in a makeshift household. Their stories illuminate how class, caste, gender, and state violence shape the possibilities of identity and agency.

Dina Dalal: Economic Independence and Female Self-Assertion

Dina Dalal is one of Mistry's most compelling studies of selfhood. A Parsi widow living alone, she resists the pressure to become dependent on her overbearing brother Nusswan. Her decision to support herself through sewing is more than an economic necessity; it is a declaration of autonomy. In a society where widowhood often produces vulnerability and dependence, Dina's rented flat becomes a hard-won space of selfhood. She insists on the right to live alone, earn money, make decisions, and define her own domestic order.

Dina's self-assertion is gendered and material. It is not merely psychological confidence; it is tied to work, rent, mobility, and the constant defense of personal space. Her independence remains precarious because it exists within hostile economic and social structures. She is vulnerable to landlords, middlemen, male authority, and financial instability. Mistry thus avoids romanticizing female independence. Dina's autonomy is real, but it is costly and fragile. Her struggle shows that selfhood for women in patriarchal societies is inseparable from material conditions.



At the same time, Dina's relationship with Ishvar and Om complicates the idea of independence as isolation. The temporary household they create becomes a space of mutual recognition where each person's humanity is affirmed. Dina's selfhood is not diminished by connection; rather, it is deepened by learning to trust, share, and care. The novel therefore redefines agency as relational rather than purely individual.

Ishvar and Omprakash: Caste, Labour, and the Assertion of Human Dignity

Ishvar and Omprakash Darji represent one of the most powerful narratives of self-assertion in contemporary Indian fiction. Born into a caste order designed to humiliate them, they inherit a social identity tied to hereditary labour and ritual degradation. Their family's decision to train as tailors rather than continue the caste occupation of leatherwork is a radical act of self-definition. Through labour, they seek to rewrite identity.

This occupational shift is not merely economic; it is existential. To become tailors is to reject caste destiny and claim personhood beyond inherited pollution. The retaliation they suffer in the village demonstrates how threatening selfhood becomes when subordinated subjects seek mobility. In the city, new forms of violence await them: homelessness, police extortion, hunger, and the coercive brutality of the Emergency. The state treats their bodies as expendable, subject to forced sterilization and institutional abuse. Yet even under such violence, Ishvar and Om persist in asserting their humanity through skill, humor, affection, and the stubborn desire for a life not entirely determined by caste.

Mistry's achievement lies in showing that selfhood under caste oppression is never abstract. It is lived through the body, labour, humiliation, kinship, and memory. Ishvar and Om are not symbols of suffering alone; they are subjects who continue to imagine, joke, work, and care for each other. Their self-assertion resides not in triumphant escape but in the refusal to internalize dehumanization. Even when the novel ends in devastating mutilation and dependency, the ethical force of their struggle remains.

Maneck Kohlah: Alienation and the Fragility of the Modern Self

Maneck Kohlah represents another dimension of selfhood in *A Fine Balance*: the emotionally dislocated modern subject. Sent from his mountain home to the city for education,



Maneck struggles with loneliness, disorientation, and the inability to reconcile memory with present reality. He is neither economically destitute nor socially powerless in the same way as Ishvar and Om, yet he suffers from a different crisis—the collapse of emotional anchorage.

Maneck's selfhood is fragile because it lacks continuity. He experiences modern life as rupture: childhood security is lost, family bonds loosen, and the city confronts him with violence he cannot assimilate. The temporary community he forms with Dina, Ishvar, and Om gives him a sense of belonging, but it cannot withstand the wider disintegration of the world around him. Maneck's eventual despair reveals the limits of selfhood when memory, place, and intimacy no longer provide meaning. In him, Mistry explores the psychic cost of modern alienation. Selfhood here is not crushed by caste or patriarchy but by emotional disconnection and historical disillusionment.

Family Matters: Ageing, Care, and the Ethics of Selfhood

Family Matters narrows the scale from national crisis to domestic life, yet it remains deeply concerned with the negotiation of selfhood. The novel centers on Nariman Vakeel, an elderly Parsi widower suffering from Parkinson's disease, and the family members whose lives are transformed by his dependence. Illness, ageing, financial strain, and religious tension become the conditions through which selfhood is tested.

Nariman Vakeel: Memory, Illness, and the Persistence of Self

Nariman's failing body threatens his autonomy, but Mistry refuses to equate physical dependence with the disappearance of personhood. Nariman remains a subject through memory, reflection, regret, and emotional presence. His recollections of youthful love and past compromise remind readers that the elderly are not merely burdens or bodies; they carry histories, desires, and unfinished selves.

The novel thus raises a crucial question: how is selfhood preserved when the body can no longer sustain independence? Nariman's answer lies in the persistence of interiority. His illness reduces his control over daily life, but it does not erase his emotional complexity. By foregrounding the vulnerability of old age, Mistry expands the notion of self-assertion. It is not



always active rebellion; sometimes it is the insistence that a dependent body still houses a thinking, remembering, feeling self worthy of dignity.

Roxana and Yezad: Caregiving, Frustration, and Moral Ambivalence

Roxana, Nariman's daughter, represents one of Mistry's most ethically grounded figures. She takes her father into her already overcrowded apartment, choosing care over convenience despite severe financial strain. Her labour—washing, feeding, soothing, organizing—may appear as domestic duty, but the novel frames it as moral agency. Roxana's selfhood is expressed through her refusal of indifference. She chooses care as an ethical stance, even when it is exhausting and materially costly.

Yezad, her husband, offers a more conflicted picture of selfhood. He is anxious, frustrated, loving, opportunistic, and increasingly susceptible to resentment and ideological rigidity. Economic pressure pushes him toward morally dubious schemes, and his growing insecurity makes him vulnerable to exclusionary religious impulses. Yezad's character is important because it demonstrates that agency is not automatically liberatory. Self-assertion can become distorted by fear, scarcity, and prejudice. Mistry's realism lies in showing that selfhood is morally unstable; it can preserve dignity, but it can also harden into defensiveness.

Across these three novels, Mistry portrays selfhood as a struggle to remain human in systems that degrade, exploit, or neglect. Whether through Dina's economic independence, Ishvar and Om's resistance to caste, Gustad's moral endurance, or Roxana's caregiving, self-assertion in Mistry is rooted in the everyday defense of dignity.

Anita Rau Badami: Gendered Subjectivity, Memory, and Diasporic Selfhood

If Mistry often situates selfhood against the violence of public institutions, Anita Rau Badami turns insistently to the domestic, emotional, and diasporic dimensions of identity. Her fiction is deeply attentive to the silences of women's lives, the burden of family expectations, the afterlife of migration, and how memory structures self-recognition. Badami's characters negotiate selfhood not only through action but through remembering, reinterpreting, mourning, and reinhabiting the past.

Tamarind Mem: Motherhood, Silence, and the Recovery of the Female Self

Tamarind Mem is one of Badami's most intricate studies of feminine subjectivity. The novel reconstructs the life of Saroja through memory, especially through the perspective of her daughter Kamini. What initially appears to be the story of an eccentric, bitter mother gradually unfolds as the story of a woman whose selfhood has been constrained by marriage, displacement, emotional neglect, and domestic expectation.

Saroja: The Inner Life of a Silenced Woman

Saroja's marriage relocates her from the lush familiarity of her natal home to an emotionally barren environment dominated by an undemonstrative husband and the repetitive demands of domestic life. Her dissatisfaction is not a trivial complaint but a sign of profound dislocation. She is expected to function as wife and mother, yet her own desires, sensitivities, and disappointments remain unacknowledged. Patriarchal domesticity reduces her to role rather than person.

Badami's great insight is that such reduction does not erase the self; it distorts its expression. Saroja's moods, resentments, and emotional volatility can be read as the aftereffects of a life in which selfhood had no legitimate outlet. She is not "difficult" by nature; she is a woman whose subjectivity has been denied recognition. Her self-assertion therefore takes indirect forms—memory, private judgment, emotional withholding, and the refusal to become fully transparent to others. The novel recovers the dignity of such obscured forms of selfhood by re-narrating Saroja not as a failed mother but as a silenced subject.

Kamini: Re-reading the Mother, Reclaiming Female Lineage

Kamini's development is equally central to the novel's exploration of selfhood. As a daughter, she must move beyond inherited irritation and learn to see her mother as a woman with a history. This interpretive labor is itself a form of agency. By reconstructing Saroja's life, Kamini also reconstructs her own place within a female lineage marked by silence, compromise, and endurance.

Badami suggests that selfhood can be negotiated through acts of understanding. Kamini's empathy does not erase the tensions of mother-daughter relations, but it transforms them. She refuses to accept the patriarchal tendency to reduce mothers to function. Instead, she restores

complexity to the maternal figure. In this sense, Tamarind Mem portrays self-assertion not only as speech but as the recovery of suppressed narratives. To tell the mother's story differently is also to assert a different understanding of womanhood.

The Hero's Walk: Masculine Failure, Family, and Emotional Reconstitution

The Hero's Walk centers on Sripathi Rao, a middle-class man in Toturpuram whose life is marked by economic disappointment, thwarted ambition, and estrangement from his daughter Maya, who migrated to Canada against his wishes. When Maya dies in a car accident, and her daughter Nandana is sent to India, the family is forced to confront unresolved grief and the challenge of care across cultural difference.

Sripathi Rao: Patriarchal Injury and the Possibility of Change

Sripathi begins the novel as a man embittered by failure. He feels humiliated by his economic stagnation and by his daughter's rejection of his authority. His selfhood is bound up with a patriarchal script of masculine control, respectability, and provision—a script he has failed to fulfill. Maya's migration is experienced by him not only as emotional loss but as a blow to paternal sovereignty.

Yet the novel refuses to leave Sripathi in grievance. Nandana's arrival disrupts his emotional defenses and compels him to engage with a child who embodies both loss and continuity. Through his growing attachment to his granddaughter, Sripathi begins to revise himself. His self-assertion no longer lies in demanding obedience but in accepting responsibility without domination. He learns to care, to soften, and to acknowledge that love cannot be governed by patriarchal pride. Badami's treatment of Sripathi is significant because it shows that masculine selfhood can be transformed through vulnerability rather than control.

Nirmala and the Quiet Strength of Domestic Agency

Nirmala, Sripathi's wife, occupies the familiar terrain of domestic labor, but Badami grants her a quiet authority. She negotiates family conflict, mediates emotional tensions, and adapts to Nandana's arrival with patience and perceptiveness. Her agency is not spectacular, but it is persistent. She is one of the novel's emotional centers, holding together a household fractured by grief and resentment.



Badami's domestic women are not passive figures trapped in service; they are interpreters, mediators, and custodians of emotional continuity. Nirmala's selfhood lies in this relational intelligence. Like Roxana in *Family Matters*, she demonstrates that care is not the opposite of agency. It can be a deliberate ethical practice through which the self affirms its values in a world of strain and disappointment.

Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?: Diaspora, Trauma, and Fragmented Belonging

In *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?*, Badami expands her canvas to include Partition, migration, Sikh nationalism, communal violence, and the 1985 Air India bombing. Here, selfhood is not only familial and gendered but also historical and transnational. The novel explores how subjects carry memory across borders and how collective trauma enters intimate life.

Bibi-ji: Reinvention, Power, and Ambivalent Agency

Bibi-ji, one of the novel's most memorable characters, is a survivor of Partition who later migrates to Canada and reinvents herself through entrepreneurial success. On one level, she exemplifies extraordinary self-assertion. She refuses to remain immobilized by victimhood and instead creates a public identity marked by competence, ambition, and authority. Migration becomes a site of self-reconstruction.

But Badami complicates this triumph by linking Bibi-ji's desire for belonging to communal and ideological investment. Her support for Sikh nationalism is tied to a longing for rootedness and symbolic restoration. In this sense, her selfhood is shaped not only by agency but by a historical wound. Badami resists celebratory narratives of empowerment by showing that reinvention can coexist with ideological rigidity. Bibi-ji's self-assertion is thus morally ambivalent: it is empowering as survival and self-making, but troubling when attached to exclusionary politics.

Leela and Nimmo: Gendered Diaspora and the Burden of History

Leela and Nimmo offer additional perspectives on female selfhood under migration and trauma. Their lives are shaped by the memories of Partition, the demands of migration, and the



violence of 1984 and after. They inhabit the in-between space of diaspora, where belonging is never settled and where history continues to wound across generations and geographies.

Badami's diasporic women are not passive bearers of tradition; they actively negotiate adaptation, loyalty, grief, and survival. Their self-assertion often takes the form of continuity—maintaining relationships, carrying memory, sustaining households, and enduring loss without surrendering meaning. In these characters, Badami shows that diaspora fragments the self but also compels it to become resourceful, layered, and relational.

Comparative Discussion: Negotiating Selfhood in Mistry and Badami

A comparative reading of Mistry and Badami reveals that while both are centrally concerned with selfhood, they approach it through different narrative emphases and symbolic terrains.

1. Selfhood as Relational and Historically Produced

Neither writer treats the self as isolated or self-generated. Their characters are formed through relations—to family, caste, religion, nation, migration, and memory. Gustad Noble's anxieties, Dina's struggle for independence, Ishvar and Om's resistance to caste, Saroja's bitterness, Sripathi's paternal injury, and Bibi-ji's diasporic reinvention all testify that identity is socially produced. Yet in both writers, selfhood is not reducible to social identity; it includes emotional depth, memory, conscience, and the possibility of reinterpretation.

2. Ordinary Lives as Sites of Agency

Both Mistry and Badami focus on ordinary people rather than heroic rebels. Their protagonists are clerks, widows, tailors, housewives, aging parents, migrants, and disappointed fathers. This choice is aesthetically and ethically important. It democratizes agency by locating self-assertion in everyday acts: sewing for a living, caring for an old parent, refusing caste occupation, revising one's view of a mother, raising a grandchild, or building a life after displacement. These novels suggest that selfhood is not made only in moments of public rebellion but in daily negotiations of survival and dignity.

3. Gender and the Forms of Self-Assertion

Gender is a crucial point of divergence. Mistry certainly creates memorable women—Dina Dalal and Roxana among them—but his fiction often places them within broader structures

of political violence, urban precarity, and communal anxiety. Badami, by contrast, gives sustained centrality to women's interior lives, mother-daughter relationships, marriage, and domestic dissatisfaction. In *Tamarind Mem*, female selfhood is recovered through memory and reinterpretation. In *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?*, it is shaped by migration and trauma. Badami's women negotiate selfhood through silence, narration, care, reinvention, and emotional persistence, thereby expanding the very meaning of self-assertion.

4. Public Violence and Private Memory

Mistry's selfhood is frequently tested by public institutions—the state, the police, caste hierarchy, economic structures, and minority politics. Badami's selfhood is more often mediated through domestic memory, family dynamics, and diasporic dislocation, even when larger historical events intrude. This difference should not be overstated, because Badami is also deeply historical and Mistry is profoundly intimate. Still, the tonal distinction matters: Mistry dramatizes how institutions assault the self; Badami explores how memory, silence, and family shape its interior negotiations.

5. The Limits of Agency

Both writers are too realistic to romanticize self-assertion. Dina cannot fully preserve the life she fought for. Ishvar and Om are mutilated by structures they resist. Maneck cannot survive emotional disillusionment. Saroja's life remains marked by unhealed deprivation. Bibi-ji's reinvention is shadowed by communal rigidity and loss. These novels insist that agency operates within unequal conditions and that the assertion of self does not guarantee liberation. Yet the value of self-assertion lies precisely in its persistence despite defeat. To work, to care, to remember, to refuse humiliation, to reinterpret a life—these acts matter even when they do not overturn oppressive structures.

Conclusion

The selected novels of Rohinton Mistry and Anita Rau Badami offer a rich and nuanced exploration of how selfhood is negotiated in contemporary Indian English fiction. Across their narratives, identity is never stable, agency is never absolute, and self-assertion is never simple. Their characters live within systems of caste, patriarchy, communal tension, migration, aging,



illness, and political violence; these systems seek to discipline, diminish, or erase the self. Yet the self persists—in labor, memory, care, resistance, emotional truth, and moral endurance.

In Rohinton Mistry's fiction, selfhood is often forged in confrontation with public structures of oppression. Gustad Noble's ethical perseverance, Dina Dalal's independence, Ishvar and Om's refusal of caste destiny, Maneck's emotional fragility, Nariman's vulnerable dignity, and Roxana's caregiving all reveal different ways in which the self struggles to remain human in an inhuman world. Mistry's fiction insists that dignity itself can be a form of resistance.

In Anita Rau Badami's novels, selfhood is shaped more insistently through domestic memory, gendered silence, intergenerational conflict, and diasporic fracture. Saroja's obscured interiority, Kamini's reinterpretation of maternal history, Sripathi's painful self-revision, Nirmala's quiet agency, and Bibi-ji's ambivalent reinvention demonstrate that the self is made and remade through memory, migration, and emotional labor. Badami's fiction enlarges the idea of self-assertion by showing how women and families negotiate autonomy not only through overt rebellion but through narration, endurance, and re-reading the past.

Taken together, these writers reveal that selfhood in Indian English fiction is not a possession but a negotiation. It is formed at the intersection of private desire and public history, of memory and materiality, of vulnerability and resistance. Their novels do not offer easy emancipation. What they offer instead is something more truthful: the recognition that to remain a self in a world structured by inequality is itself a profound struggle. By giving literary form to that struggle, Rohinton Mistry and Anita Rau Badami illuminate the ethical, emotional, and political stakes of being human in contemporary South Asian and diasporic experience.

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