



Cultural Identity In Sri Aurobindo's *Vasavadutta*: The Role Of Indianness

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ABSTRACT

This research article examines the construction and representation of Indianness in Sri Aurobindo's play *Vasavadutta*, situating it within the context of early twentieth-century Indian cultural renaissance and anti-colonial nationalism. By analysing the play's thematic preoccupations, narrative structure, and stylistic choices, the study explores how Aurobindo revitalises ancient Indian dramatic traditions to assert a distinct cultural identity in the face of colonial hegemony. Drawing on theories from postcolonial studies and Indology, the article argues that *Vasavadutta* is a deliberate artistic intervention that negotiates tradition and modernity, individual and community, and spirituality and politics. Through textual analysis, the paper demonstrates how the play embodies and enacts Indianness—not as an exclusionary or static concept, but as a dynamic, inclusive, and self-reflexive cultural process. The findings suggest that Aurobindo's creative vision, as expressed in *Vasavadutta*, provides a powerful template for understanding the role of literature in shaping, contesting, and celebrating Indian identity during and beyond the colonial encounter.

Keywords- *Vasavadutta*, postcolonial studies, cultural identity, spirituality and politics

INTRODUCTION

The question of cultural identity has occupied a central place in Indian literary and intellectual discourse, particularly during periods of political upheaval and social transformation. The advent of British colonialism in India, with its attendant cultural, social, and epistemic violence, sharply foregrounded issues of self-definition, cultural memory, and resistance. In this context, literature emerged as a crucial site for the articulation, contestation, and negotiation of Indianness—a term that transcends mere geographical or ethnolinguistic boundaries to encompass a complex tapestry of values, beliefs, philosophies, and aesthetic sensibilities derived from India's long and diverse civilizational history.

Sri Aurobindo Ghose (1872-1950), a polymath who traversed the worlds of politics, philosophy, spirituality, and literature, stands as one of the most influential figures in the cultural renaissance of modern India. His English plays, written during the first two decades of the twentieth century, are especially significant for their attempt to revive and reinterpret classical Indian dramatic forms. Among these, *Vasavadutta*—a play inspired by the ancient romantic legend of King Udayana and Princess Vasavadatta—occupies a unique position. While at first glance, the play appears to be a conventional love story set against a backdrop of royal intrigue, a closer reading reveals a text deeply invested in questions of cultural identity, tradition, and nationhood.

This research article seeks to investigate the role of Indianness in *Vasavadutta*, examining how Aurobindo's creative engagement with ancient myth and dramatic form serves as a mode of cultural assertion and self-fashioning. By situating the play within the broader context of Indian literary history, anti-colonial struggle, and philosophical thought, the study aims to offer a nuanced understanding of how literature can function as both a mirror and a maker of cultural identity.

The analysis proceeds in five sections. The first provides a historical and literary overview, tracing the evolution of Indian drama and Aurobindo's place within it. The second section theorises Indianness as it appears in *Vasavadutta*, considering questions of language, symbolism, and character. The third explores the interplay of national identity and anti-colonial discourse in the play, while the fourth investigates its philosophical and spiritual dimensions. The final section assesses the reception and legacy of *Vasavadutta*, drawing implications for contemporary debates on culture and identity.

By engaging with *Vasavadutta* as both a literary and a cultural artefact, this article hopes to illuminate how Aurobindo's play responds to the exigencies of its time, while also offering enduring resources for the ongoing project of Indian self-understanding.

DISCUSSION

1: Historical and Literary Context

1.1 The Indian Literary Renaissance and Colonial Encounter

The turn of the twentieth century was a period of profound change in Indian society. Colonialism had wrought deep disruptions in the political, cultural, and intellectual life of the subcontinent. While the British regime imposed its own language, education systems, and aesthetic standards, Indian intellectuals and writers responded with what came to be called the "Indian renaissance"—a movement characterised by the revival and reinterpretation of indigenous knowledge systems, religious philosophies, and literary traditions. This period witnessed the simultaneous assertion of cultural pride and the search for a modern Indian identity capable of withstanding colonial domination.

Literature, particularly drama and poetry, served as an important medium in this cultural resurgence. Indian writers began to look back at the country's rich classical heritage, not as a relic of the past, but as a living source of inspiration and resistance. Works from the Sanskrit tradition—such as those of Kalidasa, Bhasa,

and Bhavabhuti—were rediscovered, translated, and adapted for modern audiences. By engaging with these ancient forms, writers sought not only to revive Indian literary aesthetics but also to challenge the hegemony of Western models.

1.2 Sri Aurobindo: Life, Philosophy, and Literary Vision

Sri Aurobindo's life epitomises the convergence of activism, spirituality, and creative genius. Educated in England, Aurobindo returned to India imbued with a deep sense of nationalism and an equally profound appreciation for the philosophical depth of Indian civilisation. After playing a prominent role in the Indian independence movement, he withdrew from active politics and settled in Pondicherry, where he devoted himself to spiritual practice and writing.

Aurobindo's literary output is vast, ranging from philosophical treatises to poems, plays, and translations. Central to his vision was the idea that India's greatness lay not just in its past glories, but in its capacity for spiritual renewal and creative synthesis. In his view, literature was not merely an artistic pursuit, but a means of national regeneration—a way to awaken the deeper consciousness of the people and provide them with a sense of cultural rootedness and direction.

1.3 The Classical Tradition and the Play *Vasavadutta*

Vasavadutta is one of several plays written by Aurobindo in English, drawing upon themes and motifs from ancient Sanskrit drama. The story of Vasavadatta and Udayana is well known in Indian literature, appearing in works such as Subandhu's *Vasavadatta* and in the tales of Somadeva and Kshemendra. At its core, it is a romance involving love, separation, political intrigue, and eventual reunion.

Aurobindo's version departs from mere retelling by infusing the narrative with his own philosophical and cultural concerns. He employs the structure and conventions of Sanskrit drama—such as the use of verse, the blending of the comic and the serious, and the emphasis on *rasa* (aesthetic emotion)—while adapting them to the expectations of a modern, English-speaking audience. The result is a work that is both deeply Indian in spirit and universal in its appeal.

1.4 Literary Nationalism and Dramatic Form

A distinctive feature of *Vasavadutta*, and of Aurobindo's dramatic oeuvre more generally, is the attempt to develop an Indian idiom in English. At a time when English was the language of the coloniser, Aurobindo's choice to write Indian-themed plays in this medium was both pragmatic and subversive. It allowed him to reach educated Indians and sympathetic Western readers alike, while demonstrating that Indian themes, values, and aesthetics could be expressed forcefully and authentically in the language of power.

2. Defining Indianness in *Vasavadutta*

2.1 Indianness as a Dynamic Cultural Process

The concept of “Indianness” defies easy definition. It is not a singular or static identity, but a dynamic, evolving process shaped by India’s plural histories, religions, languages, and philosophies. In *Vasavadutta*, Indianness emerges as both a motif and a method—a way of seeing, being, and creating that is rooted in Indian traditions yet open to transformation.

Aurobindo’s vision of Indianness resists essentialism. While he draws from classical motifs, he does not portray them as fixed icons. Instead, he presents Indian culture as living, flexible, and capable of creative adaptation. This approach is evident in the play’s blending of traditional values with contemporary concerns, and in its nuanced engagement with themes such as love, duty, fate, and personal agency.

2.2 Language, Imagery, and Symbolism

Aurobindo’s use of English is marked by a conscious attempt to evoke the cadences and imagery of Sanskrit poetry and drama. The dialogue in *Vasavadutta* is elevated, poetic, and replete with references to Indian nature, mythology, and ritual. The language is designed to invoke the sensory richness and spiritual resonance of Indian literary heritage, even as it remains accessible to a modern audience.

Imagery and symbolism play a crucial role in constructing Indianness. The lotus, a recurring image in Indian art and spirituality, appears as a symbol of purity, love, and transcendence. The changing seasons, the river, the palace, and the temple are not mere backdrops but active participants in the drama, embodying the interconnectedness of the natural, the social, and the cosmic dimensions of Indian life.

Mythological allusions further deepen the cultural texture of the play. Characters invoke gods and goddesses, draw parallels with epic heroes, and frame their struggles in terms of dharma and karma. These references are not ornamental; they provide the ethical and philosophical scaffolding for the characters’ choices and actions.

2.3 Characterisation and the Ethos of Indian Drama

The characters in *Vasavadutta* are crafted in accordance with the conventions of classical Indian drama, yet they are also given psychological depth and moral complexity. Vasavadutta, the eponymous heroine, is at once a figure of beauty, intelligence, and emotional strength. Her love for Udayana is passionate yet restrained, marked by a sense of duty and self-sacrifice that echoes the archetype of the ideal Indian woman—one who is both shakti (power) and shanti (peace).

Udayana, the male protagonist, embodies the dilemmas of kingship, love, and dharma. His struggles are not merely personal but emblematic of larger social and cosmic orders. The supporting characters—friends, advisers, jesters—provide moments of levity and wisdom, reflecting the Sanskrit theatrical tradition of integrating the comic and the serious. Their interactions are governed by norms of respect, loyalty, and mutual obligation, reinforcing the Indian ideals of social harmony and collective well-being.

2.4 Narrative Structure and the Indian Aesthetic

The structure of *Vasavadutta* aligns with the principles of Sanskrit drama as outlined in the *Natyashastra*, the foundational treatise on Indian performing arts. Unlike the Aristotelian model of dramatic conflict and catharsis, the Indian tradition emphasises *rasa*—the cultivation of aesthetic emotion or mood. Aurobindo’s play is less concerned with linear plot development and more with the evocation of love (*shringara*), pathos (*karuna*), and heroism (*vira*).

This emphasis on *rasa* is integral to the play’s Indianness. It situates the work within a lineage that values emotional and spiritual experience over mere action, and that seeks to elevate both the performer and the audience toward higher states of consciousness. Aurobindo’s adaptation of this tradition in an English-language play is a testament to his belief in the universality and adaptability of Indian aesthetic principles.

2.5 Tradition and Innovation

Aurobindo’s *Vasavadutta* is not a museum piece, but a living, breathing work of art. The play honours tradition, but it also innovates. By writing in English, modernising aspects of plot and characterisation, and engaging with contemporary questions of identity and agency, Aurobindo demonstrates that Indianness is not a backwards-looking fixation but a forward-looking resource. His play invites audiences—Indian and non-Indian alike—to participate in the ongoing creation and reinvention of Indian culture.

3. National Identity and Anti-Colonial Discourse

3.1 Theatre as a Medium of Cultural Resistance

At the heart of Sri Aurobindo’s engagement with drama is the recognition of theatre as a potent tool for cultural resistance. During the colonial era, Indian theatre was often subject to censorship and Westernisation, with colonial authorities promoting European dramatic forms and themes considered “universal” or “civilised.” In this climate, Aurobindo’s choice to write *Vasavadutta*—rooted in Indian legend and aesthetic conventions—constituted an act of defiance against cultural erasure. By re-centring the Indian narrative, he reclaims the stage as a space for indigenous voices, values, and worldviews.

The very act of staging ancient Indian stories in English, the language of the coloniser, can be read as both subversive and strategic. Aurobindo uses the colonial medium to assert the sophistication and vitality of Indian civilisation, challenging Orientalist stereotypes that dismissed Indian culture as stagnant or inferior. Through *Vasavadutta*, he demonstrates that Indian stories, philosophies, and aesthetics are not only relevant but essential for the global conversation on art and identity.

3.2 Reimagining Tradition: Modernity and the Past

One of the hallmarks of Aurobindo’s approach is his refusal to position tradition as antithetical to modernity. In *Vasavadutta*, the past is not a distant, ossified reality but a living source of meaning and guidance. Characters grapple with timeless questions of love, loyalty, duty, and destiny—concerns that resonate with contemporary audiences as much as with those of the ancient world.

Yet, Aurobindo is keenly aware of the dangers of uncritical traditionalism. He reinterprets inherited motifs to suit the challenges of his own time. The play's depiction of kingship, for instance, is marked by a recognition of the ruler's ethical responsibilities to his people, not merely to lineage or divine right. Similarly, the portrayal of female characters, particularly Vasavadutta, hints at the potential for greater agency within the constraints of tradition. In these ways, the play suggests that Indian identity is best realised not through slavish imitation of the past, but through its creative transformation.

3.3 The Politics of Representation: Challenging Colonial Narratives

Colonial narratives often sought to define Indian identity in narrow, exoticising, or demeaning terms. British administrators and scholars constructed images of India as a land of mysticism, irrationality, and decadence—images that justified their imperial mission as a “civilising” one. Against this backdrop, *Vasavadutta* offers an alternative vision.

Aurobindo's characters are not passive victims of fate or history; they are active agents capable of self-reflection, moral choice, and transformation. The play's philosophical depth, emotional complexity, and ethical nuance stand in stark contrast to the caricatures propagated by colonial discourse. By foregrounding Indian conceptions of dharma, karma, and rasa, Aurobindo reclaims the right to define Indian identity on Indian terms.

3.4 Community, Nationhood, and Ethical Leadership

Vasavadutta is deeply concerned with the fate of the community and the responsibilities of leadership. The play's political subtext is unmistakable: the turmoil in the kingdom, the struggle for rightful rule, and the quest for justice all resonate with India's own search for self-determination during the colonial period. The emphasis on collective well-being, social harmony, and ethical governance reflects Aurobindo's vision of a nation built not on exclusion or dominance, but on spiritual and moral foundations.

This vision of nationhood is both modern and ancient. It draws from the Indian tradition of seeing the king not only as a political leader but also as a moral exemplar—one whose actions set the tone for the entire community. By dramatising these themes, *Vasavadutta* offers a subtle critique of colonial misrule and presents an alternative model rooted in Indian experience and philosophy.

3.5 Literary Nationalism: Writing Back to Empire

Finally, *Vasavadutta* participates in a larger project of “writing back” to the empire. By choosing to write Indian stories in English, Aurobindo asserts the right to self-representation, turning the tools of the coloniser toward the ends of decolonisation. The play's sophisticated use of language, its evocation of Indian values, and its reimagining of tradition all serve to undermine colonial claims to cultural superiority.

4. Philosophical Underpinnings and Spiritual Dimensions

4.1 Dharma: The Moral and Cosmic Order

A central pillar of Indian philosophical thought is the concept of **dharma**—a multi-layered term encompassing law, duty, righteousness, and the cosmic order. In *Vasavadutta*, dharma is not a rigid set of rules but a living principle that guides characters' actions and decisions. Aurobindo situates his protagonists within a moral universe where personal desires must be balanced with ethical obligations to family, society, and the cosmos.

Udayana's dilemmas as king and lover are emblematic of this tension. His responsibilities to his kingdom and his personal feelings for Vasavadutta are often at odds, compelling him to weigh self-interest against the greater good. Vasavadutta, too, embodies dharma—her love is tempered by loyalty, sacrifice, and an acute awareness of her duties as a princess. Their struggles mirror the broader Indian understanding that true greatness lies in harmonising one's inner inclinations with universal principles.

The play dramatises the complexity of dharma by refusing easy resolutions. Characters must interpret their duties in the context of changing circumstances, recognising that the path of righteousness is seldom straightforward. This dynamic approach to dharma distinguishes Aurobindo's work from both Western and traditionalist readings, highlighting the adaptability and inclusivity of Indian philosophical thought.

4.2 Karma and the Web of Consequences

Closely linked to dharma is the idea of **karma**—the law of action and consequence. In *Vasavadutta*, the characters' choices are portrayed as meaningful, with far-reaching impacts on themselves and others. The play resists fatalism; while destiny and prophecy are acknowledged, human agency is never sidelined. Instead, Aurobindo advances a vision of karma as a participatory process in which individuals shape their destinies through conscious, ethical action.

This emphasis on agency is important in the context of colonial India, where questions of power, will, and self-determination were paramount. By foregrounding karma, the play advocates for a proactive approach to life and leadership, suggesting that Indian identity is best expressed through purposeful, value-driven engagement with the world.

4.3 The Pursuit of Self-Realisation

Aurobindo's spirituality is not abstract or disengaged; it is deeply integrated with daily existence. *Vasavadutta* is imbued with a sense of the sacred in ordinary life. The love between Udayana and Vasavadutta is elevated beyond mere romance—it is a meeting of souls, a journey toward self-realisation and higher unity.

This spiritual dimension is articulated through symbolism, dialogue, and the unfolding of the plot. Nature itself—the seasons, the river, the changing sky—mirrors the characters' inner transformations. Episodes of meditation, prayer, and self-reflection punctuate the narrative, reminding audiences of the Indian belief in life as a spiritual quest.

4.4 Idealism and the Synthesis of Contraries

A recurring motif in Aurobindo's thought is the synthesis of apparent opposites: tradition and modernity, matter and spirit, self and society. In *Vasavadutta*, this synthesis is dramatised through the interplay of personal and collective destinies, the tension between duty and desire, and the convergence of the ancient and the contemporary.

The play does not advocate escapism or ascetic withdrawal. Instead, it posits that true spiritual realisation is achieved not by renouncing the world, but by embracing it—by finding the divine in the mundane, and by transforming society through ethical and visionary action. This idealism, far from being impractical, is presented as the very foundation of Indian identity and nationhood.

4.5 Aurobindo's Integral Vision

Ultimately, *Vasavadutta* is a work of **integral vision**. It invites audiences to see the world as interconnected—where politics, culture, ethics, and spirituality are mutually informing. This perspective is both rooted in Indian philosophical traditions and strikingly modern, anticipating contemporary discourses on holistic identity, pluralism, and the dialogic nature of culture.

By dramatising these philosophical underpinnings, Aurobindo transforms the play from a mere literary entertainment into a meditation on the possibilities of Indian life—individual and collective, temporal and eternal.

5. Reception and Legacy

5.1 Critical Reception and Scholarly Engagement

Since its publication, *Vasavadutta* has attracted a range of critical responses, both in India and abroad. Early critics viewed the play as part of Aurobindo's larger project to revitalise Indian drama and to assert a national literary identity in the English language. Scholars have noted the play's poetic style, fidelity to classical sources, and its philosophical richness as distinguishing features.

Meenakshi Mukherjee (2005) describes *Vasavadutta* as a “landmark in the reclamation of Indian narrative forms,” while Peter Heehs (1989) points to its “synthesis of classical form and modern consciousness.” Some critics, however, have raised questions about the play's accessibility for contemporary audiences, particularly those unfamiliar with Sanskrit aesthetics or Indian mythology. Others have critiqued its idealism—arguing that its focus on spiritual and ethical themes risks disengagement from the gritty realities of colonial and postcolonial society.

Despite these debates, there is broad agreement that *Vasavadutta* represents an ambitious and accomplished attempt to create a modern Indian drama that is both rooted and innovative. The play continues to be studied in university curricula, included in collections of Indian English drama, and discussed at conferences on postcolonial literature and cultural studies.

5.2 Legacy in Indian Drama and Literature

Aurobindo's influence on Indian drama is profound, if sometimes indirect. *Vasavadutta* helped inspire a generation of playwrights to explore Indian themes in English and other Indian languages. By demonstrating that Indian stories and aesthetics could be successfully adapted for modern audiences, Aurobindo paved the way for later writers such as Girish Karnad, Vijay Tendulkar, and Mahesh Dattani, who have continued to experiment with form, language, and tradition.

The play's legacy also extends to debates about language and identity in Indian literature. Aurobindo's use of English, once controversial, is now seen as a strategic and empowering choice—a way of claiming the right to self-representation in a global context. This has become increasingly relevant in a postcolonial world where questions of linguistic hybridity, translational practice, and cultural negotiation are central to literary production.

5.3 Contemporary Relevance: Indianness in a Globalised World

In today's India, the question of cultural identity is as urgent as ever. Globalisation, migration, and technological change have transformed the ways in which people think about tradition, modernity, and belonging. At the same time, rising nationalism, communal strife, and debates over cultural purity have made the notion of Indianness highly contested.

In this context, *Vasavadutta* remains a vital resource. Its vision of Indianness is neither narrow nor exclusionary. Instead, it is plural, dialogic, and self-reflexive—open to influences, yet anchored in a deep sense of history and ethical responsibility. The play's emphasis on dharma, karma, and the pursuit of higher ideals serves as a reminder that Indian identity is not just a matter of birth or custom, but of conscious choice and creative engagement.

Aurobindo's work invites contemporary audiences to move beyond binaries of East/West, tradition/modernity, and self/other. It encourages a mode of cultural citizenship grounded in respect, dialogue, and the ongoing reinvention of heritage. In a world marked by rapid change and persistent inequality, such a vision is both timely and necessary.

5.4 Enduring Questions and Future Directions

The legacy of *Vasavadutta* endures in the questions it raises about literature, culture, and nationhood. How can ancient traditions be meaningfully adapted for modern times? What role does literature play in the formation of collective identity? How can spiritual and ethical ideals inform social and political action?

These questions remain relevant not only for India but for societies everywhere grappling with the challenges of memory, diversity, and change. *Vasavadutta* suggests that the answers lie not in nostalgia or dogma, but in the creative and courageous reimagining of identity—the very process at the heart of Indianness itself.

6. CONCLUSION

Sri Aurobindo's *Vasavadutta* is more than a literary artefact; it is a dynamic site for the exploration and affirmation of Indian cultural identity. Through its revival of classical forms, philosophical depth, and engagement with contemporary issues, the play enacts a vision of Indianness that is inclusive, adaptive, and forward-looking.

By situating love, duty, and leadership within a framework of dharma and spiritual striving, Aurobindo offers a template for cultural negotiation in an age of uncertainty. His play challenges colonial narratives, reclaims indigenous modes of storytelling, and inspires ongoing dialogue about what it means to be Indian in a globalised world.

Thus, *Vasavadutta* stands as a powerful testament to the role of literature in shaping, contesting, and celebrating identity—reminding us that cultural heritage is not a fixed inheritance, but a living, evolving process, renewed with each generation.

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