



# Kavya Setu

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## **Travel and Self -Discovery: Exploring Identity in Monisha Rajesh's *Around India in 80 Trains***

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines how Monisha Rajesh's travelogue *Around India in 80 Trains* (2012) becomes a site for articulating identity in flux in a postcolonial context. Drawing on theories of hybridity, liminality, and the postcolonial flâneur, the paper argues that Rajesh's train journeys not only map physical distances but also traverse cultural, social, and psychological boundaries. By analyzing Rajesh's narrative voice, encounters with 'otherness,' and the spatial-temporal structure of train travel, this study reveals how identity emerges as relational, mobile, and negotiated. The work contributes to travel literature by offering a nuanced understanding of how diaspora, memory, and space intersect in modern India, and suggests how such narratives complicate essentialist notions of nation, culture, and belonging.

**Keywords:** Self, Identity, Travel Literature, Postcolonial

### **Introduction**

Monisha Rajesh's *Around India in 80 Trains* offers more than a chronicle of railway journeys; it provides a lens through which questions of identity—personal, cultural, diasporic—are explored. Rajesh, born to Indian parents and raised chiefly in the United Kingdom, returns to her ancestral terrain partly in search of roots, partly in desire of an embodied understanding of what "India" might mean to someone with fragmented memory and heritage. The railway journeys Rajesh undertakes serve not only as physical traversals of geography but as liminal spaces where belonging, dislocation, self-other relations, and memory coalesce. This paper analyses how Rajesh negotiates her hybrid identity through the narrative, interaction with diverse others, reflections on belonging, and the metaphorical power of the train.

Monisha Rajesh's *Around India in 80 Trains* (2012) is a witty, reflective, and adventurous travel memoir that chronicles her journey across India's vast railway network. Inspired by Jules Verne's *Around the World in Eighty Days*, Rajesh undertakes a four-month journey covering approximately 40,000 kilometers, visiting more than 100 places via 80 different trains—ranging from the luxurious Palace on Wheels to overcrowded local commuter trains.



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Born in the UK to Indian parents, Rajesh returns to India as an adult with a mission: to reconnect with a homeland she barely knows and to challenge the negative impressions she formed as a child during a brief, uncomfortable stay in Chennai. Accompanied by a photographer friend she nicknames “Passepartout” (a nod to Verne's character), she sets off on a journey that becomes as much about self-discovery as it is about geographical exploration.

Throughout the book, Rajesh travels from Kashmir to Kanyakumari, from the deserts of Rajasthan to the tea gardens of Assam. She rides a wide variety of trains, including slow rural trains, the ultra-modern Delhi Metro, and the legendary Darjeeling Toy Train. Her experiences capture the extremes of Indian life: poverty and opulence, chaos and serenity, frustration and hospitality.

The narrative is filled with humorous anecdotes, cultural observations, and insightful reflections. Rajesh encounters a vast cross-section of Indian society—saints, students, soldiers, smugglers, and swindlers—and candidly recounts moments of joy, confusion, and danger. From sharing meals with strangers to witnessing breathtaking landscapes, each leg of the journey brings her closer to understanding the complex, contradictory identity of modern India—and her own place within it.

## **Narrative Voice and Memory**

Rajesh's narrative oscillates between insider and outsider perspectives. On one hand, she carries memories—some vague, some inherited—of India. On the other, much is unknown, or forgotten. This produces a tension: belonging vs alienation. For example, Rajesh often remarks on her emotional responses to sensory landscapes (smells, sounds, food) as bridges into her heritage. Her early life in India was brief, leading to gaps in memory; travel becomes a mechanism to fill those gaps. The narrative voice thus embodies hybridity: she is Indian by descent but culturally shaped by British upbringing, and her identity is negotiated rather than fixed.

## **Encounters with Otherness and Community**

Train travel enables frequent encounters with people from vastly different social, linguistic, economic, and religious backgrounds. Rajesh uses these encounters to explore identity: how she is perceived, how she perceives, and how these relational interactions affect her sense of self. For instance, she experiences being misrecognized as foreign, despite her Indian descent; she also experiences hospitality that reaffirms belonging. These exchanges produce a social identity that is relational—formed in response to difference.

Moreover, the train is a space of contact between social classes. In sleeper class vs general vs first class compartments, Rajesh reflects on her comfort, privilege, and difference. Such reflections make visible the economic dimension of identity—how class intersects with culture and place.



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## Spatial and Temporal Structure of Trains as Metaphor for Identity

The train, in Rajesh's narrative, is not only a vehicle but a liminal space. It is always moving—from station to station, state to state, from one terrain to another. This movement mirrors the interior movement of identity formation. The in-between times—waiting on platforms, delays, shared partitioned spaces, crossing linguistic and cultural borders—become moments of self-reflection. The geography of the journey (coastlines, mountains, plains, deserts, cities) is mapped against Rajesh's emotional geography of identity: disorientation, fascination, anxiety, belonging.

Temporal aspects—the journey's duration, memories, heritage from the past, anticipations of future self-understanding—also matter. Rajesh often juxtaposes her memories (or absences of memory) with present experiences; she reflects on what might have been, or what she might have missed, and how these absent memories shape identity as much as present ones.

### Postcolonial Legacies, Power, and the Railway

The Indian railway system itself is a colonial legacy; its architecture, naming, infrastructure, bureaucracy, and class divisions reflect historical power relations. Rajesh's journey passes through these colonial imprints—stations named after colonial figures, routes originally carved for colonial administration. Her awareness of these legacies informs her identity negotiation: the colonial past remains imbricated in contemporary India, and for someone of diasporic origin, who lives in a postcolonial present, these legacies complicate notions of belonging. Through the lens above, *Around India in 80 Trains* can be seen as more than travel writing—it is auto-ethnographic, in the sense that Rajesh uses personal experience to engage with cultural identity, memory, postcoloniality, and belonging.

### Conclusion

Monisha Rajesh's *Around India in 80 Trains* exemplifies how travel writing can function as a means of self-discovery and identity formation in postcolonial settings. By weaving together memory, cultural encounter, movement, and colonial legacies, Rajesh crafts a narrative of identity that resists singular or essentialist categories. This paper suggests that travel narratives of this kind are significant for scholars interested in diaspora studies, memory studies, postcolonial theory, and identity. Future research might compare Rajesh with other diasporic travel writers to explore commonalities and divergences in identity negotiation, or examine how such travel texts are received by different audiences (in India vs abroad), and how that reception impacts identity claims.

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