

Exploring Transcultural Dimensions: Hindu Mythology and Identity Politics in Mithu Sanyal's *Identitti*

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Identitätskämpfe sind Kämpfe um Fiktionen in der Wirklichkeit (Sanyal 2021, 423).¹

1. Introduction

Mithu Sanyal's *Identitti* (2021) is an autofictional novel that explores themes of race, identity, and cultural appropriation in an academic setting. Its resonance in Germany lies in its timely engagement with identity politics and post-colonial discourse, reflecting ongoing national debates on diversity (Moltke 2022). Within the broader discourse on identity politics and racism, *Identitti* provides a compelling exploration of contemporary identity, positioning itself as a critical examination of the multifaceted nature of selfhood in today's globalized society.

The novel's protagonist, with her mixed-race background, becomes a pivotal figure through which the themes of the book are explored. Her journey of self-discovery is significantly influenced by the Hindu Goddess Kali, who transitions from an imaginary source of guidance to an active and dynamic character within the story. This transformation of Kali emphasizes the novel's engagement with the

¹ "The struggle over identity is the struggle over fiction in reality" (Sanyal 2022, 356).

evolving roles of religious figures in personal identity formation and decision-making processes. The interplay between the protagonist's personal struggles and the mythical elements of Kali enriches the narrative, offering a unique perspective on the intersections of mythology and modern identity.

Identitti not only reflects the complexities of identity and mythology but also contributes to the broader discourse on the role of literature in navigating transcultural and transreligious processes (Panagiotopoulos & Roussou 2022). As the protagonist tackles with her identity amidst a globalized world, the novel highlights the intersection of cultural and religious diversity with individual selfhood. This research aims to enhance the understanding of these intersections, offering fresh insights into how literature can address the challenges and opportunities posed by a multicultural and multi-faith world.

Eventually, this study seeks to illuminate the ways in which *Identitti* navigates the intricate landscapes of race, identity, and mythology. Through a detailed examination of the novel, the research aspires to contribute to the ongoing debate about the significance of literature in a world where cultural and religious boundaries are increasingly fluid and interwoven.

2. Plot overview

In Mithu Sanyal's *Identitti*, Nivedita Anand, a blogger known as "Mixed-Race Wonder Woman" (Sanyal 2021, 3) grapples with identity and relationships, including her tumultuous romance with Simon. When her mentor, Professor Saraswati, is exposed as a racial fraud, Nivedita defends her, thus causing a public backlash. Seeking for clarity, Nivedita moves in with Saraswati, where a diverse cast of characters, including relatives and lovers, gathers. Set in Saraswati's upscale apartment overlooking an immigrant neighbourhood, the story unfolds through intricate discussions about race, identity, and belonging. As the characters confront Saraswati's decision to claim a transracial identity, the narrative delves into complexities of privilege and self-perception, paralleled by online

debates. Amidst the turmoil, Nivedita navigates her own journey of self-discovery, influenced by her friendships and the enigmatic presence of the Hindu Goddess Kali. Sanyal introduces characters who come from diverse cultural backgrounds or who are engaged in cultural exchange. These characters often find themselves navigating between multiple cultural identities, leading to a rich exploration of how individuals negotiate their sense of self within a complex cultural landscape.

Nivedita Anand is a complex character, born in Germany to an Indian father and a Polish-German mother. Despite her mixed heritage, she faces criticism as a “coconut”. Nivedita’s world is shaken when her esteemed supervisor, Professor Saraswati, a renowned scholar in postcolonial and race studies, is revealed to be white, challenging Nivedita’s understanding of identity. Priti, Nivedita’s cousin from Birmingham, UK, embodies a contrasting perception of Indianness, seen by Nivedita as more authentic and self-assured. Saraswati’s brother, Raji, adds another layer to the story as an adopted Indian, complicating notions of identity within the family dynamic. Nivedita’s romantic entanglements add further depth to the narrative, particularly her relationship with Simon, a potentially narcissistic white man. Oluchi, Simon’s ex and Nivedita’s classmate, plays a pivotal role through her tweets and outbursts, influencing the course of events in the novel (Benofsky 2022). Throughout her journey, Nivedita’s thoughts and actions are accompanied by the constant commentary of Kali, who offers insights and challenges to her understanding of self and the world around her.

2.1 Identity negotiation

Through her characters’ experiences, Sanyal portrays the process of negotiating cultural identity in contemporary society. This includes grappling with questions of authenticity, belonging, and representation, as well as navigating the tensions between tradition and modernity. By depicting characters who actively engage with their cultural heritage in various ways, Sanyal highlights the dynamic nature of identity and the ongoing process of self-discovery and self-definition.

Francis Fukuyama's assertion that the "demand for recognition of one's identity is a master concept that unifies much of what is going on in the world politics today" (Fukuyama 2018, 4) directly complements Nivedita's journey in *Identitti*. Her exploration of identity, sparked by the question: "Wo kommst du her?" (Sanyal 2021, 15),² reflects societal pressure to neatly categorize individuals, particularly in terms of race and ethnicity, suggesting that identity must be fixed and singular. Amartya Sen, on the other hand, resists this notion, asserting that a home has to be exclusive is a limited perspective. His response, "I don't share your idea that a home has to be exclusive" (Sen 2021, 3) emphasizes the fluidity and multiplicity of identity and belonging, which, like identity, need not conform to singular or restrictive definitions. This portrays Fukuyama's idea that identity is a central force shaping global politics, as individuals and groups seek validation of their inner selves in the face of external social norms.

Furthermore, Fukuyama's notion that "Identity grows, in the first place, out of a distinction between one's true inner self and an outer world of social rules and norms that does not adequately recognize that inner self's worth or dignity" (Fukuyama 2018, 9) aligns with Nivedita's reflection on the fluidity of being: "[...] war Sein tatsächlich etwas, was man nicht war, sondern tat" (Sanyal 2021, 45),³ raising the question: "Falls Identitäten überhaupt etwas sind" (46).⁴ Her inquiry – whether identities are fixed or constructed – resonates with Fukuyama's argument that the clash between inner self-perception and societal recognition fuels the quest for identity. This tension underscores the personal and political stakes of identity, a theme central to both *Identitti* and contemporary discourse.

The concept of identity, particularly concerning race, is a primary focus for Saraswati. For Nivedita, however, identity encompasses a broader spectrum,

²"Where are you from?" (Sanyal 2022, 8).

³ "[...] being wasn't really something you were, it was something you did" (Sanyal 2022, 33).

⁴"Identities are even a thing" (Sanyal 2022, 35).

especially when her perception is disrupted upon discovering that Saraswati, whom she had idolized as a person of colour, was actually born white and originally named Sarah Vera Thielmann. Nivedita articulates her perspective in her blog, stating,

Race ist nicht real, race ist ein soziales und politisches Konstrukt. [...] weil sie sich auf in der Welt zu Wirklichkeit geronnene Realitäten beziehen [...] Diese inkarnierten Realitäten können einen großen Einfluss auf uns [...] denn die ihnen zugrundeliegenden Realitäten sind eben nicht an und für sich real. Was vor allem anderen bedeutet: Sie sind nicht unveränderlich (67).⁵

This quote encapsulates a pivotal moment in *Identitti* where Nivedita engages with the constructed nature of racial identity, particularly after discovering Saraswati's true background. Nivedita's statement highlights her growing awareness that race, while socially powerful, is not a biological or immutable truth. Instead, it is a social construct shaped by historical, political, and cultural forces. Nivedita acknowledges that while these incarnated realities of race feel tangible and have profound impacts on individuals, they are ultimately fluid and subject to change. The recognition that race is not unchangeable challenges conventional ideas about identity and authenticity. This realization not only disrupts her idealization of Saraswati but also forces her to confront the complexity of racial identity, which can be both deeply influential and simultaneously constructed.

Saraswati is very conscious of her identity, asserting confidently "[...] natürlich bin ich Saraswati" (96).⁶ In contrast, Nivedita is on a persistent quest to understand

⁵ "Race isn't real, race is a sociopolitical construct. [...] because out in the world they relate to realities that have become truths [...] these incarnated realities can have major influence on us [...] because their foundational realities are, in and of themselves, equally unreal. Which means, above all: They are not unchangeable" (Sanyal 2022, 52).

⁶ "[...] of course I'm Saraswati" (Sanyal 2022, 77).

her identity, expressing a desire: “Ich wünsche wäre als indisches Mädchen in England aufgewachsen. Dort gibt es wenigstens eine Community und kulturelles Wissen über [...] uns” (118).⁷ For Nivedita, her Indian origin is not problematic; it is the color of her skin that poses an issue. She initially perceived racism as a confrontation, assuming “[...] es handle sich dann um Rassismus, wenn jemand auf der Straße auf sie zukäme und sagte: Ich werde dich jetzt wegen deiner Hautfarbe beleidigen/anderweitig abwerten/ zusammenschlagen” (120).⁸

Saraswati challenges Nivedita to define what it means to be Indian, a question Nivedita struggles to answer, as her life has been centred around this enquiry. Nivedita associates her Indian identity with her skin color. She states, “Inderin vielleicht nicht, aber Colour ist eine Kategorie. Nämlich eine Unterdrückungskategorie” (125).⁹ Saraswati responds by quoting from her own book, “Identität ist eine notwendige Lüge” (126).¹⁰ Her response challenges the very notion of fixed identities. By calling identity a “necessary lie” Saraswati suggests that identity is a construct shaped by societal narratives and power dynamics. It is “necessary” because people use it to navigate the world and relate to others, but it is also a “lie” because it oversimplifies the complex, fluid nature of human existence.

Nivedita’s struggle with her identity, influenced by racial perceptions and societal constructs, mirrors Anderson’s notion of the nation as an imagined community. Her sense of belonging is shaped by the external categorizations of race and the inherent inequalities she faces, akin to the “deep, horizontal comradeship” that Anderson describes, despite the underlying disparities.

⁷ “Could’ve grown up as an Indian girl in England. At least there, there’s a community and a modicum of cultural awareness of [...] us” (Sanyal 2022, 97).

⁸ “[...] Racism was someone came up to her in the street and said, ‘I’m gonna insult/hurt/offend/belittle/clobber you because of your skin color’” (Sanyal 2022, 99).

⁹ “Maybe Indian isn’t, but color certainly is a category. Namely, a category used for oppression” (Sanyal 2022, 104).

¹⁰ “Identity is a necessary lie, but a lie nonetheless” (Sanyal 2022, 104).

Benedict Anderson, in his work *Imagined Communities*, defines a nation as:

[...] an imagined political community - and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. [...] It is imagined as a community because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship (Anderson 2006, 7).

This concept of the nation as an imagined and collectively perceived entity parallels the perspectives of Nivedita and Saraswati on identity. Nivedita's sense of identity, like Anderson's notion of the nation, is not grounded in any inherent or fixed reality but is an imagined construct shaped by external forces, yet powerful in its social impact.

Thus, both Saraswati's assertion that "identity is a necessary lie" and Anderson's idea of nations as imagined communities point to the constructed, fluid, and often unequal nature of identity – whether individual or collective. The title *Identitti* plays on this tension, foregrounding how race, nationality, and culture shape our sense of self and how these constructs can simultaneously empower and constrain. Both identity and nationhood are seen as socially constructed concepts that, while essential for individual and collective identity, are based on shared perceptions and beliefs.

The juxtaposition of Saraswati's and Nivedita's perspectives on identity underscores the complexity and multifaceted nature of self-perception. Saraswati's assured stance, "of course I'm Saraswati", contrasts sharply with Nivedita's ongoing struggle to reconcile her Indian heritage with the colour of her skin and the societal implications it brings. Nivedita's journey reveals the profound impact of racial categorization and societal constructs on personal identity, highlighting that for many, identity is inextricably linked to external perceptions and experiences of racism. Saraswati's challenge to Nivedita to define Indian identity, coupled with her assertion of identity being a lie prompts a deeper reflection on the fluid and constructed nature of identity. Saraswati asserts, "Als trans Inderin hatte ich die

Chance, ich zu sein, ein Ich, das ich als... Deut... Weiße nicht sein konnte. Und nicht nur das, ich durfte sogar mehr als nur ich sein" (Sanyal 2021, 356).¹¹ Saraswati's ability to be "more than just herself" draws attention to the expansive nature of identity, suggesting that through self-redefinition and crossing social boundaries, individuals can break free from the limiting labels imposed by society. This echoes the theme in *Identitti* that identity is mutable, performative, and ultimately constructed through one's interaction with societal narratives and power structures.

Saraswati's perspective, juxtaposed with Nivedita's struggle to reconcile her Indian identity with her skin colour, points out the extent to which identity categories can be both empowering and oppressive. Nivedita's identity is deeply influenced by external racial categorizations, which reflect the ways societal structures impose limitations on how individuals can self-identify. Saraswati, on the other hand, shows that while these categories exist, they are also malleable and can be subverted or expanded, allowing individuals to craft new, hybrid identities.

Thus, Saraswati's concept of "trans Inderin" illustrates that identity, far from being singular or essential, is a dynamic and evolving process. It invites us to consider how race, gender, and nationality intersect and how the act of "becoming" allows individuals to redefine themselves in ways that resist societal constraints. This self-definition reflects a profound exploration of identity's fluidity, where personal agency and societal structures continuously interact.

3. Cultural appropriation and identity as performance

The narrative of *Identitti* revolves around the collapse of Professor Saraswati's carefully constructed public persona, which leads to the painful disintegration of

¹¹ "Being a trans Indian woman gave me a chance to be me – a me that, as ... a Germ ... as a white woman, could never have been. Not only that, but I could even be more than just me, myself, and I" (Sanyal 2022, 299).

her identity. This downfall not only reflects Saraswati's personal journey but also challenges the very notion of identity itself. Saraswati is introduced as a character who performs her ethnicity through acts of "Ethnic Drag", embodying the concept described by Katrin Sieg as "the performance of 'race' as a masquerade" (Sieg 2002, 2). This performance holds particular relevance in the German context, where discussions of race are surrounded by taboo. Saraswati meticulously mimics "Indianness" through calculated gestures, movements, and the use of ethnically and academically coded props, effectively duping her students, including narrator Nivedita, into seeing her as someone she may not authentically be but continuously becomes through her performance. Her dramatic entrance into the classroom highlights her impactful presence:

[...] stürmte sie schließlich mit wehender Dupatta herein, schleuderte ihre Leder- tasche aufs Pult und verharrte einen Atemzug lang mit dem Rücken zu ihnen vor der Tafel, als müsse sie sich erst sammeln, bevor sie sich dem Seminar stellte wie einer Herausforderung. Ihr Haar lag lang und schwarz und schwer auf ihrem Nacken [...] ein synästhetisches Ganzkörpererlebnis (Sanyal 2021, 33).¹²

This narrative, partly told by Nivedita in her blog and partly through a third-person narrative, presents Saraswati's theatrical performance as both intellectually stimulating and unambiguously erotic. Nivedita, transfixed by Saraswati's act, describes it as a multisensory and erotic encounter. This scene of the first seminar highlights the somatic, psychological, and intellectual effects of Saraswati's performance on the audience, particularly on Nivedita, who experiences a profound

¹² "[...] she finally stormed in, dupatta streaming, flung her leather briefcase onto the lectern, and paused in front of the blackboard, her back to everyone, as if she had to gather herself for a second before diving into the seminar, unveiling the provocation. Her hair cascaded long and black and heavy down her nape, [...] an all-enveloping, synaesthetic whole body ASMR experience of that sort" (Sanyal 2022, 23).

moment of self-recognition and empowerment. As a person of color herself, Nivedita sees herself mirrored in Saraswati, experiencing a sense of unlimited potential and possibility that she had not previously felt.

The extraordinariness of Saraswati's performance: of a woman of colour claiming her space in the academic realm and prioritizing the experiences of other persons of colour, is emphasized through Nivedita's physical and emotional response: "Ein synästhetisches Ganzkörpererlebnis" (Sanyal 2021, 33).¹³ This portrayal illustrates the rarity and exceptionalism of such radically inverted conditions of possibility (Schweiger 2023).

Mithu Sanyal raises questions about who has the authority to interpret and represent a culture, and how this authority shapes perceptions of identity and belonging. Sanyal explores the performative nature of identity, portraying characters who actively negotiate their cultural identities in response to social and political pressures. Through their experiences, she illustrates how identity can be both constructed and contested within the framework of cultural narratives.

In their book *Ethics of Cultural Appropriation*, Young and Brunk identify two harmful ways of cultural appropriation:

The first sort of harm is violation of a property right. [...] The second sort of harm is an attack on the viability or identity of cultures or their members. Appropriation that undermines a culture in these ways would certainly cause devastating and clearly wrongful harm to members of the culture. If appropriation threatens a culture with assimilation, the same moral issues are raised. Other acts of appropriation potentially leave members of a culture exposed to discrimination, poverty, and lack of opportunity. Again, if acts of cultural appropriation can be shown to be harmful in one of these ways, we have a case for thinking that they are wrong (Young & Brunk 2009, 5).

¹³ "An all-enveloping, synaesthetic whole body ASMR experience of that sort" (Sanyal 2022, 23).

Young and Brunk's framework in *Ethics of Cultural Appropriation* identifies two key harms: the violation of property rights and the undermining of cultural identity or viability. Professor Saraswati's actions, while challenging conventional notions of identity, are risking harm as they are eroding the cultural integrity of POCs. By adopting an identity not her own, Saraswati is potentially depriving POCs of opportunities and visibility that rightfully belong to them. Her revelation of being originally white is bringing her into the spotlight, overshadowing the voices and recognition that POCs might otherwise be receiving. As Oluchi points out:

Das ist die Definition von White Privilege: dass eine weiße Frau, die über Rassismus spricht, mehr Aufmerksamkeit bekommt als Schwarze Menschen, die über Rassismus sprechen. Dass sie ins Fernsehen eingeladen wird, während PoCs nach wie vor draußen bleiben müssen (Sanyal 2021, 248).¹⁴

By embodying and performing an identity associated with a marginalized group, Saraswati inadvertently reinforces systemic inequalities. Her privileged position allows her to gain visibility and credibility in discussions about racism, overshadowing the voices of actual POCs who face the consequences of these issues daily. This aligns with the second harm described by Young and Brunk, where cultural appropriation undermines the identity and viability of a culture's members, leaving them marginalized and excluded from critical conversations and opportunities.

Professor Saraswati's actions illustrate the potential harms of cultural appropriation, as outlined in *Ethics of Cultural Appropriation*. Her performance of an Indian identity and her prominence in anti-racism discourse highlight how appropriation

¹⁴ "That is the very definition of white privilege – that a white woman tells us what racism is, that a white woman talking about racism gets more attention than black people who talk about racism. That she's invited on TV shows, while all the POC are left out – before, during, and after" (Sanyal 2022, 208).

can perpetuate white privilege and marginalize the very people it aims to represent and support.

4. Mythology as cultural lens

Cultural appropriation in *Identitti* is critically examined through Professor Saraswati's performance of Indianness, which challenges authenticity and highlights the power dynamics in cultural representation. By employing Hindu mythology as a lens, Sanyal delves into these themes, using mythological figures like Kali and Saraswati to highlight the constructed and performative nature of identity. This intersection emphasizes how cultural narratives and appropriations shape and are shaped by mythological and religious symbols, revealing deeper insights into identity politics.

Mithu Sanyal uses Hindu mythology as a lens through which to examine the transcultural dimensions of identity. By exploring the symbolism, allegory, and archetypes within these myths, she prompts readers to consider how cultural narratives shape our understanding of self and others.

4.1 Engagement with mythological archetypes

Sanyal's characters often embody or interact with archetypal figures from Hindu mythology, such as gods, goddesses, demons, and heroes. These archetypes serve as reference points for exploring universal themes and psychological dynamics, allowing readers to engage with the mythological dimension of the story on a deeper level. Through their encounters with these archetypal figures, characters deal with questions of identity, morality, and destiny.

As previously mentioned, Mithu Sanyal has selected Goddess Kali to be Nivedita's constant companion or mentor. Nivedita, with her roots in Kolkata, India, is influenced by the cultural prominence of Kali in this region. Kolkata, historically and culturally, is closely associated with the worship of Kali, who is revered as a

powerful and protective deity. The city hosts the famous Kali Temple in Kalighat, which is one of the major pilgrimage sites dedicated to her. Kali's influence is deeply embedded in the local culture, festivals, and religious practices, making her a significant figure in the collective consciousness of Kolkata's inhabitants.

Kali has a profound influence over Nivedita's thought processes, acting as her inner voice and guiding her through various situations. Described by Sanyal as "[e]ine indische Göttin mit zu vielen Armen und einer Kette aus den abgerissenen Köpfen ihrer Feinde" (9)¹⁵ and as "Kali, der hinduistischen Göttin der Zerstörung" (18),¹⁶ Kali embodies both the destructive and protective aspects of divinity, reflecting the dual nature of creation and destruction.

By describing Kali as "Prakriti" and associating her with the wild, untamed state of the forest, Pattanaik uses the metaphor of nature – characterized by chaos, unpredictability, and the absence of rules – to reflect aspects of human nature that are similarly raw and uncontrolled. The forest, symbolizes a primal state where survival and instinct dominate, paralleling certain wild or fierce qualities in human behaviour, particularly those embodied by Kali. Thus, he is not only speaking of nature in a literal sense (plants, trees, rivers) but also using it to represent untamed human instincts, suggesting that both natural and human realms share an inherent wildness when ungoverned by rules or civilization. He elaborates,

Forest is the default state of Nature. In the forest there are no rules. [...] there is no law, no authority, and no regulation. This is called 'matsya-nyay' or law of fish, the Vedic equivalent of the law of the Jungle. This is Prakriti, visualized as Kali, the wild goddess who runs naked with unbound hair, of the Puranas (Pattanaik 2017, 43).

¹⁵ "An Indian Goddess with too many arms, wearing a necklace made of her enemies' severed heads" (Sanyal 2022, 3).

¹⁶ "Kali, the Hindu goddess of Destruction" (Sanyal 2022, 10).

Kali, an extraordinary and enthralling divinity of the Indian subcontinent, is vividly described by Nilima Chitgopekar in her work *Shakti: an exploration of the divine feminine* as the goddess

[...] with a long, lolling tongue, dishevelled hair, an apron of chopped hands as a lower garment, upper body bereft of clothing, and a necklace of decapitated male heads barely hiding her drooping breasts (Chitgopekar 2022, 127).

The interpretation of unbound hair is articulated by Devdutt Pattanaik: “Hair is a powerful metaphor in Hindu mythology. [...] Unbound, unruly hair represents wild nature” (Pattanaik 2017, 101). Kali is often depicted as a fierce and powerful goddess, associated with destruction and transformation. Her story is deeply rooted in the Puranas, where she emerges as a manifestation of the goddess Durga during a battle against the demon Raktabija. Each drop of Raktabija’s blood that touched the ground produced a clone of the demon, making him nearly invincible. In her wrathful form, Kali drank the demon’s blood to prevent it from spawning more clones, ultimately leading to his defeat (Cartwright 2013). This myth underscores her role as a destroyer of evil and a protector of the cosmos.

Another significant cultural association in the novel is with Goddess Saraswati, described as “indische Göttin der Weisheit, [...] der Professorin an der Heinrich-Heine-Universität, Düsseldorf” (Sanyal 2021, 18)¹⁷ Saraswati represents wisdom and learning, juxtaposed with Kali’s fierce and transformative power. This duality of divine influences the character’s journeys, particularly Nivedita’s, as they navigate the complexities of identity and self-discovery.

¹⁷ “The Indian goddess of Knowledge, [...] Professor at Düsseldorf’s Heinrich Heine University” (Sanyal 2022, 11).

Goddess Sarasvati,¹⁸ revered as the goddess of speech and wisdom, embodies peace, positivity, and purity. Clad in white, accompanied by a swan, with a lute and manuscript in her hands, she symbolizes knowledge, creativity, and eloquence (Chitgopekar 2022, 187). In Hindu philosophy, the potency of speech and sound is central, and eloquence is often attributed to Sarasvati dancing on one's tongue (Flood 2006). Sarasvati's influence extends beyond the geographical confines, particularly evident in educational institutions, where she symbolizes not only education but liberating wisdom (Chitgopekar 2022, 192).

In *Identitti*, Professor Saraswati touches upon many aspects of the goddess Sarasvati. Described as charismatic with "Charme und ihrer schieren Intelligenz"¹⁹ (Sanyal 2021, 19), she commands respect and attention.

Sanyal delves into the intricacies of Hindu mythology by incorporating its rich symbolism and allegory into the narrative. Hindu mythology is replete with stories, characters, and symbols that carry deep cultural and philosophical significance. Sanyal draws upon this reservoir of mythological narratives to infuse her story with layers of meaning and complexity. Characters, events, and motifs from Hindu mythology are woven into the fabric of the narrative, serving as vehicles for exploring themes of identity, power, and cultural heritage.

4.2. Cultural commentary through mythology

In Mithu Sanyal's *Identitti*, the parallels between mythological figures and contemporary characters offer a rich commentary on cultural and social issues. By drawing from Hindu mythology, Sanyal encourages readers to reflect on how cultural narratives shape perceptions, behaviours, and power dynamics in modern society.

¹⁸ Goddess Sarasvati has been spelled with 'v' while Professor Saraswati has been spelled with 'w' in this paper.

¹⁹ "Disarming charm and sheer intelligence" (Sanyal 2022, 11).

The embodiment of wisdom and knowledge is central to both Goddess Sarasvati and Professor Saraswati. Goddess Sarasvati, revered for her creativity and intellectual enlightenment, symbolizes the liberating power of knowledge. Similarly, Professor Saraswati, a respected figure in South Asian postcolonial and race studies, described as having “disarming charm and sheer intelligence” (Sanyal 2022, 11), exudes charisma and intellect, mirroring the goddess’s qualities. Both figures command attention through their mastery of speech, with Goddess Sarasvati associated with eloquence, and Professor Saraswati captivating audiences through her performative lectures.

While Goddess Sarasvati transcends cultural boundaries as a universal figure of wisdom, Professor Saraswati’s identity is more complex. She performs her Indianness through calculated acts, raising questions about cultural authenticity. This tension adds depth to the novel’s exploration of identity politics, as her performance challenges notions of representation and belonging. Katrin Sieg’s concept of “Ethnic Drag” further complicates her character, as Professor Saraswati’s racial performance subverts expectations of authenticity and reinforces the fluidity of identity.

The influence of both Goddess Sarasvati and Professor Saraswati is profound. Goddess Sarasvati inspires creative and intellectual pursuits, while Professor Saraswati empowers her students, especially Nivedita, through moments of self-recognition and empowerment. Nivedita’s sense of potential mirrors the inspiration devotees find in the goddess, linking the divine and academic realms in the novel’s examination of identity and knowledge.

The comparison between Kali and Nivedita underline themes of transformation and empowerment. Kali, known for destruction and rebirth, shows Nivedita’s journey of self-discovery. Nilima Chitgopekar notes that Kali’s hair signifies her untrammelled freedom and liberation from societal norms, earning her the name *Muktakeshi*, meaning one with free-flowing hair (Chitgopekar 2022, 143). Nivedita’s unruly hair, resembling Kali’s dishevelled appearance, becomes a symbol of her untamed identity. Like Kali, Nivedita challenges societal norms,

confronting issues of race, identity, and appropriation. Her blog, *Mixed-Race Wonder Woman*, and her defence of Professor Saraswati exemplify her determination to oppose conventional views and advocate for a more nuanced understanding of identity.

Nivedita's blog also functions as a crucial tool for expressing her identity and challenging societal norms. Her use of the web as a resonance tool for her voice reflects the shifting dynamics of power and discourse in modern society. The web, much like the multiple arms of the goddess Kali, represents an uncontrolled and multifaceted space where diverse and often conflicting forces interact. This contrasts sharply with the structured, hierarchical environment of the university, where rationality and authority traditionally dominate.

Nivedita's decision to use her blog as a platform for her thoughts reflects Kali's chaotic energy and her ability to disrupt conventional structures. The web's decentralization and openness provide Nivedita with a space where she can freely express her identity without the constraints of institutional authority. The internet, like Kali, defies regulation and allows for multiplicity, enabling voices that are often marginalized or silenced in more formal spaces, such as academia, to be heard. In this sense, Nivedita's blog serves as a metaphorical extension of Kali's arms, reaching into various realms and engaging with multiple forces simultaneously. This duality – between the unrestrained nature of the web and the controlled atmosphere of the university – highlights the tension in Nivedita's identity and speech. While the university represents an intellectual hierarchy where Professor Saraswati holds authority, the web allows Nivedita to navigate her complex identity on her own terms, offering her a form of empowerment and agency. Thus, her use of the web not only serves as a platform for self-expression but also symbolizes the transformative potential of uncontrolled spaces in shaping and redefining identity.

5. Conclusion

The novel *Identitti* and its characters are transreligious and transcultural as they navigate and blend multiple cultural and religious identities, reflecting the complexities of contemporary global society. Nivedita, born to an Indian father and Polish-German mother, inadvertently gravitates towards Hindu religious symbols and deities, especially Kali, despite her Polish heritage. This blending of identities highlights the fluid and dynamic nature of cultural and religious affiliations in the modern world, where traditional boundaries are increasingly porous, allowing for a more inclusive and multifaceted exploration of selfhood. In the chapter *Decolonising the Mind* Kali interrupts Nivedita's thoughts, asking her, "Genau, warum mit mir? Und nicht zum Beispiel mit einer polnischen Göttin?".²⁰ Nivedita is initially perplexed, having no idea whom Kali is referring to. Kali then sarcastically remarks, "Soviel zu kulturellem Wissen!" (Sanyal 2021, 340).²¹ This exchange prompts Nivedita to reflect on her fixation with India and why she never considered her Polish heritage. Nivedita's fixation on her Indian heritage, as highlighted by Kali's remark about her cultural knowledge, intertwines with Sanyal's critical statement that individuals only become subjects of others when they begin to see themselves as inferior, suggesting that Nivedita's narrow cultural focus may hinder her genuine self-empowerment and growth. Through Kali, Sanyal makes a critical statement: "Aber Menschen sind erst dann vollständig unterworfen, wenn sie sich selbst als unterlegen ansehen" (341).²² This insight suggests that individuals may victimize themselves and engage in a blame game, which hinders genuine self-empowerment and growth.

²⁰ "Why me, exactly, Why don't you talk to someone else, like say, a Polish goddess for instance?" (Sanyal 2022, 285).

²¹ "So much for cultural knowledge!" (Sanyal 2022, 285).

²² "But people only truly, fully become subjects of other people when they begin to see themselves as inferior" (Sanyal 2022, 286).

This reflection connects to the earlier notion that “the struggle over identity is the struggle over fiction in reality” (Sanyal 2022, 417). The narrative underscores that identity is not a fixed essence but a dynamic and often contested construct shaped by personal, social, and cultural narratives. Nivedita’s journey, influenced by her interactions with Kali, reveals the importance of embracing the complexity and fluidity of identity, rather than succumbing to reductive or essentialist views. By doing so, Sanyal encourages readers to critically examine their own identities and the stories they tell about themselves, ultimately advocating for a more nuanced and liberated understanding of self and culture.

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