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The Concept of Self in Indian Philosophy and English Romantic Literature: A Comparative Exploration

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Abstract

This paper undertakes a comparative philosophical-literary exploration of the concept of self as it emerges in Indian philosophical traditions—particularly Advaita Vedānta and Sāṃkhya-Yoga—and in the works of major English Romantic poets such as William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and Percy Bysshe Shelley. While the Romantic tradition posits the self as both a source of poetic creativity and as a reflective, often solitary, consciousness engaging with nature and the sublime, Indian philosophical systems present the self (ātman) as a deeper ontological reality—pure, unchanging, and ultimately non-dual. Through a close reading of selected Romantic texts and primary Indian philosophical sources, this study examines whether the Romantic ideal of the poetic self aligns with the Vedāntic notion of self-realization (mokṣa) or remains trapped within a limited egoic frame. Special emphasis is placed on the tension between emotional subjectivity and metaphysical universality, and on the moral-aesthetic implications of this tension. The paper argues that Indian metaphysical insights enrich and critique the Romantic valorization of the poetic ego, inviting a reconsideration of selfhood not as expressive individuality but as spiritual unveiling. This interdisciplinary inquiry opens a productive East–West dialogue at the intersection of literature, philosophy, and consciousness studies.

I. INTRODUCTION

The question of the "self" has animated both philosophy and literature across traditions and time periods. Within the Western literary canon, the English Romantics of the late 18th and early 19th centuries—particularly Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Shelley—elevated the self as both the source and subject of poetic vision. For these poets, nature served as a mirror through which the inner landscape of the mind could be revealed, and poetry became a means of emotional and intellectual self-expression. Yet this Romantic self, though profound and expansive, is also marked by emotional volatility, existential yearning, and metaphysical ambiguity.

In contrast, the Indian philosophical traditions of Advaita Vedānta and Sāṃkhya-Yoga offer a radically different conception of the self: one that is not constructed through emotional introspection or linguistic creativity, but revealed through detachment, discrimination (*viveka*), and disciplined spiritual inquiry (*adhyātma-vidyā*). In these systems, the self (*ātman*) is not the psychological ego (*ahaṃkāra*), but the eternal witness—pure consciousness, untouched by pleasure or pain, and ontologically identical with the absolute (*brahman*).

This paper sets out to compare these two contrasting but equally rich conceptions of self: the self of the Romantic poet and the self of Indian non-dualism. Is the poetic self of Romanticism a step toward or away from the spiritual self of Vedānta? Can the emotional depths explored by the Romantics be reconciled with the metaphysical heights of Indian philosophy? Or do they offer competing visions of what it means to be human, aware, and free?

Recent scholarship has begun to re-engage with non-Western conceptions of mind and self. Indian psychology (Rao, 2011; Misra & Mohanty, 2002), cross-cultural philosophy (Ganeri, 2007), and comparative poetics (Raghavan, 1976; Ingalls, 1990) have challenged the hegemony of Eurocentric models. Yet the specific juxtaposition of Romanticism and Advaita Vedānta remains underexplored, particularly with regard to the metaphysical assumptions each brings to the question of selfhood. This paper seeks to bridge that gap.

Through textual analysis and philosophical reflection, we will explore:

- How the self is constituted in Romantic literature (e.g., in Wordsworth's *Prelude*, Shelley's *Mont Blanc*)
- How Indian systems such as Vedānta and Sāṃkhya distinguish between *ātman*, *ahaṃkāra*, and *buddhi*
- Whether the Romantic self can be seen as an aesthetic counterpart to the Vedāntic quest for liberation
- The moral and existential consequences of these differing self-concepts

By initiating a dialogue between these traditions, this paper contributes not only to comparative literature and Indian philosophy but also to larger conversations in moral psychology, aesthetics, and the philosophy of consciousness. In an era increasingly defined by fragmented identities and algorithmic selves, revisiting classical notions of self—poetic and metaphysical—offers both critical insight and therapeutic promise.

II. THE ROMANTIC SELF: IMAGINATION, NATURE, AND THE INNER WORLD

The English Romantic movement marked a significant departure from Enlightenment rationalism, with poets such as William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and Percy Bysshe Shelley foregrounding the emotional, intuitive, and imaginative aspects of human experience. Central to this poetic reorientation was a revaluation of the self—not as a stable rational agent, but as a feeling, perceiving, and creating subject whose identity was shaped in relation to nature, memory, and transcendence.

2.1 Wordsworth and the Self as Moral Imagination

In *The Prelude*, Wordsworth's autobiographical epic, the poet embarks on a journey of *self-discovery,* wherein natural landscapes evoke profound inner transformations. The self, for Wordsworth, is neither static nor egoistic—it is a dynamic and evolving consciousness shaped by experiences of the sublime. He famously describes a moment of deep immersion in nature as one in which the "gentle breeze" seemed to "move with purpose," revealing a "spirit in the woods."

This movement toward a pantheistic or quasi-mystical conception of selfhood is echoed in Wordsworth's oft-cited lines from *Tintern Abbey*:

"…a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man."

Here, the boundary between the inner self and the external world dissolves, producing a poetic experience akin to non-duality, though grounded in sensuous perception rather than

metaphysical doctrine. Scholars such as M.H. Abrams (1971) and Harold Bloom (1970) have noted that this Romantic emphasis on immanence and transcendence reflects a deep ethical investment: the self becomes attuned not only to its own emotions but to the moral order implicit in nature itself.

Yet this self is also precarious—always at risk of fragmentation, haunted by memory and the possibility of alienation. In Wordsworth, nature serves as both solace and standard, but not an ultimate ground of being. The longing for permanence in an impermanent world reveals the limits of this Romantic self, opening it to philosophical critique.

2.2 Coleridge and the Dialectic of Consciousness

Coleridge's understanding of the self is more explicitly philosophical. In *Biographia Literaria*, he introduces the distinction between primary and secondary imagination, associating the latter with poetic genius. The self, for Coleridge, is not merely passive but creative—a mind capable of synthesizing opposites, reconciling reason and emotion, self and world.

Heavily influenced by German Idealism, particularly Schelling and Kant, Coleridge posits that true knowledge arises not from sensation alone but from reflective judgment. The Romantic self becomes, in his account, a transcendental mediator, actively shaping its experience of reality.

However, in poems such as *Dejection: An Ode*, Coleridge confronts the failure of this synthesis. The loss of imagination becomes an existential crisis—a withering of the self's vitality.

He writes:

"I see, not feel, how beautiful they are!"

This moment underscores the self's dependence on inner harmony—without which the outer world becomes merely aesthetic, not transformative. The Coleridgean self thus oscillates between creative unity and melancholic dispersion, mirroring the dialectic tensions found in Sāṃkhya and Vedānta between *puruṣa* (pure consciousness) and *prakṛti* (material nature).

2.3 Shelley and the Sublime Self

Shelley's poetry pushes the Romantic self further into the sublime and the ideal. In *Mont Blanc*, the mountain becomes a symbol of eternal mind, while human thought is presented as fleeting and fragile. Shelley writes:

"The everlasting universe of things
Flows through the mind, and rolls its rapid waves…"

This image suggests a porous boundary between mind and cosmos, echoing Vedāntic descriptions of consciousness as a reflection of the infinite (*brahman*). Shelley's idealism, however, remains radically skeptical—he is aware that the self may be nothing more than a momentary eddy in the stream of perception.

In *Prometheus Unbound*, Shelley's Prometheus represents the self as ethical resistance—a figure who refuses tyranny not through brute strength but through endurance, compassion, and vision. The Romantic self here is not only aesthetic or reflective, but moral and redemptive, mirroring Indian ideals of self-purification and liberation (*mokṣa*) through suffering.

2.4 Romanticism and the Problem of Ego

Despite their spiritual aspirations, Romantic poets do not clearly distinguish between the egoic self (*ahaṃkāra* in Indian thought) and the higher self (*ātman*). The poetic self often remains entangled in emotion, memory, and desire—the very qualities that Indian systems urge us to transcend.

This ambiguity opens the Romantic tradition to critique. As Charles Taylor (1989) argues in *Sources of the Self*, the Romantic turn to inwardness was both a liberation and a burden. The self, no longer anchored in divine or social order, became responsible for its own coherence. In contrast, Vedāntic traditions ground the self in transpersonal reality, offering not expression but dissolution of ego as the path to truth.

Nonetheless, Romanticism's existential intensity and moral depth should not be dismissed. Its insights into imagination, longing, and the moral emotions complement Indian notions of *bhakti* (devotional surrender), *viveka* (discrimination), and *vairāgya* (detachment). The

Romantic self, though incomplete by Vedāntic standards, embodies a genuine aspiration toward the infinite—a yearning that may be reinterpreted, rather than rejected, within Indian metaphysical terms.

III. THE INDIAN CONCEPTION OF SELF: ADVAITA VEDĀNTA, SĀṂKHYA-YOGA, AND THE IDEA OF ĀTMAN

The Indian philosophical landscape offers some of the most profound and sustained reflections on the nature of the self. While various schools differ in metaphysical assumptions and spiritual goals, a common preoccupation runs through them: a deep distinction between the true self (*ātman*) and the empirical ego (*ahaṃkāra*). This section explores how Indian systems—especially Advaita Vedānta and Sāṃkhya-Yoga—conceptualize the self, and how these notions contrast with and critique the emotionally vibrant but often unstable self of Romantic literature.

3.1 Advaita Vedānta and the Non-Dual Self

At the heart of Advaita Vedānta lies the proposition that the true self (*ātman*) is identical with the absolute reality (*brahman*). This metaphysical claim is rooted in the *Upaniṣads*, most notably in the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad's* great dictum: "Tat tvam asi" ("Thou art that"). Śaṅkara, the foremost exponent of Advaita, interprets this not as metaphor but as ontological truth.

The empirical self (*jīva*)—our body, emotions, thoughts—is seen as a superimposition (*adhyāsa*) upon the real self. This illusion (*māyā*) is perpetuated by ignorance (*avidyā*), which causes one to misidentify with transient phenomena rather than the eternal witness. Liberation (*mokṣa*) is attained not through emotion or imagination, but through discriminative knowledge (*viveka-jñāna*) and detachment (*vairāgya*). The self, in Advaita, is neither individual nor psychological; it is universal, unchanging, and non-agentive. It does not act, desire, or suffer. As the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* declares, "The Self is not this, not that" (*neti neti*)—pointing beyond all conceptualization.

In this light, the Romantic self's longing, suffering, and poetic creativity can be read as signs of ignorance, albeit noble ones. Emotional depth and aesthetic sensitivity are not dismissed, but they are insufficient for liberation. One must transcend even the most elevated expressions of individuality to realize the non-dual truth.

3.2 Sāṃkhya-Yoga: Dualism and the Liberation of Puruṣa

While Advaita posits a monistic ontology, Sāṃkhya-Yoga upholds a dualistic metaphysics, distinguishing between puruṣa (pure consciousness) and prakṛti (material nature). Each individual self is a distinct puruṣa—eternal, passive, and observing—trapped in the evolving matrix of prakṛti due to misidentification.

Liberation (*kaivalya*) arises when the puruṣa detaches itself from prakṛti, realizing that it is not the body, mind, or emotions. Patanjali's *Yoga Sūtras* emphasize practices such as meditation (*dhyāna*), breath control (*prāṇāyāma*), and ethical discipline (*yama-niyama*) as means to still the fluctuations of the mind (*citta-vṛtti*) and reveal the seer (*draṣṭā*).

This approach, though less radical than Advaita's non-dualism, similarly aims at detachment from the phenomenal self. Emotions, memories, and poetic inspiration are seen as disturbances rather than sources of insight. The self-realized yogi is not the impassioned poet, but the tranquil sage whose inner silence mirrors the silence of consciousness itself.

3.3 Ātman, Ahaṃkāra, and Buddhi: Layers of the Self

Indian psychology provides a nuanced account of the inner faculties, distinguishing between:

- Ātman: the eternal self, pure awareness
- Buddhi: the faculty of discernment and decision-making
- Manas: the sensory and emotional mind
- Ahaṃkāra: the ego-sense or "I-maker"
- Citta: the storehouse of impressions and memory

In this schema, what Romanticism valorizes—emotion, memory, subjectivity—

belongs to the lower levels of mind, often clouded by ignorance and attachment. The goal of spiritual practice is to refine buddhi, diminish ahaṃkāra, and allow the light of ātman to shine unobstructed. This contrasts sharply with the Romantic ideal of self-expression, where ego and emotion are not obstructions but sources of poetic truth. The Indian model instead invites self-effacement, clarity, and serenity—qualities rarely celebrated in Romantic literature.

3.4 Comparative Insights: Self-Realization vs. Self-Expression

The distinction between self-realization and self-expression may be one of the most significant contrasts between Indian philosophy and Romantic literature.

Criterion	Romanticism	Advaita Vedānta / Yoga
Nature of self	Evolving, emotional, expressive	Eternal, changeless, witness
Goal	Self-discovery through experience	Liberation through knowledge
Role of emotion	Central to identity and insight	Binding, source of ignorance
Role of imagination	Creative, visionary	Potentially illusory (māyā)
Liberation	Ambiguous, emotional transcendence	Non-dual realization or detachment

However, this binary can be challenged. For instance, the Bhakti tradition within Indian thought (e.g., in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* or by poets like Tulsidas) embraces emotion—*love*, *longing*, *aesthetic delight* (*rasa*)—as pathways to the divine. Similarly, Shelley's Promethean suffering or Coleridge's melancholy can be interpreted as spiritual trials, hinting at a yearning that transcends the ego.

In this light, Romanticism and Vedānta may not be opposed, but *complementary:* one maps the terrain of the soul's turbulence, the other charts its stillness. One offers a phenomenology of becoming, the other a metaphysics of being.

3.5 Contemporary Relevance: The Self in Crisis

In an era dominated by consumerism, virtual identity, and mental health struggles, the need to revisit classical conceptions of self becomes urgent. Indian models offer a non-pathologizing view of inner life, framing suffering not merely as dysfunction, but as misidentification.

Philosophers like Jonardon Ganeri (2012) have emphasized the relevance of classical Indian views of the self for contemporary debates in philosophy of mind. Meanwhile, scholars in Indian psychology (Rao, 2011; Misra, 2002) have begun integrating these insights into therapeutic frameworks.

In this context, the Romantic self may offer catharsis, but the Vedāntic self offers clarity. Together, they point toward a more integrated vision of human flourishing—a fusion of aesthetic sensitivity with spiritual discernment.

IV. DIALOGUES AND DIVERGENCES: TOWARD A PHILOSOPHICAL SYNTHESIS

The juxtaposition of English Romanticism and Indian philosophical thought reveals both deep divergences and unexpected harmonies. While rooted in vastly different cultural, metaphysical, and literary frameworks, both traditions seek to articulate a vision of the self that transcends mere empirical existence. This section aims to bring the two traditions into dialogical tension, asking not merely what separates them, but how their juxtaposition might enrich and revise each other in meaningful ways.

4.1 Divergences: Ontology and Epistemology

At the most fundamental level, the ontological assumptions of the two traditions differ markedly. For the Romantics, the self is immanent in nature, emotion, and imagination. It is dynamic, evolving, and expressive. The Romantic self is not a static essence but a becoming—revealed through memory, reflection, and affective immersion in the world.

Indian systems such as Advaita Vedānta or Sāṃkhya take a radically different stance. The

self is not a becoming, but a being—eternal, changeless, and distinct from the fluctuations of mind and matter. Knowledge is not creative but revelatory: to know oneself is to uncover, not construct.

This leads to a divergence in epistemology. The Romantic self knows through imaginative intuition, aesthetic perception, and emotional resonance. The Vedāntic self knows through discriminative reasoning (*viveka*) and disciplined detachment. Where Shelley speaks of the "deep truth" of poetry, Śaṅkara speaks of the illusion of the world and the need to pierce it with wisdom. This divergence is not merely theoretical—it reflects two modes of consciousness: one centered on emotional attunement and expressive articulation, the other on witnessing and disidentification.

4.2 The Common Ground: Longing for Transcendence

Despite these differences, both traditions are driven by a longing for the infinite, a desire to break through the ordinary and touch the eternal. In this respect, Romanticism may be seen as a phenomenology of yearning—not yet arriving at truth, but intensely aware of its absence. This idea is most poignantly captured in Wordsworth's descriptions of childhood intimations of immortality, or in Coleridge's vision of a lost "vision in a dream" (*Kubla Khan*). These moments resonate with the Vedāntic understanding that the soul intuitively knows its eternal nature, even as it forgets it in the world of phenomena.

The Bhakti traditions of Indian thought, particularly in poets like Rāmānanda, Kabir, or Mirabai, similarly capture this emotive dimension of spiritual longing. The beloved is the Absolute; love becomes the path to knowledge. This offers a bridge to Romanticism's emphasis on affective depth as a mode of transcendence.

4.3 Towards Synthesis: Self as Transparent Medium

One possible site of synthesis lies in rethinking the self not as an entity (Romanticism) or a negation (Advaita), but as a transparent medium—a locus through which both aesthetic beauty and metaphysical truth may pass.

In both traditions, the highest state of selfhood seems to require a dissolution of ego:

- In Shelley's *Adonais*, the poet writes:

  > "He has outsoared the shadow of our night…"
  > —suggesting a transcendence of the mortal, suffering self.

- In the *Bhagavad Gītā*, Krishna declares:

  > "He who sees the Self in all beings, and all beings in the Self, never turns away from It."

Both traditions, therefore, suggest that the ego must soften or dissolve, whether through poetic sublimation or spiritual insight, to allow the infinite to shine through. The Romantic poetic self and the Vedāntic realized self may not be identical, but they might be analogous stages on a path of increasing openness to the Real.

4.4 Critique and Caution: Aesthetic Narcissism vs. Spiritual Bypass

While this synthesis is compelling, it must be approached critically. Romanticism's intense focus on individual subjectivity can risk aesthetic narcissism—where the self becomes an object of endless fascination, rather than transcendence. Conversely, Advaita's radical detachment can risk spiritual bypassing—a denial of emotional depth and ethical engagement.

To navigate this, one must avoid reducing Romantic selfhood to egoism or Vedāntic selfhood to escapism. Instead, a philosophically robust synthesis would affirm:

- The moral imagination of Romanticism (e.g., Shelley's Promethean compassion)
- The metaphysical insight of Vedānta (e.g., Śaṅkara's non-duality)
- The psychological nuance of Indian epistemology (e.g., distinction between *manas*, *buddhi*, and *ahaṃkāra*)
- The aesthetic sensitivity of Romantic poetics (e.g., Wordsworth's sublime)

Such a model envisions a self that is both sensitive and serene, expressive and discerning—capable of moving through the emotional intensities of life while grounded in the contemplative clarity of being.

4.5 Contemporary Implications: Toward a Global Philosophy of Self

In contemporary debates on consciousness, identity, and mental health, the need for cross-cultural perspectives on the self is increasingly recognized. The Romantic tradition offers a counterweight to reductive materialism, affirming the depth and dignity of subjective life. Indian philosophy offers a soteriological clarity, reminding us that the self is not merely to be expressed, but realized.

Philosophers such as Jonardon Ganeri (2012), Martha Nussbaum (2001), and Charles Taylor (1989) have emphasized the role of narrative, emotion, and cultural context in shaping the self. Meanwhile, scholars in Indian traditions (Puligandla, 1997; Radhakrishnan, 1929) continue to advocate for a dialogical approach that sees traditions not in opposition but as resources for mutual transformation.

A comparative study of Romanticism and Vedānta thus contributes not only to academic understanding but to the human task of self-becoming—a project that is at once ethical, aesthetic, and metaphysical.

V. CONCLUSION

The comparative journey between English Romanticism and Indian philosophy reveals not merely a contrast of cultural paradigms, but a profound engagement with the universal question of selfhood. In their own idioms, both traditions grapple with the mystery of human identity, the relation between inner and outer worlds, and the longing for transcendence.

Romantic poets such as Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Shelley sought to reclaim the self from mechanistic rationalism, celebrating its imaginative, emotional, and moral capacities. For them, the self was not reducible to social function or biological impulse—it was a site of creative insight, moral struggle, and aesthetic transformation. Yet, the Romantic self also bore within it tensions: between the finite and the infinite, the personal and the universal, the expressive and the elusive.

Indian philosophical systems, especially Advaita Vedānta and Sāṃkhya-Yoga, bring a radical clarity to these tensions. They distinguish between the egoic self (*ahaṃkāra*) and the true self (*ātman* or *puruṣa*), urging a move beyond emotional reactivity and cognitive delusion toward spiritual discernment and ontological stillness. Liberation, in this vision, lies not in the expression of the self but in its transcendence.

Yet, it would be simplistic to cast these traditions as wholly opposed. Romanticism's yearning, sensitivity, and moral passion find resonance in Indian *bhakti* traditions, which valorize emotion and devotion as vehicles of self-transformation. Conversely, the Romantic ideal of the "sublime self" may be reinterpreted as a partial glimpse of the Vedāntic self—an unsteady but earnest movement toward the Absolute.

This paper has argued for a dialogical synthesis, one that respects the integrity of each tradition while opening them to mutual enrichment. The Romantic self, when guided by Indian philosophical insights, can mature from expressive subjectivity to self-transcending awareness. The Vedāntic self, when seen through Romantic eyes, gains an appreciation for the aesthetic and emotional textures of human experience.

In a time when identity is increasingly fractured—by technology, consumerism, and ideological extremism—the recovery of classical visions of the self is not merely academic. It is a cultural and existential imperative. By drawing from the depths of poetic imagination and philosophical wisdom, we may reclaim a vision of selfhood that is at once anchored and open, grounded and aspiring—a self that seeks not dominance, but illumination.

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