
Echoes from the Ancestral Margins: Reclaiming Indigenous Epistemologies in the Plural Tapestry of Indian Literary Traditions

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India's indigenous literary practices represent a vast and dynamic reservoir of cultural knowledge that fundamentally challenges dominant notions of authorship, textuality, and literary value. Rooted in oral traditions, performative expressions, and communal authorship, these traditions transcend the limitations of written literature and instead embody storytelling through ritual, folklore, song, and lived experience. This paper investigates the transformative power of indigenous literary practices, foregrounding their role as living archives that preserve ecological consciousness, collective memory, and resistance against cultural erasure. By examining diverse indigenous traditions across India, this study argues that these literary forms disrupt hegemonic literary paradigms that privilege written texts and individual authorship. Through a dialogic engagement with postcolonial theory, eco-criticism, and oral tradition studies, the paper highlights how indigenous narratives articulate alternative epistemologies rooted in sustainability, community ethics, and relational identity. Furthermore, it interrogates the marginalization of indigenous voices within mainstream literary discourse and explores their increasing inclusion in contemporary academic frameworks. Ultimately, this study seeks to reconfigure Indian literary identity by acknowledging the profound contributions of indigenous traditions as foundational rather than peripheral.

Keywords: Indigenous Literature, Oral Traditions, Cultural Memory, Postcolonial Studies, Indian Literary Identity, Eco-criticism

Introduction

Indian literary studies have long been dominated by canonical texts rooted in classical Sanskrit traditions and modern urban literary production. While these traditions have undeniably contributed to the richness of Indian literature, they have simultaneously overshadowed the equally significant, yet often marginalized, contributions of indigenous

communities. Indigenous literary practices, deeply embedded in oral traditions, rituals, and communal life, offer an alternative understanding of literature—one that resists textual fixity and instead thrives on performance, memory, and collective participation.

This paper seeks to interrogate the hierarchical structures that privilege written over oral literature and individual authorship over collective expression. It argues that indigenous literary traditions are not merely supplementary to mainstream literature but are foundational to the very fabric of Indian literary identity. These traditions function as “living archives,” constantly evolving while preserving cultural memory and ecological knowledge.

Drawing upon postcolonial theory, oral tradition studies, and eco-critical perspectives, this paper examines how indigenous narratives challenge dominant literary paradigms. It further explores how these traditions articulate resistance against colonial and postcolonial marginalization while fostering cultural continuity. By foregrounding indigenous voices, this study aims to reimagine Indian literature as a pluralistic and inclusive domain.

Indigenous Literature as a Living Archive

Indigenous literary traditions resist the conventional notion of literature as a fixed, written artifact. Instead, they exist as dynamic and evolving forms of cultural expression that are transmitted orally across generations. Scholars such as Jan Vansina have emphasized that oral traditions are not merely historical records but are “documents of the present” that reflect contemporary realities while preserving the past (Vansina 27).

In the Indian context, indigenous narratives encompass a wide range of forms, including myths, folktales, songs, epics, and ritual performances. These forms are deeply intertwined with everyday life, functioning as repositories of collective knowledge and identity. Unlike written literature, which often prioritizes permanence and authorship, indigenous traditions emphasize fluidity, adaptability, and communal ownership.

The concept of the “living archive” is particularly relevant in understanding indigenous literary practices. Diana Taylor distinguishes between the archive (written records) and the repertoire (embodied practices), arguing that performance-based traditions serve as crucial modes of cultural transmission (Taylor 19). Indigenous literature, situated within the repertoire, preserves knowledge through embodied practices such as storytelling, dance, and ritual.

This perspective challenges the epistemological hierarchy that privileges written texts over oral traditions. By recognizing indigenous literature as a living archive, we

acknowledge its capacity to sustain cultural continuity while adapting to changing socio-political contexts.

Orality, Performance, and Collective Authorship

One of the defining characteristics of indigenous literary practices is their reliance on orality and performance. Oral storytelling is not merely a mode of narration but a performative act that involves interaction between the storyteller and the audience. This participatory nature transforms storytelling into a communal experience, reinforcing social bonds and shared identities.

Walter J. Ong, in his seminal work *Orality and Literacy*, argues that oral cultures prioritize memory, repetition, and formulaic structures to facilitate transmission (Ong 34). These features are evident in indigenous Indian narratives, where repetition and rhythm enhance memorability and engagement.

Furthermore, indigenous literature challenges the notion of individual authorship. Stories are collectively owned and continuously reshaped by the community. This collective authorship disrupts the modern literary emphasis on originality and intellectual property, offering an alternative model based on shared creativity.

Performance plays a crucial role in this context. Rituals, festivals, and communal gatherings provide spaces for storytelling, where narratives are enacted through music, dance, and drama. These performances are not merely artistic expressions but are integral to the cultural and spiritual life of the community.

Ecological Consciousness and Indigenous Knowledge Systems

Indigenous literary traditions are deeply rooted in ecological consciousness, reflecting a harmonious relationship between humans and nature. Unlike modern industrial paradigms that view nature as a resource to be exploited, indigenous narratives emphasize interconnectedness and sustainability.

Eco-critical scholars have highlighted the importance of indigenous knowledge systems in addressing contemporary environmental crises. Indigenous stories often encode ecological wisdom, teaching communities about sustainable practices and environmental stewardship. For instance, myths and folktales frequently depict nature as a living entity, deserving of respect and care.

This ecological perspective is particularly relevant in the Indian context, where indigenous communities have historically maintained sustainable relationships with their

environments. Their narratives serve as repositories of ecological knowledge, offering valuable insights for contemporary environmental discourse.

Moreover, indigenous literature challenges anthropocentric worldviews by foregrounding non-human agency. Animals, plants, and natural elements often play central roles in these narratives, highlighting the interconnectedness of all living beings. This perspective aligns with eco-critical theories that advocate for a more inclusive understanding of the environment.

Gender, Identity, and Resistance in Indigenous Narratives

Indigenous literary traditions also provide a platform for exploring issues of gender, identity, and resistance. While these narratives are often rooted in tradition, they are not static; they evolve to reflect changing social dynamics.

Women play a significant role in the preservation and transmission of oral traditions. Through songs, lullabies, and storytelling, they contribute to the continuity of cultural knowledge. At the same time, indigenous narratives often challenge patriarchal norms by presenting alternative representations of gender roles.

Postcolonial feminist scholars have emphasized the importance of examining indigenous narratives as sites of resistance. These narratives articulate the experiences of marginalized communities, challenging dominant discourses that seek to erase or homogenize cultural identities.

Furthermore, indigenous literature serves as a form of resistance against colonial and postcolonial marginalization. By preserving cultural practices and knowledge systems, these traditions assert the autonomy and resilience of indigenous communities.

Marginalization and the Politics of Representation

Despite their richness and diversity, indigenous literary traditions have historically been marginalized within mainstream literary discourse. Colonial and postcolonial institutions have often privileged written texts and standardized languages, relegating oral traditions to the periphery.

Edward Said's concept of "representation" is particularly relevant in this context. He argues that dominant cultures often construct and control narratives about marginalized groups, shaping how they are perceived (Said 21). Indigenous communities have frequently been represented through external perspectives, leading to misinterpretations and distortions. The marginalization of indigenous literature is also evident in academic curricula, where these traditions are often excluded or treated as supplementary. This exclusion reinforces hierarchical structures that privilege certain forms of knowledge over others.

However, there has been a growing recognition of indigenous literature within contemporary literary studies. Scholars and activists are increasingly advocating for the inclusion of these traditions, challenging the dominance of canonical texts.

Reimagining Indian Literary Identity

The inclusion of indigenous literary traditions necessitates a reconfiguration of Indian literary identity. Rather than viewing literature as a homogeneous entity, it must be understood as a pluralistic and dynamic domain that encompasses diverse forms of expression.

Homi K. Bhabha's concept of hybridity provides a useful framework for understanding this plurality. He argues that cultural identities are not fixed but are continuously shaped through interactions and exchanges (Bhabha 56). Indigenous literature, situated within this framework, contributes to the ongoing negotiation of Indian literary identity.

By recognizing the contributions of indigenous traditions, we move towards a more inclusive understanding of literature—one that values diversity and acknowledges the multiplicity of voices that shape cultural narratives.

Conclusion

Indigenous literary traditions represent a vital and dynamic component of Indian literature. As living archives, they preserve cultural memory, ecological knowledge, and communal values while challenging dominant literary paradigms. Through their emphasis on orality, performance, and collective authorship, these traditions offer alternative frameworks for understanding literature.

This paper has highlighted the transformative potential of indigenous narratives in reshaping Indian literary identity. By foregrounding marginalized voices, it calls for a more inclusive and pluralistic approach to literary studies.

In an era marked by rapid globalization and cultural homogenization, the preservation and recognition of indigenous literary traditions are more important than ever. These "silent voices" are not silent in their essence; rather, they resonate with profound insights that continue to enrich and diversify Indian literature.

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