Between Tradition and Modernity: *"Indian Knowledge Systems in Indian English Narratives"*

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Abstract

The Indian Knowledge System (IKS) represents a vast civilizational continuum of intellectual, spiritual, scientific, and cultural traditions that have evolved in the Indian subcontinent over thousands of years. Rooted in diverse sources such as the *Vedas*, *Upanishads*, epics, philosophical schools, indigenous sciences, and regional oral traditions, IKS embodies a holistic worldview that integrates knowledge, ethics, experience, and spirituality. Indian English literature, although composed in a language introduced through colonial rule, has emerged as a powerful and dynamic medium for articulating, reinterpreting, and globalizing these indigenous knowledge traditions. Rather than merely imitating Western literary models, Indian English writers have consciously reshaped the English language to express Indian modes of thought, cultural memory, and epistemic frameworks.

This paper examines how Indian English writers incorporate philosophical, ethical, ecological, mythological, and socio-cultural dimensions of the Indian Knowledge System into their literary works. Through close readings of novels, poems, and essays by writers such as Raja Rao, R.K. Narayan, Rabindranath Tagore, Amitav Ghosh, Arundhati Roy, A.K. Ramanujan, and others, the study explores how literature becomes a space for negotiating tradition and modernity. It highlights Indian English literature as a site of epistemic resistance that challenges colonial hierarchies of knowledge, preserves cultural continuity, and contributes to the broader project of intellectual decolonization by validating indigenous ways of knowing within a global literary discourse.

Keywords: articulate, reinterpret, globalize, indigenous, ecological, epistemic resistance, cultural continuity.

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1. Introduction:

Indian Knowledge System and Literary Discourse

The Indian Knowledge System (IKS) represents a civilizational repository of knowledge accumulated over thousands of years through philosophical inquiry, spiritual practice, scientific observation, and cultural experience. Rooted in canonical texts such as the *Vedas*, *Upanishads*, *Itihasas*, *Puranas*, Buddhist and Jain scriptures, and regional oral traditions, IKS embodies a holistic worldview where knowledge is integrative, ethical, and experiential. Unlike Western epistemology, which often prioritizes objectivity, empiricism, and compartmentalization, IKS emphasizes *anubhava* (experience), *prakriti–purusha* harmony, and moral responsibility.

Indian English literature emerged under colonial conditions where English functioned as a tool of cultural dominance. However, Indian writers subverted this imposed language by transforming it into a medium of indigenous self-expression. As Raja Rao famously asserts in the preface to *Kanthapura*, English had to be "made to convey the Indian spirit." Consequently, Indian English literature evolved as a dialogic space where Western literary forms intersected with Indian philosophical and cultural frameworks.

This paper argues that Indian English literature functions as a vital medium for the articulation, preservation, critique, and transformation of the Indian Knowledge System. Through philosophical reflection, mythic retelling, ecological consciousness, ethical inquiry, and linguistic innovation, Indian English writers challenge colonial epistemologies and contribute to intellectual decolonization.

2. Philosophical Foundations of IKS in Indian English Literature

2.1 Dharma, Karma, Moksha, and Ethical Consciousness

The concepts of *dharma* (moral duty), *karma* (action and consequence), and *moksha* (liberation) form the ethical and metaphysical core of the Indian Knowledge System. These principles view human life as a moral–spiritual journey where individual actions are aligned with cosmic order and ethical responsibility. Indian English literature frequently draws upon these ideas to shape character development, narrative structure, and moral conflict, embedding indigenous philosophy within literary expression.

In *The Guide*, R.K. Narayan portrays Raju's transformation as an unintended spiritual awakening shaped by karma and suffering. His final act of fasting reflects *tapasya* and an ethical movement toward moksha, while Narayan's restrained narrative voice

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mirrors the Indian acceptance of moral ambiguity. Raja Rao's *The Serpent and the Rope*, influenced by Advaita Vedanta, employs the metaphor of illusion (*maya*) and ignorance (*avidya*) to dramatize the quest for non-dual realization, rejecting Western realism in favor of contemplative narration. Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* engages with *vairagya* (detachment) and solitude, but critically exposes the emotional tensions underlying ascetic withdrawal.

Rabindranath Tagore's writings, especially *Gitanjali*, reinterpret moksha as spiritual unity achieved through love, creativity, and ethical engagement rather than renunciation. Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy redefines *dharma* as moral action rooted in *satya* and *ahimsa*, emphasizing *karma yoga*—selfless action without attachment to results. Sri Aurobindo further expands these ideas through Integral Yoga, envisioning moksha as the transformation of human consciousness rather than escape from the world.

Together, these writers demonstrate how Indian English literature rearticulates the philosophical foundations of IKS, transforming literature into a medium of ethical reflection, spiritual inquiry, and cultural continuity.

3. Myth, Epic Tradition, and Cultural Memory

3.1 Epics as Knowledge Archives

Indian epics such as the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* function within the Indian Knowledge System as living knowledge archives that transmit ethical, social, and metaphysical values across generations. Preserved through orality, regional adaptations, and literary reinterpretations, these epics sustain cultural memory and moral philosophy. Indian English literature draws upon epic narratives to reinterpret contemporary experiences, demonstrating the continuity and adaptability of myth as a mode of knowledge.

In *Kanthapura*, Raja Rao mythologizes the Indian freedom struggle through Puranic imagery and epic symbolism, transforming political resistance into *dharma yuddha*. Gandhi is presented as an avatar-like figure, while the novel's oral narrative style reflects village epistemology, where myth and history coexist. Rabindranath Tagore reinterprets epic and Upanishadic motifs through a humanistic lens, emphasizing inner moral struggle, spiritual unity, and universal ethical values rather than heroic conflict.

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* employs a fragmented, cyclical narrative structure aligned with the Indian concept of *kalachakra*, where memory functions recursively, challenging linear Western chronology. A.K. Ramanujan's translations and essays, notably "Three Hundred Ramayanas," foreground the plurality and fluidity of epic traditions, emphasizing orality, variation, and cultural context as central to Indian storytelling.

Modern retellings of the *Mahabharata* in Indian English literature—by writers such as R.K. Narayan and Girish Karnad—highlight ethical ambiguity and moral complexity, addressing dilemmas of duty, violence, and justice. Similarly, Amish Tripathi's *Shiva Trilogy* democratizes divinity by presenting dharma as contextual and evolving, engaging with issues of governance, ecology, and social ethics.

Collectively, these works demonstrate how Indian English literature preserves cultural memory while reinterpreting epic wisdom for modern contexts, affirming the Indian Knowledge System as a dynamic and evolving framework of knowledge.

4.Language, Orality, and Indigenous Narrative Forms
4.1 Indianization of English: A Theoretical Perspective

Indian English literature actively indigenizes English, aligning with postcolonial frameworks on language, power, and knowledge. Within the Indian Knowledge System, language functions as a repository of cultural memory, ethical values, and collective experience. By reshaping English to reflect indigenous rhythms, oral traditions, and multilingual realities, writers resist colonial linguistic authority and assert cultural self-representation.

Bakhtin's concept of **heteroglossia** helps explain this transformation: Indian English literature incorporates vernacular idioms, mythic registers, oral speech, and religious discourse, reflecting the layered, dialogic nature of indigenous knowledge. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's critique of colonial language further clarifies this strategy: while he advocates writing in native languages, Indian English writers "decolonize" English itself, bending syntax and narrative forms to Indian sensibilities. Postcolonial linguistics emphasizes hybridity, code-switching, and transculturation, highlighting how these strategies foreground local epistemologies within global discourse.

Raja Rao uses long, rhythmic sentences in *Kanthapura* to mimic Sanskritic cadence and oral storytelling, affirming indigenous modes of knowing. **A.K. Ramanujan**

draws on folktales, myths, and regional oral traditions, preserving pluralistic cultural memory within English. **Salman Rushdie** blends multilingual expression, magical realism, and Indian idioms, reflecting syncretic IKS epistemologies while destabilizing standard English norms.

Thus, Indian English literature transforms English into a dialogic, culturally embedded medium, enabling indigenous knowledge systems to remain dynamic, accessible, and globally resonant.

5. Poetry and Spiritual Knowledge

5.1 Mysticism and Devotion

In the Indian Knowledge System, poetry traditionally conveys spiritual insight, intertwining *sādhanā* (spiritual practice), *bhakti* (devotion), and *jñāna* (knowledge). Indian English poetry continues this legacy by translating mystical and devotional traditions into a modern literary idiom, preserving spiritual knowledge for a global audience.

Rabindranath Tagore — *Gitanjali*

Tagore's *Gitanjali* reflects Upanishadic mysticism, emphasizing the unity of the self (*ātman*) with the universal spirit (*brahman*). His simple, lyrical poetry expresses inward, experiential spirituality grounded in love, humility, and surrender, merging *bhakti* and philosophical introspection.

Sri Aurobindo

Sri Aurobindo's poetry, particularly *Savitri*, integrates Integral Yoga, presenting literature as a means of spiritual transformation. His work emphasizes the divinization of life and uses symbolic imagery and philosophical depth to awaken consciousness, exemplifying the IKS belief that art and spirituality are inseparable.

Together, Tagore and Aurobindo show how Indian English poetry sustains spiritual knowledge, embedding mysticism, devotion, and yogic philosophy within literary form and ensuring the continuity of the Indian Knowledge System in a modern context.

Conclusion

Indian English literature plays a vital role in sustaining and reinterpreting the Indian Knowledge System in the modern world. By integrating philosophy, mythology, ecology, ethics, and spirituality, Indian English writers transform the English language into a vehicle of indigenous thought and cultural expression. Literary works by writers such as Raja Rao, R.K. Narayan, Amitav Ghosh, Arundhati Roy, and

Rabindranath Tagore demonstrate how traditional knowledge systems can be preserved while remaining relevant to contemporary social and intellectual concerns.

At the same time, Indian English literature critically engages with the limitations within tradition, particularly issues of caste, gender, and social inequality, thereby presenting the Indian Knowledge System as dynamic and self-reflexive rather than static. As a decolonial practice, it challenges Western epistemological dominance and affirms the legitimacy of plural ways of knowing. Thus, Indian English literature emerges as a site of synthesis where tradition and modernity coexist, ensuring cultural continuity while contributing to intellectual decolonization.

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