

# Indian Knowledge Systems in English Literature: Representation of Tradition and Wisdom

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## **Abstract:**

Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) encompass the philosophical, ethical, ecological, linguistic, artistic and community-based practices which evolved throughout Indian civilisation. IKS is found in English literature, and in English Indian writing in particular, as well as in some colonial depictions of India, as the cultural background and as a system of interpretation of life, duty, memory, identity and spiritual experience. The paper explores the portrayal of Indian tradition and wisdom in some of the English literary works such as *Kanthapura* and *The Serpent and the Rope* by Raja Rao, *The Guide* by R. K. Narayan, *A Passage to India* by E. M. Forster, *Midnight Children* by Salman Rushdie and *The Great Indian Novel* by Shashi Tharoor. The paper presents the argument that English literature could be viewed as a bridge by which the Indian wisdom is maintained, translated and reinterpreted to appeal to the contemporary readers with the help of qualitative textual analysis. It reveals that oral narration, dharma, karma, Vedanta, myth, epic memory, communal ethics and cultural translation are key to this presentation, whereas everyday social and cultural life renders these concepts significant in their local practice and everyday life. Simultaneously, the tensions between the tradition and colonial modernity, elite and folk knowledge, spirituality and politics, continuity and change are also disclosed in the texts. IKS in English literature can thus be seen as a living, nimble and critical source of knowledge as opposed to an unchanging heritage of the past.

**Keywords:** Indian Knowledge Systems, English literature, tradition, wisdom, Indian writing in English, mythology, spirituality, cultural memory

## **Introduction**

Indian Knowledge Systems are a wide and varied collection of knowledge that is based on Indian civilisation. These are philosophy, spirituality, ethics, art, language, medicine, ecology, governance, education, social customs and oral traditions. IKS does not exempt old Sanskrit literature or official religious documents. It can also be found in folk practices, local literatures, proverbs, rituals, festivals, songs, local crafts, ecological practices and daily life of communities (Kapoor and Singh, 2005). These systems of knowledge manifest themselves in literary works in the form of stories, symbols, myths, metaphors, moral dilemmas, narrative rhythms and concepts regarding human purpose.

These knowledge systems have a special relationship with English literature that has been connected with India. In the colonial period, English was used as a means of administration, education and

authority. But later on, the English language was turned into a medium of expression of the Indian experience by Indian writers. In the preface to *Kanthapura*, Raja Rao stated that Indians could not write the same way the English could write because Indian life, Indian thought and Indian speech had other rhythms thus the English had to be modified to the Indian sensibility (Rao, 1938). This is a significant statement as it demonstrates that language itself becomes the site in which Indian tradition gets incorporated and transformed English literature.

The Indian wisdom in English literature is important because it is through the continuity in modern forms. Oral storytelling and village myth are used by *Kanthapura* as a representation of anti-colonial consciousness; oral storytelling is explored in *The Guide*, sainthood, karma and moral transformation; in *The Serpent and the Rope*, Advaita Vedanta is used to reconsider modern politics; in *Midnight, The Great Indian Novel* involves the Mahabharata framework to rewrite national history by using myth and memory and magical realism (Narayan, 1958; Rao, 1960; Rushdie, 1981; Tharoor, 1989). The texts show that Indian tradition is not a fixed object. It wanders, shifts and articulates itself via new literary forms and still has profound cultural connections.

### **Aim, Objectives and Research Questions**

The main aim of this paper is to analyse how Indian Knowledge Systems are represented in English literature as sources of tradition and wisdom. This paper concentrates on how the chosen literature pieces act as cultural memory of the Indian community as well as reconfigure it to suit contemporary, colonial and postcolonial societies. Its objectives are: first, to determine significant IKS elements in chosen English literary work; secondly, to explore how the Indian tradition is being portrayed through the narrative style, myth, spirituality and ethics; third, to determine how the Indian wisdom is being preserved, translated and re-interpreted in English; and fourth, to discuss the conflicts between tradition, colonial modernity and modern identity.

Three research questions are used to guide the paper. What are the ways in which English literary writings reflect Indian Knowledge Systems? What literary devices are employed in translation of Indian wisdom into English? So, what are the tensions in representing ancient, oral or community-based traditions using a modern and global literary language?

### **Methodology**

The approach to textual analysis in this paper is qualitative. The chosen primary texts are read with repetitive IKS-related themes like dharma, karma, oral narration, guru-disciple affiliations, mythological reference, spiritual quest, community-based knowledge, environmental consciousness and philosophical self-inquiry. Literature is not considered in the study as a source of factual history alone; the literature language, form and characterisation are read as modes of representation of knowledge. This method is appropriate as IKS tends to manifest itself in symbols, metaphors, passed down tales and daily routine instead of a strict theoretical interpretation.

The main texts were chosen as they are the representation of various points of contact between Indian tradition and English literature expression. *Kanthapura* preempts the narration of oral communities; *The Guide* explores moral and spiritual change; *The Serpent and the Rope* offer Vedantic questioning; *A Passage to India* discloses the frontiers of colonial rationality; *Midnight's Children* rewrites modern history with the epic imagination; and *The Great Indian Novel* rewrites the modern history with the epic imagination. The analysis is supported by secondary critical sources on Indian English literature, Indian

philosophy and literary tradition (Mukherjee, 1971; Naik, 1982; Radhakrishnan, 1923). The subsequent thematic graph is an interpretive visual summary, not a statistical survey data.

Theoretical Background: Indian Knowledge Systems and Literary Tradition.

The reason why Indian Knowledge Systems are holistic is the fact that they do not make a sharp distinction between knowledge and life. The Indian traditions associating knowledge with moral conduct, self-discipline, social responsibility, spiritual growth and harmony with nature are observed in many Indian traditions. Wisdom is not then just information or technical ability but a living way. Dharma, karma, moksha, ahimsa, satya, seva and lokasangraha are the concepts that relate individual action to social and cosmic order (Radhakrishnan, 1923). These ideas influence the choices of characters, their struggles and changes in literary terms.

Tradition in literature is not just a mere repetition of the past as well. Eliot (1919) claimed tradition to have a sense of history where the past and the present works interrelate. This concept can be applied in the reading of Indian English fiction given that Indian authors tend to write in a colonial language but stuff it with Indian memories, Indian idioms, Indian myths and Indian philosophical templates. The outcome is not the imitation of the Western literature. Instead, it is an imaginative intersection of Indian knowledge traditions and the transformation of English expression.

Oral and performative forms of knowledge are also a part of IKS. Cultural memory is contained in stories told by the elders, village legends, devotional songs, performances at a ritual, folk theatre, and recitation of epics. These oral forms often find their way in written English literature. The speaker in the narrative can be addressed as a tale-teller, the narrative can be organized in mythic patterns, and the morality of the events can be organized by local gods or heroes of the epic. So, literature is turned into a literary archive in which oral, philosophical, and social knowledge is stored and converted into literature.

**Table 1- Selected English Literary Texts and IKS Representation**

Text	Author	IKS Element	Representation of Tradition and Wisdom
A Passage to India	E. M. Forster	Spiritual mystery; cultural difference	Shows the difficulty of understanding India through colonial rationality
Kanthapura	Raja Rao	Oral tradition; sthala-purana; Gandhian ethics	Presents village life through mythic narration and collective memory
The Guide	R. K. Narayan	Karma; sainthood; moral transformation	Shows spiritual wisdom emerging from flawed human experience
The Serpent and the Rope	Raja Rao	Vedanta; self-realisation; metaphysics	Represents Indian philosophy as a search for ultimate truth
Midnight's Children	Salman Rushdie	Myth; memory; history; hybridity	Reworks national history through mythic and magical storytelling
The Great Indian Novel	Shashi Tharoor	Epic tradition; Mahabharata framework	Uses epic knowledge to reinterpret modern Indian politics

Note. The table outlines the key IKS components that were employed in the chosen texts and their literary purpose.

**Oral Tradition and Community Wisdom within Kanthapura.**

One of the most evident manifestations of IKS in English literature is oral tradition. The Kanthapura by Raja Rao is a story of the South Indian village as narrated by Achakka, an old woman. Her narration is reminiscent of the puranic narratural tradition, local history, and myth, religion, memory and moral education is intertwined (Rao, 1938). The village is not brought out as a mere geographical site. It is a religious as well as cultural area under the protection of the goddess Kenchamma. This is an Indian view of knowledge where land, deity, community and memory are interrelated.

This novel also illustrates that wisdom is shared. Books, schools and modern institutions are not the only sources of knowledge. Older people, rituals, festivals, songs, common suffering and vernacular speech carry it. The villagers interpret the Gandhian freedom movement in terms of well-known religious pictures. Gandhi is envisioned as a saint, and any political emancipation is associated with moral purity. Nationalism today is thus rendered in the traditional cultural language (Mukherjee, 1971). This does not render the villagers ignorant and passive. Rather it indicates their capability to make sense of contemporary politics in their own inherited knowledge system. Kanthapara is thus a protest against the colonial claim that legitimate knowledge should be western or institutional and written.

**The Guide Moral Transformation and Spiritual Wisdom.**

The Guide by R. K. Narayan is an Indian wisdom expressed in the change of a tourist guide, Raju, to spiritual guide. Raju is not presented as an innocent or righteous personality. He is big, egocentric, dishonest and obsessed with earthly success. However, the flow of the narrative puts him in such a position that the society or society starts to realise him as a spiritual man. This leaves one an important philosophical question, can spiritual truth be illuminated by social misunderstanding and individual failure? Narayan does not provide an easy answer and this vagueness makes the novel so moral.

The sacrificial concept of karma, sacrifice and responsibility can make sense of the last part of Raju. It is his past deeds that cause pain and the pain also opens the door to self-knowledge. The novel alludes that wisdom can frequently be achieved through experience and not through religious teaching. He (Raju) might not start as a true saint, but he is slowly steered to a position where he is expected to care about others (Narayan, 1958). Spirituality, in this sense is not depicted as ritual. It turns into a moral responsibility test. The plain English style which Narayan uses reinforces this representation in that it makes Indian wisdom a part of everyday social life and not an abstract philosophy.

**Vedantic Philosophy and Truth-Seeking.**

Raja Rao, in *The Serpent and the Rope*, literally takes on Vedantic philosophy. The title alludes to a well-known metaphor of Advaita Vedanta: a thing that is a rope that is mistaken as a serpent is a thing that produces fear through illusion; a thing that is known is a thing that has destroyed the illusion. This metaphor is employed in the novel to examine the contrast between the appearance and the truth, body and self, love and coldness, and East and West (Rao, 1960). Contrary to Kanthapura, symbolizing collective village wisdom, the *Serpent and the Rope* propose IKS as a metaphysical inquiry and a personal spiritual search.

The hero is a voyage between India and Europe, yet the greater voyage is internal. His great struggle is not merely between the cultural difference, but the challenge of the transition between intellectual knowledge and spiritual realisation. This is a significant aspect of Indian philosophy: the truth is not just something to be argued or comprehended on a mental plane; it has to be realised as a result of

disciplined consciousness and self-knowledge (Radhakrishnan, 1923). The novel thus broadens the horizons of English fiction by rendering metaphysical reflection an aspect of narration experience. Through English, it is a medium through which the Vedantic ideas are addressed, yet the rhythm and form of the search is Indian-centric.

### **Myth, Epic Memory and Historical Reinterpretation.**

Some of the most influential sources of Indian cultural memory are the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. These books are religious as well as literary books, yet they also serve as ethical, political and social structures. These epics are frequently used in English literature to make sense of contemporary life. The Great Indian Novel by Shashi Tharoor is a retelling of the Indian political history since independence in the form of Mahabharata. This method indicates that the tradition of epics is not completely dead or entirely ancient. It may turn to be a keen tool of political satire, historical pondering and moral reproach (Tharoor, 1989).

Equally, the mythic imagination, memory and magical realism in *Midnight's Children* by Salman Rushdie rely on the narration of the contemporary India. The body of Saleem Sinai is allegorically connected to the country, therefore, individual life and the national past are united. It is a storytelling technique typical of the Indian tradition of storytelling, in which the fate of one person can be linked with that of the cosmos or society (Rushdie, 1981). Meanwhile, Rushdie does not approach tradition in a state of complete nostalgia. His fragmentation, extravagance, humour and hybridity challenge the solidity of national myths. Hence, the IKS is found in the novel as heritage as well as arena of discussion. Myth is not employed to idealize the past; rather it is employed to think critically about the past and who we are.

### **Colonial Encounter and the Limits of Western Rationality.**

The book *A Passage to India* is not an Indianish English novel, but it is an important book, as it shows the colonial impossibility to comprehend Indian civilisation. The British personalities attempt to grasp India by law, administration, social hierarchy and rational exposition. But India continually goes beyond these categories. The Marabar Caves become a key symbol of mystery, echo and mystery. They cannot be easily deciphered and reveal the boundaries of colonial knowledge (Forster, 1924).

In terms of IKS, the novel demonstrates that Western rationality is not enough to understand Indian social, spiritual and cultural life in a comprehensive way. The British system desires that India be recognizable and controllable yet the novel portrays India as a multi-faceted and inconsistent and highly complex nation. Nevertheless, it is important to read the text critically as Forster occasionally uses orientalist mystery to depict India. This implies that Indian complexity is not only acknowledged in the novel but also deformed. It is significant because it reveals the way in which colonial English literature met Indian wisdom with curiosity, fear and misconception. It is also useful in allowing the readers to understand why the later writers in India had to express India using their own voices and knowledge traditions.

### **Cultural Translation in Language.**

English is not simply used by Indian writers in English, it is remodelled. The prose of Raja Rao in *Kanthapura* is written in the rhythm of the Indian speech and narration. In depicting the daily life of Malgudi, Narayan employs simple English. Rushdie employs multilingual and hybrid English to the playful aspect of postcolonial India and its energy. This languages imagination is in itself a

representation of IKS since the Indian knowledge is transmitted by idiom, rhythm, metaphor, proverb and cultural context (Naik, 1982). The language used in these writings tends to imply that Indian experience cannot be entirely captured using the conventional use of the standard British English.

The key to this process is translation. There are numerous Indian ideas which do not have a direct English counterpart. Other words like dharma, karma, maya, moksha, guru, seva and ahimsa have philosophical definitions which cannot be translated into one-word definitions. Once such words find their way to the English literature, they increase the expressive power of English. They also make readers get into another cultural logic. Dharma can, for example, transliterated as duty, righteousness, role, order and moral responsibility, depending on the context. The term karma is synonymous with action, consequence and ethical causality. It is through the maintenance of such ideas in English prose that Indian writers make English a vehicle that can transport Indian wisdom.

### **Social Wisdom Ethics, Ecology.**

Ethical and ecological means of understanding the world are also a part of IKS. The Indian cultures tend to focus on the intertwined relationship between people, the natural world, animals, forefathers, gods and societies. This worldview is manifested in literature in the form of divine landscapes, rivers, villages, forests, seasons and rituals. The association of Kanthapara with the goddess Kenchamma demonstrates that land is not just property, but it constitutes part of cultural identity and spirituality (Rao, 1938). It is valuable as such representation is provided as an alternative to purely material or exploitative perspectives of nature.

It is also important to social wisdom. The moral values of leadership, conflict and community responsibility, like ahimsa, seva and dharma, provide moral doctrines. Gandhi has criticised the modern civilisation in terms of its addiction to machinery, speed and material advancement, and his criticism permeates most of the imaginations in Indian literature (Gandhi, 1909/1997). Meanwhile, the boundaries of tradition are also revealed in literature. The caste hierarchy, gender restrictions and social exclusion may be obscured within the rhetoric of culture. Thus, critical reading of IKS in English literature should realise the wisdom as well as its tensions. Ethical life can be led by tradition, but this tradition should be analyzed in case it promotes inequality.

### **The Education, Memory and Contemporary Relevance.**

Education can also be applied to the application of IKS in the English literature of today. The contemporary education tends to divide the knowledge into subject, test and professionalism. IKS is reminding readers that knowledge encompasses ethical judgement, cultural memory, emotional maturity and responsibility towards the society. Indian languages, arts, culture and knowledge traditions in education are considered vital in education by the National Education Policy 2020 (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2020). This goal can be facilitated with literature as it does not make tradition a list of facts. It puts tradition with emotional life, using characters, conflicts and stories.

In this regard, English literature proves effective since it connects with the readers in regions and countries. Indian ideas enter English fiction, poetry and drama when they do so, and they become accessible to the audience who might not familiarize themselves with the Sanskrit, the Hindi and the Bengali as well as the Tamil, Kannada and other Indian languages. This however does not imply that the English language is replacing the Indian languages. Rather, it can serve as an intermediary. The ability of English to reproduce the rhythm of Indian oral story-telling is demonstrated in works like Kanthapura,

and the ability of English to become multi-lingual, unpredictable and playful is demonstrated in works like *Midnight's Children* (Rao, 1938; Rushdie, 1981). Such texts enable students to learn that Indian wisdom does not exist in isolation of modern literary study in classes. It belongs to the discussions of identity, ethics, ecology, history, nationalism and international culture.

These texts have educational worth in that they can bridge learning with practice. One that reads *The Guide* is not just learning with a dictionary sense of the meaning of karma, the student is observing the process of action, consequence, guilt and sacrifice that form a human life. A student who reads *The Great Indian Novel* does not just get to know that the Mahabharata is an epic; the student observes how the frames of epics can be used to understand contemporary political authority (Tharoor, 1989). Therefore, literature makes IKS a living way of thinking.

### **Limits, Silences and the Need for Inclusive IKS**

The English literature has assisted in the preservation and reinterpretation of the Indian Knowledge Systems; however, it is the time to realise its boundaries as well. Numerous famous Indian English works were created by elite, urban or learned authors. This can lead to the representation of Indian tradition, in the versions given in those works, sometimes focusing more on the Sanskritic, philosophical or upper-caste cultural forms than on the tribal, Dalit, women traditions, folk and regional traditions and labouring traditions. This does not render the texts useless, but implies that their depiction of IKS is incomplete as opposed to being complete.

The comprehension of the IKS has to be filled with the knowledge of farmers, craft workers, village healers, singers, performers, storytellers, women elders, local priests, boatmen, forest communities and marginalised groups. Such knowledge tends to be preserved by means of memory, performances such as practice rather than written documents. English literature will be able to embody them, but it will also misuse them when it merely calls on them as an alien setting. Thus, critical reading is required. Reader's ought to inquire as to who is speaking, whose knowledge is prized, whose experience is lacking and how power influences the literary expression of tradition.

The significance of this point in the overall argument of the paper is high. IKS should not be idealised as a harmonious and idyllic past. It is full of profound wisdom, yet they are found in social organizations that can result in inequality. The approach to literary study must be responsible; thus, it must not sidestep respect or critique. It must recognize the Indian traditions richness of philosophy, ethics and culture besides doubting the caste exclusion, gender control, and narrow communalism. England literature can be used in such a manner that IKS will become more democratic and inclusive.

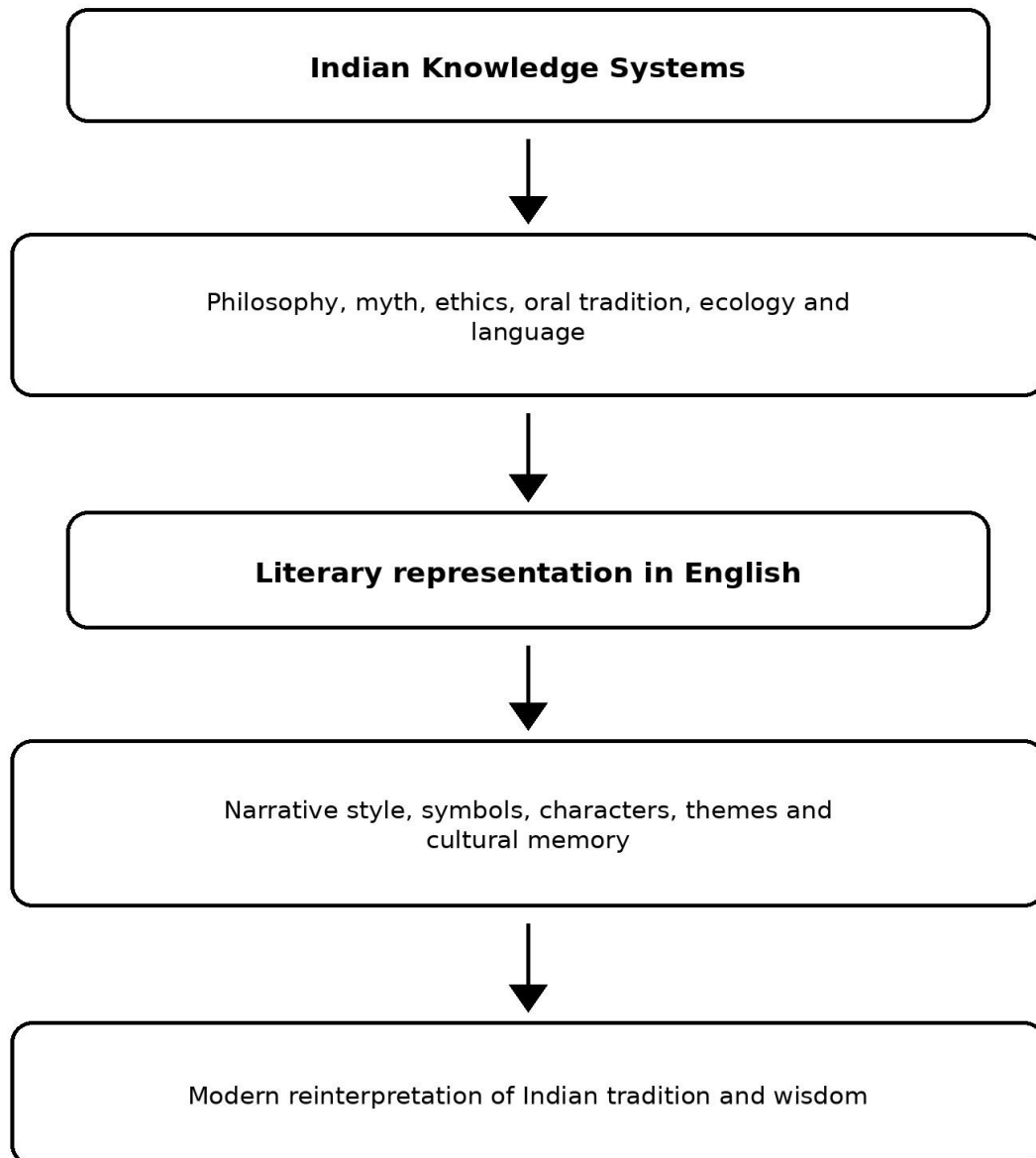
### **Comparison Pattern among the Texts Selected.**

A comparative study of the readings of the chosen text reveals that IKS is manifested in various ways, depending on the genre, the position of the author, and historical events. Tradition, in *Kanthapara*, is communal and oral; it is part of the village and is transmitted through a narrator, who is old. In *The Guide*, wisdom is mental and moral; it is created through guilt, role-playing, fasting and responsibility. In *The Serpent and the Rope*, knowledge is philosophical and metaphysical; what is real and what is illusion. In *Midnight Children*, IKS is divided, hybrid and ironical as mythic patterns are applied to make sense of the fractured national history. Epic memory in *The Great Indian Novel* approaches the commentary of the political. Indian complexity in *A Passage to India* is viewed externally, and is in part misperceived (Forster, 1924; Rao, 1938; Rushdie, 1981).

This analogy demonstrates that IKS cannot be narrowed down to a single theme e.g., religion or mythology. It operates as a story technique, as an ethics, as a history, as a source of language and a philosophical question. The same tradition can be on the one hand utilized to sustain the unity of a community, and create confusion on the other. The same myth can carry the memory in one place and it may be used to question political power in another place. Thus, the power of Indian English literature is that it portrays the Indian wisdom as plural. It is not merely the repetition of inherited knowledge; it puts into question that knowledge to lived experience, contemporary conflict and shifting social realities.

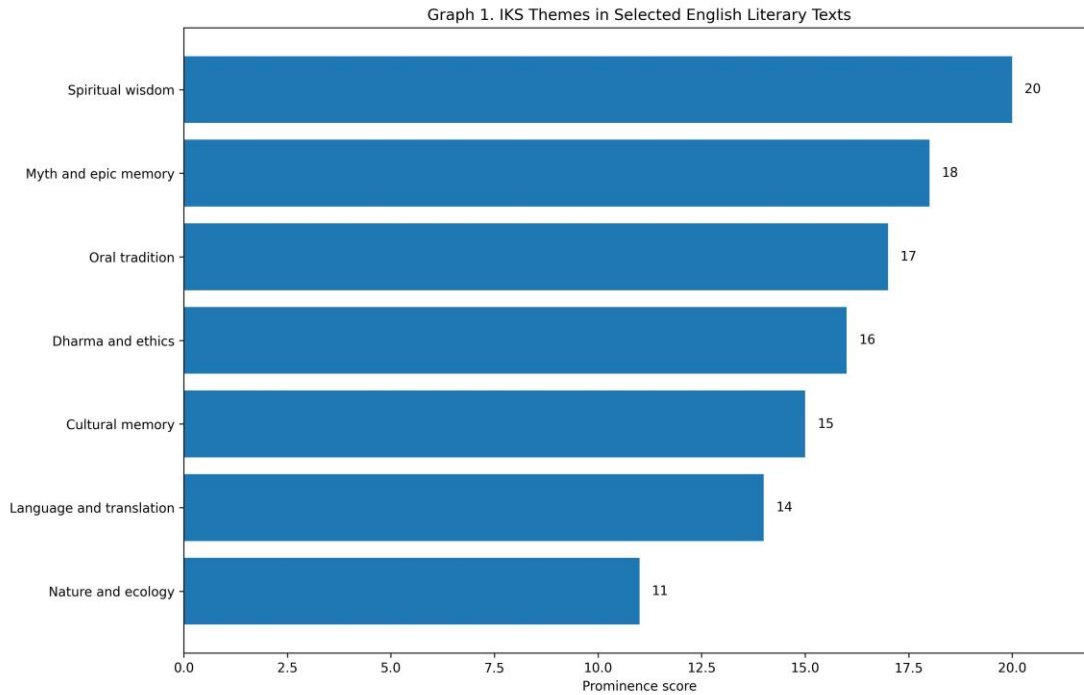
**Figure 1-** *Conceptual Image/Diagram: Movement of IKS into English Literature*

### Figure 1. Movement of IKS into English Literature



Note. The figure presents the paper's conceptual movement from indigenous knowledge sources to modern literary reinterpretation.

**Graph 1-** *Thematic Prominence of IKS Elements in Selected Texts*



Note: Scores are interpretive and based on qualitative literary analysis, not statistical survey data.

## Explanation of Figure and Graph

Figure 1 shows the conceptual shift of Indian Knowledge Systems towards English literature. It starts with IKS as a general source of philosophy, myth, ethics, oral tradition, ecology and language. These elements are incorporated into literary representation in the form of narrative style, symbol, characters, themes, and culture memory. Last but not least, literature reinterprets Indian tradition and wisdom for the reader today. The figure thus demonstrates that 'transit from tradition to literature' is not a copying exercise, but rather a process of selection, translation and transformation, which is artistic.

The following graph (Graph 1) gives an illustrative thematic coding of the major elements of the IKS in the selected texts. The prominence of the elements of spiritual wisdom, myth and epic memory, oral tradition, dharma and ethics, cultural memory, language and translation and nature and ecology in the analysis has been scored. The graph is not a statistical survey data. It is a visual summary to help in understanding the interpretative findings. Spiritual wisdom and mythic memory texts are ranked at the top, due to their reoccurrence in multiple texts.

## Discussion

These chosen texts illustrate at least three dominant ways in which IKS is at work in English literature. First, it preserved tradition, through the preservation of oral storytelling, myth, spiritual concepts, and moral values in written English literature. Secondly, it spreads Indian knowledge through rendering Indian knowledge in contemporary literary genres. Thirdly, it challenges tradition by juxtaposing it with colonialism, modernity, nationalism, gender, caste hierarchy, and political change. Indian tradition in English literature cannot be interpreted as a backward or static thing. Is active, imaginative, and open to new interpretations.

Another important aspect is that by reading about wisdom, readers can achieve a deeper level of understanding of wisdom as a lived experience, not just a set of concepts. The philosophy of knowledge in many cultures in India does not differentiate knowledge from moral, spiritual and social obligations. This can be seen in Indian English novels where characters learn in the context of suffering, responsibility, community life and reflection. In *The Guide*, Raju's path is a demonstration of wisdom coming from failure and the struggle of the moral life (Narayan, 1958). In *Kanchipuram*, stories, rituals, songs and collective memory are the ways in which villagers carry the knowledge of culture (Rao, 1938). These are examples to unsettle the colonial concept of knowledge in the institutional or written western languages.

IKS also provides other perspectives of contemporary issues. Dharma, Kama, Ahimsa and Community Responsibility give us ethical principles that guide us in conflict, leadership, justice and identity. These concepts are employed in postcolonial literature to challenge the colonial powers, materialism, and narrow nationalism. For Rushdie (1981) and Tharoor (1989) the myth and epic tradition can still illuminate the modern politics and social disorder, as the ancient stories can still be read in new and different ways. But the study also acknowledges that there are some limitations: Indian traditions may be rendered in an oversimplified way in a text that is written in English for a global audience, and the dominant and dominant zing nature of Sanskritic knowledge may be overlooked or overemphasized in comparison to tribal, Dalit, women's, folk and regional knowledge. In the future, it is recommended that the number of texts and oral-literary forms expand.

### **Conclusion**

The Indian Knowledge Systems in English literature are an abundance of tradition and modernity. English literary texts portray Indian wisdom as a living cultural force through myth, narration, dharma, karma, Vedanta, memory of the community, ecological awareness and spiritual searching, as well as through a process of doing and working. English can be transformed to its Indian image, as demonstrated by writers like Raja Rao, R. K. Narayan, Salman Rushdie and Shashi Tharoor. Even the colonial literature like *A Passage to India* is helpful because it shows the boundaries of the Western rational mind's capacity towards the Indian cultural and spiritual intricacy.

The study findings suggest that IKS in the field of English literature can be interpreted as preservation, translation and transformation. It passes on the cultural heritage through the creation of myths, ethics and oral traditions. It conveys Indian thoughts to English readers. It also begs the question about tradition in the context of colonialism, nationalism, social inequality and modernity. Thus, IKS is not a decoration of culture background only. It is a vital and imaginative source of meaning which enables English literature to link past with present and Indian wisdom to be flexible, reflective and constant.

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