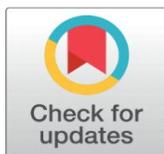
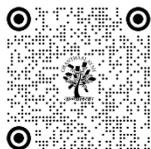


FOLKLORE AND POSTCOLONIAL IDENTITY: REVISITING CULTURAL NARRATIVES IN INDIAN LITERATURE

Ankit Jaiswal ¹



ABSTRACT

In the intersection between postcolonial literature and folklore, there is an exploration of identity, memory, and resistance. Folklore, with its oral traditions, rituals, and cultural expressions, is not only a repository of communal knowledge but also a medium for preserving cultural identities. In postcolonial literature, these narratives are often revisited to critique colonial histories, question hegemonic structures, and reclaim indigenous voices. This intersection allows us to explore how colonial and postcolonial realities (One example of this postcolonial reality is the colonial power structure seen in the form of Senanayak and his exploitation of the tribes) shape and reinterpret folk traditions. Themes such as gender, caste, ecological wisdom, and subaltern resistance emerge prominently, highlighting how folklore bridges the past with contemporary struggles for identity and justice. The integration of folklore into postcolonial texts not only subverts colonial erasures but also fosters a renewed appreciation of the socio-political relevance of folk narratives in a globalized, digitized world. This paper shall underscore the potential of folklore in enriching postcolonial discourse, reshaping cultural memory, and advocating for social and ecological sustainability. This paper shall try to explore how Indian postcolonial literature incorporates folklore to subvert colonial narratives, reclaim indigenous identities, and resist socio-political injustices. Through detailed analyses of texts such as Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*, Mahasweta Devi's short stories, and Kamala Das's poetry, this paper shall examine the interplay between oral traditions, cultural memory, and identity. Additionally, it will also investigate how folklore in postcolonial literature provides ecological wisdom, redefines gender roles, and navigates the challenges of modernization. By demonstrating the dynamism of folklore in preserving and reinterpreting heritage, the paper shall highlight its relevance in addressing contemporary cultural and ecological crises.

DOI

[10.29121/shodhkosh.v4.i2.2023.5983](https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v4.i2.2023.5983)

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Copyright: © 2023 The Author(s). This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

With the license CC-BY, authors retain the copyright, allowing anyone to download, reuse, re-print, modify, distribute, and/or copy their contribution. The work must be properly attributed to its author.



Keywords: Folklore, Postcolonial Literature, Identity, Resistance, Cultural Memory

1. INTRODUCTION

It is a truth universally acknowledged that literature often serves as a lens through which social issues and historical trends are examined and commented upon, reflecting the complexities of its time. Postcolonial literature specifically is invaluable in confronting the social pathologies that arise from postcolonial traumatic conditions and psychological struggles. It provides readers and societies with essential tools for fostering coherence and balance in postcolonial settings, while also actively searching for innovative methodologies to conduct thorough cultural analysis.

Colonialism, with its deep-rooted and varied historical background, effectively obliterated numerous native cultural elements. It often led to the severance of many indigenous populations from their longstanding traditions and cultural heritages. The colonial impact typically replaced traditional modes of thought along with historical memory with Western globalized cultural forms. It was only when the reclamation of this lost historical heritage began, primarily as a pivotal aspect of the postcolonial process, that a path towards cultural recovery was forged.

The construction of postcolonial identity is generally understood, in its most simplified form, as the process of reinstating indigenous cultures and reclaiming cultural autonomy. The rejection of colonialism has emerged as a crucial turning point in the identity-building process for many communities, and the actuation of postcolonial identities was never a straightforward or mechanical recovery of native forms; neither did it result in an apolitical return to an idealized past. The period of decolonization has not only brought about cultural and political independence but also unveiled the

intricacies and hybridity present in contemporary cultures. Literary works have consistently played a vital role in addressing the multifaceted identity crises faced by individuals and communities while renegotiating concepts of postcoloniality. Folklore, in particular, informs traditional ways of understanding and behaving and provides invaluable guides for successful negotiations within postcolonial contexts, highlighting the importance and relevance of indigenous cultural practices in contemporary society.

The exploration of cultural narratives within Postcolonial Indian literature reveals a profound engagement with folklore as a means of articulating postcolonial identity. Within Indian literature, folklore serves as an essential vessel, carrying the weight of communal memory, oral histories, and cultural rituals that encapsulate the lived experiences of marginalized communities. This exploration becomes more significant in the context of postcolonial discourse, where traditional narratives are reexamined to contest colonial legacies and reconstruct indigenous identities. Folklore serves not only as a tool for revisiting the past but also as a political tool for reclamation of what was denigrated to perhaps the lowest rung vis-à-vis the western thoughts. As a political tool, folklore recovers, reclaims, resists, and subverts.

2. THE INTERSECTION BETWEEN FOLKLORE AND POSTCOLONIAL IDENTITY IN INDIAN LITERATURE

In the intersection of folklore and postcolonial literature emerges a space for resistance and reclamation, calling for a redefinition of identity amidst the complexities of modernity and globalization. It represents a complex narrative landscape where cultural memory, resistance, and identity converge. In the context of Indian literature, folklore emerges not merely as a nostalgic repository of traditional knowledge but as a dynamic, resilient mechanism of cultural preservation and transformation. Oral traditions, rituals, and folk narratives serve as critical tools for challenging colonial historiographies, recuperating marginalized voices, and articulating contemporary social struggles.

Texts such as Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* and Mahasweta Devi's short stories exemplify this intersection by employing folk elements to critique colonial histories and assert indigenous voices. Their literary works not only reclaim cultural narratives but also interrogate societal structures through the lenses of gender, caste, and ecological wisdom, thereby linking historical oppression with present-day struggles. Furthermore, as folklore is woven into postcolonial narratives, it facilitates a renewed appreciation of cultural memory and serves as a resilient tool for advocating social justice amidst the challenges of globalization. Thus, the interplay of these elements enriches both the discourse of folklore and the complexities of postcolonial identity in contemporary Indian literature.

Theorists such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Homi Bhabha have profoundly illuminated the role of cultural narratives in challenging and subverting colonial representations. Both scholars emphasize the power of indigenous storytelling as a means of epistemic resistance—asserting the ability of marginalized voices to reclaim agency and disrupt the hegemonic discourses perpetuated by colonial powers.

3. GAYATRI CHAKRAVORTY SPIVAK AND MAHASWETA DEVI

Spivak's seminal concept of the subaltern highlights the silencing of marginalized voices within colonial and postcolonial narratives. Her engagement with Mahasweta Devi's works serves as a poignant example of how indigenous storytelling challenges this silencing. Mahasweta Devi, through her literature, becomes an advocate for India's tribal and oppressed communities, using storytelling as a weapon of resistance against systemic exploitation.

For instance, Mahasweta Devi's *Rudali* and *Draupadi* expose the intersectional oppression faced by tribal and lower-caste women. These stories not only resist the erasure of these voices but also question the colonial and patriarchal systems that perpetuate such marginalization. Spivak, in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" draws attention to the ways in which these narratives foreground voices that are often excluded from dominant historiographies. By focusing on subaltern subjects, Devi's works highlight the lived experiences and struggles of marginalized communities, functioning as a counter-discourse to colonial narratives that often dismissed or misrepresented indigenous realities.

In stories like "Draupadi" and "The Hunt," Devi uses folkloric elements to expose the intersections of gender, caste, and ecological exploitation. Folk traditions become a means of resistance, providing alternative epistemological frameworks that challenge dominant narratives of development and progress. The ecological wisdom embedded in these narratives goes beyond romantic preservation; it presents a sophisticated understanding of human-nature relationships.

Folklore emerges as a complex system of knowledge that offers sustainable alternatives to extractive, colonial models of interaction with the environment.

This negotiation between folklore and postcolonial Indian literature has led to folklore becoming a site of hybridity, a third space where there is a hybridity but also resistance and subversion. The challenge that a tribal woman like Droupdi poses to Senanayaka, representative of neo-colonial power and oppression, is the prime example of that constant resistance.

Devi's narratives also resonate with Spivak's concept of "strategic essentialism," which allows oppressed groups to unify their voices for political resistance. By giving voice to the subaltern, Mahasweta Devi's works illustrate how storytelling can become an act of reclaiming agency and challenging the epistemic violence of colonial and neo-colonial systems and thereby shaping its own identity.

Through her characters, Devi critiques the exploitation of indigenous populations while simultaneously elevating their stories to assert their agency. She masterfully uses folk motifs and indigenous cultural traditions not only to expose systemic injustices inflicted by colonialism and modern exploitative practices but also to reclaim these narratives as sites of resistance and empowerment. Devi's work reveals folklore as a critical mechanism for articulating ecological wisdom, celebrating community resilience, and challenging oppressive systems that marginalize indigenous voices.

For instance, in her short story *Draupadi*, Devi confronts the brutalities of state oppression and the valorization of modern warfare by juxtaposing it against the subversive power of so-called "primitive" methods of resistance. She writes, "The fighting forces regain their confidence in the Army Handbook. It is not a book for everyone. It says that the most despicable and repulsive style of fighting is guerrilla warfare with primitive weapons. Annihilation at sight of any and all practitioners of such warfare is the sacred duty of every soldier. Dopdi and Dulna belong to the category of such fighters, for they too kill by means of hatchet and scythe, bow and arrow, etc. In fact, their fighting power is greater than the gentlemen's. Not all gentlemen become experts in the explosion of 'chambers'; they think the power will come out on its own if the gun is held. But since Dulna and Dopdi are illiterate, their kind have practiced the use of weapons generation after generation."

This passage reveals how the colonial and postcolonial state delegitimizes indigenous resistance by branding it as "primitive" and "despicable," while simultaneously fearing its efficacy. The Army Handbook dismisses guerrilla warfare and tools like scythes, bows, and arrows as relics of an unrefined past. However, Devi deftly flips this narrative, showing that these so-called primitive methods, honed over generations, are often more effective and adaptive than the mechanized modern weaponry wielded by the state. Through *Dopdi* and *Dulna*, Devi underscores that the power of indigenous communities lies not only in their physical resilience but also in their deep-rooted knowledge systems and intimate connection to their land and traditions.

Devi's critique goes beyond the weapons themselves to highlight the symbolic resistance embodied by the indigenous fighters. The tools they wield—hatchets, scythes, and arrows—are extensions of their daily lives, deeply entwined with their ecological wisdom and cultural heritage. By using these tools in acts of defiance, they transform the mundane into the militant, challenging the supremacy of modern militarized forces. This act of reclaiming the "primitive" as a source of power subverts the colonial and modern state's attempt to delegitimize indigenous practices and affirms the agency of those who have been historically marginalized.

In this way, *Draupadi* not only critiques the violent machinery of the state but also asserts the strength of indigenous knowledge and resistance. Devi's use of folklore and guerrilla warfare as narrative motifs dismantles the binaries of primitive versus modern, showcasing that the so-called primitive has often outmaneuvered the modern, both in historical and symbolic terms. This defiance of the state's attempt to control and erase indigenous voices lies at the heart of Devi's work, cementing her as one of the most powerful chroniclers of subaltern resistance.

4. HOMI BHABHA AND RAJA RAO

Homi Bhabha's theories of hybridity, mimicry, and the "Third Space" provide a framework for understanding how postcolonial writers like Raja Rao negotiate cultural identity and resistance within colonial contexts. Raja Rao's works, especially *Kanthapura* (1938), epitomize the hybrid narrative form that Bhabha describes. Rao combines Western literary techniques with indigenous oral traditions, creating a "Third Space" where colonial and native cultures intersect, interact, and contest each other.

In Kanthapura, Rao uses the narrative voice of an elderly village woman to weave the story of Gandhian resistance in colonial India. This technique not only foregrounds indigenous epistemologies but also destabilizes the authority of colonial narratives by privileging local dialects, idioms, and oral storytelling traditions. Bhabha's concept of hybridity is evident in Rao's blending of Indian mythological references and the English language, showcasing the coexistence of multiple cultural identities and challenging the dominance of colonial epistemes.

Furthermore, Raja Rao's narrative strategy aligns with Bhabha's notion of mimicry, which reveals the inherent instability of colonial authority. By appropriating the English language—a tool of colonial dominance—Rao subverts its power, turning it into a medium for articulating anti-colonial resistance and indigenous identity. His works demonstrate how postcolonial writers use the colonizer's language to undermine colonial ideologies, creating a space for alternative cultural narratives.

Kanthapura demonstrates how folklore provides a framework for understanding collective resistance. Hindu mythological figures like Rama are reinterpreted as symbols of anti-colonial struggle, transforming traditional narratives into powerful political metaphors. By embedding nationalist discourse within folkloric storytelling, Rao creates a narrative strategy that challenges colonial fragmentation and emphasizes communal solidarity. Folklore, in this context, becomes more than a cultural artifact; it transforms into a powerful instrument of decolonization. By blending local folklore with the Gandhian struggle for independence, Rao illustrates how traditional stories serve not only as cultural artifacts but also as a means of resistance against colonial narratives. The characters draw upon folk wisdom, emphasizing their connection to the land and community, thereby reclaiming their history. The protagonist's engagement with mythic figures like the goddess Kenchamma reveals a hybrid identity that blends cultural heritage with contemporary socio-political realities.

5. STORYTELLING AS EPISTEMIC RESISTANCE

Both Mahasweta Devi and Raja Rao exemplify the transformative power of storytelling as a form of epistemic resistance. By centering indigenous voices, traditions, and experiences, they challenge the colonial erasure of local knowledge systems and assert the legitimacy of alternative worldviews. Their narratives resist homogenization and highlight the diversity and complexity of postcolonial identities.

In this light, the theories of Spivak and Bhabha offer a critical lens through which we can understand the political and cultural significance of these literary works incorporating folklore. While Spivak underscores the necessity of "listening" to the subaltern and recognizing the value of their narratives, Bhabha's concepts of hybridity and the "Third Space" illuminate the ways in which postcolonial writers negotiate and subvert colonial power structures.

Together, these theorists and writers reveal how cultural narratives serve as powerful tools for resistance, enabling marginalized communities to reclaim their histories, assert their identities, and challenge the epistemic violence of colonialism. The works of Mahasweta Devi and Raja Rao not only exemplify this process but also stand as enduring testaments to the resilience and creativity of postcolonial storytelling.

By integrating folk elements, both authors not only challenge hegemonic histories but also underscore the resilience of marginalized voices, linking the past oppression to ongoing struggles for dignity and justice. Indian postcolonial literature uses folklore not only as a dynamic tool for reclaiming erased histories, resisting cultural erasure, and addressing modern challenges like gender inequality and ecological crises but also offers solutions to cultural homogenization, environmental degradation, and identity crises in a globalized world.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

REFERENCES

- Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*. Routledge, 1989.
- Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 1994.
- Blackburn, Stuart H., and A. K. Ramanujan, editors. *Another Harmony: New Essays on the Folklore of India*. Oxford University Press, 1986.
- Das, Kamala. *Summer in Calcutta: The Love Poems of Kamala Das*. Everest Press, 1965.
- Devi, Mahasweta. *Breast Stories*. Translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Seagull Books, 1997.
- Dorson, Richard M. *Folklore and Folklife: An Introduction*. University of Chicago Press, 1972.
- Loomba, Ania. *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*. 3rd ed., Routledge, 2015.
- Mishra, Vijay. *Literature of the Indian Diaspora: Theorizing the Diasporic Imaginary*. Routledge, 2007.
- Narayan, Kirin. *Storytellers, Saints, and Scoundrels: Folk Narrative in Hindu Religious Teaching*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989.
- Rao, Raja. *Kanthapura*. Oxford University Press, 2007.
- Said, Edward W. *Culture and Imperialism*. Vintage, 1993.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, edited by Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, Columbia University Press, 1994, pp. 66–111.