

“Folk Traditions in Indian English Fiction”

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Abstract:

Indian English fiction provides a rich platform for blending modern literary techniques with traditional cultural narratives. Among the most important elements enriching this genre are folk traditions, which include oral tales, myths, rituals, customs, songs, and beliefs. These elements lend authenticity, depth, and rootedness to contemporary storytelling. This paper explores how Indian English novelists such as Raja Rao, R. K. Narayan, Gita Mehta, Salman Rushdie, and Arundhati Roy incorporate folk traditions into their works to shape identity, resist cultural imperialism, and celebrate regional ethos. The study shows how these narratives preserve oral and performative heritage and contribute meaningfully to the global literary landscape through a reimagining of indigenous storytelling in English.

Keywords

Folk traditions, Indian English fiction, oral narratives, mythology, postcolonial identity, Raja Rao, Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy etc.

Introduction:

Folk traditions include orally transmitted cultural expressions, myths, legends, and rituals. These traditions hold an essential place in Indian cultural imagination. In Indian English fiction, they serve as active narrative tools that express indigenous knowledge, spiritual depth, and communal memory. G. N. Devy emphasizes that oral traditions are ongoing modes of knowledge creation and social interaction (Devy 21). Indian English fiction has long served as a site where ancient cultural values and modern literary forms converge. A distinctive feature that enriches many of these works is the use of folk traditions. These include oral storytelling, regional myths, religious customs, proverbs, songs, and rituals passed down across generations. In Indian culture, folk traditions are living forms of memory, often functioning as moral guides, vehicles of resistance, and expressions of communal identity. Writers who adopt these traditions in their fiction do more than add cultural flavor which they create layered narratives that reflect the soul of a people rooted in their land and history.

This study explores how Indian English writers like Raja Rao, R.K. Narayan, Salman Rushdie, Gita Mehta, and Arundhati Roy integrate folk traditions into their works, making them powerful literary tools. For instance, *Kanthapura* by Raja Rao uses the voice of a village elder to tell the story in a form that resembles a sacred oral epic. Gandhi is depicted not as a political leader but as a divine figure, much like Lord Rama or Shiva, which helps rural Indians relate to the independence movement through their mythological framework. Similarly, R.K. Narayan's *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* creates characters and situations that mirror the moral universe of Indian folklore, portraying good and evil in archetypal forms familiar to local culture.

Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* draws deeply from the fantastical and metaphorical elements found in traditional Indian and Persian storytelling. Rushdie combines myth and magical realism to reflect the chaotic and miraculous nature of post-independence India. The protagonist's life becomes a metaphorical retelling of national history, shaped by folk imagination and oral exaggeration.

Gita Mehta's *A River Sutra* is constructed like a spiritual tale or fable, using the sacred river Narmada as a unifying element that connects different characters and their personal

journeys. The narrative mimics the storytelling traditions of bhakti saints and Sufi mystics, emphasizing the timeless human search for meaning.

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* reintroduces folk beliefs, songs, and symbols in a narrative that addresses caste, trauma, and gender. Folk memory in Roy's work creates an emotional and cultural atmosphere that binds the characters to their environment and ancestry.

Through these works, folk traditions preserve a cultural past and challenge dominant, often Western, literary frameworks. They act as a form of resistance and cultural reclamation. Writers use these traditions to express what cannot always be said through formal historical or political discourse. In doing so, they shape a unique postcolonial literary identity.

Objectives of the Study:

1. To examine how Indian English fiction incorporates folk traditions to reflect indigenous culture and identity.
2. To analyze the narrative function of folk elements such as myths, rituals, and oral tales in selected novels.
3. To evaluate the role of folk traditions as a tool of resistance against colonial and cultural dominance.
4. To explore how folk traditions help shape postcolonial narrative strategies in Indian English literature.

Folk Traditions as Narrative Strategies:

Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*- A Mythic Retelling of Gandhian Resistance:

Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* (1938) is one of the most important examples of how Indian English writers use folk traditions and religious language to tell stories that feel deeply rooted in Indian culture. The novel is not written like a typical Western story with straightforward narration. Instead, Rao shapes the story as if it is being told by a village

elder, just like the way stories are passed down in Indian oral traditions. The narrator is Achakka, an old Brahmin widow from the village of Kanthapura, who shares the story in a style similar to how grandmothers or elders tell tales during gatherings or around a fire. This storytelling method makes the novel feel more personal and connected to Indian rural life.

The language used in *Kanthapura* has a unique rhythm that mirrors the way people speak in South Indian villages. Rao uses English but tries to retain the flow and feel of Kannada, the regional language of Karnataka, where the story is set. This way, even though the novel is written in English, it keeps the spirit and sound of Indian speech patterns and thought processes. Rao himself talks about this challenge in the preface of the novel, where he admits that writing in English while staying true to Indian thought and tradition is not easy. He believes it is important and necessary: “The telling has not been easy. One has to convey in a language that is not one's own the spirit that is one's own” (Rao vii). A striking feature of the novel is how the Indian independence movement, especially the influence of Mahatma Gandhi, is told using familiar religious imagery. In the story, Gandhi is not just shown as a political leader. He is compared to gods like Rama and Shiva, which gives his role in the freedom struggle a sacred and divine quality. This kind of comparison helps the rural villagers, who are deeply religious and familiar with mythological stories, to relate to Gandhi and his teachings. His nonviolent resistance becomes more than just a political act; it is seen as a holy mission or dharma, much like the battles fought by divine figures in Indian epics.

Kanthapura becomes more than just a novel by blending real historical events with myth, legend, and folk storytelling; it becomes a cultural and spiritual retelling of India's freedom movement through the eyes and voices of ordinary villagers. The use of folk traditions does not just decorate the story and it shapes how the story is told, how characters are understood, and how events are remembered. Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* successfully brings together folk narrative style, religious symbolism, and political history, offering readers a powerful example of how Indian English fiction honour native storytelling forms while addressing modern themes.

R. K. Narayan and the Sacred Geography of Malgudi:

R. K. Narayan is known for his gentle, humorous storytelling, and while he does not use folk traditions as directly as some other Indian English writers, his work is still deeply connected to Indian culture and everyday village life. Instead of relying on myths or religious imagery as the main storytelling method, Narayan weaves folk elements into the background of his stories in a subtle and effective way. His fictional town of **Malgudi**, where many of his novels are set, feels like a real South Indian town because of the way he includes local customs, temple rituals, family traditions, and religious festivals. These everyday details reflect the moral and spiritual culture of traditional Indian life.

In his novel *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* (1961), Narayan introduces a character named **Vasu**, who is a powerful, arrogant taxidermist. Vasu is presented as an evil spirit directly and his behavior and personality resemble the **rakshasas** and the demon-like figures found in Indian mythology. He is selfish, destructive, and disrespectful to both nature and people. Just like the demons in ancient stories that disturb the balance of life and invite their own doom, Vasu brings harm to everything around him and ultimately causes his own downfall. His character serves as a modern version of the mythological villain, someone who lives only for his own desires and ignores all moral or social responsibility.

What makes Narayan's storytelling special is that he doesn't openly refer to these mythological connections. Instead, he lets readers feel them through the story's tone, the characters' actions, and the natural consequences that follow. The struggle between good and evil in *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* feels timeless, much like the stories told in Indian folk tales. The central character, Nataraj, who is calm, kind, and community-oriented, becomes a quiet hero by simply standing firm in his beliefs and refusing to give in to Vasu's threats.

S. P. Sree highlights that Narayan's narrative style takes strong influence from Indian storytelling traditions, especially those like the **Panchatantra**, which are collections of

moral tales often told through animals or simple characters. These stories typically carry lessons about human behavior, values, and justice (Sree 89). Similarly, Narayan's novels, though set in contemporary times, often carry a moral center and reflect the natural order of justice as understood in Indian folklore.

Through such storytelling, Narayan creates fiction that feels both modern and traditional. His use of folk elements may be quiet, but it adds richness and cultural depth to his work. Narayan builds a literary world that connects deeply with Indian readers and introduces global audiences to the rhythms and beliefs of South Indian culture.

Myth, Magic, and Memory in Modern Fiction:

Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and the Folk-Magical:

Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) is widely recognized as a groundbreaking novel that blends historical events with imagination, fantasy, and myth. It offers a unique form of storytelling that combines **magical realism** as a technique where magical events are presented in a realistic setting—with rich cultural and traditional references. At the center of the novel is **Saleem Sinai**, the protagonist, who is born exactly at the moment of India's independence. This symbolic birth ties his personal life closely to the story of the newly independent nation. As both the **narrator and central character**, Saleem tells his life story, which becomes a mirror for the history, struggles, and hopes of India itself.

Rushdie's narrative style in this novel is deeply inspired by oral storytelling traditions, especially those found in **Indo-Islamic and Persian cultures**. These traditions often include features like **repetition, digressions, exaggerated characters, and supernatural elements**. For example, Saleem's telepathic powers and his ability to connect with other children born at the stroke of midnight are not treated as oddities but as natural parts of his world. This reflects the way folk tales often blend the real with the magical without drawing a clear line between the two.

Rushdie also uses a storytelling voice that jumps back and forth in time, adds humorous or exaggerated details, and sometimes addresses the reader directly. These techniques remind us of traditional **dastan** storytelling, where the storyteller has the freedom to move around in the narrative, play with timelines, and create a sense of wonder. Saleem's narration is not just a personal autobiography—it becomes a **symbolic narrative** where his body and memories carry the weight of an entire nation's history.

What gives Saleem his unique place in the story is his identity as a “**child of midnight**.” This title is not just a mark of timing but carries deep symbolic meaning. In many folk traditions, especially across Asia, children born at special or rare moments are believed to have special powers or destinies. In the same way, Saleem is seen as someone chosen by fate to carry forward the legacy and trauma of India's independence and its aftermath. His life is full of unusual events, both joyful and tragic, much like the country's postcolonial journey.

Rushdie reflects on the nature of memory and history in his essay collection *Imaginary Homelands*, where he writes, “The past is a country from which we have all emigrated” (*Imaginary Homelands* 12). Here, he emphasizes how memory and storytelling are ways of reconnecting with our roots. In *Midnight's Children*, he uses **folk traditions and mythic forms** to retell India's past in a way that feels both personal and universal. The novel becomes a blend of truth and fantasy, where folk imagination helps fill in the emotional and cultural gaps left by political history.

In this way, Rushdie doesn't just tell a historical story. He **reclaims history through a folk-inspired lens**, showing how memory, myth, and oral tradition offer a deeper and more human understanding of the nation's identity.

Gita Mehta's *A River Sutra*: Folk as Spiritual Allegory:

Gita Mehta's *A River Sutra* (1993) is a beautifully crafted novel that weaves together a series of individual stories, all connected through a common narrator and setting. The narrator is a **retired government officer** who has left behind the noise of bureaucracy and chosen to live in peace near the banks of the **Narmada River**, one of the most

sacred rivers in India. This location is not chosen by chance. The Narmada holds a deep spiritual and cultural importance in Indian tradition and is often associated with legends, rituals, and centuries-old beliefs. In this quiet and sacred setting, the narrator listens to the personal stories of different people who come into his life and each carrying their own emotional burdens, desires, and spiritual quests.

The characters in these stories come from different walks of life and they are all united by themes like **music, love, devotion, suffering, and a deep yearning for spiritual understanding**. Some are musicians, lovers, ascetics, or seekers of truth. These stories reflect the essence of **bhakti** (devotional) and **Sufi** traditions, where the divine is approached through intense personal love, surrender, or longing. In Indian folk and religious literature, such as in the poems of Kabir or the tales of Meera Bai, the path to God often flows through emotional depth and personal experience rather than formal rituals. Mehta's characters follow similar emotional journeys, making their experiences resonate with familiar folk and spiritual traditions.

One of the unique features of *A River Sutra* is its structure. Rather than presenting one continuous plot, Mehta designs the book like a **katha**, a traditional Indian storytelling format where a narrator shares multiple moral or spiritual tales with an underlying message. Each chapter reads like a parable or fable, blending **folklore and philosophy** in a way that reflects the rhythms of Indian oral storytelling. This structure allows the reader to step into a spiritual world that doesn't rush toward a conclusion but instead unfolds gently, encouraging reflection and emotional engagement.

The language Mehta uses is often poetic and meditative. Her **lyrical tone** helps to draw readers into the emotional and spiritual depth of each story. Through her narration, one can feel the slow flow of the river, the silences of nature, and the soft stirrings of the human soul. These qualities give the novel a timeless and almost mystical quality, making it feel more like a spiritual journey than just a collection of stories.

Literary critic **P. P. Raveendran** observes that the novel provides a spiritual outlook that contrasts with the fast-paced, materialistic world we live in today (Raveendran 73). In a

world increasingly dominated by economic and technological progress, *A River Sutra* invites readers to return to the deeper emotional and spiritual questions of life through the lens of Indian folk and religious traditions. Gita Mehta combines modern narrative techniques with ancient forms of storytelling, creating a powerful literary work that connects the reader to India's rich folk heritage, spiritual philosophy, and human emotion.

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*: Folk Memory and Trauma

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) is a powerful novel that blends **folk traditions** with deep social and political themes. The book doesn't just tell a story—it immerses the reader in the cultural, emotional, and symbolic world of **Kerala**, a state in southern India known for its rich heritage of oral tales, religious customs, and performance arts. Roy uses these folk elements to bring life and depth to the world she creates, while also addressing serious issues such as **caste discrimination**, **gender inequality**, and the emotional scars left by **colonialism** and **postcolonial trauma**.

One of the most memorable characters in the novel is **Velutha**, a gifted and kind-hearted carpenter who belongs to a lower caste. His character is not presented in a loud or dramatic way, but his story carries deep emotional weight. Velutha dares to cross the strict social boundaries of caste by forming a relationship with Ammu, a woman from a higher caste. In doing so, he becomes like a **folk hero** and a person who defies unjust social rules and pays a heavy price for his courage. His tragic fate mirrors the sad endings often found in **folk legends**, where those who go against society's harsh codes are punished, even if their intentions are pure.

Roy fills her narrative with many elements from **Kerala's folk and cultural traditions**. The novel includes **lullabies**, **local songs**, **stories passed down by elders**, and **traditional rituals** that mark important events like birth, death, and mourning. These details do more than add cultural flavor—they show how deeply the characters' lives are shaped by the world they live in. The past and present blend together and personal memories become part of a larger, shared cultural experience.

One unique aspect of Roy's storytelling is her use of **Kathakali**, a classical dance-drama native to Kerala. In the novel, the performance of Kathakali is described in great detail, not just as a background event, but as a symbol of emotional and moral expression. The elaborate costumes, slow gestures, and intense facial expressions of Kathakali reflect the unspoken pain and suppressed desires of the characters. Roy includes references to **snake folklore** and **funeral rites**, which reflect the **superstitions and sacred beliefs** found in rural Kerala. These references add layers of meaning to the story and help the reader understand the psychological and cultural environment of the characters.

Scholar **Elleke Boehmer** notes that Roy's novel contains "many layers of oral memory" and does not follow a straightforward, linear pattern of storytelling. Instead, the story unfolds in fragments, moving back and forth in time, much like how stories are shared in oral traditions (Boehmer 219). This approach allows Roy to build a narrative that feels intimate, emotional, and rooted in folk culture.

In *The God of Small Things*, Roy uses folklore as background detail and a powerful narrative tool. The songs, myths, and rituals she includes help convey pain, love, resistance, and memory. Through this blend of the **personal and the traditional**, Roy gives voice to those who are often silenced in both literature and society, creating a novel that is both culturally rich and emotionally moving.

Folk Traditions as Resistance and Reclamation:

Folk traditions in Indian English fiction serve as tools for challenging colonial, capitalist, and homogenizing narratives. Writers use these traditions to validate indigenous knowledge and aesthetics. Folk storytelling affirms cultural difference and encourages readers to value non-Western perspectives. Partha Chatterjee explains that folk traditions offer a different form of modernity that emerges from within local communities (Chatterjee 56). By drawing upon such traditions, Indian English writers create a literary space that reflects Indian identity while participating in global discourse.

Conclusion:

Folk traditions in Indian English fiction provide more than cultural color. They offer deep connections to history, regional identity, and spiritual belief systems. Writers such as Raja Rao, Salman Rushdie, Gita Mehta, and Arundhati Roy use these traditions to construct layered narratives that reflect both personal and collective experience. They preserve India's diverse heritage and enrich global literature with voices rooted in ancestral knowledge and cultural continuity by incorporating folk stories, myths, and rituals into their novels.

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