



Traditional Indian Knowledge in Modern Stories: How IKS Shapes Themes and Characters in Indian English Literature

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Dharma, Karma and Moral Compass – IKS Frameworks for Relationships which provide Choice and Consequences

There are deep models found in Indian English Literature (IEL) that can offer describing characters motivations and dilemmas. Ancient Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) BAIF Postgraduate Institute of Rural Development. Dharma, a virtue, means righteousness, moral order and duties. Moreover, karma refers to action and its consequences. As such, dharma and karma ideas have meanings that penetrate the character of the moral compass. First, these are not layers added later as cultural wrapping and yes, they will constantly engage. Second, they become part of characters, often as active moral-conscience-doers, who negotiate? Ultimately, complex modern worlds became a part variety of repertoire. Above all, from multi-genre novelists to poets, we see how contemporary Hindi literary texts show their power in moving plots in different parts. Most importantly, characters become more inevitable based on ethos of philosophy. Not surprisingly, tensions in the characters in IEL are crowding their defining and fulfilling their own dharma, which is such an overarching idea, beyond simply duty. It means obligations at different stages of life (ashrama), but also based roles in society (varna), as well as what is in their nature (svabhava); all this shape their dharma, and depend on the context (desha, kala, patra – place, time, circumstance). The struggle to resolve this internal tension is regularly at the heart of their conflict. In Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*, for example, Moorthy changes from a Western-educated returnee to an understanding of his dharma as representing his village in Gandhian Satyagraha, which he explicitly reminds the reader is the dharma of the age (yuga-dharma). The narrator goes on to assert that "Action is duty. Duty is God. Work is worship" (Rao 20), effectively linking action (karma), to righteous action (dharma) within the context of a socio-political struggle. Moorthy's choices – abandoning foreign clothes, confronting the authorities – are constantly weighed against this evolving sense of dharma, demonstrating how IKS provides the language and logic for his transformation.

Similarly, karma operates not as a simplistic notion of reward and punishment, but as the intricate law of moral causation. Characters understand, consciously or subconsciously, that their actions (karma) weave their future realities. This imbues their choices with profound weight and creates a narrative expectation of consequences that feels culturally authentic. Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* masterfully illustrates this. The tragic fates of Velutha, Ammu, and ultimately Estha



and Rahel are inexorably linked to their transgressions against societal dharma (caste boundaries, marital norms) and the specific, devastating choices made during the pivotal days in December 1969. Roy does not need to explicitly invoke the word karma; the structure of the novel itself, circling back to the consequences of those "small things" done and undone, embodies its logic. As scholar Makarand R. Paranjape observes, the novel demonstrates "the inexorability of karma, the tragic consequences of violating the fundamental laws of existence, both social and cosmic" (Paranjape 142). The characters' suffering stems directly from actions that disrupted the perceived moral and social order, fulfilling the karmic expectation inherent in the IKS worldview.

Even in narratives exploring contemporary urban life, these frameworks persist. In Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy*, Lata Mehra's central dilemma – choosing a husband – is implicitly framed as a choice about her dharma. Each suitor represents a different path and sets of duties: the traditional Hindu home (kula-dharma) with Haresh, passionate modernity with Kabir, or intellectual companionship with Amit. While the novel uses modern language, the underlying tension resonates with the ancient question of aligning personal desire with familial and societal expectations of a woman's dharma. The consequences of her choice – whichever path she takes – will shape her life's trajectory, reflecting the karmic principle that choices define futures. As noted by critic Nandini Saha, the characters' negotiations between "individual aspirations and societal obligations... are deeply embedded within the conceptual framework of dharma" (Saha 78).

Dharma and karma are not just themes in IEL; they are active principles based on IKS. Ethical decisions are another important element of the story; it allows the readers to understand the characters since they will determine the characters by their decisions thus making it easier to pass judgment. In internalizing these modes of narratives, the writers of Indian English literature (IEL) shape their characters in their culturally performed logics that have been internalized to constitute their second nature. In this context, the Indian philosophical view throws light on the eternal dilemma of duty, choice and the resultant implication on the mankind.

This literary work is a research paper that provides an analysis of eco-critical literature that has come into existence in India, especially in thematic orientation of harmony. The concept of Prakriti that is formulated by the Traditional Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) is explored as an ecological knowledge based on the deep cognizance. The Indian English literary works that are reviewed in this paper form a corpus that can promote critical consciousness in relation to the current environmental problems, thus challenging the traditional ideas about the connection of nature and human agency.



Prakriti is not just a description of nature but is not just a resource of utilitarianism or space. Instead, it represents the primordial, dynamic and sacred cloth that exists everywhere in existence. Based on these, Prakriti is believed to be a multilayered net of life which encompasses the five elements, namely, earth, water, fire, air and space also known as the Pancha Mahabhutas. This conceptualization is also inclusive of the plant and the animal world as well as the cosmic forces. It is through the lenses of the ancient writings that powerful central themes, character relationships are developed to be found in the modern literature, and hence changing the narrative focus to a less romanticized approach to nature and a more pressing need that involves eco-sensitivity and sustainability.

This divine interrelatedness is written in the Upanishads. As an example, the Taittiriya Upaniṣad (2.1) provides a five-fold description of the Self, called the Pancha-Kosha. This Self that is revealed to us in the world appears out of and is nourished by the element world (Annamaya Kosha – the food sheath or Earth). The elemental world is seen as basically dependent: “From food (anna) indeed are creatures born...” (Radhakrishnan 539). This is the sense of the famous invocation of the Īśā Upaniṣad (1) which states that the divine is immanent in all creation and prescribes ethical conduct: “Īśāvāsyam idaṃ sarvaṃ yat kiñca jagatyāṃ jagat/ tena tyaktena bhuñjīthā mā grdhaḥ kasyasvid dhanam” (“All this, whatsoever moves in this universe, is pervaded by the Lord. Therefore, find enjoyments in renunciation; do not covet what belongs to others”) (Radhakrishnan 572). The IKS ethic of seva (service), aparigraha (non-possessiveness) and responsible stewardship (dharma) of Prakriti rejects its exploitation.

With this traditional knowledge basis, modern authors depict nature as an active, knowing and sacred participant. Characters frequently possess an innate sense of interconnection. In Raja Rao’s *Kanthapura*, the river Himavathy is not geography but a giver of life and witness. We are aware of the great man-made water bodies, constructed with great effort. “The river... knows the woes of the village. She has seen the old one and the new” (Rao 5). This personification is like the Atharva Veda hymn to the earth (Bhūmī Sūkta). it recognizes and adores the earth as “Mātā bhūmīḥ putro’haṃ pṛthivyāḥ” (Earth is my mother; I am her son) (Whitney 683). In other words, it provides an anthropological connection with the earth, so the individual must take care of earth.

Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide* carefully examines the tussle between modern development and traditional knowledge engrained in Prakriti. The Sundarbans ecosystem demands respect. In the novel, the character Fokir has a high level of navigational skills and great understanding, which is based on the Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS).



The ecological awareness of Fokir is not based on modern means of education, in books, workshops, and academic qualifications; it is instead based on situational experience through rhythmic cycles of tides and the behavioural habits of bird and animal populations. This difference was reflected in his effortless navigation and or direction of human beings and wildlife in shell collection activities within the Sundarbans. As a result, his orientation is very similar to the perceived divine harmonies. On the contrary, local knowledge is native, but external interventions are disruptive impositions. This, according to Madhav Gadgil, includes a complete understanding of the local flora, fauna, soil, and water that has been developed over centuries (Gadgil 152). Ghosh shows that it could be dangerous to disregard this kind of knowledge, namely, the harmonious coexistence of Prakriti, and it is against the Upanishadic idea of the divine existence that is omnipresent. The violation of ecological balance (Prakriti's inherent ṛta or cosmic order) often serves as a metaphor for social and moral decay. Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* uses the polluted Meenachal River as a witness to human transgressions, mirroring societal fracture: "The river... thickened and slowed... carrying not just silt and minnows, but plastic bags... the undigested excretions of small towns" (Roy 124). This degradation signifies a profound spiritual and societal disharmony, a direct consequence (karma) of disrupting Prakriti, akin to the later Bhakti sentiment expressed in the *Mukundamālā* (5): "kṣīti jala pāvaka gagana samīra / pañca tattva yata eha śārīra / e sabāra upara jāni eka nāma / tāra sevaka ha-i jīvana dhāma" ("Earth, water, fire, sky, and air – / This body is made of these five elements. / Knowing one Name pervading them all, / Become His servant; that is life's true goal") (Bryant 307). Pollution becomes a symptom of forgetting this inherent sacredness and unity.

Indian English literature, therefore, expresses such a strong ecological awareness through Prakriti and the textual bases that it has. It appeals to traditional IKS principles of interrelatedness, as expressed in the Upanishads, and reverence, as expressed in the Vedas, and makes the sustainable co-existence an answer to modern problems. The stories promote a shift in attitudes of exploitation to a restored religious reciprocity with the living matrix of Prakriti through the placement of ideas of harmony, conflict, decay and endurance within thematic frameworks and interwoven characterizations that are bound to nature.

Ayurvedic Archetypes and Inner Landscapes: IKS Principles Defining Character Psychology and Well-being

Indian English Literature (IEL) often takes Ayurveda, an important Indian Knowledge System (IKS), as an excellent psychological and physiological framework to present complex characters and explore their inner worlds. Ayurveda offers easy to use archetypes based on the three doshas (Vata, Pitta, Kapha) and the three gunas (Sattva, Rajas, Tamas) that are not purely western



psychological models. These can be very useful in determining temperament, motivation, internal conflict, and journeys toward (or away from) well-being.

According to Ayurveda, the Prakriti and Vikriti of an individual are dependent on the three doshas – Vata (air and ether: movement, creativity and anxiety), Pitta (fire and water: transformation, intellect and anger) and Kapha (earth and water: stability, love and lethargy). At the same time, the quality of the mind is Sattvic (pure and balanced and full of knowledge), Rajasic (active, passionate and restless) and Tamasic (inert, deluded, decaying). Current IEL characters tend to be either of these types, giving them more depth based on indigenous understanding.

In Raja Rao's seminal work, *Kanthapura*, the central character- Moorthy is endowed with the strong Sattvic qualities which include being composed, being truthful because of Satyagraha, and spiritual awakening. His actions stem from clarity and compassion which is a Sattvic nature. On the other hand, Boranna, the village money-lender, is full of greed, which is Rajas. Tamas is the inertia towards social change or empathy. The character's actions and interactions reveal how the conflict emerges as a central element. As scholar G. N. Murthy observes that Rao treats these archetypes “not as fixed categories but as flexible indicators of a psychological orientation in a specific socio-political context”, thus revealing that “traditional knowledge shapes the moral and emotional universe of the characters” (112).

The God of Small Things by Arundhati Roy provides a more complex layering. Ammu has high passion, sharp intellect, and fiery anger that shows she is a Pitta-dominant person whose imbalance is serious and caused by oppression. Her struggle lies deeply psychological, probably a Pitta individual surrounded by agnimandya causes that correspond to extreme agnimandya, resulting in emotional disturbance. Baby Kochamma, however, presents a powerful study in Tamas. Inertia and psychological manipulation emerge from profound bitterness and delusion. Roy describes her life as one of “stagnant afternoons” and “slow decay,” a vivid portrayal of Tamasic dominance where inertia breeds malice and obstructs growth (Roy 123). Scholar Vinay Dharwadker observes that Roy uses Ayurvedic concepts implicitly to “map the psychosomatic consequences of trauma and social violation,” showing how characters’ “inner imbalances mirror the fractured world they inhabit” (Dharwadker, “Modernity's Echoes” 87).

Furthermore, the quest for well-being, central to Ayurveda, often underpins character arcs. Characters grappling with mental unrest, like Omprakash Valmiki's autobiographical persona in *Joothan*, implicitly seek a return to Sattva – a state of mental clarity and dignity stripped away by caste oppression. The internal battle against the Rajas of anger and the Tamas of despair reflects an Ayurvedic understanding of psychological health as a balance. As cultural psychologist Ajit K. Dalal explains, the Ayurvedic perspective provides “a holistic framework for understanding distress

and resilience in the Indian context," one that "many Indian writers intuitively incorporate to depict authentic inner struggles" (Dasgupta and Dalal 54).

Ayurvedic archetypes provide IEL authors with sophisticated, culturally embedded vocabulary for character psychology. By weaving the doshas and gunas into character construction, they move beyond superficial traits, delving into the intricate inner landscapes shaped by ancient Indian wisdom. This exploration of temperament, imbalance, and the often-elusive pursuit of holistic well-being enriches the narrative, offering readers profound insights grounded in the enduring principles of IKS.

Narrative Threads from the Natyashastra: IKS Storytelling Techniques in Modern Plotting and Characterization

Bharata Muni's *Natyashastra*, an ancient manuscript on performance, is a cosmic design for stories in India's Knowledge System (IKS). Considered the most important ancient Indian text on theatre, the *Natyashastra* provides valuable information on theatre's nature and production. It is still a major contributor to Indian English literature. *The Ramayana* is not a subject of historical analysis anymore, but it is a helpful tool kit for current writers to create plots and develop psychologically believable characters that suit the Indian ethos. Rasa refers to the aesthetic flavor or emotion that a particular work of art produces in an audience. As per Bharata Muni, the combination of determinants, consequents and transitory states creates rasa. Today's authors assemble narratives using or not using prior knowledge to create a particular rasa karuna (pathos) vira (heroism) or shringara (love). Anita Desai's novel *Clear Light of Day* captures shanta rasa (peace/tranquility) through its slow and languorous pace while also focusing on memory. *Natyashastra* suggests that the rasa of shanta can be evoked by suggestion and after-effect. The cycle of events and the domestic space where they happen are the vibhavas and anubhavas causing this peace.

The character is also shaped by the archetypes of *Natyashastra*. The classification of nayikas (heroines) and nayakas (heroes) according to temperament, social status, and emotional states provides basic models. Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* transforms the village into a collective protagonist embodying the dharmic struggle, reminiscent of the archetypal righteous hero (dhira-lalita nayaka). Moorthy, the Gandhian leader, channels the dhirodatta (magnanimous and resolute) hero, his actions driven by dharma and evoking vira rasa. As the epic Mahabharata declares, "Dharma eva hato hanti dharmo rakshati rakshitah" ("Dharma, when destroyed, destroys; dharma, when protected, protects") (Swami Gambhirananda 3.313). The plot is organized around Moorthy's attempts to safeguard dharma from colonial encroachment, representing a classic structure.

Also, modern narrative technique of revealing the inner states is an import from the *Natyashastra*'s abhinaya (expression). Descriptions of nārāca like paralysis, perspiration and horripilation have



many parallels in the visceral use of physicality used to enhance emotion in prose today. In *Midnight's Children*, Salman Rushdie describes how Saleem Sinai's leaking body reflects the nation's fragmentation. The language is so elevated and verbose that it can appear to be theatrical. So, we see something related to the *Natyashastra* here. *Natyashastra* seems to understand that the body is the site of all emotion. Even postmodern fragmentation apparently engages the levels of suggestion (*dhvani*), which Anandavardhana works with elsewhere, but connect with performance more than text as such.

To tell a good story, one should not just think of plot and dynamics. But consider mixing of archetypes and emotions, harmonizing with dharma. According to the great commentator Abhinavagupta in the *Abhinavabharati*, *rasa* is the experience of a heightened, unparticularized state of consciousness by the spectator (Gnoli 7). *Natyashastra* writers influenced modern Indian English authors and how they can connect to it. They capable of crafting the kind of plots which can cater to culturally specific emotions rhythm and the characters of whose struggles and triumphs feel archetypally familiar and that ensures the wisdom of IKS to live on and shape compelling narratives for the contemporary.

The Living Wisdom of Oral Traditions: Folklore, Mythology, and Local Knowledge as Character & Theme Foundations

Traditional Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) may be formalized in writing by some of the best minds of the land. But their heart beats in the oral tradition. For contemporary writers of Indian English, folklore, mythology, and indigenous knowledge of the region are not incidental but foundational. The unique consciousness they offer is one that is used in the creation of characters, themes. Writers base their stories on a rich pool of shared memory and knowledge. A contemporary writer can write a tragic story without caring what Aristotle might think.

The characters in stories often have an aura of mythological characters or folk heroes. This aids the authors in speaking about universal human issues in a culturally particular context. A character grappling with dharma might consciously or unconsciously echo Arjuna's dilemma on the Kurukshetra battlefield, their internal conflict illuminated by the *Bhagavad Gita*'s enduring questions: "कर्मण्येवाधिकारस्ते मा फलेषु कदाचन।" ("Your right is to work only, but never to its fruits") (*Bhagavad Gita* 2.47). This invocation isn't mere allusion; it shapes the character's psychological landscape and the ethical weight of their choices. Similarly, figures from regional folktales – the clever Tenali Rama, the resilient Savitri, or local trickster spirits – provide templates for resilience, wit, devotion, or subversion, grounding characters in a shared cultural psyche. As A.K. Ramanujan profoundly noted, folklore offers "a way of thinking about the world, a



classification system, a set of questions and answers" (Folktales from India xxiii). Through characters who embrace or confront these systems, the relevance of tradition in changing times gets explored.

The themes are profoundly shaped by this oral wisdom. The cyclical notion of time depicted in Puranic cosmology (like that of the Yugas in Vishnu Purana) can be traced in narratives dealing with history, fate and recurrence. Traditional knowledge is often associated with Vedic worship of nature, for example, the issue of the deification of rivers in the Rigveda. The river is the goddess, Saraswati. There are, therefore, many aspects that highlight harmony and destruction of nature. The idea of connectedness (Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam – "The world is one family," found in the Maha Upanishad 6.71-73) is often the thematic antithesis of contemporary alienation or disconnection. Tales given from the ancestors have already accepted the morals. Ideas about justice, daiva, and purushartha. Contemporary writers question values. They question those. They reaffirm the values. Also, they subvert them. In *Kanthapura*, Raja Rao made effective use of the Harikatha tradition of the village as well as the framework of the Ramayana to structure the whole novel which narrates the story of a particular village's struggle, basically making the whole incident a dharmayuddha, a righteous war. The storyteller in the village says that "This is our Kurukshetra... This is our dharma" (Rao 25). By this, he summons the modern that is anchored in the mythical. Furthermore, local wisdom, such as sayings, guides on farming, healing, community, and other acts, provides a real layering and thematic richness to a work.

By analyzing a narrative to a specific geography and a social reality, exoticism can be transcended. Essentially, this helps to unmask the local knowledge that rules our everyday lives. If a character possesses an acquaintance with medicinal herbs that are transmitted by word of mouth, it inexorably links him/her to knowledge of Ayurveda that the communities were possessed long before it was formalized. The characters take decisions through the dialogues which put moral value in the novel. Amitav Ghosh and Vinita Agrawal, being recent Indian English writers, exploit folklore in their stories. In *The Hungry Tide* Ghosh uses ecological knowledge while Agrawal uses tribal myths in weaving poem. They have come to discover that there is an ocean of stories. The ancient text Kathasaritsagara does show that, indeed. The authors use folklore and mythology to allow local knowledge, which has been oral and has existed for thousands of years, to determine the characters and defining themes of the past, present, and future of Indian tales. These are not merely reference points for them.

Beyond Exoticism: IKS as a Source of Authentic Identity, Conflict, and Resolution in Contemporary Characters



For quite some time now, Indian writers' literature is in danger of representing the Indian ethos as a decorative artefact or exoticism for the West. But important modern writers are doing the opposite. To say it directly, the stories from different characters all contain IKS depicting their ways of seeing. Also, Indigenous Knowledge Systems gives their characters authentic identities so they can have believable internal and external conflict and resolution. The move goes beyond just an image. It connects characters' stories to philosophy and ethics, and philosophy and ethics to characters' stories. Characters battle with a feeling of duty and righteousness and also personal duty as an identity force. The influence of globalization on your sense of self. Strive in one's own dharma than to succeed in the dharma of another. That is the advice of the Bhagavad Gita. Nothing is ever wasted on following one's own dharma. "In another's dharma competition takes place with fear and insecurity" (Easwaran 3.35). We can see these in characters who face challenges in their work, family or social life. Their real self-manifests through negotiating their beliefs and values, not by rejecting either one. According to critic Ananya Vajpeyi, this engagement gives agency to these characters to inhabit "a subjectivity that is neither simply pre-modern nor merely a derivative of the West" (Vajpeyi 18).

Thus, conflict often arises from the tension between observing IKS principles and negotiating a fast-changing world. Karma (action/consequence) and samsara (rebirth) are cyclic in nature. This creates a philosophical backdrop for psychological and narrative tension. The characters must deal with challenges where a dharma's solution violates another or is ineffective. In the modern version of *Mahabharata*, the characters fight moral battles. For example, the battle is between corporate greed and environmental responsibility, personal ambition and family duty, and the conflict between rationality and traditional belief systems. The conflict does not arise from a belief that tradition is quaint, but rather from the implications and significance of that tradition to the character's conscience and situation.

Most importantly IKS also provides the lexicon and pathways for resolution. The characters may not find simple answers, but they usually arrive at understanding, acceptance, or action based on folk wisdom. Moksha is often thought of as a spiritual one. But we can literally read moksha as the character's wish for liberation from ignorance, debilitating attachments (moha) or dukkha or suffering caused by their conflicts. The quest for shanti (peace) through knowledge or detachment, or through right action (karma yoga), is a valid and culturally legitimate solution. The *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* says: "Lead me from the unreal to the real. Lead me from darkness to light. Lead me from death to immortality" (Radhakrishnan 5.1.1). This journey shifts from confusion of avidya to clarity of peace due to IKS concepts. The resulting offerings will feel earned and culturally agreed resolution rather than a blueprint offer of the West or nihilist despair. Writers



like Amitav Ghosh in *The Hungry Tide* or Arundhati Roy in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* create characters whose reconciliations with society and/or history acquire depth and complexity and a non-linear understanding of reconciliation.

Indian English literature matures as is the engagement. IKS is more than just local colour or symbolic weight. It becomes the authentic ground in which genuine, troubled and present-day characters take root, suffer, and come to terms with their own cultural and philosophical context. A nation will be built on the nation's own foundation. He stated, "We cannot forget that we can ... to build our national life on our foundations. We are going to need ... Our unique spiritual beliefs and distinct national ideas... We must take in what is our own and reject what is not". Present-day IKS work resonates with our characters and the issues they grapple with, according to Shankar.

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