
Folk Traditions, Orality, and Indigenous Storytelling as Literature: Voice, Memory, and Cultural Knowledge

Dr. Ashok Dayal

Assistant Professor, English

Government Girls Degree College, Dhindhui, Patti, Pratapgarh

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Abstract

This paper examines the literary status of folk traditions, orality, and indigenous storytelling by challenging the long-standing dominance of written texts in literary studies. Drawing on key theorists such as Walter J. Ong, Ruth Finnegan, Jack Goody, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, and Linda Tuhiwai Smith, it argues that oral narratives are not primitive or secondary forms but complex systems of cultural expression and knowledge. The study explores the distinctive features of oral traditions, including performance, repetition, and communal authorship, emphasizing how meaning is created through interaction rather than fixed textual form. It also engages with critical debates surrounding the reliability, permanence, and analytical value of oral literature, demonstrating that these critiques are rooted in text-centered biases. By examining the role of storytelling in preserving history, identity, and indigenous knowledge systems, the paper highlights the epistemological significance of oral traditions. Ultimately, it argues for an expanded definition of literature that recognizes oral and indigenous narratives as dynamic, legitimate, and essential forms of literary expression.

Keywords:Orality; Oral traditions; Indigenous storytelling; Folk literature; Performance; Cultural memory; Indigenous knowledge; Narrative traditions; Decolonizing literature; Literary theory

Introduction:

Literary studies have historically privileged written texts while marginalizing oral traditions and indigenous storytelling. This paper challenges that hierarchy by arguing that oral narratives constitute fully developed literary systems. Drawing on theorists such as Walter J. Ong, Ruth Finnegan, Jack Goody, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, and Linda Tuhiwai Smith, it examines how oral traditions function through performance, memory, and cultural context.

At the same time, it engages with counterarguments that question the reliability, stability, and literary status of oral forms.

The tendency to equate literature with written text has shaped academic study for centuries. Within this framework, oral traditions are often treated as incomplete or transitional forms rather than as literature in their own right. This assumption reflects cultural bias rather than analytical necessity. Walter J. Ong observes that “oral expression can exist and mostly has existed without any writing at all, writing never without orality” (7). By emphasizing the dependence of writing on speech, Ong challenges the hierarchy that places written literature above oral expression. If writing emerges from orality, then dismissing oral traditions as inferior becomes difficult to justify.

Ong further explains that individuals in oral cultures “learn a great deal and possess and practice great wisdom” without formal textual study (8). This suggests that knowledge is structured differently rather than lacking complexity. Instead of relying on written documentation, oral cultures depend on memory, repetition, and communal participation. Ruth Finnegan similarly argues that “there is no reason to suppose that oral literature is in any way inferior to written literature” (1). The persistence of this assumption reveals how deeply literary value has been tied to writing.

One of the most common criticisms of oral traditions is that they lack structural sophistication. Because they rely on repetition and formulaic patterns, they are sometimes viewed as simplistic. Ong acknowledges that oral expression is “additive rather than subordinative” (37). While critics interpret this as a limitation, it can instead be understood as a functional adaptation. Additive structures allow for clarity and continuity in spoken narratives, particularly in real-time performance.

Another major criticism concerns permanence. Jack Goody argues that writing provides discourse with a level of stability that speech cannot achieve (12). Written texts can be preserved and revisited, making them easier to analyze. However, this permanence also introduces limitations. Fixed texts cannot adapt to new contexts in the same way oral narratives can. Their stability may preserve wording, but it can also restrict interpretation.

A central debate concerns whether performance-based narratives qualify as literature. Critics often argue that literature requires a stable text. Dell Hymes challenges this view, asserting that verbal art must be understood in terms of performance (13). This shifts attention from the text itself to the conditions under which it is produced and received. Paul Zumthor further argues that the oral poem “exists only in its realization” (21), suggesting that meaning emerges through performance rather than existing in a fixed form.

Ong notes that repetition “aids memory” (44), but it also enhances audience engagement. Listeners become active participants, anticipating familiar patterns. This interactive dimension distinguishes oral storytelling from written literature. Finnegan’s observation that oral traditions are “collectively composed” (9) challenges the emphasis on individual authorship and highlights the communal nature of storytelling.

Indigenous storytelling is often dismissed as myth rather than knowledge. Ngūgĩ wa Thiong’o argues that “language carries culture” and shapes how people understand their world (15). If storytelling is embedded in language, then it becomes a primary means of preserving cultural knowledge. Linda Tuhiwai Smith explains that storytelling transmits “knowledge, history, and values” (144) and helps define “identity and belonging” (145). These perspectives demonstrate that storytelling functions as a legitimate system of knowledge.

Another major criticism is that oral traditions are unreliable as historical records. Jan Vansina explains that oral traditions exist in the present while carrying elements of the past (27). He argues that they can provide “reliable historical information” when analyzed carefully (28). This challenges the assumption that only written records are valid sources of history. Ruth Finnegan further notes that oral traditions often serve as primary historical records in non-literate societies (12).

Written literature itself often reflects the influence of oral traditions. Chinua Achebe emphasizes the importance of proverbs in shaping communication (7). Leslie Marmon Silko highlights the role of storytelling in cultural survival (2), while Zora Neale Hurston preserves the richness of oral expression through dialect and narrative style (51). These examples demonstrate that oral traditions continue to shape literary forms.

Oral traditions face significant challenges in the modern world. Ngūgĩ warns that the loss of language results in the loss of cultural memory (28). Walter Ong argues that transcription cannot fully capture the vitality of oral performance (110), while Finnegan notes that recording is always selective (20). Linda Tuhiwai Smith adds that research itself has often been associated with exploitation (1), raising ethical concerns about how oral traditions are documented.

Debates about oral traditions often focus on their perceived limitations. However, these critiques rely on standards derived from written literature. As Ong, Finnegan, and others demonstrate, oral traditions operate according to different principles. Recognizing them as literature requires expanding traditional definitions and acknowledging the diversity of human expression.

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