

**Mythic Consciousness and Indigenous Epistemology in Alexis Wright's
The Swan Book: A Study through the Lens of Indian Knowledge Systems**

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Abstract:

Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) provide a comprehensive framework for knowledge rooted in India's ancient cultural traditions, in which knowledge is defined not only by scientific reasoning and empirical evidence but also by spiritual consciousness, mythological knowledge, oracular wisdom, ethical philosophy, and generational legacy. The epistemological paradigms associated with IKS find some relevant correspondences in other indigenous cultures around the globe, such as the Aboriginal Australian knowledge system. *The Swan Book*, written by Alexis Wright in 2013, represents one of the most significant pieces of contemporary Australian Indigenous literature. By using mythological narration, dream reasoning, ancestral knowledge, symbolic spirituality, and nonlinear temporality, Wright creates an indigenous knowledge system that rejects Western rationalism and colonialism. The paper examines Wright's work from the perspective of Indian Knowledge Systems to reveal how the author draws on mythological and spiritual consciousness as a source of knowledge authority.

Keywords: Indian Knowledge Systems, Indigenous Epistemology, Mythic Consciousness, Spiritual Knowledge, Decolonial Literature, Comparative Indigenous Studies

Introduction:

There is growing scholarship on indigenous epistemologies within the broader discourse on the decolonization of knowledge systems as a means of undermining the hegemonic Eurocentric approach that prevails in academia. Within such an agenda, Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) have been rediscovered as a highly pertinent area of research. The history of Indian civilization has given rise to IKS as an epistemological approach that incorporates diverse indigenous intellectual schools, including philosophy, ethics, cosmology, spirituality, education, pedagogical practices, and cultural forms of knowledge transmission.

In contrast to Western epistemologies that favour empiricism, objectivity, and linear rationalism, the Indian system views knowledge holistically, in which myth, oral tradition, spiritual revelation, and ancestral memory serve as legitimate sources for understanding reality. Recently, comparative literary studies have begun to explore the possibility of drawing on Indian Knowledge Systems to interpret literary texts from other cultures that share similar epistemological foundations. In this respect, Alexis Wright's *The Swan Book* can be seen as a contemporary literary text that represents Aboriginal Indigenous ways of knowing through myths and stories, dreams and visions, spirituality, and a non-linear form of narration. By moving away from the Western paradigm of realism, the novel establishes the Indigenous mode of narrative in which memory, myth, and spirituality play a pivotal role. In this context, the present study aims to analyze *The Swan Book* through the lens of Indian Knowledge Systems and to identify similarities between the epistemologies of India and Aboriginal Australia. The research analyzes the representation of mythic consciousness in *The Swan Book* from the perspective of Indian Knowledge Systems. More specifically, it will be examined how the spiritual and intuitive modes of knowledge influence Indigenous epistemology. The role that oral tradition and ancestral memory play in preserving culture and transmitting it from one generation to the next will also be discussed. Furthermore, it is essential to note that Alexis Wright's narrative form presents an interesting case, as it challenges traditional epistemology in both its colonizer and Western paradigms.

Alexis Wright is considered one of the most influential contemporary Indigenous authors and intellectuals in Australia. She was born in 1950 in Cloncurry, Queensland. She is of Waanyi origin from the Gulf of Carpentaria. Alexis Wright's writing and intellectualism are deeply rooted in Indigenous activism, storytelling practices, and the pursuit of sovereignty, justice, and cultural survival for the Aboriginal community. Before becoming a well-known writer, Wright was actively engaged in activist work and filmmaking, thus acquiring a political and creative stance. The themes of her novels consistently address Indigenous resistance, storytelling practices, spirituality, and the relationship between Indigenous peoples and their history. Alexis Wright has created a unique style of narration, characterised by a fragmentary structure, rhythmic storytelling, layered mythology, and a spiritual sense of time. Among Alexis Wright's literary works are *Plains of Promise* (1997), *Carpentaria* (2006), *The Swan Book* (2013), *Tracker* (2017), and *Praiseworthy* (2023). In her literary works, Wright develops a philosophical approach to storytelling as an act of sovereignty in Indigenous narrative practice, in opposition to Western colonial epistemology.

The critical literature surrounding Wright's novel, *The Swan Book*, has most commonly addressed the book within the broader theoretical paradigms of decoloniality, trauma studies, Indigenous futurism, and postcolonial narrative experimentation. The text is generally regarded as an experimental work that seeks to depart from the traditional Western realist literary approach, favoring the expression of the unique qualities of Indigenous narratives and knowledge systems. Rather than relying on the traditional Western style of

constructing a coherent, linear narrative, Wright builds a fragmented, myth-based narrative that reflects Indigenous methods of storytelling and knowledge acquisition.

In her research on Indigenous narrative sovereignty, Anne Brewster claims that Wright's narrative approach in *The Swan Book* is in itself an expression of the political and epistemological sovereignty of Indigenous peoples. Brewster believes that Wright's refusal to embrace Western realist principles and her emphasis on Aboriginal rhythmic storytelling are direct acts of resistance toward colonization (131). Brewster's analysis implies that Wright's experiments with narrative form do not have an exclusively artistic purpose but rather serve a more ideological agenda of challenging Western literary norms and asserting the legitimacy of Indigenous stories and knowledge systems.

In the same vein, Maria Takolander analyzes *The Swan Book* as a trauma text that employs myth and magical realism to represent historical pain and the continued marginalization of Aboriginal peoples. According to her, the novel's use of surrealist and mythic techniques allows it to convey trauma through experiences that cannot be expressed through linear or rationalist storytelling (58). Takolander notes that the fusion of myth and trauma creates the potential for the representation of the shared experiences of Indigenous people while at the same time foregrounding resilience and survival. Additionally, Heather Stewart adds to the literature on *The Swan Book* by analyzing its presentation of temporality.

According to her, Wright's disruption of the traditional chronology of storytelling is indicative of particular Indigenous ideas about time that do not recognize linear progression from the past to the present and into the future, but rather a simultaneity of all three (214). Hence, the temporal ambiguity in *The Swan Book* signifies Indigenous perspectives on time and history by challenging Western ideas of historical progress. Although there is a rich body of literature on *The Swan Book*, very little research has used the theory of Indian Knowledge Systems to analyze the novel. Existing analyses have examined Aboriginal epistemology using postcolonial, trauma, or Indigenous studies as theoretical frameworks, but have not compared it with epistemologies outside the Western sphere. In this regard, the broader implications of this Indigenous knowledge system for other cultures are not explored. This research, in its examination of *The Swan Book* using the theoretical lens of Indian Knowledge Systems, hopes to fill this gap.

In the Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS), myth is not viewed simply as a fiction but as a means of acquiring significant philosophical, cosmological, ethical, and spiritual knowledge. In ancient Indian works such as the Ramayana, Mahabharata, and the Puranas, mythic narratives are used to express metaphysical truth, moral values, and cultural wisdom. According to the IKS framework, myth is an epistemic concept by which cultures understand the nature of existence, interpersonal relationships, universal order, and spiritual continuity. In Indian culture, myth is not separated from reality; it is believed to be a living form of

knowledge that transcends time, space, and historical events. Analogous epistemology of myth is evident in Alexis Wright's novel *The Swan Book*. The entire text of the novel contains myths and symbols of ancestors that serve as a way of understanding reality. For instance, the very first sentence of the book, "The swans had flown in from the world's ancient story" (Wright 1), introduces a mythical setting where mythic elements are interwoven into the text to blur the lines between the real and the fictional, historical and spiritual, memory, and imagination. The term "ancient story" in this context suggests that the swans originated from a timeless, mystical place.

In *The Swan Book*, swans also represent more than mere animals – they represent ancestral memories, spirituality, and the consciousness of the entire indigenous population. The author associates swans with sacredness and inherited knowledge, suggesting they can carry a message that cannot be deciphered by empirical means alone. In the process of writing the novel, Wright thins the boundary between mythology and reality, following Indigenous epistemological approaches that consider spiritual and material realities coexistent.

The author continues to emphasize his ideas regarding mythic consciousness with references to the intertwining of the dream, memory, and reality in descriptions of certain events. For example, in one episode, Wright states that "the old stories were alive in the winds that swept across the country" (Wright 45). This metaphorical representation of stories suggests that they can exist independently of written information, preserving knowledge not in institutions or records but in the dreams and memories of ancestors. In Indian Knowledge Systems, knowledge has always been transferred through myths and stories. Furthermore, the novel questions the Western approach to knowledge, which often ignores myths as irrational or imaginary. Instead, Wright shows that myths can be a valid way to understand historical pain, Indigenous identity, and cultural endurance.

The mythic elements in *The Swan Book* help express experiences that cannot be fully captured by realistic storytelling. In this way, myths become a powerful form of knowledge that helps keep memories alive and challenges colonial ways of presenting reality. By using a myth-based structure, *The Swan Book* shows that myths are not just symbolic details but a way of understanding the world that affects how people see themselves and maintain their culture. Similar to Indian Knowledge Systems, the novel highlights that spiritual stories and traditional tales hold deep knowledge that goes beyond what can be measured by scientific reasoning.

According to Indian philosophical systems, spiritual realization, inner consciousness, and intuitive knowledge are considered legitimate types of knowledge, also known as jnana. As discussed in Indian Knowledge Systems, the nature of truth in these epistemologies extends beyond empirical observation or critical thinking, as it can be achieved through contemplation, meditation, enlightenment, and practical experience.

According to ancient Indian philosophical literature, such as the Upanishads, ultimate knowledge goes beyond language and sense perception; it is realized through spiritual consciousness.

A similar epistemological approach is evident in the novel *The Swan Book* by Alexis Wright. Unlike the Western systems of governance that impose bureaucratic and logical order, Oblivia is characterized by her intuitive, silent, memorable, and spiritually sensitive view of the world. Wright mentions that Oblivia “understood the world in ways that had no words” (Wright 78). It is evident from Wright’s quote that there is another type of knowledge that goes beyond conventional understanding. Oblivia is unable to grasp knowledge using rational logic because of her spiritual consciousness.

In this situation, the lack of words is not associated with either ignorance or limited intellect but rather indicates a higher level of awareness that surpasses verbal expression. Indeed, Wright’s criticism is directed at Western epistemological assumptions that place an excessive emphasis on writing and empirical knowledge. In her novel, Oblivia’s intuitive awareness is indicative of an indigenous spiritual epistemology in which emotions, dreams, silences, and the presence of ancestors serve as instruments for perceiving reality.

Wright conveys spirituality through dreamlike episodes and symbolic descriptions, blurring the line between the material and spiritual worlds. For instance, in one part, it is said that spirits “lingered in the air around her like unfinished stories” (Wright 102). This statement reinforces the notion that spiritual awareness was inherent in the mundane world and that unseen spiritual forces continued to influence human lives. Indian philosophy similarly emphasizes spirituality as a source of experience interconnected with cosmic consciousness. Hence, spirituality in *The Swan Book* is presented not as a superstitious belief but as a distinct epistemology offering insight into a new world of truth beyond conventional rationalist paradigms.

One characteristic of the Indian Knowledge System is that oral tradition, culture, storytelling, and gurus are central to the transmission of knowledge across generations. Knowledge is transmitted orally in these systems, rather than being recorded or documented. Knowledge in such societies comes from experiences, memories, rituals, and culture. Ancestral knowledge is an active entity that is responsible for creating individual identity and consciousness.

In her writing, *The Swan Book*, Alexis Wright presents memory as deeply embodied and ancestral rather than historical or archivable. It is noted in the book that “the old stories stayed alive in the body” (Wright 115). It indicates that memory exists not only spiritually but also physically in humans. Inherited trauma, cultural memories, and ancestry are all embedded in one’s body. It is how the body becomes the means of maintaining historical

continuity and culture. Therefore, the view presented by Alexis Wright is opposed to the Western approach towards archiving knowledge, which emphasizes the written form of preserving knowledge.

The concept of memory as inherent in the body is further emphasized by Wright when she writes that “ancestral tales breathe through generations who refused to forget” (Wright 119). In this context, memory becomes a living thing instead of an inert entity. Such portrayals have strong similarities to Indian Knowledge Systems, in which tradition is passed down through generations via oral communication. From such portrayals, it can be seen that in *The Swan Book*, knowledge is depicted as deeply intertwined with the body, ancestry, and collective cultural memory.

In Indian cosmology, time is usually seen as circular rather than linear. Examples of reincarnation, yugas, and spiritual cycles highlight the interconnectedness of the past, present, and future. Truth is discovered in Indian philosophy through repetition, recursion, and layers of time, not just in linear chronological order. The narrative structure of Alexis Wright’s *The Swan Book* reflects this notion of time being circular. The novel is disjointed in its chronology, resulting from fragmented narrative techniques, dreams, mythic repetitions, and temporal instability. Past and present constantly merge in this novel.

Wright states that “time moved strangely in the old country, circling back through memory and dreams” (Wright 141). It is the portrayal of Indigenous understanding of time that operates on a relational rather than a Western sequential level. Time in this world is marked by disruptions to chronology, unexpected returns of memories, and the blurring of the boundary between mythology and experience. The novel’s combination of myth and reality also emphasizes cyclical temporality. Unlike the Western narrative that follows a linear progression of events, Wright builds the plot recursively, creating cycles of stories, symbols, and memories. Such a plot structure is inherent to Indigenous epistemology, where time is understood as spiritual and cyclical. Wright’s rejection of linearity thus opposes the Western understanding of temporality and history that emphasizes order and progress. Instead, *The Swan Book* represents the cyclical approach to temporality typical of the Indian Knowledge Systems.

The representation of Indigenous epistemology is strongly evident in Alexis Wright’s *The Swan Book* through the use of myths, spirituality, ancestral memory, and non-linear narratives. Wright uses a combination of spiritual knowledge, oral tradition, and inherited wisdom to challenge Western rationalism, thereby making the novel relevant epistemologically. The author’s use of mythical imagery and a fragmented narrative style reflects Indigenous epistemology.

By analyzing *The Swan Book* through Indian Knowledge Systems, one can identify several similarities between the Indigenous epistemologies of Aboriginal Australians and Indians. In particular, both cultures share a common understanding that spirituality, mythology, and collective memory constitute an important part of knowledge. The author's quotes can illustrate this claim: "the swans had flown in from the world's ancient story" (Wright 1) and "the old stories stayed alive in the body" (Wright 115). Therefore, about the analysis of the mentioned novel, one can conclude that it expands the range of Indian Knowledge Systems in comparative literature.

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