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The Indian Influence on European Literature: A Study of Narrative Styles and Literary Impressions

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Abstract

The present paper attempts to study the influence of Indian Narrative styles and literary impressions on European literature. It has often been asserted that Western literature has left an indelible mark on Indian Writing and the impact is so colossal that the impressions of Indian influence on western literary writing styles only appear to be a bleak line. However, the paper studies many literary narrative styles that are Indian by origin and have been adopted seamlessly by European writers since centuries. The paper gives numerous examples of how Indian narrative styles like frame narratives, mythological and philosophical allegories, parallel storytelling and flashbacks, magical realism and circular narratives reached far and wide through translation and were employed by European writers in their narratives. The profound impressions of Indian literary narrative styles can be seen spread across European literary and philosophical narratives, novels, plays, novellas and even dialogic discourses bringing home the fact that the process was not unidirectional but that of a wholesome exchange.

Keywords: Indian Narrative styles, influence on European literature, frame narratives, mythological and philosophical allegories, parallel storytelling and flashbacks, magical realism, circular narratives.

Introduction

The world recounts, time and again, the literary influence that the occidental literature left on the Indian subcontinent, drawing an inference that it was a unidirectional stream. Macaulay's Minute, compulsory English education, cultural invasion and many more intersecting motives are rationally put as the reasons for the indelible marks on Indian writing. "The Western influence on Indian literature was nothing if not dialectical and dialogic, which makes it perhaps as vast and complex an example as one could find anywhere in world literature not only of influence but also of reception" (Trivedi, 2007) [10]. All literature and philosophy around the world seem 'influenced' or 'inspired' from one or the other already existing forms, but India's reception-influence is charged heavily. Amit Chaudhuri mentions in the *Picador Book of English Literature*, "Indian life is plural, garrulous, rambling, lacking a fixed centre, and the Indian novel must be the same…To celebrate Indian writing simply as overblown, fantastic, lush and non-linear is to risk making it a figure for the subconscious, and to imply that what is ordinarily called thinking is alien to the Indian tradition-surely and old colonialist prejudice" (Chaudhuri, xxv). The paper attempts to draw attention to the fact that it was a bridge relationship (certainly not a one-way traffic) and Indian literary narrative styles have also significantly influenced European literature, particularly during the colonial and postcolonial periods.

This inter-cultural and literal exchange led to the borrowing of several narrative styles and techniques by European writers. The roots of 'frame narratives' or 'storytelling within a grander chronicle' that has influenced works like Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* and Giovanni Boccaccio's *The Decameron*, can be traced back to *Panchatantra*, *Kathasaritsagara*, and *Hitopadesha* that used embedded storytelling, where multiple tales are interwoven within a primary narrative. *Panchatantra* is a collection of animal fables aimed at teaching political and moral lessons, where the principal story (often a king seeking wisdom) serves as a frame for numerous auxiliary tales whereas *Kathasaritsagara* is a vast compendium of stories within stories, compiled by Somadeva, showcasing an intricate nesting of deeply layered narratives. In *Kathasaritsagar,* the central story revolves around the adventures of Prince Naravāhanadatta, on his epic journey to become the emperor of the vidyādharas (celestial beings). Along the way, various characters tell stories; often to teach, entertain, or advise, within the broader adventure. Many tales are also shared during times of conflict, dilemma, or rest, offering reflection and relief through narrative. Often, these Indian tales contain further nested stories, creating layers of narrative and cultural contexts.

Written in the early fourteenth century, Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* showcases pilgrims on a journey each telling a story, with the pilgrimage itself acting as the frame of the narrative. A group of pilgrims traveling to Canterbury agree to tell stories to pass the time. Each character (like the

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Knight, the Wife of Bath, the Miller, and many more) tells a tale, reflecting their personality, social background, and peculiar or general experiences in life. Similarly, the Italian writer Giovanni Boccaccio shows how ten young people flee Florence to escape the Black Death and stay in a countryside villa in his text 'The Decameron'. To pass the time and distract themselves from the horrors of the plague, they take turns telling stories—ten stories a day for ten days, resulting in a hundred tales. In both the narratives storytelling is used as survival technique, it is not just entertainment; it is a way of making sense of the world, of preserving culture and wisdom, and of emotionally surviving during turbulent times. The purpose of both the narratives is moral or didactic where the characters are agents/storytellers that create a complex structure. Both texts showcase a rich tapestry of human experience**,** using the frame to allow diverse voices and tales of romantic, moral, comical and philosophical coexistence.

Now the question that grips the readers' attention is that the process of colonization started in the late seventeenth century and the given texts were written in the fourteenth century, then how does the influence or exchange take place. The answer to the same lies in the age-old art of translation. As Indian tales were translated into Persian, Arabic (e.g., *Kalila wa Dimna*), and later into Latin and European languages, the frame narrative structure became a key influence on European literature.

Between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries, the Persian version was translated into Greek in 1080 CE by a physician savant in the Byzantine court at Constantinople called Symeon Seth. There were later versions in New Persian too, and then in Hebrew and old Spanish. This older Hebrew version became, via the Latin translation of John of Capua, the source of the early European translations. The English one by Sir Thomas North, written during the Elizabethan age, was based on the Italian one by Anton Francesco Doni and named 'The Moral Philosophy of Doni' known as the *Fables of Bidpai*. North's version was described as the English Version of an Italian adaptation of a Spanish translation of a Latin version of a Hebrew translation of an Arabic adaptation of the Pahlavi version of the Indian original. (Kumar, 1)

Tracing this network of translations that travelled across the world one can sincerely outline the influence of original Indian narrative structures on European literature. In a similar manner if one considers the narrative pattern of 'mythological and philosophical allegories', the *Bhagavad Gita*, *Upanishads*, and *Jataka Tales* blend philosophy with storytelling to convey moral lessons. German scholars, including Schopenhauer and Herman Hesse, were deeply influenced by Indian mythological and philosophical narratives. Schopenhauer admired the Upanishads, and Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha* (1922) [6] directly borrows Indian spiritual themes.

This weaves a compelling thread across cultures and centuries, highlighting how Indian philosophical storytelling has deeply influenced Western literary and philosophical thought, especially during the Romantic and early modern periods. In Indian texts like the *Bhagavad Gita*, *Upanishads*, and *Jataka Tales*, storytelling is a vessel for profound metaphysical and ethical inquiry. These texts don't separate narrative from philosophy—instead, philosophy is embedded in the action and choices of characters. For example: the *Gita* unfolds on the battlefield, but its focus is inward, a dialogue on dharma, duty, and self-realization, the *Upanishads* use dialogues and parables to explore the nature of the self (ātman), ultimate reality (brahman), and liberation (moksha), the *Jataka Tales*, with their moral clarity and karmic logic, teach ethical behavior through the Buddha's previous incarnations.

This fusion of narrative and philosophy deeply inspired German Romantics, who were fascinated by the spiritual depth and universalism in Indian thought; Goethe, though more indirectly, admired the poetic and symbolic richness of Eastern texts, evident in works like *West–Eastern Divan*. Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha* and its narrative connection to Indian writing styles is actually quite deep and intentional. Like ancient Indian epics and religious texts (such as the Upanishads or Jataka tales), *Siddhartha* uses very simple and clear language. The sentences are often short, and the dialogue is direct, mirroring the oral storytelling traditions of India, where clarity was crucial for passing on spiritual teachings. Indian literature, especially spiritual works like the Bhagavad Gita or Ramayana, often focuses on a soul's journey toward enlightenment. Siddhartha mirrors this exactly. Indian philosophy emphasizes the cyclical nature of life (samsara: birth, death, rebirth). In *Siddhartha,* Hesse builds the story in cycles: Siddhartha moves through stages — student, pleasure-seeker, merchant, ferryman —each bringing him closer to spiritual realization, almost like moving through different lives or reincarnations within one lifetime. In a lot of Indian philosophy, true wisdom doesn't come from teachers alone, it comes from personal experience and direct realization.

Would you actually believe that you had committed your foolish acts in order to spare your son from committing them too? And you could in any way protect your son from Sansara? How could you? By means of teachings, prayer, admonition? My dear have you entirely forgotten that story? That story containing so many lessons, that story about Siddhartha, a Brahman's son, which you once told me here on this very spot? Who has kept the Samana Siddhartha safe from Sansara, from sin, from greed, from foolishness? Were his father's religious devotion, his teacher's warnings, his own knowledge, his own search able to keep him safe? (Hesse, 148-149)

This respect for self-experience over blind discipleship reflects Indian spiritual traditions, where teachers point the way, but the seeker must walk it themselves. So, in both Indian and Western contexts, story becomes a way to philosophize, but while Indian texts often emphasize cosmic law and transcendence, the Western adaptations, especially during Romanticism and Modernism, tend to emphasize individual experience and existential inquiry.

Akin to the style of 'frame narratives' is the novel technique of 'parallel storytelling and flashbacks' that are entrenched deeply in the Indian literary narratives. The Mahabharata and Ramayana, as well as classical Sanskrit plays, often use flashbacks, parallel storytelling, and nonlinear structures to build the imposing chronicles. Modernist and postmodernist European writers, such as James Joyce (*Ulysses*) and Virginia Woolf (*To the Lighthouse*), adopted non-linear storytelling, breaking away from the rigid beginning-middle-end structure. Both Indian epics like the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, and modernist/postmodernist Western literature employ nonlinear storytelling techniques, though they arise from very different cultural and philosophical traditions.

In the Indian context, the use of flashbacks, frame narratives, and digressions reflects a cyclical view of time and a layered approach to truth and meaning. The *Mahabharata*, for example, is a story within a story within a story, and events are often retold from multiple perspectives. The narrative

moves fluidly between the past and present, and the emphasis is often on moral and philosophical exploration rather than chronological sequence. Modernist and postmodernist writers in the West, like Joyce and Woolf, were responding to the constraints of traditional narrative and seeking to reflect the fragmented consciousness of modern life. Their work often mirrors inner psychological states and subjective time. For instance, *Ulysses* condenses an entire epic into a single day, using stream-of-consciousness to blur time and thought. Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* disrupts temporal continuity to focus on memory, perception, and the passage of time in an almost meditative way. It is interesting how both traditions challenge linearity—but where Indian epics use nonlinearity to express eternal truths and dharma, modernist works use it to express uncertainty, interiority, and the fragmentation of reality. James M. in her article 'How Modernism in Literature changed Storytelling Forever mentions, "Modernism in literature was all about breaking away from tradition. Writers like James Joyce and Virginia Woolf weren't interested in following the usual plot structure or using language that played it safe. They turned to fragmented storytelling, inner monologues and characters who didn't always make sense (but that was the point!). They wanted to capture how messy, chaotic and downright strange life felt at that time." (James, 1) So even before the postmodern literary critics could classify and brand this form of narrative style, it existed in the Indian chronicle structure thousands of years ago, which positions the fact that this fragmented, digressive and flashback technique was an Indian influence in European writing.

Further on, charting the course of 'Magical Realism', folktales and epics frequently merge the supernatural with the mundane, treating gods, demons, and mystical events as part of everyday life. European authors like Franz Kafka *(Metamorphosis*) and Italo Calvino (*Invisible Cities*) adopted magical realism, a style that has roots in Indian storytelling traditions. The way Indian epics and folktales seamlessly blend the supernatural with the everyday can absolutely be seen as a precursor—or at least a parallel development—to the narrative style known as magical realism, famously embraced by many European authors. In Indian storytelling; the Ramayana and Mahabharata are filled with divine weapons, shape-shifting beings, flying chariots, and cosmic interventions—but these elements are not "fantastical" as in the Western sense. They are treated as natural extensions of the world, integrated into human struggles, emotions, and ethics. Folktales, especially in collections like the *Panchatantra* and *Jataka Tales*, often feature talking animals, miraculous events, and gods mingling with mortals—not as exceptions, but as parts of a cosmically ordered reality where the spiritual and material coexist fluidly. The supernatural is normalized, not questioned. It's not an intrusion into reality but part of it—a perspective deeply rooted in Indian cosmology and metaphysics.

This approach deeply resonates with magical realism, especially in the works of; Italian Writer Italo Calvino, particularly in *Invisible Cities*, creates dreamlike cityscapes and philosophical fables that blend the mythical, surreal, and rational. Like Indian tales, Calvino's work feels less like fiction and more like mythic metaphor. "With cities, it is as with dreams: everything imaginable can be dreamed, but even the most unexpected dream is a rebus that conceals a desire or, its reverse, a fear. Cities, like dreams, are made of desires and fears, even if the thread of their discourse is secret, their rules are absurd, their perspectives deceitful, and everything conceals something else." (Calvino, 59)

Interestingly, magical realism often emerges from postcolonial or multicultural contexts, where indigenous or traditional cosmologies meet Western rationalism. This makes Indian storytelling traditions a natural forerunner or cousin to magical realism—because Indian narratives never divorced reason from magic, or realism from wonder in the first place. In fact, Czech novelist Franz Kafka presents the absurd in *Metamorphosis*. As Gregor Samsa turns into an insect, it is accepted almost immediately and life continues awkwardly around it. Similarly, in Indian storytelling, especially in myths and folklore, the fantastic and the real mix naturally. Gods walking among humans, animals talking, miraculous births — they're narrated without a need to explain them scientifically. Kafka's focus is not on action-packed events but on Gregor's internal turmoil; is shame, isolation, helplessness. Similarly, Indian narrative traditions (like in Upanishads stories or even in Tagore's writing) often centre around internal psychological or spiritual journeys, rather than external drama. Traditional Indian narratives often have a cyclic or open-ended feel, not a clean Western "beginning-middle-end"; Kafka's stories, especially The Metamorphosis, feel unfinished or looped in despair rather than building to a neat resolution. There's a sense of endless suffering or continuous existential questioning. Indian narrative style often layers stories with symbolism. Similarly, 'The Metamorphosis' works on a symbolic level, Gregor's transformation representing alienation under capitalism, family guilt and existential despair.

Further, dealing with the trajectory of 'Circular and Self-Referential Narratives', Indian texts *Kathasaritsagara* and the *Vetala Panchavimshati* (Twenty-Five Tales of the Vampire) use looping, self-referential stories where the ending brings the reader back to the beginning. Jorge Luis Borges and Umberto Eco used similar structures in works like *Labyrinths* and *The Name of the Rose*. Tracing a lineage of labyrinthine storytelling that spans from classical Sanskrit literature to twentieth-century metafiction, one notices that both the *Kathasaritsagara* and *Vetala Panchavimshati* are masterclasses in nested narratives, recursive loops, and self-referential structures, long before postmodernism gave these techniques a label.

In the *Kathasaritsagara* tales are embedded within tales in a seemingly endless chain, mirroring the infinite nature of storytelling itself. Similarly, the *Vetala Panchavimshati* consists of a frame story—King Vikramaditya retrieving a corpse possessed by a vetala (vampire-like being)—within which each embedded story ends with a riddle that challenges logic and morality. Every time the king answers correctly, the *Vetala* flies back to its tree, restarting the cycle. This recursive storytelling mimics a game or ritual, testing both character and reader.

Jorge Luis Borges' stories in *Labyrinths* and elsewhere are philosophical puzzles, often designed to disorient. Stories like *The Garden of Forking Paths* or *The Library of Babel* create textual spaces that fold in on themselves, blurring the line between reader, author, and narrative. Umberto Eco, especially in *The Name of the Rose*, merges detective fiction with theological, semiotic, and philosophical digressions, where the structure mirrors a labyrinthine library—literally and symbolically. Eco was deeply aware of narrative traditions across cultures, and his use of circular and intertextual narratives can be seen as both homage and continuation to Indian tradition of 'circular narrative' style.

Both the Sanskrit texts and these postmodern works share a meta-awareness of storytelling. They invite the reader not just to follow a plot but to reflect on the nature of narrative, knowledge, and meaning itself.

European authors, fascinated by the richness and complexity of Indian storytelling traditions, found themselves deeply influenced by its narrative styles. The inferences drawn here evidently drive home the fact that Indian Narrative styles, whether they are 'Frame Narratives', 'Parallel storytelling and Flashbacks', 'Magical Realism' or 'Circular narratives' each has a profound impression on European Literature in terms of narrative techniques. The layered structures, where stories nested within stories, and the fluid movement between the real and the mythical, offered a fresh lens through which to explore human experience. This encounter inspired European writers to experiment with fragmented forms, non-linear timelines, and philosophical themes that blurred the boundaries between reality and imagination. The profound emphasis on inner journeys and metaphysical exploration in Indian literature also encouraged a deeper, more introspective turn in European storytelling, leaving an indelible mark on its literary evolution.

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