



Language Revitalization Through Oral Tradition in Anita Nair's *IDRIS: Keeper of the Light*

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Abstract: Language revitalization is essential for preserving endangered languages and sustaining cultural identity in postcolonial societies. This paper explores *Idris: Keeper of Light* by Anita Nair as a literary text that actively supports language revitalization through oral storytelling, indigenous vocabulary, and community-based speech practices. The novel introduces language as a living organism, in which knowledge of ancestors, cultural values, and collective memory of the community are passed on to the following generations. Nair breaks the linguistic dominance and revives the marginalized expression forms by focusing on oral narratives rather than standardized and dominant forms of language. The paper also examines the role of literature as a successful instrument in restoring languages and ensuring the continuity of cultures.

Keywords: *Language revitalization, oral storytelling, endangered languages, cultural memory, indigenous expression*

Introduction

Language is not just a communicative system but a living cultural storehouse that holds a communal memory, values, a belief system, and historical consciousness of a group of people. Sometimes, Indigenous and minority languages have been systematically excluded from postcolonial practices because of the application of colonial and standardized linguistic systems to their use, leading to the destruction of culture and fragmentation of identity. Language revitalization has thus become an important cultural and political process where it is hoped that the voices of the oppressed are reclaimed and linguistic diversity restored. Oral traditions are crucial in this very process as they serve as dynamic repositories of ancestral knowledge and social wisdom passed down in oral form via storytelling, myths, folktales, and communal speech practices. Oral traditions maintain the flexibility of the language and cultural authenticity, unlike written language, which tends to conform to the norms of the institutions. In response to the linguistic hierarchies and to save the endangered languages in the narrative space, modern literature is actively embracing these oral forms to make literary texts a formidable tool of cultural resistance and rejuvenation.

One of the most notable contributors to Indian English literature, Anita Nair, has repeatedly prefigured the minority identities, local cultures, and subdued stories in her fiction. Her texts strongly belong to the local histories, the indigenous epistemologies, and oral narratives, and thus enable alternative linguistic and cultural articulations to emerge in the context of English writings. Nair uses oral narration, local vocabulary, and community-based narration in *Idris: Keeper of Light* to use language as a living entity, as something that develops with the collective memory and experience. The novel opposes the homogenization of language by the dominance of the spoken wisdom over the standard form of language, thus disrupting the linguistic authority prevalence. It is through the figure of Idris and collective narratives about him that Nair brings out the importance of elders as the custodians of linguistic heritage and underlines intergenerational transmission as the key to language survival. This paper looks at *Idris: Keeper of Light* as a literary intervention that plays a proactive role in the language revitalization process, and how the narrative strategy used by Nair of reclaiming marginalized speech forms and strengthening the continuation of the cultural identity using oral tradition.

Idris: Keeper of the Light can also be read as a travelogue that mixes the depiction of local histories with the heterogeneous sets of foreign travellers. Idris, the main hero of this novel, is a native Somali who had lost sight in one eye during his childhood when a camel bone was stabbed into his eye. Although it restricts his spatial cognition at all times, he endeavors to deal with the handicap through several experiments besides adventure games. He, the perpetual wanderer, ever wandering around, reached Kozhikode in the seventeenth century. The time described in the novel is quite substantial, as it was the start of the modern age in the history of Kerala, and the unique cultural identity of Kerala also started being developed. The fusion and integration of numerous elements of early modernism is highly evident in the timeline of that land that forms the backdrop of this novel. In postcolonial marginalization in *Idris: Keeper of Light*, language loss is one thing that is closely related.

Anita Nair demonstrates the process of the native language of the society slowly going down as a result of official and colonial language domination. The individuals in the novel are made to believe that their mother tongue is not helpful in the context of contemporary society. Consequently, young generations are reluctant to use it. This is the silent loss that Idris notices and comprehends that language is not only a means of communication, but it is also a source of memory and identity. This is evident in the novel, in that when language is neglected, so are the people who speak it. "This notion can be traced to the time when Idris reflects that, when a language is forgotten, the people who have used it are forgotten as well" (IKL, 41). In this line, Nair relates the loss of language to social and cultural disregard. It is also significant that the postcolonial power structures, which suppress the native language in the novel, are also important. Written and standardized language is more important in the dominant culture, and oral and local language is considered inferior. Scholars have widely emphasized the interconnection between space, language, and cultural identity in shaping collective consciousness. Sasikumar observes that spatial identity in *Idris: Keeper of the Light* emerges through cultural memory and lived experience, where belonging is sustained not merely by geography but by shared narratives and linguistic continuity (Sasikumar 2019).

Nair introduces this lopsidedness as violence against cultural outpouring. Idris realizes that the voice of the language of his people is not tolerated in official places. This puts fear and shame in speakers. Through the novel, it is revealed that this marginalization is gradual and not instant. This kind of injustice is what Idris cogitates when he writes, "They told us that our words were small, they were not worthy of books or documents" (IKL, 56). This quote emphasizes that colonial and postcolonial societies keep indigenous languages at the marginal stages of society.

The characters in the novel feel the emotional effect of language loss. The old people in society are the ones who bear the pain since they can no longer be heard. Their lives are still untold, and their wisdom is forgotten. Anita Nair makes Idris witness to this gradual extinction. He realizes that it is impossible to lose language and lose history, traditions, and self-respect. Language loss is a kind of cultural death that the novel introduces. Idris says so expressively when he says that "every word he had lost was as though a bone

breaking in the body of our past” (IKL, 72). This is an eye-opener of the extent to which language loss impacts the existence of the community.

Oral tradition is a key to saving the culture and language in *Idris: Keeper of Light*. Anita Nair introduces storytelling as a living practice whereby the knowledge passes on between generations. Oral stories are not rigid and are emotive as opposed to written records. They bear emotions, ideologies, and ethical teachings. Idris is not taught about his people through the reading but through the voices. Stories help the elders to explain history, nature, and identity. The novel demonstrates that oral tradition preserves language among people through its everyday application. This point is well articulated when Idris hears “an aged man who tells him, our stories breathe only when they are said and not when they are written” (IKL, 29). In the novel, oral tradition is also a form of resistance towards cultural erasure. As the language is not embraced in the official spheres, it still lives in the domestic sphere, in fireside meetings and rituals. Anita Nair demonstrates that narration becomes a silent way of resistance. The community ensures that it does not lose its past through spoken words. From a broader linguistic perspective, Hinton argues that language revitalization depends on restoring everyday communicative functions through community-centered practices, particularly oral transmission (Hinton 46).

Idris realizes that every narration is a survival mechanism. Oral narration enables the community to keep the history of the community in its own hands. This is reflected in how Idris recalls how the old voices spoke; the language could not die (IKL, 64). This sentence demonstrates that oral tradition can empower a language that is on the verge of extinction. In the novel, oral tradition is introduced to the reader as a transition between generations. Listening makes children acquire values, customs, and language. It is an emotional, rather than an imposed, learning. Anita Nair points out that the oral tradition forms a sense of belonging and continuation. Idris comes to realize that identity is created more through the stories rather than the written rules. Tone, rhythm, and emotion that writing tends to lose are contained in oral language. The novel explains the importance of spoken memory in cultural survival. This realization is manifested by Idris when he says, “the stories put us on, even when the world attempted to shut us down” (IKL, 91). By this, Nair vehemently stands by oral tradition as an influential means of transmitting culture. Idris said that:

I speak because silence is how a language begins to disappear. The words I carry were given to me by voices that no longer walk this land, and if I do not release them into the air, they will vanish with me. Each story I tell remembers a river, a ritual, a name that was once spoken every day. When I speak, the past listens, and the young learn to hear what cannot be written down. This is why I guard the stories, not as possessions, but as light meant to travel from one voice to another (IKL, 65)

In *Idris: Keeper of Light*, Idris is not the only character who practices linguistic resistance, as other characters like Ammachi, Kannan, and Old Moosa were also able to speak their native language in the village environments. A good deal of this resistance occurs where the people know the words, such as the riverbank, the old courtyard, and the night fire circle, where there is no fear of the local words used. Ammachi has a lot of native terms when referring to emotions and family relationships. Idris realizes that these words do not alter even in the presence of outsiders. Anita Nair demonstrates that Ammachi has not been influenced in language. Idris thinks of it when he hears her and imagines, Ammachi, your words were hard, they would not take another form. This is when native languages themselves form resistance.

According to linguistic resistance, Kannan is also a key figure, as he has traveled outside the village. He speaks in native words, although he is aware of the dominating language when he goes home. Kannan addresses Idris in the old words that are no longer familiar to the young generation in the areas adjacent to the banyan tree. This choice is deliberate. He explains to Idris that there are words only to the land they are in. Anita Nair explains that resistance may be deliberate and voluntary with the help of Kannan. Idris recalls that Kannan told him that these words were better acquainted with this soil than any other language (IKL, 61). This relates language to place and identity.

Another linguistic resistance is Old Moosa, who is among the elders of the village. He does not want to use simplified language even when children are not able to follow. According to him, learning is achieved through repetition. When he is at a meeting around the old well, he narrates in pure native words. Idris notes that Moosa does not ever break down the words; he leaves them intact. Anita Nair demonstrates how Moosa defends language through the inability to transform it. This is evident when Idris talks of the fact that Moosa talked like the words required no authorization to be spoken (IKL, 82). This is an indication of the survival of indigenous vocabulary based on confidence and continuity. The memory of community in Idris: Keeper of Light is held by the characters, such as Ammachi, Moosa, and Fatima, who recall some events that are nowhere recorded. These memories are usually told at such locations as the kitchen fireplace, the steps of the mosque, and the riverbank. As Ammachi cooks, she remembers the times when they were displaced and how there were times of famine and the rituals that had been forgotten. Idris is a good listener, but he understands that it is this verbal memory that gives him an idea of what he is. Anita Nair demonstrates that memory exists in speech. This is very painfully true when Idris hears Ammachi, and his thoughts are, "her voice was full of years. No book had fed on" (IKL, 45).

The intergenerational knowledge transfer is depicted by the fact that Idris is close to Fatima, who educates and instructs him on stories and songs. Mc Ivor highlights that "indigenous language revitalization and applied linguistics share a commitment to intergenerational knowledge transfer, positioning spoken language as a site of cultural survival" (Mc Ivor,45). Fatima frequently talks when she is working without pausing to make any explanations. As she wanders along the village streets, she discusses herbs, weather signs, and ancient customs. Idris is being taught, without being aware of it. This is what Anita Nair puts forward as natural learning. This is what Idris realizes when he realizes that she spoke, and knowledge had settled in him.

Language is a medium that passes wisdom down through generations. Throughout the course of the novel, Idris realizes that he now carries the memories of other people. Following the death of Moosa, Idris goes back to the well where tales were told. He recalls what was said there and thinks about it in his head. He realizes that it is his job to remember. Anita Nair demonstrates this scene as a role change. Idris realizes that knowledge has to progress, or it would be lost. This consciousness is evident in his statement, which says, their voices live in me now (Sasikumar 2019). This demonstrates how the transfer of intergenerational knowledge is carried on by living speakers.

This novel employs the first-person narrative voice to disapprove of domination in language. The narration is largely based on the inner thoughts of Idris and the experienced life experiences. The sounds, words, and rhythms of his community make his voice. Even in cases where the narration shifts to English, it brings the form of oral speech. This decision shatters the strength of perfect and aristocratic language. The voice of Idris is nearer to spoken memory, rather than written text. As Idris is walking along the river path, he considers the ways people in his village tell stories and thinks, "In my village, our stories were not to be told on a page and sit there quietly on the page" (IKL, 39). This demonstrates that the narrator's voice is opposed to linguistic regulation. The narrative voice is also created by other characters speaking. The slow and repetitive speech of Ammachi and the strong narration of Moosa shape the perception of the world that Idris has. Their voices make their way into the narration without correction and refinement. Anita Nair does not strain them through high language. This gives the freedom of local patterns of speech in the novel. In one evening, when Idris attends an evening party, close to the fire circle, he overhears Moosa, and writes, His words move like speech, not writing. This instance demonstrates how the voice in the novel disavows the rules of dominant lingo.

The narratorial voice does not even cover everything for outsiders with an account. Certain words, feelings, and memories are left within the community. This selection presents challenges to the readers who are used to obvious meanings. Idris does not reject this doubt, as it is real life. Anita Nair employs this method to destroy linguistic superiority. The story does not exist in isolation but within society. Idris comes to this realization after he believes, "Not all words are directed to everybody" (IKL, 86). In this voice, the novel opposes linguistic hegemony and defends cultural space. Idris: Keeper of Light reveals that even

literature can be used to bring the language back to life. Anita Nair transforms literature into a place of survival by composing a novel that relies on oral speech, local words, and memory.

The novel documents voices that would otherwise be lost. Idris realizes that it is possible to keep stories told today alive by writing them down carefully. "He thinks that when he recalls the stories of Moosa after his death, he will recall them; he will not lose them" (IKL, 52). This demonstrates the collaboration of storytelling and literature. Hidden language is also impounded in the open space in the novel. Village words can now be heard by those outside the village. This makes the language stronger but not weaker. Anita Nair offers literature as an adjunct and not an immortality to oral tradition. This is observed when Idris envisions a future audience listening to the same narratives. Sitting close to the old well, he recounts in his thought that the story would go on, despite the inability of the voice (IKL, 74). This is where we have literature as a vehicle of language.

By putting the marginalized voices to the forefront, the novel questions the languages that are worth writing in. Anita Nair opens the doors of literature to simple speech. The life of Idris, words of Ammachi, and songs of Fatima are also included in a written record. This puts into perspective the previously disregarded language. When Idris thinks of this power, he believes that his words have found their home. It is through this that language revitalization helps literature through the novel. This paper has demonstrated that Idris: Keeper of Light offers the language form as a living memory by using characters, places, and words. Anita Nair, through Idris, Ammachi, Moosa, Fatima, and Kannan, demonstrates that language continues to exist in our everyday lives. The novel bridges oral tradition, native language, narrative voice, and memory in a flow. It is this association that Idris understands the worth of when he thinks, what we speak keeps us alive. Langdon further demonstrates that documentation and revitalization efforts gain social vitality when oral materials remain embedded in community life rather than isolated as static records (Langdon 133). Similarly, Amir, Abduh, and Masruddin assert that oral traditions function as living cultural systems, where performance and narration actively preserve linguistic and cultural values within indigenous communities (Amir et al.). Together, these perspectives affirm that language revitalization is inseparable from oral tradition, spatial belonging, and collective cultural memory.

Finally, Idris: Keeper of the Light by Anita Nair powerfully affirms that the survival of language is inseparable from memory, place, and oral transmission. Through Idris, the novel presents storytelling as a vital act of language revitalization, where spoken words preserve cultural knowledge that resists erasure in the absence of written records. While many characters remain rooted in their native landscapes, Idris's lack of a fixed geographical identity underscores the urgency of safeguarding language as a mobile yet enduring cultural force. His role as a storyteller transforms oral tradition into a living archive, ensuring that endangered voices, rituals, and indigenous expressions continue to circulate across generations. Ultimately, the novel asserts that language, sustained through speech and collective listening, becomes the most powerful medium through which identity, belonging, and cultural continuity are reclaimed, even amidst displacement and spatial uncertainty.

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