

# Epistemic Changes in Literary Studies: A Contemporary Reappraisal for the Present Generation

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## ABSTRACT

Literary studies have undergone significant epistemic transformations over the past century, moving beyond aesthetic appreciation towards interdisciplinary, politically conscious, and culturally grounded modes of inquiry. This paper examines the epistemic shifts within literary studies with special reference to Indian literary texts, aligning with contemporary academic expectations in UGC and Scopus-indexed journals. By incorporating case studies from Indian English and regional literature—particularly the works of Mahasweta Devi, Arundhati Roy, and Bama—the paper demonstrates how literary knowledge production has evolved to foreground marginal voices, challenge canonical authority, and interrogate power structures. The study argues that present-generation literary scholarship is marked by ethical engagement, cultural specificity, and social responsibility, reflecting a decisive departure from Eurocentric and purely formalist paradigms.

**Keywords:** Epistemic shift, Literary studies, Indian literature, Subaltern studies, Contemporary criticism

## INTRODUCTION

The discipline of literary studies has never been epistemologically static. From its early emphasis on canonical texts and aesthetic judgment to its present engagement with politics, identity, and social justice, literature as a field of knowledge has continuously redefined its critical frameworks. The term epistemic change refers to a transformation in the ways knowledge is produced, legitimized, and disseminated within a discipline. In literary studies, such changes are evident in the shift from text-centred formalism to context-sensitive, interdisciplinary, and culturally situated approaches.

In the Indian academic context, epistemic changes have gained particular significance due to the growing recognition of indigenous narratives, regional literatures, and marginalized voices. Contemporary literary criticism increasingly interrogates colonial legacies, caste hierarchies, gender politics, and ecological crises. This paper seeks to justify the title *Epistemic Changes in Literary Studies* by analyzing concrete case studies from Indian literature, thereby aligning theoretical discussions with textual practice—a key requirement for peer-reviewed and Scopus-indexed publications.

### From Canonical Aesthetics to Cultural Knowledge

Traditional literary studies, especially during the colonial and early postcolonial periods in India, were heavily influenced by British canonical models. Literature was treated as a repository of universal values, aesthetic excellence, and moral refinement. Critics such as Matthew Arnold viewed literature as “the best that has been thought and said,” privileging elite texts and authors. However, this epistemological framework began to fracture with the emergence of Marxist criticism, feminist theory, postcolonial studies, and cultural studies. Knowledge production in literature was no longer limited to artistic form but expanded to include ideology, material conditions, and power relations. The epistemic centre shifted from what literature is to what literature does in society.

## **Subaltern Epistemology: Mahasweta Devi as a Case Study**

Mahasweta Devi's short stories and novels exemplify a radical epistemic intervention in Indian literary studies. Works such as "Draupadi" and "Breast-Giver" resist elite historiography and foreground subaltern experiences, particularly those of tribal and marginalized women. Devi does not merely represent the oppressed; she challenges dominant modes of knowing history, justice, and nationhood.

In "Draupadi," the protagonist Dopdi Mejhen's body becomes a site of political resistance, unsettling traditional epistemologies that view women as passive victims. The narrative compels readers to confront state violence and ethical responsibility. From an epistemic standpoint, Devi's writing transforms literature into a mode of counter-knowledge, opposing official archives and state narratives. This marks a decisive shift from aesthetic appreciation to ethical and political engagement.

## **Postcolonial Consciousness and Environmental Knowledge: Arundhati Roy**

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* and her later non-fiction essays reflect another major epistemic transformation in literary studies—the integration of political activism, environmentalism, and cultural critique. Roy's fiction dismantles linear historiography and foregrounds "small voices," thereby challenging grand nationalist narratives.

Her narrative technique itself represents an epistemic shift: fragmented temporality and non-linear storytelling mirror the fractured realities of postcolonial societies. Roy's engagement with caste oppression, environmental degradation, and state power positions literature as a form of knowledge that actively intervenes in contemporary debates. For the present generation, Roy exemplifies how literary studies intersect with ecology, human rights, and global politics.

## **Dalit Autobiography and Knowledge from the Margins: Bama**

Dalit literature represents one of the most transformative epistemic developments in Indian literary studies. Bama's *Karukku* challenges Brahminical literary traditions by asserting lived experience as a legitimate source of knowledge. Unlike classical autobiographies that emphasize individual achievement, *Karukku* foregrounds collective suffering, resistance, and community memory.

From an epistemological perspective, Dalit writing disrupts the hierarchy between theory and experience. It asserts that knowledge emerges from pain, struggle, and survival. Literary studies, therefore, shift from interpretative authority to empathetic engagement. This change resonates strongly with contemporary academic frameworks that emphasize inclusivity, diversity, and social justice.

## **Interdisciplinarity and the Present Generation**

One of the defining epistemic features of present-generation literary studies is interdisciplinarity. Literature today intersects with sociology, anthropology, history, gender studies, and environmental studies. This convergence reflects a broader understanding of literature as cultural knowledge rather than isolated art.

For students and scholars, this shift encourages critical thinking beyond textual analysis. Literature becomes a lens through which societal structures are examined and questioned. Such epistemic openness aligns with UGC's emphasis on outcome-based education and research that addresses real-world concerns.

## **Methodological Implications**

The epistemic changes discussed above necessitate methodological reorientation. Case-study analysis, contextual reading, and theoretical plurality have replaced monolithic critical approaches. Indian texts are no longer treated as peripheral but as central to global literary discourse. This methodological shift strengthens the academic legitimacy of Indian literature in international journals and Scopus-indexed platforms.

## CONCLUSION

Epistemic changes in literary studies signify more than theoretical innovation; they reflect a transformation in the ethics and purpose of the discipline. By incorporating Indian literary case studies, this paper demonstrates how contemporary criticism foregrounds marginalized voices, challenges dominant epistemologies, and redefines literature as a site of knowledge production. For the present generation, literary studies offer not merely interpretative skills but critical consciousness and social engagement. Such epistemic reappraisal ensures that literature remains relevant, responsible, and transformative in an ever-changing world.

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