

THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES OF ORAL AND WRITTEN
LITERATURE**Usmonova Feruzakhon Rakhmonali kizi**

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Abstract. This paper provides a comprehensive critical analysis of the theoretical and methodological boundaries, intersections, and tensions between oral and written literatures. Historically marginalized by Eurocentric, print-centric paradigms, oral literature (orature) requires distinct analytical frameworks that account for its fluidity, performance dynamics, and collective authorship. By synthesizing foundational theories from the Toronto School of Communication, performance studies, and postcolonial critique, this study deconstructs the rigid binary opposition between the spoken and the written word. It examines the methodological challenges of archiving, transcribing, and translating oral texts into print media without stripping them of their performative essence. Finally, the paper investigates hybrid literary forms—specifically the textuality of oral remnants and the oralization of written texts—arguing for an integrated, multidimensional approach in contemporary literary theory.

Keywords: oral literature, orature, textuality, performance theory, transcription methodology, hybridity, epistemology.

For centuries, the academic discipline of literary studies operated under a profound structural bias: the equation of “literature” strictly with the written or printed word. Derived from the Latin *littera* (letter), the very etymology of the word marginalized the vast, ancient, and continuously evolving traditions of verbal art [3]. Oral literature – frequently conceptualized via Walter Ong’s term “orature” – was long relegated to the domains of anthropology, folklore, or pre-historic ethnography. It was viewed merely as a primitive stepping stone toward the ultimate realization of typographic literacy.

However, contemporary critical theory has forced a radical re-evaluation of this hierarchy. The realization that oral traditions possess their own complex aesthetics, formal structures, and epistemological value has shifted the focus of modern philology. This paper addresses the core theoretical and methodological issues arising from the study of both oral and written literatures. It explores how these two modes of human expression interact, clash, and merge, proposing a unified framework that respects the unique ontology of both the spoken and the inscribed word.

The scholarly discourse surrounding oral and written literatures has historically been dominated by two competing theoretical camps: the “Great Divide” hypothesis and the “Continuity” model [1]. Proponents of the Great Divide – most notably Walter Ong, Marshall McLuhan, and Eric Havelock – argued that the transition from orality to literacy shifts human consciousness

fundamentally [2]. Ong posited that oral cultures rely on formulaic, rhythmic, and mnemonic patterns to retain knowledge, resulting in thinking that is:

- ✓ Aggregative rather than analytic.
- ✓ Conservative/traditionalist rather than innovative.
- ✓ Situational rather than abstractly conceptual.

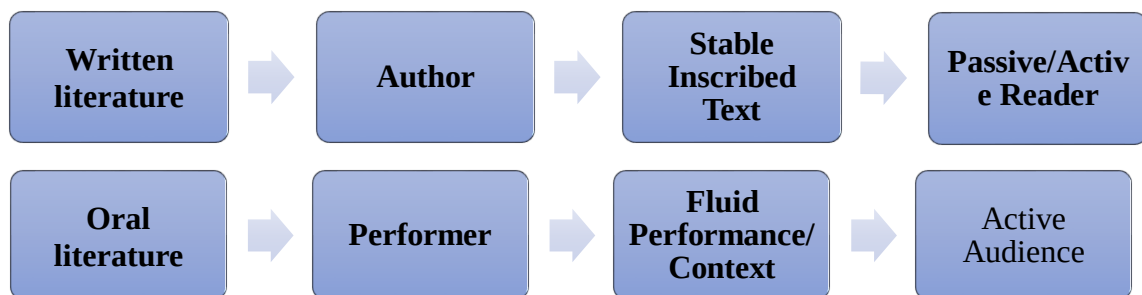
According to this view, the invention of writing, particularly the phonetic alphabet, externalized memory. It allowed the human mind to engage in abstract, linear, and detached logic. Writing created the “autonomous text”, separating the source of the communication from the receiver in time and space.

In contrast, contemporary theorists like Ruth Finnegan, Jack Goody, and various postcolonial scholars challenge this rigid binary. They argue that the “Great Divide” oversimplifies both oral and written traditions [1-2]. In reality, absolute orality and absolute literacy are ideal types rather than empirical realities.

Most cultures exist along a continuum. Oral traditions persist within highly literate societies (e.g., urban legends, slam poetry, political rhetoric), while written texts are frequently performed, read aloud, or structured around oral cadences. The continuity model views orality and literacy not as mutually exclusive evolutionary stages, but as overlapping media systems that continuously enrich each other.

The most critical theoretical challenge in evaluating oral literature is defining what constitutes the “text”. In written literature, the text is a stable, bounded, and immutable artifact. A book can be archived, duplicated, and analyzed meticulously line by line.

In oral literature, the text does not exist independently of its performance. The ontology of orature is intrinsically transient, dynamic, and situational:



As performance theorist Richard Bauman notes, performance is not merely the recitation of a pre-existing text; it is the constitutive act of oral literature. The meaning of an oral epic, folktale, or ritual chant is generated through a complex matrix of paralinguistic and extra-linguistic features:

- *Prosody and Vocalics*: Tone, pitch, volume, pacing, and strategic pauses.
- *Kinesics*: Facial expressions, gestures, and body language.
- *Proxemics and Context*: The physical setting, the time of day, and the socio-political climate of the performance.
- *Audience Interactivity*: Call-and-response patterns, applause, interruptions, and real-time corrections.

Consequently, an oral text changes with every iteration. The performer adapts the narrative to the immediate reactions of the audience, the specific patron funding the event, or shifting political realities. Authorship in oral literature is collective and cumulative; the performer acts as both a custodian of tradition and a contemporary creative agent. Traditional literary tools designed for

written works—such as close reading, structuralist plot analysis, and static semiotics—are fundamentally inadequate for capturing this fluid, multi-sensory reality.

Because academia remains structurally anchored in print and digital textuality, studying oral literature invariably requires its transformation into a written format. This process, known as transcription or textualization, introduces severe methodological distortions. When an oral performance is transcribed onto paper, it suffers an immediate three-fold reduction:

1. *Loss of Performance Dynamics*: Typography cannot easily capture the rhythm of a voice, the dramatic silence, or the subtle movement of a hand. The multi-sensory experience is flattened into two-dimensional, monochrome lines of print.

2. *Decontextualization*: The transcription strips away the community setting. The historical, social, and immediate environmental triggers that gave the performance its urgency and meaning are erased.

3. *Imposition of Foreign Grammars*: Oral speech is non-linear, paratactic, and frequently relies on repetition for structural emphasis. When transcribers insert Western punctuation (commas, periods, paragraphs) or force oral verse into Western poetic stanzas, they colonize the oral text, forcing it to comply with typographic aesthetics [1-3].

To counteract these distortions, linguists and anthropologists like Dennis Tedlock and Dell Hymes developed ethnopoetics. This methodological approach attempts to create performance-centered transcriptions. Tedlock utilized specific typographic codes to represent oral delivery:

- Capitalization/Bold font to indicate sudden increases in volume.
- Line breaks and empty vertical spaces to measure the exact duration of silences and pauses.
- Staggered lines to map changes in pitch and tone.

While ethnopoetics marked a massive step forward, contemporary methodology relies heavily on multimodal archiving. Instead of treating the written transcript as the primary object of study, researchers leverage digital platforms to couple interactive transcriptions directly with high-definition audio and video recordings. This approach ensures the original performative context remains preserved and accessible for analysis.

Oral literature is deeply embedded within the specific linguistic, cosmological, and ecological matrices of its culture of origin. Translating these works into dominant global languages (such as English, French, or Spanish) presents steep hermeneutic obstacles [3]. Oral traditions frequently employ archaic vocabulary, highly localized idioms, and metaphors drawn from specific local flora, fauna, and mythologies. A literal translation often results in nonsense, while a highly domesticated translation erases the cultural alterity of the original work. For example, an oral praise poem celebrating a king using localized pastoral metaphors loses its sacred, sociopolitical gravity when translated into standardized Western romantic prose.

The act of translating oral literature into written Western formats is never a politically neutral aesthetic exercise. Historically, it has been deeply entangled with colonial configurations of power. Early colonial ethnographers translated African, Native American, and Indigenous Australian oral traditions into simplistic, childish fairy tales to justify the “civilizing mission”. Modern methodology demands a postcolonial, self-reflexive translation practice. This approach involves providing extensive paratextual scaffolding – such as introductory essays, detailed footnotes, and parallel bilingual texts – to contextualize the cultural assumptions underlying the oral performance.

The contemporary literary landscape is defined not by the purity of either mode, but by complex hybrid forms. Authors and performers globally navigate the porous borderlands between orality and literacy. Many postcolonial novelists explicitly import the aesthetic structures of oral

storytelling into the formal architecture of the Western novel. Authors such as Chinua Achebe, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Salman Rushdie, and Toni Morrison utilize:

- Proverbial rhetoric and collective choric voices.
- Non-linear, circular narrative structures that mimic oral epics.
- Digressive storytelling modes that reject classical Aristotelian plot trajectories [5].

By forcing the printed English language to bend to the rhythms and structural demands of indigenous oral traditions, these writers decenter the authority of the Western typographic canon.

Walter Ong predicted the emergence of “secondary orality” a new phase of orality sustained by electronic media (telephone, radio, television). In the XXI century, this concept has exploded via digital platforms. Podcasts, audiobooks, TikTok videos, YouTube essays, and voice notes have created a highly participatory, immediate, and communal communicative environment that closely mirrors primary oral cultures. However, this digital orality is hyper-literate; it is backed by text-based algorithms, search engines, and written code. This synthesis creates a new ontological category: a digital verbal art that is simultaneously written, spoken, archived, and hyper-transient [4].

Acknowledging the equal value of oral and written literatures requires a major overhaul of fundamental concepts within literary theory.

Table-1

Epistemological Implications for Literary Theory

Concept	Written Canon Framework	Integrated Oral-Written Framework
The Author	Solitary, legally protected individual creator (copyright).	Collective custodian; real-time improviser and community conduit.
The Text	Fixed, static, physical, or digital graphic artifact.	Event-based, fluid, performative manifestation.
The Critic	Detached analyzer of stable linguistic signs.	Participant-observer sensitive to multimodal acoustics and social context.

By expanding literary theory to include orature, academics can move past Eurocentric models of textuality. This shift opens the discipline to a global, pluralistic understanding of how human beings use language to construct memory, identity, and art.

Conclusion

The theoretical and methodological issues underlying oral and written literatures reveal that the historical separation of these two modes was an artifact of academic provincialism rather than an empirical truth. While written literature offers durability, complex linear abstraction, and structural stability, oral literature provides immediate communal vitality, sensory immersion, and adaptive performative evolution. Methodologically, scholars must abandon the attempt to reduce oral literature to the conditions of print. Instead, they must develop flexible, multimodal, and self-reflexive strategies that honor the unique ontology of performance. As digital media continues to blend the spoken and written word into hybrid platforms, the discipline of literary studies must evolve. It must champion an integrated approach that celebrates human verbal art in all its diverse manifestations.

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