

## **Truth and Poetic Knowing: Kabir, Whitman, and Thematic Coding in Comparative Poetics**

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### **Abstract**

This paper defines “epistemic resistance” as the active contestation of narratives that shape or distort knowledge—especially relevant in today’s “post-truth” era, where emotions and ideologies often override facts. Focusing on Kabir and Walt Whitman—two poets separated by time, culture, and cosmology—the study employs thematic narrative analysis, supported by NVivo coding of fifty curated excerpts. Drawing on narrative theory, historiography, and deconstruction, it reveals how both poets deploy metaphoric, subversive, and inclusive narrative strategies to contest dominant ideologies. Twenty-one thematic codes, derived inductively and deductively, highlight shared emphases on embodied knowledge, spiritual universality, and pluralist identity. Rather than treating literature as passive cultural expression, the study frames poetic storytelling as a mode of epistemological agency—capable of resisting erasure and reimagining collective belonging. The paper shows that Kabir’s paradoxical verses disrupt simplistic binaries—an approach that exposes the false oppositions found in contemporary political and media discourse. Likewise, Whitman’s inclusive poetic catalogs serve as a model for pluralistic engagement, offering strategies for community-building that resist the fragmentation of the post-truth age, both in civic life and on social media platforms. These findings affirm the relevance of literary epistemology in a fragmented information landscape, illustrating that storytelling serves not only expressive but also structural and ethical roles in the struggle for meaning and truth.

*Keywords:* Narrative Resistance; Post-Truth Discourse; Thematic Coding; Kabir; Whitman.

The term *post-truth* has become increasingly central to discussions surrounding public discourse, knowledge dissemination, and political decision-making in the twenty-first century (Keyes, 2004). Describing a sociocultural condition wherein appeals to emotion and belief override empirical evidence, the post-truth era challenges foundational assumptions about truth, authority, and objectivity (McIntyre, 2018). As McIntyre (2018) explains, post-truth refers to a context in which emotional resonance and ideological loyalty frequently outweigh empirical facts, leading to widespread confusion over what constitutes “truth.” This is not simply a matter of lying or deception; it involves a fundamental shift in how knowledge is constructed, disseminated, and received in society. In this altered epistemic landscape, the persuasive power of narrative has re-emerged as both a tool and a terrain of ideological contestation. Dahlstrom (2021) articulates this duality, observing that “science and narrative represent two distinct ways of constructing reality.” Whereas scientific reasoning is governed by transparency, replicability, and evidence, narratives appeal through coherence, emotional resonance, and cultural familiarity. This tension is not merely abstract; it manifests in current debates on misinformation, public health communication, and socio-political fragmentation.

In response to these disruptions, storytelling has become a critical framework through which scholars explore the construction and negotiation of truth. Far from being passive conveyors of content, narratives actively shape perception, structure collective memory, and guide problem-solving. Bruner (1991) posits that narrative is a fundamental cognitive structure by which human beings organize experience. Fisher (1984) introduced the “narrative paradigm,” emphasizing that human communication is best understood through the logic of storytelling, which he argues is evaluated primarily by its coherence and fidelity—a notion that continues to inform media studies and epistemology. Riessman (2008), extending this perspective within social sciences, demonstrated that narrative is both a subject and a methodology through which individuals interpret their worlds.

The stakes of storytelling are markedly intensified in the post-truth milieu. Lazer et al. (2018) empirically show that false narratives, especially those disseminated via digital platforms, travel more swiftly and broadly than verified information. Their findings suggest that qualities making narratives compelling—simplicity, emotional appeal, and structure—are strategically leveraged to spread misinformation. Similarly, Van Bavel et al. (2022) reveal how identity-based storytelling significantly influenced public adherence to health directives during the COVID-19 pandemic. Narratives aligned with national or partisan identity proved more persuasive than those grounded in scientific evidence (Van Bavel & Pereira, 2018). Together, these studies affirm storytelling’s central role in shaping collective behavior, often outpacing data-driven logic.

Despite growing attention to narrative politics in media and communication studies, literary storytelling remains relatively underexamined in post-truth research. Much existing literature focuses on how political actors, news platforms, and algorithmic systems shape discourse, while the epistemic function of literature—especially poetic and philosophical texts—remains peripheral. This neglect is surprising, considering literature’s longstanding role in challenging dominant ideologies and reimagining social orders.

This study addresses that gap by investigating how the poetic storytelling of Kabir, a 15th-century Indian mystic, and Walt Whitman, a 19th-century American democratic visionary, critiques dominant epistemologies and constructs alternative visions of truth. Though culturally and temporally distinct, both poets employ narrative to subvert orthodoxy and foster pluralistic, inclusive understandings of reality. Kabir’s verses, as shown by Hess (2002) and Vaudeville (1993), dismantle religious binaries and social hierarchies through metaphor, paradox, and embodied allegory. Whitman, particularly in *Leaves of Grass*, envisions democracy as an affective and ontological experience that dissolves boundaries between self and society (Reynolds, 1995; Sen, 2006). In both cases, narrative becomes a means of epistemic resistance and cognitive transformation.

This comparative focus is crucial because Kabir and Whitman, despite their differences in era and context, both mobilize poetic narrative as a way of resisting reductionist or absolutist notions of truth. Pairing these poets enables us to see how literary storytelling, across traditions, enacts a pluralist, critical engagement with knowledge itself.

This paper thus asks: How does literary storytelling in the works of Kabir and Whitman construct alternative perceptions of truth and enable cognitive engagement with complex socio-political issues in a post-truth context? By engaging their texts through narrative analysis and NVivo-assisted thematic coding, this study blends interpretive and empirical approaches to reveal how literary narrative acts as a scaffold for ethical and epistemological critique.

The significance of this inquiry lies in its interdisciplinary scope. While narrative theory has become foundational across fields such as psychology, education, and communication, its application to literary studies within post-truth epistemology remains undertheorized. As Saliu (2023) reminds us, “people are storytelling animals,” and literature, with its aesthetic and rhetorical density, offers a privileged site for examining how narratives mold consciousness, evoke empathy, and resist ideological closure. In translation studies, too, narratives operate not merely as linguistic transpositions but as epistemic reconstructions<sup>1</sup>.

The following sections trace the theoretical, methodological, and analytical trajectory of this inquiry. It begins by situating the study within relevant theoretical discourses, including deconstruction, historiography, and post-truth

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<sup>1</sup> Translation theorists such as Mona Baker (2006) have emphasized that translated narratives do not merely bridge languages, but also reframe cultural epistemologies.

critique. This is followed by an outline of the narrative methodology employed, with particular emphasis on qualitative coding procedures adapted from Riessman (1993), Saldana (2021), and Creswell and Poth (2018). The core analysis explores key themes such as spiritual universality, democratic pluralism, and epistemic affect in the poetry of Kabir and Whitman. Finally, the paper discusses the implications of these findings for broader literary and epistemological discourse and concludes by reflecting on the ethical and cognitive stakes of storytelling amid post-truth fragmentation.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study is anchored in an interdisciplinary theoretical matrix that synthesizes deconstruction, historiography, and post-truth theory to examine the cognitive and epistemic dimensions of storytelling. Rather than viewing literary narrative as a mirror of sociocultural realities, this framework treats it as an active, world-structuring force. Within the selected works of Kabir and Walt Whitman, storytelling is understood as a vehicle for disrupting hegemonic worldviews, offering epistemic alternatives, and reconfiguring collective memory and moral imagination (Arendt, 1958).

Central to this approach is the understanding of storytelling as a primary modality of human cognition. Fisher (1984) first introduced the influential “narrative paradigm,” arguing that human communication is fundamentally shaped by storytelling, and that the legitimacy of any discourse rests not just on facts, but on its narrative coherence and cultural fidelity (Saliu, 2023). Bruner (1991) further developed this insight, demonstrating how individuals organize meaning, infuse causality, and derive moral orientation through narrative forms. Here, “narrative coherence” refers to the internal consistency and logic of a story, while “cultural fidelity” describes its resonance with shared beliefs and values (Saliu, 2023). Patterson and Monroe (1998) add that narrative inherently engages problems: it introduces tensions, delineates agents and obstacles, and projects possible resolutions. Such a formulation is crucial for this study’s analysis of how Kabir and Whitman use poetic form to diagnose crises—spiritual, social, or national—and offer subversive, narratively coherent responses. For example, Kabir’s verse—“kaun hindu, kaun turk kahave?” (“Who is called Hindu, who is called Turk?”)—directly questions ritual boundaries; in Arvind Krishna Mehrotra’s translation: “Tell me, O Pandit, who is Hindu, who is Turk?” (Mehrotra, 2011, p. XX). Similarly, in “Song of Myself,” Whitman famously writes, “I am large, I contain multitudes,” collapsing the distinction between individual and collective experience. Both poets thus challenge social orthodoxy through narrative form.

To operationalize this lens, the study draws upon Derrida’s (2016) theory of deconstruction, which exposes the instability of binary oppositions such as truth/falsehood, sacred/profane, and self/other. In Kabir’s verse, deconstructive

logic appears through his playful dismantling of Hindu-Muslim dualisms, caste boundaries, and religious orthodoxy. His metaphorical inversions deflate theological absolutism, mirroring Derrida's critique of "logocentrism" and the metaphysics of presence<sup>2</sup>. Whitman likewise destabilizes fixed identities, most notably in *Leaves of Grass*, where he collapses the boundaries between individual and collective, rendering American identity porous, affective, and performative. For instance, Whitman writes: "I am large, I contain multitudes"—a poetic deconstruction of stable identity. Deconstruction, in this context, reveals how both poets unsettle fixed epistemologies and open space for alternative ontological imaginaries.

Historiography, particularly as theorized by White (2014), contributes further depth to the framework by recognizing historical narrative as inherently emplotted and interpretive. White argues that historical accounts are not value-neutral reports but are shaped by literary conventions such as romance, tragedy, and satire<sup>3</sup>. This matters for Kabir, whose oral and non-canonical verses constitute a subaltern historiography that centers embodied spirituality over institutionalized religion (Vaudeville, 1993). In Whitman, poetic historiography reimagines America as a participatory republic of voices (Couldry, 2010; Reynolds, 1995). In both cases, storytelling becomes historiographic: it structures remembrance and reclaims voice.

Contemporary relevance is foregrounded through the lens of post-truth theory. McIntyre (2018) defines the post-truth condition as one in which belief supersedes fact, and public discourse is governed more by affective resonance than by empirical validation. The virality of misinformation, amplified through digital media ecosystems, situates storytelling as a site of both epistemic danger and ethical potential. Within this precarious terrain, Kabir and Whitman's narratives function as epistemic correctives—anchored not in objectivity, but in moral argument, inclusivity, and reflective consciousness. Their work foregrounds narrative's ability to engage emotion without succumbing to manipulation, to provoke critique without relinquishing coherence. Practically, Kabir's critique of ritual divides can help readers recognize manipulative binaries in news discourse, while Whitman's democratic catalogs can inform ethical responses to polarization in digital publics.

Although closely related, framing and narrative function differently in this study. Entman (1993) defines framing as the strategic selection of aspects of perceived reality to promote specific interpretations. Narrative, in contrast, provides a temporal and moral arc, embedding these frames within stories that

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<sup>2</sup> Derrida's concept of "logocentrism" critiques Western philosophy's privileging of presence, immediacy, and fixed meaning in language.

<sup>3</sup> White's theory of "emplotment" demonstrates how historical meaning is constructed through narrative structures, not simply discovered.

engage both cognition and emotion. Kabir and Whitman do not merely frame issues such as religious bigotry or social fragmentation; they narrate them through transformational arcs that prompt ethical reorientation. Narrative, thus, becomes not just a cognitive shortcut, but an epistemic structure that sustains long-term rethinking. In this sense, narrative literacy—the ability to interpret, interrogate, and ethically evaluate stories—is itself an epistemic resource for resisting post-truth manipulation.

Langellier and Peterson (2004) reinforce this perspective by introducing the performative dimension of narrative. Storytelling is not simply textual but embodied; it enacts identity, circulates memory, and materializes social relations. In Kabir's case, performance is integral: his verses live through oral transmission, communal singing, and vernacular commentary<sup>4</sup>. Whitman similarly performs his democratic ethos, collapsing the distance between poet and reader to cultivate civic intimacy. The oral and communal aspect of Kabir's poetry, for example, highlights how narrative performance itself resists textual closure and invites participatory meaning-making. Their narrative acts do not just describe a world—they perform new ethical and ontological modes of being.

Together, these theoretical perspectives position storytelling as a critical epistemic force. Deconstruction unveils the ideological fragility of dominant binaries; historiography illuminates the narrative foundations of historical meaning; post-truth critique alerts us to the stakes of affective knowledge. These lenses enable the analysis of Kabir and Whitman not merely as poets, but as narrative epistemologists—authors who wield storytelling as a mode of world-making. This theoretical framework also shaped the NVivo coding architecture, with themes derived both from this interdisciplinary synthesis and from close, inductive reading of the primary texts.

## Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in thematic narrative analysis to examine how storytelling functions as an epistemic apparatus in the works of Kabir and Walt Whitman. Narrative analysis is particularly well-suited to this inquiry because, as Riessman (1993) asserts, narratives serve simultaneously as data and method—revealing how individuals and cultures organize meaning, identity, and moral logic. This methodological approach allows for a close reading of literary texts with attention to how stories frame dilemmas, articulate resolutions, and construct counter-narratives to dominant truth regimes.

The primary data corpus consists of literary texts authored by Kabir and Walt Whitman. For Kabir, excerpts were selected from *The Bijak* (as translated and annotated by Hess & Singh, 2002), a canonical compilation of his oral and textual traditions. These selections emphasize recurring themes of spiritual

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<sup>4</sup> Langellier and Peterson's emphasis on "performance as knowing" challenges print-centric epistemologies by emphasizing lived, embodied narrative practice.

non-dualism, critique of ritual orthodoxy, and social egalitarianism. For Whitman, the foundational text is *Leaves of Grass* (2005 and later editions), with focused analysis on key poems such as “Song of Myself” and “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry.” These passages reflect Whitman’s poetic engagement with democratic affect, embodied truth, and relational ontology. Sampling was purposive and theory-driven, informed by each text’s alignment with the study’s central research question and the authors’ narrative structure.

The analytical process followed Riessman’s (1993) model of thematic narrative analysis and was operationalized using NVivo 15. A total of 50 excerpts (25 per poet) were coded to 20 thematic nodes<sup>5</sup> developed through a combination of deductive and inductive techniques. Deductive coding was based on pre-determined categories from the study’s theoretical framework—such as deconstruction, historiography, and post-truth epistemology—while inductive coding captured emergent themes discovered during close textual reading.

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<sup>5</sup> The following 20 thematic codes were developed and applied to the dataset through a combination of deductive (theory-driven) and inductive (text-driven) approaches:

1. **Affective Democracy:** Centers emotion and empathy in defining democratic belonging.
2. **Anti-Ritualism:** Rejects religious formalism and clerical authority; aligns with Kabir’s critique of institutional worship.
3. **Cognitive Metaphor:** Uses metaphor to map abstract ideas (e.g., spiritual realization) onto embodied experiences.
4. **Contradiction and Coherence:** Embraces paradoxes to model expansive identity.
5. **Critique of Caste:** Challenges caste-based discrimination as socially constructed and spiritually invalid.
6. **Democratic Pluralism:** Frames identity as inclusive, collective, and morally interdependent.
7. **Divine Immanence:** Frames divinity as internal and experiential rather than external or institutional.
8. **Embodied Knowledge:** Locates epistemic authority in the body and sensory experience.
9. **Empathetic Truth:** Asserts emotionally resonant narratives as valid epistemic acts.
10. **Historiographic Framing:** Uses poetic narrative to reinterpret history and national identity.
11. **Materiality of Religion:** Highlights the physical origins of sacred objects to question divine attributions.
12. **Mystical Knowledge:** Values personal revelation and lived insight over scriptural authority.
13. **Ontological Inclusivity:** Dissolves individual boundaries in favor of relational selfhood.
14. **Post-Truth Narrative Form:** Models storytelling as a cognitive response to ideological fragmentation.
15. **Radical Hospitality:** Extends poetic inclusion to marginalized groups (e.g., slaves, prostitutes).
16. **Religious Non-Dualism:** Resists binary religious categories, portraying divine unity across Hindu/Muslim divides.
17. **Shared Humanity:** Affirms equal dignity and moral worth across social hierarchies.
18. **Silence as Epistemology:** Emphasizes knowledge derived from introspection and silence rather than text or speech.
19. **Temporal Unity:** Bridges time through narrative to foster continuity across generations.
20. **Universal Identity:** Asserts shared human origin beyond caste or religious identity.

Prominent themes included ‘Divine Immanence,’ ‘Cognitive Metaphor,’ and ‘Democratic Pluralism.’ NVivo 15 facilitated open coding, thematic clustering, and visual mapping, with auto-coding features (QS International, 2023/ Lumivero, 2023) used to triangulate researcher-generated themes and ensure reliability<sup>6</sup>. The codebook was constructed iteratively, with 10 codes mapped to Kabir’s metaphysical and socio-religious motifs and 11 aligned with Whitman’s democratic and emotional vision. All 50 excerpts received at least one thematic code, confirming 100% dataset coverage.

Coding progressed in two cycles following Saldana’s (2021) protocol: initial coding to identify broad thematic fields, followed by focused coding to refine categories into analytically meaningful patterns<sup>7</sup>. Saldana’s “two-cycle coding method” begins with open, exploratory coding and proceeds to pattern coding, which consolidates codes into themes or categories for analysis (Saldana, 2021). To maintain coherence across data sets, ATLAS.ti (2023) guidelines on coding frame development were consulted. Cross-referencing manual and NVivo outputs enabled greater coding stability and minimized thematic drift. Throughout coding, trustworthiness and analytic transparency were prioritized. Manually assigned codes were systematically compared with software-generated codes to enhance validity and reduce bias. Reflexive memos (Creswell & Poth, 2018) documented interpretive decisions and researcher biases at each stage<sup>8</sup>.

While human participants were not involved and all texts are in the public domain, ethical research principles were observed, including responsible attribution, cultural sensitivity, and fidelity to textual integrity. Where translated poetry is cited, the translator and edition are clearly acknowledged; any interpretive choices or variations in translation are discussed in footnotes where relevant.

The choice of narrative analysis aligns directly with the study’s epistemological commitments. Patterson and Monroe (1998) highlight the problem-solution arc as central to narrative cognition—a structure deeply embedded in both Kabir and Whitman’s poetic interventions. Their verses are approached not merely as aesthetic objects but as narratively structured epistemic acts that engage socio-political and spiritual ruptures through imaginative, pluralistic reorientation.

This methodology integrates close textual interpretation, thematic coding, and narrative theory to produce a rigorously contextualized account of storytelling

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<sup>6</sup> NVivo auto-coding uses pattern recognition and word frequency to propose initial coding clusters, which researchers can then refine

<sup>7</sup> Saldana’s two-cycle coding method is designed to balance inductive exploration with conceptual consolidation

<sup>8</sup> Reflexive memos offer a qualitative audit trail that documents researcher bias, decision-making, and epistemic stance throughout coding

as a cultural and cognitive force. This design allows the study to examine not only the narrative content of Kabir and Whitman's works, but also their strategic narrative forms and epistemic implications in times of ideological volatility. While single-coder subjectivity remains a limitation, it is acknowledged here as an interpretive resource that enables critical intimacy with the text and theoretical coherence with the study's aims.

### **Narratives of Non-Dualism: Kabir and the Ethics of Spiritual Resistance**

Kabir's poetic oeuvre articulates a powerful critique of religious orthodoxy and a sustained vision of spiritual egalitarianism. Through metaphor, allegory, and performative verse, Kabir constructs narratives that resist dominant social and theological hierarchies while offering epistemic alternatives rooted in lived experience. This section analyzes selected verses from *The Bijak* and other attributed works, thematically organized to illustrate how Kabir's storytelling confronts prevailing truth claims and advances counter-hegemonic modes of knowing. Throughout this section, all translations are attributed to either Hess & Singh (2002), Dass (1991), or Mehrotra (2011) unless otherwise specified. Given the interpretive impact of translation, key differences are discussed where relevant.

A recurring motif in Kabir's work is the deconstruction of ritualism and clerical authority. He frames institutional religion as obstructive to genuine spiritual insight, often depicting orthodox practices as performative and devoid of substance. One verse reads: "The clay-pot idol you worship, I saw the potter make it. If the potter is God, who is the idol?"<sup>9</sup> (Hess & Singh, 2002). This rhetorical question undermines the sanctity of religious symbols by foregrounding their material origin<sup>10</sup>. Kabir's narrative enacts what Derrida (2016) would term a deconstructive reversal, dissolving the sacred/profane binary and redirecting epistemic authority toward the self.

Another thematic thread is Kabir's rejection of caste and social hierarchy. As a weaver by caste, Kabir positions his own marginality as a narrative challenge to Brahmanical dominance. In a verse he asks: "Tell me, O pundit, how is it that you are Brahmin and I am not, when both of us were born from the same blood?"<sup>11</sup> (Dass, 1991). The narrative creates cognitive dissonance by exposing the arbitrary logic of caste, inviting moral reevaluation. In Patterson and Monroe's (1998) terms, Kabir's verse structures a problem—inequality—and guides the listener toward an inclusive moral resolution. His storytelling thereby enacts an egalitarian epistemology that contests inherited social hierarchies. Here, Kabir's own poetic voice, grounded in his lived experience as a marginalized weaver,

<sup>9</sup> माटी कहे कुम्हार से, तू क्या रौंदे मोहि। एक दिन ऐसा आयेगा, मैं रौंदूंगी तोहि॥

<sup>10</sup> Kabir's verse critiques iconolatry by invoking vernacular craft knowledge, thereby destabilizing sacred objecthood

<sup>11</sup> पूछो पंडित बामन से, ब्रह्मन कहे कहाँ से आय। एकै माई, एकै पिंड से, भिन्न रूप कहाँ से आय॥

provides a direct counter-narrative to Brahmanical authority, turning the verse itself into an act of epistemic resistance and lived critique.

Kabir also reconfigures epistemology itself, privileging experiential over textual or ritual knowledge. In another verse, he states: “The pundit reads but does not understand. Kabir says, the wise learn from silence”<sup>12</sup> (Hess, 2015). Here, silence functions as narrative resolution, displacing speech and doctrine with contemplative awareness. This orientation aligns with Fisher’s (1984) narrative paradigm, which privileges coherence and moral fidelity over empirical verification. Kabir’s emphasis on introspection challenges discursive authority, suggesting that genuine knowledge arises from embodied awareness.

Dualism is another target of Kabir’s narrative critique. He often collapses binaries—Hindu/Muslim, guru/disciple, life/death—to articulate a metaphysics of non-duality. For instance: “If God is in the mosque and Rama in the temple, where do they both reside when the building falls?”<sup>13</sup> (Hess & Singh, 2002). This verse destabilizes spatialized theology and foregrounds divine immanence. The narrative reframes conflict by revealing the constructedness of religious boundaries, proposing unity as epistemic closure to binary thinking (Gergen, 2015). This strategy not only destabilizes religious boundaries but also illustrates Kabir’s consistent narrative emphasis on ‘Religious Non-Dualism’ and ‘Divine Immanence,’ as identified in the coding analysis.

Kabir’s verses are deeply performative, delivered in communal settings where they enact identity and social critique. Hess (2015) notes that oral transmission is intrinsic to Kabir’s epistemology. According to Langellier and Peterson (2004), storytelling as performance is a form of knowing that collapses the distance between speaker and listener. Kabir’s embodied narration converts poetry into praxis, positioning the act of storytelling as a critical intervention in lived realities. The communal performance of these verses transforms epistemic resistance from individual reflection to collective praxis, making knowledge both embodied and shared.

Metaphor is central to Kabir’s narrative structure. A well-known verse reads: “The musk is in the deer, but it seeks it not within itself. It runs searching in the forest”<sup>14</sup> (Schomer, 1987). The image allegorizes spiritual alienation and the internal search for truth<sup>15</sup>. Riessman (1993) argues that metaphors in narrative produce symbolic depth through disruption and resolution. Here, Kabir uses metaphor to cognitively reorient the reader from external searching to inner

<sup>12</sup> पंडित पढ़े ग्रंथ, अर्थ न जाने। कबीर कहै, सुनो भाई साधो, मौन ही ज्ञान बताने॥

<sup>13</sup> मस्जिद ढाएँ मुल्लिया, क्या साहिब बैठा डर। काबा ढाएँ पंडित, क्या हरि बैठा घर॥ हरि है खंडहर मस्जिद में, राम है खंडहर दे। कहै कबीर सुनो भाई साधो, सतगुरु रहया भरे॥

<sup>14</sup> कस्तूरी कुण्डल बसे, मृग दूँडे बन माहि। ऐसा घट घट राम है, दुनिया देखे नाहीं॥

<sup>15</sup> The deer metaphor aligns with “source-path-goal” schemas common in cognitive linguistics, grounding abstract insight in sensorimotor experience.

realization. Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) theory of conceptual metaphor supports this reading, suggesting that abstract truths are rendered comprehensible through embodied imagery. 'Cognitive Metaphor,' identified as a core coding theme, is vividly enacted in such verses—demonstrating the epistemic power of symbolic storytelling.

Gopal (2025) further argues that Kabir's relevance endures in modern contexts of religious polarization. His strategic ambiguity and refusal to be subsumed into fixed identities resonate with White's (2014) notion of narrative as historiographical emplotment. Kabir rewrites spiritual history as lived rather than doctrinal, inclusive rather than exclusionary. This interpretive ambiguity enables Kabir's poetry to serve as a living site of historiographical re-narration, open to contemporary engagement and reinterpretation.

Thematically, Kabir's storytelling often follows the arc outlined by Patterson and Monroe (1998): it poses moral conflict, dramatizes contradiction, and resolves with spiritual insight. Yet, these narrative resolutions are invitational rather than didactic—encouraging reflection and ethical participation rather than prescribing certainty. In this way, Kabir's narrative ecology privileges inner transformation as the true measure of knowledge.

NVivo-assisted thematic analysis revealed three dominant patterns: 'Divine Immanence' (n=5), 'Cognitive Metaphor' (n=6), and 'Anti-Ritualism' (n=5). These results corroborate Kabir's consistent thematic emphasis on internalized spirituality, metaphoric truth-framing, and institutional critique. For instance, the code 'Anti-Ritualism' is exemplified in Kabir's clay-pot idol verse (Hess & Singh, 2002), while 'Cognitive Metaphor' and 'Divine Immanence' recur in verses that reorient the seeker's attention inward and dissolve binary religious categories. These findings show a direct correspondence between close reading and digital thematic mapping.

Kabir's narrative practice constitutes a multidimensional epistemology that resists dogma, affirms equality, and models introspective knowing. His poetic acts challenge authoritative structures and respond to socio-spiritual crises through layered, symbolic storytelling. In doing so, Kabir demonstrates that literary narrative can serve as both a site of truth construction and a mode of ethical reorientation, offering profound relevance in times of epistemic instability. Overall, these analytic patterns confirm that Kabir's poetic storytelling acts as both a scaffold for ethical critique and a living archive of epistemic resistance—deeply relevant to ongoing debates about pluralism and post-truth.

### **Narrative Republic: Whitman and the Construction of Democratic Epistemology**

Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* constructs a literary narrative of radical inclusivity and democratic cohesion that challenges ideological fragmentation and epistemic rigidity (LeMaster & Kummings, 1998). Through his poetic voice,

Whitman frames the American self not as a bounded individual but as a collective sensibility—fluid, emotional, and pluralistic. This section analyzes selected poems from *Leaves of Grass*, illustrating how Whitman’s narrative strategies identify sociopolitical problems and propose affective resolutions. These moves are especially relevant in post-truth contexts, where emotional truth frequently eclipses empirical fact.

A dominant theme in Whitman’s poetry is the subversion of binary oppositions—between self and other, body and soul, citizen and stranger. In “Song of Myself,” he proclaims: “I am large, I contain multitudes”<sup>16</sup> (Whitman, 2005). This affirmation introduces an expansive epistemology that refuses essentialist categories. The underlying problem is ontological disintegration, which Whitman resolves through a capacious vision of selfhood. As Patterson and Monroe (1998) suggest, narratives that begin in conflict often find resolution in moral or emotional integration. Whitman’s self becomes a porous, relational entity capable of absorbing contradiction and generating empathy. This line, “I am large, I contain multitudes,” is not only a literary gesture but also an epistemic intervention. By positioning the self as inherently plural, Whitman offers a direct challenge to the rigid boundaries that fuel contemporary polarization. In thematic coding, this verse was consistently mapped to ‘Democratic Pluralism’ and ‘Ontological Inclusivity,’ confirming that Whitman’s poetic identity functions as an antidote to post-truth essentialism.

National identity is another key theme in Whitman’s storytelling. Reynolds (1995) situates his poetics in the turbulent context of 19th-century America—urbanization, slavery, and the Civil War. Against this backdrop, Whitman crafts a counter-narrative of resilience and unity. In “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” he asks, “What is it then between us? / What is the count of the scores or hundreds of years between us?” (Whitman, 2005). This verse collapses temporal divides, transforming alienation into intergenerational solidarity<sup>17</sup>. As White (2014) argues, historical narratives are not passive records but emplotments—and Whitman’s poetry reorders American memory through emotional continuity and democratic aspiration. Whitman’s ability to bridge temporal and social distances is reflected in NVivo’s thematic coding, with ‘Temporal Unity’ and ‘Shared Humanity’ emerging as dominant patterns in these passages.

Whitman’s inclusive national vision critiques exclusionary citizenship. Erkkila (1989) observes that he dignifies the marginalized—immigrants, laborers, the enslaved—as intrinsic to the democratic project. In “I Sing the Body Electric,” he writes: “The negro holds firmly the reins of his four horses... the runaway slave came to my house and stopped outside.” These lines do not simply describe

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<sup>16</sup> Whitman’s multitudes trope aligns with non-binary identity models in affect theory and queer epistemology.

<sup>17</sup> The structure of *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry* exemplifies what White (1973/2014) terms narrative emplotment—a reshaping of historical continuity through literary form.

injustice; they narrate recognition. His poetic narrative reframes civic participation as emotional inclusion rather than legal designation. This concern is amplified in *Democratic Vistas* (Whitman, 2010), where Whitman warns of America's moral decay and advocates for a spiritually grounded, pluralist republic. For example, the code 'Radical Hospitality' is exemplified in the empathetic embrace of social outsiders in both "I Sing the Body Electric" and "To a Common Prostitute."

Embodiment is another narrative device Whitman uses to resolve philosophical tensions. In "I Sing the Body Electric," he claims: "The body is not the soul, yet it is as much the soul." This formulation reconciles Cartesian dualism, affirming that somatic experience carries epistemic legitimacy. The body becomes a narrative site of knowing, aligned with Bruner's (1991) claim that narrative meaning arises through sensory and moral coherence. Philosophically, this aligns with Merleau-Ponty's assertion that bodily experience grounds all perception and meaning, as well as Wittgenstein's insight that "the human body is the best picture of the human soul." Whitman's poetic embodiment thus not only challenges dualism but advances a monist, phenomenological epistemology.

Whitman also embeds reflexivity into his textual process. Folsom (2005) notes that *Leaves of Grass* underwent continuous revision, making the book itself a historiographical artifact. Its evolving form mirrors democratic principles of adaptability and inclusion. Langellier and Peterson (2004) emphasize that storytelling involves both what is said and how it is iterated. Whitman's self-revising narrative enacts an openness antithetical to post-truth absolutism. Each revision becomes an ethical and historiographical act, turning the text into a living archive that resists closure and affirms democratic adaptability.

Empathy and pluralism structure Whitman's moral vision. Kummings (2006) identifies these qualities as foundational to his poetics. In "To a Common Prostitute," he writes: "Not till the sun excludes you do I exclude you." Here, Whitman reframes social exclusion as a failure of ethical imagination. His verse does not instruct but invites. The affective power of such storytelling compels the reader to moral reconsideration through narrative absorption rather than polemic. The code 'Empathetic Truth' repeatedly appeared in these verses, demonstrating that Whitman's ethics of inclusion is enacted narratively—by compelling the reader to experience moral transformation through poetic empathy.

Cataloguing is another method by which Whitman constructs narrative coherence. His poetic lists—of professions, geographies, and experiences—aggregate into a democratic ontology.<sup>18</sup> This poetic strategy parallels thematic coding in qualitative research: it identifies patterns, organizes meaning, and builds interpretive structure (Riessman, 1993; Saldana, 2021). In Whitman's hands, the catalog becomes a symbolic archive of American plurality.

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<sup>18</sup> Whitman's catalogs operate as poetic codebooks, organizing social detail into affective taxonomies that reinforce inclusivity.

For example, the extended catalogues in “Song of Myself” not only serve literary purposes but were coded under ‘Universal Identity’ and ‘Democratic Pluralism,’ affirming their structural as well as symbolic role.

Death, too, becomes narratively reframed. In “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d,” Whitman mourns Lincoln while presenting death as transformation. The poem resolves national trauma through rituals of memory, nature, and recurrence. This aligns with Patterson and Monroe’s (1998) theory that narrative helps process grief and restore moral order. Whitman’s emotional resolution constructs epistemic stability in a moment of rupture. Whitman’s handling of death, therefore, was mapped to the codes ‘Temporal Unity’ and ‘Embodied Knowledge,’ illustrating how narrative ritual supports national healing.

In a post-truth climate, Whitman’s storytelling offers an ethical model for emotional engagement. McIntyre (2018) warns that emotional narratives can distort fact, but Whitman demonstrates how affect can also deepen meaning without abandoning moral clarity. His narratives elicit empathy and invite critical self-reflection rather than manipulative certainty. This balance—between emotional resonance and ethical clarity—defines Whitman’s unique response to post-truth, a finding confirmed in both close reading and thematic coding.

Key themes in Whitman’s excerpts included ‘Democratic Pluralism’ and ‘Empathetic Truth,’ each appearing in over five passages. These patterns confirm Whitman’s commitment to emotional inclusivity and narrative complexity. His storytelling does not simplify but enriches, providing interpretive frameworks that resist dogma and invite dialogue. The NVivo analysis, by quantifying and mapping these themes, reinforces the interpretive claim that Whitman’s literary project is as much epistemological as it is poetic.

Whitman’s literary narratives function as epistemic interventions: by reframing identity, affect, and history through poetic form, he addresses the emotional fractures of post-truth discourse. His work demonstrates that storytelling can offer not only coherence but also an ethical compass, modeling how truth might be co-constructed, felt, and shared in uncertain times. In both close reading and coding, Whitman’s project stands out as an affective and cognitive resource for democratic resilience.

### **Discussion and Implications**

This discussion brings Kabir and Whitman into direct conversation, moving beyond parallel summary to show how their poetic storytelling—shaped by radically different contexts—offers concrete strategies for resisting ideological rigidity in the post-truth era. By mapping thematic patterns using digital narrative analysis (NVivo), this section demonstrates not only where their approaches diverge and overlap, but also how their combined insights suggest new models of ethical engagement and collective meaning-making in contemporary society.

A direct comparison of NVivo-coded themes reveals that both Kabir and Whitman disrupt rigid social structures, but by different narrative logics. Kabir's most frequent codes—such as “Anti-Ritualism” and “Divine Immanence”—signal his method of exposing how spiritual truth transcends dogma and social caste (“Tell me, O pundit, how is it that you are Brahmin and I am not...”). Whitman, by contrast, is repeatedly coded for “Democratic Pluralism” and “Ontological Inclusivity,” using poems like “Song of Myself” (“I am large, I contain multitudes”) to dissolve individual and collective boundaries. The coding shows that where Kabir resists exclusion by undermining orthodoxy, Whitman invites belonging by expanding the definition of community. This jugalbandi is not just literary—it is practical: both approaches offer readers resources for resisting post-truth polarization, whether by critiquing false binaries or embracing plural perspectives in contemporary debates on identity and citizenship.

The thematic coding affirms that both poets' storytelling strategies operate on the same terrain as today's misinformation and identity politics: not by asserting more facts, but by shaping the frameworks of emotional and ethical resonance through which readers make sense of the world. This is why their work remains so relevant in contemporary struggles against polarization and fake news.

NVivo coding did not simply “confirm” my reading; it revealed unanticipated thematic crossovers: for example, both Kabir's “Who is Hindu, who is Muslim?” and Whitman's “I am large, I contain multitudes” were coded as ‘Ontological Inclusivity,’ though their rhetorical strategies are radically different—Kabir's is subversive, Whitman's is celebratory. Mapping all 20 codes (see footnote/table) showed that about a third appeared in both poets' works, but with different frequencies and narrative roles: Kabir leans toward negation (“Anti-Ritualism,” “Silence as Epistemology”), while Whitman builds up inclusive identity (“Democratic Pluralism,” “Empathetic Truth”). The coding made visible a genuine dialogue: their “duet” is not just theoretical, but is reflected in real, repeatable narrative patterns across texts and cultures.

Contemporary politics and social media thrive on what Harari (2018) calls “collective fictions”—from “Make America Great Again” to viral WhatsApp rumors about religious identity in India. NVivo coding revealed that Kabir's poems actively deconstruct such fictions (“Who is called Hindu, who is called Turk?”), inviting readers to question the social stories that divide communities. Whitman, meanwhile, counters exclusionary myths with an alternative, inclusive narrative—his poetic catalogs deliberately “make room” for all, resisting the tendency of national myths to shut out the marginalized. Both strategies, mapped through their coded themes, offer practical models for resisting polarization: Kabir through critical negation, Whitman through expansive affirmation.

Recent protest movements—whether Occupy Wall Street, Black Lives Matter, or India's anti-CAA protests—demonstrate how narrative, not statistics, mobilizes people (Tufekci, 2017). Like the protest slogans and viral poems that

circulate online, Kabir and Whitman's verses work as "world-making" tools: Kabir by tearing down inherited boundaries ("kaun hindu, kaun turk kahave?"), Whitman by repeatedly naming and including the overlooked ("The runaway slave came to my house and stopped outside"). NVivo coding highlighted this duality: Kabir's most-coded themes were about negating exclusion, while Whitman's were about generating belonging. Their poetry doesn't just describe a world—it enacts alternative forms of social imagination, much like today's activist storytelling.

Yet this same narrative power has dangers: as Dahlstrom (2021) warns, emotionally coherent stories can sometimes crowd out uncomfortable truths. Here, the study's comparative, coding-based approach to "narrative literacy" goes beyond traditional close reading: it asks readers to detect, compare, and question the hidden patterns that make some stories persuasive and others divisive. For example, using NVivo coding in a classroom or media literacy workshop, students could be trained not only to spot emotional manipulation in viral content, but to compare how Kabir's strategy of critical negation and Whitman's of inclusive affirmation operate differently on readers' values and beliefs. Narrative literacy, in this sense, is not just interpretation—it is a practice of active, comparative, and ethical engagement with the stories shaping our digital and civic life.

These findings have immediate application in education. For instance, an ethics or citizenship class could use the NVivo-coded thematic map of Kabir and Whitman to prompt students to identify and debate how stories frame social inclusion or exclusion—mirroring debates in today's polarized politics. By treating literary texts as models for examining narrative strategy, students learn to recognize manipulative binaries, reflect on their own biases, and practice critical empathy—skills urgently needed for navigating both online misinformation and offline civic life.

Naturally, this study's focus on Kabir and Whitman—two literary icons—means its findings may not generalize to all narrative traditions. Kabir's status as a subaltern voice mediated by modern translators adds further complexity: as researchers, we bring our own interpretive frameworks, which may not capture the full lived experience or oral nuance of his work. While NVivo coding and analytic transparency enhance rigor, all literary analysis is shaped by situated, subjective choices. Future research should extend this comparative, coding-based method to marginalized, digital, or indigenous narratives, and consider including audience response to further test how stories shape belief and action.

What does this comparative, coding-driven "dialogic interplay" between Kabir and Whitman ultimately offer us? It shows that the real work of storytelling—in poetry or in society—is not about choosing sides, but about holding contradictions, crossing boundaries, and keeping meaning open. Whether confronting digital polarization, fake news, or communal divisions, these poets'

narrative strategies become practical tools for thinking, feeling, and living with complexity.

For teachers, researchers, or anyone navigating today's contested truths, the mapped themes and cross-cultural dialogue here model a concrete, transferable approach: bring together unlikely voices, code the patterns, and learn to read not just for what is said, but for how stories shape—and unsettle—our ways of knowing. The enduring lesson from this “jugalbandi” is simple: truth, like narrative, is not a single line to defend, but a field of tension to inhabit—with care, humility, and imagination.

### **Conclusion**

This study demonstrates that poetic storytelling, when read comparatively and analyzed systematically through digital thematic coding, is a powerful epistemic strategy in the post-truth era. Rather than merely reflecting their contexts, Kabir and Whitman actively use narrative form as cognitive interventions: Kabir critiques rigid identities and religious dogma through paradox and negation, while Whitman promotes democratic inclusion and affective unity through expansive affirmation. NVivo coding revealed unexpected thematic overlaps (such as “Ontological Inclusivity”) and productive contrasts between the poets, confirming that their narrative methods differ but their ethical intent aligns—each challenging readers to think critically and empathetically.

The practical implication of this dialogic interplay is immediate and clear. Educators can use the study's comparative thematic maps directly in classrooms to help students recognize and critique manipulative binaries prevalent in contemporary political rhetoric and online misinformation. Translators gain a methodological model for attending not just to textual fidelity, but also to the epistemic values embedded within narrative structures. For scholars of comparative literature, media studies, and digital humanities, this study presents a replicable, scalable approach to analyzing how narratives shape collective identities and knowledge structures across cultures and media.

Future research should apply this comparative thematic-coding method to other pressing narrative contexts—digital misinformation, climate crisis communication, indigenous oral traditions—and empirically test how different narrative strategies impact audience perceptions and actions in polarized environments.

Ultimately, the real lesson from Kabir and Whitman's narrative jugalbandi is practical, ethical, and timely: storytelling remains our most effective resource for navigating complexity, resisting simplification, and cultivating epistemic resilience. In times of contested truths, their poetic strategies teach us not merely how to read texts, but how to interpret and ethically engage the competing stories that continually shape our shared world.

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