The labyrinth of marginality: a critique of theorising literary representation of marginality in Indian English literature

O labirinto da marginalidade: uma crítica à teorização da representação literária da marginalidade na literatura inglesa indiana

El laberinto de la marginalidad: una crítica a la teorización de la representación literaria de la marginalidad en la literatura inglesa india

DOI:10.34117/bjdv10n7-024

Submitted: Jun 14th, 2024
Approved: Jul 05th, 2024

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ABSTRACT
In his work After Amnesia, G.N. Devy rightly points out a gap, a void created by our collective “cultural amnesia” in literary theory and criticism. Foregrounding this insight, the research on “Marginal Literature” has crucial ontological and epistemological questions ahead of itself. The question: “What is Marginal Literature?” becomes more pertinent and complex when assessed in the context of the plurality of Indian society and culture. The exercise of creating a structured and organised theoretical point of view that is comprehensive enough to address and acknowledge the diverse and multifaceted marginal experience as expressed by contemporary writers is a challenge for all scholars working to define, hypothesise, analyse the phenomenon of marginality in the form of a question, a vista, an enigma or a mere tributary in the canon of Indian Literature written and translated in English. As a doctoral candidate working in this area, in this paper, I intend to discuss the various theorists, thinkers, and perspectives that have informed and the lacunas that have restrained the discussion of marginality in my thesis.

Keywords: marginality, plurality, Indian English literature, literary theory and criticism.

RESUMO
Na sua obra After Amnesia (Depois da Amnésia), G.N. Devy assinala, com razão, uma lacuna, um vazio criado pela nossa "amnésia cultural" coletiva na teoria e crítica literárias. Tendo em conta esta constatação, a investigação sobre a "Literatura Marginal" tem pela frente questões ontológicas e epistemológicas cruciais. A questão: "O que é a Literatura Marginal?" torna-se mais pertinente e complexa quando avaliada no contexto da pluralidade da sociedade e da cultura indiana. O exercício de criar um ponto de vista teórico estruturado e organizado que seja suficientemente abrangente para abordar e reconhecer a experiência marginal diversa e multifacetada expressa pelos escritores contemporâneos é um desafio para todos os académicos que trabalham para definir, formular hipóteses, analisar o fenómeno da marginalidade sob a forma de uma questão,
uma vista, um enigma ou um mero tributário no cânone da literatura indiana escrita e traduzida em inglês. Como doutoranda a trabalhar nesta área, neste artigo, pretendo discutir os vários teóricos, pensadores e perspectivas que informaram e as lacunas que restringiram a discussão da marginalidade na minha tese.

**Palavras-chave:** marginalidade, pluralidade, literatura inglesa indiana, teoria e crítica literárias.

**RESUMEN**
En su obra After Amnesia, G.N. Devy señala acertadamente una laguna, un vacío creado por nuestra "amnesia cultural" colectiva en la teoría y la crítica literarias. A partir de esta constatación, la investigación sobre la "literatura marginal” se plantea cuestiones ontológicas y epistemológicas cruciales. La pregunta: "¿Qué es la literatura marginal?" se vuelve más pertinente y compleja cuando se evalúa en el contexto de la pluralidad de la sociedad y la cultura indias. El ejercicio de crear un punto de vista teórico estructurado y organizado que sea lo suficientemente exhaustivo como para abordar y reconocer la diversa y polifacética experiencia marginal tal y como la expresan los escritores contemporáneos es un reto para todos los estudiosos que trabajan para definir, hipotetizar y analizar el fenómeno de la marginalidad en forma de pregunta, panorama, enigma o mero afluen te en el canon de la literatura india escrita y traducida al inglés. Como doctoranda que trabaja en esta área, en este artículo pretendo discutir los diversos teóricos, pensadores y perspectivas que han informado y las lagunas que han frenado la discusión de la marginalidad en mi tesis.

**Palabras clave:** marginalidad, pluralidad, literatura inglesa india, teoría y crítica literarias.

1 **INTRODUCTION**

Primarily, the question about Marginality is the question of who does not have power and why. This leads to another question: what are the consequences of not being part of the power structures? Power in this context is not restricted to political power only. It refers to cultural, historical, and societal power as well. The episteme of marginality and marginalisation is a work in progress. It has been addressed by different disciplines, and several thinkers (discussed later) to the extent of recognising it and discussing it in different contexts and situations. The dilemma of our times that makes it essential for us to study marginality is the rampant dangers associated with centralisation along with the spread of literacy like never before in the history of mankind. It is also supported by the excavation of knowledge about the lived experiences of ordinary people who were not considered a significant part of society and were treated in a subsidiary role to the others. People's movements around the world, like the Feminist movements, Dalit Panther...
movement, Anti-Apartheid movement, Anti-Colonial Movements, Climate Movements, and the Trans Movements have played a pivotal role in bringing about a crucial tilt in the way we view the world now.

Thus, we can infer that marginal literature concerns itself with the people who have been and are still on the inverse side of power. It is about how their lives are affected, shaped, disturbed, disrupted and discontinued because of the state of marginalisation that they did not choose and cannot escape. Its objectives, subsequently, lie farthest away from the classical logic behind the creation of literature. It is not written to fulfil the purpose of entertainment, instruction or catharsis or just to exist for itself. It exists to represent the lives of those for whom existence is a struggle, a dream and a challenge. It deals with how the human spirit endeavours against the pressures and burdens of history, politics, and economics that are meant to crush it. Marginal Literature is the literature of life that denies oppression.

2 METHODOLOGY

This paper employs the critical theoretical assessment method and survey technique to understand the range of literature that addresses marginality in various aspects. The Foucaudian Analysis of power relations backgrounds the discussion on the scope of the theoretical consideration on the topic. A theoretical body of work is essential to assess the literature that is produced in the area. However, the study of such areas is bounded by the limited theoretical innovations in the area. This paper is therefore a foundational research in establishing the areas father that need to be explored.

3 DISCUSSION

The dynamics of marginality are the dynamics of the structures of power. Power relations can be examined at the level of the nation states, within a country among different communities, between humans and nature, and within humans. If the Marxist approach is taken into cognizance, the one in control of the “means of production” controls power, in the case of the Feminist theory, it is the women who are powerless, through the point of view of Dalit theory, it is the Dalit community that is deprived of the power structures. All these theories and points of view are built on a sociological approach
towards the understanding of literature. Each tries to figure out the meaning of the phenomenon like the twelve blind men trying to decipher what an elephant is.

If we map out the territory of Indian literature, the writings from the North-East states of India, Jammu and Kashmir, Andaman and Nicobar Islands suffer marginality imposed by geographical or political detachment and isolation from mainland India. On the other hand, the tribal literature reflects the world of the lives of the Adivasi people of India in juxtaposition with other parts of the country. Dalit Literature speaks of the Dalit experience and questions the caste impositions of society. Women and religious minorities write about their experiences in a world dominated by the antithesis of their identities. While this particular line of thought might hold its weaknesses, nevertheless, it invokes the universal truth that all these listed binaries are manufactured. Consequently, the following question is raised: How to view/interpret/understand marginal literature as a researcher? The researcher needs to be self-aware of his/her predispositions and prejudices before deciding to work on marginal literature. The bias that researchers might have while dealing with such works of literature is what I term, the Marginal Bias. To exemplify this bias, in the introduction to a translated version of the Punjabi Dalit Poet Lal Singh Dil’s *Poet of the Revolution*, Nirupama Dutt recalls how a prominent Punjabi critic, Dr. Harbahjan Singh almost dismissed Dil’s manuscript because it was not written on premium quality paper and had a shabby look about it. Marginal Bias thus can be avoided by phasing out terms like “superior literature” or “elite literature.” Literature itself is a means to draw attention, to bring it to the centre, to express a world in words. In her essay “The Race for Theory” Barbara Christian opines,

At the least, though, we can say that the terms "minority" and "discourse" are located firmly in a Western dualistic or "binary" frame which sees the rest of the world as minor, and tries to convince the rest of the world that it is major, usually through force and then through language, even as it claims many of the ideas that we, its "historical" other, have known and spoken about for so long. For many of us have never conceived of ourselves only as somebody's other. (5)

This insight looks at the marginal literature not as a reply or alternative to the “existing” body of literature but as an essential, autonomous, placeholder in the understanding of literature.

A complete theory or work of criticism does not address the question of the diverse experiences of marginality that are attributed to different factors regarding India. With the variety of literary voices that at present pervade the literary scene in India and the
determined promise of the possibility of these voices multiplying and becoming sturdier, there is a need to find a common ground, a meeting place to connect diversity. A similar effort can be noticed in Russell Ferguson edited, *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*. This work is a compilation of essays by theorists belonging to different demographics and ethnicities contributing to the creation of an understanding of the centre and margin in the context of American culture, Literature and Arts. In its foreword, Marcia Tucker writes down the purpose behind the anthology:

This book examines the process by which, through shifts in position, any given group can be ignored, trivialized, rendered invisible and unheard, perceived as inconsequential, de-authorized, "other," or threatening, while others are valorized. The essays challenge the idea of identity as singular or monolithic, exploring instead the concept of a "multiple, shifting, and often self-contradictory identity . . . made up of heterogeneous and heteronomous representations of gender, race, and class."

Since art and culture are inseparable, these essays also challenge the strangely persistent idea that artists and the work they make come in only one gender, color or sexual preference. (Christian 1987)

This effort, while presenting a good example for consolidating the cultural diversity of America in a body of critical work, India’s pluralism, right now, seems significantly more challenging to bring together. India is witnessing a revolution in the amount of work being written and published, and this trend is bound to grow. Historically, the restriction on education had limited literary production. The plurality is not determined by a centre and its binary but by many centres and their alternatives. Thus, the Dalit writings and texts by LGBTQ+ and marginal groups are central in themselves, and Indian culture has the features and a historically proven ability to incorporate different centres in its literary, cultural and creative imagination.

Out of the works that deal with the philosophy of marginality is the Postmodern philosopher Lyotard’s *Postmodern Condition* in which he says, “The grand narrative has lost its credibility, regardless of what mode of unification it uses, regardless of whether it is a speculative narrative or a narrative of emancipation” (Postmodern Condition 1985). This loss of reliance that Lyotard grieves, points to the fragmentation of the so-called universal narratives in the Western world that glued the perceptive reality together. On the contrary, he suggested that it is petit récits, or smaller narratives, that will fill up the void created by the fall of the grand narratives.

Postmodernist thinkers dig deeper into the reasons for the unreliability of the existing narratives. To exemplify, the use of the German word *Aufklärer* which means
“clarifier” or the “interpreter” for the one in control of the narrative came under suspicion. The basic principle behind the trust and dependability that people had on the narrator is questioned. This gives space to rewritings, reinterpretations, alternative interpretations and dispersal of the role of the narrator to many more individuals. As Simon Maplas explains:

This means that the task of the postmodern historian or writer of finite history is not simply to make up new stories but to interrogate the universal assumptions of our contemporary power structures, challenge their explanatory schemes and make room for different voices to emerge. The urgency of these challenges is most readily identifiable in the work of feminist and postcolonial writers who question the exclusion of women and non-Europeans from traditional accounts of the past. (The Postmodern 2005)

The essay titled “What is Minority Literature?” by Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, in which they discuss Franz Kafka’s craft. Their idea of minority literature is based on the fact that the use of German, the language of the dominant community (Kafka being a member of the persecuted Jewish community) created a possibility in an adverse political climate. They define minority literature as having a political value, under which the experience of the individual becomes a priority and the point of view of the world recedes to the background. The second feature is that of a “Collective Value”, the expression in minority literature is based on its relevance to a group or a community. Deleuze and Guattari’s assessment of the Minority literature is related to the “co-efficient of deterritorialization” caused by the political consequence of a language receding from the culture and use of it by the minority. “This is the way that Kafka defines the impasse which bars Prague's Jews from writing and which makes their literature an impossibility: the impossibility of not writing, the impossibility of writing in German, the impossibility of writing otherwise.” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1983, 13-33) This “impossibility” is breached by the use of the dominant language by a minority writer which creates Minority Literature.

Another theorist whose ideas assist in understanding how marginalisation occurs and sustains itself is Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci’s idea of Hegemony. In his Prison Notebooks, Gramsci describes hegemony as a combination of civil society and political society, a force that determines and authorises the dominant idea or thought in society and by the means of consent and complete obedience of the people to the ideas espoused by the ones in the position of power. Thus, hegemony becomes a tool for
understanding the adherence to a negative, harmful, and damaging idea that is considered the norm by the people at large even when they are a victim of it.

In the Indian context, Dalit theorists and thinkers have become an influential force in defining, expressing and discussing the marginal experience of Dalits in India. Out of these, the literary works of Sharamkumar Limabale, Baburao Bagul (“Dalit Literature is but Human Literature”), B. Krishnappa’s essay “Dalit Literature” and analytical and critical cultural texts by Dr. B.R Ambedkar, Gopal Guru and Sundar Sarukkai (The Cracked Mirror and Experience and Caste, and the Everyday Social), or Sekhar Bandyopadhyay’s Caste, Culture And Hegemony: Social Domination In Colonial Bengal and many others help in understanding the everyday experiences of marginality by the Dalits of India.

Dr. B. R Ambedkar’s idea of Graded Inequality in which he describes how all castes are equal stakeholders in preserving the caste system. He asserts that “All are slaves of the caste system. But all slaves are not equal in status” (Ambedkar 2015), a pertinent insight into the way hegemony operates in the Indian subcontinent. This work thus becomes a significant addition to the reading list for understanding Ambedkar’s philosophy and propositions. It highlights how breaking the psychological hegemony of caste is one of the last battles of resistance that will be fought against a casteist society.

In Literary criticism and Theory, the spotlight lies on Sharan Kumar Limbale whose Towards an Aesthetics of Dalit Literature is a robust step in the direction of creating a theoretical framework for Dalit writings. Along with Ruth Vanita’s Same-Sex love in India: Readings from Literature and History and Queering India: Same-Sex Love and Eroticism in Indian Culture and Society; Homi K Bhabha’s Location of Culture and Nation and Narration (edited); Gayatri Chakrovarty Spivak’s oeuvre of postcolonial works; Amartya Sen’s works that deal directly or indirectly with a critique of Indian culture like Identity & Violence, The Argumentative Indian and Inequality Reexamined; and G.N Devy’s work on the Tribal identity, issues and stories (The Question of Silence, Being Adivasi, The Crisis Within, After Amnesia), a working foundation of the concerns and perspectives that are significant in building an overarching discourse on marginality can be demarcated.

In his Towards an Aesthetics of Dalit Literature, he gives an alternative approach to the classical Indian critical theory of Rasa. He says that the principles of Satyam, Shivam, and Sundaram are not compatible with the lives of the Dalits who do not have any of the three values in their life. He suggests replacing these terms with Untruth,
Unholy and Unbeauty. He argues that the latter values are more inclined to the life of the Dalits. Such a categorisation is a step in the direction of creating a theory for understanding the concerns of the marginal literature.

These theoretical suggestive readings might seem eclectic (and certainly acutely limited in range) build a network of different writings that answer back to the questions “What is Marginalisation?” and “How are people marginalised?” Literature might address different aspects of these questions from different vantage points, but to create a working theoretical thesis for studying these texts must bring together these different voices. In the world political order, the difference and space between the marginalised and the oppressor is one that remains constant. The tools of oppression and marginalisation follow patterns (History is one discipline that analyses by identifying the patterns in different events, creating a connection between them) of coercion, punishment, dehumanisation and violence to maintain the hierarchical structures. These power relations can be observed in texts that deal with relationships between nation-states, female-centric narratives, the narratives around the financially disadvantaged, the stories from the LGBTQIA+ community and other marginalised areas. The human experience in these texts may look different but is connected by universal sorrow, grief and hardships. The theoretical underpinnings gives a better framework to discuss these literary works with a connected knowledge.

4 CONCLUSION

The problem with theorising is centred around finding connecting themes, the intricacies of the text; reading between what is said and what is not said. It also includes understanding and assessing the difficulties in writing, publishing and proliferating texts on marginality. Also, dealing with "Marginal Bias" is also necessary. Good literature is rejected or ignored because it does not give us the comfort of the kind of literature that we, as readers have been used to. Literature from the margins will always question the established form and ways of expressions. There also needs to be an interaction between thinkers and writers who deal with different aspects of marginality. While writing my thesis, marked by the limitation of the lengths and breadths of my knowledge I have discussed marginality as reflected in my select authors under the thematic categories of: “Hegemonic Structures and Marginality”, “Violence, Silence and Death”, “Assertions and Resistance”, “Experiments in Narration”. The movement of the themes goes from the
plausible reason behind marginality, what it causes, how it is fought or challenged, and lastly the way the works represent the world, life and voices of the marginals. This chapter scheme has helped me address, link and create a well-knit study of the texts to create a working understanding of marginality. However, the biggest challenge remains, to gain consciousness from the amnesia that keeps Indian Literary Criticism in the shadows.
REFERENCES


