

VOICES FROM THE EDGE: EXPLORING THEMES OF MARGINALITY IN ENGLISH LITERATURE

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Abstract: This study delves into the rich topic of marginality in English literature, tracing how narratives have written for the marginalized in society. Through the examination of a diverse range of texts from early novels to contemporary works the study illuminates how marginalized groups and characters subvert mainstream cultural discourses and illuminate the complexities of identity, power and resistance. The core of this study is an inquiry into how authors employ language use, narrative structure and characterization to express experience of marginality and resistance. Employing critical theory and socio-cultural critique, the study locates marginality in historical contexts and illustrates shifting significance in the broader landscape of English literary canon. Lastly, this research emphasizes the continued importance of voices from the edge in enriching our understanding of society and literature.

Keywords: Marginality, English literature, Narratives, Contemporary, Language

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1. INTRODUCTION

Background & Context:

Literary marginality is the depiction of individuals or groups that occupy the margins of prevailing social, cultural or political orders. They are likely to be marginalized by powerful systems on the basis of race, gender, class, sexuality, disability or a colonial history. English literature, from its traditional texts to its modern works, has been describing and analyzing marginality, presenting an eye from which the dynamics of power in society can be viewed. Literature has long been engaged in stabilizing and destabilizing social hierarchies. *Jane Eyre* (1847) and *Oliver Twist* (1838) are classical novels that are concerned with gender and class marginalization [1][2], while postcolonial novels such as *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) reverse imperialist and racial exclusion [3]. Postmodern fiction, from Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*, 2000 [7] to Angie Thomas's *The Hate U Give* (2017), continues same addressing more contemporary dimensions of marginality in the globalized world [5][6]. This study examines the manner in which English literature has represented marginalized individuals and groups historically and how their voice and the voiceless have found expression. In examining such stories, the

study reveals the manner in which literature constructs challenges and re-negotiates social norms. The objectives of the Study is,

- To Understand the Evolution of Marginality in Literature.
- To Analyze Representations of Marginalized Voices.

Scope and Methodology:

This study contrasts a range of English novels of different historical periods, with regard to both eternal classics and more recent works. Covered are works representing a number of aspects of marginality, such as gender, race, class and postcolonial subjectivity, novels examined is:

Classic Works: Jane Eyre [12], Oliver Twist [10], Frankenstein [13].

Postcolonial and Racial Marginality: Things Fall Apart [8], Wide Sargasso Sea [11].

Gender and Sexual Marginality: Orlando [9], The Well of Loneliness [14].

Contemporary Fiction: White Teeth [15], The Hate U Give [16].

In order to critically approach these texts, this research takes an interdisciplinary theoretical approach, borrowing from:

Postcolonial Theory: Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, Homi Bhabha explores how literature depicts colonial subjects and their marginalization [17].

Feminist and Gender Studies: Judith Butler [19], Simone de Beauvoir [18] examines gender and sexual identity in literary marginalization.

Marxist Criticism: Karl Marx, Antonio Gramsci focuses on class conflict and economic marginalization in literature [20].

Intersectionality Theory: Kimberlé Crenshaw discusses how the convergence of more than one system of oppression creates experiences of marginality [21].

Through close reading and comparative approach, this study attempts to contribute to how English literature speaks to issues of exclusion, resistance and transformation.

Thesis Statement:

Marginality has been a recurring and dynamic concern in English literature, mirroring the changing boundaries of social inclusion and exclusion. Through an analysis of major texts from various literary periods, this research contends that literature is both a reflection of social hierarchies and a site for marginalized voices to reclaim their stories. Through a range of narrative strategies, writers have reinforced and subverted dominant ideologies, informing the discourse on identity, power and resistance.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Defining Marginality:

Marginality is a multifaceted term that can be grasped from multiple frames of reference like social, cultural and literary. Marginality simply means the state of being relegated to the fringes of a hegemonic society, generally because of race, gender, class, sexuality, disability or colonial past. Marginality in literature is expressed through characters, themes and narrative forms that reflect exclusion, oppression and resistance.

Social Perspective: Marginality is associated with power relations that decide who is a part of the dominant mainstream and who is marginalized. This marginalization may be on the basis of economic status, ethnicity, gender or political ideology.

Cultural Perspective: Cultural marginality is people or communities living in-between or outside hegemonic cultural expectations. Postcolonial subjects, immigrants and gender non-conforming persons most often encounter such marginalization.

Literary Approach: Literature reflects as well as defies social hierarchies. Marginalized voices in literature may either be silenced or expressed in ways that subvert prevailing ideologies. The application of unconventional narrative styles, fractured narration and multiple narratives tends to emphasize the marginalized experience.

Key Theories & Critics:

1. **Postcolonial Theory:** Postcolonial theory considers how colonial pasts have influenced power relations between powerful and dominated societies. It challenges the portrayal of colonized people in literature and addresses themes of exile, hybridity and resistance.

Edward Said, *Orientalism* – Asserted that the West creates the East as an "Other," representing it as exotic, backward and inferior. This "Orientalism" perpetuates colonial hegemony.

Gayatri Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' – Explored how colonial discourse suppresses marginalized voices, especially women. She asked if it is possible for really marginalized people to speak for themselves within dominant literary and academic discourses.

Homi Bhabha, 'The Location of Culture' – Developed the hybridity, mimicry and the "Third Space," describing colonized subjects negotiating identity between two cultures.

2. **Feminist and Gender Studies:** Feminist literary analysis looks at how literature describes and authenticates gendered oppression and how literature bears oppressed women's voices. Gender studies expand this inquiry to observe how literature builds and unravels gender identity.

Simone de Beauvoir, 'The Second Sex' – Contended that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman," and gender is constructed. She was critical of the way literature perpetuates women's marginalization.

Judith Butler, 'Gender Trouble' – Overturned traditional understandings of gender identity, maintaining that gender is per-formative rather than necessary. Butler's theory is central to queer marginality studies in literature.

3. **Marxist and Class-Based Strategies:** Marxist literary theory deals with how literary representation is determined by economic structures. It explains how class conflict, economic oppression and power relations between the ruling and working classes are portrayed in literature.

Karl Marx 'Das Kapital' – Classified class conflict as the determining motive of history, governing the composition of societies and how literature conforms to these compositions.

Antonio Gramsci, 'Prison Notebooks' – Established the theory of cultural hegemony, wherein dominant classes exercise power by means of ideology, including mass media and literature.

4. **Intersectionality:** Intersectionality examines how various forms of marginalization race, gender and class intersect and interact. It is required in literary study that portrays characters that experience multiple oppressions.

Kimberlé Crenshaw, 'Mapping the Margins' – Was the one to popularize the term "intersectionality" to explain how Black women's experiences of discrimination cannot be explained by examining race and gender separately but must be examined in conjunction.

III. REPRESENTATIONS OF MARGINALITY IN ENGLISH LITERATURE

Marginalized Identities in Classic Literature: Traditional literature typically features characters who struggle against strict social hierarchies that grant privilege and power. The novels are centered on class, gender and rejection by society themes, illustrating how outsiders cope with their exclusion.

Jane Eyre [12] – Jane's miseries are a traditional example of gender and class marginality. She is both a governess and an orphan and hence in a state of suspended animation neither fully accepted by the upper class nor part of the proletariat. Her resistance to patriarchal norms, including spurning Rochester's initial offer and insisting on independence for her is a persuasive counterpoint to Victorian gender norms.

Frankenstein [13] – Frankenstein's monster is the archetypal "other." He is rejected, loathed and forsaken by society because of his appearance, the very incarnation of social prejudice and exclusion. The novel is a critique of exclusion by the outsider against society.

Oliver Twist [10] – Dickens depicts economic marginality in the form of Oliver, an orphan, who is subjected to the cruel harshness of poverty. The novel unmasks the abusive treatment of the poor and questions the class system of 19th-century England.

These pieces demonstrate how marginalized figures in traditional literature tend to fight against oppressive social systems, providing early criticisms of exclusion and hierarchy.

Postcolonial & Racial Marginality:

As postcolonial literature emerged, writers started to contest mainstream Eurocentric discourses and reclaim the voice of the colonized. These texts engage with issues of cultural displacement, racial discrimination and fragmentation of identity.

Things Fall Apart [8] – Achebe's novel challenges the colonial narrative by giving a native African view of British colonialism. The protagonist, Okonkwo, symbolizes the resistance against cultural destruction since the Igbo customs and tradition are being threatened by colonial invasions and colonial ideologies are thrust upon them. The novel resists the marginalization of indigenous cultures in colonial rule.

Wide Sargasso Sea [11] – Retelling Bertha Mason's tale, Jane Eyre's Creole heroine, the book offers her own version as victim of racial colonial oppression. Rhys paints manner in which Bertha (also referred to as Antoinette) is stripped of identity and agency by racial oppression and patriarchal control.

Both the books address how colonialism and racism are accountable for marginalizing entire communities, questioning the dominant historical discourses of English literature.

Gender and Sexual Marginality:

Mainstream fiction continues to interrogate marginality, most frequently challenging the intersectionality of race, class, gender and identity during an era of globalization.

White Teeth [15] – Smith's novel challenges immigration, multiculturalism and the richness of identity during postcolonial Britain. Narrated through multiracial protagonists, White Teeth reveals conflict related to second-generation immigrants caught between competing cultural demands.

The Hate U Give [16] – The novel is on institutionalized racism and police brutality in America. Starr Carter is the protagonist who witnesses Black communities being marginalized and has to balance the conflicts between her white-majority private school and Black community. It is opposed to institutionalized discrimination and is focused on the potentials of activism.

These contemporary texts show the way marginality remains an enduring issue in literature today, reflective of shifting social issues and necessitating greater representation and inclusion.

IV. THEMES AND NARRATIVE TECHNIQUES

Literature that treats marginality generally employs distinctive thematic concerns and narrative techniques to describe the lives of those who dwell at the edge of society. The next part examines how authors employ language, symbolism, voice and accounts of resistance in order to construct their accounts of marginalized subjects.

Language & Voice: One of the most significant aspects of marginality in literature is how marginalized characters are given a voice or not.

Silencing and Oppression: Many novels feature marginalized characters that are not heard. In Wide Sargasso Sea, Antoinette/Bertha's life is told through the perspectives of others for the most part, reflecting the historical silencing of women, especially colonial women. In Things Fall Apart, the erasure of Igbo culture by European colonial discourse is echoed in the silencing of native voices.

Dialect and Non-Standard English: Authors have employed non-standard English or dialect to portray marginalized identities. *White Teeth* by Zadie Smith, for example, employs multicultural slang and hybrid patterns of language to portray the immigrant experience and the children of immigrants in Britain.

Code-Switching and Dual Consciousness: Starr Carter code-switches in *The Hate U Give* between the Black English she uses in her predominantly Black neighborhood and where she works at her predominantly white school. This is the complex navigating marginalized individuals must do to move between multiple social spaces.

By projecting or limiting the voices of marginalized characters, authors set up how readers perceive their agency and struggle.

Symbolism & Metaphor: Symbolism is an influential tool in the portrayal of themes of marginality and tends to symbolize exclusion, identity crises and resistance.

Monsters and the 'Other': In *Frankenstein*, the creature is a metaphor for being rejected by society, echoing the lives of those who are considered outsiders. The novel is critical of the indiscriminate criteria upon which society regards certain beings as monstrous or not worth allowing into society.

Fire and Water in *Wide Sargasso Sea*: Antoinette's burning of Rochester's house is a metaphor for her defiance against her enforced silence and loss of self. Water, on the other hand, symbolizes escape as well as confinement, both of which are evident in her slide into madness.

Names and Identity: In *Things Fall Apart*, the loss of traditional names and their replacement with Christian names reflect erasure under colonialism. The same is true in *The Hate U Give*, where the title itself is a modification of Tupac's motto "The Hate U Give Little Infants F****s everybody" (THUG LIFE), which captures how systemic oppression educates marginalized communities.

Writers use metaphors and symbols to provide greater insight to the reader about marginality, saying something intangible in tangible terms.

Narrative Perspective:

The narrative point of view determines how marginalization is presented and interpreted.

First-Person Perspective: Most novels employ first-person narration in order to present an insider's portrait of marginalization. *The Well of Loneliness* is told in Stephen Gordon's voice to enable readers to feel her marginalization as a lesbian during early 20th-century England. In the same vein, *The Hate U Give* uses first-person narration to present the experiences of racial marginalization as very intimate for Starr Carter.

Third-Person Omniscient and Limited Point of View: *Oliver Twist* employs third-person omniscient to reveal the harsh realities of poverty and class exclusion. Conversely, *Wide Sargasso Sea* employs multiple perspectives and brings Antoinette's and Rochester's perspectives into the picture. Fragmented narrative is employed here in order to explain the instability of identity and rivalry for sympathy in colonial relationships.

Unreliable Narration and Broken Storytelling: Unreliable narrations or fractured stories are employed in some texts in an effort to parallel the dislocation and marginality of the outsiders. Jean Rhys' innovative use of modernist narrative strategies in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, for example, captures the broken identity of its heroine.

By such narrative strategies, authors construct readers' experiences of marginality and decide whether to make the reader experience oppression as external or from within the marginal character's consciousness.

Resistance & Agency:

While most literary texts present oppression, they also reveal how oppressed individuals resist it and act with agency.

Resistance against Social Norms: Jane Eyre requires autonomy through challenging social norm and earning respect in relationships. Orlando is also gender-bending in that it displays a revolutionary fluidity of action and identity.

Political and Cultural Resistance: Things Fall Apart illustrates resistance against colonial rule, although finally Okonkwo's struggle meets tragic failure. The Hate U Give depicts contemporary activism, as Starr Carter discovers her voice to protest police brutality and institutional racism.

Reclaiming Identity:

In Wide Sargasso Sea, Antoinette's last act of burning down Rochester's house can be interpreted as a declaration of agency, a refusal to be silenced.

In White Teeth, characters negotiate their multicultural identities, resisting one-dimensional definitions of nationality and belonging.

Marginal characters in literature typically represent both suffering and resistance, capturing the two realities of being excluded and empowered.

V. THE EVOLUTION OF MARGINALITY IN LITERATURE

From Exclusion to Representation:

In early English literature, the marginalized groups were not represented or stereotypically represented affirming social hierarchies.

Marginalization of Voices: The majority of English literary pieces were about dominant social classes, affirming white, male and Eurocentric voices. Women, working-class individuals, racial minorities and LGBTQ+ individuals were continuously excluded or portrayed as per the dominant culture.

Stereotypes and Misrepresentation: In Othello 'Shakespeare', Othello is a Moor and is portrayed as another whose racial difference predisposes him to tragedy and manipulation. His portrayal represents early race and otherness anxieties. In colonial texts like Robinson Crusoe 'Daniel Defoe', native people are portrayed as noble savages or as inferior characters, upholding colonialist discourses. Female characters in early fiction were characteristically depicted as passive or morally dichotomized characters, either as virtuous character Pamela in Pamela, Samuel Richardson or demonized character Bertha Mason in Jane Eyre.

Notwithstanding such misrepresentations, a few early fictions subtly criticized marginalization in ways that would provide groundwork for greater inclusiveness in later literary movements.

The Rise of Minority Authors:

With social and political change, voices from the marginalized began protesting against their exclusion from literature, leading to an escalation of literature that directly addressed issues of race, gender, class and identity.

Postcolonial Writers: Things Fall Apart [8] pushed back against Western portrayals of Africa by presenting an authentic Igbo voice. Wide Sargasso Sea [11] gave voice to previously suppressed character, Bertha Mason, recasting Jane Eyre in a postcolonial and feminist context.

Feminist Authors: 'The Second Sex', Simone de Beauvoir and 'A Room of One's Own' [9], argued for women's place in literature and society. The Handmaid's Tale, Margaret Atwood explored women's oppression in a dystopian context.

LGBTQ+ Visibility:

The Well of Loneliness, Radclyffe Hall was one of first novels to portray lesbian identity unambiguously, even if it was censored. Orlando, Virginia Woolf offered a groundbreaking exploration of gender fluidity.

Intersectional Narratives: Both of these novels like Toni Morrison's Beloved and Zadie Smith's White Teeth are based on intersectional race, gender and class oppressions.

These texts shifted away from literature's traditional way of depicting voices of their centers, so far suppressed or altered, thus allowing for a greater literary canon.

The Digital Age & New Forms of Marginality:

The computer age also re-wrote literary narratives of marginality, producing a diverse array of voices and stories.

Social Media and Internet Websites: The internet has provided marginalized writers means of evading traditional publishing barriers, disseminating their stories through blogs, self-publishing and mobilization on social media.

Afro-futurism and Speculative Fiction: Authors N.K. Jemisin, *The Broken Earth* trilogy and Octavia Butler, *Kindred* utilize speculative fiction to address issues of race, oppression and identity.

Queer and Trans Stories: Recent novels like *Detransition, Baby* provides complex representations of transgender lives.

AI and Digital Exclusion: New marginalities have appeared, such as digital inequality, algorithmic bias and representation in AI-generated stories.

VI. CONCLUSION

Summary of Key Findings:

This study has highlighted some of the most significant aspects of marginality in English literature:

Marginality as an Enduring Theme: Literature has traditionally represented individuals and groups excluded on the basis of race, gender, class, sexuality and colonial history. These narratives bring to light the lived experiences of marginalized people.

Historical Exclusion and Stereotyping: Marginalized communities were misrepresented or rendered mute through early literature that reinforced the dominant power structures and ideologies.

The Rise of Minority Writers: The postcolonial, feminist and LGBTQ+ authors have challenged such conventional narratives by providing counter-narratives that redefine power and identity.

Narrative Techniques and Representation: Discourse techniques such as fractured narrative, dialect, point-of-view shifts and symbolism have been employed to represent and subvert marginalization.

The Age of Digital Technologies and New Trends of Marginality: Recent scholarship and digital storytelling have extended the conversation on marginality further and account for new issues such as digital exclusion and intersectional oppression.

Implications for Literary Studies: Comprehending marginality in literature has significant implications for literary scholarship and criticism.

Re-envisioning the Canon:

Traditional literary canons have privileged dominant voices, but examining marginality implies broader and expansive approach to literary analysis.

Enriching Critical Models:

Post-colonialism, feminism, Marxism and intersectionality offer alternative models for the interpretation of texts that challenge Eurocentric and patriarchal models.

Encouraging Diverse Voices: Recognizing the contributions of marginalized authors shifts the literary context, influencing publishing conventions and pedagogical curriculum.

Interdisciplinary Connections: Marginality converges with history, sociology, political science and media studies to emphasize the broader social value of literary representation.

Future Research Directions:

Although this research has touched on several aspects of marginality in literature, some areas are left to be investigated further.

Comparative Studies: How other literary traditions beyond the English canon represent marginality may provide a broader international view of exclusion and resistance.

Intersectionality in Postmodern Literature: There is more work to be done on the ways postmodern authors approach intersectional types of marginality, particularly race, gender and disability.

Digital and AI-Generated Fiction: With more digital storytelling and AI-generated fiction, an examination of how these modes represent (or fail to represent) marginalized voices is an emerging interest.

Marginality and Eco-poetry: Global warming affects marginalized communities disproportionately more and is only starting to be handled in eco-poetry, hence it is an interesting topic of study.

Final Thoughts: Literary marginality is more a site of negotiation, resistance and transformation than it is a response to social structure. As literature continues to evolve, so does its relationship to questions of exclusion and identity. Literary analysis can create a wide sense of justice, representation and the power of narrative in shaping societal consciousness by critically reading these narratives.

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