

## The Concept of Marginality in Indian Context: A brief survey

**Dr. SAVEEN SOUDA**

Assistant Professor, Dept of English  
Telangana University Dichpally, Nizamabad-AP  
PIN: 503302

### ABSTRACT

*Marginality, addressed in the Indian context, pre-supposes hegemonic powers and their victims. It can often be understood in terms of culture, religion, caste, and gender. Human experience can be part of material relationships, and in order to subjugate others, society can often create false consciousness by valorizing certain perceptions, which basically serve its own interests. No sphere of human experience can be exempt from the manipulative agencies of any society. History gives ample examples of how societal constructors are perpetuated only to suit its own agenda. In Western civilization, for example, perception of Jews is seen through the prism of Christian anti-Semitism. For more than two thousand years, the Jews have been perceived as anti-Christian usurers, pawnbrokers, and seditionists and therefore they were pushed beyond the mainstream of Western society. In such a scenario:*

The impulse to oppose cultural norms appears as inarticulate revolt, as social criticism, as vision, as ideology, as completed revolution; it may spring from logic, disillusionment, or the experience of oppression. In short, it is the part of the continuing dialectic of history, as much our cultural heritage as what it opposes. What I mean, then, by 'counter-tradition' is not 'that which opposes tradition', but 'the tradition which opposes. (Theertha 1992: 17)

Such an approach is also historically an easy excuse to kill and plunder for any social and political disorder in mainstream society. Hence, theories of knowledge, disciplines of thought, philosophical enquiry, and to a large extent epistemology in an uncanny way reinforces false consciousness, which is also known as reification in Marxist terms. They can also reconstruct accepted prejudices as authentic although in actual fact they are the sources of inauthenticity.

In Indian society, politics of marginalization needs to be predicated upon caste and genealogy although, marginalization can be addressed from different aspects such as 1.social, 2.religious, 3.economic and 4.cultural as well as ethnic minorities and racial. Social –religious and economic marginality is ultimately determined by caste politics in our country. Being economically and socially advancement does not necessarily guarantee mainstream status in our country. It is ultimately caste, which valorizes or de legitimizes one's own status and identity in Indian society. The same arguments apply to artistic and cultural marginalization. There is a consciousness, which has thoroughly neglected some aspects in this tradition, which deserve profound admiration. But as noted earlier, the fate of all of these things in ultimately subservient to the dignity that one attaches historically to caste.

Indian society and culture in its traditional super structure has its own share of politics of marginalization. Whatever may be the original intention of the philosophy Varnashrama dharma or the stratification based on caste, its consequence at the present time and historically is pernicious, to say the least:

Brahmanism/casteism in a hegemonic ideology, sustained through a cleverly designed socio-religious structure, which works, to use Antonio Gramsci's phrase, as a 'permanently organized force'. Mere economism – reflected in the history –as-study-of succession –of advancing –modes –of – production approach does not help us to understand the complex and highly resilient character of Brahmanism. It works at several levels in a multiplicity of forms- all of which empower the Brahman and allied castes, and disempowered the rest, legitimizing gross inequalities, human rights abuse, gender discrimination, mass illiteracy, untouchability etc. Traditionally, it is propelled by the ruthless pursuit of self –aggrandizement based on caste, priest –craft and false philosophy – caste representing the scheme of domination, priest-craft means of exploitation and false philosophy a justification for both. (Ilaiyah 1996: 24)

Marginalization, in this paper, is largely theorized, critiqued and perceived principally in the context of caste system and its literary and cultural perceptions. Tillie Olsen's *Silences* addresses the context of marginalization in a profound way. She talks about her own experience as a child of immigrants in the explanative context of America immigrants in the early part of the twentieth century. She was exploited by business and corporate culture of America while personally she was inclined towards artistic and creative sensibilities. Unfortunately, she is forced to work hard for the mere survival of her family. After marriage, she had the responsibility of looking after her children and her husband. All her life, she had to live to take care of mundane material concerns and her creative impulse had been thus silenced by external circumstances. This is also another form of marginalization as she is not allowed to achieve her innermost moorings only because of societal restrictions and her own peculiar material condition and manipulative value system which have negatively impacted her life.

Therefore, marginalization is the enemy of spontaneous expression of one's being. Marginalization also in a very

subtle manner manipulates the inherited social prejudices in order to serve the interests of a few while silencing others in the name of ideology, culture and indeed in the Indian context the caste system itself. How marginalization has been savagely put into practice in the name of caste is a long and painful story especially the subjugation of Dalits – untouchables in Indian society:

Traditional Hindu understanding is that political power is to be held by Khstriyas and that Brahmins are to assist them in ministerial positions. But this is an inadequate understanding. Power relation cannot be discussed merely in terms of institutions that are related to the state. The Dalit-Bahujans live very much within a certain framework of power relations. First and foremost the caste system itself set up a certain type of power relations. The Maalas and the Maadigas, right from the childhood, are trained to more obey and to listen them to command and to speak. Starting from this early age one learns to listen and obey or to speak and to command depending on the status of one's caste. The lower the caste of the person, the higher will the level of obedience, and the higher the caste of the person, the stronger will be the motivation to speak and to command. (Ilaiyah1995: 36-7)

Apparently, the foundational texts of Indian culture perceived to have been allegedly discriminatory brought into practice caste subjugation in an uncanny manner. Once the theoretical framework of marginalization had been constructed with apparent theoretical substantiation from canonical texts of Indian heritage, its perpetuation through multiple institutional and socio-cultural methods became both convenient and easy. A medieval Indian social process testifies to the fact that the behavior meted out to the Dalits is similar to the fate of black people in South Africa, which is universally known as Apartheid. To this day, there is little progress in the lot of the Dalits despite the activities of the conscious Dalits who appear to be steadfastly gathering strength to counter Marginalization. The main thrust of this dissertation, therefore, is to critique politics of marginalization tackled by the selected writers in the realm of literary imagination.

In order to locate the genealogy of the aesthetic praxis of these writers, it is imperative to examine their social milieu. Therefore, Indian cultural paradigm vis-à-vis caste needs to be properly articulated since these three writers namely Mulk Raj Anand, Shiva Sankara Pillai, and Kalyan Rao, chose to write about Dalits who are not even part of Chaturvarna concept expounded in Rigveda's Xth mandala of Purusasukta. The Chaturvarnas are as follows: Brahmins, were supposed to be supreme in the caste hierarchy, next were Kshatriyas the warrior class; they are followed by Vaisyas belonging to agriculture oriented activities who later became part of the mercantile class; and lastly Sudras who were actually subordinate to the rest of them and born mainly to slave for the three higher castes. It is to be noted that Dalits were not even thought fit to be mentioned in this context. It was only in the later Vedic period, (Circa 1000 to 600 BC) discussion of the Dalits emerged and they were called Panchamas.

A noted social activist, Braj Ranjan Mani has this to comment while reflecting on origins of caste in his book *De Brahmanizing History: Dominance and Resistance in Indian society* (2005).

“Caste, according to Manu, in the creation of God, and the Brahmins, who are at the pinnacle of caste hierarchy, are the living embodiments of Good on earth. In his, own words. “A Brahman in a great god whether he is learned or imbecile (IX 317) and the brahmins should be respected in every way even if they indulge in crime (XI-319)”. Manu tries to instruct peasants, workers and even kings to religiously serve the interests of the godly Brahmins. He stresses that the greatest religion for shudras and women – who are born in sin-is to play the role of willing victims and slaves, every ready to be manipulated and exploited without a murmur of protest, so that in the next life they may get a lift up the caste ladder.” (Khair2001: 57)

What had happened to the Dalit experience for over two millennia is only to be speculated. They must have experienced social disgrace and stigma at the same time being silenced by the hegemonic interests of society. Modern India, on the contrary, has experienced resistance and made an effort to articulate the humanity of the beleaguered Dalits. Incidentally, the term Dalit is widely used in modern scholarship. To be sure, the most important theoreticians of Dalit and others backward castes are Jyothi Rao Phule, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, Ramaswamy Naikar, and Narayan guru among others.

In this context, we have to focus on the relationship between marginalization and creativity. It is interesting to critique the articulation of Dalit themes in Indian literatures. In this connection, the performance of Indian writing in English is to be commented upon for its position on the Dalit situation. It is to be noted that the major figures of Indian novel in English namely R.K. Narayan, Raja Rao and Mulk Raj Anand have not paid much attention consistently in their work, although Anand is of left wing affiliation and therefore chose to write about the working class especially of Dalits in his notable novel the *Untouchable*. Both Raja Rao and Narayan simply shied away from writing about this inhuman social stigma in their novels.

This could be understood from different points of view. For one thing, they belonged to the Brahmanical community, which is supreme in the traditional Chaturvarna hierarchy. In the case of R.K. Narayan, it can simply be his artistic choice since he wrote essentially about the middle class or lower middle class social scene in his *Malgudi* novels and to be fair to them, it is the burden of writing about social themes which could discourage the creative writers on the grounds that the human experience and the conflict per se should be the subject matter for artistic expression and not its ideological context. Raja Rao, on the other hand, has openly advocated his Brahmanical heritage and mostly wrote about their consequence in terms of philosophical and spiritual vision. If anything, Raja Rao's work attempts to bring in constructive reforms resisting western influence in his Brahmanical paradigm. Needless to add both Raja Rao and R.K. Narayan did not make the Dalit experience a governing theme in any of their works. Whether this is merely a matter of artistic choice or even an ideological stance is left largely to the realm of speculation.

As much as the theories of society and the ultimate perceptions of the society are to keep order, discipline and peace among its people, the inner working consequences of such grand conceptions often run into ambivalent behavioral patterns that are intrinsic to human conduct. Social thinkers argue that man is a social animal but it is the animalistic construct that overpowers reason and rationality and forces one to seek selfish goals. When this tendency takes the organization form, it becomes part of the class interest, which frequently occupied a dominating position of hegemonic urge. The resultant

conflict has created the victim paradigm, which starts the process of ordering. Therefore, the hegemonic interest continued to exploit the vulnerable and weak sections of society. If the weak have to remain perpetually vulnerable in their positions, they become marginalized in the cultural, religious and social, institutional contexts. Now, this is also the area of social psychology. And thus, marginality and marginalization become sustained social super structure that permanently seeks to put down certain groups of people.

Language necessarily reflects social moorings of its society. English is, therefore, evocative of its society's value system, patterns of life and its social and religious foundationalism. Indian writers will have to tackle the near impossible task of transforming Indian ethos into this alien language. In addition to this, they unwittingly or sometimes even consciously choose themes and their articulation in suitable narrative to reach the western audience. One should also remember that all of this is enacted through the prism of its own ideology. Since most of the Indian writers in English at least in the formative period hailed from the upper caste, the very notion of writing about themes such as untouchability did not suit their ideological stance. It does not exclude the fact that the writers of Marxists or liberal persuasion may take it upon themselves to address the social evils. Again, how profound their treatment of such themes is purely a matter of aesthetic assessment.

Critics have often noted that the theme of caste is not a major pre occupation for Indian writers in English. The wide spread view is that Brahmin culture and its legacy is entirely responsible for the marginalization of untouchables in our society. It is often argued that the writers of Brahmin community and those writers who have been influenced by Brahmanical thought are not comfortable writing about untouchables in a compassionate manner. Some critics go to the extent of suggesting that their writings are mostly an act of reinforcement of their hegemonic interests while adequately making a case for reforms in their own caste system.

Makarand Paranjape in his essay, "Caste of Indian English Novel" reflects the topical interest of our time. He makes a reference to Indian Literature in English 1829-1979 ed by Amrit Jit Singh, Rajiv Varma and Irnere Joshi out of the 556 writers of fiction mentioned in the book, he identifies one hundred and thirteen names as belonging to the brahmanical community. He also mentions M.K. Naik's History of Indian English Literature (1985) but the major thrust of the argument in this essay is that caste identity is incidental to the writers' creative endeavor. In fact, he says that: "I would like to argue that the operative determinant is elitism, not caste, and that caste is only one of the factors that make a person obviously form". However, the present day intellectual scenario in India hardly belongs to the new secular elite group.

In India, this phenomenon has taken savage and cruel shape especially in the realm of caste politics. Whatever may be the justification offered by certain thinkers who seem to find stratification in tradition, one cannot turn a blind eye to the social consequence that has taken a toll on human suffering of the out caste untouchable community and the sudras. Literature and creativity, in a subtle manner can legitimize or de legitimize performing arts. Indian literature, both regional and Indian English cannot escape the powerful urge to ideology (Frankfurt School of false consciousness), which can be the sub texts of all writings. It is in this context that marginalization is examined in order to reflect how creativity bends itself to power politics as well – in its passion. One of the major dialectical problems that Indian writers in English face is the context and complexity of writing in English itself. This poses a certain degree of compromise culturally as well as thematically.

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